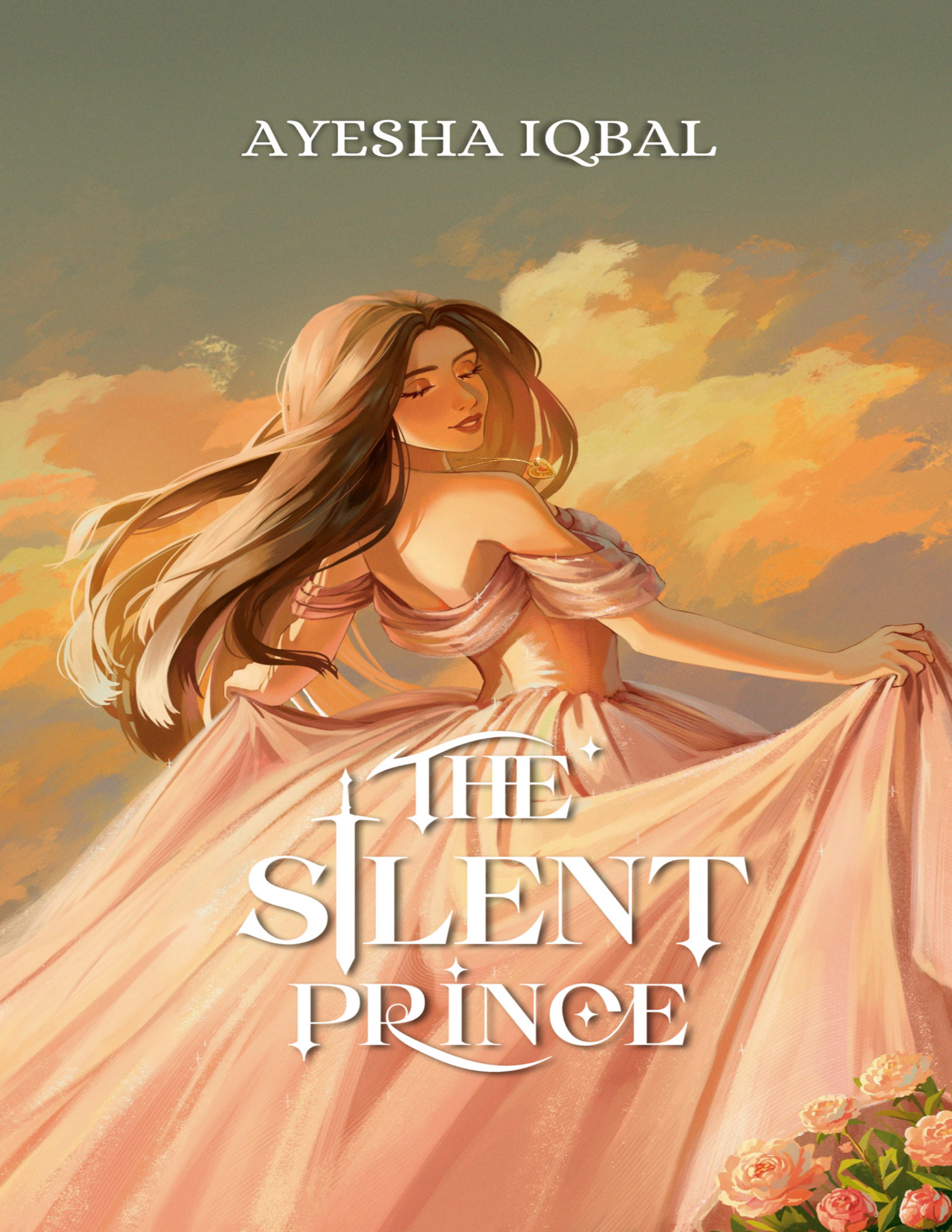
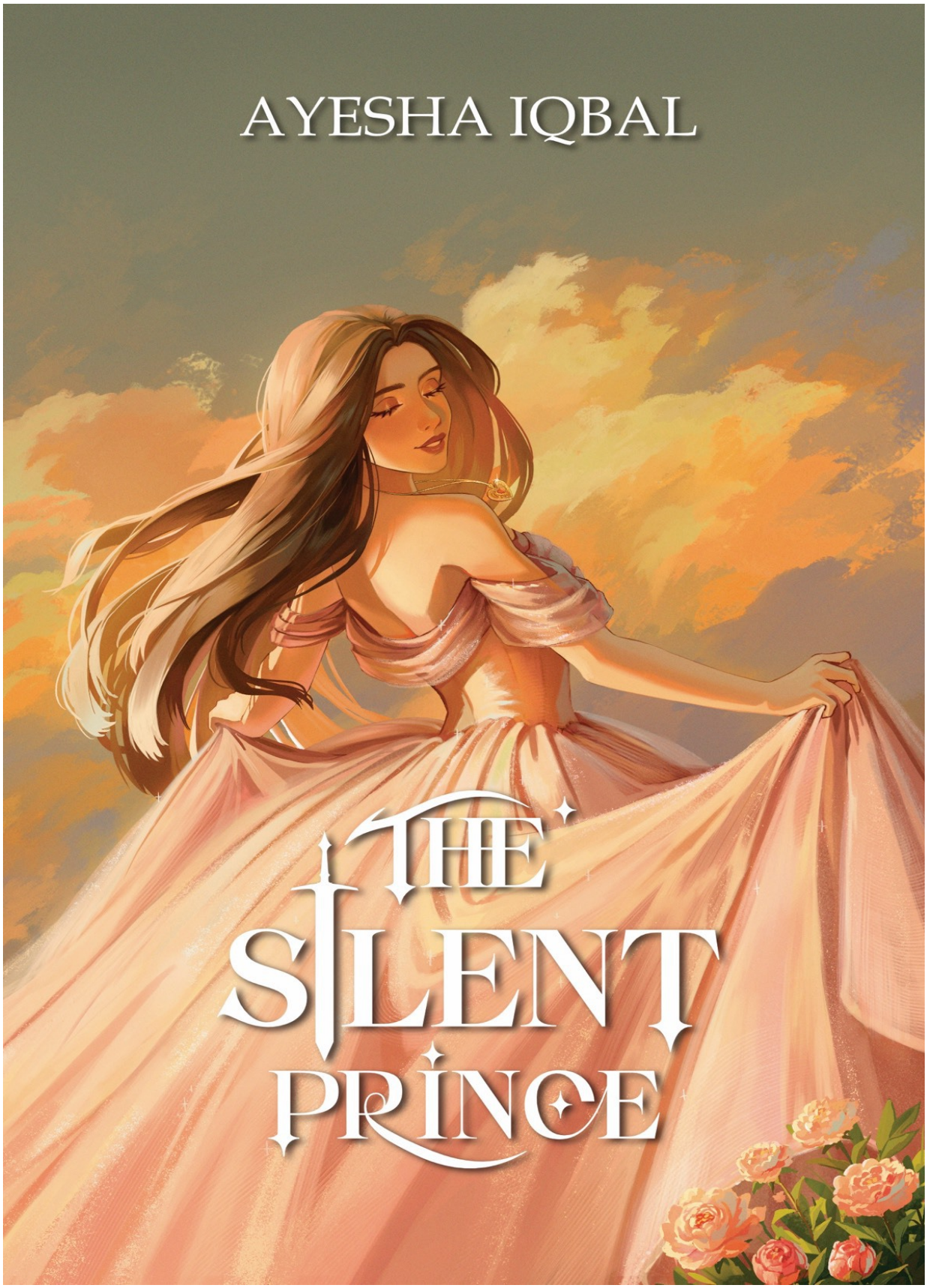
AYESHA IQBAL



THE SILENT PRINCE

AYESHA IQBAL



THE SILENT PRINCE

OceanofPDF.com

AYESHA IQBAL

THE SILENT PRINCE

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2026 by Ayesha Iqbal
Book cover art by @sophiecva
Illustration design by Pinky Kei (@pinkykei.art)
This book is entirely fictional.
The names, characters, places, events, and laws are the product of the author's creative process and are used fictionally. Any resemblance, according to the characters, the story, the plot and the events, is purely coincidental.
All rights reserved. It is strictly prohibited to produce any part of this book in any form or by any mechanical or electrical means, including information storage and retrieval systems. Respect for copyright is paramount.
It is important to note that no part of this book is to be used or reproduced in any form or manner from artificial intelligence
technologies or systems. The author's stance on technological
reproduction is clear. Everything within the story is intentional. The pacing, events, emotions, grammar, and most importantly, the timelines

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

TRIGGER WARNING

1. The Withering Garden
2. The Process Of Adorning
3. An Unwanted Fate
4. Burdening Tasks
5. One Final Prayer
6. Humility And Familiarity
7. A Binding Evening
8. Within These Dark Walls
9. Mocked In Silence
10. A Fleeting Touch
11. Library Of Worlds
12. The Silent Ink
13. Blossoms And Steel
14. His Private Chamber
15. Missing Silver Ring
16. The Crimson Band
17. Back Into Raeverband
18. The Green Booklet
19. Duty Of A Princess
20. An Unexpected Guest
21. Their First Closure
22. The Growing Rumors
23. Hands That Build
24. Learning His Language
25. The Bitter Table
26. The Unspoken Ledger
27. Searing Gray Dusk
28. A Consuming Fear
29. Their Shared Silence
30. A Small Admission
31. Quiet Beat Between

32. The Growing Heat
33. The Queen’s Decision
34. A Palace Divided
35. Riverath’s Future King
36. The Private Chamber

Acknowledgments

OceanofPDF.com

BOOK PLAYLIST

Josh Makazo – half of my heart
New West – Those Eyes
SYML – Where's My Love
Austin Giorgio – You Put a Spell on Me
Lana Del Rey – Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood
Benson Boone – In the Stars
AURORA – Runaway
Katy Perry – Wide Awake
Bella Kay – Steady
Taylor Swift – invisible string
Hozier – Talk

OceanofPDF.com

TRIGGER WARNING

Although this is a work of fiction centered around a fantasy world, romance and character development, it explores several sensitive themes that may be distressing to some readers, even when they are not described in a graphic detail.

This book contains themes of child abuse, physical abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, parental neglect, self-harm, family trauma, grief and the loss of loved ones, bullying, anxiety or panic attacks, threats of violence, and discussion of political fights. It also explores difficult family dynamics, including what is commonly referred to as “mommy issues” and “daddy issues”

OceanofPDF.com

To those whose petals are falling,
leaving you almost entirely bare, strength will bloom.
Even when you have nothing.

OceanofPDF.com

I

THE WITHERING GARDEN

E

The last petal finally falls.

Elara blinks back the tears threatening to fall and holds her hands together, intertwining her fingers in prayer. Despite the tremor of the morning cold, her grip tightens as she forces her frame to remain still. A rising breeze sways her long nightgown, scattering the decayed petals into the air.

Dawn mist clings to her late mother's roses. Fourteen years of mornings like this have passed, and three hundred and fifty red rose bushes stand barren before her. She has witnessed the winter desolation of every single bloom and the lack of care from her father, each fading stem sending an ache through her broken heart.

Elara remembers the sharp disbelief that followed her mother's passing, along with the sudden agony that gripped her heart. There had been hundreds of roses once, blooming across the grounds in all their color and loveliness. She had begged her father to replace them, to summon gardeners who would tend to the grounds with care, but her pleas had fallen upon a man who could afford to restore everything yet simply chose not to.

"Please, world… grant me happiness. Grant me something that can offer even a glimmer of hope," she whispers against her hands, her lips trembling. "I have already lost my mother, and my father has never held even an ounce of love for me." She sniffles, struggling to hold back the emotions rising within her. "I do not understand why the pain never ends, but please… help me."

Despite years of kneeling over fallen petals, Elara still does not know how to shape her wishes. The habit was simply an inheritance from her

mother. She had spent her early childhood watching her sit beside the blooming rose garden, enveloped in its rich fragrance, intertwining her fingers to pray.

As a child, Elara never understood what her mother asked for, or why she entrusted her future to something as fragile as a drifting petal. She knew that her mother did so, and that was enough for her to copy the gesture. Now, years later, she sits amidst the dust of the ruined garden, repeating the same ritual with the final remnants of her hope.

Her thoughts always return to the memories shared with her mother, Queen Aline. It is the only way she has learned to survive the emptiness, even though returning to those moments causes her heart to ache. A part of her still longs for the warmth her mother left behind. One memory rises above the rest, back when she was five, innocent of the cruelties of the world.

It was the day she finally gathered the courage to ask her mother why she prayed over the falling petals.

"Mama," Elara squeals as she rushes toward her mother, who is seated on the second-to-last step of the long staircase.

Her mother pauses her prayer, her intertwined fingers releasing as she gathers Elara into her arms. A red rose petal slips away beside them, forgotten.

"Careful, dear. You will fall and hurt yourself one day," she says with a smile, her soft voice filling the garden and blending in with the sounds of the wind and rustling leaves around them.

Elara lays her head against her mother's lap, where she finds far more comfort than she ever does among her thick pillows. "What were you doing?"

Her mother's smile grows, outshining the sunlight spilling across the garden. "Praying."

"Praying?" Elara asks, sitting up and staring at her mother with furrowed brows. "For what?"

Her mother chuckles. "It is simply something for me to believe in. I believe in you, and I believe in your father. But sometimes, believing in something greater gives you a reason to keep hoping."

Elara remains silent, her mind filling with confusion and curiosity.

Then her mother points ahead. When Elara turns, she notices one of the vibrant red roses has lost a petal, which drifts through the air. "See? A rose lost its petal. It lost a part of itself, but I noticed." Her mother rises and catches it before it can fly beyond the castle walls. When she returns to her place beside Elara, she places the petal in her hand, her smile remaining.

Elara looks down at the rose petal, lifting her gaze toward her beautiful mother to take in her pale, glowing skin, her vibrant green eyes, her deep brown hair, and her long flowing golden gown filling the steps. She closes her fingers around the petal, tilting her head to the side in a wordless question while her mother continues to smile down at her.

"Now, place it between your hands and intertwine your fingers," her mother instructs, using her cool hands to guide Elara's smaller ones together until the petal is safely resting between them. "Every fallen petal has lost the place it once held in the world, along with the form it once possessed." Leaning in closer, she drops her voice to a quiet whisper, as if sharing a profound secret. "It is sorrowful, yes, but it does not have to remain so. Give it a prayer, Elara, and ask for something good to come from it, whether for yourself or for someone else."

Elara smiles as the pieces fall into place. Closing her eyes and leaning toward her curled hands, she whispers, "I wish to become like you, Mama." Elara opens her eyes and looks up at her mother, searching her face for a reaction, especially the smile she loves so dearly.

Her mother laughs and plants a kiss against her temple. "You are better than me, dear. Never wish to become like me."

ELARA WIPES away a tear before it can slide down her cheek, forcing the memory aside. With a shuddering breath, she presses a hand to her throbbing heart, hating how painfully it reminds her she is still alive. She doubts the world hears or cares.

What was once lush grass has vanished, replaced by dark, lifeless earth. No insects stir among the soil, and no flowers bend beneath the wind. There are no signs of goodness remaining. The stone beneath her numbs the backs of her thighs as she remains on the second-to-last step of the staircase leading to the castle entrance. This was the same step where her mother once sat beside her with a red rose petal resting between their hands. Elara's fingers curl in her lap, clutching at her skirt, longing to grasp something real

and solid. Her gaze sweeps over the empty garden, waiting to hear a familiar voice that will never call her name again.

She had once found warmth here, comfort enough to rest her head against her mother's lap and believe that the world could still offer something good if she only knew how to ask for it.

Now, surrounded with nothing but death and decay, she believes in nothing at all. There is no vibrant red petal left for her to catch, nothing to rest between her palms as she prays, no mother beside her to tell her what those petals mean. The place before her still carries the shape of home, with none of its warmth.

The morning wind passes over the barren courtyard. She would worry for her people, but King Eric's severe laws have driven them far from the castle gates, leaving the fortress isolated from the very subjects she was born to serve.

She sits for hours, the chilled stone warming beneath the daylight. Closing her eyes, Elara imagines that time might grant her one more moment beside her mother. She fancies she can hear a soft step on the stairs behind her, prompting her to turn and meet that beloved smile. Queen Aline would sit beside her, stroke her hair, and they would talk until the shadows lengthened. It remains so clear in her mind that she expects to find her mother standing there when she opens her eyes.

Her gaze wanders across the garden once more. At its center lies a stretch of barren, dusty earth, the sunbaked soil wide enough for a royal family to cross in solemn procession. On either side, shaped paths curve around the castle, bordered by finely cut grass dulled beneath a veil of dust. Green is scarce, overwhelmed by soil and neglect.

The desolation reminds her of King Eric's wrath on the day the garden died. Dismissing her child's pleas as useless, her father lashed out at her, treating her tears like an insult to his crown. Her mother, he declared, would never see them again. Elara is certain her father forgets that the roses existed because of his own hands. She witnessed his devotion when she was a child. He abandoned his royal duties to kneel in the dirt, wearing his fine velvet robes, and pressed each rose seed into the earth, heedless of soil or decorum.

What began as a surprise became a ritual. He returned every morning to tend them, proving his love through consistency rather than words. Since her mother's passing, that man has faded. Whatever humanity once softened

King Eric is gone. His warmth turned to cruelty, aimed at Elara. He acts to this day as if her mother's passing remains her fault.

The sunlight strikes her eyes, a command to end her mourning. It is time to don another suffocating gown with a skirt that sweeps her ankles, pin her chestnut strands into a tight bun, and place the golden crown upon her head, heavy against her brow.

Turning away, she forces her weary legs up the long stretch of stairs toward the massive white entry doors. Slipping inside, she pulls the heavy wood closed, letting the familiar solitude of the castle wrap around her and accepting the white and gold once more. They are colors that gleam with purity, offering neither comfort nor warmth.

Along the grand hallway, crystal pots hold stiff, artificial silk replicas of foliage. Not a single living plant remains; this fortress has no use for things that are real. The walls are pristine white, the arches traced with gold, intricate patterns coiling along the ceiling like frozen vines. Crystal chandeliers hang unlit overhead. Tall windows soften the morning light into a pale glow, gold detailing at every joint.

The corridors are vacant. She continues down, passing closed doors and unused chambers, until she reaches her chamber. The silence feels heavier, as if the sound itself is unwelcome. Golden sconces line the walls at measured intervals, their glow unable to warm the space. Her bedchamber rests near the very end, positioned beside her father's.

To others, the placement appears honorable, a privilege befitting a princess. To Elara, it feels like a reminder. Though the doors stand side by side, their two worlds could not be further apart.

Elara steps deeper into her quarters, the space cold and white like the rest of the castle. She walks toward the bed, the only place in the chamber she truly cares for, and runs a hand over the tousled sheets. Here is where she and her mother once lay, whispering stories and humming songs until sleep claimed them.

It is here that she now occupies so many sleepless nights, reliving the memory of snapping at her mother in a childish fit of temper the day before Queen Aline passed away. The guards and her father claimed it was sickness that took her, but Elara knows the truth inside her heart. She carries the conviction that she broke her mother's spirit and caused her death. The blame belongs to her alone, even knowing she was a child. She fears she

had overburdened her mother, pushing her beyond the limits of what she could endure.

Perhaps she had been more exhausting than she ever understood at the time. Perhaps her father's harsh treatment toward her is justified because of it.

The death of Queen Aline was the exact moment Veyrenn began to feel like a prison. For as long as her mother had lived, she had served as a quiet shield, holding back the dark, volatile mindset of the King, but with her absence, his long-suppressed cruelty was fully unleashed. His grief twisted into an immediate tyranny meant to break his own subjects.

The serene quiet of the fortress dissolved beneath the relentless clank of golden armor as King Eric ordered the expansion of his guard. Knights swarmed the lower provinces to enforce sudden, unbearable laws, nailing heavy sheets of parchment onto every white-painted brick wall as permanent threats.

Trivial offenses meet with public floggings, and excessive tithes strip the common laborers of their livelihoods to fund his expanding military lines. Shouts and the distant echoes of weeping replace the usual order of the palace, while the workers who remain inside murmur their terrors in hushed, hurried tones near Elara's door.

On her morning walks through the upper corridors, her gaze lingers upon the heavy oak doors of what had once been the royal library. The vast collection of literature rests stripped from the shelves by her father's command, leaving the space hollowed and reassigned as guest quarters for visiting foreign envoys. To pass that threshold is to feel the sting of her deprivation, knowing that the simple act of reading a single page now constitutes a severe betrayal of her crown. Workers and guards no longer greet her when they pass, their eyes lowered and their voices distant.

Worst of all, a royal decree deems women lesser than men, declaring their intellects unworthy of cultivation. Elara faces these same restrictions, forced into garments she never wished to wear while the remnants of her education remain locked away. Her father's laws ensure that she obeys the oppressive rules imposed upon the women of Veyrenn, alongside the additional expectations that confine royalty further.

She hates her father with an intensity she cannot deny. Her fingers curl against the fabric of her gown. He should never have worn the crown. Yet even after his neglect, every cruel word, and every rough hand laid upon her

skin, he remains her father. She tells herself he sinks under the weight of sorrow, that his harshness is born of grief, that love remains beneath his hardened exterior. She clings to these excuses, knowing she lies to her own heart.

She has lost the person she loved most, along with the simple joys that once sustained her, such as reading, painting, and the fragile hope of friendship. The few people she had attempted to reach during those rare excursions beside her mother had kept their distance, whispering their resentments just loud enough for her to overhear. They assumed she was a spoiled child mimicking the ordinary customs of her people, viewing her through the lens of a wealth she had never requested.

There was a time when a girl from the outer district had approached her with the promise of friendship, only for the illusion to shatter almost immediately. The girl had demanded that Elara use her royal influence to compel the palace tailors to craft a specific, costly gown so that they might match, her patronizing tone carrying a transparent greed that had nothing to do with true companionship. The betrayal had left a lasting sting, proving that to the world outside her gates, she was either an object of scorn or a tool to be utilized.

A breath escapes her while she leaves the mattress, moving across the floorboards to seek the deeper sanctuary of her bathing chamber. Entering the adjoining space, another stretch of marble greets her with its familiar chill. She unties the fastenings of her gown, setting aside her heavy garments onto the stone bench. She avoids her reflection in the glass above the basin, unwilling to look upon the stark evidence of her sleepless nights and lack of appetite.

Stepping toward the sunken marble pool, she monitors the steaming water that the servants carted into the basin to fill the bath. She dips a finger beneath the surface to test the heat against her skin. Satisfied, she lowers her frame into the water, allowing the warmth to surround her while she prepares to face another day of silence and emptiness. She performs the role of a princess within a castle that has forgotten what royalty was ever meant to be.

It is another day of watching the garden die outside her window, and today will be no different.

Unless she makes it so. If she can.

OceanofPDF.com

II

THE PROCESS OF ADORNING

E

The bathing chamber's damp fog fades once the door opens. The heat of the bath fades while soothing oils sink into legs that must soon endure the weight of royal fabrics. The humid air clings to her skin, the damp edge of a towel trailing beneath her knees when she opens the door. Her footsteps falter at the sight of Walker asleep on the edge of the mattress, her caregiver's head resting against one of the white corner posts. Time disappears unnoticed in the steaming waters, or exhaustion has claimed the older woman at last.

The exhaustion upon the smooth chestnut skin reveals a weariness that words could never capture. Wavy strands of hair escape her tight bun, framing her forehead like ripples above her long white sleeves and muted beige bodice. Walker occupies this protective role since the dawn of Elara's life, when Queen Aline lay too burdened by royal duties to cradle her own child.

Her caregiver was a girl of sixteen when she first stepped within the castle walls. Her duty was to manage the wardrobe and replace the linens, but she brought a rare tenderness into the nursery. Elara grew to cherish her like a sanctuary. Her heart remained in its intense devotion toward her mother. Queen Aline was a grand figure whom Elara worshipped from afar, a light she constantly sought to please, while Walker remained the maternal anchor who dried her tears in the dark.

Walker rises every morning before dawn, entering the quarters with a care that refuses to disturb the early morning peace. There was a gentle patience in how she styled hair according to youthful whims, arrayed the young princess in chosen gowns, and adorned her with admired jewels.

Quiet listening and a smile made Elara feel seen. That devotion endures even now. Over time, such care deepened into something far beyond custom. Through every sorrow, a maternal embrace offered sanctuary, and whispered words of gentleness lingered before comfort returned.

When Elara attained her thirteenth year, the King commanded that all motherly affection cease. Her caregiver's sole purpose was to attire the princess, presenting her before the royal court with perfection. Every discovered infraction or embrace met with immediate castigation from the palace guards, and each brutal penalty forced a guarded silence between them. The memory forces her fingers to tighten their grip on the edges of her damp towel.

Past arguments prove that standing up to the King only brings further punishment, leaving her helpless. To question his choices means being locked in her quarters for days, where the guards are forbidden to enter even to light the candles, leaving her alone in the dark. Much as she loves her caregiver, distance remains her only shield. She cannot bear to cause more suffering for the woman who has protected her.

She stands by the bedside, her knuckles turning white against the wet cloth as she looks at the dark shadows of exhaustion beneath Walker's eyes. The sight of that weariness finally overcomes her fear of the rules. Stepping forward, Elara reaches out and presses her fingers against her caregiver's shoulder, giving a soft shake to wake her.

Walker draws a quick breath, her eyes opening at once. All remnants of sleep vanish, and she gives Elara her familiar smile. "Elara?"

To Walker, addressing the princess by her name whenever they are alone is a small defiance against the distance their positions demand. It remains one of the few boundaries the King never explicitly forbade, and to Elara, the simple gesture means far more than her caregiver could ever know. Within these walls, she does not have to be Her Highness, or the flawless ornament expected by the royal court. She can simply be Elara.

"I apologize," Walker says, smoothing the fabric of her long dress as she stands. "I have not slept well these past few nights. It feels as though something is keeping me awake."

Concern pulls at Elara's features. "Why? Did something happen? What were you dreaming?"

Walker chuckles, shaking her head. "Nothing you need to worry about, dear. You know how difficult sleep has become for me lately."

Elara’s brows furrow further. This has never been a habit with Walker, but she waves it aside with a smile. “Do not apologize. I would have let you rest here, had you wished.”

“Now then, shall we prepare for the morning?” Walker asks, reaching out to give Elara’s hand a gentle squeeze before stepping toward the vanity.

With a nod, Elara crosses to the vanity and claims the velvet chair before the mirror. Her reflection stares back at her, her complexion pale and drained of its former warmth. A strain on her neck pierces as she prepares for the custom of being adorned simply because she is a woman.

She has grown so accustomed to the restriction that she no longer voices her complaints. In years past, protests would have flown from her lips without fear, but now, silence is the only response she gives.

Sitting before the glass, she considers the origin of these oppressive decrees. The older palace servants frequently whispers about the change in her father after the funeral, recalling how gentle he had seemed while the Queen lived. Elara now understands that her mother had been the solitary force holding back his true nature, a boundary that made him conceal hostility toward women.

The moment Queen Aline died, that hidden mindset was unleashed upon Veyrenn, turning his grief into a campaign to humiliate and suppress every woman in the realm, beginning with his own daughter. Only two weeks ago, her father had cornered her against the wall of the corridor for the simple act of preparing tea for herself while he conversed with his knights.

He had stepped directly into her space, his voice rising as he yelled about a princess performing the labor of a servant, his hand slamming against the masonry to pin her in place. The penalty had extended far beyond his immediate rage. The kitchen maidservant who had inadvertently permitted Elara near the hearth was subjected to ten public lashes before the gates the following morning.

She swallows, her fingers pressing tightly against the armrests of the chair.

Walker’s brush moves through her damp strands, careful with each stroke as the morning air dries her hair. A sudden wince catches Elara as the bristles snag on a persistent tangle. Long hair has never been her preference. A layered cut resting just above her shoulders is preferable, revealing more of her face, but her father forbade it, claiming it was unladylike.

As the ritual continues, Walker's movements slow until the brush slips from her fingers. Concern pulls at Elara's features as she looks up into the reflection of the glass, noticing the deep fatigue completely overtaking her face. Realizing that the older woman is on the verge of collapsing from exhaustion right behind her chair, Elara reaches up to steady her hand.

Rising from her seat, Elara removes the hairbrush from Walker's loose grip. Grasping her by both arms, she guides her to the chair and settles her onto the cushion.

"Rest, Mistress Walker," she says, pressing a hand firmly on her shoulder when the older woman tries to protest. "That is an order. I can brush my own hair for once. Just rest."

Walker relaxes into the chair with a defeated sigh, her cheek resting against her palm as her eyes flicker with gratitude. She brushes down her dress, worried it might get crumpled, visible guilt spreading across her expression. "I apologize deeply, Elara."

Elara offers a reassuring smile. "Again, do not apologize. You are tired. How about you take the day to rest? I will let Father know that you need it."

Walker stiffens at the mention of the King, the softness vanishing from her posture. She immediately stands, shaking her head as she forces a tired smile. "There is no need, dear. I am fine." Stepping forward, she reaches for the hairbrush once more, though a tremor shakes her hands as her fingers move through the strands. "What hairstyle would you like? How about we go with braids?"

The familiar scent of her clove perfume envelops Elara, offering a temporary sense of security. She blinks at the sudden change in subject, realizing that Walker is avoiding the topic of her exhaustion.

"I would rather not," Elara says, taking the tool into her own hands before offering it back. "Do you remember the style where you pinned the top half like a crown?" She requests the simple choice, selecting an easy arrangement that will not require her caregiver to tire herself further.

A warm expression softens Walker's face. "Of course." She moves toward the bed and sits along its side.

ELARA SETTLES BEFORE HER, folding her legs beneath herself as she sinks into the soft mattress. Walker gathers the upper section of hair, twisting it carefully before securing the strands into a crown at the back of her head with the golden pins taken from the vanity casket.

Walker’s hands pause on Elara’s hair again. Turning toward her, Elara finds her caregiver massaging her own temples, as if attempting to dissolve a deep-seated ache. Walker catches her staring and purses her lips, dropping her hands to Elara's shoulders with a gentle pressure to remind her to fix her posture.

“Keep straight, Elara,” she instructs softly, a small chuckle leaving her. The familiar comfort of her clove perfume fails to ease Elara's mind now, as the earthy bitterness of the medicinal tincture lingering on Walker’s clothes has been troubling her since the moment her caregiver approached.

Elara’s eyes widen at the sharp smell, but she forces her concern aside as a faint laugh escapes her. “You are exactly like Mother,” she whispers, the admission carrying more warmth than expected.

The remaining length of hair falls freely over Elara’s shoulders, the soft waves framing her face before cascading down her back as the style is nearly finished.

“Your mother was far better, my dear,” Walker says, a second, shorter chuckle following her words. “There has to be someone reminding you to care for yourself.”

A flush spreads across Elara’s cheeks. “I do remember to take care of myself,” Elara grumbles, picking at the bedclothes.

Moments like these, when they speak of her mother or remind one another of older memories, warm her heart enough to make this otherwise stifling ritual feel worthwhile. It is all for Walker.

“I honestly do not see any resemblance between myself and your mother,” Walker admits, those trembling hands continuing their work. “You remind me of Her Majesty. The same kindness, the same features, and even your voices possesses a similar melody.”

Rather than warming, Elara’s heart sinks. Her gaze drops to the golden heart pendant resting against her collarbone. She thumbs the pendant, caressing the intricate design and the cool, unyielding gold surface. An image bursts into the forefront of her mind, revealing her mother dancing in the garden with this same necklace glinting in the sunlight.

Walker’s thumbs caress her shoulders. “Do not be saddened.”

“I am not sad,” Elara whispers, though a heavy breath betrays the lie. “It is only that I truly do not resemble her. It has always been… my wish to become like her.” She swallows, lowering her gaze to the floor.

“Then,” Walker murmurs, “your wish has already been granted. You simply do not see it.”

The tension in her muscles eases as warmth steals through her chest. With Walker’s exquisite gift for language, Elara knows the woman possesses no capacity for deceit. The compliment settles within her, allowing her to believe, if only for this single moment, that perhaps she carries more of her mother's spirit than she thought.

“Thank you,” is all she can manage before the final arrangements of her strands are complete. Elara rises, careful to keep her eyes from drifting toward the mirror. “The floral beige dress,” she murmurs. “It is a pleasant color.”

An agreeing nod sends Walker toward the wardrobe. Ornate wooden chests stand alongside low vanities holding velvet-lined compartments for jewelry. As Walker lifts the gown from the wardrobe, Elara lets the towel fall away. As always, she presses her hands to her thighs to hide the silver scars etched in her skin. They were the remnants of a habit born at sixteen, a desperate attempt to turn her internal pain outward, though the physical ache had never truly taken the sorrow away. Forcing the thought down, she focuses on the fabric and steps forward to dress.

Elara attempts to shield the scars by pressing her palms against her thighs, fingers sealed tightly together over the silver lines.

Walker returns with the dress. From a distance, the fabric resembles a gentle sweep of light, featuring a bodice smoothly sculpted without harsh embellishment and sleeves that drape softly along the arms. The wide skirt falls in layered folds, glimmering as if brushed with something closer to powdered starlight than true sparkle. She laces Elara into the gown, pulling the ribbons tighter than normal. The fabric hangs looser than before against a thinning frame, an observation upon which neither woman offers a comment.

Retrieving a small velvet pouch of slender silver pins, Walker adjusts the gown. The fabric rests against the smooth surface of her cotton chemise, the tight lacing pressing against Elara’s ribs as Walker finishes pinning the remaining folds into place.

She takes a deep breath, dreading the next part of the ritual. A golden box, smooth and unadorned, is brought forward. Walker opens the lid, revealing the crown within. Elara dips her head down, allowing her

caregiver to place the metal onto her hair. Straightening again, she already feels an ache coming on with the added weight.

Walker reaches out to pat her cheek reassuringly, offering a silent comfort before stepping back. “Eat well for breakfast this time, dear. And make sure you eat enough fruits.”

A soft murmur of gratitude follows before she steps out into the corridor, anxiety pulsing beneath her skin at the prospect of another day and another performance. Passing her father’s closed doors, she descends the marble steps toward two knights standing below, their golden armor catching the morning sun. Light spills through a tall window beside them, scattering across the white walls in shifting rays.

At the sound of her footsteps, they turn in unison and bow. “Good morning, Your Highness.”

She gives a polite nod. “Good morning,” she says, pausing to pick at her nails. When one of the guards notices the gesture, she quickly clasps her hands behind her back to stop the nervous movement. “Has Father come down yet?”

The knights exchange a fleeting look before one speaks, his gaze fixed straight ahead. “Yes, Your Highness. His Majesty is in the dining chamber.”

Elara’s heart sinks. “I see. Thank you.”

Turning right, she continues toward the dining hall. Pausing by the doorway, she spots her father standing with his back turned, deep in conversation with a knight. His velvet beige cape drapes heavily to the floor, and a golden crown glimmers atop short hair streaked with a mixture of white and dark brown.

“I need you to spread the news to the kingdom exactly as written on this paper,” the King commands, his voice carrying through the space. “I will grant you the funds to send to Raelith, and my men will scribe as many copies as necessary. The kingdom must be informed of the upcoming wedding, and of Elara’s departure after her marriage.”

The words land heavily in the silence, stealing the air from her lungs. Instinctively, her hand flies to the pendant resting on her collarbone, her eyes widening as a sudden weakness gives way in her knees. Turning swiftly, she presses her back against the cool wall outside the hall to maintain some semblance of composure.

Marriage.

OceanofPDF.com

III

AN UNWANTED FATE

E

Elara's lips part, but no sound follows.

Trying to calm the rolling in her stomach, Elara steps further into the dining hall. In front of her father, she searches his face, looking for a hint that it was nothing more than a cruel joke, clinging to the vain hope that she heard wrong and that he will correct himself. King Eric's expression remains immovable, shaped by authority rather than care. He does not even bother to look at her, refusing to acknowledge his daughter's presence in the chamber as he continues giving instructions to the knight before him.

Elara finally finds her voice. "What?" The word emerges thin. Fragile. Drawing a ragged breath, she repeats the question louder, disbelief sharpening its edges. "My departure?"

Her father sweeps his beige robe aside as he strides to the table, dropping into a chair. He folds his hands, his fingers brushing along the polished wood grains of the surface. "Was I unclear?" he asks, piercing her with a sharp glare as his eyes finally lock onto hers. "You will marry Prince Cael Everhart of Riverath. The dinner is tomorrow evening at this dining hall. His family, specifically Raelith, will arrive soon."

"Why?" The sound tears from her throat. "Why would you arrange this without telling me? I am not prepared, Father. I do not want to marry anyone, let alone to a stranger!" Elara says, her voice rising against her fear.

"Your wants mean nothing when it comes to the preservation of the crown," her father interrupts, his voice entirely stripped of warmth. "Sacrifices are required of those in our position. This marriage secures an

alliance with Riverath while removing you as a concern. You will be cared for by a prince. It is practical."

Her father cuts into the fish on his plate, lifting a bite to his mouth with callous ease, utterly unbothered by her distress.

A bitter laugh escapes Elara. One of the knights shifts, his hand drifting to the hilt of his sword. Her father lifts a single hand, halting the guard without so much as turning his head. "There is nothing practical about bartering away your own blood," she snaps, years of suppressed suffering fracturing her composure.

King Eric stiffens, his expression tightening. He glares at Elara, his eyebrows furrowed above a harsh scowl. He turns to the knight beside him, snapping his arm toward the exit of the hall.

"Leave us," he commands.

The knight's eyes widen at the outburst. He bows, straightens, and leaves without another word, the heavy doors closing behind him.

When the knight is gone, Elara fills her lungs, stepping closer to her father. "The prince will care for me?" she repeats, the words tasting foreign on her tongue, her lips turning up in a sarcastic smile. "In the way you never did?"

Her father's jaw tightens, a muscle flickering beneath his skin. He drops his voice to a dangerous growl, his eyes locking onto hers. "Mind your tongue, Elara."

"And what care did you ever show this kingdom?" Her voice rises despite her effort to restrain it, reverberating against the high ceiling of the stone chamber. "You starved your people. You buried them beneath laws that strangled their very survival while you sat on your throne counting your gold!"

The accusations pour out, fueled by years of overheard suffering. Beneath these castle walls, she had listened to the muted protests of knights and grim reports from the villages. Kitchen staff whispered fearful confidences over the hearth, while the women of the court spoke of families who had gone without succor. For more than a decade, those fragments of suffering had remained at the edges of Elara's life, impossible to confront because her father had forbidden her from stepping beyond the gates.

King Eric's eyes flare. "You will not speak in such a manner to your king," he says, his glare unyielding. "I will not permit it."

“Not permitted to speak the truth?” Stepping forward, Elara clenches her hands at her sides until her nails bite into her palms. The pain grounds her as tears prick her eyes. “You avoided me my entire life. You dressed me like an ornament and called it duty. You demanded perfection from a child who was never offered comfort.”

“I provided you with everything you could need,” he says. “What more could you wish for?”

“You provided me with nothing!” Elara blinks back tears, her voice cracking as she spits the accusation at him. “You gave me possessions, but never a life. You locked me behind stone walls and golden gates and called it protection. You punished curiosity. You kept me from the people I was born to serve, from the land that was meant to be mine.”

“Enough!” her father roars, slamming his hands onto the table with enough force to make her jump. Pushing his chair back, he towers over her like a heavy shadow. “I gave you safety,” he growls, his eyes narrowing as Elara shrinks away from his frame. “I gave you finery, jewels, and a title. I provided you with every luxury this palace could afford, yet you stand before me as an ungrateful child. You will obey this command, and you will marry the prince of Riverath.”

“That is enough,” he says, taking a step forward. His breath rushes heavily from his nostrils while his fingers curl into tight fists, betraying a desperate attempt to refrain from striking her down once more. It is a physical violence she has known before, a truth that has taught her to fear the weight of his anger for years.

“You will conduct yourself with dignity. The prince expects you to be well dressed and well behaved. You can do that, can you not?” A patronizing smile touches his lips. He lowers himself back into his chair, lifts his fork, and resumes his meal. “You are dismissed.” The command falls flat.

“Why did you arrange this marriage?” A trembling sob escapes her mouth, fracturing her voice. “Is it to gain power for only yourself, that you are willing to throw me away as though I am not made from your own blood?” Tears stream down her cheeks, her composure already gone. “Or is it that you blame me for Mother’s death? Is that why you wish to never see or acknowledge me again?”

King Eric stills entirely, his eyes widening with a torrent of unsaid emotions. With a snapping movement, he turns, grabs a golden platter from

the dining table, and hurls it across the hall. The metal shatters violently against the wall, shards raining down over one of the hanging candle sconces.

Elara flinches, stepping back as he closes the distance between them. “I will still stand my ground no matter what you do,” she cries, though the terror of her own father grips her tighter than before. “Mother would never approve of this treatment!”

“Do not involve your mother,” King Eric warns, his knuckles turning white.

King Eric steps even closer, towering over her. “I adored your mother. She was the sweetest soul to ever grace this realm,” he says, his own voice trembling with anger. “But you?” he sneers, his eyes sweeping over her frame with complete disdain. “I never wanted you. I planned for a son, and what did I get instead? A cheap, hollow imitation of the woman I loved.”

The breath escapes her, and she clamps a hand over her mouth to stifle a rising sob. Unwanted. She was unwanted simply because she was not born a son. Her knees buckle beneath the weight of his words, and she collapses onto the stone floor, the layered folds of her skirt pooling around her.

King Eric smiles, watching his own cruelty triumph as he continues without mercy. A violent panic seizes her as the man towering above her offers no remorse or succor. “This is for the best, Elara. For both of us,” he says. Turning toward the knights who watch the display with quiet appall by the door, he commands, “Remove yourselves. Leave the princess to her composure.”

The doors slam shut, leaving her alone in the silence.

Elara lies on the cold ground, feeling the crown slips from her head and land upon the stone with a heavy thud. Burying her face into her trembling forearm, she gasps out her cries beneath the weight of the grim future ahead.

A forced marriage to a prince who remains an absolute stranger. A foreign title, an unfamiliar family, and a kingdom she does not know await her. She must leave Veyrenn behind, driven out by the final truth that her father never wanted her.

Her eyes squeeze shut as she tries to clear her vision, but the darkness makes no difference. Elara does not know how long she remains on the cold floor, mourning the last shreds of identity she had clung to. Hurried

footsteps echo through the hall, followed by the worried breathing of the one woman she still holds dear.

“Elara!” Walker drops to her knees beside the princess, guiding her head onto her lap. “What happened, my dear? Where are the guards? I heard they were dismissed.” She keeps holding Elara close. Her hands stroke through the disordered hair, her lips pressing against her forehead in desperate hope of offering solace.

Elara trembles, pressing herself deeper into the embrace as the tears refuse to end.

“No, do not move,” Walker whispers, shushing her. “My Elara.”

Elara rests against Walker’s chest, eyelids dropping as exhaustion pulls her under.

“Rest, my dear,” Walker whispers against her temple.

OceanofPDF.com

IV
BURDENING TASKS

C

The upcoming winter breeze grows.

His gaze flickers upon the withered flowers and the few that remain blooming. A small number of the leaves carry shades of yellow and orange, though many still preserve their green hue. The sight infuriates Cael, as he harbors a resentment toward the cold. It remains overbearing, and on rare occasions, the rain falls to let the freezing temperature grow further until it numbs his frame.

It is this bitter air that stirs the grounds as he stares ahead at the flowing fountain, where small drops of water land upon his heavy black boots, casting a silver hue under the afternoon sun. He remains seated on one of the garden benches, alone now that the caretakers have completed their daily tasks.

At first, he had hoped his bedchamber would grant him peace, but the chamber lacked the bracing, open air of the grounds. His pulse continues to race, fueled by the echoes of the earlier confrontation with his father, King Raelith.

The decree had been absolute. An arranged marriage to a princess from the neighboring realm of Veyrenn. Years ago, a desire for true understanding had driven him to study every kingdom on the continent, examining accurately drawn maps, calculating riding distances, and devouring successive editions of historical texts. For a prince of Riverath, such knowledge was mandatory to comprehend foreign traditions.

From everything he had learned, Veyrenn was a realm of oppression. It was a land devoid of true freedom, defined by a systemic disrespect toward women who were viewed as inherently lesser than men. The very concept

disgusted him. Trying to imagine himself entangled with such traditions proved impossible to accept, especially with the thought of his younger sister, Kaera, who was only two years from her twentieth winter.

He cannot comprehend the thought of Kaera being harmed under such archaic laws, or being forced to conceal the person she truly is. Whenever the burdens of state overwhelmed their parents, Cael would step directly in front of his sister, shield her from the demands of the court, and sign his refusal with an unyielding clarity that left no chamber for argument. Freedom remains his highest virtue. Marrying into a lineage that systematically strips away human dignity feels like a fundamental betrayal of his own morals, a compromise sealed by a mere stroke of a pen upon a treaty.

The prospect of binding himself to a princess he does not know, raised beneath entirely different traditions, twists his gut with apprehension. Cael gives a slow shake of his head, entirely confused as to why his father would suddenly demand such a transactional alliance. His fingers curl into tight fists, the warm skin across his knuckles turning stark and bloodless.

Throughout his life, his father had been the one man who truly treated him like a son, even if the expectations placed upon him reached above the sky. None of this diminished the profound respect King Raelith held for his boy, occasionally setting aside royal obligations simply to spend time beside him.

For his stepmother, Queen Maereth, the opposite was true.

His biological mother had vanished into the darkness one night, leaving both father and son behind without a trace. She left no explanatory letter, leaving Cael with only a faint, desperate hope that she had at least spared a hesitating thought for the boy she abandoned. His father had worked tirelessly to raise his child alone, with little supported from any of his other relatives.

That was when Queen Maereth entered their lives. Cael never understood how his father could marry her. Once, after the Queen had shouted at him for pouring her the incorrect wine and his father had remained entirely silent, he signed to him, demanding to know where he could possibly have met such a woman. It saddened him deeply to watch his father stay quiet, his face carrying a distinct trace of fear that rendered him incapable of defending his boundaries or protecting his children. The King’s face always carried a distinct trace of fear and hesitancy around her,

rendering him incapable of defending his boundaries or protecting his children.

Driven by a rage, Cael had signed to his father, demanding to know where he could have possibly met such a woman.

Rather than taking offense at his son’s anger and disrespect toward his wife, his father merely smiled. He admitted that Queen Maereth had approached him first, brimming with a confidence that demanded nothing while offering everything. She promised to care for him, to love him, and to provide a mother’s touch.

Cael had been a mere child of four when she first arrived, and during those early years, he genuinely believed her devotion was true. She oversaw his education and respected his boundaries, though an underlying look of frustration always marred her features because he could not speak.

King Raelith believed that Maereth truly saw his kindness and his sensitive heart. He had endured the hardships of expanding a kingdom entirely alone, and in his desperation to feel loved, he clung to her blindly. Even when the King admitted she had changed over time, he spoke with a hesitation that avoided the truth of her actions. Cael sensed that deep, desperate vulnerability in his father, a weakness that prevented the King from ever providing the proper answer his son needed.

Left unchecked, Queen Maereth’s cruelty grew until it turned physical toward the prince himself. He gives a slow shake of his head, entirely confused as to why his father would suddenly demand such a transactional marriage. His stepmother was certainly capable of engineering such a cruel arrangement. Though his father had explained how Maereth came into their lives after his biological mother abandoned them, Cael never understood the marriage.

He could never comprehend how his father would allow the cruelty to endure. In truth, his father did not even know about the worst of it. Cael's hand reaches back, his fingers tracing the heavy scars that mar his shoulders through the fabric of his shirt.

He rips his hand away, forcing the memory into the dark. He had kept his torment a secret for years, refusing to shatter the affection his father still held for the woman.

Cael had spent his life protecting his father from Maereth’s malice. Now, his father has unknowingly bartered him away to another suffocating

prison. He was trading one prison for another, sacrificing his own future simply to keep his father’s borders safe.

Cael leans back against the bench, his fingers gripping the edge of the stone as a tremor passes through him.

His heart still thumps against his ribs, the meeting of the council where his father announced that to secure a lasting peace and new trade routes, Cael would wed Princess Elara of Veyrenn swirling through his mind. Breath had fled him at the declaration, thoughts of responsibilities, affections, and actions he was not ready for crashing into his skull so rapidly his head spun.

Stifled laughs had traveled through the crowd, the nobles whispering their pity for the foreign princess who was to be bound to a prince who could not even speak his vows.

Cael is pulled back to reality by a gentle poke against his left cheek. Turning his head, he finds Kaera sitting beside him, a soft smile gracing her lips. Her long black hair rests across her shoulders, cascading down her arms. Her ankle-length black dress features short sleeves, a modest square neckline, and polished velvet shoes. It is a gown she wears often, a known favorite, proving that King Raelith values the comfort of his family far above the suffocating, rigid dress codes of other courts.

“What are you doing? It is scorching out here,” Kaera notes, smoothing her skirt as she settles into the space beside him.

A smile pulls at Cael’s lips, the first to surface since this morning. He raises his hands to reply, his fingers cutting through the air with the language he uses to communicate with family and palace staff. *The heat is better than the suffocating silence of my chamber.*

Her smile fades as she leans back against the bench. After a lingering beat of silence, she speaks again, voicing the truth he had tried to hide. “You are afraid. You are afraid of what this girl will be like. You do not want to get married yet.”

Cael averts his gaze to the running fountain, watching droplets scatter across the stone near his boots. He tenses, avoiding Kaera’s eyes. She places her warm hand over his clenched fist, her gentle touch loosening the tightness in his shoulders.

“Father has a reason,” Kaera admits, her voice softening. “He never does anything without a purpose.”

Cael pulls his arm back, severing the touch. His hands lift, his fingers cutting through the air with sharp, rapid motions. *And I must assume more duties on top of everything else? Our own people mock me simply because I was born mute. I am not seen as a great prince. The high lords do not wish for me to inherit the crown.* A shuddering breath escapes his mouth.

"Let us hope for the best," Kaera reassures him, leaning closer.

Cael's hands drop to his lap. His chest rises and falls in an uneven rhythm, his gaze tracking the empty space on his finger where a wedding band will soon sit.

He cannot share Kaera's optimism. A positive outlook has never come easily to him throughout his twenty-three years, not even as a child. Offering a small nod, Cael lets her know that the attempt at comfort is appreciated.

Kaera smiles. "Perhaps the princess is kind, and I can finally have a friend of my own."

Cael raises an eyebrow with curiosity and a touch of amusement. *Is that why you are attempting to comfort me?* He signs, the ghost of a smile touching the corners of his lips.

A laugh escapes her. "I am only trying to remain positive. Actually, I recently found a book in our library and read a beautiful line. It said, *Keep your face always toward the sunshine, and shadows will fall behind you.*" Kaera picks at a loose thread on her gown, her voice soft when she speaks. "I do not like it when you are saddened."

His expression softens at his younger sister's affection. Despite the cruelty of the court and the isolation surrounding his life, he appreciates Kaera immensely, grateful that Queen Maereth had entered his father's life if only because it brought this girl into the family. She stands, smoothing her skirt before turning toward the stone stairs. Cael watches her ascend until the dark entrance of the palace swallows her from view.

He looks down at his callused hands one last time, unaware that across the border, the princess he dreads is trapped in an identical terror.

OceanofPDF.com

V

ONE FINAL PRAYER

E

Elara's eyes open, finding Walker asleep nearby.

Her vision remains blurred from the remnants of the panic attack. A deep, pulsing throb aches across the sides and back of her head, forcing a soft whimper from her lips. She is back in her own bedchamber with no memory of how she got there. Though the heavy curtains are drawn tight, a gap in the velvet reveals the darkness outside her window. The midnight hour has already passed.

She has been changed into her nightgown, the familiar soft fabric brushing against her skin. There is no need to question the transition, knowing that Walker is the only soul permitted to tend to her in such a state. Her head does not rest upon a pillow, even though her body reclines against the familiar softness of the mattress. Tilting her head, she finds Walker. The caretaker's eyes are closed in deep sleep, shadows beneath them revealing her exhaustion.

The moment Elara sits up to adjust her weight, her hands grip the sheets for support. The movement stirs the stillness, and Walker awakens with a sharp inhale, straightening her posture as her eyes widen in alarm.

"Elara?" she whispers, a wide smile of profound relief breaking across her features. "You are all right. You are all right. My dear is finally awake." Her voice carries a slight rasp from sleep.

Elara takes a moment to piece together the fragments of the previous morning: the bitter argument with King Eric, his devastating admission, the forced marriage, and the violent panic that had shattered her composure. Her grip tightens on the sheets as the reality of the situation floods back, and she fights the instinct to spiral once more. Anchoring herself in the

present, she notices Walker clutching a small, damp cloth that has left a dark patch of moisture on her skirt. On the small table beside the bed, a cup of tea sits, cold and forgotten.

Walker follows her gaze to the porcelain, a soft sigh of guilt escaping her lips. “I prepared the tea a few hours ago, hoping you might wake.” She straightens, attempting to slip from the edge of the mattress. “I can brew another for you.”

Elara reaches out to grasp the caretaker’s wrist. The grip is weak and trembling, a clear sign that what little strength she possessed has vanished. “No, it is all right. I am better now. Please, do not burden yourself further.”

“Nonsense,” Walker says, though she yields to the touch and settles back against the headboard. “Though I will stay right here beside you. Would you like to talk about what occurred this morning?”

Elara’s fingers release their hold on the woman’s wrist, trembling worse than before.

Walker moves closer, gently drawing Elara's weight back against her body. “We do not need to speak of it,” she reassures, her breath offering warmth against Elara’s temple. A moment passes, allowing the princess to steady herself before she speaks again. “One of the knights helped me carry you to your bedchamber. He insisted that you required rest to recover.”

“Thank you,” Elara whispers. Her eyes wander across the hollow bedchamber, noting the royal crown glimmering upon the vanity and one of her thick, floral beige dresses draped over a chair. She sucks in a breath as the reality of her impending marriage floods her mind once more. Picking at her nails, she says, in a trembling voice, “Father is marrying me to a prince from a kingdom called Riverath. I was afraid, and angry, and I yelled at him.”

Walker’s expression saddens, though she shows no surprise at the announcement. Elara’s eyebrows furrow. “You knew?”

Shaking her head, Walker slides her hands down to hold Elara’s. “I knew the moment I found you upon the floor by the dining hall. I demanded an answer from the guards, and they admitted the King had already signed the betrothal decree.”

Elara swallows and moistens her lips before speaking again. “How do you feel about it? You seem rather…” She pauses, her bottom lip trembling. “At ease.”

“Do not be mistaken,” Walker says with gentle firmness. “I am deeply angry,” she says, a soft chuckle leaving her. “And you know I am rarely angry. All I gathered from that announcement was that he would willingly sacrifice his own daughter to satisfy his own greed.” She lowers her voice, ensuring her disdain for King Eric remains unheard beyond the walls. Her grip on Elara’s hands tightens. “But I am powerless to help you. I am so sorry, my child.”

Smiling at her kindness, Elara presses her cheek against Walker’s shoulder, curling her weak body closer to remain enveloped in her warmth. “I am terrified, Walker,” she whispers. “I have never heard of Riverath. I have no knowledge of their courts and power. What if this prince is as cruel as Father?” She asks. “I do not know how to survive in a completely different kingdom where I still will not have a voice, and where you will not be there.”

Walker’s hands leave Elara’s, lifting to stroke through her long brown hair. “I can only imagine how terrifying it must be. Though perhaps he will be a wonderful prince. Perhaps he will be different, and truly love you for who you are.”

Elara shakes her head. “No. My own father has hurt me. Why should a strange prince be any different? I am nothing to him. A weak girl who had no say in being his wife.”

“Dear, you are not weak,” Walker says, a firmness anchoring her gentle tone. “You are magnificent and strong. You fail to see it simply because you are drowning under the weight of these horrible thoughts.” She presses a soft kiss to Elara’s head.

“I hold no distinction,” Elara murmurs, unconvinced by the comfort. “Beyond these walls, even the gentlest women are broken and discarded, treated as if their worth never existed. A title I have not earned and all the wealth in the world will not protect me from a cruel man. My father is proof of that.”

“Perhaps you should pray again in the morning, long before the dinner, so that you are granted a bit of time,” Walker suggests.

“There is nothing for me to pray for. All of the flowers are gone like dust in the dead garden outside,” Elara tugs at a thread on her nightgown so hard it snaps, unravelling a portion of the hem.

“You can pray, and wish for the best anyway,” Walker reassures her. “I used to be a girl of prayer before I turned sixteen and entered this castle. I

always prayed to whoever or whatever might be listening to me and my people, crying my heart out for happiness every night after my father left when I was five." A shuddering breath escapes her. "My mother had it hard, and she left me and my younger brother a day later without a single word on how to manage, or where she was going."

Elara sits up. Never once had the caretaker mentioned the true reason behind her work in this castle, what her family was like, or how her childhood had been unfolded. She had never asked, fearing the inquiry might hurt Walker if her early life lacked comfort.

"Mistress Walker," she whispers.

Walker gives a sad smile, the lines at the corners of her eyes growing prominent in the dim light. "I had a horrible time of it, dear. Sometimes, I could not even cry. I prayed and prayed, until whatever greatness resides above blessed me with entry to this castle to care for the loveliest human being to ever exist."

Elara's cheeks warm and her shoulders ease at the sweet, genuine words, a true smile finally surfacing.

"There is that beautiful sight," Walker murmurs, pressing another kiss against Elara's forehead. "You are the best gift I have ever received, and you are far more than I could have ever prayed for."

Still smiling, Elara asks one lingering question pressing at her thoughts regarding the younger brother. "Though I have one question, if you do not mind."

Walker's smile widens. "Is it about my younger brother, my inquisitive Elara?"

A soft chuckle escapes Elara, but Walker's smile fades. "He passed away after falling ill at a very young age," Walker says softly. "A few days later, I walked all the way to the castle to plead for employment."

Elara blinks, her smile slipping away as quickly as it had come. "You are a strong woman, Walker. Aside from Mother, you are the only person I love in this world."

The gentle expression returns to Walker's lips. She carefully guides Elara back down against the pillows, adjusting her own position to sit vigil near her. Her fingers resume their soothing stroke through Elara's long strands of hair. "Rest now. Forget about tomorrow. You are strong, but even a strong woman requires sleep."

Elara hesitates before closing her eyes, holding fast to the comfort until sleep finally overtakes her.



ELARA SITS on the familiar step in her mother's garden. The hours spent in absolute stillness have left her shoulders and back aching, tension locking into her muscles.

Remnants, she has learned, are fragile things. Kneeling, she presses her palm flat against the cracked, freezing soil. All she finds there is emptiness. She rises to brush the grime from her skirt, wishing the gesture could sweep away the burden within her. The early morning wind turns sharp, drawing a shiver from her and setting her frame to trembling. Rising from her seat, she turns her face away from the dead garden and looks up toward the fading stars. Clenching her jaw, she leans against the marble handrail to brace herself against the chill.

Her thoughts drift to the prince. She does not wonder what his physical appearance might reveal, but rather his manners. Will he hold an ounce of kindness? Will he respect the boundaries she intends to place, or will he expect them to be ignored? Or will he prove to be the same kind of man her father is?

Releasing a sharp exhale, Elara casts her unanswerable questions into the wind. Gathering the folds of her skirt, she begins her ascent to seek refuge in sleep, hoping she can block out the world until the dreaded dinner has passed. She freezes mid-step, her dirt-stained nightgown trailing behind her as Walker’s words echo in her mind. She turns back toward the garden.

“YOU CAN PRAY, and wish for the best anyway,”

SHE STEPS down into the garden. Getting onto her knees on the rough, dirty ground, her brown hair spilling into her face, she presses her trembling hands into the earth.

“World,” her voice breaks, though she forces her emotions back, trying not to cry again. “I do not know what to pray for anymore. I am entirely speechless.” Her composure shatters as a tear streams down her cheek. “I am afraid. Please, do not let anything bad happen. Do not let me be hurt again.”

Elara squeezes her eyes shut, stopping any further tears. She stands and returns to the castle, leaving her prayers behind in the quiet air, her tears the only water to touch the barren soil.

By the time the afternoon shadows lengthen into twilight, the entire fortress is thrown into a tense, chaotic rhythm. The halls fill with the frantic scuffle of servant slippers rushing down the corridors, the clink of metal from guards preparing formal armaments, and the crisp rustle of silks being carried to the dining chambers. In her own chamber, the air feels stagnant.

Walker moves with a desperate haste, her hands trembling as she hovers over the vanity table to set the final preparations. Locking Elara into her presentation is an agonizing ritual. Walker lifts the heavy pink gown, its fabric stiff from the thick, multicolored floral embroidery that runs from the bodice down to the sweeping train. Stepping into it feels like stepping into a cage. Walker works quickly as she pulls the rigid cords of the corset tight, cinching Elara’s ribs and forcing her spine straight.

As the seventh hour approaches, Elara descends to the dining chamber to await the arrival of her betrothed. She shifts in her fitted gown, the oppressive heat pressing against her chest as she struggles for each breath. Her head throbs beneath the weight of her elaborate hairstyle, the reality of her situation and uncomfortable attire mingling together until she chokes.

Some of the guards readjust their white and gold uniforms, straightening their posture as they press their backs against the walls near the dining hall doors. Others pace near the castle entrance, awaiting the arrival of the family.

Nausea tightens her throat. For years, panic has seized her whenever her thoughts spiral too far, but tonight, the panic is sharpened by a cold wave of disgust. She loathes this unseen prince already, repulsed by the concept of a man who would willingly accept a faceless, bartered bride simply to expand his borders. He is another tyrant in the making, molded by the same cruel systems that built her father. Beneath the disgust, however, a thread of curiosity tugs at her mind.

What kind of monster is he? Does he possess a cruel sneer, or does he hide his malice behind polite, courtly masks?

Elara clenches her fists at her sides to stop herself from tearing the crown from her head, the bright pink gown with its flowers and long train from her body. How easy it would be to rip at the length of her hair until nothing remained to restrain her.

Walker's presence registers before she even comes into view, heralded by her usual uniform. She wears a long, heavy beige dress that reaches her knees, layered over with a thick white apron and suffocating white tights that trap the heat against her skin. Her expression remains fixed in a subtle discomfort. The bleak reality of their attire is impossible to ignore.

Walker wears these restrictive, coarse fabrics not for personal flair, but because every servant and every guard must present perfection at all times under the King's decrees. It is a punishing duty, not vanity, serving as a permanent reminder of the expectations binding them all, and of the rigid, suffocating life Elara is about to be forced into. Walker looks up at her, offering a reassuring smile.

Nearly breaking at the sight, Elara shakes her head as her caregiver steps closer and cups her pale cheeks with warm hands.

"I am here for you," she whispers.

Elara nods. "I know. I cannot believe this is happening," she admits, her heart pounding.

"I know," Walker murmurs, pressing her forehead against Elara's. "He will be a good man. I promise." She reaches for Elara's trembling hands and presses something small and cool into her palm, closing the girl's fingers around it. It is a pressed flower, brittle with age, its petals long faded to brown. "Keep this," she murmurs. "It was your mother's. I have kept it longer than I should have, protecting it until the right moment to give it to you."

Taking the offering, Elara blinks back tears as the mention of her mother threatens to shatter her fragile composure. "Do not promise that he will be a good man," she says, her voice trembling. "You cannot know that."

Before Walker can answer, her father's voice carries through the hall, bright with a sudden, manufactured pride. "Ah, yes. Elara is here."

Turning, Elara straightens, forcing her face into a neutral mask as she watches the royal family from Riverath enter the chamber. The air thickens,

the mumbled chatter stopping as all eyes fix upon the visitors. Their attire is striking, a uniform display of silver and black from head to foot, presenting sharp and commanding features.

This king, however, she recognizes at once. Thick black hair streaked with silver falls to the nape of his neck, and his cool, pale gray eyes assess the chamber. Standing taller than her father, his presence commands attention without effort. He wears a deep black robe embroidered with intricate silver patterns, a black-fur mantle secured by a silver chain, and a crown of pure silver resting above his brow.

King Raelith Everhart of Riverath has arrived.

Every detail of his past, brief visits to Veyrenn resurfaces with sudden clarity. During those old courts, her mother had always kept her close, using stories and gentle laughter to shield her from the adult conversations of the monarchs. Now, the warmth she associates with those distant memories is gone, replaced by dread.

Her focus shifts immediately to the young man walking beside the King, the prince she is being forced to marry. Mirroring the commanding stature of his family, he enters the chamber with an undeniable grace. Soft waves of dark hair frame his striking features, beneath high cheekbones and a strong jawline. Piercing gray eyes touched faintly with blue fix upon the chamber, and his full, parted lips lend him a brooding, enigmatic air. Rich black fabric fits his form, while silver embroidery traces elaborate patterns across his high-collared vest. A polished, silver crown rests atop his head, tipped with black gems. He appears undeniably beautiful, and the sight steals her breath. Before the weight of the moment can entirely envelop her, she realizes he is looking directly at her. His gaze is unreadable. Cael’s expression remains neutral until his eyes widen. It only deepens her confusion, causing her brow to furrow further.

Only then does she notice the rest of his party. Behind them stands the Queen, a quiet but commanding woman with intelligent brown eyes and immaculate black hair cascading over her heavy black gown. Following closely is a young princess, looking to be about eighteen. Her floor-length black gown glimmers subtly like distant starlight beneath a small black tiara. Rather than coldness, the young princess stares in her direction with pure excitement.

She is bright, smiling. The warmth draws an involuntary smile from Elara’s own lips, sparking a hope that she might have an ally in this strange

family.

Pulled back to reality by the sound of her father's voice, she listens as he speaks with a hollow cheerfulness that sends a shiver of disgust through her limbs. To hear him so joyful after years of cold indifference is a bitter weight to bear.

Elara jumps when her father barks a command for her to curtsy to the prince. Stunned, she looks at her father before glancing back at the prince, who stands only a few feet away with that same unreadable expression. Her heart resumes its frantic pounding. The standard greeting now carries the crushing weight of her absolute surrender before a chamber of strangers.

The silence in the chamber becomes suffocating. Her hands clutch the thick fabric of her skirt, her knuckles turning a stark white as she forces her body into the low, agonizing movement of submission, her eyes fixed on the polished floor beneath her as she waits for the moment to end.

Elara straightens, her fingers still clutched in her skirt as she braces for a cold response. Cael steps forward, and Elara resists the urge to flinch away from him. His eyes search her face. Then, shattering every ancient rule of Veyrenn dictating a man never lower his head before a woman, he places a gloved hand over his heart and bends into a low bow.

A collective, horrified gasp ripples across the chamber. Her father's shallow smile vanishes, his features darkening as his advisors exchange frantic glances. Across the space, the Riverath royals remain unbothered. The foreign King watches his son with pride, while the younger princess smiles even wider. Elara stands frozen, staring at the silver crown still lowered before her, unsure why he would risk such a political scandal in front of so many witnesses.

Cael straightens with grace, offering a small nod.

"Let us sit!" Eric's voice bursts through the chamber, shattering the stunned silence. He gestures his guests forward with a sweep of his arm. "And enjoy this feast."

OceanofPDF.com

VI

HUMILITY AND FAMILIARITY

C

Cael cannot tear his gaze away from Elara.

He is seated right across from her, Kaera seated beside him. Raelith and Maereth by his right side. The only voices disrupting the tense atmosphere in the dining hall belong to his parents and King Eric. The light from the bright golden chandelier above them, where warm candles cast a glow through the crystal, fades into a distant blur as he continues to study her.

He traces the melody of her features beneath the heavy crown and the rigid, suffocating structure of her pink gown, noticing the false flush painted across her skin. Familiarity warms his chest as his eyes follow the dark, crescent curve of her eyebrows. Her wide eyes hold the depth of a sunlit forest, mirroring a vibrant, living world that beautifully softens the full contour of her cheeks. Beneath the crown, her hair cascades down her back in soft chestnut waves.

The sheer reality of it leaves him breathless. He knows this face. He knows it because his private chambers back in Riverath are filled with canvas after canvas bearing these exact features. Brushstrokes captured in secret since the afternoon so long ago when she offered him her friendship. He locks his fingers together firmly beneath the table, his chest hammering.

He forces his eyes to focus down on the piece of meat and vegetables on his plate. It is impossible for this princess to be the girl he spent fifteen years writing about, painting as if she were the definition of art, and silently loving.

It all started on his seventh birthday, the day Queen Maereth nearly struck him simply for wishing to celebrate with his family. The ensuing

chaos drove little Cael to run blindly from the palace, utilizing the hiding techniques he learned from Elias, the young librarian who always played with him. He managed to evade the guards, running for hours through the dense trees until exhaustion and thirst nearly claimed him, taking him far across the borders.

Cael closes his eyes, picturing that day as clearly as if it was yesterday. He had run from home and stumbled into a secluded courtyard, weeping silently on the edge of a stone fountain. The isolation of his muteness had felt absolute. Until she stepped out of the shadows. She was just a little girl, her skirt dipping around her knees like an upside down lily, her eyes the most vibrant green he had ever seen. She did not look at him in mockery.

She just blinked at him, then sat beside him on the damp stone and offered her white sleeve to dry his face. And she asked him a question. One he had never expected to hear.

“Do you want to be friends?”

That single act of unconditional kindness became his secret sanctuary. Over the years, as his stepmother’s physical cruelty grew, he turned that nameless girl into his muse, capturing her features on hidden canvases and pouring his soul into poetry dedicated to the child who saved him from his own silence.

A girl. All of it was for a girl he met when he was a child.

“Prince Cael?” King Eric’s patronizing voice interrupts his thoughts.

His grip on his utensils tightens. He looks up at King Eric, a man he remembers from the few encounters between the sovereigns over the years. He looks up at King Eric, a man he remembers from the long negotiations between the sovereigns over the years. It is difficult to forget a monarch who has spent years bargaining for structural wealth and military security within the terms of their proposed treaty. It has often pressured the council of Riverath to balance their own resources while answering these strategic demands, though King Raelith operates with grace, choosing to settle the final terms of the alliance out of respect for their shared borders.

Cael rarely interacts with King Eric, save for a lingering memory from his fifth year. When his father explained that the young prince could not speak, King Eric gave him a look of unvarnished disgust. That single glance

is enough for Cael to despise him. Cael nods curtly in response to King Eric's call.

King Eric raises his cup of wine, nodding with a shallow smile as he addresses the table. "Cheers to the wealth of Riverath, and their wonderful King and silent son." presses his lips together, eye glinting, like he is holding back a greedy chuckle. "Without you, and Elara and Prince Cael's marriage, such an alliance would never happen."

Elara's head turns to him, her eyes wide and sad. It strikes something in Cael's heart at such callous, greedy words, but with no other option but to comply, he raises his cup, mimicking his father and stepmother. They all drink.

CAEL REGARDS his future bride over the rim of his cup. She looks so nervous, casting her eyes around the chamber as though searching for something that should be there but is missing. Her mother. The archives in Riverath hold few mentions of the late Queen Aline, only noting her striking kindness and extensive charity work. Based on those brief descriptions, her daughter could be her double.

Beside him, Raelith speaks. "Cheers, Eric. I am thrilled we have settled the alliance at last." Turning, he offers Elara a kind smile. "Though the marriage is not merely to secure the relationship between our kingdoms. I truly believe it will be best for both Elara and my dear son."

Cael chokes on his wine at his father's words.

King Eric's smiling expression falters. "I could not have said it better, Raelith," his voice lowers.

His father turns his head to glance at Cael. Returning his knowing look, he nods to mirror his understanding of King Eric's arrogant behavior and total lack of respect. His father's hand grasps the cup of wine, sipping it with careful precision to weigh the strength of its bitterness and sweetness. It is far more bitter than the vintages they enjoy in Riverath, making it evident that there are many clashing ingredients. The tyrant places his utensils down on his now empty plate, letting them clatter against the surface.

Straightening his posture and clearing his throat once more, he turns to his daughter with a wide uneasy smile. "Elara, how about you fill Cael's cup with more wine?" A pause of silence before adding. "You have been

silent. Perhaps you should practice serving the man who will be your husband?”

Cael’s eyes widen with surprise at King Eric’s attempt to humiliate his daughter once again by commanding her to serve him. Subservience is something Cael never intends to demand from this marriage.

Elara stands, her chair scraping against the floor before she carefully lifts the bottle of wine. Using both hands, she pours the vintage into Cael’s cup. A few drops spill onto the cloth draped over the wooden table. Her eyes fixate on the small droplets escaping the rim, her focus wavering. Before the liquid can overflow, Cael brings his hand over hers to stabilize the bottle, stopping her from adding any more.

Her breath hitches at the sudden contact, and Cael believes he is lucky to wear gloves for this occasion to hide his rough palms. Elara’s wide eyes look into his, confused. Quickly removing his hand, he takes the bottle and returns it to its place on the table. He gives her a reassuring smile and nod of appreciation.

His fingers curl into fists under the table as he leans back in his chair. The humiliation King Eric is putting on his daughter is far too familiar to him, mirroring the exact torment he has experienced with his stepmother for years. He recognizes the fights, the tactics meant to force public submission, and the calculated efforts to make him appear weak to his people.

Kaera’s warm hand squeezing his beneath the table forces him to relax, drawing him back from the rising anger.

Queen Maereth adjusts her seating on her seat, and Kaera smiles at Cael at his kindness, though it fills with more amusement. He avoids his step-mother’s annoyance, and return Kaera’s smile with an eyebrow raise, indicating her to not express her amusement yet.

“Well, look how quiet the young couple is,” King Eric says with a hint of mockery, sipping his cup of wine. It is his third cup. “Maybe this marriage will teach both of them how to… use their tongues to communicate,” his voice dips lower, eyes only piercing into Cael’s.

Cael returns her eye contact without hesitation before shifting his focus back to observing the chamber. The absolute absence of a Queen to support Elara through this ordeal becomes impossible to ignore.

Looking across the dining hall, he follows Elara’s gaze to a single servant woman, whose bare face and modest lace gown stand out starkly

against the lavish uniforms of the palace guards. The discomfort radiating from the household staff reveals the true weight of King Eric's rigid commands, proving that every soul within these walls is merely an ornament for his superficial display.

Cael realizes that beneath the gold and the feasting, the entire event is a hollow veneer designed to mask a broken kingdom.

The dinner continues in this manner, the voices of the two kings remaining the solitary sound to fill the grand hall. Cael watches as Elara ignores the feast before her, choosing instead to pick at her nails while a heavy silence wraps around her. Sensing her distress, Kaera rises from her seat, cuts a piece of dessert, and slides the untouched plate across the table to Elara.

Elara’s eyes widen at the sudden kindness, her cheeks warming. After a brief hesitation, a smile surfaces upon her lips as she accepts the offering. Staring down at the dessert as though it were a rare comfort, she takes her first bite of the evening, as if this reassurance has given her permission to be herself. Watching her from across the space, Cael feels the remaining tension leave his shoulders. Her smile reveals small dimples by the edge of her cheeks, almost unnoticeable to a casual observer, and her flush deepens to the soft shade of a blooming poppy.

The dinner draws to a close and the servants clear away the dessert plates. King Eric and King Raelith rise from their chairs, heading into the study to sign the official treaty and taking the guards with them. Queen Maereth rises and leaves to find her husband, taking the tension with her. Only Cael, Kaera, and Elara remain.

Across the table, Elara shifts in her chair and turns her forest-green eyes toward Cael, her lips parting as though she is attempting to finally speak. Her dessert is finished, giving the impression that she has needed to eat for the entire day.

“Elara, right?” Kaera asks with a smile, starting the conversation with her easy personality and soft confidence. For most of Cael’s life, it is Kaera who speaks for him during any situation or heavy silence. Though Cael worries Kaera might be invasive due to how talkative she gets, curiosity clearly overcomes the best of his sister. Elara nods, her eyes meeting Kaera’s before shifting toward Cael, and then just as quickly dropping down to her empty plate.

“I am Kaera. Cael’s younger sister.” She smiles kindly.

Elara’s lips part and finally a voice escapes her throat. “I expected you to be younger,” she says, tilting her head.

Cael observes the exchange, leaning back against the chair.

Kaera’s expression shifts into a look of sincerity as she prepares to dissolve the superficial pretense between them. “I attained my eighteenth winter some time ago. Though I am often told I carry myself with far more urgency than my years require.”

“I have turned twenty at the first frost of this very winter,” Elara responds, her gaze lingering on Kaera before drifting back toward her plate. “A mere three moons past.” Then, she turns to Cael.

Cael’s lips part with a desperate need to reply. He does not wish to appear rude, but no one has informed her of his silence.

From the beginning, he trusts King Raelith to explain the truth with grace, but he is wrong. He knows he can lift his hands to sign his silent language, but he knows Elara will not understand his gestures.

Elara’s smile fades. The openness of her expression is replaced by something cautious and guarded. Cael accepts her defensive retreat, pushing back his heavy oak chair and rising to his feet. He leaves the dining hall to find King Raelith, unable to bear the misunderstanding any longer.

What remains behind him is a suffocating, broken tension.

OceanofPDF.com

VII

A BINDING EVENING

E

The heavy doors of the throne chamber swing open.

The vast chamber rises grandly before them, defined by towering walls of pristine white stone, sweeping beige draperies, and brilliant gold accents that catch the light from the massive chandeliers. Elara moves slowly into the space, guided gently by Walker, who walks beside yet a step behind her for support.

As King Eric and King Raelith return to take their positions beneath the royal canopy, the throne chamber grows colder. Cael crosses the floor with measured steps, returning to his position directly beside Elara as the finality of the evening closes in.

Elara parts her lips to speak, desperate to ask for another day within the sanctuary of her mother's memories, but hesitation and the rapid movement of events stop her. Her weak body refuses to cooperate, leaving her silent as the guards move into formation around them with mechanical precision. A guard approaches behind her and Cael, holding a velvet cushion flat in his steady hand. Upon it rest two simple bands forged of unadorned steel, modified only by the names engraved along the inner curves.

The first reads *Elara Everwyn*. The second, *Cael Everhart*.

"The rings confirm your marriage and your bond as a couple," King Eric announces. Another guard steps forward, presenting a white paper and two pens, the black ink stark against the clean sheet. "It is merely a matter of legal formality." His voice carries an urgency that makes Elara flinch.

Elara reaches for the band bearing her name, intending to slip it on herself. She freezes when Cael removes his gloves and intercepts the ring in one swift motion. She blinks, staring at his hands. Scars mar his knuckles,

and when he takes her fingers, rough calluses meet the soft skin of her palm.

She forces herself to meet his eyes. Without looking away from her, he slides the cold metal ring onto the fourth finger of her left hand. Elara watches it settle into place, her heart racing as another chain around her life locks into place.

Cael reaches for the first quill. He signs his name effortlessly, the fluid grace of his movement contrasting sharply against the stark white paper. Once his signature is set, he turns the handle toward her, offering the pen in an unspoken invitation rather than an overt command. She hesitates, trembling under the pressure of what this final gesture truly means.

