

MORGAN RICE


A JEWEL
FOR ROYALS

A THRONE FOR SISTERS (BOOK FIVE)

A Throne for Sisters

Морган Райс

A Jewel for Royals

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“Morgan Rice's imagination is limitless. In another series that promises to be as entertaining as the previous ones, A THRONE OF SISTERS presents us with the tale of two sisters (Sophia and Kate), orphans, fighting to survive in a cruel and demanding world of an orphanage. An instant success. I can hardly wait to put my hands on the second and third books!” --Books and Movie Reviews (Roberto Mattos) From #1 Bestseller Morgan Rice comes an unforgettable new fantasy series. In A JEWEL FOR ROYALS (A Throne for Sisters—Book Five), Sophia, 17, gets word that Sebastian, her love, is imprisoned and set to be executed. Will she risk it all for love? Her sister Kate, 15, struggles to escape the witch's power—but it may be too strong. Kate may be forced to pay the price for the deal she made—and to live a life she doesn't want to. The Queen is furious at Lady D'Angelica for failing to woo her son, Sebastian. She is prepared to sentence her to the Lead Mask. But Lady D'Angelica has her own plans, and she won't go down so easily. Cora and Emeline finally reach Stonehome—and what they find there shocks them. Most shocking of all, though, is Sophia and Kate's brother, a man who will change their destinies forever. What secrets does he hold about their long-lost parents? A JEWEL FOR ROYALS (A Throne for Sisters—Book Five) is the fifth book in a dazzling new fantasy series rife with love, heartbreak, tragedy, action, adventure, magic, swords, sorcery, dragons, fate and heart-pounding suspense. A page turner, it is filled with characters that will make you fall in love, and a world you will never forget. Book #6 in the series will be released soon. “ powerful opener to a series will produce a combination of feisty protagonists and challenging circumstances to thoroughly involve not just young adults, but adult fantasy fans who seek epic stories fueled by powerful friendships and adversaries.” --Midwest Book Review (Diane Donovan)

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Morgan Rice

A jewel for royals

Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; of the epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY, comprising 8 books; and of the new epic fantasy series A THRONE FOR SISTERS, comprising five books (and counting). Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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-Publishers Weekly

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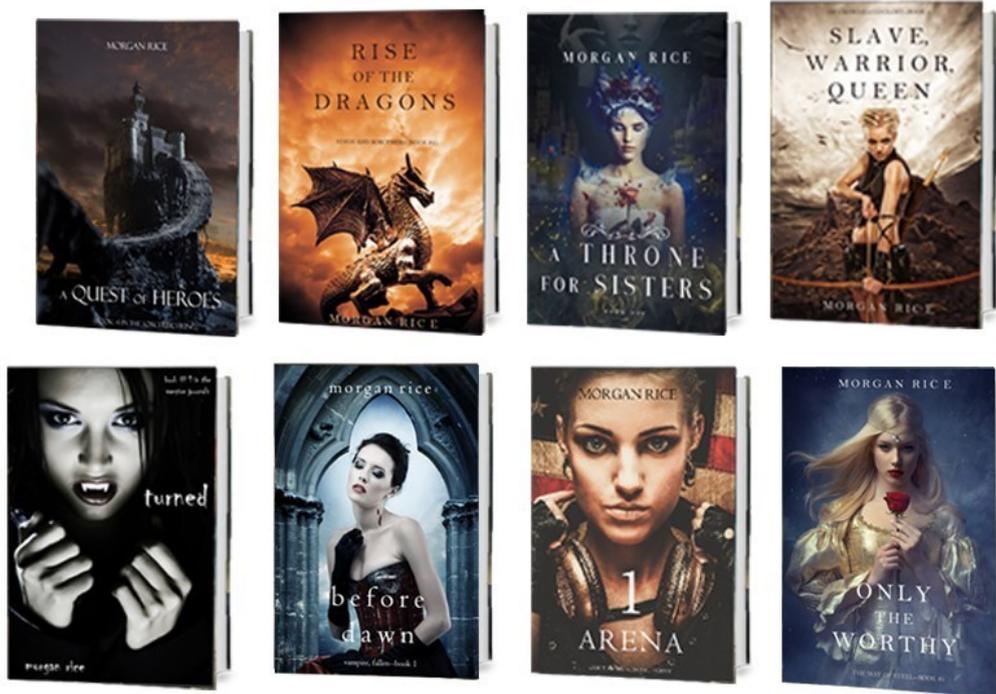
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CHAPTER ONE

Sophia stared at the young man standing in front of her, and although she knew she should ask all kinds of questions, that didn't mean she doubted who he was for an instant. The touch of his mind against hers felt too close to the way it did with Kate. The look of him there in the sunlight was too similar.

He was her brother. There was no way he could be anything else. There was only one problem with that...

"How?" Sophia asked. "How are you my brother? I don't... I don't remember a brother. I don't even know your name."

"I'm Lucas," he said. He stepped down lightly onto the dock where she and Jan stood waiting. He moved with the smoothness of a dancer, the wooden slats seeming to give beneath each step. "And you're Sophia."

Sophia nodded. Then she hugged him. It seemed so natural to do it, so obvious. She hugged him tight, as if letting him go would mean him disappearing into thin air. Even so, she had to pull back, if only so that they could both breathe.

"I only found out your name, and Kate's, a little while ago," he said. To Sophia's surprise, Sienne was rubbing up against his legs, the forest cat twining close to him before pulling back to her. "My tutors told me when I came of age. When I got your message, I came as quickly as I could. Friends in the Silk Lands lent me a ship."

It sounded as though her brother had powerful friends. It still didn't answer her biggest question.

"How can I have a brother?" she asked. "I *don't* remember you. I didn't see your picture anywhere in Monthys."

"I was... hidden," Lucas said. "Our parents knew that their peace with the Dowager was fragile, and it would not withstand a son. They put about the story that I died."

Sophia felt herself staggering slightly. She felt Jan's hand on her arm, her cousin's touch steadying her.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "The child..."

You're pregnant? Again it felt different from when someone else with a spark of talent touched her mind. It felt familiar. It felt right, somehow. It felt like home.

I am, Sophia sent back with a smile. "But we should talk aloud for now."

She didn't know if Jan had known that her brother had similar powers to hers, but he did now. It seemed only fair to warn him of that, and give him a chance to guard his thoughts.

"And there are things that we should know," Jan said. He sounded suspicious in a way that Sophia wasn't, maybe because he hadn't felt that touch of mind. "How do we know that you are who you say?"

"You're Jan Skyddar, Lars Skyddar's son?" Lucas said. "My tutors taught me about all of you, though they cautioned me not to contact you until I was ready. They said that it would be dangerous. That you would not accept me. Perhaps they were right."

"He is my brother, Jan," Sophia said. She put the arm that Jan wasn't holding through Lucas's. "I can feel his powers, and... well, *look* at him."

"But there is no record of him," Jan insisted. "Oli would have mentioned it if there were a Danse *son*. He mentioned you and Kate enough."

"Part of hiding me was hiding the traces of me," Lucas said. "I imagine that they say I died as a babe. I don't blame you for not believing me."

Sophia blamed Jan a little, even though she understood it. She wanted this to be right. She wanted everyone to just accept her brother.

"We'll take him to the castle," Sophia said. "My uncle will know about it if anyone does."

Jan seemed to accept that, and they started to make their way back up through Ishjemme, past the wooden houses and the trees that sprouted between them. To Sophia, Lucas's presence seemed right somehow, as if a fragment of her life that she hadn't known was missing had somehow been returned.

"How old are you?" Sophia asked.

"Sixteen," he said. That put him midway between her and Kate, not the oldest, but the oldest boy. Sophia could see how that would have made things dangerous back in the Dowager's kingdom. Lucas going away hadn't kept *them* safe though, had it?

"And you've been living in the Silk Lands?" Jan asked. It had a note of interrogation to it.

"There, and a couple of places in their outer islands," Lucas replied. He sent an image across to Sophia of a house that was grand but flat, the rooms divided by silks rather than solid walls. "I thought it was normal to grow up being raised by tutors. Was it like that for you?"

"Not really." Sophia hesitated for a moment, then sent across an image of the House of the Unclaimed. She saw Lucas's, her *brother's*, jaw clench.

"I'll kill them," he promised, and maybe the intensity of that made him sit better with Jan, because her cousin nodded along with the sentiment.

"Kate beat you to it," Sophia assured him. "You'll like her."

