
LIAR'S KINGDOM
CHRISTINE CALELLA


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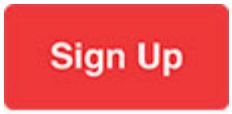
Table of Contents

About the Author

Copyright Page

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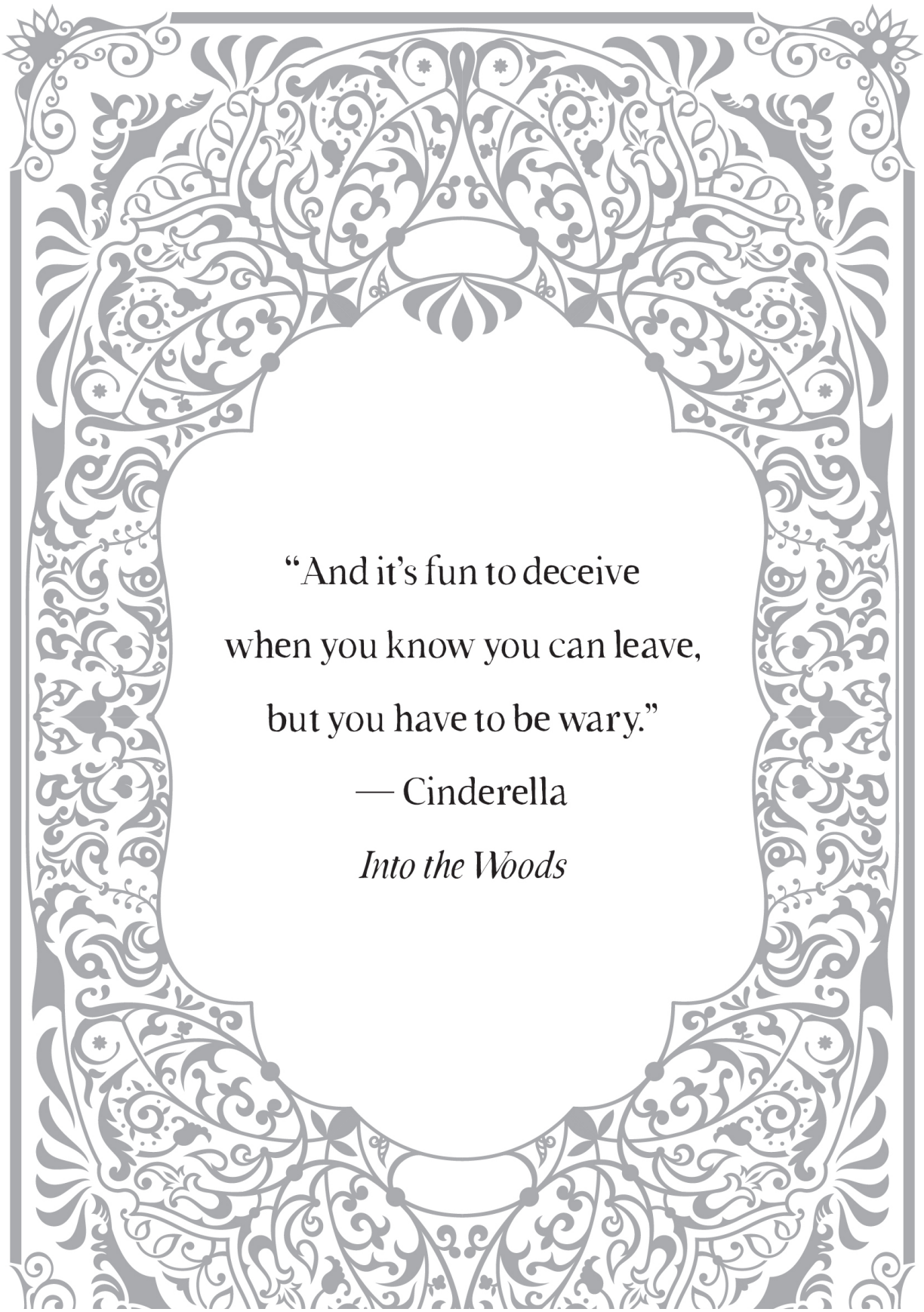
For Kathy,
You are the big sister everyone deserves.
Thanks for always picking up the phone.





A Note to the Reader

Cinderella has always been a story about abuse, with its villains lashing out with impunity toward anyone smaller and weaker than they are. Our heroine finds a way, despite all this cruelty, to be kind to everyone—even the rats. Expect heartache and bloodshed in the pages to come, but I promise you a happy ending waits on the other side.


"And it's fun to deceive
when you know you can leave,
but you have to be wary."
— Cinderella
Into the Woods





ONE

MOST PEOPLE THINK RATS ARE DIRTY, BUT THEY'RE REALLY NOT. They groom themselves frequently, licking their coats shiny and clean, and always have the good manners to eat any crumbs I leave for them on the attic floor. They actually make my job easier. Rats never leave petticoats crumpled in a heap beside their four-poster beds, expecting me to collect them, scrub them, and press them flat. They never pile dirty dishes and stained teacups on silver trays for me to wash later. And they certainly don't ring bells all the day long, screaming my name down the stairs, ready with yet another chore to add to my list.

When the royal carriage arrives, I'm sitting in the garret window seat, the shutters thrown open to catch a delicate spring breeze. I have my legs spread out, trying to stretch away the soreness in my calf muscles. It's midafternoon, and it's my first blessed moment of peace all day. The family is all asleep, napping off their lunches. My two favorite rats are with me: white-spotted Ermengarde sitting in my left palm as I feed her a nibble of hard cheese, and sleek gray Jacques resting patiently in my lap for his share, half-hidden in the folds of my blue skirt.

The carriage comes trundling up the drive, its golden accents glinting in the high sun. At first, it seems like a mirage in the desert—too beautiful to be true. Why would a carriage that fine be coming here? My stepmother rarely has visitors. I quickly move Jacques off my lap and set down Ermengarde so I can peer farther out the window. The breeze stirs the flyaway hairs of my braided crown, tickling the tip of my soot-covered

nose. It rustles the climbing wisteria that circles the attic window and fills the air with sweet pollen.

I squint down in amazement as the carriage doors fly open. Four strapping guards in cobalt blue uniforms step out, followed by two additional young men: one entirely in black with a proud, haughty demeanor, and the other decorated in a splendid array of white and gold, whose shoulders are slumped in defeat.

The coachman produces a gleaming brass horn, trumpeting it as the young noblemen amble to the front door, hands tucked lazily in their pockets. The coachman raises his chin to the clouds and shouts, "Announcing the arrival of his royal highness, the crown prince of Holbein, Bayard D'Harcourt! Will the master of the house please present himself?"

There is no master of the house. Not anymore. Not after Stepmother was done with him.

Anyone else would be standing at this window in a stupor, staring down in awe at the crown prince. For there is no logical reason for him to be here. But I don't have time for bafflement—that can only turn out badly for me. If my stepmother is blindsided, she'll strike at me like a viper, punishing me to make herself feel less small. I start to run, my worn soles clattering down the attic's spiral steps as I shout at the top of my lungs. "Stepmother! Amalia! Freida! You have to get up! There's an important visitor!"

I slam into my stepmother's locked bedroom door, thumping on it. "Stepmother! There's royalty outside! The prince!"

When she doesn't respond, I rush down the hall to Amalia. Her door is unlocked, the curtains of her bed pulled closed. I fling them open. "The prince! Get up. Get up, now!"

Amalia straightens against her pillows, the feathers that line her silk bathrobe drooping drowsily. She pushes a sleep mask from her eyes, mumbling, "What about the prince?"

I throw a pillow at her face on my way out the door. "He's *here*!"

Freida's door is also unlocked. She's somehow accumulated a new pile of laundry since this morning and dropped it all in the doorway, so when I rush in, the tip of my boot snags on a linen sheet and I fall to my knees in the

dirty bedclothes. Freida is awake, sitting at her vanity and retouching her pale blond curls.

"Go fetch my afternoon tea," Freida says, sniffing in distaste as I pull myself out of her laundry pile. "The jasmine kind I like."

My heart thuds to an anxious stop. I momentarily forget all about the prince, remembering I was supposed to pick up more jasmine at the market today. I'd been so loaded down with the rest of the supply list, Freida's tea completely slipped my mind. If they find out I made an error—

I lie smoothly, covering my tracks. "They were out of jasmine. I'll have to go back early tomorrow."

"See that you do," Freida says, lip curling. "Or I'll tell Mother, and you'll be sorry."

"Make me sorry *yourself*," I snap at her. Cornered rats are known to bite. "Or are you only brave enough to hit me when Stepmother is watching, and I'm not allowed to hit back?"

Freida glowers at me. "That's not how it is—"

The thought of the prince gallops back into my mind. I cut her off, knowing we have more important things to do than fight. *"Just get up,"* I insist. "Go downstairs. The prince is here. I don't know why."

Freida's green eyes sparkle, our argument suddenly forgotten. "Naturally, we know why! The prince was charmed by one of us at the ball after all. He's come to visit Amalia or me!" She bites back a laugh, rifling in her vanity's drawers for more rouge. "I knew the harlot he danced with wouldn't last. That's a girl you give attention to for a night. But Amalia and I are of a higher class—"

"Oh, would you stop gloating and put on your face?!" My cheeks are getting hot. What if Freida's right? If one of my stepsisters marries the prince, what will happen to me? Would Stepmother throw me out on the street when they all moved into the palace, or would I merely join the royal family's legion of scullery maids, scrubbing flagstones until my knuckles bleed while my stepfamily is fed delicacies and bedecked in jewels?

I jab my finger at a vial of Freida's lip paint. "I'd put that on too, if I were you," I say. "You need all the help you can get to compete with Amalia."

Freida gasps, in part because she knows I'm right: She's never been as pretty as Amalia. But the truth can't protect anybody, so I know to duck before Freida throws her heavy silver hairbrush at my head. It misses me, hitting the wall hard enough to leave a chip in the paint.

I hurry from Freida's room before she can chuck something else at me. Stepmother sweeps toward me in the hall, adjusting her fashionably gray powdered wig. She is a legendary beauty, with skin as pale and smooth as cream, doe-like eyes, and full, sensual lips. These enviable qualities combine to disguise the venom in her heart at first glance—but anyone who spends enough time around my stepmother soon learns what she is capable of.

"Well?" she snaps, raising a threatening arm. "Are you just going to leave his highness standing on the doorstep? Idiot girl!"

"Apologies, Stepmother," I say, dropping my eyes to the floor. I hurry down the steps before she decides to let her hand fly.

I should have known. Stepmother would've been furious at me for letting him in before waking her, and now she's angry at me for making him wait. There is no way to win with her. There never has been.

"Stop!" Stepmother demands, changing her mind quick as an autumn wind. Her claw-like hand grips my shoulder. "Where is my new hat? I must be splendidly attired for royalty."

I gulp. This is not the moment I'd planned to discuss this, but my pre-prepared lie tumbles out of my mouth. "The milliner will not release the new hat until you settle your tab for all the old ones," I squeak. "With interest."

Stepmother's black eyes crack like ice. "That impudent man!" She raises her arm to strike me for the milliner's slight.

I wait, tense yet prepared. I knew it would come to this.

But her cunning gaze darts to the door. She doesn't want me greeting royalty with a bleeding nose. "Go!" she demands. "Answer it! I'll give you gold for the milliner when the prince is gone." I turn, but her fingernails press down on my shoulder, stabbing into my flesh. "And if I find out this is a fiction, you perfidious little liar, you will regret being born."

I pull away, tripping lightly down the stairs. I'm lucky we're not alone right now. Stepmother has never been above breaking one of my bones to teach me a lesson.

For the record, the milliner *is* asking Stepmother to pay her debt. Just not with interest. He's too afraid of his baroness to ask for interest. The interest is for me. For the escape fund I keep beneath a rotten floorboard in the attic. I'll get out of this house one way or another, even if I have to secret away stray coins for decades.

I reach the grand front doors, made of cedarwood and inlaid on both sides with carvings of leaves and various woodland creatures: squirrels, mice, a fox, and majestic deer. On the other side, I can hear the impatient coachman blowing his horn again. A voice drawls, "Perhaps there's nobody home."

I push open the doors. They're heavy, and I've been doing a lot of running around in the last few minutes, so I sound breathless as I greet them: "Hello, your highness. The DeBrun estate welcomes you and your retinue."

The prince—the boy in white and gold—is leaning against the stone wall of the entry, one arm up above his head, all but dead to the world. Then he seems to rally, glancing at me. His gaze doesn't linger on my face. It takes in my bird's nest of hair, my apron, my worn boots. "Thank you, miss," he says, inclining his head a half-inch to me. "Are the baron and his lovely daughters at home?"

I blink at him. "The baron has been dead six years. But the baroness is home."

The prince's companion, the one in black, raises a shining cane and uses it to brush me aside, clearing the doorway. "Then we shall enter." He gestures for the prince to go in ahead of him. "After you, Bayard."

The prince does enter, just as Stepmother descends the grand staircase in a violet gown with a high lace collar, its train fanning out behind her. She greets him with unctuous enthusiasm. "Your highness! This visit is as surprising as it is an honor. That you should favor us with your presence is most flattering—"

I examine the boy with the cane. He's tall. Thin, but broad-shouldered, with a loping grace and hair the rich color of the dark chocolate bonbons Amalia always makes me buy at market. My sense is he doesn't carry the cane for assistance with walking—he carries it to be able to push aside peasant-folk without touching them. I think I'm safe to glare as he glides past, because the prince didn't look me in the eye, and I don't expect his companion to, either. But the boy stops, doubling back to look at me. He smirks, and the cane rises again to rest on my shoulder. "Didn't anyone ever teach you to curtsy to your social superiors?" He presses the cane down gently, urging me to dip into a show of respect.

I obey, blood pounding in my ears. I'd love to snatch that cane from him and beat him round the head with it. Years of degradation have never made the taste of it more tolerable to me.

"Good," the boy says, lightening the pressure on the cane. He removes it from my shoulder and enters the house, forgetting me in an instant. But I don't forget him, and I vow I never will. He may be as cool and impersonal as a passing shadow, but I'll resent his smug face for the rest of my life.

The guards stride past, and when they're all inside, I close the door, stealing one last look at the royal carriage. I imagine riding inside something so fine. Such a vehicle would make me feel like a prized jewel, held safe in a delicate, golden box. I picture myself running my fingers against the velvet cushions. See how I'd lay out on the seat and let the gentle sway of the carriage sweep me away, allowing me to doze through a journey that would take a peasant a week to make on foot.

I close the doors and lean against them, watching the scene unfolding in the foyer. Amalia and Freida are fully dressed now, each in their very best gowns, their stiff, ironed curls pinned atop their heads and adorned with ribbons. They rush downstairs to greet the prince so quickly that Amalia stumbles on her hem.

"May I present," Stepmother trills, "my gorgeous daughters, Amalia and Freida Tremoille?"

The prince has both my stepmother's hands in his. He raises her knuckles to his lips and kisses them lightly. She swoons. I remember the last time Stepmother's knuckles touched my lips. That scene had not been *anything* like this one.

“My dear Baroness DeBrun,” the prince says, “I am sorry to intrude upon your household without advanced notice.”

Stepmother beams at him. “Surely your highness knows you are welcome in our home at any time. But what delight brings you here today?”

The young man in black clears his throat from his position by the unlit fireplace. He seems to have been running a gloved finger across the mantel to check for dust. “Tremoille?” he asks. “I thought this was the house of DeBrun?”

Stepmother’s face sours. “These are the children of my first marriage. And you are?”

At that reminder, the prince laughs gaily at himself. “Oh, how rude of me not to introduce my companion! Baroness, ladies—” He nods to my stepsisters where they hover at the foot of the stairs, afraid to draw nearer. “I am pleased to introduce his grace, Duke Maxim D’Arcy. He is a very dear friend of mine—but don’t let his youth fool you. He’s also a trusted adviser to the king. Our country is lucky to have him.”

I’m struck again by the stark differences between Prince Bayard and his “dear friend.” It’s the difference between the blazing sun and the foreboding cloak of night. The prince’s face is open and friendly, while the duke only scowls. Even their skin tones speak to lifestyle differences: Prince Bayard is aglow with a healthy tan, suggesting that he whiles away his days riding, while the duke’s complexion is a light olive, as if he spends all his leisure time in the shade.

Maxim slowly inclines his dark head to my stepfamily, as if a bow would be too much respect. He gives a patently false smile and says, “Ladies, the prince and I are here on a very important mission.” His black eyes glitter with malice, as if he knows exactly what an embarrassing tizzy his next words will send my family into. “A mission to find his bride.”

My stepsisters crow with delight, which after a stern glare from my stepmother, quickly transitions into peals of more ladylike giggles. Freida steps boldly forward, moving to obscure Amalia’s lithe figure from sight. She flutters her pale eyelashes at his highness. “But which of us have you come for, handsome prince?”

Prince Bayard glances at Maxim, his jawline hardening. He turns from the ladies momentarily, running a hand through his shining red-brown hair. He mutters to Maxim from the corner of his mouth, “They’re too tall. The girl at the ball was shorter.”

My breath catches in my chest. Now this is interesting. I look quickly to Stepmother, whose steel-sharp eyes don’t even blink as she watches the whispering pair. I doubt she heard what I heard.

Maxim smiles indulgently at the prince. “It’s possible you’re correct, but are you willing to give up so easily? Perhaps your memory is faulty. What’s the harm of having them try it on?”

The prince nods, closing his eyes. “You’re right, as always. Tell them.”

Maxim claps his hands, turning back to the assembled ladies and addressing Freida directly. “That’s a very astute question, mademoiselle. And I’m afraid it has no easy answer.” Here, Maxim reaches into his velvet jacket and withdraws an item cushioned in swaths of white silk. He unwinds the fabric to reveal a shoe made entirely of shimmering glass. It is fairy-made, as plain as anything.

Maxim continues speaking, chuckling as he explains, “At last week’s masquerade ball, Prince Bayard met a young woman of astounding beauty. You may recall she arrived late in a gown of cornflower blue, drawing the attention of everyone in attendance. You may even recall how she and the prince danced the night away.”

My heart beats faster, pitter-pattering in my chest like the scurrying of a rat’s little feet against hardwood.

“The trouble is,” Maxim says, full-on grinning now, “this young enchantress left the ball just before midnight, and the prince didn’t obtain her name or where to find her. All she left behind was this slipper. And now the prince has vowed only to wed the maid who fits this shoe.”

It is a *very* small shoe. Dapples of light from the chandelier overhead reflect off it, leaving spots on my vision. This is all so romantic and dashing. I can hardly believe the prince would be so faithful to someone he met for a single evening.

Bayard speaks up. His voice is gentle and thoughtful, like a caress. “We have been all over the kingdom, visiting the houses of the nobility in search

of the girl who can wear this slipper. There are not many noble families left. I'm beginning to fear I will not find her."

"Worry not, crusading prince!" Stepmother cries. "My beautiful girls will surely fit the slipper. They have the daintiest feet." She winks in their direction. "I simply cannot believe one of them beguiled you at the ball and managed to hide it from her doting *mamán*." She waves a hand at Amalia, calling her forward. "Amalia, dear? You must try on the slipper first! Let's not keep the prince waiting. He has a wedding to plan."

A guard drags forward the chaise lounge for Amalia to perch on. Maxim passes the slipper to Bayard, and the prince kneels gamely to slide the shoe onto Amalia's foot.

Amalia does have small feet, but not *that* small. The shoe gets stuck half a nail from the edge of her heel, and the prince stops pressing. "Oh no, my darling!" Stepmother cries, falling to her knees to help push the shoe farther along Amalia's foot. "You did so much work in the garden this morning, your feet have obviously swollen from the heat of labor!"

I can't help it. The absurd thought of Amalia toiling in the garden is enough to break me. I let out a huff of laughter. Maxim's dark eyes flicker to me again, an expression of begrudging amusement crinkling the corner of his mouth.

"Mother," Amalia squeaks, her eyes screwed up with pain. The shoe has now reached the edge of her heel but is scraping up her skin, peeling it horribly and causing a great bubble of blood to rise up where the edge of the glass digs in.

Prince Bayard stares at my stepmother's grasping hands like he's envisioning a monster's claws. "Madame, I do not think the shoe belongs to her. Please, let her take it off."

Stepmother laughs shrilly. "Of course, you're right! It is obviously Freida's, not Amalia's." She wrenches the shoe from Amalia's foot and shoos her from the chaise. Amalia limps away, tears streaking her artfully applied makeup.

Freida hurries to take Amalia's place, and this time, Stepmother doesn't even allow the prince to touch the slipper. She knows Freida's feet are

bigger than Amalia's, but perhaps she suspects that strong Freida will bear the pain better.

She's right, at first. Freida plasters on a wooden smile as Stepmother forces the shoe onto her foot, and does not so much as wince until … *Crack!*

Everyone in the room reacts physically to the crunching of bone as Freida's big toe folds in on itself. Freida lets out a baleful howl. The guards roar in disgust. My stomach turns, and I slide against the door down to the parquet, my knees dropping out from under me. Maxim turns away, lips pursed. Prince Bayard covers his mouth with his hand like he's going to retch.

"Enough!" the prince commands, shooting to his feet. "This *hideous display* is not helping anyone."

Stepmother's face twitches with barely restrained rage. My stomach knots with my lower intestine. The moment these men are gone, she'll take this out on me.

Maxim crosses the room, seizing the slipper from my stepmother's slackened hands. He dabs Amalia's blood off the heel with the white silk, staining it red in the process. He glances apologetically to Bayard. "You were right after all, my friend. They were too tall."

The prince puts a weary hand to his chin. "Where do we go from here, Max? There are no nobles left. Perhaps a foreign princess attended without telling us? That would explain why she refused to give her name."

"If it is a foreign princess," Maxim presses, "what do you intend to do about it?"

Bayard shrugs. "What *can* I do?"

Maxim's eyes flash. "No, Bayard. You're not giving up on this. We've already crisscrossed the country looking for your mystery girl. You can't throw up your hands as soon as it gets difficult. Whatever happened to your speeches of true love? Surely, you could travel abroad to seek out the girl."

Bayard's look brightens. "I suppose I could. Father wouldn't be happy."

Maxim raises an eyebrow. "And what does your father know about love?" He claps Bayard on the shoulder, enthused now. "You must try everything. And perhaps we are not out of nobles yet." He sweeps an arm

imperiously at my stepmother. “Are there any other eligible young ladies in the house? You are the Baroness DeBrun are you not? Are there no sweet girls here by that surname?”

Amalia lets out a whimper, her eyes darting instinctively, guilelessly, toward me. Freida, hunched sideways to put her weight on her uninjured foot, elbows Amalia hard in the rib.

Maxim lets out a long, slow laugh, charting the trajectory of Amalia’s gaze to me. “Not the scullery maid, certainly?”

Stepmother’s coal-black eyes widen in outrage. “Not Ell! She didn’t even attend the ball!”

The prince’s gaze has returned to me. Again, he isn’t looking at my face. Oddly, I realize I haven’t seen him stare into Amalia’s or Freida’s face either. Doesn’t he know what his perfect bride looks like? Instead of looking at my eyes, or the shape of my mouth, the prince is looking at my hair. At my frame. At the boots on my feet, which indeed, are obviously oversized.

“Those shoes are too big for you,” the prince declares. “Ell, is it? Ell DeBrun, by any chance? The old baron’s daughter?”

I nod.

“Come forward,” Bayard commands. “Try on the slipper.”

I can hardly ignore a prince’s orders. I step forward, sitting on the chaise lounge as my stepsisters had. Stepmother strikes like lightning, stepping between the slipper and me. “I tell you,” she snarls, “Ellain has no business trying on the shoe. She did not attend the ball. We left her at home.”

“Were not all ladies of noble birth requested to attend?” Maxim drawls.

“She was left home as punishment for her deceit and disobedience.”

“I want her to try on the shoe,” Bayard says simply. And that is that. Stepmother has to step aside.

I unlace my shabby right boot, letting it fall to the marble floor. I pull off my dirty sock, with its shameful holes in the toes and heel. My face burns with embarrassment, and with the knowledge that Stepmother will seek revenge for this.

The prince accepts the shoe back from Maxim. He takes my ankle in one hand, then slides the slipper onto my toes and easily up over the heel. It fits like a dream.

The prince chokes in surprise, as if he'd been fighting for me not because he thought I was the girl, but merely to uphold my honor. The smug smile slips from Maxim's face as he stares at me in disbelief.

I keep my own jaw rigid and set as I look up into the livid face of my stepmother. "Well," I say softly, "isn't that something?"

Then the prince launches to his feet, pulling me up as well. He wraps his strong arms around my waist, swinging me about in a dizzy, giddy circle that makes laughter bubble from my throat.

"It's you!" he cries. "I've found you, my love!"

I'm dreaming. Surely, I'm dreaming. But of course—one cannot feel pain in dreams, so when Stepmother grabs me by the hair and rips me from the prince's arms, throwing me to the cold floor, I can be certain this is reality.

I cry out, covering my face in case she aims a kick at my teeth. Some small territory of my scalp burns from the sudden absence of roots, and as I peek out through my fingers I see a clump of dirty blonde hair tangled in my stepmother's clutches.

"You bully!" the prince roars. "You brute!"

The guards dash forward, wrestling Stepmother to the floor. Prince Bayard rushes to me, lifting me to a sitting position, cradling my head in his hands to check for damage. My stepsisters squawk, running to their mother's aid, but Maxim steps neatly between them, flinging out his cane as a barrier. His tongue clicks. "I wouldn't, if I were you."

I'm safe in the prince's arms, and he smells wonderful, like soap and saffron. He whispers to me. "I will never let them hurt you again. Ell, dear Ell. How wonderful to know your name. How sublime. You will leave this place today and come home with me."

Lightheaded, I reach up to touch the curve of the prince's strong jaw with my fingertips. He is really *very* handsome, with those bright, expressive eyes. That hair like burnished bronze. "That sounds lovely," I say.

"Oh, why would you ever return here?" Bayard asks, pressing a kiss to the top of my hair. A greedy shiver runs through me—it has been a long

time since someone touched me with affection.

“Why come back into the clutches of these monsters, when you might have stayed behind with me? I was so in love with you the night of the ball I would’ve married you then and there.”

Dimly, I realize I have to come up with a good answer, or this strange sequence of events could all fall away. I lick my lips, blinking the stardust and romance from my eyes. My voice is hoarse. “I was afraid. Afraid that when you saw what I really am … just a scullery maid … you wouldn’t care for me anymore. That I couldn’t live up to what you deserve.”

Bayard chuckles, stroking a strand of hair behind my ear. “You thought me that inconstant?”

I force a pained smile. “I was a fool to believe so. Can you ever forgive me?”

Bayard laughs again. “My dear Ell, if only you’ll marry me and make me the happiest man in the world, I could forgive you anything.”

I smile, closing my eyes to enjoy the sensation of being wrapped in his strong arms. Protected. “Then that’s what we’ll do.”

But a worm turns in my gut. For I know there is certainly one thing the prince would never forgive me for, if he found out.

I am not the girl he met at the ball.



TWO

AT FIRST, BAYARD WANTS TO STICK ME STRAIGHT IN THE CARRIAGE, ride off with me, and never look back. But I can't let him do that. Not with Jacques and Ermengarde still upstairs. Stepmother dislikes cleaning very much, but she'll roll up her sleeves for dirty work if it means getting vengeance on me.

The year I turned twelve, I tried to run away from home. Father had only been dead a year, but I couldn't stand being their servant anymore. Not when I knew—or at least suspected—what Stepmother had done to him. I snuck away in the night, my pack full of apples, hard cheese, and bread from the kitchen. In my apron snuffled my first pet rat, Gustav, along with the jewelry from my mother's dowry, stolen from Stepmother's room while she slept.

I was caught at the village border by a farmer who'd risen before the sun. He returned me to Stepmother, expecting a reward from his baroness for her returned property, but he received nothing but a hard look and a dismissive wave. When he was gone, Stepmother reached into my apron for Gustav. He squealed and squirmed. Without a word, she snapped his little neck and dropped his still-warm body back into my apron pocket.

So, I tell Bayard I need to gather some of my possessions from my room. "Are you certain, love?" Bayard asks, his brow furrowing handsomely. "We will commission you new clothes."

I'm bold—positively impertinent. But I'm like a starving woman at a feast, itching to touch this beautiful boy again, so I kiss Bayard on his cheek. It's smooth. Recently shaved.

“I’m certain,” I say. “I won’t be gone long.”

I have to be certain. Because even if he is willing to buy me clothes, I won’t be sticking around long enough to see them made. I need what is mine. What I can take with me when we inevitably part ways.

I run up the stairs. My heart pounds so fast I feel sick. I move like I’m being chased, because I’m half certain that if I don’t get back down there quickly, Bayard will realize the mistake he’s made. He’ll be gone before I return from the attic.

I realize too late, when I’m in my drafty old room, that I don’t have a traveling bag. Stepmother confiscated my knapsack five years ago to prevent future runaway attempts. Instead, I strip the sheets from my bed, knotting the corners to serve as a sack. I toss in the few items of any sentimental value: my sewing kit, a book gifted to me by the witch next door, a framed sketch of my father and mother, and the key to the garden gate. I pry up the rotten floorboard that hides my meager escape fund—I’ll need this very soon.

I get on my hands and knees to search below the bed, grasping for anything small and fuzzy. “Jacques!” I croon. “Ermengarde!”

Thankfully, they answer my call and come squeaking from the hole in the wall below my headboard. They climb into my hands, expecting food, but I just dump them in the sack, covering them with a shabby, patched dress. I do not know if the prince’s misplaced affections will extend to letting me take rodents into his palace. I glance out the open windows and see the carriage still there. Good. He hasn’t changed his mind yet.

Jacques and Ermengarde are confused. I’ve thrown the sheet-sack over my shoulder and can feel them turning over inside the fabric. I shush them, pleading for stillness, as we flee down the stairs. They oblige me, quieting themselves, though occasionally I can hear a bald tail whipping and thumping against another object inside.

I hit the main staircase, and from there, I see Bayard pacing the marble floor in agitation. He keeps casting furious glares in my stepmother’s direction. He spots me at the top of the stairs, and for a moment his face remains strangely blank. I want to call out, to apologize for taking too long, for whatever I’ve done wrong—beyond the obvious—but my voice breaks

in my throat. He is already displeased with me. But then Maxim touches his hand to Bayard's shoulder, and Bayard's face breaks out into a brilliant grin. "Ell? Do you have everything you need?"

"Yes," I say, my voice cracking in relief.

I meet Bayard at the foot of the stairs, and he cups my chin in his hands and gives me a short, sweet kiss. I almost faint; I've never been kissed on the lips before. Giddiness blooms in my veins. I don't ever want this to stop. When he steps back, beaming, he licks the pad of his thumb and rubs the soot off the tip of my nose. "You've got something there," he says, laughing.

"Just adorable," Maxim quips, pulling a gold pocket watch from his jacket. "If we leave now, we can make it to the capital by dinner. Let's away."

I cannot escape noticing that the duke is suddenly in a very disagreeable mood, but Bayard certainly misses it. He gallantly offers me his arm and says, "My lady, your carriage awaits." I take it eagerly. A guard strides forward to open the front door for us. Just minutes ago, that'd been my job.

Then there's a *thump* as a set of arms wrap themselves around my ankles. Amalia is on her hands and knees, her eyes swimming with tears. "Ell, you can't leave us!"

My lip curls. "You want me … to stay?"

A few of Amalia's chestnut curls are falling loose from her hurriedly assembled updo. "Of *course* I do," Amalia says, her tone aching with sincerity. "How will we ever get along without you? We don't know how to do anything!"

Revulsion rears up in my throat like a dragon standing on its hind legs, ready to shoot flames from its maw. "You want me to stay—to cook and clean and do the washing?"

Teardrops cling to Amalia's eyelashes. Although Freida looks like whoever their father was, Amalia looks like a softened version of my stepmother. The only thing that's different are the green eyes, so distinct from Stepmother's black ones. "Surely you'll at least take us with you?" Amalia tugs pathetically on the hem of my dress. "We're family, after all."

Bayard's grip on my arm tightens almost imperceptibly. A reminder he's at my side. I shake Amalia off my ankles and step outside with him into the sunlight.

The footman opens the carriage door for us and tries to take my sheet-sack. It's admirable that he doesn't blink twice at the soot-covered girl on his prince's arm or at my strange packing job. But I don't let him claim the sack. Nobody can know Jacques and Ermengarde are in there. I tighten my grip on it, giving him my pale imitation of a winning smile. "Thank you so much, really, but I'd prefer to keep it on my lap."

The footman drops into a bow. "As you wish, my lady." He lowers a tiny stepstool from the carriage to allow us to climb inside. Bayard lends me his arm, boosting me up into golden safety.

The carriage is spacious inside, but with the addition of another passenger, two of the guards opt to sit with the coachman on his bench up front. Bayard sits beside me, wrapping his arm protectively over my shoulders, leaving Maxim to squeeze between the two other guards on the opposite seat.

I'd suspected the gilded accents would be more muted inside the coach, and I was right. It seems one wants to impress passersby by blinding them with gold, but not similarly inconvenience the coddled rich folk shepherded inside. If I'm surprised by anything in the interior of the carriage, it's that when I'd imagined the velvet of the cushions, I had pictured them as crimson. In reality, they are the color of ripe summer plums.

I hear the flick of the reins outside, then hoofsteps as the thoroughbred ponies begin their dainty trot away from my house of nightmares. The carriage lurches, and Bayard shifts, encouraging me to lean against him. I'm overcome with the sweet scent of him again, but this time the joy is punctured with the fear of what *I* must smell like. Stale sweat and woodsmoke, probably.

Outside, I can hear the distant shouts of my stepfamily, who must have come scrambling from the manor to call after us. But I don't look back. I clasp my hands tight enough they hurt—reminding myself this is not a dream. I am never going back there. This carriage ride is a miraculous blessing. I just need to get to the capital city's port before Bayard realizes he doesn't love me. When we reach the palace, I'll slip away, throw my

sheet-sack over my shoulder, and set off for worlds unknown. I'll go so far away from the kingdom that Stepmother will never find me.

We make our way quickly through the outlying village, and my heart speeds up with ecstatic joy. This was as far as I managed to get the one time I'd tried to run. And now we are in the evergreen woods, with trees zipping by in a blur outside the window. A choked-up sound makes its troublesome way from my lungs as my eyes well with happy tears.

Maxim immediately clocks my tears, and Bayard the sound. With a sneer, the duke asks, "Are you homesick already, my lady?" at the same time that Bayard squeezes my hand and says, "There's nothing to be afraid of."

I blink the tears from my eyes. I squeeze Bayard's hand in return. "I'm not sad or scared," I promise him. "I'm overwhelmed with happiness."

"Oh, good!" Bayard says, positively buoyant with relief. His grin is infectiously charming as he gestures out the window at the trees. "I thought you were perhaps worried about the fae, as we're traveling through the woods. But I assure you, we're completely safe."

I stiffen in shock. The wicked fairies that prowl the kingdom's woods never crossed my mind. Though, clearly, they were not far from Bayard's mind.

"But naturally," Maxim says, his voice oozing with condescension, "our Lady Ell would not be frightened of the fae. You must be well-versed in their ways, to have obtained such beautiful fairy-made shoes for the ball. But"—he dons a patently false look of dawning realization—"how *could* you have acquired such a fairy trifle, as King Alaric has outlawed their trickery in his kingdom?" He grins, sharp-toothed as a wolf. "It must be an incredible story. Do tell."

My stomach rolls over. What am I supposed to say? Maxim dances around a threat here—reminding me that to even possess these shoes is a crime under the king's laws. And, of course, they were never mine, so how am I to concoct a convincing story about my innocence in a crime I didn't commit?

Half-panicked, I look to Bayard for an out. But he just smiles, nodding at me encouragingly. "I'll confess I've been wondering that myself!" he says.

“Your shoes are beautiful, but I’m curious how you got your hands on them.”

I have no choice. If I don’t want to be turned out of this carriage and left to fend for myself in this cursed wilderness, I need an explanation. But I can hardly think, let alone come up with a good story. I remember the grandfather clock on the second-floor hallway of our manor house that one day simply got stuck, permanently pointing to midnight. That’s just what my brain has done in this moment.

Bayard laces his fingers with mine. “Don’t be afraid, Ell—we’re certainly not going to punish you for fraternizing with fairies. You have my word.”

Bayard might have promised not to report me to the king, but the sour look on Maxim’s face tells me he’ll make no such vow. I rifle through the drawers of my mind, tossing their contents around in a frantic search for some long-buried piece of knowledge that will save me. To initiate contact with a fairy is a crime. But how else could I have gotten the shoes? I suppose I might have bought them… .

“And naturally,” Maxim laughs, those black eyes twinkling again with ill-disguised malice, “you could not have purchased them! What market in this kingdom would sell such contraband?”

I close my eyes to avoid glaring daggers at the young duke. I take a deep breath, recalling the fairy stories my mother used to tell me when I was young. In those days, fairies were not yet enemies of the state, and we could talk freely of such things. I remember one tale, of a fairy who granted wishes to anyone who did her a good deed. She disguised herself as a lion, and gave endless riches to a young woman brave enough to pluck a thorn from her paw… .

A lie falls into place, and I open my eyes, smiling sweetly up at my prince. As I ready myself to speak, my sordid family history flits through my mind—everything I cannot, and will not, share.

My father was never an honest man. I suppose it was he who taught me to lie. Nonetheless, he loved me and my mother very much. Certainly, he was willing to go to great lengths to keep my mother happy. When she was pregnant with me, my mother developed cravings for the vegetables from the witch's garden next door. She said she would eat nothing else but the purple tubers that grew in the very center of the garden. But they were the witch's prized vegetables, and when my father told our neighbor he would pay any price for them, the witch refused to sell.

My father did not want my mother to go hungry, so he climbed over the witch's garden gate one night and stole a great amount of the roots. My mother devoured them, and when the sunrise came and the witch found her beloved vegetables stolen, the witch accused my father of theft.

"I only hope your wife didn't eat them," the witch huffed. "Or the cost to your child will be great indeed."

My parents had gasped, believing the witch was laying a curse on me. But when I was born, a few short weeks later, they discovered the witch only had our best interests at heart. I was born very small, though healthy—small enough to fit in the palm of my mother's hand. "Now you see the cost," the witch said, "of eating my famous Shrinking Tubers. Your baby is terribly minimized!" But the witch (whose name turned out to be Jessamin) was generous, and in exchange for my mother's help in maintaining her garden, she mashed me a juice to drink—essence of Gigantism Gourd—that restored me, mostly, to the proper size.

It worked. As I grew older, I shot up like a weed. I never reached the average height of most children in the village, but I did become large enough to go about my day safely, and without incurring odd looks. The one thing—or rather, two things—that never quite caught up with the rest of my body were my feet.

So, all seemed well in the House of DeBrun. I was proper-sized, my father was not cursed, and the witch next door became a family friend. I remember she had fair brown skin the color of willow bark, kind eyes, and gave the most wonderful hugs. The trouble came when I was seven years old, and Mother fell out of love with my father and into love with Jessamin. By this time, King Alaric had outlawed fairies, and a witch was close enough to a fairy for Jessamin to consider leaving the kingdom for her

homeland across the sea, which was more friendly to magic. When Jessamin left her house, my mother left with her.

My father dug a grave in the garden and carved my mother's name into the headstone. He told everyone in the village and at court that my mother was dead. That was preferable, to him, to having been abandoned. Much less embarrassing.

Wildflowers grew over the grave, and in time, when my stepfamily came to stay, I would sometimes sit out among the flowers and talk to my mother's false resting place. I suppose I convinced myself that wherever she really was, Clara DeBrun could hear me somehow. I asked her to come back, to unseat Stepmother as baroness and set our family right. But she never did.

And when my father died, the workmen dug him a grave in the garden, imagining him to be at peace beside his first wife.

I couldn't say otherwise—though I dreamed of telling everyone the truth and invalidating Stepmother's claim to the family manse. But I had no proof aside from my own words. And worse yet, if the kingdom knew my mother had run off with a witch, that would make her seem like a magic user herself. I felt honor-bound to keep that information to myself rather than turn her into an object of suspicion; even if I wish my mother hadn't left me, I would never want to put her or Jessamin in danger.

So, it was with the image of the wildflower grave resting under the hazel tree in my mind that I built my lie for Bayard.



"You have heard, my lords," I say, beseeching Bayard and Maxim with wide eyes, "of the old tales of fairies who feel they owe a debt to certain humans?"

"Oh!" Bayard's own eyes light up. "Yes, like when a maiden pulls a thorn from a lion's paw."

I nod, making a concerted effort to maintain my easy smile. "Quite like that, yes." My heart is racing. On my lap, Jacques and Ermengarde are wiggling inside the sheet-sack. I press a gentle hand downward, quieting

them—and quieting my own guilt as well. This story just has to be believable enough to last me until the capital, I tell myself. In the end, I'll only have briefly inconvenienced Bayard, so the lie is not *so* evil.

"My mother," I say, lifting my blue eyes to Bayard's gray ones, "did just such an act for a fairy before she died, in the days before fairy-kind were declared illegal. There is a spot, right between a fairy's wings, that they cannot reach, and therefore cannot scratch if it itches."

"How marvelously strange!" Bayard announces. He looks to his friend for confirmation. "Is that not marvelously strange, Max?"

Maxim merely grunts. He fiddles with the handle of his cane, an ivory wolf's head, watching me out of heavy-lidded, suspicious eyes. "Yes," he drawls, finally. "I have heard of that aspect of fairy physiognomy."

Triumphant fire blazes in my chest. Maxim can't dispute that fact, because it is common knowledge in anatomists' circles. There'd been a book in my father's study about such things—the fact that unicorns have two hearts, ogres five stomachs, that pixies' wings shimmer with vibrant color, et cetera—and I had devoured it over and over again as a child.

I forge ahead, emboldened. It is only my word they can go upon, so if I do not say anything too foolish, I may just pull this off.

"Well," I say, folding my hand into Bayard's, "my mother once scratched a fairy's back, upon her request. The fairy told her she could call upon her for a boon, but sadly …" Here I drop my eyes to my lap, imitating my father's slumped shoulders whenever he told this particular lie. "… my mother passed away before ever asking for anything. She'd told me about it, but I had imagined the debt died with her."

"And obviously it didn't." Maxim's voice is cold, but I meet his gaze steadily.

"No," I say. "It didn't."

Bayard bends to kiss my fingers. "My love, I'm so sorry to hear about your mother's fate. You'll find it's something we have in common."

I squeeze Bayard's hand—words failing me when I imagine how to comfort him. A wave of guilt crashes over me. I'm taking advantage of this kindhearted prince, but what other choice do I have? I cannot go back to my

stepmother. I would rather die. And if he and Maxim force me to walk through these woods, the fairies that roam here will ensure I actually do.

"Go on," Bayard whispers to me, mistaking my silence for a pain too deep to continue speaking on the loss of my mother. "How did the fairy come to repay the debt? I think your beastly stepmother said she forbade you from attending the ball."

"She did," I nod. At least now, I can thread a little bit of truth into my tale. "I had desperately wanted to go to the ball." And I had. When the invitation to the ball came, an escape plan had materialized in my mind's eye, in one brilliant flash of light. All the noblewomen of the kingdom were invited. If I could ride to the capital with my stepfamily, I might slip away from them at the ball, losing them in the crowds and the pomp—never to be heard from again.

"But my stepmother refused to let me attend," I admit, "unless I could finish all my household chores before the hour of departure." I let out a harsh little laugh. "I would have done it too, except she poured a thousand lentils into the fireplace at the last minute. I couldn't gather them fast enough, and they left me behind. I cried myself sick."

All true. I had sobbed a great deal as my stepmother dragged me by my soot-covered hair to the cellar and locked me in the dark. But I don't include that part in my story for the prince. Instead, I say, "So when they were gone, I went out to my mother's grave in the garden. As I wept on the stone, a beautiful woman appeared in a flash of light." I conjure up the image of the fairy from my father's book. "She had pink wings, like a dragonfly."

Bayard's face goes pale. "My god, you must have been terrified."

I shake my head, not wanting to paint myself as a victim any more than I already have. "Actually, she was quite … kind to me. She said as she couldn't fulfill her debt to my mother, she would grant me a boon instead. She gave me the shoes and a gown to wear to the ball."

Maxim's voice cuts through the stuffy air of the carriage. "And how did you get to the ball? I don't imagine you rode horseback."

My muscles tense. "The fairy made me a carriage."

"What, out of thin air?" Maxim pressed. "A truly powerful fairy."

“No,” I say, shaking my head. I don’t really know the limits of what a fairy could accomplish. But transmogrification was common in the old tales, wasn’t it? I thought of Jessamin’s magical garden just over the hedge from our own. It was overgrown now, but some of her old crops still grew each year—including a selection of Gigantism Gourds.

I smile at Maxim with all my teeth. “She made it from a pumpkin.”

“A pumpkin?” Bayard laughs. “How singular.”

“And who drove the carriage? Did you have a footman? I doubt even a fairy can create life from gourds.” Maxim’s mouth is a hard, violent line, but his eyes dance. He thinks he’s beaten me.

A squeak emanates from inside my sack. I let out a sound of shock, like a hiccup. One of the guards beside Maxim looks nervously at me. “What is *that*?” Maxim demands, rearing back from the bag in horror. Bayard, however, is unfazed. A faint smile on his face, he reaches into my sheet-sack, and I don’t dare stop him.

Bayard’s white-gloved hand emerges wrapped around Ermengarde, whose pink nose is stretching into the air, sniffing inquisitively.

“A filthy rodent!” Maxim shouts. He pulls his gleaming leather boots up from the floor of the carriage, scandalized. The nervous guard gives a girlish shout as his fear escalates.

“What do you have that for?” the other guard asks, his lip curling.

Bayard scowls at the guard. “Don’t talk to my bride like that.” He turns back to me, a quirked smile quickly replacing his frown. He places Ermengarde carefully back into my outstretched palms. Sensing my fear for the animal, he asks, “Who is this, Ell?”

“Ermengarde,” I answer. “My pet.”

“She is very sweet,” Bayard says, stretching out a fingertip to stroke between her perked ears. Relief floods through me.

“You can’t bring a rat into the royal palace!” Maxim protests.

Bayard waves a hand at his friend. “If it makes her happy, I don’t mind.”

“It’s not a matter of her happiness,” Maxim snaps back. “It’s unhygienic.”

“They’re not dirty animals,” I tell him, matter-of-factly. “I should know. A lot of rats lived in my attic with me.”

“And have you brought them *all* with you?” he asks, with dawning horror.

On cue, Jacques pokes his head up from the sack. He squeaks for attention, forcing me to acknowledge him. “Just these two …”

Bayard bursts into laughter.

“Iron preserve us,” Maxim mutters.

“Tell me,” I demand of the duke, scooping Jacques and Ermengarde into my arms and cradling them to my chest. “If I had faithful servants, would you allow them to accompany me to the palace?”

Maxim rolls his eyes. “What has that got to do with anything?”

I resist the urge to stick my tongue out at him. “You asked about a footman and a driver. What if I told you the fairy made Jacques and Ermengarde my servants for the evening?”

Maxim’s expression is cold. “I’d call you a madwoman.”

“Mad as a fox!” Bayard laughs. He picks Jacques up from my embrace and holds him up to the light of the window. “A handsome fellow. We’ll have to get them special food and pillows, won’t we, Ell?”

A flood of affection bursts to life in my chest for this prince. I’ve never met anyone as amiable as him. But warmth is quickly followed by another wave of guilt. Here is a wonderful man that I am temporarily depriving of his true love. I reassure myself that at least when I have disappeared, Bayard will keep looking for the real beauty from the ball. It will be like I was never here at all.

“There’s just one more question I have for you, my lady,” Maxim says, shining the head of his cane on the edge of his sleeve. “Why did you run from the ball so early?” His smile could cut flesh as he leans toward me, despite his disgust for my pets. “You and Bayard obviously get along so well—I’m shocked you would be so keen to leave him.”

My tongue goes dry, but inspiration quickly strikes, bright as lightning. I fix him with a beaming smile. “Why, it’s simple: the fairy told me the magic would only last until midnight. If I had stayed longer, I would have

been standing before the whole court in these rags I wear now. And I would have been stuck with no transportation home."

"Can you prove that?" Maxim asks, lip curling.

I open my sack, showing him my spare assortment of belongings. "Only in that I have no fine remnants of the ball yet with me. They disappeared when I returned home, or I would surely have kept them as keepsakes, would I not?"

Bayard shoots a stern look at his friend. "Max, lay off the questions. I've never known you to be so overprotective. Can't you see this is a happy day? I've found my love, just like you wanted me to. No need to get your hackles up now."

Maxim grudgingly inclines his head to Bayard. "Of course, your highness." Black eyes glint in my direction. "Endless apologies to you, my lady. We shall soon be the best of friends, I'm sure."

I highly doubt *that.*

I look out the window to find the evergreens slipping away, replaced by rolling farmland and the distant turrets of a city on the horizon. We're almost there.



THREE

THE ROYAL PALACE IS A MARVEL, ELEVATED ON A HILL FAR ABOVE the sprawling capital city, each of its windows illuminated from within and glowing like diamonds in the dark. Its square towers of white limestone stretch up as if trying to touch the clouds, connected by stately, sturdy walls. The tallest turret bears an elegant clockface, shining as white as the moon. I crane my neck to look out the window, feeling *safe* just looking at this palace: a centuries-old symbol of stability.

Bayard leans over to lay a soft kiss on the top of my head. “Welcome home, love.”

The gilded gates swing open for us, and our carriage rattles across a graceful stone bridge. The water of the Linden River rushes powerfully beneath us as the horses prance up to a steep set of marble stairs. “Be careful not to lose a shoe,” Maxim drawls at me as the carriage door pops open.

Stepping outside, I’m overwhelmed by the sheer size of the palace. How it towers over me. How the stairs seem to stretch, growing taller and taller. My heartbeat races. I’ve made it this far; what do I do next?

The obvious choice is to run now. I’m in a new city, far from Stepmother’s reach. I could board a ship to distant lands this very night—and yet my knees are too weak to support my weight. My legs quake at the sight of all this grandeur.

Someone in blue livery takes my bag, though I try to fight them. They say gently, “Your things will be taken to your living quarters, my lady.” And

what can I say? I let them abscond with the bag containing my furry friends. But now I cannot escape. Not until I've found my belongings again.

Bayard offers his arm to escort me up the intimidating stairs. As we reach the top, he points at the iron horseshoes hung over the great doorway. "See that? After my mother passed and my sister … well …" He shakes his head, distracted. "My father ordered iron to be set above every door and window in the palace, to prevent any trickster fairy from entering."

I gulp. I'm not certain I want to meet King Alaric. Surely he'll want to know where I allegedly got my fairy shoes. My story might have gone over well enough with Bayard, but the king seems … more radical.

The great double doors open from within. We enter a dazzling hall of white marble, overhung with a seven-tiered crystal chandelier that glimmers with candlelight. A team of cobalt-liveried servants bow at the sight of the prince. They whisper behind their gloved hands, clearly wondering why Bayard is arm-in-arm with a rag-wearing urchin.

Maxim's cane clicks on the marble behind us. He snaps his fingers at the nearest valet. "Alert the king to the prince's return." The smile he sends in my direction is as brilliant as the chandelier. "He's brought someone very important to introduce him to."

My stomach drops. "No! I couldn't possibly meet the king in this state. I'm not prepared!" If only I can convince them to let me slip upstairs and tidy up first—I could find my bag and disappear before being summoned to see the king.

But neither Maxim nor Bayard, to my eternal disappointment, take my concerns seriously.

"There's nothing to worry about!" Bayard laughs. "He's going to love you."

"Yes." Maxim oozes up to my other side, slipping his arm into my free one, trapping me between himself and Bayard. "The king will adore the young lady who *stole* his son's heart. Surely you can guess he's desperate for grandchildren?"

I shiver. Maxim's words are kind on the face of them, but he discomforts me endlessly. I would suspect him of knowing I'm a liar, but I can't come up with any reason he wouldn't accuse me to Bayard if that were the case.

Perhaps he simply believes that a woman who loved the prince wouldn't have run—and is trying to protect his friend from heartbreak. Or maybe he thinks a scullery maid isn't good enough for Bayard, and wants to sabotage the wedding and prevent a country bumpkin from becoming the future queen.

Before I know it, I've been marched through a maze of shining halls into a throne room dripping with gold. My head spins. I'd probably swoon if Bayard and Maxim weren't supporting me. There's a stabbing pain in my stomach, and somewhere in the distance the palace clock tower is chiming the hour, telling me over and over again that this was a *mistake*! *Mistake! Mistake!*

The throne room is so long it takes a few minutes to traverse. In that time, the room gradually fills with courtiers: women and men in silks of bright, eye-catching colors, all staring at *me.* It's overwhelming enough that I only notice the man on the throne when we reach its foot.

King Alaric is an older man than I'd expected, with shoulder-length hair the color of snow, and gray scruff at his cheeks, like he hasn't shaved in a few days. He has a rugged face: that of a military man whose skin was weathered by many campaigns in his youth. Now he's thin, but not insubstantial, as if even age could not take away his warrior's vitality. A heavy golden crown of interwoven fleurs-de-lis rests on his brow.

He does not look happy to see me.

Bayard hardly seems to notice his father's scowl. He bounds up the steps to the throne as I drop into a sweeping curtsy. "Father!" he shouts, excitable as ever, "I've found her, and she's an angel!"

Afraid to straighten from my curtsy, I peer at the king past some stray strands of hair. He raises a white eyebrow at me, skeptical. "You're saying your ridiculous plan worked, Bayard? That *this girl* fit the shoe?"

"Perfectly! Father, meet my future wife: Ellain DeBrun."

The king reluctantly rises from his throne, pacing down the dais steps to circle me. "I suppose that would make you the daughter of Anton DeBrun?" he asks.

I nod, looking meekly down at the richly accented carpet. "Yes, sire."

“An impoverished patrician,” the king sniffs. “By the end of his life, anyway. But I hadn’t imagined things were so bad his daughter should dress this shabbily.”

My cheeks burn with embarrassment. The king isn’t wrong, of course. When I was first born, we had quite a lot of money. But a combination of bad business deals, high taxes, and my stepfamily’s extravagance has reduced our coffers to almost nothing.

The king pauses before me. He plucks at the disheveled locks of hair that have come loose from my braid. “And your hair … you wore it powdered at the ball, and now it’s covered in soot. What color is it underneath all this grime?”

“Yellow, your majesty,” I say, eyes stinging.

The king puts his hand under my chin, tilting my face up and forcing me to rise from my curtsy. He lets out a considering huff. “Very blue eyes. And a face that’s symmetrical enough. I suppose you’d be rather fetching, if given a bath and comb.” He glances over to Bayard, who’s still standing by the throne, wringing his hands. Clearly, despite his assurances that the king would love me, he’s still anxious.

The king gives his son a grudging smile. “You’ve found yourself a pretty girl, and from a noble family, if not a powerful one.” He turns to Maxim standing off to the side, his hands resting on his cane, his eyes sharpened to pinpricks. “What do you think of her, Max?” the king demands.

My breath catches in my chest. Well, I’m doomed. It’s clear the young duke despises me, and he’ll tell the king so now.

Bayard lets out an exhausted laugh. “Max agrees with me, Father!”

The king gives his son an appraising look. “I’d like to hear it from *his* lips, all the same. Max has always been … a better judge of character than you.”

Bayard’s face falls, and in two bounds down the dais steps, he comes to grab my hand. He shoots an appealing look at Maxim, silently requesting backup.

The king presses Maxim for an answer. “Well, Maxim? What do *you* think of her? Speak honestly.”

Maxim paces forward, briefly covering a yawn, then shooting me a sly grin as he removes his gloved hand from his mouth. He lets the royal pair's demands hang in the air, drawing out the moment for maximum dramatic effect. He examines the ivory head of his cane, spinning it in his hand, before meeting the king's eyes and answering smoothly. "I think Ell is exactly the girl Bayard needs."

Bayard lets out a crow of triumph. All the air has vanished from my lungs; I can hardly believe that Maxim would come to my defense.

"And the slipper?" the king says, snapping his fingers at Maxim. "How do you explain her possession of a fairy trifle?"

Bayard becomes very still and quiet. Maxim pulls at the collar of his shirt. "Well, your majesty," he says, waving a graceful hand in my direction, "Lady Ellain has explained everything. It's quite on the up-and-up. Admittedly, the slippers were a gift from a fairy, but from one who owed her dear, departed mother a boon that had gone unpaid. Ell didn't initiate contact with the fairy. We shouldn't punish her just because our armies haven't yet succeeded in routing the fae from the land."

The king raises his hand to his chin, scratching and pondering. He shoots a glare at Bayard. "Well, I don't like it!" My stomach ties itself into a particularly unsettling knot. What will the king do? Send me home to my stepmother? Throw me in the dungeon?

Bayard makes a pained sound, and the king's face softens. "But as my son seems infatuated with her and I want grandchildren sooner rather than later …" King Alaric meets my gaze again, a slight smile crinkling his eyes. "Let us forget this unfortunate fairy business and speak of plans for the wedding."

A peal of shocked laughter bursts out of my mouth as Bayard wraps his arms around my waist and lifts me into the air. I can't believe it! The king *likes* me! The crowd of assembled courtiers applauds. Cheers fill the throne room, reverberating off the walls. Maxim puts two fingers into his mouth and whistles—the sound flits over my head like a butterfly in a garden.

King Alaric brings his hands together in a brisk clap. "Tonight, we feast!"

I'm enveloped in a whirl of flashing jewels and brilliant colors as courtiers rush to embrace me. Most shout their own names at me, alongside

a few kind words of congratulations. They smell overwhelmingly like perfume: various floral and citrus scents mingling to fill my nostrils with an expensive cloud. None of these people give off the sharp whiff of sweat, nor do they carry the chalky scent of fireplace cinders, or reek of ammonia, as people who have recently scrubbed a chamber pot might. When they reach out to pat my back or clasp my hands, their palms feel soft as silk; none of them have ever used lye to clean a flagstone floor.

The king's booming laugh is audible even over the cries of the fawning nobility. "And someone get this girl a change of clothes!"

Minutes pass while Bayard and I allow ourselves to be embraced and kissed and overpraised. It's all wildly strange. Before today, it had been years since anyone said a kind word to me, much less called me pretty. And now I stand here, face still smattered with soot, hair disheveled, in a dress that hasn't been washed in a week, and this menagerie of beauties cannot wait to admire my looks!

Well, except for the king. His compliments were more even-handed, balanced out by insults of roughly equal vehemence.