She is to be bound to this prince, to serve, to obey, and to endure what life might bring at his hands. He does not speak to her, and his earlier exit proves how easy it is for him to forget her presence. Tears slide down her cheeks, burning and blurring her vision, while every gaze in the chamber turns toward her.

The Queen’s expression is laced with frustration, while Kaera’s holds genuine concern. King Raelith mirrors his daughter's worry, a tinge of guilt betraying his good intentions for this arrangement.

“We must proceed, my dear,” King Eric says, a saccharine smile twisting his lips. Looking up at him, Elara allows disdain to flare across her features. The term of endearment ignites a sharp anger within her. “I know it is difficult to leave your kingdom and your father, but Cael will care for you, accompany you, and protect you.”

A cold shiver runs down Elara’s spine, her mind unable to comprehend the potential malice of this prince, a dread modeled after the other men she has overheard and witnessed in the shadows of her youth. She fears his touch by force, a performance of intimacy demanded for the public eye and repeated in the dark of private chambers. Leaving her homeland now feels like a final exile, a reality that drains the remaining warmth from her core.

Elara signs her name, pressing on the paper so hard she nearly tears the corner. Finished, she relinquishes the pen, biting the inside of her lip to stop the tears clutching her throat.

A loud clap shatters the suffocating spell as King Eric’s booming laughter fills the grand hall. “There we have it!”

But the sound disappears in her ears. The murmurs of the guests, the clinking of glasses, and the rustle of gowns all blur into a distant hum. She

is to be bound to this prince, to serve, to obey, and to endure what life might bring at his hands.

He does not speak to her, and his earlier exit proves how easy it is for him to forget her presence. Tears slide down her cheeks while every gaze in the chamber turns toward her. She curls her trembling fingers in the folds of her skirt and lifts her chin, staring at a spot on the far wall as the chamber swirls around her.

The sound of chairs scraping against the marble floors startles Elara from her frozen state, forcing her to move. Beyond the tall windows, Elara catches glimpses of servants loading her belongings into the waiting carriage below.

She descends the steps slowly, her knees weak. The Everhart family prepares for the journey once more. Cael stands nearby, observing and assisting the guards as they secure the carriage. The queen and Kaera are already seated inside.

Her father descends the steps, looking down at her with a cold expression. Elara meets it with the same detachment. A smile curls on his lips, followed by a low chuckle. “Good grief, do not look at me like that,” he says with amusement. “Are you ready?”

“I never was,” Elara replies under her breath.

“I will miss your company,” he says, his voice intentionally raised to ensure the listening royals catch his words. “The halls will feel emptier without you. A father grows accustomed to his daughter’s presence, and I have no other close family to fill that space.” He leans closer, his tone softening further into a manufactured kindness, prompting Elara to flinch away from his reach. “You have served your role well,” he continues, projecting his voice across the space. “You may take comfort in knowing your duties here are finished.”

His voice lowers to her ear. “This is the order of the world. You are a mere title, a decorative ornament with nothing beyond what you were shaped to be. Your people will not depend on you any longer.” He straightens, patting her cheek with a calculated, dismissive familiarity. He nods to King Raelith and turns away, his heavy boots carrying him back up the stone steps.

Elara watches him go. As his familiar frame retreats, she tries to summon some semblance of emotion, some lingering sadness to be leaving

her father behind forever, but there is only a hollow vacancy. She has lost both of her parents in ways that have rendered them entirely irretrievable.

Her gaze rushes across the crowd gathered at the summit of the stone steps to watch their princess depart, searching for the solitary person she still holds dear. Walker stands among the rest of the household staff, her eyes already locked onto Elara. Their gazes meet, and it requires every ounce of willpower Elara possesses to refrain from rushing back up the steps to embrace her. Such an action would only invite her father's wrath upon the older woman, and Elara refuses to be the instrument of his malice any longer. Choking back a sob, she merely offers a nod to the woman who helped raise her, a painful excuse for a final farewell. Walker returns the gesture, tears sliding down her face to acknowledge another punishment for maintaining a vulnerable heart in such a cruel world.

"Princess, it is time," a royal guard calls from behind.

Turning her back on Walker, her father, and her home, Elara faces the pitying gaze of her new father-in-law.

There is nothing for it. Elara's feet carry her across the gravel toward the vehicle, her ears ringing as she forces herself forward. One step follows another, one foot moving in front of the other until she stands directly beside Cael. He remains near the carriage door, his posture straight and his expression elegant without effort or display. This is simply another path the world has chosen for her, a new beginning shaped by uncertainty and burden.

Elara flinches at the sudden offer, though with the guilt of rejecting him and her growing skepticism, she places her hand in his, her skin making direct contact with the raw, reddish texture of his scarred palm. His fingers close around hers, as if he is testing whether she might pull away from his touch.

Their eyes meet in a flash of mutual displeasure. Cold defiance locks between them as he helps her into the carriage. He steadies her while she gathers the excess of her thick skirt, anchoring herself onto the seat without showing vulnerability to a stranger. Once inside, she turns toward the window, careful to shield the traces of tear-streaked powder from view.

Cael takes the seat opposite her and closes the carriage door. In the dimly lit space, he keeps his eyes on his lap, granting her the privacy to shield her tears from his view. Elara's eyes widen. This constant respect surprises her once more. She avoids the gaze of everyone within the

carriage, keeping her focus locked firmly on the passing darkness outside the window to protect her privacy.

With a creak of harnesses, the horses move, their hooves striking the ground in a steady rhythm as the carriage pulls away. This is her first time leaving the castle in a very long time, stepping beyond the lands she has always known. Elara grips the edge of the seat as the carriage rattles down the road. Her kingdom flashes by.

She examines her kingdom. The night grows darker, nearing past midnight, and the exhaustion of the men outside is evident. Stiff, fading livery uniforms hang from tired shoulders, the fabric frayed at the cuffs as a stark proof that they must maintain the illusion of luxury even while their strength erodes.

There are no children playing in the streets, only ragged families with hollow eyes staring from dilapidated doorways as the grand carriage passes. The markets stand empty and crumbling, ruined by unfair taxes and systematic neglect rather than the changing seasons. It bears no resemblance to the kingdom that once thrived under the charity of Queen Aline. Sadness wells within her, paired with a deep regret that she was never allowed to alter this suffering, and now she will never receive the opportunity. Looking across the space, she notices Cael staring out his own window at the wasteland, his brow furrowed in a troubled frown.

A sigh escapes her, indifferent to whether the prince across from her hears it. She pulls away from the window, drawing the heavy velvet curtain closed to block out the view and warm the carriage’s interior. Not even her thick gown can shield her from the chill seeping into her bones.

Elara squeezes her eyes shut and leans back in her seat. Sleep calls to her, begging her to relax her taut muscles and rest, but she resists, terrified to be so vulnerable. As night closes in and the carriage darkens, however, she gives in.

The world drifts around her in a hazy blur until a coat is gently draped over her shoulders, easing the chill that has settled into her bones. A soft sigh escapes her lips, her body leaning into the protection of the heavy fabric. The scent clinging to the cloth, cedar touched by the trace of metal, tells her everything she needs to know. The last thing she remembers is the pressed flower from her mother resting in her hands after

The rhythm of the carriage carries her away as exhaustion finally wins.

OceanofPDF.com

VIII

WITHIN THESE DARK WALLS

E

The carriage is no longer moving.

The breeze in here is a tad warmer, the darkness peeks through Elara's shut eyes, and a warm blanket is draped over her. The scent is far too familiar. Elara gasps and sits up, only to find herself on a bed inside a dark bedchamber.

The chamber rises around her with an enormous, unfamiliar grandeur. Sitting amid the dark, plush bedding, Elara grips the sheets tightly for a long moment, feeling incredibly small and out of place beneath the vast ceiling and its massive chandelier. Only the need to understand her surroundings finally strengthen her resolve to move. Pushing the thick blanket aside, she realizes the formal gown still envelops her frame.

She swings her legs over the edge of the bed, her bare feet pressing into the luxurious carpet below, though the deep chill of the hidden marble seeps through the fibers to send a shiver through her body.

There are three doors within the chamber. Stepping forward to explore, Elara opens the first one directly across from the bed and finds herself in a bathing chamber. A gray marble bathtub rests along the far side, while a wide sink stretches across the wall. Oils, unguent jars, and washes rest neatly upon the surface, some unmistakably her own, while others belong to a stranger.

Retreating from the space, she moves toward the second door near the window. It opens into a dressing chamber, far larger than her wardrobe back in Veyrenn. Elara steps further inside, surveying the dark, polished cupboards where black coats, tailored trousers, and silver accessories hang in precise order directly next to her few remaining gowns. She rubs the

silken fabric of a coat between her fingers, noting the discipline revealed in the arrangement. These belong to Cael.

With a choked inhale, Elara drops the material and steps back, her heart pounding as the realization strikes her. This chamber does not belong to her alone. It is a shared space.

She feels as if she is the intruder.

Trembling, she presses her left hand to her chest. A sudden coldness weighs upon her fingers where the steel band bears his name, Cael Everhart, carved into the inner curve. An impulse to slip the band off and discard it flares up within her, but the desire is quickly smothered by the knowledge of the consequences. In Veyrenn, such defiance is punished upon the woman alone, even when the arrangement was never her choice.

She glances around the bedchamber, her brows furrowing. Her gaze lands on the black vanity filled with her cosmetic paints and perfumes. On the opposite wall rests another vanity belonging to the prince, darker and heavier, made of glass and black crystal.

Needing to occupy her mind, she decides to bathe. Turning back to the dressing chamber, she shifts through the drawers to locate her silk nightgown before walking into the bathing chamber. She closes the door and locks it, the soft click echoing in the enclosed space. Loosening the stays, she lets the heavy gown slip from her shoulders, exposing her skin to the chill air and raising a shiver across her frame.

The tub is filled with steaming water scented faintly with crushed lavender. She sinks into the bath, the warmth rising around her to wash away the grime of the journey. She stares at the band upon her finger, the metal gleaming beneath the thick steam that clouds the chamber.

“You are a mere title.”

ELARA FREEZES, her hands pausing in the thick lather as she cleanses her hair, while her father’s final parting words echo through her mind. A shiver runs down her spine at the recollection of how callously he had brushed her aside during their farewell. Her hands drop into the water, rinsing away the soap to reveal the ring binding her finger. She turns her left hand, letting the cold metal catch the light through the gray haze of steam that clouds the bathing chamber.

How different the prince had seemed when he placed that band upon her finger. Not a single word had passed between them, yet she had received more respect in his gestures and the touch of his hand at the carriage door than she had ever known from her father.

Elara shakes her head, forcing the foolish thought into the shadows of her mind. It is childish to hope he will be different, for the world has shown her repeatedly that it will take every shimmer of joy and leave it to wither away. She refuses to allow hope to bloom within her chest. Not for him, and not for anyone.

“A mere title,” she whispers into the steam, her voice swallowed by the quiet space. She closes her eyes, letting the water mask her sorrow while she steels herself for the life she must endure.

The heat leaves her dazed. At last, she steps out and wraps a folded towel around her. The mirror has fogged over entirely, leaving only vague shapes reflected back. Leaning against the sink, she draws in a slow, shivering breath.

Drying her skin, she dresses in her silk nightgown and steps back into the bedchamber, leaving her damp hair to fall around her shoulders. Elara sinks onto the plush bed, relieved there is no attendant here to force an overwhelming night preparation upon her before sleep.

She spins the metal band around her finger, biting her lip as the memory of her father's harsh punishments looms over the simple act. Hesitantly, she removes the ring and places it on the small table beside her, where the candle casts a glow across its cool surface. Cael is not here, allowing her to relax into the mattress as her heart stills into a normal, steady rhythm. A profound relief descends down her spine as she lies back, tracing the dark ceiling with her eyes while the crystal chandelier scatters the remaining light in muted patterns.

Sleep eludes her. Tossing restlessly beneath the sheets, she finds no comfort until her limbs begin to ache from the constant shifting. A soft groan escapes her, muffled by the blankets. Frustrated, she throws the bedding aside and slides off the mattress.

The final door within the chamber leads to a round, spacious balcony. Elara throws it open, the cold night air stealing her breath as it hits her face and sends a sudden chill across her skin. Padding across the dark stone, she rests her forearms on the railing, her eyes drinking in the sight of her new home below.

The air is remarkably clear, entirely free of the thick dust that permanently chokes the atmosphere of Veyrenn. High above, a vast canopy of sharp, brilliant stars reflects across the sky, unobstructed by haze. Below, the dark silhouettes of grand evergreen pines and manicured winter hedges border a gravel pathway that leads from the massive silver gates straight to the palace entrance.

Though the winter frost keeps the rest of the flora dormant, a few hardy blossoms still catch the moonlight, offering a subtle hint of color against the dark stone. The soothing melody of a running fountain rises from the center of the grounds, its water spilling into a wide basin. It is unlike anything in her homeland, where nothing is permitted to exist simply for the sake of beauty.

Her breath catches when she finds an entire area of red roses. Reminded of her mother, she wishes to rush down there and admire them up close, her fingers wrapping around the stone railings tightly.

The doorknob turns, and the bedchamber door creaks open. Whirling around, Elara grips the skirt of her nightdress, breath leaving her lungs in sharp gasps.

Cael steps inside, his eyes landing on hers across the bedchamber from the balcony. Elara freezes, her eyes wide. A brisk wind tears at her nightdress, the chill forcing her back inside the chamber. Shutting the balcony doors, she turns to face her new husband, trembling not only from the cold. They stand staring at each other for a silent moment, her frame shaking while he remains as still as a statue. Elara’s heart leaps into her throat when Cael moves, but he only enters the dressing chamber. Her gaze flies around the chamber, searching for an escape she knows she cannot find, her chest tightening with the fear of what this privacy might bring.

Breathing ceases altogether when Cael returns, carrying a thick blanket over one arm. Elara shrinks back as he approaches, her back hitting the cold glass of the balcony door. Without a single word, he offers her the fabric. Her brow furrows in confusion as she takes it, daring to look into his face. Cael only gives a sharp nod and leaves the chamber, shutting the heavy door behind him to grant her complete privacy.

Exhaling, Elara drops her head back against the glass. She clutches the blanket to her chest while her heart continues its wild rhythm, unsure how long she remains rooted to the spot. When the cold finally wins, she makes

her way back to the bed, though it is a long while before sleep claims her for its own.



Before sleep can fully take her, dawn arrives.

Though her temples ache, she forces herself to sit up. A soft knock pierces the silence of the bedchamber. She freezes, expecting it to be Cael. Pulling the many layers of blankets to her chest, she calls, “Come in.”

The door opens, revealing the face of a woman who appears to be in her twenties, noticeably younger than Walker, peeking in with a gentle smile. “Good morning, Your Highness,” she says, entering the bedchamber. She wears a simple black dress that reaches below her knees, its long sleeves covering her arms, with a lighter gray buttoned vest keeping the fabric tailored to her frame. Her blonde hair rests in a neat braid, her face entirely free of wrinkles or signs of exhaustion.

Standing by Elara’s bed, she bows. “I am your maidservant, Annie Sterling. His Majesty has appointed me to oversee your household and ensure your absolute care within Riverath. I trust your journey was tolerable and I apologize for not being here last night,” her expression laces with guilt. “You were fast asleep, and it was late.”

Elara’s grip on the blankets loosens and she adjusts, sliding off the bed and giving Annie a small smile, though it aches to know Walker is no longer with her. “It is all right,” she says, pausing to pick at her nails for a moment. “The journey was sufficient, Annie.”

Annie smiles and nods. “Understandable, Your Highness. The journey must have been long, and you are undoubtedly exhausted.” She walks into the dressing chamber to select a morning gown, shaking the fabric loose before she returns. “Breakfast with the Everharts will begin in sixty minutes.”

Elara’s eyes widen, and she swallows twice before speaking. “Of course.”

Annie turns and makes her way into the dressing chamber, selecting one of Elara's pink gowns featuring an off-shoulder neckline that flows into loose silk sleeves. Stitched glimmers and folded fabric form a subtle floral design across the bodice, complemented by a long skirt and matching light pink shoes. Returning to the main chamber, she lifts them for Elara's approval. "Is this to your liking, Your Highness?" Her tone is sweet and professional, lacking the deep, comfortable warmth of Walker.

Elara nods and sits on the chair by the new vanity, only finding familiarity in her own things from the castle. "Yes."

Annie sets the gown on the mattress and places the shoes beside the bed, folding the heavy blankets and arranging the pillows. Turning to Elara, Annie lifts the hairbrush and gently brushes her dark locks. Elara frowns at her reflection, hating the evidence of her sorrow still etched on her face. The muscles across her ribs still throb painfully from the restrictive structure of yesterday's formal gown, making each breath shallow.

She wishes to take the brush and finish the task herself, yet she refrains, reluctant to appear harsh or prevent Annie from executing her duties.

"You are majestic, Your Highness," Annie says with a warm smile, still brushing Elara's hair. "I hope Riverath will be to your liking. It is truly amazing here."

Elara relaxes, a quiet curiosity replacing her defensive guard. "What is amazing about it?"

Nodding, Annie focuses on brushing through Elara's hair. "Riverath is a gentle place, Your Highness. The people are incredibly kind, and the valley becomes beautiful once the spring arrives. You will find that life moves with much more comfort here than what you may be accustomed to."

Elara raises her eyebrows. Annie's words seem genuine and she speaks warmly of her home, but Elara has never been one to believe someone just because their words are good. "That is wonderful," she replies with a cautious smile, unwilling to dive too deeply into conversation with someone she will probably end up losing.

By the time her hair is finished, the pink gown is fitted comfortably around her frame, her shoes are slipped on, and a little perfume is misted onto her wrists and neck. Finally, her heavy crown is placed once again on her brow. While Annie takes her time returning the chambering jars to their rightful places, Elara turns and retrieves the steel ring from the table beside her bed.

She studies how the metal catches the morning sunlight streaming through the tall windows before forcing herself to slide the band onto her finger. With that same ringed hand, her fingers trail upward to touch the golden heart pendant resting against her collarbone.

“Enjoy your day, Your Highness.” Elara turns in time to see Annie bow. “I will return tonight,” Annie adds, heading for the door. She turns to leave, though when she opens the door, the sound of chatter and a mixture of strong smells fill the hall.

Elara turns and offers a nod at her kindness. She takes a deep breath, gathering the flowing fabric of her pink skirt, and forces herself to step past the threshold into the grand corridor.

If Elara thought the bedchamber was grand, what lies outside surpasses it. The walls and floors carry the same dark grandeur, polished and pristine. A long carpet stretches endlessly before her, deep black woven with muted gray floral patterns and bordered designs. A carpet stretches down the middle of the corridor, softening the pristine polish of the dark marble floors.

Elara’s shoes sink into it as she moves forward, the plush fibers muting the sound of her footsteps. Tall doors line the hall at even intervals, with stands holding living plants between them. Elara runs her fingers across the feathery leaves of a fern as she passes, relishing the texture of something so alive. Towering windows illuminate the corridor, and crystal chandeliers larger than any she has ever seen twinkle overhead.

Progress is slow as Elara navigates the labyrinth of unfamiliar corridors, the immense scale of the fortress quickly disorienting her. She descends a wide flight of stairs only to hit a dead end, forcing her to backtrack as frustration mounts within her chest. Her stomach growls with hunger, the physical discomfort sharpening her anxiety as the minutes slip away.

When she finally discovers the correct passageway, pairs of guards stationed at the intersections snap to attention, offering low, respectful bows. Maids carrying folded linens dip into polite curtsies, murmuring soft morning greetings to their new princess. Elara offers hesitant nods in return, her defenses thoroughly rattled by their unprompted respect as she hurries toward the dining hall.

On reaching the wide staircase, she descends, her hand brushing against the cool silver of the railing. The stairs open into a curved landing designed to overlook the space below, offering a clear view of the palace interior.

Below her, the palace is alive. Knights, guards, chefs, and servants move through the lower levels in a practiced harmony, their voices overlapping in easy conversation. Laughter rings across the open space, mingling invitingly with the sweet scent of fresh pastries and roasted meats. Elara tilts her head as she takes in the sound, noting how vastly different this warmth is from the cold silence she has always been accustomed to.

Her gaze drifts across the chamber, following a portly man who carries a tray of precariously balanced water pitchers. Her stomach tightens. Cael strides into view, his dark attire blending seamlessly with the palace decor. Elara watches as he lifts his hands, moving them in a series of rapid motions to communicate with a guard. He stops in the middle of the hall, the light from a massive chandelier highlighting his dark hair, leaving him as the solitary still figure in a frenzy of movement. As if sensing her presence, Cael looks up, his eyes connecting with hers where she stands fixed upon the balcony.

Elara flushes and steps back, tripping over the train of her gown. The moment lasts less than a breath. Looking down, Cael continues forward and disappears into one of the adjoining chambers. Elara remains still, her hand tightening at her side as she stares at the exact space where he stood only a moment before. With a shake of her head, she turns and descends the stairs into the hall below, following the prince into what she hopes is the dining hall.

So intent is she in her mission to follow him, she veers straight into the path of a tall man with brown skin.

“Oh, I apologize, Your Highness!” A tall man steps back, his smooth russet skin catching the light. His long dark hair is tied neatly, and his presence carries a youthful vigor despite his years. Straightening his round wire glasses, he surveys her through piercing hazel eyes. “I did not see you. Are you all right?”

A careful study of his features precedes her reply. “I am sorry. Yes, I am all right.”

“You appear uncertain, Your Highness,” he observes. “If you are lost, I would be glad to assist you.”

Elara blinks at his astute observation, surprised by the ease with which he reads her state of mind.

Before she can respond, the man eases into a broad smile. “My name is Elias Winston. I am the librarian here, stationed on the top floor.”

“Good morning to you,” Elara returns with a small, tentative smile. With a slight hesitation, she asks, “Is breakfast happening?”

He nods, pointing toward the door where she had seen Cael enter earlier. “That is the dining hall for the royals.”

Elara inclines her head. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, Your Highness,” he replies, bowing.

Elara smiles. Such a small interaction, but it loosens the knot in her stomach she has been able to shake since the day of her wedding. The journey down the corridor brings her to the dining chamber. Turning the silver knob reveals a space that commands immediate admiration. Though there are only a few family members present, the hall is cavernous. A fireplace warms one end, with a small glass table nearby, flanked by black and silver couches with smooth upholstery. Large portraits adorn the walls, showcasing the royal family throughout the generations. Elara steps closer to the only likenesses she recognizes, her hands clasped in front of her. To the left, King Raelith and the queen are captured in dignified formality, stern and cold, presenting the very image of power. Next to them, Cael and the princess are immortalized in elegance.

Elara’s eyes linger on the portrait of the prince. The artist captured him perfectly, replicating the swirling storm in his deep gray eyes, the rigid way he carries himself, and even the slight tilt of his eyebrow that gives him the appearance of someone not to be crossed. She cannot help the faint admiration that rises within her chest before shaking herself from the thought.

“Good morning, Elara,” King Raelith greets, his smile bright as he gestures toward the table. “Please, take your seat next to Cael.”

“Good morning, Your Majesty,” Elara begins, catching herself before finishing. She steps forward and slides into the empty chair beside Cael. “I mean... Father.” The title tastes bitter upon her tongue, a word she has only ever associated with cold indifference and cruelty. She stumbles over the correction, aware of Cael’s gaze burning into her side as she settles into her seat.

He waves a hand dismissively, his smile easy. “I hope you had a good rest. Last night’s journey was long. Please, do eat. If you need anything else, ask the chefs. They will assist you with whatever you wish.”

Elara allows herself a small smile, her shoulders relaxing. “Thank you.” She rises once more, scooping freshly cut fruit into the small bowl beside

her utensils. She returns to her seat and begins to eat. The fruit is sweeter than any she has tasted back at the castle. When she finishes, her appetite is not yet sated.

King Raelith speaks to Cael in a softer tone. “Son,” Raelith says, his tone soft, “I have lightened your duties for today. Perhaps Elara can join you.” He offers her a smile she looks up just in time to catch. “I am sure she would like to see more of her new kingdom.”

Elara chokes on a piece of fruit at the suggestion. *Her new kingdom.*

Elara studies Cael through her watering eyes, searching his features for any sign of his true thoughts. He does not narrow his eyes in suspicion, nor does he look relieved to have his responsibilities lightened. The prince remains entirely quiet, and his absolute silence makes her wonder if he is as constrained by this arrangement as she is, equally unhappy. He might already find her insufferable, too uncertain, or maybe even useless, which is exactly what her father considers her to be.

Now he will likely take her out to explore her new kingdom. Alone with him. Surrounded by complete unfamiliarity. With no comforting presence, and no one she truly knows.

A guard enters the chamber, jarring Elara from her thoughts. Ignoring the rest of the royal family altogether, he strides across the chamber to his king and, bending down, whispers something Elara cannot catch.

“Duty calls for me elsewhere. I must depart,” King Raelith says, dabbing the corners of his lips neatly with his napkin before rising from his chair. “Enjoy your meal, family.”

The queen rises immediately afterward, setting down her utensils with a sharp clink. Her movements are rigid, carrying the same cold composure she wore ever since Elara first entered the dining hall. She does not offer her a glance or a single word as she sweeps out of the chamber.

Kaera remains seated, her eyes studying Elara. Elara returns her gaze, though discomforted under such scrutiny. Undeniably, Kaera seems to be a decent soul, a rare comfort alongside King Raelith. She turns toward Cael, seated beside her. Unlike the others, he seems untouched by the stillness that has settled over the chamber. He continues eating in silence.

Elara forces herself to pick at the food upon her plate, knowing she must maintain her strength despite the heavy knot in her stomach. For years, meals had been a matter of survival under her father’s scrutiny, and now, surrounded by strangers in an unfamiliar kingdom, the act of eating

feels no different. She swallows a small bite simply to satisfy her physical need, keeping her defensive guard firmly in place as she waits for the breakfast to conclude.

She lowers her gaze toward the plate before her and lifts another piece of roasted salmon with her utensils. The moment it touches her tongue, she nearly hums in satisfaction.

The rich seasoning melts warmly across her mouth, balanced by the faint smokiness left from roasting. The texture is delicate, softer than most meals she remembers receiving within the castle walls. It is proper food, bearing no resemblance to the lifeless portions she forced herself to survive upon within her homeland. In Veyrenn, the combination of the long drought and her father's taxing neglect left even the royal kitchen sparse, rendering every meal dry and tasteless. Under the constant weight of her father's scrutiny, eating had always felt like chewing dust.

"The salmon is excellent," Kaera says, smiling.

Elara's eyes widen, a wave of embarrassment washing over her. "It is better than anything I have eaten in Veyrenn."

Kaera's smile widens. "I would not know about Veyrenn, but our chefs are excellent."

"I am willing to try more. All my life, I would eat chicken with heavy amounts of pepper or beef that is overcooked," she admits, before pausing, that she might have spoken too much.

Kaera's expression softens, before leaning forward on the dining table. "I understand that," she continues. "I recall one of our old chefs cooked our beef horrendously, leaving some cuts entirely rare and others

overdone." Turning her head toward Cael, she offers him a smile that seems to share an inside joke. "Right, Cael? I remember the expression upon your face."

Cael's lips twitch, before he adjusts his expression and continues to eat. His gray eyes flick upon her, observing her in silence before his attention shifts away again just as quickly.

Elara's throat goes dry and she puts down her fork, balling her hands in her lap. "Cael and Kaera, will you please take me to the kingdom?"

Cael pauses and turns toward her once more. His expression softens in a way few people would notice, catching Elara by surprise. She tilts her head, searching his eyes to see if the warmth is genuine, before he offers a nod of approval.

“Bonding trip,” Kaera says, smoothing the fabric of her dress as she stands and begins to lead the way out of the dining hall.

Elara rises to follow, her gaze lingering on the prince as he pushes his own chair back. The smile that graces Cael’s lips is barely visible, subtle enough to go unrecognized by anyone else.

But Elara recognizes it.

OceanofPDF.com

IX

MOCKED IN SILENCE

E

Cael moves ahead of Elara.

He walks with long, measured strides that force Elara to quicken her pace simply to keep up with him. There is no modern swagger or display in his walk, only the steady pace of a man comfortable with his own authority. Kaera is already near the entrance, mounted on a large, dark brown horse with a rippling mane.

Cael descend the steps, the wind growing stronger as they move, almost as if he controls the weather. Gathering the heavy folds of her skirt, Elara steps down after him. The chill wind bites at the exposed skin of her face and she shivers, drawing her arms closer around herself. She turns around and looks up at the palace, her eyes widening at the scale of the fortress from the outside.

Drawn toward the winter roses since last night, Elara steps forward to bend over the frost-hardy blooms, inhaling their rich scent and brushing her fingers against the petals. Her thoughts fill with memories of her mother and how dearly she had adored them. She recalls her smile, the warmth in her eyes whenever her father grew them just for her. One of the petals falls, despite the flower's fresh appearance.

A quick glance around ensures no one is watching, Elara turns her back to Cael, who remains some distance away, she clasps her hands together to pray. “World, I ask that you grant me something good. It does not need to be now, but even something small in a lifetime will suffice. Please, hear me,” she whispers against her folded hands, feeling her breath warming the cold skin.

The thud of hooves against the ground rises behind her. She turns to see a large white steed standing nearby, its long mane flowing and its blue eyes bright enough to rival the open sky. Remaining perfectly still, Elara watches, hesitant to approach. Cael moves with ease, placing a black and light leather saddle atop the steed's back, buckling it securely.

An unrestrained smile touches Elara's lips as she places her hand gently against the animal's soft muzzle, her touch careful.

Turning, she finds Cael drawing closer. He mounts the steed, his hand moving to ruffle the side of its neck. This steed trusts him, and he trusts it in return. She sees it in the softened set of his features and the slight lift at the corner of his lips.

An attempt to mount the animal fails when her foot slips against the stirrup, the heavy layers of her skirt disrupting her balance.

A sigh escapes her. As she tries to gather the fabric, Cael dismounts and steps beside her. He takes her hand. Elara flinches, her heart racing at the sudden proximity, and looks up into his eyes. His expression remains neutral, though his cheeks grow faintly pink.

With effortless strength, he lifts her and sits her securely into the saddle. He mounts once more, positioning himself in front of her, and pats the steed's neck to signal it forward. Elara watches the silent interaction. Usually, from what she has seen with the guards and knights in her castle, they would whistle and click their tongues.

Cael does not do that. Rather, he simply pats the horse and flicks his wrist. She tenses as the horse begins to move, the ground shifting beneath them. Elara forces her spine straight, though it strains her posture, reluctant to touch him. Attempting to anchor herself, she reaches down to grasp the slippery leather side of the seat, but the shifting movement of the steed only leaves her more unstable.

With a sudden jolt, her hands fly forward to grasp the thick fabric of his coat. Cael tenses instantly at the contact, his body turning rigid beneath her touch, but he continues forward without a word.

He adjusts his seating on the saddle and moves a little further forward, leaning the upper half of his body away so that there is space left between them. Elara relaxes, finding comfort in the inch of extra space, despite her hands grasping him.

"Today's duties are light. We observe the kingdom to check for any issues. It includes visits to the small taverns and bakeries where the owners

serve refreshments and food to sustain the people," Kaera says, looking over at Elara. "It is the duty Cael and I enjoy most, if the people are cooperative. As long as it is not overwhelming, I do not mind." She smiles.

Elara raises an eyebrow, listening attentively to the explanation. She never held any responsibilities as a princess in Veyrenn, having no duties to complete or commit to. Knowing Kaera and Cael work together indicates that a princess can actively work here. It sparks a thought within her that here, she might find a purpose for her title instead of simply wearing it as an ornament.

The farther they travel, the larger the pine trees grow, their thick branches filtering the cold sunlight and softening its reach. The crisp scent of damp earth and evergreen needles fills the air, entirely different from the choking dust of her old home. She catches small glimpses of wildlife through the thick undergrowth, noticing the sudden flash of a rabbit darting into the brush and the distant chirping of birds nesting high above. The thud of the horse's hooves against the trail echoes through the woods, while the cool wind brushes against her face.

The dense forest eventually thins, opening into the wide paths of a bustling village situated a short distance from the castle grounds. Children's laughter carries through the open streets, mingling with the warm scent of sweet buns and fresh fruit. Dogs bark as they race across the stone paths, chasing thrown sticks while cheerful voices call out to one another. Well-fed cats rest beneath benches and near baskets of produce, their tails flicking as they watch the passing crowd, though they slide into shaded corners at the approach of the horse.

When Cael draws the steed to a stop near the center of the market, the surrounding noise softens. Conversations trail off, and curious glances turn toward Elara. A few of the vendors and guards stationed on street duty bow respectfully at the appearance of the royals, leaving Elara acutely aware of the community observing her arrival.

Whispers ripple gently through the crowd, though none of them are secretive. "That must be her," someone murmurs. "She is more beautiful than I expected," another voice replies.

Elara remains still beneath their attention. A new presence, a new royal, their princess. She does not know how to greet them. She had never stood before her own people, never learned how to speak to a crowd or command their trust.

Standing among strangers now, she hesitates. She forces a small smile, though she does not speak. She does not know if she can. Cael pats the white horse, indicating for it to step forward as if he wants to avoid the crowd. The horse moves forward toward a vendor, selling freshly made buns.

As they pass, Elara hears a whisper from a girl, her braids bouncing as she looks up with wide eyes. “Mama,” she whispers, tugging at her mother’s sleeve, “look how pretty she is.” Her mother hushes her, smiling at her daughter’s innocence.

As she steps down onto the clean stone paths, the solid rows of gray and black stone buildings rise around her. Elara walks past the cottages with their sloped roofs and the narrow shops with open doors, her hand reaching out to touch the smooth wood of a stall displaying fresh bread and vibrant winter produce.

Overhead, hanging signs sway in the breeze, their painted symbols creaking. The stone beneath her feet is well worn but perfectly cared for, a testament to long-standing order that stands in contrast to the neglect she has always known. Withered vines cling to the stone walls, and frosted planters stand filled with dead leaves along the paths, confirming the harshness of the season as she moves deeper into the market.

Steam rises from the trays, curling into the air, carrying a rich, comforting scent. The vendor looks up and smiles. “Good morning, Your Highness,” he says. “Back for the sweet buns?”

Dismounting the horse, Cael turns and looks up at Elara, waiting to see if she wishes to come down. She hesitates to move, unused to the height of the grand steed and terrified to embarrass herself in front of the observing crowd. Noticing her stillness, Cael turns back to the stall without a word. He nods and offers the vendor a few silver coins that clink as they meet the man’s palm.

The vendor works, sliding three fresh buns into a brown paper bag before passing the warm package to the prince. “There you are,” he says, glancing toward Elara. “I hope you enjoy them, Your Highness. The royal family favors these.”

Cael takes the bag and, turning back to Elara, offers her one of the warm buns. She accepts it with a hesitant smile, acutely aware of the eyes still focused on her from around the crowded space. Gradually, the surrounding

noise picks up again and the village returns to its familiar rhythm, though Elara still catches the occasional stare as she follows Cael down the street.

Kaera slows her steed beside them, offering Elara a quick, reassuring smile. “I must see to the textile merchants on the eastern wall,” she says. “Do not let my brother bore you to tears.”

Once his sister disappears into the crowd, Cael guides the white steed to the edge of a grassy plaza. Turning back, he extends his gloved hands to help Elara down from the saddle. She takes it reluctantly, allowing him to help her down onto the cobblestone street. Looking up, she finds Cael already studying her, his eyes soft. Elara steps back under his scrutiny, blinking as her mind reels.

A nearby bench under a winter tree provides a moment of rest, and Elara stands beside Cael while he remains occupied with his immediate duties nearby. As he reviews a ledger with a local guardsman, her attention drifts toward a man hurrying through the square. In one hand he carries a stack of papers, and in the other, a hammer. Elara watches as the man presses a notice against the trunk of a tree, driving a nail firmly through its corner before continuing to pin the pages to walls, shopfronts, and torch brackets while ignoring the protests of shop owners.

One of the sheets detaches from a post, tumbling across the cobblestones until it slides directly to Elara’s feet. Freezing in place, she glances down to reveal the very same notice the man has been hanging throughout the village. Bending down to retrieve the parchment, she guides her eyes across the written page.

A PRINCE MUST SPEAK.

Prince Cael Everhart, the silent prince of Riverath.
Does the prince think his muteness hides his weakness?
All see him. The throne cannot speak for him.
Cael Everhart will fail us.
He is only The Silent Prince for us all.

THE CRUEL LINES command Elara’s undivided attention for several long moments. Cael is mute. Everything falls into place. The silence. The careful expressions. The way others observed him. The way he communicated using hand motions.

Elara lifts her chin, her forest-green eyes tracking a sudden shift in the air until her gaze collides with Cael's across the cobblestone square. He now stands near the threshold of the small restaurant, but his steady, untouchable composure is gone. His eyes are wide, fixed with absolute shock on the crumpled parchment held between her trembling fingers.

For a breathless moment, the raw vulnerability exposed on his features leaves her frozen. Cael's expression turns rigid with a flash of panic. He lowers his head abruptly, his gaze darting away as he forces himself to look at the street signs.

Around her, the marketplace continues without pause. Glancing at the paper again, the reality of Cael's life sinks into her chest. The cruel words stare back at her from the page, sharp and thoughtless. Slowly, she folds the notice against itself before setting it beside her on the bench. She finds Cael again, still standing on the threshold of the same restaurant.

A young woman approaches him from the edge of the square, her expression strained with visible distress. Her hands move anxiously as she explains a situation Elara cannot hear.

Cael's eyes remain fixed upon the distressed woman as though every word matters. His expression is focused without the slightest trace of impatience. He responds only with a nod and a reassuring gesture of his hand before stepping into the small tavern behind them to assist with the inspection. Elara watches as his frame disappears into the entrance, leaving her to wait on the clean stone path outside.

Elara watches him disappear, then rises to explore a little on her own, leaving the hateful poster about the prince behind her on the bench. Walking onward through the cobblestone streets, her gaze wanders over the people of Riverath. Girls, women, and elders move with effortless freedom, dressed according to their own preferences. Some wear flowing garments that sway with every step, while others choose fitted silhouettes that leave little concealed. Rich fabrics and simple cloth exist side by side, adorned with jewelry or left unembellished, each reflecting its wearer rather than expectation. No one appears confined by custom or judgment.

The clothier's shop stands open, its door creaking softly as Elara steps inside. Walls gleam with polished oak shelves, lined with silk rolls of every shade. Light streams through the large front windows, reflecting off crystal chandeliers and highlighting the embroidery of gowns arranged on black and beige mannequins. The aroma of pressed linen and floral perfume drifts

through the space, mixing with the radiant warmth that emanates from a brick hearth built into the wall.

A soft carpet muffles her steps, creating a calm, serene atmosphere despite the bustle outside. Elara's eyes land on a dress displayed against the wall, and she moves toward it, pulled by the allure of the shimmering fabric. Rubbing the smooth green silk between her fingers, she studies the careful craftsmanship of every stitch in the soft pink flowers scattered along the skirt, the boned bodice with its fluid sleeves, and the single pink flower at the waist. The color is nearly identical to her eyes.

Elara has never seen such a lovely gown.

"Hello, Your Highness!" The woman steps out from behind a curtain with clear excitement, the only other presence in the boutique. "You are from Veyrenn, yes? I learned about your arrival through the King's official announcement, when he requested that we prepare for our new princess and treat you with utmost kindness." She nods, her smile warm and welcoming.

Elara studies her closely, noting how vastly the woman's appearance differs from the rigid dress codes of Veyrenn. Her light brown skin gleams warmly beneath the lantern light. Dark hair is pulled into a hurried bun atop her head, with a few stray strands falling near her eyes as a sign of her constant work. She wears a simple silk dress protected by a sturdy canvas apron, where several silver sewing pins and a soft measuring tape rest within the front pockets. Thick boots click against the floor as she moves, completing an attire that values personal comfort and actual labor over the hollow, superficial perfection demanded by Elara's father.

"Do you see anything you like?" she continues brightly. "I would love to gift you one of my dresses. Free of charge."

An immediate shake of her head accompanies her refusal. "I cannot accept that. You deserve to be paid for such beauty." Her eyes drift back to the green silk dress.

The owner sweeps her eyes over Elara's current attire, offering a knowing look before she leans in with a playful grin, her voice lowering conspiratorially. "You are sweet, Your Highness. Truly. But it is all right. I do this for every new customer, and for those who need it most."

Elara's chest tightens at the sudden appraisal, a wave of self-consciousness rushing over her. She wonders if the stiff remnants of her Veyrenn wardrobe make her distress obvious to everyone in this new

kingdom. “That is kind of you,” she says. “You seem young. How long have you worked here?”

“I am the owner,” the woman replies, pride lighting her face. “I am twenty-one. I searched my whole life for something that felt right.” She turns quickly, lifting a freshly stitched dress from a table and setting it beside a mannequin. “One day, I made a hat to sell when I needed coin. People liked it. Then they wanted more. And here I am.” She steps back to admire her work. “There is nothing better than seeing someone wear what I created.”

“That is wonderful.” Elara smiles.

“If you do not mind, how about you? Your passion, your personality, your style. I could make you a beautiful dress,” the tailor says. “Rumors have been circulating across the square, and the people say His Highness’s wife looks different from the folk of our valley. You carry the pale look of someone kept deep within stone fortresses, and your clothing is so stiff and guarded. You do look different, of course, but darling, you are beautiful. I am furious the court rumors did not bother to mention that!”

Warmth blooms in Elara’s chest. She is unaccustomed to such kindness. Walker offered them a few times during her life, gentle words spoken in private, and her mother had given them freely. But since her passing, praise of any kind has become something distance. Unfamiliar.

“Oh, I continue speaking without pause,” the owner says with a joyous laugh. “My name is Olivia Wyn. Though most call me Liv, you are welcome to use my full name.”

Elara returns the sentiment with a small nod. “Greetings, Olivia. I assume my own title has preceded me.”

“Of course! News of the prince’s marriage spread across the kingdom yesterday.” Olivia tracks Elara's gaze as it drifts once more to the garment display. “I can already tell you adore that one. It would look beautiful on you, for the color matches your eyes.”

Stepping closer to the dress form, Elara lets her own fingers brush against the silk. The fabric feels cool and smooth beneath her touch, prompting her to imagine how the gown might drape against her figure.

Lowering her gaze toward the gown, she watches the green silk slip between her fingers. Her own dress remains heavy against her body, modest and restrictive in the way she has always been taught proper women should dress. This gown is different. The neckline reveals more skin than she is

accustomed to, the shape softer, freer, untouched by the rigid expectations she has carried throughout her life.

Elara places the gown back against the frame. She does not possess any funds of her own, meaning everything she receives now must be provided by her new husband. She remains entirely at the mercy of his generosity, and she would never dare ask for something as frivolous as a dress from him. Even considering the possibility feels shameless, as though she is reaching for a comfort she has no right to desire. She worries it will appear self-indulgent, though a part of her cannot deny the pull she feels toward it.

Elara exhales, her fingertips tracing once more along the edge of the silk. She finds herself caught somewhere between habit and longing.

“Oh, Your Highness. You are here,” Olivia says suddenly, her voice brightening even further.

With a swooping sensation in her gut, Elara turns to find Cael standing at the entrance of the shop.

“Her Highness was just admiring one of the dresses,” Olivia says with a pleased smile.

Despite whatever chaos the restaurant subjected him to earlier, Cael still appears unshaken. His dark attire remains immaculate, untouched by disorder, and somehow his presence alone seems to eclipse the elegance surrounding him. The black belt secured firmly at his waist holds his sword neatly against his side, while his gaze moves across the boutique.

“I must extend my deepest gratitude for your royal patronage, Prince Cael. Your endorsement has brought great prosperity to my shop,” Olivia says, bowing her head. “I am incredibly grateful you chose my establishment to craft the new uniforms for your guard.”

Cael returns her smile with a small one, nodding his head. He looks at Elara, their eyes locking once again before she turns her head away, distracting herself with the green dress.

“This is the only dress Her Highness seems to adore. I think it would truly suit her, and she would shine in it.” Olivia’s eyes sparkle as they rest on Elara. “I was also considering offering it to her without cost. You know my usual kindness.” She turns toward Elara. “Your Highness, if you wish to try it on, I do not mind at all.”

“Really?” Elara asks, lifting her eyes to search for Cael, only to realize his gaze has been fixed on her the entire time. Cael replies with a direct, encouraging nod.

Olivia squeals with excitement, carefully extracting the dress from the wooden form. “Right this way, Your Highness,” she says, gesturing forward as Elara follows her into the back chamber.

In the spacious dressing chamber, the walls are lined with mirrors from floor to ceiling. A small cushioned bench sits in the center, flanked by neatly stacked racks of clothing and a low table holding velvet gloves. Olivia suspends the green dress from a polished wooden peg along the wall before stepping out the door. “If you need any assistance fastening the gown, please let me know.”

Left alone, Elara examines her reflection in the mirror, her heavy gown still draped over her frame. Slowly untying and unclasping the restrictions, she lets the fabric fall away. With excitement, she takes the green dress and slides it on.

“It fits,” Elara whispers to herself. She spins once, enjoying the gentle swish of the skirt around her legs and the incredible freedom of movement the slit permits, even if it exposes her knees to the open air. Goosebumps dot her bare arms in the chill of the dressing space, but the cold no longer bothers her. Not when she feels so light and unburdened within such a gown. Her shoes do not match the vibrant shade, but the discrepancy does not matter, as the hem of the long skirt conceals them from view anyway.

She steps out of the dressing chamber and finds Cael standing there alone. When his gaze meets hers, his eyes widen. Elara wraps her arms around herself, grateful the dress covers the scars along her thighs. He takes a slow step closer, and then another, until only a foot separates them.

“Cael,” Elara whispers, the name escaping her lips as a warning against his proximity. His unexpected nearness puts her entirely on guard, her breath catching as he steps closer. The tips of Cael’s nose and ears turn a subtle shade of red.

“It fits beautifully on you,” Olivia approaches, smoothing the fabric of Elara’s dress. Cael lowers his gaze first and steps back. He lifts a hand and gives a small nod, approval clear without a single word.

Olivia clasps her hands together, satisfied, and moves to fetch a ribbon and wrapping paper, humming softly as the bell above the door rings with a passing customer.

Elara looks at her reflection once more. She smooths the fabric at her waist and exhales slowly. Finally, for the first time since arriving in Riverath, she does not feel like a guest.

OceanofPDF.com

X

A FLEETING TOUCH

C

Cael cannot feel his body.

He wishes he had not been present when Elara saw that poster, and he wishes he had not witnessed the public shame and humiliation of that muteness. The reality of it aches deep within the chest, making it impossible to process anything around the square.

A tight grip fastens around the package containing Elara's new dress, an attire entirely different from the restrictive garments she has been wearing. The white horse, named Snow, remains standing nearby while a royal guard ensures the safety and comfort of the steed. Reassured of her wellbeing, his mind drifts once again.

Cael watches Elara from the corner of his eye. For fifteen years, he has cherished the memory of the kind girl who once crossed his path, representing her image through his devotion to art. He spent every restless morning and night painting her features, writing poems to find solace when no comfort came his way on difficult days. Now, with this princess resembling her, he holds onto a desperate hope that Elara might possess that same spirit.

Nevertheless, his worst nightmare has come true today. On her very first day in his kingdom, before he could find a way to explain the truth of his silence with dignity, she discovered the cruel posters shaming his muteness. The exposure leaves him feeling stripped of his position as her husband.

He knows he should not care about the opinion of a stranger, but Elara is politically bound to him. Will she look at him with disgust, mirroring the judgment of his people and his stepmother? Having his own wife shame him will only break him further, leaving him with no escape.

Cael adverts his gaze as it lands on a passerby glaring at him in anger. His breathing slowly grows heavier, a desperate wish to escape suffocating him. Seeking an anchor, Cael reaches for the quill and leather notebook in the pocket of his black coat.

Any poem will do, whether it is about that childhood girl or his own suffocating feelings. Trying to pry his mind away from the lingering stares of the crowd and the fear that Elara is disturbed by him, he tries to write, but his thoughts swirl so much, it is impossible. His arms flatten against his sides, his weak grip holding the parchment as his eyes fixate on Elara in front of him, standing on the steps just outside the clothier's shop.

He remains half a pace behind her, as if he is trying to hide in her shadow. Her head turns toward him, her expression holding nothing but softness and curiosity. The look reminds him intensely of that girl from his past, who wore the exact same expression when she first stumbled upon him by the fountain.

His fingers tighten around the silver quill, moving across the faded, uneven paper of his notebook in an unstable, uncharacteristic scrawl. The sudden terror of her discovery leaves his mind fractured, and the words come out as a desperate plea.

A WALL OF GLASS*, a threat of stone,*
Bound to a crown, though entirely alone.
Turn away from the shadow I bear,
Lest you down in the quiet we share.
A mantle of green, a spirit so light,
Lost to the freeze of a kingdom in night.

HE FREEZES as the last word leaves his quill, his heart hammering against his ribs. He captures her green gown, her isolation, and the terrifying truth that she is now bound to the very silence that suffocates him. The urge to tear the page out and burn it consumes him, terrified that if she glances down, she will see his soul laid bare in an unstable scrawl and what he had written about her.

Tilting his head up, he finds eyes of a vibrant forest looking at him, studying him without judgment. Her eyes look down at his trembling hand holding onto the notebook and silver quill. Cael smacks the notebook shut,

placing it inside his coat to lock his secrets away as he pries his eyes from hers. Elara wilts at the movement, the smile fading from her lips as the light goes out of her eyes. Noticing her withdrawal, a wince of regret touches his features, his fear of exposure translating into a rudeness.

The beat of a horse's hooves breaks the tense silence. Kaera has returned, sitting upon her brown horse and her wavy mane tossing in the wind. She looks between them, her eyes narrowing at Elara's curious expression and Cael's pale one.

"Both of your expressions indicate that you have witnessed a battle," Kaera says with a smile on her lips.

Hilarious, Cael signs, rolling his eyes.

"I do not think it is nice to speak upon battle in such manner," Elara says, her voice low.

Cael and Kaera look her way with surprise. Evidently, his wife does not appreciate dark humor. He exchanges a glance with Kaera, who raises her eyebrows in response. They each offer a nod, a silent agreement to respect her boundaries.

Cael steps down the stairs and approaches the towering white steed, using the physical routine of checking the leather reins to calm his racing thoughts. He keeps his back turned to Elara.

Kaera watches from her saddle, her gaze shifting between Elara's soft expression and Cael's rigid posture. Adjusting her seat, she points her horse toward the main thoroughfare. "If we are finished at the clothier's establishment, we should proceed to the lower square. The marketplace vendors are waiting for our inspection before the afternoon cold settles."

Cael mounts Snow, his knuckles turning bloodless against the leather as he extends his bare, callused hand down to her. Elara places her palm in his, the small touch of her skin sending a jolt through him as he lifts her back onto the saddle behind his frame. He remains unused to the softness, his body freezing at the contact.

As they continue to move forward, exploring their duties while letting Elara study the path with her eyes, Cael adjusts his position to give Elara the space she needs. He has not missed the way she has flinched away from him over the last two days.

No doubt she hates him already.

Cael stops himself, realizing he is being far too harsh upon her. He saw the sheer fear in her eyes when her father was in the chamber back in

Veyrenn, and the way she relaxed during those rare moments the king was gone. Perhaps she is simply being distant to protect herself, studying him from afar until she is sure he is safe, much like he is doing with her. Though for entirely different reasons.

They arrive at the lower square where the vendors and small shop owners are waiting for the royal inspection. Around this area, Cael feels more confident. Here, he is more respected, having helped the people many times. It is specifically named Raeverband Market, in the main area where larger buildings and stores remain in Raeverband.

Except the place where Cael feels the most at ease is in chaos. A group of people and families stare from their shops and homes, eyes wide and gasps of surprise. Some of them form into a group, attempting to stop a tall butchering yelling at a small boy.

“You thieving, conniving piece of refuse! You thought you could steal from me and I would not notice?” he groans, one hand grasping onto the boy’s shirt collar.

“I did not, I swear!” the boy pleads. “I am telling you, I saw a cat snatch it and it ran away.”

The butcher steps directly into the boy’s face, his features twisted in unhinged rage. “Show me your pockets, boy! Prove your innocence!”

Before any of the guards can intervene to stop the violent chaos and release the kid, the butcher raises his free hand to physically harm the young boy. Cael leaps from Snow’s saddle and rushes toward them. He grabs the man’s arm, lunging forward. Then, he twists the man’s hand away, glaring at him. Storming grey eyes into shocked blue.

“Your Highness,” the man stammers.

The soldiers jump from their mounts, immediately checking on the little boy. Cael gives the butcher one final glare before tossing his arm away and turning to inspect the child himself. The boy’s eyes are wide with tears, his cheeks bright red. He appears to be only around nine years old. One of the guards speaks to him on behalf of Cael so the child can understand.

“Are you all right?” a guard asks in a gentler tone.

The boy’s eyes drift from the soldier to Cael, his head shaking frantically. “Please do not take me away, Prince. I have never stolen anything. I am not a criminal, I know better!”

Kaera slips from her horse, bending in front of the child with a soft expression while Elara remains on Snow. “That man will never harm you

again. He will face his consequences."

The boy only inclines his head, the fear lingering across his face. Cael pats the child's shoulder, reassuring him without words before he turns and signs to the soldiers. *Apprehend him.*

Obeying the command, the guards take the butcher and guide him away as instructed.

"Will I still get into trouble?" the young boy asks.

Cael tilts his head down, his expression softening. Hoping the boy will not flinch or run away, he kneels down to meet the child's height and offers him a reassuring smile. He shakes his head in the negative, his singular dimple on his right cheek evident.

Kaera steps beside them with an encouraging grin. "Here," she says, handing the boy a piece of a cocoa bar.

The boy offers a shy smile and takes the bar. "Thank you, Prince and Princess." He turns away, finding a quiet corner to rest in peace.

Kaera chuckles before turning to Cael, her eyebrows furrowing. "I cannot believe anyone, let alone a grown man, could harm a child. Even if the boy did steal."

Cael nods. He turns to find Elara's gaze locked onto him, a small, genuinely pleased smile gracing her lips. The approval in her expression is unmistakable. The moment she notices his eyes tracking her, she averts her gaze, her smile disappearing.

Cael turns away, hiding a smile. Forcing his stern composure to return, his hands move to face his sister. *We must complete our rounds*, he signs to Kaera. He scans the square, noting the many vendors who still wait for his assistance.

Cael moves from one wooden stall to the next, trying to lose himself in the familiar, rhythmic routine of the market. He stops by a blacksmith's table to inspect a row of iron horse harnesses, his fingers checking the quality of the metal loops before using his silver quill to scratch a quick signature onto an official receipt.

Out of the corner of his eye, he continuously tracks Elara's position near the horse. Every time he looks up, he catches her green eyes fixed intently on his hands. She remains silent, her expression unreadable. He cannot tell if she is looking at him with hidden pity, or if she is simply waiting for the tour to end so she can distance herself from him. He forces his focus back

to a spice vendor’s unbalanced scales, using a firm nod to command the merchant’s attention.

Cael spends his entire morning and afternoon walking and riding back and forth. Stamping ledgers, verifying trade weights, and sealing official merchant manifests with the royal wax press keep his mind anchored in the clockwork rhythm of his duties. The rush of adrenaline from his physical labor and his rescue of the young boy yesterday fades, leaving him feeling raw, drained, and hyper-aware of the silence humming in his own ears. He can feel the phantom weight of the words on that poster pressing against his chest.

Kaera handles the smaller details, mostly accompanying Cael on these daily rides to be his voice while he completes his mandatory duties. Elara stands by his side silently. She lifts her dress to follow beside Cael with every step. As the sun fades into the horizon, turning the sky deep orange, she shivers, rubbing her arms as a chill breeze blows through the market. The rising chill indicates that the winter wind will only grow more severe.

Cael shrugs off his thick coat and offers it to her, careful to avoid touching her or causing her to startle.

Elara responds by leaning away from him and shaking her head. “It is fine. You need it too,” she says, smiling even as her teeth chatter from the cold.

A sharp winter breeze sweeps through the market square, rustling the thin green silk of her new dress. Noting her sudden shiver, Cael continues to offer her the coat until she relents and takes the garment, wrapping it tightly around herself. It is far too large on her frame, and Cael cannot help but smile, thinking of the way he had given her the same coat the night before when she had fallen asleep in the carriage. It had swallowed her small frame then, too. A few times, as he had carried her upstairs to his bedchamber, she had almost disappeared in the excess fabric of her dress and his coat.

When the chattering of her teeth stops, and the blue in her lips fades, he nods, more to himself than anyone else and resumes his duties. Cael looks around for Kaera as he approaches the blacksmith's shop. She is a short distance away, talking to a smiling mother who holds her young daughter in her arms. Cael bites his lip, tapping his fingers against the side of his leg. With a quiet sigh, he brings out his green leather booklet and steps up to the blacksmith.

Almost desperately, he flips past his earlier, frantic poem to find a fresh, unblemished page. Pressing the silver quill down and letting the black ink settle into a neat script, he turns the booklet around so the blacksmith can read his words. The vendor squints his eyes against the fading sunlight to decipher the text.

Two new anvils are approved. Bring this page to the lower garrison tomorrow to collect them.

A look of relief washes over the blacksmith's weathered features, and he dips into a low bow. "Thank you, Your Highness," the vendor says softly as Cael tears the authorization page from his leather notebook and hands it over. "This will save my family's forge."

Cael offers a single, reassuring nod to the man, closing his booklet with a click of the strap. He slides his silver quill back into his pocket, satisfied. Turning back toward the open thoroughfare, he checks on Elara, ensuring she is still comfortable despite the biting wind.

Kaera rushes back with a bright smile. "Elara, I see a blooming flower that I have never seen before. Do you wish to view it?" she asks excitedly, her energy matching that of a young child.

Elara smiles, nodding her head before glancing back toward Cael, as though silently asking if he would like to join them. Cael adverts his gaze and shakes his head, using the opportunity to claim a moment for himself. The softness in her expression fades as she turns to follow Kaera.

Finding the opportunity, he guides Snow away from the large crowd toward an area where the trees are thick, their long branches and leaves sweeping the ground. He buries his face against the steed's neck, breathing in her familiar scent of dust and hair. Snow nuzzles him, letting out a whoosh of air onto his neck.

He inhales slowly, holding the breath until his lungs ache from the strain. The muscles across his shoulders burn, and his feet ache from the long hours of walking through the square. Though his formal training prepares him for physical exhaustion, teaching him how to endure the severe weight of his duties without a single break, he rarely finds the opportunity to claim a moment of rest.

Reaching out, he brings his hand up to pat the side of Snow's neck, offering the steed a tired, appreciative smile. From afar, the clear sound of Kaera's laughter echoes through the market. His eyes find Elara, easily spotted in the distance in her green silk dress, and relief fills his chest to see her sharing in the amusement as well.

Kaera and Elara return, laughing at Kaera's horse as it nudges her palm, demanding attention. He raises his eyebrows as he notices the small paperwhite blossom in Elara's hand, the way her fingers trace the delicate petals as if she is seeking comfort through the movement.

Standing upright, he brushes the stray leaves from his linen tunic. He walks out from beneath the shadow of the trees to meet them as they look around the market paths for him.

Kaera's expression brightens. "There you are," she smiles. "Shall we return? So far, our duties are completed, and the air is getting cold."

He nods as his sister mounts her horse. Turning toward his own steed, he offers his bare hand, preparing to help Elara into the saddle again. Instead of taking his offered palm, she stops directly in front of him.

"Cael," she says, her voice timid but steady.

He straightens his posture, his stomach turning as he wonders if she is going to ask questions he would rather not answer.

With a shy smile, she lifts the paperwhite flower toward his chest. "Can you put this in the horse's mane?"

Eyes blinking, Cael nods. He reaches out to take the white paperwhite, his fingers brushing her palm. His breath hitches at the contact of her skin against his, smooth where his is so rough. Elara's cheeks redden and she looks down, her soft brown hair curtaining her face. Swallowing, Cael turns away to hide the sudden impact of the touch. Working quickly, he weaves a section of Snow's mane into a tight braid and secures the flower through the center.

Cael steps back to admire the simple adornment, his eyes tracking the way the white petals gleam against Snow's coat before his gaze drifts back down to Elara. A rare softness ripples over his features, his heart hammering against his ribs as he waits for her reaction.

With a smile, her pinks still stained pink, Elara steps forward to pet Snow's nose. Cael's physical exhaustion temporarily disappears and wonders about the intention behind her offering the white rose to Snow,

trying to comprehend the sudden softness across her face. Nonetheless, he steps back to give Elara her moment.

“Is this your horse?” Elara asks, her eyes on his.

He offers a nod.

“Beautiful,” she murmurs, leaning in closer to bring her other hand to pet Snow’s neck. “The horses back in my father’s castle were always hungry and sad,” she admits, her throat bobbing as if she is physically forcing the painful memory down.

He purses his lips, remembering the devastating sight of the Veyrenn horses with their trembling legs, their ribs visible from severe starvation, and the way they flinched at every human contact. They had been abused under the negligence of King Eric, a complete fool.

Extending his hand toward Elara, he waits. When she takes his palm, her thumb strokes the back of his fingers, a motion so brief that he might have imagined it. The touch sends a jolt down his spine before she quickly mounts onto Snow’s back, leaving an awkward stillness hanging between them in the cold morning air.

He climbs into the saddle behind her, gathering the reins. The entire way back to the palace, his skin burns from the memory of her thumb against his knuckles.

“I have noticed the way your people respect you,” Elara says, her voice still low. “They must respect you and your dedication.”

Her praise hangs in the space between them, his jaw tightening as he keeps his gaze fixed straight ahead.

OceanofPDF.com

XI

LIBRARY OF WORLDS

E

Before the morning sun clears the horizon, Elara stands before her vanity mirror as Annie laces her into the new green gown. She brushes the tangles from Elara's hair with a gentle touch, smoothing the strands into place. The care in the gesture causes Elara to hold her breath. Her mind resists the urge to trust the woman's gentleness, terrified that allowing a new face into her life will invite the same painful loss she suffered with Walker.

Annie steps back, declaring herself satisfied. Elara thanks her and makes her way down stairs, remembering the way to the dining hall after yesterday.

Elara stops on the threshold of the dining hall, a sudden warmth heating her face. No one is present in the cavernous space except Cael. Rubbing the silk of her green dress between her fingers, she steps tentatively into the chamber. He turns at the sound of her footsteps and dips his head. Gripping the doorframe for balance, she inclines her head in response as the breath rushes from her lungs. If Cael notices her confusion, he makes no remark upon it as he turns to pull out the chair beside his own, gesturing for her to sit.

Elara takes her seat, hoping the flush of her face is not as noticeable as it feels. She loads her plate with a piece of roasted chicken coated in seasoned gravy and a glass of crisp apple nectar, letting her hair fall forward to hide her countenance. Cael continues his meal in unhurried silence.

As she eats, Elara tracks Cael's movements, her eyes dropping to his hands. He relies on those palms to communicate, and she is his wife, and she cannot understand a single word he tries to say. His people mock him,

and his own wife cannot understand him. Elara sets down her utensils, opening her mouth to tell him that his muteness matters nothing to her, but the words die on her lips as she recalls the raw panic upon his face when he saw that poster in her hand.

When Cael finishes his breakfast, he rises from the table. Elara stands with him, leaving her meal unfinished, and grabs his arm. Cael pauses, turning toward her. His attention settles on her so intently that Elara falters under his gaze, forgetting why she stopped him to begin with.

Swallowing, she tries again. “I wished to thank you for this dress. It is… something entirely new for me.” Her fingers lightly brush the skirt, her breath faltering. “Thank you.”

For several seconds, Cael does not respond. His steady eyes remain fixed on hers, unreadable. Cael swallows, and Elara tracks the movement in his throat, wondering what emotion or thought he is forcing down with the motion. For some reason, it makes her grin.

Slowly, he inclines his head.

Elara rises, intending to explore the library. Elias mentioned the archives were located upon one of the upper floors, and she is certain she can find the chamber on her own, or ask one of the passing servants if the need arises.

Sunlight spills through the tall windows lining the walls as she walks toward the staircase ahead. She ascends multiple flights of stairs, passing through halls bathed in light. The ascent is steep, forcing her to stop and catch her breath upon a wide marble landing. From this vantage point, she notes the lower corridors leading toward the throne chambers, guest dining halls, and the private quarters of the palace workers. Continuing upward, she takes a wrong turn and accidentally enters a threshold lined with war chambers and the treasury, where detailed maps and grand tapestries depicting historical victories cover the stone walls.

Realizing her mistake, she backtracks past the quarters of the ministers and advisers, scanning the uniform doors until she finally discovers the correct entrance to the archives. A single chamber occupies this level, its dark door standing ajar. Through the narrow opening the soft sounds of dusting, shuffling, and a familiar hum.

A gentle push opens the door, the heavy wood creaking. The library is so much larger than she expected. The dark walls lined with towering bookshelves packed with neatly arranged volumes spanning at least three

levels. Sunlight filters through tall arched windows, casting a warm glow across the endless rows of books as dust motes float in the light, catching her attention as her gaze travels upward.

At the top of a silver ladder, Elias carefully dusts the highest shelves, rearranging books with precise, deliberate movements. The scrape of his brush against the wood and the soft thud of books settling into place fill the chamber. Elara gasps, marveling at the sheer size of the magnificence before her. Rows of towering shelves stretch toward a high ceiling, packed with ancient volumes and bound parchments that fill the air with the comforting scent of old paper.

Ornate black railings and carved wooden details frame the balconies and staircases connecting the tiers. The intricate woodwork shapes the massive archive, where every corner seems to hold a secret waiting to be discovered. The scent of aged pages draws Elara further inside, comforting in a way she has not realized she missed.

“Mr. Elias?” she calls, using his proper title, a sign of respect deeply ingrained from her upbringing.

He turns toward her at once, his lips curving into a pleasant smile beneath his graying beard. “Your Highness,” he greets with a smile, descending the ladder. His movements are slower than most, deliberate with age rather than weakness.

“What brings you here?” He sets his dusting cloth over the ladder’s top rung and wipes his palms against his breeches before descending the rest of the way, his eyes crinkling with the same warmth Elara associates with a grandfather.

“I only wish to find a book to read,” Elara says, a sudden wave of embarrassment coloring the confession as she realizes how long it has been since she was permitted such a simple pleasure. The vulnerability catches her off guard, emerging because her father's rigid court had starved her of any time for herself. Reading once filled much of her time when she was younger. Before court lessons consumed her mornings and appearances occupied the rest of her days, she often spent hours hidden within stories until Walker came searching for her. It has been far too long since she last held a book in her hands, breathing in the scent of printed pages and being pulled into a world separate from her own.

“What manner of stories do you prefer, Your Highness?” Elias asks, adjusting his wire glasses. “I shall show you a few sections that may

interest you.” Beckoning her to follow him, Elias ascends the nearest staircase, the wood creaking under his feet. Elara follows him, her own footsteps nearly silent against the library floor.

He leads her past rows of towering shelves, each level stacked with volumes of varying sizes and bindings. Some are bound in soft, worn leather, their spines fading from years of careful handling. Others are gilt with intricate designs, catching the soft lamplight and reflecting it across the polished floor.

“Here,” Elias says, pausing before a section filled with illustrated volumes and neatly labeled rows. “These are stories of other lands, other times. Tales of adventure, courage, and discovery. Many of them are suited for young readers, but the lessons within are timeless.” He pulls a volume from the shelf, handing it to her. The cover is soft and smooth under her fingertips, the painted imagery on the front remarkably vivid.

Carefully opening the volume, her eyes widen at the painted images of forests, castles, and distant realms. The pages smell faintly of ink and old parchment, sending a thrill through her chest. Surrounding realities fade for a moment, erasing her identity and the political pull of the palace beyond these walls. Within this small alcove, only the story and its possibilities remain.

Elias watches her. “Take your time, Your Highness. There is no rush. This library is yours to explore.”

Elara turns a page, her fingers tracing the illustrations. The soft rustle of paper, the faint echo in the high-ceilinged chamber, and the occasional thump of her heartbeat form a gentle music around her. She leans back, settling against the edge of the railing. As she reads, sweet, long-buried memories return, and tears threaten to spill once more. Moving toward the far end of the library where she can hide between the deep shelves, she slides to the floor, disregarding the tables and chairs along the aisles. The cold wood beneath her feels preferable, offering a secluded space to absorb the moment fully.

Tears blur her vision, one falling onto the page and leaving a small stain. Wiping the moisture away, she continues to read as the emotional fracture inside her spreads. Hugging the volume tightly against her chest, she recalls the quiet afternoons when her mother would read stories aloud to her. The most memorable tale had been that of a gentle knight and a princess, a story that had prompted a young Elara to confess her innocent

desire to marry a sweet prince. A desperate wish takes root within her heart to bring her mother back to life, the memory of that lost warmth making the cold reality of her current marriage ache all the more.

I would have read every single word in this book for you, Mother, Elara thinks. *And if the book was terrible, I would make something up. Something beautiful.*

Drawing a breath, she clears her vision to focus on the written text. Time passes in a blur. Her legs begin to numb.

Elias' voice several shelves down startles her. "Good afternoon, Cael. Your duties finished quite quickly today?"

Elara's breath hitches. Peering around a shelf, she catches a glimpse of Cael standing near the doorway. Retreating deeper between the shelves, she holds the text up as a protective shield to conceal her tears. Her throat locks tight as she struggles to suppress a sudden spike of panic, terrified to reveal her bare, crying self to anyone within the fortress.

Elias chuckles. "Yes, they are making it easier for you. I almost forgot to mention, Her Highness was just here."

Elara frowns, noting how Elias calls Cael by his name but addresses her with strict formality. She wonders if the two share a bond as warm as the one she possesses with Walker. Rising quickly to brush the dust from her green silk skirt, she shakes back her hair and squares her shoulders, approaching the two men.

Elias immediately smiles. "There you are. How is the book? I have the second volume ready for you," he says, holding out another thick copy.

"It was good. Thank you," Elara replies, taking the book from Elias's hands. She admires the rough, hand-cut grain of the leather binding, the thick vellum pages against her fingertips bringing back distant memories of her childhood.

Lifting his chin, Elias addresses Cael. "Let me get your book, Cael." He turns to move toward the back of the library, his soft humming blending with the rustle of the shelves.

Elara looks up at Cael, and he looks right back. The silence stretches between them as she searches for anything to say. The night they shared the bedchamber comes back to her, prompting her to bite her lip as she tries to think of a way to apologize for taking his space. She rubs her damp palm against the green silk skirt of her dress to steady her nerves. Shifting the new volume against her chest, she speaks. "Do you come here often?"

Cael’s lifts his hands, moving slower than usual, as if he is considering whether to respond. With a jolt, Elara remembers she cannot understand his language. Embarrassment creeps over her cheeks and she breaks eye contact, watching his hands as they lower to his sides. Cael tilts his head toward the shelf behind her.

Elara blinks, unsure what he is trying to convey. Before she can ask another question, Elias returns, holding a book with a beautifully painted cover. *The Rose and the Crown*.

She recognizes the title. She has never read the story herself, though she remembers hearing about it as a child, when the older girls would speak of it as one of the most famous romances ever written. She had always known it was a story of love, though she never knew enough about it to understand why it had remained so beloved for generations.

A sharp ache of dramatic irony pricks at her mind. The prince of Riverath is reading a work of romance while their own marriage is a cold transaction forged between two crowns. She finds a curiosity rising regarding whether he seeks a hidden comfort in such tales. Tapping her fingers along the cover of her book, she bites her lip, trying and failing to think of anything else to say. When the silence thickens, she retreats back to her hidden alcove and sinks to the floor, letting the book fall open on her lap.

She tries to focus on her book, but finds herself entirely engrossed by the silent conversation happening between Cael and Elias. She tracks the unfamiliar language, mesmerized by the fluidity within each motion. There is no hesitation between either of them. No confusion. Only understanding.

In the high-ceilinged silence of the chamber, the language carries its own soft, rhythmic cadence. Elara tracks the faint rustle of their wool sleeves cutting through the air and the light, clean slap of a palm against a chest, a physical soundtrack to a conversation she can see but not comprehend.

A strange weight settles inside her chest as she watches the smooth fluidity of his hands. For the first time since leaving Veyrenn, she acknowledges a reluctant awareness building within herself. She finds herself staring at the dark sheen of his hair, caught off guard by how handsome he appears in the quiet spaces of the library.

The moment the observation takes root, her defensive armor slams shut out of pure survival. To find him attractive is to give him a dangerous pull

over her thoughts. She refuses to let her guard down, reminding herself that any appeal he possesses cannot distract her from the reality of her political arrangement.

She quickly forces her focus away from their private conversation to maintain her distance. Though she idly turns the pages of her book, she watches the men from the corner of her eye. Elara squints toward Elias, wondering if she could ask him to teach her a few hand motions, just enough to say something simple. The thought vanishes as quickly as it came. Cael might not want that from her, or he might simply prefer their silent arrangement.

Cael shifts beside the shelves. The constant awareness of his presence brings a strange sense of comfort. Deliberately, she reinforces the invisible bricks of her protective barrier, holding the thick book tightly against her ribs like a shield, determined to keep her heart safe from the danger of his kindness.

Deeply immersed in the text, she continues reading while the sunlight gradually dims across the open pages. Amber fades into shadow while lantern flames begin flickering throughout the library. Closing the thick volume with a rustle of paper, she finally stands from the floor, knowing she can no longer delay her return to the sanctuary of their bedchamber to resume her routine.

Drawing the book closer against her chest, she reflects on how stories always offer a world kinder than reality. One where endings are softened instead of wounded.

OceanofPDF.com

XII

THE SILENT INK

E

Elara does not return to her bedchamber.

She pauses at the sound of activity far below. The rhythmic bustle of servants crossing the threshold and the glimpse of Cael entering the main dining hall signal that dinner has begun. Memories of Veyrenn flash through her mind, where every shared meal with King Eric meant navigating a minefield of sharp remarks.

A sudden rumble cuts through the quiet corridor, a reminder of her empty stomach. Her hand presses flat against her waist. She hesitates, torn between the physical need for sustenance and the instinct to retreat to the sanctuary of being alone, even within a chamber that does not belong to her.

With a soft exhale, she forces her aching legs down the grand staircase, stepping into the cavernous hall only to find the royal family already assembled at the long table.

The atmosphere hangs thick and suffocating over the chamber. Elara glides into an empty seat, her fingers tightening around the edge of her porcelain plate as she observes the gathering. Rigid postures, the clink of silver utensils against ceramic, and averted eyes betray an invisible tension pulling through the air between the walls. King Raelith offers a smile that fails to lessen the chill, while the Queen and Kaera remain unreadable.

Beside her, Cael eats as though the rigidity in the chamber does not affect him at all. As the minutes stretch on and her plate remains empty, his hand shifts. Without a glance in her direction, he nudges the silver bread basket an inch closer to her side. Elara stares at the bread basket and takes a single slice.

Elara takes a spoonful of cut fruit, letting the sweet, juicy flavor melt against her tongue. The Queen's sharp gaze cuts across the table to fix on her, making Elara freeze before lifting her spoon to her mouth again. She sets her silver fork down with a deliberate, echoing clink that draws Kaera's attention.

"I see the weavers of Riverath waste their finest green silk on a girl who still eats like a starving peasant," Queen Maereth says, her voice smooth but laced with a lethal, mocking venom. "In Veyrenn, do they teach princesses to hunch over their plates as if someone might steal their scraps? Or did King Eric neglect your court training before discarding you at our gates?"

Elara's breath hooks in her throat, a wave of hot, suffocating humiliation rushing up her neck. Her fingers tighten around her utensil, the invisible walls of her protective barrier fracturing under the sudden, public assault. She lowers her eyes, unable to defend herself against a queen.

"Maereth, that is quite enough," King Raelith commands, his voice dropping into a low rumble that vibrates through the mahogany table. He narrows his eyes at his wife. "Elara is our family and a princess of this palace. You will treat her with the absolute respect her status demands, or you will excuse yourself from this table immediately."

Beside her, Cael slams his utensils down with enough force to make Elara jump. Her head snaps toward him just in time to watch a muscle in his jaw tick as he glares at his stepmother. The storm swirling in his eyes causes Elara to hold her breath, her gaze darting between her husband and her mother-in-law.

Maereth scorns them both, her lips curling into a tight sneer. She pushes back from the table and sweeps from the chamber, heels clacking on the marble floor.

Kaera watches, seemingly exhausted though not surprised, like a soul who witnesses this kind of scene more often than she does not. Just as Elara has her entire life.

King Raelith is the last to stand, pausing to offer a quiet *goodnight* before he follows his wife. His footsteps fade beyond the hall with the guards trailing after him.

Now only Elara, Cael, and Kaera remain, along with the knights stationed along the walls. Kaera's shoulders relax and she lets out a slow breath. Cael slides his untouched glass of water toward Elara when her own runs empty, refusing to look up from his plate. Swallowing the tears

strangling her, she murmurs a *thank you*. He offers a nod, and a small smile touches the corner of his mouth to reassure her. Her food sits untouched, getting cold.

“Do not listen to her,” Kaera reassures Elara, though there is no smile on her lips. “Mother has always been rather rude.”

“I understand. It can get quite exhausting,” Elara replies, her voice trails lower, the thought of her own father surfacing.

“Do not let her get to you,” Kaera says, a gentle smile returning to her lips. “Mother has never agreed with the customs of our valley, especially when it comes to the freedom our people possess. She clings to the rigid constraints of her own upbringing, and it is almost unheard of for a queen to oppose her own kingdom’s traditions so entirely.”

“It is alright to prefer modesty. I was raised under it. It often feels overbearing,” Elara replies, her focus shifting down to her plate.

Kaera nods with enthusiastic agreement. “Absolutely. Like you said, it becomes a burden. Not every woman wishes to navigate life in heavy, suffocating gowns, and I am grateful Father altered those regulations.” A pause softens her features. “Riverath has always embraced the freedom of our people, permitting women to wear garments that offer comfort and contour to their frame,” she explains. “It is only recently, as kingdoms like Veyrenn have closed their borders and enforced such unnatural restrictions, that our traditional styles have begun to cause a stir among outsiders.”

“King Raelith is compassionate,” Elara notes, a smile forming. “My own father never established such liberating laws. He simply demands every woman be held back.” A pang of regret strikes her chest for oversharing once more.

Kaera’s expression does not falter. “I knew you were resilient from the very moment our eyes met across the dining hall on that first evening. I know little of Veyrenn, but existence there must be incredibly difficult, and I cannot fully fathom it. I am truly glad you are here.”

Warmth stirs within Elara at her words. No one had ever looked past her title, save for her mother and Walker. Years of enduring hollow labels by those who coveted her title make Kaera’s confession a rare treasure. Elara takes her kindness and locks it deep within herself. A place where she can enjoy it in safety. Without fear of it being stripped away from her as everything else in her life has been. To Kaera, she offers only a slight nod.