"By the sounds of it, I'd better hope that she likes me," he replied.

Sophia had no doubts on that score. Lucas was their brother, and Kate would see that as clearly as she had. By the looks of it, the two of them were a good fit, too. They weren't the opposite poles that Kate and Sophia so often seemed to be.

"If you grew up... *there*," Lucas said, "how did you come to be here, Sophia?"

"It's a long and complicated story," Sophia assured him.

Her brother shrugged. "Well, it looks like a long walk back to the castle, and I'd like to know. I feel as if I've missed too much of your life already."

Sophia did her best, setting it out piece by piece, from escaping the House of the Unclaimed, to infiltrating the palace, falling in love with Sebastian, having to leave, being recaptured...

"It sounds as though you've been through a lot," Lucas said. "And you haven't even started to tell me how all this led to you ending up here."

"There was an artist: Laurette van Klett."

"The one who painted you, complete with the mark of the indentured?" Lucas said. He sounded as if he'd already placed her in the same category as the others who'd tormented her, and Sophia didn't want that.

"She paints what she sees," Sophia said. That was one person on her journey she held no anger toward. "And she saw the resemblance in a painting between me and my mother. Without that, I wouldn't have known where to start looking."

"Then we all owe her our gratitude," Jan said. "What about you, Lucas? You mentioned tutors before. What did they tutor you in? What did they tutor you to *become*?"

Again, Sophia had the sense of her cousin trying to protect her from her brother.

"They taught me languages and politics, fighting, and at least the beginnings of how to use the talents we all have," Lucas explained.

"They taught you how to be a king in waiting?" Jan asked.

Now Sophia understood some of his worry. He thought Lucas was there to try to push her aside. Honestly though, she suspected her cousin was more worried than she was. It wasn't as though she had *asked* to be called the heir to the throne of the Dowager's kingdom.

"You think I'm here to claim the throne?" Lucas asked. He shook his head. "They taught me to be a noble, as best they could. They also taught me that there is nothing more important than family. Nothing. It's why I came."

Sophia could feel his sincerity even if Jan couldn't. It was enough for her – more than enough. It helped her to feel... safe. She and Kate had relied on one another for so long. Now, there was her extended collection of cousins, her uncle... and a brother. Sophia couldn't say how much that felt as though her world had expanded.

The only thing that would make it better was Sebastian being there. That absence felt like a hole in the world that couldn't be filled.

“So,” Lucas said. “The father of your child is the son of the woman who ordered our parents killed?”

“You think that makes things too complicated?” Sophia asked.

Lucas gave a kind of half-shrug. “Complicated, yes. Too complicated? That's for you to say. Why is he not here?”

“I don't know,” Sophia admitted. “I wish he was.”

At last, they arrived at the castle, moving through it to the hall. News of Lucas's arrival must have spread ahead of them, because all the cousins were there outside the hall, even Rika, who had a bandage masking the injury to her face she had received defending Sophia. Sophia went over to her first, taking her hands.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Are *you*?” Rika countered. “Is the baby?”

“Everything's fine,” Sophia assured her. She looked around. “Is Kate here?”

Ulf shook his head. “Frig and I haven't seen her today.”

Hans coughed. “We can't wait. We need to go in. Father is waiting.”

He made it sound serious, but then, Sophia could remember what it had been like when she arrived there, and how cautious people had been with her. In Ishjemme, they were careful about people claiming to be one of their own. Sophia felt almost as nervous standing there waiting for the doors to open as she had the first time, when it had been her claiming her heritage.

Lars Skyddar stood in front of the ducal seat, waiting for them with a serious expression as if ready to receive an ambassador. Sophia kept her hand interlinked with her brother's as she walked forward, even though that drew a frown of confusion from her uncle.

“Uncle,” Sophia said, “this is Lucas. He's the one who came from the Silk Lands. He's my brother.”

“I've told her that it isn't possible,” Jan said. “That – ”

Her uncle held up a hand. “There was a boy child. I thought... they told me, even *me*, that he died.”

Lucas stepped forward. “I didn't die. I was hidden.”

“In the Silk Lands?”

“With Official Ko,” Lucas said.

The name seemed to be enough for Sophia's uncle. He stepped forward and treated Lucas to the same crushing, all-encompassing hug that he'd given Sophia when he'd recognized her.

“I thought I'd been blessed enough with my nieces coming back,” he said. “I hadn't thought that I might have a nephew too. We must celebrate!”

It seemed obvious that there should be a banquet, and just as obvious that there was no time in which to prepare one, which meant that almost at once, there were servants running in almost every direction, trying to prepare things. It seemed almost that Sophia and Lucas became the still point at the heart of it all, standing there while even her cousins ran around trying to prepare things.

Are things always this chaotic? Lucas asked, as a half dozen servants ran past with platters.

Only when there's a new family member, I think, Sophia sent back. She stood there, wondering if she should ask the next question.

“Whatever it is, ask it,” Lucas said. “I know there must be many things that you need to know.”

“You said before that you were raised by tutors,” Sophia said. “Does that mean... are my, *our*, parents not in the Silk Lands?”

Lucas shook his head. “At least, not that I could find. I’ve been looking since I came of age.”

“You’ve been searching for them as well? Your tutors didn’t know where they were?” Sophia asked. She sighed. “I’m sorry. I sound as though I’m not happy to have gained a brother. I am. I’m so happy you’re here.”

“But it would be perfect if it were all of us?” Lucas guessed. “I understand, Sophia. I have gained two sisters, and cousins... but I am greedy enough to want parents too.”

“I don’t think that counts as greed,” Sophia said with a smile.

“Perhaps, perhaps not. Official Ko said that things are as they are, and pain comes from wishing otherwise. To be fair, he usually said it while drinking wine and being massaged with the finest oils.”

“Do you know *anything* about our parents and where they went?” Sophia asked.

Lucas nodded. “I don’t know where they went,” he said. “But I know how to find them.”

CHAPTER TWO

Kate opened her eyes as the blinding light faded, trying to make sense of where she was and what had happened. The last thing she remembered, she'd been fighting her way through to an image of Siobhan's fountain, plunging her blade into the ball of energy that had bound her to the witch as an apprentice. She'd severed the link. She'd won.

Now, it seemed that she was out in the open air, with no sign of Haxa's cottage or the caves that lay behind it. It looked only a little like the parts of Ishjemme's landscape that she had seen, but the flat meadows and bursts of woodland *could* have been there. Kate hoped so. The alternative was that the magic had transported her to some corner of the world she didn't know.

In spite of the strangeness of being in a place she didn't know, Kate felt free for the first time in a long time. She'd done it. She'd fought through everything that Siobhan, and her own mind, had put in the way, and she'd broken from the witch's grasp. Next to that, finding her way back to Ishjemme's castle seemed like an easy thing.

Kate picked a direction at random and set off, walking with steady steps.

She marched along, trying to think of what she would do with her newfound freedom. She would protect Sophia, obviously. That part went without saying. She would help to bring up her little niece or nephew when they arrived. Perhaps she would be able to send for Will, although with the war that might be difficult. And she would find their parents. Yes, that seemed like a good thing to do. Sophia wasn't going to be able to wander the world looking for them as her pregnancy progressed, but Kate could.

"First, I have to find where I am," she said. She looked around, but there were still no landmarks that she recognized. There was, however, a woman working a little ways away in a field, bent over a rake as she scraped away weeds. Perhaps she would be able to help.

"Hello!" Kate called out.

The woman looked up. She was old, her face lined with many seasons out there working. To her, Kate probably looked like some kind of bandit or thief, armed as she was. Even so, she smiled as Kate approached. People were friendly in Ishjemme.

"Hello, dear," she said. "Will you give me your name?"

"I'm Kate." And, because that didn't seem enough, because she *could* claim it now, "Kate Danse, daughter of Alfred and Christina Danse."

"A good name," the woman said. "What brings you out here?"

"I... don't know," Kate admitted. "I'm a bit lost. I was hoping you could help me to find my way."

"Of course," the woman said. "It is an honor that you have put your path into my hands. You are doing that, aren't you?"

That seemed an odd way to put it, but Kate didn't know where they were. Perhaps it was just how people spoke here.

"Yes, I suppose so," she said. "I'm trying to find my way back to Ishjemme."

"Of course," the woman said. "I know ways everywhere. Still, I feel that one turn deserves another." She hefted the rake. "I don't have much strength left these days. Will you give me your strength, Kate?"