At last, Bayard tugs me free, leading me out into the glimmering hallway. His bright laugh upon seeing my shocked face is like soaring music. My knees go weak looking at him. He's so beautiful it feels like I'm staring at the sun. "Father is right! The court can be … a lot to deal with. I know that better than anyone."

I look back over my shoulder as the double doors swing shut. "Who … were all those people?" I gasp. Absurdly, I try to rattle off a few names, even though I don't plan to stay long enough to need them. "The woman with the silver sailboat in her hair … was she the Marchioness D'Artagnan? And the man, in the jacket with the epaulets … was he Count DeGlace or General D'Chamberd?"

Discomfort ripples across Bayard's face, so fast I think I've imagined it. "I wouldn't know who you mean." Bayard laughs, linking his arm genially with mine. "There were so many coming at us all at once! But I'm sure you'll get to know them all in time. Right now, I want to show you your room, and give you a chance to rest before dinner."

Gratefully, I fold myself against him. His presence makes Stepmother and her threats feel a world away. Hope flutters in my heart as I look up into Bayard's brilliant smile. I'm starting to truly believe he'll never hurt me.

My racing heart thuds to a brief stop as I consider how *I'm* hurting him. It should not *matter* that he is kind. I cannot stay, as much as I'm tempted. I am deceiving him, and he deserves better.

But then he tugs me along the hall and my pulse sprints forward again.

Everywhere we go, guards in brilliant, blue uniforms open doors at our approach. Bayard escorts me up two flights of stairs until we reach a hall lined with oil portraits of D'Harcourts all scowling down at me, the dirty scullery maid with the audacity to hold hands with a crown prince.

Finally, Bayard cheerfully announces we've reached "the royal wing." He indicates the king's quarters, then the entry to his own suite, as well as the rooms that were once allotted to his departed mother. Finally, he comes to a stop and carefully places his hands over my eyes, making me giggle helplessly.

"I want your apartments to be a surprise!" he tells me.

"You can assume *everything* about this day is a surprise to me," I reply.

But I walk carefully, eyes closed, led forward by Bayard. I can tell the room is lined with plush carpeting by the way my shoes sink into it with each step. A door creaks and we shuffle through. Finally, he removes his hands from my eyes and announces, "Your new home sweet home!"

That makes me laugh too—it's been years since my home seemed in any way sweet—but when my eyes focus on the room surrounding me, my mirth transmutes to a gasp. The walls are the color of a robin's egg, embossed with a pattern of gold fleur-de-lis. The four-poster bed must have been magicked into being before such things were illegal, because each post is formed from the trunk of a slender birch tree, their white upper branches braiding together into a frame that supports a gossamer canopy. A window seat with cushions of crushed velvet provides a perfect place to read. Glorious light will surely stream through those stained-glass windows come morning. Ermengarde and Jacques are already waiting for me on the seat, squeaking and gamboling about, sniffing at the contents of this strange, new

world. I feel a burst of relief to see them there—safe and sound and familiar.

Across from the bed, more jaw-dropping than all the rest, is a marble fireplace. It is unlit for now, but I can imagine it crackling merrily as I warm my hands by the flames in the wintertime. A porcelain vase of splendid white blossoms spills over the mantel, filling the room with the sweet scent of orchids.

My eyes sting, becoming a river. It's impossible to catch my breath. Instead of trying to form words, I throw myself at Bayard, wrapping my arms around his solid frame and burying my face in his chest. "Are these happy tears again?" Bayard teases. I nod vigorously, unable to speak.

There has never been a room more different than my drafty garret cell with its ancient mattress, creaky walls, and windows that break open in the slightest rainstorm.

How can I flee this place now? Now, when I've seen such a room as I've never imagined?

A knock comes at the door, and Bayard, brushing away my tears with the pads of his thumbs, calls for the newcomer to enter. A gorgeous young woman tiptoes into the room, wearing a beaming smile that reveals a deep dimple in each cheek.

"Trude!" Bayard exclaims, apparently thrilled beyond measure.

"Your highness," the woman says, dipping a graceful curtsy. She turns her flashing, apple-cheeked smile on me, and curtsies again. "And my lady! My name is Trude D'Chastain, daughter of the Marquis D'Chastain. I've just requested the king to allow me the honor of serving as your first lady-in-waiting, if you'll have me. I hope to be of use and a comfort to you during your transition to life at court."

Trude straightens up, her luscious brown curls *boing*ing like a spring from the motion. She is generously figured, with a thick waist and ample bosom set off to advantage by her elegantly tailored gown and bustle, cut from canary yellow silk. I've never seen anyone so … *stunning,* and I cannot imagine why Bayard would want a filthy serving girl like me when he is already acquainted with this beauty.

I stammer out an affirmative. “Yes, I—yes, I would welcome your help. It’s lovely to meet you, Trude.”

Trude squeals with delight and pulls me into an emphatic hug. “I’m so happy for you both! And I will henceforth be your truest friend and confidante, cross my heart.”

She whirls around, winking at Bayard. “And now you, your highness, must leave us. The king wants Lady Ellain dressed and ready for the feast as soon as possible.”

Bayard laughs, executing a half-bow in mine and Trude’s direction. “Of course, ladies.” He seizes my hand and gives my fingers another courtly kiss. “An hour until dinner seems an eternity to suffer your absence, Ell. I will think only of you until we meet again.”

He glances at Trude on his way out, eyes crinkling in a warm smile. “And thank you, old friend, for being here for Ell. Your kindness never fails.”

The door clicks shut behind my amiable prince as he goes, and my stomach lurches. I’ll be counting the minutes until we’re reunited too—but perhaps for different reasons. So far, he has been my lifeboat in a raging sea, my only assurance that all will be right.

I pray Trude doesn’t ask any tricky questions now Bayard is gone. I shudder to think what will happen if she proves half as shrewd as Maxim.



FOUR

BUT TRUDE DOES NOT SEEM AT ALL INTERESTED IN DISCOVERING inconsistencies in my story. She's much too busy trying to make me look presentable. She claps her hands together merrily, announcing, "Well, now we've got *the boy* out of here, let's get started! What have you brought with you to wear?"

I shrug and point to the stack of my belongings on the window seat beside Ermengarde and Jacques. My sheets and the shabby dress have been folded neatly by some servant's careful hands. Trude crosses the room, then stops, startled, when she spots the rats.

I rush forward to place a calming hand on Trude's forearm. "Those are my pets: Jacques and Ermengarde. They're really very nice, and soft. And clean. I promise they won't bite."

Mollified, Trude slinks toward the window seat and extends a hand slowly to Jacques. He raises his head like a dignified statesman to nuzzle at the tips of Trude's fingers. She bursts out laughing. "That tickles!"

Satisfied the rats are neither dangerous nor unhygienic, Trude reverts back to her original aim of inspecting my clothing. Her golden skin pales ever so slightly as she registers that the dress I've brought with me is even less suitable than the one I've got on. "We will … find you something else!" Trude suggests brightly. "Now, let's get you into a bath!"

My stomach does a funny little hop. "A bath?" I think back to the last time I'd had a chance to fill a tub with heated water and actually soak. It would have been years ago, an hour's work to lug buckets of water discreetly up the stairs while my stepfamily was asleep. Most of the time, I

just scrub at my face—and any other relevant bits—with cold water in the spare moments between waking and chores.

Trude chews her lower lip apprehensively, clearly wondering if she's offended me by suggesting I wash.

I laugh, grabbing her hands. I know the uncertainty of wondering if you've displeased someone, and I don't want her to worry for a second. "Oh no, I know I'm filthy! Just the thought of a bath is quite a pleasant surprise." I spin around, looking at the various doors leading to other rooms in the suite. "Just … point me in the direction of the pump, and of course, the bathroom, and I'll start filling up the tub!"

Trude looks even *more* horrified at this suggestion, and I frantically try to guess what I've done wrong. "You cannot think I was suggesting *you* prepare the tub! No, your ladyship, there are inlaid taps, and even if there were not, the servants would carry in hot water for you." She's searching my face—perhaps wondering how some unwashed know-nothing could have swept into the ball and captured the heart of the prince. This is probably completely at odds with the cultured, graceful noblewoman everyone saw him dancing with a few nights ago.

I clasp my hands together and look up into Trude's large brown eyes. "Trude … may I call you Trude?"

Trude bobs her head in a rush to affirm me.

"Okay. Well, Trude, I need to confess something to you." I gesture at my filthy dress and my falling-apart boots. "As you've probably guessed, I don't spend a lot of time among high society. That night at the ball was the … exception for me. I'm afraid I haven't a clue how I'm supposed to behave." I'm queasy as I prepare to broach my final question. To confess to her my great need, in order to disguise a greater secret.

"Would you perhaps consider being a guide for me? Show me what I ought to do, and how to make friends here? I'm completely at a loss, and I don't want to embarrass myself—or Bayard."

By way of reply, Trude wraps me up in another bear-like hug. "Yes," she whispers. "Yes, of course I will. I'd be happy to help. Trust in me: I know this court backward and forward—I've lived here all my life. Bayard and I were even tutored together as children, and I know he deserves the world.

I'll do everything I can to help you. He's had such a hard few years. I just … I just want you both to be *so* happy."

"And," I add, my voice pitching a little higher than before, "could we perhaps try to keep things discreet? I don't want people finding out what a bumbling rube I am."

Trude laughs. It's a crisp, carefree sound, like the jingling of gold coins in a purse. She releases me from the hug and squeezes my hands. "Your secrets are my secrets now, your ladyship," she promises.

"Ell," I tell her. "You can call me Ell."

Despite Trude's trusting nature, I feel uneasy. Not *quite* guilty, because nothing I'd said to her was an outright lie. But then, it wasn't the whole truth either. This dancing with words, playing with the truth—it's wrong. I should leave; lies of omission will certainly rack up in this palace.

But … perhaps I can enjoy just *one* bath before I go.

The bathtub in the adjoining room is a miracle unlike anything else I've seen so far. It's a tub of hammered copper, reflecting the flames from the gilded candlesticks that line the wall. The tub has become a source of light itself, glowing softly in the dimness. A servant with a starched white apron over her cobalt dress—she tells me her name is Zita when I press her for it—has already laid out a fluffy white towel for my use. I run a hand against its fabric and my fingers practically disappear in its depths.

Trude spins the left tap and water streams, hissing, into the tub. Zita crosses to a cabinet by the wall, its doors painted with grasping lilies, and removes a magenta glass vial and small wicker basket. As the water level rises in the tub, gentle curlicues of steam emanate from the surface, filling the room with a pleasant humidity. Zita removes the vial's stopper and pours a dash of its liquid into the bath, which immediately foams. She then reaches into her wicker basket and tosses in a handful of its herbal mixture, which floats at the surface, dotting it with muted color. I recognize mint leaves, sweet almonds, pine nuts, marshmallow root, and dried lily bulbs.

Finally, Trude closes the tap off, and the water stills. By now, it's blossomed into a veritable sea of froth, including a few rosy-hued bubbles large enough for me to see my reflection in.

Zita and Trude help me undress, which is ridiculous, because I'm wearing no more clothing than I was this morning when I dressed myself. When I'm bare as the day I was born, cheeks burning with shame and my arms covering the most private areas of my body, Trude guides me into the welcoming depths of the tub.

I let out an involuntary moan as the hot water disperses a layer of grime from my skin and begins uncoiling six years of tension from my shoulders.

"Nice, isn't it?" Trude asks me.

There aren't words to describe how wonderful this feels, so I just nod. I'm already ten times lighter than before stepping into the bath. I'm surprised I don't float on its surface. The water covers almost my entire body, lapping like a tide against the nape of my neck.

Trude kindly allows me a few minutes to soak and enjoy. The gentle mixture of sweet scents from Zita's herbs dances from the steam, clearing my airways as I breathe in deeply. Then, glancing at a clock in the corner, Trude says we should start the cleaning part of the itinerary.

Zita and Trude both produce some heavy-duty brushes on wooden poles, and each claims a part of my body to shine up. Zita scrubs at my back, while Trude pulls my left foot out of the water, attempting to buff away a lifetime of calluses. "Oh, so dainty!" she cries, examining the smallness of my foot. "No wonder Bayard couldn't find anyone else who fit your slipper!" Next, Trude inspects my hands, using a tiny metal instrument to pull the dirt out from beneath my nails. "Tell me if this hurts!" she trills. Luckily, it doesn't hurt at all. Trude is nothing if not gentle with me. She runs her hands against my own, murmuring to Zita, "Put in a household order for a week's worth of unicorn milk. Her hands are scratchy—we'll need to moisturize them well before the wedding."

I pull my hands back, self-conscious, to hide them beneath the water. "I don't mean any offense," Trude assures me. "Your hands are nothing to be ashamed of. It just proves you've put in a lot more days of hard work than most noblewomen in this palace."

"I noticed," I mutter, thinking of the way the nobles' soft hands had grasped at me.

“But still,” Trude presses on, not unkindly, “a princess’s hands should be smooth, if possible. And unicorn milk is the best thing in the world for smoothing out rough skin and blemishes.”

Finally, Trude’s nimble hands work on my bird’s nest of hair, detangling my braids, lathering my whole scalp with white lotion that smells of honey and strawberries, and finally dragging a comb through the various knots, calcified under layers of soot. “I’m so sorry!” she apologizes, trying to pull a brush through one especially stubborn snarl. “But I promise your hair will be all lovely golden curls when we’re—” And that’s when the brush snaps straight from the handle.

Trude and I stare at the brush, floating bristles-up in the slowly dissipating foam, for nearly five seconds before we burst out laughing. “I think,” I suggest, “this particular knot may be worth cutting off.”

Trude nods. “Now I know why you wore a powdered wig to the ball! Much easier.”

When all is said and done, my hair hangs clean, limp, and shining yellow down my back. Trude helps me out of the tub, and Zita wraps the lush towel around me. A knock comes at the bathroom door, and Trude squeals with delight and claps her hands together. “That must be your dress!”

I follow Trude back out into the main chamber, where a silk gown of the brightest, most vibrant pink I’ve ever seen is spread out neatly on the bed. It is undeniably beautiful, but while the dress takes my breath away, it’s not because I’m excited to wear it—it’s because this is exactly the kind of dress my stepsister Amalia would wear. She adores romantic colors—pinks and purples and mauves of all shades—and this is clearly a gown born from her wildest dreams.

“The valet inquired for dresses from one of the … more petite duchesses,” Trude says, all tact. “Won’t you look scrumptious? You’ll make a fantastic third impression on the court.”

Second, I mentally correct.

When I’m clothed and my hair has been pinned up in elegant ringlets, Trude leads me arm-in-arm from the royal wing to a cavernous room flickering with torchlight. When the doors open, a roar of approval from the assembled courtiers greets us. I glance upward, trying to figure out just how

tall this room is. My only coherent thought is that I deeply pity any servants who have to dust the great wooden beams overhead.

Long tables line the walls, forming a giant rectangle, with the king and Bayard seated in high-backed chairs at the farthest end of the room. Candelabras gleam among the many silver trays. Trude leads me across the center dance floor, empty until the conclusion of the meal. I probably look a fool, my mouth slack at the sight of this glorious feast. The tables groan under the weight of tempting culinary offerings: duck à l'orange toasted golden brown, hearty loaves of pumpernickel bread slathered in melting butter, scallion soup, venison and gravy, roasted potatoes, salad, candied fruits, flounder with lemon, grapes fresh off the vine, even a selection of oysters.

Perhaps it's alright I'm staying for dinner before I depart.

It takes an eternity to cross the vast floor separating the entrance from the royal table. When we finally stand before King Alaric and Bayard, Trude falls into a curtsy, and I rush to copy her. Bayard's face is oddly blank as he looks at me in my bright pink gown. With a pang, I worry that perhaps I don't clean up as prettily as he'd expected.

King Alaric slams the foot of his goblet on the table. "Our guest of honor has arrived! And looking far more regal than before." He gestures to an empty seat, also with a high, throne-like back, beside his own. "Lady Ellain, please do me the honor of sitting at my left hand."

At these words from his father, Bayard's face clears of his vacant look, his smile returning. Unspeakable relief floods through me as I circle the table to take my seat beside the king. When I reach my assigned place, Bayard leaps up to pull out my chair before a servant can. He seizes my hand and gives it another kiss. "Dear Ell," he murmurs, "you look so different each time I see you I can hardly believe you are the same person. But breathtakingly lovely in each incarnation." I instantly blush. I can't help it. Bayard is unlawfully charming—I've never known anyone to have such a way with words.

I settle into my chair, taking care not to trod on my gown's hem too much. The king reaches out a gnarled hand bedecked with rings to place it over mine. He raises my hand into the air and announces, "Now that my

soon-to-be-daughter is here, it is high time for us all to eat, drink, and be merry!"

The court lets out another flurry of cheers and begins digging in. A servant leans over my shoulder to fill my cup with bloodred wine. "Beware of that merlot, my dear," King Alaric chuckles to me. "It is exquisite, but if you are unprepared for its strength, it will knock you flat on your ass."

Someone coughs delicately beside me, and I notice with displeasure who's sitting to my left. Dressed in a new velvet waistcoat and jacket, this time in slate gray instead of coal black, Maxim watches events unfold out of the corner of his eye. He swirls the contents of his goblet with a grim smile and pipes up with, "Ah, but Ell has nothing to beware here. She is home at last, among her new family. Certainly, we will take great care of her."

I squirm to my right, dragging my heavy chair as many inches closer to the king as the space will allow. It's appropriate Bayard be seated at the king's right hand, but I do wish he was beside me now. Why do all of Maxim's words bear the nasty aura of doublespeak?

Glancing down the long table, I see Trude at the far end. With a warm smile, she leans forward to toast me before taking her first sip of wine. I mouth to her a plaintive wish we could have sat together.

"Oh, am I not enough for you?" Maxim drawls. "But naturally, you'll want more acquaintances at court than just Bayard and me. Allow me to provide introductions." He waves a lazy hand at the king's favorites, those allowed to sit at his very own table. Before beginning to rattle off names, he raises an index finger at me, cautioning, "Pay attention now, my lady. There will be a test."

I can't tell if he's joking, but Maxim doesn't seem to have a sense of humor, so likely not.

Maxim calls up courtiers from the top table to meet me one by one. They each leave their appointed seats and come to curtsy or bow before me. Maxim whispers in my ear, listing a few notable qualities about each person.

"Lady Josephine D'Accord. The finest racquet player in court. She knows all the gossip people share over the course of a doubles game.

“Baron Louis DeVere, owner and proprietor of the finest vineyards in the kingdom. I believe he’s responsible for the wine we are drinking tonight.

“The Comte and Comtesse D’Amiot. They are extremely well-connected in the foreign silk trade.”

I frantically try to retain all the new information. I’m ashamed to note it’s especially hard to concentrate with the wafts from Maxim’s expensive cologne overwhelming my senses each time he inches closer. It’s masculine and pleasant—far more pleasant than he himself is.

Over the king’s head, Bayard keeps catching my eye with an encouraging smile, or leaning forward to tell me I’m doing well. He’s an incredibly calming presence—at least as calming as it was to soak in that glorious bath.

Meanwhile, Maxim is like nothing so much as a vicious pinch.

As the evening goes on, King Alaric proceeds to get increasingly drunk. At a certain point—his teeth stained blue from all the wine—he decides Maxim’s introductions should cease so he may speak with me uninterrupted himself. With a wave of his hand, he banishes Maxim from the table altogether. When Maxim stands, his scent of smoke and sandalwood still lingers around me.

Maxim leaves us with a bow, a frown drifting onto his face like storm clouds. Several women spot him departing and quickly beat a path toward him to ask for a dance. He brushes them off with a haughty expression—I suppose he thinks he’s as far above them as he is above me. Some people are too handsome for their own good.

The king clears his throat, demanding my attention.

I shiver, though it isn’t cold. Maxim is a prickly, unpleasant fellow, but in the mere hours I have known him, I’ve come to learn what to expect, and a few minor things to appreciate. The king, on the other hand? He’s a dangerous enigma.

“You have probably heard about what happened to Princess Bernadine,” King Alaric says to me, his elbow on the table, scruffy chin resting in his hand.

I nod—Bayard’s sister. What a tragedy, especially after the death of the queen. I don’t think there’s anyone in Holbein who doesn’t know about the

princess's mysterious disappearance. "Yes, sire. I remember when she first went missing, the army searched the kingdom top to bottom for her."

"That's not the half of it," the king mutters. "She went out riding one day—she was a very fine rider, my Bernadine—and never came back from the royal forest. The work of those damned fairies, of course. How else does a girl go missing in a forest she has ridden through ten thousand times on ten thousand different days? Tell me!" He brings the palm of his hand down on the table forcefully enough to rattle the nearby saucers.

I jump a little in my seat, tense to my bone marrow. I watch the king's hand carefully, wary it might fly in my direction. "I—I'm afraid I don't know, sire."

King Alaric rolls his eyes. "It was rhetorical."

"I'm sorry," I say, shrinking into myself.

Fire surges behind the king's green eyes. He jabs his pointer finger into my face, close enough to make me flinch. "Princesses do not cringe. They do not apologize and whimper like trembling little milkmaids."

I can't breathe. I open my mouth to apologize again, but catch myself and clamp it shut. Instead, I twist a clump of my silk skirts in my hands to excise this new, nervous energy. Noticing my rigid stance, the king looks sidelong at me, a smile uncoiling like a languid snake. The rage flickers away from his face as quickly as it arrived. "You must not take my fits of anger too seriously, my dear," he tells me. "You are family now, and safe from any of my wraths."

I'm tempted to tell King Alaric that this hasn't been my experience with family. But as that doesn't seem to be the response he's looking for, I take a deep breath, fake a smile, and act boldly. I reach for the king's hand, squeezing it and saying, "I am grateful to count among my blessings a new father."

The king's expression instantly softens into indulgence. He pinches my cheek. "And I am pleased to have a daughter again." Still, he balefully looks me up and down for perhaps the sixtieth time, and observes, "You are inconveniently short, however. Do you suppose my grandsons will be as short as you?"

I take a long drink from my goblet of wine, savoring the warmth as it flows down my throat, before saying into the echoing confines of my cup, "My mother ate Shrinking Tubers in great quantities when she was pregnant with me, so I do not suppose it to be an inheritable occurrence."

A sharp burst of laughter comes from just over King Alaric's shoulder, where Bayard is leaning against the back of his father's chair. He extends a hand to me. "So that's why your feet are so very small, I'm guessing? Come, my miniature teacup. Let's dance."

A peal of giggles escapes me as Bayard takes my hands and tugs me to my feet, saving me from his father's undivided attention. I'm not sure if it's the wine going to my head, or the heady rush of exhilaration that *hell's bells, I'm actually getting away with this*, but being called a "miniature teacup" seems very flattering to me in the moment. However, when Bayard spins me toward the dance floor, my stomach leaps into my throat and I stagger to a stop.

He danced with the girl at the ball all night. Surely, she was a good dancer. Won't he know I'm not her when we get out on the floor and I underperform?

"What is the matter, my dearest?" Bayard says, tilting my chin upwards to give me a gentle peck on the lips.

"Oh!" I fake a beaming grin and pull up the hem of my gown to show him my slippers, which are several sizes too big, being loans from the court. "I just think I will be a tad more ungraceful than when we last danced."

Bayard throws back his head and laughs, promptly getting on one knee and removing the shoes—dyed the same pink as my gown—from my feet. This is *not* what I wanted. I wanted an out. But what can I do, when he is seizing my hand again and pulling me onto the floor?

Frantically, I think back to the days when a dancing tutor was brought in to teach my stepsisters about the art of court dance. I would sometimes sit in the hall outside, my head against the door, listening to their tutor count out the steps—*And 1, 2, 3, and 1, 2, 3, and spin! Spin!*—and imagine that I, too, was being prepared to go to fabulous parties and dance the night away. Sometimes in the evenings when the rest of the house was asleep, I'd waltz

in the garret, humming to myself, my arms up to embrace a suitor who wasn't there.

Well, there's a suitor here now. I lay my right hand on Bayard's shoulder, lacing the fingers of my left into his. His free hand settles on my waist, the music starts—a waterfall of trembling string instruments—and Bayard sweeps me into the center of the room.

My heart spreads its wings. We're not just fumbling our way through the steps, we move like we were made to be a pair. It's like all my years of attic fantasies have sprung into being. It's shockingly easy to follow the rhythm, to spin like the other women do, until it feels I've left the earth entirely. Perhaps I'm just rising to meet Bayard's level of excellence, and true, he's leading, holding me in those strong arms, but soon the smile I'm faking becomes all too real. We're alone in this room, for all I know. The floor is gone, and the ceiling too, and we are floating on air.

When the music stops, my head is spinning. I throw my arms around his neck and stand on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek. The room is dripping in yellow candlelight. I'm shaking all over.

I've never had a moment that sweet. Not even in my wildest dreams.

The orchestra begins playing a new song, and Bayard and I ready ourselves to launch into another flight around the room. But King Alaric stands from his place at the head table and taps the glass of his goblet with a meat fork, calling everyone's attention to him. "My loyal court!" he shouts, extending his arms. The music shrieks to a stop.

"We are delighted that my son's … eccentric means of finding a bride have paid off beautifully!" Alaric says. "We should not wait even a week to delay the start of their lives together." He inclines his head to us. "Every day matters when it comes to siring an heir, after all."

A nasty jolt brings me back to earth after the ecstasy of our dance. I need to get out of this court faster than I thought.

Bayard's nose wrinkles in distaste, and he presses his mouth to the top of my head, disguising his whisper as a kiss. "I apologize on his behalf, for his fixation on grandchildren."

Alaric is still talking. "Therefore, in accordance with my blessing of this marriage, we shall have the wedding occur in three days' time, at noon in

our throne room! All the arrangements can surely be prepared by then." He shoots a glare at the nearest steward, as if to say, *they'd better be.*

My heart stutters. Three days. Three days until Bayard and I are to be wed. This is happening faster than I'd ever imagined. It's a startling slap back to reality. I am a *liar.* I have had my bath, my dinner, my one perfect dance. I must leave now, before this wedding comes to pass.

Yes, there is a very large part of me that wants to stay—lies be damned. My instincts are screaming at me to seize this opportunity with both hands. To stay. To marry the prince and be happy and *safe.* And maybe, if there were a month between now and the wedding date, I could assure myself Bayard had come to love me in that time. Which would make my crime more forgivable, I suppose. But three days? This feels much more like I'm scurrying to steal my prize before his real love has time to present herself.

My stomach gurgles, and I press a hand to my abdomen to quiet the noise. Even my own body wants to betray my deception.

"Darling, are you alright?" Bayard asks, leaning down to check my face. "You've gone quite pale."

"I'm a little faint, actually," I admit. "Too much excitement, perhaps?"

Bayard's nimble fingers move to tuck a curl behind my ear. "Of course. We've traveled a long way, and I know meeting new people is always stressful for me. You should rest."

I nod at him, swallowing the dry lump in my throat. "That's a very good idea."

Bayard scoops me up by my waist, lifting me for a goodnight kiss, and then announces to the room how thrilled we are about our upcoming wedding. "I hope you'll excuse my bride's departure for the evening," he says, turning his toothy smile on the crowd. "She is very excited to meet you all, but we think a full night's sleep is necessary before diving into the many intricacies of event planning tomorrow."

The crowd laughs, bringing their hands together in rapturous applause once more. As we're turning to leave, Maxim appears in front of us, blocking our path. He seizes me in a sudden embrace.

"How fantastic about you and Bayard, Ell," he whispers in my ear, each word as sharp as a dagger and as quiet as the grave. "I truly think if my

friend had not tracked down that spectacular girl at the ball—his one true love in all the world—he would have died of a broken heart, as surely as if someone had shot him there with a crossbow bolt." He draws back, a tight smile on his face. Louder now, so everyone can hear it, he finishes off with, "So thank heavens his highness found *you*!"



FIVE

ON THE WALK UPSTAIRS, I PLAN IT OUT. I'LL GATHER MY THINGS, wait for the palace to quiet, and disappear in the dead of night. But then I see the guards gathered at my chamber door, all straight-backed and at attention, ready to protect me as I sleep. My vision blurs as anxiety overtakes me. How could I explain my departure to them? Or could I sneak past them?

The answer is obvious: I could do neither.

Zita helps me slip into a cotton nightgown embroidered at the neck and sleeves in silver and blue. If she notices my shallow breathing or a gleam of sweat on my brow, she says nothing. By this point, my gorgeous bed—with no fewer than four mattresses stacked on top of each other, all so large a horse could stretch out on top, and each clearly stuffed with untold thousands of goose feathers—taunts me with the promised respite of sleep.

And I don't have much of a choice otherwise, with the guards stationed outside. But even snuggling on what is practically a cloud, curled beneath a duvet of brocade and eiderdown, I learn I would have been better off reclining on my old bed, despite its threadbare blankets and the rusted springs of my ancient mattress.

Here, though my spine isn't being twisted in knots, my conscience is. Every time I close my eyes, I see Bayard, frozen in that terrible last image Maxim left with me. Looming in the dark, there is always the prince, an iron bolt embedded in his chest, a bloodstain slowly blooming across the white expanse of his collared coat. And in my hands, there's a crossbow.

I need to get out of here.

And if I cannot sneak away from a heavily guarded palace, then I need to be released by royal command. And risk royal displeasure in the process.

I don't know how late it is when I finally throw back the blankets, stagger out of bed, and pull on the floor-length robe that Zita left for me on a nearby armchair. I seize the candelabra on the mantel, light its three wicks with the match set left beside it, and abscond from the room. When I hit the hall, heavy candlestick in hand, I nearly crash straight into a guard stationed outside my door. The man, an older gentleman with a kind face, doffs his blue cap to me and bows, stepping into the small circles of light given off by my candles. "My lady, is something wrong?"

My breathing is shallow. "I need to find—I need to talk to the prince."

"Are you in danger?" he asks me, a frown creasing his lips. I wish, absurdly, that he didn't seem so nice. For years now, Stepmother had been locking me away for no reason at all. But when I am punished by these kind people, I'll know I truly deserve it.

"No," I say, trembling all the same.

"Then allow me to escort you."

I follow him down the hall, readying myself. I will confess everything to Bayard. He's been entirely wonderful so far, and surely he'll be angry with me for lying, but perhaps he'll be forgiving and allow me to leave the palace unharmed. But no matter the consequence, I can't let this go any further than it already has. I cannot trick a good man into marriage. If I were to continue this, what would that make me? Some black widow, like Stepmother? No. No, I'd rather die than be like her.

By the time we reach the prince's room at the other end of the royal wing, tears stream unwillingly down my cheeks. *How stupid*, I think, using my free hand to furiously brush them away. *He'll think you're crying in an attempt to evoke pity, rather than rage.* That isn't the goal—if I ever thought crying would make someone less angry with me, Stepmother had long convinced me otherwise. Yet I can't stop weeping for the imminent loss of Bayard and this life where people are *kind* to me.

But this life isn't mine. I've stolen it. And, thus, I cannot stay.

There are two guards stationed outside Bayard's apartments, and when they see us coming, my face wet with tears, they burst into activity. One

pulls out his knife, shouting to ask if there's been an intruder, while the other comes to flank me, checking for obvious injuries. He takes the candelabra from my grip and passes it off to his partner. Then he pulls my right arm up to the light so my robe sleeve falls back, inspecting the long, thin scar that divides the skin of my forearm, a remnant from years ago.

"I'm fine," I insist, pulling back my arm. But saying those words just makes me cry harder. "I just want to—to talk to the prince."

The guard bows sharply, allowing me entry into Bayard's room. He leads me through a decorative entrance, and then raps three times on Bayard's bedchamber door before entering.

Bayard must have been in a deep sleep, because he wrenches out of bed, horrified at the sound. He blinks stuporously, and in that strange place between sleep and waking, I don't think he recognizes either of us through the gloom.

The guard clears his throat. "Your highness, Lady Ellain to see you. Most urgently, I think."

"Ell!" Bayard exclaims, rubbing his eyes. As he squints at me, he notices the water streaks on my face. "What's wrong?"

I glance nervously at the guard. I suppose when this conversation is over, Bayard will call for him to forcibly remove me from the palace—or worse, lock me in the dungeon and throw away the key. Seeing my apprehension, the guard bows and retreats from the room to give us privacy.

Bayard's loose cotton shirt and breeches make him look vulnerable, much more human than in his princely finery. He crosses to the door and squeezes my shoulders. "Ell, you're scaring me. What's happened?"

The words tumble out of my mouth before I plan what to say. Unfortunately, they're accompanied by another storm of tears. "I can't marry you," I say. "I'm sorry. I'm so so so sorry—"

Bayard gives a yelp. "What? Ell, I don't understand!"

"I can't marry you!" I repeat, matching Bayard's panicked tone. "I can't. You don't love me—"

"Of course I do," Bayard insists, bringing his face close to mine and cradling my head in his hands. "I searched the kingdom for you."

“That’s just the thing …” I’m bleating like a frightened sheep. He isn’t getting it. But my brain shuts down, fighting me for every word. *Don’t tell him, you idiot. It’s not too late to walk this back. Only a fool would give up the safety and security of a prince’s love.*

“You really don’t love me!” I try again. The words “I lied to you” tremble on the tip of my tongue. As I try to force them out, Bayard claps his hands over my mouth. Not painfully, but still enough to shut me up.

“Ell, my darling,” he says, falling to his knees, his hands slipping down to grip my springtime green robe. “Please, I beg you, don’t say another word. This is too painful. I know exactly why you’re concerned about marrying me.”

“You do?” I say, brows knitting together. I am quite sure he doesn’t, but maybe Bayard is more perceptive than I gave him credit for.

Bayard gulps, a lost, dismayed expression on his face. “I’m afraid I haven’t been completely honest with you.”

I choke out a laugh. This is absurd. *Him*, not being honest with *me*?

“Please, I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me, because I can tell my dishonesty has caused you pain.” He takes a deep, shuddering breath. “Only two people in the world know this about me. Three, if you count my sister, but who knows where she is.”

I make a noise of disruption, but he holds up a hand. “Please, love, just let me get this out. I know you must be furious with me. What man needs a *shoe* to locate the woman he loves? Can’t he just remember her face? The rest of the court thinks you never took your mask off, but you and I know that’s not true.”

My heart stutters, unsure. If the girl at the ball had taken her mask off, how on earth could Bayard have mistaken me for her?

“But the truth is,” Bayard says, spreading his hands, “I can’t recognize my own face in the mirror most days.”

I’m not sure how we got here. “I—I don’t know exactly what you feel guilty about,” I cautiously try, “but we all do things we aren’t proud of sometimes. You’re still … you.”

Bayard bites his bottom lip, a shy smile twisting there. “No, my love, I’m not speaking metaphorically. I can’t recognize faces. Even of the people

dearest to me. Even my own. I mean, if I look in a mirror quite consciously, logic dictates that I am the one staring back, but I don't recognize anything in my reflection. Sometimes, if I look in a mirror unexpectedly, I think to myself, 'Who is that man, and why is he staring at me?'"

Understanding clicks into place, like a door unlocking. The strange, blank looks Bayard gives me whenever I enter the room, and how they melt into a smile the moment someone says my name. "But no," I protest, turning the day over in my head, "That's not true. You recognized Trude earlier, the moment she entered the room!"

"Ah, yes," Bayard says, moving to get off his knees. He takes my hand, cautiously, as if unsure whether I'll rip it away, and leads me to the edge of the bed. I allow myself to be led, curiosity getting the better of me.

When I'm settled, Bayard admits, "You're right. I did recognize Trude. But only because she smiled. When I look at a face, I see the various elements of it, and usually they mean nothing to me. But sometimes, there's one distinct feature—I don't know, a wart on someone's nose, or maybe an eyepatch—I can use to identify someone. Even when we were children in the schoolroom, I could always recognize Trude because she has the sweetest dimples in all the world, and those aren't terribly common." He shakes his head. "But that doesn't work for everyone. If they don't have something quite unique to their face, I'm lost. I always knew my sister because she had livid red hair, but I couldn't recognize my own father if he didn't wear a crown."

"So," I say, my head buzzing with this new information, "so looking at me right now, there's nothing you see to mark me as me?" Or to mark me as *not* the girl from the ball.

Bayard puts his hand under my chin, tilting my face this way and that, as his father had done earlier. "You have very blue eyes," he says, parroting the king's words. "And like you said, yellow hair. But half the women in court have yellow hair and blue eyes, so that's not very helpful. Your teeth are straight, so nothing useful there. If one of them overlapped, that would be a marker." His face smooths out, spotting something. He points to my nose, then taps it on its slightly upturned tip. "Sometimes, when you're thinking, your nose wrinkles a little." He laughs, adding, "And it scrunches

up even *more* when you're mad. That's something that's just yours, but it's not constant, and not visible from a distance."

He drops his hand from my chin, sighing. "You're just like Max. He's my best friend, and there's nothing in his looks I can hang onto—except maybe the black eyes, but that's not *totally* unique. You know, I asked him to carry that silly cane around, the one with the wolf's head? Whenever he's holding it, I know it's him."

Bayard looks so sad I can't help myself. I wrap my left arm around his right, threading my fingers into his. He melts into me, head tilting to rest against the top of mine. "Ell," he breathes, "you have to understand. Not recognizing you isn't a commentary on the depths of my feelings … or lack thereof. It's entirely unrelated. I love you desperately, even if I don't know your face."

I rub my right hand against his shoulder, mulling all this over. "But … why? Why do you love me? All told, we haven't known each other twenty-four hours." That statement is true whether I had been the girl at the ball or not. "What can your love be based on, if you don't even know what I look like?"

Bayard gives a soft laugh. "A side effect of my condition is that looks don't matter to me one bit. They're completely irrelevant to what love is about. I don't love you because your face is symmetrical. In fact, I tend to think it's much better to be interesting looking than handsome. I wish I had something strange and unusual about my face so I could recognize myself!"

Laughing, he buries his face in my hair, speaking quietly. "I love you because, from the first moment our hands touched, it was like lightning. I felt like we were made for each other. Like you were my other half."

"And now?" I ask, glad I don't have to look him in the eye. "Do you still feel that way now?"

"Are you kidding?" Bayard asks, bringing in his soft mouth to kiss my cheek, my ear, my neck. "My feelings grow stronger every moment I spend with you. I felt it again when we danced tonight. I feel it in your sweet, soft ways. The gentleness you have toward your pets. I feel it in your laughter—the way you're not afraid to talk back to Max. By the way, most of the time your nose scrunches up, it's when you're talking to him." He sighs happily,

like his whole life is falling into place. “And I want to spend the rest of my life discovering a new reason to love you each day.”

My heart thunders beneath my nightgown. If that’s true—if Bayard’s affection isn’t based on the beauty of the girl he met at the ball, and he still feels an electric connection to me, as he did with her—then why should I give him up? I *want* to be here, with him, and that girl ran away. If he felt the same dancing with me as he did with her, then why should she have ownership of him just because she got to him first? If Stepmother hadn’t locked me in the cellar, if I’d been *allowed* to go to the ball, maybe Bayard and I would have met then, and we might have still ended up how we are tonight… .

Then Bayard hits me with the final blow. “Please don’t leave, Ell. I don’t want to be alone anymore. I wasn’t raised to be the heir, and when you’re a prince who can’t recognize faces, every second of your life is fraught with tension. If I accidentally reintroduced myself to a foreign diplomat I’d already met, we could be at war *like that.*” He snaps his fingers. “I’m not cut out for this. Bernadine was supposed to succeed our father, not me. But with you here? I feel so much calmer. Like I finally have someone I can be honest with, who’ll accept me the way I am. Please don’t leave.”

I close my eyes, a deep breath shuddering through me. It’s now or never. In this moment, I either have to tell Bayard the truth, or keep it buried forever. Lock my lies in an iron box, or come clean and be all alone in the world. And why should I be alone? Why, after six years of daily fear and pain, should I toss away this happy ending?

I open my eyes, allowing myself a shy smile. “Okay,” I tell him, clasping his smooth hands. “I’ll stay. For the rest of my life, I’ll stay.”

Bayard leans in to give me a tentative, polite kiss. I let him, sealing a pact between us. “No more running away?” he asks.

I think of my hundred plans to escape Stepmother’s house, crystallized in the flickering shadows of a drafty attic. For years and years, my fondest desire was simply to run away and not look back. “No more running away,” I promise.

Bayard rewards me with another short, chaste kiss, then stands, going to light a few candles about the room, filling it with a warm glow. I lean back

on the bed, letting my clean hair fan out around me, and stare at the velvet canopy above. When Bayard returns and stretches out beside me, he's holding a midnight blue box. "I have a gift for you," he murmurs.

I roll onto my side, the better to look at him, and he opens the box to reveal two glimmering earrings the likes of which I couldn't have imagined. My breath catches. Their bases of pearls and diamonds wink like stars in the dancing candlelight. From each base dangles a teardrop sapphire smaller than my thumb but significantly larger than my thumbnail. "Do you like them?" Bayard asks, reaching out to tickle my ear. "I know they're ostentatious, but the largeness is the point. If you always wear these in public, then I'll be able to spot you from a distance. No more confusion."

"They're beautiful, Bayard." My throat is tight with emotion. Not because of the extravagance of the gift, though that is astounding, but because he just told me he gave a similar identifying gift to Maxim, his very best friend. This underscores that I matter to him. Really matter. I try to form the words to thank him, but I'm not as eloquent as him. "It's—it's been a long time since someone … cared about me. I can't tell you how much this means."

Bayard inches closer to me on the bed and tenderly affixes each earring for me, clipping them to fasten at my earlobes. Then he pulls me close to him, resting my head against his chest. I breathe in the smell of soap and saffron, and—finally, finally, finally—I'm at peace.

After a few minutes of comfortable silence, Bayard admits, "I'm so relieved you're staying. For a second, I wasn't sure I could convince you."

Emboldened, I reach up to tap the tip of his nose. "Well, you're very persuasive. And being so handsome doesn't hurt your chances either."

Bayard gives a booming laugh. "Why, thank you. I suppose I'll take your word on that last bit."

I lean on my elbow, studying him. "You can't recognize yourself in mirrors, perhaps, but surely you know you're pretty?"

Bayard flops over onto his back, grinning. "I don't know how to judge myself!"

"But people must tell you you're handsome all the time!"

Bayard nods emphatically. “Yes, they tell me I’m handsome all the time. They also tell me I’m brilliant and gracious and the world’s best dancer. But, as I’m a prince, I choose to take those words with a grain of salt and consider that perhaps they are lying to flatter me and increase their standing at court.”

I suck on my teeth, remembering the way my stepfamily fell over themselves at his arrival. They were willing to crush their own toes and slice their skin open to have him. I can see how living among constantly fawning people would make someone question objective truth. And my lies probably aren’t helping.

But I push that thought away—Bayard chose me. He begged me to stay, and I’m staying.

I lay a hand on Bayard’s cheek. “You’re very handsome. Trust me.”

“I do,” Bayard says. He reaches for my hand, running his own down my forearm in a light, tickling caress. He pauses, brow furrowing, when he reaches the raised scar the guard noticed outside. “What’s this, love?” He tilts my arm to inspect it.

I shrug, uncomfortable. “Just a scar.”

“Quite a scar,” Bayard muses. “It looks like you’ve seen battle.”

My head grows dizzy and hot. I pray Bayard didn’t note his dream girl from the ball as having milky, unblemished arms. My throat constricts. “I broke my arm when I was thirteen.”

Bayard’s face darkens, and so does his tone. “*How* did you break your arm?”

I don’t say anything. It’s not something I go around telling people. Not just because I don’t want sympathy, but because for years and years, no one would have believed me if I did.

“Ell,” Bayard presses me, sounding passably stern, as if he suspects the truth. “How did you break your arm? Did you fall?”

My vision is hazy now. “Yes,” I tell him, my voice like the tiniest squeak from a mouse. “A little fall down the stairs. The bone splintered through my skin.”

But that was just another lie. How could I tell Bayard what really happened? He’d only pity me. And I can’t bear to see pity cloud his eyes,

eclipsing the love he says he bears.

I'd do anything to keep that love for me intact.

I am not sure Bayard believes me this time … but he lets it go, for now.



SIX

I WAKE IN BAYARD'S BED, EARRINGS STILL ON, MY HEAD AGAINST HIS chest. He's still serenely asleep, and the light of the rising sun from the window makes his bronze hair, and even his eyelashes, glow red. As I sit up, his hand—previously resting protectively over the back of my head—drops away. My stomach is churning, and for a moment I don't know why. My ears are perked for the slightest sound: the ringing of an impatient bell, my stepmother shouting my name. The noisy birds in the garden below elevate my pulse, because I instinctively feel their song is mocking me. *It's dawn, you idiot,* they say. *You should have been up hours ago. How will you ever have breakfast and the washing done in time now?*

I swallow a dry lump in my throat and take three deep breaths. One breath for every family member I remind myself I *don't* have to cook breakfast for today.

I lean down, laying a kiss against Bayard's temple. He stirs, a faint smile on his face. "You're an early riser," he mutters.

"For years now," I tell him.

"Must you go?" Bayard yawns, turning over and drawing the covers closer.

"Yes," I say, smiling fondly at him. "I'm awake, and there's no sleeping again."

I return to my room, which is aglow with the pink dawn. Ermengarde and Jacques are back on the window seat, dozing in the rainbow sunbeams. My bedlinens are violently askew from my night spent tossing and turning with

guilt, so I quickly remake the bed, at once smoothing out the covers and smoothing away any lingering qualms. I made Bayard a promise last night to stay. I have no intention of breaking it.

"What do you think you're doing?"

A voice comes from the doorway leading to the suite's other rooms. I glance over to see Zita, her jet-black hair pinned neatly in a braided coil, her lustrous skin the same reddish brown as a gleaming copper coin. She is standing with a posture so straight that it lends her an almost military bearing; her cobalt uniform is scrupulously clean and pressed to perfection. I notice her eyes are narrowed in suspicion, as if she can see into my thoughts and disapproves of everything I'm hiding.

I'm surprised to hear Zita speak so forcefully to me. When I asked for her name last night she'd been reluctant to give it, a behavior I'd attributed to shyness. But the girl standing in my doorway looks anything but shy now. She's all sharp bones and even sharper expressions.

I shrug, actively stopping myself from shrinking at her tone. If I want to appear less guilty, I need to cultivate an aura of surety. A cool and confident air. "I was just making the bed," I explain.

"Oh really?" Zita says, stomping forward. "Well, that's my job."

I restrain a laugh. "But it's nothing; I always make my bed at home."

Not home, I remind myself. *That place will never be home again.*

"It may be nothing to you," Zita snaps, "but the cleaning in these apartments falls to me. That is my job. I do the cleaning, and in exchange I get paid. Tell me, do you think I continue to get paid when the head steward finds out the little princess is doing my work for me? No. I get sacked, is what I get. So leave off."

Despite my resolution to stay confident, my skin itches under the heat of Zita's stare. I try to reduce the conflict with an off-handed comment. "Oh, it's just that I like cleaning… ." Not true. I don't like cleaning, but I'm anxious when I'm not doing it, so I do it.

"Oh, you like cleaning?" Zita asks, raising a dark eyebrow. "Bully for you. I don't, but it's how I make a living, so again, leave off."

I raise my hands in surrender. "You've got it. I won't clean again. I think we've gotten off on the wrong foot here. It's nice to meet you." I stick out a

hand for Zita to shake. She frowns consideringly, then accepts it with a firm pump. It's almost reassuring that her hand is rough and not smoothed by years of idle living and lotion application.

"My lady," she says.

"You can call me Ell," I tell her, hoping to begin a friendship and therefore never have an interaction like this again.

Zita sucks on her teeth. "With respect, my lady, no." She turns away from me, slipping a rag out of her apron pocket and moving to dust the mantel. "And where in blazes is the candelabra?"

I'm dizzy and confused, totally lost as to why this maid seems to hate me. I have a frantic thought that perhaps Zita is the woman Bayard danced with at the ball, but a simple glance at her gray uniform shoes tells me she wouldn't have fit the glass slipper. This anger comes from something else. "A guard has it," I say, waving away her concerns for the missing hardware. "Why won't you call me Ell? We're going to be seeing a lot of each other. It seems best we get familiar. You know, become friends."

Zita flicks her rag in annoyance, and a particle of dust flies off it, dancing in the sunlight from the window. She folds the scrap of fabric and returns it to her apron, then points at the clock on the mantel, its small hand pointing to the sky. "A new hour has just begun, mistress. Let us make a deal to be familiar—and thus honest, as only people on the same level with one another can be truly honest—for five minutes, and then never again."

I cross my arms, drawing my robe tight, feeling a chill in the air. "Alright, deal. Five minutes of honesty. Why don't you want to call me by my name?"

Zita's mouth thins into a smirk. "Because you are nobility. Soon to be royalty. It's one thing for you to be chummy with Lady Trude. Ladies-in-waiting are companions who *play* at work—but in the end she's a noblewoman just like you. No one will ever ask her to scrub a chamber pot. But *you* make the laws of the land, and you can change my life on a whim. Today you want to be friends. You want me to call you Ell. Tomorrow, or next week, or next month, you'll likely change your mind and say a maid calling you by anything less than your title is impertinence. You could have me fired then, or thrown in the stocks, or even into the dungeon. I don't

know when the change in you will occur. But that's the truth of it. No matter how sweet a mistress seems, she never forgets she is the mistress and you are the servant."

She gives a casual jerk of the shoulders. "I don't want the rug pulled out from under me next month, is all."

Indignation heats my cheeks. "But you don't understand. I'm not like that. Ask anyone who brought me here. I was a servant to my stepfamily for years. I have calluses on my hands; I know how to scrub a pot. I'm not going to be some tyrant! I'm just like you."

Zita wags her finger at me. "No. No, you're not. Not anymore. Because you just said I should ask someone who brought you here. That'd be … who? The prince? The grand duke? I'm not allowed to talk to those people. And even if you're telling the truth now, even if you stay humble and sweet your whole life long, do you think the king will take kindly to a maidservant speaking to his daughter-in-law like an equal? No. He'd have me thrown out of here. And then how do I pay bills? How do I eat? Will you sell those fine earrings you're wearing to send money back to my family?"

I look down, shuffling my bare feet against the ornate carpet. My hands fly self-consciously to the earrings Bayard gave me. Exhaling in a huff, I say, "Well, if I'm really so bad as all that, you're taking an awfully big risk speaking so boldly to me."

"I lack tact," Zita says, raising her chin. "It's been said. It's one of the things Princess Bernadine liked best about me, back when I was *her* maid, *her* confidante. But those days are done—and all they got me was a load of trouble when she up and disappeared in the forest. I'm not making that mistake twice."

A shiver runs through me.

I exhale deeply, trying to gather my thoughts. "Thank you for your honesty, Zita."

Zita smooths out her apron and gives me a nod. "You're welcome. It's the last honesty you're likely to hear in this place. You watch out when you pick your other ladies-in-waiting, mind. They'll be jostling to join your

retinue soon enough. They all long for royal influence. Lady Trude is mostly harmless, but this court has plenty of vipers itching to bite you."

I nod, studying Zita's face. I appreciate her warning about the nobility, and I see where she's coming from with everything else. I think of all the scenarios with my stepmother in which there was no path to victory, or even a path to something other than painful defeat. Though I'd like to think of my maid as a friend, that wish pulls Zita into a world of confusing choices, all of which would likely hurt her somewhere down the line. I don't want to do that to her. "I apologize," I say, fighting to keep my tone even. "I'll respect your boundaries from here on out and … endeavor to do right by you. To never put you in a difficult situation."

Zita's shoulders square. She nods. "Thank you."

I glance at the clock. Less than thirty seconds of honesty left. "And before our time is up, I'd like to tell you I admire you. I wish I had the bravery to speak to my stepfamily the way you just talked to me."

"Well," Zita says, her canny eyes looking me up and down, "in that case, I'll say that while we can't be friends, I think it speaks well of you that you at least had the inclination."

In a few minutes' time, there's a knock at the door to the apartments followed by a chef wheeling in a silver tray. Zita carries it into my bedroom and lays it on a low table by the fireplace. When she whips off the gleaming cover, a symphony of tantalizing smells greets my nose. Poached quail eggs, two strips of bacon, potatoes drizzled in melted cheese, and even a soft, flaky pastry covered in powdered sugar, reminding me of the untouched first snow of winter. The chef follows Zita into the room, making a very low bow in my direction, and with a gesture toward the rats on the windowsill, takes the lid off a second, smaller tray, which contains a selection of bread crumbs, brown rice, and fresh fruit.

I thank the chef sincerely for thinking of my pets, and with a broad smile, he insists that it is "no trouble, no trouble." Then, with a sharp gesture toward Zita, he orders, "You tell me anything in particular she likes, eh?"

Zita shoots me a knowing look, as if to say, *You see the difference between us now?*

Trude arrives to help me dress shortly after breakfast is served, bouncing enthusiastically into the suite. Unfortunately, the next loaned dress she produces is even less my style than the one from yesterday evening. Worse, it reminds me just as strongly of my other stepsister, with its very Freida-like hue of acid green. Looking into the mirror and fighting the urge to retch, I ask Trude, "Is there any way we can communicate to the seamstresses working on my wardrobe that I never want to see this color again?"

Trude stares at my reflection in wide-eyed horror. "I think that would be best. This shade doesn't do a *thing* for you." I laugh, assuming nobody else at court will dare tell me the dress is ugly to my face. They'll probably all pretend it's the very height of fashion as long as it's worn by the royal bride-to-be.

After dressing, I spend the morning being swept around the palace to oversee various preparations for the wedding. Be it flowers, silverware, music, or wine, I am equally ignorant about all of them, relying entirely on Trude in matters of taste. I'm intensely grateful to have her at my side. When the head seamstress makes me examine about fifty sketches for potential bridal gowns, I admire Trude's extraordinary competence as she rattles off instructions to an assistant about what I want—well, what *she* wants for me to want—for my day-to-day wardrobe. "Obviously, a wide range of blues, particularly some in the D'Harcourt cobalt. A few deeper regal purples, violets, and plums. But we'll mostly live in a range of pastels. Blush and palest pink, buttercream yellow, mint green, lilac, powder blue, et cetera. Just think delicate, and youthful, but still maintaining a royal gravitas in the silhouettes… ."

It really is a shame Trude isn't the royal bride. She actually knows what she's doing.

Next, we visit the palace kitchens, and the same heavily-accented chef who brought me my breakfast runs through possibilities for the wedding menu. It's extraordinarily strange to stand in the cavernous kitchens, which are filled with a regiment of highly trained chefs wielding very sharp knives, plus a navy's worth of scullery maids. They bustle around in a

perfectly choreographed dance. There aren't windows here, being underground, but it's brightly lit by torches and flaming hearths.

I compare these magnificent surroundings with the kitchen back home, which was my own special domain, considering my stepmother and stepsisters didn't have a clue how to cook. My kitchen had gorgeous windows, through which golden sunlight streamed on a clear day. I was usually left to my own devices there, as they discovered early on it was sometimes visited by the manor rats, who were poking around for food. But other than the rats, I was always alone. That was a blessing—I couldn't be struck when I was the only person in the room. But what I wouldn't have traded for a little bit of friendly company. Another servant to pass the time with.

Everything here is bustling and loud. Envy burns bright and hot in my chest.

I direct my gaze to the head chef, wanting to get out of here as quickly as possible before I start to cry. "I think I'll yield to your years of experience."

The chef smiles, closing his eyes like a contented cat. Clearly, this is exactly what he was hoping I'd say.

Finally, it's time for lunch. The meal is held in the same hall as last night's dinner, but it's nowhere near as formal. A tremendous relief. The king isn't here, and everyone who is already seated is eating at their own pace, not waiting for anyone of high rank to begin the meal.

There's another major difference though, which is that Bayard's face lights up immediately upon my approach to the royal table. The glimmering earrings he gave me are fulfilling their desired function. "Ell!" he says, reaching out to punch Maxim jovially in the shoulder. "Isn't she fantastic? When she walks into the room, you can't look away."

Maxim spears a piece of his braised lamb and raises it to his mouth. "Yes, it would be hard not to fixate on a dress that bright."

I scowl, taking the seat beside Bayard and sticking my tongue out at Maxim. Bayard laughs, reaching for my hand. "Yes, that's exactly the spirit to take with him. Max has a tongue sharper than a dagger, so we all need to give as good as we get."

“A challenge for you, Bayard,” Maxim replies, “as you are too kind to fight back, even verbally.”

Bayard promptly proves Maxim’s accusation right by letting out a booming laugh and slapping Maxim on the back rather than arguing.

Maxim’s dark eyes flit toward me. “Ellain, are you to join us in today’s pre-wedding festivities? The men of the court will be heading into the woods this afternoon for a celebratory hunt. If you come, I’ll rescind all cruel comments on your dress, for no other attire could ensure so completely that you’ll stick out among the brush. There will be no tragic hunting accidents today, I’ll tell you that.”

I scrunch my nose at Maxim, saying, “If you want reflective gear of your own, I’d be happy to lend you a gown.”

Maxim settles back in his chair, taking another bite of his meal, as if unwilling to dignify my quip with a return volley. A rush of pleasure and pride brings heat to my cheeks. Our banter has morphed into pitched battle yet again, and this time, I’ve won.

“What will you be hunting?” I ask Bayard.

“There’s a herd of elusive white deer in the royal forest,” he explains. “It’s traditional for the court to spread out and try to bring one home to serve at a wedding feast.”

My brows knit together in concern. “But isn’t the forest dangerous? What about the fae?”

Bayard waves away my worry. “Oh no, we take precautions. We’ll all be carrying iron crossbows and wearing red cloaks, so the fae will likely stay away.”

I twist my fingers under the table. “What do the red cloaks do?”

Maxim taps the edge of his knife against his plate, as if excising nervous energy. “The fae despise red. Since human blood contains small traces of iron, the color inspires fear. They stay away from it, whenever they can.”

Bayard brushes his hand against mine. “You should come. The forest is gorgeous. And escorted by us, you’ll be completely safe.”

I incline my head, blushing. “Alright. Besides, I’ll confess to wanting to escape the wedding planning. I have no opinions on anything! I fear I’m disappointing everyone.”

“Oh, not at all,” Maxim drawls. “They want nothing so much as for you to tell them they can rule their own domains.”

When my belly is pleasantly full with bread and lamb, Bayard seizes my hand and, in his excitement, practically drags me into the palace’s rear grounds, which bloom with greenery. He calls for a red cloak in my size to be brought, then steers me to an area lined with freestanding targets. “Let’s get you armed and teach you to shoot,” he says.

A servant fetches a crossbow, an intimidatingly heavy invention of black metal constructed of sinister curves and angles. Bayard positions it in my arms and shows me where the trigger is. “Have you got it steady?” he asks.

I nod cautiously, feeling the full weight of this death machine in my arms.

“Great!” Bayard says. “Now you just need to get the stance right.” He snaps his fingers in Maxim’s direction, where he’s lingering at the edge of the nearby stables. “Max, you’re a better shot than me. You should show Ell how best to aim.”