Kaera’s smile dims, replaced by a flicker of confusion. Glancing at Cael, who maintains an unreadable expression, she blinks back something that might be disappointment and rises. “Enjoy the rest of your meal. I will retire to my bedchamber.”

Watching Kaera depart, Elara bites her lip, staring down at her plate. She should have accepted the kindness offered to her. She should have kept the conversation going and allowed herself a potential friend, but instead, she slammed a barrier in place between them and did not even wish her goodnight.

The image of the garden anchors itself in her thoughts like a physical necessity, a sanctuary where a silent prayer might calm the voices fracturing her composure. The food may have silenced her hunger, but her heart remains empty. Setting her spoon down, she rises, smoothing the green silk of her skirt.

She does not look at Cael as she leaves, but an intuition tells her his eyes track her departure anyway.

Turning toward the exit, the familiar habit of walking through the garden before resting guides her steps out of the hall. As she crosses the threshold and descends the grand outdoor stairs, a spiral of shivers runs along her bare arms and legs. The winter air is biting, but she does not care. She has survived far worse. Stepping onto the dark earth of the garden below, her eyes return instantly to the red roses. Their rich scent surrounds the chill, though many of the petals are brittle, browning at the edges from the oncoming frost.

Elara looks around, noticing another cluster of plants nearby. Poppies. They do not bloom in the winter, and currently, the patch holds nothing but tightly closed, dormant green pods buried in the cold soil. She stares down at them, her chest aching with longing, waiting for them to open to a sky that offers no warmth.

She wishes for the light pink petals to break through the frozen dirt, remembering how they used to remind her of the dresses her mother wore, long and smooth, beginning in soft pink and fading into white along the skirt. Sinking to her knees, she brushes a cold pod between her thumb and finger, hoping her touch might coax some life into the barren earth. Footsteps approach behind her. Elara turns her head and looks up to find Cael standing nearby. Her smile fades, though her expression remains soft.

“Cael?” she whispers, unsure how else to begin.

He nods, his gaze resting on hers. His quiet evaluation carries no threat or reason for fear. His expression is entirely calm.

A powerful urge arises within her chest to confess everything, from her innate love of greenery to her secret dream of tending a living garden of her own. Though, her old hesitation wins out, driven entirely by the fear of becoming a burden with her spoken words.

A sudden movement beside her draws her attention. Reaching into the inner fold of his heavy black tunic, Cael draws out a slender leather booklet kept specifically for moments exactly like this one. The faint, rhythmic scratch of a silver quill against the parchment cuts through the night air.

Cael then holds out the small notebook toward her, his storm-grey eyes locking onto hers as he offers the page. A single question is written carefully across the paper in his clean, looping script.

Do you like them?

His handwriting is beautiful, cursive and neat. Elara stares at the looping script, a wave of hesitation paralyzing her tongue. Her fingers tremble as she reaches out, taking the leather booklet from his hand, her skin brushing against his callused fingers for a breathless second. The physical contact sends a tremor of nervous energy through her core, forcing her hand away.

Back in Veyrenn, expressing a personal desire or a soft passion was a dangerous vulnerability, a weakness her father would instantly weaponize to mock her. She worries that if she reveals too much, Cael will view her as a foolish, self-indulgent girl who cares for trivial things. Fighting past the instinct to shut down, she forces a soft breath past her lips.

She glances once more at the pink poppies before lifting her gaze. “I love them. I love flowers, and how they bloom, how natural they are.” Her voice falters as she realizes she has said more than he asked. Cael does not interrupt. He only watches her, listening with attentiveness. A soft pink flush rises across her cheeks. “One day, I wish to grow my own garden and call it mine.”

Cael writes again, his silver quill moving with careful slowness before he turns the notebook toward her.

What are your favorite flowers?

“I really love roses and pink poppies,” Elara replies after a pause. “Roses, because they were my mother’s favorite. Pink poppies simply remind me of her.” Her fingers brush lightly over the petals once more, tracing their fragile edges.

“She used to say flowers remember kindness,” Elara continues. “That they bloom best when they are treated gently, and given time.”

A heavy, suffocating panic suddenly tightens her chest the moment the words leave her mouth. She freezes, her fingertips digging into the green silk of her skirt as she fiercely regrets the admission. She has never spoken of her mother’s private wisdom to anyone but Walker, and exposing such a fragile memory to a stranger feels entirely reckless. She braces herself for a dismissive shrug, expecting him to view her sentimentality as a burden.

When she lifts her gaze, Cael is watching her. Declining to reach for the notebook at once, he stands there to listen as though her words possess genuine weight. The absence of judgment in his grey eyes catches her completely off guard, melting the rigid tension in her shoulders until a sensation of safety settles over her nerves.

“And yours?” Elara asks. “What are your favorite flowers?”

Freezing in place, Cael widens his eyes as a sudden warmth rises to his cheeks, coloring the tips of his ears and nose. A visible restlessness overtakes him, driven by the simple fact that she seeks to learn something personal about his life. Observing the subtle shift, Elara hesitates as a flicker of concern crosses her face.

Wondering if the cold has reached him again, she watches as he reaches for the pen once more, his movement hesitant as his thumb presses hard enough against the metal that his knuckles whiten. Turning it again, showing his written words.

White lilies and pink poppies.

Elara’s eyes widen at their love for the same flower. A smile reaches her lips before she can contain it. “We like the same flower. I have never heard of white lilies before.”

Turning his head, Cael searches the distant edge of the path before walking toward a withered bush of white, brittle stems. He points down at the frost-bitten greenery. Driven by curiosity, Elara rises, adjusting her

green silk dress before stepping forward to stand beside him. Her eyes trace the remains of several large white lily blossoms, their six elegant, flared petals now drooping and turned to a dark brown against the cold dirt. The central yellow pistils and thin stamens are dusted with frost, the reddish-brown pollen washed away by the winter breeze.

“These were white lilies?” Elara asks, her voice lowering as sorrow touches her frame. She extends her hand, her finger hovering over a brittle, ruined petal without touching it, fearing it might crumble. “They must have been beautiful.”

Cael shifts his posture beside her, his gaze moving elsewhere. Following his look, Elara notices a neighboring bush filled with dormant light pink peonies that she had not spotted earlier under the grey sky. Their petals are tightly locked away, surviving beneath the freezing air. A soft gasp escapes her as she approaches them. “I have not seen these flowers in so long,” she says, speaking more to Cael than to herself. “Though I had forgotten their name.”

Cael steps closer to her side, his gaze tracking the way her fingers trace the delicate layers of the blossoms. Lifting his booklet once more, his silver quill glides across the paper before he angles the page toward her. A single word rests in the center of the ink.

Peonies.

A wave of recognition washes over her as she reads the script, the name instantly unlocking a deeper flood of childhood memories. “Peonies,” she repeats, the word tasting familiar and comforting on her tongue. “Yes, that is it. Thank you.”

Before the moment can extend, a woman with her golden hair tied messily rushes forward, wearing the tightly fitted black and polished silver uniform of a Riverath guard. “Your Highness, your father has been calling for you.”

Cael lowers his gaze, the booklet remaining blank as the garden suddenly feels smaller around them. Turning to follow the messenger without a backward glance, his rapid departure leaves her chest tightening with a familiar ache. Drawing in a steady breath, she redirects her attention to the dark blooms before her eyes drop to the gravel.

Looking down at the gravel path, Elara catches sight of Cael's notebook and quill. The items must have fallen from his pocket when he shoved them into his coat so hastily. She kneels to pick them up, attempting to call out for him, but he is already far out of sight. Pressing his belongings protectively against her chest, she makes her way inside the palace the second she feels the winter breeze grow stronger against her bare arms and calves.

Clutching the booklet against her chest, she wanders through the upper corridor, her eyes scanning the corners of the gallery for his broad frame. She hopes to return his belongings immediately, refusing to leave them scattered where the palace servants might disturb his privacy. The stone hallways remain vacant, the silence offering no clue as to where he has retreated.

Realizing he is nowhere to be found, she tightens her grip on the leather, deciding to keep the item under her protection until they meet. She navigates the interior quickly, hurrying up the stairs and down the long hall until she enters her bedchamber.

Only a few of the chandeliers are lit, casting a dim glow in the dark chamber. Annie is by the bed, arranging the sheets, and turns when Elara enters. She greets Elara with her usual kind smile. "Greetings, Your Highness."

Quickly, Elara hides the items behind her back, her fingers locking around the leather in a tight grip. Nonetheless, she forces herself to return Annie's smile. "Greetings, Mistress Annie," she says. "I would love for you to grant me time to bathe."

Annie nods with understanding. "Absolutely, Your Highness. Bathe as long as you wish. I will remain here and wait for you."

Elara's expression softens before she steps into the bathing chamber. She brings the notebook around and presses it against her chest to prevent Annie seeing it. Having it so close sends a shiver down her spine, like it might hold filthy secrets. Perhaps they do.

She places them by the wide, dark marble sink. Elara stares at the booklet as she pulls on the laces at the back of her dress. Why is she being so protective of it? Is it simply because it contains Cael's innermost thoughts? Or is it because she recognized the panic on his face when he caught her looking at it yesterday? She, of anyone, knows the desperation of locking secrets away.

Forcing her thoughts away from the imposing book, she steps into the bathing chamber and sets the volume down upon the counter. She tests the water, her brow furrowing upon finding it entirely too cold, but she refuses to call for Annie to fix it. The process would take far too long, and she is simply too exhausted to wait. A breath of weariness escapes her lips as she undresses and forces herself to sink into the bath, trying to forget the prince she regrets assuming was cruel.

Elara leans her head back against the edge of the tub, staring up at the ceiling of dark paint and silver designs. She feels the booklet staring at her, tempting her to let secrets spill onto her palms when she should be protecting their privacy.

The cold water aches against her body, but she submerges her face and hair before rising to step out. Her teeth chatter as she dries herself with a cloth, slipping into the folded nightgown from the shelf beneath the sink. Grabbing her green silk dress, her damp fingers caress the smooth material.

Grasping the dress in her palms, she prepares to exit the bathing chamber before realizing it is too dangerous to leave the prince's booklet exposed to Annie. Moving with hurried anxiousness, she shoves the volume beneath a small stack of folded towels on a low shelf. The dark leather binding remains visible, but she lets out a long breath, wiping her palms against her nightgown before stepping out into the main chamber. Annie sits on the edge of the bed, her head turned toward the night outside and the soft murmur of the wind.

“Mistress Annie,” Elara says gently.

Annie startles at the sound of Elara’s voice, her frame tightening as she dips into a hasty bow. Straightening once more, she looks at the princess. “I apologize,” she says, her eyebrows furrowing. “Your hair, Your Highness. It is not entirely wet.”

“Yes, the water was too cold for my liking,” Elara admits, displeased by the discomforting chill.

“I understand,” Annie smiles, guiding Elara to her chair. She lifts the hairbrush, gently working through only the damp strands to avoid snagging the dry ones at the top of her head.

Silence pesters within Elara’s ears, broken only by the rhythmic stroke of the brush through her hair.

“Your Highness, I apologize,” Annie says, her voice lowering.

Shoulders tensing, Elara studies Annie's reflection in the mirror. "For what, Mistress Annie? There is nothing to apologize for."

"I can sense your discomfort toward me," Annie admits. "I was a regular woman who cleaned the palace along with the others, but His Majesty found me suitable to care for you because of my supposed enthusiastic personality." A brief pause slows her movements. "You can always request another mistress."

"That is unacceptable," Elara says, her tone firm but not unkind as guilt stirs within her. "It is not you. You are a sweet person, and I apologize for causing you to think such a thing. You are a wonderful woman."

Annie's expression softens. "I appreciate it, Your Highness. I appreciate your company, patience, and understanding."

Guilt swallows Elara. She looks away from her reflection in the mirror, tracing her nail along a grain in the wood of the vanity. Thoughts of Walker and her mother tighten her throat. She swallows hard to force the emotion back down before it can overcome her composure.

"This entire thing reminds me of someone important," Elara confesses, not offering more. "I do not know how to process this. The new environment and the laws, it is different."

Annie inclines her head. "I imagine so. I cannot exactly understand the burden you are feeling. You are not only a new princess in a new kingdom, but you have left behind things you love." She continues to brush through her hair. "Perhaps someone too, and you have to endure it all."

Elara's fingers curl into her nightgown. "Yes."

Annie sets the brush down upon the vanity and squeezes Elara's shoulder. She offers a smile that reveals an understanding of loss. "I promise you are not alone," she says. "Princess Kaera is impeccably kind. She defends every innocent person she sees. Especially us, the women who work here. His Majesty is a gentleman and he is known for his warm heart. I am here because of him." Her smile warms. "His Highness is…" She pauses.

"Is silent," Elara completes her sentence. "He is rather confusing, even to me. Maybe he is bad or not."

"Oh, never bad," Annie shakes her head vigorously. "He is kind and hardworking, just like His Majesty. But he mostly works outside of the palace, and I am occupied with my own duties here."

“And the Queen?” Elara asks, rather hoping for an entire bucket of information about Queen Maereth’s character. “How is her character, and how does she seem in the palace?”

Annie’s smile fades, and her expression shifts. “Well, Her Majesty is kind too.” Her words do not match her mumbled tone, or the way she suddenly avoids Elara's eyes.

Elara is unconvinced, though she does not push the matter, recognizing that Annie has reached the limit of what she will say. “I appreciate your honesty and the help,” she says, biting the inside of her cheeks before standing to give Annie a genuine smile. “It is getting late, and sleep is overcoming me.”

Annie returns the smile and bows. “I understand. Rest well, Your Highness.” Stepping away, she clicks the door behind her when she leaves.

As soon as Annie is gone, Elara rushes to the bathing chamber and grabs Cael's booklet and quill again. She forces her gaze away from it and the lingering temptation to read it, placing it in the drawer of her vanity. She makes her way toward her bed and slips inside the thick blankets, sinking her body against the mattress, forcing her eyes shut as she hopes for sleep to overcome her.

It does not.

Elara constantly turns, curling into her sleep and setting herself in the position she finds most comfortable, sleeping on her right side with her hands underneath her cheek, pressing. With a frustrated huff, she sits up, her gaze drifting to the window and the night sky outside. The longer she sits there, the more awake she becomes.

Elara slips off the bed and rushes toward the vanity, her hands hovering above the booklet. Opening the volume means invading his privacy, a risk that threatens her safety. Her fingers tremble with guilt, but her curiosity overrides her caution. She picks up the booklet and opens the first page, promising herself to look at only one. Her eyes widen.

A TENDER LIGHT *that makes a ghost a slave,*
Binding my silent mind to one desire
To seek her warmth anew.
Through all the secret lines I choose to trace,
Wishing to block the sorrow and the sting.
She brings a love I have no right to claim.

I long to stand before her one last night,
To know she looks beyond my voiceless name,
And lifts a silent prince above his shame.

EYES SOFTENING at the poetic words of devotion, Elara's thumb caresses the vintage paper, as if the words could reach out and caress her in return. She stands frozen, the raw vulnerability of his hidden voice striking her like a physical blow.

Her heart hammers against her ribs as a crushing sensation of intimacy rattles her defenses. This is his real voice. The prince who cannot speak out loud, the man she assumed was cold, has a soul that bleeds with agonizing poetry. The words feel dangerously alive on the page, stripping away every single piece of the protective armor she spent the day building against him.

The words are beautiful and there is no doubt that it is a love poem. Her curiosity grows, along with the urge to turn more and more of the pages in the booklet.

It all makes sense to Elara. The way Cael hid his notebook, like he is afraid of his genuine feelings being seen. The artistic beauty he possesses and his sudden disappearance last time when they were by Raeverband. The romantic book he read in the library.

Who is this mysterious woman Cael writes about? Elara finds herself trying to imagine her. Does she have golden hair or black? Perhaps she wears shorter dresses than Elara does. What color are her eyes. Given Cael's ethereal appearance, she must be incredibly beautiful.

Her fingers clench around the edges of the booklet, the heavy leather scoring deep lines into her palms. A strange, cold weight drops into her stomach, making her breathing shallow as she sits back onto her bed, pulling her knees against her chest. She fixes her gaze on the ink, tracing the words about another woman's warmth. Something inside her roils at the discovery. She knows it is wrong for him to harbor affection for another while being bound to her, even though she does not care for him and this marriage was forced upon them. Holding her breath, she stares at the looping script.

The rustle of the garden leaves outside is suddenly cut short by the click of thick boots making their way back up the stairs, toward the corridor outside.

Cael is back.

Elara freezes, her eyes widening in a sudden spike of panic as she looks down at the open pages still resting in her hands.

She quickly takes the booklet with her to bed, hiding it with her under the blankets. Keeping it against her chest, she listens as the silence returns, followed by the slow creak of the bedchamber door opening. Elara holds her breath, trying to shut her eyes to pretend she is asleep, though the rigidity of her posture might give her away.

Soft sniffles and a trembling breath echo through the bedchamber. With a jolt, Elara realizes that Cael is crying. Remaining still in place, she listens to the bathing chamber's water running, a heavy exhale, and the sharp rustle of shedding clothing.

When his footsteps finally approach the bath chamber door, they pause. He shifts his direction, walking towards the bed with a measured stride that echoes softly against the stone floorboards.

Elara clutches the booklet, hiding it deeper inside the blankets without a single movement. She remains still beneath the covers, locking her muscles as she swallows the lump of nervousness rising in her throat to keep her breathing shallow.

After that second, the fabric of his coat swishes as he turns away. His boots create a steady rhythm as he walks toward the main exit, and the door shuts behind him with a soft click.

Letting out a relieved breath, Elara slides off the bed to hide the notebook in her vanity once more. Cael showing up like that was a clear warning not to be so nosy. With the booklet finally out of her grasp, she returns to her bed and falls asleep, her mind drifting back to the specific poem about another woman.

OceanofPDF.com

XIII

BLOSSOMS AND STEEL

E

The next morning, Elara returns to the garden.

She sits on the second step of the grand, dark marble staircase, looking out at the thick green leaves dusted with morning frost. A few resilient white paperwhites bloom amidst the cold air, their pale petals anchoring the quiet landscape. Nearby, an elderly gardener tends to them with unhurried care, untouched by the bustle of the palace beyond. Her gaze lingers on a cluster of pink poppies, and, as always, her thoughts return to her mother.

The silver ring upon her finger remains a strange weight, and the crown resting upon her head acts as a constant reminder of the forced arrangement. Wrapped in her usual gown, with long silk gloves shielding her hands and arms, she feels little of the cold beyond the sting at the tip of her nose.

A stronger wind sweeps through the garden, carrying with it the sharp bite of winter, though it scarcely troubles her.

Footsteps and low murmured chatter reach her ears. A group of three women approaches along the path. One has pale skin and wears a pink silk scarf wrapped around her head, covering her hair and neck. Her coat is thick, and her clothing beneath is hidden by a black gardening apron. The second woman, with warm-toned skin, has long golden hair and emerald eyes, dressed in a simple long gown with thick tights underneath, a glimpse of them appearing around her ankles as the skirt sways from the wind. The third has hazelnut-dark skin, her black hair secured in a neat bun, wire frames resting upon her nose, and plain breeches paired with a long tunic.

When they notice Elara alone upon the steps, embarrassment takes hold of her. The sound of their giggles and whispered words cuts deeper than

expected. A throb beats within her chest, carrying the weight of the isolation she has endured throughout her life.

Harsh words spoken behind her back. Cruel laughter from common children she once tried to befriend during outings through the market streets, mocking her for being too prim and proper to ever join their games.

They had called her entitled for wanting companionship, for wishing to talk, to laugh, to run freely and play. Even grown adults spoke of her with cruelty, whispering words like political pawn and useless heir that she did not understand until she was older, unafraid of any punishment from a careless king who never bothered to enforce her safety.

A physical shiver runs through her tightening frame. Few ever understood that the title, the wealth, or the distance placed between her and others were things never requested. Unfamiliar treatment and harsh judgment had always followed her nature and her uncertainty.

Shifting her gaze away to shut out the soft laughter, a longing arises to escape the moment. Immobilized on the marble step, she forces her frame to remain perfectly frozen, hoping that staying still will prevent the three women from noticing her presence.

The women move through the garden, each carrying brown paper bags. The trio works near the patch of hardy hellebores, their gloved hands parting the frosted earth with care and setting the loosened soil aside before placing the winter roots within. Another woman waters the ground, smoothing the soil against the chill.

The third woman approaches Elara, her dark skin catching a soft golden sheen beneath the morning sunlight.

“Your Highness,” she says, inclining her head with respect. “Do you take an interest in these flowers? Forgive me if I seem intrusive, but I could not help but notice.”

Straightening her posture as her earlier anxieties ease, she offers a smile. “Yes,” she replies. “I adore flowers, especially pink poppies.”

The woman lets out a laugh. “A coincidence, then. His Highness requested that we clear the dead autumn stalks and prepare the earth to plant pink poppy bulbs for the spring. It was a surprise to the three of us. We expected roses, or apple trees, since they are so prized in Riverath.” Her gaze drifts toward the garden, where the remaining leaves carry shades of yellow and orange against the gray sky. “Though it is winter, he insisted on this preparation.”

“He did?” Elara’s heart skips a beat, a wave of confusion rushing straight to her chest.

She stares at the dark earth, her mind spinning back to the silence of the bedchamber last night. She replays the sound of Cael’s muffled sniffles in the dark, matching his tears with the verses she read from his booklet. The realization that he secretly ordered these specific flowers, her mother’s favorite, just for her alters her old assumptions. He is not the cruel, detached captor her father trained her to expect; he tracks her grief in secrecy.

Still, a cold spike of fear keeps her protective barrier locked. She worries that leaning into this hidden kindness is a dangerous trap, a vulnerability that will leave her exposed when the reality of their forced political transaction inevitably crashes down.

“Yes. Quite unexpected,” the woman continues, smiling. “If you wish to explore the grounds further, you may do so. Our work will not disturb you.”

“I would like to help you plant them. I wish to learn,” Elara reconsiders.

The woman’s brows rise in pleasant surprise before her expression softens into a warm smile. “Of course, Your Highness. We would be honored to teach you.”

Before they begin working the soil, the dark-haired woman hands Elara a light wooden rake to help clear the remaining debris from the patch. Elara takes the tool, the smooth handle cool against her palms as she pulls the dried yellow and orange leaves away from the planting beds, piling them neatly to the side.

Finishing with the last of the dead roots and clearing the fallen leaves, the remaining two women turn toward Elara. “She wishes to join us?” the woman with the scarf asks, her voice bright with delight.

“I may?” Elara asks, caught off guard by her own boldness. “But... what of my gown? It will be stained.”

The blonde woman lets out a quiet laugh. “Flowers have never minded fine fabric, Your Highness. Mud certainly does.” She gestures toward a nearby shed. “We keep plenty of gardening aprons to protect your dress. We have even helped Her Highness before. We simply gather the skirt, pin it in place, and you will be able to move about comfortably.”

Elara’s shoulders ease. “Do you happen to have any pins?”

While the first woman steps away to retrieve a garden apron, the remaining two stand close. Receiving a nod of consent, they lift the fabric

of the gown, folding the skirt and securing it just above her knees. A chill brushes her skin, sending a ripple of goosebumps along her legs. When the woman with the scarf returns, she produces several golden pins from her pocket and looks up at Elara with a smile.

“I must always be prepared, Your Highness,” she says with a laugh. “My scarf does not always stay in place.”

Elara looks at the woman, unfamiliar with the scarf though she does not wish to offend her by asking. The woman smiles, as if she is sensing her confusion. “It is the scarf I wear to cover my hair, neck, and ears. It is a culture my family and I follow back at home.”

Elara listens with fascination. Though she does not understand the tradition, she admires the woman’s confidence and composure in wearing what is proper and comfortable for her.

“There,” the woman concludes, as all three step back to check that the fabric is secure. “And here is the gardening apron.” She slips it over Elara’s head and ties it at her waist.

A study of her reflection reveals a transformation, and a sense of lightness and support takes root. Within minutes, surrounded by these women, a long-cherished wish becomes reality. She has been here for only three days, and although the burden she once carried has eased, unease remains beneath everything she has begun to experience. The entire arrangement, this kingdom, and the life now unfolding around her still feel unreal.

Maybe the world is finally listening to my struggles, she thinks, a rare sense of peace settling over her.

For the past hour, the three women have guided her through the steps of gardening. They teach her how to plant securely, how to cover each bulb with care, and the measures necessary to ensure the poppies grow healthy and endure within the cold ground.

Pouring water over the soil, she pats the earth with her bare hands until it is even and firm, the rhythm of her motions settling into harmony. The damp earth catches beneath her fingernails as she attempts to smooth a stubborn ridge of soil. A thick, buried root resists the pressure of her palm, springing upward and threatening to displace the newly planted bulbs.

Noting her struggle, Celestia kneels into the mud beside her. Without a word, the blonde woman places her gloved hand over Elara’s wrist, guiding

her hand to alter the angle of her weight until the earth finally yields and packs down flat.

When her task is complete, impatience stirs within her. She longs to see a flower emerge, or even the rise of a stem. Nothing appears, and Elara knows patience is required for the winter bulbs to sleep until spring. Turning toward the three women, an unaccustomed smile touches her lips, born from the warmth of an experience she has never known before.

Only two words come to her. “Thank you.”

Instead of a simple nod, Asma reaches deep into the pocket of her black gardening apron. She produces a rough linen pouch tied with a piece of twine and presses the coarse fabric into Elara’s soiled palm. “These are the seeds of the winter poppies from my family’s valley,” she says, her voice low so the sound does not carry beyond their small circle. “They are resilient. They thrive even when the frost is harsh.”

Elara closes her fingers around the small weight, the texture of the twine pressing against her skin. Feeling her heart thump with warmth and new gratitude, all she can do is offer a genuine smile.

Asma’s smile only grows, the warmth of kindness growing warmer than the sun’s heat. “This is your garden. You may shape it as you wish. You may grow your own flowers, plant what pleases you. You could even cultivate fruits and vegetables.”

“I wish I could do all of that,” Elara says. “I have never been given such freedom. When you mentioned roses earlier, I found myself wanting to grow them. The deep red ones. There is more than enough space in the garden.”

Before any of the women can answer, a sudden, heavy sensation presses against the back of Elara's neck. The warmth in her chest turns ice cold. Tilting her chin upward, her eyes land on the high balcony of the private chambers.

Queen Maereth stands motionless against the stone balustrade, her immaculate posture rigid as her icy gaze fixates directly on Elara’s mud-stained hands and pinned-up skirt. The open disgust on her face fractures Elara’s peaceful sanctuary in an instant. Without a word, Queen Maereth turns her back and disappears inside, leaving a suffocating shadow over the courtyard.

The dark-haired woman gives a thoughtful shrug, breaking the heavy quiet. “It would transform the gardens, Your Highness. Still, I think more

flowers would only make them lovelier. Especially with the Flower Festival approaching. Raeverband will look stunning again."

Still recovering from Queen Maereth's coldness, she replies nonetheless. "The Flower Festival?" she asks. "What is it?"

"It marks the season when the flowers across Riverath are at their finest," the woman with the scarf explains, the silk draped over her shoulder shifting with the breeze. "After the old king's wife passed away, it became a festival in her honor, a way for the kingdom to remember her."

The story returns to Elara at once. A king who filled his kingdom with flowers after losing the woman he loved, offering their beauty not only to himself but to everyone around him. She cannot decide whether the tradition is born from devotion or grief. Perhaps both. Even so, it leaves her wanting to learn more.

"When does it begin?" she asks.

"In about three months," the blonde woman replies. "It sounds far away, though the seasons always seem to arrive sooner than expected."

Following her words, Celestia gestures toward the nearby garden shed. "Before we begin organizing the rest of the seasonal seeds for the spring and summer crops, we should make sure these winter pods are sorted."

The woman with the scarf clasps her hands together with sudden excitement. "I cannot wait to grow oxblood lilies again. They always bloom beautifully during the festival. I only wish it were sooner."

"Besides, have you forgotten what happened the last time? You neglected them," the blonde woman says with an amused smile.

Asma wrinkles her nose. "I was working two jobs and looking after my sister. Do not make me sound irresponsible, Celestia." Her arm nudges her playfully.

Celestia's smile widens. "My starburst lilies, on the other hand, were magnificent."

"They died because you forgot to water them," the dark-haired woman remarks, laughter already creeping into her voice.

"Oh, please, Claire," Asma and Celestia reply together before dissolving into laughter.

"And you never grew anything at all," Celestia adds, nudging Claire lightly with her elbow, "because you were far too busy with your girlfriend. Kissing like there is no tomorrow."

Claire gasps with a humorous dramatic sense, scoffing. "Gracious."

The three women laugh, revealing their close camaraderie with each other. A tightening sensation grips Elara's chest, her fingers curling into the fabric of her skirt as she witnesses a warmth she has never known. A distraction appears in the shape of Kaera, who holds a tray of baked pastries while wearing thick black gloves to protect her palms from the heat.

"I see you are entertaining Elara," Kaera smiles. "I baked some cookies with the pastry chefs." She shrugs. "I was bored."

The women bow, but instead of the nervousness they had earlier with Queen Maereth, they smile and enthusiastically greet Kaera.

Surprisingly, Kaera first turns to Elara to offer her a cookie. "I see you are overtaking my sister-in-law. I have made extra just in case. You should try some."

Elara smiles, accepting a cookie and taking a bite. It is perfectly sweet, soft yet crunching beneath her teeth with warm chocolate that accompanies the rich flavor. "This is amazing," she murmurs after she swallows the bite.

Kaera's smile widens, almost shyly as her cheeks warm. "Thank you," Kaera says, her expression turning thoughtful. "I find a certain peace in the work. The process can feel entirely burdensome when one is new to the craft, but it remains an entertaining pursuit when you know a delicious reward awaits at the end."

Asma takes one, nodding. "Absolutely. Her Highness makes amazing cookies. She has been doing it for three years from what we are told, and they progressively improve."

"You, Asma, simply wish to see my face turn into a strawberry," Kaera says with a playful frown.

They all continue to smile, brightening the space amidst the muted tones of the oncoming winter. Elara watches their easy exchange with wonder. The stark reminder of her own isolation quickly makes her feel out of place amidst their effortless familiarity. Untying the gardening apron and removing the pins allows her skirt to fall back into its original shape as she steps away from the group. After removing her gloves, she folds the material carefully and places them upon a nearby bench beside the fountain, hoping the items will be found later.

Patting her hair to ensure her appearance is orderly, Elara turns away, desiring to return to her chamber and read Cael's booklet further. Before she can take more than two steps, a frantic commotion pulls her up short as a young kitchen servant sprints into the path. Gravel flies as the boy comes to

a stop in front of Kaera, his apron askew as he doubles over to catch his breath.

“Your Highnesses, please,” the boy gasps, his eyes wide. “A dispute has broken out in the lower kitchens between a female knight from the new garrison and a male vanguard. The argument is turning violent, and the guards are struggling to control it before the kitchen staff is harmed.”

The easy peace of the morning shatters. Elara freezes, her fingers tightening around the rough linen seed pouch hidden in her pocket as she looks over at Kaera.

Kaera’s playful demeanor vanishes, her jaw tightening into a fierce, commanding line as she hands the tray of cookies over to Asma. “Not inside our palace,” she says, her sharp gaze then landing onto Elara. “Accompany me.”

Any thought of returning to her quiet vanity drawer disappears. Elara’s pulse quickens as they hurry toward the shouting that echoes up from the subterranean depths of the palace. This is her first time being involved in something a princess must do. Control chaos, commit to her duties.

Kaera’s sudden sharpness shocks Elara. It is a different side of her than she has observed so far. In the kitchen, the chefs line the walls while a handful of guards try to calm two knights, screaming their heads off at each other.

“What is happening here?” Kaera demands, stepping directly into the path of the drawn blades. The reckless proximity to the swinging steel causes Elara to gasp, shocked by the sheer defiance in her sister-in-law’s posture. Kaera raises her hand, her fierce gaze slicing through the combatants and instantly forcing their weapons down into a silent surrender.

The two knights snap to attention, the angry words dying instantly upon their lips. They strike their right fists over their hearts in the traditional salute of the Riverath vanguard, forcing their postures straight. They face Kaera and Elara, attempting to look as though the heated encounter had never occurred.

The chaotic shouting resumes instantly, both men barking over one another until Kaera raises a hand to slice through the noise. “Gavin,” she commands, pointing directly at the chef, “tell me what the problem is.”

Gavin breaks beneath his simmering rage. He steps forward, his boots grinding against the stone floor as he gestures sharply at the empty wooden supply crates scattered near the preparation tables. “Your Highness, the

lower city guards face a severe shortage because of sheer incompetence," Gavin barks, his voice tight as he glares at his opponent. "Three full bundles of bread and dried meat vanished from the morning shipment under the watch of Iris and her squad. I refuse to let my vanguards go hungry while Iris permits thieves to plunder the palace stores."

Iris's jaw tightens. Her hand drops to the polished steel pommel of her sword, her posture locking into an imposing frame. Elara is unsure how Gavin maintains his defiance as Kaera towers over him. She would have shattered under such an intense gaze.

"Watch your tongue, Gavin," Iris fires back, her voice dropping into a lethal hum that echoes through the kitchen. "My squad tracks every single delivery from the moment the wagons clear the outer gates. Your men are simply lazy, looking for someone to blame for their own carelessness instead of cross-checking their distribution tallies." The female knights behind her nod.

Kaera steps forward, her gaze turning frosty as she looks between the two soldiers. "Stand down, both of you. Iris, present the morning ledgers to my quarters. Gavin, return to your post and wait for the overseers to count the remaining bundles. The palace kitchen is no place for steel."

Gavin tightens his jaw, his pale face flushing deeper as he offers a stiff, barely respectful nod that looks more like defiance than compliance. "With all due respect, Princess, while you spend your mornings experimenting with sugar and flour, my vanguards are patrolling the lower boundaries on empty stomachs. Iris's negligence compromises our guard lines, and a standard paper count does not feed my men."

A suffocating silence grips the chamber as the kitchen staff shrinks back into the shadows. Kaera's shoulders lock, her hands clenching into fists as the vanguard's dismissive tone strikes her authority like a physical slap.

Before Gavin can step back, Elara moves into the open space between the knights, her green silk gown rustling against the flagstones as she addresses the vanguard directly. The sudden movement draws every eye in the kitchen toward her, the cold authority of her Veyrenn court upbringing bleeding into her posture.

"A thief does not steal food right from a kitchen where guards stand at every doorway," Elara continues, stepping closer to the empty wooden crates. "Back in my father's castle, when food went missing, it was never the fault of the guards tracking the records. The mistake always came from

the vanguards who took the goods straight from the wagons before the counting even started at the gates. Tell me, Gavin, did your own men check the delivery carts before you brought your anger down to the kitchen?”

Iris lets out a low breath, her hand slowly leaving her sword as she tracks Elara’s logic. Gavin shifts his weight on his boots as her direct question leaves him without a defense in front of the others.

Beside her, Kaera looks down at Elara with wide surprise. The tense distance between the two princesses disappears in the light of the moment, a deep feeling of protection forming between them as Elara stands her ground.

Gavin opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out. He drops his gaze to the stone floor, his jaw tight with embarrassment.

Kaera seizes the moment to finish the matter, her commanding posture returning. “You heard her, Gavin. Take your squires and go check the delivery wagons at the outer gate right now. Iris, go with them and make sure the count is done correctly this time. I want a new report on my table before noon.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Iris replies smoothly, giving Elara a look of appreciation before turning around.

Gavin offers a brief bow and exits, Iris and the other guards close behind. The loud clatter of their heavy boots fades down the corridor, leaving the lower kitchen in quiet once again. The chefs and servants let out a collective breath, slowly returning to their workstations to handle the preparation tables.

Kaera turns to Elara, her cold expression melting into a wide, bright smile that brings back her familiar warmth. She places a hand on Elara’s shoulder, a gesture that breaks the last of the boundaries between them. “I cannot thank you enough,” she says. “I did not expect you to stand up for me like that. You handled him perfectly.”

Elara returns the smile, her heart warming at the praise. “I only said what I know is true. My father’s men did the exact same thing back at the castle. However, my legs were trembling the entire time.”

Kaera nods. “Absolutely. When you force yourself to remain stern or neutral, acting completely unlike your usual self, you can barely believe the words come from your own mouth.” A pause follows, her gaze shifting to the chefs who relax and resume their quiet conversation, before continuing.

“It makes your body weak. Your mind races, overthinking whether what you did was right or wrong. Your knees almost buckle.”

Elara raises her eyebrows. Her body is weak from the adrenaline, even as the panic clears. Her hand clutches the hidden seed pouch Asma gave her earlier as she replies. “I feel it.”

“Yes, I apologize,” Kaera exhales softly. “It is frightening at first. You did amazing, nonetheless.”

“Thank you,” Elara says. “Gavin’s commentary was harsh and unnecessary. You bake beautifully, and I am sure of it just from the cookies you gave earlier.”

Kaera’s cheeks redden again. “Maybe we can bake together next time! Perhaps a cake or cookies?”

“I would love that. We should make different flavored cookies,” she suggests nervously, her shoulders shrugging with curiosity.

“I would love that,” Kaera nods, right before one of the female bakers approaches her with a kind smile.

“Your Highness, we would love for you to suggest what dessert to make for the evening,” one of the baker’s insist.

“His Majesty has already ordered the pastries for the upcoming feast, but we would love your opinion on the flavor combinations,” the other baker explains, bowing respectfully. “We know you possess excellent taste in sweets, and your guidance would ensure the execution is perfect.”

Turning with her smile growing further, Kaera inclines her head excitedly. “Of course, I will be with you in a bit.” She looks at Elara with a slight raise of one eyebrow, a silent request to accompany her.

Elara’s face lights up for a moment, but she frowns the next. “I am sorry, I wish to rest.”

Kaera’s smile fades, though it remains warm. “That is fine. Please rest well, and you can come down here any time.”

Elara shares one last smile before stepping out of the kitchen, making her way back to her bedchamber. Without losing a second, Elara races to the vanity, pulling out Cael’s booklet. With a tight swallow down her throat, she opens the leather cover and turns to the second page.

I BEAR the sorrow of each dawn and night,
Praying the cruel world to grant my spirit strength.
Met with cold malice despite this hollow wealth,

Cruel whispers steal all my peace away.
Only the memory of the girl I once met,
Guides my dark soul and keeps my purpose true.
I live to see her gentle light return,
Sustaining this ghost until our paths align.

ELARA SITS by the edge of her bed, her eyes focusing on the handwriting and the words of pain written beautifully across the vintage paper, her heart aching. Cael's suffering from his silence, enduring his people's hatred toward him for something he cannot stop or control, brings a familiar pain through her.

Closing the booklet to let the new poem sink in, she picks up the second volume Elias provided. Opening the stiff, thick cover, so different from the soft, worn booklet, she starts to read.

Though her focus continues to drift.

OceanofPDF.com

XIV

HIS PRIVATE CHAMBER

C

Cael guides Snow back to the palace.

His hand grasps the saddle leather as the two guards by the gates bow to him and to King Raelith beside him, who sits visibly spent upon his steed. A few of their knights and Hartwell rush from the palace entrance down the stairs, as if they have been waiting for his return.

“Your Majesty, Your Highness,” Hartwell says, his gaze landing on King Raelith to study his condition. “You were out for so long. We were worried for you.” His voice trembles with growing concern. “Oh, Your Majesty, you seem entirely spent.” He carefully guides King Raelith off his steed, offering his reliable strength for support.

“I am all right, Hartwell,” King Raelith coughs, shaking his head. “I am merely parched.”

“I will fetch you the coolest water, refreshing like the clean rivers of Riverath.” Hartwell begins guiding the king inside.

Cael stands motionless between his own horse and his father’s, Aldric. He frowns at how his father limps, the skin of his face appearing more wrinkled and loose, the dark circles beneath his eyes heavier than a stone cast upon his back. It is starkly evident to him that his father is growing older and weaker.

Swallowing a surge of aching emotions, he turns to one of the knights and raises his hands to sign. *Please take Snow and Aldric back to the stables, feed them, and quench their thirst.* His hands tremble from exhaustion, and the movement of his arms and shoulders ache.

One of the knights, Synthia, a warm-complexioned woman who has trained for five years, is a relatively new member within the palace but

perfectly sharp. “Yes, Your Highness,” she says. “Do you wish for any of us to escort you to your quarters? You seem deeply exhausted as well.”

Cael shakes his head, needing absolute privacy at a time like this.

Synthia bows. “Very well, Your Highness. We will keep the steeds safe and lead them to the stables as you requested.”

Forcing his feet forward, his legs feeling like lead as though dragging him down, he enters the palace and reaches the corridor outside his old bedchamber. It belongs to Elara now. The arrangement took place the same day the marriage dinner was held. He cannot sleep within the same bedchamber as her. Even if they possessed separate mattresses, the arrangement would prove far too awkward. They would likely both suffocate in such close proximity.

So, Cael abandoned his bedchamber as if it were never his own. Not that he minded, really. It felt like brushing away the physical memories of harm. This is the exact sanctuary where Queen Maereth once slashed his bare back while he silently screamed for breath into his mattress, crying until he passed out from exhaustion with his body trembling and bleeding.

Cael stands before the threshold, his hand hovering above the brass handle despite his urgent need to wash and change. Pressing the metal carefully, the soft mechanism alerts Elara if she is awake. When no sound answers from within, he opens the door cautiously, only to find her sitting on the edge of the mattress with a thick volume held open in her palms.

Elara’s entire body tenses, her eyes lifting to meet his. “Cael,” she whispers his name, as if testing the weight of it.

Inclining his head, he enters and makes his way past her toward the dressing chamber and the bathing area. He turns the brass fixtures, knowing the flow is freezing in the upcoming winter. Sinking into the deep marble basin, his clothes crumble to the stone floor far aside. A sudden chill runs through his frame, and his aching muscles only tense further. Forcing his head beneath the water, he clears his mind as best as he can.

Cael lets the freezing water sting the permanent marks on his back, his scarred, rough palms, and the black ink marking his left arm.

The tattoo glistens under the dim light, revealing the jagged black lines he carved into his own flesh at the age of fifteen. It was a time when the crushing weight of his tasks and the constant trauma inflicted by his stepmother fractured his memory, causing him to forget names, dates, and daily details out of pure psychological survival.

Terrified that the heavy stress would eventually erase the only pure thing left in his mind, he took a risk to preserve a single memory. It was the memory of the girl who made him feel seen. Sitting alone in the freezing dark of his private chamber with a stolen sewing needle and a bottle of thick ink, he sterilized the metal tip over a candle flame. In silence, he forced the instrument deep into his skin, dot by dot, enduring the bleeding and the biting pain without making a single sound.

It was a forbidden, permanent rebellion against his royal blood, a black anchor etched forever onto his forearm to ensure that no matter how much the kingdom broke him, he would never forget her presence.

In a traditional kingdom like Riverath, a royal's skin is considered property of the crown and a symbol of the realm's purity. Marking the flesh is seen as a high crime because it permanently ruins the royal image. By marking his arm, Cael was claiming ownership over his own body, taking that power away from King Raelith and Queen Maereth.

He finishes and dries himself, leaving his hair damp and dripping as the water drains away, he pulls on his black silk sleepwear. His shirt is buttoned, his trousers fit loosely, and he adds a comfortable robe that is not thick enough to warm him fully from the cold. Exiting the changing chamber, he finds Elara standing, arms hidden behind her back and her expression uncertain.

Cael is confused by her stance, though he does not press. He attempts to walk away, but his eyes find his thick black coat folded by the edge of the bed. It is his favorite one. A coat he was given by Elias, who had gifted it to him a few birthdays ago, crafted by the librarian's niece who stitches coats and sweaters when Cael was deeply ill.

Craving the comfort of those good memories, he reaches out to take it before pausing. His eyes land on the three thick layers of covers crumbled on the bed, indicating they are still being used by Elara. Knowing her thick dress leaves her arms and neck exposed to the cold, he ignores the item and forces himself to exit the chamber.

"Cael," Elara says his name, clearly this time.

He pauses and turns, finding her holding the silver quill he dropped that night along with his lost booklet. It had been an overbearing weight, knowing his volume of secretive poems and silent written words was lost where anyone might find and read it.

“I found it after it dropped. I have been keeping it safe,” she says, glancing away before meeting his eyes, then looking away once more.

The revelation is not entirely relieving, knowing his private thoughts are exposed to her. He carefully steps forward and takes it by the very end, ensuring their skin does not make contact. When the silence remains unbroken, he offers a nod of gratitude, turns on his heel, and exits the bedchamber.

He walks the familiar path to remain hidden, stepping up the stairs until he reaches the very top of the palace. Up here, no candles are lit and no chandeliers glow. The only light is the faint brightness of the moon filtering through the glass of the pointed ceiling. The only official chamber on this level is the library, closed and soundless behind an unlocked door.

Farther down the hall lies another chamber that Cael enters. He does not know why it was originally built, though he is certain his father used it before. He first discovered it when he was younger, catching King Raelith rummaging through personal belongings and keeping a specific lock and materials to keep it sealed shut.

His father had abandoned the private chamber a few years later, when Cael was only four years old. Wanting a separate space apart from his bedchamber, and feeling a desire for his own sanctuary, his father did not hesitate to give him the key when he turned ten, deeming him grown enough to arrange things and understand privacy.

This week, he feels fortunate to have it. Cael unlocks the mechanism, pushing through the heavy door, welcoming the unheated coolness and the windows that overlook the night outside. Locking the door behind him, he turns to take in the private chamber filled with portraits he has painted over the years, the attempted and incomplete canvases stacked dry and forgotten in the far corner.

A wide desk of black wood stands near the middle far end, large enough to be considered a dining table. Black ink stains the dark surface, and quills are scattered across almost every corner. A single booklet sits open and incomplete, a reassurance that no one can enter his space without the key. Worn papers are spread out with words he disliked, despite being his own creation. Crumbled pages lie nearby alongside black ink drawings, filled with corrected mistakes and rough sketches. A long chaise crafted from light gray velvet rests in the center of the chamber.

The faint moonlight cuts across the center of the dark workspace, illuminating a single tall wooden easel standing separate from the cluttered corners. Resting upon it is an incomplete canvas, the rough charcoal lines tracing the side profile of a woman’s face, the slight curve of her nose, and the edge of a heavy collar.

It is a sketch he began from memory on the very first night she arrived. He stares at the silver light catching the unfinished texture of her hair on the canvas, his jaw tightening into a rigid line before he forces his eyes away.

All it brings is exhaustion. He sinks onto the large chair near the table, resting his head against the open pages of the large booklet. This is the place where he stays and sleeps, keeping only a single pillow and a blanket by the velvet chaise. It is all he possesses, despite being a prince of luxury. He did not think or plan much when Elara moved into his bedchamber. It aches his back and strains his already sore shoulders.

Not wishing to hassle his weak father, Cael does not request another mattress or make a move, preventing his father from knowing that he is sleeping in this chamber. He does not want anyone inside his private bedchamber anymore.

Cael’s scarred palm brush over the parchment, his skin catching against the coarse fibers of the paper. Looking down at the ink, his chest tightens with a familiar dislike for the incomplete lines and the jagged handwriting staring back at him. Each stroke feels wrong, a mess of ink and mistakes that fails to capture the true quiet inside his mind. With a shallow breath, he slams the thick volume shut, the solid thud sealing his private words away where only he can access them.

Moving away from the desk, he settles onto the velvet chaise, pulling the lone blanket over his frame. He lets his heavy silver crown slip, too exhausted to pick it up.

Hours dissolve into the expanse of the night until the pale, gray light of a winter dawn breaks through the tall glass windowpanes. Cael pushes himself up from the stiff cushions, a burning ache radiating across his shoulders and down his lower back.

He sits there under the dim light, forcing his breathing to remain steady as he prepares his tense body to face the palace duties awaiting him. His blankets only leaving him warmer than usual and the pillow offering no softness, he stands and brings his hands to his face, rubbing the exhaustion away, picking his crown and placing it atop his messy black hair.

Cael exits his chamber. He does not have time to dwell on his physical discomfort. He walks to his old bedchamber and hesitates outside the door. He is sure Elara is still asleep. She usually wakes an hour past him. Hearing soft footsteps approaching, he turns to find Annie. Elara's mistress that he had asked his father to assign her after seeing how cumbersome her dresses were.

"Good morning, Your Highness," she whispers, bowing. "Would you like your clothes?"

Cael nods, a flush of warmth coloring his cheeks. This silent coordination has served as their routine ever since Elara first arrived. Annie enters the chamber first to ensure the princess is awake, and he follows only after receiving confirmation. He does not keep his own personal valet or servant, ensuring his tattoos are kept as a solace secret and so do his scars of abuse.

Annie steps forward, walking into the bedchamber. "Good morning, Your Highness," her voice is noticeably softer. "You are awake early. Did you sleep well?"

The thickness of the door between him and Elara in the bedchamber mumbles her voice, he can still understand what she says. "I woke up early to keep reading."

Assured of his privacy, Cael enters the sleeping quarters and makes his way toward the changing area. He forces his stiff shoulders back to pull on his clean garments. While his fingers handle the silver studs and heavy leather fastenings, he listens to the muffled sounds filtering through the thick wooden door. He can hear Annie moving softly around the bedchamber, the light rustle of her footsteps accompanying the crisp, snapping sound of heavy sheets as she lifts and flattens them, tidying the wide mattress where Elara slept.

Once the final leather strap is secured, he checks his wrists, pulling the long, dark sleeves of his tunic down until they cover the glimpse of black ink that extends down his arm to wrap around his skin.

Cael opens the door and steps back out into the main bedchamber, expecting to see Elara. Instead, he freezes. The grand space is too silent, and his gaze drifts to the bed. The mattress is neatly made, the thick layers of covers pulled smooth.

She is not there.

Catching his sudden movement and tracking his silent glance toward the empty sheets, Annie stops her work near the washstand. She offers him a reassuring nod, her voice dropping into a soft, hushed cadence before he can move toward the corridor.

“The princess woke early today, Your Highness,” Annie updates, smoothing down her apron. “She went down to the gardens to spend her morning with the workers.”

A lump forms in his throat, feeling like a thick ball of stone. The feeling is inexplicable, prompting Cael to pivot away as he exits the sleeping quarters, angry with himself for being so foolish.

He makes his way down the hall to check on his father’s well-being, only to find Hartwell already entering the King’s bedchamber. As he increases his pace, a cold presence pricks the hair on the back of his neck. Queen Maereth. She does not bother to glance at Cael.

Instead, she offers a harsh comment. “Raelith does not wish to be burdened by your chaos and your useless silence,” she whispers venomously. “If you truly care for his failing health, you will leave him and let him rest. It is now your burden to step forward and take his responsibilities. You were not trained in the shadows for nothing.”

Cael’s falters to a stop, and Queen Maereth halts beside him. He still feels anxious anywhere near her. Her gaze feels like a knife piercing deep into his skin. He attempts to lift his hands and sign his firm reply, only for her to take a step forward.

Cael flinches.

Queen Maereth’s lips curl into a cruel smile. “Excellent.” Pivoting away, she enters the royal suite alongside King Raelith. The muffled chatter of their voices filters through the heavy oak door, mocking the silence of the corridor.

Cael stands alone in the empty corridor, the hollow thud of his heartbeat filling the silence.

OceanofPDF.com

XV

MISSING SILVER RING

E

Elara adjusts the green silk dress, her fingers dropping into the deep fold of her pocket until they find the rough, coarse fabric of the small linen pouch Asma gave her. The light weight of the poppy seeds rest against her thigh with every step she takes down the long corridors.

Waking up long past the morning meal, Elara foregoes cosmetic paints in her haste, driven by a restless undercurrent of worry. Annie assists her into the green silk dress, providing the effortless comfort she craves before leaving her to navigate the day.

Though the dining hall stands empty when she descends, a request to the kitchen provides a bowl of fruit drizzled with honey, which she finishes in silence. Resolving to explore the palace, she carries the winter seeds like a hidden treasure, intending to plant them safely in the soil later.

She walks through the vast halls, navigating the unfamiliar corridors as she begins her exploration of the palace Turning to her left, she finds another long corridor. A carpet stretches down its center, and several doors stand ajar along the way. The first chamber reveals a spacious guest area. Velvet black couches and chairs are arranged around a crystal table at its center. The walls are adorned with paintings depicting Riverath's historic victories, the triumphs of its early builders, and its people's enduring resolve to protect one another.

The second chamber, across from the first and set farther back, is even larger. It is not a dining hall, but a private dining chamber. A long black table occupies the center, draped with a light gray cloth. Chairs trimmed with silver steel and embroidered in silver and black surround it. Paintings

line the walls, and the table is set for a meal, though the chamber looks unused. In the far corner on the right stands a grand black piano. Elara pauses in the doorway.

In Veyrenn, meals are performances of silence, every clink of a utensil a small liability. Here, the presence of the piano suggests something entirely different. Something more like ease.

She imagines a dinner where someone rises afterward and plays, where the music fills the chamber, not because it is required, but simply for the joy of hearing it. She wonders who among the Riverath family plays. Perhaps the king, or the princess. Elara finds herself almost wishing it is Cael, a mute prince who speaks through keys rather than words. Elara thinks back to the beautiful poems she read within his booklet. Those verses are a form of music themselves, prompting her to realize that his artistry would naturally bleed into another instrument beyond his pen.

Stepping away from the threshold to continue down the corridor, the memory of the piano lingers in her mind as her path leads toward the third chamber. A large table occupies the center, with a framed slate board positioned against the far wall. More chairs surround it, and black wooden shelves lined with books fill the space. No plates or utensils are in sight.

This is a council chamber. It is smaller than Elara would have imagined. Paintings and rolled maps are arranged across the table. The ceiling bears sweeping artwork that stretches across the palace, though most other chambers remain unadorned. Elara wonders why only this chamber has been granted such distinction.

The final doorway opens into a hushed sanctuary reserved for private reflection, where rows of black wooden benches stand in equal alignment. Walking slowly down the central aisle, her footsteps are muffled against the deep velvet runner lining the floor as her eyes track the crystal chandeliers hanging overhead. She runs her fingertips along the smooth silk lining the backs of the benches, her gaze tracing the intricate lines carved into the grand chair of silver and black crystal at the front.

Coming to a stop, she clasps her hands behind her back as she stares up at the portrait of King Raelith and his late queen standing side by side, their hands not touching. There is something tender in the composition, as if the painter noticed a moment too small for words and chose to preserve it anyway.

Elara’s father never commissioned a portrait of her mother after her death, or even before. He did not mourn. He simply erased. Every painting was taken down from its hook. Every gown was given away before the cold air had even left the quarters. Every flower arrangement her mother once favored was pulled from its vase and discarded without hesitation. It was a correction, as if her mother had been a mistake to remove. At barely six years of age, the harsh lesson took root that love, under her father’s rule, was a temporary fixture. Sinking onto one of the black benches, the firm wood provides a grounding sensation against her body.

Her hands rest on her lap. Formal prayers are absent, as traditional religious education never offered genuine comfort, leaving her uncertain if she even possesses the knowledge to speak to the divine.

Elara has always offered a prayer over the falling petals of a rose, a practice her mother taught her. She takes what could be considered a loss and attempts to transform it into something beautiful, full of hope. Releasing her sorrow into the stillness of the sanctuary, she does the same with her own sadness, hoping that whatever forces are listening might turn that grief into something worthwhile.

Elara’s gaze returns to the canvas overhead, absorbing the image of a king who chooses to keep his queen’s face prominent upon the wall.

The chapel holds its heavy silence around her. Elara remains seated longer than she intends, not moving, not speaking, only staying where she is as the light shifts across the stone floor, moving between pale lines carved into the marble. Rustle of footsteps causes Elara to startle, and she turns to find a maid approaching the altar.

“Good morning, Your Highness,” the maid says, offering a weary smile as she prepares a bucket of water and unfolds a large cloth to clean the benches and table in the chapel.

“Good morning,” Elara replies, returning the smile. She leaves, giving the maid space to work.

Crossing back through the grand hall to ascend the central staircase, the upper corridor reveals a door standing ajar, prompting a soft gasp of surprise to die in her throat. The chamber is a grand hall filled with musical instruments. Pianos, cellos, violins, and flutes rest carefully throughout the space, accompanied by rows of seats and a centrally placed couch. The music, she imagines, must be gentle and calming, sometimes resembling a prayer.

She has never seen such instruments before. In the castle of her childhood, none exist. She stands in the doorway, hesitant. She has read of music in stolen books, of its power to make people weep or dance, of the emotions it conveys without words. Still, she has never heard it. Her father banned musicians from the castle the year her mother died, claiming their presence was frivolous and distracting.

Stepping forward slowly, her fingers brush against the smooth, cool wood of a cello. The pristine surface indicates constant care, as though someone regularly polishes the instruments and tightens the strings for hands that may never arrive. An unbidden impulse guides her toward the grand piano, the largest and most recognizable silhouette in the chamber. Extending a single finger, she presses the final key along the board.

The sound that comes is low and resonant, deeper than she expected, filling the chamber before fading into the walls. Elara does not move. She had read that music could reach somewhere inside a person that words could not find, but until now, she had never understood it. The sound caught her off guard, pressing against her heart and staying there long after it faded away. She stands very still, her finger still resting on the key, and breathes.

Tapping a few more keys results in a discordant rhythm that clashes against the walls. Frowning, her attention shifts to a nearby violin. Lifting the taut bow to trail across the strings, the resulting sound is incredibly harsh, causing her to wince. In a flustered attempt to stop, one of the strings snaps with a sharp crack. A gasp escapes her lips as she returns the instrument to its place while her heart races with panic.

“Your Highness?” a voice calls from behind her.

Turning to find Elias standing in the doorway with one curious brow lifted, an instinctive shift to conceal the damaged instrument. Guilt and nervousness radiate from her posture, but he does not scold. His gaze softens, then he glances down at the book in his hands.

“I was searching for you to hand the third volume of the tales of adventure, courage, and discovery,” he says with a small smile. “I assumed you had finished the second.”

Elara remains silent.

“You seem distressed, Your Highness,” he continues, his voice gentle and warm. “Is something troubling you? If you do not mind my asking, I would like to know.”

Elara hesitates, the words catching in her throat. “I… I broke one of the strings on the violin,” she admits.

A reassuring laugh escapes him. “A broken string can always be replaced, Your Highness. Please, do not trouble yourself over it.” He gestures toward the shelves with an easy smile. “Do you have an interest in musical instruments? I have books on every one of them, if you would like to learn.”

“Very well,” she replies, her shoulders relaxing under his kindness. “I suppose confessing the mistake is only fair.”

Elias smiles. “Do not trouble yourself. Mistakes happen, and they are easily repaired.”

“I did not mean to break it,” Elara murmurs, casting a fleeting glance back toward the violin.

“Of course not,” he replies gently. “Curiosity and courage are never wrong. Come. I will help you with this one, and then we can continue with your reading.”

Her lips curve into the faintest of smiles, the tightness in her chest easing. Following Elias along the side wing toward the library, they cross paths with the maid from earlier, who carries fresh linens toward the guest chambers. She glances up and offers another tired smile. “Ah! Your Highness, the chapel is clean now. I hope it meets your expectations.”

Elara blinks. “You do not need to report such things to me.”

The maid’s expression shifts, confusion flickering across her features. “Of course, Your Highness. Forgive me.”

“No,” Elara says quickly, flaring her hands. “I only meant thank you. For your work.”

The maid curtsies, her surprise evident, and moves on without looking back, yet a noticeable change loosens the tension in her shoulders.

They reach the refuge of the library, where the hours slip away within the walls, allowing her to lose herself in tales of adventure, courage, and discovery. The pages depict distant kingdoms where women rule as warriors, where lovers choose each other freely, and where heroes defy the fates assigned to them.

Elias sits across from her, occasionally glancing up from his own reading. He does not speak, and she does not feel the need to fill the silence, which is itself a strange and gentle thing. She has spent most of her life

either alone or surrounded by people who required something from her. This is different. This is simply company.

The tale of a foreign woman inheriting a sword she does not know how to use demands her undivided attention. Reading the passage twice, she finds her own helplessness mirrored on the page. The desire to hold a weapon takes root, a refusal to remain a spectator in a dangerous court, even as she tries to convince herself it is only a story.

The light shifts without her noticing, pale morning becoming the amber of late afternoon, the shadows of the shelves stretching long across the polished floor. At some point, a servant passes in the corridor beyond, footsteps quickening toward the kitchens. Registering the movement distantly, she turns another page until a sudden pull of hunger forces her to surface from the text, blinking as if returning from a great distance.

She had not thought of the palace once. She had not thought of her father, or the ring on her finger, or what she is here to be. She had not thought of Cael either.

Midday arrives all too quickly, prompting a decision to check on the progress of the garden. Descending the grand stairs, the cool wind blows much weaker than before. The three women are absent, leaving her free to examine the beds where the winter poppy bulbs remain buried beneath the frozen soil. The patch is dark and still, showing no signs of life amidst the decaying autumn roots. The surrounding grounds are dying, the summer layout dissolving into brittle stalks and barren earth. Only a sparse cluster of white winter camellias and pale Christmas roses manage to break through the frost, their solitary blossoms appearing scattered across the amber yard to preserve a appearance of life against the biting season.

As she straightens, her attention shifts to the older, fading pink poppies nearby from the late autumn. Their petals thin, edges curling inward from the morning frost. A sudden, familiar pang of anxiety grips her heart, drawing her thoughts back to her mother’s dying flowers in Veyrenn. Hurrying across the stone, her eyes scan the immediate area for a source of water. The sun stands high now, pale and thin, casting long reflections against the stone.

A silver steel watering can rests to the right of the stairs near the entrance. It holds little, though it must suffice. She lifts it and returns to the empty beds, pouring over the frozen soil. The earth darkens further, drinking in what it is given. Her patience thins, replaced by a deep urgency.

Here, no one interrupts her. No one questions her presence or her purpose. Kneeling to continue the desperate task, the vessel grows lighter with every pour as she coats the first row, then the second. Forcing her aching arms to rise and refill the can, the repetition tests her physical limits under the thin winter sun.

At barely six years of age, a solitary seat on the second-to-last step of the castle reveals the first petal falling from her mother’s roses. Looking up in expectation of some acknowledgment of the small loss, her mother's eyes remain distant and tired. Reaching out to retrieve the fallen remnant, her small palms press the petal tight as if the gesture can prevent it from disappearing entirely. A sharp shake of her head releases the grip of the memory.

Fourteen years later, the ritual continues in unfamiliar soil, tending fields within a kingdom that still resists feeling like home. Defusing the urge to stop, she moves to the next cluster of plants. More dark earth. More water. The green fabric of the dress Cael provided clings to her back while her knees ache against the hard stone. The watering can slips from her grasp once, striking the steps with a hollow clatter. Freezing at the sound, she reaches out with unsteady fingers to lift the metal container again.

The approach of footsteps goes unnoticed until an unhurried hand rests on her shoulder. An involuntary flinch precedes her turn. Asma stands close behind, her silk scarf a vibrant lavender today, her expression carrying no reaction to the sudden movement.

“Good afternoon, Your Highness,” she says, her smile soft. “Watering the soil too often causes the dormant roots to weaken more quickly.”

Elara’s brows draw together. “The ground is barren. Someone must care for it.”

Asma inclines her head. “The seeds we buried require time to sleep, even with proper care.”

Glancing down at the silver watering can, the cool metal presses against her palms as a silent embarrassment stills her movements. “I did not know.”

“How could you?” Asma replies. “You were never taught.” Silence stretches between them. Elara remains kneeling, her gaze fixed on the damp soil.

After a moment, Asma speaks again. “The girls and I will check the beds soon. His Highness requested it once he returns. He also said he will

bring more bags of winter camellia seeds.” A chuckle escapes her. “It is quite confusing, considering the frost has already settled.”

“He did?” Elara asks, lifting her head. “When will he return?” A sudden racing of her pulse accompanies the questions, driven by the memory of the previous night’s silent retreat and the lingering worry that her presence has somehow offended him.

Asma lifts her shoulders in a small shrug. “I am not sure,” she says. “Only that he instructed us to check the preparation beds and add more winter blossoms.” She exhales, looking down at the bare soil. “I do not understand his insistence. They will be striking, but there are many other plants that survive this season.” After a small pause, she looks back up. “Would you like to learn?”

Elara looks up, startled. “Learn? I thought you, Celestia, and Claire taught me everything yesterday.”

Asma lets out a laugh. “We taught you the beginning. There is more to it than planting and watering.” She gestures toward the empty patch. “If you wish to tend them, you must know how to help them, not weaken them.”

Following a hesitation, a nod marks her consent to the interaction. Asma kneels close by, her joints creaking as she settles onto the damp earth. She reaches down into the soil to check a hidden node with careful ease.

“Look at the earth,” she says. “The moisture freezes when the winter air overwhelms it. The frost has already taken its toll.” She releases the soil and presses her palm down. “This is damp. Too much water traps the roots beneath. They begin to fail beneath the surface, unseen, turning to ice before they can grow.”

Asma reaches down, her fingers parting the dark, wet earth to expose the fragile white threads of a struggling root system. She takes Elara’s hand, guiding Elara’s fingertips until they press directly into the cool, suffocating mud. The damp pressure forces Elara to feel the hidden resistance beneath the surface, a visceral lesson in how a well-meaning gesture can destroy what it intends to nurture.

“They need the correct measure, at the correct time, especially during the winter,” Asma smiles. “Everything that lives requires balance, Your Highness. Excess can be as destructive as neglect.”

The words take root in Elara. Her thoughts turn inward, pulled toward memories of rigid rules and watchful restraint that were always disguised as care. Silence settles over the damp earth as she absorbs the weight of the

lesson, her gaze fixed on her soil-stained fingertips. Moving before her hesitation can stop her, she reaches deep into her pocket and pulls out the rough linen pouch, holding the small bundle out between her palms.

“Asma,” Elara says, her voice low. “You gave me these winter poppy seeds earlier. If the correct measure and time are what they need, could we plant them together now?”

Asma’s eyes widen in pleasant surprise, a warm smile breaking across her features as she looks from the linen pouch up to Elara’s face. “It would be an absolute honor, Your Highness,” she replies softly, her joints creaking as she shifts her posture to clear a fresh, untouched patch of dark earth between them.

Asma guides Elara’s hands to the new plot. “Touch the soil before you water,” she instructs, pressing Elara’s hand into the earth. “If it feels damp a few inches down, the roots are satisfied. If the earth crumbles and dries beneath your fingers without being frozen to ice, then you water. Only during the middle of the day, when the sun is at its highest, so the moisture absorbs before the nighttime frost freezes the roots.”

Sinking her fingers into the cool dirt to nestle the new seeds beneath the surface, Elara absorbs the instruction carefully. “Middle of the day, when the sun is at its highest.”

“Good.” Asma releases her hand and rises, brushing soil from her apron. “If you wish, come at dawn tomorrow. I will show you how to maintain the soil and prepare the beds for the new seeds His Highness intends to bring.”

She walks toward the far side of the garden, lifting a bucket and watering only a small selection of plants with measured restraint. Elara watches her movements, then turns back to the empty beds before her. Her jaw tightens, worry still present. Turning back to Asma, wishing to ask questions, she pushes her hesitancy aside.

“Do you have any idea why Cael would request to grow more winter camellias?” Elara asks.

Asma’s smile fades, replaced by a soft look of understanding. “I am sure it is to grow more flowers in the garden, since the winter is removing every blooming color left.”

Elara’s lips part. “How is the garden usually like when it is not winter? Perhaps during spring?”

“Ethereal,” Asma says quickly. “It is filled with complete greenery, every kind of flower with different colors and shades, many fruits growing

with ease, and each one of them lasts long. Honestly, it is one of the main reasons why I loathe winter. It is only cold, and it takes things away from you."

The garden gates open with a drawn-out screech. Footsteps follow, and two voices rise together. "Welcome back, Your Highness."

Elara stills. Freezing in place at the sound, her attention shifts to Cael as he guides his white steed through the palace gates. He wears a black silk tunic traced with silver embroidery, secured by a wide, decorated belt and structured shoulder guards that grant his frame a rigid authority. Dark breeches complete the attire. In his hand, he carries his silver sword, faintly stained, the markings dulled by a hurried attempt to clean it. His silver crown catches the afternoon light, casting glimmers across the stone.

The garden gates open with a drawn-out screech. Footsteps follow, and two voices rise together. "Welcome back, Your Highness."

Elara stills. Her attention shifts to Cael as he guides his white steed through the palace gates. He wears a black silk tunic traced with silver embroidery, secured by a wide, decorated belt and structured shoulder guards that grant his frame a rigid authority. Dark breeches complete the attire. In his hand, he carries his stained silver sword, the markings dulled by a hurried attempt to clean it. His silver crown catches the afternoon light, casting glimmers across the stone.

Elara's gaze drifts to his hands. His ring is absent.

She almost scoffs at the sight. Despite her not wishing to trust him or be here in this new kingdom, she never removes her own band in public, upholding the visual vow of their marriage. Seeing his band off sinks Elara's heart in a way she would not expect.

"Your Highness," Asma calls across the garden, setting down her wooden supply crate to hurry toward Cael, her apron lifting with her rushed steps. "You have returned earlier than expected. We did not anticipate your arrival until evening."

Cael inclines his head in acknowledgment. He places several bags of pink poppy seeds into her hands, his attention moving beyond her to find Elara, who is still kneeling in the bare earth.

"Her Highness has been tending the winter camellias," Asma says, gentle amusement coloring her tone. "With determination, though she nearly drowned the soil with her concern."

Rising to her feet as a hot flush spreads across her cheeks, Elara brushes the loose dirt from her green dress, a wave of self-consciousness taking hold at the sight of the dark stains marring the fabric. “I was only trying to help.”

Cael looks at her momentarily before turning to Asma, raising his hands to sign something. Elara focuses on his silent language and the easy understanding Asma shows in her expression, nodding after every movement he makes with his fingers and hands.

“Absolutely, Your Highness. I will ensure these pink poppies are stored safely and plan ahead for their spring planting, and I will let Her Highness accompany me when the time comes,” Asma smiles.

Cael dismounts his steed and has one of the guards guide the horse away. Asma then bows to both of them before she goes to handle the poppy seeds Cael gave her.

The breeze returns, and with Elara’s exposed skin, it sends a small shiver and spots of goosebumps. Cael steps closer to her, his boots grinding against the stone. He reaches down to secure his stained silver sword into its sheath, the dull metal scraping into place. As his gloved hand moves, Elara notices the silver quill she returned to him earlier is tucked into the side pocket of his structured vest.

Her gaze drops to his bare hand again, her fingers gripping the green silk of her skirt at the sight of his missing wedding ring. The memory of his hidden poem flashes through her thoughts, prompting her to step back and square her frame to meet his evaluation.

Cael slowly lifts his left hand, turning his palm over in the afternoon sunlight as if checking the leather grip. He intentionally lets her see the empty space where his wedding band usually rests. He does not sign a single word, but his grey eyes snap up to lock onto hers, challenging her silent judgment. Elara shifts her own right hand, her silver band gleaming brightly in the sun, drawing a contrast between her loyalty to the public vow and his sudden defiance.

Any lingering warmth or positive thoughts she harbored about his secret flower orders instantly fade. The small, hopeful illusions shatter under the weight of his bare glove, reminding her that his gestures mean nothing when his public actions show complete disregard. He remains a stranger, an unreadable prince who casts away the symbol of their alliance without a second thought.

Turning her gaze away from him to conceal the sharp sting in her chest, she forces her posture to relax and steps back toward the flowerbeds. She chooses to ignore his presence, resuming her time with Asma by focusing her attention back on the dark, damp soil and the winter camellia seeds waiting for her care.

OceanofPDF.com

XVI

THE CRIMSON BAND

C

Cael’s boots thud down the hallway.

The sound of books settling onto shelves and a cloth wiping against dark wood echoes from the library as Elias works. Slowing his pace to remain discreet, Cael enters his private chamber and closes the heavy door with a silent click, locking it from within.

The ache in his body fades as he sinks against the chaise, his hand grasping the weight of his crown and sword to toss them gently onto the floor. With no windows to connect him to the world, the pitch-black sanctuary feels like a tomb.

Something ached within him after witnessing Elara’s discomforted expression earlier. It was a look of disgust. Frustration. Anything and everything but good. His heart had sunk at the ire in her green eyes, a sensation he had not felt since the first time his stepmother took a belt to his back.

What had he done wrong? Perhaps it was how vulnerable he appeared, covered in dirt and buried under heavy exhaustion. Turning his body onto his right side, he swallows a bitter wave of emotion. He does not know why he cares so much for her to find something acceptable in him. All his life, he was never desperate for one particular person to be pleased with him. Not the people who work for him, not Kaera, and he never was this desperate to be loved by his father.

He does not know why Elara means this much to him. Her comfort, her space, how she feels toward him. This whole marriage was only arranged for political reasons. It should not mean anything to him.

Neither should she.

A burning sensation builds behind his eyes. Before it can overtake him, he whips out his notebook and quill, discarding his coat on the chaise. He places the quill on the table and pulls off his thick black gloves, his palms hot and sweaty. The silver band on his finger glints, fogged with the heat.

He had been forced to remove the ring from his gloves and wear it bare on his finger while helping the guards clear the heavy debris of a collapsed stone warehouse that held the lower city's winter supplies. The manual labor required hours under a freezing sky, forcing him to haul jagged granite blocks and soot-covered timbers to rescue the trapped workers. His father remained at the palace managing a separate, demanding political issue. The friction tore right through his gloves, leaving his bare hands split, raw, and bleeding.

He slides the silver wedding band over his injured finger, his jaw tightening into a rigid line as the cold metal catches against the raw, torn edges of his flesh. A flash of pain shoots up his arm, a brutal reminder of the moment his left hand caught beneath a jagged granite slab while he pulled a trapped worker from the rubble.

He forces the band past the swollen knuckle anyway, refusing to leave his behind despite the bleeding. The silver finally settles tight against the base of his finger, a protective, stinging weight that burns against his raw skin.

Reaching for a matchbox near the corner of the table, he strikes a match against the rough strip, a small spark of orange fire cutting through the darkness. He holds the flame against the wick of a heavily melted candle resting on a silver holder, the wax pooled and hardened into an irregular shape from the past three nights. The flame catches slowly, casting a low, amber glow that dances across his workspace.

Overwhelmed by the ache of that final gaze, he dips his silver quill into the fresh black inkwell. With his split knuckles throbbing as he grips the metal, he forces the instrument across the paper, letting the booklet capture the heavy pain he can never say aloud.

THE RAW AND crimson bleeding of my hand,
Is nothing to the coldness of her stance.
Each dawn arrives, I hope she finds her peace,
But from her flinching face, there is no release.
It makes me think I am the silent beast,

Upon whose curse my bitter people feast.
Her deep green eyes remain my only grace,
Like whispering forests in a desolate place.
I never wished for any eyes to see,
But by her gaze, I long to be.

HIS LEFT HAND STOPS WRITING, trembling with held-back insecurity and ache. Ink splatters across the page, the fragile paper giving way beneath the heavy dark liquid and the sheer force of his grip. Forcing his spine straight, he begins another line.

MY TREMBLING hands and aching fingers strain,
To shape the heavy words that mask my pain.
I curl upon this cold, relentless space,
Neglecting all my comfort for her grace.
A deep devotion torn of old memories,
Replaying childhood shadows through trees.
I long to see that vanished girl remain,
And pray she notices my heart again.

HIS FINGERS RELEASE the quill as Cael presses his right cheek on his folded forearm on the desk. His breathing quickens before he forces it to stabilize. Another poem is written, then another, until the crickets chirp to indicate the deepening night. Below, the chattering and plates clattering echo from the dining hall while the scent of food leaves his stomach rumbling. His hands aching and his back deeply strained.

Squeezing his eyes shut as a burning sensation spreads, a breath of exhaustion escapes his mouth. He looks down at the last two sentences he wrote in his new poem.

I WRITE these hidden verses where no other eye can see,
A silent monster longing for her gentle light to set me free.

CAEL BURIES his face into the thick booklet, the scent of old paper filling his lungs. Bringing his hands to his hair, stroking and pulling the exhaustion

away, he remains unsatisfied with his pouring of emotions.

He is overwhelmed by these sudden, growing feelings, having never experienced anything like this in his life. It was possible his father's failing health caused the behavior. Alternatively, he did not want Elara to look at him the same way his people did.

He is afraid. So afraid.

"Have you seen His Highness? His Majesty and the rest are asking about his presence," one of the male guards asks, his voice muffled.

"No, I have not," Elias answers, releasing a breath. "I have been waiting for him. Usually, every middle of the week, he would come by and find time to read with me."

"Have you seen His Highness? His Majesty and the rest are asking about his presence," one of the guards asks, his voice muffled by the wood.

Cael forces his head up, his right arm aching from the uncomfortable position it held for hours, his focus sharpening as the voices leak through the entrance of the archives.

"No, I have not," Elias answers. "I have been waiting for him. Usually, every middle of the week, he would come by and find time to read with me."

Setting his quill aside, Cael leans forward and blows the candle out. The sudden darkness returning to the windowless sanctuary creates a clean, sensory ending to his night, shrouding him within the space.

"His Majesty has fallen ill. His wish is to see His Highness, since he has already interacted with Princess Kaera," the guard says.

His heart skips a beat. The guard's words slice through the dark, a brutal reminder that the fragile layout of his life can fracture at any second. His body starts to shake violently as the terrifying reality sinks in. His father never falls ill, never retreats from the burdens of the throne, and never asks for help unless the strain is truly life-threatening.

Frantic and disoriented from the endless hours of writing, Cael pushes himself away from the desk so quickly that his knees buckle beneath his weight. He forgets the heavy black coat resting on the chaise, he ignores his aching back, and more than anything, he forgets to pull his thick black leather gloves back onto his hands. He leaves his raw, split knuckles and the sticky crimson stains exposed, his only focus the terrifying panic driving his feet toward the door.

Hearing the guard's footsteps pass and Elias entering the library, evident from the click of the door, Cael quickly exits his private chamber. He rushes down the hallway and stairs with his buckling knees, pressing a hand along the wall to steady himself.

He reaches the floor where King Raelith's and Queen Maereth's bedchamber lies, his boots skidding against the floorboards. He does not spare his stepmother a glance, not for one second, as he forces his lingering fear of her to vanish.

But as he raises his arm to approach the heavy wood, his eyes land on his bare fingers. Frustration strikes his chest like a physical blow. Hartwell remains by the corner, near Raelith. His father tracks every single detail of his condition, and exposing these injuries will only place a heavier, unnecessary burden of worry on the old man's failing health.

Cael tries to pull the long sleeves of his embroidered black silk tunic down to wrap around his palms, attempting to tuck his raw knuckles into the dark fabric, but the material is too fitted to hide the dark bruising underneath. He curls his fingers into tight fists, hiding the wounds inside his palms as best as he can.

