

A woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a light blue off-the-shoulder gown and a tiara, is shown in profile, looking down. She is positioned behind the title text.

DAWN BROWER

THE
ENCHANTED
PRINCESS

A small, ornate crown icon is centered above the text.

BROKEN CURSES

1

THE ENCHANTED PRINCESS

BROKEN CURSES BOOK ONE

DAWN BROWER

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Some ideas come when you least expect it and it is those moments of inspiration that live on inside of you for your entire life. This book sprung to life from a dream, but the characters were inspired by some special people in my life. Princess Elodie is just another name for Elizabeth Paige Zelno. Even the kingdom carries a stamp of you in it. I hope you love it as much as I did writing it. This book is for you.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

My son, Nathan was instrumental in helping me plot and plan this book. It is as much his as it is mine in conception. Therefore, thanks for helping me to create a world I hope will inspire many. I love you and hope you do not mind me picking your brain too much. You do come up with some fabulous ideas.

Lulu the crazy fun bird that is both annoying and fun—she is written that way for my niece, Brooklyn. Nothing can compare to her energy and I hope that comes across on the page.

A Princess's Secret

The sun loomed on the horizon as it rose to welcome the dawn. Across the rolling green hills, a stone fortress sat in a valley surrounded by a body of water. The moat had been designed in a wide and deep circle to keep predators at bay. A wooden drawbridge was lowered across it, welcoming people to enter the bailey. Echoes of steel on steel filled the air as the royal guard sparred, honing their skills.

It was time for her to head back inside and pretend to be the girl the inhabitants believed she was. At least for a little while, and then she could do what she wanted. Picking up her basket of flowers, she walked over the drawbridge and headed to her chambers. She deposited the basket on a nearby table for her maid to use to dress her hair later, then quickly exited the same way she came to disappear for a few hours. To go outside and pretend to be someone she wasn't, and most of all, to escape the castle and every single expectation thrown at her.

For Elodie Kendrick, Princess of Zelnor, the castle was both a prison and a refuge. From the moment she was born, it had been her home, and the one place she should have been comfortable. That turned out to be a highly erroneous conclusion to make. The castle was stifling, and the inhabitant's expectations didn't match what she wanted for herself. Stepping outside of the castle's protective gates wasn't allowed. If she took it upon herself to leave, her safety couldn't be guaranteed. In the minds of most men, a woman wasn't capable of protecting herself.

Mere weeks before her seventeenth birthday, the desire to rebel grew inside of her until she took steps to change the course of her life. A year later, she'd learned every skill she could charm a willing knight to teach her. She trained hard and long, and entirely in secret. Her favorite choice of weapons was two short swords she kept sheathed in a leather scabbard that hugged her back when she wore it.

Sparring was her favorite activity. Each morning, after the guard finished their daily exercise, she met one of the guard's most lethal knights, Cale

Griffin. He hadn't wanted to aid her, but the alternative would have been worse. The stupid male believed she'd hurt herself if left to her own devices. As time went by, they'd developed an easy friendship. At times, she believed there could be more between them if their stations in life were different. The queen would never allow Elodie to marry so far beneath her.

Stupid queen.

She wasn't even her mother, not in the true sense. Her father had married Fiona to provide a maternal figure for Elodie. Fiona Kendrick didn't have anything remotely kind or gentle residing inside her body. The queen was an icy bitch that ruled with a steel fist. No one dared to question her. She was the first woman to gain their respect, and Elodie should be grateful for that. When it was her time to rule, perhaps they wouldn't dismiss her out of hand, but she couldn't find it inside of her to have any congenial feelings for her stepmother. Saying their relationship was strained was an understatement.

She slid into an empty room where she stored her gear, careful to check that she wasn't being watched. The queen had spies everywhere, and so far she'd been lucky. As long as her stepmother didn't know she was gaining skills, she couldn't do anything to prevent them. Satisfied no one was following her, she moved over to a trunk sitting against a wall. She flipped it open, grabbed the items she sought, and removed her clothing to change into something more appropriate for what she had planned.

Elodie dressed in a pair of black leathers so soft they hugged her legs. Then she slipped on a matching tunic. She picked up her scabbard and checked her short swords. Then attached it to her back, and drew a dark hood over her head to hide her hair. The light brown locks streaked with gold were telling, and any who spotted her would sound the alarm. Then she'd never meet Cale in time for their morning ritual and her activities would be stopped forevermore.

Elodie squared her shoulders, quietly exited the room, and then headed out of the keep. Never seeing Cale again would be the worst. That wasn't going to happen. He was a handsome knight with long, black hair, and eyes so dark they almost matched his hair. Every inch of his body was finely honed muscle and sinew from hours of training. Something Elodie shouldn't even know, but in the process of learning, she'd managed to touch him more times than she could count. His body was hard all over, and one day she'd like to explore his bare chest. Through his clothes, he felt amazing, and it

fueled a naive girl's imagination.

Elodie kept alert as she headed toward their meeting spot. Cale hadn't wanted her to go alone, but she'd made him see reason. If he waited to escort her out of the castle, people would notice and wonder who she was. Going it alone gave her more freedom, and no one paid her any mind. She glanced over her shoulder and quickened her pace. An eerie feeling of being watched filled her. It had to be her imagination...

She slipped into the forest and breathed a sigh of relief for the cover the trees gave her. Cale would probably already be at their meeting spot. The guard hadn't been in the lists as she left. Elodie slipped past a row of trees and entered a clearing that met the edge of a small pond. Her knight stood on the edge, staring down into the abyss.

"Pondering all of life's questions?" Elodie asked as she lowered her hood.

He spun around and met her gaze, a hand resting comfortably on the hilt of his sword. A ring dagger swung neatly from the top of his armor—a decorative piece with jewels embedded in the hilt. She'd asked him about it once, but he'd refused to tell her why he carried it. Maybe one day he'd be comfortable with sharing his secrets with her. Patience wasn't always one of her strong suits, but her stubbornness could aid her to find some.

"You weren't followed?"

He always asked her that. Every. Single. Time. As if, months later, she would have failed to arrive in secrecy. When would he begin to trust her?

"Actually, there is a herd of horses heading this way. I tried to tell them you don't like being watched, but..." She shrugged. Joking helped ease the tension settling between her shoulder blades. There wasn't anyone watching them—she hoped. She'd have noticed if she'd been followed. That was the first thing Cale had trained her to do. "They wouldn't listen to me. Sorry, you'll have to deal with an audience today. Hope you don't mind."

He glared at her. His eyes turned to dark blue ice, creating a need to squirm deep inside of her. She would not give into the urge. The bastard would use it against her. Showing weakness was the biggest mistake she could make. Cale didn't suffer flaws of any kind. He didn't seem to care that she was female and treated her, for the most part, as if she was another knight in training. At times, she found that almost—irritating. Once he agreed to teach her, their dynamic changed. Before he'd been proper and courteous in all things. She was to be queen one day and respect was given to her for that

alone. Cale wouldn't have broken that for any reason if she'd not begged him until he caved.

"Your mouth will get you in trouble one day."

Elodie rolled her eyes. It was on the tip of her tongue to snap out something that would most definitely bring on danger of another variety. What she wanted to do with her mouth had nothing to do with words and everything to do with tasting her handsome knight. He probably wouldn't take lightly to his student kissing him though. He didn't even seem to like her most days.

"It's a good thing that someday isn't this one," she replied. "Are you ready to teach me, oh wise one?"

"Your antics aren't the least bit funny, princess," he said. His voice was edged with fury and sliced through her. "If we're caught..."

Guilt was bitter and hard to swallow. It pooled in her gut and fermented, rolling through her stomach. Her breakfast became a dead weight that wanted to expel itself from her body. She forced herself to calm down and remember her goal. Cale was doing her a favor, and he was right. If they were caught, he would be exiled and she'd probably be locked in a tower.

"I apologize," she said. "It may not seem like it at times, but I do appreciate all you've taught me."

He nodded. "Let's begin."

Cale's focus was on her as if nothing else existed. He pulled his sword out and held it high. The wind blew across the pond and pushed his dark locks in his face, and still he remained motionless—waiting. Elodie circled around him and took measure of his stance. It was a dance they played at each session. She would attack from a different angle every time, and he'd parry her blows with a skill she admired.

She wanted to surprise him, but wasn't sure how. She'd attacked from every angle possible and he'd yet to be taken unaware. What would it take to throw him off guard? This male, so sure of every possible move a person could make, he anticipated anything and everything. What must it have taken him to become the skilled warrior before her? A mere three years separated them in age, but a lifetime filled the gap in experience. Elodie was an untried youth in comparison to the old soul inhabiting Cale's body.

Maybe it was time to use her youth to her advantage. It wasn't that he expected her to move a certain way, but he'd taught her everything she knew.

If she approached him with something he'd not seen from her before, she might have a chance of knocking him on his ass. Maybe it was time to get up close and personal with her favorite male.

Elodie met Cale's gaze and took several steps in his direction. She didn't look away once as she approached and didn't reach for her swords. As soon as they were unsheathed, the battle would rage and they'd spar until one of them gave. She always gave. Today, she'd come out of this match the victor.

"Princess?" Weariness filled his gaze the closer she approached. She was almost a breath away now. "What game are you playing now?"

"No games, knight."

That was a lie. That was exactly what she was going to do. To win, she'd have to up the stakes and do the unthinkable. Elodie closed the distance between them and placed her lips on his. A spark ignited, but she couldn't let it overtake her. His lips had been soft where the rest of him was hard. At another time, she would have explored that and found out if there was more than a glimmer of fire. Today she had other plans.

Cale stood momentarily stunned as Elodie stepped out of his reach. She pulled both of her swords out and assumed a fighting position. Her knight shook his head lightly, unprepared for her attack. She lunged forward twirling as she approached him. Both of her blades met with the steel of his sword. They danced like that for several heartbeats. She would lunge and he'd parry, the sounds of their blades meeting echoing through the valley. He was stronger, but she was more agile. Part of her training was learning to use that to her advantage.

Elodie ran toward Cale, flipped in the air and landed on the other side of him. He turned as her elbow came up to meet his nose. Blood spurted out as the bone cracked. He wiped his face and looped his arm around her waist pulling her toward him. She spun out of his grasp and dropped to the ground. Cale stalked forward, probably thinking he had the advantage. Her lips tilted upward as she lifted one of her blades to meet his, and then twisted her legs around his ankle and knocked him to the ground. His sword fell out of his hand as he braced himself for impact. Elodie leaped to her feet and stalked over to his side. Cale rolled onto his back to meet the brush of her blade at his throat.

"Do you concede?"

A low rumble filled the air as Cale's laughter spilled out of him. "It's

about damn time.”

Elodie was confused. Time for what? Instead of asking, she demanded, “Admit defeat.” She’d knick him if she had to, but she’d already cracked his nose. Marring any more of his skin didn’t sit well with her.

“Princess,” he said lightly. “I admitted defeat months ago when you charmed me into training you.” He rolled to his side and stood. “But aye, today you won, and with tactics I could never have taught you.”

The kiss? She’d wanted to feel his lips on hers for so long and decided to use their battle as a reason to do it. At least she could take comfort in knowing she’d fooled him in that regard. One day, she’d find out what a real kiss was, and she hoped it would be him who bestowed it upon her.

She glanced at him and slid her swords into the scabbard. “I hate to tell you this, but you do not possess all the knowledge in the land, Sir Griffin. I am capable of gaining wisdom from others.”

She often saw more than she should and most people ignored her. A princess apparently should be ignorant in some regards. If her father was still alive, or her mother, perhaps things would be different...

“I never said you weren’t,” he replied, coming to his feet. “Some things are learned the hard way though. Go back to the keep. I’ll follow at a distance.”

Elodie wanted to argue but realized it would be futile. As far as Cale was concerned, their lesson was over. No matter, tomorrow was another day, and she would find a way to best him again.



* * *

Sneaking back into the castle was not as easy as slipping out. The midday meal would be served soon, and more of the castle’s inhabitants would be bustling around. Elodie kept her head lowered and her hood securely covering her head. She scanned the courtyard and tracked everyone’s movements as she eased her way into the keep’s main building. Once inside, she used the servant’s stairs to make her way to her hidey hole. A clear path

was before her as she stepped around the corner and entered the room. She breathed a sigh of relief and lowered her hood.

“Was it worth it, milady?”

Elodie spun around at the sound of a female voice echoing through the room. Her heart beat hard in her chest, thundering through her ears. No one was supposed to realize what she was doing each day. It appeared as if her luck had run out.

“Susanna,” Elodie said breathlessly. “You frightened me.” What was her maid doing in her secret room? No one came into this area of the keep. It was more or less a storage room.

“The queen was searching for you,” Susanna replied. “She dispatched me to bring you to her immediately. I fear it’s not something good she wants you for.”

Nothing Fiona ever did was *good*. That still didn’t answer how Susanna knew to find her in this particular part of the castle. And to think she’d thought her actions careful... “How long ago did she summon me?”

“It was mere moments ago. Luckily, I’ve been keeping track of your activities,” she said with a hint of disapproval in her voice. “Otherwise, her highness might have caught wind of your unseemly behavior.”

Elodie had no regrets. The months of training Cale had unwillingly given her gave her a skill set she’d be able to utilize once she was queen. Her eighteenth birthday was a week away, and afterward, she would be the rightful ruler of Zelnor. That had to be irritating her stepmother to no end. Soon she’d take up the role as advisor, and the people would look to Elodie for guidance.

“My desire to be a strong leader is the reason for my actions,” she paused and looked directly into Susanna’s eyes. “And I don’t need to explain myself to you. I am the Princess of Zelnor, and it is my right to do what I believe is best.”

How dare Susanna look at her with censure in her eyes. Elodie pulled off the gloves protecting her fair skin and tossed them into a trunk. The short swords and scabbard came off next—emptiness filling her at their loss. She stripped off her tunic and leathers, folded them, and placed them next to her weapons.

Susanna sighed. “You’re young and foolish.” Elodie lifted her shift, removed it, and handed it to Susanna. She tossed it on the floor and continued

to chastise Elodie. “Aye, you have a right to do as you please, but they’re dangerous, these lessons.”

Susanna grew up alongside her and was a mere three months older than Elodie. She’d been groomed to be a maid since she started to walk. At first, she’d been Elodie’s playmate, but that changed once she could be trained. No one knew her better than Susanna did.

“It’s even more hazardous for me to be ignorant and unskilled. I’m to be queen soon, and I refuse to be a useless monarch.”

It was an old argument between them—one that would never be settled. Susanna believed she’d be better off letting her guard protect her. Living in a tower surrounded by men dictating her every move had never appealed to her.

“So you’ve explained on more than one occasion,” Susanna said. “But you were almost caught this time. What would you have done if the queen had found you instead of me? How many times do you think you’ve almost been caught?” She raised a brow. “Today wasn’t the first time.”

Elodie’s mouth fell open in surprise. “How long have you known what I’ve been doing?”

“Since the first,” Susanna said. “You’re welcome.”

She should never have doubted her maid. Susanna had always been on her side, even when she disagreed. “Thank you,” Elodie said. “Do you have any idea what Fiona wants?”

Susanna shrugged. “I don’t know, but they are preparing for guests. From the amount of activity, I’d say they’re special ones too.”

Elodie tilted her head. “My birthday celebration is soon. It’s probably guests that are arriving early for that.” She blew out a breath. “Fiona will want to discuss comportment and how I’m a horrible princess. I can’t wait until I can ignore her constant lectures.”

Susanna picked up the gown Elodie had tossed across a mirror and helped her put it on. After all the laces were tied, she said emphatically, “You don’t like wearing gowns, but you’ll make a fine queen. Don’t let her change you.”