Maxim takes his sweet time wandering over to us, a thin smile twisting his handsome features. “As my prince commands,” he says. “But then you should go speak to the stable hands and select our horses. If we delay the court setting out, they’ll use the time to get falling-down drunk.”

Bayard dips into an obliging half-bow to his friend and walks backward toward the stables, throwing up both thumbs to me as he goes. “You’re in good hands!”

My arms already feel tired from the weight of the bow, but Maxim quickly takes a position at my back, steadying my hands and drawing me close to him as he lifts and aims the bolt at a distant target. A charge passes between us, almost as if I was struck by lightning at his touch. My breath catches in my throat—what is this feeling, exactly? Mutual hatred, I suppose. It *must* be hatred, for it could not reasonably be anything else.

Maxim’s breath is hot against my ear as he whispers, “I have to commend you on your determination. I thought for sure you would’ve confessed to your deception and fled by now.”

My body stiffens, and cold dread pools in my stomach.

“Surely you knew *I* knew you were lying?” Maxim hisses. “Or did you underestimate me, as I underestimated you?”

I’m trapped with my back against his chest, my arms pinned inside his surprisingly muscular ones. A cloud of his cologne—that now-familiar sharp, smoky musk—thickens the air around me. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I demur, glad I don’t have to meet his dark, cunning eyes. I fear if I return his mesmerizing gaze, I might spill secrets I’d far rather keep.

“No more lies, Ellain,” Maxim says. “We’ve progressed beyond that. I know you aren’t the girl from the ball. So why don’t you just tell Bayard, and save me the trouble of informing on you myself?”

My heart pounds against my ribcage, like a frantic knock at a door.

“Well?” Maxim says, impatient. He removes his arms from their stranglehold on my posture, spinning me around to face him, crossbow still raised. “Go *tell* him. Now.”

There is something about his rush to get me talking that gives me pause. Something in the twitch of his lip as he points me at the stables. I glance over my shoulder, checking no servants or courtiers are near. “Why?” I ask, suddenly suspicious. “Why would you give me this chance to tell Bayard?”

“Because,” Maxim sneers, his eyes crackling with hatred, “I am very kind.”

“Now,” I coo, straightening my spine, very aware I’m holding a deadly weapon. “That doesn’t have a ring of truthfulness to it.”

Maxim pauses, looking down his aquiline nose at the tip of the iron bolt loaded on my crossbow and ready to fire. He mutters, “Don’t make me tell him myself. You’ll regret that. The king will ensure your end is much more painful if I’m forced to unmask you.”

And maybe it’s the purveyor of cold death in my hands, or maybe it’s the color of the gown I’m wearing, silently urging me to be like Freida, to fight even when it’s no use … but I call his bluff. “Why don’t you go do that?” I ask him.

Maxim’s pretty mouth twitches again, but he says nothing.

“Your loyalty lies with Bayard,” I tell him. “Or, at least, it should. But you haven’t told him yet. Why? You’ve been with him all morning. You

were alone with him last night. You've had plenty of opportunities. So why"—I raise my eyebrows as a delicious smile creeps across my face —"*why* wouldn't you tell him?"

Maxim takes a step closer so the tip of the bolt rests against his black leather doublet. "Don't play with me, little girl."

I conspicuously move my finger to the trigger. "No, don't play with me. There are only two reasons you wouldn't tell Bayard yourself. It's either that you don't think you'll be believed, as you have no evidence … or it's that you have a greater secret to hide yourself."

Maxim's face blanches, confirming that I'm onto something.

I think about the girl at the ball, and how suspicious it was she'd run from the loving arms of a prince. And not only a prince, but Bayard, who is absurdly charming. Why would she do that? Perhaps she was already in love with someone else. And Maxim, though repulsive in his manner and personality, is *terribly* good-looking. I can see how someone might overlook his annoying ways in favor of his face.

"You already know who the girl at the ball was," I murmur. "You're in love with her. You don't want Bayard to have her. And to prove I'm not her, you'd have to explain exactly who she really is. So you are what we'd call 'well and truly stuck.'"

Maxim sets his jaw, taking an affronted step back. "You think you're very clever, don't you?"

Barbaric joy flares in my chest, like a fire stoked in a hearth. "Cleverer than you thought I was."

A buoyant shout echoes across the green as Bayard exits the stables and begins the long jog back to us. "All right over there, you two? Has she hit the target yet?"

With a sidelong smirk toward Maxim—one worthy of, well, *him*—I quickly lower the crossbow and call out, "The trigger went off and I accidentally shot Max in the gut. That's fine, right?"

Happy-go-lucky as ever, Bayard reaches us, slinging his arms around both our shoulders. He digs his knuckles into Maxim's hair, playfully ruffling it. "She's a spitfire, isn't she, Max?"

Maxim smiles through grinding teeth. “A worthy sparring partner, indeed.”



SEVEN

THE CLOAK I'M GIVEN TO WEAR IN THE FOREST IS A BLESSING AND a curse, really. A blessing because it obscures most of my putrid green dress, but also a curse due to how hideously the crimson velvet clashes with what remains visible of my dress. As much as I'd like Maxim to be spirited away by the fae and whisked out of my life forever, he's right; nobody is going to accidentally shoot me today. But now that Maxim is officially my mortal enemy, I wouldn't put it past him to shoot me on purpose. After all … I did just threaten to do that to him.

Bayard hoists me into the saddle of the white pony he's selected for me. "This is Lulabelle," he tells me, stroking the horse's mane. "She's very gentle. Easy to handle. I wasn't sure how much riding experience you have."

I have a little experience—enough to ride our family's old gray mare to market and back to stock our kitchens. Of course, the mare wasn't what she used to be, and couldn't make even that short journey without becoming fatigued. Frankly, if she wasn't so easily worn out, there was no way Stepmother would have let me ride her without supervision. Anything that could have made an escape attempt feasible was forbidden.

A crowd of other courtiers draped in red join us, all on fine, expensive steeds of their own. A fair number of them seem to be half-drunk, despite the fact we've barely begun the afternoon. Maxim closes his eyes as a few of the rowdy noblemen applaud and cheer for their prince upon arrival. "Those fools are liable to slip from their saddles," he comments to Bayard.

“Lighten up, Max,” Bayard laughs, flicking his reins and sending his white stallion forward. “It’s supposed to be a celebration!”

“The point of which,” Maxim says, through grinding teeth, “is to kill an animal that is notoriously difficult to kill. The deer will hear us from miles away with these idiots along for the ride.”

Despite the mild weather and the additional layer of warmth from the cloak, I can’t help shivering as we trot our horses away from the palace’s sunny fields and into the shadows of the forest. Still, I resolve myself to hide any signs of fear. After all, everyone in this hunting party believes I’ve already met a fairy.

But I am afraid. As many stories I’ve heard of good fairies, I’ve heard twice as many of wicked ones. King Alaric’s men distribute pamphlets in the outlying villages to warn us of the many vicious crimes fairies have committed against unsuspecting peasants. You never hear the same horror story twice. Maxim says fairies fear blood, but to me, it sounds like they enjoy spilling it more.

For a few moments upon entry into the forest, a reverent hush falls over our party, even from the rowdy ones. No one seems completely immune to the overwhelming aura of malevolence here. I keep one eye always on the supply of bolts in my pack, as it’s not safe to ride with my bow loaded.

Eventually, though, the sense of respect the men have for the forest seems to wear off, and they drunkenly abandon their horses, bows raised, as they stumble through the underbrush in search of woodland creatures to shoot. With every snap of a branch under their feet, I watch Maxim flinch, savoring his irritation.

Bayard halts his horse beside mine, jerking his head away from the majority of the retinue. “Let’s go that way. Might have a better chance of tracking something.”

“After you,” I say.

“I’ll join,” Maxim grunts, yanking his reins to follow us. He doesn’t want to give me a second alone with Bayard after we’ve finally shown each other our hands. Though I can’t imagine what he thinks I could tell Bayard to destroy him without destroying myself in the process.

As we trot deeper into the forest, and farther from the intoxicated horseplay of the others, the woods settle into a sacred quiet. Not silence—there's still the chatter of birds and the rustling of leaves in the wind—but a sense of tranquility. "Careful," Bayard says, pointing to something half-hidden in the weeds. "That's a fairy snare. Made of iron thread. Don't let Lulabelle trigger it."

"Are there many fairy traps in these woods?" I ask, looking around. When I squint, I spot another snare, this one dangling from an overhead branch. I can easily picture an indigo-winged pixie caught with the snare tightened around its middle, kicking and struggling to escape. But famously, years ago, King Alaric had all the pixies in the kingdom's borders captured and ground to glittering dust.

"Very many," Bayard says, clicking his tongue. "Deeper in, you'll find iron jaws as well, such as for a bear. The jaws kill instead of trap. Father wanted them everywhere throughout the forest, but Maxim argued it didn't seem wise to keep those so close to the palace."

"To be fair," Maxim muses, leading his horse away from the glinting snare, "if I clamped an iron-toothed maw around your ankle, you'd probably die too. So I advised the king to keep them farther away from his appallingly careless court."

As we continue on single-file, with Bayard leading the way, the scorching gaze of Maxim's enmity burns a hole in the back of my head.

"I think I see something!" Bayard cries out, and his horse speeds ahead, faster than I can keep up. For a moment, I lose him in the canopies of green, and I pause, trying to figure out where he has gone. Branches crunch to my left. I swivel my head—looking for the scarlet of Bayard's cloak.

That's when Maxim's cool voice breaks the heady quiet of the forest. "Don't move, Ell. Don't move one inch."

Instinctively, hating myself, I follow orders. Holding my breath, my eyes track to him, to find he has his crossbow pointed in my direction. Poised to fire.

I swallow. My throat is dry. My pulse pounds. "Do not do this, Maxim. Bayard won't forgive you."

Maxim's eyes close in a slow, languorous blink. "He won't forgive me if I don't."

And he lets his bolt fly.

I cry out in anticipation of agony, but the iron speeds past me to my left. An animal roar splits the forest as a creature of significant weight hits the ground. I almost retch in fear when I see the animal Maxim has wounded is a great wolf, which must have been creeping silently toward me.

The wolf has an iron bolt embedded in its haunch. I throw a hand to my pounding heart, staring at the flash of crimson blood and white teeth as the wolf slinks clumsily away to lick its wounds.

A whine escapes me as I turn toward Maxim, who looks almost disappointed as he busies himself with reloading his weapon. "I don't suppose you thought I was aiming at you?" he asks dryly.

"No, *never*," I spit.

His predatory grin flashes again. He's pleased to have frightened me, if only momentarily. "Then let us be even … for now. Shame it was a wolf, actually. They're relatively harmless and important to the ecosystem. In truth, I had hoped it was an ogre. Fae aren't the only dangerous beings lurking in these woods, you know."

"Of course not," I say. "*You're* lurking here right now."

Maxim's black eyes dance, and I suspect he's getting a perverse pleasure out of having me as an adversary. He jerks his head slightly to the right. "Bayard went that way, in case you're wondering. Do try to keep up."

Scowling, I flick my reins and send Lulabelle galloping off in Bayard's direction. When we catch up to him, he is so engaged in the process of tracking the white stag he doesn't appear to realize he ever lost us.

"I swear I saw something," Bayard mutters, his eyes scanning the thick flora.

I join him in searching, and receive a start. "There!" I shout, spotting the tail of something white in the distance, stark against the lush greenery.

"Good eye!" Bayard roars, kicking his horse into a gallop to pursue it. I do the same, and with every leap over a fallen branch, I lift into the air, briefly weightless before dropping back into my pony's saddle. Bayard's

exhilarated laugh ricochets off the tree trunks, bouncing back to us on the air.

“Whoa,” Bayard shouts, pulling his reins tight and forcing his horse to rear back. He throws out an arm to tell me to do the same. I let out a squeak, not ready to stop so suddenly. Luckily, Bayard was right to pick Lulabelle for me. She stops short the moment I so much as twitch the reins, bringing me to a safe pause.

Every muscle in my back seizes as Maxim’s black steed swerves to avoid colliding with Lulabelle—and me. He trots to a stop alongside me, baring his white, even teeth at me in a smile that reminds me of the iron traps deeper in the woods.

Bayard points to a deer about two hundred yards away, just on the other side of a crystalline creek. No, not just any deer. A magnificent stag, with everything from his hooves to his antlers the color of the purest snow. Bayard raises a finger to his mouth, telling us to whisper. “He’s drinking.”

Maxim immediately dismounts his horse, raising and loading his crossbow.

“Wait!” I say, my eyes narrowing as I take a better look at the stag. “It’s not just drinking, it’s already trapped.” A fairy snare, cunningly hidden among the smooth rocks beside the creek, has tightened around the stag’s foreleg.

“Then it can’t run,” Maxim observes, taking deliberate aim. “An easy target.”

“No,” Bayard orders, “stand down, Max. It’s the stag for my wedding feast. If someone’s going to kill this magnificent creature, it ought to be me.”

Reluctantly, Maxim lowers his weapon.

Bayard swings off his horse, and I follow as he advances toward the creek. I consider gripping his arm to stop him from lining up his shot. He hasn’t raised his crossbow yet, though. His brows furrow handsomely as he inspects the beast, standing with its head raised like the proudest king.

“Are you really going to kill it?” I whisper, dreading the answer.

Bayard lets me grab his arm, even drawing closer to allow it. His voice is low. “I almost don’t want to. It’s traditional to kill a white deer for a

wedding feast, but who says we need to eat this gorgeous thing for our marriage to be blessed? Surely it can be just as blessed by sparing the creature."

Behind me, Maxim groans. But my heart melts at Bayard's words.

"I'm going to let it out," Bayard announces. He lays his crossbow on the ground beside me.

"Are you mad?" Maxim asks. "It'll gore you. Just look at those antlers!"

A brilliant smile flashes across Bayard's face. "Well, then I'll tell you my dying request. If I don't make it, I want you and Ell to marry. Neither of you should be alone in my absence."

Maxim lets out a rough, bark-like laugh. I stand on my tiptoes to kiss Bayard's cheek. "I think I'd rather be a widow."

"Very flattering," Maxim mutters, "but you're not married yet."

Carefully, Bayard wades through the stream. His hands are raised as he approaches the stag, to show he carries no weapons. When he reaches the other side, he kneels, disturbed water rippling around him.

Maxim draws closer to me, jaw slightly agape as we both hold our breath. We may hate each other, but we both want Bayard to be alright.

The stag leans its head down, as if to nuzzle the top of Bayard's cheek, or to lay a gentle kiss there. I draw closer, and see—or think I see—something strange in the stag's fragmented reflection in the creek.

Bayard is hard at work, slowly loosening the loop caught just above the deer's hoof, and then the most nerve-wracking part yet, raising its leg upward at the joint to guide it out. When its hoof is free, the deer prances happily, knowing it's been granted a stay of execution.

Grinning, Bayard turns to look at us, both thumbs in the air.

I gasp—the air ripping out of my lungs as the stag transforms behind Bayard, shifting like water and becoming the very image of a beautiful woman. But not a human one. She is clad in a gown of snowy white. Her ears are long and tapered to a point. Her face is too perfect, too symmetrical. Sky-high cheekbones are set into her oval face, which is ornamented by glinting, feline eyes. Her skin is of the deepest, richest brown, yet her hair, falling in long waves to her waist, is as white as her gown. Her canine teeth are sharp.

In the distance, I hear laughter and the cracking of twigs in the underbrush as someone from our party approaches on the opposite side of the creek. But the world is hollowed out by fear, and I can't tear my eyes away from the monster to look at them. I stand in numb horror as the fairy puts an elegant hand to Bayard's shoulder, and Maxim throws out an arm, shouting, "No!"

Bayard jerks around from the touch, shivering like he's been thrown into the depths of winter.

When she speaks, the fairy's voice seems like it comes from everywhere and nowhere, surrounding us on all sides like a creeping mist: husky and lyrical and compelling. "You have bestowed upon me an act of mercy. It is a debt that requires repayment. I will return to you in your hour of greatest need. Simply call upon me by this name, 'Myranda,' and I will come for you, gentle prince."

And she dissolves into a flurry of snowflakes, blowing away on the spring breeze.



EIGHT

I THROW MYSELF ACROSS THE CREEK, CHILLED WATER SEEPING TO MY calves, diving at Bayard to embrace him.

Bayard lets out a nervous laugh and lays a kiss against the side of my head. Courtiers ford toward us through a natural wall of bushes, but they're drunk enough they don't seem to fully comprehend what has happened here. "Oy!" one of them calls. "Why's it snowing? It's quite balmy out, come to think of it."

Maxim, pulling himself together after a brief moment of genuine emotion, holds up his hands to them. "No need to panic, everyone. Just because there was a fairy here does not mean we're in danger."

"There was a fairy here?" another nobleman yelps, dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief.

Wrapped in Bayard's arms, I shoot a scathing glare in Maxim's direction. He's up to something. I can practically see the well-oiled gears turning in his head, like when you view the body of a grandfather clock. He returns my gaze with a shit-eating grin.

The remainder of the hunt is called off, for obvious reasons.

The news of their prince's fairy encounter spreads fast among the party. They demand details from Bayard, who seems unsettled. I think he'd have preferred to keep this bizarre story to himself, but he now knows it will certainly get back to his father. Still, Bayard gives them the whole truth. The courtiers are amazed by the tale. One of the more sober men points out

that Bayard and I are now a matching pair. We both, as far as they know, have won boons from kind fairies.

One courtier makes the mistake of asking Bayard what he'll request from the fairy when she returns.

"I hope she doesn't return," Bayard says, looking pale. "I'll never call in my favor. That would run counter to everything my father has taught me … wouldn't it?"

That brings solemnity back into the proceedings, as the courtiers finally break through their optimistic, intoxicated haze to realize how enraged King Alaric will soon be to discover there is a living fairy so close to his palace.

When we return from the forest, Bayard kisses my hand with a distracted air, telling me, "I must go see my father. If he doesn't hear this story from me first, he'll be furious."

"He'll likely be furious either way," Maxim notes.

"That's true," Bayard muses. "Perhaps you ought to come with me, Max? He listens to your counsel better than mine."

Maxim gives a deep bow. "As my prince commands."

"Shall I join you too?" I offer.

"No," Bayard says, waving a hand. "This has nothing to do with you, Ell. I don't want to pull you into it."

"But I'm happy to help—"

"That's very sweet," Maxim purrs, interrupting me. "But you'd be useless. You don't know the king well enough to navigate his moods. In time, perhaps. But for now, why not relax and enjoy your evening?"

Bayard echoes Maxim's sentiments, though more earnestly. But there's a distant look in his eyes that tells me he's not really here with us.

At dinner, Bayard, Alaric, and Maxim are all absent, leaving me alone at the head table. Trude slides into the seat that should have been Maxim's, but even her upbeat attitude can't distract me from my mounting anxieties.

"Are you unwell?" Trude finally asks me, breaking the flaky crust off her shepherd's pie. "You seem out of it."

Trude probably suspects me of wedding jitters, but it's Maxim—with his flashing dark eyes and million jibes—that troubles me. Who knows what he

could be whispering to Bayard and Alaric about me now? For a moment, I'd been a worthy opponent, but now this has become a decidedly one-sided duel.

Trude places a hand on my arm, squeezing it. "My lady, is this about the fairy everyone's saying his highness met in the woods?"

I fake a gratified smile. "Yes, that's what I'm worried about."

"But Bayard is fine," Trude whispers, leaning in close like we're the oldest of friends. "There's no need to fret."

The ache in my stomach tells me that's not true. "He could have been hurt."

Trude kindly pushes back. "But you should know better than anyone that not all fairies are bad."

The blood drains from my face. "That's right, of course." I hedge. "Not all fairies are bad, but you can hardly tell by looking at them which are kind and which are cruel, can you? Under different circumstances, things might have turned out quite differently for Bayard."

"But luckily," Trude says, her smile coming out like the sun peeking from behind a cloud, "this one *was* kind. I suppose fairies are like people in that way, no? You cannot tell if a person is good or bad by looking at them."

"No," I say, fiddling with my hands. "No, I suppose you can't."

"Oh, *do* tell me about your experience with the fairy and your mother," Trude says, the thrill turning her round cheeks a little redder. "I've been desperate to know. My governess used to tell me the most marvelous stories about fairies—" her face flashes briefly serious, "before such things were forbidden, of course—and your tale sounds as *magical* as any she could invent!"

"Well," I say, shrugging, "there really wasn't much to it. I barely got to know her at all." I hope if I insist how limited my time with the fairy was, Trude will give up and change the subject.

Trude clucks in amused disappointment. "Oh, don't be a tease! You must give details. What did she say? How did you learn you could trust her? What did she *wear*?"

My mind goes utterly blank, except for the illustration of the fairy from my father's anatomy book. "Well, she was very … pink."

Trude blinks, obviously disappointed I can't give her more.

"Well," she says, bouncing back quickly, "all I can say is your fairy was a sartorial genius. That gown! The cornflower blue went so dreamily with Bayard's cobalt regalia. As you twirled together, it was like a whirlpool at sea!" She blushes. "Well, I should think. I've never been to sea, but I do love imagining what different lives might be like. I mean, *how marvelous* to be a sailor with the wind at your back and a sapphire ocean beneath you."

My heart leaps. Trude and I have something in common. How often had I sat in my garret window and dreamed of a better life? In fact, that was probably why concocting my own fairy tale for Bayard came so easily. I add to Trude's imaginings, "Or to be a milkmaid! You could lie in the field as the cows grazed and watch the clouds roll by overhead. And there'd always be fresh milk and cheese. You'd never go hungry."

Softness crinkles Trude's eyes, and I think she understands what I'm implying about having gone hungry before. Respectfully, she doesn't pry. She props her elbow on the table, resting her chin in her hand, and suggests another fantasy. "Or to be a dragon tamer in a distant land. I would adore seeing a dragon's scales. All those brilliant colors!"

"If you could go anywhere," I ask her, "and I mean absolutely anywhere in all the world, right at this very moment, where would you choose to go?"

To my surprise, Trude's lower lip wobbles slightly at this question. She fights to keep her tone as upbeat as it was moments before, but does not quite succeed. "Oh, I suppose anywhere would be very wonderful indeed! The chief virtue of traveling, to my mind, would be to go somewhere that is not here."

Unsure, I glance around the room, with its array of gourmet delicacies upon silver platters. "And what's so bad about being here?" I laugh.

Trude flinches as if I hit her, mumbling, "I didn't mean to offend. I meant nothing of it, really. Forget I said it."

Dismayed, I lay my hand on Trude's. I lean close to whisper to her. "I'm not offended. I'm just curious why you feel that way."

Trude shrugs, a shy smile warming her face again. But she does not meet my eye as she answers: "I think anywhere, no matter how lovely, would begin to feel like a cage if you could never leave it."

I think of my childhood home, with the wisteria lining the tower, the marble parquet, and the cellar so deep and dark I thought I'd never see the sun again.

"I completely agree," I tell Trude. "You have no idea how much."

"Every woman in my family," Trude confides, "for generations back, has done the same thing. Had the same story. We've been born, taught to dance and talk prettily, and married another courtier to have sons and daughters who repeat the cycle. We don't travel. We don't do anything new. I wish, sometimes, I could do something new." Her next words rip out of her in a kind of exhausted confession: "I don't want my mother's life."

"But you are so good at being a courtier," I say, surprised. "You know so many things that I do not."

"You're kind to say so," Trude says, her eyes glassy with unshed tears. "But that doesn't stop me from wishing I lived another life entirely. Luckily, I have my imagination. I can live there for as long as I need to. There, I can be a chimera charmer. Or a mathematician. Or even a knight on a grand quest to rescue the person I love."

I stare at Trude in wonder. She returns my gaze with a soft, wobbly smile. I decide to join her in the land of imagination once more. "I often liked to think of myself as a thief somewhere, living only by my wits!"

"What's this about a thief?" A slick voice cuts like a knife through our shared glee. Maxim stands with his hand on the back of Trude's—well, *his*—chair.

Behind him stomps Bayard, a sour look on his pretty face. They had clearly been in the midst of a rare argument that Bayard wasn't quite ready to let go. "You know, Max, I tend to think you're terribly clever, but that was badly done!"

"What did Max do?" I ask, eyes darting between them.

"An accident, I assure you," Maxim says, wearing a placating smile. "A slip of the tongue. I was merely explaining to Bayard's father that he spared the stag for his bride's benefit, and not due to some moral weakness on your part." He purses his lips at me. "Ell, I by no means meant to imply you were a *fairy magnet.* I can't be blamed for the king taking it that way."

"Oh, can't you?" Bayard snipes.

The smile slips off Maxim's face. He mutters darkly, "If you had just taken my advice and shot the damn thing, Bayard—"

"Everyone stop," I say, raising both my hands to quiet them.

I close my eyes, the only way I can resist glaring at Maxim with Bayard watching. "Is the king angry at me?"

"I wouldn't say that …" Bayard begins hesitantly. "But he does want you to meet with him tomorrow morning."

"A little father-daughter bonding," Maxim adds.

I clench my fists beneath the table, fighting the urge to deck Maxim in his perfect jaw. I can't get this Freida-inspired dress off fast enough. It's making me violent in a way I've never been.



After Zita helps me slip into a clean nightgown and robe, I carefully remove the heavy earrings and lay them in a flat box on my vanity. I massage my aching earlobes, inspecting them in the mirror to find they've been bruised slightly purple by the tightness of the clasps and the weight of the gems.

I shrug at my reflection, as if she were a friend. I've dealt with much worse injuries, and at least these bruises are the result of love and attention rather than scorn and cruelty.

I crawl into bed, a pit in my stomach as I contemplate what the king has in store for our meeting tomorrow. When sleep eludes me, I kneel on the plush carpet, calling for Jacques and Ermengarde beneath the bed. After a full day in the bedroom, they've obviously begun to explore, but they enjoyed years of security beneath my bedframe in the attic, and I suspect they've retreated to old habits.

They don't come at my call immediately—the selfish little rodents—even though I'm the reason they're living the high life. But Jacques's squeaking lets me know I'm looking in the right place. I click my tongue against the roof of my mouth. "Lovelies, come!"

They scurry out. I lift them into the bed beside me, stroking them beneath their teeny-tiny chins. When I lie down, they crawl onto my belly, licking my hand to request more scratches. I sigh contentedly, their warm bodies

and hummingbird heartbeats calming me like nothing else in the world. They drop off to sleep under my hand, and I follow not long after.

My dreams are dark and frenetic. A white stag bites the end of my red cloak and tears it off, leaving me stumbling in a pitch-black forest. I trip on a root and my shoes—spun from the finest glass—splinter, slicing into my feet.

I wake to Zita pulling back the gauzy curtains of my bed. Sunlight hits my eyes and I squint. "Breakfast's on," she says, producing a bed tray laden with another mouthwatering breakfast. But there's no time to savor it, because Trude flies into the room, chewing her nails so forcibly I worry she'll accidentally bite off a fingertip.

"Oh, good!" she says. "You're up. I'm absolutely incensed. The seamstress's team still hasn't finished any of the day-wear gowns we requested, and all that's left is the third loaned dress."

"To be fair," I say, crawling from bed, "I do think the king making the wedding tomorrow forced them to focus on the wedding gown."

"Yes, but—" Trude sighs. "This dress is … well, it's a little too ostentatious for my taste. A little dramatic for someone so young… ." She gestures, exhausted, at the dress she's spread out on the bed. It's indeed the richest of the three gowns, with an extensive ruffle-lined train and silk that shimmers in various shades of purple, all of which remind me of food: eggplant, plums, grapes that might become the king's favored merlot.

I sigh. If I didn't know better, I'd say these clothes are part of a cosmic punishment. This dress is very like the regal gowns Stepmother favors. I hold it against myself and walk to the gilded mirror, scowling to even think of donning it.

"It is a little much, isn't it?" I groan. "But since we haven't got any other option …"

I go to meet the king in the dress that is the definition of putting on airs. I'd been instructed to meet him in the throne room, so I brace myself as I reenter the magnificently arched room. I expect the king to hit me with a withering put-down, but when he glances at me, it's with a smile of grudging approval. "Finally," he grunts, "you look like a queen instead of a scullery maid in her mistress's stolen clothing."

Which I suppose is *still* a put-down, but directed at my past self instead of my current one. It's a step in the right direction, anyway, and a bellwether that perhaps the king is not as incandescently furious with me as I'd feared.

I curtsy. "Your majesty."

The king offers me his arm, his silver doublet shining.

I have no choice but to thread my arm with his, and he leads me onto the dais. He jerks his head at the throne. "Sit," he grunts.

I stare at him. Surely this is a trick… .

"Sit," he repeats, angrier this time.

I sit, sinking into the golden cushion, the fabric of my magnificent gown pooling around me.

The king produces a leather-bound book from behind his back. "Read this," he says, handing it to me. Then, his eyes narrow. "You *can* read, can't you?"

Rather than answer directly, I read from the page aloud. It's a genealogical tree of the D'Harcourt line, starting with the most recent additions. "Princess Bernadine D'Harcourt, heir apparent, born to King Alaric D'Harcourt and his queen, Eloise. Prince Bayard D'Harcourt, second in line, born to the same."

The king stabs the page with his index finger. "Tomorrow, your name will be added beside my son's. You will be a D'Harcourt. You must recognize how many of our line came before you." He flips through the pages, showing me how far back the branches of this family tree stretch. At least twenty-six generations of D'Harcourt kings and queens, and countless royal children to spare. On the page with Alaric's name, I see he once had three older brothers, all of which pre-deceased him.

"The family tree has been whittled down to a toothpick," the king mutters. "There's just Bayard left now, and he was never meant to ascend the throne. Some fairy curse has scrambled the boy's brains, I'm sure of it. But the cowardice? The lack of spine? He came by that naturally."

I try to protest, but the king cuts me off with a wave of his hand, like a conductor silencing an orchestra. I'm sitting on the throne—but he holds all the power. Tears burn at the corners of my eyes. How could he speak of his

own son so cruelly? Bayard is a good person, and he isn't stupid, or cowardly, or cursed.

I flinch as the king tugs on my left earring. The gesture reminds me of when Freida would start out teasing … then go too far. "I trust that based on this … jewelry, Bayard's told you of his deficiency? Tell me, do you think a boy who can't recognize faces is a worthy successor to my throne?"

I set my jaw. "Bayard is a wonderful man."

King Alaric gives a harsh laugh. "That isn't an answer." He slams his book shut. "Maxim mentioned it was your idea to spare the stag yesterday. The stag that turned out to be a filthy little fairy."

Despite my muscles locking from fear, I can't help but think "little" is not the word to describe Myranda. She was no pixie, after all. She'd been grand, powerful, disturbingly beautiful.

"I'm not expecting you to recognize a fairy," Alaric says, waving a hand. "But the fact remains: You told Bayard to spare it, and he did. He has no instincts of his own, and few people he can trust." He raises a white eyebrow at me. "You realize that will be your role now, yes? When you marry my son tomorrow, you will guide him in his kingship. The fate of the kingdom will be on your shoulders." His lip curls. "Is that something you can handle?"

Unthinking, a glib reply slides from my lips. "Is that another rhetorical question, sire?"

Alaric barks a laugh. "You may be an uncultured woman, but at least you are not slow-witted. No, it is not rhetorical. Answer me: Do you think you can run a kingdom?"

I don't reply right away. Instead, I run my finger against the throne's arm, accumulating dust on its pad. I brush it away, musing. The obvious answer, the one I want to shout until it echoes through this massive, glittering room, is of course, "No! All I've ever been is a scullery maid. How could I possibly be a queen and run a kingdom?"

But then … if I'm a scullery maid, what are the other nobles? They're nothing. I've known hard work, and they've not known even that. And surely running a kingdom is hard work.

"I've managed a household for six years," I say. "Since I was eleven."

King Alaric gives a little chuckle. “Servant’s work. The two are not the same.”

Heat flares in my cheeks. I push back. “Perhaps not on the same scale, but they require similar skills. I’d like to see most people keep an estate afloat with no one to help. I cleaned that house with no servants. I stocked our kitchen with food. Every harvest, the people paid tithes and taxes to the barony while I managed the books. When we were low on money, I pawned what needed to be pawned. All while my stepfamily did nothing but drain our coffers.”

The king gives me a considering smile. “Perhaps then we should call you a steward, and not a scullery maid. But a queen needs more. She needs to be decisive. She must make the kill when the stag is in front of her. She needs, in short, courage.”

Now I’m actively angry. I know I’m not the boldest person alive: I long for security. Somewhere safe to hang my hat. But that’s not a function of being a coward. It’s because I’ve been through the darkest part of the forest and have no desire to go back again. And this king—this man who can ruin lives on a whim, as Zita said—can’t possibly know the bravery it takes for servants to face each day.

I lift my head and tell him, cool as can be, “You’d be surprised how much courage it takes to clean a chimney.”

The king’s mouth hardens. “Then perhaps you have some grit in you, and not just in your hair.”

He turns his back on me, glaring out to where the nobles are usually assembled. “There is much you’ll need to learn. You will study our noble houses. Learn their names, learn their faces. When you and my son greet the nobility together, you will always announce the newcomer’s name first. You will be gregarious, amiable, popular. You will make up for my son’s deficits. You’ll be the people’s queen, will you not?”

He turns back to me, putting his fingers under my chin and forcing my head up and down. I itch to grab the white hair that falls to his shoulders and give a hard yank. But in a triumph of restraint, I resist.

I remember something Maxim said on my first night at the palace while introducing me to the many courtiers: *“Pay attention now, my lady. There*

will be a test." At the time, I'd believed that was a cruel joke. And knowing him better, I still think it was a joke … just one of a different kind.

The king snaps his fingers, and the golden doors at the far end of the room open at his command. "I've summoned your teacher to meet us here. Learn from him as if your life depends on it."

The implicit message is clear: My life actually *does* depend on it. Because if I can't be the partner he wants for Bayard, he has no use for me at all.

And that's when the slim, shadow-clad figure of my teacher slips into the throne room.

Maxim.

I close my eyes and sigh.

Maxim's extravagantly long legs carry him quickly to the base of the dais. His dark hair is swept back from his forehead, still slightly wet, as if some harried valet rushed him out of his chambers to attend the king.

"You're late," Alaric snaps.

Maxim's torso dips into a bow, but his hungry eyes rake over the sight of me on the throne. He is pale with anger. Of course he's livid that I would dare seat myself here. Today, he looks more villainous than ever, with that accentuated widow's peak and a lean, hungry look about him. Like a starved wolf.

Still, he addresses the king mildly, his tone carrying no trace of the fury that's made his body so rigid. "A thousand apologies, sire. I was in no fit state to call upon you, and rushed to make myself presentable."

The king rolls his bloodshot eyes. "Playing peasant again, were you? A waste of time."

Playing peasant? What a strange thing for Alaric to say about Maxim—the most high-and-mighty aristocrat I know. I study Maxim's face for a sign of what the king means, but his expression remains calm.

"Your majesty," Maxim suggests, voice smooth as velvet, "I would be honored to teach Lady Ell the ways of court. But if your intention is to mold a ruler, should she not learn from a king? How can I hope to measure up to the great standard you have set?"

It's a good thing Alaric's back is to me as he surveys Maxim, because I can't quite hide my knowing smirk. Maxim wants to teach me as little as I want to learn from him.

Alaric's temper flares despite the compliments. "Do you not think a king's time valuable, D'Arcy? Might not my hours be better spent?"

Bluff called, Maxim lowers his eyes to the floor, dropping into a half-bow. "You are correct, as always, your Majesty. I had not considered."

Alaric calms, and Maxim braves a question. His handsome visage is calculatedly innocent—I marvel at the treachery that long, dark lashes and a fake smile can hide. "To what good use do you intend to put your hours today, sire?"

The king snorts. "The only use worth a damn. I'm riding out to survey the troops."

Maxim's lip curls. "Ah, yes. Of course."

A boyish, enthused gleam enters the king's green eyes that reminds me of Bayard. It's the first time I've seen the slightest family resemblance between them at all, but there is something *wrong* about that look when in Alaric's eyes. "My men have become a marvel!" he exclaims. "A magnificent fighting force, outfitted entirely with iron weapons. They will be my grand legacy. In three hundred years, people will remember Alaric the Conqueror—the king who wiped out the fairy threat."

As he sweeps from the dais, a rapturous smile overtakes his face. He waves carelessly at Maxim. "The whiners come today. Stand with her as she passes judgment. Do not let her be overgenerous."

And just like that, he leaves us in the echoing chamber of the throne room. He practically waltzes away, floating on air at the thought of war.



NINE

I TURN STIFFLY TO MAXIM WHEN THE GOLDEN DOUBLE DOORS SHUT behind the king. “Whiners?” I ask.

Maxim snorts, derision in his voice. “That’s what his majesty calls the petitioners. Those few peasant-folk either stupid or optimistic enough to believe their great king might give a whit about their trivial lives.” His handsome face twists in disgust—I do not know at whom this revulsion is directed. “It’s tradition for the monarch to receive petitioners once a month, but Alaric bows out as frequently as possible.” Maxim digs into his waistcoat for a watch. “They’ll be queuing now. Fret not, it won’t be a long line. Most commoners within walking distance know better than to try squeezing aid from a stone.”

“But,” I protest, flummoxed, “shouldn’t this be something Bayard helps the king with?” Bayard is the heir to the throne after all.

A cruel smile twitches at the corner of Maxim’s mouth. His tone is hard. “And what makes you think Alaric trusts his son with anything? Bayard doesn’t have nearly as much power at this court as you think.” He returns his watch to his pocket, dark brows furrowed in agitation. “So, if you’re done asking stupid questions, let’s allow the hordes entry.”

I smooth the folds of my deep purple gown and straighten on the throne. “Fine,” I say, my voice ringing out stronger than I expected. “Let them in.”

Maxim calls for the guards to open the doors, and a troupe of some thirty commonfolk shuffle into the gilded monstrosity that is the throne room. They are open-mouthed, gawking at the splendor. They’re at least as dirty as I was when I labored for my stepfamily—each of them shabby, thin,

travel-worn, with patched trousers and split boots. My eyes linger on the unmistakable signs of people who make do with what little they have.

Shame roils in my gut. I am nothing but a child dressed up in a gaudy costume. They look more like myself than I do.

“Line up at the foot of the throne!” Maxim barks out. It is a rough, commanding sound. I shoot him a glare.

He shrugs. “What? It’s a big room. You expect them to hear me if I whisper?”

“Welcome,” I address the group softly as they reach the dais. “My name is Lady Ellain DeBrun. We are so pleased you could join us today.”

“Do remember to bow,” Maxim says in a lazy drawl, fiddling with the head of his wolf’s cane much as he did the day he visited my family home. “You’re in the presence of Prince Bayard’s fiancée. Your future queen. Surely you’ve heard how he traveled the kingdom to find her?”

The petitioners drop into bows and curtsies, their eyes fixed on me with a mixture of awe and distrust.

“Never mind him,” I say, waving a hand at Maxim. “We’re all friends here. Now, tell me your troubles, and I’ll see how I can help.”

Maxim lets out a small noise halfway between a snort and snicker, but otherwise says nothing. His obsidian eyes roam the room, as if our conversation bores him.

A man with a bushy red beard and a shining baldpate pushes to the front of the group. Although he dresses in burlap, his voice is firm and proud. He has a body made strong from labor, and his back remains upright. Unlike the others, he is obviously not intimidated by the palace’s grandeur. “Milady, we represent the village of Hawthorne. We are struggling, ma’am, to keep up with the king’s wartime taxes. Half the young men in our village have been drafted, and we have too few people to work the fields. Might some of our boys be released from service, or else the burden of taxes be lowered? It is now a choice between paying the king and feeding our families. Besides that, creatures encroach from the wilderness. Ogres lurk at the outskirts of villages. A banshee cursed our wheat yield last spring. We need our fighting youth home to push them back.”

The smile slowly drains away from my face. These are the problems the king thinks of as *trivial*? I don't know what I expected them to ask for, but it wasn't this.

I lean forward on the throne, my hands clasped nervously together. "Sir, I am most sorry to hear of your plight. I *will* speak to the king about your village's needs. We don't want our people endangered or hungry." I've known hunger. If I can spare someone else from it, I will.

Maxim's gloved hand rests on my shoulder, first lightly, then squeezing with a vice-like grip. "Her ladyship may speak with the king," he says, eyes flint-like as he gazes down at the farmer, "but I'm afraid I can already tell you his answer. The king will lessen no taxes, nor release any men from service. Not even for such reasonable cause."

The cautious pleasure that had previously graced the farmer's face slips away, replaced by a bubbling anger. "But, *sir*—"

Maxim holds up a hand. "Apologies. It's not what you like to hear, I understand. But I'll give you no false hope. If he does this for your village, he must do it for them all." Here Maxim pauses to pick a speck of lint from the cuff of his silver-embroidered sleeve. "The king has commissioned an iron weapon for every man in the army. That is not cheap. If I may give you comfort, it's that the king believes the fairy menace will be quashed quickly, and then soldiers will be allowed to return home."

But Maxim's tone does not suggest he personally agrees with the king.

I snap my head toward Maxim, heat flooding my cheeks. "Well, we must do *something* for them!"

Maxim ducks to bring his face close to mine. His aquiline nose is but centimeters from mine. Another charge passes between us—hatred like palpable heat. His voice is measured, low and husky. "There is little you can do. Little *anyone* can do until Alaric decides his war is at an end. The king's authority is absolute."

My hands white-knuckle the arms of the throne. His apathy, his disregard for these hardworking people—it takes everything in me to resist slapping him. I must remain regal, lest Maxim report my unfitness to the king.

A woman rocking a sleeping baby in her arms focuses on me, as if hoping I am the bearer of good news. "Will the war last much longer?"

I have no answer, and my rage slowly drains away, leaving my body weaker for its absence.

I don't know how long the war will last.

Maxim lowers himself toward me in a mocking bow. "If my lady will allow me to share my opinion on the state of the war with these good people?"

I give him a rigid nod, but I know he senses the threatening message in my fiery gaze: *If you are cruel to them, I'll make you pay.*

Maxim turns from me and addresses the young mother with the lifeless tone of an over-rehearsed script: "The fae cannot shed our blood. At least not directly. They can trick us into hurting each other, but they cannot wound us themselves. The spilling of blood weakens them. If we march on the fairy stronghold, our victory is all but inevitable."

My brows knit together. My mind reels. "But … no," I interject, more confused than angry now. "That's not right. All the pamphlets say otherwise. Just last month, I read a pamphlet about a young boy whom a fairy *strangled with his own viscera.*"

Some new emotion sparks behind Maxim's dark eyes—I can't place it. On anyone else, I would say it was … joy. But that doesn't make any sense.

Maxim whispers to me, taking the audacious liberty of tracing his index finger around the curve of my ear as he does so. An eerie thrill races up my spine. "Our good king believes peasants lack the brainpower to understand the complexities of the fairy menace, so he tells them a story violent enough to scare them away. For their own good, of course." He punctuates this statement by flicking the dangling sapphire of my earring.

"Well," I gulp, looking at all the petitioners staring blankly up at me. "That's … educational." They couldn't hear what Maxim said. And I can hardly reveal to them that their king is distributing anti-fairy propaganda.

I change the subject, feeling the hideous golden walls shrinking in on me. "As his grace said, we will pursue the matter with his majesty, but cannot guarantee the outcome you desire. Does anyone else have any other matters you'd like to put before us today?"

A high, cracked voice pipes up as an old woman shoves her way to the front. "I do!" She has gnarled hands and a mane of wiry white hair. Her face

is distorted with outrage. “What are you going to do about all them folks walking into the forest?”

I squint at the woman, confused. “Do you mean poachers, ma’am?”

“No poachers, foolish girl!” the old woman shrieks. “Them walking into the forest and not a one coming back! They go in. They don’t come out. And what are you royals gonna do about it?”

I’m startled. Everyone in Holbein has been raised to fear the forests. They are where the fairies dwell. Certainly Alaric has done his part to increase that superstition. Why would people be braving them now?

I tilt my head to the side, considering the woman. “How many people, grandmother?”

The crone counts people off on her fingers. “Near on twelve in my village alone this past year. It’ll be more, the harder times get.”

“Do you believe they are being eaten by some creature, magical or otherwise?”

The woman scoffs. “If they’re being eaten, them creatures have mighty nice table manners. Ain’t seen so much as a scarf left behind, nor a drip of blood. I’m telling ya, they walk in, they disappear. I been hearing tell they walk in *to* disappear.”

This chills me to the marrow, perhaps because it rings so true. If someone had told me that I could simply *disappear* to escape my stepmother’s house —I might well have taken them up on the bargain.

I draw myself up, standing from the throne. “This matter sounds serious,” I tell the crowd. “I will have a squadron of guards sent into the forest to search for lost villagers. Perhaps they’ll find some sign of them. If it is a nonmagical cause, we will discover it. If truly no trace of them can be found …”

“Then surely,” Maxim chuckles, “it is good we have *you* on the case, my lady.”

I send Maxim a sharp, questioning look, but he is unruffled. He spreads his hands, fixing the peasants with his first easy smile of the meeting. “Being fairy-blest, Lady Ellain is a natural diplomat to negotiate with the fair folk. If your neighbors are being held against their will, I’m certain our incipient princess can arrange their release.”

My stomach drops so hard I swear it hits the ground.

All Maxim does is grin as the villagers gasp in awe and fall to their knees before me.



I'm to sit for a royal portrait in the afternoon. I return to my bedroom with a crowded mind to find Zita waiting for me with the bathwater running. "Lady Trude is coming," she tells me, pouring a dash of the bubbling soap into the water. "She's picking up a dress for your portrait from the seamstresses."

I sigh in relief that an image of me dressed like my stepmother won't be hanging in the palace for half a century. As she turns the tap off, Zita fixes me with a piercing look. "You spoke to the petitioners?"

"How did you know?" I ask.

"I have friends in the village," Zita says, tossing in the bath's regular mixture of herbs. "They asked about the war?" It's phrased as a question, but it isn't one.

My grim face is reflected at me in a very large bubble. "Yes, they did."

Zita removes my bathrobe, and I step into the water. She relentlessly pursues conversation, perhaps thinking I'll be more truthful while I'm naked and vulnerable. "And what did you think of the situation … my lady?"

I douse my hair in the water. "I think an awful lot of men have been separated from their families, pulled from their homes and their work, to fight a threat we have no proof is really a threat at all."

I cannot stop dwelling on the fact that the king's pamphlets are lies. The fairies aren't slaughtering peasants in the woods. If they are dangerous, they're dangerous in a very different way than we've been led to expect. They're not maiming people—they are simply making them vanish into thin air. I tilt my head backward to look at Zita. "Do you know why the king hates fairies? The real reason. I know the pamphlets are a big pile of horse dung."

Zita's smile is harsh and crooked as she lathers my hair. "Oh, you've found out about that, did you? I only know because my uncle works in the printing press." Her smile fades, flickering out like a candle. "But yes, I know why the king hates fairies."

"Why?" I ask.

Zita doesn't answer, and all I hear is the popping of the tiny bubbles in my hair.

"Zita," I say, trying to sound authoritative. "I don't want to order you to talk."

"There's the noblewoman popping out," Zita gloats. She's not angry, but rather vindicated, like she is rolling around in her rightness. "Exactly on schedule."

"Zita—" I say again.

"Fine," she mutters, pulling her fingers out of my hair and dipping them in the bathwater to get the suds off. "If it's to be an order, I'll tell you—but if you run your mouth about what I say, I'll be dead. So keep *that* on your conscience, my lady. The king hates fairies because he had an affair with one. He made a deal and it went bad. They are very beautiful creatures, and he desired one. But, as I've heard, he didn't hold up his end of the deal, so in vengeance, the fairy arranged the queen's death."

"How did she die?" I ask, my voice so quiet I can barely hear it myself.

Zita sticks out her tongue, pretending to thrust a dagger into her chest. "Stabbed. Through the heart. With a stake carved from an ash branch."

My hand flies reflexively to my heart. I lean over the tub's edge, watching Zita where she sits on the floor. Her hands are folded behind her head now, and she's quite at her ease.

"Who killed her? Who delivered the blows?"

Zita straightens, wiggling her cobalt dress down where it had ridden up. She shakes a finger at me. "Now those are two very different questions. A maid delivered the blows; she was burned at the stake for the crime. The king claimed he found her standing over the queen, her mistress's blood on her hands."

An image of myself flashes through my mind. I'm splayed out on the floor, a wooden branch piercing my heart, as Zita stands above me with a

deranged grin.

I can tell Zita is imagining it too, for a moment. Because, with a doleful look, she adds, “At least that’s what they say. I’m not sure I believe it. But as for who really killed her? It was the king. Pamphlets or no, direct violence or no, only a fool breaks a bargain with a fairy. There are severe consequences for such things.”

She stands, sighing. “And now half the money I earn is taxed from my pocket to pay for iron weapons.” She rolls her eyes. “As if it needed to be harder to make ends meet. And all because fifteen years ago, King Alaric couldn’t bear to keep his pants belted.”

I agree with her assessment of the king’s character, but I don’t dare tell her so, because Zita would probably accuse me of trying to be her friend again. “And a harsh end for a servant who didn’t need to be involved in the first place,” I say, thinking of the terrible way the queen’s maid died. When choosing between being stabbed and being burned at the stake, I’m at a loss to decide which is a more dreadful way to go.

“Nella,” Zita whispers, turning away with a sniff. “Her name was Nella.”

“Did you know her?” I ask.

Zita shakes her head. “Not personally. I was too young. But she was a friend of my aunt’s.” She rolls her shoulders, as if to say that *actually,* none of this bothered her in the slightest. She adopts a sharply bright tone. “Well, that’s just the way of things! The royals break a promise, and the commonfolk pay the price.”

I want to ask Zita if she’s referring to another specific event, but I’m interrupted by a knock at the door to the suite outside. “That’ll be Lady Trude with the dress,” Zita says, bustling off.

When I’m wrapped in a towel, I pad out into the main bedroom, where Trude looks distraught. “Ell!” she shouts, flinging out an arm to me. “This is a disaster!”

“What’s a disaster?” I ask, fighting off a wry smile. After the conversation I’ve had with Zita, there is no sartorial catastrophe that won’t be funny by comparison.

“This!” Trude shrieks. She holds up the dress, which is a gorgeous shade of midnight blue. The silhouette is graceful, if dramatic, and its few

ornamentations are subtle and sophisticated. It's nothing like any of the lurid gowns I was loaned.

"It's lovely, Trude. I'm not sure why you're upset."

Trude spins the dress around, showing me an unfinished back. There's a long open slit where a line of buttons is clearly supposed to go, but as of yet, they are nowhere to be seen. "It's going to fall straight off you!" Trude says, shaking it. "You can't wear this for a royal portrait."

Behind me, Zita snickers into her hand.

"I have an idea," I say, holding a calming hand out to Trude. "Zita, where did you put the belongings I arrived with that first day? I've a sewing kit we can use."

Zita heads off to whatever drawer she squirrelled my shabby possessions into, and a minute later returns with my sewing kit: a pale blue box that once contained one of my mother's hats. I dig through, pulling out all the pins I can find. I pass the spool of thread containing my darkest blue over to Trude. "Sew me in!"

Trude's full lips pucker into a skeptical pout. "I've never sewn before…." she says.

"Really?" I'm shocked, given how deeply Trude loves gowns and how much she knows about them. "Well, now's your chance to try something new!"

Trude helps me into my petticoats and panniers, and I talk her through the process of looping thread where the buttons should be and pulling tight to cinch me up. When I crane my head to see the results in the mirror, it's clear this isn't the most elegant solution. The back of my dress is a mass of thread tangled in unnecessary knots. But from the front? I look passably like a princess.

Even though the back is far from flawless, Trude's face splits into a wide, incandescent grin. "Oh! I mean—it's terrible, but look—it worked, didn't it?" She's positively tickled pink. "Wow! I mean, I actually did that? It felt so good! I'd quite like to sew, I think. I mean, *really* sew, not just this silly mess. Too bad …" Her face takes on a dreamier, more reticent expression. "What a fun thing. Like a peek into a different life."

Trude insists I walk the halls with my bathrobe over the dress—there are still a few awkward holes where my stays are visible through the gaps—and I agree, if only to make her settle.

The portrait is to be painted in a parlor off the throne room, where I find Bayard standing resplendent in cobalt blue, with a crown—slightly more delicately wrought than his father's—sitting atop his bronze curls. He spots me, breaking into a laugh at the sight of my flapping bathrobe. "What's all this about?" he asks.

With a wink, I drop the robe off my shoulders, showing him my messily stitched-together back.

The court portraitist is already here, wearing a long smock and standing before a massive canvas. The king is also here, and he presents us with a dainty fleur-de-lis tiara, which I suppose is for me. "Put this on, Ellain. Perhaps giving you a crown seems premature, as you won't be wed until tomorrow, but rest easy. This one is just copper and gilded paint."

With a false smile and a tiny curtsy, I take the tiara from the king and place it on my head.

The portraitist waves his paintbrush toward a magnificently high-backed mahogany chair, carved with images of twisting vines and, to my shock, anatomically correct human hearts tucked discreetly among the flora. "We shall have the prince sit, as on a throne," the painter instructs, "with his bride standing behind him, one hand on the back of the chair."

"No," the king says, his imperious voice ringing through the room. "She's too short, it will throw the proportions off entirely. Ellain will sit. Bayard will stand."

The king departs, expecting his orders to be obeyed.

We take the positions Alaric demanded. When I sink into the ornate chair, the portraitist scurries up to me as if he were Jacques, bending to adjust the flow of my gown's skirts until they're arranged as he prefers. Then he fiddles with the placement of Bayard's fingers as they grip the chair-back. Finally, he tilts my chin up, forcing me to stare directly ahead. "Perfect," the artist says, kissing the tips of his fingers. "Now neither of you move an inch."

“Easier said than done,” Bayard mutters as the artist backs away. “My nose already itches.”

I giggle. “I’ve got a crick in my neck.”

“No talking!” the artist shouts from behind his canvas. He selects a stick of charcoal and starts sketching.

With my face pointed forward just so, my eyes fall on the completed portrait hanging on the wall opposite us. It’s in a gleaming gold frame, the same size and dimensions of the canvas the artist is using now. The image depicts four people, and with a jolt, I realize one of them is a young Bayard at perhaps three years old. But the round gray eyes and shining curls are still the same.

It’s easy to determine who the others in the portrait are. There’s King Alaric, with bright red hair that’s since been bleached white by age, though still with his ever-present scruffy beard. He sits in the same carved chair I sit in now. A young girl, older than Bayard, but with the same shockingly red hair as their father, stands at his right hand in a pink velvet gown. That has to be Princess Bernadine. My stomach sours to know that little girl will one day walk into the woods and never return.

Lastly, in a gown of white lace, stands the late Queen Eloise. She has brown hair, arranged in curls at the top of her head. A tiara similar to my own graces her appearance, though I suspect hers is real gold. One of her hands rests gracefully on the back of the king’s chair, while the other holds Bayard’s chubby toddler paw. He is so tiny that his hand is lifted above his head to clasp hers.

“Your mother was beautiful,” I whisper to Bayard.

“That’s not my mother,” Bayard says. His voice is clipped, and I can’t tell if it’s because he’s angry or because he’s trying not to move his mouth too much.

“It’s not?” I ask, searching the distant portrait for signs I was incorrect.

“No,” Bayard says, his words barely a sigh, “I mean that doesn’t *look* like my mother.”

I can’t help it. I twist my head to look up at him. “How can you tell?” I’m thinking of Alaric’s fevered statement that Bayard wasn’t always like this. That the fairy’s curse changed him.

“I can tell because the only thing I remember about my mother was her eyes,” Bayard says, pointing his index and middle fingers up at his own. “They were two different colors. One gray, like me, and one blue, like my sister. I never had a problem recognizing her, thanks to that.” So this proves it conclusively. Alaric is wrong. Bayard is under no curse. In many ways, I think this has made him more perceptive. Not many people are forced to look for the one feature in each person that’s unique to them alone.

The artist’s brush clatters against his palette as he sprints back to return us to our pre-ordained poses. “Stop! Moving!”

When the artist retreats to his easel, Bayard whispers, “Look again, closely. In that portrait, both her eyes are blue. So that’s not my mother. It’s a false version of my mother. One I don’t even recognize.”

“It’s a lie,” I say. The fake crown on top of my head is starting to pinch. With costume jewelry and a dress that’s only regal from the front, it’s fitting I’m adorned mostly in fakery. “Perhaps portraits are always lies.”



TEN

KING ALARIC PUT THE FEAR OF USELESSNESS IN ME, SO I RESIGN myself to another long, restless night. I send a message to Trude, asking her to help me memorize our various courtiers before tomorrow's wedding ball. The kitchens send up hot tea with a dash of cognac and a bowl of roasted nuts. We sit at the writing desk in my bedroom, staying awake into the late hours. I study the noble family trees, Trude describing their prominent members for me. She's almost as good at spotting what makes someone memorable as Bayard is. "The Comtesse D'Amiot has extravagantly long eyelashes! And her husband's eyebrows are prematurely white, though for some reason the hair on his head is still dark."

As the clock on the mantel ticks toward midnight, we grow tipsy from the augmented tea, and Trude demonstrates how her older brothers taught her to catch food in her mouth. She throws a nut into the air in a high, thin arc, then with unerring skill, moves her head to catch it between her lips. "I played this game with everyone in our schoolroom, way back when," she chuckles. "But Bayard was always best at it. We were a team, tossing snacks back and forth to show off. I remember once he caught *thirty-seven* marshmallows in a row—and ended up with a stomachache all morning." She brushes a tear of mirth from her eye.

"Let me try!" I laugh, opening my mouth wide.

Trude tries throwing the nuts for me, but after four or five bounce off my cheek and one hits me in the eye, Trude calls the fun to a halt. "We have to end this," she says, tipping over in her chair with uncontrollable giggles. "Or you'll get a swollen eye the night before your wedding."

Trude stands to find her shoes—slipped off sometime between her second cup of tea and her fourth. “I ought to let you sleep. You’ve got a big day tomorrow.” But she lingers in the doorway, gazing at me with a strange, dreamy expression that tells me she’s only partly here and partly in the land of her imagination. “You are so lucky, you know that?”

I nod, knowing exactly what she means. But then she continues, and the delicate bubble of my good mood begins to pop.

“Every girl at this court has been in love with him since they were old enough to speak,” Trude says, swaying a little bit as she regards me, yet still wearing her trademark dimpled smile. “Me included, a little, I’ll admit. But I’m just so happy he’s found you, and you will be good for him. I only wish that I could find someone to love as completely as you two have.”