Cael brings his folded, bleeding fingers and knuckles forward, knocking on the door twice. Weak.

It does not take long for Hartwell to answer, pulling the door open. His eyes widen at the disheveled sight of Cael, but he steps aside without questioning his presence or his appearance.

King Raelith is seated against the headboard of the bed, a velvet blanket around him, thicker than the three blankets Elara keeps, to keep him extra warm. His beard is uncut, long and thick and grayer. His once neat hair is slowly reaching to his shoulders. The heaviness beneath his eyes has grown worse.

"My son," King Raelith smiles.

Cael does not move. He blinks and swallows hard, silently asking if this is really happening. King Raelith has been injured and sick multiple times from his sacrifices, fighting in battles, threats, and simple colds, but this is the worst he has ever looked, and Cael does not know how to process it. If something happens to his father, it would be as though Cael was losing a part of himself.

"Where were you? I have not seen you," King Raelith says with a rather sad expression. "I had been waiting for you."

Forcing a step forward, and then another, Cael slowly sits by the edge of the bed. Queen Maereth is not here, and he is incredibly relieved by that. His father extends his trembling hand forward over Cael's bleeding one, his thumb caressing the scarred knuckle.

The soft pressure of his father's thumb moving over the raw, split skin forces Cael to release his breath in a quiet shudder. He had tried so hard to tuck the wounds away, to lock his hands beneath his sleeves, but the King's watchful gaze always breaks through his defenses. Watching his father study the crimson stains and the dark soot still trapped under his fingernails makes Cael feels exposed, his independent barrier failing in the presence of the one person who truly understands his silence.

"You are hurt," King Raelith states with concern. "Shall I have one of the nurses heal you?"

Cael shakes his head, bringing his other hand over his father's. Much as he tries to stop it, his bottom lip trembles.

King Raelith smiles warmly. "You must eat and rest well. I will be unable to attend to my duties for a few days, so I rely on you, Kaera, and Elara to help me. I beg of you."

Leaving his father's hands, Cael signs. *Do not beg. We will do it. Though, I cannot allow you to fulfill your duties any further.*

"What do you mean, son? I am the King of Riverath. It is not simple for me to abandon—"

Please, Cael signs, his hands trembling. *You are growing older and weaker quickly. It is unhealthy for you. Rely on us.*

His father stills and remains silent before inclining his head, forgoing the stubbornness he usually maintains. His smile returns. "I am happy that you came, Cael. You will have Kaera and Elara by your side at all times. You are not alone, and you never will be."

Cael longs sign many words. Words like *it will be different without you* or *you will not be there to reassure us of your state*. Forcing them back, he stands and nods. Keeping his head down and his eyes fixed upon his boots, he exits the bedchamber without looking back.

The click of the door sealing behind him cuts off the faint warmth of his father's chamber, leaving Cael stranded in the sudden, silent expanse of the corridor. His boots slow, dragging against the floorboards until his weight gives way, his shoulders slumping as the rigid posture of a protective prince fractures.

Now that he is out of his father’s sight, the physical reality of his day catches up to him. He slowly lifts his bare hands, tracking the crimson cuts and dark granary soot lining his skin. The throbbing ache finally settles deep into his bones, matching the heavy pressure pressing down upon his chest.

The murmur of cloth moving against stone sounds behind him. Hartwell steps into view, closing the heavy bedchamber door quietly to grant them absolute privacy.

“Your Highness,” Hartwell says softly, his eyes dropping to Cael’s exposed, bleeding knuckles before looking up with a weary gentleness. “I am glad you came. His Majesty needed to see you. He had been avoiding me and the care required for his health, refusing until he saw all three of you.”

Cael offers a tired nod, his chest rising and falling with a slow breath. Just when he thought his father had stopped being stubborn, he was proven wrong.

Hartwell steps closer, his voice dropping into a serious tone. “A dangerous dispute broke out in the kitchens over the morning shipment of rations. Gavin accused Iris’s squad of negligence, and the argument nearly turned violent before the staff.”

Cael’s jaw tightens, his body bracing for the weight of chaos.

“Princess Kaera intervened,” Hartwell continues, a hint of genuine awe filtering through his words. “But it was Her Highness, Elara, who finished the matter. She stepped directly into the line of fire. She used her own background to expose the vanguard’s mistakes, silencing Gavin in front of the entire kitchen to protect your sister’s authority.”

Cael’s breath catches in his throat as the realization hits his chest like a physical blow. The quiet, guarded wife who had turned her back on him in the garden, the woman he believed was repulsed by his vulnerable frame, was down there risking her own peace to protect his sister and his home.

Hartwell clears his throat. “You do not wish to involve Her Highnesses a lot, and I understand your protectiveness, Your Highness. Though they have their own strengths and voices too.” A pause. “Princess Elara is finding her confidence, it seems, from what Princess Kaera stated when both of them came here a moment ago. His Majesty is entrusting all of you.”

A racing of his heartbeat echoes through his ears as he looks down at his bare hands. He senses a familiar presence walking along the lower floor. Looking over, Cael finds Elara making her way to the garden outside, despite her thin dress and the trembling cold.

He needs to see her.

OceanofPDF.com

XVII

BACK INTO RAEVERBAND

E

Elara's eyes remain on the pale winter camellias.

Though, her mind remains elsewhere. She reflects upon her observation of the bare skin where Cael's wedding band belonged, a striking absence within a palace she still finds difficulty calling her home. She cannot dismiss the sudden display of defiance, as if the growing alliance between them meant nothing.

Crouching on her knees, unbothered to make a single move, she feels someone step in beside her. She expects it to be Asma or one of the maids. Instead, it is Kaera.

Her black hair is down, unbrushed, her crown glimmering atop her head under the palace's glowing candles, chandeliers, and windows. Her black dress smooths down to her ankles, the material thick despite being silk, covering her arms, collarbone, and whatever skin there is except her hands. Simple, black, polished thick shoes with heels complete her attire. Nothing else accompanies her look, no jewelry or cosmetics. Not even a smile.

"Admiring the little flowers we have?" Kaera comments in a teasing manner, tugging her skirt up to her knees and crouching beside Elara near the blossoms. "It is freezing out here."

Elara swallows. "Kaera, I am confused," she admits, hesitating to continue. "About what just happened."

"With my father?" Kaera offers a weak smile. "He is an old man. He would have fallen ill one day anyway."

Shaking her head, Elara clarifies. "It is not that. I am questioning why he would call for us and let us know. Is it only for us to know that we must

strengthen our titles as princesses and make our appearances every single time beside Cael?”

Kaera only looks at her, her weak smile fading. “Yes, though I am sure it is more than that. My father considers you family. It is not always the public he is worried about,” a chuckle escapes her mouth. “Sure, he is stubborn and always mentions his duties and appearance as King. He does not truly care about that.”

Kaera falls silent, her fingers tightening into the black silk of her dress. She looks at Elara out of the corner of her eye, her expression guarded, as if calculating the danger of sharing a palace secret with a foreign princess.

Elara listens attentively, her hand instinctively reaching toward one of the winter camellias with her thumb and caress the softness.

“He wants us to avoid worrying over him. Especially Cael,” Kaera says, looking ahead at the flowers. A half-stifled laugh escapes her lips as she gestures toward the high palace walls. “He acts as though we will easily move on and forget his presence, but the grief is real. It is difficult to bear the weight of his decline alone, especially since Cael and I do not share the same mother to tie us together.”

Elara’s eyes widen, her breath catching with surprise at the confession. “You and Cael do not share the same mother?”

Kaera looks away, her fingers tightening around the edge of her fabric. “Keep the depth of our estrangement a secret. At least between us and Cael. I rarely admit these personal fractures within my family, unless I believe that person is entirely loyal.”

Elara’s entire body goes rigid. In her father’s castle, division between siblings was a vulnerability used to destroy alliances from within. Her mind flashes back to the rigid rules of her childhood, expecting Kaera to use this admission as a calculated demand for a political favor. But as she looks at the unbrushed hair and the complete lack of cosmetic paints on the princess beside her, the human grief breaks through her suspicion. Her hesitation melts, replacing her Veyrenn armor with empathy as she reaches out.

Shoulders easing at Kaera’s confession, Elara lays her hand on her back. Kaera turns her head and her composure melts. She looks the most vulnerable Elara has ever seen her.

“Cael and I have different mothers. I do not know much about his, and Father never confessed what happened to his previous marriage, except that I know he wishes to see her every day,” Kaera slowly lays her secret bare,

trembling. “When I turned thirteen, my mother decided it was time for me to know the tension and secrets between her and Father.” She inclines her head, swallowing. “It never changed anything. Raelith has raised me and loved me and Cael equally, like no other. He abandoned his duties, and he would read us stories past our bedtimes separately when we were awake.”

A soft smile appears on Kaera’s lips. “By time, he always seemed like he was avoiding me simply to teach Cael how to be a better prince. Strong in strength and mentality. I thought he favored him more than he favored me.”

Elara’s brows furrow. “I am sure that is not true. I have seen it with my own eyes. He adores both you and Cael,” she says with confidence. The worry Raelith holds for his children has not escaped her in her short time here. She has noticed the manner in which he requests two separate dishes during meals so they both possess what they like, and the warm smile on his lips when he watches Cael and Kaera tease each other.

“I am sure of that,” Kaera breathes out. “But I fear he still has not moved on from his first wife and only lingers toward Cael because he is her biological son.”

Elara’s hand leaves Kaera’s shoulders, pressing both of her palms on her thighs. “I find it unnoticeable. You and Cael look exactly the same.” Taking her words back, she shakes her head. “I apologize. I only meant that as an extravagant compliment. You two hold such an amazing bond, and I promise King Raelith adores you both.”

The tip of Kaera’s nose reddens, along with her cheeks and chin. Tears fill her eyes and she hastily wipes them away. “I have never seen him ill like this. I am afraid something horrible will happen.”

Elara steps closer to Kaera, wrapping her in a sisterly embrace. She has never made such a move to console another before. She acts solely on what she once wished to receive when she mourned Queen Aline. “Let us not think negatively and hope for the best.”

“Father is too old, Elara. He is nearly sixty. Most of our family members only reach the age of fifty. I cannot lose him,” Kaera’s voice breaks.

“You will not,” Elara reassures. “No matter what, your father will forever remain in your heart. In everyone’s heart. He is a dear man.” She swallows, the rising fear and emotions reminding her of her own mother.

“I am anxious about how Cael feels,” Kaera says, shaking her head as if to dismiss the heavy reality.

Despite her own shifting confusion regarding the silent prince, what she has read and witnessed tells her he gives far more than he takes. “He is strong,” Elara admits.

The final words slip from Elara’s lips, hanging quietly in the freezing air between them. A sudden, cold shift in the wind causes the chandeliers above the terrace to flicker, casting a long, sharp shadow straight across the dark patch of soil where they are crouching. Both women tense, turning their heads toward the palace entrance.

Standing at the top of the stairs is Cael. His tall frame cutting through the dim amber light of the corridor behind him. He is still dressed in his dark, structured tunic, his silver crown resting perfectly atop his messy black hair, but his gloves are gone. His left hand is exposed, the silver band shining against his bare, swollen finger, catching the glint of the chandeliers. He stands there, his eyes fixed on Elara, revealing that he caught the exact moment she defended his character.

Kaera turns her head at the sight of her older brother. Standing back up and adjusting her dress, she makes her way to him as he descends the stairs, slowly stepping into the garden. Neither speaks or acknowledges their father’s sickness. Kaera offers a nod before she retreats into the palace. Once again, Elara is alone with Cael.

She remains crouching in her muddy green silk dress, her heart hammering against her ribs. She ducks her head to hide the warmth coloring her cheeks. Cael stands still a few feet away from her, keeping his boots clear of the damp earth.

Desperate to escape his intense storm-grey gaze, Elara forces herself to stand up, brushing the damp soil from her skirt. She would rather avoid his presence after seeing him without the band earlier this afternoon. Her gaze drops to his uncovered hands, her breath catching at the sight of the crimson cuts splitting his swollen knuckles. Beside the raw injuries, his silver wedding band gleams under the candlelight. The suspicious thoughts she harbored vanishing against the reality of his bloodied skin.

“Cael,” is all Elara can say.

Cael’s eyes glance at the stains on her dress before he makes his way toward the winter camellias, offering them nothing but his silent admiration. The air returns to its usual heaviness. Because of his condition, he cannot

ask her questions or voice whatever he wishes. Folding her arms over her chest, she tries to block out the sharpening chill.

He turns to her again, and Elara feels the immediate weight of his gaze, quickly avoiding it. Cael stands up straighter and closes the remaining distance between them. Reaching down, his right hand folds back his left sleeve, revealing the stain of dark dirt and the extent of his raw injuries. Her fingers curl at the painful sight.

Cael brings out the silver quill from his pocket and begins writing directly onto his own skin, attempting to bring his words forward without a booklet. Leaning closer, Elara reads his script with growing concern and confusion as the dark ink traces over his bruised flesh.

YOU MUST REST INSIDE. Cold.

ELARA OFFERS A NOD. “You must as well,” she mumbles, the sharpening cold finally causing her to shiver. “And please, never write with ink your skin. I am certain it is harmful, and you must treat your injuries.” The words spill from her before she can stop them, yet she does not regret the advice.

Cael lowers his arm, his fingers tightening around the silver quill before he slides the instrument back into the pocket of his structured vest. He offers a single tilt of his head toward the palace doors, the motion a silent invitation for her to leave the dark soil behind.

Uncurling her fingers from the fabric of her skirt, Elara steps onto the stone path beside him. They begin their slow walk up the stairs side by side in absolute silence, the amber light of the chandeliers guiding their steps as they navigate the grand corridors.

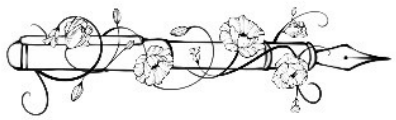
Desiring to bridge the distance between them, Elara recalls her training in formal court conversation. She keeps her gaze fixed forward, her voice low as she breaks the isolation. “I saw you hand those poppy seed bags to Asma earlier this afternoon,” she says. “Why did you request so many of them, even during the winter season?”

Cael pauses on the step, his grey eyes turning to meet hers. He glances at his wrist where he first wrote, and then looks back at Elara. She shakes her head. “Forgive me. Is the intent merely to prepare them for the upcoming spring?”

He nods.

Elara redirects her gaze to his injured fingers. “It would be nice if we could prepare more white lilies as well.”

Warmth relaxes the corners of his mouth, catching her by surprise as the severe mask of the prince vanishes.



SUMMONING the necessary courage to ask Cael if she may accompany him beyond the palace gates again requires several long minutes of internal hesitation. While anxiety coils within her chest to trigger old defensive habits, a nod of assent settles the matter, allowing her to mount behind him on the white steed.

They ride through the same paths, past the sweet bun stand, until he dismounts with effortless ease. He extends his hand to her. She grasps it, allowing him to guide her safely to the ground.

Today, she wears a different gown, the green silk abandoned in her quarters to allow the servants to remove the deep soil stains marring the fabric. The morning air offers a temporary warmth as the bright sun cuts through the freezing winter atmosphere. Two days have passed since she last saw him in the garden, and they have not spoken.

A lingering sense of deliberate distance shadows their interactions. Stolen glances now and again track his movements through the crowded streets, emphasizing the harsh difference between this public space and the safety of the fortress. Within the palace, workers, servants, and guards communicate through fluid gestures, their natural signs practiced in ways hers are not. Out here among the townspeople, however, very few understand him properly, drawing a sharp contrast to the ease of the royal household where his expressions meet immediate recognition.

The separation between their respective worlds becomes impossible to ignore. He is her husband, formally and legally, even if they remain near strangers, and a desire arises to truly know him.

Smoothing the fabric of her skirt with a light touch, the presence of onlookers becomes obvious as quiet whispers ripple through the crowd. Elara inhales a deep, steady breath before continuing forward on her own, sensing Cael entering the boutique she visited before, the same one where Olivia had given her the green dress.

A young boy peers down from a balcony high above, his gaze fixed on her. Elara smiles at him. He beams in return, then turns and calls down loudly, “Ma, the princess greeted me!”

A chuckle escapes her lips as her soft leather shoes brush against the rough earth of the road. Between the houses, she notices small farms where people sell fresh vegetables and fruits to passersby. Shops and eating houses appear next, offering a variety of cuisines. Steaming stews, large round flatbreads baked with savory herbs and curd, spiced cinnamon ciders and chilled refreshments.

Eventually, she comes to a bridge spanning a narrow blue river. Small fish of various shades of orange, green, and yellow move beneath the surface, occasionally fed by onlookers sprinkling bits of bread or grain. Stepping onto the curved bridge to pause at its highest point, she ignores all passing gazes to focus entirely on the slow currents below. Elara watches them glide and swirl, following their movement beneath the water, as though nothing above the surface exists at all.

When she finally looks up again, she continues her walk across the bridge, leaving the onlookers behind as she moves deeper into the streets of the lower city. The soft smile lingers while her focus returns to the rhythmic movements of the colorful fish. Folding her arms across the railing, she rests her chin against the wood. The steel beneath her skin feels bracingly cold. A light breeze moves across the bridge, swaying strands of her hair as they fall across her shoulders and down her back.

A fleeting imagination of sharing this quiet moment with a trusted companion surfaces. Despite the deep terror associated with vulnerability, the prospect of escaping her total isolation would be incredibly welcoming. Looking ahead past the immediate crowd, Cael’s tall silhouette appears further down the road, his black outfit shifting with each movement.

A shift in the wind brings a sharp chill, causing a shiver to run down her spine. Pulling her arms from the stone railing, she wraps them tightly around her torso for warmth. She realizes then that she could have worn one

of her larger gowns this morning, something heavier that might have protected her from the cold more properly.

The competitive cries of women selling their wares cut through the air, drawing her attention toward the bustling rows of stalls. Stepping down from the bridge, she follows the vibrant sounds, realizing the market expands much further into the lower city than she originally anticipated.

“Get your honeyed tarts!” a woman calls, her voice carrying through the street.

“Come here and get your very best spice and seasoning!” another man shouts soon after.

Elara looks ahead and realizes there is far more beyond the bridge than she first noticed. More stands stretch along the roads further ahead, lined closely beside one another. Spices, flower seeds, small packaged snacks, fresh pastries, dolls, figurines, and powdered toppings are arranged carefully across wooden tables beneath hanging signs and fabrics. The stands are close together, creating narrow paths between them where people move shoulder to shoulder. They struggle through the crowded paths, carrying paper bags and baskets filled with whatever they purchased.

The dense trade displays offer a perfect invitation to continue exploring, though the surrounding chatter softens noticeably the moment her boots cross into the narrow paths. One by one, the stand owners notice her. Their voices lower, and their attention follows her movements openly. She continues walking and pretends not to notice while observing the goods displayed around her. At one stand selling freshly baked cupcakes, a woman offers her a bright smile.

Her red hair is pulled back into a ponytail with a hairband, and her black dress sways gently in the wind against her light brown skin. “Your Highness, please, you must try a fresh cupcake today,” the woman says, gesturing to her display. “I would gladly bake a large cake for the palace, should you require it.”

Elara shakes her head. “There is no need. I am only observing.” She moves on.

A young man stands behind another table covered in wooden boxes filled with different powdered toppings, each unique scent blending into the crisp winter air as he waves a welcoming hand toward her. He offers her a nervous smile the moment she passes, and Elara returns it before continuing further through the market.

Soon, she notices a quieter stand tucked away from the others, where books are stacked and spread across a wooden table. Some are piled neatly while others lay open to display their covers. There is no owner in sight.

Curious, Elara steps closer, scanning the titles until one catches her attention. *Letters Beneath the Moon* is written across the cover in delicate silver lettering. The book is bound in deep blue leather, its edges worn from years of handling, while a painted crescent moon stretches across the center beneath a scattering of tiny stars. Two figures stand beneath it, their silhouettes separated by a narrow river of silver, as though the story itself is about distance, longing, and everything left unsaid.

An attempt to retrieve the volume causes the entire stall to shift unexpectedly, the table bumping against her hand to rattle the surrounding collection before a soft, startled exclamation echoes from below.

Elara pulls her hand back immediately.

A young woman rises from beneath the stand itself, straightening so suddenly she nearly bumps her head again. A white scarf wraps around her head, concealing her hair, ears, and neck entirely. The style reminds Elara of Asma's scarf, both in appearance and purpose.

The woman looks close to Elara's own age. Her skin is pale against the dark fabric she wears, while her eyes are a deep brown, large and expressive despite the nervousness gathering within them. Her face is round and soft, carrying emotions she seems reluctant to voice aloud. A long black garment drapes smoothly along her body, buttoned carefully from collar to waist without a single wrinkle visible. "I am sorry," the woman says, bowing her head and avoiding Elara's eyes entirely.

Concern crosses Elara's expression. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," the woman nearly falters before swallowing to continue more carefully. "My apologies, Your Highness. Would you like a book? These are all free."

"Really?" Elara asks, her heart filling with excitement.

The woman nods with a shy smile. "Yes, I am giving them away because my father from Zah—" She stops abruptly. Her eyes widen as she looks up at Elara, almost like she has already revealed too much.

Elara's concern deepens, though before she can respond, the woman hurries to explain, her words spilling out in nervous haste.

"I only meant that my younger sister does not want them anymore, so I wanted to give them away. We even tried selling them for almost nothing,

but people still complained and harassed us."

"I apologize," Elara says softly.

"There is no need, Your Highness." The woman gestures toward the book Elara has been admiring. "Do you like this one?"

"Yes, it seems very interesting."

"Then please, take it." The woman nods, her smile growing more certain. "It belongs to you now."

Before she can draw her hands back, Elara's gaze slips to the corner of the wooden table, catching on a small volume bound in deep forest-green leather. It is a blank booklet, its pages thick and tightly bound, unblemished by ink. Her heart drops with a pang of guilt as the visual memory of Cael's raw, split knuckles and the silver quill tracing directly over his wounded skin flashes behind her eyes.

She remembers scolding him by the white lilies, demanding he stop staining his own skin to write his words. A necessity takes hold of her chest. He lacked his booklet in that environment, meaning she had inadvertently stripped away his only immediate means to communicate. Fingering the green leather, she realizes she wants him to have it, providing another volume to pour his silent thoughts into so he no longer has to cause himself pain.

"May I take this one as well?" Elara asks softly, her voice carrying a trace of hesitation.

The woman nods. "Of course, Your Highness. Take whatever brings you joy."

Accepting both offerings, the dual weight settles into her palms. The green booklet feels like a quiet confession of her own growing concern for this mysterious prince, a tangible piece of care for a man whose hidden sacrifices she is only beginning to understand.

Securing the volume within her grasp, she tucks it against her side to keep it hidden from view. "I still feel guilty accepting these. I should support you."

A blush warms the woman's cheeks as she offers Elara her first genuine smile. "Please do not, Your Highness. It would make me and my sister glad to know you have it."

Holding the volumes close, Elara steps lead her away. The light breeze lifts the edges of the pages gently, like they are a precious treasure to be admired and explored. Passing back across the stone bridge while ignoring

the cool wind against her skin, an exhaustive search reveals no sign of Cael anywhere in the crowd.

She decides to continue exploring, even as the sunlight deepens into warmer shades of orange, signaling noon drawing nearer. Her steps carry her much farther than intended, passing foreign dwellings unobserved until the dense chatter of the market fades into the background. Trees begin surrounding the path ahead.

Slowing her pace, the stone roads disappear beneath her feet, replaced by uneven earth and thick roots. Pushing past the clustered trees and rocks of a river bank, she steps into the forest. Dead grass cushions the ground beneath her shoes. A clear spring bubbles from ice-rimmed stones, feeding a winding creek that glides through the barren landscape without a sound.

Elara stops mid-step, her mouth parting in silent awe as she blinks at the unexpected clearing. It is an area of total isolation, a hidden sanctuary that feels cared for by an unseen hand. The dark earth near the water’s edge is arranged. Kneeling near the bank to let her skirt spread across the grass, she sets the deep blue book down, her fingers still holding the small green booklet she purchased for the prince. Looking at the soil, her breath catches. The planting beds are completely bare. Tucked into the hollow of a tree trunk rests a set of worn gardening tools, along with a silver steel watering can.

The mystery vanishes as a clear certainty fills her mind, confirming that no other person is present in the clearing. Finding a bare, clean stone, shaped almost like a seat, Elara sits on it and looks down at the book and booklet in her hands. She does not know how to approach Cael and admit she bought a booklet for him because she kept his old one.

A sudden, freezing shift in the wind cuts straight through the dense canopy, breaking her solitary thoughts. Hours slip past unnoticed as she remains absorbed in the clearing, until a deep chill alerts her to the fading winter light. The brightness completely recedes from the sky, leaving the winding creek and the meticulous rows of white lilies cast in the deep shadows of early evening.

Scrambling up from the firm stone, a sharp shiver runs down Elara’s spine as the biting air hits her bare skin. Her fingers tighten in panic, clutching both the blue leather volume and the small green booklet tight against her chest. She turns in a frantic circle, her eyes scanning the shifting shadows only to realize the path back to the stone bridge and the safety of

the busy market is erased by the blinding mist. The evening air drops into a biting freeze, her gown offering little defense as she stands lost in the fading light.

The snapping of a root shatters the stillness behind her. The distinct thud of horse hooves echoes through the clearing, trapping her in a rigid stance as she realizes she is no longer alone. Her heart hammers violently against her ribs as an imposing, tall silhouette breaks through the thick air. With a sigh of relief, she realizes it is Cael. He emerges from the frost, his storm-grey eyes locking onto her frame.

Elara steps back. Her eyes widen with confusion at how Cael found her here of all places. Though if it was easy for her to find a precious place like this, it would not be hard for him either.

He guides his horse forward to Elara. Even with his heavy silver crown gleaming in the dim mist, his posture carries a profound, bone-deep exhaustion from his morning labor. Standing in front of him, Elara's fingers tighten around the green leather booklet.

She scrambles internally, terrified that if he steps closer, he will see the blank green notebook and realize she has been tracking his pain, or worse, remember the original booklet she still has hidden back in her vanity drawer. Tucking the small volume behind the larger book, Elara smooths back her hair, heart hammering as she waits for his next move.

Slowly, Cael extends his left hand down toward her. His thick black leather gloves are back on, but the silver marriage ring is now worn prominently over the leather, catching the glint of the freezing mist. Knowing that on this hand and arm were deep injures, and knowing that she jumped to a hasty conclusion, Elara blushes, refusing to meet his eyes as she grasps his hand.

Cael hoists her onto the saddle behind him, barely waiting for her to secure her hold around his waist before steering the horse back toward Raeverband. He has no booklet to write with, but Elara requires no inked words to recognize they cannot remain in this isolated wood. The rigidity of his posture and the urgency of his movements convey that they have no time to waste. With King Raelith fallen gravely ill, it is vital they present a unified, unbreakable bond to the public. The authority of the crown must be protected.

Elara makes no effort to maintain a distance between them as they ride back into the noisy market. The dense chatter of the vendors and shoppers

vanishes the moment they appear, the crowd falling into a hush to stare at the uncommunicative prince and the new Veyrenn princess.

Elara swallows, straightening her spine, masking the guilt of having falsely suspected him of betrayal and trying to mimic Cael's stern public composure to fit her role of princess in this vast kingdom. Keeping the booklet hidden in the space between her and Cael, she lifts a hand to wave at her people.

Stepping forward and keeping their focus straight ahead, they find someone waiting by the mounting block. It is the tall, elderly sentinel who was present within King Raelith's royal suite. He previously identified himself as Hartwell, a man who has served the king for years. His face is pale, his posture replaced by a panic that signals an emergency.

Before Cael can fully bring the horse to a stop, Hartwell hurries forward, his soft leather boots scuffing against the stones. He does not offer a royal greeting.

He reaches up toward the saddle, his hands holding a heavy parchment document bound in dark, foreign leather. It is sealed with a crimson wax stamp bearing the sharp, stylized crest of Omar Zahraani, which depicts a curved scimitar crossed beneath a falcon. "Your Highness, His Majesty has received a letter from Omar Zahraani. It is urgent. He arrives in two days without prior agreement," he says, his voice a low whisper as he delivers the news, ensuring no nearby courtyard guards can overhear the contents.

The name is familiar to Elara, matching the crest she recognized upon the dark leather of the document. *Zahraani.* It casts a strange weight into her chest. Cael tenses in front of her, bringing his hands up and signing his words with great hurry.

Hartwell pursues his lips, his expression tightening before he continues. "A foreign rider reached the outer perimeter checkpoints under the cover of the morning frost to deliver the message to the guards, who brought it straight to the royal suite," he breathes out. "The letter is a demand for a discussion regarding the redistribution of the shared border territories. Omar Zahraani is openly exploiting the rumors of His Majesty's failing health, using this precise moment of weakness to force a massive shift in political power. His Majesty is also insisting on participating in this discussion, despite his condition."

Cael signs with forced movements, his hands cutting sharply through the air.

“I know, Your Highness.” Hartwell shakes his head. “I promise that I have tried my best telling His Majesty to rest, but his treaty with Omar is a fragile peace. The king believes his personal presence is the only thing preventing an open conflict.”

Fear catches her throat as she absorbs the reality. She realizes now why Cael was so desperate to project absolute unity in the market. If Omar Zahraani’s spies report that the prince and his new princess are fractured, it will prove to the foreign leader that Riverath is ready to crumble.

Clutching the hidden green booklet tighter against her side, she prepares herself to follow Cael straight into the sick King Raelith’s chamber to face the impending threat.

OceanofPDF.com

XVIII

THE GREEN BOOKLET

C

Cael rushes towards the council chamber.

His mind spins so rapidly, Cael barely notices his surroundings until he stops dead on the threshold of the council chamber. His father and stepmother are already seated at the end of the large table.

Cael rushes toward the council chamber, his sister and Elara close behind. King Raelith looks frail, his gray hair spilling over his shoulders in disarray and his breathing shallow, but he has forced himself into an artificial posture of authority. High-ranking vanguards, royal knights, and the palace advisors are gathered around the perimeter, their faces tense. Kaera and Elara stand close beside Cael, their joints locking with shock and concern as they witness the sick king risking his life to maintain his public position.

Cael's jaw tightens into a rigid line as his eyes lock onto his father's pale, trembling frame. A sharp wave of protective anger crashes against his chest. He told his father to remain in his bedchamber. To find him here, surrounded by the calculating gazes of the advisors and the cold, unbothered presence of Queen Maereth, makes the air in the chamber suffocating.

He forces a breath through his lungs, his broad shoulders squaring as his fingers curl into tight fists to hide his knuckles. Beside him, he registers Elara standing against the tension, while Kaera's hand reaches out to grasp her sleeve in shared dread for their father's safety.

Not waiting for an invitation or a word of greeting from the council, Cael breaks his stasis and steps forward. His heavy boots thud forcefully against the stone floor, drawing every tense face in the chamber directly to

him. He bypasses Queen Maereth, offering her no glance as he places his tall frame at the head of the massive table.

His gloved hands strike the dark wood to unroll the parchment maps of the southern border checkpoints. The guards and advisors step forward and take their own seats, ready to begin the meeting.

Cael raises his hands, his fingers beginning to move with rapid speed as he takes control of the assembly, leaving his weak father to simply watch from the end of the table. *You belong in your quarters. This burden is mine to carry, not yours. Let me protect your strength while you heal.* Never once has Cael scolded his own father, but the overwhelming events make him think less.

He avoids every gaze in the chamber.

“Son, I handled Omar before. I understand his tactics. His manipulation. His plea to gain power and support from us,” King Raelith says, his voice soft but tone is firm. “Please, let me handle this before I care for my health.”

Hartwell stands straight, though he does not defend King Raelith or his case this time. Queen Maereth’s gaze pierces Cael, eyes widening with anger. “Do not speak to the king in such manner. Especially not in a council chamber.”

“I am not Cael’s King, I am his father,” he firmly tells her, before facing Cael again. “This once, Cael. accompany me. Though I want to be the head of the conversation.”

Cael’s frustration fades, his shoulders relaxing at his father’s gentle tone. The note of pleading in his voice. Swallowing his previous emotions, he inclines his head. There are three empty seats near him. one by the right, two across to King Raelith’s left. They are saved.

Cael takes the empty seat next to his father, Elara and Kaera falling into the chairs to his right, their focus dropping straight to the surface of the table.

King Raelith places his trembling, bare hand over the edge of the southern border lines on the map. He looks across the gathered advisors, his voice a raspy murmur that carries a chilling authority. “We have forty-eight hours before Omar Zahraani and his personal escort arrive at our gates. He is coming to test our resolve at the negotiation table, and he is counting on our internal distraction to force a surrender of our territories.”

A senior vanguard advisor leans forward, his finger tracking the narrow mountain passes marked in faded ink. “If we pull the watchtower patrols from the eastern ridge to reinforce the primary gates, we leave our flank exposed, Your Majesty. Omar is a calculator. He will anticipate a heavy forward defense and look for the seams.”

Cael remains still beside Elara, tracking every movement of the advisor’s finger on the parchment. He raises his right hand, his gloved fingers tapping against a specific, secondary valley road tucked behind the eastern watchtowers.

He signs a single, rapid sequence of instructions. *The eastern ridge stays populated. We split the second vanguard unit into the shadows of the lower valley. We surprise them if they attempt to circle the perimeter.*

The senior vanguard looks up from the map, studying the prince's silent command before offering a respectful incline of his head. “A hidden forward defense. It will force Omar’s scouts to report an impenetrable line, keeping him at the negotiation table rather than risking a skirmish. A brilliant deployment, Your Highness.”

Lowering his hands back to the dark wood, Cael feels the stinging, heavy ache throbbing beneath his leather gloves. Out of the corner of his eye, he catches the slight movement of Elara beside him, her gaze kept low as she tracks the patterns on the tablecloth. He notes the way she straightens her spine, her delicate features locking into the exact, stern composure. Under the watchful stares of the court, her rigid posture shields his position, presenting a flawless front that masks her internal confusion.

The low, serious murmurs of the advisors continue to echo around the chamber, mapping out numbers, rations, and defensive formations. The air in the chamber remains freezing, but the collective focus stays anchored on the parchment. Slowly, the maps are rolled up and the heavy parchment is tied with leather cords. One by one, the advisors and high-ranking vanguards bow their heads to the royal family and exit the council chamber. Only Hartwell remains behind. As soon as the door shuts behind the last council member, the professional silence shatters.

“You arrogant, useless boy,” Maereth spits, her voice cutting through the quiet chamber like a jagged blade as she slams her palms against the dark wood of the table. She stands up, her sharp features contorted with a shameless, boiling anger as she points a trembling finger directly at Cael’s face. “How dare you barge in here and command this council? How dare

you display your childish, chaotic defiance in front of the King's advisors? You are a curse upon this crown, a silent embarrassment who thinks a few frantic hand gestures make him fit to rule."

Cael does not move, his rigid posture locking into place as he stares straight ahead at the empty tablecloth, his jaw clenched so tightly the muscle leaps beneath his skin. He does not raise his hands to defend himself. He simply absorbs the venomous words in stillness.

"Maereth, enough," King Raelith commands weakly, his raspy voice breaking into a fit of shallow coughing as he reaches out to grasp his wife's wrist, trying his absolute best to calm her down. "He was protecting my strength. Do not speak to my son this way."

"Your son is a danger to our survival!" she snaps back, tearing her arm away from the King's frail grip, unbothered by his failing breath. "Omar Zahraani will arrive in two days, and you expect us to rely on a broken prince who cannot even speak to his own people? He is nothing but chaos wrapped in a crown."

Kaera's shoulders shake with a mounting fury, her fingers gripping her skirt so hard that her knuckles strain against the smooth silk, while Elara stands beside her with an expression of disgust. The shameless cruelty of the display leaves a palpable tension in the space.

Cael finally responds, unable to watch the growing weakness of his father under the strain for another second. Raising his hands, his eyes narrow as he cuts his gestures aggressively through the space. *You are only making father weak by doing this. If you care about him, stop causing worse chaos than there already is. He is growing helpless and he cannot handle everything.*

"How dare you?" Queen Maereth's loud voice cuts through the entire chamber so sharply that his ears begin to ring. "How dare you speak to your own mother in such a way? Ever since I have arrived in this palace, all you did was disregard me."

Cael's injured fingers curl into a tight fist, the pain within his hand increasing. That physical ache is nothing compared to the agony in his heart at her words. He forces his muscles to lock, stopping himself from pounding his fist against the wood of the table.

"Mother, you know that is false," Kaera steps in, facing her mother. A mouse sizing up to a cat. "You have been unkind to Cael nearly his entire

life. I have seen how you pushed him aside, ruining every year of his celebrations."

Elara cannot handle the escalating chaos. Cael notices the slight attempt she makes to rise from her chair without drawing notice, the sheer panic in her green eyes. He does not blame her. He wishes to depart as well. Instead of granting the desire to sign exactly what he thinks of his stepmother, he pushes back his chair, curling his injured hand gently around Elara's upper arm to guide her from the council chamber. She follows beside him, her fearful gaze fixed on the floor as they make their way through the corridors in absolute silence.

They arrive within the privacy of a small sitting chamber in the eastern wing, where a roaring fire crackles within the hearth to push back the winter chill. As they walk inside, Cael's mind reels, but not with the confrontation they just left. He is accustomed to the domestic warfare of his family. What he cannot understand is why, whenever Elara is nearby, any negative emotion melts away.

His world is different when she is around, and he is not certain if that truth soothes or terrifies him.

He is not certain how they end up in the small sitting chamber in the east wing. He did not plan to take them anywhere in particular, but his feet cut a path to the sanctuary and Elara followed with hesitation. Cael swallows, runs his hand through his hair, then yanks on the lapels of his coat to smooth the fabric down. Elara looks up at him with expectant eyes, the light from the nearby hearth flickering across her face. Reaching out, he gestures to one of the plush armchairs by the fire, inviting her to rest.

Elara sits, and Cael pulls on a woven cord to summon a maid. Once the servant enters and receives his instructions for tea, she departs, leaving them alone. To his surprise, Elara is holding a small, vibrant green booklet like the one he lost, her posture nervous. "I purchased this in the market," she says, holding it out to him as he steps in front of her chair. "You lost your other booklet, and I do not want you writing on your skin, so I obtained this for you."

Cael's mouth parts. He slowly raises his left arm as he reaches out to accept the gift. To touch the pristine surface of the deep forest-green leather, he uses his right hand to peel back the thick black glove from his left hand. The motion exposes his severely swollen knuckles and the jagged, raw cuts

still caked with dark granary soot, the silver ring shining tight against his injured skin.

As his ruined fingers brush across the cool cover of the new booklet, the painful ringing from Queen Maereth's loud voice fades from his mind. Profound comfort fills him at Elara's gesture. She does not judge him for his silence. She might even accept it.

Cael cradles the vibrant green volume against his chest, the texture a soothing, protective weight against his wounds. Looking into her deep green eyes, he does not attempt to sign or reach for a script. He simply offers a single, slow incline of his head, feeling a crack in the invisible barrier that separates them.

Except he keeps his hand there, his finger nearly brushing against Elara. the feeling does not burn. Elara's lips part, her gaze softening. Cael's posture relaxes at the touch, grounding them both in a shared warmth before she draws her hand back to her dress.

"Is it alright if I can sit with you?" She asks, voice still low.

Cael inclines his head and scoots right by the other end of the bench, while Elara sits by the other one. Her head tilts downward, looking down at her fingers playing with the material of her dress

"Your mother… or *Maereth* was wrong," Elara admits, her voice cutting the silence.

Cael turns his head, surprised by her sudden honesty.

"Everything she has said was not right. It is painful to bear such words from your own parent," she continues. "What you did was right. Your entrance into the Council chamber and your sternness." A pause, swallowing a chunk of emotions down her throat. "If I were you and had a parent who I cared deeply for, I will yell with shock and concern. Rushing around like I have gone mad."

He remains still, listening to her attentively. Elara's opening of her words and admitting some of her relatable struggles ease something in Cael. it is evident both of them struggle with their family. Put on a show only for their title. Perhaps misunderstood too.

As the afternoon shadows grow longer, the distant sound of heavy boots echoing near the top of the palace stairs indicates that a guard or a servant is approaching to look for them. Hearing the disturbance, Cael quickly slips the small green volume deep inside the secret inner pocket of his structured vest, hiding it from the rest of the palace. He looks up and locks his eyes

onto Elara’s, sharing a knowing glance. They step inside together, their distance growing closer that their brush constantly brushes against each others, though neither of them creates distance.

He looks at her one last time, the hidden gift and his ruined hand turning into a boundary that the rest of the court can never reach.

OceanofPDF.com

XIX

DUTY OF A PRINCESS

E

Elara checks on the winter camellias.

Studying the frozen soil intently, she waits as if patience alone can encourage the first signs of green to emerge. Witnessing no significant change, she turns toward the scattered lenten roses, their colors providing the solitary accompaniment to the garden. No gardener appears, no Cael, no Kaera, and no watchful court stares down from the high terraces. Now provides the opportunity to speak with her mother, an intimacy denied to her since her arrival.

Bringing her hands together and intertwining her fingers in a tight, protective grip, Elara presses her lips against her thumbs. She closes her eyes, letting a sharp, freezing breath fill her chest before she whispers into the quiet space. “Mother, I miss you.”

Her voice breaks on the final word, the sound thin and fragile against the vastness of the courtyard. She swallows hard, forcing her throat to stabilize as she touches the cold gold links of the necklace resting against her collarbone. The metal is freezing against her skin, an icy, physical anchor to a memory that refuses to fade. She opens her eyes to look into the deep center of a pale winter blossom, its fragile layers catching the early morning light.

“I have not forgotten about you,” she murmurs, her knuckles straining against each other as her grip tightens. “Your necklace and this grand garden grant me with little colors remind me of you every passing second. But I am afraid, Mother. I do not know how to be a princess here. The duties I must fulfill... I am afraid I will be judged by the advisors simply for asking how to fulfill them.”

She exhales, a pale cloud of mist flowering in the winter air before dissipating. Her thoughts drift to the previous night. A small smile softening the corners of her lips. “Kaera… she is an amazing princess. An amazing person. She is bright just as you were, confident and gentle. She is the only person who reminds me of good in this stone fortress. Now that Mistress Walker is not here with me, and despite me having a new maid assigned to my chambers, I find myself trusting Kaera and King Raelith more than I thought I would.”

Cael appears in her head. The sudden memory of his silhouette standing before her in the forest mist pauses her prayer entirely, his intense storm-grey eyes flashing behind her eyelids. She shakes her head to clear the vision, her heartbeat quickening.

“Cael, my husband, he is… confusing,” she admits to the silent petals, her shoulders losing their tension as her body eases. “He has not harmed me in any manner once. He brought me a wonderful dress, offered me his coat, and he accompanies and helps me at all times before I even think to ask.” A pause interrupts the soft prayer, before she murmurs, “Better than father could ever be. I am only ever grateful to be away from him.”

Elara recalls Cael’s poems and the fact that they are directed to another woman. Her limbs falter, her balance nearly giving way. She stands up, her fingers uncurling as she lets her hands drop to her sides, staring into the purple tint of the lenten roses. She realizes now why she stands out here in the freezing dirt. She is not throwing a generic prayer out to the heavens or the grand history of the realm. This world has treated her like a political pawn, a piece of Veyrenn currency traded to protect a border.

She is praying to her mother because her mother is the only piece of absolute, uncorrupted goodness she ever possessed. She wants to move on from her grief, to find an internal solace rooted in her mother's memory, rather than spending her days stranded in this palace waiting for the petals of her own life to fade.

She returns to the palace to focus on what the world will bring.

Omar.

Ever since the unsettling encounter about the political emergency between Riverath and Zahraan became public yesterday, a heavy shadow has blanketed the household. Cael takes over most of the duties in the second council meeting this morning, and Elara spends the entire time in a

state of confusion. Her mind has not stopped spinning over the impending arrival of Omar Zahraani.

She tells herself the garden is enough, but a strange restlessness has begun to grow. She wants something to occupy herself with beyond reading and wandering the palace halls, something that belongs to her in a tangible way. The palace remains enormous, alive with duties and movements that continue around her without ever truly reaching her, and she has started to feel the sharpness of that separation more than before.

Back in Veyrenn, this had been Elara's life. Endless hours spent confined within her chambers or drifting through corridors with nowhere particular to go, expected to remain graceful, silent, and unobtrusive while the rest of the kingdom moved without her presence mattering within it.

Here, maybe because Riverath feels so alive in comparison, the idleness has become more difficult to endure. A powerful urge to be useful returns, pulsing beneath her thoughts no matter how often she attempts to dismiss the feeling.

The grand dining hall is hollow as she passes it, though the distant kitchens echo with loud chattering and frantic arrangements for the upcoming state dinner. It sounds as though the staff is preparing for a final hurrah before the foreign delegation arrives.

Leaving the corridors of the east wing behind, Elara wanders into a sector of the palace where she has never set foot before. A passing maid steps into the corridor, and Elara's steps slow. She glances toward the maid beside her, but her companion merely continues forward with tired eyes fixed on the floor, unbothered by the grand architecture of the empty chamber.

"Good morning," she asks, hoping to fracture the silence.

Looking back, a soft smile touches the maid's lips. "Good morning to you, Your Highness."

Elara's gaze returns to the statue. Decorative is not the word for it. The figure feels almost symbolic, like a declaration of something she does not possess the language to understand just now. Her attention wanders deeper through the palace. Only then does the pattern crystallize in her mind. Everywhere she looks, she sees women. Female knights stand at attention near the walls, armor gleaming beneath the muted morning light, while female guards patrol the corridors with measured discipline, hands resting near their weapons as servants move between them carrying folded linens,

trays of food, and baskets of flowers. In a distant sitting area, several young girls laugh amongst themselves while braiding strands of one another's hair, their voices carrying softly through the space.

The absence becomes impossible to ignore once she notices it. Very few men walk these halls at all.

"Excuse me," Elara calls to the same maid, who is dusting a few of the tables and glass pots. "Are there only women here?"

The maid nods. "Yes. This side of the palace, the right wing, is reserved entirely for women. The left wing belongs to the men. This area was chosen for us by Her Highness."

Elara's eyes widen. "Kaera?"

The maid smiles, her tired expression softening. "Yes. She shows kindness without hesitation. This is where she holds court and gives her orders. Her nature is gentle, but she rules with a firm hand." A chuckle escapes her as she shakes her head.

Elara smiles at this information about Kaera. The maid's description of her recalls every moment and mood she has witnessed herself. She now holds back her own chuckle.

The maid glances at her with a wider smile. "Within this wing, most of us simply call her Princess Kaera. She has never corrected it. Sometimes, we feel like Kaera is truly our best friend."

Elara nods slowly. "That is wonderful. What is your name, dear?"

The maid stops her task momentarily, fully turning to face Elara now. "Maren, Your Highness."

Studying her exhaustion further, Elara steps forward and takes the feather duster, setting it aside on the floor. "Where is your bedchamber? You look like you are about to faint."

Maren does not reassure or convince Elara that she is fine. "Just above," she replies, her voice fainter now.

Elara guides her carefully up the staircase, taking the left path along the upper landing before leading her through the corridor. As they pass, several maids and female knights pause what they are doing to acknowledge them with respectful smiles. A few bow politely in greeting, their deference sincere.

At the very end of the hall, Elara opens the bedchamber door and helps the maid inside. The chamber is spacious without appearing excessive, grand in structure while remaining restrained in decoration. It resembles

Elara's own chamber in design, though smaller in scale and noticeably more personal.

While several framed paintings hang neatly along the walls, soft landscapes rendered in muted tones border a portrait of a young boy standing beside a woman. A four-stringed gittern rests upon a nearby stand, its polished wooden face catching the pale light. The small instrument, built for light and portable melodies, feels out of place in a chamber so heavily defined by unsaid endurance. It anchors the space with a sudden, aching sense of personal history.

Elara steps closer to the canvas, her focus locking onto the brushstrokes of the portrait. Maren notices her attention.

"My son painted that," Maren says, her smile carrying a fragile grace that grows around an old wound rather than concealing it. "I rarely see him now. My brother is raising him deeper within the kingdom. At least he remembers me."

Silence follows as Elara's attention remains fixed on the canvas, tracing the uneven brushstrokes that shape the young boy beside the woman. "How old is he?" she asks.

"Seven," Maren replies. "Nearly eight."

"Why is he not with you?" she asks, her focus remaining locked on the portrait as Maren moves slowly toward the bed.

"My work here could not give him the life he deserved," Maren says with care. "There was no one nearby to help me raise him. His father…" Her voice falters before she gathers herself once more. "He did not stay. In the end, it was only me, and I could not carry both burdens alone. My brother offered to take him in, and I accepted, though it cost me far more than I ever imagined."

Elara absorbs her words in silence. Thoughts of her own mother surface almost instinctively, followed by the realization that absence wears many faces. Death. Distance. A parent who chooses to leave and never returns.

"Do you regret it?" she murmurs. "Coming here? I understand being away from your family causes pain."

Maren considers the question longer than Elara expects, her gaze dropping to her folded hands. "Some mornings," she admits. "His Majesty created these positions for women like me," she continues. "Women without family nearby, without anyone waiting for them when the day is done." Her eyes drift toward the bedchamber door, where muted voices

carry through the corridor beyond. “He said we would find that here instead.”

The revelation sends a cold prickle across Elara’s skin. In Veyrenn, her father viewed vulnerable women as liabilities to be discarded or locked away, transforming his fortress into a prison of presentation. Here, the concept of a ruler actively building a sanctuary of defense for his people is foreign.

Maren falls silent for a moment before adding, “For the most part, we have. Many of the workers in this palace did not simply walk by with aching feet and plead for His Majesty to accept them and work for him. It was more like His Majesty and His Highness found us and gave us a place.”

Elara’s stomach twists, but she wipes her face of emotion. “Cael helped?”

Maren smiles. “Oh, yes. He helped tremendously and accompanied us like we are all beyond professional duties and work. He is always the first one to bring people in. Her Highness sees many women, even young ones, and gives them a chance to enter.” Turning her head away, Maren looks ahead at the other women and maids walking. “You help us all as well. You helped me, Your Highness.”

Elara’s breath catches in her throat. She opens her mouth to ask what Maren means, but the words die upon her lips. Before she can form her question, a harsh shout echoes from the corridor outside, shattering the peace of the chamber.

“Everyone, silence!” The sudden command fractures the stillness of the corridor, delivered by a voice stern with authority. Stepping toward the bedchamber doorway to turn toward the sound, Elara locks her focus on the landing.

At the center of the staircase stands Kaera. Her black hair is drawn into a loose bun, several strands escaping to frame a face shaped more by resolve than softness. She wears a gown elegant in its restraint, the bodice simple, its flowing sleeves resting low upon her arms, while the pale gray skirt catches the shifting light each time she moves. A silver crown rests upon her head, gleaming where sunlight spills through the windows.

“There will be a dinner tomorrow,” she announces, her voice carrying the effortless authority of someone long accustomed to obedience. “Leader Omar of Zahraan will attend alongside his delegation. I expect the palace to be spotless by evening, particularly the guest dining halls. The menu will

require further adjustments as well, so speak with the head chef before noon.”

Then, she exhales, exhaustion evident as every woman’s voice quiets. Kaera gives a firm nod, a silent command to continue. Movement returns, the staff moving in sync to obey their princess.

Beside Elara, Maren leans in and whispers to her, “She seems exhausted, Your Highness. I am worried.”

Elara turns to Maren’s expression of concern before shifting her gaze back toward Kaera standing upon the staircase. Awareness gathers piece by piece as the terrifying connection forms. Physical movement becomes impossible. She forces her posture to straighten. “I appreciate your kind words and work, Maren.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” Maren inclines her head.

Wanting to reach Kaera before she leaves, Elara hurries toward the staircase, panting under the weight of dragging her heavy pink skirt around. Kaera’s eyes land on hers. Her earlier sternness fades with a smile. Around them, movement returns to the wing as maids gather baskets and folded linens before hurrying down separate halls. Guards reposition themselves near the staircase, armor shifting. Voices remain low, purposeful, blending into the rhythm of preparation surrounding the approaching evening.

“Let us go. These wonderful women have it all arranged,” Elara reassures. “I will work with you by your side.”

Kaera’s gaze softens, her stance straightening. “Together?”

“Together,” Elara smiles.

The heavy oak doors of the wing swing open, and Elara accompanies Kaera down the winding stone staircases toward the lower dining halls and preparation areas. Kaera clutches a thick, heavy leather inventory log against her chest, her knuckles straining against the material, but the noticeable tremor in her fingers betrays the immense fatigue draining her posture.

Matching her pace, Elara extends her hand, her fingers gently easing the heavy log away from the other princess’s grip to share the burden.

Kaera glances at her with a flicker of surprise, her shoulders dropping a fraction as she releases a tired breath. “Thank you,” she murmurs, her voice carrying the strain of a long morning. “The advisors left the checklists in absolute chaos.”

“Let us settle it together,” Elara says, offering a calm smile as they step into the dining hall.

They work side by side, checking the long black tables that stretch across the stone floor. Elara helps Kaera select the exact silver candleholders and heavy, pristine linens required for today’s summit. Each polished piece of flatware must rest in flawless symmetry, ensuring everything looks impeccable to hide the kingdom’s internal stress from Omar Zahraani.

While arranging the heavy silver ornaments at the center of the table, Kaera’s movements slow, her eyes fixing onto the polished base of a silver candelabra. “Father insisted on reviewing the guard rotations himself this morning,” she says, her voice sinking to a more personal, fragile register. “He can barely lift his cup, Elara. Watching him force that crown authority in front of the vanguards... it frightens me. I feel as if the entire foundation of our home is fracturing before he can even face the Zahraani delegation.”

Elara listens, setting a heavy silver candelabra down with a metallic clink before reaching out to touch Kaera’s arm. “He is a king, Kaera. His strength belongs to his people, but right now, your composure is what encourages him to continue.”

Kaera gives a nod in acknowledgment, her fingers lingering against the metal before returning to her task. A silence settles between them for several minutes, the only sound the rustle of fabric as they work. Adjusting the edge of a heavy linen runner, a sense of clarity settles in Elara’s mind. In Veyrenn, her endless hours spent mastering the formal presentation of the high court felt like a prison of useless idleness. Here, beneath the shifting shadows of the chandeliers, that exact background is finally useful, providing a shield of perfection to guard Riverath’s royal family from the threats outside their gates.

They move together into the massive, bustling palace kitchens, where the loud chattering of the staff echoes against the stone walls and the rich aroma of roasting meats and savory herbs fills the air.

Navigating past the large preparation tables, they speak with the head chef to finalize the adjustments Kaera announced on the staircase earlier. The chef listens intently, his brow furrowed as he takes in the princess’s commands regarding the main courses.

Stepping closer to the wide wooden counter, Elara offers her own soft input, suggesting the addition of specific honeyed tarts and spiced

cinnamon cider elements she observed at the lower city market during her walk. The combination balances Riverath's traditional grandeur with a comforting, welcoming warmth, creating a menu designed to ease the high tension of the summit. The head chef nods in deep agreement and he relays the new instructions to the nearby bakers.

Standing beside Kaera beneath the glow of the overhead lanterns, Elara watches the kitchen staff work, their movements aligned to meet the demands of the crown.

Kaera leans back against the flour-dusted edge of the central preparation table, her silver crown tilting as she watches the head chef scold a young baker who nearly dropped a tray of savory flatbreads. A smile touches her lips, though her eyes drop to her lap, the warmth fading into a heavy shadow.

"My mother used to tell me that the kitchens are the true heart of a kingdom," Kaera murmurs, her voice dropping below the clatter of iron pots so only Elara can hear. "She said you can measure the fear of a palace by how fast the servants move. Look at them. They are terrified. They act as though tomorrow is a final hurrah because they know my father is fading, and they know my mother will look for any excuse to punish them if the facade breaks."

A prickle of anxiety tightens against Elara's ribcage at the mention of Queen Maereth. She casts a glance toward the kitchen entrance, her posture locking into a guarded stance. "I... I was afraid she would return to the council chamber this morning," she admits in a soft whisper, her fingers tracing the edge of the wood. "The way she spoke to Cael yesterday... it was so cruel. I kept waiting for her to step out of the shadows and halt our work here."

Kaera's jaw tightens, a sharp edge of resentment hardening her posture as she looks ahead at the roaring stone ovens. "She sneers at Cael because his silence makes him an easy target in front of the high advisors. She ignores the truth. He spent his entire morning securing the fractured iron gate blockades at the eastern perimeter while she sat comfortably by the hearth."

She pauses, swallowing hard as her breathing hitches with a sudden wave of protective anger. "She wants the council to believe he is a liability, but Cael carries the weight of this entire kingdom on his back while Father

is weak. He bleeds for this palace in secret, and she dares to call him a curse upon the crown."

A knot forms in Elara's throat. The vivid image of Cael's bleeding knuckles and the silent, agonizing weight he carries alone flashes behind her eyes, deepening the resolution in her heart. In her own past, her father had manipulated and harmed her because she was helpless, with no one there to defend her or keep his anger calm.

"Elara, your fingers are pressing onto the flatbread," Kaera states with concern, watching her fingers curl inside the bread.

Elara returns to reality and gasps, pulling her fingers out as the scorching heat reddens her skin. "Oh!"

Elara startles as a broad shadow falls over her, only now realizing that Cael has entered the space. Before Kaera can step in to check the damage her unintentional mistake caused, Cael steps between them, his rough hand holding hers as his eyes study her reddening fingers. The chatter in the kitchen dissipates as a tremor flutters in her stomach at the unexpected contact.

Gently, Cael guides Elara toward the washbasin, turning the bronze fixture to let the cool mountain water rush out, and brings her fingers beneath the stream to cool the burning sensation. Elara opens her mouth to thank him, but all that comes out is a little whimper of pain, her mind still reeling at the memories of her father.

Cael's touch is entirely different from the manner of her father. He remains gentle, even over the blistering skin of her fingers. She finds herself looking at him instead of the injury, admiring the lines of his face and the intensity in his stormy eyes as he inspects the damage done to her hand. The chatter of the kitchen becomes nothing more than a low hum in her ears as Cael turns off the water and meets her eyes. Pink blooms across his nose and cheeks, but he does not look away from her, his thumb drawing gentle circles over her knuckles.

"I feel as if I am interrupting something," Kaera says with a hint of a tease. "Though I hate to be the kind of person to ruin two lovebirds' growing bond, we have Omar coming in tomorrow."

Elara snatches her hand from Cael's. "Let us continue," she says, her voice muddied as her face flames. Forcing her gaze away from Cael and his presence, the tingles in her stomach remain.

OceanofPDF.com

XX
AN UNEXPECTED GUEST

E

Anxiety continues to occupy Elara’s thoughts, driven by the stark reality that her wardrobe lacks the necessary finery for an unexpected royal banquet. The impending arrival of foreign leaders and their delegation ensures the gathering will demand absolute perfection.

Returning to the main fortress to ascend the central staircase, each measured step accompanies the restless beating of her heart. Upon reaching the upper landing to push the heavy doors open, the setting sun spills golden beams through the balcony curtains to stain the dark floor. The chamber greets her in silence.

She moves toward the dressing chamber, already preparing herself for the long task of sorting through the few gowns she owns, expecting difficult choices and disappointment alike. Her attention fixes on two wooden dress forms standing near the cupboards, positioned side by side like carefully prepared offerings.

The first frame displays a formal black doublet, where the soft light glimmers across the fabric to reveal delicate silver embroidery woven into the chest. Beneath the heavy velvet rests a crisp white silk undershirt fastened with dark clasps, paired with matching tailored breeches that lend the entire ensemble a sharp, polished appearance.

Beside the doublet stands a second apparel form dressed in a long black gown threaded with golden sparkles, the glittering hue echoing the jewelry she favors daily. The bodice is fitted to the form, rising into a high neckline supported by slender straps. Layers of soft fabric fall into a full skirt that shifts with the breeze drifting through the balcony doors.

Elara steps forward before she has realized she has done so, her fingers brushing against the textile, finding it smooth. She has never worn black before. Not in dresses, not in jewelry, not even in the embroidery of her veils or crowns. Her father banned the color entirely from her wardrobe, forbidding her from donning the shade even when mourning her mother.

She steps back, studying the gown beneath the fading sunlight while imagining the way the fabric will drape once worn, and how the golden details will catch the ambient candlelight across the dining hall. Her gaze shifts toward the matching suit beside it.

The dinner is still hours away. Elara withdraws her hand from the gown and leaves it resting on its mannequin before crossing toward the vanity. Lowering herself into the chair, she studies her reflection in the mirror as the late afternoon light softens her features.

Elara enters the adjoining bathing chamber. A twist of the sculpted silver valves allows only boiling hot water to rush into the basin, countering the freezing temperature of the stone. While she waits for the bath to fill, she undresses, setting her clothing aside before placing her crown beside the sink. She retrieves her lavender soap and rose-scented shampoo, then lowers herself into the bath, the intense heat of the water gradually relaxing her frame as she forces herself to adjust to the harsh northern climate.

A deep massage against her scalp allows the floral aroma to bloom. Rinsing her hair clean, she guides the lavender soap across her skin methodically until her gaze drops toward the faint blemish lines on her thighs.

Elara freezes, her palm stalling over her skin. Her fingers trace the uneven ridges of the marks, her chest tightening as the old discomfort returns. She forces her eyes away to stare blankly at the steaming water, waiting for the shaking in her hands to pass.

When she is done, Elara retrieves a folded towel from the cabinet beneath the sink and wraps it around herself. Her wet hair clings to her face and shoulders, tangled in small knots that she works free.

Once her skin is dried and anointed with soothing oils, she returns to the bedchamber to approach the vanity, finding Annie waiting like she usually does. Patient. Her head turns toward the princess and she stands, bowing half of her body down. “Greetings again, Your Highness. Shall I help you dress?” Annie gestures to the new, black dress.

“Yes, please. I worry I will take too long like I did last night,” Elara makes a light joke to lighten the worry in her heart. Last night, she requested Annie to let her handle her routine herself, from the growing duties yesterday.

Annie lets out a genuine laugh. “Of course.”

Elara sits and feels Annie combing through her wet hair. While Annie works, Elara examines her reflection. The dark circles beneath her eyes appear lighter, almost unnoticeable, but her hair looks thinner. Her brow furrows as she turns her head.

“Is there something wrong, Your Highness?”

Elara swallows. “The hair at the side of my head is thinner. Am I ill?”

“Oh, it could be because of stress. Lack of sleep. Perhaps not hydrating well, Your Highness,” Annie avoids brushing too much at the side of Elara’s head, instead focusing on the back and ends.

Elara looks down, avoiding her reflection. Catching sight of the silver scars on her thighs, she quickly brings her hands flat over them, shielding them from view. She feels Annie’s gaze on her, but the maid remains silent. Once Elara’s hair is dried and as straight as it can be, Annie brings the black dress over.

“This will require pins and adjustments,” Annie says, mostly to herself. “Your recent illness has left you smaller, but we can secure the fit.”

Elara stands and lets Annie bring the dress to her, slipping it onto her body as she removes the towel. The material, despite appearing glamorous and textured on the outside, is silky smooth underneath, like a soft caress against her skin. After many pins tighten around her frame, Annie steps back to study the dress.

“It looks wonderful,” Annie smiles at Elara. “Especially on you, Your Highness.”

Elara’s cheeks warm with the compliment. “Thank you.”

“Is it uncomfortable? I can adjust it. Your comfort matters most,” Annie insists, encouraging Elara to be entirely honest.

The validation carries a sincerity she had spent her entire childhood longing to hear within the walls of her father’s castle. She swallows against the rising tightness in her throat before offering a smile. “I am fine, I promise.”

Annie studies her for a moment longer, apparently satisfied with the answer. Turning back to the vanity, she retrieves the golden crown to rest it

atop Elara’s hair, then reaches for the selection of golden crystal jewelry arranged on the velvet tray. Elara parts her lips, intending to protest the excess, but a sudden hesitation stalls her voice.

Annie secures the delicate crystal studs into her ears and guides the matching necklace to rest against her collarbone, granting the ensemble a new, commanding purpose. Unexpectedly, her fingers lift the original golden chain with the heart-shaped locket, which Elara had tucked inside its protective velvet cover to shield it from harm while she bathed. Annie lifts the piece and clasps it around her neck, as though instinctively recognizing its profound value.

“Is this to your liking, Your Highness?” Annie asks, stepping back to observe the reflection. “You rarely go a day without this piece. I assumed you wished to keep it on.”

“Yes,” Elara replies, her voice carrying a trace of desperate gratitude.

“The pendant is beautiful,” Annie notes, her gaze tracking the delicate golden filigree tracing the edges of the heart. “I have a small chained bracelet my son crafted for me a year ago.” Raising her right forearm, she displays a gold charm wrapped snugly around her wrist.

Elara studies the growing fondness written across Annie’s features before she finds the courage to speak. “This pendant belonged to my mother,” she lets the words hang in the air. “I have kept it ever since her passing.”

Annie pauses. She slowly extends a gentle hand toward Elara’s shoulder. Elara remains still as Annie rests her palm against the silk, offering a supportive squeeze. “I am sorry, my dear. I understand how heavily the absence of your closest family weighs.”

Elara remains motionless, absorbing the quiet reassurance of the touch before Annie’s fingers loosen their hold. “I will take my leave now, Your Highness. Enjoy your evening.” With a final, respectful bow, the caretaker exits the chamber.

Once Annie departs, Elara’s gaze drifts to the drawer where she concealed Cael's booklet. Her mind has been turning so rapidly today that she requires an escape before the evening dinner. She longs to lose herself in the poems of the man she married, the one who so gently cared for her burnt hand this morning.

Before she can think too much about it, Elara pulls open the drawer and retrieves the leather booklet, eager to lose herself in his secret verses before

the heavy duties of the banquet begin.

A SPILL *of chestnut silk against the cold,*
Where morning catches in each winding strand.
Her forest eyes, a vibrant grace to hold,
Like summer leaves above a barren land.
Her parting lips, a breath that stills the chamber,
A quiet warmth where all my shadows fade,
She breaks the winter of my silent gloom,
The brightest dream that ever light has made.

ELARA STILLS as her fingers tighten against the worn leather. Cael is not writing about a lost queen or a ghost from his past. This specific description is an exact reflection of her own features, tracing the precise elements she shares with her mother.

The chestnut hair. The forest-green eyes. The profound symmetry between her mother's memory and her own reflection leaves her paralyzed.

She rereads the poem again and again. Her eyes track the delicate ink lines as an uncontrollable trembling takes hold of her hands. Her heart hammers as she tries to comprehend the silent reverence he has kept hidden from her all this time. Before she can process the depth of his verses, the sharp, rhythmic echo of approaching footsteps breaks the corridor's silence.

Moving with frantic speed, Elara slams the booklet back into the drawer and shoves it shut. She retreats several paces away from the vanity to smooth her black skirt, forcing her posture into a flawless, unbothered stance.

The heavy handles move, and Cael opens the door. He steps into the bedchamber, dressed in his simple black coat and silk buttoned shirt.

Elara turns from the drawer, her heart leaping. Cael halts near the threshold, his gaze tracking across her frame. His eyes linger on the long black gown, the golden sparkles catching the amber chandelier light, before moving down to the locket resting against her collarbone.

She forces a nervous smile to her lips, her shoulders dropping as she offers a nod. Cael watches her, the tension in his jaw softening. The corner of his mouth lifts, returning a genuine smile that reaches his eyes. He gives

her an incline of his head in greeting, then turns his steps toward the adjoining changing chamber to prepare for the evening.

The door clicks shut, and the knot in her chest finally unravels. She glances at her palms, noticing the trembling has stopped, then reaches down to align the heavy pleats of her skirt. From the adjacent area, the sliding of drawers and the heavy rustle of velvet mark the passage of the minutes.

A moment later, the door opens. Stepping fully into the chamber, Cael walks over to stand beside her near the vanity mirrors. In the dark glass, the striking symmetry of their appearance is impossible to ignore. His black doublet and silver embroidery complement her glittering black-and-gold gown. Standing together, they form a formidable alliance, presenting the unbreakable facade required to shield the throne from the impending Zahraani arrival.

Forcing herself to maintain her composure, Elara turns back toward the balcony, creating distance between them. She rests her forearms against the railing and gazes toward the palace gardens as the wind dries the remaining moisture from her waves. Below, the gardens glow beneath the fading sunlight, the flowers and trimmed hedges darkening as evening settles over Riverath.

The air carries the scent of jasmine and damp earth alongside the faint traces of spices drifting upward from the palace kitchens, where preparations for the dinner continue below. Above, the sky deepens from blue into violet, streaked with fading orange and pale pink near the horizon where the sun sinks lower. Her hair lifts with each gust before falling back against her shoulders, prompting her to run her fingers through the strands to loosen a small knot near her temple.

A distant horn echoes from the outer perimeter, signaling the unsealing of the valley gates. Elara steps out onto the balcony when the sound dies away, her fingers tightening against the stone railing to watch the procession advance through the fading light. The horses, their harnesses adorned with gold details, catch the last remains of the sun. Cloaked figures ride beside them, some dressed in black, others in pale fabrics layered beneath dark outer robes that shift with the wind. Even from this distance, the delegation carries a presence both disciplined and deliberate, making the fortress below stir with urgency.

Servants cross the courtyards at a quick pace. Lanterns are lit one by one along the garden paths and upper terraces, their warm glow spreading

across the royal grounds. The sounds of preparation drift upward through the air, voices mingling with footsteps and the faint clatter of dishes arranged in the dining halls.

A moment later, Cael steps onto the balcony.

Elara turns instinctively, and once again, Cael's eyes find her. The evening wind passes between them, lifting loose strands of Elara's hair across her shoulders. He steps closer to the stone railing to follow her line of sight toward the approaching delegation, a turn of their heads revealing a shared expression of unease. Cael unfolds his black coat and offers it to Elara before they leave the balcony to navigate the central staircase.

"It is not cold inside the palace," Elara states, her voice gentle rather than a rejection.

He only stares, his expression unreadable, before he folds the coat and keeps it against his side.

Elara is the first to turn and walk down the hall, where the usual comfortable chatter has vanished. Cael follows by her side. Their soft footsteps echo against the marble floors until they reach the lower corridor, where Leader Omar already waits.

She slows. The servants moving through the passage lower their gazes as he passes, and even the guards straighten at his approach. The corridor falls painfully quiet. Then Leader Omar removes one hand from beside his sword and places it over the center of his chest, the gesture measured and formal.

"Princess Elara and Prince Cael," he says, his voice deep, carrying the same smooth accent she encountered within the marketplace. "An honor."

Elara gathers herself to sink into a respectful curtsy, though her thoughts remain tangled. "Leader Omar," she replies. "Welcome to Riverath. It receives you kindly."

His gaze studies her with unnerving precision, observant without becoming openly intrusive, as if he is measuring not only her words but the space surrounding them. Behind him, several members of the delegation remain motionless beneath their layered robes and veils, silent shadows against the marble hall.

Then she notices one of the knights. His skin carries a warm, sun-kissed bronze hue that stands out sharply against the deep black of his heavy wraps. Thick, sharply defined dark eyebrows arch downward over his

piercing eyes, adding a harsh focus to his gaze, while a few black strands of hair fall across his forehead to shadow his brow.

His intense focus is shameless, though his attention is fixed entirely on Cael beside her. Slowly turning her head, Elara sees Cael staring back. Their eyes are narrowed, as if they have encountered each other before, and the meeting was not a happy one.

Tearing her focus away, she forces a steady register into her voice. “I hope your journey was peaceful.”

“It was long,” Omar replies. “But worthwhile.” His eyes turn toward her for another second before shifting to Cael.

“Riverath honors you,” Elara says, offering a nod to conclude the interaction.

“The honor is entirely mine,” Omar replies, his smile warm, though it does not ease her discomfort. Around him, members of the delegation stand in composed silence, their layered robes carrying traces of distant travel despite the grandeur surrounding them.

King Raelith steps forward before the silence can stretch further. “Dear Elara is adapting to palace life,” he says. “Her world has changed greatly in a short amount of time.”

Omar hums in acknowledgment, his eyes remaining fixed upon her. “Adjustment reveals character far better than comfort.”

Cael alters his posture, stepping closer to Elara’s side. His gaze anchors on the foreign leader.

Elara’s breathing slows, a slight shift in her demeanor that Omar catches immediately. A subtle calculation registers within the older man’s expression, observant rather than surprised, as though he recognizes an unspoken truce passing between the young royals. Cael bypasses the final steps of the staircase and positions himself directly beside Elara, close enough for the heavy fabric of his sleeve to brush against her arm.

King Raelith gestures outward toward the lower corridor, where the guest dining halls are situated. His exhaustion and earlier frailty vanish beneath a forced, stubborn majesty. “Now that everyone has arrived, dinner awaits us down the hall,” he offers a polite smile to Omar. “Please, come.”

“Do not mind if I do,” Omar replies, falling into step beside the monarch.

Elara and Cael follow. A chill runs through her frame from the draft; the winter frost has returned to the point that even the stone corridors of the

palace offer no protection from the cold. Before she can step fully into the dining hall, a heavy warmth settles over her shoulders.

Recognizing Cael's coat, Elara steps into its weight, her hands sliding down the large wool lapels to draw the fabric closer around her chest. The dark garment conceals her glittering gown and her mother's golden locket. "Thank you."

They all take their places at the table, Omar on Raelith's left, Cael and Elara situated next to Maereth on his right. Tall candles flicker between floral arrangements woven with deep crimson petals and winter greenery, their fresh scent blending with the richer aromas drifting from the kitchens beyond.

Elara maintains a composed bearing. Across the table, Queen Maereth studies the dark coat resting on Elara's shoulders, her eyes widening with warning. Hesitantly, Elara reaches up to loosen the heavy collar, but she refuses to remove it entirely, desperate for more warmth against the growing heat from the fireplace.

Members of the Zahraani delegation take their seats while Riverath's vanguards remain stationed along the stone walls in disciplined silence.

Kaera sits beside Queen Maereth, her black hair swaying down her back. Her cheeks are pinker than usual, and long crystal earrings enhance her features, her bracelets and a heavy necklace catching the candlelight along her wrists and neck. Her dark eyes move once over Elara's gown, her jewelry, and the loosened waves of her hair. The tips of her lips tilt into a soft smile, expressing her silent adoration for the black dress. Elara feels a warmth rise in her chest at the wordless praise.

Kaera's attention shifts toward Omar. "I trust the southern routes remained stable during your journey," she says, her voice carrying the effortless authority of her court.

Omar leans back in his steel-trimmed chair. "Stable enough. Breakdown rarely delays when neighboring kingdoms begin rearranging themselves through marriage alliances."

Cael's hand shifts beside hers beneath the tablecloth, not making contact, simply narrowing the distance between them.

King Raelith's expression does not alter. "Riverath's alliances are not uncertain."

Omar lifts his glass lazily, a faint smirk touching his lips beneath his beard. "We shall see."

Servants begin arriving with the first course before cutting into what was becoming a dangerous conversation. Plates are placed carefully before each guest: roasted vegetables glazed with herbs, warm dark bread brushed with butter, and bowls of thick soup carrying rich scents of garlic, cream, and spice.

The soft sounds of dining fill the chamber, blending with the music drifting through the architecture. Elara feels a persistent pressure. From farther down the table, the masked knight with the sun-kissed skin and fierce, dark eyebrows locks his piercing hazel gaze onto Cael, then onto her. Before her anxiety can spiral further, Cael shifts his broad shoulders, his arm brushing against hers. The physical contact forces her focus back.

The musicians continue uninterrupted, the piano carrying the melody while the violin weaves through it in long, restrained notes that drift across the chamber like a slow current. Candlelight flickers against polished silver and crystal, scattering warm reflections across the table, but little of that warmth reaches the atmosphere gathering around the banquet.

King Raelith folds his hands before him, his expression composed. “State the purpose of this sudden visit, Omar. Riverath expects formal notice before a delegation crosses our border.”

Omar does not answer immediately. Instead, he reaches for his glass of wine, turning it once between his fingers before setting it back upon the table untouched. “Military support,” he says, his voice deep and smoothly accented. “Weapons. Reinforcements stationed temporarily along the northern routes. Enough to remind these factions that my borders are not vulnerable. The forces of Oakhaven executed a surprise assault upon my outer grain warehouses, striking over a territorial dispute along the fertile river lands. After this sudden violation of our perimeter, I require the support.”

Elara notices several knights stationed along the walls straighten almost imperceptibly, their attention sharpening despite the discipline that keeps them otherwise still.

Queen Maereth speaks. “Military aid sent across a border has a habit of staying there,” she says evenly, keeping her gaze on her plate. “Reinforcements become permanent casualties when an ally faces an endless conflict.”

Omar’s eyes shift toward her, amusement flickering beneath his calm facade. “Spoken like someone raised beside war councils.” A patronizing

smile appears on his lips.

“I was.”

The violin rises into a sharper passage before softening once more beneath the piano’s slow rhythm.

King Raelith’s expression remains unreadable. “Riverath does not involve itself lightly in external conflicts.”

“Isolation is rarely sustainable,” Omar says, his gaze drifting toward Elara and Cael. “Your choice to secure an external marriage suggests you already understand this truth.”

Discomfort stirs within Elara at being drawn into a conversation she barely understands. Beside her, Cael remains perfectly composed, the faint tightening in his jaw betraying his restraint whenever Omar redirects attention toward their marriage.

She reaches automatically for the nearest glass, only for Cael’s hand to touch her wrist beneath the tablecloth, halting her movement. When she looks at him in confusion, his gaze shifts toward the dark vintage before landing upon the untouched iced water already resting beside her plate. Heat rises faintly into her cheeks as she withdraws her hand and reaches instead for the water, realizing he is shielding her from drinking something altered.

Cael releases her wrist, his bare fingers remaining against her skin for only a second longer than necessary.

The piano melody lowers, nearly drowned beneath the stillness overtaking the table. Even the servants move more carefully now, placing dishes and refilling glasses with lowered eyes, understanding instinctively that this conversation has drifted far beyond diplomacy.

King Raelith regards Omar across the length of the table, candlelight sharpening the silver threaded through his dark coat. “A rewrite of our borders,” he says, his voice thin but unyielding. “You arrive without warning, demand our standing regiments to fight your border war, and imply our own northern front will suffer if I refuse. You mask a threat under the guise of an alliance request.”

Omar exhales once through his nose, the faintest crack appearing within his composure. “You misunderstand my intention.”

“No,” King Raelith replies, his gaze steady. “I understand your motives. They remain identical to your past transgressions.”

The words echo across the chamber. Elara becomes painfully aware of how little anyone else at the table speaks. Queen Maereth sits in total silence beside her husband, while Kaera watches Omar with the watchful stillness she might reserve for an opponent across a battlefield.