Her lips tilted upward. “You’re a wonderful friend for saying so.” Elodie stared at herself in the dusty mirror. She looked a fright, and it would take a miracle to make her presentable.

“I’m your only friend. Someone has to tell you the things you need to hear.” She motioned toward a stool. “Sit so I can untangle your hair and

make you at least moderately passable as the princess you're supposed to be."

Elodie stuck her tongue out. "Do your worst."

She sat down and let Susanna yank on her hair. Pain wasn't a problem. Every muscle in her body ached from her training with Cale. Having her hair brushed and styled was almost relaxing.

"There," Susanna said. "You're ready to face your stepmother."

Lucky her. Elodie scrunched her nose up. "I suppose there is no time like the present to wander into the throne room. Maybe she won't be there, and I can avoid her longer..."

"As if she'd leave her favorite place in the castle," Susanna said and snorted. "Go before she gets suspicious."

Elodie nodded, walked out of the room, and then headed to see her stepmother. She hadn't completely calmed down after Susanna scared her. Butterflies danced in her stomach and her heart continued to beat heavily in her chest. When she pushed open the large doors to enter the throne room, a sight greeted her that stilled it completely.

Standing in front of her stepmother, the current ruling queen of Zelnor, was Elodie's favorite knight, Sir Cale Griffin. All signs pointed to an unpleasant meeting, and all she wanted to do was spin on her heels and avoid it completely. Unfortunately, that wasn't possible. Besides, Elodie never ran from a fight.

Bring it, Fiona...

Knight to Remember

The throne room was furnished in elaborate velvet brocade of the richest blue velvet and accented with gold filigree. At the back sat the room's focal point—the thrones. Both had high backs that hugged the wall and were ensconced in blue velvet and gold to match the decorating scheme. The queen normally sat on the right, but since her father's death that had changed. Fiona decided, since she was acting ruler, she'd take the seat Elodie's father once claimed. It hurt deep inside to see Fiona sitting in that place of honor.

The queen's golden hair was piled high on her head in an elaborate chignon with curls spilling over her heart-shaped face. Her green eyes were cold and hard. Elodie blinked back tears and focused on the flag filling the wall above the thrones instead. The same rich color scheme graced Zelnon's banner along with a roaring white tiger. Elodie had never seen a tiger, but rumor claimed one roamed her lands, protecting them from harm.

"Come here," Fiona demanded. "You're an ungrateful child and have no respect for anyone or anything."

Elodie lifted her chin in defiance. Respect had to be earned, and Fiona had yet to do something that made Elodie feel any sort of admiration for her. She moved closer to the back of the room, dread filling her with each step. What would Fiona want to discuss with her? Why was Cale there?

"Please forgive me, Stepmother," Elodie said with feigned remorse. "I was unaware you required my presence." She lowered her gaze so the queen couldn't see her eyes. If she was able to look into them, she'd realize Elodie wasn't the least bit sorry.

"Where have you been?" the queen demanded.

"I..." She had no ready excuse. What could she possibly say that was acceptable? Nothing would be appropriate, and the queen would have a fit if she realized what Elodie had been doing and Cale would be banished.

"Did I not see you picking flowers earlier?" Cale asked. "Did you find some pretty ones?"

Elodie's gaze flew to his and she sent him a silent thank you. "You're

correct, Sir Griffin. There was a lovely patch of wildflowers in the meadow outside the castle. My maid is going to use them to dress my hair later.”

“A waste,” the queen said dismissively. “Were you outside the keep alone?” She narrowed her gaze pinning Elodie in place. “You know you’re not to be allowed anywhere unescorted.”

Drat. “I wasn’t far from the drawbridge. I was in the line of sight of some of the knights who were training.”

“She was, your highness,” Cale bowed his head. “The men kept watch of her as they trained.”

She’d owe him a thousand times more than she could ever repay. He was saving her left and right. A lump was forming in her throat, and she was having trouble swallowing. It seemed like she’d be forever bowing her head to her stepmother, begging for forgiveness, but that time would soon come to an end. Patience could be hard to attain at times, and unfortunately the closer she came to her eighteenth birthday the struggle became even more difficult.

“I don’t like it,” the queen said, glaring at Elodie. “You will not do it again.”

Elodie bit back a retort. It wouldn’t serve her purpose to let go of the rage boiling deep inside of her. “Yes, Stepmother.”

“Now, for the reason I’ve called you here.” Fiona’s lips tilted upward. “I have a surprise for you.”

Susanna’s prediction came to mind as her stepmother spoke. Elodie braced herself for bad news. If Fiona thought it was a good thing, it was everything but. “Oh?” Elodie raised a brow. “What is it?”

“There are several things we must discuss. First, I wanted to inform you that Sir Griffin will be leaving us soon.” A smirk filled her features at that announcement. Did Fiona know Cale had been training her?

“He is?” She turned her gaze to Cale and lifted a brow and then returned her focus to Fiona. “Where is he to go?”

The royal guard didn’t generally leave Zelnor for any reason. They were a peaceful land. A knight in their kingdom only left when a member of the royal family visited other nations. She wasn’t going anywhere, and as far as she was aware, neither was Fiona. So what reason could Cale have to leave? Why hadn’t he mentioned it to her earlier? Did her feelings mean so little to him? Pain shredded her from the inside out at his neglect.

“It’s personal,” he said.

If he wanted to pique her curiosity, that was a sure way to do it—as if saying it was personal would be enough to deter her from asking more questions. He’d learn soon enough. Elodie nodded as if she was going to let the subject drop, but fully planned on discussing it in depth with Cale at their next training session.

“I realize he’s the head of your personal guard, but I’ll have to assign someone else. When a new knight is picked, I’ll inform you of the change.” Fiona sat back and tapped her hand on the arm of the throne. “Try not to drive this one away too.”

What was that supposed to mean? Why did Fiona believe she was the reason Cale wanted to leave? “Pardon me?” she asked.

“Never mind,” Fiona replied and flipped her hand dismissively. “It doesn’t matter. We need to move on to the other reason I summoned you.”

Her stepmother had already thrown a wrench in her life by telling her Cale was leaving. What other bad news could she possibly have to impart? “When is Sir Griffin to leave?” She deliberately kept her gaze on Fiona, not wanting to see Cale’s reaction. Elodie steeled herself for the response. None was forthcoming, and dread filled her at the silence that greeted her. Immediately—he was leaving before she could even have another training session. The traitor was abandoning her when she needed him most.

“I see,” she said and held her head high. “Then I wish you safe travels. What else do you need to discuss? I’d like to rest before the evening’s festivities.” The festival in the afternoon was designed for the villagers. Technically, Elodie wasn’t required to attend and no one expected her to. She had other plans though and would go in secret. The ball was for her princess persona and the festival was for her warrior side.

The entire week would consist of celebrations leading up to her birthday, and that night was the first one. On the day she reached her majority, they’d have a coronation and then kingdom-wide merriment would ensue. She’d been looking forward to the many entertainments that the steward had planned. Now, all she wanted to do was curl up in a ball and give into the tears threatening to spill.

“This won’t take long,” the queen said. “I’m to inform you that your betrothed will arrive tomorrow. You will wed after the coronation.”

“What?” Her mouth hung open in shock. Elodie clenched her fists at her side. She wasn’t betrothed to anyone. Her father wouldn’t have done that to

her. "You must be mistaken."

"I assure you, I am not." The queen held her head high and looked down at Elodie. "The contracts were drawn up and signed by all the appropriate parties."

Did she not warrant input in her own life? She would prefer to at least like the person she was supposed to spend the rest of her life with. Fiona was effectively taking away all her choices. She'd never hated her more than in this moment.

"I don't believe you," Elodie blurted out. "My father believed in love and would never have forced a marriage on me."

"Your father was a fool," Fiona said scathingly. "And you're right, he didn't arrange this marriage. I brokered it and it was signed by me, and your other guardian."

Abram signed it? He was her father's best friend. Why would he betray her and her father's wishes? What did Fiona have on him to make him agree to it? She'd go to Abram and beg him to undo it. There had to be a way to dissolve the agreement. She had no desire to marry someone she didn't even know.

"Who have you promised my hand to in marriage?" She glared at Fiona. Hatred spilled out of her in waves. The rage built up inside her to indefinable degrees. Years of repressed resentment and mistrust were about to explode from her. "More importantly, what do you stand to gain from it?" Fiona did nothing without reason. This marriage smelled, and she didn't even have the name of her betrothed yet. "Why all the secrecy? Did you believe I'd have a problem with it?"

The queen narrowed her gaze and sat forward. "Silence," she roared. "You will not question me on this matter. It is for the best, and we need this alliance."

"We need nothing of the sort," Elodie shouted. She stared at Fiona thoughtfully and stated, "Maybe you do though." She lifted a brow mockingly. "Now tell me who it is you've tied me to."

Cale moved forward, making his way to her. Elodie forgot he was even in the room. He was probably going to offer her some kind of support, but she didn't want it. She held up her hand, motioning for him to stop. Cale failed her as much as everyone else in her life had. Why had he even bothered to train her? Before this insufferable meeting she'd have run to him and begged

him to aid her. Nothing would entice her to do anything so foolish again. Her eyes had been opened. Her stepmother's pronouncement had momentarily blinded her to everything around her. All she'd seen was the evil woman her father had foolishly married. She often wondered how he'd not seen her rotten core. Cale's choice had been made, and it wasn't Elodie. His actions put him firmly in the enemy camp. Something she couldn't overlook even if she wanted to. Her future, and that of her people, was at stake.

The queen finally started to speak, and Elodie turned her gaze away from Cale to face her. "You're betrothed to the Royal Prince of Katriel, Daire Reilly."

Elodie laughed maniacally. Of course that is who she'd betrothed Elodie to. Fiona couldn't stand to lose control of Zelnon, and the only way to retain an ounce of it was for Elodie to marry into her family. Prince Daire? Fiona's beloved nephew and well-known knave—what a joke. He was the third son in line, and unlikely to inherit the crown in his own lands. He wasn't anyone worth her time, and she was done with her audience with Fiona. Elodie curtsied more out of habit than respect and then spun on her heels and stormed out of the throne room. It was time to lick her wounds and plan. She would not be marrying anyone.



* * *

"Elle, wait," Cale yelled after her.

She ignored him and kept walking at a furious pace. It wasn't his fault her stepmother was evil incarnate, but at the same time she wanted to blame him. He was leaving her to deal with everything on her own. By morning, he'd be out of her life, and soon after her knight wouldn't be more than a memory. Elodie lifted her skirt and skipped the steps in the tower leading to her chamber. She had to escape, and there was one way to do that. In skirts, she couldn't leave the castle unescorted, but in her training garb no one would give her a second glance. The need to punch something or hack it to death was overwhelming.

Elodie pushed open the door to the storage room and stormed inside, letting it close behind her. The trunk holding her gear was in the far corner buried under some unused blankets. Her dress was squeezing her so tight she couldn't breathe properly. After she disposed of it and was more comfortable, she'd leave the castle—perhaps for good. Let Fiona have it. She'd have a happier life if she never had to lay eyes on her stepmother ever again.

The door slammed open with a booming sound echoing through the chamber. Cale's large frame filled the entrance. Her breath froze in her chest, and she had to remind herself to let air in and out. He was magnificent and quite irate. His cheeks were flushed a deep red. A storm raged in the depths of his blue eyes, the likes she'd never seen before. "Do you ever listen?" He seethed.

"Not when I don't like what I'm about to hear," she spat out. "I don't need any lectures. Especially from you."

"Grow up, princess," he said with disdain. "The world isn't perfect, and it's far from fair. Whoever filled your head with nonsense did you a grave disservice."

If he wanted to fight, then by all means, she'd give him one. No one knew how unfair life was more than she did. Her mother died when she was ten, and her father married Fiona to give her a motherly figure in her life. That was the cruelest joke of all. Her stepmother was the furthest thing from warm and fuzzy a person could get. Still, Elodie endured and was happy to have her father in her life, until he wasn't. His death had devastated her, and Cale had the audacity to tell her to grow up? She stomped over to him and slapped him. The added redness added to his already flushed face.

"Get out," she ordered. "As far as I'm concerned, the sooner you're gone the happier my life will be."

Cale lifted his hand and rubbed his cheek. "I don't want to leave."

That was news to her. In the throne room, he hadn't been too grieved by the idea. "Your personal reasons are calling you. I believe I told you to go."

She was already starting to calm down, but she'd dug a hole for herself without a way out. Besides, it would be easier on her once he let her be. She could cry in peace without an unwanted audience.

Cale reached out and grabbed her wrist. "Look at me," he demanded.

She didn't want to—it hurt too much. Elodie lifted her gaze to meet his. The storm still brewed, but it wasn't the same. Sorrow and regret greeted her

and filled her soul.

“I don’t want to leave,” he repeated. “But I can’t stay and watch you marry another. It would destroy me.”

It was the closest he ever came to admitting he felt something more for her than a knight should. How could she let him go without admitting what was inside her heart? Would it be wrong to declare anything when she wasn’t free to be with him? Talk about life not being fair.

“Take me with you,” she said. “I don’t want to fight Fiona anymore. It’s exhausting, and I’d rather be happy.”

He shook his head sadly. “You’ll never be happy if you leave your home. This is your birthright, and I refuse to aid you in abandoning it.”

Why did he have to be so noble? “It’s not your decision to make.” She brought her hand to his cheek. “I want to go.”

He stared down at her. His face was a blank canvas without any emotion spilling from him. The storm in his eyes turned into a gentle breeze and calmed the one raging inside of her. She didn’t understand how he did it, but he’d always had the ability to soothe her. “I’d do anything for you, Elle,” he said quietly. “But I can’t do this. I can’t give you the life you deserve.”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

What did he mean by that? They could have a future together outside of this castle. Why did he have to be so bloody obstinate? He was the best person she knew. If she couldn’t trust him, who could she? Tears that she’d been holding back were forming in the corner of her eyes. Wetness spread across her cheek before she even realized she’d given in to them. Cale brought his hand up and wiped them away.

“You’re meant for greater things,” he whispered. “I can’t be your rock anymore.” He leaned down and kissed her forehead. “You’re a warrior in your own right, and there isn’t anything you can’t handle. There isn’t anyone I’d trust more to handle your kingdom and Queen Fiona. Don’t run from your responsibilities—face them. Defend your castle, your throne, and your family name with everything you have.”

“How am I supposed to do that without you here?”

All she could focus on was the fact that he was leaving her. That she would probably never see him again. What would she have left once he was gone? Who would she spar with? The rest of the knights were too afraid of her stepmother to dare defy her commands.

“With all the fire brewing inside of you,” he answered. “You don’t need me. I would only stand in your way.”

Elodie glanced up and met his gaze. “You promised me you’d always be here. I counted on you to be by my side as I was coronated queen, and every day thereafter.”

“Some promises are meant to be broken,” he said quietly. “You can’t fly until you’re set free. I’m holding you back.”

How could he believe that? If not for him, she’d still be a fumbling idiot playing with swords. She’d probably have cut a finger off or something if he hadn’t taught her how to properly hold a blade. His principles were what drew her to him in the first place. There wasn’t a knight in the guard she’d turn to other than him.

“Nonsense,” she retorted. “You’re honorable to the core. You wouldn’t stand in my way for anything.”

“Precisely,” he said solemnly. “It’s my duty to protect you, even from yourself.”

The more he spoke, the more she wanted to hit him again. He was toying with her emotions in the worst way. Hurt and anger spiraled through her, battling for the right to rule. She wasn’t sure which would win, but she did know, either way, she was the loser.