A hard lump forms in my throat. Trude was, at some point, a little bit in love with Bayard? *My* Bayard? On some level, it was a perfectly natural, rational response. He is so very wonderful. Easy to love. But I do not like to think of *Trude* loving him. Surely—surely—she was not the girl from the ball, or she would have said something.

Unless Trude’s longing to escape the palace is so great that it precluded marrying the prince.

Paranoia ticking like a clock in the back of my brain, I rise from my seat and cross to her, taking her hands in mine as I study her face. I say something kind, and eminently true, to test her reaction. “Trude, you are the best friend I have ever had in my whole life.”

Trude’s brilliant smile splits her face, and I know she could not fake such vibrancy if she truly were the girl from the ball. She is not a person of guile. Not like me. I’m safe. I just need to nudge her in the right direction—namely, away from Bayard and *my* happy ending.

I squeeze her hands and say, most solemnly, “You are a very special person. And you will find some spectacular *someone* to love. You will find your heart’s wish—be it for a lover so charming, or a life so grand. You just need to keep your eyes focused on the road ahead of you, and I know that someday your wish will be granted.”

Trude blushes prettily and leans in to kiss my cheek. “You are too sweet. I have been lonely here a long time, and if I must live my life in this stuffy

court, I am glad it will be alongside a friend like you. And I do hope you're right about wishing. Now, I *must insist* you get some rest. I really should too."

I incline my head to her as she goes, but I don't follow her instructions. I'm one sleep away from being a princess, and I won't be taking many orders anymore, no matter how well-meaning.

I set aside the worry of Trude and countless others at court in love with Bayard. I should keep my eyes on the road ahead—I can get more studying done. I've taken copious notes from Trude's observations and have space in the attic of my mind yet to organize names and faces.

A few hours later, a scowling Zita rouses me with a prod to the forehead. I sit up and find a bit of drool has adhered the Marquis DeGlace's family tree to the side of my face. It's still pitch-dark outside, so I shuffle off to bed—which is quickly becoming my little slice of paradise—and fall into its depths.



The morning of my wedding day, I wake with Ermengarde's whiskers tickling my face. I wish I could say I rested well, knowing the next time I slept I would be Bayard's wife and a princess to boot. But my nightmares remained as present as ever.

Awake, I stare at the canopy over my head, listing all the ways this day could go horribly wrong. Bayard could decide at the altar he doesn't love me after all. Maxim could shout to the court that I'm a traitor and a liar. The real girl from the ball could come thundering up the aisle in glass slippers and a sweeping gown of snowy white.

Ermengarde crawls across my face, her little claws scrambling against my cheek, to squeak in my ear. I pick her up and find that after just a few days of palace eating, she's noticeably heavier than she was before. I pet her along the crest of her back and she closes her eyes, pleased by the attention. "Are you hungry, little one? You've become so spoiled so fast."

Things go smoothly at first. Instead of my normal bath, I find the tub filled with the unicorn's milk Trude asked Zita to order. It smells like roses

and honey, and when I dip my finger into it to check its temperature, it tingles. The unicorn's milk obviously has magical properties, because when I get out of the tub, the calluses on my hands are softer than before.

When Trude arrives, she isn't holding the wedding gown, but rather, directing a team of six footmen, all carrying the dress in a box longer than I am tall. They lay it on the floor and Trude pops the lid. She immediately bursts into tears looking at the dress. "It's—it's spectacular!" she gasps.

I kneel to get a good look at it. The gown is made of a gauzy fabric I can't name. It looks more like cobwebs than anything else—insubstantial and gossamer, but strong. Its color is the palest powder blue. One might be forgiven for mistaking it for white. A train of excessive length is lined with bunches of silk flowers that glimmer at the stamens with tiny bulbs of glass, each no larger than the smallest teardrop.

We eventually succeed in getting me into it—it's complicated, with many laces and buttons involved—and my breath is sucked from my lungs when I glance at my reflection. My figure is cinched into a tight hourglass. Beads of glass shine at my waistline, calling attention to my smallest point. The sleeves, like puffs of cirrus clouds, curve around my shoulders, accentuating my bare neckline. I cannot recognize myself. I see a beauty who comes from wealth and power. I do not see the girl of the cinders anywhere.

I clasp Bayard's earrings over my still-purple earlobes, just as a knock comes at the suite door. Trude is applying finishing touches to my curls, so Zita goes to answer it. "Where is she?" comes the cold, imperious voice I wish I didn't know so well.

"I don't think my mistress is taking visitors now, your grace," Zita insists. But Maxim must move past her—even from another room, I visualize him brushing her aside with that blasted cane of his—because he strides to the door of my bedroom.

"Your lady will make an exception for me. We have an understanding."

The door swings open, and Maxim stands imposingly in the entry, his tall, thin frame set off to advantage in more jet-black finery, this time silk. My heart speeds up looking at him. What has he come here to do?

However, upon seeing me, Maxim seems uncharacteristically struck speechless.

I sigh, waiting for his latest insult. “Well, just get on with it. Say whatever awful thing you’ve concocted.”

Maxim licks his lips, flicking the tip of his cane in Trude’s direction. “Get out. All the way out of the suite. I don’t want you eavesdropping on our conversation.”

Trude, who hasn’t stopped crying since she first saw the gown, glances at me, unsure what to do. She doesn’t want to abandon me to Maxim. I nod my head toward her. “You can go. Don’t worry.” I smile tightly at Maxim. “I’m sure as the prince’s best friend, he just wants to give me some last-minute marital advice.”

Trude gives us both a tentative wave, leaving the suite altogether.

Maxim huffs, adjusting the starched white cuff of his sleeve where it folds over the black silk jacket. “More a warning than advice.”

I breathe deeply, preparing myself. I will not be afraid of this man. I won’t be bullied anymore. Not when victory—a safe, secure future—is almost at hand.

Maxim’s black eyes cut me like a blade. “Don’t marry him. You know it’s wrong.”

My throat tightens. “Why is it so wrong? I’ll be good to Bayard, and he’ll be good to me. What could be wrong about that?” My eyes flick guiltily to the door. He had sent Trude out, but he’d forgotten to dismiss Zita. I wouldn’t be the slightest bit surprised if Zita has her ear pressed against the keyhole right now, listening in. After all, that’s what I would have done in my days as a servant.

Maxim’s reply is as damning as it is infuriating. “You are not equals.”

My heart rages like burning coals. “You don’t know me. You have no idea what I’ve been through. What I’m made of. I’m not so inferior as you might think.”

Maxim steps closer, extending a hand. I flinch, expecting him to slap me across the cheek—but the gesture is too slow, too languid. Whatever he was planning to do with that hand, he seems to think better of it. “Do not. Marry

him," Maxim repeats. His eyes are glazed over like glass. "You will regret it."

"Is that a threat?" I whisper, voice husky.

"When I'm threatening you, you'll know it," Maxim says, a smile curling up his face.

"Bayard loves me," I say, crossing my arms defiantly. "I'm not throwing that away."

The smile flickers off Maxim's face. He looks disgusted. "Surely you can't be so naive as to believe that. If he loves you at all, it's by accident."

That comment stings *worse* than the slap I'd been anticipating. I don't have a comeback for it—at least nothing I can say with the possibility of Zita eavesdropping.

Maxim advances on me, now so close I could easily return a physical blow to match his verbal barb. But as badly as I want to punch him in the mouth, I know better than to strike anyone.

He looms over me, velvet voice hushed. "Reconsider your course, my lady. I promise you, if you marry Bayard, that mistake will haunt you for the rest of your life. You will be bonded until death parts you. You will never climb out of the smoldering wreckage left by that error. Until the last spark of creation in your body flickers out, you will still be cleaning up the mess you've made."

My nostrils flare. I'm breathing heavily, like I've been chased a long way. "Now, that's a real threat," I say, my words savage and harsh. "Bravo, your grace. But I am through being pushed around. I will stay my course. If this is a mistake, so be it. My whole life has been a series of other people's messes that I am *forever* cleaning up. At least now, I will have the luxury of cleaning up after myself."

Maxim's elegant face settles into something like a tranquil fury. "So be it. I'll play my next card and see your house of lies crumble."

Unbidden, my eye twitches, just as we hear another knock at the suite door followed by the creaking sound of someone letting themselves in. "Ell!"

Maxim and I both freeze at the sound of Bayard's voice.

“Your highness!” Zita throws open the door of my bedroom for him, shooting a venomous glare at Maxim as she does so. Based on the speed with which she opened the door for Bayard, it’s clear my theory she would eavesdrop was completely correct.

Bayard strides in, magnificent in regalia of purest white, just like the first day I met him. He’s momentarily taken aback by the sight of a man in my room, but then his eyes find the cane in Maxim’s hand and he greets his friend—albeit with surprise. “Max! What on earth are you doing here?”

Maxim’s smile is wooden. I seize his arm and wrap it in my own, patting it in a familiar way I rather hope will enrage him. “Max was just giving me some advice on how to be a good wife to you. After all, he knows you best, doesn’t he?”

Maxim yanks his arm from me, as if my touch is as hot as a boiling kettle. “Ellain is being overly kind to me, attributing goodness where there is none. I was mostly teasing her, I’ll confess; suggesting we lay tar down the palace steps to avoid a runaway bride situation.”

He shoots me a sidelong look that says, *See? There are no precautions to stop you running, so why don’t you just do it?*

I tilt my head to the side, looking at Bayard. “But I told him I wouldn’t dream of it.” I cross to squeeze his hands. “Is something wrong? I didn’t think I’d see you before the ceremony.”

Bayard’s eyes linger on Maxim for a second, then dart to me. “Actually, there has been an unexpected development. You have some … visitors.”

My heart lurches to a stop like a carriage that has popped an axle. “Visitors? But I don’t … know anyone.”

Bayard’s face is forlorn. I don’t have to ask why—because suddenly two figures in blindingly bright gowns have bustled into the room, their gaits awkward from recent injury. “Ell, darling!” they chorus.

It’s a sudden punch to my gut. Their names rip from my lungs. “Amalia? Freida?”

Bayard shrugs, looking helpless. He whispers to me, “I don’t know how they got in. I told the steward not to invite them.”

My chest feels tight. The room becomes hazy. My voice grows hysterical. “Then how did they find out?”

Maxim crosses the room to lean against the fireplace mantel, an evil smile like curling smoke at his lips. “Yes, *who* could have sent them an invitation?”

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” My words are choked as I whirl on him. If my stepsisters are here, that’s bad enough. But it also means Stepmother is nearby. I want to show Maxim the scar up my arm. To cry out, *Do you know who you let in? Someone who could do* this.

My stays are too tight. I’m swooning.

Bayard darts forward to catch me as I tilt forward, but Maxim’s stride is longer, and he gets there first. He grabs my upper arm and keeps me upright. I rip myself away from him, as he did to me a minute ago. “I’m fine!” The walls of this decadent room are closing in.

Freida limps forward, taking the enormous feathered hat from her head and batting at the boys like troublesome flies. “Oh, don’t baby her. Ell is always *so* dramatic. She’s stronger than she looks.”

“Besides, we’ll take care of her,” Amalia pipes up, beaming. “And you two can be on your way. I’m sure you grand gentlemen have much to attend to before the ceremony.”

Bayard hesitates. He looks to me for an answer.

I nod at him to go. Whatever reason my stepsisters are here—I need to learn of it without him around. Before they ruin everything for me, as they’ve always done. “Yes,” I say, my voice hollow. “Please leave us.” I raise my voice so I can be clearly heard outside the door. “You *too*, Zita.”

I have to trust she won’t eavesdrop if she knows I know that she’s waiting there.

Bayard is obviously troubled, but he allows Maxim to steer him from the room. Maxim glances back at me with a triumphant smirk. His black eyes —the same shade as my stepmother’s—rake over me. He inclines his head with mock respect before leaving. “And my lady? You do look *very* lovely.” He shuts the door behind him with a click.

I’m alone with my stepsisters. Amalia waltzes over to my bed and spreads herself out upon it. But Freida stays tense, prowling the room with the hunger of a jungle cat. She picks up a golden hairbrush, admiring it.

“My, my, my, sister dearest,” she muses. “You really have lucked into something here.”

I snatch the heavy brush from Freida’s grip. “Don’t touch my things,” I growl. They’ve already stolen enough from me for a lifetime.

Freida snickers, folding her arms to stare me down. “Don’t be cross, Ellain. You have to learn to share. Or we will make things very difficult for you.”

Amalia sits up on the bed, yawning luxuriously. “And Mother will too.”

I startle, wheeling to stare at her. “She’s here?”

“Of course she is!” Freida titters. “Like she’d pass up an opportunity to mingle with the king. She’s dining with him now. I wouldn’t be surprised if she manages to wrap that preening old man around her little finger.”

No.

This can’t be happening. Stepmother is like a termite. Once she finds her way into a house, she never leaves again. I’m doomed. Just when I thought I’d finally be happy—they’re going to rip it away from me. “What are you doing here?” I ask, numb.

Freida seizes on the question like a dog with a bone. “We’re here to capitalize on your newfound fortune. It’s time you found Amalia and me some rich husbands among your new court. Perhaps it’s time you shared with your only family some of the comforts you’ve secured here.”

I let out a long, wild cackle. “Have you absolutely lost your senses? I will give you nothing. As nothing is all you *ever* gave to me.”

Freida steels her jaw, pacing closer to me. “I don’t think you’ll have much of a choice, Ell. Because we know you’re lying.”

I try to give a dismissive laugh, but it isn’t as convincing as I’d like. “What proof do you have of that?”

“You stayed in the cellar all night long,” Amalia says, rising from the bed and lovingly smoothing out the damask coverlets. “You were still in there when we returned. You couldn’t have attended the ball. It’s just luck your feet fit that slipper. So it’s only fair that if you benefit from that luck, we should too.”

My fingers tighten on the handle of the hairbrush. *Fair*? If we all got what was fair in life, I would have two loving, present parents instead of three monsters who ruled over me with greed and petty selfishness. I would never have been made a prisoner in my own home. I would never have been bruised, bloodied, or beaten at Stepmother's hands.

Bayard is the only piece of luck that's ever come my way. I won't let them snatch him from me. Won't let them tear this new home apart to enrich themselves, as they did the place I grew up.

No. I have one chance to stop this. One chance to *get them out.*

A garbled scream explodes from me as I whirl toward the vanity in the corner, throwing my hairbrush with all my might at the ornate mirror. Upon impact, it smashes in a rainstorm of glass, sending glittering shards flying over my makeup, the cushioned seat, and the thick carpet.

Shock slackens Freida's face. "What have you—?"

A rush of footsteps. People are coming to my aid.

I throw myself to the ground, just before my door slams open to reveal Zita and a pair of guards, who goggle at me in shock. "What's happened?" the taller guard demands.

I'm on the ground, my chest heaving with suppressed sobs. I gesture at Freida. "She threw my hairbrush at me. I dodged and it struck the mirror."

Amalia lets out a birdlike squawk. Freida's eyes bulge as she lunges at me, twisting my arm in desperation. "You little liar! I did not!"

But I don't feel a speck of guilt in framing her. Freida always turns to violence when her ire is up. Just because she didn't throw the hairbrush this time doesn't mean she hasn't done it a thousand times before.

The guards rush to tear her off me, but it's clever Zita who gets Freida to let go, jabbing her with a stray pin from her apron pocket.

Freida shrieks as she and Amalia are hustled from the room. "Thank you," I gasp to the guards. "Please, show them to the front gate. I don't want them at the ceremony. I never want to see them again."

"As you command, my lady," the first guard says.

"And see that my stepmother goes with them," I call at the guards' backs.

When they're gone, I sink into the nearest chair, my pale gown rising around me like bubbles in the bath. Zita leans over, watching everyone go. When she's satisfied they're out of the suite, she crouches in front of me, a look fierce enough for a jungle cat on her face.

"Whatever you do, you cannot trust Maxim," she tells me.

"I don't," I murmur, head in my hands. "But I hardly think that matters now. We need to get my stepmother out of the palace."

"Never mind that," Zita insists. "Maxim doesn't love you, no matter what he says."

I lift my head to look at her, confusion bringing an instant ache to my temples. *"What?"*

"I was listening at the door," Zita says, rolling her eyes. "He wants you to run away with him. But it's a trap. Don't fall for it."

"He didn't want—no." I laugh. What a conclusion to draw. "He just doesn't want me marrying Bayard. He doesn't think I'm good enough for him."

Zita holds out a pair of grasping hands, as if she's throttling someone. "Whether you are or not, keep with the prince. He's harmless. Whereas the duke is an untrustworthy, disease-spitting rat."

I sit up straight, my spine hitting the chairback. I exhale in a whistle. "No, he's not. I *like* rats."

A vicious smile stretches across Zita's cheeks. I know she doesn't want to go any further, but I'm desperate for answers. "Why exactly do you think Maxim is a traitorous snake?"

"I don't need a reason to declare that some smug, arrogant blue blood is a snake, okay?" Zita says, shooting to her feet and turning away. She breathes a heavy sigh, then swivels back to me. "But if you must know, Duke Maxim was very close with Princess Bernadine. I think he was … romancing her, manipulating her feelings. His family is next in line for the throne, you know, if the D'Harcourts die out. At first, I figured he was only trying to marry her. To leapfrog over Bayard in the line of succession. But then he told her to meet him in the woods the day she disappeared, and she never came back."

I gasp, my head spinning with the implications of this. “You think he killed her?” I whisper. “Why?”

Slowly, Zita shakes her head. “No. He didn’t kill her. He vanished her.”

My blood chills. “Like the missing villagers.”

Zita crosses her arms, uncomfortable. “I followed the princess into the woods that day. I didn’t trust him, and she wouldn’t listen to me. One second, I could see her there, with him in the trees ahead, and then she was gone. There was no scream. Only silence.”

She gives a harsh laugh, her gaze drifting away from me, lost in memories. “But he came back just fine. When the search party went out, he didn’t admit to having been with her. Nobody knew he was with her but me—and I couldn’t tell. The duke is too powerful. Too influential. In the end, King Alaric decided Bernadine’s servants were to blame. He said we should have stopped her from entering the woods alone.”

Zita’s gray uniform shoe kicks out to strike the leg of a nearby armchair. “I thought the king would burn us like he did Nella, but instead he stuck us in the stocks for three days straight. People threw rotten fruit, we had nothing to eat, and that was *still* mercy.” Her eyes stare into the center of the hearth, as if she’s imagining flames there. “One day, I’ll find out what that greasy duke did to Bernadine. I swear it. And I’m going to make it happen to him too.”

I stand, hitching my skirts to move forward. “Thank you for being honest with me, Zita.”

Zita glares at me. “Don’t go thinking this means we’re friends. I just can’t have two of my mistresses vanishing into thin air. Next time around, the king will burn me.”



ELEVEN

THE WEDDING IS IN THE THRONE ROOM AT HIGH NOON.

After my conversation with Zita, I check that not only are my stepsisters driven out of this palace like the plague, but my stepmother is too. I find her outside the gilded doors, arguing with the guards who are barring her entry from the ceremony. One tries to grab her by the shoulder, and she instantly slaps him across the face.

"You presume to touch me?" she shouts. "I am the mother of the bride! The king will hear of this insult."

"Yes," I say, gliding up to her, steel in my heart. "He *will* hear of this. But not from you. It is only my word that matters here now."

Stepmother looms in the doorway, glowering at me. She radiates anger, but forces a sickly smile. "Ellain," she says, poisonous-sweet, "tell these stupid men to leave your doting *mamán* alone."

"My only doting *mamán* is dead and buried," I say, the lie coming out smooth as milk in tea. "You are the monster who stole my childhood. These men are going to escort you out now."

A deep, rolling chuckle escapes Stepmother's painted lips. "You think you've beaten me, haven't you? You think this is your happy ending." Her black eyes widen, glimmering with malice. "But you're wrong, Ellain. You'll see."

At this hint of a threat, the guards flank my stepmother, seizing her by the arms. She is pinned, immobile. But she straightens regally, refusing to

surrender her dignity by struggling. “Alright, I’ll go,” she tells the guards, her nose in the air. “But I *will* be back.”

I do not watch her depart. I’m afraid my courage will crumble if I do. Some part of me still believes Stepmother’s wicked arts can steal my happiness, even now.

I take steadying breaths as I face the golden doors of the throne room. I rearrange the train of my flowing gown. There are still shards of mirror glass caught in the lace hem. I leave them there to glitter.

When the double doors swing open for me, I enter alone. If I had a family, it would have been traditional for them to wait with me for the doors to open. This would have been the time for us to say our last goodbyes before I trade my old name for a new one.

But the only family I have has been thrown out, so no one is here with me to bid Ellain DeBrun farewell.

Trumpeters announce my entrance. The steward’s staff have brought in enough gilded chairs for the entire court to sit upon, leaving a long aisle between the two sections.

The court stands when I enter.

There is a soft murmur of approval, but I know the court well enough by now to know that just because they say they like my appearance doesn’t mean they really do.

Still, *I* like how I look today. I am clean and wearing a gown sewn from stardust and moonbeams. And if I have bags under my eyes from a late night of memorizing these silver-tongued liars’ names? It matters not. If I like my appearance, nobody else’s opinion is worth two copper pieces.

The king is presiding over our marriage. I suppose that makes sense. He is the law of the land.

On the dais, Bayard waits. A golden crown rests on his curls, and his gray eyes are shining with happiness. Maxim lurks behind him in his black attire—a crafty, disapproving shadow.

I walk shakily down the long aisle toward Bayard. My palms sweat as I hitch up the gossamer skirts of my gown.

Trude is on my side of the dais—filling in the traditional role of my best friend. It’s a relief to see Trude up there, her dimpled smile so charming and

big. She's still crying, the soft-hearted fool. I'm overwhelmed by a rush of affection for my vibrant, daydreaming, almond-catching new friend. It isn't just a lifetime of security with Bayard that waits for me on the dais.

It's a lifetime of happiness in every respect. Happiness like I have only imagined, and never felt.

Trude and Maxim step off the dais when I arrive. I sink into a curtsy to the king, and it's their arms that lift me out of it. Maxim pulls me into an embrace first. This is when most brides would get a murmur of congratulations from their soon-to-be-husband's comrade, but instead of anything kind, Maxim just whispers in my ear, "You don't love him."

My throat goes dry as Trude wraps me tightly in her arms. Her tear-stained cheek touches mine, and I barely notice the wetness. Was that true, what Maxim said? Do I not love Bayard? Does it even matter?

"You're a vision," Trude says, swaying a little bit as she holds me. "Your happy ending is waiting for you. You just have to step up and claim it. Take care of Bayard for me. Heaven knows he deserves a true, unselfish love—a love like you can give him—more than anyone in all the world."

My head buzzes like the hives of bees Jessamin used to keep in her garden. Thoughts are flitting left and right and upside-down through my skull so fast I can barely register them. She did not say *"Take care of Bayard."* She said, "*Take care of Bayard* for me."

Trude lets me go, but her words echo in my mind. Bayard reaches out to take my hands, helping me onto the dais. The touch of his hands is warm, inviting and soft. He makes me feel safe, for the first time since my father was living.

Of *course* I love Bayard. It would be impossible not to love him, wouldn't it? He is the very ideal of a man. He is tall and charming and thoughtful and amiable. Compassionate, generous, as kind as he is handsome—*hell's bells*, he's even a prince. With a fortune to his name and a kingdom as his birthright. It would be nothing short of madness to not love him. He is everything I ever wanted. Everything fairy tales have ever told me a young woman should want.

Maxim is being absurd. Love is not a tangible thing. You can't prove if someone loves anyone or not. But I do *like* Bayard. I like him very, very

much. I am fond of him after only a few days, and he is so lovable—I'm sure it's only a matter of time before all doubts vanish. And until then, liking will do. Liking will be an *exquisite* change of itinerary.

And he will never hurt me. I feel this in my bones, and when it comes down to the bottom of the well, what you feel in your bones is all that matters.

It's traditional for a bride and groom to exchange vows of their own making. Bayard goes first. He kisses my knuckles chivalrously, then declares, "Ellain DeBrun. My sweet Ell. I've known since I first met you that I could be my truest self with you. I look forward to spending each day waking up beside you. I vow to love you. I vow to protect you from all harm. And I vow to make you happy every day until one of us departs from this world."

My smile goes wobbly as I fight back tears. Bayard is extraordinary. No, it can't possibly be long until I see him as the other half of my soul.

But I have resolved that no vow I make to him today will be a lie, so when I give vows in return, I don't speak of romantic love. Instead, I think of building a family together, and I recall everything I wish my real family could have been to me. And I say this: "Bayard D'Harcourt. You saved my life when you came to my door."

Bayard is trying so hard to suppress a grin that he's forced to bite his lower lip.

"I can never thank you enough for that day," I say. "I will be forever in your debt. So let me say that hereafter I vow to be your most faithful friend. I vow to always treat you with the kindness you deserve. And I vow to never abandon you. I will be at your side until one of us goes where the other can't follow."

"With those vows," the king bellows, puffing out his chest in pride, "I declare these two to be wed, and to be known furthermore as a pair, sharing one name and one heart: Prince Bayard and Princess Ellain D'Harcourt, heirs presumptive of the Kingdom of Holbein. What was once halved is now whole."

At these words, Bayard can't hold back his boyish grin any longer. It splits his face in two as he pulls me toward him and bestows on me the

sweetest, gentlest kiss yet.

I'm shaking like an unsteady pile of dishes. I throw my arms around Bayard's neck and he spins me in a dizzy circle, like he did the first day we met. The throne room explodes into joyous, discordant shouts and applause. All around us, white feathers start falling like snow. I extend a hand to catch one as it drifts dreamily through the air, and look up to see a set of four servants perched in the rafters, shaking the feathers out of gigantic metal tubs. Unsteady work—enough to jar me from my moment of incandescent happiness.

A dog whistle from behind the throne makes me snap my head to look: Molded into the far wall are golden grates that stretch only a foot off the ground. But there is the crisp sound of echoing claps coming from the innards of the grates, and I see the outlines of human heads in the darkness behind them.

I startle, realizing these heads belong to another set of blue-clad servants, who have been watching the ceremony from within the walls themselves. I had not realized there were secret passages built between the rooms of this palace, and now I wonder what their purpose is.

Bayard grabs my hand and starts pulling me down the aisle. A shocked laugh bursts out of me. "Where are we going?" I call out over the clamor of applause.

"The treasury!" Bayard shouts back.

"The *what*?"

"It's traditional!"

As we race breathlessly from the throne room, me pulling up my skirts to avoid tumbling onto the marble floor, the courtiers stream after us, like the flowing of a river. The king is running at our side as well. He's laughing at me as I try to run in my overabundance of gown, though good-naturedly for once, I think. Most of the court is roaring with amusement, actually, as Bayard makes a sudden move to grip me by the waist and lift me into his arms. We move much faster now, with my arms slung around his neck and him holding me aloft.

We reach the treasury, in a section of the palace I have never yet been to. It is a vast, echoing place with incredibly high, arched ceilings and no fewer

than ten massive vaults. The king steps forward, taking a golden key from a chain around his neck, and unlocks the first of the vaults. Blue-liveried guards rush to open the vault door, and suddenly my vision is covered in dappled spots, as if I've stared too long into the sun.

I see mountains of shining gold, many stacked in bars, but also a great deal of loose coins, interspersed with glimmering jewels and the odd string of pearls. In the corner, numerous locked trunks, their surfaces filmy with dust, wait. Bayard pulls me over the threshold of the vault, and I squint at the label on one of the trunks, which reads "Deeds of Land."

I look up at Bayard in bewilderment. "What are we doing here, exactly?"

Bayard steers me toward the mountain of coinage. "D'Harcourt tradition states that at a royal wedding, the new couple should proceed to the treasury and take as much gold as they can carry to the commonfolk waiting at the gates below. We throw it to the people, so the fates bless our union!"

Next to me, King Alaric is stroking his scruffy beard. "Noblesse oblige, dear girl."

It seems massively condescending to me. From what Maxim said, it sounds like half the kingdom is waiting out front. To take them only the coins we could carry—when there are presumably nine other vaults here full of treasure?

But I suppose taking them something is better than nothing. Bayard kneels, scooping gilt money into his arms. Naturally, some spill out, slipping away like water between fingers. "No, fill this instead!" I shout. I pull up the top layer of my skirts, forming a massive basket in which to carry four times as much gold as we could keep securely in our arms. Bayard roars in delight, and starts dumping coins into my gown.

King Alaric's brow furrows into a scowl. "Surely you can't lift that all the way, Ellain. Best to pour some out."

I don't know if it's the stampede of approval from the crowd, or the rush of having finally secured my prized future of happiness, but I'm emboldened to throw a wink at my new father-in-law. "I wouldn't be so sure—I've carried a lot of heavy laundry in my day."

And then it's down three flights of stairs from the treasury to the majestic front doors. A carriage is waiting to escort us across the river bridge to the

front gates. The coolness of the gold bleeds through the layers of my gown, chilling my knees. I gasp as we approach the gates, seeing the ocean of commonfolk assembled there: a riot of colorfully dressed people, all roaring louder than thunder.

The carriage stops and the footman lowers a tiny step for us to descend. Bayard lends his arm for me to lean on as I scramble down, keeping my makeshift sack of gold steady.

The gilded gates don't open as I expect them to. The bars are wide, so at first, Bayard takes charge of reaching through to pass gold to those in front. I suppose for past weddings, when they only loaded up their arms, they would have run out of coins after those in the first row. Men grip Bayard's hands in thanks as he passes off gold. Women weep with joy. When most people up front have received something, I jerk my head to the top of the gate. "Bayard, do you think you can throw coins over to the people in back?"

Bayard nods, winking at me as I'd winked earlier, and grabs another handful of coins from my skirts. "You haven't seen me play racquet yet. I've got quite the arm."

Warmth creeps into my cheeks. "I believe you."

And Bayard proves his braggadocio right. He manages to gamely toss the coins up in a long, slender arc—like Trude's almond toss on a far grander scale—allowing those much farther back to take gold home to their families.

As we begin to run out of coins, Bayard nudges me forward to reach through the bars to hand out a few pieces myself. "It feels good!"

I tentatively agree, my eyes landing on a large, pregnant woman with tears streaming down her face. She's shouting herself hoarse, and I don't think Bayard's hands found hers the first time around. I press three fat gold pieces into her hand, and the woman wails her thanks. But as I try to pull away, she doesn't let me go. Instead, she yanks hard on my arm, so that I stagger forward to hit the bars, my puffed sleeve snagging on the metal.

"Fairy-blest!" she cries, snot dripping from her nose. "Fairy-blest princess, lay your hand on my baby! Make her special—anointed like you. Give her your luck, please, princess!"

My jaw slackens, surely making me look exactly like the country bumpkin I am. But the woman guides my open palm to rest on her belly, and I find myself murmuring the words, “May your life be blest.”

Those nearby roar with new interest at a much different, more frantic pitch. A man with cataracts in one eye snatches my hand before I can pull it back through the bars. He presses it to the side of his head. “Bless me, princess! Give me fairy favor!”

These words catch like wildfire, as those in earshot echo them. “Fairy favor! Fairy favor!” The shouts ripple out, transforming into something new. The same words the mother-to-be had said: “Fairy-blest! Fairy-blest! Fairy-blest!”

Fear tightens my throat. How can they call me this? I have no magic to make their lives better—and it disturbs me that they’d lay this responsibility on my shoulders. How desperate must they be if they turn to a helpless girl for aid?

Another man seizes my hand and shouts a request, incoherent to my ear. He’s terribly strong, and squeezes far too tight, grinding my finger bones together. I wince in pain, and Bayard springs into action, drawing a sword —it scrapes against his scabbard, making a ringing, metallic sound like when I used to sharpen kitchen knives—and threads it through the iron bars to hold it over the grasping man’s wrist. He lifts an eyebrow to the man, silently daring him to give him a reason.

The man releases me, and I stumble back from the gate, massaging my hand.

The tumult of the crowd shakes the ground. They’re shrieking, stamping their feet. Some begin to climb the gate, arms outstretched to me. “Fairy-blest! No more war! Fairy-blest! No more war!”

Blood pounds in my ears. My vision blurs with anxiety. I realize, the people do not see the fae as our enemies. They still think, despite the king’s propaganda, that magic holds the answers to their problems. Don’t they know better? Don’t they know there is no good looking to fairies for help? They wouldn’t come if we called. We are all alone.

Bayard wraps his arms around me, leaning down to kiss the top of my head. He makes to turn me back toward the carriage, when I hear something

clang against the bars of the gate. I whirl around, the hair rising on the back of my neck.

And there they are, having shoved everyone else out of their way. My stepfamily, arrayed in their brightest silks, but looking rather worse for wear after tussling with the royal guards. The gilded gate is all that stands between us. “Ell!” They beg, keening like hungry puppies. “Ell, let us back in!”

Stepmother’s eyes crack like splitting coals. Spit flies from her lips as she delivers a monologue in rapid, hushed tones. “Ellain DeBrun. You were a creature of the soot and ashes three days ago, and before our tale is done, I will see you thrown back into the grime where you belong. You will be placed in a cellar so dark and deep that everyone you have ever known will forget your name. You will beg for mercy, for my forgiveness, and none shall come. This is your final chance to unlock the gate and save your unworthy skin.”

My muscles lock painfully. My response is buried in my chest, hardly a whisper: “No.”

I give my great enemy a thin smile, before kissing the pads of my two forefingers. I reach through the bars of the gates and press my fingertips firmly but tenderly against her lips. “Goodbye, Stepmother,” I say.

Bayard must recognize my stepsisters’ unique clothing and connect who the older woman at their side is. He gently pulls me away from the vicious, spitting viper that is my stepmother and boosts me into the carriage. He tells the coachman to cue the horses.

I look back at my stepfamily through the bars. I suppose this is the part of a story where a better person would tell the coachman to stop. To open the gates and let them in. To offer forgiveness.

But I’ll never forgive them.

I’d rather die. I’d rather be lit on fire. I’d rather shatter into a million pieces.

Stepmother’s voice rises above the tumult. “You are not fairy-blest!” My heart stops. I grip Bayard’s hand, my palm clammy. “You are nothing, Ellain DeBrun! You are a fraud! I will see you returned to the cinders, you ungrateful little—”

Her voice melts in with the rest. We have driven far enough away that I can no longer hear her. Yet her words still seem to be throwing themselves against my ribcage, threatening to storm the gates and rip out my heart.



TWELVE

In my many nights in the garret, picturing a beautiful world I could escape into, I had imagined countless balls. I'd conjured visions of silk gowns, towering wigs, feasts, and ten-piece orchestras. But the ball held to celebrate our marriage proves that for all these years, I'd been suffering from a failure of imagination.

It's like stepping into Fairyland—if such a thing were not illegal on pain of death. The strings play so loudly my eardrums rattle. Ribbons of thin, almost translucent paper, in every hue of the rainbow, float gently from the ceiling. A fountain of champagne bubbles in the corner of the ballroom, shooting spurts of fizzy liquid into graceful waterfalls for our glasses to catch. There are jugglers, singers, jesters, even a dancing bear. The courtiers wear masks trimmed with gold and silver, turning them strange and fey in the candlelight.

And the food. The food.

Marbleized steaks, racks of glistening lamb, succulent turkey. Breads coated with flour, which crackle when you rip them open, each still warm and soft within. Endless varieties of cheese. Roasted vegetables that seem to sing your name as their scents pass beneath your nose—making me finally understand why, when pregnant, my mother longed for nothing but greens. Lobster dripping with butter. Puddings, pies, rum soufflés. An eight-foot replica of the royal palace constructed solely of sugar-dusted gingerbread walls, with the most delicate marzipan shingles on the tower roofs, and fragile sheets of crystal candy for windows. The attention to detail is

astounding: There are even little iron horseshoes above each entryway, which upon closer inspection seem to be hewn from gumdrops.

The only food I do not see is venison. No noble deer from the royal forest has died for this meal.

By the time the dancing begins, I've had three cups of champagne, and my cheeks glow with happiness. Bayard and I move every bit as gracefully as we did the night of my arrival. We whirl about light as air, and the court marvels, cheering at our agility. Several times in mid-spin I see Trude engaged with her own dancing partners, and still she can't keep her eyes off me and Bayard.

We pause dancing, and when members of the court come to fawn over us, I ask for each of them to remove their masks for me. Then, with feigned shock and delight, I announce that I *do* know their faces, and their names from when we were previously introduced. "Oh, Lady Josephine! You simply must teach me to play racquet. It is Bayard's very favorite sport and I should learn to keep up with him, don't you think?" or "Ah, General D'Chamberd! His majesty spoke to me of the troops yesterday. I understand we have you to thank for their skill and discipline?"

Bayard beams at me each time I announce a new visitor. It's clear he's having the time of his life, never having to worry about who's speaking to him. Tension melts from his shoulders like wax from a candle.

I am in my glory. I am useful.

Even the king notices how well-acquainted I've become with the court. As I finish my fourth champagne, the king calls for a server to refill my glass and leans in to murmur approval in my ear. "You are shockingly delightful tonight. There is more sugar in you than in the wedding cake, and these idiots can't get enough. They're ready to eat you up."

I give the king a restrained smile, lifting an eyebrow. He can tell there's a falseness to the eager way I interact with these people—I'm charming them just as he ordered me to do, after all—but so what? If anything, the king seems to approve of me more heartily for my insincerity. He believes himself miles above them, and assumes I feel the same. But faking enthusiasm aside, I don't sneer at these people as Alaric does. It's not their

fault there's no substance to them. They're like flaky pastries by design, dissolving on your tongue and leaving the stomach empty.

But it's good to know I'm not letting Bayard or Alaric down. I've already had one parental figure despise me, and it didn't improve my life. As much as I find the king … distasteful, I'd prefer to stay on his good side. He's surprised I'm doing well—but I wasn't speaking from naivete when I said my experience running our household would help me. If someone assigns me a task, my sheer determination will always see me through.

My racing heartbeat tells me that, on some level, my body still thinks I'm performing for Stepmother. I still think forgetting one name or face will mean her hand delivering a stinging blow to my cheek, or a jab to my nose.

But no. Stepmother is outside the gates, and I'm secure inside. I am the princess and future queen. She will never invade my home again.

Bayard soon rescues me from his father, guiding me on another turn around the ballroom, where we swirl and twirl a magical spell. Returned to the safety of Bayard's arms, I'm sure my love for him will bloom rapturously any day now. He is much too marvelous for it to be otherwise.

When the music shifts into something sharper—more dangerous and acute—a white-gloved hand taps Bayard on the shoulder. Maxim stands behind him. "Your father wants to speak with you. In the meantime, may I cut in?"

Bayard stiffens with discomfort, glancing nervously over at his father, lounging at the high table. He gives my hand a brief, perfunctory kiss, and leaves me to Maxim's nonexistent mercy.

Maxim slips his hand into mine, sporting that shit-eating smirk. He places his other hand on my waist and steers me out onto the floor for the new, faster-paced song. I'm grateful he's wearing gloves—if his skin were actually touching me, I suspect the fabric of my gown would sizzle from the sheer heat of his hatred. My skin prickles with revulsion at being so near to the man who vanished Princess Bernadine. A betrayer. A potential usurper. A liar of the highest degree, who dared to accuse *me* of villainy when his soul is so much more stained than mine.

"Can't you leave me alone now?" I ask. "Your gambit with my stepfamily failed. I've won the game."

Maxim shakes his head, tutting. “My dear, we have hardly begun to play. But tonight let’s call a brief truce. You’ve already played your hand, and I have played both of mine.”

My heart stutters. *Both?*

“Your cards were better than mine on the face of it, I’ll admit,” Maxim continues. “But I played mine in a devilishly clever way. Did you happen to notice how the peasants love you now? Their fairy-blest princess?”

Dread creeps across my skin like the rosy fingers of dawn across a horizon. *Fairy-blest.* These are the words Maxim called me yesterday to the petitioners—and they are surely no words the king would like to hear describing his new daughter. The terrifying, overwhelming excitement outside … it was all Maxim’s doing. He lit one spark of damning interest and waited for it to erupt into the flames of my execution pyre.

It’s no wonder they were so excited—when things are so dire that peasants willingly march into the woods to disappear, they’ll grasp at any crumb of hope. Even a false rumor about a fairy-blest girl. And Maxim took advantage of their desperation to undo me.

My eyes narrow in fury as he dips me to the music. He lifts me back to my feet, grinning, and we spin outward. I think, ungenerously, that the only reason he doesn’t drop me is because people are watching.

“What comes next in your evil plan?” I growl into his ear as the dance brings us close again.

“Wait and see, darling,” Maxim replies. “The anticipation is half the fun.”

In retaliation, and with nothing else to say, I press hard on the fingers clasped with mine, grinding his metacarpal bones together as the grasping man outside had done to me. Maxim disguises his momentary shock as a booming laugh. He tightens his grip on my hand in return, though thankfully, he does not attempt to crush my bones in vengeance. And even with the papery layer of fabric between my skin and his, I sense calluses hidden beneath the smooth silk of his glove.

I stop dancing, looking up into Maxim’s glimmering eyes with genuine surprise. “Who has you doing hard labor, rich boy?”

Maxim's usually petulant lips part in surprise. He's about to answer when the music shrieks to a sudden halt. A stream of guards has rushed into the ballroom, their captain cutting through the guests to whisper in the king's ear.

For three long, terrible seconds, the entire court waits in suspended animation. We watch as the king's face goes ruddy with murderous rage. "And where do they get the *nerve*?" he shouts at the captain.

Maxim and I break apart, our fingers slipping away from each other. A heavy, leaden disappointment lands in my stomach. We were on the verge of something important, and I'm sorry to have it cut short. Those calluses were perhaps the first hint of a human element to my enemy and, unless I am very much mistaken, I think he was going to tell me the true story behind them.

As one, we move toward King Alaric and Bayard. "Is something the matter, sire?" Maxim asks, his brow too artfully furrowed, his manner too smooth to be genuinely concerned. In the space of a heartbeat, I know Maxim already knows—or at least suspects—what has the king riled up. Meaning the rumor he instigated is probably the cause.

"It's those damn peasants outside!" the king roars. His teeth are blue from wine again. I take Bayard's hand as his father continues to shout. "They've gone absolutely out of their skulls. Trying to climb over the gate!"

Maxim crosses his arms, a tiny smile blooming on his face like the first rosebud of spring. The *snake.* "Is there something they want?"

"Want?" King Alaric splutters. The question throws him, making him pause, only to round on the guard captain. "Well? What do they want? They must want something!"

My eyes slide to meet Bayard's. We know what they want. After all, they had shouted it at us a few hours earlier, when the first attempts at climbing the gate began. They'd cried for fairy favor and an end to war.

The captain of the guard looks to the floor, littered with the decorative remnants of the ball, and mutters something to that effect. Unsurprisingly, this does nothing to calm Alaric. "So that's how those filthy droves want to play it? We give them gold, they give us insubordination! We protect them

from the fairy abomination, and they whine about the cost of war? General D'Chamberd!"

He shouts over the powdered heads of the nobility, and D'Chamberd comes skittering from the crowd, the combination of overindulgence and sudden exertion painting his face puffy and red. He skids to a stop before the king, saluting. "Your majesty!"

Alaric snaps his fingers decisively at his general. "Fetch the regiments from the fortress and rout these rabble-rousers. That will teach them the consequences of their meaningless tantrums."

My hands fly to my mouth as I picture that rowdy, brilliant crowd of commonfolk being preyed upon by a row of hardened soldiers. Alaric's beloved iron weapons could hardly be put to use on our own people, could they?

"You're joking!" I gasp.

Alaric's feverish gaze flies to Bayard. "Is your little bride questioning my authority?"

Bayard grabs my arm, pulling me behind him. He says, "No, of course not" at the exact moment I cry out "Yes!"

The king raises a warning hand to me. "It is a happy day, Ellain, and I do not hit women. Do not make me strike my son on your behalf."

Bayard's eyes close and his jaw tightens. He moves half an inch closer to me, but otherwise keeps his posture dignified and upright. I swallow a hard lump in my throat. I know instantly this is not the first time Alaric has threatened violence against his son. Bayard and I have more in common than being light on our feet.

I go lightheaded with rage. Illogically, my mind tells me it would be one thing to hit me—that falls within the column of "acceptable"—while it would be quite another to hit Bayard for a mistake *I'd* made. I shove past Bayard's outstretched arm and step between him and Alaric. Perhaps it's the five cups of champagne, still churning in my deepest guts, making me impractically brave. "You cannot turn weapons on our people—"

Bayard's voice echoes behind me. "Ell, please—"

But I'm blundering on, fury heating my face. "—what possible good—"

“Who are you to tell me what I can and cannot do?” Alaric thunders. “In front of my own court?”

He raises his arm again, and his eyes are locked on me. I immediately know his words about not hitting women were just that: words. Words to make himself feel noble while bullying others.

But before the king’s arm has a chance to lower, a shining black cane snaps out between us, causing Alaric to pause. Maxim’s smooth voice diffuses the conflict like poison dispersing in the bloodstream. “Your majesty, I believe her highness is too much in her cups to be eloquent. I don’t think Princess Ellain meant to question your wisdom or your royal authority.”

I open my mouth to protest, but Maxim’s white-gloved hand flutters at me, bidding me silent. He continues, speaking confidently in the face of the softening king. “My understanding of her ill-phrased point was merely that she wanted to caution you against the optics of such … decisive movement against the peasants. As we all know, they’ll talk amongst themselves, and as you rightly say, sire, *whine* all-the-day long. If you strike down one crowd, they’ll tell their peasant friends, and soon there will be a new crowd triple the size to complain about your treatment of the first. It will be a needlessly irritating cycle for your majesty, do you not think?”

King Alaric cracks his neck from side to side, sighing. “Your words have a ring of truth to them.” He clearly appreciates Maxim lacing his argument with silver-tongued compliments. A bubble of discontent swells in my stomach. How could a ruler ever really know his populace if he wouldn’t accept the truth unless it was first couched in flattery?

The king closes his eyes, thinking. Briskly, he asks Maxim, “What are our other options?”

Maxim dips into a bow. “Allow me to speak to the people on your behalf, sire. I will discover what rankles them and report back to you. Perhaps we can find some small, mollifying crumb to give them. A show of your great benevolence.”

Alaric nods in approval. “Yes. Do that. Now.”

With a second bow, Maxim slips away into the crowd and out of the ballroom, as slimy and slippery as squid ink.

Now, Alaric gradually straightens his spine, turning to glower at me. “From now on, when you presume to give me counsel, you will speak it as a sensible person does, so I never again mistake you for some dewy-eyed, soft-hearted, insubordinate, *idiotic* dreamer.” His voice softens to a mock-paternal caress. “Is that perfectly clear?”

I bite back fighting words only because Bayard’s fingertips brush against my wrist. I smooth my face the way Maxim does to win the king’s favor, lowering myself into the deepest of curtsies. “Forgive me, my liege. I meant no disrespect. It’s clear I have much to learn in terms of public speaking. I should have chosen my words more carefully.”

The king nods and puts his index finger beneath my chin, using it to push me back into a standing position. As if I am a marionette puppet and all my strings link there. “What did I tell you when you first arrived? Princesses do not apologize. It isn’t becoming.”

I close my eyes, forcibly twisting my mouth into a painfully vacant smile. No way to win. What a familiar position to find myself in again, and again, and again.

Alaric’s gaze snaps to his son. “Take your little bride off to the marriage bed. Get to work on making me an heir for this throne with a working brain.”

Bayard’s entire face heats like a glowing poker—not just the tips of his ears this time. But he bows to his father, takes me by the arm, and leads me from the ballroom. A pair of guards peel off from sentry duty and march six paces behind us all the way to the royal wing, making sure we go precisely where the king wants us to.

The party is clearly over.

Upstairs in Bayard’s chambers, we’re both keenly aware what everyone expects from us now, but given the circumstances, there’s hardly an aura of romance in the air. We stand ten feet apart across an ocean of blue carpet, unable to make eye contact.

The silence between us weighs heavier than a skirt full of gold. Finally, Bayard breaks it. “Why would you talk to him that way? It’s not wise. You cannot do that again.”

I clench my shaking hands into my skirts. “He was going to turn the troops on his own people. I had to do *some*thing!”

Bayard’s jawline goes tight. His wan face is glazed with sweat. “You have no idea what you’re dealing with when it comes to my father. He is … not forgiving, Ell. He is changeable and temperamental and rough. I don’t want you getting hurt. He could have hit you tonight, you know.”

A hollow laugh escapes me. As if it would have been my first time getting struck. “Some things are worth being hit for,” I tell him.

“No,” Bayard says, pacing closer to me and wrapping gentle hands around my wrists. “Love, that is a risky game to play. Do not. You just have to—” The apple bobs in his throat, and he tries again. “We need to be cautious. Stay on my father’s good side. When he says family is safe, he’s lying. I don’t want you harmed.”

I’m lightheaded from champagne. My emotions are closer to the surface tonight than usual, because otherwise I’d never dare ask Bayard what I do next: “Whatever happened to that vow you made today? To protect me? Now you’re just saying to lie low.”

Bayard looks deeply hurt and taken aback. “Ell, lying low is *how* I’m protecting you. My father’s vendettas become intense.”

“And what about the people?” I demand. “Who will protect them?”

Bayard shakes his head, a limp curl falling across his forehead. “One day, you and I will rule this kingdom together, and things will be better. But we need to be patient and wait for that day.”

I rip my hands away from him, staggering in my ridiculous gown only to trip on the hem and collapse to the floor. I scramble into an upright sitting position, an indefinable ache filling my chest. My eyes sting with unshed tears. I pound my palms uselessly against the carpet. “I am *tired* of waiting! I am tired of wishing and hoping and praying for things to get better. I’m not sitting still anymore, Bayard. We have power in this kingdom, don’t we? Why can’t we use it?”

Bayard creeps to me, crouching to look me in the eye. “Sadly, my love, I do not have the power you imagine. Maybe if my father had ever liked me —but he thinks I’m about as useful as a match in a rainstorm. You haven’t

been at court very long, but surely you've noticed how he'd rather listen to Max than me."

I pause. That's true. Over and over again, Alaric turns to Maxim for counsel, despite him being a young man the same age as his son and heir. I tilt my head to the side. "Why is that?"

Bayard shrugs, collapsing onto the floor to sit at my level. "Hard to say. Max's father was my father's chief adviser before he passed. Maybe he thinks Max takes after him? But I'd guess my father likes Max better than me not *despite* him not being family, but precisely *because* he isn't family. Father puts absurd expectations on his children. On me, on Bernadine. We have to be the perfect royals. He wants us to be bold yet obliging, charming yet authoritative, brutal yet genteel …" Bayard gives a long sigh, leaning back until his head hits the baseboard of the four-poster bed. "Not that my father is half those things, but years of fawning have led him to believe he's perfection itself."

My anger with Bayard extinguishes as quickly as if a bucket of water had been dumped on it. I crawl to him so we're sitting side by side against the bedframe. I lay a hand against his head, urging him to rest it against my shoulder. I gently stroke his hair. "It's alright," I croon. "It's all going to be alright."

Forgiving silence settles in the room. Eventually, I offer, "I'm sorry I put you in a position for him to be angry with you."

Bayard replies, "You were doing what you thought was right. I'm just sorry I wasn't the crusading knight you hoped I'd be."

I give a rueful laugh. "How furious your father would be if he heard us *apologizing* right now."

Bayard chuckles too. "The horror!"

He sits up, giving me a short but tender kiss. He cuts it off too soon; the kiss dies before blooming into anything. With disappointment, I realize my husband is almost too gentlemanly. We are married now; I would like our kisses to grow deeper, longer, more intense. I did not think it was possible —but somehow I find myself comparing this short kiss with the sensation of Maxim's gloved finger tracing my ear. They both make me long for more.

“I’ll tell you what though,” he says, taking my hand and helping me to my feet. “I will not be a horse, trained to breed on command. You are not a broodmare, and I am not some pedigree stud.”

He is good. He is gentle and thoughtful. But an overwhelming part of me wishes he would take me in his arms and kiss me with urgency. With need. Maybe if he did, then these strange compulsions I feel for Maxim would be burned away in our passion.

Perhaps I just need to encourage my husband. Tell him that I desire him, so he will no longer worry about moving too fast for me. If anything, I’d like to move faster.

I giggle, running my hands flirtatiously down his arms and admiring the biceps I find beneath his shirt. I draw close to him, fluttering my eyelashes in a come-hither sort of way. “Agree to disagree. I like being close to you. I like being kissed, touched, by you. I would welcome more of it.”

Bayard grins sheepishly, brushing a stray strand of hair out of my eye, as if he thought my eyelashes were going wild trying to brush out a foreign object. He’s a little unsteady on his feet from drink too. “That’s very kind of you, darling.”

Kind? I am not trying to be kind. I am trying to be temptation on legs. Perhaps I need to be more direct?

“I would welcome more *right now*,” I clarify, closing the gap between us and tilting my head up for another sweet kiss.

Bayard winces very slightly, but lays a gentle palm on the side of my face. This innocent touch sets my skin afire, making me greedy for more. “Ell, you are perfection itself. But I think I’m the kind of person who needs more time to become truly intimate in that way. I love you, but we have known each other only days. We have our whole lives together ahead of us. Why not take our time?” He takes a step back from me. “Now, how about I help you into a nightgown, and then we both crawl into this bed to just … sleep? Who could perform when their father’s ordered them to bed their wife, anyway? All the spontaneity is gone.”

I nod. “Of course. I understand completely.” And on some level, I do understand. It’s every person’s right not to rush into things. But I also

wonder if it is my right to wish dearly that Bayard *was* the type to rush in. I certainly want to.

Still, a taunting notion pricks at me; if Bayard had married Trude, someone he had known for years, this likely wouldn't be a problem.

"Are you disappointed?" Bayard asks me, his brows knitting together in earnest concern.

"Only a little," I admit. "But it's okay. I'm sure we'll get there in time." There are not many hours 'til the dawn, anyway, and I'm exhausted from a day that has brought equal excitement and horror. Sleep will be welcome.

Zita must have come to lay out nightclothes for me here at some point during the ball, because a nightgown and my green robe are folded on a nearby chest of drawers. I go to pick them up and see a carved wooden box, its lid embedded with sapphires, sitting next to the stack of my clothes. "What's this?" I ask, lifting the box's lid.

I'm greeted by the faint blue glimmer of the glass slipper I tried on for Bayard only a few days ago, sitting on a bed of white velvet.

Bayard is across the room, stripping off his doublet. His pants are already bunched on the floor in the corner, waiting for some servant to collect them in the morning. "Your slipper! You know, I've been wondering … whatever happened to the other? This one stayed after midnight, when you said all your other clothes disappeared. I have to imagine the other one lingered come day-break too."

I freeze, fingers perched on the edge of the box. An obvious solution presents itself, and I am not one to turn down an obvious solution. I turn to Bayard with a sad smile. "My stepmother shattered it."

A ripple of anger crosses Bayard's face again, but by now I know him well enough I don't fear it being directed at me. He is across the room in three quick strides, and then he has me in his arms, wrapped in a steady embrace.

I melt into him, momentarily hopeful. There's still time for passion to bloom with Bayard. Perhaps I will wake in the morning completely head over glass heels for him.

And as for Stepmother? I feel no guilt in pinning a manufactured crime on her name. After all, if I had owned a glass slipper to break, she certainly

would have done it.



THIRTEEN

MY SCANT HOURS OF SLEEP PRODUCE DREAMS TINGED WITH uncertainty. Bayard turns a corner ahead of me, but when I reach him, he winks out of view. My stepfamily shakes the front gate's bars, but when I reach to them through the gap, my hand turns to ash from the wrist, crumbling and blowing away upon the wind. Trude tries to balance the ivory wolf's head of Maxim's cane on her nose, and I keep shouting at her to *stop*—sensing that if the cane should clatter to the floor, something terrible will happen to her. When it inevitably tumbles to the ground, it shatters into a thousand shards of dagger-like glass.

I wake with a gasp, clawing at my face, expecting it to be pierced by glass fragments. My breathing gradually slows as I realize my palms are still bloodless and dry. I collapse back onto my pillows, willing my heartbeat to calm.

Next to me, Bayard remains asleep, despite the tinge of a pink sunrise reaching through the window. He must be an incredibly heavy sleeper. If a tremendous beanstalk burst up from the garden outside and a giant climbed down from the clouds, he'd probably go on snoring.

But he only enjoys blissful sleep for another moment or two, because the bedroom door is suddenly banged open by a pair of guards. The sound of wood slamming against the wall makes Bayard jerk awake, yelping. I drag the blankets up farther over myself, squinting at the intruders. I recognize one of them. "Aren't you captain of the guard?" I ask for Bayard's benefit, since I imagine all guards look the same to him in those matching uniforms. "What are you doing here?"

The captain bows. “The king requests your attendance in the throne room. Both of you.”

Stupefied, I blink at Bayard. He rubs his face, trying to wake up. “Alright, just give us a moment to get dressed,” he mutters.

The captain shakes his head, his mouth a grim, uncomfortable line. “He said you should come as you are.”

“That’s absurd!” I blurt out, but Bayard just shakes his head at me, a gesture so small it’s almost imperceptible. “Okay …” I say, yielding. I throw back the blankets and jump out of bed, quickly pulling on my much-beloved robe as an extra layer over my semi-sheer nightgown.

Bayard leaves bed too, yawning so widely I worry he’ll dislocate his jaw. His bronze hair is tousled from sleep, and as the captain shepherds us from Bayard’s quarters, I glance with horror in the mirror to find my hair is sticking up at all angles, entirely unkempt after tossing and turning all night. I try patting it down as we hit the hall, but it’s no use.

There are some nobles lounging in the throne room when we arrive, which initially shocks me as it’s so early in the morning. But then I see their bloodshot eyes and that they’re wearing the same spectacular outfits as last night. None of them are up early—rather, they haven’t gone to sleep.

The same seems true of the king. A half-empty merlot bottle dangles from his hand, and he has one leg slung over the arm of the throne. When we enter, he greets us with a roar of laughter. I sink into an awkward curtsy in my nightgown, while Bayard bows. The king points at my hair, which is mussed particularly badly on the right side. “Now, that’s the look of a wife who’s been properly wedded and bedded! Bayard, could you have actually done something right?”

The assembled courtiers burst into lecherous laughter. Bayard grimaces, his face heating.

Maxim strolls up to the dais from among the crowd of soused nobles. He’s obviously not slept either, as he’s still wearing his black silk—although now it’s looking slightly rumpled. His canny eyes, underlined by dark shadows, search our faces for something. He leans casually against the throne, whispering in King Alaric’s ear.

“Right!” the king says, setting down his wine bottle and flinging his leg off the arm of the throne as he reverts to a normal sitting position. “I’ve called you both here to discuss the peasant problem.” He raises the index finger of his left hand, and then lifts the same finger on his right, drawing them both together. “And the fairy problem—which right now, are one and the same.”