Omar's gaze shifts toward Cael. "And what does your heir think?" he asks, a slow sneer warming his tone. "Surely Prince Cael has opinions regarding military strategy. If only he could speak them aloud." The insult alters the atmosphere in an instant. Several members of the foreign delegation glance toward the crown prince, their eyes widening at the blunt venom of the remark.

King Raelith is the first to counter Omar's manners, his posture straightening. "I will not tolerate you speaking to my son in that manner."

Elara looks up at Cael, noting the sharp shift in his posture before he raises his bare hands to command the space. His long fingers move with cutting precision through the air. He does not have his leather notebook, but he requires no page; his movements are so commanding that the entire table watches his fingers cut through the silence. Hartwell steps forward, his voice projecting the prince's silent words for the assembly to hear.

"Weakened rulers invite invasion," Hartwell translates, his delivery matching the unyielding speed of the prince's gestures. "And kingdoms unable to secure their own borders eventually lose the right to claim them."

Omar absorbs the statement, his amused expression dissolving until only a dangerous stillness remains. He lifts his gaze back toward Cael, his eyes glinting as a dark glare settles over his features. "Is that what you believe, Prince?" he asks.

Elara's breath catches at the bluntness of the exchange, but Cael's expression never changes. He watches Omar from across the table, his storm-grey eyes unwavering beneath the older man's stare.

"It is not about what I want," King Raelith continues, steering the council back to the map lines. "You came seeking to exploit my resources while contributing nothing of value. I will not squander my kingdom's strength to secure yours. There must be balance."

Omar's eyes narrow, the golden light of the candles glinting off his heavy rings. "You may regret this decision when chaos spreads beyond my borders."

"If it does," King Raelith pauses, his tone dropping to a colder register, "then I will address it. I will not be manipulated into carrying burdens that

are yours to bear. I am denying this immediate deployment, but I remain bound to the defensive terms of our existing treaties."

The hall suffocates with restrained anger, the air sharpened by a tension that spreads over the porcelain plates like smoke. The tightening of Cael's shoulders is impossible to miss.

Elara senses the selfishness beneath Omar's requests, the greed concealed beneath polished words and practiced diplomacy, but she maintains her silence. She recognizes the danger beneath Omar's calculated demands carries the very same secretive nature she witnessed in the marketplace with the vendor. This is not her place to interfere, no matter how the discomfort presses against her ribs.

Omar scoffs, the sound rough with disdain as he looks directly at Elara. "You waste your defenses on this southern princess, a mere ornament unsuited for the harsh realities of a war council."

Elara's fingers tighten against the edge of the dark wood.

King Raelith does not rise from his seat. "Speaking negatively about those uninvolved reflects immaturity, Omar. I have aided you and many rulers for decades, and you remain the only one who has failed to outgrow selfishness."

Omar's hands slam against the table, the brute impact rattling the silver utensils and sending iced water spilling across the silk cloth. Around the chamber, chairs scrape against the marble floor as nearly everyone rises in alarm, the vanguards shifting toward their weapons. Only King Raelith remains seated, unmoving beside Queen Maereth.

Elara flinches as she grips the edge of the wood. Before she can pull back from the table, Cael moves, his frame shifting to block her from Omar's line of sight. His fingers slide over her wrist, his grip firm as his free hand drops to the hilt of the dagger at his belt.

"We do not behave like this at the dining table. This conduct is unacceptable within Riverath," Kaera says, her voice stern and unwavering as strands of black hair fall across her shoulders.

Omar laughs dismissively. "Silence, woman. You do not order men. You listen."

Kaera lets out a low growl of disgust, her fingers tightening until the empty crystal glass within her grasp cracks in her hand. Rage flashes across her expression, sharp enough to still the entire chamber. Elara watches the glass fracture in Kaera's palm, a cold prickle of awe running down her

spine. King Raelith's jaw tightens. Queen Maereth watches the chaos with narrowed eyes filled with disapproval instead of surprise.

"I have held great patience for you, Omar. All you do is insult my family, and you return demanding our strength." Raelith's tone lowers. "Causing chaos each time you enter my kingdom will not grant you your wish."

With the erupting chaos and everyone only focusing on each other, Elara pushes her chair back to stand on her feet. Leaving the dining hall, Elara's heart races at her dismissive action. She hurries down the dim hall toward the outside of the palace.

Stepping past the stairs to remain near the overflowing water fountain, Elara keeps her gaze down on her hand, her focus shifting to the silver band on her finger. A breath interrupts the silence beside her. She whips around, finding the knight who has been staring into her eyes all evening.

Elara takes a few steps back to create distance, thoroughly confused by how she did not hear a single footstep or notice anyone following her from the dining hall.

The knight parts his lips, his gaze tracking her defensive posture with an unhurried observation. "Terrifying, is it not? The way these powerful men scream and draw blades over borders while you are left seeking shelter beneath a borrower's coat." His accent is quite thick, his deep voice mirroring Omar's smoothness in tone but carrying an artificial layer of warmth.

"Who are you?" Elara asks with an accusatory sharpness in her voice. "You have been staring at me all evening."

"I am Amir," he says simply, a confident smile forming on his lips to mask his true intent. "Simply a knight working for Omar. Just like the rest."

Elara turns her head, her eyes discreetly looking around to find any guards or knights to shield her. There is nobody near them except the two guards stationed by the outer gates, whose gazes remain fixed ahead. Her fingers curl against the fabric of her black dress, her knuckles turning white as she searches for an escape from the isolation.

"I do not mean any offense, Your Highness. I am simply here to find my way out of the chaos as well. The deliberate insult from Omar is unbelievable," Amir says, insulting the very leader he serves, his voice lowering into a sympathetic murmur to win her confidence. He takes a single, slow step closer, his hands held open to project an innocent,

harmless demeanor. “He is always like that, and I have no choice but to shield him.”

“Can you not leave?” Elara asks as she avoids his piercing gaze, her hands moving down to hide the throbbing burn on her skin.

Amir lets out a humorless laugh. “Leaving a warlord like Omar is not a matter of simply walking away, Your Highness. Once you wear his crest, your life belongs to his campaigns. If I desert my post, my family across the southern border pays the price.” He lowers his head, letting a silence hang between them to let his fabricated tragedy sink in. “So, I stay. I shield his cruelty, even when it sickens me.”

Elara studies his uncovered features, the genuine warmth of her nature wrestling with the deep caution she learned back in Veyrenn. The raw honesty of his words touches a familiar ache in her own chest. She understands the suffocating weight of being bound to a ruthless ruler’s demands. “I apologize,” she murmurs, her voice softening as she relaxes her defensive stance by an inch. “No one should be forced to carry a burden that causes them misery.”

A glint of satisfaction flashes across Amir’s hazel eyes, though he quickly conceals it behind a grateful smile. He takes another slow step forward, his voice dropping to a gentle whisper. “You are far too kind for a palace like this, Princess. I saw the way you straightened your spine inside when the shouting started. You are trying so hard to stand as a shield for Prince Cael, though I wonder... who is shielding you?”

The sudden, intrusive question makes her breath hitch, her fingers tightening around her black dress by her hips.

“He is a powerful prince, no doubt,” Amir continues, planting the first seed of suspicion into her thoughts. “But men who remain entirely silent usually do so because they are hiding darkness. Do not let his royal titles blind you to the danger, Elara. You are completely alone in this kingdom, and you deserve someone you can truly trust.”

Elara tilts her head, her gaze sharpening. “How do you know so much about him?”

“It is hard to avoid a reputed prince like him,” Amir replies, a faint, mocking crease appearing at the corners of his eyes. “Always devoted to his duties, enduring the disrespect from the court, and he is seemingly very kind and caring, is he not?”

Elara clenches her jaw. How did he manage to pinpoint her exact thoughts about Cael so easily? The fragile trust she had begun to extend toward her husband shatters as Amir's words pierce into her heart like ice shards.

"That is his show," Amir purrs, stepping a fraction closer as his voice drops into a cold, dangerous register. "He shows such deliberate kindness, acting as though he is perfect to enhance his arrogance and secure his upcoming title as the kindest King Riverath has ever seen." A pause follows, his eyes piercing directly into Elara's features. "Have you not witnessed it? Are you not tricked?"

"My bond with Cael is none of your concern," Elara lashes out, her defensive training kicking in as she takes another step back to create distance between them. "You are a knight from another kingdom, and I do not think this conversation is appropriate."

"You do believe he is a good man. I am sorry for you."

A rush of footsteps breaks through the shadows at the top of the stairs. It is Cael, and only him, his rapid movements carrying a visible worry. His black boots echo against the large garden's silence, but before Elara can move to reach him, her hand is gently grabbed by Amir as his lips make contact against her knuckles.

Her knees nearly buckle at the unexpected, intimate contact from a man she does not know and does not like. She cannot move, her body stilling as she forgets the function of every muscle in her frame, leaving only the burning sensation of an unknown man's lips pressing against her skin beneath the moonlight.

OceanofPDF.com

XXI
THEIR FIRST CLOSURE

C

Cael closes the distance with rapid speed, his boots thudding hard against the stone. He steps directly between Elara and Amir, his broad shoulders and tall silhouette cutting off the space between them and forcing Amir to let go of her hand. His gut aches at what he had witnessed. The sight of Elara's shock from the action. The motion of her rubbing the top of her knuckles where Amir kissed.

She did not ask for it and neither did she like it.

Cael's entire body goes rigid as he senses Elara shrink behind him. Grasping Amir's collar, he pulls the man closer until they are nose to nose, his bruised knuckles turning stark white under the strain. His glare conveys a threat that requires no weapon.

"We meet again, Cael," Amir says, his voice carrying that same smooth, mocking tone as he stares directly into the prince's gaze. "You are still as weak as ever. You have not learned anything." He remains entirely unbothered by the crushing grip on his shirt. Releasing his hold smoothly, he lifts both hands in a gesture of exaggerated innocence, a patronizing smile lingering on his lips before he pulls the dark black fabric of his face-wrap back up over his jaw to conceal his features.

The fury vibrating through Cael's shoulders darkens the space between them. He does not lift his hands to sign a response, refusing to grant the foreign knight a single motion of his physical language. His glare remains fixed on the man, a wordless promise of ruin if he ever steps near Elara again.

Amir lets out a muffled scoff beneath his black layers, unbothered by the lethal promise written across the prince's features. He leans closer, his

voice dropping to a dangerous whisper meant to pierce the quiet garden. “You can play the silent protector all you wish, Your Highness, but we both know the truth. You cannot shield her from the darkness you keep hidden in your own courts. A mute crown cannot build an alliance out of lies.”

Turning his head toward Elara one last time, Amir offers a slow, mocking bow that ridicules the stiff formality of the palace. “Sleep well, Princess Elara. I am sure your perfect husband has many more secrets to share with you in the dark.”

Cael steps forward, his fingers clamping around Amir’s wrist. With a sharp twist, he cranks the arm backward, forcing Amir’s shoulder down. A gasp escapes Amir’s lips as his knees buckle under the strain, his weight shifting to find balance against the grip. Cael does not lift his hands to sign a response.

Amir stumbles backward as the pressure releases, wrenching his arm out of the restriction, and retreats into the shadows of the stone corridor, vanishing before the guards turn their heads.

Elara parts her lips as she prepares to speak, but the words die in her throat. A sudden tumult shatters the corridor as Omar and his knights march down the stairs in rage. Their faces contort with rage following King Raelith’s refusal of aid, the entire foreign delegation retreating under the escort of the palace guard. Cael turns his head toward the disruption.

The heavy echo of boots and the clatter of armored vanguards follow closely behind the retreating foreign unit. King Raelith steps out onto the landing, his breathing shallow and ragged, though his expression remains firm as he watches the Zahraani forces descend. Kaera stands rigidly by his shoulder, her palm wrapped tightly in a white cloth from the table, her dark eyes still burning with anger.

Queen Maereth stops near the top of the stairs, her sharp features contorted with disapproval as she looks over the courtyard. “A complete disgrace,” she says quietly. “We host a dinner to secure our borders, and it ends with a cracked glass, a weak princess abandoning her role, and a foreign leader storming out of our gates.”

Cael pays no mind to his stepmother’s stinging words, ignoring the chaos unfolding on the stairs above them. His focus remains fixed on Elara as the foreign delegation retreats past their position. Stepping deeper into her space, he reaches up to adjust the wool collar of his coat around her

neck, securing the dark fabric against her skin to block out the biting cold of the drafty corridor.

He does not sign any explanation. Rather, he reaches down with his bare left hand, his swollen fingers and raw cuts exposed beneath the light of the lanterns. He takes her hand gently in his palm, his thumb rubbing over the exact spot on her knuckles where the stranger just pressed his lips, helping her erase the burning discomfort and the lies the knight left behind.

Elara tenses beneath his touch. Realizing her hesitation, Cael begins to withdraw his hand, but she takes a deliberate step closer to him, anchoring her frame against his chest like she needs this.

“I did not want that,” Elara shakes her head, her voice cracking with a wave of guilt and panic that convinces Cael of her true intentions. “I did not want him to touch me. To kiss me. It burns, Cael.”

Cael wraps his arm around her upper torso, guiding her away from the fountain and back inside the fortress. He ignores the disastrous events that have fractured the evening, steering her through the dark corridors to the bedchamber. He sits Elara down on the edge of the bed, the frantic chattering from the courtyard below growing muffled through the closed crystal doors.

Her breathing remains shallow and heavy, her fingers rubbing against her knuckles with desperation. Her body shakes, causing Cael’s eyes to widen as the realization strikes him. She is panicking. Her skin grows pink from the rising distress, and Cael takes her hand back into his palm. Never once has he witnessed her like this, and the sight breaks something deep within his chest.

“He kissed me,” Elara whispers, her voice breaking against the quiet of the chamber.

Cael sits directly beside her and wraps his arms around her shoulders, leaning her against his broad frame for support. She sits still in an uncomfortable position for as long as possible, fighting her own boundaries, before she finally surrenders into his embrace and rests her head against his arm.

His breathing stops, his heart racing rapidly at their sudden closeness. Elara only leans closer into his warmth, her fingers gripping the velvet of his doublet for stability. The heavy black fabric of her dress tugs against her as her legs attempt to fold on the bed, her body curling inward to find

escape from the lingering fright. Cael releases his held breath and carefully brings his bare, injured hand down to slip her shoes off.

With her feet freed from the constraints of her shoes, Elara draws her knees closer toward her chest, her fingers relaxing against his silk shirt as her breathing slowly finds its regular rhythm. Cael maintains his hold on her, offering a solid anchor until the last traces of her trembling fade.

Her hand slides down to meet his bare left palm. Her fingertips hesitantly trace the raw cuts and swollen skin he had exposed to protect her by the fountain, her gaze lingering on the injuries before she looks up to meet his eyes.

Cael shifts back against the headboard, guiding her with him so she can rest more comfortably against his frame. He adjusts the heavy coat over her shoulders, smoothing the wool to shield her from the drafts drifting past the crystal doors.

Elara leans her head against his chest, her hands coming to rest flat within his own. They remain in the silent embrace as the muffled noise from the gardens dies away.

Elara moves, sliding her palm into his hand until their fingers lace together. Cael’s hand tightens around hers in response, his thumb brushing against her skin. He halts for a fraction of a second, his posture freezing to evaluate whether his weight might cause her to pull away. When she remains against his side, tension releases from his shoulders. He raises his hand, his fingers moving to smooth loose, dark waves away from her face, his touch hovering with caution before settling against her cheek. Elara rests her face into his palm. Cael holds her there, his thumb anchoring against her jawline with a strength that reveals his desire to keep her to his side.

The warmth of the chamber increases as the fire burns down to low embers. Elara shifts her position on the mattress, uncurling her legs to stretch against the soft sheets. Cael adapts to her movements without a word, his arm remaining securely around her shoulders as he pulls the velvet blankets up to cover them both, locking them away from the cold palace corridors outside.

Her breathing slows, though it still trembles. Cael remains where he is, slowly adjusting his posture to keep this closeness between them as long as Elara needs.

The night was hectic and even Cael cannot forget it. The sight of Amir after many years, the first interaction they have had ever since they were young, and his former companion involving Elara in their old mess makes his insides burn.

They were the exact same age. Thirteen years old. Riverath and Zahraan had a massive dispute before signing a major peace pact regarding those southern border checkpoints. To guarantee that Leader Omar would not attack or break the treaty, King Raelith demanded a living pledge of peace. Omar had to send one of his high-ranking boys, Amir, to live inside the Riverath main palace as a Royal Ward. He was raised alongside Cael.

He was of noble blood, and King Raelith placed him in the exact same war academy, elite sparring matches, and strategy lessons as Cael. For years, they ate at the same stone tables, wore the same training tunics, and bled on the same training grounds.

King Raelith wanted to actively mold Amir. He knew that one day, Cael would inherit Riverath and Amir would become a powerful leader in Zahraan. Raelith's goal was to show Amir the stability, strategy, and principles of Riverath so that when the boys grew up and took power, they would never go to war. He wanted to foster a brotherhood to secure a lifetime of peace for both kingdoms.

They became deeply familiar with each other, as Amir learned sign language for him and saw him as a true friend. But afraid of exposing his vulnerabilities or bringing anyone else into the crushing misery of his royal burdens, Cael had forced himself to endure his grueling morning labors alone, withdrawing into isolation. When the wardship contract expired as they reached adulthood, the official release papers were signed just as a fragile peace formed between Riverath and Zahraan. Despite having the diplomatic option to remain at court as an ally, Amir left immediately.

Cael's caresses the wool of the coat shielding Elara's arm. For many years, he has wished he could return to the past and apologize. Except Amir never gave him the time to do so, and the deep resentment the knight carries only drove the wedge further between them. But Cael cannot reconcile the image of his childhood companion who used to smile, shove food down his face, and wished to be a savior for his people, with the sneering, manipulative man who made Elara uncomfortable tonight.

The night grows deeper, and Elara's eyes blink open. Cael has not slept, the churning feeling in his chest keeping him alert beside her in the dark.

“Cael?” she calls gently.

He looks down, bringing his hands to the sides of her arms as she sits up, offering the support and strength she is gradually regaining.

Looking down at her knuckle, her other hand caressing the skin. Elara speaks. “Amir… he spoke as though he knew you before you wore the crown.”

The reminder of the green booklet she gave Cael and the silver quill pokes underneath his weight in his pocket. Something he has been carrying all along in case of need during the evening. He needs to tell the truth to Elara in the simplest way possible after what she endured and what probable things he told.

Opening the booklet to the very first page, he starts to write. His muscles weaken as he writes further, before showing it to Elara.

He is a man who used to work in this palace beside me. A year after, he left due to a misunderstanding.

Her eyes squint, her vision remaining blurry. “A misunderstanding? Was it a heated encounter?” She hesitates. “He looked at you like you were his enemy.”

Cael takes her words in and inclines his head, knowing there is no need to deny Amir’s evident hatred.

“He told me you were hiding darkness behind your silence. Yet, you shielded me tonight when no one else was looking.”

Her words hang between them, the chamber feeling rather small around Cael as his chesty tightens.

“You-” Elara swallows. “You granted me kindness behind doors, gave me your coat willingly and knew I would need it. You wrote on your own skin even though ink can harm you. You disobeyed my kingdom’s law in a dining hall back in my castle, with everyone witnessing it.”

She breathes out, trembling. “I do not think a malicious man would do any of that to give a stranger a voice.”

Her fingers twist into the soft fabric of the velvet blanket, her gaze dropping to the dark space between them. She rubs the side of her thumb against her palm, a habit that betrays the fluttering rhythm of her pulse.

“Amir wanted me to see an enemy when I look at you. He wanted me to believe your silence is a cage for something terrible.”

She pauses, taking a shallow breath that hitches in her throat before her green eyes lift, locking onto his with an unshielded, desperate sincerity. “But my father spoke in thunderous tones every day of my life, and his words only ever brought me ruin. Your silence... it is the only place I have ever felt entirely safe.”

Cael stalls, his hand freezing over the open page of the forest-green booklet. The crushing restriction inside his chest gives way to a profound warmth, her words dismantling the poisonous doubts Amir had spent the evening planting. He looks at her flushed face, noting the slight tremor in her lower lip and the way her shoulders rise and fall with her uneven breathing.

Lifting his right hand, his bare, injured fingers move to caress the side of her face. His thumb brushes along her cheekbone. He turns his attention back to the paper, dipping the silver quill into the dark ink pool. His hand remains steady as he carves a single, elegant line across the pristine page before tilting the book to let her read the fresh script.

My silence has always been a shield for those I protect. From this night forward, it belongs entirely to you.

Elara reads the message, a soft exhale slipping past her lips as the remaining tension drains from her frame. She moves closer, letting her head sink back onto the steady heat of his shoulder. Cael closes the booklet, setting the green volume and the silver quill on the bedside table before wrapping his uninjured arm securely around her waist. They remain locked in the embrace as the low embers of the hearth fade into total darkness, sealing their true alliance long before the first light of dawn breaks over the fractured kingdom.

OceanofPDF.com

XXII

THE GROWING RUMORS

E

Elara sits by her seat in the Council chamber.

Across from her sits Cael. Beside her is Kaera, while King Raelith and Queen Maereth occupy the larger chairs at the head of the long table. They had been called in earlier this morning for a brief discussion following the heated encounter with Omar last night. Despite the exhaustion and anxiety coiled in everyone's expression, they force their focus onto the King's words.

The core anxiety does not center on Omar. It fastens instead to King Raelith, to the striking paleness of his face, the decline of his shoulders, and the exhaustion mapping his features.

Clearing his throat, the monarch finally speaks. "I refuse to launch any military movement or take action against Omar Zahraani. I want to do absolutely nothing. I believe that starting a fight with a peace we worked many years to build for the sake of Riverath will only bring ruin." A pause follows before he continues. "We will always remain bigger. The better in our minds and our hearts."

That is all. He does not say or indicate any more. Cael's posture remains tense, his eyes fixed on his father, his expression unreadable. With the King retreating to his chambers to rest, Elara, Cael, and Kaera rise from their chairs in unison and exit. No words are exchanged, and nothing is discussed.

Kaera turns and makes her way toward the women's side of the palace to resume her duties, leaving Elara behind. Left alone in the freezing, hollow corridor, Elara wanders down the central hallway, her mind spinning with restlessness over the King's passivity. Seeking a pocket of fresh air to

clear her head, she pushes open a wooden side door and steps out onto the stone terrace stairs.

The sudden transition from the dim, suffocating halls into the bright winter courtyard forces her to blink against the blinding glare of the morning sun. Her steps halt on the top landing, a sharp gasp catching in her throat as her eyes adjust to the light.

Of all the things she expected to see within the palace grounds, the Prince of Riverath seated upon the stone steps, gently stroking a stray cat, had never crossed her mind.

The creature’s fur is black, its hazel eyes half closed beneath the morning sun, its tail curled neatly around its paws. Cael’s hand moves along its back with care, reflecting the exact tenderness he offered her the night before.

One of the guards stands nearby, his posture rigid, his gaze fixed straight ahead as though guarding something beyond the palace grounds. After a moment, he inclines his head toward the prince. “Your Highness,” he says, never taking his eyes from the path ahead, “I would advise against touching cats with black fur. They are believed to carry ill fortune.” A pause follows before he adds more quietly, “Some say worse.”

Cael lifts his gaze toward him. The guard straightens, shoulders pulling back in silent correction before falling quiet once more. Returning his attention to the cat without hesitation, Cael watches the animal press into his palm with total trust, leaning into the gentle rub of his thumb behind its ear.

A laugh threatens to escape Elara, though she restrains it behind a smile. The same prince who sits through political negotiations with unreadable composure now rests upon cold stone, absorbed in comforting a stray cat. She watches him a moment longer, realizing the sight does not surprise her nearly as much as it should.

The garden air carries the scent of soil and frost. Sunlight spills across the marble steps, catching against the pale pink fabric of her dress and the embroidered petals trailing along the skirt. She descends, mindful not to startle the animal, and lowers herself beside him, gathering the folds of her dress neatly beneath her. Cael glances toward her at once. The severity in his expression eases, softening into a calm facade as he gives a small nod in greeting.

“Good morning,” Elara says softly.

The cat lifts its head at the sound of her voice, blinking at her before pressing itself closer against Cael’s leg, as if it has already chosen where its loyalties belong.

Warmth brushes against her palm. Elara startles, looking down to find the black cat has abandoned its place beside Cael. It moves toward her instead, pressing its head against the hand resting against her dress. A low purr vibrates beneath her fingers, steady and unapologetic in its demand for attention.

A smile finds her before she can stop it. She strokes its back gently with the tips of her nails, earning another pleased sound from the creature. The cat responds by climbing one step higher to settle directly between them, positioning itself with such confidence that it appears determined to receive affection from both sides equally.

Elara lets out a chuckle. Beside her, Cael reaches forward as well, and together they begin stroking the animal’s dark fur. Their hands brush once. Neither comments on it. Eventually, their movements slow into the same rhythm, guided less by intention than by the animal stretched comfortably between them.

The residual tension that once accompanied every moment spent near him vanishes. The constant nervousness no longer tightens her shoulders. Her heart does not race. It beats with its usual steady rhythm.

The guard’s presence fades from her awareness, and the distant sounds of the gardens soften into the background. When she lifts her gaze, she finds Cael already looking at her. Then the cat decides it has exhausted the purpose of the stairs altogether. With surprising agility, it springs onto Elara’s lap and begins gathering the fabric of her skirt beneath its paws. The embroidered details stitched along the black, glittering material crumple beneath its relentless kneading, causing her to stiffen in total uncertainty.

Her life has rarely extended beyond palace walls. Animals exist as distant things, such as horses prepared for riding, birds passing overhead, or creatures admired from afar instead of held.

The cat seems unconcerned by her hesitation. She lowers her hand and strokes its back once more. The creature rewards her by pressing closer against her torso before settling across her lap. After a moment, it rolls onto its back with absolute trust, exposing its stomach and stretching its paws toward the sky. One of the cat’s claws catches against the necklace resting at her throat.

Elara stills as the small claw snags the chain. The golden pendant glints, suspended against her collarbone. She unhooks the tiny claw, her fingers lingering over her mother's necklace to press the metal against her skin, holding onto the keepsake for a simple sense of comfort.

She watches him watch the cat bat at the chain, and wonders if he remembers the previous night as clearly as she does. The cat catches the filigree once more and tugs it toward itself. Before Elara can react, another hand reaches forward.

Cael carefully frees the necklace from the creature's grasp. His fingers brush against the chain near her collarbone before he withdraws his hand, his movements focused on preventing the cat from damaging the gold.

Elara lowers her gaze. The pendant settles back against her skin while the cat stretches contentedly across her lap, entirely unaware of the significance it has interrupted.

Cael watches the scene, a smile softening the usual composure of his features as a faint color rises along his cheeks. Observing his guards drop to reveal the gentle soul beneath his silent title cements in her mind what she had admitted to him the previous night.

He is a safe place for her.

A quiet warmth rises between them, Cael's own silent amusement revealed through the subtle movement of his shoulders. How rare is it for anyone to see this side of him?

"Your Highness, the steed is ready," the vanguard announces.

They both turn toward the interruption. The armored guard steps onto the garden landing, his pale blond hair illuminated by the winter sunlight while his vivid green eyes observe the scene with disciplined composure. He leads the white steed by its leather bridle with practiced ease. The horse moves gracefully along the stone path, bringing the crisp scent of leather and sweet hay into the air. It flares its nostrils, releasing a soft, warm huff of breath that turns to mist in the morning chill before standing still at the landing.

The guard's hold remains relaxed, accustomed to an animal that requires little guidance and carries itself with confidence. The moment the steed notices Cael, that composure disappears. It pulls forward, slipping several steps ahead before the guard can restrain it. The white steed lowers its head, seeking attention with the confidence of long familiarity. Cael rises

immediately and places a hand against its forehead, stroking between its ears with calm assurance while the horse leans into the touch.

The reaction from the cat is immediate. It stiffens and arches its back on Elara’s lap, a low warning rumble vibrating from its throat. Its tail lashes once against her skirt before it fixes an unwavering stare upon the much larger intruder. Elara smooths her hand over its head in reassurance, her fingers moving gently through the dark fur. The cat relaxes, leaning into her touch while continuing to watch the horse with suspicion.

Elara watches Cael, understanding that he intends to ride beyond the palace grounds, further into the kingdom. There are valleys she has not seen, villages she knows only through reports, and forests whose edges she has glimpsed from a distance. Riverath holds more than corridors and council halls; it holds life beyond ceremony.

She rises and carefully lifts the cat from her lap, placing it upon the stone step. The creature stills there without complaint, its tail flicking against the marble. “May I come with you?”

Cael’s smile softens into thought, carrying caution rather than refusal. He turns toward the guard and signs something. The guard bows at once and steps away without question. When Cael looks back at her, he gives a single nod.

Another horse is led onto the garden path, a dark brown mare with its coat smooth and glossy and its saddle already secured. Her heart begins to race. Before she can step toward it, the guard places a foot into the stirrup and mounts in one clean motion. Settling into the saddle, he gathers the reins and waits, leaving the white steed as her remaining option. The animal shifts but does not resist her approach. Gathering her skirt, she places a foot into the stirrup and attempts to mount.

Cael steps beside her before she can try again. Without hesitation, he takes her hand. With steady strength, he guides her upward, one hand supporting hers while the other finds her waist. Once she is seated, he releases her, ensuring her balance is certain before letting go.

Cael swings into the saddle behind her, his chest coming close enough that she can feel the warmth of his frame against her back. Reaching around her to take the leather reins, his arm grazes her side in the process. The steed begins to walk, its hooves pressing against the stone path.

Elara balances herself, one hand resting near the front of the saddle as they pass through the open gates. Beyond the fortress grounds, the air feels

wider than it does within the stone walls, carrying the scent of open land. She has always preferred it. Riverath stretches out in ways she has not seen, and finally, she finds herself looking forward to discovering it.

Cael dismounts first, landing upon the earth before stepping to Elara's side and extending a hand toward her. She places her hand in his, allowing him to support her as she slides from the saddle. Her feet meet the ground. She draws a breath before smoothing the folds of her skirt and settling fully upon the solid earth.

Behind them, the guard dismounts as well and leads the dark brown horse alongside the white steed, keeping both animals calm as he guides them a respectful distance away. He remains attentive, his posture alert while the horses lower their heads near the path.

Elara lifts an arm and stretches it, easing the stiffness from her shoulders. The journey has carried them deep into the outer kingdom, far past the excursions she had known before, delivering her to a landscape entirely unfamiliar.

Beyond the market rises a broad curved bridge of pale stone, arching over a wide river fed by a waterfall whose rushing waters create a constant rhythm beneath the hum of daily life. Along the riverbank, citizens sit with fishing rods resting in their hands, steel buckets positioned beside them while they exchange words and watch the current.

Withered vegetation stretches in every direction. Frosted planters border the pathways in maintained rows, brittle petals drifting from overhanging branches whenever the wind stirs them. Near the waterfall, clusters of dead lily pads float upon calmer pools of water, their broad leaves shifting with the current.

Not far beyond stretches a sprawling common filled with rope swings hanging from sturdy oak branches, carved wooden obstacles, and low climbing frames. Children run freely beneath the afternoon sun, their laughter drifting through the air in lively bursts that rise above the murmur of the river. The sky seems different here, clearer and more expansive than the one seen from the palace towers. A crisp freshness fills the air, absent from the stone and candlelight of the palace halls, carrying the faint scents of water, woodsmoke, and distant cooking fires. This expanse offers a welcome reprieve from the heaviness of the previous evening.

"I have never seen anything like this before," Elara whispers, the words leaving her before she realizes she has spoken.

The guard responds from nearby, maintaining a respectful distance. “This is the far district of Riverath, Your Highness. Most of the kingdom’s shops are located here, while the residential areas continue further inward beyond the marketplace. That is why we have come. His Highness has been overseeing plans to expand the available space for homes and public buildings while preserving the trees, waterways, and the marketplace that already serves the people. He believes progress should never come at the cost of comfort or the safety of his citizens.”

Elara turns toward Cael, a sense of admiration settling within her heart. She glances beyond him toward the market, the pale stone bridge, the families moving freely through the streets, and the careful balance maintained between nature and expansion.

“Admirable,” she says softly, a genuine smile finding its way onto her face.

Growing chatter drifts from behind the line of shops, louder now than the sounds of the river. Four figures emerge from between the market stalls and begin making their way in their direction, two women and two men, all tall and broad-supported, their builds shaped by years of physical labor rather than military training.

One carries a wooden crate balanced against his hip, while another wipes her hands against her heavy canvas apron before breaking into a grin at the sight of the prince. Their pace quickens as they approach, recognition already brightening their expressions.

THEY WEAR fitted dark tunics and heavy gray trousers with reinforced knees and straight, practical cuts. Wide leather belts fitted with split-hide tool pouches rest at their waists, while sturdy work jackets are tied neatly around their hips.

They stop a respectful distance from Cael and bow halfway at the waist in perfect unison. “Good morning, Your Highness,” they greet before straightening once more.

One of the women steps forward. Her black hair is cut short, almost shaggy, framing bright blue eyes that immediately brighten with recognition. “Today is the official work, Your Highness?” she asks with a smile. “Are you planning on starting the house?”

Cael nods and begins to sign. His bare, injured hands move with practiced clarity, each motion deliberate. The workers watch closely,

following his words. Before he has even finished, several of them nod in agreement.

A sorrow begins to blossom inside Elara's chest.

By status, she stands closest to him. She shares his table, his carriage, and his title. Still, she remains outside this language that flows from him so naturally, watching conversations unfold without being able to step fully into them.

I must learn, she thinks. *I can ask Mister Elias or Cael.*

Cael and the workers make their way toward an open space beside one of the smaller restaurants several steps away. The guard remains near Elara as she follows, and she gradually becomes aware of footsteps aligning with hers. No one crowds her, the subtle pattern showing a sense of protection.

Ahead, tiles and stone have already been laid, the lower portion of a structure partially completed. Wooden beams rest nearby in neat stacks, while tools, measuring cords, and rolled plans occupy a long worktable beneath a canvas awning.

Cael stops near the unfinished entrance and signs again. The workers study his hands, then turn toward the structure itself, measuring distances with their eyes.

"Yes," the short-haired woman replies after a moment. "We understand. We can raise the floor and redo that section. It will be easier to create a gradual slope rather than a steep one."

Elara glances toward the blonde-haired guard beside her. Meeting her questioning look, he smiles. "This house is being built specifically for one of the shop owners here, Your Highness," he explains, gesturing toward a bakery farther down the path. A woman can be seen arranging trays outside beneath a striped awning. "There. They have a son who was born with weak bones and muscles. He relies on a wheeled chair at all times. The slope will allow him to enter and leave his home without difficulty."

Elara's gaze returns to the unfinished foundation. It is not grand. It is not a palace, a monument, or a project intended to impress visiting rulers.

It is a house. A single house, altered so one child may move through it with dignity. She looks toward Cael. He is already discussing measurements with the workers, his attention fixed upon details most rulers would never bother to notice. There is no audience gathered around him, no court waiting to applaud his generosity. Only laborers, stone, and plans spread across a table.

Elara’s gaze shifts toward the bakery. Even from a distance, she notices the steel slope installed beside the steps, and the incline appears steeper than it should be. For someone dependent upon wheels, navigating it would not be simple.

She looks back toward Cael. There is determination in the way he stands. His expression remains stern, composed for those around him, but no harshness accompanies it. His attention rests upon the measurements and the adjustments required to make the house truly useful. Kindness, she realizes, does not always arrive clothed in softness. Sometimes it stands firm and builds with its own hands.

As he listens to the workers, his focus never wavers. His attention shifts to whatever stands before him, undivided and absolute. The black silk of his shirt traces the shape of his arms and shoulders, hinting at a disciplined strength where nothing appears careless. Her gaze lifts to his face, tracking the black hair framing his features and the crown catching the sunlight whenever he turns. The sharp line of his jaw, the straight structure of his nose, the steadiness within his eyes. Every element seems placed with intention.

Cael looks like a ruler, still he stands here discussing the angle of a slope for a child he has likely never met.

Movement at the edge of her vision causes her to turn. It is one of the guards on his steed, breathing heavily. “I have finally found you, Your Highness. There is a rumor in Raeverband escalating about you. They are claiming that you have harmed the trust of your own marriage alliance. That you secretly bargained behind closed doors to turn Princess Elara over to the Zahraani forces in exchange for a peaceful border retreat.”

The words hit Elara like a physical blow. Her mind flashes back to her childhood castle, a place defined by cold manipulation and a father who treated vulnerable women like liabilities to be traded away. Amir’s voice from the previous evening rings through her thoughts, exposing her deepest fears.

“*That is his show. He shows such deliberate kindness to enhance his arrogance.”*

SHE LOOKS TOWARD CAEL, her heart hammering against her ribs as the profound safety of the previous night shatters. The memory of his arms holding her in the dark, the tenderness that had solidified her trust, dissolves. The weight of Amir's venomous warning rises within her chest, making the distance between her and her husband feel entirely unbridgeable once more.

Cael stops mid-motion, his hand freezing over the architectural plans as the report registers. His gaze shifts to find Elara's face, taking in her pale features and the defensive way her posture locks up, a horror gathering in his eyes.

He immediately mounts his steed, extending his hesitant hand toward her to help her, despite the distress churning across her features. When Elara makes no move to take his hand, he slips off his steed, gesturing for her to go first.

"No, I do not believe it," Elara says, her breath trembling.

Cael shakes his head desperately, taking only one step forward to her. He whips the green booklet and quill out of the inside of his coat's pocket, preparing to write.

Elara takes his hands, preventing him from continuing. Feeling his fingers tremble under her weak hold, she finally speaks. "I do not believe it is true, Cael." She pauses, making sure her words sink. "Let us go together and discuss."

Cael's eyes widen, almost wet with fear. Her heartbeat stills for a moment at the sight of his unshielded vulnerability. He is truly afraid that someone else will not believe him.

Effortlessly, they move and mount onto the steed, hurrying back toward the main area of Raeverband. A small, angry crowd of lower-court nobles and disgruntled citizens has already gathered. The rumor from the border passes has traveled faster than their horses. The guard beside them prepares his shield and sword.

Never once has Elara witnessed a growing group of angry people threatening their own prince, hurtling insults. A bold voice from the crowd shouts across the stone path. "You are a cheap prince with wealth and a crown. Now, you are selling a princess away like she is a mere trinket." His voice grows. "She will forever be far greater than anything you do, Silent Prince!"

Cael’s jaw clenches so tight the skin turns pale, making Elara wonder if he will break his teeth, but his arms tighten securely around the leather reins. Shifting his body, he blocks Elara’s view of the crowd, shielding her from being made a spectacle even as his own reputation is dragged through the dirt. No one of higher standing arrives, neither the king nor the queen, to defend Cael’s honor and, in accordance with Elara’s hope, his innocence.

“It is a false rumor,” the guard who informed them of the issue speaks, reining his steed in beside them. “You have no evidence to support this claim. Princess Elara remains beside Prince Cael,” he adds, sweeping his arm toward them to command the attention of the assembly.

Elara covers her ears, failing to block out the screaming crowd. She presses her forehead between Cael's shoulder blades, hiding from the vitriol. He tenses, but he does not pull away, and the noise of the crowd falters to witness her close contact with the prince they despise. Cael makes no attempt to address the accusations. Clicking his tongue, he urges his horse forward.

Elara hears the crowd shouting as they clear the square, and her arms tighten around Cael before the sound fades into the distance. She remains silent before they enter the courtyard at the palace and the horse slows for her voice to carry.

“I apologize,” Elara murmurs, turning her face away as he dismounts. “I cannot handle loud atmospheres.” She does not realize she is shaking before this moment.

Cael extends his injured hands, gathering her waist to lift her down from the saddle with absolute care.

Once her feet touch the stone path of the garden courtyard, she pulls back, her hands trembling as she smooths the fabric of her dress.

He watches her, his chest rising and falling with heavy, controlled breaths. The sting of the public insults still hangs in the air, but his focus remains anchored on her pale face and her uneven breathing. Gently, he reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out the forest-green leather booklet alongside the silver quill. His raw knuckles strain as he touches the paper, his movements rapid. He turns the book toward her, the ink still wet.

YOU DO NOT NEED to apologize to me. Your safety matters to me.

ELARA READS THE LINES, the suffocating panic in her chest easing by a fraction as she looks from the paper back to him. Cael extends his hand, his fingers waiting in the crisp air to guide her out of the courtyard. Elara places her palm in his, allowing his firm grip to lead her past the thresholds and into the warmth of the palace entrance hall. She reads the lines within his booklet, the suffocating panic in her chest easing by a fraction as she looks from the paper back to his face. Before she can find her voice to speak, the heavy timber doors at the end of the hall fracture open with a sharp thud.

The blond vanguard steps through first, his expression dark with frustration, but he quickly moves aside as Queen Maereth sweeps into the hall. Her sharp features are contorted with venomous disapproval, the silver embroidery of her gown catching the light as her quick, furious steps hit the stone floor. Behind her, several high advisors follow in a panicked cluster, their hushed, urgent whispers cutting through the quiet.

“A complete and utter humiliation,” Queen Maereth spits out, her voice cutting through the space like a blade as she stops a few paces away. “Our own citizens are shouting treason at the gates. They accuse the crown prince of trading his wife like an ornament to secure a border retreat, and you simply ride away in silence.”

Cael does not sign a response. He places his broad frame directly between his stepmother and Elara, his posture locking into an unyielding shield that blocks the Queen’s path. His jaw remains clenched, his hand tightening around the edges of the green booklet as he refuses to grant the court vipers a single trace of his internal thoughts.

“The King has fallen ill once again,” one of the elder advisors announces from the back, his voice trembling under the weight of the crisis. “The stress of the border rumor has taken a physical toll. His Majesty’s illness has flared, and the high council demands immediate answers before the outer districts fracture into rebellion.”

Cael’s arm guides Elara, moving inside the palace to escort her up the stairs toward her bedchamber. He avoids his stepmother, steering past the corridors where guards and knights gather anxiously outside King Raelith’s private quarters. Chaos stirs beneath these high walls, though it is filled with more fear than anger.

“Cael,” Elara whispers.

He looks down at her, his eyes betraying his attempt to hold his raw vulnerability back. He does not offer her anything, not even an attempt to take out his notebook and reassure her. He is afraid. Silent as he avoids her eyes. Understanding his intentions, she takes a step back, and her fingers, which she did not know had been grasping his sleeve, release their hold.

He remains in place, his eyes finally meeting hers to offer a stiff incline of his head in acknowledgment, as if he is afraid to ignore her presence. Turning down the hallway, he moves to meet King Raelith in the royal quarters, his silhouette vanishing into the dark corridor. Every guard and knight stationed by the King's threshold stiffens and bows to him, holding back their questions as the prince slips into the chamber.

Reluctantly, Elara retreats into her own bedchamber to ease her racing mind. When the heavy wooden door clicks closed behind her, the rumors of Cael trading her away to Zahraani hands steal the breath from her throat. Frustration builds beneath her ribs; every time she allows herself to trust her husband, the fragile safety melts painfully beneath the weight of malicious words.

Desperate to uncover the truth behind his hidden nature, she pulls his stolen booklet from her vanity drawer. Flipping through the initial pages, she stops at a verse written in faded black ink, some of the words blurred by time. Bringing the parchment closer to her face in the dim light, she reads the lines.

I BREAK my bone to build their falling walls,
And bleed in silence where the shadows grow.
They strike the hand that lifts them when they fall,
And curse the very blood that shields them so.
I ruin my own flesh beneath the stone,
To buy a peace their anger tears apart.
I bear the winter of this land alone,
And carve their kingdom from my breaking heart.

“OH, CAEL,” Elara whispers. This poem, she realizes, is an exact reflection of what he endures, a testament to the solitary pain he carries. She understands now how he commits to his grueling duties alone, regardless of the physical toll. He absorbs the insults of his own people and suppresses

the agony they inflict. Cael acts as though his heart is forged from the unfeeling steel of his blade, but behind his guarded eyes and the soft tremble of his lips, she sees the reality. He is entirely misunderstood.

The revelation allows the tight panic in her body to ease, prompting her to sit on the edge of the mattress. Her heart aches with an unexpected heaviness that leaves her throat tight. Slowly, her fingers turn to another page, searching for more of his hidden thoughts.

A SENTENCE PASSED *upon a binding breath,*
This life is shaped to bear a world of stones.
No passing hour defies the pull of death,
Or eases the despair within my bones.
I weep in secret when the sharp words strike,
This quiet is no shield against the knife,
It paints me as a monster, dark and like
The very sins that haunt my hollow life.
The queen's cold slashes linger on my skin,
A bitter weight upon a breaking frame,
I crave the border paths where winds begin,
To lose my duty and my royal name.

ELARA SNIFFLES, leaning back against the pillows as the uncomfortable fabric of her cream-accented white gown clings to her skin, shifting above her knees. Her eyes remain on the poem of despair, staggered by the disclosure of his stepmother physically harming him. She never expected Queen Maereth to be this monstrous. Cael carries physical scars he hides from the world, harboring a desolation that drains his will to live. He truly believes the world exists only to punish him.

She closes the booklet with a loud, echoing flap, her body shaking at the profound impact of their shared relatability.

His long black coats and outfits that do not expose a trace of his skin, his scarred hands hidden beneath thick black gloves, the high folded collars covering his neck. It all makes sense now. Every garment is an intentional armor to keep the palace from seeing how much he bleeds in secret.

Reopening the notebook, Elara traces her thumbs over the poem, feeling the texture of the dried black ink beneath her fingertips, as if the gentle

caress could somehow comfort him and ease his deep sorrow.

“Mother, what shall I do?” Elara whispers to the silent air, letting her soft words flow into the empty space of the bedchamber. “Should I trust this prince? Perhaps learn to understand him more?”

She receives no answer from the shadows, and she squeezes her eyes shut against the rising weight of her choices, the warmth of his touch on her knuckles still fighting the harsh whispers of the court outside.

Standing, she exits her bedchamber.

OceanofPDF.com

XXIII
HANDS THAT BUILD

C

Cael sits by his father's bed in the dim light.

The distant, chaotic chatter of worry, confusion, and understandable frustration rises from the council chambers below, yet there is no one left to handle the court. Not him, not King Raelith, and certainly not Kaera, whom he had witnessed fleeing into the isolation of the women's wing the moment they arrived with Elara. Queen Maereth, however, paces the stone floor with an untamed fury, casting her bitter blame upon nobody else but him.

"How did a rumor of that magnitude form, Cael? Where was your ignorant self while the outer districts were being poisoned, and why is the scandal not handled already?" Her voice fractures the lashing out at him like a whip.

Hartwell, standing by the dark corner near King Raelith, adjusts his stance, his muscles tightening as he prepares to navigate another heated encounter.

Cael does not sign an answer. He remains unmoving near the edge of the mattress, his heavy crown resting aside on the plush carpet. He glances up at his father, whose eyes are open, his pale lips parting to draw a shallow breath through his mouth. The King's features are hollow, his eyes filled with an agonizing worry for his son. He is unable to speak at length, a horrible, choking ache tightening his throat in accordance with what the physician had warned. His cup of hot tea rests on the bedside table, finished and stained with dark residue.

"Do not ignore me!" Queen Maereth yells, stepping toward him with quick, thudding steps, her jaw contorted with absolute venom.

Cael flinches, his broad shoulders tightening as he begins to rise to his feet, but Hartwell moves first. In a direct violation of court protocol, Hartwell steps into her path, placing his armored frame as a physical barrier between the furious queen and the crown prince. A knight possesses no legal right to obstruct a monarch and still, Hartwell commits the defiance anyway, keeping his posture professional while physically shielding Cael from her advance.

“Your Majesty, please,” Hartwell stammers, though he forces his tone to remain steady as he bows half his body down in an attempt to soften the insubordination. “His Majesty is gravely ill, and allowing a conflict to grow beneath this roof will only exhaust everyone else. Please, accept my advice as a matter of general concern for the throne. I apologize.”

“Hartwell, move,” her voice drops, laced with a held-back threat that promises immediate ruin for his rank. “This is a matter between me and the hideous prince. Ever since that Veyrenn princess joined this palace, problems have only plagued our house.” A sharp, patronizing scoff escapes her mouth as she glares over Hartwell’s shoulder. “It is evident that Cael is distracted by her presence. The fool loves her, and his domestic attachment is bleeding our borders dry!”

“There is nothing wrong with that,” King Raelith suddenly speaks, his voice much clearer now from the hot tea, though it still cracks beneath the strain. “She is his wife, and their bond is their personal commitment. As for the rumors,” a ragged breath leaves his mouth, “the timing is too deliberate. I assume it is an act of revenge from Amir, a calculated retaliation for our refusal to grant Omar Zahraani our military reinforcements.”

“And how exactly would you know?” Queen Maereth snaps, turning her fury back toward the bed, her eyebrows furrowing deeper. “You made a catastrophic, short-sighted decision to deny his demands, despite his threatening behavior, and now you expect all of us to stand back while the citizens revolt. You are desperate for peace and kindness, Raelith. It is pathetic. Your passivity is a disease that will destroy this kingdom before the winter ends.”

“No, it is not,” King Raelith says, closing his eyes momentarily against the blinding headache. “My father, Raedwald, was a man who ruled with strict, unbending laws, some of which were unbearable to live under. I witnessed how he would consistently insist on fighting back, launching campaigns where no neighboring kingdom wanted a truce with him, and his

aggression only bought permanent harm to his health, his land, and to me, his family.” His eyes open, fixed on his wife. “I do not want to bring that same destruction to you, and certainly not to Cael either. I cannot sit by and watch him endure such hatred. Hartwell, fetch the vanguards. I wish to make a public speech to the outer districts.”

Hartwell turns entirely, his eyes wide with surprise as his professional mask slips. “Your Majesty, you have already overwhelmed yourself by attending the summit with Omar and announcing your decision early this sunrise. It is highly recommended you rest before you attempt another move.”

Before King Raelith can protest, Cael raises his hands. *Hartwell is correct. Your position weakens the more you neglect your health, and a speech will not resolve the unrest. Let me handle Raeverband. My eyes remain on your identical ones. I will handle everything on my own. You taught me this long ago.*

His father shakes his head against the pillows, a tear slipping through the deep creases of his worn face. “No, I was wrong, Cael. You should not think you are alone. It is already suffocating me to think of how much I have forced you to endure in the dark. I cannot believe my own people, the very subjects we shield, treat my son as though he is a beast.” His voice trembles. “I cannot let you carry it alone anymore.”

Cael’s hands drop to his sides, his fingers uncurling, unable to sign and unable to think. Through all his years of silent suffering and grueling labor, he had believed he was enduring the misery alone, with no eyes in the court to care for his pain. But his father had witnessed the cruelty all along, keeping the realization locked away.

Inclining his head to his father, Cael acknowledges his kindness and wordlessly thanks him. King Raelith catches his breath and chuckles, only to break into a sudden cough. Standing instantly, Cael holds his father’s shoulders, stabilizing him against the mattress.

“I forgot I could not laugh as I wish.” King Raelith shakes his head in displeasure as his coughing subsides. “Do not thank me. You are my son before you are a prince with a title. Kaera is my daughter before her own title.” A weak smile meets his pale lips. “You two are my children whom I adore.”

Queen Maereth’s fingers crack as she curls them with mounting anger. She watches the quiet interaction and King Raelith’s kind words with bitter

resentment. “Utterly pathetic. It is no wonder he remains plagued by accusations and hatred,” she says, shaking her head. “You shield him like he is a helpless child.”

“The rumors and hatred are not either of our faults. People lack humanity sometimes,” King Raelith states firmly. “Cael is many things, but spoiled is not one of them.”

A soft knock at the door silences the growing heat in the chamber. Hartwell steps toward it and pulls the heavy wood open, revealing Elara standing on the threshold in her white gown, her mother’s golden pendant resting against her collarbone, her eyes pink from her tears. She is wearing the same black coat Cael had given her. Wearing it without shame.

“Good afternoon,” Elara whispers, inclining her head before stepping inside when Hartwell welcomes her past the guard line.

“Elara, dear,” King Raelith smiles, greeting her almost as if she is his own daughter, the warmth in his voice breaking the tension. “Come sit by Cael and me.”

Hesitating for a brief second, she walks over and sits near Cael on the edge of the mattress, leaving little distance between them. All Cael can take in is the scent of a blooming garden surrounding her, the subtle hint of red roses soothing his racing thoughts. He keeps his composure rigid, his eyes drifting toward Queen Maereth, who remains standing across from them.

Queen Maereth fixes a venomous stare on Elara, her gaze narrowing as she takes in the proximity between the young royals. She takes a deliberate step closer to the edge of the mattress, her skirts sweeping against the carpet.

“How touching,” the Queen sneers, her voice dropping into a cold, transactional register. “The princess returns to her keeper right on cue, unbothered by the fact that her name is being dragged through the mud at our very gates. Tell me, Veyrenn, does it comfort you to know you are being bartered away like an ornament to secure a border retreat?”

The accusation strikes Elara’s. Her gaze drops to the floorboards as her breath hitches. Her posture locks, her shoulders drawing inward as she remains frozen in her seat.

Cael shifts his weight, his shoulders moving to block his stepmother’s line of sight and shield Elara from the assault. He does not sign a response, but the protective finality of his stance places a barrier between them.

“That is enough, Maereth,” King Raelith says, his voice carries an unbreakable authority that silences the chamber. The tone catches the Queen off guard, freezing her in her tracks. “You will not bring your malice into this chamber, nor will you threaten my children. Elara belongs to this house, and her placement beside Cael is absolute. Leave us.”

Queen Maereth’s jaw tightens, a flash of humiliation crossing her features as she realizes she has lost her political leverage.

Realizing she has been thoroughly outmaneuvered, the Queen turns on her heel. “You will regret this blind complacency when the outer districts burn,” she spits, her furious steps pounding against the marble as she sweeps out of the bedchamber, the heavy doors slamming shut behind her.

Hartwell relaxes, releasing a long breath. He offers a respectful bow to the three of them before slipping out into the corridor to secure the threshold.

Cael turns his head toward Elara, his intense features softening into a profound, vulnerable worry as he notices her shallow breathing and her downcast eyes. He wants to comfort her, but he remains still, giving her the physical space she needs while her mind wrestles with the terrifying confusion of the rumors.

“Elara, I was just about to request your presence,” King Raelith says, his expression softening with a reassuring smile. “I want to personally assure you that the rumors are false. You are here, your place beside my son is absolute, and Riverath will never abandon you to our enemies. Not even to our closest of friends.”

Cael studies how Elara’s tension fades, noting the small smile that touches her lips. Reassured by the change, he turns to his father and signs the thought that has been gnawing at him ever since he first heard the report.

I think it is Amir who started this rumor, his bare fingers move through the silent chamber. *Omar would not move a single step to forge such a calculated lie. Amir, his seemingly trusted knight, is the one who orchestrated this. Perhaps he was ordered, but it must be him.*

King Raelith exhales. “It could surely be him. Let us avoid the political chaos for now and allow me to handle the court. As for the market districts, Hartwell and I will plan thoroughly to convince each and every one of our people of your innocence.”

It is impossible, Cael signs, his jaw tightening into a severe line. *Many hate me simply because I do not have a voice. That is different from the rumors.*

King Raelith offers them a weak but comforting nod, his fatigue catching up to him as he sinks deeper into his pillows. His eyes close under the weight of his exhaustion before he opens them to look at Cael and Elara one last time. He whispers for them to return to their chambers and rest, promising that Hartwell will guard his threshold through the evening to ensure no more disruptions fracture his recovery.

As they exit the royal bedchamber and walk down the freezing corridors of the main palace, the tension between them changes. It is no longer filled with the panic of Amir's rumors, but a mutual exhaustion that slows their steps along the cold marble. Cael stays close to her side, his bearing still protective as the echoes of the courtyard riot finally fade from their thoughts.

The moment they step inside their chamber and the heavy wooden doors click shut, sealing out the hostile court, they turn to each other. They are finally alone in the sanctuary of their own space. The silence lingers and Elara bites her lip, Cael tracking the movement with his eyes. Finally, she speaks.

"Cael, have you…" she pauses, rethinking her words before letting them out at last. "Ever imagined having a voice?"

Cael halts, his hands freezing on the collar of his black coat as her sudden curiosity catches him off guard. She shakes her head, her posture stiffening with regret. "You do not need to answer me. I apologize. It is too personal."

Cael looks at her, the fear that his silent hesitation might be mistaken for a harsh rejection gnawing at his chest. Bringing out the forest-green booklet and silver quill, a motion that has become necessary between them, he writes. Turning the page, he ensures the fresh script is readable under the low light of the lamps.

YES, I have. I imagine my voice to be like my father.

SHE TAKES A STEP CLOSER, narrowing the space between them until only a tentative distance remains. "I would imagine it to be softer," she admits

with a murmur, her gaze drifting down to the ink on the page.

Cael almost smiles at her honesty, before writing something else. He writes it on the same page, though leaving some space with his new words between the previous. He turns it again.

Why softer?

"Because your father speaks with the weight of his kingdom. Despite his gentle words, it will not be as soft as your voice," Elara admits. "But, Cael… your physical gentleness, the way you reply to those who harm you, how you care for Kaera and me, despite us not knowing each other well," she pauses. "Your voice would be the gentlest lullaby one can hear. Like a prayer."

Cael forces a stilling strength into his frame to remain steady. His cheeks redden, darkening beneath the amber light of the lamps. He sets the green booklet and quill onto the nearby table, breaking their formal routine for just a moment. He takes a step forward, closing the remaining distance between them by a fraction.

Elara's breath catches in her throat, though she does not pull away. Her eyes meet his, their earlier distance slowly closing as she remains anchored beneath his gaze. He notes the single gold fleck within the dark ring of her iris as the space between them vanishes. Her eyes flick down at the dark silk of his shirt, then lift to search his eyes once again.

For a second, Cael could swear her gaze drifted down to his lips.

Slowly, he lifts his right hand first, only to make sure Elara is not shocked by his sudden movement. Finding nothing but her eyes locked on his, his fingers adjust the collar of his coat around her neck, pulling her long hair over her shoulders, his touch feather-light against her skin.

It draws a trembling breath from Elara's mouth. She almost tilts her face toward his fingers before she takes a step back, creating a larger distance than they already had. "Thank you."

He inclines his head in a silent acknowledgment and turns, exiting the bedchamber. He steps outside and immediately presses his back against the solid wood of the door. Looking down at his fingers where they touched Elara's soft skin, he almost wheezes to catch his breath, the overwhelming proximity leaving him undone. He squeezes his eyes shut.

Taking one last breath to steady his pulse, he makes his way toward his own private chamber.

OceanofPDF.com

XXIV
LEARNING HIS LANGUAGE

E

The corridor receives her in silence.

Light filters through the tall windows above, settling against the dark paneled walls. Candles burn in their holders at measured intervals, their glow steady and dignified. The long carpet softens her approach, absorbing the rhythm of her footsteps. Her skirt follows in a restrained sweep, her dark hair falling down her back as she makes her way toward the library.

Her thoughts remain anchored to the unfinished house in Raeverband, the memory of the laid foundation still fresh in her mind. Only hours ago, she had watched Cael focus on the measurements required to protect a child he had never met. It feels impossible to reconcile that protective prince with the cold manipulator the kingdom now claims he is.

It twists something beneath her ribs, driving her to seek answers behind the heavy wooden doors ahead.

The library door stands ajar. She presses it open and steps inside, the comforting scent of paper, leather, and age surrounding her. Elias sits at one of the tables, a thick volume opened in his hands, his posture upright under the amber light of the lamps.

At the sound of the door, he looks up. Upon seeing her, he closes the book and rises, offering a respectful bow. “Good afternoon, Your Highness,” he greets with a warm smile. “Have you returned to resume your reading?”

Elara nods her head. “Yes, and I wish to learn a language.”

His expression brightens with scholarly interest. “Indeed. We have the southern scripts, the ancient texts of Veyrenn, the classical court dialects,

and—”

“The Common Sign,” she replies with a gentle, determined smile.

Elias stops mid-sentence, his mouth still parted around the unfinished word. He lowers the volume he had been holding onto the table, the movement slower than before, as though granting himself a moment to ensure he had heard her correctly.

She had made the decision on the walk here, somewhere between the second landing and the top of the staircase, while watching her fingers trail along the banister and thinking of the way Cael’s hands moved when he spoke. Her own hands merely steadied her. He conveyed entire sentences, entire emotions, without the need for a single sound.

The memory of their breathtaking closeness inside her bedchamber flashes through her mind, the warmth of his fingers pulling her hair over her shoulders making her chest tighten. She cannot remain outside his world any longer.

The silence stretches long enough for unease to settle within her. Has she overstepped? Touched on something far more significant than she intended? At last, Elias folds his hands over the closed book. “Yes,” he answers softly, a profound respect shining in his eyes. “I will find the perfect text for you.”

He turns and walks toward the upper shelves, his fingers trailing along the leather spines as he searches. Elara takes her seat across from the place where he had been sitting. The library feels different now, carrying a solemnity that borders on reverence.

Footsteps descend the wooden staircase. Elias returns carrying a thick volume, its spine worn with frequent use. He places the book upon the table before her. The letters on its cover read *The Visual Language of the Realm* in firm, elegant print.

He smiles, though there is something reflective in it. “Cael learned the hand structures from this very book,” he says. “I remember the hours we spent together over these pages, and the many mistakes he made. With each error, he would laugh rather than grow discouraged.”

Warmth gathers behind Elara’s ribs. She pictures a young boy, small enough that his feet would not reach the floor, his grey eyes serious with concentration, ink already smudged across the back of one hand from the morning’s earlier work. She imagines him seated upon a chair too large for his small frame, straining to reach the table despite the height. She sees him

peering over the edge, concentrating with determination before breaking into silent laughter at his own mistakes. As the image unfolds in her mind, she finds herself smiling.

Elias's smile widens, his pride undisguised. "He grew up with a great passion for writing and reading. He would spend hours lost in books. Especially romantic novels."

The recollection draws an immediate image to Elara's mind. She remembers the last time she saw him with a book in hand, the absorption upon his face, the quiet concentration in his eyes as he turned each page. That it had been a romantic tale renders the memory unexpectedly tender.

A laugh escapes her. "That is surprising." Curiosity stirs afterward, impossible to suppress. She leans forward, resting one hand against the edge of the dark wood. "What novels did he read?"

"Oh, many," Elias replies, settling more comfortably into his chair. "The first was *The Star-Crossed Lovers of Vaelen*. He returned to it often, as though studying its sorrow anew each time he read it. There was another, a tale about two lovers separated by an ancient vow. I confess many of the titles escape me now, but I remember my own delight in observing his interest in such bittersweet love stories."

It is difficult to reconcile the unyielding prince she observes during tense council meetings with a quiet boy seeking out stories of tragic devotion. Elara thinks of the day in the library when Elias had handed him that same red volume, and the way she had found it endearing then, only to dismiss the feeling afterward. Lowering her gaze to the book resting between them, her fingers brush across its worn cover. "You sound very fond of him," she says softly.

Elias scratches his cheek and chuckles. "I watched him grow from a determined little boy into the man he is now. It would be difficult not to be."

Something stills within Elara. She glances down at the thick book once more, tracing the embossed letters upon the cover with her thumb. The volume suddenly feels less like a lesson and more like a bridge, one that finally allows her to step into a part of Cael's world she has only ever observed from afar.

Elara opens the volume before her, her fingertips skimming the thick, rough parchment. She fixes her gaze on the orderly rows of black text and reads the gray lettering of the title.

SIGN LANGUAGE GUIDE: PART ONE.

“How did he learn?”

Elias folds his hands upon the table. “He began with the fundamentals. In the language of the hands, clarity and brevity are essential. One does not replicate every spoken word. Meaning is conveyed more directly. A sentence becomes shorter, stripped of unnecessary ornamentation to preserve the core truth of the thought.”

Elara inclines her head, absorbing each word. Though the same instruction appears within the opening pages before her, she receives it now with greater gravity. She turns several pages and pauses. An illustration of a hand greets her, its position drawn by precise guidance beneath it. *Hello.*

She studies the angle of the palm, the direction of movement, the position of the fingers. *What if I perform it incorrectly?* she wonders. *What if my attempt appears careless rather than sincere?* The scrape of a chair interrupts her thoughts.

Elias rises, carrying his volume with him. “I shall return this to its shelf,” he remarks, already making his way toward the back of the library, where the taller cases stand.

As his figure recedes among the long rows of books, Elara senses the small privacy afforded to her. She straightens in her seat and glances once toward the shelves, ensuring Elias’s attention remains occupied. Then she looks back to the page.

She lifts her hand and positions her palm exactly as the illustration instructs, adjusting her fingers with precision. Her dominant hand rises, fingers straight and joined, thumb relaxed. She places it near her temple with the palm facing outward, hesitates for a moment, then moves it forward in a graceful arc away from her head, resembling a restrained and courteous salute.

The motion is awkward. She lowers her hand and glances around, relieved that no one has witnessed it. A sigh escapes her. Then, after only a moment’s hesitation, she lifts her hand and tries again. This time the movement feels smoother, more certain.

As her hand rises to repeat the motion, the positioning pulls at the sensitive skin of her knuckles, a reminder of the stranger’s touch from the courtyard. In Veyrenn, under her father's heavy rules, the blame for such a transgression belongs to her, and the memory of King Eric’s punishments

makes her entire frame lock with terror. She braces for a blow, fearing the retribution Cael might hurl at her for the encounter.

Instead, the lingering warmth of his skin where he wiped the stranger’s trace away in the bedchamber breaks her fright.

She repeats the motion once, then again. Her fingers feel awkward at first, unaccustomed to such precision. The muscles in her hand protest the deliberate positioning, reminding her that grace requires practice. However, with each repetition, the movement grows steadier. She commits not only the position but the intention behind it to memory. She turns the page, wondering if this is how he felt at five years old, discovering the small triumph of a hand doing exactly what the mind asked of it. The next lesson presents four phrases.

Good morning. Good afternoon. Good evening. Good night.

They appear simple, and she approaches them with a disciplined attention. For *good morning*, she begins with the sign for good, resting one palm flat before her other hand descends to meet it. Her forearm rises in a fluid line, a clear representation of the sun ascending. She repeats the motion before skimming through the remaining symbols for the day's progression. The gestures for *good afternoon*, *good evening*, and *good night* follow a similar pattern, each motion shifting her hands to mirror the descent of the light beyond the horizon. She practices the sequence multiple times.

Time passes around her. Sunlight stretches across the table in pale bands, illuminating the open pages before her, while dust drifts through the air. The library remains undisturbed, save for the occasional rustle of a turning page somewhere among the shelves.

Footsteps eventually approach. She does not lower her hands. Instead, she straightens and performs the sign for *hello* as Elias rounds the corner. He pauses when he sees it. Then, without words, he lifts his own hand and returns the greeting. His smile deepens as he lowers his hand once more, carrying something beyond approval.

Elara lowers her hand. An unexpected tide of emotion floods her chest, catching her by surprise. It is only one word, only a beginning. It is the first time she has reached toward him in his own language and been met there, and the difference between that and every other gesture she has made feels immeasurable.

Elias retrieves another book, thinner than the one before her, and places it upon the table near her resting arms.

“This,” he says with the same gentle smile, “is a guide to simple sentences. It aided Cael greatly. He mastered its contents within a week.” It is a dark, muted blue, its surface unadorned save for gold foil lettering pressed across the front. *Common Sign Phrases.*

Elara accepts it. The weight feels greater than the first volume, as though it carries expectation alongside instruction. She opens it and turns several pages, her eyes moving across rows of diagrams, structured examples, and explanations beneath each illustrated hand. There is far more here than she anticipated.

The urge to learn everything all at once is overwhelming. She wants to memorize every page, every gesture, every meaning hidden within the diagrams. She knows well enough to recognize impatience when it appears. She does not need to master everything today. Carefully, she closes the second book and places it beside the first.

Elara rises from her seat and gathers both volumes against her chest. She adjusts her hold on the books, carrying with her not only the weight of the volumes but the image of a small boy who once sat in this very chair, laughing silently at his own mistakes until he no longer made them. She will begin where he began.

A rustle and the thud of an item hitting the floor sounds just down the hall, making her freeze. With it comes the sound of ragged breathing. Elara moves toward the noise, her steps measured. At the end of the hall is a door she has never flourished a glance toward until this moment.

Tightening her grip on the books, she moves forward while the sounds continue. She reaches for the handle, her posture freezing when the metal clicks to alert the presence on the opposite side. The wood flies open and a tall form rushes out, colliding into her frame. Elara rights herself and steps back, looking up to find Cael standing before her. His eyes are wide, his black hair disheveled, and his breathing uneven.

“Cael, are you…” Her words trail off when she catches sight of his hands, stained with black ink and vibrant paint, holding a single red rose.

What is wrong with him? Was it only hours ago they stood so close, tenderness and warmth closing the distance between them before her gaze wandered to places she had no intention for it to go? This looks like a

different man than the one who so gently brushed his fingers through her hair. What could cause such an abrupt change? Could his father be worse?

“You seem unwell,” she admits, her voice low.

Cael does not move as his breathing stabilizes. His eyes then move down to the books she is holding, his gaze tracking the title. His eyebrows furrow.

Elara shifts the volumes, pressing them against her hip. “I am only curious. Elias convinced me to learn it.”

Her eyes drift away to avoid his, only to find a canvas by a desk in the same chamber behind Cael. When Cael realizes where she is looking, he turns and closes the door. Elara blinks and realizes that he is hiding far more than poems within his booklet.

Cael keeps his hand pressed firmly against the solid wood behind him, his broad frame blocking the threshold like a sentinel guarding a forbidden boundary. His breathing, though stabilized, remains shallow as he downplays the presence of the single red rose in his hand. He lowers his arm, tilting the stem back toward the shadow of his thigh to conceal the velvet petals, yet the rich fragrance of the bloom has already escaped, hanging thick and undeniable in the narrow space between them.

He looks at her with an intensity that borders on desperation, his gray eyes searching her flushed face. His ink-stained fingers twitch against the dark fabric of his clothes, but he does not reach for his pockets. He does not try to bring out his new booklet, refusing to ruin the clean leather with the wet paint and charcoal darkening his palms. He simply stays rooted in place.

Elara watches his stained hands. Realizing she has touched upon a vulnerability he is desperate to guard, she takes a careful step back. She draws her dark skirts closer to her frame to grant him the physical distance his posture is silently begging for, ensuring her sign language books remain tucked away out of his sight.

“Rest well, Cael,” she whispers into the dim light of the corridor, her voice carrying a gentleness that requires no translation.

Cael remains pinned against the wood of his door, his gaze following her movement as she begins to step away. He does not budge from his position, but as she turns back toward the main hallway, he offers a single, slow incline of his head through the shadows.

The unspoken intimacy from those moments in the bedchamber lingers between them in the silence, unbreakable and hidden even as she walks away, the books pressed against her heart.

OceanofPDF.com

XXV
THE BITTER TABLE

Elara sits on her bed.

She adjusts her pillows and setting herself against the headboard to draw her back upright. Her hair spills over her shoulders and along her arms, while the guide Elias lent her rests in her hands, nowhere near completed. She stares ahead at the door of the changing room, thinking of that night Cael held her through her panic.

She wishes she knew him better, to understand the thoughts whirling behind that stone expression. She looks down at the volumes in her hands, realizing that learning his primary form of communication remains the best place to begin. Pressing her head against the wood, Elara relaxes her frame, letting her breathing find a steady rhythm. She encourages herself to dismiss the chaotic events, opening the guide to turn back to the page she left.

For an hour, she sits in the very same position. Her legs ache, eyes staring at the faded light brown paper while the scent of thick parchment sticks to her fingers. Dinner awaits downstairs, and her absence will be noticed if she delays much longer. Still, Elara cannot bring herself to close the book. She has learned far more than she anticipated. What began with a simple greeting unfolded into longer phrases, then into short exchanges. *How are you? I am fine, thank you.*

Her hands rise before her once more as she repeats a phrase she has already mastered, refining the angles and smoothing the transitions between signs. Around her, the chamber darkens, though she barely notices. Sounds drift upward from the floors below, accompanied by the aroma of food that reaches her at intervals and stirs her stomach.

She lifts her gaze toward the door. Slowly, she raises her hands and begins to sign. She points gently to her chest for *me*. Both open hands move forward before drawing back toward herself, her fingers closing for *want*. Her index finger lifts to her temple and flicks outward for *understand*. Finally, she points toward the door for *you*, holding her focus steady as though someone stands there to receive it. *Me want understand you.*

A smile touches her lips as she lowers her hands. She adapts more quickly than she expected. Flipping back through several pages, she revisits earlier lessons and traces the symbols with her eyes. Each one feels less foreign than before. Though she has spent hours studying them, she fears they might slip away if neglected. She rereads a few passages, committing them once more to memory.

Three sharp knocks strike the door. She closes the book and slides both volumes beside her, her thick skirt concealing most of them from view. “Enter,” she calls.

Annie steps inside, her dark skin luminous beneath the soft glow filtering through the windows. Bright eyes lift toward Elara with a familiar smile. She offers a respectful bow before speaking. “Forgive the interruption, Your Highness. His Majesty requests your presence for dinner before the courses are set upon the table.”

Elara nods. She gathers the books and tucks them behind her neatly arranged pillows before rising from the bed. Her hands smooth the folds of her skirt. She would have preferred another hour alone with the pages, away from expectations and formalities, where she could focus entirely upon the strange language taking shape beneath her understanding but duty calls.

“Yes. I will be down shortly,” she replies, mirroring Annie’s smile.

Annie inclines her head and withdraws from the chamber, the door closing behind.

Elara releases a breath and crosses the chamber. The moment she steps into the corridor, the familiar sounds of the castle surround her. Distant conversations drift through the halls. Servants move between chambers carrying trays and linens. Guards stand watch along the walls, their armor catching the light.

The doors to the dining chamber stand open, letting warm light spill outward across the corridor. Inside, Cael, Queen Maereth, Kaera, and even King Raelith have already taken their places around the table. Elara steps forward and takes the empty seat beside Cael. He turns toward her almost

immediately. His eyes meet hers, and a smile touches his lips, subtle enough that most would never notice it.

The simple exchange draws her thoughts back to their earlier meeting. He looks composed, bearing no resemblance to the unstable man she found in the corridor outside the library.His hands are now hidden beneath his black gloves, and the silver band around his finger shines under the light.

Next, her thoughts travel to the books hidden beneath her pillows. She considers the pages she occupied her hours pouring over, and the motions she practiced before her hands ached. She performs it for him. All for him.

Could I ask him to help me practice? Would he sit with me and correct my hands when they formed a sign incorrectly? Would he guide me through the structure of sentences that I still struggle to understand?

She hesitates. His days are already occupied by responsibilities she can scarcely imagine. Councils, meetings, matters of the kingdom, expectations that seem to follow him wherever he goes. She does not wish to become another obligation. The thought remains at the edge of her mind as servants begin placing the first course before them. Her attention drifts toward Cael as he turns to address his father. His posture straightens in an assured manner, while his shoulders relax into confidence.

His hands rise from the table. The movements that follow are fluid and precise. Each sign transitions seamlessly into the next, shaped with a certainty that comes only through years of practice. His fingers form words she does not recognize despite everything she studied throughout the afternoon. The signs arrive one after another, too quickly for her to examine individually.

His expression changes alongside them. His brows lift before lowering again. Tension touches his jaw as he emphasizes a particular point. Elara finds herself watching not only his hands but his entire face. The language exists beyond simple gestures. Every movement seems connected to the next.

Her eyes search for something familiar among the succession of signs. One word she practiced. One gesture she could confidently recognize. Occasionally, something appears vaguely familiar before disappearing again beneath the pace of the conversation.

She swallows. *I cannot memorize everything so quickly. Not even the basics,* she thinks. *How can I ever reach his level and understand him fully?*

His sentences are longer than the examples contained within her guidebooks. The structure differs from the simple exercises she repeated in her chamber. There is a refinement to the way he transitions between ideas, a natural ease that cannot be learned within a few days. It speaks of years spent shaping the language, until each sign becomes as effortless as breathing itself.

King Raelith regards him with a weak attentive focus before offering a nod. “Yes, I see why it is reasonable to do that. Though making the final decision is difficult. You may have to remind them not to proceed without confirmation.”

Cael’s hands lower to the table, and he returns his attention to the meal before him. He lifts the knife in his left hand and the fork in his right, cutting into the steaming beef. Nothing about him appears rushed, even during something as ordinary as dinner. Then, he sets his utensils on his plate, lifting his hands again to sign once again, shaking his head.

King Raelith nods, glancing toward the knights and guards standing around the dining hall, their backs pressed against the walls. “Yes, I know I am not meant to be down here. Though you must understand my motives, son.” He looks into Cael’s eyes. “Every single chance I feel better, I will not waste my time in bed. I want to spend more time outside, in my very own palace with my family. Address me as stubborn all you wish, but I will not listen.”

Cael lifts his hands in defeat and resumes his meal, his eyes looking anywhere except his father.

Elara finds herself unable to withdraw her gaze from him. Her eyes lower toward her own untouched plate, though her thoughts remain fixed upon the silent conversation that had taken place only moments ago. She gathers her composure and rises from her seat to reach for the serving dish. The scent of roasted meat and seasoning drifts upward as she lifts it. She places a modest portion of steak onto her plate before setting the dish back in its place and settling once more into her chair. Taking up her knife and fork properly, she cuts a piece and brings it to her mouth. When she tastes it, she finds it firm and chewy, though seasoned well enough that she hardly minds.

“Ah, yes. Elara, I have not seen you all day after we met in my bedchamber,” King Raelith remarks with a pleasant smile, attempting to

start a conversation with her. “Have you been busying yourself inside of the palace walls?”

She looks up, pausing mid-chew. She swallows and straightens in her seat. “Yes... I was in the library with Elias for the afternoon.” She does not mention the part where she saw Cael exiting a suspicious chamber and locking it in a panic.

Raelith nods and resumes his meal. He chews for a moment before dabbing his lips with his napkin. “Very good. There are many books in that library, and many new volumes are delivered whenever published. It is hard to get bored in that chamber.”

“It is hard.” From the corner of Elara’s eye, she notices the stillness that anchors over Cael beside her. Though he remains focused on his meal, she catches the slightest warmth rising to his cheeks. “I find the library admirable,” she continues. “The many genres for fictional and non-fictional books are spectacular.”

King Raelith smiles, turning toward Cael with unmistakable pride, the expression softening the lines around his eyes. “That is well observed. I am pleased you noticed. I trust Elias gave you a long description of the books he loves,” he laughs, before coughing to clear his throat. “That man treasures the library like his own home and treats the books like they are his family.”

Cael does not look toward his father, his gaze remaining fixed upon Elara. She wonders whether she has said something improper. The thought fades quickly, though she becomes very aware of her posture and the warmth gathering in her face.