“I don’t need your protection,” she said defiantly. “I’m not going to fight with you anymore. It’s clear you’re determined to leave, and nothing I say is going to convince you to stay. So go and let me find a way to forget you.”

As if that would ever be possible. She’d always remember her honorable knight, even when she didn’t want to.

“I am sorry,” he said sorrowfully. “This is for the best. I’m not leaving until morning. If you want to talk before...”

There was no appropriate response to that. Begging him wouldn’t work, reason was beyond him, and unloading her feelings on him would be greeted with a rigid veneer. Cale wouldn’t thank her for telling him how she felt about him. He’d deflect again, and say leaving was for the best. She couldn’t go through those emotions again.

He was being difficult for no good reason. Even if he believed he was right. Going away could never be honorable. He was the one thing in her life that made waking up each day worthwhile. Without him, what would she be left with? Sometimes she wondered why she bothered to fight for her right to

rule. It would be so much easier if she gave up and let Fiona have the kingdom. If not for her father and what she thought he would want, she might have given in to that desire. Fighting with Cale now wouldn't help her anymore than giving up her rightful place as Zelnon's ruler would. She couldn't make him be something he didn't want to be. As much as she wanted to run away, it didn't solve anything. She had to face her problems head on and find the courage to do it alone.

"I won't," she interrupted. "I've said all I need to."

She turned her back to him. The sound of the door clicking shut was the only indication he'd left. The deafening silence turned out to be her undoing. She hugged her arms around her middle and dropped to the floor, giving in to the sorrow. The battle for supremacy had been won, and pain greeted her in victory.

A Prince by Any Other Name

Drowning herself in sorrows wouldn't aid her in her ultimate quest. The time for planning and action arose far quicker than she'd anticipated, but Elodie could and would work with it. Cale was right. Her people were more important than a broken heart and secret wishes. Fiona would not win in the end, and nothing would make her willingly marry Prince Daire. She hadn't seen him in several years, but the boy she'd known was a selfish jerk. He'd pushed her in mud and laughed when she'd cried. The older version of him couldn't be any better.

Hopping to her feet, she walked over to the trunk she stored her gear in and flung it open. Her problems wouldn't be solved inside the castle walls. There was one person who might be able to give her a clear picture of her future and which direction she should take. If there were any clues to be had, the White Witch would have them. Elodie prayed she'd had a vision recently that could give her some insight. Unfortunately, her visions were often images that had to be unraveled for a deeper meaning. More often than not, the connotation wasn't understood until well after the prophecy came to pass. Still, it was something for her to go on, and she needed something to hold on to.

After she was changed into her training garb, she attached her scabbard to her back and secured her swords inside. As an afterthought, she grabbed her bow and quiver full of arrows. The quiver fit nicely in-between her short swords in the middle of her back and didn't impede access to either one. She kept the bow in her hand for convenience. There was no telling who she would run into on her way to Paige's cottage. The White Witch lived on an unbeaten path on the other side of the woods. It was best to err on the side of caution and be prepared for anything. Including treachery both seen and unseen.

She pulled her necklace out from underneath her tunic, caressing the ruby embedded in the locket and clicking the latch open. On opposite sides of each other were miniatures of her parents. Her mother's likeness had been crafted

inside soon after her death, and Elodie had worn the locket for more years than she could remember. After her father died, she had his picture added to it. The locket was all she had to remember her parents. She closed it, kissed the red stone, and appealed to whatever higher being was listening for bravery, strength, and the conviction to continue fighting.

“I will prevail,” she vowed and slid her hood over her head.

She opened the door and stopped short when she found Susanna waiting on the other side.

“I didn’t wish to disturb you,” her maid said. “You must be hurting something fierce.”

Elodie didn’t acknowledge her maid’s statement. Bringing a voice to her pain would give it life. It was best to leave it behind and not look back. “I’m off to see Paige Innis. Cover for me while I’m gone.”

“You can’t go there alone,” her maid said on a gasp. “You know what she is.”

“Aye,” Elodie agreed. “And I intend to use every weapon in my arsenal to fight my stepmother. Either you’re with me or against me. Which is it, Susanna?”

The maid lifted her chin and met Elodie’s gaze, her honey eyes warm and comforting. Her raven hair tumbled over her shoulder in waves as she nodded. “You have my loyalty, always and forever.”

That was how it should be, but Elodie couldn’t help but have doubts. Her stepmother ruled with an iron fist and no one was to disobey her. Susanna had proved to be loyal though. She would have to take her maid’s word, but trusting didn’t come easy to her. “Very well,” she said and moved past Susanna. “I will be back before the fair this afternoon. The archery contest appeals to me.”

“Be safe, milady,” Susanna said. “The witch is eerie.”

Elodie rolled her eyes. “I’m not afraid of her.”

Susanna crossed herself. “Don’t mock her magic. If you had a healthy appreciation for it, you wouldn’t take the risk you’re about to.”

“It’s ridiculous superstition,” Elodie said. “Her visions though, that’s entirely different. The gods must speak through her. It’s not her fault us mere mortals have trouble interpreting their messages.”

“You believe in gods but not magic?” Susanna asked appalled. “How can one exist and not the other? How do you think they use their divine power?”

Elodie frowned. She'd never contemplated the inner workings of the gods. She'd always taken them at face value. They were all-powerful and could dispense their wrath or benevolence, depending on their moods. Was it really her job to question how or why they did anything? She'd rather they didn't take notice of her or her small kingdom.

"I'm not going to debate magic with you," Elodie said haughtily. "I have more important matters at hand. Like keeping my stepmother from gaining total control over the kingdom. I need Paige to do that."

"Very well, milady," Susanna said. "Do you know what gown you intend to wear this evening? I can pull it out and brush it so it's ready."

Elodie waved her hand. "I really don't care. You choose."

Where had her maid missed her point about other things being far more important? Once she was queen, she'd quit wearing dresses altogether. She'd go through the formalities while Fiona ruled in her stead, but afterward she'd be the warrior queen Cale had helped her to become.

"I will pull out the new turquoise one," Susanna said. "It brings out the blue in your eyes."

"Fine," Elodie said absentmindedly and strolled past her maid. "Whatever. It doesn't matter. I'll return later."

She sneaked out of the castle and crossed the drawbridge. No one paid her any mind. There were so many people in the courtyard that she became another nameless, faceless person. When she was dressed as the princess, people paid her attention. Elodie preferred being unnoticeable. It helped her to disappear and find time for herself. This might be the last chance she had for a long time. There would be no more meetings with her knight, and her training was at an end.

The path to the witch's house turned out to be unencumbered. Dark clouds were forming in the sky, promising a storm the likes they hadn't seen in a while. Maybe this hadn't been as good an idea as she'd thought. Hopefully the storm would end well before the tournaments were scheduled to begin. Today was the beginning of the weeklong celebration. Each day would bring a different event. The villagers would be sad if any of it had to be cancelled.

Elodie was so lost in her own thoughts that she stopped paying attention where she was walking and slammed into something solid. She flailed her arms out, attempting to retain her balance, her bow slipping out of her hands,

but it did no good as she started to descend toward the hard ground. Her hood slid off her head, uncovering her hair. Fear filled her as she realized she could be discovered, and all might be lost in the process.

“Easy now,” a male said as he wrapped his hands firmly around her arms, preventing her from hitting the hard surface. “No need to fall at my feet to gain my attention.”

Elodie glanced up and met the stranger’s gaze. His eyes were a stunning mixture of blue and green, each competing for dominance as the most impressive shade. Golden hair kissed by the sun fell over his shoulder in waves. She had an urge to run her fingers through it to see if the locks were as silky as they appeared. He was too beautiful to be real, and far too arrogant for his own good.

“Thank you,” Elodie pulled her arms from his grasp. “I apologize for slamming into you. I was lost in my own head.”

“Thinking can be hazardous for your health,” he declared picking up her bow and handing it to her. “As evidenced by our collision, a pretty girl like you should find something less dangerous to entertain yourself with.”

Elodie’s mouth fell open as she contemplated her response while she took her bow from him. Men like him were the reason for the dictates on her at the castle. Some believed her incapable of defending herself, and she wasn’t allowed outside the castle walls sans escort. If the guard knew she slipped out regularly, they’d have a fit, and then Fiona would lock her in the tower. Once was enough for her to realize she’d do whatever was necessary to prevent that from happening again. She hated being locked up for any reason, but in the tower especially. Escaping was impossible.

“I’m sure you believe what you’re saying, but you don’t know a thing about me.” She lifted her chin in defiance. “Thank you once again for preventing my fall, but I must bid you farewell.”

Elodie brushed past him and slipped deeper into the woods to close the distance between her and Paige’s cottage. The male had been handsome as sin and equally as opinionated. Their conversation had been brief, but it was enough for her to realize she didn’t need to further their acquaintance. Soon, the male was gone from her thoughts and where he belonged—a distant memory. If it could be said he was even that. The witch’s cottage was beyond the hill, and Elodie would be there shortly.

A tree branch cracked, the sound echoing through the woods. Elodie

paused, listened and dropped her bow to the ground preparing for anything. Footsteps pounding on the forest floor caught her attention. She drew her short swords out in one smooth move and turned to meet her foe. Her swords came flat against the blond male's throat. He swallowed hard and held up his hands in surrender.

"Easy, sweetheart," he said. "I mean you no harm, promise."

"Then why are you following me?" she demanded. Elodie narrowed her gaze and studied him. His clothes weren't the finest and indicated he was a common villager. He wore leather pants, similar to hers, and a dark tunic. A quiver rested in the middle of his back, a long bow attached to in an efficient manner. It was an inventive design, and if she allowed him to live she'd inquire on its construction. It would be useful to carry a bow in a similar manner. She hadn't noticed that previously. Was he a hunter?

He kept his hands upward. "What kind of male would I be if I let you continue unescorted? I was making sure you made it to your destination unharmed."

"Why should I believe you?" She kept her swords against his neck. "Before today, I've never laid eyes on you."

Distrust was as comfortable as a warm cloak. It kept her alert and alive. This guy could have an ulterior motive she was unable to decipher. Until she felt safe enough, she'd keep him exactly as he was—completely at her mercy.

"And what a shame that is." His lips tilted upward into a cocky smile. "It would've been a tragedy for us to remain unacquainted. Admit it, you like me." He winked at her playfully.

The male had absolutely no shame. She had him in an untenable position, and he was flirting with her. How was she supposed to fight against that? "You're an idiot."

"Maybe," he replied with charm oozing off of him in waves. "Or maybe I know a gem when I see one."

Elodie wasn't as unaffected as she'd like to be. What female wasn't susceptible to a handsome guy's open interest? He might want to have a dalliance of some sort, but Elodie couldn't let herself fall under his spell. She had a kingdom depending on her. Gorgeous blond males weren't on her agenda. Even if he was the most tempting one she'd come across in her life. Her heart belonged to Cale even if he didn't want it. She wasn't ready to dally with anyone else.

An image of Cale filled her mind. His handsome stoic features emphasized by his dark locks. He was beautiful in his own way, even if it was different than the blond male. They were like night and day in comparison. She glowed before both of them but in contrasting ways. The blond made her want to feel womanly and present herself at her best. With Cale, she wanted to conquer the world. He amped up her courage and strengthened her from the inside out. That is what she needed—not to make herself feel pretty and desired. None of it mattered though. Until she found a way to let her heartache go she'd rather focus on something else—like removing Fiona from her kingdom.

“I don't have time for you,” she said and sheathed her blades. “My destination is over that hill.” Elodie gestured toward a green mass of grass filling their line of sight. “Rest easy, that I'll arrive safe and sound. Now, leave me in peace.”

She bent over and picked up her bow, then headed toward the hill she'd pointed at. The witch probably already had a vision and expected her. It was almost eerie how she often sat outside waiting for company. Elodie wasn't sure if she'd like to have visions bestowed on her in a similar manner. What must it be like to always have a glimpse of the future and never having the choice of living in the moment?

“All right, before you pull out the blades and threaten to cut my head off again,” the male said as he fell in step beside her. “I find myself incapable of leaving you alone yet. My instincts tell me you need me, and I'm going to listen to them even though it is clear you have a murderous streak that is a breath away from being unleashed.”

Elodie closed her eyes and prayed for the second time that day for patience. Please save her from well-meaning people and the need to save her from herself. What would it take for them to leave her the hell alone? Perhaps it would be best to humor him for the time being. Once he met the White Witch, he'd run for cover. Not many people could handle being in her presence.

“Fine,” she said, acquiescingly. “It's your funeral.”

Let him take that however he liked. She didn't have time or the inclination to pull her punches. The guy was pretty to look at, and it wouldn't hurt to have him along. She could take care of herself, as he'd already figured out. No male would stand in her way.

“You’re hilarious,” he said with amusement dripping from his voice. “I think we will be the best of friends.”

“We’re not friends,” she ground out. “I don’t need you.”

They cleared the hill, and the witch’s cottage was mere feet away. She sat outside on a stool, stoking a fire. Her hair was pure white with streaks of silver running through it in stark contrast. She wasn’t an old woman, making her white and silver hair an aberration. Paige Innis was, in fact, the same age as Elodie. They even shared the same birthday.

A cauldron was sitting above the fire on a hook settled at the center of a tripod of metal beams. The fire licked the bottom and caused liquid to bubble over the top. Smoke billowed upward and formed a tunnel up into the dark sky. Paige lifted a long metal spoon and stirred the contents. She didn’t look up once at their direction. Elodie took a hesitant step toward her. Hopefully, she wasn’t imposing on a ritual of some sort. Susanna’s warnings finally taking root inside of her.

The male tapped her on the shoulder and said drolly, “Friends don’t let friends meet with creepy women.”

Elodie shook her head. “Then it’s a good thing we’re not even acquaintances. Go find someone else to bother.”

She kept moving forward and let him make his own decision. It didn’t matter one way or the other if he continued with her. Paige didn’t take well to strangers, and she wasn’t sure how the witch would react to the male.

“Hello, Elle,” Paige said as Elodie approached. “I expected you sooner.”

“I was unexpectedly delayed,” she said. The last thing she wanted to do was unintentionally offend the White Witch. “My apologies.”

“No need,” she said and brushed her hair away from her face. “You’re here now. It’s not too late.” Paige glanced up and met Elodie’s gaze. Her eyes swirled with silver that almost matched the streaks in her hair. “I’m glad you brought the prince. This affects you both.”

“What prince?” What was the witch talking about?

“The golden one that followed you down the hill of course,” Paige said with a cryptic smile on her face. “Do you know of any others?”

There was one prince she was acquainted with, and she had no desire to see him. This entire trek had been to avoid him and the decree she marry the fool. Elodie’s head jerked up and she spun on her heels to meet the stranger’s gaze. She narrowed her gaze and really looked at him. Was he? “Daire?” she

asked.

Those blue-green eyes should have sparked her memory. The last time she'd seen them he'd been mocking her. His hair was lighter, more golden somehow. Was it from spending lazy hours underneath the sun, or was there a more desirable explanation. How could she not have seen it before? Now that Paige had called him out, it was undeniable. The boy she'd known had grown into a handsome guy, and while he'd been relatively unselfish he hadn't exactly been forthcoming on his identity. Had he realized who she was and decided to play games with her?

He sighed. "I suppose the jig is up."

Elodie stormed over to his side and punched him in the face. She wanted to yank her blades out and slide one into his gut, but she held in the urge. "What tricks are you up to now? As a boy, you found it fun to push a girl into a mud puddle. I see you've graduated to much more covert schemes." At times, it was difficult for her to accept they were the same age. He was a little older than her—by a day. His birthday was the day before hers. It was one of the reason's they'd been playmates as children. Their parents had erroneously believed that they would get along and didn't like the idea of them socializing with servants. So every summer they'd been stuck with each other until her mother's death. Her father couldn't be bothered with worrying about Elodie's social obligations and kept her at home. There were no more visits to Katriel and Daire had not visited Zelnor. Secretly, Elodie had been relieved.