If that was what it took to get back, Kate would work on a dozen fields. It couldn't be any harder than the tasks set in the House of the Unclaimed, or the more enjoyable work at Thomas's forge.

"Yes," Kate said, holding out her hand for the rake.

The other woman laughed and stepped back, pulling at the cloak she wore. It came away, and as it did so, everything about her seemed to shift. Siobhan stood there in front of her, and now the landscape around them changed, shifting to something far too familiar.

She was still in the dream space of the ritual.

Kate flung herself forward, knowing that her only chance lay in killing Siobhan now, but the woman of the fountain was faster. She flung her cloak, and somehow it became a bubble of raw power, whose walls held Kate as tightly as any prison cell.

“You can’t do this,” Kate yelled. “You have no power over me anymore!”

“I *had* no power,” Siobhan said. “But you have just given me your path, your name, and your strength. Here, in this place, those things *mean* something.”

Kate slammed her fist against the wall of the bubble. It held.

“You wouldn’t want to weaken that bubble, Kate dear,” Siobhan said. “You’re a long way from the silver path now.”

“You won’t force me to be your apprentice again,” Kate said. “You won’t force me to kill for you.”

“Oh, we’re past that,” Siobhan said. “Had I known that you would cause such trouble, I would never have made you my apprentice in the first place, but some things can’t be foreseen, even by me.”

“If I’m such trouble, why not let me go?” Kate tried. Even as she said it, she knew it wouldn’t work like that. Pride would compel Siobhan to more, even if nothing else did.

“Let you go?” Siobhan said. “Do you know what you *did*, when you plunged a blade forged with my own runes into my fountain? When you carved apart our link, with no care for the consequences?”

“You didn’t give me a choice,” Kate said. “You – ”

“*You* destroyed the heart of my power,” Siobhan said. “So much of it, wiped out in an instant. I barely had the strength to hold to this. But I am not without knowledge, not without ways to survive.”

She gestured, and the scene beyond the bubble shimmered. *Now* Kate recognized the interior of Haxa’s cottage, carved on every surface with runes and figures. The rune witch sat on a chair, watching over Kate’s still form. She’d obviously dragged or carried it up from the ritual space deeper in the caves.

“My fountain sustained me,” Siobhan said. “Now I need a vessel to do the same. And there happens to be a conveniently empty one.”

“No!” Kate shouted, slamming her hand against the bubble again.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Siobhan said. “I won’t be there long. Just long enough to kill your sister, I think.”

Kate went cold at the thought of that. “Why? Why do you want Sophia dead? Just to hurt me? Kill me instead. Please.”

Siobhan considered her. “You really would give your life for her, wouldn’t you? You’d kill for her. You’d die for her. And now none of that is enough.”

“Please, Siobhan, I’m begging you!” Kate called out.

“If you didn’t want this, you should have done as I required,” Siobhan said. “With your help, I could have set things on a path where my home would have been safe forever. Where I would have had power. Now, you have taken that away, and I need to live.”

Kate still didn’t see why that meant Sophia had to die.

“Live in my body then,” she said. “But don’t hurt Sophia. You’ve no reason to.”

“I’ve *every* reason,” Siobhan said. “You think masquerading as the younger sister of a ruler is enough? You think dying in a single human lifetime is *enough*? Your sister carries a child. A child who will rule. I will shape it as an unborn thing. I will kill her and rip the child clear. I will take it and grow with it. I will become all I need to be.”

“No,” Kate said as she realized the full horror of it. “No.”

Siobhan laughed, and there was cruelty in it. “They will kill your body when I kill Sophia,” she said. “And you will be left here, between worlds. I hope you enjoy your freedom from me, apprentice.”

She murmured words and it seemed that she faded. The image of Haxa’s cottage didn’t, though, and Kate found herself screaming as she saw her own body take a breath.

“Haxa, no, it isn’t me!” she yelled, and then tried to send the same message with her power. Nothing happened.

On the other side of that slender divide, though, plenty happened. Siobhan gasped with her lungs, opened her eyes, and sat up with Kate’s body.

“Easy, Kate,” Haxa said, not rising. “You’ve had a long ordeal.”

Kate watched her body feel around itself unsteadily, as if trying to work out where it was. To Haxa, it must have looked as though Kate was still disoriented by her experience, but Kate could see that Siobhan was testing out her limbs, working out what they could and couldn’t do.

She finally stood, rising unsteadily. Her first step had her staggering, but her second was more confident. She drew Kate’s sword, swishing it through the air as if testing the balance. Haxa looked a little worried at that, but didn’t back away. Probably she thought it was the kind of thing Kate might do to test her balance and coordination.

“Do you know where you are?” Haxa asked.

Siobhan stared over at her using Kate’s eyes. “Yes, I know.”

“And you know who I am?”

“You are the one who calls herself Haxa to try to hide her name. You are the keeper of runes, and were no foe of mine until you decided to help my apprentice.”

From where she stood trapped, Kate saw Haxa’s expression shift to one of horror.

“You aren’t Kate.”

“No,” Siobhan said, “I’m not.”

She moved then, with all the speed and power of Kate’s body, lunging with the light sword so that it was barely more than a flicker as it lanced into Haxa’s chest. It protruded from the other side, transfixing her.

“The problem with names,” Siobhan said, “is that they only work when you have breath to use them. You shouldn’t have stood against me, rune witch.”

She let Haxa fall, and then looked up, as if knowing where Kate’s vantage point lay.

“She died because of you. Sophia will die because of you. Her child, and this kingdom, will be mine because of you. I want you to think about that, Kate. Think about it when the bubble fades and your fears come for you.”

She waved a hand, and the image faded. Kate threw herself at the bubble, trying to get to her, trying to get out of there and find a way to stop Siobhan.

She paused as things around her shifted, becoming a kind of gray, misty landscape now that Siobhan wasn’t shaping it to fool her. There was a faint glimmer of silver in the distance that might have been the safe path, but it was so far away it might as well not have been there.

Figures started to come from the mist. Kate recognized the faces of people she’d killed: nuns and soldiers, Lord Cranston’s training master and the Master of Crows’ men. She knew they were just images rather than ghosts, but that did nothing to reduce the fear that threaded through her, making her hand shake and the sword she carried seem useless.

Gertrude Illiard was there again, holding a pillow.

“I’m going to be first,” she promised. “I’m going to smother you as you smothered me, but you won’t die. Not here. No matter what we do to you, you won’t die, even if you beg for it.”

Kate looked around at them, and each of them held some kind of implement, whether it was a knife or a whip, a sword or a strangling rope. Each of them seemed to hunger with the need to hurt her, and Kate knew that they would fall upon her without mercy as soon as they could.

She could see the shield fading now, becoming more translucent. Kate gripped her sword tighter and braced herself for what was going to come.

CHAPTER THREE

Emeline followed Asha, Vincente, and the others across the moors beyond Strand, keeping hold of Cora's forearm so that they wouldn't lose one another in the mists that rose up off the moors.

"We did it," Emeline said. "We found Stonehome."

"I think Stonehome found us," Cora pointed out.

That was a fair point, given that the place's inhabitants had rescued them from execution. Emeline could still remember the burning heat of the pyres if she closed her eyes, the acrid stink of the smoke. She didn't want to.

"Also," Cora said, "I think that to find somewhere, you have to be able to see it."

I like your pet, Asha sent back, ahead of them. *Does she always talk this much?*

The woman who seemed to be one of Stonehome's leaders strode forward, her long coat trailing, her broad hat keeping off the damp.

She isn't my pet, Emeline sent over to her. She thought about saying it aloud for Cora's sake, but it was for her sake that she didn't.

Why else would someone keep one of the Normal around? Asha asked.

"Ignore Asha," Vincente said, aloud. He was tall enough to loom over them, but in spite of that, and the cleaver-like blade he carried, he seemed the friendlier of the two. "She has trouble believing that those without our gifts can be part of our community. Thankfully, not all of us feel that way. As for the mist, it is one of our protections. Those who seek Stonehome to harm it wander without finding it. They become lost."

"And we can hunt the ones who came to hurt us," Asha said, with a smile that wasn't entirely reassuring. "Still, we're nearly there. It will lift soon."

It did, and it was like stepping onto a broad island hemmed in by the mist, the land rising up out of it in a broad expanse that was easily bigger than Ashton had been. Not that it was packed with houses the way the city was. Instead, most of it seemed to be grazing land, or plots where people were working to grow vegetables. Within that perimeter of growing land sat a dry stone wall as high as someone's shoulder, sitting in front of a ditch in a way that made it into a defensive structure rather than just a marker. Emeline felt a faint flicker of power and wondered if there was more to it than that.