“I love books as well,” Elara says, her shoulders losing their tension. “I prefer to spend a whole day reading than executing any other task.”

“A hobby for the weak,” the Queen interjects. “A true ruler of Riverath commands councils rather than pages. It is an investment of time I find entirely indulgent for someone of your station.”

Elara turns toward her, caught off guard not only by the interruption but by the dismissal of something she had spoken with complete sincerity. She is already expecting another complaint or an insult. No matter how many times Queen Maereth’s cruelty occurs, she will never get used to it. She will never forget the physical cruelty towards Cael. The woman reminds her so much of her father.

“This is precisely why Riverath’s progress slows,” the Queen continues, her sharp eyes boring into them. “You read books, do not involve yourself at all in our political duties and courts, and neither do you have the confidence to defend your own husband from such rumors.”

Cael lowers his gaze, his knife clicking against the porcelain as his grip tightens. His jaw clenches until the skin turns pale. He slices through his food with a severe pressure, keeping his focus pinned downward as he refuses to look at his mother.

King Raelith clears his throat when a small silence spreads across the table. “They labor for us. It is not unreasonable that they receive more than wages alone. All three of them deserve a break.”

“There is no such thing as a break when you are a part of the royal bloodline in Riverath,” Queen Maereth replies, placing her utensils upon the linen despite having only just used them. “They receive our payment and our care. That is sufficient. We do everything and so much more, and have we ever received a break? No.”

“My love, compensation is not the same as consideration,” the King answers, his tone careful and measured. He reaches for his goblet before setting it down untouched. “I have reassured them that Hartwell and I will deal with the rumors toward Cael. I insisted on it, and I want them to focus on themselves and their regular duties.”

“We elevate them, and they respond with complacency,” Queen Maereth states. “They treat our prosperity like entitlement. It is simple for Elara to become more involved.”

King Raelith reaches across the small distance between them and rests a hand upon her shoulder. The gesture lasts a single moment before she strikes it away.

“Do not touch me,” Queen Maereth snaps, her chin rising with sharp disdain. “These two do not belong under the same ceiling if they continue to slack.”

“They are ruling with balance,” Raelith’s voice remains composed, Elara notices the strain beginning to surface beneath it. “Cael completes his duties without instruction. He builds. He improves. Our son demonstrates strength despite what he must endure. Elara is with him many times, and I hear their departure every morning.” A reassuring smile meets his lips, hoping to soothe his wife. “Kaera needs rest. Her body has been cramping and she wishes for privacy.”

Queen Maereth lets out a low laugh, though there is little amusement within it. “*Your* son, perhaps. He acts entirely under your influence. There is no wonder why your children are spoiled rotten and your kingdom has never improved since they were born.”

Cael and Kaera look up at her with shock at the blatant denial that she is either of their mothers, despite Kaera being her own flesh and blood. Elara stares at her plate, recalling similar stinging words from her father the day she learned she would be marrying Cael. She can imagine the pain her husband and sister-in-law are feeling right now.

“Maereth,” the King says, his patience wavering. “Not at the dining table. It has become a habit that we forfeit every meal to discord. This is beneath us. Please, leave our children out of this.” He shakes his head weakly. “They *are* our children. No matter if they slack or are consistent, they will learn. They must be treated with respect.”

“It is not my doing,” she retorts, the words arrive quickly, as though she has repeated this argument many times before. “If they are my children too, I can talk about them as I please.”

“It is not an if, Maereth dear. They are your children too,” King Raelith says. “Perhaps the constant chaos of the council and the threats from Zahraan are leaving us heated. We must not let them overwhelm us, and truly believe we can navigate this together.”

Elara looks up at Kaera, trying to avoid Queen Maereth’s expression. The princess is not smiling. Without that warmth, Elara feels as though she has returned to her own castle.

Along the walls, the knights and guards lower their gazes to the polished floor. The tension shows even beneath their layers of silver armor and ceremonial attire. Nearby servants exchange uneasy glances before quickly returning their attention to their duties.

Elara’s fork rests in her hand. She leaves her meal untouched, allowing the warmth of the food to cool. Beside her, she feels the tension radiating from Cael. His silence carries greater force than raised voices.

“Let us finish our dinner. It is not good manners to leave delightful meals and drinks wasted,” King Raelith says, taking a sip of hot water from his cup, only to stare down into the vessel before turning to one of the servants. “Would you please bring me fresh hot tea?”

The servant smiles nervously and bows. “Of course, Your Majesty.”

Underneath the heavy linen tablecloth, away from Queen Maereth's watchful eyes, Cael lowers his left hand to gently find Elara's fingers. Their fingers do not intertwine, though the roughness of his hand presses firmly against her skin. Elara looks down toward the drape of the tablecloth over her lap, flustered by the hidden interaction.

The servant returns to the dining hall, carrying a fresh porcelain pot of steaming tea. The clatter of the porcelain against the dark wood breaks the heavy domestic silence, granting Elara an excuse to lift her eyes from her lap and regain her composure. As the steaming liquid fills King Raelith's cup, Cael slides his hand back to his own side of the table. The absence of his physical touch leaves her skin feeling cold.

Queen Maereth shifts her gaze to Elara, her eyebrows arching. "I expect to see you in the high court tomorrow morning, Princess," she commands. "Since you have spent the entire afternoon wasting your time in the library, you will find our financial and border logs far more useful to the crown than fictional tales."

Elara straightens, her pulse quickening at the direct order. Before she can stumble over a verbal response, she catches Cael's expression out of the corner of her eye. His jaw remains locked, but he gives her a soft gaze, signaling that he will stand with her when tomorrow comes.

Both King Raelith and Queen Maereth stand, making their leave, though King Raelith pauses to look back at the three of them with a warm, tired expression, smiling despite his fatigue. "Have a good night's rest, my children. Do not let the burdens of this evening steal the morning from you." With those gentle words, he follows his wife out of the dining chamber, a heavy silence settling over the table.

Kaera breathes out, rubbing her palms over her face. "Thank Riverath," she says, a sudden smile breaking across her features. "Do not worry, Elara. Cael and I will accompany you."

"Thank you." Elara's voice lowers. "Why does she not like me? I have never meant any harm, and I rarely ever speak with her. All she does is insult and mock me."

Cael's hand slides to hers beneath the table, slowly intertwining their fingers. Her breath catches at the contact, the thick fabric of his glove pressing firmly against her palm as if to absorb the lingering chill of her anxieties. She looks up at him, finding him smiling. A dimple is evident on

his right cheek, and Elara cannot help but stare, the comforting proximity melting her remaining defenses.

"I will now take my departure. Before I do, I would love some sweets," Kaera smiles excitedly, placing a few baked pastries onto a small plate before she exits, moving almost like a child who just received a reward.

Elara cannot help but laugh, her eyes landing on Cael's once more, only to realize he is already looking at her. His hand slides away from hers to pull out the forest-green booklet, a silent routine she privately hopes to outgrow as she leans his language. He turns the open page toward her.

I WILL GO OUT into Raeverband tomorrow alone. Kaera will accompany you, and you will remain safe. I have duties to handle.

"CAEL, what about the rumors? They have not been solved," Elara says, her posture tightening as she leans toward him. "I wish to accompany you."

His grip on the quill tightens with a sudden flash of anxiety, the silver tip scratching rapidly across the pristine paper before he presses the booklet flat against the table for her to read.

YOU WERE UNCOMFORTABLE LAST TIME. I cannot have you experience the same thing again. My own knights will accompany me and keep me safe.

ELARA READS THE FRANTIC INK, her jaw tightening. Instead of pulling back or allowing him to withdraw the booklet, she places her palm flat over his fresh script, her fingers covering his words. She leans in, her eyes locking onto his with an uncompromising clarity.

"I panicked because I did not understand," she says, her voice steady and hushed in the empty dining hall. "I cannot force you to bring me with you, considering that I am overwhelming to handle. It is alright if you do not want me to come along."

Cael stares at her hand resting against his booklet. Then he shakes his head, writing on the same page with his left hand. Pulling away, he gives her a chance to read.

THERE IS no part of your presence I find unwelcome. You are merely a storm to look upon, overwhelming in a grace I have no words to match.

THE RAW SINCERITY of his words catches her by surprise, leaving her flustered beneath the low glow of the chandeliers. She looks up from the booklet to meet his eyes, deep color rising along his cheeks. Her lips part, but no sound follows. Her fingers loosen from the table fabric. Looking up, she traces the soft color on his cheeks.

OceanofPDF.com

XXVI
THE UNSPOKEN LEDGER

C

Snow paces steadily beneath Cael.

He keeps his eyes fixed ahead as his knights and guards remain close beside him, moving through the main area of Raeverband. When he finalizes his spot near the market center, he pats the side of the steed's neck, indicating for the steed to stop. She obeys, and he dismounts with grace. His other companions do the same.

The townspeople do not launch an active riot or form a dangerous crowd because the wall of armored guards keeps them contained. Still, their hatred is palpable. He catches their sharp glances, their hushed murmurs, and the way the merchants deliberately look away when he passes.

Before him rests the heavy oak merchant table, where the high-tier trade masters review the kingdom's distribution logs. Cael extends his hand towards the head timber merchant, his fingers open in a silent, authoritative demand for the morning's import ledgers.

The merchant, a broad-shouldered man with a grease-stained apron and a sneering mouth, locks eyes with the prince. He does not bow. He does not lower his chin in the mandatory reverence required by the crown. Instead, he lifts the heavy leather-bound volume and shoves it across the wood, letting it slide with a loud scrape that knocks against Cael's knuckles.

"There are the numbers, *Silent Prince*," the merchant mutters. He leans forward, his hands pressing flat against the timber desk as he drops his voice to a venomous whisper. "Though I doubt a ruler who hoards our grain and barters his own Veyrenn bride to the southern savages cares much for the price of common pine."

The insult cuts through the space like a blade. Along the perimeter, several trade masters stifle low, mocking chuckles.

Before the merchant can even draw his next breath, the air fractures with the heavy, metallic clatter of armor. The blond vanguard steps forward with blinding speed, his armored shoulder driving into the space between them to force the merchant back. The knight’s gloved hand grips the hilt of his broadsword, the steel releasing a sharp, warning click as it slips an inch from its scabbard.

“Watch your tongue, trader,” the vanguard growls, his vivid green eyes flashing with fury from beneath his helm. He plants his boots against the stone, his massive shield shifting forward to form a firm wall that pins the merchant back into his stall. “One more treasonous breath against the crown prince, and your trading license will be the very least of what you forfeit today.”

Cael remains expressionless. His jaw clenches until the muscle aches, but his posture never breaks. He ignores the merchant’s trembling terror. Reaching into the inner pocket of his coat, he pulls out a silver-tipped quill, dipping it into a small well of blood-red ink he carries at his belt.

He turns the parchment pages of the ledger. His eyes track the numbers, scanning the falsified timber prices the merchant had inflated to profit off the lower-district housing crisis. Without a single sound, Cael strikes a crimson line through the fraudulent figures, carving the true, fair prices into the paper with enough force to indent the page.

He slams the book closed with a definitive snap that makes the merchant flinch. He pushes the ledger back to the edge of the wood, his storm-grey eyes fixing upon the man with a severe, chilling finality that requires no words to be understood. He has corrected the corruption, and he has done it in total silence.

He guides Snow along the broken cobblestone path, his guards forming a protective perimeter as they arrive at the edge of the lower district. Before him lie the gray stone foundations of the collapsed granary. Stacks of dark slate and bags of dry mortar line the perimeter, where the scent of earth and wet stone hangs in the air.

Cael crouches near the newly laid baseline, running his gloved fingers over the edge of the mortar to check the consistency. He presses his thumb into the drying paste, ensuring the thick binder will withstand the coming frost. The crunch of loose gravel draws his gaze upward.

An elderly laborer steps out from the construction line, his leather apron stiff with dried grey slurry and his bare hands calloused from decades of handling flint. He stops a few paces away, his shoulders stooped under the weight of his age. This man had been here the night the roof timber gave way. He had seen the prince discard his formal title to lift the crushing granite beams off the trapped scaffolding crew with his own hands.

Slowly, the old bricklayer bends at the waist, lowering his chin toward his chest in a deep bow. When he speaks, his voice is faint and rough, trembling like dry parchment under the cold wind.

“May the light of the true valley keep your path clear, Your Highness,” the old man murmurs, his eyes fixed on the stone floor. “My family is alive today because you refused to leave us under the rubble. May the heavens shield you as you have shielded the small.”

Cael freezes, his hand remaining suspended over the raw foundation. He does not bring out his booklet. Instead, he simply lowers his head in a deep nod of respect.

One of the guards, Maveric, nearly mirroring Cael’s height with his tanned skin and black hair, steps forward along the path. He maintains a disciplined posture, keeping his voice low as he delivers the report. “Your Highness, the lower-district food cellars require an immediate review. The morning reports indicate the storage shafts are failing to vent properly, threatening the salted meat reserves before the frost locks the kingdom down.”

Cael nods once, his expression flat, and they all walk there together through the narrow stone passages. The damp chill of the underground cellars rises to meet them as they descend the stairs, the air thick with the heavy scent of salt, stone, and curing wood.

An elderly woman stands by the entrance of the primary vault, wrapping a worn shawl around her thin shoulders. Her face lines with false compliance when she recognizes the prince. “Oh, Your Highness, we are deeply blessed by your sudden presence,” she murmurs, bowing her head with an exaggerated reverence. “We are merely keepers trying to preserve what little remains for our families. The cellar is at your disposal, a testament to Riverath’s fine care.”

Cael ignores her, stepping past her to inspect the low ceiling grid. His gray eyes narrow as he tracks the problem, finding a subtle flaw where the primary ventilation shafts are blocked with damp winter straw. If left

untouched, the trapped moisture will rot the entire district's food supply within weeks.

He lifts his hand, reaching up to clear the dense blockage.

"Such a shame I miss the opportunity to meet our new princess, and I suppose the chance is gone," the elderly woman says. "It is unsurprising how easy it is for a silent prince to trade his bride away." The malice in her words drops like a stone into a dark void.

Maveric steps forward, his hand dropping toward the hilt of his blade as his jaw tightens to defend his prince against the treasonous insult. Before the knight can utter a word, Cael raises his right hand, his palm open in a silent command that halts the guard in his tracks.

Cael's fingers clench so fiercely that a vein pulses over his hand and wrist, his eyes darkening as he stares at the cold stone wall. He forces the anger beneath his skin under control.

He forces his focus back to the task before him. He drives his fingers into the shaft, ripping out the rotting clump of wet straw and throwing it onto the floor. He checks the airflow one last time, ensuring the vent runs clear, before turning on his heel. He makes his way back toward the stairs without looking at her, his boots grinding against the stone as he leaves the bitter atmosphere of the cellars behind.

"Of course, a silent prince like him is angry," one of the women whispers, scoffing at her own remark from afar, though Cael's ears do not miss the words. "It is pathetic that he is still here, carrying out his duties as if it would change what he is."

The burning heat inside his chest drains away, leaving only a hollow sense of defeat. He does not turn around. He steps toward his steed and signals a halt near a narrow alleyway, offering a slow incline of his head to his men. Dismounting, he leaves the reins with Maveric and walks down the pavement alone, needing space from the watchful eyes of his guard. His steps slow before the large glass window of Olivia's boutique.

Displayed behind the clean pane, catching the pale morning light, rests a garment that draws his attention. The skirt flows downward in long, graceful folds, entirely devoid of the heavy hoops or overbearing wire structures most court ornaments demand. Across the heavy cream-colored fabric runs a delicate pattern of pale pink and white floral embroidery.

Cael stops, his gaze anchoring on the long, full sleeves tailored to taper at the wrist to keep the chill from slipping past.

The image of Elara fills his thoughts, erasing the remaining traces of the cellar confrontation.

He remembers the way she shivered on her bed, her small hands clutching her heavy gowns. He recalls the nervous way she had smoothed her fingers over the glittering fabric at dinner, her posture tightening whenever Queen Maereth would glare at her across the table. She is trapped beneath the burden of expectation, trapped inside clothes meant to make her an ornament rather than keep her safe.

His cheeks grow warm, the stern lines of his face softening as he studies the protective sleeves. He has spent enough time noticing the small things that make Elara uncomfortable to know he cannot leave the shop without it. Cael walks up the stone steps, not bothering to spare a sign or statement to his waiting guards and knights. Stepping inside the warm chamber, he bypasses the fabric racks to avoid the few people browsing the stalls to meet Olivia in the middle of the store while she finishes smiling with s customer.

Her smile fades when she finds Cael. His expression hardens, expecting another complaint, an insult, or another trade worker to abandon him after the rumors. Instead, her smile grows wider.

“Greetings, Your Highness.”

Cael lets out a slow breath, the defensive armor around his posture dropping. Because Olivia knows the language of the hands, he lifts his fingers to sign, though a shy hesitation makes his movements smaller than usual. *I want the dress by the window,* he signs, his gaze drifting toward the floor as the deep warmth on his cheeks darkens. *The white and pink floral one*.

Olivia follows his gaze back to the window display, a knowing glimmer brightening her eyes. She knows Elara’s exact measurements, having custom-fitted the emerald gown for the princess only weeks ago, and the target of the prince’s purchase is obvious. It is a relief on his part, considering he did not specifically check her exact measurements.

“An excellent choice, Your Highness,” Olivia says warmly, her hands moving through the air to return a sign of compliance before she steps over to retrieve the garment. “The lining is thick wool, and it will drape beautifully on the princess without weighing her down.”

While she folds the floral dress into a dark parchment wrap, Cael pulls a small velvet pouch of royal gold coins from his belt. He unfastens the

leather drawstring and places the formal payment onto the wooden counter.

Olivia sets the finished bundle down but does not step away. She turns to a cedar rack behind her counter, reaching up to pull down a thick, heavy woolen coat dyed in a matching shade of pale rose, lined with soft winter fleece.

“Take this as well, Cael,” she says, dropping his formal title for a brief moment of genuine care. “I saw the princess walking outside by the tailoring shop yesterday wearing your large traveling coat. She looked quite swallowed by it. She needs a proper winter layer of her own to keep her warm against the frost.”

Cael’s fingers smooth over the thick lining, and the thought of Elara wrapped in it brings a softness to his expression. He can already imagine her discovering the coat in her bedchamber, sheltered from the winter cold. He lifts his hands again. *Thank you once again, Olivia.*

He does not head straight back to the palace. There are still storage manifests to review, checkpoint lines to verify, and distribution logs to sign before the high court convenes for the winter session. He keeps his gaze ahead, forcing his thoughts away from the warmth of the tailoring shop and back into the strict alignment of his responsibilities.

His mind drifts to the way Elara had looked at him over the dinner table when his fingers found hers beneath the heavy tablecloth. She had been so easily flustered, her green eyes wide with a quiet, breathless curiosity that shattered her usual royal defenses. He remembers the soft color that had risen to her cheeks when she admitted she imagined his voice to be softer than his father’s commanding tone.

Surrounded by a kingdom that scorns his existence, the memory of her closeness protects him like a shield against the elements, a soft melody playing beneath the harsh reality of his station. Maveric signals a turn toward the eastern warehouse block, drawing Cael out of the recollection. He dismounts near the iron-ringed cargo doors.

The duty here is meticulous and draining. Cael stands before the district overseers, reviewing the written manifests for the incoming coal and firewood shipments meant to heat the lower-district shelters. The overseers hand him the ledgers with stiff, reluctant movements, their lips tightly drawn as they refuse to meet his eyes. They do not offer a single word of greeting, keeping their remarks brief and administrative to avoid crossing the line into open defiance. Cael scans the pages, his silver-tipped quill

carving corrections into the margins wherever the distribution lines appear uneven or falsified to favor the wealthy estates.

By the time Cael finishes and mounts Snow again, the fading daylight has flattened into a dull, leaden grey. The wind picks up, whistling through the narrow stone corridors of the lower commercial streets, carrying the distant, growing hum of an unsettled crowd. He notices the shift in the air before his vanguards can call it out.

The hostile murmurs that had been rippling through the outer edges of the market all day are suddenly converging, condensing into a sharp, focused aggression along the main thoroughfare. The poisonous border rumors have finally found a breaking point among a disgruntled faction of lower-court sympathizers and trade agitators.

They emerge from the shadows of the arched stone alleyways, a coordinated group of broad-shouldered men carrying heavy iron utility bars and crude wooden staves. They do not scatter when the royal horses approach. Instead, they form a solid, menacing line directly across the cobblestone path, their features twisted with a dark, unyielding malice.

“There he is!” a harsh, booming voice shouts from the center of the blockade, drawing several more figures from the surrounding storefronts. “The silent coward who sells our princess away to foreign vanguards! Why should we bow to a mute monster who hoards our safety behind his palace walls?”

The aggressors step forward in unison, their iron bars scraping against the cobblestones as they prepare to launch a physical assault on the prince. Before the first weapon can even rise, the air fractures with the thunderous, deafening clatter of steel.

“Hold the line!” Maveric roars, his voice carrying the disciplined authority of a veteran knight as he drives his horse forward.

The five royal guards move with a blinding precision, their steeds rearing as they wheel their massive frames into a solid, impenetrable wall of armor around Cael. The three knights draw their broadswords in a single, fluid motion, the steel releasing a sharp, terrifying ring, while the two guards shift their massive iron-bound shields forward, locking them edge-to-edge into a defensive barrier.

An aggressive trade master launches himself forward, swinging a heavy timber stave at the guard line. A knight deflects the blow with a resounding,

metallic smash of his shield, the force of the impact sending the weapon splintering onto the stone and knocking the back into the dirt.

The rest of the guards ground their boots and steeds against the cobblestones, using their sheer physical weight to shove the surging crowd back into the market stalls, keeping them contained within the iron wall of their armor.

Cael remains centered inside the protective ring as he grips the leather reins. He does not attempt to stand his ground or correct their corruption. The terrifying realization of what this growing violence means, and the necessity of keeping his secret gifts for Elara safe from their destructive hands, drives his immediate response.

He cannot let them ruin the fragile trust he has built with his princess. His hand checks the parcel secured against the saddle before he urges Snow forward.

With a click of his tongue, he commands his steed to break away from the center of the fray. The white animal leaps forward, its hooves striking the cobblestones with a furious, rhythmic thunder as Cael rushes past the edge of the blocked alleyway, leaving his guards to handle the containment.

Maveric and the knights maintain their unbreakable perimeter, moving their horses back in an orderly, defensive retreat to cover his path as they clear the commercial rows. Cael rides hard through the freezing winter fog, his chest rising and falling with unstable breaths as the lower district vanishes behind him. He speeds past the outer warehouse block and bursts through the massive iron gates of the upper palace courtyard, the heavy doors slamming shut behind his arrival to seal out the chaos of the kingdom.

The warm glow filtering from Elara’s balcony windows illuminates the falling afternoon darkness, confirming she is safe inside her quarters, removed from the chaos of the thoroughfare.

He guides his steed behind the palace walls, far from the main gates where the loud alarms still echo from the outer courtyard. There is no guard or knight present to take the animal.

Cael secures Snow within the stone stables, where the scent of other horses and dry hay hangs in the quiet air, and the candles of the iron chandelier above fade, yielding to the encroaching night. Only a few horses rest with their eyes closed, while others stand, looking across the dim space.

When he is certain of the steed's security, he turns and exits the large structure, making his way into the palace. The interior corridors welcome him. Moving with a cautious tread to avoid detection as the palace grows darker, indicating each soul has retired for the night, he makes his way down the hallway until he stands before the wooden door of Elara's bedchamber.

He halts for a second, his breathing finally stabilizing in the shadows. Feeling exhausted and suddenly hesitant, he refrains from knocking or seeking her presence. Instead, he bends down and places the parchment wrap containing the floral dress and the thick rose coat flat against the stone floor beside her threshold, ensuring she will perceive it the moment she opens her door.

He brushes his fingers gently against the wood. Sliding his hand back to his side, he leaves the garments behind. Turning away, he retreats down the corridor toward the isolation of his own private chamber. Each step forward, he makes his way up the grand staircase leaves him more exhausted, as though a heavy burden holds him down, an entire mountain of pain.

Once inside the sanctuary of his dark chamber, the doors click shut, sealing him away from the demands of the crown. The composure he forced himself to maintain all afternoon cracks. A wave of pain tightens inside his chest, the raw pressure behind his ribs building until he fears he will weep from the agony within his heart.

Reclining upon the chaise, his crown hits the floor with a loud clatter as he pushes his gloves off, tossing them aside. He draws a single breath, allowing the hope of meeting her soon to remain hidden within the silence of his quarters.

OceanofPDF.com

XXVII

SEARING GRAY DUSK

E

The dress fits perfectly on Elara's frame.

The smooth fabric of the long sleeves warms her arms and grants them comfort. The garment is remarkably modest for the winter, with its beautiful, seamless blend of white and pink fabric, decorated with floral designs stitched neatly around the bodice and skirt. Elara holds back a smile, wondering who would grant her such a gift.

Glancing at Annie, who continues to replace the bedding with a clean, crisp set, she watches her lift the folded linens. "It fits perfectly, and it is quite easy to move in," Elara admits, testing the weight of the sleeves.

"It really is, Your Highness. The pink rose coat is also the perfect material for such breezy weather." She points toward the corner of the bed, where she had positioned the outerwear earlier to give Elara the chance to open the parcel herself. "The dress looks very splendid on you."

"Thank you, really," Elara says with a blush at the warmth of the compliment. Turning to her reflection in the vanity mirror, she moves in a slow rhythm from left to right to test the graceful sway of the skirt. "I wonder who could have left it," she says, the words falling more to herself than to her companion.

"It is most probably a gift from a courtier, or perhaps it is Olivia," Annie suggests, smoothing her hands down the simple, dark fabric of her own attire. "She makes most of the clothes for the royal family, and even the guards and knights. In fact, this casual outfit for my role was made by her. She is known to be very kind to help the palace with their garments."

Elara's expression softens, the memory of Olivia and her warmth returning to her thoughts, alongside the green silk dress she received with

the help of Cael. “Her dresses are lovely. Though, if the palace truly adores her work and designs, how come they do not invite her here to work for them personally?” she asks, recalling how in Veyrenn, no matter the service her father wanted to receive, that specific craftsman was forced to work for him, and only him, bound only to the crown’s command.

“I am not sure, but a guard from the women’s wing mentioned that Olivia wishes to keep her own small shop while helping the people in the palace,” Annie inclines her head, her statement becoming more confident. “His Majesty respected her wishes.”

Elara takes her words in, digesting the rare respect shown to a common trade worker in this realm. “That is kind.”

“Extremely.” Finally setting the new sheets, Annie folds the used ones over her arm. “I will take my leave now, Your Highness.” She bows by the door and exits.

When the door clicks shut, Elara moves toward the corner of the bed to lift the heavy rose coat. As her fingers gather the thick winter fleece, her gaze anchors on the dark parchment wrap resting on the mattress. Along the edge of the crisp paper lies a faint, distinct smudge of black ink mixed with a trace of dark, fresh paint.

Elara freezes, her thumb hovering just above the mark. The click of the hidden chamber door, the ruffled black hair, and the broad frame of the prince blocking her view all rush back into her mind. Most of all, the memory centers on his hands, stained with those exact shades of charcoal ink and wet paint, holding a single red rose.

Could he have left this at my door? She questions quietly, her pulse quickens at the possibility. It makes sense. Olivia knew her precise measurements from the emerald gown, but Cael was the one who had watched her shiver in her bedchamber, noticing how she clutched the uncomfortable fabric of her formal wear. He was the one who always ensured she was shielded from the elements. Knowing he endured the bitter market district during the late hours of the previous night brings worry to her thoughts.

Smoothing the beautiful white and pink folds of her new skirt, she lifts the heavy rose coat and slips it over her shoulders. The thick material embraces her with warmth, making her feel protected. Feeling more ready for the day than she has since arriving in Riverath, Elara steps into the hall.

She has only made her way past the first landing of the grand staircase when a hurried rustle of fabric approaches from the intersecting hallway.

Kaera joins her, the customary brightness gone from her face. Her expression holds a tense, heavy weight that signals trouble. Looking down at the white and pink floral dress, a smile touches her lips. “You look beautiful, Elara,” she says, placing a hand on Elara’s arm to guide her down the remaining steps toward the lower levels of the fortress rather than the dining hall. “But we must hurry. Father has ordered the high court doors opened, and he requests your presence at the central table.”

Elara halts. “The high court? Has something happened with the ledger logs? Why is my presence needed?”

“The border rumors have broken past the market gates,” Kaera explains, her grip tightening on Elara’s sleeve as she increases her pace down the stone corridor. “The trade masters and lower nobles are demanding an immediate audience. My father is forcing himself to preside over the assembly to settle the unrest himself, and he believes your physical presence is the only way to silence their accusations.” She swallows her rush of emotions before she continues. “He will explain everything once we are seated.”

They reach the massive, iron-reinforced double doors of the council chamber, where two vanguards stand at attention, their silver armor gleaming under the torches. The guards bow deeply to both princesses, their gauntlets clattering against their shields as they pull the heavy wood open, allowing the chaotic, angry roar of the gathering court to spill out into the hallway.

Elara stills when all eyes land on her frame. Cael stands from his seat, his gaze lighting up at the sight of her garment. He closes the distance between them, extending his hand to guide her toward the table, his touch offering an anchor amidst the frost of the gathering.

“Come closer, my dear child,” King Raelith says, his voice soft and trembling with paternal warmth as he lifts a frail hand to motion her toward the central dais. He leans forward, his thin fingers resting upon the stone armrests to steady his breathing, though a cough catches in his throat before he manages a tender, reassuring smile for her across the assembly.

Queen Maereth sits beside him, her cold gaze tracking the soft floral gown and the rose coat enveloping the Veyrenn bride, her lips drawn into a thin line of disapproval.

Elara steps forward, slipping her hand into Cael's grip as they walk together toward King Raelith. The demanding whispers resume with each step they take toward the head of the long mahogany table, the weight of the court's scrutiny pressing on her from all sides.

The High Chancellor steps to the center of the chamber, unrolling a heavy parchment scroll stamped with the seal of the trade districts. "Your Majesty, the outer districts remain in severe friction. The trade masters demand immediate clarification regarding the border reports from Zahraan, and whether our alliance with Veyrenn is being compromised to secure the southern trade lines."

King Raelith dabs his pale lips with a linen cloth, forcing a steady composure into his frail frame as he addresses the chamber. "The alliance is absolute," the King states, his voice carrying an unmasked protectiveness that rings through the hall. "Princess Elara stands before you not as a piece of political leverage, but as a daughter of this house. The rumors circulating past our gates are malicious fabrications designed to fracture our unity, and Riverath will not be swayed by the venom of those who spread them."

A burdensome silence settles over the assembly, but the peace fractures almost immediately.

A prominent, wealthy trade master from the back rows step forward, his fine silk robes sweeping against the floorboards as he dares to challenge the throne. "With respect, Your Majesty," his tone laced with a dark malice as he points a finger toward the table. "The common people do not see an alliance. They see the marketplace rioting. They see the crown prince hiding the princess away inside these walls while the outer districts face the threat of a Zahraani infiltration! If the princess is truly cherished, why must she be shielded from her own subjects?"

The court vipers to break into a frenzy of agreement. King Raelith attempts to speak, but a violent fit of coughing seizes his chest, forcing him back against the throne as his breath fails him. Elara feels the tension radiating from Cael. He sits rigidly, his gloved hands tightening into fists flat against the table because he has no voice to strike back against their treasonous words.

King Raelith raises his hand, waving off the court physician who rushes forward with a vial of tonic. He forces his posture upright, his expression hardening as he stares directly at the defiant trade master. "You speak of the market like you represent the hearts of our citizens, yet you only echo the

panic born of border shadows," King Raelith says, his voice raspy but carrying the finality of the crown. "If my people require reassurance, they shall receive it from the throne itself. I shall address the outer districts publicly for the afternoon from the palace square. The princess and the crown prince will stand beside me, and the kingdom will see the truth of our alliance with their own eyes."

King Raelith looks over at Elara, his eyes softening. "Until then, this ledger log dispute is closed. You may return to your quarters." His eyes land on Cael, his smile remaining. "We must prepare our words for the late afternoon and ensure the people are prepared."

The high court table clears and the murmuring nobles retreat to the corridors. Cael matches her movement, walking at her side through the heavy halls to escort her to the security of her threshold. They walk in a shared silence, his presence a shield against the eyes of the remaining court.

When they reach her doors, Elara enters the solitude of her space, not wanting to look back. She paces the stone floor, her fingers tracing the edge of the vanity while her anxiety mounts. She lacked training for this world. In Veyrenn, her father kept her isolated from the ruthless mechanics of statecraft, leaving her unequipped to navigate the volatile currents of a kingdom on the brink of revolt.

She knows she cannot remain a mere ornament when they step onto the public platform at morning. Forcing her posture straight, she begins a different kind of preparation. She practices speaking aloud to the empty space, her voice trembling as she shapes the raw, honest words she will need to defend the prince, forcing her tone to find its footing for the first time in her life.

"I am Elara and I declare," she begins, then pauses, realizing how unnatural the words sound in her mouth. Shaking her head, she tries again. "Greetings, I am Elara Everwyn. The rumors are false, and Cael treats me kindly." She pauses again, becoming frustrated as she stares at her reflection.

"Greetings. I am Elara Everwyn, you may hear of me as the newly arrived princess from Veyrenn," she continues. "Cael Everhart, the Prince of Riverath and known as my…" she hesitates, the weight of the contract crashing down on her. "Husband."

She turns away from her reflection, her breathing shallow. A low knock on the heavy door makes her jump as it fractures the tense silence of her

room. It is not the rapid, official tap of a vanguard or Annie's light touch. Elara clears her throat, forcing a calm composure as she smooths the white and pink folds of her skirt. "Enter," she calls out, her voice strained.

The heavy door pulls open to reveal Cael standing on the threshold. His eyes track her with an intense focus. Elara takes an involuntary step back and bumps into the vanity, her lips parting.

"Cael," she whispers.

Cael steps inside the sanctuary, closing the door behind him to seal out the distant, mounting roar of the gathering crowd below the balcony. His brow furrows with worry, his analytical gaze assessing her posture.

He walks closer, reaching into his tunic, he pulls out the forest-green leather booklet and silver quill. He quickly shapes a message and turns the book toward her, holding it steady beneath the morning sunlight for her to read.

YOU ARE safe within these walls, and I will be right beside you out there.

HIS WORDS DO NOT ERASE her fear, but they remind her that she will not be facing the crowd alone.

"No," Elara shakes her head, her breath trembling. "I have no experience with public speaking, and the pressure of these rumors overwhelms me. I am terrified I will fail. I must speak with King Raelith to ensure I remain silent during the address."

Glancing up at Cael, she studies him. He remains unreadable like usual, though something sad flashes briefly through his features.

Elara hesitates, then clears her throat. "I apologize," she says, looking down to pick at her thumbnails. "I know you suffer as well. You were forced into this alliance the same as me. I watch you when we enter the village. You execute everything alone." Her eyelashes flutter as she meets his eyes. "You perform so much, while I fail to achieve anything a princess should complete. I do not even know the methods, and now, I must face a crowd of angry people to calm their fears. I will fail."

Elara's throat tightens. She breaks eye contact with Cael and stares at the ground while her father's voice echoes within her mind, calling her worthless and demanding she remain a pretty ornament. She is the creature of his design, a useless princess locked inside her quarters and crying to a

mother long gone. Every person she ever allowed herself to trust has departed from her life.

Cael slips off his black gloves, placing the silver band onto his bare finger. "A testament to his vow, even when there is no one else to witness it. Elara's eyes widen with confusion. Taking another step closer, Cael brings both of his warm, bare, and ink-stained palms to her cheeks. His thumbs brush her cheekbones. Delicately. As if she were the fragile petal of the rose he held yesterday.

"Cael," is all she can utter, as if his name is the only familiar word her reeling mind can latch onto.

He continues to caress her soft skin, the booklet and quill useless in the inner pocket of his coat. Elara cannot help but lean into the gentle touch of affection she has craved all of her life.

Cael leans down his forehead to rest it against hers. She closes her eyes, focusing entirely on the rhythm of his breathing and the soothing pressure of his ink-stained palms holding her cheeks.

She swallows the rest of her unsaid words and steps even closer, her cheek nearly pressing against his shoulder. Cael tilts his head to watch her, only one of his hands remaining on her cheek while the other rests on her arm, indicating she can press closer.

Elara does without thinking, her eyes meeting his. He holds her there in the gentle stasis for a long moment. "You have shown me kindness like no other," she admits, not wanting to regret the words her heart breaks to speak. "You have shown the strength you hold from your own people." She recalls his poems but forces them aside. "Why?"

Cael stills for a moment before his hand leaves her cheek, though the other wraps around her shoulder. Bringing his booklet out again, he writes while keeping a hold on her. She reads the words as he writes them.

YOU HAVE NOT INSULTED ME. You have not stabbed another blade into my bleeding heart. It felt as if you were gently removing them. Removing the words people claim I am for something that is not my fault.

ELARA'S HEART aches at his raw admission. "It was never a bother to me that you are mute. It has been confusing, but I never thought that you are less than anyone else."

Cael stares at her for a long moment, his gray eyes shining with an intensity that grounds her racing thoughts. He slides the green booklet back into the inner pocket of his coat, letting it rest against his chest as his hand lingers over the fabric.

His gaze drifts toward her collar. Stepping forward, he reaches out to let his fingers brush against the coat, adjusting the heavy lapels to close the gap against her throat. The topmost button secures beneath his touch, ensuring the thick material wraps around her frame to lock out the frost. A trace of color rises to Cael's cheeks.

Cael steps back, a trace of color rising to his cheeks. Elara rests her fingertips over the newly secured button, her lips parting. Three sharp knocks strike the heavy wooden door, and they jump apart.

Maveric's disciplined voice carries into the chamber. "Your Highnesses, His Majesty is making his way to the public staging balcony and requests your presence."

Elara draws the fabric even closer. Cael gives her a reassuring incline of his head, his fingers finding his black gloves to pull them back over his hands and adjusts the ring over.



THE AFTERNOON SHADOWS stretch long and lean over the marketplace of Raeverband, casting the central square into a chilly, amber gloom as the sun dips beneath the valley ridge. The main area is far more crowded than it has ever been, a dense sea of heavy wool cloaks, mud-stained aprons, and pale, faces filling every courtyard tier up to the grand stone steps.

Elara sits behind Cael on his steed, her fingers buried deep within the sleeves of her pink coat to insulate her arms from the biting wind. She leans closer to his frame, allowing the distinct scent of cedarwood and ink to offer her comfort in this harsh land.

Low, venomous murmurs ripple through the perimeter the moment the steed enters the lower terrace, a wave of bitter glances and sharp, hissing

scoffs rising from the market masters. No one dares to form an active barrier or launch a physical strike, yet the open hatred of the populace hangs like dust in the cold air, a palpable malice directed at the young prince guiding the reins.

The atmosphere alters when King Raelith and Queen Maereth arrive at the upper landing. Accompanied by the heavy, rhythmic stomp of an elite royal detachment, the monarchs step into the fading light. The roaring discord of the trade masters dies in stillness, replaced by a calculated, unified reverence.

Through Elara’s eyes, the brutal injustice of the shift is agonizing to behold. She feels the sudden, rigid strain that anchors over Cael’s body, the muscles of his broad back locking as he absorbs the staggering contrast in their treatment. The silent realization that his people grant his frail father immediate, unquestioned honor while offering him nothing but vitriol and scorn cuts through his armor. Even without his booklet, the hurt vibrating through his frame is clear to her, an enduring agony that makes her own chest tighten with anger.

They slip off their steeds at the base of the steps. More than twenty heavily armored vanguards and knights form a rigid, interlocking circle around the royal family, their silver chest plates and iron-bound shields creating an impenetrable wall that isolates them from the front rows of the populace.

King Raelith steps to the center of the elevated platform, his fingers gripping the edge of the balustrade to steady his failing balance. He strains to remain steady, his pale chest rising and falling beneath his heavy velvet robes, but he waves the advisor back with a disciplined movement of his hand. Despite it all, Hartwell remains close to him.

The silence over the plaza deepens as the King steps to the edge of the stone balustrade. Beside him, Queen Maereth stands in a frozen state of pure anger, her calculating features locking into a sharp, critical mask at his unprompted choice to address the crowd without her counsel.

“People of Riverath,” King Raelith says. “You stand before this throne demanding answers for the friction at our gates, yet your anger is guided by shadows. The rumors circulating through your markets are not truths; they are weapons forged by our true enemy.” He pauses, allowing a cough to catch in his throat before he forces his voice to remain authoritative. “The tension along our southern boundaries is not a product of internal betrayal,

nor is it a careless trade involving our newly arrived princess. It is a calculated campaign of infiltration by Zahraan. The southern kingdom seeks to fracture our unity from within, turning your fears into a weapon to weaken our borders before they ever strike. Our alliance with Veyrenn is not a cowardly bargain; it is the vital shield that keeps their expansion at bay."

He forces his posture straighter, the lines of his pale face tightening as he shifts his gaze toward Cael, offering a nod of public trust that demands the entire square to witness his absolute confidence in the prince.

"You look upon my son and demand that he speak to earn your allegiance," the King continues, his voice rising with an unyielding paternal intensity that cuts through the chilly air. "For years, you have treated his silence as a flaw, an act of cowardice, or a reason for your bitter scorn. You whisper venomous words from the safety of your stalls, yet Cael is the one who has spent his youth bleeding for your preservation. He is the one physically building your shelters, inspecting your storehouses, and ensuring your survival through the winter frost." He pauses. "His silence is a trait of his birth, not a shield for cowardice or a failure of leadership. You weaponize his condition because you lack the depth to understand his worth. I command you to grant him the trust and reverence he earned through years of sacrifice, rather than demanding empty declarations from a prince who protects this kingdom with actual labor."

He pauses to draw a breath. "And you weave shameful falsehoods around Princess Elara, claiming she is a bartered prisoner hidden away to conceal a dark transaction and that Cael is the man who causes it," King Raelith declares, his eyes flashing with a severe finality. "She stands beneath this roof as a daughter of the realm, granted the protection and honor of the crown. Our alliance with Veyrenn is built on mutual dignity, not a cowardly exchange to pacify our enemies. Those who claim otherwise do not speak for the safety of Riverath; they merely carry the venom of Zahraan into our home to destroy us from within."

Near the end of his address, as the King's voice strains against a sudden, harsh cough. A trade master in the front row snaps. His features twist with bitterness as he breaks the silence of the square.

"He is still pathetic!" the agitator bellows, pointing a calloused finger at Cael. "The silent coward sits behind his wealthy armor while we starve on rumors. The King is horrible for defending his silence, treating a mute

monster like a prince while the valley rots. Nowhere in the future will he help us or guide us."

People around him gasp at his boldness, especially in the presence of King Raelith. A vanguard steps forward instantly with blinding speed, his gloved hand dropping to his hilt as his armored shoulder drives into the space to suppress the shout.

Elara's entire body hardens. She steps past the perimeter of shields, her fingers gripping her coat tightly across her chest.

"Is this how you treat a prince who risks his life daily, enduring the baring frost just to care for citizens he does not personally know?" Elara's voice starts soft, slowly increasing until it rings across the square. Trembling, she takes a deep breath and presses forward. "You insult your king for the rare grace of protecting his son, an affection that is scarce within royal walls. He has guided Cael's steps, and the prince's kindness has only grown. You select a natural imperfection to weaponize as shame, as though your cruelty benefits the realm."

The man only continues, his features twisting with a darker malice. "We have another royal who disrespects her own subjects. We were already set for failure when a princess like you from an oppressive kingdom decided to join a realm known for its freedom. This is—"

Cael's eyes flash toward Elara, and something in his expression breaks.

Before the man can finish, a flash of steel slices the air. Cael draws his blade with fluid precision, slipping the sharp tip of the steel directly against the man's skin, carving a small scar. Drops of blood drip down his neck.

Everyone gasps, stepping backward as the trade master stares down at the blood dripping down his shirt with wide eyes.

Elara stands frozen, her gaze dropping to the dark gray coat fabric bunched tightly in her fists as her pulse hammers. She does not look away from the gleaming edge of the metal or the single bead of red staining the front of the man's shirt.

Cael does not lower his arm, his gloved fingers holding the hilt with unmoving control.

King Raelith steps forward, his expression severe gravity as he places a firm hand onto Cael's shoulder, silently commanding his son to stand back.

Cael releases a slow breath through his nose, his grip on the hilt loosening just enough for the blade to tilt downward. He registers his

father’s touch with a short, tilt of his chin, sheathing the weapon in one smooth motion before stepping behind the wall of guards.

A wave of murmurs rises from the gathering, the fragile composure of the plaza fracturing under the sight of blood on the stone. Several onlookers point and shout in a panicked frenzy, while others in the back rows push forward to see the wound, ignoring the warning lines of the guards. King Raelith attempts to raise his hand to address the disorderly movement of his people.

A distinct whistling hiss slices through the afternoon air.

From the high, shadowed windows of the trade arcade across the square, two heavy black-iron canisters fly through the twilight, striking the stone balustrade with a loud, metallic clatter. Their lit fuses spark for a second before the canisters detonate in a blinding flash of orange fire and thick sulfur smoke. The shockwave shatters the stone railing, sending jagged shrapnel through the air and throwing the vanguards against the ground.

Cael moves with desperate precision. He does not look toward the fire or his guards. Throwing his frame over Elara, he locks her against his chest, using the wool folds of his dark gray coat to shield her from the blast and falling debris.

Knights shout. Fleeing people scream. Smoke clogs the air, filling Elara's lungs. Guards protect the royal family, but Elara focuses on the man shielding her body with his own.

By the corner of Elara’s eyes as the smoke fades, she can make out a familiar tall knight. His hair black, skin sun-kissed with a black cloth draped over his mouth. He is far in the distance, hazel eyes deep. Suddenly, she coughs and blinks her eyes rapidly, burning from the heavy material.

Cael cradles her face, his gaze searching her for injuries. Seeing none, he pulls her to her feet, guiding her frame to the guards who rush the family back toward the castle. Glancing over her shoulder to ensure Cael remains close behind her, her eyes land on another figure. Standing in the middle of the chaos, his gaze fixed on her retreating form, is the knight from the garden, black fabric draped over his mouth.

“Cael,” she reaches for him. “Cael, I saw—”

She cuts off when Cael shakes his head, pressing his palm against her lower back to urge her to run.

Guards sprint across the courtyard, barking orders to secure the perimeter while helping the scattered citizens away from the smoke. Medics

tend to the fallen on the stone steps, binding wounds and clearing the pathways. Once the initial panic subsides and the courtyard achieves a guarded stability, the focus shifts inside the secure hall.

“Your Majesty! Your Highness!” Two knights rush toward them, breathing heavily. “The border guards are injured, though not dead. They are weak, unable to support themselves.”

The other knight assists his words, the details of the breach unfolding. “Someone forced a passage past the gates prior to the attack. We lack certainty regarding the identity, but the remaining guards and knights will search Riverath to the limits of our strength.” She clears her throat. “No physical evidence remains behind to identify who penetrated the perimeter and harmed the guards.”

Far behind, knights assist the injured guards by using their own strength as support. A few carry the fallen, while others use the steeds to bear the wounded. Each one has crimson dripping off their shield and clothes onto the fresh, polished green grass.

“Let us return,” Kaera says, her arms holding King Raelith with desperation while he continues coughing, gasping for air. Tears stream down her cheeks. “Father, please.”

Queen Maereth presses her hands onto his shoulders, her concern a vulnerable display. “Dear?” Her voice trembles, her eyes widening while his face turns red. “Someone escort us back!”

The horses remain near the anxious circle of the wounded and their companions. The white steed nudges her nose against Cael to ensure he is well. Cael brings his trembling hand to settle on her nose. Kaera stands beside him, stabilizing her frame while she hugs her brown steed close. “You are alright,” she whispers.

Elara swallows the bile rising at the back of her throat, hiding her shaking hands in the folds of her skirt. She cannot panic now. People watch their movements. She shifts closer to Cael, both to maintain the facade of unity and because his proximity calms her frame.

Cael turns toward her, the unreadable depth in his eyes shifting into clarity. His hands catch her by surprise as he hooks them beneath her arms and lifts her effortlessly. Elara has no time to protest before he places her gently onto the saddle of his horse. His touch is an unvoiced reassurance that anchors her spinning thoughts before she can even grasp the edge of the ledger.

Leaving her secured, Cael shifts toward his father. While the knights establish a defensive perimeter to manage the heavy crowd, Cael steps between them, sliding his broad shoulder beneath King Raelith's arm to hoist him onto his own mount.

Queen Maereth watches the display from her own saddle, her jaw locking so tightly the muscles along her throat strain. The insults and anger she forces herself to hold back are evident, her calculating eyes darting from her stepson's capabilities to the silent, watching crowd.

Cael avoids her.

Turning toward Kaera, who is struggling to stabilize her footing against her stirrup, he extends his bare hand and gives her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. She offers a nod in return, keeping her composure intact despite the tears still marking her cheeks.

The horses break into a synchronized stride back toward the upper fortress gates. Hartwell rides ahead, his posture tense and his hands gripping his reins. Throughout the entire ride back, Cael sits directly behind Elara. He leaves no distance between them, his chest pressing against her back.

Every time the horse adjusts its footing on the steep stone paths, Cael's body absorbs the movement, keeping her securely against him. Elara's eyes remain ahead, terrified. Just when she expected this new kingdom to be freer, more peaceful, filled with genuine people, everything had turned horrendous. She wonders whether living in such a harsh community, beneath the appearance of great care, is truly better than remaining locked within her father's castle, spared from such roles and dangers. Her father's negligence towards her is better than what is happening now.

The moment they burst through the palace gates, the main courtyard floods with movement while household staff, gardeners, nurses, and servants from both wings rush toward the royal family. Elara finds Asma, Celestia, and Claire near the interior garden arches, stepping away from the soil and flowers to watch their appearance of stained skin and uneven breathing.

Cael does not wait for the servants to intervene. His hands grasp her waist, and he lifts her from the saddle before lowering her onto the stone floor of the courtyard. Keeping his palms on her upper arms, he scans the white and pink floral dress for tears or blood. His fingers shake, a tremor betraying his internal terror while he lifts her hands, turning her bare palms

over beneath the daylight to ensure no crimson marks her skin. He offers a gesture to the approaching nurses, waving his hand to command them to bring items to heal her.

Nearby, knights deploy with a wooden litter, lifting King Raelith to transfer him past the palace thresholds. They carry him through the grand entryways and into the safety of the lower hall to escape the smoke. Turning from the crowded courtyard, Cael maintains a firm grip on her arm to guide her dazed demeanor away from where the physicians surround his coughing father. He leads her on foot past the threshold and down a quieter, adjoining stone corridor, away from the roaring panic of the main hall, until he pushes open the heavy oak doors of the palace infirmary.

Inside the vestibule, the staff scrambles to attend to the incoming wounded. “Your Majesty! Please, lay him here!” an old nurse cries out, her hands trembling while she helps guide the king onto a cushioned cot, her voice breaking with distress. Hartwell accompanies them, ignoring his own steed while he slips off the saddle outside. “Bring the warm tonics! There are more who are struck!”

One of the nurses rushes toward Elara, her eyes landing on her fingers and her stained dress. “Your Highness, are your hands burned?” A young kitchen servant approaches Elara’s side, her eyes wide with worry while she reaches out to steady her arm. “Princess, are you harmed? Did the shrapnel reach you?”

The rapid questions only fuel the illness coiling in her throat. She shakes her head, her voice trapped inside her throat while she looks at the surrounding staff, realizing that despite the hatred of the outer marketplace, these inner walls hold the protective loyalty of people who care.

Cael maintains a firm grip on her arm to guide her dazed demeanor up the stone steps of the palace. His knuckles turn white against her sleeve, his frame tensing with the effort to remain her support. They pass through the entrance and cross the expanse of the grand hall where the physicians surround his coughing father. Steering her past the initial crowd, he leads her down an adjoining stone corridor until he pushes open the doors of the palace infirmary.

Two elderly nurses follow them inside, their arms laden with fresh linens, water basins, and jars of soothing winter green salve. Cael does not retreat to his own quarters, nor does he allow the servants to tend to his own dirt-stained tunic.

He steps back to anchor himself beside the threshold, his broad frame blocking the entrance like a silent guard, his unmoving eyes fixed on Elara as the nurses begin to wash the sulfur grime from her wrists.

Elara looks at him. For a moment, the ache in her hands and the rapid beats of her heart fade from her focus. Cael stands by the entrance like a sentry, his arms crossed while his dark hair shadows his gaze. He carries the weight of a storm cloud gathering thunder. Noticing her stare, he raises one eyebrow, ignoring the nurse who attempts to inspect his frame for wounds.

She drops her eyes from his face, catching sight of his blade instead. Crimson coats the point from the throat in the square. She averts her face, her stomach turning at the grim display. He then discreetly hides the sword behind him, though his stance and place remain the same.

The elderly nurses finish their work, smoothing a clean linen wrap over her wrists before gathering their basins. They lower their heads in a respectful bow and slip past his broad frame into the corridor, pulling the heavy oak doors closed.

The emptiness leaves nothing but the crackle of the fire and the heavy sound of Cael’s breathing near the door.

Elara remains in the large leather armchair. He does not reach for his green booklet, and he does not move from his post. The memory of the marketplace explosion seems to fade into the shadows, leaving only the profound silence they now share.

Neither of them knew what would come next.

OceanofPDF.com

XXVIII

A CONSUMING FEAR

E

Elara stands by her balcony, watching the garden.

Cael's coat protects her from the morning breeze. No gardeners move among the beds. The usual chatter has vanished, and the scent of the morning meal has not emerged from the kitchens below. At her throat, the golden pendant feels freezing against her skin.

Elara closes her fingers around the metal, holding it tight until it begins to warm beneath her palm. Her gaze remains fixed upon the paths below, searching for any movement. The empty benches, the abandoned tools, and the roses bending beneath the breeze seem strangely unfamiliar, as though the palace changed overnight while leaving every stone in place. She listens for footsteps in the corridors behind her, for servants beginning their morning routine, or for the distant sound of voices carrying through the courtyard, but nothing reaches her.

The memory of dripping crimson returns to her thoughts, accompanied by the image of Queen Maereth's raw panic and the reality of King Raelith's worsening health. The small hope she allowed herself to harbor has shattered, and guilt pierces her heart while her hands slide along the inside of the coat.

Her fingers hesitate, attempting to intertwine into a prayer before falling apart. She presses them together once more, harder this time. She forces herself to think of her mother, searching for the strength and gentleness she remembers from her youth. Queen Aline had taught her that tears were not a sign of weakness, and Walker had reinforced that lesson, promising she would always be there for Elara, even from a distance.

A tear slides down Elara’s cheek. Yielding to the exhaustion in her body, she lets her quiet sobs escape. A few strands of hair sway and cling to her wet cheeks, trapping her within her own grief.

“Mother, I cannot do this,” Elara whispers, her limbs trembling. “How long must I endure this? How many more tragedies must I face before the world stops resenting me?” She shakes her head. “I am too weak. I am not like you, and I never will be.”

She buries her chin deeper into the wool collar, pulling the massive fabric tighter around her chest. Her gaze anchors on the vacant dirt paths of the garden, where the untended white roses flutter. Usually, by this hour, the rhythmic scrape of iron spades and the chatter of the laundry servants would rise to her balcony, offering a comfortable, predictable backdrop to the morning.

Instead, the kingdom holds its breath behind iron gates, leaving her alone with the echoing memory of the blast, the ground filling with crimson, and the trade master’s blood dripping onto the stone.

Her fingers slide lower into the deep pockets of the coat, searching for any small distraction to halt the rapid beating of her heart. Ever since she slipped the garment on after dressing this morning, the wool has served as a shield, but now her knuckles press against the rough seams of the lining for a different reason. Her thumbs trace the inner fabric, seeking the lingering shield of Cael’s arms when he locked his frame around her to block the fire. That barrier is the only piece of protection she can grasp. The scent of cedarwood and ink remains the only constant presence anchoring her to the space.

She closes her eyes and breathes it in. The scent belongs to him, and for reasons she cannot explain, that presence is easier to endure than the emptiness surrounding her.

Turning back to her bedchamber, she abandons the view and shuts the glass doors behind her. Moving across the chamber, she pulls Cael’s old booklet from her vanity drawer once more. She turns past the pages where he had written the words exchanged between them, her fingers slowing whenever she reaches a familiar passage.

She has read the booklet so many times that she already knows which page comes next, where the ink grows darker from the pressure of his quill, and where a corner has begun to soften from repeated handling. Only five

poems remain unread. She pauses, reluctant to spend another one so quickly, then carefully turns the page.

I FEEL the breath stall within my throat, and my pulse slacken,
Leaving me to reach blindly for a single thread I wish to live for.
The cruelty of the woman I forced myself to call a mother,
Her decree that my very birth was fashioned as a punishment,
Forces my own mind to believe the shadow of her words.
Every rising dawn, I wish to meet the queen who gave me life,
To desperately touch the gentle grace my father promised me.
Instead, I remain stranded in a kingdom of deceit,
A palace of heavy drapes hiding the bleeding truth.
I hold my hands back from the light, locking my desperation away,
Lest the only beauty I possess be ruined by the monster they claim I am.

THE POEM CONTINUES to the very next page, though when Elara's vision finally clears, she realizes wet teardrops have splattered onto the paper. She brings the back of her hand to wipe the moisture away, turning to the next page to read the continuation, her mouth parting to let out a trembling breath.

Her eyes remain on the final words for several seconds. She reads them again, more slowly this time, following each line until the meaning settles into something she cannot dismiss. The girl he had written about had not been a stranger to him. He had watched her, remembered her, and carried the weight of her presence long before Elara understood what any of it meant.

Elara's fingers move over the edge of the parchment without touching the ink. Yesterday, when he had drawn his sword, the raw speed of his action had blurred her vision. Now she wonders what had been passing through his mind before the weapon ever left its sheath.

AND THEN, the northern winds brought a princess from Veyrenn.
I watch her move through these corridors, clad in grief.
I wish to know the thoughts behind her downcast eyes,
To perceive the wounds from a father who left her hollow.
Still, she turns from my shadow as though I am a threat,

Her posture locking in distrust whenever I bridge the space.
I see her find an easy comfort among the common servants,
Sharing her gentle words with those who carry no crown.
It brings a bitter ache to see her warmth granted so freely,
While I wonder if she will ever seek a sanctuary in my silence.
I crave to be the anchor that stays her trembling frame,
But she looks upon my mute existence and finds only a cage.

HER FINGERS TREMBLE over his neat script. The paper rustles under her touch, the sound filling the space between her quickening breaths as she stares at the text.

The memory of his sword strike yesterday shifts. He had drawn it to silence the venom thrown at her name, placing himself between her and the men who had dared to speak of her that way. She rests her bare palms flat against the wooden surface of the vanity. Reaching for the booklet again, she hesitates, and leaves it inside the drawer. She straightens and turns toward the door.

Kaera stands outside, her eyes mirroring Elara's surprise. "Are you well?" She asks, her voice soft.

Elara blinks at the question, but she replies anyway. "Yes." She swallows, feeling guilty for her dishonesty.

"Yes, alright," Kaera mumbles, avoiding Elara's eyes before she clears her throat. "I only came here because I need company. Father and mother are both angry and probably still recovering. Cael…" her voice trails off, "is nowhere to be found again." She lowers her gaze to the floor, rubbing her thumb against the side of her hand. "I do not want to sit alone with all of it."

Elara studies her face. The usually composed princess looks tired, her hair falling around her shoulders and her posture lacking the careful elegance she normally carries through the palace.

"Then you do not have to," Elara says. "I would be glad to keep you company."

"Really?" Kaera's entire demeanor brightens. "I would love for you to come to my bedchamber. I wish to show you the drawings and paintings I have been doing."

"Drawings and paintings?" Elara asks, following Kaera a short distance down the hall. She realizes she has never seen Kaera's bedchamber. The

only private sanctuary she has visited besides her own is the chamber Cael tried so desperately to hide from her.

Entering the bedchamber as the door shuts softly behind them, Elara's eyes widen at the sudden colors and history of art across Kaera's walls, greenery climbing over the gray stone surfaces. Her ceiling holds a detailed painting of angels. One of them looks like her in the middle, wearing a black dress with matching dark hair, except the painted hand extends toward one angel with pale skin and golden blonde hair, whose face remains unrecognizable. Paintings of different sizes with intricate frames hang on the walls. Her bed in the center of the room is draped in silver. A large crystal chandelier hangs from the center of the ceiling.

Elara slows near the center of the chamber, turning gradually as she takes in the walls around her. Nothing resembles the cold symmetry of the palace corridors. Even the unfinished paintings seem to belong here, scattered among the flowers and candles as though Kaera has allowed every unfinished thought to remain visible rather than hiding it away.

A clear glass door reaches out to her balcony. The view from here shows the left side of the palace rather than the front courtyard visible from her own bedchamber. The view of the garden from this angle is unclear, though the path below reveals the knights, guards, and gardeners working, gathering their equipment and gear.

"It is beautiful," Elara smiles, turning to Kaera, who is now sitting on the left side of her bed, waiting for her. "You truly do adore art. The painting on the ceiling makes it evident."

"Yes, I took the habit from Cael," she says with reddening cheeks. "I saw how he used to paint this one girl all the time with dark brown hair and green eyes. It was rather confusing, but I focused more on his skills and persistence." She swallows to stabilize her voice. "Knowing I needed to find what I love, I asked him to teach me, despite him not having enough time. But he did teach me, and after a week, I learned my own style and rhythm."

Elara's smile fades, catching only one phrase of what Kaera said. "A girl with dark brown hair and green eyes?"

"Yes, and I still wonder to this day who she is," Kaera says with a chuckle. "She looks a lot like you, but younger. He was thirteen while I was eight, and curious. I recall asking him about her when I found those specific portraits hidden among his landscapes. He paints many subjects, but he kept

those pieces tucked away. Of course, he never replied and brushed the questions off."

Elara's fingers reach for her pink and white dress under the coat, which she has decided to wear again, grasping the skirt tightly.

"Though I doubt he still paints, let alone remembers whoever that girl was. Each time, he would paint her on a canvas with a pink floral dress, and the background was entirely green," Kaera says, shaking her head with a smile. "Cael will never tell me who she is."

Elara does not answer immediately. Her fingers remain curled around the fabric of her skirt. Her gaze drifts back toward the paintings on the wall, searching the memory of those descriptions as though the answer might be hidden somewhere within the chamber. Brown hair, green eyes, a pink floral dress, and greenery surrounding her. She has worn dresses like that before. She has stood among trees before, wandering places where no court attendant followed her and no one cared enough to ask where she had gone.

Her heart aches as though something sharp has lodged beneath her ribs, leaving Elara unable to draw a full breath. She had worn many pink floral dresses when she was younger, and now the details Kaera has given her seem to follow the shape of memories she has never examined closely. She cannot be certain if they ever truly crossed paths, but the possibility refuses to leave her.

"What else did she have?" Elara finds her voice, asking until her desperate need for answers is satisfied.

Kaera hums, her gaze drifting ahead to the clear doors as she tries to recall the memories. "Perhaps a nice smile. I have only seen Cael paint and draw her three times. It mainly focuses on her face and a greenery background with pink flowers."

Elara remembers a small forest pathway in Veyrenn, an old, specific location that is now entirely soil, replaced with a newer tailoring shop that has not succeeded in its trade due to King Eric's demand for the owner to work exclusively for him. Recalling the space, it was a location where she would sneak away to find solace from the judgment of the court, avoiding her mother's long shopping trips and her father's harsh duties.

She remembers the trees, the flowers, and the warmth of the afternoon sun upon her skin, but not a boy standing among them. If Cael had seen her there, she should remember him. She searches through the memory again

and finds only fragments, each one dissolving before she can hold it firmly enough to understand.

“I see,” is all she manages, though her fingers remain curled around the fabric of her skirt.

Kaera does not press her. Instead, she brings a small black wooden board, smooth and thick, onto her lap. It serves as a portable table, holding multiple worn, crumpled papers and quills with different colored inks. The blue ink has the least amount left compared to the rest, and Elara assumes it must be her favorite color.

Taking a few steps forward to sit beside Kaera on the right side of the bed, she looks over the previous drawings where the ink is dry. Her hands lift one to study it. It is a drawing of a rose in the top corner, sharp in its details with deliberate, messy lines.

Elara swallows and quickly places it back onto the wooden board. “You are very skilled,” she says with a smile. Turning her head to continue studying the details of the bedchamber, she finds a stack of white canvases placed over each other on a small table in the far corner. “Do you paint usually? I would love to see them.”

Kaera inclines her head enthusiastically, rushing toward the table of canvases to carry all fifteen of them over, laying them in front of Elara. She takes the one on top, noting the precise details along the edges. It is a man, she realizes, with pale skin and golden hair. Tilting her head, she notes the simple details resemble the angel reaching for Kaera on the ceiling painting. She catches Kaera’s smile fading and pauses.

Resuming her inspection of the paintings, Elara only finds more of the same subject. A pale man with golden hair, wearing a pointed hat with golden bells, the traditional hat of a jester, dyed in white and light blue. None of his facial features are painted, and Elara assumes it is because Kaera is having trouble capturing them or the work remains unfinished.

“You also paint one person.”

Kaera inclines her head. “It is a man I met once while on duty with father and Cael. His wrists were tied with a light blue ribbon, looking young, almost like me, and he was juggling. People laughed, but I found him majestic. I asked father to search for him or have him come again, only to realize he is not from this kingdom.”

“That is sad,” Elara’s eyebrows furrow, her thumb caressing the dry paint of this hidden figure. “Was he wearing such a hat?”

“Yes, he was a young boy in a light blue and white jester costume,” Kaera admits, sitting back down against the mattress. “The treatment he endured was cruel. He performed in the middle of Raeverbend while Cael and I were on duty to practice our titles. I felt deep remorse.”

Shaking her head, Elara brings her hand over Kaera’s shoulder comfortingly. “It is not your fault. Perhaps he is happy now.”

“I hope,” Kaera’s fingers tighten around one of the canvases.

Elara looks down at the unfinished face again. The absence of its features makes the painting strangely intimate. Kaera remembers his clothes, his hands, the ribbon around his wrists, and the way he had been made to perform, but the face remains untouched.

“You never finished him.”

Kaera’s fingers loosen around the canvas. “I could never decide what his face looked like.”

“Because you do not remember?” Elara tilts her head.

“Because I remember how he looked at everyone else,” Kaera replies, her gaze lowering to the painted hands. “I never saw enough of him to know what he looked like when no one was watching.”

The way Kaera speaks of the boy is tender, even after so many years. Elara does not know much about true love, let alone affection toward another person, though she once prayed that she might experience something like it. After witnessing the soft gaze her father held for her mother, she had always imagined that something capable of creating such warmth must be beautiful.

“Do you know something about Cael writing poems?” Elara asks.

Kaera’s eyebrows raise, then she smiles. “Yes, but I did not pay much attention to it, considering writing has been my biggest failure. I almost wished to become illiterate.” She cracks a smile. “Though even in his poems, he writes about the girl with brown hair and green eyes. I truly think he has a specific type.” She glances at Elara with a smile laced with a tease.

Elara lowers her eyes toward her hands, suddenly conscious of the floral pattern spread across her own dress. Her thumb brushes over one of the embroidered flowers, tracing its shape without thinking. “Are you not curious who it may be?”

With a release of breath, Kaera’s tone turns serious, yet still gentle. “I do not know much about Cael, with every bit of honesty in my heart. We may have a close bond, but he is secretive, as if I would judge him. I try my

very best to get near to him, but he does not reply. All he gives me is an expression of hesitancy and leaves."

"He did the same with me. It made me want to know more about him, so I started learning sign language with the guidance of Mister Elias."

Kaera's sad expression melts as she looks at Elara with excitement once again. "Are you interested in him?"

"Perhaps, though it is mainly because he is a confusing man," Elara smiles, only to chuckle as Kaera squeals with delight.

"That is perfect. I have seen how Cael looks at you."

Elara's forces her smile to remain. "Except that he loves this one girl who may look identical to me."

Kaera shakes her head. "Nonsense. Cael would never glance at another woman while married. At least, I am confident in how loyal he is. He defended me against Mother and has always been protective of me. Whenever I accidentally broke one of our glass or crystal decorations, Cael saw how terrified I was. He always claimed that it was him." She pauses. "He never wanted to be a prince, knowing he would always be judged. He accepted the role because he made a solemn promise to Father, and he has carried that responsibility ever since."

Elara looks toward the balcony doors. Somewhere beyond those walls, the kingdom is still recovering from what happened yesterday, but inside Kaera's bedchamber, the paintings and scattered papers make the palace feel distant.

For several seconds, neither princess speaks.

Then the latch snaps. Queen Maereth barges into the bedchamber, her regal garments sweeping behind her. Her immaculate posture is taut, her chest rising and falling with an anger that dominates the space. Her thin lips draw into a hard line as her gaze fixes upon Elara, stilling on the pink and white floral dress she wears.

"Out," Queen Maereth commands, her voice low, carrying a finality that echoes off the ceiling angels. She does not look at her daughter. Her frozen glare remains pinned to Elara, her fingers tightening into claws against the fine silk of her sleeves. "Kaera, leave us. I must address the woman who brought this lethal curse upon my household."

Kaera stands up from the mattress instantly, her hands trembling as she steps between them, trying her best to preserve her composure. "Mother, please, Father is still recovering—"

“Do not test my patience, child,” the Queen snaps, her tone cutting through the space like a blade as she takes another step closer, forcing her shadow over the bed. “The King lies in his chambers gasping for his life because we allowed a Veyrenn viper past our gates. The outer districts are burning, our border guards are bleeding on the stone, and I will not have you coddling the very distraction Zahraan used to lure my husband onto an open platform.”

She points a commanding finger toward the door, her voice rising to a rumbly authority. “Leave. Now.”

“It is my bedchamber,” Kaera does not back down. “You have insulted Elara many times when it is not under her control being in this palace. She has not done anything!”

“Your father is severely ill because of her defense toward that fool Cael. His life is on the line, and this princess and Cael’s attachment worsens everything.”

“And how about you, Mother?” Kaera’s arms fold over her chest. “All you do is argue with him, causing unnecessary destruction. He is your husband, though you treat him unfairly.”

“Unfairly?” Queen Maereth almost spits the word out. “You spend your time in this bedchamber, avoiding your role, and paint one ridiculous, helpless little boy, enslaved for our joy. Your standards are even lower than your worthless brother’s.” She pauses for a mere second before continuing. “That clown will leave your life. If he does not, he will leave this world. By my hands.”

Elara’s chest tightens. She wants to stand, to say something, to defend Kaera the way no one ever defended her. Instead, she remains where she is, trapped between shock and helplessness.

“He is not at fault. No one is except you,” Kaera shouts. Queen Maereth raises her hand, her fingers curling into a weapon, but her gaze flickers toward the slightly ajar door. Realizing any passing guard might witness the strike, the Queen freezes, her arm remaining poised in the air.

Elara brings her hands over Kaera’s, gently guiding her away. “What have I ever done to you?” The same fury she felt toward King Eric returns, her eyes wide with frustration and fear.

“Live,” Queen Maereth states coldly. “I never liked you from the second I read your name. Your pathetic, kind mother and your reasonable father.

You are bringing this kingdom down, introducing a glimmer of hope into a palace that requires only duties."

"Royalty must be beyond duties. A family requires support and love," Elara tries to convince her, her voice breaking.

"What do you know about family?" Queen Maereth sneers. "You lived locked away like a caged bird. The whispers of your father neglecting you are common knowledge. You lived under oppression, and now you become spoiled under these laws of freedom. You are a distraction to my son, making him lazy and soft when he must focus on his command. You are useless to this court, a lazy burden attempting to speak back to your mother-in-law."

Elara flinches, her frame trembling under the weight of the words. "I am not a distraction, and I am not useless. I want to help this kingdom. My mother taught me the value of peace."

"Your mother?" Queen Maereth tilts her head, her eyes wide with challenge. "She was innocent enough to agree to this marriage, knowing you would suffer in this palace. She signed you away to secure her own peace."

Elara's breath leaves her lungs at the sudden revelation. Her legs weaken under the weight of the words, her world fracturing while her vision blurs. Tears swell in her eyes, streaming down her cheeks in heartbreak.

Kaera looks at her with shock.

"You are lying," Elara whispers, her voice cracking from the depth of her devastation. "My mother would never do that."

Queen Maereth takes another step forward, her velvet gown sweeping across the stone floor with a slow pace to cement her triumph over Elara's tears. "She did that very thing," she says, smoothing the elegant silk of her bodice. "Your mother knew the reality of our court expectations. She knew the crown requires discipline and bitter sacrifices, not soft sentiments for fragile girls. She planned this alliance for the coin and your kingdom's future success with your father long prior to her death, when you were still too young to understand the value of a treasury. She penned her signature alongside his seal because she desired the stability of our wealth over your comfort. She bartered you to a silent prince to ensure your crown remained funded, leaving you to handle the heavy duties she selected for your future."

The words strike Elara with such force that she forgets to breathe. She wants to reject them, to call them another cruelty from a woman who has hated her since before they ever met, but the certainty she reaches for refuses to come.

Then, she recalls a distant glimpse of a childhood memory. She remembers her mother sitting by the desk in Veyrenn a few months prior to her death, her fingers trembling over a parchment scroll. Elara was five years old, watching from the doorway while the wax seal cooled on the document. Her mother turned, the stroke of her fingers against Elara's small cheek feeling more like a plea for forgiveness than a maternal blessing.

"I AM SO SORRY, Elara. It had to be done."

The words echo across the years, fitting into place with devastating clarity while Maereth's cruel triumph rings true. Before she can utter another word, the silence of the watching vanguards outside shatters. The thunderous clatter of heavy leather boots echoes from the stone corridor, rushing toward the open threshold.

Cael is here.

OceanofPDF.com

XXIX
THEIR SHARED SILENCE

C

Cael rushes between Elara and his stepmother.

Kaera’s eyes are wide with fear, tears streaming down her cheeks as she holds the stacks of canvases tightly against her chest. Behind him, he can feel Elara’s weakness without needing to turn toward her, the tremor in her breathing telling him all he needs to know.

Forcing himself to maintain his composure, his eyes glare down into Queen Maereth’s. A moment passes, and she lets out a chuckle.

“This does not concern you,” she spits, her gaze snapping to him. “You dare to stand there and play the protector after what occurred yesterday? Your father lies in his bed gasping for his life because you dragged him onto that stone platform, exposing our court vulnerability to the crowd. Your voiceless nature makes this kingdom look weak to our enemies, inviting the very chaos that breached our gates. You are a defect to this lineage, a prince who cannot even shout a command, and you rush in here to shield a useless Veyrenn bargain.”

Cael’s arms hang at his sides, his expression giving nothing away as he remains between her and the bed. He keeps his attention on her, refusing to give her the satisfaction of seeing him lose control.

“You have no voice to command respect, and you have no right to interfere,” she continues, her elegant velvet gown rustling as she glares at his un-gloved hands. “All you ever bring to this palace is destruction. You cannot even speak to defend your own title, let alone a princess who brought a lethal curse into our home. You are nothing but a burden to your father’s health, and your pathetic attachment to her changes nothing. Move out of my sight before I have the vanguards remove you myself.”

Failing to provoke a reaction from him, Maereth shifts her focus, her glassy glare piercing past his shoulder to anchor onto Elara. “And you sit there weeping for a mother you think was innocent,” she sneers, her voice dropping into a razor-sharp whisper.

Queen Maereth turns to Elara. “Look at yourself, Elara. You are nothing but a paid transaction to keep your father’s court from collapsing, a pretty distraction sent here to bleed while your home kingdom thrives on our gold. Your mother knew exactly what awaited you, she signed your misery away for a chest of silver.”

He can feel the devastating impact of the words on Elara behind him. He takes a step back, his body a physical shield for Elara. The desperation to turn and hold her is overwhelming, but he knows better than to be distracted.

Queen Maereth lunges forward to shove her weight against his chest and clear her path to the mattress.

Cael’s hand snaps forward, fingers clamping around her slender wrist to stop her striking him across the face. He does not tighten his grip, yet a red mark appears on her pale skin. He maintains his hold on her, releasing her wrist only when she understands he will not allow her to touch Elara.

“Release me,” Queen Maereth demands, her voice dropping into a deadly whisper as she glares down at her wrist.

Cael maintains his grip for one second longer, before his fingers uncoil and slide back to his side. She pulls her arm back, refusing to show a single trace of physical weakness despite the swelling color on her skin.

“Mother, please, stop,” Kaera begs from the corner. “She does not deserve this. Please, just leave her alone.”

Queen Maereth turns her head, her focus landing on her daughter. “And you sit here coddling her like a broken doll, taking habits from a useless prince who cannot even speak to defend his own title. Look at Cael. He stands there like a mute monster who can only offer you violence and silence. You degrade your own bloodline by weeping for his tragic attachments.”

She turns her stare back to Elara, her posture locking into a rigid line of triumph.

“You insult my presence, mock my worth, glare at me, and speak in such a malicious way about my mother,” Elara says, her eyes wide with pain and anger while tears stream down her red cheeks. “You do not carry

the title of a great mother either. You insult Cael and Kaera with your cruelty.”

Cael’s heart beats quicker at the sight and her words. Her hands grip Kaera’s bedsheets, unable to find strength on her own frame.

“My mother never once treated me with hostility,” Elara continues. “What you perform here is unkind. My mother...” Her lips tremble while her gaze falls to the dress Cael brought for her. “She had her reasons. There were circumstances I never understood as a child, but that does not mean she wanted to hurt my future.”

She wipes her tears with the back of her hand, but more gather along her lashes while she tries to clear them. Her fingers tremble against her cheek, and she lowers her hand into her lap, ashamed that Queen Maereth can see how the words reach her heart.

Maereth’s chest heaves beneath her velvet bodice while she steps closer to the bed. “You speak of circumstances to defend a woman who signed your life away for riches. Queen Aline was no angel. She was a schemer who approached our emissaries fourteen years ago, when you were a child of five and Cael was only eight. She recognized the rising wealth of Riverath and desired that treasury for her own husband’s expansion. She bought her kingdom’s luxury and political gain with your future misery, and you ruin your own dignity by defending the hand that pushed you into our palace.”

Cael shifts only enough to prevent her from coming any closer. His boots remain planted against the floorboards, his hands relaxing by his sides despite the tension tightening through his arms. He does not need to threaten her again.

Before Queen Maereth can step forward again or launch into another wave of insults, a vanguard clears his throat loudly from the open threshold, shattering the mounting friction. “Your Majesty, the high council advisors have assembled in the main hall. They demand your immediate presence to sign the emergency border logs.”