"It's not like that," he said as he rubbed his cheek. "I had no intention of intercepting you, but once our paths crossed, I couldn't let you go on your own. It's not my fault you didn't recognize me."

She hadn't wanted to see him as the boy she'd once known. It hadn't been a deliberate choice, but it was one nonetheless. Daire had grown into a handsome guy, and she didn't like what it did to her to gaze upon his blindingly beautiful visage. "You could have corrected that at any time."

"I rather enjoyed the anonymity," he said. "It was nice to have you look at me with regular disdain not open hatred."

"Oh..." Elodie dropped her bow and reached for her blades. Why had she brought the damn thing? It slowed her down. Daire reacted faster than she'd expected and held her hands in place. "Let me go." She yanked her arms, attempting to free them from his firm grasp.

"As soon as you promise to be reasonable," he replied. "Come on, I'm

not the ogre you're making me out to be in that brain of yours. If you think about it, you know me." The corner of his mouth lifted enticingly. "We were friends once before I was an idiot. Don't you remember when you told me we could always depend on each other?"

She didn't want to think about those times. Looking upon him in a favorable light now would weaken her resolve. He was not to be trusted. The nephew of the queen was her adversary, and she best remember that.

"I was a foolish girl who had to grow up too fast. You were not the person I'd believed you to be."

"People make mistakes, Elle."

He wasn't wrong. She'd made her fair share, but she wouldn't admit that to him. There was too much at stake, and he was the enemy. She couldn't let her guard down around him.

"Some can't be forgotten," she replied. "Go back to your kingdom, Daire. I'm not marrying you."

"Maybe, maybe not," the witch said, interrupting their skirmish. "It's not yet clear."

Daire let go of Elodie and faced Paige. "What do you mean?"

"A prince is a prince is a prince," she said strangely. Her voice and expression were bizarre. Paige's eyes were unfocused as she stared into the smoke billowing out of the cauldron. "Which prince she chooses hasn't been foretold. The images are murky."

Elodie smiled. "A prince by any other name would be preferable to him." She gestured toward Daire. "I'm open to the possibility."

Daire frowned and folded his arms against his chest. "I think you've insulted me."

"You have doubts?" Elodie said. "Let me clear it up for you. You could be the last male alive and I'd still never marry you."

"Be careful what you wish for," the witch said mysteriously. Her silver eyes swirled as she stared at Elodie. "Some prophecies are self-fulfilling."

As the words left her mouth the clouds opened up and unleashed hell on them. The rain pelted them, stinging her skin, and the wind twirled angrily around them. There was nothing to protect Elodie from the onslaught of the storm. Daire wrapped his arms around her and lifted her up. He carried her inside the cottage. Paige shut the door behind them.

They were stuck in each other's company until the downpour passed them

by. Elodie was afraid the time would be more than she could handle and braced herself for the worst. If Daire wanted to convince her he would make a good husband, let him try his best. She'd be able to withstand anything and wasn't about to accept him for any reason.

A Queen's Vow

Paige sat on a rocking chair. The room was completely dark, with brightness coming from the occasional lightning illuminating it. Elodie shivered involuntarily. Her clothing was soaked through and plastered against her skin. Warmth was fleeting as her skin turned to ice beneath them.

“You’re freezing,” Daire said.

Elodie glanced up and wanted to remark on his observation skills but chose to ignore him instead. She still couldn’t believe she’d failed to recognize him. For a brief moment, she’d started to like him, though she’d been reluctant to admit that to herself and she wouldn’t do so now. The last thing the prince needed was to realize his charm had started to worm its way into her good graces.

“Perhaps there is a blanket you can use.”

Why was he insisting on being so helpful? She could find her own damn blanket; she didn’t need him taking care of her. “Leave it be,” Elodie said. “I’m fine.”

“A choice must be made,” Paige’s voice echoed through the darkness. It sent shivers through Elodie’s already frozen limbs. “Salvation or heart.”

That was easy enough. What choice was there to make there? Without salvation, the rest was useless. Wasn’t it? Maybe she did not fully understand the message. Paige’s visions weren’t always what they appeared to be.

“Who has to make the choice?”

Paige remained quiet and left the answer to Elodie’s own interpretation. Great. Without anything to go on, the decision would probably happen too late to make a difference. She had to gather more information. Warmth spread through her shoulders, but her body hadn’t stopped shaking. She glanced up and met Daire’s gaze. He’d wrapped a blanket of some sort around her. Thanking him was the appropriate response—if he’d been anyone other than the prince she despised.

“It’s not going to help much unless you take off the wet clothes.”

“I’m not undressing,” Elodie seethed. “It’s improper.” How could he

suggest something so ridiculous? It would make her vulnerable in ways she didn't want to imagine.

"I'm trying to help," he said exasperated. "Meet me half way here."

She didn't have to make any concessions for him. If she bent even a little bit he'd swoop in and take advantage of her perceived weakness. Showing him any compassion or understanding would tip the balance in his favor. The blanket did help though. Elodie pulled it tighter around herself. After the storm passed she'd return to the castle, and this would all be a distant memory. They shouldn't have to wait too long, and they could both head back. She'd try to lose him in the process and enter her chamber without anyone realizing she'd been gone. If she crossed the drawbridge with him it would be tantamount to agreeing to the preposterous betrothal.

Elodie glanced at Paige. She was still rocking in her chair, but almost furiously as if deep in the throes of a ferocious battle.

"Be careful," Paige looked up at Elodie and whispered, "The wrong choice will trap you in an endless nightmare."

Elodie laughed. "I'm already heading in that direction. I'm open to suggestions."

"A tiger, a dragon, and a relentless bird." Paige rocked harder in the chair. "Noble, loyal, and a pathfinder—one will betray you when you least expect it."

Her vision must be taking control of her mind. The allegory was strong in this one. The question of what it meant would take ages to decipher. The animals represented people in her life, but she failed to see how. Did those words describe one, all three, or were they designated to an individual? One word for one animal? Hell, it might be even more complicated than that.

"What does it mean?" Daire said.

Elodie rolled her eyes. "You mean you can't decode visions? Sucks to be you."

"Follow the signs and keep those you trust close." The witch froze in place. "Two different paths, both desired, but one will bring you home—the other will be your downfall."

Wait... "Am I stuck here?" Elodie asked. Would she have to put up with Daire far longer than she anticipated? That wasn't happening. She was supposed to lean on those she trusted. He was far from being in that inner circle, and it would take an act of extreme measures for that to change.

“You’re misunderstanding her,” Daire said carefully. “The danger isn’t here.”

What did he mean? Where was this danger, and did he play a part in enacting it? There were two people she trusted, Cale and Susanna. Neither one of them was near. Besides, Cale had made it clear he was bailing before things became too difficult. He wasn’t the person she’d believed him to be if he couldn’t handle the heat. Daire, unfortunately, was the only one available to her. So if he had figured out part of the riddle, she’d let him explain it to her.

“I didn’t realize you had brains inside that pretty head of yours,” she retorted. “You speak gibberish?” Elodie snapped her fingers and pointed at him. “That’s right, it is the language of your people. Why don’t you translate it for me?”

“No need to be rude,” Daire said. “I’d be happy to help. All you have to do is ask—nicely.”

That was asking way too much. “As if.” She snorted. “I’ll figure it out on my own. I don’t need you.”

Thunder rocked the walls of the cottage, shaking its foundation. That last bit of lightning had been close. The storm was moving over them, and if a bolt hit the witch’s house they might not survive it. Perhaps that was the danger in itself. It could be they were reading far too much into the vision. Sometimes the simplest answer worked the best.

Another boom crashed, causing Elodie to lose her balance for the second time that day. This time she was bound to hit the floor. Daire wrapped his strong arms around her and kept her still. How was he able to keep his feet planted on the ground when she kept losing her equilibrium? Damn male. She didn’t want to accept his help, and he kept giving it to her freely. How was she supposed to continue hating him when he was being so nice?

“Easy now.” His voice was husky. “I’ve got you. Another one could hit at any moment.”

As he spoke, the cottage shook again. The roof rattled and dust fell over them. Elodie leaned into Daire’s heat and let herself accept what he offered. It was a moment in time, and after it was over she could go back to hating him. Survival was the most important thing. After what seemed like ages, the wind died down and the cottage stopped quaking at intermediate intervals. It was time to put distance between them again. Elodie didn’t want to step back

from his welcoming heat but had to find a way to force herself to. There could never be anything good between them. There was too much distrust and pain to weed through to make anything work as it should. It was too bad because he might have been a good person if not for the influences in his life.

“Let me go,” she whispered. “I have to leave.”

The storm had passed and it was time to head back to the castle. Anything could be awaiting her there and she was almost afraid to find out. Either way, Daire couldn’t keep holding on to her. It made her feel things she didn’t want to examine too closely.

“We both must head back,” he agreed.

“The storm was a warning,” Paige said as she stood. “An omen of what is to come.”

“It was no different than any other storm,” Daire disagreed. “It doesn’t have a hidden meaning.”

“Everything is colored by the experiences of life,” Paige retorted. “Each one of us has our own story to tell and how we interpret it guides us in the direction that will determine our true fate. Different outcomes for contrasting choices.” Light streamed through a nearby window, outlining the witch’s features and highlighting her silver white hair. “We are the masters of our own fate. No one but you can alter your future. Beware those who will attempt to take the decisions away from you.” Her face glowed as she spoke, and her skin was almost translucent. Elodie stepped forward involuntarily. “Peril wraps around you like a cloak. It seeps into your skin and is becoming one with your soul. Don’t let it in or you won’t have a life to come back to.”

Elodie stood frozen as Paige’s words penetrated her brain. In some ways, she wasn’t surprised by any of it, and at the same time it was more than she could bear. Ever since her father’s death she’d had doubts about Fiona and her altruistic façade. She insisted that she wanted what was best for Elodie, and her rules were meant to protect her... None of it had truly made sense to her, and at the same time, if Elodie disappeared, Fiona would be able to continue to rule in her stead. What was she missing?

“You both must go,” Paige said insistently. “Now, before things are unchangeable.”

Elodie spun on her heels and headed out of the cottage. She didn’t bother to check on Daire. He could follow her or not. It didn’t matter to her one way or the other. The castle and the deception weaved into its walls awaited her,

and it was time to make her wishes known. No more would she be subject to the demands of Queen Fiona. Eighteen or not, it was her land, her people, and her right to rule. The time to fight was at hand and Elodie intended to win.



* * *

Elodie left her hood down. She'd grabbed her bow as she left the witch's cottage and prepared to enter the castle as the warrior she'd been training to become. The festival was well under way as they approached. It was almost as if the storm hadn't reached the castle and concentrated on the cottage. Perhaps it was more than they believed it to be. Paige had claimed it was a warning, and if so, then Elodie best pay attention. What was it attempting to caution her on?

"It looks like the royal party of Katriel arrived while I was indisposed," Daire said as he stepped beside her. "I decided to travel ahead. I'm glad I did or I might have missed our little interlude."

"You're making it sound dirty," Elodie said disdainfully. In a way, it was. "We waited out a storm and listened to the witch rave about danger lurking around every corner. Don't make something out of it that it wasn't."

Daire chuckled lightly. "Elle, I promise you I fully comprehend what happened between us." He nudged her with his shoulder. "Admit it, you like me."

She scrunched her nose up in displeasure. "You think too highly of yourself."

"Is this festival for me?"

Case in point... "It launches my weeklong birthday celebration and leads up to my coronation as queen."

He flashed her a weary look and sighed. "And you say I'm conceited," he scoffed.

Elodie's mouth dropped open. Did he just... The urge to stab him grew the more he talked. She might give in to it one day. An image of her blade sliding into his body filled her mind and she smiled with satisfaction. If only

she could give in and see if it would feel as good as the idea of it presented in her head.

“I’m not sure I like that particular smile of yours,” Daire said. “It is downright terrifying.”

“You think so?” She lifted her lips even higher. “Glad to know its working.”

Daire shook his head and sighed. “You don’t have to work so hard. I already like you, Elle.”

She didn’t want him to have any congenial feelings for her. It would be much better if he disliked her as much as she did him—or at least she tried to. He was making it harder and harder to remember why she was supposed to hate him.

“Don’t flatter yourself.” Elodie snorted. “I wouldn’t bother with you for any incentive.”

Daire sighed. “One day, you will realize you find me irresistible, and I’ll have moved on.” He held up his hand, preventing her from speaking. “Don’t argue with me on this. It’s inevitable. You *want* to hate me, but it’s clear you’re finding it impossible. There’s only so much disdain a person can swallow before they walk away and don’t look back.”

“Then we don’t have a problem,” Elodie said once he allowed her to get a word in. “Walk away now and we can pretend to be friends.”

“That’s the thing,” he said. “I’m not big on falsehoods and make-believe. Either we are or we aren’t. You can’t always have it your way.”

If he was to be believed, then she could trust him. What had Paige said? *The wrong choice will trap you in an endless nightmare.* How was she to figure out what direction to take? She had trouble putting her faith into an unknown quantity. If Cale would stay and help her... Elodie shook that idea away. It wouldn’t do any good to wish for something beyond possible. Cale made his choice, and she had to accept it. Even if it didn’t sit well with her and who she’d believed him to be. She’d been harboring some pent-up emotions where he was concerned.

Perhaps he’d done her a favor by breaking her heart before she could fall too deeply in love with him. With the right incentive, she’d have not only tumbled over willingly, but completely. Cale had crushed all of her hopes and dreams with one fatal blow. Still, her heart ached for what they could have had if he’d not been so ready to destroy it. The possibilities were endless, and

she'd never have the opportunity to discover if they could have found true love with each other. Cale had taken so much from them both with his hasty declarations and impending exit from her life.

"I'm to be queen," she said haughtily. "It's in the job description to always get what I want."

That wasn't entirely true. A good queen put her people first. Elodie intended to be the best ruler her lands ever had. Daire didn't need to know that though. He wasn't the person she would lean on and ask to help guide her through uncharted territory. He could return to his home and hope his brothers abdicated so he could rule there. Honestly, she didn't give a damn what he did as long as he left her alone.

"Well, queen-to-be," Daire mocked. "Explain this festival." He gestured toward the revelry outside the castle walls. "What is the point?"

Elodie smiled. "It is meant to be a spot of fun and competition. There is an archery contest I wanted to participate in. I wonder if it has started."

"Archery?" He raised a brow. "Let's find out, shall we?" He held out his arm to her.

She stared at him as if he'd grown another head. What made him think she'd take his arm and allow him to escort her? "Follow me," she said and headed away from him. He would either come or not; she didn't care either way. He would learn soon enough she didn't need a male to lead her.

Daire stepped beside her and kept the pace as they walked toward the archery contest. Stacks of hay were set up in a field with targets pinned to them. A bunch of villagers were gathering near to participate. Elodie approached the person in charge and said, "Is it too late to join?"

"We have not yet begun," the male said not looking up. When he did, he bowed. "I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you, princess. We always have room for you."

She frowned. "Don't bow. Today I'm part of the revelry. Add Prince Daire as a contestant as well."

The male glanced over her shoulder and met Daire's gaze. He nodded several times as he marked something on a parchment. "Yes, yes, he said. "I have you."

The organizer stepped away absentmindedly. He talked to someone else and they gestured it was time to begin. The first set of archers stepped up and pulled an arrow up to their bow, nocking it in place. Elodie was in the first

group. She held the arrow in place and kept her focus on the target. The center was in her sight. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and reminded herself to remain calm, then opened them and let the arrow fly. It hit the target, but it was slightly off center. Still a good shot, and she was proud of her first round.