Within it, there sat a series of stone and peat houses: low cottages with peat and turf roofs, round houses that looked as though they had been there forever. At the heart of it was a stone circle similar to the others on the plain, except that this was larger, and filled with people.

They'd found Stonehome at last.

"Come on," Asha said, walking briskly toward it. "We'll get you settled in. I'll make sure no one mistakes you for an invader and kills you."

Emeline watched her, then looked over to Vincente.

"Is she always like this?" she asked.

"Usually she's worse," Vincente said. "But she helps to protect us. Come on, you should both see your new home."

They went down toward the stone-built village, the others following in their wake or breaking off to run to the fields to talk to friends.

"This seems such a beautiful place," Cora said. Emeline was glad she liked it. She wasn't sure what she would have done if her friend had decided that Stonehome wasn't the sanctuary she had been hoping for.

"It is," Vincente agreed. "I am not sure who founded it, but it quickly became a place for those like us."

"Those with powers," Emeline said.

Vincente shrugged. “That is what Asha says. Personally, I prefer to think of it as a place for all the dispossessed. You are both welcome here.”

“As simply as that?” Cora asked.

Emeline guessed that her suspicions had a lot to do with the things they’d encountered on the road. It had seemed that almost everyone they’d met had been determined to rob them, enslave them, or worse. She had to admit that she might have shared a lot of them, except that these were people like her in so many ways. She wanted to be able to trust them.

“Your friend’s powers make it obvious that she is one of us, while you... you were one of the indentured?”

Cora nodded.

“I know what that was like,” Vincente said. “I grew up in a place where they told me I had to pay for my freedom. So did Asha. She paid for it in blood. It is why she is careful about trusting others.”

Emeline found herself thinking about Kate at that. She wondered what had become of Sophia’s sister. Had she managed to find Sophia? Was she on the way to Stonehome too, or trying to find her way to Ishjemme to be with her? There was no way of knowing, but Emeline could hope.

They went down into the village, following Vincente. At first glance, it might have seemed like just a normal village, but as she looked closer, Emeline could see the differences. She could see the runes and spell marks worked into the stone and wood of the buildings, could feel the pressure of dozens of people with a talent for magic in the same space.

“It’s so quiet here,” Cora said.

It might have seemed quiet to her, but to Emeline, the air was alive with chatter as people communicated mind to mind. It seemed to be as common as talking aloud here, perhaps more so.

There were other things too. She had already seen what the healer, Tabor, could do, but there were those who were using other talents. One boy seemed to be playing a game of cup and ball without touching it. A man was sparking lights in glass jars, but there seemed to be no kindling involved. There was even a smith working without fire, the metal seeming to respond to his touch like a living thing.

“We all have our gifts,” Vincente said. “We have collected knowledge, so that we can help those with power to express them as much as they can.”

“You’d have liked our friend Sophia,” Cora said. “She seemed to have all kinds of powers.”

“Truly powerful individuals are rare,” Vincente said. “The ones who seem strongest are often the most limited.”

“And yet you manage to summon a mist that spreads for miles around,” Emeline pointed out. She knew that took more than a limited stock of power. Far more.

“We do that together,” Vincente said. “If you stay, you will probably contribute to it, Emeline.”

He gestured to the circle at the heart of the village, where figures sat on stone seats. Emeline could feel the crackle of power there, even if it seemed that they were doing nothing more strenuous than staring. As she watched, one of them rose, looking exhausted, and another villager moved in to take their place.

Emeline hadn’t thought of that. The most powerful of them got their power by channeling energy from other places. She’d heard of witches stealing people’s lives away, while Sophia seemed to gain power from the land itself. That even made sense, given who she was. This, though... this was a whole village of those with power channeling it together to become more than the sum of their parts. How much power would they be able to generate like that?

“Look, Cora,” she said, pointing. “They’re protecting the whole village.”

Cora stared at it. “That’s... can anyone do that?”

“Anyone with a spark of power,” Vincente said. “If someone normal were to do it, either nothing would happen, or...”

“Or?” Emeline asked.

“Their life would be sucked out. It is not safe to try.”

Emeline could see Cora’s discomfort at that, but it didn’t seem to last. She was too busy looking around at the village as if trying to understand how it all worked.

“Come,” Vincente said. “There’s an empty house this way.”

He led the way to a stone-walled cottage that wasn’t very big, but still seemed more than big enough for the two of them. Its door creaked as Vincente opened it, but Emeline guessed that could be fixed. If she could learn to guide a boat or a wagon, she could learn to fix a door.

“What will we do here?” Cora asked.

Vincente smiled at that. “You’ll live. Our farms bring in enough food, and we share it with anyone who helps work in the village. People contribute whatever they’re suited to contribute. Those who can work metal or wood do it to build or to sell. Those who can fight work to protect the village, or hunt. We find a use for any talent.”

“I’ve spent my life applying makeup to nobles while they prepare for parties,” Cora said.

Vincente shrugged. “Well, I’m sure you’ll find something. And there are celebrations here too. You’ll find a way to fit in.”

“And what if we wanted to leave?” Cora asked.

Emeline looked around. “Why would anyone *want* to leave? You don’t want to, do you?”

She did the unthinkable then, and delved into her friend’s mind without asking. She could feel the doubts there, but also the hope that this would be all right. Cora *wanted* to be able to stay. She just didn’t want to feel like a caged animal. She didn’t want to be trapped again. Emeline could understand that, but even so, she relaxed. Cora was going to stay.

“I don’t,” Cora said, “but... I need to know that this isn’t all some trick, or some prison. I need to know that I’m not indentured again in all but name.”

“You aren’t,” Vincente said. “We hope that you will stay, but if you choose to leave, we only ask that you keep our secrets. Those secrets protect Stonehome, more than the mist, more than our warriors. Now, I shall leave you to settle in. When you are ready, come to the roundhouse at the heart of the village. Flora runs the eating hall there, and there will be food for both of you.”

He left, which meant that Emeline and Cora were able to look around their new home.

“It’s small,” Emeline said. “I know you used to live in a palace.”

“I used to live in whatever corner of a palace I could find to sleep in,” Cora pointed out. “Compared to a store cupboard or an empty niche, this is huge. It will need work though.”

“We can work,” Emeline said, already looking around to see the possibilities. “We crossed half of the kingdom. We can make a cottage better to live in.”

“Do you think Kate or Sophia will ever come here?” Cora asked.

Emeline had been asking herself almost the same question. “I think Sophia is going to be busy in Ishjemme,” she said. “With luck, she actually found her family.”

“And you found yours, kind of,” Cora said.

That was true. The people out there might not have truly been her kin, but they felt like it. They had experienced the same hatred out in the world, the same need to hide. And now, they were there for one another. It was as close to a definition of family as Emeline had found.

It made Cora family too. Emeline didn’t want her to forget that.

Emeline hugged her. “This can be a family for both of us, I think. It’s a place we can both be free. It’s a place where we can both be *safe*.”

“I like the idea of being safe,” Cora said.

“I like the idea of not having to walk across the kingdom hunting for this place anymore,” Emeline replied. She’d had enough of being on the road by now. She looked up. “We have a roof.”

After so long on the road, even that seemed like a luxury.

“We have a roof,” Cora agreed. “And a family.”

It felt strange to be able to say it after so long. It was enough. More than enough.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dowager Queen Mary of the House of Flamborg sat in her receiving rooms and struggled to contain the fury that threatened to consume her. Fury at the embarrassment of the last day or so, fury at the way her body was betraying her, leaving her to cough blood into a lace handkerchief even now. Above all, fury at sons who would not do as they were told.

“Prince Rupert, your majesty,” a servant announced, as her eldest son flounced into the receiving chamber, looking for all the world as though he expected praise for all that he had done.

“Congratulating me on my victory, Mother?” Rupert said.

The Dowager adopted her iciest tone. It was the only thing keeping her from shouting right then. “It is customary to bow.”

That, at least, was enough to stop Rupert in his tracks, staring at her with a mixture of shock and anger before he essayed a brief bow. Good, let him remember that she still ruled here. He seemed to have forgotten it thoroughly enough in the past days.

“So, you want me to congratulate you, do you?” the Dowager asked.

“I won!” Rupert insisted. “I pushed back the invasion. I saved the kingdom.”

He made it sound as if he were a knight riding back from some great quest in the old days. Well, days like that were long past.