Dread prickles the back of my neck. Alaric gestures at me. “Those unwashed idiots think Ellain is the fair folk’s own little friend. And that makes them forget the fae are our most vicious enemies! I need the people afraid of fairies, not dreaming that they’ll listen to all their whining and useless wishing …” He trails off, eyes glancing toward the ceiling. He appears to be chewing on something.

Bayard reaches out to lace his hand with mine. His face is a studied case in passivity, but his eyes are screaming.

My heart beats so fast it’s dizzying. I decide to hurry this conversation to its intended conclusion and find out how worried I should be. “Sire?” I say, tilting my head inquisitively. I force a smile, making my eyes as innocently wide as possible. “Do go on. You’re completely right about the fairy menace—Bayard and I both think so—and we’d love to hear your intended solution.”

Next to the king, Maxim’s mouth stiffens into a wry smile. I’ve learned from his example last night, and he knows it.

The king smiles indulgently down at me with his blue-stained teeth, nodding. “Well put, Ellain. It is clever of you to agree. And you will be pleased to know I’ve a plan that will end this war with the fae permanently! Then those ungrateful peasants will finally praise me, as they should have done all along.”

Something stirs in my chest, like a mouse leaving its hole in the wall. Genuine curiosity, against all my better instincts. “Truly, your majesty?” I ask, tentatively. “You are calling off the war?”

Rolling laughter from the king. “Not canceling the war, my dear. *Ending* it. And I will need your help.”

I point mutely at myself, unable to grasp this concept.

“Ell?” Bayard asks, looking horrified. Perhaps he’s imagining his father putting an iron halberd in my hand and shoving me off to the front lines. “What can Ell do?”

King Alaric waves a hand, grinning. “She can do what princesses do best. Diplomacy. After all, she knows a fairy personally. She’ll call upon this … fairy godmother, as the people are calling it … and talk with her. We can negotiate a peace treaty, like civilized species, can we not?”

Bayard looks skeptical, perhaps sensing a trap, but not knowing where in the brush it lies.

I know, however. The trap is not anything so elaborate. He is simply lying.

I recall Alaric’s pride in his strengthened armies. But what good are soldiers, if you don’t know where to direct them to march? He doesn’t know how to get to Fairyland—no one does.

On the dais, Maxim’s eyes meet mine. He knows Alaric is lying too.

My mouth quirks into a smile. “Your majesty is being humble. You are clearly holding back the cleverest part of your plan. We aren’t really going to just sign a treaty, are we?”

King Alaric gazes at me in wonder. “Fates preserve me, you have some sense. No, that’s just what we’ll *tell* your fairy, when she answers your call. And then we will trick her into revealing the location of their home, and rout her kind in totality. We’ll leave none alive enough to flutter a wing. And you will make it all possible.”

My heart stops. No. No no no no no. King Alaric had mentioned me calling upon a fairy once before, but I’d barely registered it. Now, the blood rushes out of my face, rendering me cold all over. Maxim’s expression transforms from a restrained smirk to a brilliant smile, showing all of his teeth. I do not have a fairy godmother. He knows I do not have a fairy godmother. And he’s clearly maneuvered the king into a state of high hopes for this plan, knowing it is impossible for me to do anything but fail.

I have to lower the king’s expectations. Immediately.

My words stumble over themselves in their rush to leave my mouth. “Your majesty, while it is a brilliant plan, I’m not sure I can set it in motion.”

The king's face grows cloudy with displeasure. "And why is that?"

Courtiers draw closer to me and Bayard on all sides now, prowling the edges of the throne room like hungry dogs. They sense my weakness. I draw my robe closer to myself, aware again of how unpolished and un-princess-like I appear. "Sire, it's not that I don't want to do my part …" I try, glancing around the room, as if a secret passage might emerge as a means of escape. "But I was never given the fairy's name. I wouldn't know how to call her! And it was my mother to whom she owed the boon, not me. She is hardly in my debt… . She might not answer if I call, as I've done nothing for her in exchange."

The king's lip curls. His words come out in a growl. "Surely you can *try*?"

I give a short, sharp laugh. "Gladly," I say. Nervousness claws at my stomach, but I make a big deal about kneeling on the dais steps and flinging out my hands in supplication. "Oh, great, kind fairy! I do not know your name, but could you find it in your heart to answer my call?"

Nothing happens. Such a severe hush falls over the throne room that one could hear a pin drop—the nobles have reared back in terror that I'd call a fairy so swiftly—but nothing happens.

Bayard pulls at the cotton collar of his sleep-shirt. "Well, she did try, Father, and that's what really—"

Alaric flings a silencing hand in Bayard's direction. "Don't be an idiot, boy! She cannot call a fairy here, for here it cannot come. There's an iron horseshoe over every entrance. Ellain must call the fairy somewhere iron will not bar it from answering."

I gulp, already feeling the pine branches of the forest reaching toward me, brushing against my skin and snagging my clothes like grasping, spindly hands. "I suppose, if it pleases your majesty, I could take a journey into the forest and try there… ."

Alaric gives a shocked laugh, eyes wide. "What, are you mad? Go into the forest, where the fae are strongest, and call them? I'm planning an ambush for *them*, not us. Princess Bernadine already disappeared in that forest, I'll not lose another daughter there."

Warm relief floods my chest. So, the king is not dead set against me after all. He called me "daughter" and is worried for my safety. My failure to call the fairy hasn't jeopardized my place here. Yet.

"No," the king continues, shaking his head, "no. If we're going to call a fairy, and we don't even have its blasted name, there's only one sensible thing to do. We'll have to go back to where Ellain first met it. She will call the creature from her father's garden."

I gasp as if punched in the gut. A direct hit from a cannon blast couldn't have knocked the air from my lungs so completely. No. He couldn't make me return to Stepmother's house. He couldn't.

Especially not after all I'd done to throw them out of the palace just *yesterday.* My bridges have been burned, and it would be near-suicidal foolishness to walk back into my stepmother's web.

I rise to my feet. "No."

King Alaric's eyebrows rise. "What did you say to me, Ellain?"

My jaw steels. "I said no. I'm not going back to that house. I am never going back to that house. You can't make me."

Alaric stands from his throne, pacing toward me. His voice is soft but lethal. "You'll find, daughter, that I can make you do anything I damn well please."

Thunder pulses through my veins. Flames lick the inside of my skull. I throw out my arms and stab my pointer finger at the ground. "I would rather have *birds peck out my eyes* than go back to that house."

The king moves slowly, barely expending energy to descend the dais stairs. He lets gravity take him down each step, his boots thumping ominously. His expression edges the line between fury and amusement. He crouches with his hands on his knees until we are nose-to-nose, like I am a toddler, crying from a skinned knee. His words are a serpent's hiss: "Shall I call for the royal falconer, dear?"

I *think* he's bluffing—and yet my heart races, because I do not *know.*

"Father, if I may." Bayard bounds forward, his hand lifted tentatively in the air. "Ell doesn't know the name of the fairy she met. Perhaps I could call upon the fairy from the woods instead, as I do know her name. Then no one would have to return—"

Alaric quiets his son with a glare. “Don’t be an idiot, boy. The last thing I need is the peasants finding out my weak-brained son spared a fairy’s life when he could have shot it dead. Unfortunately, they already know of Ellain’s disgusting little trade-off. And unless we obliterate the fairy who helped her, the peasantry will all think they can beg for fairy blessings in defiance of my decree. And when we announce Ellain tricked her fool of a fairy to win the war, all the better. It will look like we planned it from the beginning.”

He turns back to me, his pointer finger held to my throat like the blade of an axe. “At noon today, this court will journey to your father’s house. You will call the fairy. And we will set in motion the greatest military expedition the kingdom has ever known. If you do not comply, you are *both* of no use to me.” His eyes cut to Bayard, lip curling with disgust.

He pulls his hand back, and my own scrambles up to my neck, rubbing the place where he’d threatened the executioner’s blade. My chest heaves with quick, shallow breaths. I steal a glance at Maxim, who still stands on the dais, his right hand resting possessively against the throne-back. His other arm leans on the head of his cane. He looks completely at peace, and very, very smug.

I close my eyes, taking a moment to reconcile myself to my fate. “Fine,” I mutter, snapping them open again and flinging a vitriolic look at Maxim. He’s to blame for this. The king is the vehicle of my newest misery, but Maxim is the mastermind behind it.

I turn on my heel, green robe billowing out behind me, and storm from the throne room without another word.



The king’s declaration unleashes a flurry of movement across the palace. The king will go nowhere without his admiring court, so now every servant must pitch in to make the hungover courtiers ready for an impromptu departure. Eyes red from weeping, I return to my bedroom to find a fleet of servants carting in box after box after box of the gowns the royal seamstresses had made for me. Unlike the royal blue one we’d tampered

with for the portrait, these are finished to perfection. I am too numb from horror to appreciate them, although they are in the very finest of taste.

Zita, leading the endeavor, curses viciously under her breath as she packs me a trunk for the journey. Various servants hand her dresses, which she either accepts or declines to include. “A black gown?” she huffs at one unfortunate valet. “Is she in mourning? Put that in storage and don’t let me see it again until someone’s dead.”

Trude soon appears in my doorway to help me dress. She’s gentle with me, aware of my distress. She takes my hands in hers and says, “Here’s what I think: We should send a message with your gown. You should arrive in a nice sunshine yellow or buttercream. Yellow says happiness.” She takes my hand and squeezes it. “Above all else, they should know you are perfectly happy without them.”

I choke back a sob of gratitude. Trude knowing I need the right gown as a shield means more to me than she could ever know. It is a kindness, and my heart fills with affection for her. It positively overflows after what she does next; she whips out a handkerchief clumsily embroidered with marigolds. She waves it under my nose and says, “Look at this! I had so much fun altering your dress, I asked my maid to teach me to sew. Isn’t it something? I don’t quite know *what* it is, but it’s definitely something.”

“It’s lovely,” I tell her, meaning it wholeheartedly. Yes, there are stray bits of thread here and there, and the stitches aren’t as tiny as one might wish, but the object sings with the wonderment of trying something new.

Trude’s smile doubles in size at my approval. She uses her handkerchief to dab at the wetness below my eyes. Then she produces a hot cup of tea, insisting I drink to calm my nerves.

By now, the other servants have left and Zita has closed my trunk. I glance nervously at her—Zita seems to understand the king’s temperament better than most. I am hoping, mercurial as he is, he’ll change his mind after the first few failed attempts to call the fairy, and I’m praying Zita’s packing will reinforce that hope. But Zita is a pessimist. She informs me she packed seven gowns. The idea of a week in my old home makes me want to vomit.

“Do you really think this journey will help to end the war, or just make it worse?” she asks me, signaling to a valet to carry the trunk away.

My stomach turns over. “I think it will do nothing one way or the other.”

Zita’s lips pucker judgmentally. She mutters, “I suppose nothing is better than something awful.”

I set down the teacup Trude gave me, and it rattles in its saucer. “If the war is unavoidable, do you think it’s better,” I ask her, “to get it over with now or delay it as long as possible?”

Zita shrugs, whipping out a rag and polishing the new mirror—already replaced from my stunt with the hairbrush yesterday—so violently it seems a spot has personally insulted her. “Doesn’t matter. Either way, it’s the commonfolk who will bleed for it.”

I watch my maid and all her restless energy with baleful sadness. “Perhaps we can find another option.”

“Oh yes,” Zita says with a harsh laugh. She puts her hand on a bedpost and spins toward me. “Yes, perhaps there shall be an unexpected path to peace. And perhaps someday royalty will fight on the front lines and bleed for us poor folks, instead of the other way around.”

With that comment, I let the subject drop. It’s too near the one factor I cannot bear to consider: What happens when the king finally does give up on this harebrained scheme? There is no fairy to call, so it has no chance of success. How do I stop him from taking his rage out on me, or worse, Bayard, on my behalf? Above all, how do I stop him from punishing the people for my mistakes?



FOURTEEN

THE CARAVAN OF CARRIAGES TRUNDLING OFF TO MY FAMILY MANSE is positively immense. It's not just nobility who are coming, but servants as well, carting picnic baskets of food along—this was actually on my suggestion. I thought if they planned to make it a holiday, they should at least bring something to eat. I'm not sure exactly what we'll find in my stepmother's lair, but I don't anticipate a kitchen well-stocked enough to provide for a hungry court.

I peer out the window of our carriage at the long line of vehicles behind us. Somewhere out there, Zita is riding in a wagon alongside Bayard's and the king's favorite valets, and the idea of the sour look on her face brings me a strange comfort.

The king opted to ride in a carriage entirely to himself, to read without "hearing anyone's idle prattle." So once again, I find myself sharing a loveseat with Bayard and glaring into the face of my worst enemy.

"You look absolutely splendid today, your highness," Maxim tells me, inclining his head with his usual smirk. "Bayard, is it not like the sun has drifted into our coach and gotten caught here?"

My mouth puckers like I'm sucking on a lemon rind. But Bayard seizes my hand and kisses it. "His tone is mocking, but his description is accurate, beloved."

It frustrates me Maxim should choose to mock my appearance, today of all days, when the dress Trude picked for me is all that's giving me the courage to set out to Stepmother's house without tears dripping down my nose. She made good in selecting my armor: a spectacular yellow dress with

an off-the-shoulder neckline and gauzy sleeves that sparkle in the light, flowing outward before gathering at my wrists. My satin sash is D'Harcourt cobalt, matching my sapphire earrings—a reminder to myself and everyone else that yes, I *am* royalty.

I choose to ignore Maxim's slight. Turning to Bayard, I lean in to give him a tender kiss, even tickling my nose against his. It's more overtly mushy than I usually am, but I have settled on a policy of behaving as if I'm deeply smitten with Bayard, in the hopes that I will soon fall fully for my charming prince and help build up the trust he needs between us. Besides, if I act as if this trip back into Stepmother's clutches does not rattle me, then perhaps I will keep myself composed when we arrive.

Bayard looks at me quizzically, but seems pleased nonetheless. He studies my face, as one might check an egg's shell for hairline fractures. "You're cheerier than I'd expected you to be. I know this will be difficult."

I shrug, wrapping my arm in his and holding it tight. "I've decided to have a positive outlook. My family can't ruin us if we don't let them."

"That's the spirit!" Bayard says, delighted. But as he grows happier, Maxim's expression grows proportionately dourer. I suppose he expected me to be a gibbering mess, and therefore an easier enemy to dispatch. I won't give him the satisfaction of watching me cringe again.

We have several hours of riding before we see my family's home in the distance. Bayard suggests we pass the time playing traveling games, such as one where somebody looks out the window and names a color, and the others must guess what object they're thinking of. "Not this again," Maxim groans, sinking down into a position so inelegant and bent it must hurt his spine. "We played this stupid game for hours while looking for your bride. I humored you when you were lovesick; I won't do it when you're happy."

Maxim's bad attitude just makes Bayard laugh harder, and we respond by cheerily yelling out colors as loudly as we can until Maxim is forced to shove his fingers in his ears. It will never make up for whatever he did to Princess Bernadine, but I take a deep pleasure in tormenting him with slight miseries until I can find a way to bring him to justice.

After winging our way through mountain and meadow and glen, we find ourselves in the evergreen forest outside of my village. In the hush of its

dangerous boughs, a dread I cannot fake away seeps into my stomach, churning my insides like butter. When we break through the trees and finally see my family home in the distance, I sigh.

It's just as I left it, with wisteria climbing the northwest tower and twittering bluebirds perched on its shingled roof. The windows are still large and welcoming—big enough to drench the inner halls with sunlight when the curtains are drawn back. The drive is still a pebbled circle, with a vine-covered well in the center. It is still my home. Still the place I grew up.

It is still a gaping, black abyss, drawing me ever back into the soot of the fireplace and the creeping darkness of the cellar.

"Everything considered," Bayard says softly, "it really is a lovely house."

I hum a little bit to myself, thinking. "Yes, it is. Don't you wish the world could always be as lovely as it looks?"

We roll up through the front drive, the king's carriage just ahead of our own. As we trot closer to the front door, I spot an odd, limping figure dragging a wheelbarrow around the house from the back garden. Looking closer, I realize it's Freida, hunched over from the labor of fighting the wheelbarrow's rusted, wonky wheel.

Freida shouts with all her considerable lungpower. "Alright, bring it out!"

The heavy front doors creak open as someone tries to force her way through. It is Amalia, tiptoeing tentatively backwards, clearly unwilling to put her weight on her injured right heel. She's carrying something massive, made of dark wood, and as she totters down the front steps, Stepmother emerges holding the other end.

We pull to a stop in front of the house, and there's a tremendous crash followed by the crunching of wood and glass. Stepmother must have seen the never-ending line of carriages pulling past the gates and released her end of the object in shock.

Then it all moves quickly—footmen disembarking from various carriages, steps lowering, and doors popping open—and before I've drawn a single breath, Bayard stands below me with his arm outstretched to guide me safely to solid earth.

I clear my throat and step forward. Now that I'm on the ground, it's easier to see the massive object Amalia and Stepmother were carrying is the

grandfather clock from the upstairs hallway. The impact of its fall has rendered the pane of its clockface a web of shattered glass.

Amalia's mouth hangs like a bullfrog's. Up close, I spot that the hem of her mauve gown is torn. Freida—whose own dress is speckled with dirt and mud—abandons her wheelbarrow and comes tearing over to stare at us, utterly gobsmacked.

"You," Stepmother says, black eyes searing me with their hatred.

She's not wearing her usual fashionable wig. I wonder if she's already hocked it.

"Me," I reply. My eyes track to the broken face of the clock again and the hand that's been stuck at midnight for years. "So, what was the plan here?" I ask, biting my lower lip. "Were you pawning it to pay for food? No one will take it. It's broken."

Stepmother's cheeks flare red with anger. "Well, now it is. Thanks to you and this untimely visit home."

Maxim gives a snorting laugh, tapping the clockface with the tip of his cane. "Yes, broken now and broken before. It is neither noon nor midnight, yet there is the hand."

For once, Maxim is being vexing to someone else. I lean into the crook of Bayard's neck. He wraps his arm more tightly, more protectively, around my waist. He's not paying the slightest bit of attention to his friend's quips. His gray eyes are locked on my stepmother with visceral hatred, such as I didn't even know my charming prince was capable of.

The king, who has taken his sweet time climbing out his own carriage—perhaps because it would be an insult to his rank to exit before Bayard or I—now comes crunching across the gravel to stand beside me. He claps his hands together expectantly in my stepmother's direction. "Madame, we require the use of your garden. I trust you will comply?"

Stepmother is not one to miss an opportunity. Instead of standing there in awe, she sweeps into a deep, elegant curtsy, as if she's the grandest woman the kingdom has ever seen. Which, now that I am thinking of it, perhaps she is. It doesn't hurt that her lace-trimmed dress is still in fine order and immaculately clean, unlike my stepsisters' ensembles. "Your majesty," she says, her voice soft and breathy. "We are honored beyond all speaking to

have you in our home. We only wish we had been able to prepare in order to provide the standard of hospitality you so richly deserve."

I search Alaric's face for any sign of his expression softening. Stepmother has a strange power over men. My father was gone on a business trip three days and came back with my stepmother on his arm, newly-wed and with her children in tow. She works fast, and her hold over men is strong. I'm not sure if the king is fooled by her, but I do my best to counter her influence. I sweep forward to take my father-in-law's arm. Bayard makes a soft sound as I step away from him.

"Your majesty," I say, "I'm eager to show you my childhood home. Shall we proceed?"

King Alaric accepts my arm with the same curiosity as Bayard showed earlier in the carriage, surprised to find me so amenable. As we walk forward into the house, I whisper in his ear, "One thing you must know about my stepmother is that she is a conniving leech. Very charming, but dangerous. She seeks out powerful men."

The king throws back his white head and laughs. "As do all women, in their own way. But ladies always seem distrustful of other ladies most of all. And I gathered during the meal I took with your stepmother that you are not fond of each other? Nevertheless, you can trust *me* to remain in control of my faculties. I am a king, not a weak-willed man to be easily swayed … even by such beauty."

He glances back over his shoulder at Stepmother, a grudging smile crinkling his weathered face.

I worry my warnings have perhaps backfired and only brought more attention to Stepmother's appeals. But I wipe away my scowl before Alaric notices. We step inside the foyer, and the rest of the court streams in after us. Trude weaves delicately through the crowd to stand beside me. She's looking luminous in a plum-colored gown of rich brocade, which has a high neck and a daring slit down the center, the better to show off her ample décolletage. This morning, she told me she selected it purposely to complement my own gown. Yellow and purple, apparently, enrich each other when standing side by side.

Clever Zita—whose wagon was probably near the back of the line of carriages—follows in Trude's wake like a duckling trailing after its mother, knowing the nobles would barely notice her enough to make room for a servant. She hovers behind me, her gray heels clicking on the tiled floor.

There is a strange smell floating in the air of the foyer. I lift my nose and sniff, trying to locate the source. It's a bit like bad fish, and I'm not the only person to notice the oddness. There's a soft murmur among the courtiers as they look around at the grand staircase, the portraits hanging on the wall. One man even approaches a suit of armor and playfully slides the visor up and down, filling the room with the tinny screeches of the joints.

The king's brows furrow in displeasure. His nostrils flare, and it's clear he's sniffing for the source of the smell, too. There are a few mud prints on the floor, which I eye with curiosity, suspecting they might be horse dung. Following a hunch, I unsheathe my arm from the king's and cross over to the mantel. I run my finger across it, like Maxim did so pretentiously on his first visit here, and find dust accumulated there. I flick the grime off my thumb, a sly smile spreading across my face.

"The garden is that way," I say, waving my hand in the direction of my father's study, where there's a back entrance to the grounds. "But first, might I offer his majesty tea after his long journey?"

I turn on my heel, sunbeam skirts swishing around me, and push through the doors leading to the kitchen. "No, wait!" Freida calls out, shoving the Marquis DeGlace out of her way in an attempt to stop me. But hobbling on her broken right toe, she doesn't have the speed to catch up.

When the stale kitchen air hits my face, I gasp in shock. While the dung in the foyer didn't speak well for my stepfamily's domestic talents, the kitchen is a nightmare of untold proportions. I cover my mouth and nose as the scent of rotten fish becomes overwhelming. I cannot reconcile the horrors before me with the mental image of the kitchen as I had left it: gleaming copper pots and cast-iron pans, each jar and dish well-scrubbed and set in its proper place. The light still streams golden through the window, but everything else is unrecognizable. Now, I gaze upon a mountain of filthy plates and crockery, as if they have used every item in the kitchen in the half-week since I've departed, dropping them first in the sink, then on every conceivable inch of the countertops. Now they sit,

precariously arranged, stacked high above my head, crusted with burnt food remnants and moldering horribly.

A number of perversely curious courtiers have followed me into the kitchen, as well as the king, Bayard, Zita, Trude, and Maxim. The king goggles, revolted by the wondrous amount of mess. Amalia and Freida dance from foot to foot in agitation, their faces warped in expressions of exquisite discomfort.

I peer into the sink, finding that some of the porcelain at the bottom has cracked under the weight of the dishware that came after. Stepmother's favorite teapot is here also, scorched black on the bottom. "And what is this?" I demand, jabbing my finger at it. "Did someone try to heat the water in the teapot, rather than the kettle?"

"I thought—" Amalia squeaks, arms crossed tightly across her chest, "I thought that was how it worked."

Trude sticks out her lower lip, making eye contact with me.

"Isn't it?" Amalia asks, her voice hitching momentarily higher.

I shake my head at her, but something has been unlocked deep inside me. Laughter. Roaring bursts of laughter. I clap a hand over my mouth, but nothing can hold it back. I am howling. "I haven't been gone a week!" I say, brushing tears of mirth from my eyes. "What have you done?"

There's a glorious vindication in knowing the same people who forced me to do every task for them—and hit me whenever it wasn't done to perfection—don't have the faintest clue how to live like anything but barnyard animals without me.

Then Amalia screams. Not just any scream. A terrible, blood-curdling scream. She throws out her arm, pointing to something skittering in the sink, slinking in the empty spaces between the food-stained dishes. "A rat! Oh, kill it—someone kill it!"

Freida leaps into action, grabbing a cleaver from the nearest drawer. I seize her arm as she lurches past me, heading for the sink with murder in her eyes. I snarl, "Let it go. It's their house too, and they were here first."

Stepmother clicks her tongue, smoothing out the chestnut waves of her natural hair. "You were always absurdly fond of those dirty, disgusting creatures." Freida rips her arm away from me, but I barely feel it. I've pried

the cleaver from her hand, and in staring down at it, I am flung back in time.



Father had only been dead one week when Stepmother sold my puppy, claiming it made Freida sniffle. He had been dead two weeks when Stepmother ordered me out of my childhood bedroom, giving it to Amalia, and declared I would henceforth sleep in the attic. It was only three weeks before the servants were dismissed, and I was told to take on their various duties.

And it was only one month after Father's death when Stepmother gave me my first bloody nose. It was the day she'd realized there were occasionally rats in the kitchen, having found one asleep in her teapot. She hit me in the nose with the heel of her palm, as if this was somehow my fault, and ordered me to kill it.

She handed me a cleaver and left the room. Blood dripping from my nostrils and shocked tears welling in my eyes, I gave chase to the offending rat. I managed to bring down the cleaver as the rat scurried across the cutting table, and though I missed its center, the cleaver landed with a resounding thunk, clipping off the tip of its tail.

The rat gave a whimper—more of a soft whine, really—and curled up in the corner of the table, shaking and bleeding. My hands were shaking too, even as blood began to crust beneath my nose. And I immediately felt a stab of pain—a twisting knife in my heart—as I realized we were the same. I might as well have cut off my own tail.

I scooped the rat into my hands. It bit me, naturally, as was fair after what I'd done to it. But I didn't let go. I ran up the many flights of stairs to my attic bedroom, where I wrapped the rat's tail nub tightly in a handkerchief to stop the bleeding, and dumped out the contents of my sewing kit to make him a soft, contained place to sleep. Over the next several weeks, I fed the rat half of my meager meals each day. I got thinner. He got fatter and stronger. But this was my way of apology. By the time his tail scabbed over, ending in a sudden stump, he had begun to trust me.

I named him Gustav.



I come back to myself and let the cleaver clatter back into the drawer from whence it came. The rat comes squeaking from the sink. It scurries down to the floor and over Amalia's toes as it escapes into the storage room. Amalia shrieks again, clutching at herself and dancing like her feet are trapped on hot coals.

I glare at her. "If you'd just do your dishes, they wouldn't be drawn to the sink."

"It is a problem easily solved," Stepmother sneers, snapping her fingers in Zita's direction, where she lingers in the doorway. "You. Maid. Get to work washing these. That's the point of you, isn't it? There's a broom in the corner. You can sweep up when you're done."

Zita twitches, drawing her sharp elbows closer to herself, as if she might use them to fend off an attack. She eyes my stepmother warily, crossing the kitchen to the vile, grime-filled sink.

My fists clench as blood pounds in my ears. The audacity of my stepmother to speak to Zita that way. My voice rings out, imperious and commanding and royal. "Zita," I say, "if you scrub one plate, if you dust one single solitary object, if you so much as *lay a finger on that broom* … you are fired from my service. You work for me, not them, and I order you to go take a break."

Wry amusement ripples across Zita's face. She spins smartly and returns to her original position by the door. I turn to confront my stepmother, whose face has gone pale with rage as she says, "You dare—"

I put up a hand to silence her. "Save it. Sit in your own filth for once, Stepmother."

Next, I look over to where the king and Bayard stand. They both wear expressions of intense curiosity, but Bayard's is concerned, while Alaric's carries a shade of approval. I decide I should press forward. I'd rather fail him now, when the sting of failure will be tempered with a recent success in

his eyes. “Unfortunately, it does not seem as though a clean cup of tea is within our capabilities at the moment. Shall we adjourn to the garden?”

The king offers me his arm once more, and we sweep from the kitchen.

The air in the back garden is thick with the scent of wildflowers, heavy with spring pollen. The courtiers trailing us fall silent, as if this space is deserving of reverence. I suppose they think this because my parents’ graves are here. I wonder how respectful they might be if they knew one of the graves contained nothing, a hollow fraud.

I glance over the fence to the witch’s garden next door. Her house stands empty, and has for many years now, but her magic is not so easily leached from the earth. The Gigantism Gourds still grow every fall, bursting spontaneously from the soil and swelling to tremendous sizes. They resist rot longer than non-magical pumpkins, and there is one from last autumn only withering now … almost the size of a carriage.

King Alaric pulls his arm from mine, waving his hand lazily at the gravestone bearing my mother’s name, crested with curling vines and pink clematis flowers. “I suppose you’d best get on with it,” he says. “Call the fairy just as you did that night.” There’s very little ceremony as he tells me to kneel on my allegedly dead mother’s grave. Not even half a moment’s pause to ask me what she had been like.

“It’s preposterous,” Stepmother mutters at the very back of the crowd. “I *locked her in the cellar* that night.”

I tense, but it’s not necessary. No one is listening to her. All eyes are locked on me, waiting to see what I will do. When Stepmother starts again, Trude shushes her, and I’ve never seen her naturally cheery face so stern. “That will quite *do*, Madame. We have no use for your prattle here. Now either be quiet, or go away.”

Stepmother does not go inside, but she does fall wonderfully silent, leaning against the side of the house with a resigned, petulant expression. Freida and Amalia huddle close by, hands clasped.

With that miraculous sight to buoy me, I exhale deeply, trying to disperse this endless, aching dread. I am perhaps the *only* person in this garden breathing. You could hear a mouse snuffle in the weeds. I remind myself there’s nothing to be worried about, because I know exactly what will

happen. I will call for a fairy and none will come. The king will be furious. He will make me try again. And again. And again, until finally, regally purple with rage, he will give up. Then he'll presumably punish me in some subtle, indirect way. But what can he do to me that has not been done already?

And yet, despite all that stunning logic, my stomach twists into a painful knot as I sink to my knees on the raised patch of grass before my mother's headstone. The court will be expecting me to get a little misty, so I conjure some tears. It's not hard. I'm so nervous I'd like to cry already, and my eyes passing over my father's headstone is enough to tip me over the edge.

My father was not a perfect man—not even a particularly *good* one—but I miss him terribly. And I curse Stepmother every day for taking him from me. Almost as much as I curse my father for letting her into our lives in the first place.

A single hot tear burns my cheek as I reach out my arms toward the headstone, yellow skirts piled around me on the thin, dewy grass. While I don't exactly hate my mother for *leaving* with Jessamin—I know they tried to take me with them, until my father put his foot down and demanded I stay—I do resent the fact she never came back. That she left me here, unguarded, her position open to be filled by someone as cruel as my stepmother. That was the difference between my real mother and my false one; Clara DeBrun you couldn't get to stick around, while Claudette Tremoille you couldn't persuade to leave.

"Fairy godmother," I say, my voice cracking like a dropped dish, "won't you please come back? Will you return and speak with me? It's very important. I need your guidance." I reach up to brush away the tear on my cheek. "Please. Please come if you hear me."

Nothing happens, as nothing is always wont to do. We are all very still, waiting. My outstretched arms get heavy, drifting lower and lower toward the earth. I have to remind myself to keep my face expectant and hopeful, as if I really do think a fairy might come. But there is only nothing.

"Try again!" the king snaps. "Perhaps the old insect is hard of hearing."

My shoulders tense painfully, but I nod. My knees already hurt. One is pressed up against a small rock, but I don't dare take the time to adjust my

position. I call out again, my voice raised to an even higher volume. “If you can hear me, fairy godmother, I want to thank you for your gift. If you would please—”

“No need to shout, dear, I’m right here.”

I blink, rearing back onto my feet in shock. Because I am staring into the sublimely beautiful face of a woman with pink dragonfly wings, perched on the edge of my mother’s headstone.



FIFTEEN

THE COURTIERS ERUPT INTO MINGLED SCREAMS OF FEAR AND delight. My heart hammers against my ribcage.

No, I think. *No, this can't be right.* I cannot believe my eyes.

Because what I'm seeing is … impossible.

The fairy before me is nearly seven feet tall, a towering vision I couldn't tap on the head unless I was sitting atop a pony. But her beauty is an unnatural kind; like the fairy Myranda who blessed Bayard, she has slim, pointed ears and features that are eerily symmetrical. But those simple facts are where the two fairies' similarities stop. This one has skin so pale, so abnormally white it might have been made of cow's milk. Her wings flutter like a hummingbird's—they are iridescent in the sunshine and colored with the delicacy of stained glass. The rest of her is a pink spectacle in a dizzying spectrum of shades. Her hair is the vibrant color of magnolias. Her round, friendly eyes have irises that glow like the blush of early dawn. Roses bloom in her cheeks. And her extraordinarily voluminous gown too reflects a garden, sewn from thousands upon thousands of different flower petals of every kind and shape: azaleas, petunias, cherry blossoms, tulips, peonies, and endless more.

There is no denying it. This is a fairy. But why is she here?

"Really, sweet Ell," the fairy laughs. "You must close your mouth. It is not becoming for a princess. Did you think I would ignore your plaintive call?"

My jaw—which I hadn't even realized had dropped open—snaps shut. I shake my head, forcing a smile. "I should have known better," I tell the fairy, who is positively beaming at me.

King Alaric steps tentatively forward. A guard at his side raises an iron crossbow, keeping it trained on the fairy.

The fairy extends her lower lip, pouting. She shakes her head at the guard. "That is no way for friends to behave. Why must there be threats at such a happy reunion?"

The king studies the fairy's beautiful face intensely. "Who are you? Name yourself."

With a graceful flick of her wrist, the fairy says, "You may call me Galiena. I am so very glad to be here with you all today. This is sure to be a momentous occasion."

King Alaric's left eyebrow twitches, as if now he's gotten exactly what he wanted—a real live fairy in front of him—he doesn't trust his good fortune. "And you are the fairy who gave Ellain her magical trifles and slippers? Who arranged for her to come to our ball?"

Fear chokes me, making it difficult to breathe.

But Galiena throws back her lustrous head and laughs. It is a tinkling sound, like the chiming of a champagne glass before a toast. She waves her hand in my direction, and all the breath is whisked from my lungs as I begin spinning around and around, unable to stop. The courtiers coo and applaud, which I don't understand at all. Can't they see I'm out of control?

As I spin, my yellow dress swirls out around me and begins to change shades, a bright, cornflower blue bleeding across the fabric. Finally, with a painful jerk of my legs, I yank myself to a stop, and my feet fly out from under me. I'm flat on my ass, in a sea of bright blue tulle. And peeking out from beneath the folds of my gown are a new pair of glass slippers, twinkling invitingly in the sunlight.

"Does that answer your question?" Galiena asks, her smile mischievous now.

No, I think, blinking stupidly. *No, it doesn't answer anything at all.*

Bayard hurries to me, face a mask of concern, and lifts me off the ground. "Are you alright?" he asks. I nod, and relieved, he puts his hand

beneath my chin and lifts my face to his for a kiss. “There’s my dream girl.”

But while I know Galiena’s response in no way confirmed or denied anything, the king seems satisfied with this display of magic as proof she is who she says she is. And after all, why wouldn’t he? Everything about this fairy lines up perfectly with the lies I’ve spoon-fed him.

I can’t help it. My eyes flick to the back of the crowd. Past Trude—so ecstatic to see a fairy in the flesh that she’s hopping to see over the heads of the crowd—my gaze finds my stepfamily. Stepmother’s expression barely changes, save a slight narrowing of her eyes, but Freida’s face is crumpled in a furious scowl. Amalia has sunk to the ground altogether, her hands pressed to her heart and utterly unblinking.

Finally, I search for the one person above all whose reaction I need to see. Maxim is lurking over by the gate connecting our garden with Jessamin’s abandoned pumpkin patch. He is half in shadow, so I cannot make out his expression. Still, I must imagine he is baffled beyond all comprehension, and that delights me.

Even though I haven’t one foggy clue what’s happening myself, I won’t let that stop me from enjoying a miracle when it falls into my lap.

King Alaric recovers from his moment of insecurity. He raises his chin, pleased with himself. “Why then, let us get to the meat of it. Fairy Galiena, I would like to broach the topic of peace between our kinds, if you would serve as our ambassador to your queen.”

Galiena’s eyes flick upwards, mulling this over. “Peace *would* be ideal. As you well know, fairy-kind deeply resents your edict prohibiting us from this kingdom. But I am not sure we can trust you, Alaric D’Harcourt. You are not a friend to us, nor even a reliable dealmaker, if rumors carry weight.”

King Alaric’s face blanches. “I will not tolerate slander of my name and reputation.”

Galiena waves an impossibly tapered finger at him. “It is only slander if it is not true. Fairies *only* deal in truth. It is humans who lie and betray promises, not us. We believe in paying our debts, and seeing that the debts owed to us are repaid. It is only fair, and you know we must value fairness, for it is even in our name. Why else should we be called the Fair Folk?”

“Fairies have not been so fair to me,” Alaric practically spits.

“Then observe your own behavior,” Galiena shoots back, bristling. “For the fae repay unkindness with unkindness, and generosity with generosity. All that which you receive from us is what you have first given.”

Bayard’s hand tightens on my waist as he pulls me closer to him. He’s frightened. His breathing has gone shallow, as if he believes Galiena will strike his father dead here and now.

Alaric’s face blooms with shadow. “I am not here to speak of the past,” he says. “I have come instead to secure a brighter future.”

“*If* that is true,” Galiena says, hesitantly, “then perhaps we can come to an arrangement.”

Alaric’s eyebrows lift. “Will you relay my message of treaty to your queen? Will she agree to meet with us in search of peace?”

Galiena lays a finger against her rosebud lips. “I could do that. Queen Tanaquill and I have known each other for a very long time. But you should know she resents your mistreatment of the small fae and is well aware that you broke a deal with her sister. She would not trust a known liar like you at your word.”

A smile pulls at one corner of Alaric’s lips, as if a fishhook had caught there. Despite the insult, I can tell this is exactly what he was hoping the fairy would say. “Then, as a token of our serious intentions in this matter, perhaps take a representative from my court with you? Someone to relate our desires to Queen Tanaquill? You could take Prince Bayard, my … *beloved* son.”

Bayard’s breath hitches, and I utter a sharp, “No.”

So, this was Alaric’s plan all along. To send a spy with my fairy godmother back to her royal court. It’s a dangerous gambit—and he’s willing to risk his only son and heir’s life to see it through. What if the fairies, clever and lethal as they are, realize Bayard is the prelude to an invasion and repay this treachery with his death?

Galiena’s eyes trace across Bayard’s pale, slackened face before settling on me. “I am afraid I cannot do that,” she says. “If I take the prince to fairy court, we could never let him return. There are secrets in Tanaquill’s palace we wouldn’t like mortals to discover”— her lip curls as she glances back at

Alaric, —"as I'm sure you know. Those who travel to our realm are meant to stay."

Bayard and I exhale in unison.

"What I can do," Galiena says, back to watching me now, "is speak to a representative of your interests now. Alone. One who is on better terms with our kind. I would gladly speak privately with Ell, for instance."

Galiena floats toward me with her lightning-fast wings, her pointed feet barely skimming the ground. "Ell, were you the architect of today's meeting? Speak honestly, dear. Was calling me all your idea?"

My tongue feels thick in my mouth. But she is a fairy, and she told me to speak honestly. It wasn't my idea, it was—*ha!* A grin splits my face as I shake my head no.

"It was a clever idea," I say, eyes drifting to the shade of the alder tree where Maxim is still standing, "but I'm sorry to say it was not mine. Today's meeting is the brainchild of Duke Maxim D'Arcy!"

Galiena claps her hands with delight. "How absolutely marvelous! I'll speak to you both then."

I have only a split second to question this—speak to us *both*?—before Galiena flings out her arms and summons me to join her. I fly forward like a rag doll that's been thrown. The yanking motion feels like a string is attached to my navel, and I'm furiously grateful I didn't eat anything this morning. I collide with Galiena and she throws an arm around my waist, just as she uses her other to scoop up Maxim, who's also been magically pulled close. Galiena launches us all into the air. I yelp as my feet are dragged off the ground. I kick out reflexively as we soar upward, past the first story of the manor.

"Don't struggle, you idiot!" Maxim shouts at me from her other side. "You'll splatter if she drops you!" He's right—my heart jolts to realize it—and I go limp.

The crowd below breaks out into a cacophony of screams, interpreting this sudden move as a double kidnapping. The guard beside the king lifts his crossbow and aims up at Galiena. "No!" Bayard shouts, darting forward to push the weapon down. "You'll hit them!"

But it's too late. The guard had already pulled the trigger. I scream again as the iron bolt whizzes through the air, focused on bringing grisly death to the only creature that keeps us airborne. Luckily, Galiena is prepared. In the last millisecond before the bolt pierces her chest, she twitches the two forefingers of the hand wrapped around my waist, conjuring from nothingness a thin shard of glass, much like an icicle, which intercepts the bolt, sending it plummeting back to earth. We keep flying upward as the bolt impales the largest of Jessamin's rotting pumpkins with a sickening squelch.

Our flight path curves around the northwest tower, to the attic room where not too long ago, I shivered and slept. With another dismissive flick of her fingers, Galiena blows the wisteria-framed window open and we soar through, landing with a thud on the creaky floor of my old room. We are now many flights of stairs away from anyone else on the property, and thus far out of earshot, which I assume is precisely what she had in mind.

Galiena's arm snakes away from my waist, and I stagger in my uncomfortable glass heels before catching myself on the edge of my bed. The harsh coils of the mattress screech their disapproval.

Maxim, steadier than me, is slowly pacing the attic, taking it all in. His eyes tilt upward, studying the cobweb-lined rafters and the places where missing shingles allow beams of sunlight to sneak through. "*This* is where you slept?" he asks me, lip curling.

I take off a glass shoe and chuck it into Maxim's gut. It's only thanks to his cunning-quick hands that he catches the slipper before it hits the ground. I snarl at him, "Are my accommodations not to your grace's liking?"

"Children, children," Galiena coos. "Calm down. We are all on the same team, are we not?"

I get to my feet, flattening out my mussed hair and trying to regain some measure of royal dignity. "Uh, yes, your … uh … fairy-ness? We can certainly negotiate a treaty between your kind and the kingdom of Holbein to—"

Galiena raises a hand to cut me off, chuckling warmly. "Sweetheart, no. You obviously don't understand what's happening here. I do not refer to an alliance between your kingdom and Fairyland, as we all know that is not

what wicked Alaric has in mind. I am speaking of an alliance between *us.* The three people in this room. Together, we have every advantage necessary to overthrow a royal dynasty and everything to gain from doing so."

My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth. My eyes ricochet between Galiena and Maxim. My brain is a clock with rusted gears, barely able to tick along from one second to the next. Why would a fairy magically appear to cover for my lies? What benefit could that offer her? And why would she be friendly with Maxim?

Finally, *finally*, understanding strikes midnight.

I point an accusatory finger in Maxim's direction. "You planned this. You arranged for the entire court to come back here so I could meet her."

Maxim's gloved fingers thread together. He doesn't speak. He just nods.

I swing my head to Galiena. "And you!" I hitch my skirts and point at the remaining shoe on my other foot. "This shoe is exactly like the one Bayard put on me! But how could you have gotten it just right unless you'd *seen* the first pair? But you didn't just see them, did you? You made them."

Galiena nods, a vicious pink-ribbon smile curling into her cheeks.

I pace between the two of them, hands behind my back, the glass slipper clicking against the floorboards while my bare foot pads softly. "And if you made the shoes, and Maxim knew that in advance, which I suspect he did, as his hands were tied at revealing my lie, *and you both want to overthrow the D'Harcourt dynasty—*" I gasp, so thunderstruck that I hit my palm hard against my own forehead. "There was never a girl at the ball, was there?"

Maxim lets out a harsh, disbelieving laugh. I dart to him, pushing him in the chest so hard he's knocked back a few paces. "Or, no *real* girl, I should say?" I shriek. "These shoes were Galiena's creations. The dress too. I thought you fancied the same girl as Bayard, but the truth is worse than that. You couldn't say I was lying definitively, because you'd be admitting that Bayard's dream girl was some twisted lover's invention of your own making. You wanted him chasing a woman who didn't exist!"

Maxim brings his hands together in a slow clap. "Well reasoned, Ellain. The girl at the ball was in fact Galiena. I lifted the iron horseshoe from my window at the palace for a single evening so she could dance the night away with Bayard and enchant him to want more. Frankly, I thought the

shoe left behind as a clue was *much* too freakishly tiny for a real woman to wear, so ideally he'd keep looking forever."

My heart aches for Bayard. It would break him to know this. *"Why?"* I hiss. "Why would you do such a cruel thing?"

Across the room, Galiena lets out a short, sharp laugh as she admires the view from the window. Maxim, for his part, doesn't look amused at all. He's as affronted as if I'd slapped him across the face. "*I'm* cruel, am I? I saw a friend who loathes his life in the palace, yet wouldn't take action to fix it. So I gave him the push he needed to start over. Is that so wrong? *You're* the one who lied in order to raise your station."

"Bullshit!" I snap. "You saw a boy who couldn't recognize faces and took advantage. But you still haven't answered why. Why would you create him a quest with no end?"

Maxim gives a loose-shouldered shrug, striding away from me. "A quest with no end was the goal in itself. To get him to leave the kingdom and never return. With no remaining D'Harcourt heirs to inherit the throne, the crown would pass to me. My family is next in line, you know, and I'm the last of my family."

Mixed emotions wage war inside me. My disgust at Maxim grapples against the blooming giddiness in my chest as I slowly process that now my great, original lie has been rendered harmless. There was no real girl from the ball. She was only an illusion. A trick, in fact, I saved Bayard from. I am not the villain of this story after all!

And I will never be caught. The weight of a long-held tension eases deliciously off my shoulders.

"I *knew* you were a treacherous bastard," I say, laughing. "That's why you made Bernadine vanish. Don't deny it."

"I won't deny it!" Maxim says, raising his hands in surrender. "I did play a game on her, which resulted in her vanishing. But I did not lie to her, as you did Bayard. Everything I said to Bernadine was perfectly true." He gives a wolfish, crooked smile. "Who told you about that, anyway? That little maid of yours?"

A cold shiver runs through me. My hands quake, but I speak in measured tones, never averting my gaze from his, so he knows I mean every word I

say: “If you come near Zita, I will personally take a meat cleaver and carve out your spine.”

“Oh, marvelous,” Galiena says, retreating from the window and floating over to rejoin us. “You have a fire in you, little girl. I quite like that. I like your ability to deceive the royal family even more. Fairies cannot lie, you know. So, while I was initially disappointed your teeny-tiny feet mucked up our plan, I think now you will be a useful tool in our arsenal.”

I suck on my teeth for a second, taking that in. Then, very slowly and carefully, I push back on her words. “What do you mean, you can’t lie? Every word you said down below was a lie. Is your name even Galiena?”

The fairy laughs again. “Oh, mercy me, no. Of course not. If I gave my real name, or showed my real form, then Alaric would know exactly who I am, and he’d have me murdered on the spot.”

“Then you lied,” I point out, confused but indignant.

Galiena shakes her head, clicking her tongue. “You’ll actually find I didn’t. Nothing I said down there was a falsehood. Strictly speaking, anyway. The art of choosing your words precisely is important to the fair folk. We never, never lie. We just dance around the truth.”

Fresh horror dawns on me. “You’re the fairy that killed Queen Eloise.”

Galiena floats slowly downward to perch on my unforgiving mattress. “Please don’t be disappointed in me, Ellain. Remember, technically, I have never killed anyone. Fairies cannot spill blood, we just … arrange for it to be spilled. It’s Alaric who killed her.”

This is roughly the same sentiment Zita expressed to me, but I have the shrewdest suspicion Galiena is speaking much more literally. Is it possible Alaric personally wielded the weapon that slayed his wife, then framed a servant for his crime?

I draw my arms tight around my chest, feeling suddenly very unsafe, both in this room with Galiena and in my new family. I don’t blame the king for killing the queen—if indeed he was under a fairy’s enchantment at the time—but I do blame him for executing Nella to cover it up.

Galiena rises to her feet, gliding very close to me. She smells overwhelmingly like strawberries and cream. She lays her soft palm upon my cheek. The fairy’s voice is gentle as she tells me, “And trust this: The

king did me a great unkindness first, which had to be repaid. I swore a vow I would never forgive him, and I would mastermind the undoing of his reign and dynasty—and we fairies take our vows very seriously. Is there no one in this wretched old world you would like to see punished for their cruelty? That is all I did."

My heart cries out in response: *Stepmother. Punish Stepmother. Make her cry as I have cried. Take everyone she loves from her, as she took Father from me.*

Galiena must see the bright gleam of vengeance in my eyes. "Yes, little one! I see you have an answer. Speak the name of the monster and we will make a bargain. You are already royalty; I cannot promise your station will rise higher. But I can give you the satisfaction your soul demands. I can repay wickedness unto the wicked. Just tell me their name, and we will be sworn to help each other."

But no. I step back, pulling my face from her creamy hands. If Alaric was cruel, then he is the one who should be punished. But she had punished the queen for his crimes, and whatever she said, that was not fair at all. And to make my stepmother pay, I'd have to betray Bayard by colluding with Galiena! Bayard, who has been nothing but kind and wonderful to me. I would be the world's worst villain if I agreed to this.

"No." My voice is small, but firm. "I'm not agreeing to any bargain with you. I will not hurt my husband for anything in this life." I jab a finger in Maxim's direction, whose handsome face is furrowed with annoyance. "And you! You should be ashamed. Bayard calls you his greatest friend. To think you would harm him to take a throne for yourself. You obviously never cared about him at all."

For the first time in our acquaintance, Maxim's face lights up with genuine anger, the flicker of a hungry flame. His usually cool and aloof expression melts away. His eyes are a raging inferno. "How dare you, you … *filthy little usurper.* I do want the throne, but if you think I don't care about my friend, you are a fool. If he truly meant nothing to me—if I were willing to harm him to get what I want—I'd already have a crown on my head."

I clamp my jaw tight, breathing heavily. Finally, through gritted teeth, I mutter, "You were perfectly willing to harm Bernadine."

“I *didn’t* harm her,” Maxim growls. “I gave her a way out. She’s safe and happy in Fairyland now. Show me a D’Harcourt heir who actually wants to rule this kingdom—Bayard *included*—and I’ll show you a mare that can leap through the eye of a needle.”

Outside the door, a floorboard groans. My breath hitches. The stairs. There’s more than one loose step I knew to silently hop over while sneaking down for a stolen midnight meal. Someone is coming to check—or more likely, spy—on us.

I hold up a hand to quiet both Maxim and Galiena. “Everyone shut up. Somebody’s outside.”

I cross to the door, listening with my ear against the wood. I hear breathing through the keyhole, and satisfied our eavesdropper is on the other side, I throw the door open without warning. Amalia and Freida tumble into the room head over heels and flop to the floorboards in a tangle of skirts.

Amalia pats her shiny chestnut hair, grinning sheepishly. Freida curses at me under her breath.

“Hello, sisters,” I say.

Galiena stares down her perky nose at the pair, then flicks a hand in Maxim’s direction. “I won’t parley when spies are afoot. You can speak with Princess Ellain and find us a time to begin this conversation anew.” Then she spins on the spot, her petal-cloud gown swirling and folding in on itself, until she melts away into nothingness, leaving only the faintest odor of strawberries behind to mix with the scent of the moldy rafters.

I cross my arms and tap my foot, glowering at my stepsisters. “To what do I owe this pleasure?” I ask. “You’ve never visited me up here before.”

Freida smooths out the panels of her chartreuse skirts, trying to regain her dignity. She folds her hands against her heart, saying, “You were *kidnapped* by a fairy. We were worried sick about you.”

Amalia extends a hand to Maxim, batting her green eyes flirtatiously. She clearly expects him to help her to her feet. Maxim responds with nothing more than his classic look of revulsion. He ignores her hand as steadfastly as if she’d asked him to scrape dung off her shoe. He shoots me a look of

purest loathing, and mutters, “We’ll talk more on this. Come find me tomorrow after breakfast.”

Then he brushes past my stepsisters, still on the ground, and descends the stairs.



SIXTEEN

I CLOSE THE DOOR BEHIND HIM, LISTENING TO THE CREAKS OF THE steps, ensuring Maxim's actually gone all the way down. When I'm certain, I turn to my stepsisters, who have finally scrambled up from the floor. "What do you want?" I snap. "To blackmail me again? Well, good luck. My stock with the king has never been higher after summoning that fairy."

"Yeah, I saw her," Freida drawls, her eyes narrowing. "And she's fishier than rotten trout. What's with this private conversation business?"

I hitch up my skirts, moving to step by her. "You're right; it is business. But none of yours. Get out of my way."

Amalia seizes my arm. "Ell, please! If you don't take us to court, how will we ever find rich husbands? We'll be stuck here for the rest of our lives."

I scoff. "I fail to see the injustice."

Freida throws herself against the door, barring my exit. "Listen. We have something to offer you, you know."

"What's that?" I ask, my skepticism deep and bountiful enough to flood the Linden River.

"Loyalty," Freida responds.

This time, my laugh comes out sounding more like a shriek.

"Freida is right!" Amalia pouts. "You've landed yourself in a nest of royal vipers. There are no honest men or women at court, and favor comes and goes so quickly. You need people you can rely on to tell you where you stand and to serve your interests."

“And why would I rely on you two?” I demand.

“Because,” Freida says, rolling her eyes like it’s obvious, “our situation has never been more dire. Our only chance to enrich ourselves is through you now. If you fall from grace, we lose opportunity. It’s in our best interests to keep you uplifted, so we’ll always tell you the truth about which way the wind is blowing. And, as an added bonus, we’ll never lie or flatter you to spare your feelings because we don’t very much like you.”

I smirk. “Charming argument. I’ll pass.” I wave a hand at Freida to get out of the way, but she doesn’t. “Move or I’ll move you.”

Freida bares her teeth at me. “I’d like to see you try.”

Something in me snaps. She wants a fight? I’ll give her the fight she deserves. “Perfect! I can finally hit back.”

I dart toward her, grabbing her upper arm and pulling back with all my might. Freida is much stronger and taller than me, though, so I don’t make much headway. In response, she grabs a fistful of my hair and pulls my head backwards. “You always said,” Freida growled, “that I was only brave enough to hit you when Mother was watching. But it was the other way around! I only hit you *because* she was watching.”

Amalia flutters around the room, clearly vexed. “No! Both of you stop. Stop it! We’re supposed to be getting along!”

“You’re no pacifist, Freida,” I snap, thinking of a thousand thrown objects. I reach up to where Freida’s hands are buried in my hair and dig my fingernails into her palm. She yelps, ripping at the puffy sleeve of my blue magic-conjured gown so it tears straight off my shoulder. In response, I kick her in the shins with my remaining glass shoe. The impact shatters it, and Freida screams in fright, releasing me. I seize my chance, and throw open the door to flee.

I rush down the long, narrow flights of stairs to the rest of the house below, my skirts hiked past my knees. Even with the necessity of speed, I instinctively leap over the steps that creak. I have spent too many years silently creeping around this house to unlearn those habits. Freida barrels after me, lumbering around the turns in the stairs. Even with a broken toe, she’s fast. Amalia shouts after us both, “No, no! We’re meant to be a *family*!”

I burst through to the second floor landing and see royal guards pacing the hall, checking for me in each room. I stop short, wheezing, to try doing something about my ruined sleeve. “There she is!” one of them calls.

Freida bangs through the door behind me, only to give a yelp as Amalia —hot on her heels—grabs the cape-like ornamentation of Freida’s gown, yanking her backward.

The guards stride toward us. “Is something wrong, your highness?”

I give an airy laugh, glancing behind me at Freida, flat on her backside on the stairs. “Oh no! Just a family discussion that grew passionate.”

“And the fairy is gone, as the Duke D’Arcy said?”

I nod. “Yes. She is gone.” I glare at my stepsisters. “She did not much appreciate being interrupted.”

Flanked by the guards, I descend the grand stairs to our foyer. Amalia and Freida follow me at a distance, slinking like a pair of guilty cats.

Downstairs, King Alaric is fuming. His mood must have taken on a destructive bent, as there are shards of broken porcelain on the marble floor. I watch, emotionless, as he grabs a bust of my grandfather, lifts it over his head, and brings it to the earth with a crunch.

“We could try speaking to her again,” Maxim is telling him, loudly, to be heard over the sound of breaking objects. He still has the glass slipper I chucked at him in his hands. “She was willing to hear us out, but not to make a decision quickly. Some acts of diplomacy take multiple attempts to reach fruition.”

“Ell!” Bayard spots me, or rather, spots the massive sapphires dangling from my ears, and rushes to embrace me. “Are you alright? What’s happened to your gown?”

“Who cares?” Alaric shouts, spinning around to face us. “We made this blasted trip for nothing!” He kicks the toe of his boot at the basket of iron pokers by the hearth, upending them and making them clatter to the floor.

“Then let us go home,” I suggest, hitting the king with a dazzling smile. “And, as his grace says, try again another day. Now we have Galiena’s name, we can talk considerably nearer the palace next time.”

The king stews for a moment before his shoulders finally slump in defeat. “Fine. Yes, fine, let us get out of this rancid pigsty.”

I am barefoot now, but I still execute a rather elegant curtsy. “As you say, your majesty.” I turn to the courtiers, who have abandoned the garden in their fright—though they aren’t so terrified as to prevent themselves from enjoying the contents of their picnic baskets—and clap my hands briskly. “You heard the king! Let us pack up and leave.”

My eyes find my stepmother, lingering at the kitchen doorway. I cannot resist. Flushed with victory, I stroll closer to my tormentor and wave a mocking hand at her. “*Thank you* for your hospitality, Stepmother. It will be some time before we see each other again, I’m afraid.”

Stepmother darts toward me, like a snake leaping to strike. At some point in the last hour, her red lip paint has become smeared, making her mouth look as mine often did after being hit, swollen and bleeding at the corner. “You vicious little bitch,” she murmurs. “You think you’ve risen too far for me to touch you, but you’re wrong.”

She runs to the king, seizing the gold front of his doublet. “Your majesty, I beg you! I am a faithful subject, trying to save you and your son from treachery. My stepdaughter is a liar. She was never *at* the ball! She has always been a deceitful, lazy, willful brat.”

The king goes stock-still before carefully prying my stepmother’s fingers from his clothing. But he does not look angry. Perhaps because she is so beautiful he cannot help but treat her more mercifully than he would most people. If anything, he looks amusedly intrigued. He moves his thumb languorously to the edge of her lower lip, wiping away the smudged paint. His greedy eyes linger on Stepmother’s full lips several seconds too long—and I wonder if Stepmother smeared the paint purposefully to draw his wandering eyes there. The king’s voice is husky as he asks, “Is that so, baroness?”