“Not bad,” Daire said. “Could be better though.”

She spun on her heels and glared up at him. “You think you can beat me?”

“Without even trying,” he replied.

Elodie wanted to wipe the smugness oozing out of him and show him he wasn’t as perfect as he believed. “Care to make a wager?” It was probably a bad idea, but she couldn’t stop the words from spilling out of her mouth.

His lips tilted upward into a mocking grin. “You don’t want to do that, princess. It won’t be pretty when you lose.”

Ohhh... Elodie gritted her teeth and made herself calm down. She’d make him pay for that. “So you’re afraid. I understand.”

He winked at her. His lips tilted up into a half smile that oozed cockiness. “Very well,” Daire agreed, humor echoing in his words. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I’ll take my chances.” She rolled her eyes.

Daire moved past her to take his place. He was in the second group of archers, and they were preparing to launch their arrows. His stance was good, and he probably did have some skill. Perhaps she should do something to aid her cause. She stepped closer to him and said, “We didn’t discuss terms.”

He didn’t glance in her direction as he replied, “It’s simple. When I win, you will owe me a boon.”

“No,” she disagreed. “When I win, it’s you who will bestow upon me a gift.”

Daire kept the bow in place, his arrow nocked and ready to launch. He stared down at her, not once looking at the target, and let the arrow fly. It hit dead center, and he hadn’t even been focusing on where to send it. “You were saying?”

How the hell... That wasn’t real. He couldn’t shoot without actually looking at the target. She would not let him win so he could hold it over her head for the rest of their days. He already had an ego the size of a mountain. It was up to her to knock him down several pegs on his imaginary ladder of

supremacy.

“The contest isn’t over yet,” she said. “There are three more rounds.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Daire said with arrogance dripping from him. “I’m good at exactly one thing—well two but that’s for another day. Archery is in my blood, and when it’s over you will owe me.”

She was afraid he was right. What had she gotten herself into? What if this was the beginning of her downfall. Deciphering the witch’s clues had never been more important. The boon Daire demanded might be more than she was willing to give.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Elodie spun around and met Fiona’s gaze. Her green eyes were pure ice as she glared at Elodie. “Daire and I are becoming better acquainted. Isn’t that what you wanted?” She lifted a brow, daring her to disagree.

“Don’t put words into my mouth, girl,” Fiona said. “I promise you, they will come back to bite you. Why are you dressed like a common villager? Go inside and dress appropriately. It’s unseemly for a princess to wear trousers.”

Elodie lifted her chin defiantly. “I’d love to, but Daire and I are in the midst of a pointed battle. I can’t abandon it until one of us wins.” Even if it wasn’t her.

“I believe it’s inevitable that I win,” Daire interjected. “Don’t let me stand in the way of propriety.”

Elodie turned and faced him. She tried to tell him to shut his mouth without saying a word. Hopefully, her enraged glare got the message across. “Don’t count your winnings before all the arrows have hit their target. A Kendrick doesn’t give up until they’re forced to.”

“Consider yourself forced,” the queen said. She motioned toward some of the guard. “Escort the princess inside.”

Elodie tried to evade them but wasn’t strong enough. “I’ll make you regret this.”

The queen stared at her without any emotion. “Not as much as you already do, my dear. Keep fighting me, and I’ll show you exactly what you will receive, and I promise you this—you will rue the day you ever defied me.” Fiona unlatched Elodie’s scabbard and quiver then held it up to one of the guards. “The princess won’t be needing these. See it’s disposed of. And take her bow too.”

The knight took Elodie’s weapons away and walked off. Cale had given

those to her. They had meant so much to her. The blades had been more than a gift... They had represented her freedom and the need to overcome every one of her adversities. In her heart of hearts, they were also the one thing she had that Cale had given her. By taking them from her Fiona had effectively severed her last remaining tie to her knight. It wasn't something she'd readily thank her stepmother for.

At least there was no physical sign the gift had come from Cale. For that, she could be thankful because if Fiona realized where they'd come from she might find a way to enact some form of punishment on him. She might be disappointed in his decision, but she never wanted to see him hurt. Fiona could take them away from her and maybe in some way her stepmother believed she was doing the right thing. That didn't change anything though. It still stung to realize she had no power and it would be days before she could do anything—if Fiona actually allowed the coronation to take place.

Elodie made a silent vow of her own. The queen would fall, and she'd be the one to stomp her out of power. But first she had to lick her wounds and come back to fight another day. While she was sequestered in her tower, she'd attempt to interpret the witch's vision. The answer was there. All she needed was time and a moment of clarity to uncover it.

Advice Not Taken

Sitting alone in her chambers for the rest of the afternoon gave Elodie a lot to think about. The longer she remained without anyone to talk to, the more resolved she became. Fiona could take her weapons, but that wouldn't stop her. Once she was queen she'd banish her stepmother. What she had done, and in front of the villagers... It was inexcusable.

The door to her chambers opened. Elodie turned toward it to see who dared interrupt her solitude. Susanna walked in and shut the door behind her. "A fine mess you've managed to fall into this time, milady."

"I don't need any more lectures," Elodie said sullenly. "What are you doing here?"

Fiona didn't usually allow her visitors when she was being punished. What game was she playing now? Did she hope to lure her with a false sense of security? Elodie would be neither a fool nor a willing part of Fiona's schemes. She should have waited to reveal her skills. At least no one realized her true talent was with the short swords. Her archery was subpar in comparison.

"I'm here to help you dress for the ball," Susanna said. "I pressed the gown earlier."

Right, the ball. "I'm surprised Fiona is allowing me to attend."

"She can't very well keep you locked in your room. This celebration is for you, after all. How would she explain your absence?"

Susanna pulled the dress out of the armoire and laid it on the bed. She smoothed out the skirts, then turned toward Elodie. "You're going to look beautiful when I'm done."

Elodie's lips twitched. "You mean I'm not always beautiful?"

Susanna waved her hand. "You know what I mean."

Her maid was her biggest supporter, but she also realized Elodie didn't care for the more elegant side of being a princess. Wearing ball gowns, elaborate hair styles, and tiaras weren't what made someone a good ruler. Leather trousers and simple black tunics were far more practical and

comfortable. Anything else was unnecessary flash.

"I don't want to go," Elodie said. "Fiona gave me the perfect excuse to stay in my chambers for the evening. If I went down there, I'd have to put on a good face and pretend all is well in my world. We both know that is the furthest thing from the truth."

"You have to go," Susanna said. "Not for yourself, and not even for Fiona. This isn't the time for selfishness."

"You're not going to talk me into it," Elodie replied. "It's not selfish when I've been banned from attending."

It was ridiculous, but she couldn't shake the stubborn out of herself. She should go down to the ball. The guests would think it was odd she wasn't in attendance, and Fiona would be able to say she'd sent her maid to help her prepare for the evening. The queen would probably punish Susanna for failing to deliver her on time. She was being a selfish brat.

"That nonsense doesn't work with me." Susanna lifted her hands and rested them on her hips. She glared at Elodie and said, "If you won't go for yourself, or even to show the villagers there is nothing to worry about, at least go to see Sir Griffin one last time. Tomorrow, he will be gone, and you'll regret not seeing him off."

"I can say good bye in the morning," Elodie said. "There's no reason to put a fancy dress on and say it tonight."

She probably wouldn't bother seeking Cale out. All the words they needed to relay had been said. There was no reason to rehash it. An ache filled her whenever she thought about him. Seeing him would be a thousand times worse. Falling for him had been so easy. Finding a way to move past it would be more work than she could ever imagine. It would be akin to starting her training all over again. A novice with no skill fumbling to find balance where there was none. She was that eager pupil once again, but this time she was fighting for ownership of her own heart.

Going back to the beginning when their lives became irrevocably intertwined... She didn't relish thinking of those first days. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. As much as she wanted to forget she never could. He was an integral part of her now—interwoven in her soul in a way nothing could unravel. He'd taught her many things over the past year, but the greatest gift he'd given her was the ability to trust again. He might be leaving, but that didn't mean his lessons should be tossed aside as useless.

Cale was a warrior first and a protector second. Both parts of him were telling him to leave her. Maybe one day she'd understand that decision but for now, all she had was the pain that filled her. For that reason, She wouldn't willingly seek him out.

Why go through that heartache again? Cale had made his choice, and she wouldn't stand in his way. The ball wasn't the place to see him. Besides, he'd not be there for personal reasons. His place was with the guard. However, Prince Daire would be there, and no doubt she'd be required to dance with him. Elodie wasn't sure she was ready for another round of his charming veneer.

Susanna sighed. "You may not want to hear this, but I'm going to say it anyway. You're a stubborn idiot. Regrets are funny things. We all have some, and no matter how much we try, we can't escape them. They linger in our minds like wishes we never sent out on the wind. Why add to the list something you can prevent?" Susanna crossed over to her side and cupped her cheek in her hand. "Go to the ball and tell him how you feel. It might not go the way you hope, but at least you'll know you tried."

Did she want to take that risk? Lay her heart out and bare her soul? What if he crushed her even more than before? Would she survive that gut-wrenching pain? Crying was a useless endeavor, and she'd hate to give in to it for the second time that day. What if Susanna was right? Maybe Cale didn't realize how much she cared for him. If she opened herself up to the possibility, it might give her the one thing she needed to continue to fight her stepmother. She was alone and had no one she could trust. No, that wasn't entirely true. Susanna would stay by her side no matter what. They had a bond that even the vilest of queens could not break. But Susanna wasn't a soldier, and she couldn't fight a war.

"You're right," Elodie agreed. "I should go to the ball."

She could at least speak to Cale and gauge his reactions. He might be more receptive than she realized. Elodie had a decision to make, but she wouldn't make one until she had all the information. Fools rushed in and let their heart rule their judgment. Once she was at the ball, she'd study everyone and see if there was any one she could rely on. There was also Abram to consider. He'd signed that betrothal agreement and kept it from her. She wanted to talk to him and figure out why he'd done it. Had the queen forced his hand, or had he truly believed he'd done the right thing for her.

Susanna smiled and said, "I'm glad you're able to see reason. Now, let's make sure you're a vision no one will be able to forget."

Elodie fully intended to give them something to remember her by. They'd be thinking about her for a very long time. When the night was over, she'd put her mark on the world. Fiona would realize that she may be the current queen, but her days were numbered. In less than a week, she'd be a distant memory. Her lips tilted upward slowly as she plotted in her mind. Maybe she wouldn't be able to do what she wanted at the ball, but she would be able to set the wheels in motion.

"The flowers I picked earlier," Elodie said. "Are they still usable?"

They'd been her excuse for being outside the castle walls as the princess. She had liked them when she'd picked them, but wasn't sure until that moment if she'd actually use them. Their wildness suited her needs. They had beautiful white petals with a hit of blue around the center.

"There are a few that can be used," Susanna said. "What did you have in mind?"

"Let's forego the tiara tonight," Elodie said. "Make me a crown as wild as I am."

Susanna nodded and said, "Aye, I can do that. Now sit so I can do something with this mop of hair you have."

Elodie did as her maid demanded. She brushed her hair until it fell down her back in waves, then separated it into sections. Susanna plaited each section and twisted them together in an elaborate coiffure. Tiny tendrils were left to dangle over her high cheekbones like spun gold. "There," Susanna said as she admired her handiwork. "The crown will wait until after we have you dressed. It will take me a minute to weave the flowers together."

"No need to rush," Elodie said. "They're not about to kick me out if I'm a few minutes late. After all, I'm the honored guest—the princess is never late."

Susanna rolled her eyes and picked up her aquamarine gown, holding it out for Elodie. "Aye," she said sarcastically. "Because everyone is waiting on bated breath for you to appear." After she stepped into it, Susanna pulled it up and Elodie slid her arms through the butterfly sleeves. The skirt billowed out and had a sweeping train. Susanna laced her up and tied the ribbons at the back. "You're a vision," Susanna said. "Now sit so I can dress your hair with these flowers."

Susanna brushed a lock of her hair back and picked up the flower. The lock escaped once again and she blew it out of her way as she stared at the blooms. The delicate blossoms shimmered in the candlelight as she worked with them, bending them to her will. Elodie became mesmerized by her skill and stared as she wound them together into a crown that accented her hair. Susanna dressed, then pinned the masterpiece to the top of her head.

Elodie was finally ready to face the guests, and more importantly, her stepmother. The regal princess side of her would walk in and steal their hearts away. The warrior half wanted to sharpen her blades for the war to come. When the time was right, she'd reveal all.

"Thank you," Elodie said. "I wouldn't have even thought of going if you hadn't talked me into it. You're a good friend."

How sad was it that her one true friend was a servant?

"Think nothing of it," Susanna said. "Now go and have fun. Find that handsome knight and make some memories you'll look back on when you're old and gray."

Elodie laughed and hugged her. "I'm making no promises."

The night was young, and anything could happen. Perhaps it would be better than she'd originally believed.



* * *

Elodie headed toward the ballroom and stopped at the top of the stairs. She stared down at the revelry and admired all the pretty dresses and handsome men. They really were something to behold. The decorations enhanced the beauty of the room, and the candlelit chandeliers gave it a soft glow. No one had yet noticed she was at the edge of the stairs about to descend. She searched for the one person she hoped to talk to but couldn't find him. Where was Cale? He should be stationed along the wall, watching the guests. As a knight in the royal guard, it was his job to protect not only the family, but any guests they had at the castle.

Rapidly, she scanned the room and the edges where all the guards were in

position. He hadn't been at the door when she entered, and he was nowhere she'd expect to find him. Had he left already? Her heart thudded in her chest, and she realized she'd pinned a lot of hopes on actually seeing him again. What a fool she'd been, and she'd pretended for a moment she was smarter than the world at large. She wasn't any brighter than any woman in the room. When it came to matters of the heart, any one was susceptible to hope and dreams. In that regard, Elodie wasn't any different.

"They look like they're having fun," a male said.

She turned to find Daire at her side. His golden locks had been slicked back and tied with a dark blue band emphasizing his gorgeous face. She'd not seen him dressed in formal wear, and a part of her wished she hadn't now. Black breeches hugged his thighs. The waistcoat and matching jacket highlighted his heavily muscled chest. Elodie steeled herself for the onslaught of his charm and prepared to be as churlish as possible. Otherwise, she might fall victim to it, and there would be no turning back afterward.

She kept a mask of boredom over her features and glanced over him as if she wasn't letting her preconceived notions rule her. Did he think he was too good to be on time? When she boasted of a princess never being late earlier, she'd been joking. Bad manners and entitlement appeared to dictate Daire's actions. Admittedly, if she'd cared, she would have been on time. Her stepmother had ticked her off, so she'd deliberately taken her time. Rationally, she realized she was being hard on him because of what he represented, but she couldn't stop herself from reacting adversely toward him. She questioned every one of his motives and wouldn't apologize for it. Had he been waiting for her so he could pounce?

What was it about him she found so distrusting? Other than the fact he was a direct relation to her stepmother... He was too handsome, way too charming, and his skill with the bow had been enviable. She hated to admit it, but he almost appeared—perfect. Any other woman probably would be grateful to be betrothed to him. Elodie wasn't any woman though. She was the royal princess of Zelnon and the queen in waiting. The male she married had to be trustworthy, loyal, and beyond reproach. Prince Daire left her with too many doubts to think he was the right guy to spend her life with. Matters of the heart aside, she couldn't risk her land or her people.

"I suppose they do," she reluctantly agreed. Cale wasn't there, and she had no reason to expect him to be. Now she'd be stuck entertaining Daire for

the night. "That is what a ball is designed for, is it not?" She raised a brow.