“By following your own reckless plan rather than the one that was agreed,” the Dowager said.

“It worked!”

The Dowager made an effort to contain her temper, at least for now. It was growing harder by the second, though.

“And you believe that the strategy I chose would not have worked?” she demanded. “You think that they would not have broken against our defenses? You think I should be proud of the *slaughter* you inflicted?”

“A slaughter of enemies, and of those who would not fight them,” Rupert countered. “Do you think I haven’t heard the stories of the things *you’ve* done, Mother? Of the killings of the nobles who supported the Danses? Of your agreement to let the Masked Goddess’s church kill any they deemed evil?”

She would not let her son compare those things. She would not go over the hard necessities of the past with a boy who had been no more than a babe in arms for even the most recent of them.

“Those were different,” she said. “We had no better options.”

“We had no better options here,” Rupert snapped.

“We had an option that didn’t involve the slaughter of our people,” the Dowager replied, with just as much heat in her tone. “That didn’t involve the destruction of some of the kingdom’s most valuable farmland. You pushed the New Army back, but our plan could have crushed it.”

“Sebastian’s plan was a foolish one, as you would have seen if you weren’t so blind to his faults.”

Which brought the Dowager to the second reason for her anger. The greater one, and the one that she’d been holding back only because she didn’t trust herself not to explode with it.

“Where is your brother, Rupert?” she asked.

He tried for innocence. He should have realized by now that it didn’t work with her.

“How would I know, Mother?”

“Rupert, Sebastian was last seen at the docks, trying to grab a ship to Ishjemme. You arrived personally to grab him. *Do you think I don’t have spies?*”

She watched him trying to work out what to say next. He’d done this ever since he was a boy, trying to find the form of words that would let him cheat the world into the shape he wanted.

“Sebastian is in a safe place,” Rupert said.

“Meaning that you have imprisoned him, your own brother. You have no right to do that, Rupert.” A coughing fit took some of the punch from her words. She ignored the fresh blood.

“I’d have thought you’d be happy, Mother,” he said. “He was, after all, trying to flee the kingdom after running out of the marriage *you* arranged.”

That was true, but it didn’t change anything. “If I wanted Sebastian stopped, I would have ordered it,” she said. “You will release him at once.”

“As you say, Mother,” Rupert said, and again the Dowager had the feeling that he was anything but sincere.

“Rupert, let me be clear about this. Your actions today have placed all of us in great danger. Ordering the army around as you will? Imprisoning the heir to the throne without authority? What do you think that will look like to the Assembly of Nobles?”

“Damn them!” Rupert said, the words bursting out. “I have enough of them for this.”

“You can’t afford to damn them,” the Dowager said. “The civil wars taught us that. We must work with them. And the fact that you talk as if you own a faction of them worries me, Rupert. You need to learn your place.”

She could see his anger now, no longer disguised as it had been.

“My place is as your heir,” he said.

“*Sebastian’s* place is as my heir,” the Dowager shot back. “Yours... the mountain lands require a governor to limit their raids southward. Perhaps life among the shepherds and the farmers will teach you humility. Or perhaps not, and at least you will be far enough away from here for me to forget my anger with you.”

“You can’t – ”

“I can,” the Dowager snapped back. “And just for arguing, it will not be the mountain lands, and you will not be a governor. You will go to the Near Colonies, where you will act as an assistant to my envoy there. He will provide regular reports on you, and you will not return until I deem you ready.”

“Mother...” Rupert began.

The Dowager fixed him in place with a look. She could still do that, even if her body was crumbling.

“Speak again, and you will be a clerk in the *Far* Colonies,” she snapped. “Now get out, and I expect to see Sebastian here by the end of the day. He is my heir, Rupert. Do not forget that.”

“Trust me, Mother,” Rupert said as he left. “I have not.”

The Dowager waited until he was gone, then snapped her fingers at the nearest servant.

“There is still one more annoyance to be dealt with. Bring me Milady d’Angelica, then leave.”

Angelica was still wearing her wedding dress when the guard came to her, summoning her to speak with the queen. He gave her no time to change, but merely escorted her briskly to her receiving chambers.

To Angelica, the old woman looked worn paper thin. Perhaps she would die soon. Just the thought of that had Angelica hoping that Sebastian would be found quickly, and made to go through with the wedding. There was too much at stake for it not to happen, in spite of the betrayal she currently felt at him running away.

She bobbed into a curtsy, then knelt as she felt the weight of the Dowager’s gaze upon her. The old woman rose from her seat unsteadily, only emphasizing the difference in their positions.

“Explain to me,” the Dowager said, “why I am not currently congratulating you on your wedding to my son.”

Angelica dared to look up at her. “Sebastian ran. How was I to know that he would *run*?”

“Because you are not supposed to be stupid,” the Dowager retorted.

Angelica felt a thrill of anger at that. This old woman loved playing games with her, seeing how far she could push. Soon, though, she would be in a position where she didn't need the old woman's approval.

"I took every step I could," Angelica said. "I seduced Sebastian."

"Not thoroughly enough!" the Dowager shouted, stepping forward to slap Angelica.

Angelica half rose, then felt strong hands pushing her down again. The guard had remained standing behind her, just a reminder of how helpless she was here. For the first time there, Angelica felt afraid.

"If you had seduced my son completely, he wouldn't have been trying to get away from here, to Ishjemme," the Dowager said, in a calmer tone. "What is in Ishjemme, Angelica?"

Angelica swallowed, answering out of reflex. "Sophia is."

That did nothing but stoke the other woman's anger.

"So my son was doing exactly what I told you to stop him from doing," the Dowager said. "I told you that the whole *point* of your continued existence was to prevent him from marrying that girl."

"You *didn't* tell me that she was the oldest daughter of the Danses," Angelica said, "or that they're claiming her as the rightful ruler of this kingdom."

This time, Angelica held firm for the Dowager's slap. She would be strong. She would find a way out of this. She would find a way to put that old woman on her knees before this was done.

"I am the rightful ruler of this kingdom," the Dowager said. "And my son will be after me. But if he marries her, that brings their kind in through the back door. It returns the kingdom to what it was, a place ruled by magic."

That was one thing Angelica could agree with her on. She had no love for those who could look into minds. If the Dowager could have seen into hers, no doubt she would have stabbed her simply as an act of self-preservation.

"I'm intrigued as to how you know all this," the Dowager said.

"I have a spy in Ishjemme," Angelica said, determined to show her usefulness. If she could show that she was still useful, this could still turn out to her advantage. "A noble there. I have been in contact with him for some time."

"So, you collude with a foreign power?" the Dowager asked. "With a family that has no love for me?"

"Not that," Angelica said. "I seek information. And... I may have already solved the problem with Sophia."

The Dowager didn't respond to that, merely left a gap into which Angelica felt she had to pour words before it claimed her.

"Endi has sent an assassin to kill her," Angelica said. "And I have hired one of my own should that fail. Even if he should reach there, Sebastian won't find Sophia waiting for him."

"He will not reach there," the Dowager said. "Rupert has imprisoned him."

"Imprisoned him?" Angelica said. "You must –"

"Do not tell me what I must do!"

The Dowager looked down at her, and now Angelica felt true terror.

"You have been a snake from the start," the Dowager said. "You tried to force my son into marriage by trickery. You sought to advance yourself at the expense of my family. You are a woman who hires assassins and spies, who kills those who stand against her. While I thought you might keep my son from his deluded attachment to this girl, I could stomach that. No more."

"It is no worse than you have done," Angelica insisted. She knew as soon as she said it that it was the wrong thing to say.

A nod from the Dowager, and the guard's hands were dragging Angelica roughly to her feet.

“I have only ever acted as I needed to in order to preserve my family,” the Dowager said. “Every death, every compromise, was so that my sons would not be killed by someone else eager to seize power. Someone like *you*. You act only for yourself, and you will die for it.”

“No,” Angelica said, as if that one word had the power to stop it. “Please, I can make this right.”

“You’ve had your chances,” the Dowager said. “If my son will not marry you willingly, I’ll not force him to bed down with a spider like you.”

“The Assembly of Nobles... my family...”

“Oh, I probably can’t truly have you wearing the mask of lead for your actions,” the Dowager said, “but there are other ways. Your fiancé has just abandoned you. Your queen has just spoken to you harshly. In retrospect, I should have seen how upset you were, how fragile...”

“No,” Angelica said again.