Stepmother nods fervently, clearly encouraged by the king’s attentions. “Oh, yes. If you had but known her as a spoiled child—waltzing around the kitchen speaking nonsense! Claiming to be a mermaid, or an opera singer, or a princess—”

“She *is* a princess,” Bayard interrupts her. He comes to my side and takes my hand. “She is not claiming to be anything but what she is.”

I cast Bayard a glowing look, standing on my tiptoes to lay a kiss on his cheek.

Stepmother flings a hand out in Bayard's direction. "But your highness, it is in your interest that I speak! I am saving you from a conniver's clutches. Ellain was not at your ball. I locked her in the cellar and she was still there when we returned. She claims the fairy came to her when she wept at her mother's grave, but I tell you: *She could not have been in the garden at all.*"

The passion of her entreaty stills the room, as the king and his court consider her claim. Bayard turns to me with a sweet, but expectant, look. He's waiting for me to offer a counterargument. An explanation.

I open my mouth, prepared to speak. I'll simply say my stepmother is lying. It's her word against mine, and I have a fairy and a shoe that fits as "proof" of my story. And there is no real girl from the ball who will *ever* come to contradict me.

But before the first word has time to leave my mouth, Amalia staggers out into the center of the foyer. Her plaintive cry fills the room, echoing off the high ceiling. "I can't keep it to myself anymore!" She puts a theatrical hand to her heart, staring her mother straight in the eye. "I've kept it from you, as I knew you'd be furious, but I let Ell out of the cellar that night. I felt too guilty we wouldn't let her come to the ball, and she was crying so hard down in the dark. I stole the key and let her out, so it's natural she would have gone to the garden."

I'm so shocked Amalia would lie for me that I slump against Bayard's chest, whose guileless gray eyes have grown wide with understanding.

Staring at Amalia, Stepmother's face goes dark as a rain cloud right before the thunder. "You *what*? Have you no sense at all?"

But Amalia brushes past her mother, faltering toward me in a limp I believe she's exaggerating to increase her rapt audience's pity. "Ell," she says, her voice cracking with emotion, "I know one good deed cannot erase a lifetime of mistakes, but I want you to know how happy I am for you. I hope one day we can be the sisters we were always meant to be, and that you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

All around the room, the courtiers melt. I'm not surprised. Amalia has all the beauty and manipulative abilities of her mother, but considerably less

sharpness. Stepmother always behaves like someone who is capable of hurting you, whereas Amalia seems harmless and innocent.

"You brainless, ungrateful baggage! You've ruined all our lives!" Stepmother shouts, rushing at Amalia to seize her by the wrist. I gasp, thinking perhaps she's going to break Amalia's arm. But before I have a chance to act, Freida acts for me. She launches herself at Stepmother, tackling her to the ground. She pins her mother's arms to stop her from struggling. "No, Mother!" Freida shouts. "It's over."

Amalia's cheeks are wet with tears. She straightens her spine proudly. "I don't want to live here anymore. I cannot be party to your cruelty." She turns to me, hands clasped. "Ell. My sister. Please allow Freida and me to accompany you back to court. I apologize from the bottom of my heart for everything we allowed to happen to you—please save us now."

I fight back an audible groan. So, this is the gambit. Strike a figure so noble I look a villain not to take them back with open arms. Still restraining Stepmother's claw-like hands, Freida flashes me a quick, knowing smile.

I hate them. I hate them with every fiber of my being, and yet, I cannot help but be impressed. And I cannot deny that Amalia's lie about freeing me from the cellar has done me a favor. I exhale deeply, breathing out my searing anger. I make the decision to be like a fairy, and return good deeds in equal measure.

I glance to Bayard first, and then over at the king. I dab at fake tears, as if I don't want to become weepy in front of the court. "I would be happy to have you and Freida join me in the palace," I tell Amalia. "It means the world to me that we try to reconcile."

A burst of inspiration strikes me. If I must have my stepsisters foisted on me, I can at least use them to solve another problem. "And if you are willing to renounce your mother, and if the king and Prince Bayard allow it, you would be welcome to live at court, perhaps joining Trude as my ladies-in-waiting."

Freida climbs off Stepmother, who's gone as limp as a dead fish. Freida smacks at the front of her skirts, brushing off dirt as if beating a rug. Amalia looks hesitant—no doubt an offer of service as ladies-in-waiting is not what she had in mind. She'd probably envisioned something with more leisure

time. But hadn't Freida said upstairs they could be of use, my spies among the court? I'll take them up on that. After years of helping them, turnabout is fair play. And with them as my official companions, I can follow Zita's advice, putting off appointing any other noblewomen to my household whose motives I'd have to question. Better the devils I know.

Amalia looks to Freida, her commanding officer, to give their answer. Freida drops into a curtsy. "Beloved sister, nothing would make us happier. We've long since despised our mother's cruelty, but have been too afraid to stand up to her. We vow to never again stand idly by and let her harm anyone … least of all you."

Stepmother shoots into a sitting position, her eyes narrowing into pinpoints of hatred as she looks upon her daughters. I almost pity her. It's shameless what Amalia and Freida are doing, forswearing her the instant it's beneficial to them. There's no doubt she was a good mother … to them, anyway. She doted on them, giving them everything they wanted. But she also told them to be ruthless and relentless in the pursuit of social advancement. It seems she taught them too well.

I glance over at the king, who grudgingly nods in my direction. "They may return with us. Consider it a wedding gift."

"Thank you," I say, curtsying. Bayard seizes my arm, looking deeply into my eyes for answers. "Ell, are you sure about this? They were cruel to you."

I throw my arms around Bayard. He is so good—and he's correct. I would never have invited them back to court if their excellent playacting hadn't forced my hand. I stand on tiptoes to whisper in his ear. "You're right: I may regret this tomorrow," I tell him. "But we came here to call for a peace treaty. Why shouldn't it be with them?"

Bayard nods and kisses my forehead. When he releases me, I hold out my arms for my stepsisters, and they run to embrace me. With the three of us tangled in one another's limbs, so close that the scent of my perfume and their sweat from unaccustomed labor mingles together, I whisper, "You had better live up to your promises this time."

"We will," Freida murmurs back. "We know the best way to advance is at your side. You have our loyalty and our love."

I snort, but pull away, forcing a smile.

Freida and Amalia climb into the carriage with me and Bayard, and end up sitting on either side of Maxim, which throws him into an obvious discomfort that I relish.

The carriage door snaps shut, and the wheels tumble into motion. Together, my stepsisters and I depart, leaving Stepmother behind in front of the manor that was my birthright. She stares numbly after us, clenched fists trembling with rage. She is alone. And she has many dishes to do.



I don't want my stepsisters out of my sight, but since I'm expected to sleep in Bayard's quarters, I settle for keeping them in Zita's. I give them chilly orders to sleep in my suite, but warn them on pain of death (and I'm only slightly kidding) that they'd better not ask Zita for anything while I'm gone. I join Bayard in his compartments for the evening, worried about him. Since departing my family manse, he's been less bouncy than usual. Like a deflated soufflé.

We're both exhausted, so after dressing for bed, there's very little talking as we crawl beneath the blankets. I wrap my arms around him from behind and kiss his neck. I suspect he knows what his father's offer of sending him off to Fairyland meant. And he is so attentive to my feelings, I don't want to neglect his. "Are you alright, dear?" I ask, stroking a curl off his forehead.

Bayard rolls onto his back, the better to look at me, and cups my chin in his hand. "My father's behavior today was telling, wasn't it?"

I wrinkle my nose, trying to downplay the resounding message. "Oh, I don't know—"

"Ell," Bayard laughs ruefully, "everyone else at court lies to spare my feelings. Don't you start too."

I put my elbow on the pillow and lean on my hand. "Well, in that case … no, it wasn't too good, was it?"

"No," Bayard agrees, staring at the ceiling.

I dart down to face-level with him and give him a peck on the lips. "Who cares what he thinks?" I say, fierce with righteousness. "He's cruel. And

he's blind to what love is. He doesn't know a good thing when he sees it. Or he would absolutely recognize the treasure he has in you."

Bayard wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me close to him. As always, his touch is warm and gentle. "I'm so grateful to have you."

"And I you." I mean it when I say that. Because I do have love for Bayard. His pain hurts me, too. I want everything best for him. And starting tonight, I can finally begin loving him with a heart unencumbered by guilt. My soul is light knowing I didn't steal him from anyone. Instead, I am his rescuer, who snatched him from the iron jaws of a trap. And perhaps he is my reward for that.

I will guard him against all wicked plots and schemes. And he will guard my heart.

I slot my head into the cozy notch beneath his chin and settle into a position for comfortable sleep. I ask, "What's your favorite thing to do at court? Because that's what we should do tomorrow. Whatever that is."

Bayard strokes a soft hand against my hair. "A marvelous plan. We could play racquet, if you're interested." He yawns. "Perhaps tomorrow late morning?"

"Why wait until late morning?" I nuzzle sleepily into him.

"Because according to Maxim, you two need to discuss further the fairy problem after breakfast." He gives another harsh laugh. "I would join, but my father's forbidden it. He says I'd just muck it up."

I groan, cursing under my breath. Swept up in my relief and happiness, I'd forgotten I need to deal with Maxim and the delicate balance of things with Galiena. They still have an evil plan that needs undoing.

"Alright then," I say, sighing. "Late morning. Though I'd much rather skip all that rot and just be with you."

Bayard wishes me goodnight with another swift, sweet kiss, and slips off into a dream. I lie awake, all drowsiness gone, ruminating on the many tricks and snares the fairy and my husband's treacherous best friend have in store.



SEVENTEEN

I STARE INTO BAYARD'S MIRROR, WRAPPING THE FABRIC OF MY ROBE around myself in the thin light of day. He's awake in bed, but just barely, with a pleasant, sleepy smile on his face. I prepare myself for the brief, chilly walk in my sleep-things back to my compartments to change for the day. "Where am I even supposed to find Maxim? I don't know where he lives in this place."

Bayard yawns, stretching luxuriously. "Oh, you wouldn't find him in his rooms anyway. He's an early riser. He'll be in the forge, I'm sure, like most mornings."

I study Bayard's reflection in the mirror, raising an eyebrow skeptically. "What do you mean, the *forge*?" I ask.

Bayard shrugs. "It's his hobby. He—I'm actually not sure what the correct verbiage is here—blacksmiths for fun." He gives a little laugh. "Absolutely mad. But brilliant in a way too, I suppose."

I guess I know how Maxim got those calluses hidden beneath his gloves. He labors for leisure. I've never known anyone in my entire life who worked despite not needing to. I don't quite know what to make of it.

"Alright then," I say, tying my robe tight around my waist. "I'll see you later for racquet?"

Back in my room, Amalia and Freida are snoring. Amalia's palm is lying on top of Freida's cheek and Freida's foot (the one with the broken toe) is elevated over Amalia's rump.

"You're back," Zita says simply, eyeing me curiously.

I nod. “Were they awful?”

Zita considers this, a mockingly thoughtful finger to her lips. “Entirely awful. But no more than any other noblewomen, I suppose.”

I giggle, finally becoming used to Zita’s needling jokes. “Any chance of a bath?”

Zita rolls her shoulders. “I’ll turn the taps. See what I can do.”

After my brief but decadent soak, Trude frantically knocks on the door when she arrives to help me dress. The sound seems to rouse my stepsisters, and they wake with bleats of surprise I can hear even through the bathroom door.

I stand from the bath and Zita wraps me up in a fluffy towel before going off to let Trude in. I exit the bathroom and stand in the doorway, glaring at my stepsisters. “Good morning, if you can call it good.”

Freida rubs at her eyes, muttering, “Well, we’re waking up in a better place than yesterday, so ‘good morning’ works for me.”

I glance out to the door to the foyer, where Trude is surely coming in now. I turn back to my stepsisters and spit out, “I’m only going to say this once: Don’t be the scorpion that bites the toad as he is carried across the river. If you sting me, we’ll both drown.”

Amalia looks fearfully at Freida, but Freida merely gives me a stoic nod. “We know that. We want to be useful.”

The door creaks open as Trude enters. “Oh good!” she says, sighing in relief. “You’re not dressed yet. I was afraid your sisters being here would mean I’m getting replaced.”

I shoot Trude a beaming smile. “*Step*sisters. And no, you are irreplaceable.”

After hearing about my plan to play racquet, Trude dresses me in the simplest ensemble I’ve worn since coming to the palace. Its sole decoration is the line of tiny, delicate buttons down the front. The teal satin skirt stops at my ankles, making it easy to move in. I sigh happily, twirling in the mirror and feeling the fabric sway with me. It’s a genuine relief to feel a breeze.

After Trude helps me fasten a matching velvet ribbon in my hair, I cross to the bed and rip the pillow out from under Amalia’s head. “Get up,” I say

in her ear. She groans, but rises when Freida pinches her.

"You want to be useful?" I ask. They both nod. Despite my misgivings, I know just how to use them. Freida had been right. They won't tell me lies, like everyone else at court. "Go make friends," I tell them. "Go make friends with absolutely everyone and report the truth of where they all stand. I want to know about feuds among the nobility. I want to know how they really feel about me and the royal family. I want to know everything, whether it's beautiful or ugly, just as it really is. Can you do that?"

Amalia gulps, a little unsure. But Freida lays a hand on her sister's and says, firmly, "We can."

"Good," I say, turning to go. But at the last second, I turn back. "And if you can, find out what everyone says about Duke Maxim D'Arcy, too. He's proved a mystery so far."

Zita gives me directions to the palace forge, but her puckered lips tell me to be cautious. The forge is located out on the grounds, not too far from the stables. I push open the heavy iron door and am struck by the overwhelming heat, as if the hottest day of summer has been stacked on top of itself three times. And yet, when I glance to the windows, I find they're thrown open. The heat is too intense even to escape. The next thing I notice is the rhythmic clanging of hammers, so loud it makes my eardrums ring.

As I edge into the forge, the doors snapping shut behind me, I bring my hands up to the earrings Bayard gave me, idly wondering how hot it would have to be before the metal in each base began to melt into the flesh of my earlobes.

There are eight or nine sweaty, soot-blackened men standing at anvils, banging hammers against glowing ore. They wear thick leather gloves and aprons that dwarf the rest of their bodies. Their faces are obscured by scraps of cloth to protect from stray sparks.

I cautiously approach the nearest blacksmith, a sinewy man who is bent over what can only be the half-hammered form of a halberd. I pause, eyeing the way his bare biceps gleam with sweat as he pounds the metal flat. I'm a

little woozy, and it's not just from the heat. I raise my voice and wave a hand in front of his face to draw his attention. I can't help it—I place my hands over my ears to block out the noise—and shout, "I'm looking for the Duke D'Arcy? I was told he might be here?"

The man lays down his hammer and straightens to his full, towering height. He rips the covering from his lower face and reveals a crooked grin.

I close my eyes, cursing my own stupidity. The blacksmith in front of me *is* Maxim. Since they are usually hidden under a layer of black finery, I'd never have expected those lean, muscled arms could belong to someone of his class. Though I suppose Bayard is no slouch in that category either.

Maxim sweeps into a taunting bow, with extra theatrical hand gestures. "Your highness," he murmurs.

"Well?" I snap. "I don't suppose you want to talk about Galiena out here in the open, do you?"

Maxim doesn't try to shout over the thunder of the smiths at work. He merely tugs at my elbow and leads me through the heat and haze of the forge, into an adjacent room. This one is smaller, but also quieter. Only one person is at work here: a woman in the process of blowing through a long tube. I stare at her in wonder as a bubble expands at the end of her instrument. Maxim clears his throat, she startles, and the bubble strikes the ground. Rather than popping, as I'd expected, it shatters into a hundred fragments of paper-thin glass.

"Brigitte," Maxim says to her, "would you mind giving the princess and me the room for now? We need to speak privately."

The glassblower nods repeatedly, moving to sweep up the accidental glass on the floor.

"It's alright," Maxim says, his hand raised. "Leave it."

The glassblower lets out an incoherent squeak of thanks, gathers up her few personal items, and scurries from the workspace.

When she's gone, Maxim strips the oversized gloves from his hands, and I see the bare skin of them for the first time. "This is actually the ideal place to discuss private matters," he tells me, flexing his fingers. "It's too loud for anyone to eavesdrop."

My anxiety won't allow a mess of glass to sit untidied, so my eyes roam the room looking for something to pick it up with. When I finally spot a broom and dustpan in the corner directly behind me, I find Maxim is also reaching past me for the handle—his lean brings him close enough to my ear that he might have dipped down to bite it. I push back on his chest before he can seize the broom. "I've got this."

I roll up my sleeves, taking the broom and pan to kneel in the center of the room. I gather the shards before they can hurt anyone. Maxim watches me with black eyes shining. He nods to my exposed forearm. "How exactly did you get that nasty scar?"

My posture goes rigid as I stand. "None of your business," I spit at him.

Maxim shrugs, unperturbed by my tone. "You asked about my calluses, I'll ask about your scar."

I place the dust pan to the side, resolvedly keeping my eyes off him. But even with studied avoidance, I can't help but notice that Maxim is *alive* here. Vibrating with energy. This forge is where he is in his own domain, like me in my kitchen at home. This is the place where he can be alone with his scheming little thoughts, like I could be alone with my dreams. He comes here when he wants no one to bother him.

Maxim walks to the door to make sure it's barred against entry. When he's satisfied, he turns back to me and asks, "Have you thought any more on Galiena's proposition?"

I stubbornly jut out my jaw. "My answer is the same as before. I'm not going to turn on Bayard."

Maxim shakes his head so subtly it's almost imperceptible. "I wouldn't think of it like that. Think of it as freeing him from a burden. Bayard never wanted the throne. When Bernadine was the presumptive heir, he called himself lucky to be nothing more than a spare. It left him free to travel, to marry for love, to do anything he wanted with his life. Ever since Bernadine disappeared, he's been trapped in a gilded cage."

"And whose fault is that?" I snap at him.

Maxim raises his callused hands in surrender. "I'll admit, I miscalculated. I thought Bayard would abdicate, or Alaric—the ruthless bastard that he is—would force him to. But I didn't understand how seriously Bayard takes

his father's opinion. He's willing to be miserable under the thumb of the king rather than break free and seize his happiness. And Alaric? I didn't realize how committed he was to maintaining the D'Harcourt dynasty. This obsession with babies of his … it's new. He neither accepts Bayard as a suitable heir, nor is willing to dismiss him. He thinks if he pushes Bayard hard enough, he'll get himself a grandchild to supersede Bayard in succession." A sad smile creeps across his face. "Tell me, is that what you want to be? Nothing more than a royal broodmare?"

I choke back a laugh. "As if you have my best interests at heart."

Maxim's response is low, almost throaty. "I assure you I do."

"And what is my role in your awful little dream world? Do I convince Bayard to abdicate to you? Do I trick him into vanishing into Fairyland? Do we run off together for worlds unknown and leave the kingdom forever?"

"Your role could be whatever you want it to be," Maxim says, crossing to a little black box by the windowsill. It looks not terribly unlike the box containing the slipper in Bayard's bedroom, and when Maxim opens it, I find it also contains a glass shoe—the one I'd thrown at him in the attic. "The really spectacular thing about glass is," he murmurs, selecting a ceramic crucible from a long wall of instruments and dropping the slipper into its bowl, "it can be remade as many times as you like. It doesn't have to stay one thing forever."

He stokes the coals within a clay furnace and pokes the crucible containing the slipper inside. Grudgingly curious, I draw closer to watch the ridiculous shoe melt, taking on the color and consistency of honey. "This glass could become anything now," Maxim muses. "It could be a window pane, a vase, even a knife, if you wanted. Glass can hold a very sharp edge. Sharper even than iron, which is a crude material that grows dull fast. Steel is usually preferable, if you don't mind spending a little extra money and time for a superior product."

"I don't want to talk weapons with you," I tell him.

"What *do* you want to talk about?" Maxim asks, laying down the crucible to look me directly in the eye.

"I want to know why you want the throne," I say. "You've spent so much time explaining how Bayard doesn't want it. You never told me why you

do. But you must want it an awful lot, or why would you break your friend's trust like this?" Maxim's flash of anger back in the garret sufficiently convinced me that he cares for Bayard on some level, which only leaves me more baffled.

Maxim closes his eyes, his lips moving very slightly as he considers what to share with me. Finally, he exhales deeply and says, "That question brings us directly back to weaponry, I'm afraid."

I'm skeptical, but I don't interrupt him. I just cross my arms and tap my foot, waiting for him to continue.

"Like I said," Maxim hums, staring into the flickering fire of the furnace. "Iron weapons don't hold a sharp edge. Certainly not sharp enough to pierce an ogre's hide. Which is why it was unfortunate that after the incident with Queen Eloise, Alaric defaulted all soldiers and royal guard's blades to be made of iron. To fight the fairies. I think I was … five at the time. But fairies aren't the only threat in this kingdom, so when an ogre attacked my parents' carriage, none of the blades carried by their guards could penetrate the ogre's thick skin. My parents were devoured. I don't … exactly blame the ogre. Every creature needs to eat. But I do blame Alaric for his short-sightedness. For thinking the only problems anyone in the kingdom could face were his own. I would do better."

I try to imagine a woman and man with refined demeanors; people who could create someone like Maxim. I imagine them waving goodbye to a tiny dark-haired boy before climbing into a carriage. I imagine that boy sitting patiently in an empty parlor, legs swinging from his chair, as he waits for his parents to come home. But I do not imagine his tears—I don't need to. I've cried those same tears myself.

Maxim chews on his bottom lip, pensive. "I know you think I'm a smug, arrogant bastard. And you're right. But I also know more about the commonfolk than any other noble at court. After my parents died, with no other family, I was essentially raised by the staff. I'm not saying I know what it's like to be a peasant, but I'm a damn sight closer to understanding their experience than anyone else in this palace." He nods his head graciously at me, acknowledging something I hadn't expected him to. "Present company excluded."

His eyes wander the room, examining the various instruments lining the walls. “My father was the king’s favored adviser, his general before D’Chamberd. The most trusted man on my father’s staff was his blacksmith. As I got older—the head of a dukedom, surrounded only by adults in my employ, most too intimidated by me to stop me from becoming a bullying, snot-nosed brat—that smith stepped in to take over my education. He thought learning a craft would humble me. Teach me the value of a hard day’s work.” Maxim gives a quiet laugh, barely a puff of air. “He was half right, anyway. I mastered the trade, but never the humility.”

Softly, I ask, “So you decided to devote your talents to working with our enemies?”

“I don’t believe the fairies *are* our enemies,” Maxim says simply. “I believe fairies do unto us as we do unto them. I believe Alaric enraged Galiena a long time ago, and she sought vengeance, and now the entire kingdom must live in fear because of their king’s mistakes. We shouldn’t be waging a pointless war with the fair folk. They cannot spill blood, but they are still formidable. If we fight them, we will lose, and our soldiers will die. We should make peace and invite them back into our lands. They hide from our traps in the forests now—those few who haven’t departed for other kingdoms—and it only emboldens the other magical creatures. Ogres, yes, but also chimeras, ghouls, dragons, and banshees. Fairies kept those other populations in check just by being here. They were the apex predator, and now the others run wild in their absence. You know half the terrible deeds Alaric prints in those anti-fairy pamphlets were really done by some other magical being? If we allowed the fairies back, we could restore balance to the kingdom.”

I nod, thinking carefully. “And you’re willing to—I’m just guessing here—let Alaric die to accomplish that? Let Bernadine be vanished from the mortal world, and Bayard … well, who knows what?”

Maxim fires back, prickly now. “Alaric more than deserves what’s coming to him. You cannot honestly say you have any affection for that old brute.”

“None,” I answer. “But it’s not him I’m worried for.”

Maxim scoffs. “Please don’t pretend you love him.”

I raise my voice, anger searing my cheeks. “How would you know anything about who I love?”

“Because I know you,” Maxim snaps back. “I’ve recognized myself in you since the moment you narrowed your impertinent, *infuriatingly blue* eyes at me in that doorway. There is a bite in you he doesn’t see. That he couldn’t love if he did.”

“Bayard does love me,” I insist, my voice trembling.

Maxim lets out a howling laugh. “If that’s true, he loves you by accident! I would—”

He clenches a fist, and looks away from me.

“You’d what?” I demand.

His eyes return to my face. I realize I’ve been wrong, comparing his black eyes to my stepmother’s all this time. His eyes are not cold at all. They burn and crackle with heat like a flaming coal. “I’d—I’d never accept accidental love if I were you. It’s imitation. It’s cheap and you’re better than that.”

I blink at him in surprise. “You’re the one who told me I wasn’t on Bayard’s level before the wedding.”

Maxim shakes his head, wrenching his eyes away from my face to stare into the furnace. He watches the glass that was once a slipper glow. “I wasn’t calling you inferior. I was saying you aren’t a match for each other. That you could never be true partners.”

“You’re making a lot of assumptions about what I want,” I tell him coldly. I point into the furnace at the melted glass. “Glass may be changeable, but it’s fragile too. Maybe all I want is to give my heart to someone who would never break it. That’s who Bayard is. And I owe him a debt for that. I won’t break his heart either, and I won’t help you betray him. You can tell your fairy I’ll make no bargain with her, and if you try to hurt my husband, I will stand in your way *every time*.”

Maxim lets out a soft laugh. “Have it your way, darling. But know that you and I are essentially the same. Neither of us stands down when we see something we want. We spot a chance for happiness and we seize it. I’ll not be easily swayed from my object, even if you raise an army of scullery maids against me.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Is that so?” I seize his hand and he tenses beneath my grip. I guide his palm to rest on the raised scar on my forearm. Heat ignites where his skin grazes mine.

He told me about his parents; fairy-like, I feel myself in debt to him. I offer something back so we can be equals again: “My stepmother broke this arm when I was thirteen.” I grind my teeth with the difficulty of getting these words out. “Because I dropped her favorite teacup. Such a small thing for such a harsh punishment.”

Maxim stands very still, hardly even breathing. The blackness of his eyes deepens, somehow. We are physically closer than we’ve ever been, even while we were dancing.

“I know what it’s like to live under a tyrant,” I say. “I won’t do it again. And seeing as I can’t trust you not to be a tyrant, I won’t let you win. You cannot break me in any way I haven’t already been broken. Don’t underestimate what I can survive—or what I’ll do to protect my people.”

Maxim rips his hand away from my arm, as if I’ve pressed his skin to the glowing embers of the forge. I cannot see his expression—his back is turned to me. I don’t want to hear the next clever thing that comes out of his pretty mouth. I won’t let him be glib about what I’ve shared.

I leave him, skirts swishing around my ankles as I stride from the room and from the smithy altogether. Maxim and I have reached an impasse—I cannot reveal his treachery and he cannot reveal mine—and yet I have no interest in sitting still. It’s time to be bold. Decisive. To cut off my enemy at the knees before he launches his next attack. My mind whirls like the gears of a well-oiled clock as my feet lead me to Bayard and our appointment at the racquet courts.



The courts are tiled in jade green, each with a low net stretched across its rectangular surface and marble walls a skilled player might use to bounce their ball over the net and into the scoring area. Many of the nobles observe from the balcony above the courts, drinking merlot and noshing on triangular sandwiches. Trude is among them, cheering supportively

whenever Bayard (or I, but far more often Bayard) scores a point. Bayard is in fact quite good at the game, and very patient in his attempts to teach me how to swing my racquet. But I'm distracted by the courtiers above us—more specifically, by my stepsisters mingling with the courtiers above. They move among them, melding easily into preexisting conversations and huddles, despite having no invitation. Occasionally Amalia perches on the arm of a nobleman's chair and leans over to display the jewels resting above her décolletage. A few times, Freida whispers into someone's ear—a wry smile quirking at her lips—and then the favored courtier bursts into delighted laughter at her latest bold witticism. At one point, I even see the Marchioness D'Artagnan spit out her wine in unprepared amusement, spraying red droplets all over her nearest companion's face.

It's safe to say my stepsisters are doing precisely as I asked.



I call my four palace allies—both enthusiastic and reluctant—together in my suite that evening after dinner. Freida, Amalia, Trude, and Zita. It's time to be honest (or honest-ish) with them and gather all the information I can as I seek to undo Maxim.

I stand in the center of the room, watching them carefully before I speak: "I believe Duke Maxim D'Arcy vanished Princess Bernadine, and I have reason to suspect he wants to do the same to Bayard."

That makes Freida catapult up straight, her injured foot swinging off the ottoman she was using to elevate it. Trude lets out a strangled squeal from her seat at my vanity.

I glance over at Zita, sitting at the window. She nods, face pinched.

I hold up a hand to silence the others' questions, continuing, "He all but admitted it to me. He thought I might be willing to betray Bayard. But I'm not, and so we have a limited amount of time to strike back at him before he endangers the prince."

"Why don't you tell the king?" Trude asks, breathless. "Get the duke locked in prison now, before he can do something terrible?"

Zita scoffs at Trude's question. Freida gives the tiniest shake of her head. Amalia watches me intently from my bed, clutching a pillow to her stomach as if fighting off a persistent cramp.

I walk over to Trude and place my hands on her shoulders. "The king will only have my word against his. I'm not sure even Bayard would completely believe me. Maxim is his dearest friend, and he's too honorable to comprehend the idea his confidante may not be. Caution is necessary."

"That makes sense," Freida says, her eyes bright with cunning. "If you take aim for the duke, you'd better be certain that shot will be lethal. The impression I've picked up from court is that his grace is very well-respected. He must think his reputation would earn him a crown if no other heirs remain."

Amalia nods emphatically. "And it's not just the prince who likes him. Everybody does. I mostly think the courtiers are grateful for his skill at soothing the king's tempers. They're all terrified of Alaric, and Maxim is the only person who seems to have any standing with him."

"No way King Alaric likes you more than Maxim," Freida adds. "He's only known you a few days. You're going to have trouble convincing anyone to turn against the duke."

"Precisely," I say. "So I need iron-clad proof of my claims before I go forward."

Zita clears her throat, legs crossed delicately at the ankles. "And exactly what proof do you expect to provide?"

I steel my jaw and drop the riskiest part of my plan. "Princess Bernadine herself. Maxim tricked her into vanishing. She and the villagers disappeared in the same way. They're not dead—they're in Fairyland."

Four sets of eyes stare at me like I'm the babbling banshee of Pim.

"You … what?" Zita says.

I produce the book of spells and herbology Jessamin gave me as a parting gift that I couldn't bear to leave behind in that holey old attic. I open it to a dog-eared, illustrated page and throw it onto the bed for the others to inspect. "There are precautions I can take. A crown of marigolds counteracts fairy glamours and enchantments. If we find where Bernadine and the villagers disappeared to, perhaps we can bring them back. And with

Bernadine returned, she can speak to the king about Maxim's betrayal herself."

Zita crosses from the window. She scans the book with one hand over her mouth. "No," she says, finally, batting her apron like she's trying to shake the dust of my terrible idea off it. "No, I'll have nothing to do with this. I am not going the way of Nella when this fails, *which it will*."

I cross my arms. "Zita, you have to help. You're the only one who knows where Bernadine disappeared."

"Good then!" she snarls. "If it'll keep you from doing such a fool thing, all the better for me to keep my mouth shut!"

I grind my teeth together, self-hatred erupting in my chest like a spring blossom unfolding. I despise that I have to do this, but Bayard's *life*—and my life at his side—are at stake. "Zita, you told me I would one day stop acting like a mouse and start acting like a mistress. This is not a request. It's a command. And if you don't help me, you will not be my chambermaid much longer."

Zita's brown eyes sharpen, glinting with malice. "You wretched—" She cuts herself off, fists clenching.

"I'll take precautions for you, too," I assure her. "Unlike with Bernadine, when I go into the woods, I won't be alone. I'll take Amalia and Freida with me, so if I vanish permanently, I give you every permission to point the finger of blame at them."

Amalia squeaks. Freida blusters, "We most certainly are *not* going into that damned forest with you."

"Yes," I say, "you are." I remove Bayard's earrings from my lobes. "Or tomorrow morning, I'll wake to find these jewels mysteriously missing, and lo, I'll discover them among your possessions. Then you'll be sent home as thieves to face the mother you betrayed."

That shuts Freida *right* up.

"Where do I fit into all of this?" Trude whispers. Her face is pale with fear. Perhaps she expects me to threaten her, too.

I give Trude a weak smile. "I don't have a way to force you to help. But I know you have a good heart and you care about Bayard. If you will, I only

ask that you run interference for me while I'm in the forest. Ideally, no one should discover I'm gone until Bernadine is back safe and sound."

Trude sighs, but smiles back at me. "That I'll do." She stands and examines the illustration of the marigold crown in the book. "And there's a patch of marigolds on the edge of the forest. I'll go pick enough to weave into a protective crown. Just promise me it won't be only Bernadine who comes back safe." She wraps me in a ferocious hug, which I return gratefully.



EIGHTEEN

THE NEXT MORNING, I LEAVE BAYARD'S BED AN HOUR BEFORE dawn, laying a light kiss on his forehead. He doesn't stir as I slip out.

Trude, Zita, and my stepsisters are waiting for me in my bedroom. Trude helps me don a sky blue dress that allows easy movement and places a wreath of marigolds on top of my neatly-pinned curls. Zita carries four crimson cloaks: one for each of us going into the forest. Amalia and Freida tighten the lace at their necks as if the cloak is a noose.

Trude kisses me on both cheeks before we go. She shoves a number of pillows beneath the blankets of my bed and says, "If anyone asks, I'll say you have a terrible migraine and must not be disturbed."

I squeeze her hands. "Thank you."

Jacques dozes on his pillow at the windowsill. Ermengarde snuffles beneath the bed. I blow them each a kiss, an odd chill of dread permeating my veins. If I die in Fairyland, or never return, Bayard will understand what's happened to me. He will mourn, of course, but he'll know why I'm not around. But my pets would never be able to puzzle out why I was with them one day and gone the next. They wouldn't know I'm dead; they'd think I'd chosen to abandon them.

Like mother, like daughter, I suppose.

I carry a basket laden with everything I need. A lantern, a spool of bright red thread, provisions of water, cheese, and bread—only a fool would eat what is offered in Fairyland—and an iron key.

We can't exit through the door to my suite without the guards spotting us. Luckily, Zita has an answer for that. She leads us into my bathroom—of all places—and pushes ever so slightly on a panel of the robin's egg blue wall. It swings backward, revealing a narrow corridor illuminated with flickering torches.

"A secret passageway?" I ask, gaping.

Zita gives a harsh laugh. "Hardly. Haven't you wondered why you never see servants carrying trays of food through the halls? We're meant to keep out of sight, scurrying through the walls like rodents. The likeness is true enough—the nobility find us just as unsightly."

We slip into the low light of the corridor, moving briskly with Zita at the head of the line, deftly navigating the twists and turns of the mazelike inner walls. The space is so narrow we have to walk single file. My stepsisters go hand in hand, but perhaps that is more about Freida dragging the fretting Amalia along than it is about comfort.

We descend through the innards of the palace and emerge from a door near the stables. We slip into the armory, taking three crossbows off the shelf: one for me, which I tuck into the belly of my basket, one for Zita, and one for Freida. Amalia abstains, as she couldn't hold it straight enough to aim properly.

The forest is every bit as deep, dark, and impenetrable as I remember. But this time, I don't have a faithful horse beneath me or stalwart Bayard at my side. We stumble over roots and fallen branches, the fog thick enough to choke on. But Zita leads us forward with the same confidence as she did in the servants' passageway.

"You're sure you know where you're going?" Freida spits behind me.

"I'm not interested in being questioned by the likes of you," Zita shoots back, deadpan. "I've walked this path hundreds of times. I returned again and again for Bernadine, hoping one day she'd come back."

We walk two miles deep into the forest, far enough in that I see a flash of iron lying in wait beneath a pile of leaves, and call out just in time to prevent it from snapping shut around Amalia's ankle. She leaps into Freida's arms, gasping for breath, forcing Freida to drop her crossbow to

the mossy forest floor. “Watch it!” she shouts. “I could have shot myself in the toe.”

I levy them both a stern look. “Let’s not waste time.”

After that, Amalia follows close behind me, holding on to the end of my crimson cloak.

Finally, we reach a willow tree with thicker and longer roots than many others in the forest, forming an intricate tangle as if purposefully woven that way through the centuries. Zita lifts a curtain of its trailing branches and ushers me through to the gnarled trunk beyond. “This is the place,” she whispers. “I saw Bernadine go beneath the vines with Maxim, and she never came out again.”

I nod, swallowing a hard lump in my throat. Turning back now isn’t an option, so I refuse to think of everything that could go wrong with this plan. Instead, I reach into my basket and knot the red thread tightly around the bow of the iron key. Then I unwind the spool completely, circling the other end of the thread securely around my wrist. I toss the key upwards—once, then twice—to wrap around one of the willow’s sturdy, curving boughs. According to the witch’s book, this iron, which fairy magic cannot touch, and this thread in the color they fear, will make sure I am anchored to the mortal world and can follow the path of my thread home again.

Next, I tug the hood of my red cloak up over the crown of marigolds, taking deep, steadying breaths. The other three watch me intently. Freida and Amalia are holding hands again—but this time with no rancor. “Well,” I say, facing Zita. “Once I’m gone, you can head back to the palace. No one needs to know you were ever here with me, or that you even knew about it. And if my stepsisters return without me”—I cast them both a withering glare,—“then you have your perfect scapegoat.”

Freida rips her hand out of Amalia’s and shoulders the crossbow that had been lying at her feet. “And if anything comes to pester us while you’re gone, I’ll shoot it dead.”

I clap my hands, trying to sound more confident than I feel. I face the knotted trunk, examining it closely. I lift my palms, the basket swinging from the crook of my elbow, to stretch them toward the willow bark. “I suppose I’ll just touch it and see what—”

I am hurtling upside down through a starry sky. I cannot breathe, and it is agony.



I'm thrown painfully to the forest floor. I gasp, choking for air, and it fills my lungs … much more sweetly scented than it was a moment ago. My carefully packed provisions have scattered everywhere. I scramble to place them back in the basket. The candle in my lantern has gone out, and its glass casing is now webbed with cracks.

I lift my head to see where I am—and it is not the same forest I was just standing in. The sky is the blushing pink of a new dawn. Stark white clouds roll across the sky like jolly court jesters mid-somersault. The grass ahead of me is poison green; too bright, too vibrant. The trees are not the dark-wooded shadows of the royal forest, but slender, silver birches that slice through the air like comely daggers. The red thread around my wrist stretches up behind me, leading to a knob on the trunk of the nearest birch. I notice another difference too: Where the forest I left behind was quiet, this one is alive with birdsong.

And what's more: I hear the chatter of people.

No, not people.

Fairies.

I am in no deserted forest anymore, but a popular Fairyland thoroughfare, despite the lack of a paved road. They weave around me in large numbers, linking arms, gossiping as mortal villagers do, and laughing unnaturally musical laughs. I stare in open-mouthed horror. They have more variety to their features than I could have ever conceived. Though Myranda and Galiena had seemed like impossibly beautiful humans, many of these fairies carry distinctly animal features.

Passing beside me, a fairy in white petticoats kicks idly at one of my fallen chunks of cheese, and I see that her feet are furred and clawed. A lynx's tail twitches from a hole in her skirts, and her ears are pointy, catlike. Her giggling companion has a mostly human face, but it is stacked on the elongated, feathered neck of a swan. Luckily, as I've not yet found my

fallen iron crossbow, their interest in me seems to only go as far as kicking my lunch across the grass. They continue on their journey, not sparing me a glance.

The fairies all seem to be headed in the same direction. Far off on the horizon, I see a glimmering palace, golden against the pink sky. That must be the palace of Tanaquill, the fairy queen. Perhaps they are headed to a feast at her court, or a ball.

Above me, a trio of garishly colored pixies flit through the air, their slender wings whirring insect-like as they fly. They take my breath away; I haven't seen a pixie since I was a child—after Queen Eloise died, the king ordered all pixies still within the kingdom's borders to be captured and ground to glittering dust. They've been gone from Holbein so long that I almost forgot they were real creatures, and not a concoction of my overactive imagination.

There are so many feet—tiny and humanoid in their silk shoes, or else bare and animal—moving around me that I become panicked. Where is my crossbow? I feel like I'm in a nightmare where I've forgotten my most important possession at home, just when I need it most. But it was certainly in my basket when I touched the tree and was transported here.

I'm so fixated on scrambling on all fours across the muddy grass that I become only vaguely aware of the crash of giant footfalls, each sounding like a house collapsing. I roll to the side just in time before a foot longer than I am tall comes squelching down into the wet earth just where I had been kneeling seconds earlier. I let out a terrified shriek, staring at the foot, which has a bunion on its side as big as my skull. I tilt my head, following the foot up the incredible length of the giant's leg, clad in black-and-white striped trousers. Up and up I crane my neck to see a rail-thin giant whose head skims the very clouds above. His massive nostrils flare as he sniffs.

"I smell …" he says, in a low booming voice like rolling thunder, "a little, scurrying creature." He crouches lower to the earth and seizes my whole body in his carriage-sized hand before I have a chance to dart away. The string around my wrist gives a mighty tug, pulling more thread through the tree from the mortal world as I'm lifted upward. It trails through the air below me, bloodred against the backdrop of the green grass. "What are you doing here, tiny one?"

I clear my throat, which has gone dry as sawdust. I announce myself like a princess ought to, despite a little trembling. “I am here to find the Princess Bernadine D’Harcourt. Might you know where she is?”

The giant is holding me close to his face, squinting at me. I wrap my arms around his tree-sized thumb for balance, and luckily he doesn’t seem interested in squeezing me until my eyes pop out. “Yes,” he says, thinking it over.

“You do?” I cry, suddenly flush with excitement. “Will you tell me where she is?”

The giant’s mouth moves like he’s a cow chewing on cud. “No,” he finally decides.

“Why not?” I ask.

“Because,” the giant says, “if I tell you, you will be in my debt. And I do not think that is a kind position to place you in.” He lowers his hand again, setting me gently back on the ground. “I give you this advice for free, little mouse. Make no deals in Fairyland you cannot complete.” He lets out a chuckle. “And search no more for your iron weapon. There is no iron in Fairyland. It is probably still waiting for you on the other side.”

I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly ashamed. This giant was so much kinder than the stories implied his kind to be.

“Thank you,” I tell him as he begins to straighten up.

If the giant smiles or nods approvingly at me, I cannot tell, because his face is now simply too far away. “Good manners. That is important.”

He strides away, elongated limbs flying over the heads of the other bustling fairies, and is gone from me in a trice. Another fairy, whose interest was seemingly piqued by my conversation with the giant, hops up to me with enthusiasm. I clap my hands over my mouth to prevent myself from shrieking, because I find myself face to face with a creature—finely attired, in blue breeches and a doublet—with the legs of a goat but the head and torso of a frog. Its bulbous eyes watch me as if I am a particularly delicious-looking fly.

“I know where the D’Harcourt princess bides,” the frog-fairy says, licking his glistening green lips with a pink, prehensile tongue. “And I will tell you, if you win a wager against me.”

My eyes narrow in suspicion. This seems to be exactly the sort of bargain the friendly giant advised me against. The frog-fairy has a small leather purse buckled to his belt, and I can see it pulsating, as if something inside is trying to push its way out. If I strain my ears, I can almost hear the tinny, high-pitched scream of some very small, very frightened creature. "And what if I should lose?" I ask him, keeping my voice even.

The fairy shrugs, unconcerned and grinning. "But why should you lose? It is a simple game, and you are young and pretty. You obviously have luck on your side." He holds up a blue marble and begins swapping it between his hands, fast as lightning. Then he holds out the fists of his webbed hands and says, "Where is the marble? If you guess correctly, I shall lead you to the princess."

I press my lips together, staring at the slickness of his offered hands. "No," I say. "No, I do not yet agree to play."

The frog gives me a sickening smile. "Not *yet* agree? Mayhaps I shall sweeten the deal. I am a wealthy prince, as you can see. Perhaps if you win, I shall give you my hand in marriage." He gallantly waves one of those uncanny, amphibian hands. I eye him warily, suddenly sure that the marigold crown I'm wearing has made me immune to some glamour he is using to disguise himself.

I think of Galiena, so carefully choosing her words. My gut tells me he plays a similar game. I dig deeper. "A prince indeed? Of what locale?"

"Why, I am fairy prince!" he cries, voice slick with guile. "My domain lies in that direction. Do you not see the golden palace on the horizon?" Having lately become something of an expert in lying with the truth, I suspect that while a fairy and perhaps a prince, he is no kinsman to Tanaquill. Perhaps he rules over a pond in her garden.

"And you are wealthy?" I query. "In what jewels or gold do you claim this wealth?"

"Why," he answers gamely, "I have this bulging purse at my hip. It is a fairy trifle, and contains far more than it appears. Uncountable treasure lies within, which I value above all else."

No specifics again. And having heard cries from within the leather, I'd wager his treasure is not currency. I must do something.

“You are a handsome specimen,” I lie, and see my guess about his glamoured appearance is corroborated by his smug grin. “Close your eyes for me. I shall walk in a circle around you, so that I might see all of my potential groom.”

The fairy’s protuberant eyes blink close, green eyelids sliding down with all the contentment of a sleeping toad on a lily pad. I don’t waste any time —I grip my skirts, lifting them past my ankles, and sprint in a close circle around him, so that my crimson thread continues to extend, resting lightly around the shoulders of his finely embroidered doublet. Then I dart for the nearest tree, and he yelps in fury as the bloodred string tightens, binding him to the birch trunk I’ve orbited.

“Duplicitous wench! How dare you! This is not how the game is played,” he howls, struggling in vain against the flimsy string. “To think I might have made you my bride!”

I let out a gasping laugh. “Is that supposed to change my mind?” I lower the hood of my cloak, revealing the crown of marigolds. “I do not know what dashing glamour you’re wearing to confuse mortal women, sir, but I assure you it will not work on me. Fairies cannot lie, so I suppose you are *some* manner of prince. Perhaps you lord over a lily pad. But I know a truehearted prince when I see one. And now, I will see what your wealth really consists of, because I do not think it will be gold.”

I reach my hand to the leather pouch at his waist, popping it open, and a stream of glorious, rainbow-colored dragonflies pours out. Many of them arc into the golden horizon, dispersing into the fairy woods, but yet more land with delicacy on my arms and cape, or perch in the circlet of marigolds atop my hair. They whisper to me in a thousand gentle voices, like the rustle of wind against wildflowers. *“We are the mortals who once lost to him in similar wagers,”* they say. *“But there was no ring, no wedding bed. Only crystalline wings and a leather jail, and whenever he grew peckish, he would devour us.”*

I feel my face grow hot with rage as I turn on the fairy. “You are bound in my string, and I think I will leave you here. You will not play this trick on anyone else.”

Enraged, the frog-fairy spits out his tongue, lashing my hand with the wet, sticky thing. I shriek and take off at a run, trying to get out of his

terrible reach. In abject frustration, he beats his satyr-like hooves on the ground, and I soon realize he is unable to follow me deeper into the birchwood.

After a few minutes of running, I notice a conspicuous absence at my wrist. I cry out in terror—my red string has been severed, a by-blow of that darting tongue. Perhaps his screams as I fled were not only frustration, but physical pain at having touched the crimson thread. Whatever happened, I am now alone in the fairy woods, with no clue how to find my way either to Bernadine, or home again.

My breathing grows shallow. I am on the verge of collapsing from panic. But the dragonflies—which now I realize accompanied me as I ran—dot my face with feather-light kisses and whisper to me again. *"Clever maiden, fret not! We will repay you for your kindness."*

Fairyland runs on favors. On debts. "Can you take me to Princess Bernadine D'Harcourt?" I ask, my hands clasped together in anticipation.

"We can, we can!" the dragonflies cry, ecstatic to be of use. And they swirl around me in a great, glittering cloud.

When I can see my surroundings again, I stand in the front garden of a handsome cottage. I wonder how far I have strayed from my tree. The dragonflies move in a swarm toward the cottage, which is graced by a nest of happy bluebirds on its thatched roof. *"The one that you seek lives there,"* they say. *"And our debt is repaid!"*

They zoom blissfully away as I step closer to the dwelling, and I knock twice on the wooden front door. "Come in!" a voice calls.

I open the door and step inside, greeted by the sight of a seated woman with lustrous red hair. Her attire is strange; it's cut in the style of the peasantry but from very fine materials. Her kirtle is of brown velvet, and the pink smock beneath it is silk. She rests on a three-legged stool in front of a tub of laundry. She pulls her hands out of the soapy water and uses the expensive fabric of her ensemble to dry them off, before fixing me with an incandescent smile. My heart lurches with a pang of wistfulness. Here in Fairyland, Bayard already feels so far away, but the family resemblance is unmistakable.

“Hello!” Bernadine says, leaping to her feet. “It’s so pleasant to have a visitor!” Her blue eyes twinkle as they take me in. “And a mortal one too. The fair folk are lovely, but one must be on one’s guard with them.” Her smile freezes, taking in my fidgeting hands, my obvious nervousness. “Have we met before?”

I shake my head, clearing my throat. “No,” I say. “We haven’t met. But we are family.” I remember that I’m in the presence of the crown princess, so I dip into a quick curtsy, just to get us off on the right foot. “My name is Ellain DeBrun. I recently married your brother.”

Bernadine claps her hands together in delight. “How gorgeous! Is Bayard with you? I positively *long* to see him.”

I start to loosen up. She’s just as amiable as her brother. This will be easy. “No, unfortunately Bayard isn’t with me,” I tell her. “But you can see him any time you want! I’ve actually come to take you home. We can return to the mortal world today. You could be having lunch with Bayard in an hour.”

Bernadine’s lips press together, thinning. “Where are my manners?” she says, turning her back to me and heading over to a crackling hearth, where a kettle is coming to a boil. “I must offer you something. Tea, perhaps? Buttered bread?”

I shake my head. I don’t want to sit here drinking tea. I certainly don’t want to eat fairy food, which ties you more strongly to the land. I glance around the cottage, taking it all in. It is romantic and quaint, with its striped wallpaper and teal baseboards. A feather bed on a metal frame sits in the corner. A cupboard stacked with porcelain plates and cups is along the back wall. Herbs of many kinds dangle from the ceiling. Out back, a clothesline runs between two birches, their drying silks flapping in the slight breeze.

“Didn’t you hear me?” I say, following her to the hearth. “We can go. Now, even. You don’t have to be stuck here anymore.”

Bernadine ignores me. She plucks a sprig of lavender from the planter box at the windowsill and drops it into a delicate porcelain cup. She pours boiling water from the kettle into the cup and leaves it to steep. She stands at the sill, silently watching the steam curl up from her tea.

I snap my fingers under her nose. “Bernadine!” I say. “We have to go. I have already been looking for you for some time. If we linger much longer,

they will think I'm missing."

Bernadine takes the cup in her hands, and I wonder if the heat scorches her palms. She shakes her head. "Ellain, is it? I'm afraid I have no interest in returning home. I am very fond of Bayard, of course, and he is welcome to visit me here, but no. No, I am not going back to the mortal world. End of discussion."

Something rotten squirms in my gut. Emotions are rising in me that I don't want to interrogate right now. Instead, I focus on Bernadine. Surely, I can make her understand the gravity of the situation. "They think you're dead, you know," I explain to her. "Your family thinks you're dead."

Bernadine bites her lower lip, but then visibly pushes away any guilty thoughts. "I am happy here. I do not want to be queen. I much prefer this little corner of existence all my own. And I think it will do no good to go back."

"Bayard does not want to be king," I say, venom dripping from my lips, "and yet he is willing to do his duty."

"Great!" Bernadine says, quite chipper. "That's settled then."

I become queasy with anger again, and this time my thoughts can't help flitting to my mother. Clara DeBrun might have been willing to take me along on her fabulous world travels, but she also did not put up much of a fight when my father insisted on keeping me. She had gone off on her merry way. I wonder briefly if she thinks of me, the child she left behind, with as little consideration as Bernadine does Bayard.

I grab Bernadine by both shoulders, only barely resisting the urge to shake her. "No, nothing's settled. Maxim D'Arcy is plotting with a fairy to unseat your father from the throne. To do away with Bayard entirely. I cannot stop him alone, but if you'd just return with me, your word about what he did to you would scuttle any chance to complete his coup."

Bernadine rolls her eyes, pulling away from me and returning to her stool. She picks up another velvet kirtle—slate gray, this time—which is splattered horribly with mud and grass stains. My experience with laundry tells me that a dress in that condition is most certainly a lost cause. "That is not my concern anymore," she laughs gaily. "I am ever so much more useful here. Look! I have a cottage to maintain, and a garden of vegetables

and flowers and herbs, and there is no one pestering me with silly affairs of state." She dunks the kirtle into the soapy water and begins scrubbing it merrily against the washing board. "I always had a peasant's enterprising spirit," she tells me. "I longed for good, honest work. I never slept well in the palace, you know. The beds were much too soft. Now, in Fairyland, I can have the simple life I always desired! I shall not give that up for anything."

After less than ten seconds of labor, she pulls the kirtle out of the washbasin and drapes it over the windowsill to dry. It is miraculously stain-free. I stare at it, bile rising in my throat. The magic of Fairyland is doing the laundry for her, and she calls it honest work. Princess Bernadine likes the idea of chores, but she hasn't a clue what they really demand. I cross to her, taking her hands in mine. A real washerwoman has hands cracked by lye. Hers are as soft as any courtier's, even after all these months playacting at cottage life.

Bernadine doesn't pull her hands away from me. She smiles placidly as I meet her gaze.

"You think you're useful here, do you?" I say, speaking evenly, as if she is the white stag in the forest, and I wish to keep her from fleeing.

Bernadine nods, unbothered.

"Useful to whom?" I ask.

Her eyes flicker with confusion. Her response is halting, infused with trepidation. "Why, to myself, I suppose. There is simple virtue in a peasant's self-sufficiency."

My answer comes out biting. I can't restrain myself anymore. "A true peasant is not merely *self*-sufficient," I remind her. "They are part of a community. Their labors help not just themselves, but also their kin and their neighbors. Often, they support nobles like you. Nobles like … me, now. They work hard so you don't have to. They work so hard that you don't even know the *meaning* of hard work. And this is how you repay them?"

Bernadine's eyes widen, as if no one has ever spoken to her this way before.

“Don’t be useful to only yourself,” I spit at her, fully feeling every speck of anger I’ve quietly packed away since my mother left. “That is not being useful at all. Who are you here for? Who are you helping?”

Finally, Bernadine rips her hands from mine. She wraps her arms around herself, face scrunched in a pout.

But I’m not deterred. “You are wearing velvet and silk,” I continue. “Your laundry cleans itself after a simple rinse, and I’ll wager that bed in the corner may be smaller than the one you left behind, but it is no less soft. I was a servant for six years in my father’s house. I know what it’s like to do the cooking, the mending, the washing, the weeding. It is not something *peasants* do with a light heart and a whistle. It is not a game to them. It is survival.

“You desire usefulness?” I ask her, waving a hand at the door. “Come home with me and save your brother from treachery. Save the kingdom. But don’t pretend that hiding out here is hard work. It is make-believe, as surely as it was make-believe when I imagined myself to be a mermaid, or a dragon tamer, or a famous actress. Come back to reality with me, princess. Ruling may be undesirable work to you, but it is work worth doing.”

Bernadine’s lips pucker as she thinks over what I said.

Finally, she says, “No. I shan’t. I’m a princess, and you can’t make me do anything I don’t want to do.”

Blood pounds in my ears. For the first time in my life, I almost understand my stepmother. I could so easily imagine striking this spoiled brat until my arms are too tired to strike anymore.

Bernadine lifts her chin, pointing her haughty nose up at the low, quaint ceiling. “And I shan’t apologize either. My father taught me that. I shall do as I like. And you may leave me.”

Those words land like a slap on my own cheek. I let out a low, wild laugh. She’s dismissed me like I’m her chambermaid.

I am used to following orders. Reflexively, my shoulders slump, and my feet shuffle to the front door. I open it, and then pause. *Who are you here for?* I think, turning the question I asked Bernadine back on myself. *Are you here to find someone else to save the kingdom for you? Tough luck. You’ll have to roll up your sleeves and do it yourself.*

And you can start by staying loyal to people who have been loyal to you.

I turn back to Bernadine, fixing her with my steadiest gaze. “Zita was put in the stocks for you. She was fired. She might have even died because of your complete disregard for the needs of others. She has waited for you to return, but you do *not* deserve her. You do not deserve a fraction of the privilege and luxury you have been given. You are a waste. You are choosing to live an empty life, and for that, I pity you.”

Bernadine blinks at me several times, trying to hold back the sudden tears that have risen there. Now I’m sure no one has ever spoken to her this way before. But then a hard look crosses her face and she spits out the words, “Who’s Zita?”

I shake my head. She is being spiteful, but even now, I see a pool of regret welling in her eyes, warring with the haughtiness her father nurtured so lovingly. She has crossed a line, and she knows it, but she is still too proud to walk it back.

I speak to her in a voice that is firm, but as kind as I can manage. “I do not believe you don’t remember. I do believe you would prefer to forget the debt you owe her. But that behavior will not get you far in Fairyland. Should your credit run out here, and should you choose to return to the mortal world one day, you can come to the palace and ask for me. I will find you a job of good, honest work. And you’ll find out how you really like it. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to clean up the mess you left behind in the real world.”

I storm out of her cottage. Bernadine lingers in the doorway, calling after me, “I have better credit here than you think! My dear friend, the fairy princess, gave me this house. The spiders of the forest gave me the silk for my clothes. They love me here! They *love* me—” It almost sounds like she is trying to persuade herself.



NINETEEN

I PLUNGE BACK INTO THE FOREST OF BIRCH TREES, MY HANDS BALLED into furious fists. My head spins with resentment. I have risked my life and my station at court to try to bring Bernadine back home, and now I discover it was all for nothing. In fact, Holbein just might be better off without her.

But now I don't even have anything to guide me back to the mortal world. I try to push Bernadine out of my thoughts, focusing on what I need to do. The forest grows darker around me as I hike farther and farther away, the pink fairy sky becoming violet as the sun sets. How to find my way back to the beginning of my string, now that it is no longer attached to my wrist?

That's when her voice calls out to me. "Ell!" Bernadine is calling me—but from where I do not know.

"Please don't go!" she cries. "Wait. Don't leave me!"

I pause, turning on my heel as I try to source her whereabouts. "I'm here!" she says. "In this cave."

"A cave?" I ask, brows furrowed together. "Why? And where?"

"Night falls," she answers. "And Tanaquill's feast will end soon. The creatures that stalk this forest will shortly return from her table, appeased but not satisfied. Some are friendly, others are not. It is not safe to wander alone. You need to shelter with a friend. Come find me by my voice."

I follow her voice to the mouth of a green crystal cave. I squint, unable to see inside as the shadows fall. "Quickly!" Bernadine says. "There are monsters near!"