Queen Maereth smooths the elegant velvet of her gown, forcing her posture back into a cold mask. She offers them one final stare of pure malice before turning on her heel, her heavy skirts sweeping past the threshold as she exits into the corridor with her guards following close behind.

The moment the hallway falls silent, Kaera moves toward the door, gathering her scattered canvases into her arms. She looks at Cael's tense shoulders and then down at Elara's tired demeanor. Then, she steps out into the corridor, pulling the heavy wood closed behind her until the latch clicks into place.

The emptiness of the chamber leaves nothing but the morning light tracking across the gray stone. Cael turns around, his knees almost buckling and steps toward the bed. He sinks to his knees in front of Elara, his palms lifting to frame her face, cradling her cheeks. He searches her expression, his thumbs brushing beneath her eyes to check for tears, waiting for the look of horror he dreaded his sword strike yesterday would cause, but her eyes reveal no terror toward him.

Her gaze remains pinned to a vacant patch of air past his shoulder, unfocused. She does not blink, and she makes no move to hide her face from him.

The warmth leaves her cheeks so rapidly it feels like the frost from the courtyard stone is transferring into her frame. She offers no resistance when he applies a light pressure to tilt her chin down, her face drifting wherever his palms guide her, like a porcelain ornament left behind in a vacant gallery. Her mind is trapped under the weight of the reveal, her posture locking into a hollow suspension that terrifies him far more than his stepmother's screaming ever could.

He slides his thumbs closer to her cheekbones, trying to anchor her focus back to the chamber, but her fingers remain limp against Kaera's bedsheets, drained of the strength to hold on.

Are you all right, my petal? Cael signs, the endearment slipping into the movement. Remembering that she does not know the language, he reaches for the booklet and quill with unstable hands.

"I am not," Elara whispers, tears continuing to spill down her cheeks. "I do not think I know how to be."

Cael's brows draw together. His hands freeze against her skin. *She understood his hands*. Without the written words, she read his question. He leaves his palms resting against her face, his thumbs staying still to let her finish while he processes the sudden connection.

Elara wipes beneath one eye with the back of her hand, though another tear follows almost immediately. "Almost my entire journey here, I could not determine whether I was happy or not." She pauses. "Everything

changed so quickly. A man I claimed as my father sold me away with ease, and I came here believing that perhaps I could still find something good in all of it.” Her voice grows quieter, and she seems to reconsider how much she has already revealed. “I suppose I was beginning to believe I had.”

Her voice falters, and she looks down at the dress gathered beneath her fingers. A heavy silence settles over the mattress as she draws a shallow breath.

“I thought I could have something that belonged to me,” she says, her voice growing softer, almost trailing into a whisper. “A place where I could be loved.” Her fingers gather the fabric of her dress again, though she releases it when she notices herself doing so. “Someone who would not make me feel as though I were a burden for simply existing.” The admission leaves her visibly uncomfortable, and she lowers her gaze. “I was beginning to believe that I could be happy here, even after everything that happened in Veyrenn.”

She draws a shaky breath, pressing her lips together. “And now my mother. I always thought she was kind.” She lowers her gaze, her fingers curling together in her lap. “She was gentle with me,” she adds hesitantly. “When I was frightened, she would tell me that I did not have to hide my tears.”

Elara’s voice falters. She turns away, refusing to let Cael see how deeply the memory has reached her. “I believed she loved me. I still want to believe that.”

You do not have to decide what to believe today, Cael signs, making each movement easy for her to follow. *Remember what you know. Leave the rest until you are ready. You do not have to tell me anything you are not ready to tell me.* Realizing his trembling hands are overwhelming her, Cael lowers his arms into his lap, letting the drop be a silent indication that his incomplete feelings are left unfinished for now.

“Why me?” Elara asks, her voice quieter. “What made you want to protect me?” She hesitates, almost reconsidering the question before she continues. “I was not even kind to you when we first met.”

Cael’s lips curve into a small smile, and the sight makes her cheeks redden. He carefully brings out his green booklet and opens it over her lap, keeping his wrists and hands from touching her or her dress. He adjusts his position so her back rests almost against his chest, her head looking down at the parchment. His left hand starts to move with the quill, letting her watch

the ink form without having to turn the pages. He pauses after the first few letters, his nib hovering as he thinks whether it is right to mention the deeper truths he hides.

You do not owe me anything, petal. I never needed your kindness to know you are a warm-hearted woman. It is the shield you place around yourself, the way you try your best to be strong, bearing the discomfort you can speak freely about now, though choose not to. The way you wish to understand me first.

As she reads the final words, Elara slowly tilts her head up to look into his eyes. Her soft green eyes make Cael forget his own existence. He never imagined he would be this close to her, let alone have her leaning against him for support. There is an aching familiarity on those eyes he cannot understand, but his need to protect her from the cruelty she has endured overrides everything else.

He lifts his left hand as his fingers reach toward her face. The back of his hand grazes the soft curve of her jaw, his knuckles brushing away the loose strands of hair that have dried against her damp cheek. His touch is tentative, almost questioning, and he pauses when his fingers reach the edge of her skin, giving her the opportunity to pull away. She does not. Only then does his palm settle gently against her cheek as he watches her expression.

Elara does not pull away from his touch. Her breathing remains uneven, and the uncertainty in her expression does not disappear, but some of the rigidity leaves her shoulders as she allows herself to remain within his reach. She turns her face toward his palm, her eyes closing for a moment as though the warmth of his hand gives her somewhere to rest. His thumb brushes away another tear.

After a long pause, Elara moves closer on her own. Her forehead comes to rest against his chest, and her fingers curl into the fabric of his shirt.

Cael’s breath catches. He gives her the opportunity to change her mind, his hands hovering near her back until her grip tightens.

Only then does he wrap his arms around her.



CAEL ENSURES Elara is asleep within her quarters.

Her brown hair spreads across the pillows and bedsheets, her eyes closed under the dim light of the hearth. The redness across her cheeks remains. No matter how many times Cael wipes her tears, they grow to stain her skin and the corners of her eyes. The sight is infuriating to him, fracturing his composure in ways he has never felt prior to this night.

Even when Maereth slashed the leather belt across his back, leaving marks that bled and ached for months, that physical torment pales in comparison to the pain of witnessing Elara break in his arms inside these walls.

He tried his best to confess only an atom of his feelings toward her. He tried his best to distract her momentarily from the pain he saw through her eyes, but it was impossible. The desire he holds for her happiness leaves him hollow when he cannot grant it.

Cael blames himself, and knows it is his fault for not being there. For being consumed in his private chamber amidst the market chaos and the growing cruelty of his stepmother. Though he wonders if her words were true. Did her parents really sell her away for wealth and power?

Knuckles turning white as he clenches his fists, he rises to his feet and exits the bedchamber, his anger growing with every step. He hates that it has to be his stepmother harming Elara. His heart sinks with fear and his mind races on how he can have all of this stop and make sure nothing gets to his father and Kaera.

It is impossible.

Cael stands, wincing at the sudden pain in his right calf. Looking down, he recalls the untreated injury from the attack. The blood remains, dried and unwiped. He had assumed the ache would fade, though it only intensifies. Forcing the discomfort aside, he exits the chamber and makes his way to his parents' quarters, pressing his ear against the thick wood to catch any voice of the woman he despises.

Hearing only the movement of blankets, the ragged breathing of King Raelith, and a static silence, he turns around to make his way down the stairs. He bites the inside of his cheek until he tastes a drop of metallic blood. He does not panic or spit it out. His bite becomes more severe, nearly tearing the inside of his mouth when he finds Queen Maereth in the dining chamber, sipping tea.

She does not say anything or glance his way, and the deliberate dismissal only fuels the fire burning within him. He marches forward to stand directly across the table from her, his eyes wide and red-rimmed. When he ensures her gaze is locked onto his, he raises his arms to sign with rigid, violent movements.

I will not allow you to get near Elara, he signs, *I will not tolerate the harassment and the burden you have laid upon a princess who never asked for this cage.* He intakes a breath, his teeth stained with red. *I will make sure she remains with me at all times, and I will secure extra vanguards to keep you away from her. You carry the title of a queen. You might as well act like one.*

He stands in front of the woman he could never face without flinching, forcing down the ancient terror that demands he keep a safe distance from her. No upcoming rumors or palace whispers will make him hesitate to protect his bride.

“How dare you speak to me like that?” Queen Maereth shouts, standing to her feet. The cup of tea sits forgotten, her knuckles turning white against her fine porcelain saucer. “You come into this hall with blood on your hands and dare to lecture me on my duties? You are an ungrateful, silent curse upon this house!”

Cael slams his palms against the wood, letting the force sting his scarred hands. He forces his arms back up, continuing to sign with a wild speed that shatters her composure. *Elara is innocent. She is not the architect of your misery, and if you hurl another insult at her, I will strip the remaining authority you hold over the high council myself.*

“You dare speak to the queen this way!” Maereth’s fingers curl into fists. The knights and guards along the wall exchange nervous glances, but they say nothing, staying out of the dispute. She glances at them, lowering her voice to disguise her words so only Cael will know the meaning. “Have you forgotten the lessons I taught you in your youth?”

Visions of his stepmother beating his back until he bled flash across Cael’s mind, but he lifts his chin. Everyone in the palace understands his language. The knights in the hall will know the secret he finally exposes to them, and he no longer cares who learns the truth.

You mean the years you took a belt to my back? Cael signs, his movements sharp. *No, I have not forgotten. I still have the scars to remind me every day.* He cuts through her shouting by lifting his arms back into the space. *I will not allow you to treat Elara the same way. I command the vanguards now. Say another word against her, and I will remove your signet ring and bar you from all future council meetings.*

His stepmother's eyes dart around the hall, tracking the men who watch the conversation with furrowed brows. They witness the confession of what she did to his childhood frame. “You dare accuse me of such malice? Your queen? You forget your place. You may be crown prince, but I still hold far more power than you.”

Cael exhales, his hands slicing through the air. *Not for much longer. I let you escape consequences for the sake of my father and the kingdom, but I am done trying to keep the peace with your presence. That complacency died the moment you targeted my wife. If you even speak to her again, I will follow through on my promise to strip you of your authority.*

He does not give her another chance to respond. Whirling around, he moves to leave.

“This is not over, Cael.” The queen’s voice drops into a low register. The sound sends chills down Cael’s spine, but he does not turn back.

Cael passes the silent, wide-eyed vanguards stationed along the perimeter, unbothered by the public exposure of his past. The only matter of importance is that a permanent boundary has been drawn.

He climbs the grand stone staircase with a quickening pace, the quiet of the upper corridors swallowing the echo of his footsteps. Pushing the door open, he steps back into the sanctuary where Elara remains seated on the edge of the mattress. Her tired eyes lift to meet his and the volatile storm that had consumed him all morning finally begins to fade.

Cael pauses his steps, studying the returning heaviness beneath her eyes and the red fading from her cheeks. He can tell she has not slept, but instead of focusing on the thick second volume of the sign language book in her lap, he drops to his knees to meet her gaze.

I am sorry for the cruelty you endured, Cael signs, his movements gentle while he searches her face. *My stepmother speaks with malice, but her words regarding your presence are false. I will remain close to your side from this moment onward. She will not threaten your peace again.*

Elara's fingers tighten against the cover of the book. "Thank you, Cael," she whispers. "It is not your fault. I do not expect an apology from you. I think I should be the one apologizing. Your stepmother insults you because of me. She attempts to hurt you and Kaera because of my presence here."

Cael shakes his head, moving closer to her. *No, do not say that. Her behavior has matched this pattern for years. Because she is my stepmother, I should know how to handle her actions. Except I do not. I have never stood against her.* He holds her gaze, his expression softening. *Not until now.*

Elara wipes a tear with her finger to check its descent. She takes a breath to stabilize her frame, looking down at the heavy binding in her lap. "I do not want to remain blind to what passes between you anymore. I want to understand your thoughts when she targets us. I want to learn the lines of this text. I have studied some sentences, but Mister Elias tells me your signs are different. Your movements are full, direct, and I want to learn that meaning."

Cael remains still, his expression unreadable. Taking a step forward, and then another, he brings his finger to gently guide Elara's chin to anchor her gaze on his. She does not react. Her eyes do not widen. Her lips do not part. Her cheeks do not redden like he usually witnesses, when he finds himself wanting to adore her further.

He pulls his finger away and signs. *Sleep. You need it.*

The tip of her nose and cheeks redden with something she is holding back. Shaking her head, Elara finally speaks again. "No. I cannot sleep. Though I want to make use of my time. I do not have the strength to leave this bedchamber, so I want to learn your language." She inclines her head, as if she is reassuring herself that she truly means her words. "I need your help."

After a moment of hesitation, Cael nods. Sitting across from her against the plush mattress, he waits for her to open the volume. Reaching the page Elara wishes to study, she turns the book to have it facing Cael. "This sentence and these guides, they are not precise on how I shall sign," she points at the sentence where it says *Past night, sky star glow, me look-up*

feel peace. It is a simpler manner of sign language that Cael had not insisted on learning when he was younger, having chosen the direct script instead.

He recalls how these sentences, basic to him now, led him to sit for hours when he was a child, his legs aching from sitting in the same uncomfortable position in the library beside Elias.

He does not wish to force Elara to learn the complex direct script he uses, so he will adjust. He straightens and points his finger at the first two words. *Past night.* Looking into her eyes, he raises his right hand back over his shoulder for *past*, then he crosses his arms to indicate a setting sun for *night*. He makes sure his movements are slow.

Elara only stares. Raising her arms, she copies him, though she messes up for *night*, since the detailed posture for it is confusing. He offers her a smile and repeats the movement again, deliberately pausing and slowing down further.

Finally, she copies him and gets it correctly, repeating it a few more times as her eyes study her own posture.

The realization that someone wants to learn an entire language out of genuine desire to understand his thoughts catch him by surprise. Unlike his family or the staff who learned out of necessity, she seeks his voice despite the forced marriage that bound their fates. Her request makes him want to step closer, to leave the formal rules of their marriage behind and learn every detail of her heart in return.

Amazing, he signs with a smile.

When Elara smiles, it is a kindness so natural that for a moment, he forgets the years of hesitancy of his own silent language. “Then there is *sky star glow*. It is confusing because some of the words get merged into one motion.”

Cael keeps smiling, and then raises his hand to trace the sky, pinching his fingers in a twinkling motion for *stars*. Then, he opens his hands wide for *glowing*.

She copies him, and continues to repeat it until she understands. Then, for *me look-up*, he first points to himself and then uses a *V* handshape to mimic his eyes looking up at the ceiling. Finally, for *feel peace*, he brings his hand to his chest for *feel*, then he flattens his hands to smooth them downward like calming waters for *peace*.

They practice for hours while the sky outside deepens into night. Elara repeats the sequence one more time, signing the entire sentence while her

focus remains on her hands and posture. Her movement grows slow, her eyes drooping with exhaustion. At last, her head drops against his shoulder, falling asleep in place.

Cael closes the volume and places it on the small table beside the bed. He lays her down and ensures the blanket covers her frame. She removed her crown long ago, and her hair spills over the pillows, shining in the light of the candles.

He sits by her side, his gaze anchored onto her sleeping form. The dim firelight tracks across the stone of the quarters, casting a glow over the pink and white folds of her dress.

While studying the even rise and fall of her breathing, he notices the lines of despair from his stepmother's confrontation finally softening on her face. The sight of her crown sitting forgotten on the far edge of the wooden bedframe leaves his frame tight with a strange, aching protective heat.

Cael reaches out, his fingers trembling while he grazes a stray strand of brown hair, tucking it away from her cheek. He leaves his hand resting against the white linen of her pillow. He knows the land past their gates remains locked under a severe perimeter, and he knows the vipers of the high council will continue to whisper venom about her presence, but she remains asleep under his care.

He longs to slip away to his sanctuary and pour the woes of the day into his journal, but he refuses to leave.

For her, he remains.

OceanofPDF.com

XXX
A SMALL ADMISSION

E

Elara's attempts to forget Queen Maereth's words fail.

Three days have passed since the confrontation, and the palace remains locked. Ahead from the stairs, the knights and guards prepare their shields and adjust their gear. The horses wait for their riders, some nudging for attention.

No laughter or smile is shared. The emptiness within her chest expands with every passing second, a heavy numbness making her breathing irregular and her throat tight under the strain. She lifts her hand, her fingers tightening around the golden pendant resting against her collarbone. The metal is freezing against her skin, a weight she is no longer comfortable wearing. She unclasps the necklace to hold it in her hand, but the motion relieves nothing. Her gaze drifts to the white flowers, and her breath shudders.

One of the female guards approaches, her skin a clear almond and her dark hair falling down her back. Her uniform is smooth and polished, tailored closely to her frame. "Your Highness, the breeze is growing colder. It is better for you to enter the palace and rest. I am sure you need it."

Elara glances up at the guard, swallowing. She has not slept for the past few nights, even with Cael remaining by her side, caring for her whenever she does not require privacy. He teaches her his language until she becomes exhausted, despite remaining tense and his gaze drifting to the balcony by her bedchamber.

Her thoughts center on her mother. Every time she recalls Queen Aline's apology and that childhood glimpse of the signed marriage parchment, she wants to cry, to scream with the full force of her lungs, yet she never does.

Elara is hesitant to ask about the truth, or even to have Cael or Kaera ask on her behalf. Kaera does nothing but apologize for Queen Maereth, which only deepens the ache, knowing how truly guilty the young princess feels, blaming herself for provoking her mother.

“I am all right,” Elara says to the guard, forcing a smile. “I wish to feel the breeze.”

The guard accepts the answer and lets out a soft chuckle. “Her Highness is the same. Always out here in the cold.”

“Kaera does it too?” Elara looks up.

“She does, Your Highness,” the guard reassures her with a nod, her hair lifting in the wind. “She has not been doing it much lately, for some reason. But Her Highness would stay out here with His Highness by the benches.”

“By the benches,” Elara whispers, her gaze drifting ahead to the two seats positioned across from each other along the central walkway of the garden.

The rest of the riders mount their steeds, adjusting for their upcoming patrol. The guard smiles at Elara. “I will take my leave now, Your Highness.” She mounts her caramel-colored steed.

The gates open, and the riders exit one by one. Elara looks down at the pendant in her palm, tears welling in her eyes again. She shakes her head and takes a deep breath of air. Forcing herself up, she makes her way toward the right side of the palace, where the gardening tools remain beside a wooden bucket.

She does not bother wearing an apron and picks up the watering can. Moving toward the fountain, she fills the vessel with the fresh, flowing water. Watering the flowers and bushes, Elara gives particular attention to the pink lenten roses while making her way toward the opposite side of the large garden. She fills the can once more, tending to the foliage there.

This part of the garden has fewer pink lenten roses blooming, yet the deep color of the red winter roses enhances its vibrancy. Stepping toward them, Elara lets her gaze rest upon the petals. She reaches for an old, dented steel can resting near the fountain, filling the worn vessel to water the roots.

A sudden awareness of an imposing gaze sends a shiver down her spine. Expecting Queen Maereth, she looks back, only to find Cael standing at the edge of the garden.

Good morning, Cael signs comfortably.

“Good morning,” Elara murmurs, her eyes drifting back to the golden pendant. It feels far too heavy in her hand for something so small.

Cael takes the watering can from her and guides her toward the stairs, his hand resting on her shoulder as he lowers her onto the second-to-last step. He returns the tool to its rightful spot and walks back, taking a seat next to her. He leaves a wide distance between them, as if they had not been embracing each other the past few nights, as if neither quite knows how to cross the space after spending those dark hours so close.

Elara leans her head against the cold railing, keeping her eyes ahead. She presses her palms to her forehead, seeking the chill of her skin to soothe a sudden warmth. A swallow brings a raspy ache to her throat, her breaths turning shallow while she stares down into the courtyard.

Movement beside her makes her open her eyes. Cael has completely closed the distance between them. He guides her head to lay on his shoulder and places the pink rose coat around her shoulders and arms, warming her frame.

Elara is too tired to question him, so she wears it. She sits up and pulls the thick material down over her legs, no longer feeling the cold stone. The coat fits her perfectly, as if it were stitched and made precisely for her. She keeps her head on Cael’s shoulder, though the coldness starts to numb her bare hands. Tucking them inside the coat does not warm them enough.

Cael removes his light gray leather gloves. He slides one over her right hand, and the other over her left. The material inside is thick and warm, and it feels new, unlike the gloves that usually conceal his calloused, scarred hands.

Looking at Cael’s bare hands resting over her gloved ones, Elara smiles. “Thank you.”

A smile touches Cael’s lips as he raises his hands to sign. *You are forgetful. You always leave your coat behind. Do you think it is summer?*

Elara chuckles, relieved that she begins to understand his movements. “It is not a habit of mine. Back in Veyrenn, our winters do not possess this level of frost. I bore the chill of my kingdom without needing these thick layers to protect my arms. I am unaccustomed to the northern cold, which is why I hide under the thick blankets within my quarters.”

Cael’s eyebrows raise with surprise. *No coat?*

“No,” Elara looks ahead, exhaling a breath. “I do not know why we did not have enough winter clothes. Yet I did not complain. I believed the

blankets offered enough of a shield.”

He inclines his head. For a second, nothing passes between them except comfort. Then, Cael brings his hand to adjust the coat’s collar to shield Elara’s bare neck. Something inside her stomach flutters. She whispers. “Cael, do you ever grow weary of me?”

No, my Petal, Cael signs.

Elara’s heart warms at the endearment, remembering how the symbols looked on the pages of her guide. Every time he addresses her as his petal, a soft blush stains her cheeks.

Cael reads the uncertainty that makes her shoulders tense. He shifts on the stone step to face her, lifting his hands back into the space between them. He keeps his movements slow, using the specific signs she has been studying with him over the past few nights. *You are not a burden. Your presence does not tire me, Elara. Taking care of your frame is not a chore. It is the only peaceful refuge I possess in this palace.*

Elara studies his hands as they settle against his lap. There is something painful in the tenderness of his answer, because she has spent years believing that her presence is something others endure rather than something they seek. She turns her gaze toward the path, uncertain how to respond. Would allowing her heart to believe his words cause her grief in the future?

Cael watches her face. His signs melt her defenses, her heart racing with thoughts she cannot comprehend. He lifts his arms once more to continue. *I choose to remain by your side because I want to,* he signs, his expression softening. *I want to be here. I want to ensure you feel secure within these walls, and nothing will change that resolve.*

He lowers his hands and takes her gloved palm. His thumb traces a circle over the gray leather, drawing her against his shoulder while the winter breeze passes over the garden.

Looking down at their joined hands, Elara almost whispers her question. “What happens when I do not need a shield?”

Then I will simply sit beside you, Cael signs.

Leaning closer to his frame while enjoying his warmth, she asks a question she has held in her mind since yesterday. “Cael, why do you refer to me as a petal? Why not the common names like sweetheart?”

Cael’s smile fades into something more thoughtful. He looks toward the garden before returning his gaze to her, as if the answer is something he has

carried for much longer than he has ever intended to explain. *Such names are overrated, my petal.* He signs.

Elara's fingers tighten around his hand.

You remind me of a petal because a petal is something one runs to protect without hesitation. It is delicate, but not fragile. Easy to admire, easy to hold, though impossible to forget. His smile only grows warmer.

Elara sniffs, annoyed that her nose remains congested at a time like this. "I never knew I was seen in such a manner," she admits rather shyly. "All of my life, I believed that I am forgettable. Hideous because of my emotional state. I just wanted to disappear." A pause cracks her voice. "I heard men mock my body, whispering that it is too delicate. They always said no man would ever want me."

Cael's eyes remain upon hers, carrying an emotion she cannot name. Elara almost wishes she had not spoken. She has grown accustomed to keeping those words buried so deeply that hearing them aloud makes them feel more real. Slowly, he slides off the steps and lowers himself onto his knee before her feet.

A gasp escapes from Elara's mouth.

You are beautiful, he signs, his fingers cutting through the space. The growing wind gains strength around them, whistling across the stone courtyard while the chill drifts between them. Elara's eyes begin to sting, shifting her gaze away and then back to his hands.

You are my sanctuary. Your green eyes are filled with colors that none of these flowers can bring to give me peace. It has been hard for me to hold back my words of affection toward you, but I wish for you to know that I adore you deeply. He pauses, the softness of his adoration deepening as he looks up into her face. *Not a day goes by where I do not think of you, or focus entirely on making sure you are well.*

His eyes start to fill with unshed tears, the grey color turning glassy beneath the morning light. *Not a day goes by where I cannot help myself but feel angry with how people treat you, looking at you as if you are a mere pawn, and knowing the cruelty your father showed you. And I am not an angry man, petal.*

"Why? What have I done for you to feel such a way toward me?" Elara asks again, still unable to handle all of this sudden affection and the weight of his words toward her.

Because when I look at you, I do not feel the need to be the prince everyone expects me to become, he signs as tears stream down his reddening cheek. *I do not have to hide my hands, my silence, or the parts of me that people have spent years deciding were weaknesses. You look at me, and you do not search for what is missing.*

Elara's chest tightens as each word reaches her. Cael lowers his gaze for a moment, gathering himself before continuing his movements.

You listen to me with more patience than anyone else ever has. You never look at me as though my silence makes me less of a man. And when you are beside me, I find myself wanting to show you every part of who I am, even the parts I have spent my life keeping hidden. His thumb brushes over the side of her gloved hand.

Elara's lips tremble. "I have done all of that?"

Cael gives her a nod. *You did not have to try. That is what makes it precious.*

She looks away, overwhelmed by the tenderness in his expression, before slowly returning her gaze to him. "Then why does it feel as though I have done so little?"

Tears stream down Elara's cheeks as the warmth of his words embrace her broken heart. She covers her face, which she considers hideous. The poems of his she secretly and desperately read to figure out his feelings return to her memory.

Her entire body trembles as her sobs fill the garden. "No. I do not deserve this."

Cael's hands gently pulling her gloved ones away from her face. He presses his lips against her forehead. Still on one knee, he leans forward, offering her support.

Elara wraps her arms weakly around his neck, crying against him. Cael pats her back beneath the coat, bringing the direct warmth of his contact to her shivering frame.

She shakes her head against his shoulder. "I have been so afraid, Cael. I felt and thought that I was completely alone. Queen Maereth made me feel as though I were not enough for anyone." She sniffles, her voice breaking. "I prayed for happiness, but I feel like I will never catch it."

Cael looks up at her face, his cheeks stained with tears like hers. His hands slip away from her frame to sign his intent. *I will try my best to make you happy. I want to see you happy. The world has been cruel to your life.*

He shakes his head, his fingers trembling while he continues. *I want to be enough for you to rely on my strength. I want to prove my devotion through actions, rather than offering empty promises with my hands.*

Elara tenses, her frame torn between old loyalties and new realities. Her sobs fade, yet the force of the release leaves her frame trembling. For her entire life, she depended on a mother who harbored secrets, relying on withering flowers and falling petals to guide her choices. She prayed to a world that abandoned her for years, ignoring her desperate grasp for its attention.

Whoever or whatever granted Cael to her life, the truth remains clear. The marriage once felt like a punishment on the day King Eric displayed his cruelty during the cold exchange of rings.

Now, the pain of every single loss she tried to comprehend washes away in Cael's embrace.

First, you must rest. You are ill, Cael signs.

"No wonder my throat has been aching all morning. It must be the cold," Elara murmurs, bringing the back of her hand to her forehead.

Cael's smile shifts into a humorous line. *It is because you did not wear the coat enough.*

Elara almost chuckles, but a cough interrupts the sound, her teeth clattering from the cold. Before she can react, Cael gathers her into his arms. He carries her with ease, lifting her away from the benches and navigating the path toward the palace entrance.

The doors click shut behind them, cutting off the rushing sound of the fountain and locking the freezing winter wind outside. The warmth of the interior hallways greets her skin, though it does not ease the shivering within her limbs. She keeps her arms wrapped tightly around his neck in fear of slipping from his grip, watching the dark gray masonry of the corridors slowly pass over her head as he walks.

He adjusts his hold as they reach the base of the grand staircase, shifting her weight closer to his chest to offer a more reassuring embrace. Each step he takes up the winding stairs is slow, a prolonged silence hanging between them as her head rests against his shoulder.

When they finally reach Elara's bedchamber, he pushes open the door and places her onto the bed. It is an intimate routine they share now and Elara finds comfort in it. Cael drops to his knees and assists her in removing

her shoes. “I am only ill, Cael. I am not injured, and neither am I dying,” she smiles.

Cael pauses, his fingers resting against the leather edge of her shoes as he looks up from his position. He does not treat her condition with a frantic rush that would make her feel like a burden. He places her footwear onto the floorboards.

An illness requires care before it turns severe, he signs, his gestures clear so she can process his sentences through her exhaustion. *I am ensuring the frost does not claim another inch of your strength.*

He stands, reaching for the heavy blankets. He pulls the thick covers up to her chin, tucking the fabric around her shoulders to insulate her against the chill still clinging to her green dress.

Elara watches him, her head sinking into the pillows as the warmth of the chamber begins to soothe the sharp ache behind her ribs. Despite the burning sensation behind her eyes, she cannot bring herself to fall asleep just yet.

Turning onto her right side, she continues to observe him, her hands tucking under her cheek. When she notices his attempt to leave the bedchamber with quick steps, she speaks. “Stay.”

Cael instantly stops in his tracks and turns to face her. Her blinking slows, her eyelids growing heavy.

His eyes widen as his lips part, his face reddening. Without a single glance toward the door, he makes his way back toward the bed and sits on the floor beside her. Elara almost asks why he chooses to sit on the plush carpet instead of the mattress, but she holds the question back. She slips the gloves from her hands, reaches one palm from beneath the blankets, and lets it rest against the edge of the mattress, close enough to ensure he is still there.

Cael looks up at her hand and places his own over hers. Elara’s eyes finally close, the warmth of his palm remaining against her fingers as sleep begins to pull her under.

The last thing she feels is the touch of his lips on her forehead.

OceanofPDF.com

XXXI

QUIET BEAT BETWEEN

C

Cael’s eyes open, his vision blurring.

A weary breath escapes him. Every part of him wants to close his eyes again, but he forces himself upright instead. His legs ache from sitting on the floor. Stretching his arms forward, his long silk sleeve tugs up, where it almost reveals his tattoo.

Quickly adjusting his posture, he feels movement behind him on the bed. He turns toward Elara. She remains asleep, curled onto her side and facing him. His lips turn into a smile before he reaches forward and brushes the back of his hand across her forehead.

Her fever has risen. Cael’s hand remains against her forehead longer than necessary. The heat beneath his palm unsettles him more than he wants to admit. He has seen illness before. He knows that fever can pass with proper care, but the knowledge does little to ease the tightening in his chest.

His gaze lowers to her face, remaining on the faint flush across her cheeks. Only hours ago, she wept, overwhelmed by his confession and begging him to remain when she could no longer stay awake. The thought of leaving her, even for a short while, feels strangely difficult.

He makes no attempt to straighten his appearance except to adjust his crown. His hair remains disheveled, and creases run through his black shirt from the hours he slept.

Leaving the bedchamber behind him, Cael makes his way through the palace. The halls are nearly empty at this hour, lit only by scattered candles that cast long shadows across the stone. He descends the staircase and crosses the main hall, passing the family dining chamber, the kitchens, the council chambers, and several guest dining chambers before reaching the

dispensary tucked along the quieter wing of the palace. He raises his hand and knocks against the solid wooden door.

It opens within seconds. Nurse Elsher stands before him. She has served the palace for nearly ten years and remains one of the most trusted healers among the royal staff. She was also the woman who cared for Kaera throughout much of her childhood, often allowing the curious princess to wander the dispensary whenever no patients required her attention.

The chandelier behind her casts a warm glow across her dark skin. Despite the weariness within her brown eyes, kindness softens them the moment she recognizes him. Her black hair is gathered neatly beneath a light gray cap, and a dark coat hangs loosely over the simple clothing she wears beneath it.

"Your Highness," she greets, her voice rough before she clears her throat. "Please, come in. No one is here at this hour. I treated the last patient nearly an hour ago."

"What can I do for you, Your Highness?" Nurse Elsher asks as she crosses to the desk in the corner and begins searching the drawers. "Do you need medication for Her Highness?"

Cael turns toward her and signs. *Elara has a fever and the condition worsens. What should I do?*

Nurse Elsher takes a while to follow the full meaning of his signs. She nods in understanding.

"That is unfortunate, though it is common with fever. Does she have any other symptoms?"

Cael shakes his head before answering. *No. Only a worsening fever, a blocked nose, and dizziness.*

Nurse Elsher walks to the cabinets lining the far wall, each drawer marked with careful labels. Kneeling before the lowest cabinet, she unlocks it with a small ring of silver keys and removes a freshly prepared box containing a bottle of syrup.

After locking the drawer again, she returns and places the box into Cael's hands.

"Here," she says while he studies the label. "This syrup is meant for high fevers and sore throats. Regarding blocked or runny noses, the shelves remain empty at the moment." She lets out a sigh, looking over the glass vials. "The weather has been unpredictable. Warmth stayed for several days,

and then the bitter cold returned during the nights. Many of the maids and a few guards arrived here with the same illness."

Cael nods, his fingers lifting to deliver the question. *Are they well?*

"I have not received concerning reports," she replies with a shrug of her shoulders. "They remain in their quarters to rest." A faint laugh escapes her lips. "I swear to Riverath, I feel the onset of a chill myself. Perhaps that is old age speaking."

Cael considers her words, deciding he will arrange for another nurse to assist her so she can rest more often. For now, he signs again. *Do you have a small towel and a basin for the fever?*

Nurse Elsher nods at once. "Of course." She turns toward the desk and reaches beneath it, pulling out a plastic basin with a folded black towel resting inside. "These were stocked only an hour ago."

Cael accepts the basin and towel, balancing them carefully with the bottle of medicine already in his hands.

"Thank you for your hard work, Your Highness," she says with a warm smile, inclining her head. The gratitude catches him by surprise. "Though I assure you, I and the other nurses would be glad to help Her Highness if needed. Do not overwork yourself."

Cael gives a small nod, taking the glass vial from her palm. He leaves the dispensary and steps into the quiet hallway, his thoughts racing back to Elara. Caring for her frame has become an instinct rather than a task he promised to fulfill. He wants to be useful to her welfare in every way he can manage, to show her that his care does not depend upon a crown, a sword, or a voice.

The thought of her waking alone with a worsening fever unsettles him. His heart races at the image of her green eyes. For the first time in his life, he possesses a companion he can feel close to, someone whose presence inspires the words and verses he locks away.

He makes his way back toward her quarters, yet his pace slows halfway through the grand corridor. Memories surface from years prior, from moments when Kaera would fall ill as a child. He would sit beside her bed with a warm cup of water between his hands, waiting while she stirred enough to drink.

Cael makes his way toward the kitchen adjoining the family dining hall. When he opens the heavy door, darkness and silence greet his frame. He

lights the candles along the walls, casting a warm glow across the spacious area.

At the far end stands a smaller door. Cael crosses the kitchen and steps inside. This second kitchen is more compact, its walls lined with tall cabinets reaching almost to the ceiling. He remembers exactly where he left it. Opening one of the upper cabinets, he retrieves a thick silver flask wrapped in heavy boiled leather to keep water warm. He purchased the vessel years ago after falling ill during a harsh winter, then secured a second matching flask for Kaera. This spare remained untouched in the cupboard, waiting in case a need arose within the household.

He sets the bottle upon the marble counter before retrieving a small black pot from a lower cabinet and placing it on the stove. Soon the water reaches a gentle boil. He dips two fingers into the pot, testing it against his own skin before nodding, satisfied it will not scald her. Carefully, he pours it into the insulated bottle before sealing the lid.

“Your Highness?” A red-haired baker calls from behind, holding a tray of light caramel brown and pink striped pastries. “We prepared your favorite strawberry croissants. There is no special occasion, yet the staff wishes to offer this token for your past assistance.”

The dessert never originated in Riverath. Elias introduced the sweet to Cael at ten years old, bringing the recipe to the palace during a rare visit of comfort. Cael's body stills, a wave of caution passing through his frame. He realizes six pastries rest on the silver tray, warm and flaking beneath the light.

“We made two for your frame and Her Highness,” the baker continues, her voice lowering. “We wish to offer them to the King, yet we fear the risk to his health. Queen Maereth is unhappy. She entered the kitchens this morning for breakfast and scolded the entire staff without cause.”

Another baker steps forward, his voice a whisper. “We are concerned, Your Highness. She inspected the provisions herself.”

Cael’s eyebrows furrow with concern as he takes in their honesty. He lifts his free hand to sign. *I will speak with her. Do not let this trouble your minds. You performed no wrong.*

The staff smiles with relief. “Thank you, Your Highness. We pray for the quick healing of your princess. Nurse Elsher informed us she prepares further syrups for her care.”

Cael inclines his head. Hesitant to delay while Elara suffers, he takes the warm tray. With the medicine, basin, towel, and silver flask gathered securely within the strength of his arms, he returns upstairs toward her quarters. By the time he reaches the heavy door, a portion of the unease inside his chest disappears.

At least now, he has everything Elara needs.

He eases the door open, hoping not to disturb her sleep. He finds her sitting upright against the headboard, her eyes half open as they wander sleepily across the chamber.

"Cael?" she murmurs.

He closes the door behind him and crosses to the bedside. Setting everything on the table beside her, he lowers himself onto the edge of the mattress before lifting his hands. *How do you feel?*

Elara swallows carefully. "My throat still hurts."

His brows draw together. *Sleep. You need more of it.*

Elara shakes her head. "I am not tired anymore," she mumbles, her voice still thick. "I think I have rested enough."

Worry returns immediately. Cael presses the back of his hand against her forehead once more. Her temperature has not changed.

"What are those?" she asks, her gaze drifting toward the insulated bottle, the plastic basin, and the folded towel.

Cael picks up the silver flask. The boiled leather wrap remains warm beneath his hands. He unscrews the cap and pours a small amount of hot water into the metal vessel, deep enough to serve as a cup. He offers it to her lips.

Elara pauses before accepting it. She takes a sip, letting the warmth travel down her throat. A breath escapes her lips as she lowers the cup. "This is nice… very nice."

Cael steadies her with one hand against her arm before lifting the other to sign. *You must eat a meal before medication.*

Her gaze drifts to the tray of croissants and her cheeks warm, her desperate hunger evident. A smile touches his lips. He sets the tray on her blanket-covered lap, letting her take as much as she desires. First, she picks one up by the far right of the tray and takes a bite. Cael sits by the edge and takes a bite for his own. Elara fills the silence with a hum.

"Exquisite," Elara mumbles with her mouth still full.

A few crumbs fall onto the blanket. Cael reaches over and brushes them away with his fingertips before returning to his own croissant. He holds back his chuckle. Sweet memories between him and Elias returns, something that only happens when he eats this certain dessert or when he passes his library occasionally.

As he chews, his head drifts to the time where Elias hugged Cael, where he was frustrated and helpless of how he did not understand Sign Language and took time adjusting to it.

Cael had not been crying, nor had he asked for comfort, but Elias had offered it anyway. As Cael grew older, training, duties, and the mockery surrounding his silence taught him to become more guarded. Physical affection became something he rarely accepted without wondering what had prompted it.

That is why the memory lingers now. Elara's presence does not feel like something he has to earn through usefulness, and Elias's kindness had once felt the same. For a moment, Cael wonders whether he should have returned to Elias more often, whether too much time has passed for the gesture to mean what it once did. He pushes the thought aside and reaches for the medicine.

By the time Cael and Elara are done, there are two croissants left, and he plans on giving them to Kaera later. He reaches for the box, removing the bottle of syrup before holding it up for her to see.

Elara understands. She pours the thick syrup into its cap and takes a sip, her eyebrows furrowing at the bitter taste.

Cael watches her. Her eyes remain heavy with sleep, every movement softened by the fever and exhaustion. Tangled strands of hair frame her face, with a few crumbs still resting near her lips. He finds himself lingering on the sight longer than he intends to.

Oh, my beautiful petal, he thinks, warmth rising into his cheeks. *If you were only a single petal in an endless garden, I believe I would still find you and admire you above all the rest.* His hands begin to move instinctively, but he stops himself before forming the words.

Some things, he decides, are better left within the quiet of his own thoughts.

Elara watches him for a moment before scooting closer. Her right hand reaches toward his leg, pointing to his calf. "Your calf. You kept walking in an improper manner. Are you injured?"

Cael blinks, surprised. He had forgotten about the ache entirely while tending to her, barely noticing the unevenness in his steps. She had noticed. *It is only a scratch,* he signs.

Concern does not leave her face. “Scratches do not make you limp. You need rest, too.”

Cael lowers his hands. His gaze settles on her instead, taking in the tiredness beneath her eyes and the way she struggles to remain awake even while trying to worry about him. A faint shuffle of footsteps sounds beyond the door, but he pays it no attention. Instead, he reaches for her hands and encloses them within his own.

“Assure me you will take care of yourself too.” Her eyes grow glassy again, tears gathering along her lashes. “I cannot bear the thought of you always caring for everyone else and putting yourself after them.” Her voice weakens as she looks down. “It hurts me far more than I can put into words.”

Cael’s chest tightens. He brings his thumbs to her cheeks, carefully wiping away the tears before they can fall. Elara tilts her head into his touch without hesitation, seeking the warmth of his calloused hands against her skin.

Leaning closer, Cael adjusts the pillows behind her, lifting one before settling it against her back. Once he is satisfied that she is comfortable, he gently guides her head onto them. His fingers remain against her cheek for another moment.

I will, he signs.

OceanofPDF.com

XXXII
THE GROWING HEAT

C

Cael opens the door to find Kaera.

Her arms remain folded across her chest, the upper portion of her sleeve pressing against the cool stone wall where the glowing candle flame fails to reach her frame. She wears a long black dress composed of a smooth, fine fabric, a small gray coat accompanying her bare arms to offer a touch of warmth.

“So, this is where you stay now?” Kaera asks with a thin tint of humor, a soft smile gracing her lips.

Cael recognizes the humor for what it is, a shield she reaches for whenever something hurts more than she wishes to reveal. He does not question her state or mention her vulnerability unless she chooses to reveal it herself. Yet the remaining puffiness beneath her eyelids tugs at his heart.

Cael looks down at the silver tray holding the two leftover pastries, extending the offering toward Kaera. Her eyes widen with confusion while she lifts one and eats it, one hand resting beneath her mouth to catch any falling crumbs.

“Is this intended for me? How thoughtful of your mind,” Kaera almost laughs. “Perhaps you missed my company? Do not worry, I missed yours while you stayed away.”

A smile upturns Cael’s lips at her words. Kaera finishes the final bite, retrieving a clean linen handkerchief from the inside of her coat to wipe her fingers, ensuring no crumb drops while her expression becomes serious. “Father requested me to locate your frame.”

Cael’s shoulders stiffen. He expected his father to remain resting within his quarters. He would not call for him unless something of importance

required his presence. Cael lifts his hands to sign. *Is it urgent? Do you possess any particular idea why he requires my presence?*

Kaera folds her soiled handkerchief, sliding the fabric back into her small pocket. “He needs us. Including Elara. Yet when we meet his frame within his private quarters, we can inform him of her cold.” A pause cracks the quiet between them. “I think it is something troublesome yet again.”

Cael nods, while his attention drifts toward the closed door behind him. His hand remains upon the wood for another moment while he steps away. They begin walking side by side through the corridor, their footsteps soft against the stone. The palace is quieter than it has been for the past few days, while the distant movements of servants and guards remind Cael that the morning began without his oversight.

Kaera breaks the silence. “How is Elara?”

Cael looks down at her. *Her fever has not worsened. She is resting.*

Kaera smiles, shaking her head. “It reminds me of the moments when you cared for my frame when I fell ill. You abandoned your duties to care for me, while Father and Mother stayed distressed.” A quiet laugh escapes her mouth. “I recall how your eyebrows furrowed because of how bland the hot chicken soup tasted.”

He laughs, his shoulders shaking at the recollection.

Kaera’s smile fades. “For now, we all need rest. Let the chefs prepare Elara’s meals, Annie bring what she requires, and have the nurse check her condition every day.” A pause follows her words. “You overwhelm your frame. I wonder if you will ever stop.”

He halts his steps and faces her, raising his hands to sign in a firm manner. *I willingly chose to care for her frame. I can prepare the things she needs, and I can ensure she is well. Like how I performed for you. Am I not capable?*

Kaera’s eyes widen, her eyebrows furrowing with hurt. “I was recommending that you take a break. It was a reminder.”

Cael relaxes, feeling guilt for his sudden outburst. He does not break his composure or lashing out. *I apologize,* he signs, unable to deliver more symbols while his strength begins to falter.

“No,” Kaera’s fingers curl at her sides, her breathing heavy while her humor disappears. “Do not dismiss this, Cael. You stayed focused entirely on this section of the palace, refusing to let anyone in, while the entire palace fell into chaos. Father was hurt, Mother was screaming at the guards,

and I was left alone within my quarters wondering if you even cared to look for me. You did not check on my welfare a single time."

Cael stands motionless, the guilt striking his chest while he watches a tear track down her cheek.

"You hide away," she continues, her voice lowering to a trembling whisper that echoes off the stone walls. "You keep your heart hidden beneath your duties. You expect me to tell you everything, to talk about the jester I care for, but you offer me nothing in return. You have never shared your true thoughts with my life."

She gasps for her breath, forcing her frame to straighten. "I am your sister, Cael, but I watch you reach for Elara first, giving her the immediate concern you denied to my safety during the crisis." A sob escapes her mouth while she struggles to hold it back. "I have been afraid for days. Father relies on your strength," she points a finger at his frame. "I am pushed aside, as if I hold no strength and knowledge to help this family."

Cael's chest tightens as memories begin to surface, small moments he had never thought to hold onto. Kaera waiting outside his study with a smile, asking if he had a moment to spare. Kaera sitting beside him during meals, speaking about something that had happened during her day while his attention remained fixed on the reports before him. There had been moments when she had reached toward him, and he had always believed she would understand when duty demanded his attention. He had never considered that, perhaps, she had been waiting for him to reach back.

He had been afraid for Elara. That much remains undeniable. When he had seen her vulnerable, his instincts had carried him toward her before he could consider anything else. But that fear had never meant he felt less for Kaera, nor had his concern for Elara ever been intended to make his sister feel forgotten.

He simply had not realized how often his instincts had placed one person before another, leaving Kaera to believe she had become the one he could afford to neglect.

"And Mother," she begins, her eyelashes fluttering as tears continue to stream down her cheeks. "She put me aside as well, insulted me, and humiliated me more times than I can count for no reason. That day when she lashed out at Elara and me, not once have you approached me and asked if I were alright. Instead, you rushed to Elara in my own bedchamber, and made me feel forgotten."

He shakes his head, taking a step forward to hug his younger sister. Seeing her in such distress breaks him, and knowing she is enduring it because of him only pierces his heart further.

Cael does not attempt to raise his hands, knowing he holds no excuses. He takes a step toward his younger sister, his arms opening to offer comfort while Kaera takes a trembling step backward.

“Do not,” she whispers, wiping her cheek with the heel of her hand. “Do not make this disappear with an embrace, Cael.”

He stops. Her lips tremble while she looks at his frame, her anger now buried beneath a deep sorrow. “I know you face heavy duties. I know you must navigate the crises of this palace. I witnessed your strength after the attack, and I know you labor to protect this kingdom.”

Kaera draws in a shaky breath, her fingers curling into the fabric of her sleeves. “But I am still your sister, Cael. You left me to face the terror alone, without a single sign to ensure I survived the night.”

Cael’s hands fall to his sides.

“I was standing right there,” she continues. “In my own bedchamber. I was frightened too. Mother had just humiliated me, Father was sick, the palace was falling apart, and you looked at Elara as though nothing else existed.” Her voice cracks. “I kept telling myself it was because she was frightened. Because she was new here. Because she needed you more than I did.” She laughs once, though there is no humor within it. “I kept making excuses for you because you are my brother, and I thought surely you would notice me eventually.”

Another tear slips down her cheek. “But you never did.” Kaera looks away, pressing her lips together as she tries to steady herself. “And then I saw you disappear behind that door with her. Three days, Cael. Three days, and I did not know whether you were sleeping, whether you were eating, whether you had even left the bedchamber.”

She looks back at him. “I was afraid for you.” The words leave her more quietly than everything before them. “And I hated myself for being angry with Elara because of it.”

Cael’s expression falters.

“I do not hate her,” Kaera says quickly, almost as though she fears he might misunderstand. “She has been kind to me. She has done nothing wrong. That is what makes this worse.” Her voice begins to shake again. “I love you. But I do not know where I am supposed to stand anymore when

everyone seems to need a different part of you.” She swallows hard. “Father needs his heir. The court needs its prince. Elara needs the man who promised to protect her.”

Before Cael can reply, Kaera interrupts once again. “Do you like Elara because of that girl you painted?”

His body jolts backward, his back leaning against the stone wall for support.

“I have wondered about it for days,” Kaera admits, her voice barely above a whisper. “I kept telling myself it was impossible. That she only reminded me of her, and that there was no reason for you to feel anything because of a girl you have not seen in years.”

Cael’s fingers curl against his palms.

“But then I saw the way you looked at Elara.” She swallows. “And I remembered those paintings.” Her eyes become glassy again. “You never told me who she was. You never told me why you painted her so many times. You never told me whether you ever found her again.” She takes a small step toward him.

“So, tell me, Cael.” Her voice trembles. “Is that why you cannot look away from Elara?”

Cael’s hands lift, but they stop before the first sign can form. His thoughts have become tangled, each one colliding with the next. He had spent years believing the girl in those paintings belonged to a distant part of his life, a memory he had never been able to recover. Elara had been different. She was Elara. He had told himself that every time the resemblance unsettled him, refusing to let an old memory determine what he felt for the woman standing before him now. Kaera’s question forces the possibility into the open.

What if that was never a coincidence?

Kaera watches him while they continue down the hall. “You never have to answer me if you are not ready,” she says. “I only wanted to know if you ever thought about it too.”

Cael finally looks at her. He lowers his hands, staring at his palms for a moment before forcing himself to meet her eyes. His fingers move, the gestures heavy with his internal conflict. *I have wondered.* He hesitates, his hands lingering in the space between them. *I do not know if she is the girl I remember from those childhood canvases.* His chest tightens with the

uncertainty, though there is one thing he holds absolute. *I do not want to look at Elara and see a ghost.*

Kaera watches him closely, but she remains silent, allowing his revelation to settle over the corridor.

Cael swallows past the dryness in his throat before lifting his arms to add one final statement. *She is Elara.*

“I have wondered as well,” Kaera admits, her voice barely above a whisper. “More than once.” Her fingers loosen at her sides, her posture relaxing as she draws a slow breath. “Perhaps I should not have asked you now. You have enough to carry.” She pauses. “We shall meet Father.”

He makes no move to stop her, nor does he allow a single question to linger in his mind. Knowing he must move ahead, he does. They walk the remaining distance to the royal chambers in complete silence. Before they knock on the door, Kaera exhales a quiet breath. “You are limping.”

Cael’s eyebrows raise, surprised by her sudden observation. *Did you notice? Is it that obvious?*

“Of course,” Kaera shakes her head. “You are obvious, Cael. You never told anyone that you are injured.”

It is merely a scratch.

Kaera hums, her eyebrow raising to indicate that she does not believe his words. Cael almost smiles before he knocks on the door. Hartwell pulls open the double doors. The space behind him reveals the dim, soft warmth of his parents’ bedchamber, the familiar scent of burnt lavender and medicinal tonics filling his nostrils.

“You both are here,” Hartwell says, a relieved smile gracing his face before he bows and steps aside to grant them passage.

Cael and Kaera share a glance before stepping inside. King Raelith rests against a mountain of plush velvet pillows at the center of the bed, his frame weak, yet his face relaxes into a soft smile the moment his children cross the threshold. The severe distance he maintains before the court vipers disappears in their presence.

His hair grows more silver. Thinning up top and in his beard. Both the prince and princess still, avoiding Queen Maereth beside him.

“My children,” Raelith says, his voice raspy and thin. He reaches a trembling hand toward them, his gaze sweeping over Kaera’s tired face before his eyes settle on Cael. He pauses, his eyebrows drawing together.

“Where is Elara? I had hoped she would accompany you so I might ensure she is recovering well from the disaster.”

Lifting his bare hands into the space, Cael steps toward the side of the bed, his signs slow and clear. *Elara is ill, Father. I have left her to rest until the fever breaks.*

“I am sure Nurse Elsher can care for her,” King Raelith assures them, his hands guiding Cael closer to the edge of his bed while Kaera remains by the side, standing. “How are you feeling, son?”

Cael swallows, feeling the chamber shift as a wave of heat builds beneath his skin. Beside him, Kaera’s sharp intake of breath is unnoticed by anyone but him. He recognizes what she is feeling after her earlier confession in the corridor, so he steps away from the mattress to stand by her side, keeping his composure intact. *Well.*

“Is his health improving?” Kaera asks Hartwell, choosing to address him rather than asking her father directly. “Internally, at least.”

“No, Your Highness,” Hartwell admits, bowing his head deeply. “I apologize, but we are still searching for the root of His Majesty’s illness. Let us all hope for the best, and expect a positive turn.”

Queen Maereth slips off the far side of the bed and stands to her full height, her hands adjusting the heavy folds of her thick black velvet robe. “That is not the purpose for which Raelith summoned you. Silence yourselves and listen to him.”

Neither Cael nor Kaera lashes back, their focus locked onto their father’s worsening health and the fragile state of his recovery. King Raelith clears his throat, his body shuddering from the force. “Do not bring trouble, dear Maereth.” He raises a weak, reassuring hand to silence his wife, his focus returning to his children. He rests his hand over the documents scattered across his lap, taking a slow breath before he speaks.

“The high council advisors and the outer district lords have gathered in the main hall,” the King explains. “They are demanding signatures and answers regarding the marketplace blast. I am far too weak to endure the roaring arguments of the court chamber today.” Raelith shifts the documents across his lap, selecting one of the sealed reports before him. “The blast has made the southern districts uneasy. Merchants are already refusing to move their goods through the lower roads, fearing another attack, while the rumors of Zahraani involvement continue to spread without evidence.”

His thumb presses against the edge of the parchment. “We cannot allow fear to close the trade routes for us. The vanguard will be divided. One portion will reinforce the southern roads and remain near the marketplace, while another will patrol the eastern approach where our merchants enter the city. Their orders are to protect the routes, not provoke Zahraan or cross the border.”

Kaera’s expression sharpens. “So, the deployment is meant to protect the trade lines while making it clear that Riverath is not preparing for war.”

Raelith gives a faint nod. “Exactly. We will increase protection without giving the council reason to claim that we are turning a marketplace attack into a military campaign. Therefore, I want you and Cael to enter the grand hall together. You will present the new vanguard deployment and sign the emergency logs before the entire assembly. For the first time, you shall manage the court alone, without my presence to guide the lords.”

Cael’s heart races. To stand ahead of the critical eyes of his father without his normal composure tests his frame, a wave of pressure rushing through his joints. He must face the sovereign who relies on his strength, and the weight of the family’s future now rests on his bare hands.

Kaera takes a half-step closer to Cael, her posture straightening as she looks back at their father. “We will handle it.”

King Raelith smiles, reaching out his weak hand and squeezes Cael’s wrist, his gaze filled with faith. “Do not fear their voices, my son. You are the heir to this throne, and Kaera possesses a sharp mind to aid you. Elara has yet to improve, though I do not doubt her abilities. It is time for the kingdom to see the strength and unity of the generation that will one day rule these lands.”

The reassuring smile on Kaera’s lips disappears.

Cael pulls his hand away a little too quickly, feeling Kaera’s gaze. Queen Maereth speaks instantly. “Is that how you appreciate your own father’s sacrifice and hard work? He is offering you a position only a sufficient king deserves to hold. Not a mute boy.”

King Raelith does not seem angry while he offers another weak smile. “Cael is capable of becoming a better king than my own rule. Even now, his achievements as a prince surpass the choices of my own reign.” He clears his hoarse throat once more. “I believe in your strength. All of you.”

Kaera is the first to exit the bedchamber, the door shutting behind her with force that vibrates the stone. Cael glances back at his father for a final

moment, offering him a formal bow before rushing off. He ignores Maereth's growing frustration from behind, signaled by her heavy exhale, and rushes toward Kaera, recognizing the depth of her feelings. It is evidence that has been laying before him long before his eyes could truly recognize it.

Cael maintains a habit of studying people and objects with a precise focus. At least, that was his belief. Now, he realizes the sheer magnitude of what he has missed.

"You follow my steps because you noticed my tears," Kaera cries while she moves down the corridor, reaching her quarters. Her hand presses the heavy latch. She turns to face Cael. "You see the truth now. Father reaches for your strength first. He calls for your presence first. His eyes hold a different adoration toward your life."

The back of her hand wipes her tears away while they stream with anger. "You possess a purpose in this palace, Cael. Father relies on your strength, and the high council fears your authority. You take the lead for this lineage." Her voice trembles while she continues to pour out her heart. "But what am I to this family? People address me as Her Highness, but the title remains empty. I manage small duties around the kingdom, but I remain known only as your sister, an afterthought in these halls. I possess the knowledge to help. Still, they push my frame into the shadows, denying my voice in court and the chance to protect the family I love." She shakes her head while the tears stream down her cheeks.

"It is unfair," her voice breaks, and she pushes the door open, shutting the heavy wood behind her frame. "Too unfair," she says at last, her voice mumbled while her heavy sobs remain the only sounds left to hear in the quiet hallway.

Cael stands by the closed door, taking Kaera's words into his thoughts. His father pressured him and overwhelmed his schedule with duties far more than a prince should bear, yet he knew all along the weight was intended for his own growth. Raelith expressed love toward Cael by abandoning his own administrative chaos to ensure his son fared well, checking on his frame at night and treating him with care until Cael requested boundaries. His father demonstrated his belief through actions rather than words, carrying a warm smile.

A single tear falls from Cael's eye, slipping to his chin until it lands on the carpet. Memories of their childhood surface, striking his chest with

guilt. He remembers Kaera at a younger age, standing at his side to mimic his precise gestures during his lessons. She copied his movements with hopeful eyes staring toward their father, starving for a word of praise or a sliver of the same recognition.

King Raelith offered guidance to his daughter, but his heaviest hopes stayed locked onto Cael. Kaera dropped her arms in silence whenever his attention drifted back to the heir. His father spent years pouring a different magnitude of focus into one child, blind to the heartbreak of the girl waiting in the shadows for equal recognition.

Cael turns and forces his heavy legs along the corridor, bypassing the door to Elara’s quarters. Kaera’s words continue to flood his racing heart, piercing his thoughts.

Seeking an ounce of clarity amidst the chaos, he changes his direction and makes his way toward his private sanctuary.

OceanofPDF.com

XXXIII

THE QUEEN'S DECISION

Elara's presses the back of her hand against her forehead, expecting to feel the heat that had troubled her for days. Nothing remains. Only the coolness of her own skin greets her touch. The soreness in her throat is gone. Relieved, she slips from the mattress, only to shiver and retreat beneath the sheets again. The winter has grown harsher, and she realizes a coat alone may not be enough to keep her warm.

"This is why I loathe winter!" Asma complains from the garden below, groaning as she looks over the withered beds. "I only wish I could grow every vibrant flower and watch them bloom again."

Elara finds herself smiling as she listens to the voices below. After days of waking to silence, hearing them again makes the palace feel less empty. She turns and makes her way toward the balcony, pulling the glass doors open. A stronger gust rushes into the chamber, stirring the curtains behind her and sending a chill across her skin. Elara shivers as she steps outside, the numbing cold of the stone seeping through her bare feet.

Her eyes find Asma, Claire, and Celestia below, all three bundled against the cold. Asma is crouched beside one of the flower beds, inspecting the soil with a dissatisfied expression, while Claire gathers a few fallen stems into a basket. Celestia stands nearby, rubbing her hands together for warmth as she listens to Asma complain.

Celestia lays her hand on Asma's shoulder, offering her a smile. "It is alright, Asma. The winter passes quickly most of the time. In no time, we will be able to plant every flower we wish."

Elara looks down at her simple nightgown, recalling the heavy gowns and dresses waiting for her in the changing chamber. Another shiver

escapes her before she returns inside, closing the balcony doors behind her. She rubs her hands together and makes her way toward the changing chamber, intending to warm the water for a quick bath before dressing.

A familiar figure stands inside, his back turned toward her. Cael's dark hair falls against his neck, leaving the scars crossing his back exposed. Some are thin and pale, others darker against his skin. Elara's gaze catches on one before moving to another, following the uneven marks without meaning to. The floral tattoo winding around his left arm is partially visible, the lilies stretching along his skin in intricate patterns.

Fragments of his poems return to her thoughts. Lines she read in isolation now carry a different meaning. The wounds he described in those verses have remained hidden beneath his long sleeves and the clothes covering his skin all this time.

Elara's eyes drift toward the lilies winding around his arm. She has no memory of reading about those. Why lilies? Why had he chosen to place something so delicate against skin marked by so much pain?

She turns her head away, realizing how long she has been looking. Her fingers tighten against the door. She should close it. She should give him the privacy he was never meant to lose.

He turns at the sound of the door. His eyes meet hers.

Elara's cheeks grow warm. Her gaze drops to the floorboards. "I am sorry. I did not know you were here." She turns and pulls the heavy door shut behind her.

Burying her face in her palms, Elara stands there, mortified. She can still see the scars whenever she closes her eyes, and worse, she can remember the fragments he had written about them. Had he written those poems because he could not speak of the wounds aloud? Had anyone ever known what he meant when he wrote them?

Her hands slowly fall from her face. Her own scars come to mind, the ones she had spent years hiding beneath fabric. Had Cael ever looked at his in the same way? Had he once wished they were not there, or had he simply learned to live with what could not be changed? Elara turns toward the wardrobe, determined to occupy herself with anything else. She takes two steps before stopping, her fingers curling against the fabric of her nightgown.

She cannot forget what she saw.

A moment later, the door pulls open. Cael wears a long black coat with wide lapels over a dark vest. A silver chain hangs against his high collar, catching the dim light. His black trousers are held by a leather belt with a silver buckle, his hands hidden within his dark leather gloves. It takes Elara a moment to stabilize herself.

He halts in the doorway, a familiar gray coat draped over his forearm. His jaw is set, while one gloved hand rests against the polished silver pommel of the ceremonial sword at his hip.

Elara studies him for another moment. The formal coat. The silver chain. The ceremonial sword. Even the rigid way he carries himself is different from the man who had stood before her only moments earlier. He is about to step before the kingdom.

“Are you leaving somewhere?” Elara asks, her voice breaking the silence of the bedchamber.

To court. Everyone is waiting for my presence, Cael signs, his gaze avoiding hers as the tips of his ears and nose redden beneath the dim light.

“Has something occurred again?” Elara’s eyebrows furrow, her fingers tightening against the fabric of her nightgown.

He pauses, his expression composed. Then he steps forward and places the coat over Elara’s shoulders, guiding her arms into its thick fabric before stepping back.

The high council and the outer lords have gathered, Cael signs. *They are demanding answers and signatures regarding the marketplace blast.* His hands pause before continuing. *Father wants Kaera and me to present the vanguard deployment and sign the emergency logs in his place.*

Elara remains still, the warmth of his coat still draped over her shoulders as she takes in his explanation.

“What about Raelith? Will you attend without him?” Elara asks, pausing before her voice lowers into the silence of the chamber. “How will you be able to bring your words out in court?”

He is still weak, Cael signs, his eyebrows relaxing into their usual furrow. *Kaera will speak her part, and we will accompany each other.*

A painful knot tightens in Elara’s throat. “You did not tell me.”

You are ill, my petal. You need rest. Cael reaches forward and brings his palm to Elara’s forehead.

Elara closes her eyes, the tension in her shoulders loosening. His touch is warm against her forehead, familiar enough to silence the questions

pressing against her mind.

He pulls his hand away, but Elara's fingers close around the fabric of his coat. "Do not do all of this on your own. I know Kaera will be there, but..." She swallows and tries again. "I cannot keep lying here while everyone else decides what I am capable of."

Elara forces herself to meet his eyes again. "I have spent my entire life being told that I am too fragile to matter. I will not let a fever make that decision for me again."

Cael's hands begin to rise.

"I know you are afraid," she whispers.

His hands stop.

Elara takes a small step closer. "I am afraid too." Her fingers loosen against his coat. "But I want to stand beside you." She pauses, her voice barely above a whisper. "Let me be your voice, Cael."

She shakes her head, forcing her voice out against the aching soreness in her throat. "You put the entire kingdom on your own shoulders all the time, but I cannot allow you to stand in that dark hall alone. I do not care about the rumors or the fever."

Cael's hands begin to rise, only for Elara to interrupt.

She takes a step closer to him. "I want to be your voice, Cael. Let me stand beside you."

Cael's lips part, hands attempting to lift to sign a word. Nothing follows. A knock at the door interrupts them. Elara steps away from Cael as Annie enters the chamber, a smile blooming across her face.

"Good morning, Your Highnesses," she says, bowing to them both before turning to Elara. "I see that your puffy eyes and the redness across your face have faded, Your Highness."

Before Elara can form her words, Cael gives Annie a short incline of his head before stepping across the quarters to exit, leaving her behind. Her eyes remain fixed on the closed door in disbelief at how he left her, unable to comprehend that he did not acknowledge her words. Cael being tense, indifferent, and distant aches her broken heart.

The weight of everything that has happened presses against her again. Her mother's secrets, Maereth's cruelty, and the uncertainty of what waits beyond these walls.

Annie turns her head, offering Elara a weak chuckle. "I am sure His Highness is only distressed."

Elara swallows before turning to the dressing area to finish her routine. Annie helps by granting her the warm water she desperately needs, helping her dry and dress in one of her large gowns.

Annie helps Elara with the golden crystal pendants on her ears and extends her hand to reach for the heart pendant necklace. Elara watches her reach for it, and her mouth speaks before her mind can. “I prefer not to wear it today,” she says, taking the ornament and placing it inside her jewelry casket.

“Oh,” Annie pulls her hand away, her eyebrows raised, but she does not press for an answer. Lastly, she places the crown atop her head, absolute silence surrounding them.

By the time they are done, Elara stands by the mattress, leaving the gray coat on the bed, and reaches for the pink garment instead. She slides her arms through the sleeves, convincing herself that it is because the fabric is thicker, but her fingers linger over the hem for a moment.

Annie continues to watch Elara from the side, smoothing the linen towels before she walks toward the exit. Her steps pause near the threshold, her head turning back to face Elara. “Your Highness?”

Elara looks up from the bed, her hands folding the pink coat neatly over her frame and her thick gown to secure the warmth. “Yes?”

“I know it is not my place to invade your personal feelings, but I hope you are doing well. That whatever is affecting you will ease,” Annie says. “I am here for you.”

Elara averts her gaze, her eyes tracking the dark patterns of the stone floorboards as her throat tightens. The overwhelming sting of Cael’s sudden departure and the crushing weight of her mother’s secrets lock her voice into a fragile constraint.

“I am fine,” she whispers, refusing to look up, her chin dropping toward the collar of her pink coat. “You may leave.”

Annie bows at once and exits. Elara sinks against the bed. Her trembling hands grasp her skirt, fingers splaying across the glimmering fabric. Her lips part, her voice aching to be heard. Even if it is the hollow air. “I cannot cry.”

Her blurring eyes lift toward the jewelry casket, but another memory rises before she can stop it. Elara’s fingers tighten around the pink wool, the warmth beneath her palms reminding her of a comfort she has not allowed herself to remember in years.

“Why are you weeping, my dear?” Aline asks, having just returned from her duties. For a moment, she stands by the threshold of Elara’s sleeping quarters before she enters and closes the door behind her. She steps forward and lowers herself onto her knees, her arms wrapping around Elara’s frame.

Elara buries her face into her mother’s neck, unable to speak from the heavy sobs interrupting her attempts to bring her words out.

Aline does not press further for an explanation. Instead, she sways back and forth in a slow rhythm, her fingers stroking through Elara’s dark hair. “There is no need for you to speak,” she whispers, pressing her lips against Elara’s temple. “Your mother will set aside every single one of her royal duties, if it ensures you are no longer sad.”

“Nobody likes me, Mother,” Elara cries, her hands rubbing the tears streaming down her cheeks. “I have no friends.”

“Oh, my dear,” Aline tightens her embrace around Elara, holding her closer against her chest. “I love you. I love you very much, and you are my friend. The best one I hold.”

“No, I am not.” Elara shakes her head, her breath hitching.

Aline’s fingers pause their stroking before she gently moves her head back to ensure Elara’s eyes meet hers. A soft smile graces her lips. “How about this? Do you recall the princess and the knight story, which you disliked?”

Elara sniffles, her voice trembling. “Yes.”

“The princess, Grace, she spent her entire life locked within her castle because her parents were cruel.” Her mother’s voice softens into a gentle cadence. “They appeared kind and righteous for the public eye, but they were horrible beasts behind locked doors, treating their daughter as a mere transaction for power. For many years, the knight could not gather the courage to protect her, leaving the princess to weep alone in the dark of her bedchamber.”

“But the story does not end in her defeat, Elara. Within that cage, the princess carried a hidden, unyielding courage that no beast could strip away. When the castle fell into darkness and the knight himself was wounded and silenced, unable to speak or defend the gates, it was not the knight who saved the princess. It was Princess Grace who stepped forward into the hall. She chose to stand right beside him, shielding his broken

frame and using her own voice to command the kingdom when he could not."

Aline smiles, her fingers brushing a stray strand of hair behind Elara's ear. "True courage does not mean you are never frightened, my dear. It means that when someone you love is facing a storm, you find the strength to step beyond your sanctuary and stand beside them."

THE MEMORY DISSOLVES into the present. Elara blinks, the pale morning light of Riverath returning to focus as her fingers tighten around the gray wool of Cael's coat.

Aline's story remains with her. The frightened princess. The wounded knight. The girl who stepped beyond the safety of her chamber because someone she loved needed her.

Elara slowly looks down at the coat in her hands. That was why the story had always stayed with her.

Elara draws a deep breath and wipes her tears. She cannot remain in the bedchamber forever. She rises and leaves, the chattering of workers drifting upward from the floor below. The palace no longer feels quite as suffocating as it had moments ago.

Cael is waiting beside her door.

Elara stops, finding him occupied as his eyes look ahead of the corridor, before he turns to her.

"You have been here this whole time?" she asks.

His eyes move across Elara's dress and coat. Then, onto her stained red cheeks that she forgot to wash. He raises his hands. *I was waiting for you.*

Elara stands still, her eyelashes flickering as relief washes over her. "I thought you already started."

Cael tilts his head, then straightens with a faint smile. *Never, my petal. I would never leave you. Whatever words you speak, I will carry them with me.* He extends his hand.

Elara steps forward and takes his extended hand, allowing the lingering coldness in her fingers to melt against the warmth of his touch. He wraps his palm around hers, anchoring her as they turn away from the bedchamber. They walk down the stone corridor side by side. The upper wings dissolve as they descend the grand staircase, replaced by a turbulent hum rising from the lower levels of the palace.

Reaching the court chamber, the vanguards stationed at the perimeter grip the massive iron handles, pulling the double doors inward to grant them entry.

A blast of chaotic noise rushes out to meet them. The hall is packed to the tiers with shouting advisors, outer district lords, and noble families, their voices clashing in a frantic uproar over the security logs and the marketplace disaster. Arguments bounce off the high arched stone ceilings as men gesture aggressively across the floor.

The moment Cael steps past the threshold with Elara by his side, some of the noise quiets as the closer rows of councilors notice his broad frame and dark court garments, their voices dropping into hushed whispers. Further into the chamber, many of the distant lords do not quiet, their discussions continuing to roar over the assembly as they demand answers.

Elara's eyes land on Kaera, who stands near the head of the table. A recollection of their silent distance over the past days flits through her mind. She had not been able to speak with her. Now, seeing the shadows beneath Kaera's eyes and the tension in her shoulders, Elara understands how little rest the princess has had.

Kaera remains where she stands, holding her ground against the noise. Elara steps forward, unable to prevent the soft smile appearing on her lips. When their eyes meet, Kaera's breath catches. "Elara? I thought you were unwell," she says, shifting her stance while the long length of her black sleeves hangs low. Silver crystals shimmer across the fabric covering her shoulders.

The striking gown makes Kaera resemble Queen Maereth, but her eyes carry none of the Queen's cold malice.

"I feel better now," Elara says, hesitation lingering in her tone before she gathers enough courage to continue. "Thank you for everything, Kaera. I should have told you this before... but you were very brave for defending me against Maereth." She pauses. "You defended me as if I were already your family. It is possible..." A small smile touches her lips. "It is possible you are even a best friend."

Kaera's expression brightens, a thin tint of pink spreading across her cheeks as the outer chamber tension drops from her posture. "Really? Am I truly brave?"

Elara chuckles, adoring how Kaera brightens, the contrast between her majestic garments and her relief striking a beautiful chord. "Yes, very much

so. You are amazing, and I appreciate you. For also understanding me and being kind toward me."

Kaera wraps her arms around Elara, ignoring the loud chaos surrounding them in the court chamber. Elara does not waste her time and wraps her arms around Kaera's upper back, accepting the physical comfort without a single thought of restraint.

"Thank you, Elara," Kaera murmurs against her shoulder. "You are the only princess that I wished to become friends with."

Elara holds Kaera closer, her hand moving gently to the back of her head. Kaera's shoulders slowly loosen beneath her touch. "Are you well, Kaera? You seem exhausted."

"I am," Kaera admits, her voice growing thick with emotion, but she does not answer further.

Cael steps in and stands by Elara's side, watching the interaction with a soft expression. When Kaera looks up from the embrace, her eyebrows furrow, her body tensing under Elara's arms as her gaze meets her brother's. The warmth that was growing in her expression fades.

"Where were you?" Kaera asks, her tone now neutral. "You are late, and you were supposed to arrive many minutes before the crowd gathered here." She steps back and fixes her dress, smoothing it with her hands to regain her courtly composure.

Cael remains still under his sister's scrutiny, his expression unchanging as he gives her a short incline of his head. He does not offer a sign to explain his delay, keeping his reasons guarded.

Elara tracks the distance between Cael and his younger sister, a silence that stands in contrast to the gentle devotion defining their bond. In all her time observing their interactions, they have never known a single moment of discord. They remain protective of one another, sharing smiles and an unyielding warmth that shields their frames from the rest of the court. Witnessing this barrier between them reveals the magnitude of the kingdom's crisis.

Kaera draws a breath, her gaze moving from his dark garments to Elara's stained cheeks before she looks down at the open documents resting on the table. The softness from the embrace disappears.

"Anyhow, how shall we start?" she asks, her voice dropping into a professional register to match the status of the chamber.

Before either sibling can move, a crash echoes from the center of the hall. One of the outer district lords slams his open palm against a high council desk, the force of the blow cutting through the nearby chatter and drawing the attention of the front rows. “We have waited long enough for the crown to speak!” the lord shouts, gesturing aggressively toward the platform where they stand. “The marketplace blast has ruined our trade, and we demand to know the deployment strategy before another log is signed!”

Whispers rise from the tiers as the nobles lean forward to track their response. Elara feels a pulse of nervousness behind her ribs, but looking at the rigid, silent way Cael carries himself beside her, she adjusts her position to stand tall by his side.

The high council and the outer district lords will silence themselves, he signs, his gestures cutting through the turbulent chatter with a stark authority. The vanguard garrison will not be used to launch a military campaign. The immediate deployment will be divided into two distinct perimeters.

He pauses, his gaze locking onto the tiers of shouting advisors, his posture mirroring the discipline his father demanded of him. *One portion of the vanguard will reinforce the southern roads to protect the marketplace and stabilize the merchants. The second portion will patrol the eastern approach where our foreign goods enter the city. We secure the borders, protect our trade, and do not provoke a war with Zahraan.*

He drops his hands, his chest rising and falling with a slow breath as his gaze sweeps across the closer rows of councilors.

Kaera steps forward, her fingers tightening around the massive leather-bound ledger as she pulls it across the wood. “The exact patrol rotations and sector assignments are detailed within these emergency logs,” she says. “The garrison numbers are ready for verification. We require the signatures of the district overseers to finalize the southern perimeter now.”

The shouting outer lord narrows his eyes, his gaze darting between the siblings on the elevated platform. “A ledger means nothing when the boundary lines are collapsing!” He points a finger at the platform. “The crown offers paper rotations and silent hand movements while the threat of Zahraan looms over our heads. We must sign our livelihoods away on the word of a princess who handles bakery dough and a prince who cannot command his own guards aloud? You speak of dividing the vanguard to

strengthen Riverath's protective shield, but how do we trust a defensive shield commanded by a prince who lacks a voice to order a charge?"

Sneers break out along the rows of advisors, their muffled chuckles vibrating through the tense air.

Cael's jaw sets into a firm line. He lifts his leather-gloved hands. Before he can complete the first sentence, an older high council member at the side table slams a stack of border reports on the table, blocking Cael from view.

"Save the hand gestures, Your Highness," the councilor says, turning his back on Cael's lifting arms. "We require verbal assurances that our defenses will hold against Zahraan's raiders. We cannot spend the morning decoding silent commands while the protective borders remain exposed."

Cael's hands freeze mid-air. His fingers tremble. Slowly, his arms drop back toward the table. He stands motionless, his mouth pressed into a tight line as the shouting voices crowd him out.

Elara steps past the grand table, shifting her position until she stands directly in front of Cael. Her movement cuts off the mocking gaze of the tiers. Heat floods her chest, wiping away the lingering doubts in her mind. She looks out at the assembly, her lungs expanding as the lesson from her mother's story rushes to the surface.

"Silence!" Elara commands, her voice ringing sharp and clear across the stone hall. The laughter stops. The front rows freeze.

The councilors stare at the foreign princess, their mouths parting in disbelief. Elara does not pause. She straightens her spine, pointing a hand toward the open leather ledger before locking her eyes onto the older councilor.

"You demand verbal assurances, but you lack the basic discipline to look at the parchment on the table," Kaera states, her voice steady. "While you waste your breath shouting like children over burning storehouses, Prince Cael has already mapped the immediate deployment needed to strengthen Riverath's defenses. The strategies are written ahead of your eyes. Read his ink rather than demanding a voice he does not possess, and understand the commands of your Crown Prince."

Elara inhales a breath, her damp palms uncurling from her skirt. "I demand respect for my husband. His inability to speak does not give you the right to treat him as less than a royal, nor as less than your prince." Her gaze sweeps across the sea of faces staring back at her. The weight of their eyes press down on her, making her knees tremble beneath her gown.

Before her limbs give way, Cael steps up beside her, his broad shoulder brushing hers as his hand slides over her wrist. He does not look down, keeping his gaze locked onto the assembly, but the pressure of his palm provides the reassurance she needs. His thumb strokes across her skin for a single heartbeat.