The Dowager looked past her, to the guard. “Take her to the roof and throw her off it. Make it look as though she jumped from grief at losing Sebastian. Make sure you are not seen.”

Angelica tried to beg, tried to fight her way clear, but already those strong hands were pulling her backward. She did the only thing she could, and screamed.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rupert stewed as he walked along Ashton's streets, toward its docks. He should have been riding down the streets to the cries of a loving populace, celebrating his victory. He should have had the common folk cheering his name and throwing flowers. There should have been women along the route eager to throw themselves at him, and young men jealous that they could never be him.

Instead, there were only damp streets and people going about whatever dreary business peasants got up to when they weren't cheering for their betters.

"Your highness, is everything all right?" Sir Quentin Mires asked. He walked as one of a dozen soldiers who had been chosen to accompany him, probably to make sure that he got to the ship without wandering off. Probably with orders to get Sebastian's location before he left. It wasn't even *close* to the same thing. It wasn't even enough for an honor guard, not really.

"No, Sir Quentin," Rupert said. "Everything is *not* all right."

He should have been the hero in this moment. He'd single-handedly stopped the invasion, when his mother and his brother had been too cowardly to do what was needed. He'd been the prince that the kingdom had required in that moment, and what was he getting for it?

"What is it even like in the Near Colonies?" he demanded.

"I'm told that their islands vary, your highness," Sir Quentin said. "Some are rocky, some are sandy, others have swamps."

"Swamps," Rupert repeated. "My mother has sent me to help rule over *swamps*."

"I'm told that there is a wide variety of wildlife there," Sir Quentin said. "Some of the kingdom's men of the natural sciences spend years there in the hopes of making discoveries."

"So *infested* swamps?" Rupert said. "You do know that you aren't making this better, Sir Quentin?" He decided to ask the important questions, checking things off on his fingers as he went. "Are there any good gambling parlors there? Famed courtesans? Notable local drinks?"

"I'm told the wine is –"

"*Damn the wine!*" Rupert snapped back, unable to help himself. Normally, he did a better job of remembering to be the golden prince that everyone expected. "Forgive me, Sir Quentin, but the quality of the wine or the plentiful wildlife will not make up for the fact that I am exiled in all but name."

The other man bowed his head. "No, your highness, of course not. You deserve better."

That was a statement so obvious as to be useless. Of course he deserved better. He was the elder of the princes and the rightful heir to the throne. He deserved everything that this kingdom had to offer.

"I've half a mind to tell my mother that I won't go," Rupert said. He glanced around at Ashton. He'd never thought that he would miss a stinking, squalid city like this.

"That might be... unwise, your highness," Sir Quentin said, in that special voice he had that probably meant he was trying to avoid calling Rupert an idiot. He probably thought Rupert didn't notice. People tended to think he was stupid, until it was too late.

"I know, I know," Rupert said. "If I stay, I risk execution. Do you actually think that my mother would execute me?"

The pause was too long as Sir Quentin searched for the next words.

"You do. You actually think that my mother would execute her own son."

"She does have a certain reputation for... ruthlessness," the courtier pointed out. Honestly, was this the way men with connections in the Assembly of Nobles talked all the time? "And even if she did not actually go through with *your* execution, those around you might be... vulnerable."

"Ah, so it's your own hide that you're worried about," Rupert said. That made more sense to him. People, he found, mostly looked after their own interests. It was a lesson he'd learned early.

“I would have thought that your contacts in the Assembly would keep you safe, especially after a victory like this.”

Sir Quentin shrugged. “In a month or two, perhaps. We have the support now. But for the moment, they are still talking about the overreach of royal power, about you acting without their consent. In the time it took for them to change their minds, a man might lose his head.”

Sir Quentin might lose his anyway if he suggested that Rupert somehow needed permission to do what he wanted. He was the man who would become king!

“And of course, even if she did not execute you, your highness, your mother might imprison you, or send you off to a worse place with guards to make sure that you arrived safely.”

Rupert gestured pointedly at the men who surrounded him, marching along in step with him and Sir Quentin.

“I thought that was what was happening already?”

Sir Quentin shook his head. “These men are among those who fought beside you against the New Army. They respect the boldness of your decision, and wanted to see that you did not leave alone, without the honor of an escort.”

So it *was* an honor guard. Rupert wasn’t sure that he could have taken it for one. Even so, now that he cared to look around at them, he saw that most of the men there were officers rather than common soldiers, and that most of them seemed happy to be accompanying him. It was closer to the kind of adulation that Rupert wanted, but it still wasn’t enough to offset the stupidity of what his mother had done to him.

It was a humiliation, and, knowing his mother, a calculated one.

They reached the docks. Rupert had been expecting that for this at least there would be a grand fighting ship waiting, cannon firing a salute to him in acknowledgment of his status, if nothing else.

Instead, there was nothing.

“Where is the ship?” Rupert demanded, looking around. As far as he could see, the docks were merely bustling with the usual selection of ships, merchants getting back to their trade after the retreat of the New Army. He’d have thought that they, at least, would thank him for his efforts, but they seemed too busy trying to earn their coin.

“I believe the ship is there, your highness,” Sir Quentin said, pointing.

“No,” Rupert said, following the line of the other man’s pointing finger. “No.”

The boat was a tub, suitable for a merchant’s journey, perhaps, and already partly loaded with goods for the journey back to the Near Colonies. It was anything but suitable to carry a prince.

“It is a little less than grand,” Sir Quentin said. “But I believe Her Majesty thought that traveling without attention would lower the chances of danger along the way.”

Rupert doubted that his mother had been thinking about pirates. She’d been thinking about what would make him the least comfortable, and she’d done a good job of judging it.

Still,” Sir Quentin said, with a sigh, “at least you will not be alone in this.”

Rupert stopped at that, staring at the other man.

“Forgive me, Sir Quentin,” Rupert said, pinching the bridge of his nose to stave off a headache, “but why exactly are you here?”

Sir Quentin turned to him. “I’m sorry, your highness, I should have said. My own position has become... somewhat precarious at the moment.”

“Meaning that you’re scared of my mother’s anger if I’m not around?” Rupert said.

“Wouldn’t you be?” Sir Quentin asked, breaking free from the carefully considered phrases of the politician for a moment. “The way I see it, I can wait around for her to find an excuse to execute me, or I can pursue my family’s business interests in the Near Colonies for a while.”

He made it sound so simple: go to the Near Colonies, release Sebastian, wait for the furor to subside, and come back again looking suitably chastened. The trouble with that was simple: Rupert couldn’t bring himself to do it.

He couldn't pretend to be sorry for something that had clearly been the right decision. He couldn't release his brother to take what was his. His brother didn't deserve to be free when he'd all but executed a coup against Rupert, using some ruse or trick with their mother to persuade her to give him the throne.

"I can't do it," Rupert said. "I *won't* do it."

"Your highness," Sir Quentin said, in that stupidly reasonable tone he had. "Your mother will have sent word to the governor of the Near Colonies. He will be expecting your arrival, and will send back word if you are not there. Even if you were to run, your mother will send soldiers, not least to find out where Prince Sebastian is."

Rupert barely, *barely*, restrained himself from hitting the other man. It wasn't a good idea to strike your allies, at least while they were still useful.

And Rupert had thought of a way that Sir Quentin could be *very* useful. He looked around the accompanying group of officers until he found one with blond hair who seemed to be around the right size.

"You, what is your name?"

"Aubry Chomley, your highness," the man said. His uniform had a captain's insignia.

"Well, Chomley," Rupert said, "how loyal are you?"

"Completely," the other man said. "I saw what you did against the New Army. You saved our kingdom, and you are the rightful heir to the throne."

"Good man," Rupert said. "Your loyalty does you credit, but now, I have a test of that loyalty."

"Name it," the other man said.

"I need you to swap clothes with me."

"Your highness?" The soldier and Sir Quentin managed to say it almost in unison.

Rupert managed not to sigh. "It's simple. Chomley here will go with you to the boat. He will pretend to be me, and go with you to the Near Colonies."

The soldier looked as nervous at that as if Rupert had commanded him to charge a horde of the enemy.

"Won't... won't people notice?" the man said. "Won't the governor notice?"

"Why would he?" Rupert asked. "I've never met the man, and Sir Quentin here will vouch for you. Won't you, Sir Quentin?"

Sir Quentin looked back and forth from Rupert to the soldier, obviously trying to calculate the course of action most likely to keep him his head.