My heart races. Her words raise the hair on the back of my neck, urging me inward. I am expecting to see Bernadine's remorseful face shining out of the darkness. Instead, I am struck with something rope-like and sticky that seizes me by the waist and drags me forward.

I cry out in horror, thinking of the frog-fairy's tongue, as I collide with a large web made of the same sticky rope-like material. The web is strong, and now clings to my gown, my hair, my cloak. I try to rip myself off the web, but only manage to tear out a few strands of hair in the process. The more I struggle, the more the web pulls me into its diaphanous embrace.

The clicking, scuttling sound of many footsteps makes my skin crawl. Two hundred glowing, yellow eyes peer at me from the shadows as two spiders, each with a carapace the size of a hunting dog, approach the web. They speak in unison, with Bernadine's musical voice: "Are you from Holbein? This voice always seems to work on mortals from Holbein. They all seem to know the sweet girl who lent it to us. Such an accommodating dealmaker, her highness. A small amount of silk in exchange for use of her dulcet tones."

My whole body begins to tremble, shaking the web. I can't help but ask: "And did the princess know what you would do with her voice?"

The spiders click their mandibles, seeming to me the arachnid equivalent of a shrug. "We doubt it. She didn't ask."

Of course she didn't, I think. *Only Bernadine could be so careless.*

"But she did tell our friend Imelda that she had a visitor who was very rude," the spiders told me. "And Imelda sang to us on the wind, asking that we call your name."

Imelda? In my panic-clouded mind, I don't recall such a person.

"Don't worry," the spiders tell me. "We're not going to eat you. Not yet anyway. Brood-Mother told us not to snack until she returns from Tanaquill's palace. Brood-Mother deigns to sit at Tanaquill's table, but will not risk enchantment by eating her food. So we may not gorge ourselves without her."

Tears begin to spill down my cheeks. I'm going to be sick with fear.

"Oy!" A second voice calls from deeper in the cave. I expect another trick, but my eyes have begun to adjust to the dim, and I can see another

human figure, a man with a bushy red beard, caught in a web farther along the cave wall. “I know you!” the man continues.

It’s the man from Hawthorne village, who came to represent his community before Alaric. “What are you doing here?” I gasp.

“My wife and I fled Holbein from the royal forest,” he shouts back. “We heard what that old woman said, and wanted a better life for our child in Fairyland. We set up camp on the outskirts of a fairy village, and at first we were optimistic. But when I left my family to gather firewood, I heard the missing princess’s voice. I followed it and now I’m trapped.” He gives a choking sob. “We should have stayed in Holbein. Without me, what will become of them in this land of monsters?”

The spiders let out piercing shrieks, bidding us to be quiet. “Cease your chattering!”

“And *what* are you going to do about it?” I demand of them, snarling even as hot tears drip down my nose. I weep for my plight. I weep for this man and his family. I weep for my kingdom. “You can hardly do anything worse to us than what you already have planned!”

The spiders click their pincers at me threateningly, but do nothing more. I’ve called their bluff. Just like Freida and Amalia, they will wait for their mother to deal the punishing blow.

“What is your name?” I ask the man. “If we’re going to die, let’s die as friends.”

“Rowan,” he replies, his voice cracking mournfully.

“Well, Rowan,” I tell him, screwing my eyes shut so that I do not have to look at the spiders still menacing me. “I think you were brave to run. No matter how it worked out. I’m sorry the kingdom was a place you had to run from.”

“What was a princess like *you* running from?” he asks. Then his voice rises a whole octave in excitement. “You have a blade? Cut us free!”

I snap my eyes back open, studying him. “I have no blade,” I admit, my words raspy with fear and confusion.

“He isn’t talking to you,” an annoyingly familiar voice growls in my ear.

Unable to turn around, I call out his name, my heart in my throat. “Maxim?”

He doesn’t answer, but from behind me, I make out the ringing sound of a metal blade being drawn from its sheath.

My stomach turns to lead. This is the end for me. He is going to literally stab me in the back. I will die, impaled on his blade, and my bloodied corpse will remain here as it cools, held upright only by the strength of the Brood-Mother’s web.

But though I hear a whoosh of air as his blade swings, it does not connect with my flesh. I crane my head as best I can, still tangled in the web, and see his rapier emerging from the underbelly of the spider closest to me. The creature shrieks in agony as it dies, falling from the web and hitting the crystal floor with a dull thump. Its sibling darts at Maxim in vengeance, pincers clashing, but Maxim throws off his crimson cloak and drapes it over the creature. The spider screams in Bernadine’s voice, muffled beneath the fabric. “I cannot see!” Maxim drives his blade down over the lump in the cloak, skewering the spider. The cloak trembles, then stills.

“Unpleasant,” Maxim observes dryly, yanking his sword free. Its blade is now stained with blue-black goo. “But less unpleasant than finding you headless, I suppose.”

“You—you saved me,” I mumble, head spinning. “Why?”

Maxim doesn’t acknowledge my question, but makes quick work of the web restraining me, slicing through the devilishly sticky cords and freeing my arms and legs. I stagger back, whirling around to gaze at him in wonder. He has followed me all the way to Fairyland. For what possible reason beyond cold-blooded elimination of his rival? Surely he still means to do away with me. Perhaps he just doesn’t think it honorable to deal the killing blow while I’m incapacitated.

But Maxim merely cuts me a perfunctory glance as his attention moves to Rowan, whom he also seems to recognize from the throne room. “Sir,” he says as he strides toward him. “Where is your family?”

“Not here,” Rowan gasps, eyes wide with relief as Maxim methodically tears apart the Brood-Mother’s web with his sword.

Only now do I realize that Maxim’s blade has an identical wolf’s head as the cane Bayard gave him. They are one and the same.

Rowan, a powerfully built man, claps Maxim on the shoulder. If I didn't already know he was deceptively strong for his graceful frame, I would have expected him to buckle under the blow. "I had the wrong measure of you," Rowan tells Maxim. "I thought you were a smug, arrogant arse. But you've got more heart than I gave you credit for."

"You had the right measure of me the first time," Maxim quips, scowling at him. He beckons curtly in my direction. "Well, Ellain, I suppose we all ought to get moving before the Brood-Mother comes back and decides to repay us for slaying her spawn." He extends a hand to me, as if he genuinely expects me to take it.

I stare at him in befuddled awe as Maxim strides from the cave, glancing right and left for any approaching enemies as our trio hurries to put distance between ourselves and our near-death experience. He's a creature painted in a palette of dark, muted colors, sticking out in an extraordinary way against the poisonous, oversaturated kaleidoscope of Fairyland. Utterly without whimsy and unerringly sure of himself, Maxim seems more solid, more real, than anything else here.

Rowan shuffles behind us, his broad arms crossed over his chest. He's muttering consoling words to himself, convincing himself he will see his family again after all. Maxim and I pace a bit ahead, allowing him a few feet of space to reckon with his close call.

"Why did you come?" I demand of Maxim, under my breath.

Maxim rolls his eyes. "I should ask you the same question. At least *I* know my way around Fairyland. You don't even have a string to guide you." He holds up his own wrist, which bears a red thread identical to the one I had lost.

I shiver, but refuse to be distracted. "A deflection isn't an answer."

"*Fine.* I'm here for you," Maxim snaps, his eyes crackling with anger. "Because you are the most thick-headed maiden alive, to come here and risk everything. And for what? *Bernadine*, I presume? You don't even know her. And how did you expect to find her, when what you don't know about Fairyland could fill the royal library?"

Offended beyond belief, I flick my red cloak disdainfully behind me. "For your information," I tell him, my nose in the air, "I *already* found her."

Maxim quickens his pace, his hands clasped behind his back as he affects a thoughtful expression. “And yet I can’t help but notice that you are still traveling alone.” He gives a light chuckle. “Well, save for myself and our friend here. Was her highness not to your liking?”

I say nothing, gritting my jaw. But silence is answer enough, and he keeps needling. “Was Bernadine not the worthy heir you hoped to find? Did you, perhaps, even discover that she likes it here? That I am not quite the villain you’ve made me out to be?”

“You’re *plenty* villainous,” I snarl.

This doesn’t seem to penetrate Maxim’s thick skin. He keeps strolling beside me as casually as if we were in the halls of the palace. “And yet, I have saved you.”

“And why would you bother to save *me*?”

He fixes me with a merciless stare. “Ellain, your mistrust of me is becoming very wearing. When have I ever indicated an interest in causing you bodily harm?” At this, he brings his right hand to his face, pinching the bottom of his nose. I see the pads of his fingers glistening with ruby blood.

“What happened there?” I inquire.

“Your pugilistic stepsister,” Maxim says, his lip curling. “She tried awfully hard to stop me from going through the tree after you. I’m quite lucky my nose isn’t broken.”

I’m awestruck. Freida finally did something for me.

“Why’d you come here if you knew I had no hope of convincing Bernadine to come back? Waste of time to foil a dead end plan. Hell’s bells, you could have let the Brood-Mother eat me. Then I would be out of your hair forever.”

Now Maxim’s starting to look angry. “I didn’t journey here to foil your precious scheme. Galiena is marshaling forces against you back home. I came to make sure you didn’t die.” He gestures to his right, following his thread. “Though I’ll confess you did a pretty good job handling that fellow.” I see we’re now passing the tree where I bound the frog-fairy, and I feel a jolt of relief that we’re back on the path I know. He’s sleeping against the trunk—emitting loud snores—as if fruitlessly fighting the thread had quite tuckered him out.

“Still, I had to show up,” Maxim continues, “if only to make sure you didn’t come to a wretched fate. I’ve traveled here much in the past. In fact, I even visited Bernadine once myself to make sure she was safe. Because I know what happens to mortals who are unprepared to survive in Fairyland.” He casts a look back at Rowan, who has calmed and returned to himself, now standing much straighter.

“As if you’d care if I died,” I accuse him.

“Care?” Maxim asks, voice almost shrill. “If you died here, it would break … Bayard’s heart. I couldn’t allow that.”

I’m starting to actually believe Maxim might truly care for Bayard. Only genuine affection could get him to risk himself like this, for someone he hates. I can feel myself thawing slightly toward him—and then he goes and ruins it all.

“And that’s why I want to show you a different portal out. Some other tree that will take you far from Holbein.”

I cackle in wild disbelief. “You *are* trying to get rid of me! Admit it!”

Maxim reaches out and grabs the red string, reeling it back and idly twisting it around my own wrist, binding us together. The sight of this thread makes my heart flutter: a physical connection I cannot deny, a proxy for the emotional link that I’ve been feeling growing inexorably between us, despite my better judgment.

Maxim’s voice goes low and insistent. He is but inches from my face as he gazes, imploringly, into my eyes. “I am trying to save you. Galiena is not pleased that you refused to join us. If you go now, take a different route back to the real world, you can be spared what’s coming. You can start a new life where you’ll be safe.”

I give an angry yank on the crimson thread between us as I set off away from him, forcing him to jog several yards to catch up to me. Finally, I see the birch tree where both our strings lead straight through the trunk to the mortal world. “You’re out of your mind if you think I’m abandoning Bayard. We’re making a home, and I’m going back to it.”

I close the gap between us, tilting my head upward so that Maxim can feel my hot breath on his neck as I tell him, husky-voiced, “If you think

what Galiena's bringing will be so bad, *stop* her. If you made a bad deal, renege."

"I can't do that," he says, teeth gritted. He mirrors me, bringing his face even closer to mine. Every inch of my skin is afire from his proximity.

"What *can* you do?" I demand. "If you're truly on my side?"

"I can save you."

I swallow, licking my lips even as my eyes are locked on his. "Try again."

Maxim draws away, sighing heavily. It looks like it pains him to do it, but he turns away from me to give Rowan his full attention. "If you can take me to your family's camp, I will lead you all safely back to Holbein with my thread."

"That's a start," I tell Maxim.

He fixes me with a mournful gaze. "If you insist on going back, be ready."

"I am," I say.

"Don't lie," he growls, and reaches out to push me into the trunk of the birch tree.

For a moment, it's strange to be back in the mortal world. I'd become so accustomed to the twilight sky of Fairyland that it almost feels unnatural to blink up through the canopy of the forest at a blue, midday sky. Maxim is not beside me. He stayed behind in Fairyland, keeping his promise to Rowan and his family.

Amalia and Freida shriek when they spot me in the grass. They rush to me with pale faces, pulling me into a grasping hug.

"I thought you were dead for sure!" Freida bellows.

"It's been hours!" Amalia whines. "We weren't sure how much longer to stay. We decided a fairy must have eaten you."

I give a harsh laugh, ripping myself out of their shockingly tight embrace. "And I'm sure that my untimely death would have been very

inconvenient for you, given that King Alaric probably would have evicted you from the palace."

Freida puts her hands on her hips, turning expectantly to the willow tree, as if waiting for someone else to walk through it. "Well?" she says to me. "Where is she? Is royalty always late?"

"Bernadine's not coming," I admit, my head aching as the full extent of my failure sinks in.

Amalia throws her hands to her mouth. "Because she was eaten?"

"No," I snort, exasperated. "No one was eaten; she's just a lazy sod who can't be bothered to save her kingdom."

I grip my skirts and look around to determine which direction will lead us back to the palace. "But look who I'm talking to. The two laziest creatures in Holbein."

"Don't mutter under your breath at us," Freida jeers. "We're here helping you, you know."

"You're here helping yourselves," I snap back. "Like you always do."

"What about that slimy duke?" Freida pesters. "He was looking for you, and I fought him off. Did he find you? Did you see I slugged him in the nose?"

I nod, unwrapping the thread that binds me to Maxim from my wrist. It flutters to the forest floor, its bright hue standing out against the green brush. "He did find me. And actually, he told me how hard you fought him, so I'll give you that."

"Did you at least kill him?" Freida asks, sounding hopeful.

Our return to the castle grounds is mostly silent. I don't have words to share with my stepsisters. For the first time in my entire life, they came through for me. They stood faithfully at the willow tree and did their best to protect me. I was the one who had failed. I'd led them all on a pointless mission. We'd gained no ground against Galiena at all.

At the edge of the castle grounds, I send Amalia to scout who is lingering by the entrance. Ideally, we'll slip back in the way we came, and emerge in my chambers to find Trude waiting for us, with neither Bayard, the king, nor the guards any the wiser that I've been gone.

Amalia is not the world's brightest burning candle, but she is cunning, and she helps us navigate a path free of patrolmen. We creep back into the servants' passageway without incident. We get a little lost in the maze of walls, but eventually stumble back into my magnificently appointed bathroom.

In the suite, I call out for Trude, but I can't find her anywhere. The pillows shoved beneath my blankets as a makeshift-me are still intact. Everything is unbearably silent—I can't even hear Ermengarde or Jacques snuffling about for crumbs. The only sound is that of my stepsisters limping into the room and collapsing in their preferred chairs. "What are we going to do now, then?" Freida demands. "We can't let that conniving duke win. If he beats you, he beats us, and I am a sore loser."

"That's an understatement," I say, sighing. Amalia gives a tittering laugh —which makes sense, because I'd need both hands and all my toes to count the number of times Freida walloped her for winning at cards.

I collapse backward onto the bed, my head nestled in the fluffy pillows. I close my eyes, thinking. Willing the gears of my mind to turn faster, to outrace Galiena's machinations. Maxim said she's putting something in motion against me, and my gambit's been a failure.

My hand brushes against fur. One of my rats curled in the warm space between my pillows. I'm so relieved to find one of them. I cup Jacques's sleeping form in my hands. It takes a brief moment for me to realize—he is not asleep.

I let out a strangled cry, squirming upright. *No, no this can't be happening again.* Jacques's tiny neck has been snapped. The same way Stepmother did to Gustav, all those years ago.

"What?" Amalia shrieks. "What is it?" She launches forward, puzzled. Jacques's tiny gray body is cradled in my hands. His state is not immediately obvious to her either, but then she lets out a gasp.

I roll from my mattress and lurch to my feet, calling desperately for Ermengarde. Freida grabs me by the shoulder. “No,” she orders. “Don’t waste time. Go find your husband and show him what they’ve done.”

“What they’ve—” I’m wheezing. “What do you mean?” The shallow breaths I’m taking are doing nothing to calm me. Jacques is dead, and I don’t understand why.

Freida spins me to face her. “Ell, you listen to me. They did this to rattle you. You obviously have an enemy in court; maybe it’s the duke, but it could be someone else. They’re sending you a message. They want you running, but you’re not going to do it. Instead, you march down that hall, find the prince, and make him swear to find the person who did this and grant you revenge.”

I take another gasping, rattling breath, and nod. I know one thing—Maxim didn’t do this. Why save me only to kill my innocent pet? But I bet he knows who really did it.

A creak at the doorway. My head shoots to the right, searching for the source of the noise. Zita is standing at the entrance to the bedchamber, her face blank, her hair disheveled. She jabs her pointer finger in the direction of the bathroom. “You have to get out of here,” she whispers.

I stammer in confusion. “What’s happening? Zita, I don’t understand—”

Pounding comes at the door to the suite, out in the hall. “Open up! We know you’re in there!”

“It’s the guards,” Zita says. “You’ve got to move. Back into the servants’ passage!”

More banging on the door. Bayard’s voice calls out now, “Ell, come on, we just want to talk to you.”

But the reasonable premise of Bayard’s statement is ruined by one of the guards following it up with, “Let us in, or we’ll break down the door!”

That convinces me. I let Zita pull me back into the bathroom and open the secret passageway again. Amalia and Freida share a terrified look, following me back into the dark. Zita shuts the door tightly behind us, muffling the sound of the guardsmen’s shouting. I realize she has a stack of fabric tucked beneath her arm, which she now shoves into my hands.

They’re the clothes I arrived in.

“You’d better put those on,” Zita mutters. “You’ll be less conspicuous as you flee.”

“Flee?” I demand. “What exactly am I fleeing?”

Zita’s thin eyebrow shoots up. “The truth.” She shakes her head, clucking her tongue. “The duke’s revealed you as a fraud and now word is spreading among the staff.” A wry smile twists her lips. “I wish you’d told me you were a con artist sooner. It’s jolly funny. If I’d known, we actually *might* have been friends.”

I blink stupidly at her, chilling realization dawning. Whatever he’d done in Fairyland, Maxim was not my ally. It was just more mind games. “Maxim’s revealed me, then?”

Zita nods. “And Alaric’s laying a trap to catch you if you run. He’s laid pitch on the front steps, so you’ll have to go out a servants’ exit. That tar will catch you like a rat in a trap.”

My heart is pounding. No, this can’t be. Surely Bayard and the king would wait to hear my word against Maxim’s. They couldn’t toss me away so easily.

Zita stamps her foot against the ground. “I hate that *loathsome bastard* getting away with this! He can’t be the undoing of both you and Bernadine. I won’t have it. This is where I draw the line!’” She huffs out a breath of irritated air. “Well, I’ll show him. I’m getting you out of here, one way or another. I’ll rot in the stocks if that’s what it takes.”

I strip away the red cloak at my neck, and then the blue gown.

“I’ve an idea!” Freida gasps. She reaches up to the lobes of my ears—I flinch, expecting her to yank the earrings painfully away now that I’m not useful to her. But instead she carefully unclips them and affixes them to her own ears. Her green eyes sparkle with cunning. “Your prince doesn’t see faces too well, does he? I’m blonde like you. Put me in the dress and the cloak, and I’ll put the hood up. I’ll barrel down the hall and draw them away.” Somehow I’m not surprised Frieda figured out Bayard’s secret.

She slaps Amalia on the shoulder. “But you go out first. Prime them to think I’m Ell. Make them assume you’re betraying her.”

I stare at my stepsisters as Amalia quickly helps Freida shake out her hair and squeeze into the dress I’d dropped to the floor. It is nearly six inches

too short on Freida and it strains at the shoulders, but with the hood of the cloak up and her hair streaming out … it might buy us a few minutes.

"Why are you helping me?" I demand. I ought to be running, but I need to know.

"This isn't the first time I've helped you," Amalia says, snippy.

"Yes, it is!"

"*No*, it isn't—" Amalia insists, her voice breaking. "I really did unlock the cellar door that night. Didn't you ever notice?"

No, I never had. My heart fractures just slightly, as I remember that fateful night of the ball. I had stayed in the dark of the cellar sobbing so hard for so long that I eventually fell into a deep and dreamless sleep. I'd never even thought to try the door. I was too used to being abandoned. Too used to being locked in.

For the first time in her life, my stepsister had been kind to me. And I hadn't even noticed.

I try to make my dry, cracked lips form words of gratitude, but I cannot.

Amalia won't let me waste any more time. With a quick, curt nod, she says, "Good luck, sister."

Amalia pushes out into another servants' doorway, this one leading into the hallway of the royal wing. For the second time in an hour, she screams bloody murder for me. "Oh help! I didn't know she was a liar, you must believe me! Look, look, she's coming!"

Then Freida slips out beyond Amalia, hip-checking her to the floor as she makes her furious way down the hall. Amalia cries out like a wounded gazelle as the servants' doorway closes on the scene. There's a pounding of guardsmen's boots as Amalia shrieks. "There! She's getting away!"

"Come on!" Zita urges, and we're flying. Me, back in my plain dress and oversized boots again. I feel a twinge of guilt that my stepsisters are sacrificing themselves for me, and that they're using Bayard's inability to recognize faces against him, if only briefly. But I need to survive, so I can't let those thoughts slow me down.

Zita weaves through the darkened maze for what feels like ten minutes before we emerge into the bright, busy space of the kitchens. There is so

much sound and movement of servants here no one notices two more bodies join them, slipping quietly in from the passage and out a side door.

We stand in sunlight at the top of a staircase. The door pokes straight out of the side of the hill the palace is built upon. To my right, there's a ramp where food must be delivered. Zita is gasping for breath. She points at a dirt road to the villages below. "Run!" she says. "Run until you can't run anymore."

I throw my arms around her and grasp her tight. "Thank you."

"Princesses don't thank servants," Zita mutters.

"What about con artists?"

Zita pulls away, grim laughter tilting her mouth again. "Go. You're wasting time."

She turns from me, stealing back into the kitchens as I descend the steep set of stairs. My feet slip and slide in the ill-fitting boots. Already I've grown used to expensive shoes designed for me, and it feels unnatural to run in the same pair I'd worn for years. One second, I'm scrambling down the gray stone surface of the steps, and then—with only two or three to go—the steps turn black. *Pitch*-black, in fact.

I cannot move. I'm stuck.

The soles of my boots are glued to a thick layer of tar that wasn't there a millisecond ago. The overwhelming smell of it, pungent and bitter, burns my nostrils. I try to pry my boots off the steps, but I cannot tug hard enough. My left foot rips entirely out of the oversized shoe, and I squeal, desperate to rebalance myself without laying my bare foot against the pitch. I don't want to imagine what will happen to my skin if I try to tear it away from this malodorous goo.

Laughter tinkles from above as Galiena appears in the sky, drifting down like a soap bubble. "Ooh," she cries, "you got very close! I'll admit I didn't think of laying tar at a servants' exit. I'd hoped you'd go whistling out the front and get stuck there—what a scene that would have made for the crowds—but, ah, you are clever. No matter, I've still won in the end."

I'm shaking all over, staring at Galiena. "Why are you doing this?" I ask her.

Galiena shrugs. “You did not help me when I asked. I am merely returning to you your unkindness.”

She disappears as the door to the kitchens opens, and the guards come rushing out.



TWENTY

THEY GRAB ME UNDERNEATH MY ARMS AND LIFT ME STRAIGHT OUT of my boots. I'm carried two feet off the ground over the steps, the guards' own boots, well-laced to their feet, squelching with difficulty through the tar. Once safely back in the kitchen, they drop me, pulling me roughly to the throne room.

The entire court is assembled there, as they were on the night I first arrived, but now the room is thick with tension. They stand stock-still as I'm marched inside. No one is drunk. No one laughs. No one even smiles.

King Alaric awaits me on his throne. He's rigid with anger as I'm thrown at the foot of the dais. Maxim stands at Alaric's right side, Bayard at his left. Bayard is wringing his hands, refusing to look me in the face. Though I suppose that, with Freida wearing my earrings, looking in my face wouldn't do very much for him.

Maxim is at his side. In direct contrast, Maxim's eyes are bright with attention, searching my expression for … something. His jawline is set, hard. I wonder if he bothered to bring Rowan and his family back to Holbein, or if that was just another lie.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Alaric asks, his voice thundering.

I say nothing to the king. What *can* I say? I don't even really know what Maxim told them I did. Was it the truth, which is damning enough, or yet more lies?

I remain on my knees, staring up at Bayard. “Bayard,” I call out. “Please.”

Bayard looks pointedly away from me. “You lied to me. You lied about everything.”

My eyes itch with oncoming tears. “Not everything,” I whisper. “The promise I made to you at our wedding was true.”

Bayard looks hesitantly at my face. Even though I know it’s mostly blankness he sees, there must be something he recognizes, because his expression softens. “Like what?”

“I promised to be your faithful friend,” I say. “And I am that.”

Alaric splutters. “You dare call yourself a friend? You, a fairy spy, who has gone off gallivanting in the forest to report on our movements!”

“What?” I gasp. “No, I’m not a spy!”

I glare at Maxim. So *this* is what he said to them.

“I’m not a spy!” I repeat, desperation cracking my voice. “I went into the forest to find Princess Bernadine!”

Alaric, red-faced with anger, scoffs. “Oh, and where is she?”

My shoulders slump. “It didn’t work.” I lift my chin, jabbing a finger at Maxim. “But *he’s* the one who tricked her into going there in the first place!”

Bayard’s eyes widen, flicking to Maxim. His fists clench, his voice lowers. “Just because you are caught in a lie, Ell, doesn’t mean you should drag Max down with you.”

“I’m not lying!” I screech.

“You filthy little deceiver. Your stepmother was right about you. She is wise as she is comely.” These words come from Alaric, who is looking at me like I am cow dung that’s been crushed into the heel of his shoe. He leans back in his chair, gesturing to the nearest door to the hall. “Send them in!”

The door to my right opens and two women enter. The sight steals all breath from my lungs. My stepmother, clothed in a gown of violet lace, is steering a smaller woman into the throne room by the shoulders.

Stepmother's face is savage with triumph as she casts Alaric a glowing look.

The younger woman is demure and graceful, entering the room with her hands laced together. Her hair shines white-blonde in the light from the hanging chandeliers. Her gown is a whirlpool of tulle, perfectly matching her wide, round eyes, which are such a pale blue they're almost translucent. Her mouth falls into a kittenish pout. She is the most beautiful woman I've seen in all my life—and on her tiny feet glitters a pair of glass slippers.

She walks steadily up to the dais, taking Bayard's hand in hers. "Ellain," Bayard says, his voice cracking, "this is Odette. The girl I met at the ball."

My heart shatters like glass.

"No," I whisper. "No, she isn't."

"Prove it." This demand comes from the king.

But I can't. She is *not* the girl Bayard met at the ball. But neither am I.

I rise to my feet, staring at Odette. She cannot quite meet my gaze. "You are a liar," I say. "You are deceiving him. Why are you doing it?"

Odette's glassy eyes suddenly flash to mine, and I can see they're filled with tears. "Why did *you*?"

I stumble back, her words landing like a punch to the gut. My breath comes short and fast. I look desperately at Alaric. "Your majesty, you're being taken in! Maxim is trying to destroy your family." To Bayard, I shout, "I am your *wife*!"

Bayard turns away from me.

The guards slink back to my side, restraining my arms as the king rises to his feet. "Ellain DeBrun," he announces, each syllable ringing with a dreadful authority, "I find you guilty of treason. You are an ally to the fae and a traitor to your kingdom. You willfully misled your king and your prince, scheming your way into a royal marriage. The only way the family tree can be pruned of your rotting branch is death, so that is exactly what I condemn you to. Tomorrow at dawn, you will be tied to a stake and set alight."

I'm screaming. Incoherent, wordless screaming. I'm looking down at myself from above as I writhe and struggle.

The guards tighten their grips on my arms. The king approaches me and levies a sharp slap across my cheek. It stings, and I fall silent.

"Go to your death with a little dignity," my father-in-law commands.

My chest starts to shake. Tremble. But it's not with sobs. I'm laughing. "What would you know about dignity?" I ask him. "You are a coward who would rather burn an innocent servant than admit your own crime against your wife."

The king stiffens, his face blanching. Behind him, Bayard's head gives a surprised jerk.

Alaric stammers. "You—how dare you—apologize!"

"No," I whisper, grinning madly. "No, I won't apologize. Not to you or anyone else. I am a princess, and what's more, *I'm not sorry.* You call me a liar? You're the biggest liar here. And you may burn me if you wish. I cannot stop you. But I *can* curse you. And I do. I curse you, Alaric D'Harcourt, with my dying breath. Everything you do shall be returned to you. Your unkindness will echo back in kind. Your cruelty will be heaped upon your shoulders two-fold. You can burn me, break me, but you can't escape your debt. You will certainly outlive me, but you will die alone, loveless, friendless, pathetic. And it will be by your own making."

King Alaric's face isn't white anymore. It's beet red. He sprays spit across my face as he shouts to the guards restraining me, "Take her to the Forgetting Pit! Tomorrow, this bitch will burn to cinders!"

The guards drag me down the center aisle of the throne room, but I don't make it easy for them. I'll obey no more orders. I go out kicking madly, laughing like I've just been witness to the world's funniest joke. I scream the same words over and over again, "I'm not sorry! *I'm not sorry!*"

The Forgetting Pit is a sunken room deep in the bowels of the dungeon, an oubliette made of stone so blue it's almost black. There is no bed. No pot to piss in. Only a long wooden ladder, leading down into the all-consuming darkness of the well, and an iron grate that squeals shut behind me, sealing me in from above.

At first, I pace. I'm giddy with grief. I laugh and cry at once. I'll die at dawn, just like Nella did. Maxim and Galiena have won. I can only imagine who this Odette is—some poor peasant girl Galiena convinced to make a magical deal? But no matter what, Bayard will wed a girl who doesn't love him. Doesn't care about him.

And what did it matter? I remind myself. Why should I care about Bayard's happiness? He abandoned me here. He can rot in his sadness.

I sigh so heavily my knees go weak and I sink to the damp floor. I don't actually want Bayard to be miserable. I'm furious with him, and yet, I know I'm equally to blame, if not more so. I *am* a liar. I chose to deceive him. He has merely been deceived again, by someone worse than me.

For hours upon hours, I am alone. Completely alone. I do not suppose I expected visitors here in the aptly named Pit of Forgetting—and yet, I did. I expected a mournful face. Trude, perhaps. Zita, if she were allowed.

My body aches with the bone-deep chill of this place, and with the loneliness. I long for the comforting warmth of my pets, of Jacques and Ermengarde. I stifle another sob. Jacques's body is cold now. He'll never be warm again.

I wonder if it was worth it. My week of glory, of feeling loved and safe for such a brief moment in time. Was it worth this night of sorrow and dying in a ferocious blaze? Would I have preferred to toil in my stepmother's house for the rest of a long life, until my hair turned white and my spine grew twisted and stooped?

My tears still, and my wails quiet, all at once. If I could do it all again—I'd choose exactly the same. I'm in exquisite pain now, mourning the loss of the friendships and happiness I've come to know in the past few days. But even this agony is preferable to never having anything to lose in the first place. At least this way, I'll burn bright. I'll be burnt to cinders just once, instead of being forced to wear them for sixty years.

Somewhere far above me, a clock faintly chimes. I count off the strokes. *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven. Twelve.*

Light footsteps echo, then stop. The glow of a lantern being set on the grate overhead illuminates my sunken cell, making shadows on the walls. I look up to see Bayard's face staring down at me. "Ell?"

I move to the ladder, climb until the grate prevents me from going any higher. My face tilts up to Bayard's. My heart leaps around inside my ribcage. Is Bayard here to free me?

"Bayard," I say, my voice croaking from lack of water.

Bayard chews on his lower lip, watching me with a pained expression. "I have to know, Ell. I have to know why you lied to me."

My stomach plummets ten feet to the bottom of the cell, but I cling onto my ladder. Anger burns in my chest. If Bayard is so dead set on the truth, he shouldn't have clapped his hand over my mouth the night I arrived. He might have had the truth from me straight from the beginning. "I *tried* to tell you," I protest, heat rising in my cheeks. "The first night I was here, in fact! But you stopped me. You practically begged me not to tell you! That's not my fault, it's yours."

Bayard's usually calm expression morphs into something much nastier. He lets out an incredulous laugh. "I thought you were going to tell me you didn't love me, not that we'd never met! Don't put this on me. You were the one who pretended to be something you're not."

"Who forced me to put on the shoe?" I snap. "Did I run into the foyer, hand in the air, begging to be your bride? No! His royal highness ordered me to try on the slipper, and now what? You don't like the girl who fit it?"

Bayard smacks his palm against the grate, and lets out a grunt of mixed pain and anger. "I was honest with you, from the very beginning! But you lied to me. You took advantage of me. You—" He breaks off, and I can see he's biting back tears. "I loved you. I told you things I don't tell *anyone.* But you were just using me."

I am shocked so thoroughly back into guilt and shame that I almost let go of the ladder. Because Bayard is right. I violated his trust and all my rationalizations that I was the hero of his story were to make myself feel better. I owe him the truth. The real truth.

My throat tightens as I look back up at him. "You're right. I'm sorry, Bayard."

Bayard's eyebrows come together. "You're sorry?"

It must sound funny, after all my screaming in the throne room. But I nod. "I really am. You didn't deserve what I did to you. And I don't have a

good excuse." I inhale so sharply it hurts. "But I hope you understand I never intended to be cruel. I did it because my stepmother's house was an endless nightmare and you offered me an escape. It was wrong to lie to you, but at the same time, I would've been a fool not to run far away the moment I had the chance. I spent so many years in the dark and the dirt, and you were *radiant.* And *kind.* There was no part of me brave enough or selfless enough to give you up, even if I didn't deserve you. Which I don't."

"Ell." Bayard's voice breaks again. "Ell, I'm sorry too. For what's going to happen."

"Can't you stop it?" I beg.

He shakes his head. "I don't think I can."

"Can't you *try*?" I know Bayard is afraid of his father, but when we stood on that altar, he promised to protect me.

Bayard swallows, and picks up his lantern. "I have someone waiting for me. Odette… . She is truly the love of my life. She understands me. It's as if I've known her for years."

I let out a harsh laugh. "Yes, *run* to your new bride. She is every bit the liar I am, Bayard—this time in league with Galiena. I hope you know that."

He doesn't answer. But he does stop, thinking, before placing the lantern back down, leaving it to flicker on the grate. "You don't deserve to wait in the dark," he says.

And then he's gone. He passes from the ring of light generated by the flame, and disappears from my view.

But I'm not alone. A door closes. Someone's boots are tapping against the flagstones above. "Bayard?" I call out, thinking he's changed his mind again.

"Not Bayard. I thought you said you were ready."

A new face looms above me. The face I despise most in the world. Well, second-most. Third-most, perhaps, after Stepmother and Galiena.

"Maxim D'Arcy," I jeer. "It's not enough to vanquish me, you must taunt me before I die?"

Maxim's face is gaunt. The lantern glow throws the hollowness of his cheekbones into skeleton-like contrast. "You infuriating girl," he says, voice

growling. “I ask you again, for probably the last time: What in the *hell* makes you think I want you dead?”

I let out a sharp, disbelieving laugh. “I thought lobbying the king for my execution was a clue. Not to mention letting someone kill my rats and playing mind games with me in Fairyland.”

Maxim snorts, positively indignant. He’s on his hands and knees on the grate above me, peering down like a forest wolf might upon its prey. “First of all, I didn’t kill your pets. And I warned you Galiena was moving against you. You were meant to heed me and be long gone before it mattered.”

He takes a ragged breath that shakes the entirety of his lean frame. Hunter he may be, but somehow, he looks helpless. “And I didn’t tell the king to kill you. That was his idea—granted, your stepmother pushed him in that direction. She’s seeking vengeance. She’s left your stepsisters free for now, but I don’t know how long that will last. She is—” He shudders, unable to finish.

“Well, it’s your fault for bringing her here!” I snap.

“Please. That was Galiena, not me! You could have avoided all of this if you’d taken the out I offered you in Fairyland.”

I pause, thinking. Indeed, Galiena had magicked up the tar that caught me by the kitchen exit. But Maxim had been the one to reveal me! I will not be tricked so easily. “Ah, but you told Alaric I was a spy,” I remind him.

Maxim rolls his eyes. “I had to play along with Galiena’s plan so that she wouldn’t suspect I was about to betray her. I could never have snuck off to Fairyland if she knew I was hoping to outmaneuver her by reaching you first. By the way, do you offer no thanks that I escorted Rowan and his clan back to the mortal world? I did it to please you, after all.”

“You—you—” I can’t think. I hope I can trust that he’s telling the truth, and they are safe. Nothing makes sense. The gears of my mind have ground to a halt, stuck at perpetual midnight. “Why would you do that?”

“You really are an idiot,” Maxim says, every word harsh and distinct. “I didn’t think it would be possible for me to fall in love with someone so colossally dense.”

There are burning embers in my throat, sapping away all the moisture it takes to speak. I open my mouth to reply, and nothing comes out.

He loves me?

"No, you don't," I finally manage to insist.

His next words come out clipped, as if he's straining to win an argument without raising his voice. "You vex me, you surprise me, you delight me. You never noticed?"

I narrow my eyes. *"Liar."*

Maxim lets out a roar of frustration, then digs into the front pocket of his jacket. He pulls out Ermengarde, whose little pink nose is raised in the air. She crawls from his loosely clenched hand and makes her way up his arm, snuffling affectionately. "If I didn't care, why would I go out of my way to save this disgusting creature for you?"

I'm without words again. Still clinging to the ladder with one hand—my muscles have really begun to ache—I gape at what I'm seeing. Rats are *smart.* I may not always trust my intuition, but I trust Ermengarde's.

Maxim's eyes are squeezed shut. He has never looked this uncomfortable, but he doesn't move to shake Ermengarde off. He allows her to sniff at his unprotected neck. "I hate these revolting things," he tells me, through gritted teeth, "I really do."

"But she likes you," I say, the wonder of it all finally sinking in. "Did you *really* save Ermengarde?"

Maxim nods, like it pains him to say it. He picks Ermengarde off his shoulder and passes her to me through the bars, shuddering. "Galiena wanted to kill them both. Rather, she got Odette to do it, since she can't risk touching blood. But they couldn't find this one quickly enough. I managed to sneak her into my pocket while Odette was killing the first."

I close my eyes, unwilling to picture Jacques's cruel end.

"Who is Odette?" I ask.

Maxim shakes his head. "I'm not sure. Someone Galiena tricked into accepting a deal."

I raise an eyebrow. "Someone like you?"

"No," Maxim snipes. "Not someone like me. When I entered into my deal with Galiena, I ensured that the terms were very clear. I made it

perfectly plain she wasn't allowed to kill Bayard under our agreement. He was never in danger from me. And nor was the kingdom. But now?"

My calf has started to cramp from all this time suspended on the ladder, but I ignore the discomfort, pressing on. "What about now?"

Maxim's eyes close. "She's obviously made a deal with your wretched stepmother. The king is *enchanted* by her. It's been half a day and he's talking of marriage. Of creating new heirs. Who knows what your stepmother offered to do for Galiena in exchange for a kingdom?"

I laugh, soft and low. "Well, if my stepmother is to be queen, then I'm quite glad to be shuffling off the mortal coil at dawn. I'm getting the better end of the deal."

"Don't say that," Maxim says, sharply.

"I'm going to die," I respond. "I'll say whatever I damn well like."

"You're not going to die," Maxim assures me.

"And how will you stop it?" I ask, skeptical. "Alaric isn't listening to you anymore, is he? If you don't want me dead, you probably already asked him to commute my sentence. There's little you can do at this point."

Maxim stands, and I realize for the first time he isn't holding his cane. Perhaps he knew Bayard would be visiting me too, and he wanted to slip by his friend unrecognized. "Yes, there is little I can do," Maxim admits. "But if I play my cards quite cunningly, perhaps a little will be enough."

Unlike Bayard, he takes the lantern with him when he goes. I suppose Maxim knows Alaric would be furious should he discover I had visitors. That I was granted the kindness of company.

I am alone in the darkness of the Forgetting Pit once more. I slowly descend back to the ground. My head rings with despair and confusion. Maxim's confession was startling—but I cannot focus on it. I am numb from betrayal and grief. I wish for so many things: a mother who stayed, a father who lived. I wish Bayard would stand by me. That Trude had come to say goodbye. But alas, none of that was meant for me.

I curl up on the mossy stones with Ermengarde napping in the crook of my neck. I'm grateful to have her, but again, with a rat as my only companion, I might as well be back in the cellar beneath my stepmother's house. I'm cold and hungry. I'm frightened. I'm locked into the embrace of

shadows, forbidden to go to the ball. And this time, no one will come to unlock the door.



TWENTY-ONE

When the new day dawns, Stepmother comes to collect me from my cell, flanked by a regiment of guards. She is draped in an extravagant gown of black velvet, with a cluster of onyx gemstones wrapped around her throat, sending one very clear message: She is about to attend my funeral. All I want is to seize the gaudy necklace and throttle her with it.

Stepmother's black eyes sparkle with malice as I'm hauled from the pit. I could fight the guards, but what's the point? I'm about to burn to death—must I burn with additional bruises? Stepmother watches with satisfaction as the guards bind my arms behind my back. "I'll admit," she says, bringing her hands together in sarcastic applause, "I was impressed you managed to snare that prince. My own daughters couldn't manage it and I taught them all I knew. But here you are, the filthy little creature who cleaned the hearth, having risen so high … if only briefly. You must be more like me than I realized."

"I am *nothing* like you!" I spit.

"Oh really?" Stepmother's eyebrow arches. "Did you not ruthlessly seize the affections of a man to raise your social station?" The guards exchange uncomfortable glances. Stepmother speaks as if they're furniture. But would any of them dare raise their doubts to the king about his new bride-to-be? Probably not.

Guilt roils in my stomach. Yes, I lied to Bayard, but I never wished him harm. "You murdered my father," I growled. "We are not the same."

Stepmother shrugs carelessly. “If you say so. And indeed, you’re right about one thing: We are of a very different caliber. For tomorrow, I will be queen, and you will be ash in a dustbin.”

She waves a hand at the guards and a door is flung open. I’m pulled out into blinding daylight. When I blink the sun from my eyes, I see rows of assembled courtiers, all crowded around a wooden stake nearly twenty feet high atop a large amount of dry straw. To the right of the stake is a dais holding four throne-like seats. The crowd parts for my stepmother as she joins King Alaric on the dais, taking her seat beside him. The other two seats are filled with Bayard and Odette. They will be free to marry when I’m gone.

Hovering beside Alaric’s chair is Maxim, leaning over from a standing position to whisper in the king’s ear. I search his calm face for any hint of a plan. His eyes meet mine—and his gaze is steady. Does he have no scheme at all? Was pretending to love me just the final twist of the knife?

Then I ask myself: Why would it hurt me were his words a farce? I don’t love him back—or rather, I don’t think I do. No, I couldn’t *possibly* love him back. He’s a scheming, mocking, arrogant bully. Maxim is not the kind of man any sensible person falls in love with, not with perfect Bayard standing right there.

But I cannot deny—or rather, I refuse to lie to myself, with my death approaching—that I do feel pain at the idea his confession might have been another deception.

The guards shove me against the stake and lash me to it. A man in a black coat with a carved mask on his face—the executioner—steps up to me, carrying a set of matches. He leans in close, and bizarrely, his eyes flash pink. He speaks with a woman’s voice.

Galiena’s voice.

“You should have accepted my deal,” she taunts. “If you had, you might still be up there, with a tiara on your head.” Her eyes flick to the dais, crawling across Stepmother and Odette. My replacement is clearly ill at ease. She is gnawing on her fingernails, visibly distraught.

“Who is she?” I ask Galiena, jerking my chin at Odette. “What did you offer her to make her party to this?”

Galiena gives her tinkling laugh again. “Oh, just a girl like all the others! I promised to ensure she would marry her true love, if she did as I said. That’s the funny thing: When mortals hear those terms, they think more instruction will be forthcoming. Then they agree and they find that ‘doing as I say’ is in fact, the deal.”

I sigh, feeling a twinge of sadness for poor Odette. She was desperate for love and entered into a deal without understanding the terms. She may never be free of Galiena’s orders. But then the moment passes—as I remember that at least Odette will be alive at the end of the day—and I decide to save my sadness for myself.

Galiena lights a match, waving it tauntingly. Furious squeaking echoes from my apron pocket, as Ermengarde lifts her head to tell Galiena exactly what she thinks of her.

Galiena’s eyes flash in anger. “Goodbye, Ellain.”

She drops the match and the hay catches flame. Slowly at first, then much more rapidly. I stifle a scream. The smoke will only kill me faster if I breathe it in.

Then, suddenly—“Stop!” Bayard flings out his arms and leaps from the dais. He pushes his way through the crowd to me and stamps out the nascent flame with his boot. He spins to face his father. “Please, can’t we just exile her? This is barbaric!”

Odette falls to her knees in front of the king. “Yes, your majesty. I beg you. I cannot watch Ell die.”

Ell? That’s awfully familiar for someone I’ve only exchanged a sentence with. But nice of her, all the same. She cannot marry Bayard if I don’t die, so why should she speak for me?

I look to Maxim. A small smile is crawling across his face. He’s asked them to do this. He’s stalling.

King Alaric glares at Odette. “Get out of the way!” He jabs a finger at Bayard, who is standing only a few feet from me on the straw. “And you, you useless boy. Get back here at once, or you’ll regret it.”

Then the nearby crowd yelps, rippling like the disturbed surface of a pond. At first, I can’t figure out quite why, until the general D’Chamberd is physically pushed to his knees by Freida shoving her way through the

crowd. Scampering behind her is Amalia, holding a crown of freshly woven marigolds. I blink at it in confusion. Does Amalia think to put it on me? I'm not under enchantment, so what would that accomplish?

But instead, Amalia darts for the dais. With a yelp from Stepmother, a pair of guards rushes to close off Amalia's path, seizing her. "Your grace!" Amalia shouts.

Grinning, Maxim leans down from the dais, plucks the wreath from Amalia's hand, and drops it onto Odette's blond head.

Only now, she isn't blond. And she isn't Odette. In a sprinkling of glass shards, the enchantment is reversed by the marigolds and peels away—and the woman kneeling in supplication at Alaric's feet is revealed to be Trude. The crowd gasps; my heart aches.

No wonder she didn't visit me.

"See?" Maxim shouts, pointing at Trude. "*She* was the one working with a fairy, not the princess! Trude D'Chastain deceived us all with fairy charms. It was never Ellain who lied after all; she has obviously been wrongly accused! Who knows what treason Trude planned to commit when the princess was dead and she was married to Bayard?"

King Alaric gapes at Trude, open-mouthed. Stepmother moves to grab his arm, but he yanks it away. His gaze drifts to me, to Bayard, whose face has gone pale staring at Trude. I remember what Bayard said last night, that it felt like he'd known this person all his life. And he had.

"I did not mean to do it!" Trude gasps, tears running down her face. Her eyes are brown again, devoid of glass-like translucence. "She tricked me into a deal!" She points an accusatory finger at the executioner. "That's her, in disguise!"

Alaric seizes Trude by the collar of her dress. He looks like he might throw her off the dais in his rage. "Whatever your ridiculous claims, you are a traitor! You will *never* marry my son now. Guards, drag her to the Forgetting Pit!"

Galiena gives a shout of sudden pain.

My head swivels to her.

She is quickly backing away from the hay, staring down at her right hand in disbelief. A crack has emerged in her pointer finger … and it's spreading.

I watch in growing horror—the same horror mirrored on Galiena's face—as the finger crumbles away, disintegrating. She breathes heavily, then glances up to catch me looking. Regaining her dignity, she throws me a jaunty wink, and then *dissolves*, melting from the air like wax. She is gone—but at least that shows the crowd Trude isn't a complete liar. Everyone roars in fear and outrage.

"Silence," King Alaric calls. "Silence!"

But the madness goes on, screaming and wailing and a rush of bodies trying to get away from the courtyard, as if fearing Galiena will start hunting them. My stepmother tries to push through the crowd toward me, but Maxim wields his cane like a sword, barring her way. Bayard draws a knife from his belt and cuts me free from the stake. He raises my arm above our heads and calls out, "Grant her pardon, Father! She is my wife and she should not die today."

Alaric blinks over the heads of the fleeing crowd. Stepmother whispers in his ear, but he's too distracted to listen. He gives his assent for my pardon in the form of a blunt nod.

Bayard takes me by the hand back into the palace, where I find myself nose to nose with Alaric in the grand entryway, Stepmother lingering behind him, sharp eyes taking everything in. "Well," Alaric says brusquely, "I suppose you are no traitor."

Fire like the kind I was almost engulfed in leaps to my throat. "Is that all you have to say?"

Alaric crosses his arms. "Hardly. You are still my son's wife: So I will say that I shall see you at my wedding ceremony tomorrow."

He walks away, arm in arm with my stepmother, who casts a crestfallen look back in my direction. She obviously bemoans my escape from death most severely.

"We cannot let her marry your father, Bayard," I say, grinding my teeth together. "She will destroy this kingdom."

Bayard stands a few feet away from me. He refuses to look me in the eye.

I glance over at him, hesitant.

Bayard meets my gaze at last. His tone is even, but forlorn. "Whether or not Trude lied, I know you did too. You admitted as much last night. So I'm

to play the fool, am I? To stand by your side forever, knowing you never loved me? That no one did?"

My heart shatters. "No, Bayard—that's not true—"

"Isn't it?"

I genuinely think Trude loved him. If she did not, then he could have never been the terms of her deal with Galiena. I open my mouth to say this, but he raises a hand to stop me. "I don't want you dead, Ellain. But I don't love you anymore either. We may be married, and there is nothing we can do to change that, but I won't forget the lies you told."

And he walks away from me, leaving me in the gilded hallway. Having been alone in a damp cell the previous night, I can now definitively say it is not the room that makes the punishment. It is the solitude.

A few straggler courtiers make their way past, curtsying and bowing to me as if they had not queued up to watch me die only minutes ago. My eyes are trained blankly on the wall, my feet stuck to the well-polished floor as if still adhered to the tar on the steps.

Bayard is done with me. Trude is condemned. Stepmother is on the threshold of having control over me once again. I don't know how to move forward.

For years and years, I was provided a list of daily tasks. Chores to complete. Steps to take.

Now, I suppose, I must come up with my next task on my own.

I rip my feet from the floor and move briskly through the hall, huffing and puffing as I make my way to the royal wing. I have to set this right. And I know just where to start.

I'd expected my suite to be empty when I arrived. But three people wait for me there, alert as any soldier awaiting orders from their commanding officer: Zita, Amalia, and Freida. I gawk at them, freezing in my tracks.

"Glad I'm not sweeping you up right now," Zita says, smirking. She points to a silver tray resting on my bed. "Figured you'd be hungry."

I hadn't realized it until she said it—I suppose fear had dulled my hunger pangs—but now I recognize that I'm *ravenous.* I cross to the bed, throw off the lid, and start shoveling forkfuls of egg into my mouth. After I suck

down a glass of ice-cold water, I pluck Ermengarde from my apron pocket and place her down to nibble at the spare bits of toast.

Remembering my manners, I thank Zita for being so thoughtful. She responds only with a nod, but her dark eyes glitter with amusement. Then I turn to my stepsisters. "What are you two doing here? And why did you help me today, for that matter?"

Amalia shrugs. "We just … wanted to."

I squint at her in suspicion.

"No," Freida says, waving a hand at me. "Really. Look, I know you think we're pure evil, born and bred. But we don't want to see you die."

I roll my eyes. "No, you were just content to make me toil for you for six years."

Freida throws up her arms in exasperation. "How many times do we have to apologize for that?"

"*Once* would be nice!" I shoot back.

Freida pauses. She exhales deeply, shame etched across her face. Amalia squeezes her shoulder and looks at me. "We're sorry. We really are."

I glance at Zita. I trust her to be a good judge of character. Zita just shrugs at me, as unsure as I am.

I tap my bare foot at them. "You expect me to believe you're still on my side, with your mother on the precipice of being queen? She could give you everything you ever wanted."

Amalia pouts. "Doubtful. Not after us double-crossing her."

"More importantly," Freida says, shushing Amalia and making intense eye contact with me, "we know we were wrong before. We know we owe you. And contrary to popular opinion, we don't want to spend all our lives playing the villains in your story."

My breath catches. I chew my lower lip, thinking.

"And need we remind you," Amalia breathes, her eyes getting misty as she stares down at the carpet, "we know our mother isn't the nicest person in the kingdom. She'll do anything to anybody to get what she wants. We're not the exception."

"She broke my damned *toe*," Freida pipes up.

“And sheared off half my heel!”

I come to a decision, crossing the room to my stepsisters and holding out my hands. They each take one and then each other’s. I squeeze. “Alright. We’re on the same side. Let’s deal with your mother.”

“Where do we start?” Zita asks.

I swallow. “We start by finding out more about Galiena’s plan. She’s working with Stepmother, I know it. Therefore, we need to talk to the other person still on her hook.” I think of Trude, now almost certainly sealed in the darkness of the Forgetting Pit. “And if we can stop Trude from getting wrongfully executed, that would be a nice bonus.”

“How are we going to do that?” Amalia asks, wide-eyed.

“Easy,” I say with a shrug. “I’m going to act like a princess.”

With that, Freida reaches into the pocket of her gown and produces my earrings from Bayard. Wordlessly, she hands them over.



I sweep into the dungeons in a gown of D’Harcourt cobalt, a sapphire tiara perched atop my hair. Zita and my stepsisters file in behind me, their arms heavy with supplies: blankets, pillows, a lantern, a basket of food, a cask of water, and a piss-pot. A guard holds out an arm, trying to prevent me from entering. “I’m sorry, your highness. No visitors.”

I crane my neck up to look at him, raising an eyebrow. It’s my best impression of Stepmother’s imperious ways. “Who are you to tell me that?”

The guard tries to stammer out something about the king, but I hold up a hand to cut him off. Bayard and Maxim got past the guards last night, so if rules don’t apply to them, I’ll be damned if they apply to me. “Last night, I was shivering in that cell. Today, I am a princess again. Tomorrow, I may be queen. Ask yourself: Do you really want to be on my bad side?”

In a split second, the guard makes up his mind. He opens the door for me, stooping into a bow. “Your highness.”

I grant him a gracious smile as I pass through the entryway.

Trude is huddled against the wall in the depths of the pit, head buried in her arms, her body wracked with silent sobs.

"Trude?" I call out, peering through the grate.

She lifts her head, her jaw dropping as she sees me. "Ell? What are you doing here?"

I give her a weak smile. "It's no fun down there. Thought I'd bring you supplies to make it a little more bearable. We have blankets and food." I bite the inside of my lip, nervous to broach the subject hanging between us. "Thank you for standing up for me this morning. I know it couldn't have been easy … what with your deal with Galiena and all."

The others shuffle over to join me at the grate. Zita lowers the basket of food through the gaps with a length of rope, while Amalia and Freida start shoving pillows and blankets through so that they fall to the cell floor with a thump.

Trude hauls herself off the ground and paces closer to the ladder, but doesn't climb. Her eyes are puffy and red from crying. Her words come out in a frog's croak. "I'm sorry, Ell. I didn't mean to make that deal. She told me she'd help me marry my true love. But I didn't know she meant Bayard and I *definitely* didn't know what she'd ask me to do." Her voice breaks. "I couldn't control my own body. When she made me kill Jacques—"

I put up a hand. "Please. I don't … I can't hear the details. I know you didn't mean to."

"She came to me at the edge of the forest," Trude explains. "When I was picking the marigolds. I thought she was *good.* I thought that maybe you were right. That wishing really could amount to something. I thought …" Her breath comes out in a painful gasp. "I don't know what I thought."

As cold fingers grip my heart, I realize the truth. "Well, I do. You thought you could trust her, because I *told you* that you could. You made a wish because I *encouraged* you to. I'm to blame for all this, not you."

Trude just blinks up at me. "Why are you being so nice to me? I almost stole your husband and got you killed."

I gesture for Trude to climb up the ladder so I can hand her the chamber pot. As she makes her careful way up, I chew on her question. By the time she reaches the top, I have an answer.

“I’ve lived for years in fear and anger. When I got here, it’d been so long since I heard a kind word I almost forgot what kindness sounded like. But you were good to me. You helped me remember what kindness was. I have no desire to hate you for something that wasn’t your fault.” I give a harsh little laugh. “And what’s more, I don’t believe you stole anything from me. Unfortunately, I think it’s more accurate to say I stole Bayard from you.”

Trude’s eyes well with tears as I pass her the pot and she cradles it beneath her elbow. “I’m not sure. Just because he was my true love, that doesn’t mean I was his. All these years, and he never said anything. Why not, if it was requited? And now it’s too late. I find it hard to believe anyone could love me after what I’ve done.”

“That’s not true,” I assure her. “You are so much more than one mistake. Trude, we’re going to get you out of here. You and Bayard will be together, if I can do anything about it. I should never have steered you away from him.” My heart throbs in my chest. It hurts to admit it aloud, but I force the words out: “You two were meant for each other.” My eyes sting with tears as I rush on. “But to get there, first you need to tell me everything about your deal with Galiena. And anything you might know about my stepmother’s. Tell me every word exactly. With fairies, the wording is everything.”



TWENTY-TWO

MAXIM HASN'T SOUGHT ME OUT AFTER MY NEAR-EXECUTION, SO I seek him out in his little corner of the forge. I find him mercilessly hammering out nails from a thin length of glowing iron. I put a hand on his shoulder to still him and his muscles tense beneath my touch.

He pulls off his mask and glares at me. "Your highness. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I lay a finger mockingly on my lips. "And here I thought you'd be glad to see me alive."

Maxim's jaw tenses. He brings his hammer down to flatten the edge of his half-finished nail, pounding the metal as if it had personally insulted him. "On the contrary, I'm thrilled to see you alive. Certainly a more welcome sight than you swanning off into the sunset with Bayard."

I can't help it; I laugh in his face. "Please don't tell me you intend to be petty and jealous."

Maxim raises an eyebrow at me. "I'm never petty."

"Oh, no?"

He lays his hammer aside. "Shall we go scare Brigitte out of the glass smithy and talk this out?"

I fiddle with my hands behind my back, suddenly nervous to be alone with Maxim without a grate of iron between us. "Yes," I tentatively agree.

Brigitte isn't in the smithy, so we enter. Maxim locks the door behind us, and leans against it, staring at me. "Do you think me an utter fool for what I said to you last night?"

I hover at least six feet away from him, afraid to draw any closer. “No.” I shake my head. “I rather think I’m in your debt.”