Daire shrugged. "More goes on at balls than dancing."

"Such as?" She glanced up at him. What did he mean by that remark? She'd never done anything other than dance and partake in small talk at the balls she attended. What did he do at them that was so different?

"Sometimes," he said. "If you're lucky enough, you float, and if the gods are smiling down at you, a woman glances at you with a glint in her eyes. It makes you feel you're capable of defeating those same powerful beings."

Elodie repressed a grin. He was attempting to charm her again. She would not give him the satisfaction of realizing it was working. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't find it in herself to dislike him. That didn't mean she trusted him. There was a huge gap between like and trust. He'd have to do a lot for her to bestow that honor on his shoulders. So far, she hadn't seen anything that gave her the impression he was worth giving either.

"I'm sure if you try hard enough there is a woman down there willing to do that for you." She kept herself poised and in control. "Don't let me keep you from finding her. I'm capable of entertaining myself."

He held his hand over his chest and said, "But what kind of future husband would I be if I abandoned my betrothed for another woman? Not one worth keeping."

"Considering I don't intend to honor that agreement, you have my blessing to do as you wish," she encouraged him. "We're never getting married."

Daire's lips twitched. "Haven't you ever heard the saying, 'never say never?'"

What was his point? "I'll take my chances."

Elodie walked down the stairs and continued to search for Cale. He had to be there. She didn't want to admit defeat yet. Susanna was right, and it irritated her to admit that. Cale held a piece of her heart, and she wanted to have a moment with him to tell him that. Life was about taking risks, and she shouldn't shy away from him now. When he was gone, it would be too late, and she may never have the opportunity again. She scanned the room several times, her heart thundering in her chest. Where was he? What if he'd already left? Damn it. She was an idiot. Her stomach churned as anguish settle deep inside of it.

"Who are you looking for?" Daire asked as he stepped beside her.

“Maybe I can help you find them.”

“No one,” she said dismissively.

She hadn’t realized he was still dogging her heels. He had to give up at some point. At least she hoped so. Unfortunately, he wasn’t showing any signs of leaving her alone. If she admitted she was searching for Cale, it would open her up to all kinds of questions. None of which she wanted to answer. Technically, Daire was her betrothed even if she didn’t have any intention of honoring the contract. It just didn’t feel right to admit to Daire that she wanted to find her knight.

“Then why do you keep scanning the room?”

Elodie gritted her teeth. Did he have to be so observant? There wasn’t a chance in hell she’d admit she’d been looking for Cale. How would she explain that? Daire would probably laugh at her, and she wasn’t about to give him ammunition to use against her.

“I’m observing the guests and making sure they are indeed enjoying themselves, as you’ve already mentioned. Plus, I wanted to see who accepted the invitations. Queen Fiona didn’t confer with me on the guest list.” She really had no idea who’d been invited or why. Most of them were nobles in the kingdom, but she wasn’t friendly with any of them. Not that they were enemies, but she didn’t have a personal relationship with a single person in the room. She’d never felt more alone in her life. Surrounded by hundreds of people, she had no one she could lean on. Was this a sign of how her life would be for the rest of her life? Would she always be on the outside looking in?

“Ah, Elodie dear,” a male said. “I’m glad to see you’ve finally arrived.”

She turned at met Abram’s gaze. The other person she wanted to talk to that evening. Good, maybe she could ask him if he’d really approved of the betrothal. It would’ve been easier if Daire wasn’t by her side, but she wouldn’t let that prevent her from interrogating her guardian.

“Are you?” She lifted a brow.

“What?” he said, confusion filling his gaze.

“Glad I’m here?”

“Don’t give the old man a hard time,” Daire chastised her.

How dare he? Why was she surprised? Of course, Daire would stick up for Abram. He probably saw him as an ally. Well, that was too damn bad. She wasn’t going to be held back by anyone.

“Elodie doesn’t mean to be rude,” Abram said. “She’s not used to having so many people in the castle. It’s good to see the two of you getting along so well. It’s nice when two young people can find accord and a reason to hold a relationship together.”

“Are you senile?” Elodie asked. It was the only explanation. “Prince Daire and I do not get along. We never have.”

“I wouldn’t go that far...” Daire frowned. “We’ve barely had an argument since I arrived.”

Elodie spun on her heels and faced him. “You’re not even supposed to be here yet. Queen Fiona said you were arriving tomorrow.”

He shrugged. “We made good time. I’m not going to make excuses for being punctual.”

Abram glanced from Elodie to Daire. He crinkled his brows together and opened his mouth and closed it several times. Elodie wasn’t sure what was going on in his head, but it was clear he was at a loss for words. She couldn’t really blame him for that. Daire made her speechless on a regular basis.

“I’m going to let you two work this out on your own,” Abram said and walked away.

Elodie’s cheeks heated and she clenched her fists. The need to hit something, preferably Daire, was growing rapidly inside of her. His actions drove her to violence. If they actually married, he might not survive to see what being a king looked like.

“Great.” She turned and faced Daire. “You chased him away.”

Daire shook his head several times and closed his eyes. “Elle, sometimes I wonder if you realize what a harpy you are.”

Jerk. His opinion of her shouldn’t bother her, but it did. It was perfectly acceptable to dislike him and tell him often. To openly berate her though... Game on. He didn’t realize what he unleashed by opening his mouth to criticize her.

“Insults will get you everywhere,” she smirked. “Would you like to share a few? Now that sounds like jolly fun.”

“I have a better idea,” he said and lifted her hand into his. “I believe this dance is mine.”

Warmth spread through her at his touch, and she didn’t appreciate how it made her feel. She enjoyed it a little too much. She yanked her hand out of his. He couldn’t realize he affected her in any way. It wouldn’t help her cause

to dissolve their betrothal. "You presume too much."

Dancing with him was the last thing she wanted to do. She spun on her heels and walked right into a solid chest. Glancing up, she met Cale's dark blue eyes. The muscles in his cheeks were clenched and his lips were a flat line. He wasn't dressed as a knight, and instead was wearing formal evening wear. His dark jacket made him even more devastating to behold. That was why she'd been unable to find him. Oh, how handsome he was... Her heart leapt inside of her as she met his gaze. She swallowed a lump that was forming in her throat. Tiny sensations danced across her skin as she teetered on the edge of giddiness.

"Dance with me," he said, holding his hand out to her. It was almost as bad as Daire's demand. Cale's was at least a borderline question. Elodie didn't have to think twice. She placed her gloved hand into his and allowed him to lead her to the floor.

"I thought you'd left," she said, lost in his gorgeous face. It had been mere hours and she'd missed him. How was she going to survive never seeing him again?

"Not until morning," he replied, softly locking his gaze with hers for a moment. It was magical for the short time it lasted. When he glanced away, it left her cold. The words that followed only added to the chill seeping through her. "I told you earlier. There was no reason to leave before then."

Elodie hadn't realized Cale could dance. She should have. He was skilled at everything else, so why would he have failed to learn something so basic as dancing. He twirled her around the floor, and it was almost like she floated. Daire's earlier statement came to the front of her mind. She didn't like having him there interrupting her time with Cale. Elodie looked up at him and did her best to etch his face in her memory. After this night, she might not ever see him again. If this was to be their final goodbye, she wanted to make sure it stayed with her forever. It hurt, but one day down the road she'd appreciate the effort she made now.

"I wish things could be different," Cale whispered. It was so low she almost didn't catch what he said. "If you ever..." He shook his head, dismissing his words away. "Just be careful," he told her. "Trust no one."

If he was so worried about her, why was he leaving? What did he know that she didn't? "Don't go," she pleaded. "How am I to navigate the treacherous path I'm on if I have no one I can depend on?"

Cale stared down at her and she caught a small glimpse of his pain before he shoved it away and replaced it with the blank mask he wore so often. He didn't show this side of him often. He had feelings, but he didn't let them out for anyone but her. Her brave, stoic knight... He couldn't really be leaving her. She refused to believe it.

The dance ended too soon, and Cale was leading her off the floor, not looking at her again. He stopped in front of the queen and bowed. Fiona smiled and said, "Well done, Sir Griffin."

Elodie glanced at him and then at Fiona. Was he tasked with delivering her to Fiona's side? Was that why he'd danced with her? That couldn't be right? Cale wouldn't betray her... No, he wouldn't do that to her. He, more than anyone, realized how much she despised her stepmother. Susanna had told her to tell him how she felt. She couldn't tell him what she herself didn't know anymore? How could she have been so wrong about him? The deception he'd weaved stabbed through her heart. It made her question the world at large. How was she supposed to ascertain what was the truth?

Everything had changed in an instant, and Elodie didn't know where to turn. So she didn't say anything at all. Susanna had meant well but some advice was best not taken, and whatever feelings she had for Cale were hers to keep. She couldn't very well share something that was tainted and may no longer true. Spinning on her heels, she took slow even strides out of the ballroom. Not once did she look back. There was nothing there for her anymore.

A Curse Flies

Elodie leaned against the wall and wrapped her arms around her waist. Her chest burned as she gasped for air—her emotions overwhelming her. The dress had to go. The tight lacing was cutting into her, making it even harder for her to breathe. She was almost to her chamber. If she had to, she would cut the damn thing off. What did she need it for anyway? As far as she was concerned, there would be no more balls for her. Dresses had always felt cumbersome and restricting.

Slowly, she made her way through the hallway leading up to the tower her chamber was located in. She had to stop several times, attempting to breathe. Finally, she found her room and pushed the door open, then stumbled inside. Candles remained lit on the wall sconces, and a fire had been stoked to keep the night chill out of the room. Susanna, however, wasn't anywhere to be found. Elodie had hoped her maid would still be around to help her remove her gown. She would have to cut the laces to remove it.

She dropped to the floor by her bed and reached underneath. Skimming her hand over the cold surface, she searched for the one thing guaranteed to bring her relief. Her hand brushed over a rough wool blanket. She latched onto it and yanked out. Quickly, she unfolded it and relief flooded her at the sight. Her stepmother hadn't taken every weapon from her. The short swords she practiced with would be missed, but the ones laying before her had more meaning. They had been her mother's blades. Her father had given them to her on her sixteenth birthday before his death. Elodie pulled one of the blades out of the fine leather scabbard and held it before her. The polished steel gleamed in the candlelight, and flecks of light from the jeweled tip danced on the ceiling. Without giving it a second thought she reached behind her and slid it through the laces of her gown. It glided easily through and sliced them away. Sweet precious air filled her lungs as she was finally able to breathe.

"Oh, dear," Susanna said as she entered the room. "What have you done to your lovely dress."

Elodie looked down and then said, "Improved it immensely."

“What am I to do with you?” Susanna sighed. “Why are you here? What happened to going to the ball and talking with Sir Griffin?”

She had no desire to explain herself to Susanna. Describing the betrayal that filled her heart would be too much. The way Fiona had looked at Cale... It spoke volumes to the lengths her stepmother would go to control her. And Cale, well, it was clear she'd misjudged him. He was a better liar than she could ever have imagined. He didn't care about her, and she was unwise to ever believe he did. At least she hadn't foolishly laid her heart before him in the hope he had tender feelings for her.

“The ball was a raging success.” And it was if you considered the fact it had opened her eyes to those around her. Fiona had always been clear, but the rest had hidden their treachery well. “I danced, and yes, talked to the noble knight.”

What she didn't say was that the conversation had been brief and his actions spoke far louder than any words he could have uttered. There would be no sharing of her heart's desire with him. Those feelings were best left dead and forgotten. They were as useless as fighting for her right to decide her own fate. As long as she remained in the castle she'd be constantly clawing for even the smallest liberties. If she stayed, she'd never know peace or happiness. Fiona would always find a way to usurp her and, in the end, retain control of the kingdom.

“And?” Susanna lifted a brow.

Elodie blinked several times. What had they been discussing? Oh, that's right, the knight who stole her heart and then proceeded to crush it out of existence. What did Susanna expect her to say? That she'd spilled all and he reciprocated her feelings? Clearly, they were both fools for thinking thusly.

“There's nothing to say,” Elodie said flatly. “I have no future with him or anyone.”

She would not marry Daire. As far as Elodie was concerned, she'd never willingly tie herself to another male. The prince may have changed, but she wasn't prepared to take a chance with him. Celebrations were scheduled for each day, and it should have been a glorious time for her. She was to be queen, and with her rule she'd finally have control of her life.

There was nothing to revel in. If she stayed, what would she gain? A stepmother who'd never relinquish control and a husband whose charm blinded those around them. Perhaps it would be best if she disappeared for a

little while. She could return at the end, stronger and without any impediments to her rule.

Susanna placed a hand on her shoulder. Elodie glanced up and met her gaze. Pain must have been pouring off Elodie in waves because Susanna's next words echoed with remorse. "I'm sorry," she said. "I thought he..."

"So did I," Elodie said. "It doesn't matter." None of it did. It was time to let all of that go and focus on what she wanted out of life. She thought she'd wanted to rule her kingdom, but perhaps that was too much to ask. Maybe Fiona would do a better job. She shook her head. Where had that thought come from? "Help me out of this dress and get me a set of my training clothes."

Susanna nodded. Elodie rose, letting the dress fall down in to a pool of blue silk at her feet. She kicked it away and stood before Susanna in her shift. Her maid picked up the dress and hung it up in the armoire. "I may be able to repair the laces for you to wear it another day," she said.

"I will never wear that gown again. You may as well burn it." Elodie's gaze turned to the fire. Perhaps she'd toss it into the flames herself once Susanna left.

"I'll do no such thing and neither will you. Don't think I missed how you stared at the fire." She wagged her finger at Elodie, chastising her. "I'll return in a few moments with the garments you asked for. Don't do anything stupid before I return."

Elodie sat on her bed and waited. She was rather surprised Susanna didn't argue with her. Her maid had to realize why she wanted her training clothes. She reached down and picked up her mother's blades. The desire to destroy something ran through her blood. It was too bad she didn't have Cale to train with anymore. A good sparring might cool the rage burning inside of her. She couldn't stay in the castle another night under Fiona's rule. She'd find someplace else to go until the day of her birthday. Then would she return and face her responsibilities.

"Here you go," Susanna said and handed her the leather trousers and black tunic. "I'm sure you're planning something foolish and I should stop you, but you have always followed your own path. Promise me you'll at least try to be careful."

That was the last thing she wanted to do. Promises were too easily broken anyway. What did it matter if she said the words and later betrayed them?

Elodie bit her lip and contemplated her actions. She wouldn't be any better than Cale if she blatantly made a promise she didn't intend to keep. It would be better to deflect and make none. Elodie's conscience wouldn't allow her to deceive Susanna.

She grabbed the clothes from her maid and dressed quickly. "I have to leave." Her boots sat by the dressing table. Elodie crossed over and slipped them on, then bent over to tie them snugly on her feet.

"I figured as much," she said gravely, her face devoid of emotion. "Whatever transpired between you and your knight must not have been good."

Nothing, and yet so much, had happened in the short time she'd been with Cale. One dance followed by betrayal had been enough. For a moment, it had been everything she could have hoped for—until it wasn't.

"I refuse to discuss it," Elodie said as she slid her scabbard on. "He'll be gone by morning, and after that no longer an issue. He made his choice, and it wasn't me." That still burned to admit. "Dwelling on something I can't change is a useless endeavor." Her locket dangled against her cool skin. It reminded her what was important—her parents, her people, and defeating Fiona once and for all. She would return and honor her commitments. But until that time came, she'd have to figure out a few things first. Her emotions were too wrapped up in the things she'd lost, and it weighed heavily on her heart.