This time, Rupert *did* sigh. "Look, it's simple. You go to the Near Colonies. You vouch for Chomley as me. Since I'm still here, that gives us a chance to get together the support we need. Support that could bring you back far quicker than if you start waiting for my mother to forget a slight."

That part seemed to catch the other man's attention. He nodded. "Very well," Sir Quentin said. "I'll do it."

"And you, Captain?" Rupert asked. "Or should I say General?"

It took a moment for that to sink in. He saw Chomley swallow.

"Anything you require, your highness," the man said.

It took a matter of minutes to find an empty building among the warehouses and the boat sheds, changing clothes with the captain so that now Chomley looked... well, frankly, nothing like a prince of the realm, but with Sir Quentin's recommendation it should be enough.

"Go," Rupert commanded them, and they went, accompanied by about half of the soldiers to make it seem more authentic. He looked around at the others, considering what he would do next.

There was no question of leaving Ashton, but he would have to move carefully now until he was ready. Sebastian was safe enough where he was for the time being. The palace was big enough that he would be able to keep away from his mother for a while at least. He knew he had support. It was time to find out how much, and how much power it could buy him.

“Come on,” he told the others. “It’s time to work out how we take what should be mine.”

CHAPTER SIX

“I am Lady Emmeline Constance Ysalt D’Angelica, Marchioness of Sowerd and Lady of the Order of the Sash!” Angelica shouted out, hoping that someone would hear her. Hoping that her full name would demand attention if nothing else did. “I am being taken to be killed against my will!”

The guard dragging her didn’t look concerned by it, which said to Angelica that there was no real chance of anyone hearing her. No one who would help, at least. In a place with as many cruelties as the palace, the servants were long used to ignoring cries for help, to being blind and deaf unless their betters told them not to be.

“I will not let you do this,” Angelica said, trying to dig in her heels and hold her ground. The guard simply pulled her along anyway, the size difference too great. She struck out at him instead, and connected hard enough that her hand stung with it. For a moment the guard’s grip relaxed, and Angelica turned to run.

The guard was on her in moments, grabbing at her and striking her so that Angelica’s head rang with it.

“You can’t... you can’t strike me,” she said. “People will know. You want to make this look like an accident!”

He slapped her again, and Angelica had the feeling that he did it simply because he could.

“After you’ve fallen from a building, no one will notice a bruise,” he said. He snatched her up then, carrying her over his shoulder as easily as if she were a wayward child. Angelica had never felt as helpless as she did in that moment.

“Scream again,” he warned, “and I’ll hit you again.”

Angelica didn’t, if only because it didn’t seem likely to make any difference. She hadn’t seen anyone on the way here, either because everyone was still busy with the wedding that hadn’t happened or because the Dowager had carefully kept them out of the way in preparation for this. Angelica wouldn’t put that past her. The old woman planned as patiently and as cruelly as a cat waiting outside a mouse hole.

“You don’t have to do this,” Angelica said.

The guard replied with just a shrug that jostled her in her place on his shoulder. They went up through the palace, along winding staircases that narrowed more the further up they went. At one point, the guard had to set Angelica down just to get through, but he kept a cruel hold on her hair, dragging her along with a sharpness that made Angelica cry out in pain.

“You could just let me go,” Angelica said. “No one would know.”

The guard snorted at that. “No one would notice when you just popped back up at court, or in your family’s home? The Dowager’s spies wouldn’t know you were alive?”

“I could leave,” Angelica tried. The truth was that she would probably *have* to leave if she was going to live. The Dowager wouldn’t stop at just this attempt on her life. “My family has interests so far across the sea that there’s hardly ever news. I could disappear.”

The guard didn’t seem any more impressed by that idea than the last. “And when some spy mentions you? No, I reckon I’ll do my duty.”

“I could give you money,” Angelica said. They were getting higher now. So high that, looking out of the slender windows, she could see the city arranged like some child’s toy below. Maybe that was how the Dowager saw it: as a toy to be arranged for her amusement.

It meant that they must be almost at the roof, too.

“Don’t you *want* money?” Angelica demanded. “A man like you can’t earn much. I could give you enough wealth that you’d be a rich man.”

“Can’t give me anything if you’re dead,” the guard pointed out. “And I can’t spend it if I am.”

There was a small door ahead, iron bound, with a simple latch. Angelica thought that the route to her death should have more drama to it, somehow. Even so, just the sight of it made her fear rise again, making her pull back even while the guard dragged her forward.

If Angelica had possessed a dagger, she would have used it while he unlatched the door and opened it to let the cold air beyond rip at them. If she'd had so much as a sharp eating knife, she would have at least tried to cut his throat with it, but she didn't. In her wedding dress, she didn't. The most she had were a couple of powders designed to refresh her makeup, a sedative snuff that was supposed to be there for the threat of nerves, and... that was it. That was all she had. Everything else was below somewhere, tucked away against the conclusion of her wedding.

"Please," she begged, and there didn't have to be much acting to it to look helpless, "if money won't do it, then what about decency? I'm just a young woman, caught up in a game I didn't want. Please help me."

The guard pulled her out onto the roof. It was flat, with crenulations that had nothing to do with real defense. The wind whipped at Angelica's hair.

"Do you expect me to believe any of that?" the guard asked. "That you're just some innocent little thing? You know the stories they tell about you around the palace, milady?"

Angelica knew most of them. She made a point of knowing what people said about her so that she could have revenge for the slight later.

"They say that you're vain and you're cruel. That you've ruined people just for speaking to you in the wrong tone, and arranged for rivals to be shipped off with a mark of indenture tattooed on them where it wasn't before. You think you deserve mercy?"

"Those are lies," Angelica said. "They're –"

"I don't much care either way." He pulled her over toward the parapet. "The Dowager has given me my orders."

"And what will she do when you've fulfilled them?" Angelica demanded. "Do you think she'll let you live? If the Assembly were to find out that she murdered a noblewoman, she'd be deposed."

The big man shrugged. "I've killed for her before."

He said it as though it was nothing, and Angelica knew then that she was going to die. Whatever she said, whatever she tried, this man was going to murder her. By the look of it, he was going to enjoy it as well.

He pushed Angelica back toward the edge, and she knew it would just be moments before she fell. Inexplicably, she found herself thinking about Sebastian, and the thoughts weren't the hate-filled ones they should have been, given the way he'd abandoned her. Angelica couldn't understand why that would be the case, when he was nothing but the man she'd targeted as a husband to further her position, a man she'd been prepared to lure into bed with a sleeping powder...

An idea came to her. It was a desperate one, but right then, everything was desperate.

"I could offer you something more valuable than money," Angelica said. "Something better."

The guard laughed, but even so, he paused. "What?"

Angelica reached down to her belt, drawing out the small snuff box of sedative, lifting it as if it were the most precious thing in the world. The guard let her, staring almost entranced as he tried to work out what it was. Very delicately, Angelica opened the box.

"What is it?" the guard demanded. "It looks like –"

Angelica blew sharply, sending a scattering of powder into his face as he gasped. She cut left as he grabbed for her, hoping to dodge past while he was still dealing with the powder in his eyes. One meaty hand clamped on her arm, and the two of them pressed back toward the edge of the palace's roof.

Angelica didn't know what effect the sedative would have. It had worked quickly whenever she'd used it, but it was normally a thing of small doses and minor effects. How much would such

a large dose do to a man that size, and would she have enough time before it happened? Already, Angelica could feel the edge of the roof against her back, the sky visible as the big man pushed at her.

“I’ll kill you!” the guard bellowed, and the best Angelica could say about it was that his words came out slightly slurred. Was his grip weakening? Was the pressure pushing her back any less?

She was tilted back so much now that she could see the ground below her, and a scattering of servants and nobles. Another second, and she would be falling, to crash to the cobbles of the courtyard and smash as surely as a dropped goblet.

In that second, Angelica felt the guard’s grip weaken. Not much, but enough for her to twist and slip by him, putting him with his back to the empty sky.

“You should have taken the money,” she said, and charged forward, shoving with all her might. The guard teetered on the edge for a second, then toppled back, his arms flailing at the air.

Not just the air. One managed to catch at her, and Angelica found herself jerked forward, to the edge and over it. She screamed, grabbing for anything she could find. Her fingers found a piece of stonework, lost their grip, and then found it again while the guard continued to tumble below her. Angelica looked down just long enough to follow his fall to the ground. She felt a brief moment of satisfaction as he hit, quickly replaced by the terror that came from hanging from the side of the castle.