“And that’s all you are to me?” Maxim presses. “My debtor?”

I want to drop my eyes to the floor, but I can’t tear them away from his lips, curved into a petulant frown. “I don’t know what I am to you.”

“But you know what you are to Bayard.”

“Yes,” I say, a note of challenge in my voice. “It’s very clear what I am to Bayard. I am his wife, a noted liar and betrayer, whom he once loved and never shall again.”

Maxim swallows heavily. “He took your hand after the scene today.”

“Because he doesn’t want me to *die*.”

He nods, grudgingly admitting, “We have that in common, my friend and I.”

“Thank you,” I say, inching closer to him. “For saving my life. I understand you enlisted my stepsisters, told them to fetch the marigolds? Must have been quite a speech you gave them, to guilt them into helping.”

A smile creeps into the corner of his mouth. “It wasn’t as hard as you might think.”

I dash across the last few feet separating us and take his hand. He’s not wearing his smith’s gloves, so I’m touching his bare palm, calluses and all. Heat ignites where skin meets skin. “Do you think I can count on your help one more time?”

Maxim stares at our laced fingers. “Unfortunately for me,” he drawls, “you’ll find I’m very much at your command.”

“What about Galiena’s command?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “We can safely assume she knows I’m not playing for her team anymore. Our deal is null and void.”

“And why is that? Why can your deal be ended without ill-effects to either of you?”

Maxim’s lips thin as he thinks. “I’ve already done everything for Galiena I promised to. Typically, the only ill-effect of breaking a fairy deal occurs when the human’s stupid enough to let down his end of the bargain. Fairies take their vows much too seriously to ever break them.”

“I wouldn’t be sure about that,” I say, tentatively stroking his index finger with my own. “Did you see Galiena’s finger today?”

His brows furrow, searching my face. “No, what happened to it?”

“It broke apart, like shattered glass. And the funny thing is—it happened the minute Alaric pronounced that Trude and Bayard would never marry. And that was the promise Galiena made to Trude.”

Maxim drops my hand. He runs his fingers through his hair, pacing the length of the smithy. “Interesting. *Interesting!* Because Trude has upheld her half. She killed your rat, she appeared as ‘Odette,’ and she claimed you were a liar. But now she doesn’t get the boon Galiena offered?”

I nod, following his frenetic route across the room. “Does it hurt a fairy when they’re unable to uphold a vow?”

Maxim strokes his chin, lost in thought. “It’s possible. Very, very possible.” He swings around to stare at me, his face transformed with delight. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so happy. “And she made a similar promise to your stepmother, didn’t she? She promised her a kingdom. So, what happens to Galiena if we prevent her from marrying the king?”

“Exactly,” I say. I step forward to meet him and he scoops me into his arms. We’re alight with the flow of ideas, our synchronicity, and the heat of the room. I throw my arms around his neck, pressing my mouth against his. Maxim’s hands may be callused, but his lips are soft. Kissing him is like being transported somewhere else. Like hurtling through a doorway to Fairyland. It is not safe and gentle, like when I kissed Bayard. But it is *alive*, like a new fire springing to life in a hearth—something that both warms me and could burn me all the same.

He lifts me onto a nearby counter, his powerful hands squeezing my thighs, my waist. I move my mouth away from his, in order to leave a trail of kisses down his neck. I meet sharp stubble upon his chin, like he was too busy planning my rescue to shave this morning. He throws out a hand to steady himself against the wall, and then says, “Stop.”

I freeze, my nose nestled in the crook of his shoulder. He smells like sweat and the caustic bite of burning coal. I draw back, eye to eye with him from my seat on the countertop.

His hands brush lightly against my shoulders, smoothing out the sleeves of my gown, and then withdraw. He's breathing hard and fast as he stares into my face. "Tell me about Bayard. You said he doesn't love you. But do you love him?"

I let out a harsh laugh. "You were the one who insisted I didn't."

The corner of Maxim's mouth twitches. "Call it wishful thinking."

"No," I say, quietly. "I don't love Bayard. Or, not in the way you think."

"But you are his wife."

"Yes, I am." I clasp my hands in my lap, looking down at them. "But not forever."

"Until *death* parts you," Maxim reminds me. "And I may be a treacherous adviser, but my determination not to kill my friend remains steadfast. I wouldn't even do it for you."

I blink slowly, deciding whether to take the leap. To admit my family's oldest secret. "What if Bayard didn't have to be the one to die? What if I disappeared one day and a grave was planted with my name on it? Then Bayard would be free. And I would face the exile I deserve with dignity."

Maxim's eyebrows come together. He caresses the side of my face as he studies me. "Where did you come up with an idea like that?"

I cradle his hand against my face. "My mother isn't dead. My father is, but Clara DeBrun is out there somewhere, traveling the world. That could be me, too. I'd be sad to leave, but I could bear it to save the kingdom."

"But is that really what you want?" Maxim presses me. "To run away?"

"I want a home," I tell him, my voice breaking. "I want a place where I belong, where I'm loved, where the bad things stay outside. But we can't always have what we want."

And I don't deserve to gain a home at the expense of Bayard and Trude's happiness.

Maxim's expression hardens. "Then let's focus on getting rid of your stepmother. Now, surely there must be something in her past that would persuade Alaric not to marry her?"

I shrug. "She killed my father. Perhaps the king wouldn't want a black widow for his bride. But I have no proof. It's just my word against hers."

Maxim smiles a devious smile. “That’s the beauty of fighting a fairy. They cannot lie … but we can. If we don’t have proof, let’s manufacture some. Tell me, what is the name of the doctor in your local village, the one who would have examined your father’s body?”

“Dr. Mettlevet,” I say. “But he died last year.”

“All the better,” Maxim muses. “He can’t contradict us. Let us say Dr. Mettlevet had his suspicions about your father’s mysterious demise. Let us even say those suspicions haunted him enough that he recorded them on his deathbed.”

My lips curve into a smile. “You really are treacherous. I’m glad you’re on my side.”

“From now on,” he says, before bowing to give me a courtly kiss on the hand. I lift my eyes to his, and I see resolve hardening in their black depths before he speaks again. “If you left … I would follow. I could be your home.”

I tear my hand back, as if I were scalded. “Don’t say that,” I whisper.

“Why not?” he murmurs, drawing closer.

“Because …” I stammer.

Maxim looks pained, almost offended. “Do you still not believe my intentions are true? Even after today?”

Fear chokes me. I draw my arms around myself like a shield. “I want to believe it. But I can’t. With Bayard, we had no passion, but we had trust. With you, it’s the exact opposite. I’m drawn to you, but I can’t *trust* you. You’re still the boy who brought my stepfamily into this palace. You’re still the boy who told me to know my place the very instant we met. How can I ever be sure of you?”

Maxim’s eyes close. His handsome features smooth into serene acceptance. “I know where your place is, Ell.” Then he sinks to his knees, surrendering the advantage of his height, to stare up into my face. “Your place is above me. I only hope you know how sorry I am. I’ve been hateful. Unforgivable, really. But I want to make amends, even if it doesn’t earn me your love in return. Tell me to fall silent, I will. Tell me to crawl, I’ll crawl. Give me an impossible task. Command me to cross the world to find a fallen star to set into your crown, and I will find a way.”

I place my hand against his chest, cherishing the quickening beat of his pulse. He is dear to me, and yet, he scares me. If I give him my heart, he not only *could* break it, but he probably would. “Here’s an impossible task,” I tell him, the splintering pain in my own chest reminding me this is an impermanent arrangement. “Become a good man. Devote your life to this kingdom. To its *people.* If you are the only person capable of ruling well, I need you to promise you will stay here, and let me go when the time comes.”

Maxim’s dark eyes shine as he looks up at me, as if I am a sacred thing. “The only way to earn your love is to give it up?”

“You spent all this time convincing me to betray my kingdom,” I whisper. “But I don’t think you would have ever loved me if I had. Somewhere in that cold heart of yours, you care. Now prove it.”

I lean down to brush my lips against his. He meets me with an eager sweetness that’s unlike him. He knows this is not forgiveness, because forgiveness would be the most impossible thing of all. I pull him upward, burying my uncertainty in his touch for a few more fleeting moments. No, this is not forgiveness. Not absolution. But it’s the next best thing.

Before my stepmother’s wedding, I go to Bayard’s rooms in a dress of shining gold. I find him looking in a mirror, slowly buttoning the jacket of his military-style suit. He doesn’t seem surprised at the sound of my voice asking, “What do you see?”

Bayard’s gray eyes slide to me. “No one I recognize.”

I straighten the high collar of his jacket. It’s a wifely gesture, but he tenses when I come near him. “I’m sorry, Bayard. I know you’re under no obligation to forgive me, but I promise I’m going to make this right.” I unclip my earrings one at a time, sorry to let them go, and press them gently into his palm. “When this is over,” I solemnly vow, “you will never need to see me again. And you can give these to your true love, so you can always see Trude coming.”

Bayard’s fingers drift closed over the earrings, a sad smile moving across his face. “That’s the thing, Ell. I don’t need these to recognize Trude. I can spot her smile from a league away.”

“Have you always loved her?” I ask, a hollow tinge to my voice, even though I know I have no honest right to be sad. He was never mine to lose.

“Yes,” Bayard admits, sinking in defeat onto his mattress. If I had expected a roundabout, faltering explanation, I do not get one. Instead, his gaze is sure on my face as he confesses. “I’ve loved her since we were children.”

I groan, frustrated beyond reason with him. I flop down beside him on what was once our bed. “Then why hold a ball? Why search elsewhere for a bride? Trude is a noblewoman, of better stock than I. Surely your father would have approved the match.”

Bayard rolls his eyes. “But *I* could not approve of it. I could not ask Trude to marry me. I could not ask her to make that sacrifice.”

“What sacrifice?” I demand. “To marry a handsome prince? A boy who is kind and good and a lifelong friend, whom she loved in return?”

“Ell.” Bayard’s mouth quivers in a wretched facsimile of a smile. He is laughing at me, for not understanding Trude the way he does. “That may be how you viewed the arrangement. But Trude has lived in this palace all her life, and she has only ever wanted to escape. That’s the one thing I can never give her. As my bride she could have had gorgeous gowns, elegant jewels, and an army of royal children. But she didn’t want those. She only wanted to be free. No, better for me to find someone else to love. Someone who could be happy stuck here with me, helping me through princely duties I’m not suited for.” He closes his eyes, bringing the heels of his palms up to rub them in exhaustion. “I feared trapping her alongside me in a gilded cage, and now she is trapped alone in an iron one.”

I tenderly pry his hands away from his eyes. “She’s going to be alright. Max and I have a plan.”

Bayard’s tortured smile grows wider, yet more pained, showing teeth. It is not the boyish smile I’ve come to know. “He loves you, doesn’t he? I should have guessed. He’s never paid attention to anyone like he has with you. And he fought *hard* against us marrying.”

I give a quiet laugh. “He’s an awful saboteur, it seems.”

Slowly, Bayard leans in to plant a light kiss at the top of my head, like the old days. “Keep the earrings, Ell. They were a gift.” His soft hands affix

them back on my ears. Tears sting my eyes. No matter how this ends—I will always be grateful for my charming, generous, and above all, *kind* husband. The man who saved me from the cinders.



Bayard and I enter the throne room arm in arm.

There is a moment, in every wedding, when anyone who might have an objection should feel encouraged to say their piece. If that person has any brains at all, that moment should be at the very beginning.

The king is presiding over his own ceremony. He is the only authority necessary to unite himself in marriage with my stepmother. She is wearing a dramatic caped gown of snowy white, not too unlike what the fairy Myranda was wearing when we met her in the forest. It looks unnatural on her. Stepmother thrives in the dark.

"Father," Bayard calls out as the rest of the court moves to take their seats. "Before you begin, might your family offer you congratulations?"

I step forward, to the very edge of the dais, dropping into a curtsy. Stepmother surveys me with a curled lip, rightfully suspicious. Alaric, meanwhile, looks pleasantly surprised. "Your majesty," I say. "As your devoted children, Bayard and I wish you every happiness, as you so thoroughly deserve. It's clear you are born anew since you met my stepmother, and no one wants to see you content more than we do."

Stepmother tightens her grip on the king's arm, glaring daggers at me.

"But," I add, raising a finger, "chief among our wishes for you, dear king, is that you live a long and healthy life. And I would be remiss in not only my duty to this kingdom, but in my affections as a daughter, not to bring Claudette Tremoille's past to your attention."

Maxim splits from the crowd, taking his place at my free side. He holds a tight scroll of paper with a broken wax seal. "It has long been the princess's suspicion," Maxim announces to the crowd in a booming voice, "that Claudette Tremoille is responsible for the death of her former husband, the princess's father, Anton DeBrun. After only a year of marriage to Claudette, Anton fell suddenly dead of seizures." He dramatically unwraps his scroll.

“Dr. Hans Mettlevet, the local doctor, examined the late baron’s body. While he was too intimidated by the baroness to publicly share his findings at that time, his conscience prevailed upon him to record his diagnosis on his deathbed. I have that diagnosis in my hands, having paid his widow an extravagant sum to acquire it.”

Alaric’s square jaw is so tight I expect to hear one of his molars crack. Stepmother’s eyes bulge, almost ogre-like.

Maxim clears his throat theatrically. “Dr. Mettlevet writes here that he strongly believes the Baron DeBrun died of arsenic poisoning. I believe the baroness was previously married, also to an otherwise healthy man who died young. He was a merchant. Her next catch was a nobleman. Is this pernicious viper now to graduate to a king?”

Alaric rips his arm from my stepmother’s grip. “What do you have to say about this?”

Stepmother’s delicate hand flies to her mouth. Her eyes seek out mine. I raise my chin in defiance. I’ve won.

But if I’ve won, why are her eyes dancing like that? Why, when she removes her hand, is she smiling?

Stepmother moves languorously, silkily, to take the king’s many-ringed hands in hers. She raises them to her mouth and kisses each gnarled finger. She takes refuge in audacity. “My love,” she whispers, voice husky. “All they say is true.”

A gasp rips out of me. My knees go weak, and both Maxim and Bayard fling out their arms to steady me. Did I just imagine my stepmother’s confession? Why would she admit to such a thing?

King Alaric’s green eyes are locked on Stepmother. On her pouting lips. On her dewy skin and smooth waterfall of chestnut hair. He does not pull away from her.

This is the same man who ruined a kingdom for desire once before.

“I did kill my previous husbands,” Stepmother announces to the room, louder now. “They were weak men and I could not tolerate them. But my darling King Alaric is not a weak man. He is a conqueror.” A slight smile tugs at Alaric’s weathered mouth.

“No,” I murmur. “No, no, no.”

Stepmother leans in closer to Alaric, crooning in his ear. “You’ve spoken to me of your desire for a new heir. Yes, I am an admitted killer, but you are a warrior. Does that not make us a perfect match? Our child would be a stallion. A paragon. Someone worthy at last to carry on your legacy.”

“Yes.” The king nods, transfixed by Stepmother’s shameless claims. “Yes.”

“No,” I shout, “no!”

Alaric puffs out his chest and declares, “That’s a good enough marriage vow for me. I declare us to be wed, and to be known furthermore as a pair, sharing one name and one heart. What was once halved is now whole.”

He seizes my stepmother, pulling her into a rough and passionate kiss. When she draws back, she’s laughing. She waves to the assembled guards and calls out, “Take these three away to the Forgetting Pit! They may speak the truth, but it is a truth inconvenient to their new queen, and we have no need of this weak generation anymore.”

Guards circle us immediately. I am struck that they turned on us without question. Maxim seems similarly distraught. He gestures an angry hand to Bayard. “You would betray your crown prince this easily?”

The guards do not seem to hear Maxim. They raise their halberds.

Bayard gives a tiny, grim shake of the head. His lips are thin. “Don’t bother,” he tells Maxim. “There’s something wrong with them. Look at their eyes. All of them blue. Every single pair. They weren’t always like that.”

I gasp, seeing at once what Bayard’s trained perceptiveness has led him to: the first sign of danger, which Maxim and I completely missed. Horror prickles my skin as I note that every guard surrounding us has pale, glassy blue eyes. The same eyes Trude bore in her disguise as Odette, when she was still bound to follow Galiena’s commands.

The enchanted guards launch themselves at Bayard first. He lets himself go limp as they descend on him, his knees buckling and hitting the floor.

Another guard seizes me by the arm, twisting it behind my head. I kick out, trying to bite and scratch.

“Not on your life!” Maxim roars. He jams the ivory head of his wolf’s cane hard into the ribs of the guard restraining me, but there’s no fighting

them all off. Countless more guards come upon him like a flood. They seize him from behind, and the courtiers around us do nothing.

"They're under her control!" I scream to the nobles as the guards drag us away. "They're under Galiena's control!"

Stepmother cackles. "Oh, darling girl, of course they are!" Then she jabs her thumb at King Alaric, who now stands limply at her side, jaw slackened and eyes vacant. Once green, his eyes are now shining and blue. "In exchange for my crown, I promised she could control them all. From the king to the guards to the standing army, I vowed to let her work her will through them, as long as I get mine."

"You monster!" I spit at her.

"Better a monster than a scullery maid," Stepmother replies, curling her lip at me. "You thought you could rise above me. Rise above what station I graciously allowed you. But now you shall suffer. And with your soft, dreamer's heart, dream *this*: I will work my peasants to the bone, as I did you. Galiena will allow me that, I'd wager. She will allow me to use our army to incur order with force. And you will know it is your fault. Because you dared to aspire beyond the dirt and soot."

My heart plummets as I am dragged from the room. Because she's right.

It is my fault.



TWENTY-THREE

"She beat us … with the truth," Maxim says, his incredulous words echoing off the walls of the Forgetting Pit. "I can hardly believe it."

I am slumped on the floor, back against the wall, holding my knees tight to my chest to quell my rising panic. "She's going to ruin our people's lives. We can't let this happen. We can't." I think of Rowan and his young family, of the old woman who came to the palace, of all the people who need our help. They will all suffer the way I suffered for years under Stepmother's thumb. All because of me.

Trude and Bayard, our companions in this sunken hell, are not quite as distraught as we are. I suppose they're just glad to be reunited. After an enthusiastic embrace upon their reunion, they've lain out among the pillows and blankets I deposited earlier, whispering apologies and sweet nothings to one another. It seems my suspicion was correct: After years of friendship, Bayard is much more comfortable leaping into intimacy with his true love.

A door creaking and shouts from above warn us we're about to have additions to our already cramped cell. "Let us go!" Amalia shouts. "Our mother is the queen!"

"Forget it, Amalia," Freida spits out. "We betrayed her. Turnabout's fair play."

The grate squeaks as it's drawn upward. My stepsisters are shoved onto the ladder, forced to descend.

Freida's feet have hardly touched the floor before she snaps at me and Maxim. "Great plan! Really successful!"

That's when I'm struck in the head by a pair of ill-shaped boots. A clump of fabric comes flopping down beside it. The guards above have shoved my old clothes through the gaps in the grate. "The queen says you're not to put on airs anymore," one guard shouts to me. "If we come back to find you dressed like royalty, we have instructions to put you in the iron maiden."

I curse under my breath. Trust my stepmother to be petty even in victory. Like I could possibly care what I'm wearing when I am crushed by guilt, knowing that out there somewhere, commoners are about to suffer en masse so that my stepmother can twist her knife once more in my heart. My back to Maxim, I start plucking clumsily at the buttons at the back of my golden gown. Trude hops up from her love nest to help me, ever the faithful lady-in-waiting. My stepsisters silently move to stand between me and the boys, so I can strip and re-dress in my shabby servant's garb with some modicum of privacy.

Shame heating my face, more for my role in our doom than this latest humiliation, I tie my hair back with a handkerchief and lace my now tar-stained boots onto my feet. "What's going on up there?" I ask my stepsisters, trying to change the subject.

Freida whistles. "Oh, it's bad."

Amalia nods. "The king's new army has arrived. Soon Mother's going to send them to break the spirit of the peasantry, I'm sure. But first she ordered them to remove the horseshoes from every window and door."

"Is that so?" Maxim muses. He paces the short length of the circular cell —a ridiculous image, as his long legs bring him from edge to edge in only three paces. "That must be a term of her deal with Galiena. Without the iron keeping them out, now any fairy can enter the palace, should they wish."

"Mother's called for a grand banquet tonight," Freida reports in the dry tone of someone already bored by defeat, "with an official coronation for herself at sunset."

"Only hours to go," Bayard whispers from the floor. "Serves my father right, I suppose. If he'd just listened to us for once, he wouldn't be losing his kingdom."

“We have to do something before then,” I insist, wringing my hands together. “If we don’t, we’ll all burn together at dawn. And if we burn, no one will be left to defend our people. This is so much bigger than us.”

A shadow crosses over Trude’s face as she considers this. “I know this will sound stupid coming from me, the girl who ruined everything by entering into a deal with a fairy … but if they can enter the palace now, why doesn’t Bayard call the fairy who owes him a boon?”

Bayard leaps to his feet. “Brilliant!”

Maxim looks at Trude with incredulous respect. “Of course! So simple. I should have thought of that.”

I cast Maxim an amused look and wave at him to settle down. He flashes a grin at me, crossing to me from behind and wrapping his arms around my waist, then resting his chin at the top of my head.

Bayard vibrates with excitement. “I’m really about to call a fairy,” he mutters. “My father would kill me!”

Freida snorts. “Oh, pox on your father.”

“Yes!” Trude says, bouncing her head in agreement with Freida. “Pox on your father!”

Bayard shoots a look at me, readying to evoke the way I called a fairy on my mother’s grave. He lowers himself to his knees and flings out his arms. “Oh great and kind fairy Myranda! You told me to call you in my hour of greatest need, and I call you now!”

Flurries of snow drift down through the grate, as if it’s suddenly wintertime in our cell. I look up to see the sublimely beautiful fairy from the forest smiling at us through the iron. “Hello, sweet prince.”

Bayard’s face splits into a grin and he waves at Myranda with his whole arm. “Hello! Thank you ever so much for coming. Could you please free us?”

Sadly, the fairy shakes her magnificent head. “I’m afraid not. My magic does not work on iron, and that is what this grate is constructed of. I cannot unlock it for you, as much as I wish to.” Her mild frown stretches upward into a smile as she wags a finger at Bayard. “And you wouldn’t want me to. For I promised to help in your hour of greatest need—and this is not yet that.”

“Well, I don’t know how it could get much worse!” Amalia shouts, stamping her foot.

The fairy laughs, an oddly low and throaty sound, almost like the pounding of hoofbeats. “Ask yourself how it might become better. Your hero is already on her way.”

Then the door to the chamber opens, and Zita shouts, “Oh hell’s bells!”

Myranda gestures for Zita to come closer. “I will not hurt you, child. We are happy to see you.”

Hesitantly, Zita creeps over to the grate, watching Myranda with suspicion. She’s clutching an iron key in her hand. “I’m here to bust you useless, ungrateful nobles out!”

“Zita?” I ask. “How did you get that key? How’d you get past the guards?”

Zita shrugs. “Let’s just say I have a big family, and if you have a big enough family, you’re bound to have at least one auntie who knows a lot about baking sedatives into muffins.”

Myranda floats gently into the air, allowing Zita to unlock the grate, swinging it upward. Maxim nudges me forward to climb the ladder, and I do. Once at the top, I throw my arms around Zita in an ecstatic hug. “I knew we were friends!”

“Oh, shut up,” Zita mutters into my hair, returning the embrace. “I can’t stand you.”

When Bayard reaches the top of the ladder, Myranda offers him her hand. He bends to kiss it in chivalrous fashion. “I will return for you, sweet prince,” Myranda vows, “when *you* need me most. But I will not involve myself directly in this matter with Queen Tanaquill’s sister. Your ‘Galiena’ agitates for war between our kinds, which I do not desire. And with the army your new queen has promised her, Galiena may attempt to seize the golden throne of Tanaquill, using your countrymen as her pawns. She has already marshaled the spider-brood to stand behind her. Yet Fairyland politics are subtle, and wisdom requires that I remain aloof for now. Only greater chaos would arise in your land were we to see fairy set against fairy. Instead I put my trust into your capable, mortal hands. Will you promise not to think too harshly of me?”

Bayard nods in sad understanding. “Of course. I appreciate your honesty.”

Myranda turns to me. “But there is one thing I can do.” Her luminous brown eyes are fixed on my face. I wilt under her gaze. Then she bestows a smile on me, and I relax. “Bayard is not the only person here to whom I owe a debt. You were the first to encourage him not to shoot me. Perhaps what I owe to you is not as large, but it is worth a trifle. Hold out your hands.”

I do. My palms sting with icy cold as snowflakes flit about my skin like buzzing insects. They melt into the air, replaced by the cool surface of a glass slipper. The one Bayard usually keeps upstairs in his suite.

My eyebrows knit together as I look at Myranda. “What is this for?”

She winks at me. “You’ll know it when you see it. That’s the thing about glass. It is very beautiful, but oh-so-fragile as well.”

She waves an arm at our group. “I must leave you. But I’ll tell you this: The names of the fae have power. Princess Imelda—or as you know her, Galiena—will surely attend your new queen’s coronation now that we can enter the palace. If you can use her name to bind her, that will increase your own power sixfold. Quickly now, this may be your last chance to save both our kingdoms before war breaks out. The fate of Holbein, and the soul of Fairyland, depend on you.”

And then she’s gone—dissolving in a flurry of snow.

I am left holding a pretty slipper in my hand, with not a thought in my head. I turn to the others. “What do we do now?”

Bayard shrugs. “Search me.”

Maxim laces his fingers together, bringing them up to his mouth. “I think it’s time to move beyond words, to violence.”

Zita snickers. “Like you spoiled nobles know how to fight.”

“*I* know how to fight,” Freida huffs.

“You don’t understand,” Zita says. “There’s an army out there under her control. You need an army to combat it. And you have six people. Seven, I suppose, *if* you count me.”

“An army …” I mutter. Something Maxim once sneered at me floats to the top of my brain. *I’ll not be easily swayed from my object, even if you raise an army of scullery maids against me.*

I startle with excitement. “Zita! Do you think the other servants are frightened by these developments?”

Zita cackles. “We’re always frightened by the changing of nobles. Better the devil you know.”

“Frightened enough to take up arms?” I press her.

“What arms, exactly?” Zita says, scowling. “We were trained to fry eggs and stoke fires, not swing a halberd.”

“Well, that’s perfect,” I tell her. “Because frying pans and stokers have one thing in common: They’re made of iron.”

We take the crossbows that belong to the collapsed guards, snoozing on the floor outside the entrance to the Forgetting Pit. There are only two weapons, so we give them to Maxim and Bayard, our best shots. Our plan is not fancy or complicated; we will wait in the walls until the coronation is about to begin, and then rush at Galiena and Stepmother when they reveal themselves on the high dais. That’s the moment they’ll make themselves the easiest targets. We arm Amalia and Freida with iron pokers, and Trude and myself with cast-iron pans good for swinging.

Meanwhile, Zita has spoken with the servants. They’re not fools. They can see the way the wind is blowing. Word has spread of Stepmother’s terrifying pronouncement about the commonfolk. Those in the smithy know and trust Maxim, while the rest are fond of Bayard, if not his father. Besides this, everyone is disturbed by the army with their vacant blue eyes. They want to free their brothers from fairy servitude—and reduce the risk of having their own will stolen from them.

When the clock tower strikes six, the servants will abandon their posts and meet the assembled army on the palace grounds. Neither they nor we expect them to win a battle against a well-heeled army with cooking implements for weapons, but we hope they’ll hold them back while we

destroy Galiena. One good shot to her chest with an iron bolt, and the magic she holds over the army will die with her. And Maxim and Bayard have trained long with crossbows—so it's not impossible.

We all take posts inside the throne room walls, in the secret passages originally intended for use by the servants. Such a ludicrous reason for these to exist, but we'll gladly use them to launch a sneak attack.

Zita leads me to my position inside the walls: beside the golden air vent near the royal dais, where the servants watched me marry. I've been stationed here because I'm the only one short enough that my head won't be visible from inside the room. Shortly before six chimes, Zita bobs me a last curtsy, her trademark sly smile creeping across her cheeks. "Off to command the troops, I suppose," she tells me. "Just call me General D'Chambermaid."

"You're brilliant," I whisper to her back as she departs. She pretends not to hear me—but her chin lifts proudly before disappearing into the darkness.

My heart races, practically crawling up my throat. I am nothing more than a pair of eyes floating in the darkness of the passageway, peering out from the grate.

Trumpets sound from inside the throne room. The courtiers—more like hostages than revelers—stop their anxious chatter and fall into deep bows and curtsies as my stepmother sweeps into the room, blank-faced Alaric escorting her down the aisle. I flex my clammy fingers on the handle of my frying pan. Sweat beads on the back of my neck.

I'd like to push through the flimsy grate and strike at Stepmother's head as she reaches the dais, but I cannot make a move until Galiena reveals herself.

I'm staring at the back of the throne, but I assume Stepmother's crown must be resting on its seat. When they reach it, Alaric lifts a crown of fleur-de-lis identical to his own and places it on her brow. With a tremulous voice not at all typical for him, Alaric announces: "I hereby yield my divine right to rule to my wife, Queen Claudette D'Harcourt. I will serve as her consort from this day until my last."

The courtiers bow their heads, sinking to their knees.

A long, wild laugh bubbles from Stepmother's throat. From within the folds of her satin eggplant gown, she withdraws a stake whittled from white wood. I realize what she's about to do an instant before she does it, averting my eyes as the ash branch is driven into Alaric's chest.

He lets out a strangled groan, falling to his knees on the dais and slumping sideways before the throne. He rolls over, so that his blanched-white face is facing the grate where I hide. A glimmer of recognition enters his eyes as they transition from blue to his natural green: He sees me shrouded in the shadows beyond.

A dribble of blood stretches from the corner of his mouth.

The crowd's screaming gives way to eerie silence as the chiming of bells announces Galiena's arrival, resplendent in her pink gown of flower petals. She kicks Alaric's body over with the toe of her tiny slippers, bending to seize him by the chin. "Once I vowed to never forgive you. And you vowed to never apologize. Would you like to break your vow now? Do you at last *apologize,* your majesty?" She forces him to nod his head up and down before flicking him back to the ground. I hear a rattle in his throat, and then silence.

Alaric is dead. And Galiena is here.

Now is the time to act. Galiena and Stepmother are both sitting ducks on the dais, but I suppose Maxim and Bayard are in shock. I can imagine their feelings; we never thought a tyrant like Alaric could be dispatched so easily.

Maxim comes to his senses first. He pushes out from a panel in the wall —a blur of black silk. He pulls the trigger without making a sound.

Bayard is spurred to movement as well, a split second later. He roars with confused grief as he aims at Galiena.

But she is too fast. She flicks her fingers as she did that day in my father's garden. Two cylindrical shards of glass materialize out of thin air, colliding with the iron bolts speeding toward her, and knocking them off-course. The first bolt—Maxim's—veers off and buries itself in my stepmother's neck.

I am too shocked to scream. Stepmother falls soundlessly, her throat split open, spilling ruby-red blood, like a magnificent necklace. My tormentor is dead—so why do I not feel victory? Why do I feel no rush of joy, no

satisfaction? I'm so busy staring at her fall—thinking, *no, this can't possibly be true*—that I don't immediately see where the second bolt has flown.

A soft whimper, like a rat whose tail has been cleaved off, drags my eyes to the side of the room, where Maxim's face has gone pale. He's still on his feet, but staring down in disbelief at the iron bolt sticking out of his gut.

No.

"No!" Bayard shouts, moving to catch Maxim as he collapses. They're both on the floor, Bayard frantically trying to staunch the flow of his friend's blood. *My love's blood.*

I love him.

And I forgive him. Too late. Far too late.

I feel an invisible tug at my wrist, as if there is still a magical thread binding us together, as the crimson one did when we strolled in Fairyland. I cannot bear to let that thread be severed so soon.

The frying pan slips out of my hands to the floor of the passageway, but the clatter cannot be heard over the wails of the courtiers. I push on the grate, and it swings up.

Galiena laughs her champagne glass chime laugh. She twirls her fingers in the air, and the crown so recently placed on Stepmother's brow floats upward and drops itself on Galiena's head. "Once upon a time," Galiena lectures the courtiers, all clutching each other and weeping silently, "your king promised me I would be his queen. There was a time I might have settled for that. But when he scorned me, I knew I would have no rest or peace until he—and everyone else who ever looked down upon me—were crushed beneath my slipper. Now his debt is finally paid and I have a golden crown to match Tanaquill's. Next, I shall have my human army throw themselves against the doors of my sister's palace, and when she too writhes at my feet, I shall at last be satisfied."

My eyes blur with tears, watching Galiena's dragonfly wings flutter in her amusement. My hands are empty, and without thinking, they reach into my apron pocket, grasping for the glass slipper Myranda gave me. She told me I would know when to use it.

I slam the glass slipper against the edge of the grate and it shatters in my hands. I keep the longest, deadliest-looking shard and crawl up through my

mouse hole. I creep silently behind Galiena and push my dirty sleeve up past my elbow.

Following the line of my old scar, where splintered bone once punctured my skin, I drag the glass up my arm, coating it in the crimson iron of my blood. Accustomed as I am to pain, I bear it without a sound.

Lifting the red-dripping shard above my head, I bring it down true, directly into the center of Galiena's back, right between her wings.

Galiena lets out a howl of agony and shock, sinking to her knees. Her skirts bloom around her, dwarfing her body as she screams. I leave the shard sticking out of her back.

Galiena's too-white hands scramble for the shard, her missing finger all the more evident as she tries desperately to seize it and rip it out—but that is exactly the spot where fairies cannot reach to scratch. She looks absurdly like a useless noblewoman unable to unbutton her gown without assistance.

"Do you need some help there?" I croak, stepping in front of the throne.

The crowd gasps upon seeing me emerge. Some cry out with joy. But I am not here for them. My eyes track to Maxim, who is convulsing in Bayard's arms.

Galiena stares at me in horror and revulsion, like I'm the filthy scullery maid who dares poison her mistress's dinner. "I will pluck the thorn from your back, Princess Imelda." I sneer down at her, feeling the power ringing in my voice from the use of her true name. "If you promise me six boons." My left hand is clamped around my right arm, where blood still pours freely. But I don't feel the pain. I just feel the hot rush of rage and approaching vengeance.

"I'll give you nothing," Galiena chokes out. But I can tell the glass and blood invading her body are weakening her.

"Then you'll die," I tell her, evenly.

After years in Stepmother's house, I perfected the art of waiting. Unfortunately, Maxim doesn't have much time left. I *need* the boons if he's to live. But I am good at pretending—and now Maxim's life depends on Galiena being convinced.

The fairy thinks better of my offer. Boons or death? "Fine, take it out," Galiena roars, "and I'll give you anything you want!"

Immediately, I bend to rip the shard out from between her wings. She falls forward onto her stomach, gasping. Her wings flap pathetically before, at last, becoming still.

"My first boon I request," I say, words tumbling out of my mouth, "is that you heal Maxim D'Arcy's wounds immediately and completely."

Bayard, clearly remembering what Myranda said about being unable to work magic on iron, closes his fingers around the bolt in Maxim's stomach and rips it out. I can only imagine the damage this does to his organs, but it cannot be helped. Maxim howls in misery, but it's mercifully short-lived. Bound by her word, Galiena grinds her teeth, shooting out her four-fingered hand toward his prostrate form.

The flesh of his stomach begins to knit together. Maxim stops screaming. He stares in wonder at the place where his blood had just been gushing. Bayard lets out a relieved, breathless laugh and drags Maxim into a hug.

My vision blurs with tears of desperate relief. We will have time. I'll have the chance to tell him everything. That he's found the fallen star, done the impossible, been forgiven. That the promises he's made I'll happily return. Forgiveness isn't something people earn. It's a gift you give when losing the other person is the most terrible alternative you can contemplate.

Galiena's sharp-edged voice shatters my reverie. "What *else* do you desire?"

I exhale, gathering my dignity, and turn on Galiena with my chin raised. I am a princess. She is at my mercy, and today, I'll have none.

Now is the time for me to ask Galiena for things I know she cannot give, and see how much of her breaks apart. To save us all—I need to tell the truth.

"My second request," I tell Galiena, hands trembling as my blood drips from my fingers, "is that you raise my mother from the grave at the hazel tree."

Galiena looks surprised—but willing. She straightens from her position on the ground and rises into the air. She waves her arms gracefully, saying, "Your wish is my—" She cuts off her own sentence, gasping in pain. She glares at me. "No."

“Yes,” I say. “Restore my mother to life. Restore dust to bones, restore skin and blood and beating heart, and raise her from the grave in that garden.”

Galiena’s cry is shrill. “But you *know* I cannot!” She stares helplessly at her hands, where a cobweb of fractures is beginning to form. The sound is like the cracking of ice falling into warm water.

I smile. “No, you can’t. Because she isn’t dead.”

The court is getting slowly to their feet. Their plaintive cries silence. They stare hungrily at my face, confused and curious and enthralled.

I pace closer to Galiena. “My next request: Give me again the cornflower blue dress I wore at the ball where I met the prince.”

“You didn’t meet the prince at a ball!” Galiena growls. “You vicious minx, you—”

Her hands begin to break apart, a waterfall of tinkling glass rushing to gather in a puddle on the floor.

I let out a soft laugh. “Give me again the carriage you made for me. Turn my rats again into footmen.”

“I—” Galiena gasps. The cracks are spreading, up to her bare shoulders now. “I—”

I pause, looking out across the floor to Bayard. He’s watching me with fascination. I realize I never told him about my mother. I fumble for another impossible request and then I remember what Maxim said to me in the attic only a few days ago. *Find me a D’Harcourt heir who actually wants to rule this kingdom, and I’ll show you a mare that can leap through the eye of a needle.*

If I am to reveal my lies, I might as well help Bayard realize the lies he’s been telling himself.

I look down at Galiena, who is moaning, hardly listening to me anymore as she helplessly watches her shoulders break apart and the cracks inch up her neck. Softly, I request of her, “Find us a king of the D’Harcourt line who truly desires to rule.”

Galiena’s pink eyes dart to Bayard. They widen with relief, thinking perhaps I have granted her reprieve. But as she searches Bayard’s blank face, she realizes she cannot grant what I asked for.

Bayard's brows come slightly together, and he glances at Maxim for confirmation. Grudgingly, Maxim nods.

"Oh," Bayard says, simply. "Oh."

Galiena lets out a sob of rage. Fissures of broken glass run deep through her face now. Her visage looks like a gorge cutting into the earth between mountains.

I sink to her level, among the shards of glass that once formed her limbs. I force Galiena to look into my eyes, as she forced Alaric to look at her when she demanded his apology.

This time, I give Galiena a chance.

"You once vowed never to forgive King Alaric, or his kingdom, or his line, for the crime of breaking your heart. You swore eternal vengeance against the D'Harcourts for the sins of their father."

I glance out to the crowd. My gaze travels over Maxim, over Trude guarding the entrance, to finally rest on my stepsisters in the center aisle. They both hold iron pokers slackly in their hands. Amalia leans against Freida, as if she will faint without her support. Freida sees me watching them, and gives me an encouraging nod.

There was a time when they made my life a nightmare. Now, they've risked everything for me. My heart is truly open to them for the first time since they were children, arriving on my father's doorstep in the shadow of their mother.

"I know what it's like to feel that hatred," I tell Galiena. "I know what it's like to swear never to forgive." I tear my eyes away from my stepsisters—no, my *sisters*. "But I've had a taste of forgiveness now, and it is far preferable. I will grant you the same opportunity. Princess Imelda, my final boon is this: I ask you to forgive King Alaric for the wrongs he has done you and relinquish your quest to destroy his line."

Galiena's teeth chatter violently. "I made a *vow*—" she snarls.

"Break it," I demand of her. "Or break yourself."

All of a sudden, Galiena's face transmutes to serenity. Her teeth still and her pain seems to ease. "No," she says. "No. I shall never forgive."

And so she shatters.

Her face collapses in on itself, and takes the remainder of her body with it, crunching into a rainbow of glass, which pours to the floor like glittering dust. All told, the glass that was once a fairy makes only a small pile.



TWENTY-FOUR

ZITA TELLS ME IT WAS SHOCKINGLY NOT TOO DIFFICULT TO BEAT back the army of glamoured soldiers. The servants at the palace are well-trained in their various arts—at least better trained than a regiment of freshly drafted young men designed to be cannon fodder for a pointless war—and they wielded their makeshift weapons with skill.

By the time Galiena had disintegrated, the soldiers and servants alike were embracing on the grounds, thrilled to tears to be free of her. And, if they had a suspicion Alaric was dead too, that also contributed to their joy—though they were tactful enough not to mention it.

Zita is kind enough to escort me to the room where the printing press is stored. There, we work together to lay out the blocks necessary to draft the announcement of my death. We press the words onto a sheet of parchment, and I deliver it to Bayard, who I find organizing the stacks of letters and books in his father's study, Maxim at his side, giving him instructions of what should go where. Trude is in the corner, brewing tea for everyone.

I drop the announcement in front of Bayard, and my hand hits the burnished desk with a slapping sound. "You can distribute these to the people, just as your father distributed his anti-fairy propaganda," I tell him, businesslike. "And after a period of respectful mourning, you and Trude can marry, as it really should've been from the beginning."

Bayard's gray eyes flick down the paper, taking it in. He picks up a quill, dipping it in ink. "It's a very clever idea, Ell," he says, scribbling something atop the parchment, "but may I suggest one small alteration?"

When he turns the paper back to me, it is Crown Prince Bayard's death it heralds.

I stare at him in bemusement. "What's this?"

Bayard gives a soft laugh and takes my hand. Trude sidles over to us and squeezes my shoulders. "Ell," Bayard says, "I don't want to be king. And let's face it; I'd be rotten at it. There's only one person in this room who has what it takes to rule."

My gaze darts to Maxim, who is taking a long, meditative sip from his cup of tea. "Max?" I guess.

Bayard snorts, "Hardly. He's much too evil."

Maxim doesn't make a sound to dispute this.

The old boyish grin reappears on Bayard's face as he raises my hands to his lips. "You, my darling wife, should be queen. You understand our people. You care about them. And more importantly, you'd actually be willing to do the work of making their lives better. You solved our problems yesterday, as no one else could have. You, and no one else, deserve to lead this kingdom forward. Besides!" He points to a portrait hanging between bookshelves. It's the completed portrait of him and me, where I sit on the throne. "You are a D'Harcourt now."

A sigh escapes my lips as I stare into the face of my incredibly lovable, but not-quite-beloved, husband. "But where will you go?" I ask him, tone serious now. Though I know we aren't meant to be together, I'll miss him very much.

"Everywhere," Bayard answers.

"And I'll go with him," Trude pipes up, threading her arm into his. "We'll see everything. We'll see the dragon-tamers of the North. The great waterfalls of Frinlay. We'll buy a ticket to view the babbling banshee of Pim. Maybe I'll even study with a seamstress in some far-off city."

My heart aches and rejoices at once. Bayard will finally be free of his father's expectations. Trude will live all the lives she's ever imagined. And I'll get to stay here, and finally make a home. But the cost is … I will have to lose them both.

"The tragedy is, of course," Maxim says, his voice quiet but thick with undisguised emotion, "that you won't be able to come back. Your face is on

coins, Bayard. If you return, people will realize you're not dead." He brushes, irritated, beneath his eyes, but then admits, "The loss of you in our lives will be immeasurable."

"Do not be so sure of that," a throaty, rich voice says.

I swivel my head to see the fairy Myranda standing in the doorway. With Galiena's quest for vengeance ended, and no more need to ban the fairies, Myranda had been able to appear without even being called.

"You have done well, my sweet humans," she says, extending her magnificent arms to us. "Your bravery and honesty have saved your kingdom and safeguarded Tanaquill's throne."

Something itches in the back of my mind. I think it must be bothering Maxim too, because he catches my eye before saying to Myranda, "Yes, it seems we have done Tanaquill a great boon, though we have not yet had the pleasure of meeting."

Myranda grants us a wily, sharp-toothed smile. "I'm certain she is grateful."

"You're certain?" I ask, tilting my head to one side. I think of the precise wording the frog-fairy used against me in Fairyland. Of how Galiena deftly introduced herself by a false name.

I dip into a deep curtsy. "It is an honor to do a service for your majesty."

Myranda lets out a warm, throaty laugh, and her snowy garb melts away, replaced by rivulets of shining gold flowing down her body like heated wax. Her face remains the same in this true form, but her hair is now a glorious onyx, complemented by the massive orange and black wings of a monarch butterfly. "What a clever thing you are!" she tells me. "I am so very fond of insightful humans."

Bayard's mouth hangs open. "You're the queen of the fae."

Tanaquill beams down at Bayard. "I am. Now remember, you promised not to think too harshly of me, princeling. You must keep your promises. And I did help, in my own, subtle way. Though fighting my grasping sister directly was not the gambit I preferred."

Maxim crosses his arms. "Yes, you certainly did help. But not until it was too late to save King Alaric."

Tanaquill is blithely unconcerned by his implied allegation. “What love did I hold for Alaric? His prohibition of my kind within his borders was not, perhaps, nearly so big a threat to my throne as Imelda’s scheming, but he was still a violent brute, who ground my sweet pixies into dust. He mistreated the small fae, who are my beloved subjects. He was also cruel to his son, whom I have great cause to admire.” Bayard’s face flushes. He seems torn between his filial duty to mourn his father and the intimate understanding that all charges Tanaquill sets against Alaric now are true.

“I will admit,” Tanaquill concludes, “I was not perturbed by the idea of someone sweeping the king’s chess piece off the board.”

It smarts my pride a little to see how we were manipulated to Tanaquill’s ends, even if she is mostly benevolent. But ultimately, I didn’t hold love for Alaric either and cannot be too put out. I watch a similar mental struggle playing out behind Maxim’s darting eyes as he apparently weighs the wisdom of picking a fight with this magical ruler. Ultimately, he must also decide against it, because he inclines his head toward her respectfully. “Then I hope with our new regime, we can install a long-lasting peace with you and Fairyland.”

Queen Tanaquill flashes us all a brilliant smile. “I desire that as well. But that is not why I am here today. I am here to return kindness onto the kind.” She stretches to take Bayard’s perfect face in her hands. “How would you like to look nothing like yourself, dear prince?” she asks him.

Bayard’s laugh is shocked, but delighted. “I’m afraid I wouldn’t be able to tell the difference!”

Without a moment’s pause, Tanaquill blows softly upon Bayard’s face, and a stream of snowflakes settles on his skin, obscuring his features. When they melt away, the handsome brow and sloping nose I know so well are gone. They have been replaced by a freckled, sun-kissed face. Bayard looks excitedly at us for our approval. Trude clasps her hands over her mouth, clearly waiting to see if Bayard is happy with his change in appearance before expressing her own opinion. Maxim and I just gape at him, unable to speak.

Bayard no longer has two gray eyes, but rather, like his mother before him, mismatched irises. One eye is dark brown, almost black, and one is blue. His hair is redder than it was before, the same vivid red of his sister.

And his nose is a cute, elfish snub. He whirls to look at himself in the nearest mirror.

A shriek of joy bursts out of him. “Is that me? I have my mother’s blue eye! And Maxim’s black one! I have—I have Ell’s nose! My sister’s hair! The freckles are to give me something all my own, I suppose.”

Trude’s laugh is loud and buoyant. She lays an affectionate kiss on Bayard’s cheek. “And very handsome freckles they are, too.”

Bayard squeezes Trude’s hands, then beams at Tanaquill. “I have all the parts of my friends’ faces I could always recognize.”

Tanaquill nods indulgently. “And now you will carry your loved ones with you on your travels, and you can return to visit occasionally, without fear of discovery.”

It is perhaps not proper, but overwhelmed with joy, Bayard rushes to embrace the fairy queen, and she seems to appreciate it. Bayard and Trude board a ship to worlds unknown not long after, under the cover of night. Maxim composes a beautiful elegy espousing the departed crown prince’s many virtues, to be printed and distributed to the people, just as we announced Alaric’s death after we regained control of the castle. And unlike his father’s obituary, not one word of our praise for Bayard is a lie.

I retreat to my chambers—a false widow, but a widow all the same. I go to the trunk in a spare room and withdraw the mourning clothes Zita thought I wouldn’t need. I feel a wistful closeness to my father in this moment.

The courtiers, amenable and pliable as usual, don’t fuss when we announce Bayard is dead and I, as the last D’Harcourt, will be coronated in his place. They have never been particularly argumentative in the past, but I do wonder if, on some level, Tanaquill’s last gift to Bayard also included a little bit of magical persuasion to ease the details of his departure and send him smoothly on his way. The courtiers certainly know he did not die in the battle, but none of them seem inclined to spread that news among the populace. He will truly begin his new life with nothing to hold him back.

Draped in black silk and a skirt lined with raven’s feathers, I meet my right-hand man in the king’s—*ahem*—the queen’s study. I have plans I’d like to run by him.

The heat of exciting ideas alights in my chest as I describe my apprenticeship edict. It will command every adolescent of noble birth to embark on an apprenticeship with a common tradesman and learn not just the value of an honest day's work, but discover firsthand how ordinary people live. I hope this shared experience will engender a greater understanding and sympathy between the aristocrats and ordinary people. We'll pay the guildsmen generously for taking on the noble spawn, of course, as I imagine they'll be a handful at first, and fair compensation will be more than necessary. It will infuse our village economies with the gold Alaric spent years hoarding, and I hope that after a few years, we'll find the nobility embracing the opportunity to learn, grow, and be useful. I think of Maxim's love of smithing—of how it gives him insight others don't have—and the way Trude lit up with joy when she embroidered her first handkerchief. The nobility will no longer take for granted all that the commonfolk contribute, and they will give back to the kingdom as well, instead of lingering in selfishness and malaise. No more Bernadines, confused about what ordinary people have to offer. Instead, our society will become interconnected, regardless of rank.

And at the same time, I will welcome community leaders like Rowan, village elders, guild captains, and individuals of otherwise low birth into the world of politics, to advise me and help guide our legislative decisions. I may be closer to a peasant than any queen we've had before, but I cannot speak to every experience. We need more voices in the room. We'll build a bridge between the nobility and the common people and enrich all the kingdom as a result.

Planning is not too unlike dreaming, I find. It's just more concrete.

Maxim takes the quill, jotting down my ideas until his hands are stained to the wrists with black ink. He isn't wearing gloves today, but his wolf's head cane leans against the desk. He carries Bayard with him still. "What about the army?" he asks me.

"We'll release the men drafted for the fairy war, drastically lower taxes with the army downsized, and sign a real treaty with Queen Tanaquill. We'll disseminate truths about the fae in all subsequent pamphlets so the people can educate themselves on how to deal fairly with them. No one will ever need to enter into a deal without fully understanding the terms. They won't

have to seek escape from Holbein, and if we don't offend the fairies, we can live peacefully side by side with them."

"And," Maxim adds, making a note, "the other magical creatures will settle down with the fairies back in Holbein."

"Furthermore," I say, my voice speeding with excitement, "there will no longer be a draft. If our causes are not worthy enough to inspire volunteers, then we ought not to be fighting that war anyway."

Maxim reaches out an ink-stained hand for mine. I let him take it, treasuring the heat that still ignites when our fingers touch. This is not a flash in the pan, what's between us. It's the warm, crackling fireplace you return to when darkness falls and the night is cold.

"I love you," Maxim says, eyes trained downward at the list of plans between us. "You don't have to tell me you return my feelings. I hope you will one day, of course, but there isn't any rush." Now his gaze flicks to mine, hypnotic. Open, vulnerable, and irresistible. "I know you're technically still married to my best friend… ."

I tighten my grip on his hand. "Not in my heart."

Maxim's wolf-grin widens. He is not threatening to me anymore, but he is still sharp. I don't think that will ever change. Nor would I want it to. I was right in my initial assessment of him; sometimes Max is like nothing as much as he is like a vicious pinch. But a nice pinch is sometimes what you need to remind yourself the good things around you aren't a dream.

"Then let me make my vow to you," he murmurs. "From this day and forever, I swear to be honest with you. I swear to respect you and to protect you to the best of my ability. I cannot promise there will never be pain, but I can promise to never break your heart. I vow to be a better man for you, if not a perfect saint."

I give an embarrassingly phlegmy laugh, my fingers tracing his cheek. "I don't want a perfect saint."

"Oh, good," Maxim laughs—before becoming deadly serious again. "Finally, I vow to love you purposefully. Not by accident. Every day until I die."

I draw his face to mine, meeting it with a slow, lingering kiss. "And I swear to return your love and attentions in kind. I swear to be true to you. I

swear to tease and pester you mercilessly when you deserve it. I swear to work with you to improve the world around us. And I swear not to leave you and go wandering. You will never have to lay down tar to catch me. I swear to never run away."

"That sounds …" Maxim says, running a hand through my hair and probably streaking some of my curls ink-black, "… like a very fair deal."

"Glad you like it, treacherous adviser," I say, slipping out of my chair and into his lap, arms wrapped lazily around his neck.

Maxim throws back his head and laughs, tightening his grip on my waist. "I like *you*, benevolent tyrant." He lifts my arm to his mouth—kissing his way tenderly down its twice-healed scar.

I scrunch my nose at him. A blush creeps into my cheeks, but I don't bother hiding it. I'm not hiding anything anymore.

What I have with Maxim is nothing like my old dreams. It's not a fantasy. It's substantial, real life. I wouldn't have ever imagined this for myself, waltzing around my attic, or staring out the window of my old kitchen. No, this reality actually exceeds my hopes, proving that even the greatest dreamers can suffer from a failure of imagination.



We let a respectful amount of time pass before my official coronation. When the time comes, my sisters meet me at the door to the throne room, as they might have done before my wedding if I hadn't sent them away. Completely oblivious to the way they ruffle my hair, Amalia and Freida pull me into a bone-crushing hug.

I don't mind.

They have been uncharacteristically quiet and self-reflective lately. Their mother's death was hard on them, even if they knew she wasn't a kind woman. And I understand why. It's difficult to admit—but Stepmother's death was hard on me, too. I didn't feel the gratification, the vindication, I thought I'd feel when she was vanquished. Reality is messier than that. I still don't forgive her, and perhaps I never will, but I cannot feel triumph either.

“Ell,” Freida says, my cheek pressed against her clammy one. “We’re so proud of you.”

“Really, truly,” Amalia chirps. She’s sniffling back tears. “And I swear, it’s not because we want to get things out of our new queen.”

“A suspiciously specific denial,” I tease, yanking playfully on one of Amalia’s curls.

“Honestly, though,” Freida says, pulling back. She looks different than she used to. She’s still in garish green, just as Amalia still favors vibrant pink. But she is steadier, calmer than she was before. Her new sense of serenity bleeds through to the way she holds herself. “We can’t stop thinking about that fairy.”

“Galiena?” I ask.

“Yes,” Amalia confirms, quietly, playing with her sleeve instead of meeting my eye.

“She didn’t forgive the king,” Freida says. She seems to be chewing on the inside of her cheek. “And I don’t really blame her. She did terrible things, but he did terrible things to her first.”

“It isn’t surprising she wouldn’t forgive him,” Amalia adds. Her eyes are fixed on me.

“I suppose not,” I concede.

“But I don’t want to be that terrible,” Freida says, her voice a croak. “I don’t ever want to be so evil someone would rather shatter than forgive me.”

“Nor I!” Amalia says, her sniffing unable to stem the tide of tears and snot.

This time, I’m the one who pulls my sisters into a hug.

I know it will take effort to repair our relationship, but I’m willing to roll up my sleeves and do the hard work. And for the first time, I really believe they’re ready, too.

Trumpets blow as I enter the throne room. Countless silks rustle against marble as the courtiers sweep into their bows and curtsies. My sisters slink behind me down the aisle, holding the train of my long, black gown.

At the end of the room, on one side of the golden throne, is Maxim in a suit of ember-black and shining epaulets. Judging by the grin on his face, he doesn't seem to mind I'm being crowned instead of him. The other arm of my chair is flanked by Zita, wearing a military-inspired cobalt blue gown, with a commander's blue cap over her jet-colored hair. My brilliant, incisive, *never-tactful* General D'Chambermaid.

When the time comes, I place the fleur-de-lis crown on my own head. The room cheers, and I hope that the people gathered at the front gate cheer, too. I hope they know I'll stand by them for as long as I live, and do right by them.

It occurs to me, as the heavy gold connects with my head, making it almost difficult to lift my neck, that the costume jewelry I wore for my portrait was plenty regal-looking, and much lighter to boot. I should look into selling some of the royal gems and crowns and giving that money back to the people. Who needs all this pomp anyway? I'd be fine wearing a handkerchief in my hair, rather than a crown.

Ermengarde, now considerably slenderer than she was even a few days ago, having just given birth to a litter of sleek gray and piebald baby rats, pokes her head out of the pocket of my gown and nuzzles my hand. I'm sure there are people who would object to me filling the palace with a new generation of rodents, but ultimately, we all know there are far worse things a palace *could* be filled with.

I stand from the throne, addressing my courtiers. "From this day forward, let the kingdom of Holbein be one that meets injustice with justice, lies with truth, and kindness with the same kindness in return. Work with me to create a land that is merciful and wise, one that cares for the needs of all who pass through it."

I descend from the dais, heading for the treasury—and then the front gates. Freida and Amalia pick up my train again to ensure I don't trip, and I realize how much gold I could conceivably fit in a length of fabric that extravagant. I almost long to have Bayard here to help me pitch gold over the fence, but I know my allegedly-deceased husband is quite happy traveling the world with my man-stealing, gorgeous, indescribably wonderful lady-in-waiting—and I don't wish them to hurry back too soon on my account.

We have enough, the five of us: my evil stepsisters, my horribly impertinent maid, my treacherous adviser—who will now only ever be treacherous on my behalf—and me. Queen Ellain the Liar is what I hear they're all calling me, though perhaps with just a *touch* of pride.

And I can't deny the accuracy of the title.

But from now on, I intend to be honest. And I can honestly say that with my court of rodents and rogues and social climbers, I expect to live very much happily ever after.

THE END

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To be sitting here, typing out these words of gratitude for my second book, feels almost like an impossible task. Last month my debut came out, and today I am flooded with memories of every friend and family member who cheered me on and came out to support me. How do you begin listing names when you feel a need to thank everyone you know?

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Contents

Title Page
Copyright Notice

A NOTE TO THE READER
ONE
TWO
THREE
FOUR
FIVE
SIX
SEVEN
EIGHT
NINE
TEN
ELEVEN
TWELVE
THIRTEEN
FOURTEEN
FIFTEEN
SIXTEEN
SEVENTEEN
EIGHTEEN
NINETEEN
TWENTY
TWENTY-ONE

TWENTY-TWO
TWENTY-THREE
TWENTY-FOUR

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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