The older councilor clears his throat, his posture shrinking as he reaches down to touch the border reports he had slammed flat moments ago. He looks from Cael's posture to Elara, his lips parting to speak, but no words come out.

Kaera breaks the standstill. Seizing the hush Elara has granted them, she steps to the front edge of the platform and thrusts the iron quill toward the front rows, her long black sleeves swishing against the wood. "The defensive response is prepared. The crown must decide whether Riverath will remain on the defensive or answer Zahraan with force."

The shouting outer lord stares at the platform for one final second, his chest rising with a breath as he looks at the united front before him. Lowering his chin, he steps up the stone stairs to grasp the quill.

A violent crash echoes from the back of the chamber. The oak doors slam inward against the stone walls with a deafening bang that vibrates through the floorboards.

Queen Maereth storms into the chamber, her jaw set as she slams her way past the outer guards. Her immaculate posture remains unyielding, but the folds of her black velvet robe snap against her ankles with every aggressive step, signaling a chaotic anger that puts the entire assembly on edge.

Queen Maereth steps closer to the platform, her voice rising to a sharp, chilling register that echoes off the stone walls. "We will not cower behind paper logs while our enemy bides their time. Riverath must strike back at Zahraan with every blade we possess. We will push into their territories, cut down their forces, and burn their strongholds until their very name vanishes from the valley map. Only when they are erased will this kingdom know true security."

Silence falls over the space. Nobody raises a hand. The nobles remain still, their faces neutral and their eyes locked on the Queen, listening to her cruel decree as if an unprovoked war is exactly what they had been waiting for all along.

Kaera steps forward. “This is madness! Father explicitly ordered a divided defense to prevent a conflict. If we cross into the buffer zone and attack them now, we will cause an irreversible mess and destroy our own trade lines before the vanguard is even prepared!”

We cannot launch an assault, Cael signs. *A border war will isolate Riverath completely. We protect our people; we do not march into a trap.*

Maereth does not look at him, turning her back on his lifting arms with cold indifference. She fixes her gaze on the silent tiers of the assembly. “The King’s illness has left us exposed,” she states, her voice freezing the space. “The high council knows the truth. We strike now until Zahraan is nothing but ash, or we allow them to destroy us from within.”

The advisors remain motionless.

Elara’s breath hooks in her throat. She looks at the tiers of noble families and high council members, searching for a single trace of resistance, but she finds nothing. A hollow dread settles within her as she takes in the blank expressions of the advisors, realization dawning that these men are not horrified by the demand for total erasure. Some of them are welcoming it.

Kaera steps forward. “You are marching into a tactical death trap. Zahraan’s forces have spent years mapping the terrain of that valley buffer zone. If you cross the perimeter without a secured vanguard deployment, you expose our lines to a bottleneck. They will cut down the advance, block the retreat, and isolate Riverath from the eastern trade routes before our blades can even strike.”

Maereth’s jaw tightens as she glares at her daughter, her posture fracturing under the unexpected defiance.

Kaera does not break her gaze. “A total war requires preparation, not reckless panic. Our father’s divided vanguard was designed to secure the borders while keeping our armies from being exposed in the frost. Look at the truth of the maps before you send Riverath into a war we are not prepared to fight.”

Maereth raises one hand. “Enough.” She steps down from the platform, her eyes sweeping across the nobles, the guards stationed along the walls, and the knights gathered beneath the royal banners. “You have spent long enough arguing over maps, trade routes, and what Zahraan might do next,” she says. “While you debate, our enemy prepares. While you hesitate, our

people suffer. I will not stand here and watch Riverath become a kingdom ruled by fear."

A murmur spreads through the chamber. Maereth turns toward the guards. "Knights of Riverath. Guards of the crown. You answer to the throne. You will prepare the vanguard for war."

The chamber erupts. Nobles begin shouting over one another, chairs scrape violently against the stone, and advisors rise from their seats as voices collide across the hall.

"Your Majesty—" someone attempts to protest.

Maereth's voice cuts through them. "Silence! I am your queen. And until the king returns to this hall, my authority stands."

The guards straighten. One by one, they lower their heads. "Yes, Your Majesty." The response spreads through the chamber as more voices join them.

Maereth turns back toward Kaera and Cael, her expression cold and victorious. "Let it be known that Riverath will no longer wait for Zahraan to decide our fate."

Elara looks up at Cael, pleading for him to sign something. Indicate something. It is possible he could make one final move to convince the court that his authority could stand against Maereth's. Nothing. Cael's hands remain at his sides.

The nobles begin to rise from their seats, murmuring among themselves as they file out of the chamber. Guards move from their positions along the walls, following the Queen's orders. Knights gather beneath the royal banners, their voices low as they begin preparing for what comes next. One by one, the chamber empties.

Kaera remains still, staring at her mother in disbelief. Cael steps closer to Elara's side, silently standing with her as the last of the nobles disappear through the doors.

Queen Maereth turns toward Cael. "I promised you. I warned you that I would prove how useless you all are. I will rule this kingdom as a greater queen, by my own power and my own orders."

"What?" Elara asks, her breath hitching.

A faint smile touches Maereth's lips. "You wish to know what happens when the king can no longer stand before his kingdom," she says. "Now you will see."

Cael’s hand closes around Elara’s. Neither of them speaks. Beyond the council doors, the sound of marching footsteps begins to fade into the corridors. The kingdom is already moving according to the Queen’s command.

Elara realizes that no one is coming to stop her.

OceanofPDF.com

XXXIV
A PALACE DIVIDED

E

Elara falls into her seat.

The doors slam shut and the professional silence shatters in an instant. Kaera turns on her heel, her long black sleeves swishing as her eyes lock onto Cael. “How could you stand there and let her take everything?”

Cael’s head tilts downward, facing the floorboards while he recovers from the events. Veins twitch in his neck, growing distinct. The tension in his frame mounting until he signs his response. *The lords choose to follow her mandate because they are blinded by their own panic. She capitalizes on their collective rage and sense of loss from the attack, an emotional leverage that shields her actions from their scrutiny. They obey her commands out of a desire for vengeance, ignoring the boundaries of my legal title.*

Kaera lets out a harsh breath, her finger pointing at Cael. “You could have at least signed something. You have the iron quill in your hand, but you freeze like a coward the moment she steps inside. The outer lords were ready to back our divided vanguard. They were reaching for the ink before she broke the doors down.”

Cael steps forward, the movement closing the gap between them. *The outer lords are sheep looking for an executioner!* his hands slash through the space, his gestures cutting the silence. *Did you not see their faces? They did not want paper logs. They wanted blood. If I sign a refusal, Maereth orders the vanguard to arrest us for treason right there on the platform!*

Kaera does not back away, her hands curling into tight fists. “So, we yield? We allow her to march our soldiers into a valley bottleneck because

you fear a confrontation? Father is failing in his bedchamber, Cael. He spent his life building our defense lines, and you let her burn his legacy to ash without a single word of protest."

Another agonizing pause follows before his fingers move. *He is ill,* Cael signs, his eyes narrowing as his shoulders draw tight. *Not dying.*

Kaera rubs both of her palms over her face. "No, Cael. His health worsens and nothing has eased it. Mother takes advantage of that, and we are starting a war." She stops, her gaze wavering. "I wonder if father truly made that decision or was it mother alone?"

Cael halts, his hands dropping an inch while her words strike a visible blow to his stature. *Father desires a defense,* he signs, his pace slowing while he struggles for composure. *He agreed to the perimeter security. He would never order an unprovoked slaughter in the valley. Maereth fabricates his verbal approval to manipulate the council.*

"Then why did you not expose her?" Kaera cries, her expression a mix of desperation and grief. "If you know it is a lie, you should shout the truth to the advisors. You should make them see that the crown is being manipulated by a tyrant."

Cael's gestures sharpen. *With what army? Look at the courtyard. Look at the perimeter guards. They bow to her without hesitation. If we turn the council into a battlefield without preparation, we ensure our own executions before Omar Zahraani arrives at the gates.*

Elara's forearms wrap over each other on the dining table, her head dazing from the impact of the growing voices and the sharp movements of the familiar hands that held her with warmth. She keeps her cheek pressed against her skin, watching the shadows of his fingers twist against the wall.

"Do not lecture me when you are the one leaving us to die in secret," Kaera screams, stepping into his space until her chest nearly brushes his dark court vest. "You think you are protecting us by hiding behind your silence? You keep secrets from the council, you keep secrets from the vanguards, and you keep secrets from your own sister. I have to guess your strategies while Maereth marches our people into a grave."

Cael's chest heaves. His hands lift with a force that makes the silver chain at his high collar snap. *You think I desire this isolation?* he signs while his eyes lock onto his sister. *You think I enjoy standing like a statue while Maereth targets your frame to wound my title? Every choice I make is*

to shield you from the malice she directs at my back. If I show a single fracture in my composure, she will use your safety to crush my resolve.

“I do not want your shield, Cael!” Kaera cries, tears breaking past her eyelashes. “I want my brother. I want the person who used to look at me with warmth instead of this calculating stone mask. You have become like Maereth, turning every interaction into a political transaction. You are consumed by your own pain and your own burdens, and you do not even see how much this family is crumbling around you!”

Cael freezes, his hands remaining mid-air. The veins in his neck pulse, but the energy drains from his posture, leaving him looking hollow. He turns and exits the chamber, the door slamming.

Elara stands, intending to follow, but she halts when Kaera sinks into the vacant seat of her father and covers her face, weeping. Elara hesitates, her boots glued to the stone floor.

Approaching the table, Elara slides into the neighboring seat. She wraps her arms around Kaera’s shaking shoulders, drawing the younger princess against her chest. Elara rests her chin against the dark hair, her fingers moving through the black strands in a slow rhythm.

Kaera’s frame trembles as her royal composure fractures. Her fingers clutch at the pink fabric of Elara’s gown, desperate for an anchor while her raw, exhausted weeping fills the vast space.

“I am scared,” Kaera murmurs between her sobs. “I am scared of what will happen to us. To Riverath. To Cael.” She shakes her head against Elara's shoulder. “The world is cruel.”

The admission pierces straight through Elara’s defenses. Memories return of the countless nights she spent locked inside her own chamber in Veyrenn, suffocated by an identical helplessness. She remembers the cold tiles against her knees and the way she used to bury her face in her palms to stifle her cries, believing her voice carried no value in a court driven by power. Watching Kaera break down in the king’s chair is like staring into a mirror of her own isolation.

Elara organizes her thoughts, pressing her cheek against the dark waves. “I know,” she whispers, her throat tightening with shared sorrow. “I know the world is cruel, Kaera. I have known that terror for a very long time.”

Kaera lowers her hands, her skin pale beneath the dim chandelier. She grips the edge of the table, her knuckles turning white. “It is unfair. He leaves us in the dark while the entire kingdom crumbles. He expects me to

stand before the high council, to translate his silence and carry his burdens when the outer lords demand verbal declarations, but he treats me like an outsider.”

Elara pulls back, her gaze searching Kaera’s face. “I am certain that is not his intention.”

Kaera scoffs, a bitter sound that cuts through the quiet space. “I am his sister, and I have witnessed his behavior for my entire life. He ignores the people who support him and respect his standing. He turns a blind eye to our loyalty and locks himself away like a broken man.” She folds her arms over her chest, her chin rising in defiance. “Father praises Cael more than he ever mentions my name.”

She swallows to force her voice from trembling, her posture rigid as she fights her own sorrow. “It feels as if I am nothing to either of them. As if I am weak. Father relies on Cael, trains him, and spends his hours with him. I try my best to form a connection with mother, but she turned cold before I could even understand her rules.”

Elara senses the heavy isolation beneath Kaera’s words, the vulnerability concealed beneath her sharp accusations and rigid defense, but she maintains her silence. She recognizes the resentment beneath Kaera’s claims and they carry the same desperate longing for acknowledgment she endured inside her own castle.

She swallows, choosing her words carefully. “Cael endures a massive weight as well. In times like these, we cannot compare our pain and assume the path is easy for him. Cael deals with constant scrutiny from the very people he drains his strength to protect. He defends them and commits to his duties, returning to these halls with bleeding hands.” She slides her palm over Kaera’s fingers, squeezing them with quiet reassurance. “He is secretive, but everything he does is to preserve this kingdom for you and for Raelith.”

Kaera’s fingers grip Elara’s coat, trembling. “He offered no defense,” she snaps, her voice fracturing. “When I confronted Cael about how Father favors his title, he offered uncertainty. When we spoke with father, instructing us on what we must do to move forward,” Kaera’s eyelashes flutter as tears continue to spill. “He reached for Cael first. Mentioned him first.”

“Kaera,” Elara whispers, leaning forward to envelop her in her arms, resting her cheek on the top of her head.

Kaera buries her face into Elara’s shoulder. “It is unfair. Why am I any different? Is it because I am young? A woman? Weak? Pathetic?”

Elara tightens her embrace. “No, my dear. You are not any of those.” Her gaze drifts down to the glinting band on her finger. “When I saw your smile back at my castle during the first time we met, I immediately felt at ease despite the heaviness weighing me down. The way you speak, the way you are not afraid to snap, the way you stand against the workers whether they are older or younger or bigger or smaller. You treat everyone fairly.” A smile upturns her lips. “I adore it all.”

Kaera pulls away, searching for sincerity in Elara’s eyes. “You have noticed?”

“Of course. You even stood against Cael and spoke your mind and feelings. Not many people can do that.”

“You do that well,” Kaera murmurs, wiping her tears with the back of her hands. “You defended me, even when you are soft spoken. You even defended Cael publicly and with certainty. You see the warmth beneath the stone mask.”

Elara’s heart flutters, and she presses her hand over it, attempting to make the sensation fade. She hesitates while answering, her gaze drifting back to the silver band. “I only speak because I know the goodness in his heart.”

Kaera remains in Elara’s embrace, her head tilting with curiosity as the tears on her cheeks dry. “Tell me the truth, Elara. Do you hold love for Cael in your heart?” A trembling breath escapes her lips. “He alters his priorities for you. He abandons his duties to care for your safety. He held you closely the night Omar left the palace, when you were shaking from the tension.”

A wave of exposure crashes over Elara, her pulse quickening under the scrutiny. She meets Kaera’s eyes, her lips pressing into a thin line as her mind races. She recalls the beautiful poems she discovered in his booklet. He wrote those verses of adoration for another woman, and she cannot forget the hidden painting Cael attempted to keep from her gaze.

Elara grips the pink fabric of her garment. She tears her eyes away from Kaera’s face, dropping her focus to the floorboards as the silence stretches between them.

“I do not know,” she whispers, the confession leaving her lips in a hesitant breath as her knuckles turn white where she grips the fabric bunching under her fingers. “Around him, I feel warmth. My stomach

flutters, and the aches within me ease. It is just... he looks at me, Kaera. Truly looks at me. Not at a princess from Veyrenn, and not at a political chip for your father's council. When he stands between me and the threats in these corridors, it is the first time in my life I have ever felt... safe. The silence between us does not feel like a cage. It feels like a shield. I have spent my entire life bracing for a blow whenever a man steps near me. With Cael, I can relax. My mind stops running. I do not know if that is love, but it is a comfort I never believed I would find."

Kaera's eyebrows furrow as she continues to listen, her posture remaining still as she processes the raw honesty.

A tear slips from Elara's cheek without her realizing. "But I do not think he thinks the same way toward me. Those paintings, and I am not sure if you know this, but he writes beautiful poems of this one woman. They are the best thing I have ever read, and all of them are written for a different person. Not to me, his wife." Her voice breaks. "I do not know. I am sorry. I do not mean to be upset and cry." She shakes her head, turning away to hide her face.

Kaera watches the tears drop onto the dark table, her voice a soft murmur. "I believe that woman is you."

Elara's eyes widen, pupils dilating as her mind stalls. Her pulse shutters and her lips part, but no sound escapes as she tries to make sense of the claim.

Kaera rests her hand against the edge of the table, her composure faltering as she lets out a heavy breath. "He does not tell me anything, Elara. He never tells me anything. But I am his sister. I have spent my entire life watching him hide behind that mask. I know about him writing poems. He always carried this one small booklet and wrote poems in it. He wrote about a girl with green eyes, long brown hair, and a simple dress. The exact features from the paintings he always did and that I mentioned to you. I know it looks like he is dreaming of another person, but I notice the way he looks at you when you wear those linen garments or walk through the gardens. He tracks your movements like you are the only real thing left in this palace. There is nobody else."

A sudden stillness locks Elara's frame.

Kaera looks down at her own hands, tracking the grain of the wood as her mourning returns to a quiet, isolated stillness. "I am not sure, but I have

seen the way he cares for you before he cares for anyone else. It almost made me feel... jealous."

Eyebrows furrowing, Elara leans in closer. "Jealous?" She studies Kaera's downturned face, her heart hammering.

Kaera shifts, her fingers following a split in the dark grain. "For years, I was the only person he shielded. We endured Maereth's coldness and our father's fading health together, locked in our own silent corners. I am the one who translates his hands, yet he treats me like a soldier on his perimeter. With you, he does not look at a strategy or a duty. He cares. I watch him carry your burdens when he refuses to let anyone assist with his own, and it made me realize how empty this palace remains for the rest of us."

Elara watches the tight line of Kaera's shoulders, noting the way the younger princess braces herself against the seat.

Kaera examines her fingernails. "But he used to share things with me. He used to possess a warmth before the court forced him into total isolation. The last time he ever spent an afternoon beside me, I was ten winters old. He was fifteen."

"I had begged him for weeks to teach me how to paint and draw," Kaera continues, her fingers tracking a line in the wood. "He finally granted me a short amount of time. Mid-way through the lesson, I left my bedchamber to search for extra brushes. That was when I spotted Maereth and our father passing down the stairs."

Kaera pauses, a bitter edge entering her expression. "Maereth was talking ill of Cael, her tone filled with a mockery that made our father look uncomfortable. I followed from behind to listen. Maereth was laughing about a day from years before, back when I was a mere baby. She mocked the way Cael ran away to Veyrenn because of a rude comment she had made to him on his birthday." She shakes her head.

Elara's breath vanishes. She stares blindly into the dim chandelier light, her eyes wide as dizziness sweeps through her chest. The revelation that Cael walked the paths of her home kingdom so many years ago has her head spinning into complete disarray as she searches the dark corners of her mind for a glimpse of a boy she never knew existed outside her borders.

"Maereth said how King Eric had to guide Cael back to Riverath with his guards," Kaera whispers, looking into Elara's eyes. "She laughed at his weakness, mentioning that when King Eric arrived, he told them he found

Cael by a green area of a running fountain, blooming flowers, and butterflies. I have been studying his paintings. He would always paint a background of greenery with simple pink flowers. Then, there is the girl that looks like you. Green eyes, brown hair and pink dress."

A sudden brightness flashes behind Elara's eyes, a pull of memory drawing her back to her early childhood in Veyrenn. She sees a vivid fragment of a sunlit afternoon, the heavy scent of crushed grass rising from a secluded corner of the royal estate. She recalls the splash of cold water leaping from a stone basin, the bright flicker of orange wings drifting through the summer heat, and her own small shoes sinking into the clover. A silhouette sits near the edge of her vision, where soft sobs interrupt the fluttering wings, a form she had passed without a second thought during her childhood.

Elara regains a bit of her composure and finally speaks, her voice a hushed whisper. "The eastern conservatory fountain. That was my mother's favorite sanctuary. I used to hide among those exact bushes whenever I needed to cry."

Kaera watches her, the anger gone from her expression as she notes the shock defining Elara's features.

A bitter sadness darkens Elara's expression. "It was beautiful then. A paradise of wild greenery and running water before my father ruined it. He ordered the walls torn down and the basin drained two winters later, replacing the sanctuary with stone barracks for his personal guard. He despised anything he could not weaponize for his defense." She takes a trembling breath.

"You do not remember him?" Kaera leans forward.

"No," Elara admits, a sudden guilt swallowing her confidence. "I do not understand how Cael, a young boy, could make his way to a different kingdom alone. It feels impossible that we met." She tilts her head, her gaze drifting to one of the large glass vases with soil and blooming white flowers. "I met children my age before my isolation inside the palace walls. I attempted to make connections, but insults were thrown at me, or they wished to be near me merely because of my title and the wealth my family holds. It is not impossible for Cael to be one of them."

She shakes her head, denying the turn of events. "I would feel some recognition toward him. I do not forget faces." She searches for Kaera's reaction. Finding nothing, her back presses against the chair. "I am realizing

all of this now. I remain unable to comprehend that my mother planned this marriage so that Veyrenn could improve its standing. My father seems to know Cael beyond his status as Raelith's son."

"You are overwhelmed," Kaera states softly.

Elara's lips tremble, eyelashes fluttering from the tears streaming down her cheeks. "I am confused. Afraid."

Under the pressure of these revelations, she imagines herself in Walker's embrace, letting her panic break in those arms. She wishes for Walker to hold her, to prevent the world and this marriage from pulling them apart. A sob escapes her mouth, interrupting the thick silence. She desires only to be an ordinary woman with companions who wish for her friendship, caring parents, and a caretaker who remains by her side.

"If this is love," Elara murmurs, her voice breaking. "It hurts too much. I thought it was meant to be beautiful."

Kaera's head tilts, her expression softening into shared grief. She wraps her arms around Elara, her own quiet breaths syncing with the tears. "I know."

A moment of shared grief passes through them, letting the air carry it and hold their shared moment secret. Elara slowly sits up, glancing at Kaera, cheeks wet with tears.

Kaera is first to break the silence. "In spite of my infuriation with Cael, I know he holds a deeper devotion toward you. I know that if you are truly that girl, he remains bound to you." A pause. "If you are not, he is holding onto something stronger."

Elara shakes her head in denial.

Kaera's posture shifts as she leans her head back against the carved crest of her father's seat. "He will not speak of it. If you confront him, his mask will only harden. He thinks he protects us by remaining a statue. He thinks if he shows his vulnerabilities, Maereth or the outer lords will find a way to tear them apart."

Elara takes in her words. Both of them possess a different perspective of Cael. He says little regarding himself, his private writing, or the secrets he keeps within that closed study. Still, he offered revelations she did not expect. She has witnessed his nature herself, through moments intentional and unintentional.

She turns her head away, forcing her mind to dismiss the memory of the scars across his back, his verses, and the deep insecurity she held back

without acknowledgment. Her hair slides forward, covering her features and shielding her from the light.

Kaera stands, the wood beneath her creaking under her weight. “I must return to my quarters and prevent Cael from fighting against mother and the outer lords alone.”

“I will not have you arrange this on your own. Neither will I let you continue feeling abandoned,” she murmurs. She looks up to meet Kaera’s wide eyes, rising from her seat to pull her into an embrace. “Never alone.”

Kaera freezes before she melts. She returns the hold, weeping against Elara’s shoulder. “We must do something,” she pleads, her frame shaking.

Elara swallows, her blurred, tear-filled eyes looking ahead.

“We will.”

OceanofPDF.com

XXXV
RIVERATH'S FUTURE KING

C

Cael tries to match his stride with Maereth's, his lungs burning. He continues rushing toward the retreating lords, opening his mouth to let out a desperate plea for them to stop. Only a trembling breath escapes his throat, and his steps falter as the weight of his terror locks his limbs. He never trained for a betrayal of this magnitude, and he never expected the person he fears to push the kingdom over the brink of ruin.

Queen Maereth stops, turning her head to cast a cold look of disdain at him. She offers a mocking smile to the lords beside her, cementing his public humiliation before continuing her march. The nobles ignore his breathless plea, their loud discussions regarding the vanguard drowning out his presence. They stream past the double doors of the corridor, and a guard loyal to Maereth closes the oak panels directly in his face, locking him out.

He presses his forehead against the cold surface, his chest heaving while his hands slide down the carved wood. A suffocating helplessness locks his throat, reminding him of his weakness before the queen. He is a crown prince who cannot command his own gates, a coward who can only tremble in the corridor while his kingdom marches toward destruction.

Footsteps echo behind him. Cael turns to find Kaera watching him near the stairs. Her earlier anger is gone, replaced with a soft look of worry. Unable to face her pity, he jerks his gaze down to his trembling hands, hiding the frantic sign language half-formed on his fingers. He ducks his chin and steps past her, fleeing toward the sanctuary of the royal wing.

He needs to see his father, to grasp a single moment with him.

Kaera hurries by his side, her hands lifting her long skirt by the stairs. “Cael, where did mother go? Where are the lords? Did they all leave?” Her breathing quickens as her steps echo on the stone. “Tell me. I will follow them. I will demand answers from the vanguard commanders myself if the lords refuse to listen. Mother cannot simply dismiss the entire garrison. They are going to start a war, Cael, and no one is stopping her.”

Cael does not halt his pace, keeping his hands pinned to his sides while dragging his feet forward toward his father’s bedchamber.

Kaera’s step falters for a moment before she sprints ahead to stand directly in front of King Raelith’s door, blocking his path. “We cannot let father know. Cael, please,” her voice trembles as her hands reach for his long sleeves, tugging them with all the might she holds. “He is weak enough. Knowing the wife he adores is making such a chaotic decision will kill him. You know it will. We must handle this ourselves. If she finds out we ran to him like frightened children, she will strip the knights of their titles before the sun sets.”

Cael’s eyes bore into Kaera’s, noting the tears threatening to fall. The sight triggers a memory of her crying to him when she was younger. She was seven, while he was twelve with new, bleeding slashes on his back he tried to hide under his coat.

“I heard Mama yelling,” Kaera admits, her hand wiping the tears flowing down her cheek, her small frame trembling with fear. “Did she punish you?”

Cael’s hands wrap the coat around him tighter. The minor movement causes the burning sensation from the fresh slashes of Maereth’s leather strap to worsen. He forces his legs to hold his weight, struggling to remain upright. His stepmother’s mocking words echo within his mind. She had berated him for praising Kaera’s skills, for giving the girl hope that she might improve as a princess, and for wishing to share that same hope with their citizens. Knowing Kaera heard the entire exchange while standing outside his threshold leaves him with no lies to form. His gaze flickers up the hallway, hoping no one watches.

He lifts his trembling hands. She yelled, but do not worry. She simply fails to see the potential you hold, Kaera.

Kaera shakes her head, burying her face into her palms as her cries grow louder. “No. She hurt you, Cael. Where did she hurt you?” She drops

her hands and grasps his sleeve, tugging the material. "Please, tell me. I will let Father know, and he will stop her."

Cael rests his palm on top of her head, smoothing her hair. Kaera lifts her head, her eyes wide and spilling tears. In moments when she grows certain of Maereth's cruelty, he has no choice but to construct a shield of deception. He refuses to let King Raelith discover that the woman he adores is a monster. For Kaera, Maereth is her biological mother. He cannot plant a single seed of negativity in the girl's mind toward the woman who birthed her. Wrapping his arms around his sister, he pulls her into a tight embrace. Kaera's cries deepen while his hand comforts her, feeling her body trembling against his.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Cael feels a single tear escape.

HIS EYES MEET Kaera's now, a faint trace of warmth softening his expression. She holds the same courage she possessed when she was younger. Cael brings his hands to the back of her head, offering a few comforting pats. He lowers them only to raise his fingers to sign his promise. *I will not tell him anything. Do not cry or worry, I will try my best to handle everything.*

"You cannot handle all of this on your own. I will stand in your place. I will take the maps with me and bring our initial plan of peace back into display for the lords and the guards. They will listen." She nods her head. "*I* will stop them."

Cael's hands lower to his sides. A small smile forms on his lips, and he offers her a nod.

"Make sure Father is alright." Kaera steps to the side, walking away from the threshold before rushing her way down the stairs.

He reaches for the entrance, but the door swings open ahead of his touch. Hartwell stands in the doorway, his eyebrows furrowing and his chest heaving from the weight of what he overheard. He steps out into the corridor, closing the door to muffle the sound. He leans close, his voice dropping into a low whisper.

"I heard her, Your Highness. The guards are already whispering about the new commands. If the queen enforces these decisions, it will break the stability of our entire guard. You must see your father. He woke a few moments ago, asking for you."

The guard places a firm hand on Cael's shoulder, a gesture of allegiance, before stepping aside to hold the door open. Cael swallows and steps past him into the dim interior. The heavy scent of dried winter herbs and medicinal tonics fills the space. Across the quarters, King Raelith rests against a pile of pillows, his breathing shallow but his eyes open. He tracks his son's arrival, a smile meeting his lips. "My son."

The door closes, shutting Cael and Raelith into the interior alone. His shoulders drop and his knees weaken, but he keeps himself composed. Bringing his hand to his crown, he removes it from his head and grips the cool silver. He makes his way to Raelith's bed and sinks onto the carpet beside it.

His father extends a trembling, pale hand toward Cael's fingers, his grip weak but full of a familiar warmth. "What is wrong?" He coughs, clearing his throat.

Cael flinches at the coughs and turns his head away, unable to watch his father's failing state. He lifts his hands, his symbols jerky and tense. *I am tired.*

King Raelith lets out a raspy chuckle, the sound catching in his chest. "You used to be tired when you first trained." His gaze drifts to the ceiling, resting his head against his pillows. "It took me two months to realize the duties of a prince and your expectations weighed on you. You spent nights staring at the border ledgers, ignoring your meals. I could not help but tone the lessons down a little to save your spirit."

A little? Cael signs, his eyes narrowing to hide the sting of tears.

"I removed one of your tasks in training," his father smiles, his hold on Cael's fingers sliding away to remain over his lap on the blanket. His thumb strokes the fabric. "But what is weighing on you, Cael? I know the burden of that silence."

Cael swallows, avoiding Raelith's gaze. *Nothing. It is hard to address the lords and the council with what is happening. Most of them do not agree with me.* He leaves out the critical details, exhaling a breath of guilt.

"They can be difficult. I am sure you recall many heated encounters I have faced with them." Raelith offers his son a reassuring smile. "You have witnessed their behavior, and how they never hold back their initial intentions. They care about money, chaos that leads to destruction. Wealth and power. All of it is what they want." A pause. "Not the kingdom's and everyone's safety."

Listening attentively, Cael lays his head on the mattress and closes his eyes for a moment.

“Rest here,” King Raelith lays his hand on Cael’s head. “Tell me before you fall asleep, how are Kaera and Elara? Yesterday, Kaera unexpectedly left and I could not help but feel worried.”

Cael’s body tenses again when he remembers Kaera’s tears. The way she let out the anger and sadness she has been holding back. The way his father reached for his hand first and not theirs together. He sits upright on the floor, looking at Raelith’s pale face and begins to sign. *Father, do you have a favorite between me and Kaera?*

King Raelith’s eyebrows furrow, snatching his hand back like it got burned. “Absolutely not. That question saddens me.”

That is how Kaera feels, Cael admits. *I see why it seems that way. Yesterday, you reached for me first. You talked as if I were the only one in the chamber. Whenever there is chaos or a royal is needed, you reach to me first. Not Kaera.* His eyes open. *I defended you, but I do not think I can anymore.*

“But is that not what you wanted when you became eighteen?” Raelith asks, straightening his position, only to cough.

Cael stands and adjusts his father back against the pillows. He places one hand on the monarch’s back and one on his wrist. The thick sleeves of the robe shift up Raelith’s forearm, revealing thinning pale skin. The king’s breath catches in his throat as if grabbed. Cael brings his hands back and looks away, masking his panic.

King Raelith adjusts his robe. “Tell me, Cael. At eighteen, you wanted Kaera to remain safe, to love her role as a princess where danger does not meet her. You demanded lesser duties for her, parameters that do not involve destruction or the chaos outside our gates. You promised the same for Elara before she arrived here.”

Guilt pierces Cael’s heart, his breathing unstable.

“I tried to convince you that it was wrong, and that it was Kaera’s place to decide. But I understood your intentions,” Raelith’s voice lowers into a murmur, his gaze fixed on his son. “You wish to protect her and Elara from the burdens of the throne. I reassured you that you do not carry this weight alone. Yet you lock your thoughts away from me.”

I cannot have them hurt, Cael signs, the movement of his hands sharp, cutting through the air. *I am not losing them.*

King Raelith stares at his son, his eyebrows furrowing as he studies the fierce determination in the prince's eyes. His shoulders relax, and he exhales. "You will not lose them, my son. The guards remain loyal, and the palace walls stand secure. Do not let the defiance of the council trick you into believing our control fractures."

That is impossible, Father, Cael signs, his head shaking as his gaze drops back to the floor. *The court continues to despise my presence. Nobody believes my intentions. I begin to think that I do not believe in my own capability either.* He sinks back onto the carpet beside the bed, his posture collapsing. *I am a failure. No matter what I commit to, through these past five years of labor and your own commands, they offer nothing but hatred. Why, Father?* His fingers start to tremble. *What have I done to deserve this hostility? Why did you even choose to have me in the first place?*

King Raelith freezes, the raspy breathing in his chest faltering. The lines on his face deepen, a sorrow twisting his features while he stares down at the trembling hands of the prince.

Cael's features tighten in the stillness of the space. The man leans forward, disregarding the stiffness in his limbs to reach down from the mattress. His pale fingers wrap around Cael's wrists, halting the erratic movement of his hands.

"Look at me, Cael," Raelith commands, his voice dropping into a fierce, raw whisper that cracks with emotion. He waits until his son's eyes meet his own. "Do not ever say that. You are my son, the greatest blessing of my life, and the finest choice this lineage has ever known. You are not a failure. You carry the burden of a kingdom that does not deserve your sacrifice, but you were born to lead them, Cael. My love for you is not bound by a crown or a voice."

"The lords will learn to listen," Raelith continues, his grip tightening around his son's wrists. "They will listen because they must. They will listen to you, respect your intent, because they will realize that a king who rules with labor possesses a strength that loud proclamations can never replicate."

I ask why the court hates me, and you answer with the throne, Cael signs, his head pressing against the mattress, feeling heavy. *I cannot carry a crown, Father. I cannot face the council hall ever again.* His hands hitch and jerk, the lines of his symbols breaking as he forces himself to his feet. *I*

get no reprieve. I am a man prior to a prince, and I hold everything inside my chest.

"It is what is expected of our lineage."

No, it is what you expect of my life, Cael signs, stepping forward to lean over the mattress. His hands snap through the air while burning tears well in his wide eyes.

King Raelith parts his lips to answer, his jaw tightening. A rattling gasp leaves his throat instead. His chest seizes. A harsh cough rips from his lungs, doubling his frame over toward his knees.

Cael's hands freeze mid-motion, his anger vanishing. He drops to his knees beside the mattress, his shoulders shaking while his palms support his father's back. He watches, a dark crimson stain spotting the white linen sheet. He guides his father to sink against the pillows again, the tears welling in his eyes.

Waiting for his father to adjust and meet his gaze, Cael steps back. *What is wrong? Why is there blood?*

King Raelith drifts his gaze away, swallowing. "I have not been meaning to tell you this news soon. Especially not now." He clears his throat, wincing at the pain. "My son, I cannot hide it from you anymore. Nurse Elsher and the physicians investigated my illness. It is not a common cold. They found a decay inside my lungs, a black rot that spreads with every breath I draw. There is no tonic to reverse the damage, and no cure exists to halt the decline."

Cael's legs weaken, but his hands grasp the sheets for support, his eyes wide while his breathing becomes heavier.

"My strength leaves me," Raelith whispers, looking into his son's eyes. "The truth, Cael. I am dying."

Cael's heart skips a beat. What little strength he has left flees. Turning his face away, he blinks hard and attempts to sign. His hands do not move.

"I am not saying this to frighten you," his father murmurs, his hand landing on Cael's shoulder. "I am telling you because you deserve to know the truth. You have spent years preparing for this title without ever being told how close the moment rests. It is time, my son. The throne must pass to you. Not in a year. Not when matters grow calmer, or when the borders stand stronger, or when the people become more willing to accept the transition." A shuddering breath leaves his frame. "Soon."

The word hardens over Cael with a density that feels physical. King Raelith reaches forward and places his palm over Cael's hand. The grip is weaker than the last.

"You are ready," his father says. "You have been ready for longer than you realize. The only barrier standing between you and that crown is your own belief that you are not enough." He smiles. "You are enough. You have been enough. I witness the prince you have become. I witness the burden you carry for this kingdom and for its people, even when they offer nothing in return."

Cael's eyes burn with moisture. He keeps his gaze lowered.

"I request one thing of you," King Raelith adds. Cael lifts his gaze, meeting his father's identical gray eyes. "Let Elara stand beside you when the time arrives. Not because the law requires the match, and not because the court expects the alliance. Stand with her because a solitary king is an easy target for the council. She belongs to a lineage that understands the weight of a throne, and her presence at your side will form a defense that our enemies cannot fracture. You must secure her loyalty, Cael, for she is the partner who will ensure your rule survives the trials ahead."

Cael takes in his father's words and the manner he addresses Elara. His thoughts return to his admission of his sickness and him dying. *No,* he signs. *You need to find more physicians or nurses, other than the ones we possess in Riverath. I will send messengers across the seas and kingdoms to inspect your condition. It is a common cold.*

"Cael."

Yes, a common cold, Cael signs, his head nodding while his shoulders ease at his own desperate reassurance. *I will call Nurse Elsher and force her to examine your chest again. In front of my eyes. Or I will remove her from this palace for her incorrect analysis—*

Tears stream down his father's cheeks. Cael's hands drop to his sides, his breath catching.

"Son," he inhales a shuddering breath. "The physicians investigated the decay. They checked the progress multiple times a day. Every day. I have taken more medicines than my frame can tolerate." He tilts his head, avoiding his son's wide eyes. "The cause of my decline is beyond a common cold. It is death."

Cael forces his hands up to sign a counterargument, but his fingers lose their strength and fail him. His father lets out a sob, shaking his head. "This

reality breaks my heart, my son. For your entire life, my sole wish was to witness your success. I know I mention your title and your ascension to the throne, hoping you become a better ruler than I have been. The truth remains, I pushed you because I knew my presence would not remain to guide your path."

"I love you, my son. I do not admit it much, but I love you and Kaera. You are both my pride." Raelith extends his hand forward.

Cael glances down at his father's hand, unable to move.

King Raelith's eyebrows furrow. "I think you need rest. Go to your quarters. You have earned it today."

Cael nods. He rises from the floor, his knees weakening while his palms use the mattress for support. He turns and opens the door to leave, only to find Kaera standing in the corridor. She has not left, and was listening to King Raelith's words. Her wide eyes fill with terror, a soft shuddering breath of shock escaping her mouth.

"Cael, is Father dying?" She murmurs. "No. No, please." She lunges forward and throws her arms around his torso, holding him while her body shakes. "He cannot die. We cannot lose him!"

Cael places his hand on Kaera's back, his fingers trembling while he stares ahead into the dim hallway. His younger sister takes a long moment to slow her tears, looking up at his face. "Cael? Why do your hands remain still? Why are you not weeping?"

Cael cannot force his fingers to move. He untangles Kaera's arms from his waist, giving her a nod to urge her into their father's presence. He turns away, leaving her behind in the upper corridor. His feet carry him down the stairs. He intends to find Nurse Elsher to demand a real explanation, but the weight of his father's words fractures his strength with every step.

By the time he reaches the lower floor, his vision blurs and his lungs heave in a desperate fight for air. He stumbles into the dining hall, unable to walk any further toward the infirmary.

"Cael?" Elara calls, seated near the fireplace. She stands and rushes toward his frame. "Are you alright?"

Cael only stares at her. Before his fingers can lift to sign, she guides him to the other chair near the fireplace.

"You are pale," Elara whispers, her eyes searching his features. "And trembling." She brings her fingers to his palms, feeling his cold skin. Her

posture shifts forward while her touch moves to his shoulder to shake him. “What happened? Please, tell me.”

Then, she slides her palms down to his chest, an intimate movement that makes his eyes snap back to hers, his breathing heavy under her touch. “Your heart is racing.”

Cael swallows, his father’s words echoing in his thoughts.

STAND with her because a solitary king is an easy target for the council lords. She belongs to a lineage that understands the weight of a throne, and her presence at your side will form a defense that our enemies cannot fracture.

“CAEL?”

Without thinking, he wraps his arms around her into a tight embrace, his body shaking and losing all its might. A broken sob escapes his mouth while tears stream down his cheeks. It takes Elara a moment to return his embrace with equal pressure, placing her hands over his head. The crown slips from his hair, thudding against the floor.

Cael’s embrace weakens. Elara only tightens her hold on him. He pulls back to meet her eyes, his hands sliding from her back to her arms. *My father is dying.* He glances down at the silver crown resting on the floor. *We will become king and queen soon.*

The tenderness in Elara’s expression fades.

OceanofPDF.com

XXXVI

THE PRIVATE CHAMBER

E

Elara's world stops.

The meaning of his signs fills the space between them, the word *soon* echoing inside her mind until it settles over her limbs like a sudden frost. Her gaze drops from Cael's wide eyes to his crown resting on the floor by her foot.

She is no longer a captive princess waiting for her father's wrath to fade, nor is she a bargaining chip meant to hide in the shadows of a foreign court. She will face the weight of a crown she never sought, alongside a silent prince who is breaking in her arms.

Elara tries to keep her composure at this harsh moment. The pressure leaves her on the verge of panic, her breathing turning shallow while her fingers lock against her skirts. What is happening to Raelith? Does everyone know? Did Cael know this entire time, or is he finding out now too? How can two people who are trapped and helpless in this palace stop a queen who controls the entire court? How can a princess who spent her time by a withering garden become queen? The questions beat against her chest, a physical ache that mirrors the trembling of the prince beside her.

"I am sorry for your father," Elara murmurs.

King Raelith is the man who made Elara feel at ease when she first arrived. Beside Kaera, the sovereign ensured her well-being, never once punishing her or expecting an action beyond her capacity. He is a complete contrast to her own father. She recognizes the magnitude of his warmth through the care Cael and Kaera demonstrate toward him. During their simple interactions around the table at meals, she witnessed a bond she spent her entire existence wishing to receive from her own lineage.

Her father-in-law granted that comfort without hesitation.

Elara's throat tightens, a thick pressure blocking her breath while she struggles to comprehend the loss.

"I am so sorry," Elara repeats, her voice trembling. She forces the burning sensation from her eyes, blinking against the threat of tears. "Does Kaera know? The rest of the palace, and perhaps Hartwell?"

She pauses, realizing her rapid inquiries risk overwhelming his state. Her lips press shut, refusing to utter another word into the quiet hall.

Cael looks up. His gray eyes are bloodshot, a storm cloud releasing its rain. *Kaera knows,* he signs, his hands shaking while he struggles to form the symbols. *She wept and pleaded for me to share her tears at that moment, but I could not.* He squeezes his eyes shut. *I cannot believe he is dying. I felt the truth from the beginning, my heart aching under the expectation of a harsh punishment, but I denied the reality.*

He is the only elder member of this family who sees past my silence, Cael continues, his tears spilling over his cheeks. *I viewed his presence as my entire world during my youth. I looked up to him, mimicked his stride, and found my strength because of his devotion to me.* He pauses while a ragged gasp fractures his breathing. *Even after my mother abandoned our family, he refused to surrender his hope for my future. He sat awake past midnight, exhausted from the duties of the state, to reassure my mind of his endless love. He reminded me that no matter what the court muttered about my inability to speak, he cherished my existence.*

His body sinks against his chair. He brings his palms over his face while tears spill past his fingers, the silence surrounding the tremors racking his frame.

Tears escape from Elara's eyes. Cael's bond with his father reminds her of a connection she once possessed with Aline and Walker. Their sacrifice of exhaustion and health meant everything to her. Their love ensured her mind felt validated beyond a royal title. She brings her hand up to reach for her locket, only to find bare skin. Looking down at her collarbone, she remembers she stopped wearing the token. She stopped reaching for her mother.

She looks over at Cael and studies his devastation, his frame trembling and hopeless. Elara's fingers clench with a growing familiarity piercing her heart, a sensation she tries to force down. Leaning forward, her hands reach

for his wrists and remove his palms from his face, revealing his wet cheeks and broken eyes. Elara leans her face closer by an inch, hesitant.

Cael reads her and brings his hand to the back of her neck, guiding her forward further until their foreheads touch.

Elara closes her eyes, taking a moment to breathe. “What will we do now, Cael? I do not know how we will manage this transition, or if I possess the capacity to be a queen. I am not adequate as a princess. Let alone a ruler with a throne.”

When Elara opens her eyes, she finds Cael’s gaze on her face. He pulls back two inches and raises his hands to sign. *I cannot think of a solution while Maereth blocks our path. I could not bring myself to inform Father of her actions. It will overwhelm his remaining strength.*

Elara nods and speaks, her voice stammering. “I am confused why Maereth pursues this path. Why is she putting this kingdom into danger?” She shakes her head. “What will she gain from this choice? It will harm the realm, leaving nothing but destruction.”

She wants absolute dominion, Cael signs while his tears dry against his skin. *She wishes to secure her own power and stand alone. She takes advantage of my father’s condition.*

“But that is her husband.”

He used to be, Cael signs. *I remember her shouting at my father a few years into their marriage after my mother left. I witnessed her manipulating his choices, forcing him into wrong decisions for this kingdom. She caused chaos in the palace, mistreating our staff, the guards, and the knights.* His hands tug on Elara’s coat, ensuring the fabric rests firm against her frame. *She hurt all three of us in many ways. The malice began when I was six years old, worsening over time. Her rage terrified my father. The fear explains his constant hesitation.*

Cael’s hands tremble, the exhaustion of the memories settling into his frame, and Elara takes his palms back into her own grasp to anchor him.

“You do not have to say anything else if you do not wish to,” Elara murmurs, her hands sliding up to Cael’s cheeks to let his tears wet her skin. “It is clear she holds disdain for all of us. Perhaps it is power she aims for, or a political motive that will tear everything apart. All we know is that she cannot deceive the court forever. She cannot harm what Raelith spent years sacrificing to build, or what you work to protect.”

Her voice lowers into a quiet confession. “I am confused, Cael. I am afraid of everything happening around us. I am expected to stand beside you as queen, but I could not serve as your voice when Maereth took over the court. I fear that when I stand beside you, I will repeat the mistake. I worry that instead of serving as a shield, my silence will drag you down.”

She looks down, her words dropping into a whisper. “Books and knowledge were stripped from my life. My routine consisted of mourning by my mother’s dying garden or weeping within my quarters, afraid to encounter the staff. I do not know how to care for my own welfare, let alone the lives of our people.”

She sniffles to check her tears, leaning down to reach for Cael’s crown on the floor. She places the gold on her lap, letting the metal catch the reflection of the fire. “But I will not run away.”

Cael’s grip on the back of her neck weakens. Elara leans forward, lifting the crown back atop his hair. “I do not want to make another mistake that brings regret. I remain afraid, Cael, but I cannot allow another kingdom to suffer.”

He remains still, his gaze searching her eyes to read the sincerity behind her words. Then, he presses his lips to Elara’s forehead. His touch is soft against her skin.

Elara’s grip tightens around Cael’s hands while her posture eases, leaning into his physical affection. “Cael.”

Cael pulls back with a small smile, his right dimple showing. *Your silence was not weakness,* he signs. *None of them would have listened to our words. Father reminded me of their hypocrisy in court. You have done far more for my heart than any line within my booklet could.*

Elara gazes at his hands, the weight of his validation lifting the pressure from her mind. “You will not face them alone,” she says, her voice steadying. “If I am to stand beside you, I will learn to navigate their schemes. I will be your shield, Cael.”

Cael’s breathing slows, his gaze glinting under the firelight. He lifts his hands to return the vow. *If you are my shield, I will be your sword. No lord on the high council will threaten your safety while I draw breath. Not even my stepmother will reach you. We face the court together.*

Elara’s smile remains, a soft warmth touching her expression. “Thank you, Cael. Thank you for being in my life, and for remaining beyond our signed papers.”

Cael’s expression softens, the tension leaving his shoulders. *Thank you for existing, petal.*

The quiet of the dining hall lingers for a fragile second, the warmth of his final sign settling between them. Elara keeps her palms pressed against his knuckles, her chest rising with a deep breath while they watch the low embers of the hearth fade to gray ash. The afternoon light stretches long and dim across the dark stone floor, a momentary sanctuary from the obligations waiting outside the door.

The doors crash open against the stone wall, the impact shattering the silence. Hartwell steps into the chamber, his chest heaving under a ragged breath, his face pale. He discards all formal protocols, his grip tightening around the hilt of his sword while his gaze locks onto the prince and princess.

“Your Highness,” he gasps, his knuckles turning pale against the framework of the entrance. “Queen Maereth utilizes her presence to sway the council and the citizens. She coordinates the arrangements to advance the timeline, forcing the deployment of the full battalion by tomorrow dawn. We must halt her influence now.”

Elara’s hands break from Cael’s grasp, her fingers tightening against her skirts while the color drains from her face.

Where is she located? Cael signs, standing up.

“She works at the writing table within the private quarters,” Hartwell answers, his fingers resting firm on the hilt of his blade. “Two senior advisors remain beside her, reviewing the recruitment tallies. The momentum grows every hour. They do not expect your presence. If you confront them now, you can arrest this decree.”

Both Elara and Cael force their trembling limbs to move, her boots clicking against the dark stone while she bridges the space between them. Cael’s fingers splay over her lower back, guiding her forward. A flutter stirs in her stomach at the contact, the heat of his touch serving as an anchor.

Together, they follow Hartwell, stepping out into the palace hallway. The air in the corridor hangs stagnant, the grand tapestries casting long shadows against the walls under the afternoon light. The pressure against her back regulates her rapid breaths, guiding her movements until her shoes match the pace of his own. They continue to hurry toward that wing.

Cael does not hesitate and pushes the door open, forcing their entry into the interior.

Queen Maereth sits behind the large mahogany desk, her fingers pressing the edge of the thick parchment charter that rests between her and the advisors. Stitched into the heading of the state document is the formal emblem of the crown, the ink fresh under the light of the tallow candles. Two senior council lords flank her. Their leather folders open while their heavy breathing scratches the silence of the private quarters.

Maereth lifts her chin and fixes her cold gaze onto her stepson. “Welcome, Cael. We review the border security while your father rests from his wounds. The high council recognizes the weight of my husband’s incapacitation, and we deliberate on the defense of Riverath.”

Elara steps past Cael, fixing her stare on the two senior advisors. One counselor fidgets with his woolen robes, his knuckles turning pale while his focus drops to the floorboards to avoid looking at the prince.

“This session lacks the legal authorization of the lineage,” Elara states, holding her posture straight. “Cael stands within this chamber, and his presence represents the throne while the king recovers. Factions of this council waver because they recognize the economic ruin of a premature campaign. You demand a swift retaliation, Maereth, but your charter demands the deployment of the entire southern vanguard, leaving our capital defenseless.”

Cael lifts his hands, addressing the hesitating advisors. *The vanguard prepares for a strike, but the true threat remains the consequence of her choices. A retaliation will ignite a total conflict that our forces are not equipped to endure. Look at the parchment on the table. Read the deployment lines she drew, and realize the destruction born of this panic.*

The advisor who avoided his gaze looks down at the charter on the desk. He tracks the scale of the mobilization tallies Maereth outlined, exchanging a tense glance with the second lord. The raw truth of Cael’s warning creates a fracture in their confidence.

The first advisor hesitates, his fingers hovering near the parchment as he seeks Maereth’s approval. He looks up, but his focus collides with Cael’s gaze. Terror ripples through his frame, his knuckles whitening as he pulls his hand back from the desk.

“I cannot place my seal upon this charter if Cael forces a legal veto,” the counselor states, his voice fracturing while he retreats a full step from the desk. “The enemy is already at our borders, and this political delay leaves our defense units without a unified command.”

The second advisor moves in tandem with his companion, pulling his frame back into the shadows. He folds his arms across his chest and closes his leather folder with a decisive thud.

Maereth drops her quill. It clatters on the desk, black ink spattering across the unrolled parchment and the front of her dress. She shoves her chair back, the iron legs screeching against the floorboards. She rises to her full height, her composure shattering while her chest heaves with a jagged breath. Her face twists into a sneer that exposes her teeth while she turns her attention to Cael.

“You allow a mute stone statue to dictate the boundaries of your courage?” She points a finger at the parchment on the desk. “You mistake his stubbornness for wisdom. He surrenders our defenses while our enemies march toward us.”

She turns her venom to Elara, stepping around the corner of the desk to close the physical gap between them.

Elara’s heart sinks, stepping back while the memory of Maereth’s previous attempt to harm her batters against her skull. The gesture mirrors the physical violence she endured within the castle walls of Veyrenn, where King Eric targeted her with similar cruelty. Weakness spreads through her limbs, her knees trembling while the weight of that old terror resurfaces to rob the air from her lungs.

Cael intercepts. He stands between them, offering no other warning than his menacing demeanor. Keeping his eyes fixed on his stepmother, he extends his free hand behind his back to find Elara. His fingers slip into her palm, his thumb pressing against her knuckles to absorb the tremor in her grip.

Maereth’s steps falter, her wide eyes staring into her stepson’s face. With a sneer, she shifts her stance to glare at Elara over Cael's shoulder. “And you arrive here to preach of economic ruin, carrying the blood of Aline. You are a hostage from a foreign kingdom, sent to this castle to honor a contract born of your mother’s desperation. You possess no authority within these walls to lecture my council on the survival of my realm.”

“Sign the documents,” Maereth turns and commands the lords, her hand slamming onto the mahogany surface once more. “We strike Zahraan, or we prove ourselves as weak as the heir.”

The two advisors stand frozen behind the desk, their hands hovering over their closed leather folders. The first lord clears his throat, his voice trembling while he faces the queen’s mounting fury. “Your Majesty, we must urge caution. The southern vanguard cannot sustain a defense campaign without the treasury’s immediate release of emergency coin for the garrison supplies. We cannot sign this charter under these conditions.”

Maereth opens her mouth to deliver a response, her features twisting with rage at the open defiance.

The doors burst outward, the impact rattling against the stone walls of the private quarters to fracture the tense silence. A breathless military messenger plunges into the chamber, his leather chest guard stained with melted frost. His fingers grip the doorframe to support his weight while his gaze darts across the assembly.

“Your Highnesses,” the messenger pants. “The perimeter lines have collapsed. The battalion you sent has failed. Troops from Omar are mobilizing near the southern shelves. Their advanced scout units have crossed the outer markers, advancing directly toward our valley gates.”

The first counselor drops his leather folder, the parchment sheets sliding across the polished oak to flutter to the floorboards. Hartwell’s hand grips the pommel of his longsword until his leather glove creaks in the sudden stillness. The two senior advisors pivot their torsos away from the writing table, their bodies stiffening while they fix their stare on Queen Maereth. A hard grin touches her lips while her chin rises to meet their silent accusation.

The parchment charter on the desk flies to the floorboards, the pages scattering while the first iron bells toll from the palace towers. Deep, metallic notes shake the masonry beneath their boots. Below the quarters, the corridors fill with the din of mobilizing defense units. The rhythmic clank of plate armor and the hurried shouts of captains ring up the stairwells while the palace shifts into a defensive panic.

Cael fixes his gaze on Elara, his features tightening while the messenger’s words fill the quarters. Elara sways, the color draining from her cheeks in unison with the grim weight that takes hold of Cael. This gathering carried no intent to legalize a future campaign. The assembly served only to mask an execution already set in motion.

Cael pivots back to face Maereth. *What have you done?* his fingers demand, the fluid force cutting the air. *You sent those men to their deaths*

without the authorization of the crown.

Maereth’s wide eyes of rage slowly melt into a smile of satisfaction.

“I execute what is necessary for this realm, securing the future of your titles,” Maereth states, her voice lowering while her gaze drifts to Elara. “This conflict is the correction Riverath requires. Our people deserve a sovereign who wields a sword, not a queen who remains a helpless ornament defined by glimmering accessories.”

Cael’s hand leaves Elara’s, attempting to take one step forward until Hartwell steps in between.

A hard tension locks Cael’s frame, his knuckles turning white while he fixes his gaze on the queen. His fingers curl into fists at his sides, his jaw tightening under the weight of his anger. The force radiating from him halts Maereth’s smile, the focus in his eyes answering the strike against Elara’s worth without a single sign.

Hartwell throws his weight into the space, his palms pressing flat against the chest of Cael’s tunic to hold him back. “Your Highness, no. The gates. The vanguard requires your presence at the perimeter wall right now.”

Elara watches the back of Cael’s tunic, her fingernails digging into her palms to stem the rising terror. This dark despair echoes her childhood fears, blurring the edges of the corridor. She stands frozen while the sound of the alarm bells echoes.

Cael relaxes under Hartwell’s pressure, a hard tension locking the muscles of his neck while he turns to Elara, blocking the sight of the rushing advisors. She looks up at him, swallowing while the group moves out of the private quarters together.

Hartwell steps to the center of the corridor, his head turning while he barks orders to the passing guards. “Secure the eastern barricades! Bring the heavy shields to the main gate courtyard!”

Cael intercepts an advancing knight who carries a standard issue longsword. He places his hand on the man’s iron pauldron to halt his stride, forcing the guard to look directly at him. Cael guides the knight toward the narrow window slit overlooking the lower courtyard, using his physical stance to center the man's attention on the target zone below.

Form a defensive line at the lower archway, he signs, his chest expanding with a steady breath. *Split the archer units into two flanks to cover the ridge. Hold the perimeter wall until the reserve units arrive.*

The knight tracks the movements, his expression hardening while he absorbs the instructions. He strikes his armored fist against his breastplate in a silent salute, turning to execute the deployment. With his defense instructions finalized, Cael pivots himself back toward where Elara stands.

“Cael?” Elara whispers, her eyes searching his.

His stern expression softens while his hands reach forward, grasping her cold, trembling fingers. He takes a step closer, letting the guards and knights rush past them, the footsteps thudding against the stone floor boards. Their sole focus remains on each other.

“We must leave,” Elara states, holding his hand. “I told you I will not run.”

Cael swallows, bringing his thumb to brush over her wrist, tracking her racing pulse beneath her skin. He leans down and presses his lips against her forehead, lingering there to absorb the tremor in her frame before he pulls away.

“What are you doing?” Elara’s voice breaks, a weakness spreading through her limbs. She catches a glimpse of the courtyard through the narrow window slits, where the winter wind howls against the iron gates. “We must leave now. We do not have time.”

Cael takes a step back, his movements heavy with hesitation while he raises his hands to sign. *You must remain safe within these walls*, his fingers declare. *Stay with my father and Kaera. I will return.*

“No,” Elara replies, taking a step forward to follow his path toward the exit. “I will come with you. I do not know where Kaera is, but I will not let you face that courtyard alone. We do not know the severity of the danger outside.”

Cael pauses at her defiance. *You promised to be my voice*, he signs, the fluid force of his movements carrying a desperate weight. *If the capital falls, my voice dies with you. Stay behind.* His hands fall to his sides. His fingers break from her grasp, slipping away while his stride carries him toward the main stairwell. He joins Hartwell, moving into the marching crowd of guards.

Elara’s body moves on instinct, her feet taking three steps forward to follow him. Her limbs seek the warmth of his presence, her fingers reaching into the empty air to reclaim his touch. She pushes past the private quarters, her gown rustling against the stone floors while she tries to bridge the widening gap between them.

Elara tries to say his name, but nothing comes out. She trembles and almost falls over. Her hands reach for the stair's railing, and she forces her feet to step up to escape the chaos.

Turning her head, she stares at the slowly quieting palace as everyone leaves. She gasps for air, squeezing her eyes but all she can see is Cael leaving. She enters into her bedchamber, slamming the door shut and sinking onto her knees. She lays her head by the side of the vanity, coughing.

The oak paneling absorbs the muffled echoes of the alarm bells, leaving her alone with the sound of her own breaths. The fabric of her skirt puddles around her frame on the cold floor while she grips the carved wood of the vanity.

Elara's reeling mind drifts to Cael's booklet. Needing an anchor, she reaches into the drawer of the vanity and pulls it out. There are only three poems she has not read. Her hand rests on the leather cover. Cael is outside, fighting back an enemy while she is left here. Alone. Useless. Shaking her head, she opens the book and flips to the final three verses.

THE URGE TO disappear pierces my aching heart,
It overwhelms my frame until my defenses part.
This union leaves no hope for me,
But I see the familiarity of her forest eyes,
It reminds me of a girl fifteen summers ago,
A child standing amid the dark fortress view,
Eyes of hope I have never witnessed in the night,
And a kindness so bright, I thought I would never see,
The sole beautiful ghost who remains a part of me.

ELARA'S MIND flashes to the memory of her mother's eastern conservatory fountain. She recalls the glimpse of her own movement, a sensation that someone stood there whom she wished to reach. Her memory remains out of grasp, her mind failing to seize the connection. She buries her face against the parchment page.

Tears spill past her lashes, her chest shaking while her breaths fracture the silence. She forces herself upright, refusing to waste the remaining moments. Her fingers scramble through the booklet, passing the text he

used to communicate with the court, searching for the other verse. Wiping her eyes to clear her vision, she reads.

She finds comfort in others except me,
All I can feel is the coldness of her shield,
I strive to prove this silent frame is kind,
To offer warmth her defenses will not yield,
But my touch remains a shadow she must flee,
Leaving my hands empty while she turns to depart,
Finding peace in a world that excludes my heart.

"Oh, Cael," Elara whispers, tracing the ink strokes while her breathing suspends over the final line. The elegance of his handwriting burns into her focus.

Memories of her arrival in Riverath resurface, a time when fear dictated her steps. She recalls the terror that he might mirror the cruelty of King Eric, suspicion framing his gestures as a mere performance to lower her guard. Reading his confession, she reviews his consistent protection across the past weeks. A numbness takes hold of her limbs while the truth of his sincerity undermines the remaining walls of her isolation.

Elara turns to the next page, revealing a short verse marred by splatters of black ink. The dark stains cross the fibers of the page, blotting the margins where his pen faltered.

A wall of glass, a threat of stone,
Bound to a crown, though entirely alone.
Turn away from the shadow I bear,
Lest you down in the quiet we share.
A mantle of green, a spirit so light,
Lost to the freeze of a kingdom in night.

Despite knowing she counted it to be the last, her fingers desperately turn toward more pages. She wants to find more of his words and to feel the hollow comfort of his confessions. A small explosion echoes from afar,

rattling the glass doors of the balcony. A gasp rips out of her throat as she glances up at the clear doors.

Everything is happening too quickly. The glass balcony doors rattle again for a second, deeper resonance, the vibrating the glass until it cracks the glass. The vulnerability of her position hits her, a warning that the stone walls offer no protection against a siege. She looks down at the ink-stained splatters on the page, the black stains serving as a mirror to the chaos unfolding at the gates.

She stops her tears. Reading old pages for the sake of her comfort will not alter the threat, nor will it fulfill the vow she shared by the fireplace. She promised to be his shield, yet she remains hidden on the floorboards while he faces the vanguard. She tucks the booklet into the inside of her coat's pocket, forcing her weight onto her feet while a resolve hardens inside her chest to honor his command and secure the safety of his family.

Elara exits her bedchamber and presses her palms against the cold wall to guide herself forward. A quick glance into Kaera's bedchamber reveals the princess is gone.

Elara turns back around quickly, her focus locking onto the empty passage while she forces her limbs to move. She must find Kaera to fulfill the directive Cael delivered during their separation. Each sanctuary she checks is empty. When she stands in front of King Raelith's bedchamber, her heart sinks. She must not waste time.

Opening the door, Elara enters. Her steps falter when she sees King Raelith propped against the pillows on his bed, his eyes closed while his breath rasps each time he inhales. His pale skin clings tight to the contours of his skull. He is weaker than the last time she saw him, his body noticeably thinner beneath the layers of linen sheets, his physical presence fading into the mattress. A heavy odor of damp metal, stale sweat, and rot hangs over the mattress. He is unlike the noble king she met weeks ago in her castle.

Kaera is seated in a chair near his side, her black hair covering her face while the tremors of her shoulders indicate her grief. Elara takes a tentative step forward and sinks onto her knees by her side, bringing her hands to secure the princess's fingers.

Kaera sniffles, holding her sobs back while she looks up to meet her eyes. "Elara, what is happening outside?"

“They are attacking,” Elara whispers. “Cael left to defend the walls, and he commanded me to care for you and Raelith. It is not safe.”

“Riverath is already coming to a ruin because of my mother,” Kaera states, her voice breaking when she brings her hand over her mouth to stifle her growing sobs. “My father is dying, Elara. He told me the truth, and while I look at him, I have nothing left to grasp.”

“Why is all of this happening?” Kaera continues, her lips trembling. “Is the world punishing us?”

Elara remains silent, taking in Kaera’s words. She is unable to grant an answer. She looks over at King Raelith again, noticing a stained splatter of crimson on his robes.

“I am staying here with him. No matter what happens,” Kaera says. “I cannot leave my father like this.”

“Kaera, please,” Elara whispers. Her pleas cut off at the sound of approaching footsteps. She turns and opens the door, finding Queen Maereth approaching up the stairs. Her lips squeeze shut. Glancing back over her shoulder, she watches Kaera sink into the chair, her head in her hands.

With a shuddering exhale, Elara retreats from the threshold to evade the queen’s line of sight. She forces her trembling limbs to move, her boots catching the stone steps of the adjacent stairwell while she flees toward the quiet upper levels. She climbs to avoid Maereth, escaping the threat of words that would sting her weak heart. When she reaches the top landing, she stands within the shadows of the corridor. She looks down through the stairwell balustrade to observe Queen Maereth entering the bedchamber below. She expects to hear a loud voice of anger or mockery echo up the stone shaft.

Except the sound that rises through the dark passage is a sob. It is a weeping note that does not belong to Kaera.

Elara turns back to face the solitary hallway ahead of her, finding the private chamber Cael tried to hide from her sight. She shifts her gaze away from the oak paneling, a conflict rising within her thoughts. The urge pushes her forward to discover the truth of the glimpses flashing through her memory every time she looks at Cael. She desires to uncover what more he is hiding, to find a fragment of truth she can clutch.

Her feet remain frozen to the floorboards. Guilt takes hold of her mind, recalling the times she stripped his vulnerability away. Those discoveries

lacked planning, and one occurred by her own choice. She forces her mind to imagine the reality of possessing a booklet of her own deepest, saddest secrets. To have someone discover each page, stripping away every protective barrier to leave her bare, would only leave her wrecked.

Elara takes a step forward. Then another. When she stands in front of the door, she stares at the silver doorknob while another explosion echoes from afar, louder than the last. A gasp escapes her mouth, her eyes squeezing shut. Her hand grasps the doorknob and pushes it open. She expected it to be locked, anticipating a struggle to open it, but the mechanism opens to her touch.

She freezes.

Canvases fill her vision, crowding the interior. A black wooden table occupies the center of the chamber, holding pools of black ink and dense stacks of booklets. Faded, stained papers lie crumbled across the floorboards. Her gaze drifts to the artwork, her breath locking in her throat when she targets an old, weathered canvas.

It is a painting of a young girl.

The piece displays thick brushstrokes, the texture carrying the unrefined style of an early attempt. The pigment captures the curve of childhood cheeks and the flow of brown strands against a background of green grass.

She approaches the canvas, her thumb brushing the cracked, dry texture of the old paint. The features on the aged cloth belong to her own childhood frame. Her breath stalls as she turns to see landscapes depicting a bright sky. Her eyes then land on a newer portrait, a piece executed with precision and detail. This canvas captures her form as she appears now. The warm candlelight from the wall sconces illuminates her current likeness, the soft glow warming the rich tones of the oil pigments while the painting depicts her eyes filled with familiarity, matching the look she gave him when they stood weeks ago in the castle dining hall.

Elara approaches the table, her breaths rising deep within her chest. Her focus narrows down to the surface, where a single booklet rests open. A quill sits beside the binding, the tip dry where he left his final thoughts incomplete. She pulls the booklet into her tight grasp, the leather cool against her palms while she turns to the previous pages to discover his voice.

THE SILENT WINTERS froze my youthful tongue,

Within these walls where heavy grief was hung,
A lonely boy possessed no voice to speak,
Amid the shadows where the light grew bleak.
But memory preserved a summer night,
A girl who offered grace and sudden light,
Your forest eyes became my secret shield,
The sole devotion that would never yield.
I held that phantom warmth across the years,
To conquer every shade of silent fears,
And now the child I carried in my mind,
Stands as the love I always hoped to find.

"IT CANNOT BE," Elara's voice trembles, her eyes landing upon the paintings and down at the poems. The resemblance. The answers to the poems he wrote in his booklet. She recalls one of the lines in his poems she once read a while ago.

ONLY THE MEMORY of the girl I once met,

ELARA'S HEAD THROBS, pulling a moan from her mouth. She presses the heel of her hand against her brow, while the candlelit chamber recedes into a dark blur. The throb behind her temples gives way to a rhythmic pressure, like the pulse of rising water. The echo of the palace alarm bells begins to distort, melting into a softer splash.

A sensory warmth replaces the chill in her limbs. The scent of ink and aged paper fades, overtaken by the heavy fragrance of blooming jasmine and wet moss. In the theater of her mind, the darkness fades to reveal a soft luminescence filtering through a structure of overhead glass. The details assemble piece by piece, sharpening until her focus centers on the fluid ripple of a stone pool.

ELARA PACES BESIDE HER MOTHER, her small fingers clasping the woman's palm while her shorter stride strains to match the forward momentum. Tilting her chin, a smile parts her lips. "Mama?"

Queen Aline maintains her focus to the left while King Eric marches ahead in the center, guards and knights forming an iron perimeter around their frames. “Yes?”

“How long will your duties take today?” Elara asks, her brow folding into a furrow. “You always take too long.”

Her mother offers a soft laugh, the morning radiance softening the pink hue of her cheeks. “I know, my dear. Your father and I must manage affairs that demand our patience. To guarantee your safety, remain beside Walker. During our last visit, you escaped our sight and became lost within the press.”

Elara nods, her chin dipping. “Okay.”

Her parents part from her side, dissolving into the gathering together to greet the citizens who maintain a distance. Elara watches her mother’s gentle composure, observing the care she extends to the elderly and the assistance she offers to the families. She sees a woman she wishes to become one day, a queen of kindness who grants hope and delivers only goodness, even when the work leaves her exhausted behind the castle walls.

“Let us find a secure spot to sit, Elara,” Walker says, taking her hand to guide their path into the middle of Veyrenn’s central area. They settle upon a wooden bench, the morning warmth resting upon their skin.

Elara remains seated, her legs swinging back and forth in a matching rhythm. Veyrenn increases in land while new structures appear across the district. Boutiques, apothecaries, and small stands selling fresh fruits and vegetables line the street. Each season, the kingdom improves in appearance and work. It makes Elara wonder if she can ever match such success.

“I see the merchants opened new boutiques,” Walker smiles. “Perhaps one day, we will have the tailors stitch a prettier gown for you?”

“Is my dress now ugly?” Elara asks, her lips pouting while she looks down at her short pink dress with light floral stitched patterns.

“Elara, I carried no such intent.” Walker places her hand on Elara’s head, smoothing her strands. She slides her palm down to the side of Elara’s face, her fingers resting against the curve of her cheek to tilt her chin upward. “You possess many wonderful dresses, and you look beautiful in all of them.”

“Like mama?”

Walker chuckles. “Like her.”

They look ahead together. A group of three children runs in a circle, giggling while they chase each other. The children are older and taller than her. Walker's expression softens at the sight, admiring the shared joy.

Elara swallows, extending her foot forward to step onto the stone and approach them, wanting to ask if they wish to share their game. Gaining the confidence, she nears the group. "Can I play with you?"

The children stop, their smiles fading while their brows fold into furrows. The girl with golden hair and warm skin speaks first, her gaze sweeping over Elara's small frame with a snarky look. "You are too small to keep pace with our circle, and your long skirt will leave you tripping over the stones."

The two older boys stand behind her, their chests shaking while they laugh along with the dismissal. The first boy points to Elara's shoes, his grin widening to match the girl's mocking expression while they step back to resume their game, leaving Elara isolated on the pavement.

They turn to take their leave. Elara sniffles. "But mama told me these were prettier than my other shoes."

She turns to find Walker's eyes on her, her expression saddened. Elara almost starts to tear up, turning her face away to watch the other children play. "I wish I could have fun like them."

"Dear, how about I play with you?" Walker offers.

Elara exhales, her bottom lip trembling. "But I want kids my age to play with me. Why do they not like me?"

A moment of silence passes between them. Walker guides Elara back onto her seat, stroking through her dark strands. "Kids know no better sometimes. You do. That is why you are the better person."

Elara only nods, considering Walker has said the same words during their last outing. Walker turns away for a moment, searching for something, while the sound of sniffles echoes from somewhere nearby. The giggles and the chattering disrupt the noise, leaving her frustrated. She tries her best to focus on the sounds.

Another sniffle.

She looks up at Walker, making sure the woman is distracted, and takes the chance to look away. When she does, Elara takes the opportunity to slip off the bench, rushing toward the familiar path of the eastern conservatory fountain. The space stands as something Aline took her time to grow and

arrange, a small spot of sanctuary her mother shared with Elara four days ago.

Squeezing through the thick trees, Elara hears the familiar sounds of the water running from the fountain, splashing against the stone basin. Nearby one of the furthest trees sits a boy. His knees are curled against his frame, his black hair messy, and his clothes are entirely black, decorated with silver chains. His face is buried in his forearms.

"Are you crying?" Elara asks, taking a hesitant step forward.

The boy's sniffle pauses, his head rising to meet Elara's gaze. His eyes are a storming gray, piercing under the intense light.

Elara frowns. "Your eyes. It looks like they are storming."

The boy does not speak or move, bringing his hand to wipe his tears. He turns his face away, avoiding Elara.

Her heart aches at the second rejection today, and tears swell up in her eyes again. "I am not bad. I only wish to make a friend."

It takes the boy a moment to look up at Elara with his tearing eyes. He does not smile, the hard tension in his shoulders easing.

Elara's fingers curl against the skirt of her dress. "I am Elara."

The boy only stares. He opens his mouth, but then seals it shut into a thin line. She does not take it as a rejection. Her lips turn into a reassuring smile, taking a step closer to the boy while leaving a wide distance.

"Do you want to be friends?"

ELARA'S EYES snap open under the warm candlelight of the private space, her breath catching in her throat while the fragrance of jasmine and the fountain waters dissolve into the dark air. The throb behind her temples recedes, leaving the smell of aged ink and the physical reality of the parchment in her hands.

She looks down at the booklet, then shifts her gaze to the portraits on the walls. The truth lands with absolute clarity, dismantling the remaining walls of her defenses. The silent child in the garden, the boy she thought feared her presence, stood as the single soul who never rejected her offer of friendship. His written words proved her worth, showing she remained his anchor through fifteen lonely summers.

Tears stream down Elara's cheeks, staining the paper of the booklet below her. She quickly stands, reaching for the other paintings and more poems. Kneeling down, she finds another painting of her now. It is where

she is looking forward, her eyes glimmering with hope and the background being a simple light green paint. The feature she recognizes first on the painting is the golden locket on her collarbone. It is detailed. Important.

Elara shakes her head, her eyes blurring. “How could I forget the only person who did not reject me? How did I not realize?”

A sharp explosion from afar echoes again, the rumble fading into a heavy silence. She wastes no time and stands, her heart urging her to find Cael and ensure his safety. She places the canvas aside, her breathing shallow while her fingers catch the silver doorknob.

Only for the door to open.

Cael stands within the chamber, his eyes wide while the bright afternoon light frames his silhouette from behind. Dust stains the contours of his cheeks, and gray grime blankets the fabric of his dark clothes. Elara’s fingers clutch the fabric of her skirt, her heart racing while the shock of her discovery locks her frame. His gaze shifts away from her face, dropping to the exposed canvases and the three portraits that reveal his history.

Witnessing his presence now alters everything. Her mind holds only the image of the child from the garden, the boy who preserved her memory through fifteen years of isolation. The prince she was forcefully wedded to is the husband who paints her likeness and composes verses to honor her worth. Every doubt, every confusion, and every tear she shed across the past weeks feels like a mistake. There was truly no other woman but her.

Cael remains motionless, his chest expanding with heavy breaths while his hands hang loose at his sides. He delivers no signs, while the exposure leaves him bare before her.

“Are you that boy by the garden?” She knows the answer, but the need to confirm it overwhelms her.

He continues to stare at her before finally offering a nod.

Elara’s lips part to say more but nothing comes out. All her previous questions are replaced by newer ones, that leaves her overwhelmed. She attempts to apologize for being here. In his private sanctuary and going through his things. Nothing.

Cael takes a step forward, his gaze still on hers. Elara tilts her head up and she almost feels herself shatter beneath his gaze. “I am so sorry. I should have not come here and I—”

He raises his hand, his fingers moving to brush a tear from her cheek. His touch carries the warmth of his exertion, the skin rough against her face

while his features soften with devotion. Without a moment for Elara to adjust to his response, he lays his forehead against hers, the tips of their noses pressing.

“Cael.” She slides her arms over his neck. “I am sorry I did not share the same amount of love toward you. That I did not remember you any sooner. But I am happy I get to meet you again.”

Cael pulls away and drops a light kiss on her forehead. He brings his hands back. *You do not need to share the same affection toward me in return. The kindness you shared with me was enough to make me feel seen for centuries.* A smile touches his lips, his gray eyes shining with light.

An explosion echoes from afar, a reminder that the clash has not calmed down, a chaos that will continue unless Elara brings her strength to fight beside him. His eyes remain on hers, holding a serene peace despite the attack.

“I want to ask you one final time,” Elara says, her hands sliding over his beating heart. “Do you want to be my friend?”

A softness touches the corners of his mouth. *I wanted nothing more than to be your friend.* He steps back and offers his hand.

Elara takes his hand, enveloped in his warmth while they leave his private sanctuary to meet the onslaught together.

OceanofPDF.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Silent Prince is a story I first began to dream of and write when I was only fourteen years old. I was young then, filled with nothing but hope. Never did I imagine that this book would be published one day, or that I would become devoted to refining it to the best of my ability so that someone other than myself could read it.

Elara and Cael are characters born from my own heart. I knew from the start that I wanted to represent myself through them, to feel seen, and to help others feel seen in return. They have undergone so many transformations and faced endless challenges to become who they are now. Seeing people across social media, alongside my own closest friends, adore them and root for their best versions made me realize that I could never abandon their journey.

Now, I want to take a moment to thank you for reading this book. To the readers who choose to open these pages, thank you for welcoming Elara and Cael into your hearts and joining them on their journey. Your willingness to step into their world gives their story life, and your hope for their future means everything.

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to my best friends, both those who are writers and authors themselves, and those who are not. To my beta readers, who protected and nurtured my manuscript as if it were their own, you all supported me every step of the way, seeing a potential in me that I often failed to see in myself.

I want to thank my parents for their endless support of me and this book. They stood by my side through the hardest parts of this creative journey, just as they celebrated with me through the happiest ones. They have conducted deep research and managed tasks to find options to share my book with the world.

Additionally, I want to thank the artist who helped me bring the beautiful cover of *The Silent Prince* to life, looking beyond the canvas to capture the soul of the story.

Thank you.

OceanofPDF.com