Angelica scabbled for handholds, trying to find something more to hold onto. Her feet hung in thin air for a moment, then managed to find purchase on the rough sides of a stone-wrought heraldic shield. Angelica noted with faint amusement that it was the royal crest, but also couldn’t help feeling relief at the fact it was there. Without it, she would undoubtedly now be as dead as the Dowager wished her to be.

The climb back up onto the roof seemed to take forever, Angelica’s muscles burning with the unexpected effort. Below, she could hear screams now, as people started to gather around the fallen guard. No doubt, some of them would be looking up, seeing her as she made it back onto the roof, toppling over and lying there, breathing hard.

“Get up,” she told herself. “You’re dead if you stay here. *Get up.*”

She forced herself to her feet, trying to think. The Dowager had tried to kill her. The obvious thing to do was run, because who could stand up to the Dowager? She needed to find a way out of the palace, perhaps make it to the docks and set off for her family’s lands overseas. That or sneak out through one of the city’s smaller routes, avoiding any watchers that had been set and making it out into the country. Her family was powerful, with the kind of friends who could raise questions in the Assembly of Nobles over this, who would —

“They’ll do what the Dowager tells them,” Angelica told herself. If they acted at all, it would be so slowly that she would undoubtedly be murdered in the meantime. The best she could hope for was to run and keep running, never being safe, never being at the heart of things again. It was an unacceptable solution to it all.

Which brought her back to her earlier question: who could stand up to the Dowager?

Angelica dusted herself off carefully, rearranging her hair as neatly as possible as she nodded to herself. This plan was... dangerous, yes. Unpleasant, almost certainly. But it was the best chance that she had.

While the people below shouted, she set off at a run back through the palace.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sebastian's eyes were starting to get used to the near dark of his cell, the damp, even the stench of it. He was starting to adjust to the faint gurgle of water somewhere in the distance and the sound of people coming and going beyond. That was probably a bad sign. There were some places that no one should get used to.

The cell was small, just a few feet on each side, with a front of iron bars, fastened with a solid lock. This was not some fine tower prison, where a man's family could pay for his upkeep in style until the time finally came for him to lose his head. This was the kind of place a man might be thrown into for the world to forget him.

"And if I'm forgotten," Sebastian whispered, "Rupert gets the crown."

That had to be what this was about. Sebastian had no doubt about that part. If his brother made him disappear, if he made it look as though Sebastian had run off never to return, then Rupert would become the heir to the throne by default. The fact that he hadn't killed Sebastian yet suggested that might be enough for him; that he might release Sebastian once he had what he wanted.

"Or it might just mean he wants to take his time about killing me," Sebastian said.

He couldn't hear other voices in the near dark at the moment, although from time to time they drifted in from further away. Sebastian suspected that there were other cells down here, maybe other prisoners. Wherever *here* was. That was actually a question worth thinking about. If they were beneath the palace somewhere, then there was a chance that Sebastian could attract enough attention to get help. If they were somewhere else in the city... well, it would depend on where they were, but Sebastian would find a way to get help.

He tried to think about the journey that they'd taken to get there, but it was impossible to say for certain. Not the palace, he guessed now. Even Rupert wouldn't be arrogant enough to stow Sebastian there. His brother, his family, had enough money that he could have bought other property around the city. Some extra house kept for liaisons or murky business.

"Probably both, knowing Rupert," Sebastian said.

"Shut up, you," a voice said. A figure came out of the dark: a nondescript man who served as one of his jailers. The man only came down a couple of times a day, bringing brackish water and stale bread. Now, he rattled a wooden club against the bars of Sebastian's cell, making him start at the sudden noise after so long in the silence.

"You know who I am," Sebastian said. "I'm Rupert's brother, the Dowager's younger son." He gripped the bars. "She will kill anyone involved in harming her sons. You know that, you aren't an idiot. Your only chance to survive right now is to be the one who lets me go."

Sebastian didn't like making the threat. It was the kind of thing his brother might have done, but it was also no more than the truth. His mother *would* tear Ashton apart looking for him if she thought that he'd been taken, and when she found him, anyone who had harmed him would die for it. When it came to her family, his mother was every inch the cruel, implacable monarch people believed.

"That only matters if she finds out," the guard said, swatting at Sebastian's hands almost casually with the club. Sebastian grimaced in pain, but managed to grab hold of the club, pulling the other man closer, his hands going to his belt.

It wasn't a good strategy. After all, the other man was armed, and Sebastian was trapped in a confined cell, without the ability to get around him, or avoid him. The guard struck him with his free hand, then jabbed him in the gut with his club. Sebastian felt the air rushing out of him. He went down to his knees.

"Arrogant nobles," the man snapped, spitting on the floor beside Sebastian. "Think that everything will work out for them, whatever they try. Well, it won't. Your mother won't come for

you, you're not getting out of here, and I'll be standing right there when your brother decides to start cutting bits off you."

He hit Sebastian again with the club, then backed away into the dark. Sebastian heard the sound of a bolt.

He didn't mind the pain then, even though it ran across his ribs like fire. He didn't care about himself, or what Rupert might do, or what might be happening now to let all this take place. Even like this, Sebastian found his thoughts turning to Sophia, and Ishjemme, and his child.

How far along would her pregnancy be by now? Far enough that it would be visible; far enough that it wouldn't be so long until their child was born. Sebastian couldn't stand the thought that he might miss that moment, might miss hearing their child's first cries in the cold air of the dukedom. He couldn't stand the thought that he wasn't with Sophia now, standing by her side and protecting her from whatever harm the world tried to throw at her. He had no doubt that, once they learned that she lived, whoever had tried to kill her would make the attempt again. Sebastian needed to be there to stop it, whatever it took.

"Which is why," he said, taking out a key that he'd snatched from the guard's belt, "I need to escape."

Sebastian moved slowly and carefully, not wanting to make any more noise than he had to. He fit the key into the lock and managed to turn it, the grating sound of metal on metal seeming far too loud. The creak of the cell door was louder, sounding like it should summon guards at any moment.

Even so, Sebastian kept going. He edged from the cell, into the corridor beyond it. It was a short, cramped, dark corridor which, instead of a door at the end, had barrels, stacked up as if to hide the entrance to it. There were other cells too, set in a line, although for the moment at least, they were empty. Sebastian was grateful for that. He wasn't sure that he could escape himself without trying to take others with him.

Sebastian went to move the boxes and found that some of them were already set on a small wheeled cart, easy to push out of the way. It wasn't quite a secret door, but it served almost the same purpose. Sebastian pushed it aside, and now he could see that the corridor that held his cell was set back from a wide, vaulted cellar, lit with candles. Even the light from those was enough to sting his eyes after the dark.

He moved through the space carefully, looking at where butts of wine and casks of ale sat alongside beef, venison, and other supplies. A length of hard salt beef sat waiting to be consumed, and Sebastian tore off a hunk, chewing at it with the lack of grace of a starving man. He looked around, hoping to find, not a sword, because who would keep one of those in a cellar, but at least a carving knife or a butcher's hook. Something he could use in his escape.

There was nothing, and no time to hunt further. Sebastian didn't know how often people came through this space, and he needed to be gone before any of the guards got back. He hurried over to where a flight of stone steps led to a door, suggesting a way out. Sebastian hurried up those steps, ignoring the pain that came with each movement, and made it to the top.

He half expected the door to be bolted, but a door leading down to a cellar couldn't be, or how would people fetch things up for the house above? Sebastian was convinced now that it *was* a grand townhouse, and not the palace, simply because, as impressive as this space was, it didn't hold enough food to feed a whole palace of courtiers and servants, soldiers and nobles.

Sebastian swung the door open and found himself standing face to face with the guard who had beaten him, sitting on a chair, waiting for him. Two more men stood beside him.

"You thought I wouldn't notice my key was gone?" he asked. He laughed. "You think I would *carry* my key so close to you unless there were a reason?"

The truth seeped into Sebastian then, and the shock as it hit him made him stand there dumbly. They'd let him get this far. It was all some trick, some *game*.

“Do you think we don’t watch the ones his highness tells us to?” the man said. “You think he hasn’t had all kinds down there, trying to get out all ways? Oh, you should hear some of the women cry when they think they’ve escaped, neat as you like, only to be dragged back.”

Sebastian threw himself forward at the man. It didn’t matter in that moment that there were three of them, or that he was weak from the lack of food. What mattered was getting out of there, getting to Sophia, even if it hurt. He’d realized back at the wedding that he couldn’t spend his life without her. Now was the moment when he proved it.

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