Susanna wrapped her arms around Elodie's waist and hugged her tight. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Elodie said, returning the hug. "You're the one person I can count on. If not for you, I'd have given up long ago. Now I must go."

Elodie unwrapped her arms and walked away from Susanna. She pulled up her hood to cover her features and sneaked out. No one stopped her or paid her any mind. Most of the inhabitants of the castle were bustling around to handle the needs of the ball. It made it much easier to slip out and not look back.



* * *

“I thought you might do this,” a male voice boomed behind her.

Elodie didn't want to stop and deal with him. She wanted to leave all of her worries behind, and he was at the top of that particular list. “Go away, Daire.”

“I can't let you leave,” he said fiercely.

“Try and stop me.” She seethed. “I won't hold back like I did before.”

“Neither will I.” His voice etched with somber notes.

She turned to glare at him. The moonlight gave his handsome features a soft glow. In the sunlight, he'd sparkled with charm, but in the moonlight, he had an ethereal appeal. In any setting, Daire was devastating to behold, and she ached to look at him. Elodie focused on something other than his gorgeous face. Her gaze landed on a broach pinned to the bands of his quiver. A giant dragon was depicted on it with ruby fire extending outward. She hadn't noticed that earlier, or maybe she'd been too distracted by his male beauty. He'd changed out of his evening clothes and now wore a simple dark tunic and pantaloons. How much had he seen at the ball? She hadn't bothered to look around her after her dance with Cale. Daire had the wherewithal to realize she'd been planning something and reacted in kind. His keen observation skills would be her undoing if she allowed them. She had to stop reacting to everything and instead plan. Maybe then she'd be able to gain the upper hand.

“Did you plan on hunting?” she asked. “Why else would you grab your bow and quiver?”

“When you left the ball, I thought you might run,” he said flippantly. The following smile was so cocksure Elodie wanted to wipe it off his face with her fist. “It pays to always be prepared. Where are you off to, princess?”

“Anywhere you are not,” she shot out. “Go back to the castle, Daire. Better yet, go back to your own kingdom. I don't need or want you here.”

Would she ever be free of him? He kept turning up like a bad omen about to strike when she least expected it. What did he care if she decided to go traipsing in the woods in the middle of the night? Did he actually want to marry her? She didn't believe it for a second. They barely knew each other, and what little there was... She shook her head. People changed all the time, and perhaps he'd grown out of his bullish tendencies. The last time she'd

seen him, he had been a mere boy. That didn't mean she had any desire to marry him. She had plans for her life, and not one of them included him.

"Wherever you go," he ground out. "I go with you. Accept it or not, I don't really care, but I will be next to you every step of the way."

Damn it all. If he didn't leave, it wouldn't look good. The ramifications of both of them disappearing would be disastrous. She took a deep breath and tried to calm her raging emotions. It was hard to think with her heartbeats thundering in her ears. Elodie clenched her hands at her side. She would not pull out one of her blades and gut him. There had to be a less murderous way to get him to back off and leave her the hell alone. She stared up at the night sky and sought a solution. Perhaps the gods would take mercy on her and offer her one. The twinkling stars spread across the dark canvas offered no such wisdom. She was on her own. Something she should be used to by this point. Either she disposed of him by some harmful means or she sucked it up and let him come along. She chose to ignore him and spun on her heels to head into the forest. The sounds of his feet hitting the soft ground told her he indeed followed her. *Thump, squish, crack* echoed through the woods. Each step brought a new sound to fill the silence.

They continued the same way for several heartbeats until Elodie could take it no more. "I really wish you would go." She really didn't want to be tied to him for the rest of her life. If he stayed by her side, there might be no way of undoing the betrothal. They'd be good and truly stuck with each other. She didn't really want to kill him. As much as he irritated her, he hadn't been all bad to deal with.

"I really wish you had more sense than to go off halfcocked in the middle of the night. Don't you enjoy your warm comfortable bed?" Daire asked.

There were merits to his question. Her bed was a little slice of heaven on any given day. If only it didn't come with Fiona and all that entailed. No doubt she'd regret leaving behind certain creature comforts when the cold night began to seep into her, but at the moment, she couldn't find any reason to care. Her blood still ran hot, and she had too much energy to burn.

"Some things are more important than the luxuries afforded behind the castle walls."

"Such as?"

One day she'd give in to the urge to stab him. "Why don't you tell me what you stand to gain by following me," she deflected. The edge of the

forest drew near, and the field she often trained in with Cale came into view. The roar of the river reverberated in the distance.

“Nothing but misery.” They stepped into the open field, and the moon brightened their path. He stopped and turned his ear to listen behind him. “Someone is following us.”

She’d been so caught up in his presence, she’d not thought to consider someone else might come after her. Her carelessness might cost them too much. Who else had noticed her leaving the castle? Elodie strode to Daire’s side and waited to see who emerged from the trees after them.

The last person she expected broke through and stopped abruptly when he noticed them staring in his direction. The very knight who betrayed everything Elodie held dear, Sir Cale Griffin. The moonlight danced across his dark hair and highlighted his high cheekbones. She brought her hand up to her chest and rubbed the ache burning inside. A part of her would always carry the remnants of her feelings for him. If she could erase him from her heart and mind, she’d have already done so. She couldn’t make out his expression. What must he be thinking? More importantly, why was he following them?

“What are you doing here,” Cale demanded.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Elodie retorted. “Why are you following us.”

Cale’s gaze darted between Elodie and Daire. “I’m doing no such thing.”

Somehow, Elodie doubted it. She lowered her hood and took several steps in his direction. When she stood directly in front of him, she glanced up into his eyes. Pain reflected back before he blinked it away. His mouth was drawn taught and crinkles formed on his forehead. What did he have to worry about?

“I’d like to believe you, but I refuse to be that stupid ever again,” Elodie retorted.

“On the contrary,” Daire drawled. “We are out in the middle of the night. It’s clear you’re missing the capabilities of determining exactly what is irrational and unwise.”

Cale’s gaze leapt toward Daire. His face carried its usual blank expression as he said, “I hate to agree with him, but he has a point. You shouldn’t be out here alone.”

Elodie laughed. Who had she pissed off to be stuck with two men who

thought they could dictate to her. She was the master of her own fate. Raising a brow, she said, "I'm not exactly alone, am I?"

"Not because of any rational decision you've made." Daire snorted. "You fully intended to traipse around the woods at night on your own. If I hadn't followed you, where would you be?"

"Much farther along, I expect," she countered. "You two idiots are holding me back." Something was starting to itch on her head. She reached up and felt the flowers still pinned in place. Why hadn't she thought to remove the damn things before she left. Susanna had them pinned tight in her hair and she couldn't locate the pins to remove it.

"What are you doing now?" Cale asked stepping forward. His eyes rested on the top of her head. "What possessed you to put flowers in your hair?"

"Shut up," Elodie shrieked. "No more lectures."

She yanked on the flowers but they weren't budging. It was almost as if they had somehow fused to her. Her breathing was becoming ragged again as she tried to force air down her lungs. What was wrong with her?

"I think she's trying to remove them now," Daire said blandly. "Perhaps we should help her."

The moon seemed to glow even brighter than before. It enveloped her in its radiance. Her skin heated and she clawed at the flowers. What were they doing to her and why now?

"Something isn't right," Cale said. He studied Elodie. "Where did you get those flowers?"

Elodie blinked several times. Her mouth wasn't working and her tongue felt huge and numb. She shook her head and brought her hands up to her throat. Was she dying?

Cale looked at Dare and demanded, "Help me take the flowers off."

Both men yanked on the flowers. Blue and white petals floated over top of them like raindrops falling from the sky. A bright powder formed from them, sprinkling the dust over their skin. All three of them sneezed at once. Elodie's eyelids began to droop slowly. Sleep had never sounded so glorious in her life. Daire's mention of a warm comfortable bed wouldn't leave her mind. Yes, she whispered inside her mind. *I want to go there.*

"Don't give into it, Elle," Cale demanded. "It will sweep you away forever."

But it seems so heavenly... She wanted to say it, but words were beyond

her. Elodie blinked several times. Both men were becoming more and more difficult to focus on.

“We’re too late,” Daire said. “It’s taken over. All we can do is follow her through.”

“Yes,” Cale acknowledged. “Stop fighting the pull.”

Elodie couldn’t agree more. She closed her eyes and fell. Her body floated around her, and warmth spread through all her limbs. This was what heaven was. Why hadn’t she found it sooner? There were no worries, and for once she was completely at peace.

Then it all came to a screeching halt and the true nightmare began. Pain crawled over her and held her immobile. The world turned black and the warmth turned into a flame that scorched her skin. Daire was right—something she hated to admit. When it came to making imprudent mistakes, she was the queen of fools.

Dreamscape

Elodie opened her eyes and blinked several times. Bright light screamed through every one of her senses. It echoed across all of her nerve ending and snapped through her mind. Closing her eyes did nothing to stop the agony from spreading through and taking over each part of her. Light was not supposed to carry sound, and it certainly wasn't supposed to leave her writhing in unspeakable amounts of pain.

She brought her hands up to her ears and tried to block it out, but nothing worked. Giving up seemed like the best solution, but even that somehow seemed wrong. Every decision she made was both erroneous and misguided. No matter what she did, she couldn't win, and now she was paying for all those mistakes. If something didn't ease her burgeoning misery, she'd expire from the excruciating torment being thrust upon her.

A cool breeze brushed over her already distressed skin. Elodie curled into a ball and gave into the need to cry. Tears slipped from her eyes and drenched her cheeks. A chill spread through her and put out the fire blazing inside. Slowly, she opened her eyes and tried to focus on the world around her. The glow had dulled to a glistening ray of lustrous light. Her eyes adjusted enough to appreciate the beauty of her surroundings.

She laid near a large tree that was so tall it almost touched the sky. Its branches spread far and wide, shading her from some of the suns most penetrating rays. Was it the reason she could now focus on the world around her without pain? She couldn't be certain because when she'd first opened her eyes, blinding white nothingness had greeted her. Elodie sat up and stared at the massive tree. It didn't have leaves like normal trees. Each branch had silver and white flowers that blew dust around her with each gust of wind. It was almost like snowfall on a hot summer day.

"All better now?" the leaves whistled in the wind.

She had to be hearing things. Since when did trees talk? Where was she, and how did she end up there? Elodie searched her mind, trying to make sense of what had happened to her. What had she been doing? She jolted to

her feet and glanced around her. The last thing she recalled was trying to remove the flowers from her hair. They'd latched onto her and were trying to fuse into her scalp. They weren't the same flowers she'd picked earlier in the day. Those flowers had been harmless wildflowers. The ones Susanna had made her crown with had been infused with magic. Had she believed the wrong person betrayed her? Was Cale innocent of any wrong doing? No, she couldn't believe her only friend had worked against her. Someone else must have replaced the flowers. Susanna was probably an unwitting accomplice until Elodie found out; otherwise, she wouldn't doubt her.

"Who's there?" she asked. It felt stupid talking to a tree because, as far as she could tell, there wasn't another soul around except her. Magic existed and it was time she stopped pretending it didn't. The White Witch's visions came from somewhere. The gods had power, and magic was an extension of it. Some people were able to harness it and use it for many reasons. Someone had found a way to make Elodie disappear. She wasn't entirely sure where she was, but she was certain of one thing. Zelnor didn't have any trees with white and silver flowers. Home was very far away, and exactly how far was indeterminate.

"Don't be afraid, child," the tree's voice filled her mind. It wasn't talking exactly. Its voice was touching her mind in some way.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"This is the beginning and the end," it said. *"No place, and every place altogether."*

"Can you be more specific," she asked frustrated.

Wind blew around, swirling upward and pushing her toward to the branches. The dark brown trunk beckoned her. Something wasn't quite right about this tree. What did it want from her? *"Come closer,"* the voice whistled through her mind.

Her feet started to move on their own accord as if she were caught in a magnetic field. Her body was being pulled toward its polar opposite, and she was helpless to stop it. "Let me go," she managed to grit out. Whatever the tree wanted from her couldn't be good. Its leaves were a pot of honey meant to entice and trap her forever.

"I mean you no harm," it insisted. *"Want to help you..."*

"I don't believe you," Elodie said. Distrust had become a comfortable part of her soul, and nothing would convince her the tree was harmless.

Tendrils of vines descended from the top of the tree, writhing toward her. Elodie reacted on instinct, reaching behind her back and pulling her two short swords out. When one vine started to wrap around her arm she slashed it with the opposite hand's blade. The tree hissed in pain and screamed in her head. *"You'll pay."* More vines came rushing down toward her. Elodie flipped and danced around them, slicing with each movement. She finally twisted and turned enough to be out of reach. After one final flip, she was out of the tree's magnetic pull. Her breathing was ragged, but she'd never felt so exhilarated in her life.

The tree might not be able to touch her, but it could still speak to her. *"You'll not escape us, princess."*

"Who are you, and why are you trying to kill me?"

The magic of the tree was strong, and someone was harnessing its power. Her foe was unknown, and she couldn't think of anyone with enough magical ability to utilize it, let alone control it enough to attempt to kill her. What had the White Witch warned her about? That if she wasn't careful, she'd fall into an endless nightmare? Was she at the edge of that prophecy, and had she been instrumental in her own downfall? Why hadn't she taken time to decipher it more? Too many distractions and not enough brain power to overcome them all. Cale and Daire were at the top of that list too. If not for them following her, maybe she'd have had time to ponder things more. Instead, she'd argued with them and fallen into a trap. Between the two males and her stepmother she hadn't stood a chance.

"You're weak, and the pathetic never survive long." It hissed.

She wanted to scream at it that she was strong and she would prevail, but held her tongue. The tree was baiting her, and if she wanted to survive, she had to keep her wits about her. Whoever was behind this would reveal themselves in time. Betrayal seemed to be lurking around every corner, and she wasn't sure who to trust anymore. Cale had told her to trust no one, and perhaps she should take that advice to heart. In the meantime, she'd have to focus on surviving and finding her way home.

"Believe what you want. I'm comfortable with my own truth. Are you?"

A slow smile formed on her face as she stared at the tree. It had given her the false impression it was protecting her. Now that she was away from its influence, it was clear it had been her tormenter from the start. The sky was clear and the sun was rising in the sky. Whatever bright light had been

surrounding her before hadn't come from it. The tree had leaked pain into her mind and created illusions to control her. What would it have done if she'd not been able to pull away from it in time? Would she be dead or in endless torment, far greater than she'd already suffered? She didn't want to stick around long enough to find out. The tree probably wouldn't answer her questions either honestly or willingly. It was doing the bidding of its evil master.

"Truth is as truth does," the tree wailed. *"A talented deceiver has the ability to warp reality. What you believe may not be as concrete as you think."*

Arrogant laughter floated through her mind. What did the egotistical tree mean by that statement? She accepted magic was real, and as far as she could tell, she had a good grasp on reality. Had someone messed with it and she hadn't noticed? She needed more answers and wasn't sure if the tree would be helpful in gaining them or not.

"How was reality misrepresented?"

"Sleep leads to dreams, dreams to nightmares, and in turn, a landscape of no return."

Elodie closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Reality itself hadn't changed. In the real world, time went on as it normally did. Everyone would go about their day as if it was the same as before. But for Elodie, each day would bring a new surprise, a new challenge, and if she wasn't careful, it could lead to her death. This wasn't merely a world that was distorted—the world itself was perverted and designed to lead her to her own demise.

"Is there a way out?" She had to ask even though she wasn't entirely certain the tree would give her any answers. "Will I ever go home?"

"This is your new home," the tree said gleefully. *"How long until you're no longer here but everywhere?"*

That implied she wouldn't die but become infused into the world like the tiny dust particles it had sprinkled on her when she woke. She didn't want to break up into thousands of pieces. Not only did that sound painful, but permeant.

"I want to go to my old home. It's friendlier in its own way." Fiona might hate her, but she hadn't tried to kill her—yet. Of course, she may very well be the person who sent her to this hell. She wouldn't know for certain until she found a way home. "How do I return," she asked again.

“First you must find the ring of destiny. Through it, you can slip through the endless torment and find peace.”

That didn't exactly give her much hope, but at least it was a clue. She wouldn't take the tree's word for it. Someone around this world must have an idea on how to escape. She'd ask around and see if the ring of destiny was something worth exploring, or if there was an option that was more viable. Either way, the tree had given her all it would. It was time to move on and explore her new home for however long she was to remain. She had to understand it if she hoped to survive.



* * *

Elodie walked along a path watching everything through a wary gaze. Rows and rows of hedges lined the edge of the walkway. She had two choices: either go back to the murderous tree or keep moving forward and become locked inside a wall of shrubbery. So far, the green plants didn't want to eat her and hadn't started talking to her. That had to be a good sign that she was moving in the right direction. The tree had not been all that forthcoming with information, and mostly spoke in riddles. It was almost like deciphering one of the White Witch's premonitions.

Maybe she should finally stop to think about what they could mean. Her visions were always filled with so much imagery that didn't seem to add up to anything in particular. It wasn't until after things unfolded that things became clear. She wanted to understand it, but all she'd been able to do was add to her frustrations. It would help if she had someone to discuss it with. Maybe in this case two minds were better than one so they could bounce ideas off each other. *A choice must be made—heart or salvation.* The White Witch had said a lot, but that one kept coming back to her. What if in choosing with her heart it would lead to her salvation? No, that couldn't be right. That wasn't a choice, it was wishful thinking.

Elodie sheathed her short swords in the scabbard and made her way down the long path. When it ended and she had no choice but to choose another

direction, she went left. After a while, everything looked the same and she became completely lost. The wall of bushes had quickly turned into a maze, trapping her inside of it. There was no way to tell if she was going the right way, and even if she wanted to, she couldn't turn around and go back the way she'd come.

Her mind was still fuzzy from the drugging influence of the tree, and she'd failed to keep track of the turns she'd made. She was lost and completely alone. Why had she wished everyone would leave her alone? This had to be why she had been thrust into this existence. The more she traveled down the path of hedges she started to believe she was not in a real world. The White Witch had warned her about this nightmare, and if she didn't figure out the riddle she'd be trapped there forever.

Elodie took another turn and found a fountain in the middle of the rows of hedges. It was massive, taking up most of the center. The fountain was an octagon and flanked by a half square on each side. Two mermaids sat on the edge of each side, dipping their hands into the crystal-clear water; one had a silver tail, and the other had a white one. Each tail sparkled in the sunlight like an iridescent pearl.

A large schooner was nestled directly in the middle of the fountain tipped over. Water sprouted up through a large hole in the side. Silver coins shot out of the hole and flew in every direction. Several flew at her and she had to raise her hands to block them from pelting her face. They started to fly out faster and faster, making it hard for her to avoid being hit. Her stomach was being pounded on, and her arms were raw with pain. She had to get around the fountain and run to the other side.

Elodie kept as low as she dared and rushed past the left side of the fountain. The mermaids turned and watched her as she moved. One of them opened her mouth and a sweet melody filled the air. It was beautiful and heartbreaking. It made her think of Cale and his betrayal. He was the reason she'd run out of the castle. If not for him, she might not be in her current predicament. Men could not be trusted. They always betrayed and thought of themselves first. Cale had to pay...

"Find him," an arioso voice urged her. The white tail swished in the water as the musical voice lulled her into complacency. "Kill him."

"Yes," Elodie agreed. "He needs to die."

The song rose to a crescendo and filled her heart with hatred. Elodie

reached for her blades and swung them around, ready to face any enemy. There was one she wanted to find; when she located Cale, he would pay for his duplicity.

“Never trust a male,” the mermaid said. “None are worthy of you.”

How had she not seen it before? Cale was not the only male who had let her down. Every male since the moment she was born had betrayed her in some way. Her father had when he had married Fiona, Cale did by siding with her, and Daire, the rat bastard, was related to her stepmother. None of them had Elodie’s best interest at heart. They thought of themselves and what they stood to gain from knowing her. They would all rue the day they had pushed her away for their own interests. She had to find them.

“Where are they?” Elodie demanded. “Tell me where to find them.”

“Bring them to me,” the mermaid ordered. “We will feast on their souls. Together, we will rule over all that dare to pass by.”

“I must find them first,” she said. “Are they near?”

They must be if the mermaid wanted her to bring them back to her. The silver tailed mermaid turned and swam across the fountain. She swished her tail on the side of the water as she leaned in to whisper in her fellow mermaid’s ear. “Yes,” the white one agreed. They turned toward Elodie and smiled. “Come play in the water with us. Become one with us.”

They wanted her to be a mermaid? It did have its benefits. They were both beautiful, they had gorgeous hair, but empty eyes. They seemed content with their life. Could Elodie be like them? Would it better to be emotionless and kill any male that comes near the fountain? What kind of life would that be?

A miserable one...

“I’m going to find the males to kill,” she said instead. Her head was starting to clear from the song they’d sang earlier. It had put a temporary spell over her. Elodie was starting to think she was trapped in a place that bled magic like breathing. It was filled with traps to lure her to death. If she was not careful, she would fall for one of them, and that would be the end of her. First the trees and now the mermaids. Nothing and no one could be trusted. Everything had to be treated as suspect. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. Both times, she had almost failed to see through the magical lure.

“They will come to us,” they both said in a singsong voice. “They search

for you now.”

“What?”

Were Cale and Daire trapped in this world too? If so, she really did have to find them. This was her curse, and she hadn’t meant to share it with anyone else. What had they been thinking?

“The blond one is pretty,” the white one said. “We might play with him a while first.”

“Yes,” the silver one agreed. “The dark one will die fast. He’s too true to live long.”

They wanted to have a spot of fun at Daire’s expense. She almost felt bad for him. He was too pretty for his own good, but even he didn’t deserve to be tortured by mermaids. What did they mean by Cale being too true?

“Truth is bad?” she asked.

“All males are,” they hummed together. “But he is unattainable.”

“He’s betrayed me, so he must die,” she played along.

“Has he,” they crooned. “Or were you misled to believe it?”

“No, I saw...”

What did she see? Her stepmother had smiled at them and nodded. Had she indicated something that was not true? It was something that her stepmother was fully capable of doing. Had Cale continued to be loyal to her? What did Fiona stand to gain by driving a wedge between them? Cale was supposed to leave, and there would not have been any contact between them. There was no logical reason to make her hate him.

“Illusions are effective and so fun,” the silver one said. “Join us, help us create them. They will die at our hands.”

Elodie shook her head and backed away from them. She put as much distance as she could between them and scooted along the hedges. Each step she took, she kept her gaze locked on them. They could not move beyond the water. That was why they kept inviting her to join them. If she had listened and moved toward them, she would have died. It was clear as day now that she was beyond their influence.

“No,” Elodie said and turned toward the path of hedges leading away from the mermaids. She had a new mission—find Cale and Daire. Once they were all reunited, they could work together to find a way out of the dreamscape.

A Little Birdie Told

The maze opened into a field that spread outward and seemed to go on forever. It was flat and green with spots of giant wildflowers growing in a circle. They were white with silver in the middle. They were at least three feet high and had massive centers surrounded by large petals. The stems bent downward as if the flower itself was too large and heavy to hold up. Elodie gave them a wide berth and watched them closely. So far, everything she had encountered had been hell-bent on killing her. The flowers, while pretty, could be equally murderous. She didn't trust anything and took nothing at face value.

She circled around them, watching them with each step she took. Each flower's head lifted as she passed as if they were trying to figure her out. Silver spores floated out of them and hovered in the air like needles in the wind. Elodie stepped back and they rose higher, adjusting their trajectory. They were going to shoot the blasted things at her. What would they do if they hit her? Were they deadly? She fully expected they were, and her life was about to come to a halt. This world was dangerous and nothing in her life had prepared her for it.

"Freeze!" Someone shrilled loudly.

Elodie lifted her hands and covered her ears. The sound was so intense, a stabbing pain erupted inside of them. What the hell had made that awful sound. She lowered her hands slowly and looked around her. The spores were still poised to strike. What were they waiting for?

"You don't follow directions well, do you?"

A bird, about a foot long from its head to the bottom of its tail, flew above the large flowers. It was stark white with wings tipped in silver. That appeared to be the theme for the world she was stuck in—anything out of the ordinary had white and silver embedded in it. So far it all had been bad and out to end her life. Was the bird playing a more elaborate game?

"I can," she replied. "When it is warranted. Why should I listen to you?"

The bird drifted higher above the flowers and twirled in circles around

them. Its feet danced on the petals as the flowers started to hum a tune that seemed oddly familiar. The bird stopped suddenly and flew over to her. Its wings flapped so fast that a gust of wind poured over Elodie's face.

"I'm the princess of the flowers," she said. "But you can call me Lulu."

That was different. None of the strange entities had bothered to introduce themselves to her as yet. What did the bird have planned for her? She itched to pull her blades out to protect herself. Something inside of her decided to trust the silly bird.

"Hello, Princess Lulu," she said. "I'm Elodie."

"Do you take me for a fool?" The bird pulled its wings back in a haughty manner. "You're far more than an Elodie ever could be."

"Oh?" she raised a brow. "What do you know about Elodies?"

This had to be the silliest conversation she'd ever had in her life. Her name was Elodie; it didn't designate what she was. The bird would probably be affronted to be called something as lowly as a flying creature.

"I know they are rare, and that a lot of the inhabitants of this land wants to catch you." She floated upward. "It would be a tragedy if you let them."

Truer words had never been spoken to her... "What do you propose I do about it?"

Lulu the crazy princess bird cackled. "What do I know? I'm the princess of the flowers. No one tells me anything."

She started to twirl in the sky again—spinning and spinning wildly. She darted upward and then floated to the ground. One of the flowers lowered its head and caught the bird, cushioning it with its petals. The bird spread its wings across it and almost blended in with them.

Dawdling around doing nothing didn't help her find Cale or Daire. They could end up in a trap designed for her. There had to be a way to find them. Perhaps the easily distracted bird would have an idea where they were. If she could get the blasted thing's attention again.

Elodie cleared her throat. "Pardon me, princess..."

The bird jumped up and appeared to do cartwheels across the flowers. She didn't understand the hyper creature and wasn't sure if she wanted to. It stopped on the flower closest to her and turned to face Elodie. "I thought I told you to call me Lulu." Then it started to skip across the flowers singing a euphonious melody.

"Princess Dear, Princess Dear, turn around. Princess Dear, Princess Dear,

touch the ground.” Lulu did the motions of the song, spinning and spinning until she fell to the ground. “Princess Duncce, Princess Duncce, follow the clue. Princess Duncce, Princess Duncce, you know what to do.”

Elodie was mesmerized by Lulu’s song and dance, but it was different then her previous encounters. The bird, in a strange way, appeared to want to help her. She wasn’t sure what the song meant, but it must be important in some way. On the other hand, she wasn’t entirely sure if the bird was referring to her as the duncce or not. Perhaps she should be offended.

“Princess Darling, Princess Darling, you’re certain to err. Princess Darling, Princess Darling, remember to say a prayer.” The spores fell from the sky and hit the ground around Elodie’s feet. She cringed pulling her arms and legs tight against her body. Damn bird—just when she had been starting to trust it. “Princess Dimwit, Princess Dimwit, beware the light. Princess Dimwit, Princess Dimwit carry on the fight.”

Oh yes, the bird was definitely insulting her... Elodie frowned as it soared by her once more. Her irritation was increasing as she endured Lulu’s shenanigans.

Lulu spun around in the air and then floated down until she was directly in front of Elodie. Birds, as far as she was aware, did not have the ability to smile. This one however had mastered it in some form. Its beak twisted upward, and it was terrifying to behold. Elodie wasn’t sure if she ever wanted to see anything like it ever again.

“There are rules,” Lulu said. “They must be followed or else.”

“What are these rules?” Elodie asked.

“The first and most important one is to never tell.”

That wasn’t going to be useful in helping her out of the strange world she’d found herself in. The bird was probably trying to give her something to work with, but for the life of her, Elodie didn’t know what it was.

“What *can* you tell me?”

“Daft you are,” Lulu said, cackling. “Remember the first rule.”

Had that been what she had been telling her to begin with. The most important rule was that she could not tell her any of the rules. How was she supposed to know if she broke them if no one could tell her what they were? That was the most ridiculous thing she’d ever heard.

“What was your song about?”

“That one is easy,” Lulu sat on top of Elodie’s head. “Think hard and

you'll figure it out."

Elodie tapped her chin and did a big production of thinking about it. The main topic of the entire song had been a princess, but Lulu had declared herself the princess of the flowers. It could be about the bird. Somehow, Elodie doubted it was though. "Let me see," she said. "Was it about you?"

"And the others call me a birdbrain."

Elodie's lips tilted upward in the first true smile she'd experienced since she woke in the strange world. "Don't birds, by the very definition, have birdbrains?"

"Not you too," Lulu exclaimed and leaped off her head. She floated in front of her face and pecked Elodie's nose.

"Ouch," Elodie yelped and rubbed her sore nose. "Damn it. Was that necessary?"

"My intelligence is not to be questioned. I am far smarter than you are. At least I didn't trap myself in a sleep of no end," Lulu said haughtily.

Silly bird didn't realize how close it was to being chopped to death with one of her short swords. "Will your clue help me escape?"

The bird seemed to shrug. "Depends on the path you take. Treachery lurks where you least expect it and will strike after you think you've won."

So far, that hadn't exactly been her experience. She had been attacked twice now, and she still wasn't sure if Lulu was on her side. The bird certainly seemed to want to aid her. Perhaps, at least for the moment, she would give the bird the benefit of the doubt.

"How will I recognize it?"

"You won't," the bird said haughtily. "You're the fool and have much to learn."

How weird was it she was contemplating asking the bird to tutor her in the fine art of navigating a dream world? Would Lulu be willing to help her? She was already doing much more than most of the individuals in the world had.

"It's too bad I don't have someone smart enough to teach me," she said with a sigh. "I fear no one is brave enough to do it."

"You're forgetting something," Lulu said in a singsong voice.

"What?" Elodie asked, encouragingly.

"You're the nitwit, not me."

She flew up to the flowers and nestled against the petals, hugging them

with her wings. Was that it? Did Lulu already give up on her and now she was on her own? What would it take to entice the bird to help her?

Elodie bit her lip and studied Lulu. She was pecking her feathers and ignoring her completely. Or was she? The bird kept glancing at Elodie. Was she checking to see if she still watched? Maybe it was time to call Lulu's bluff. She snorted and turned her back to the bird. "I'll be off then," she called out. "Have fun being princess of the flowers."

"Wait," Lulu called out. "What about the knight and the prince?"

Elodie spun on her heels and faced the bird. "Do you know where they are?"

"I might," she said. "Or might not. Will you take me with you?"

That did not make sense. Could she not leave of her own accord? Perhaps it was more complicated than that. Maybe the bird was a spy of some kind and meant to keep an eye on Elodie's progress. Could she take the risk and allow Lulu to travel with her? She calculated all the possibilities and decided to hedge her bet. The feathery creature could be out to deceive her, but on the other hand, she could be useful navigating the dreamscape. Elodie could use all the help she could get.

"What's in it for me?" She lifted a brow.

"A life for a life," the bird said. "You free me, and in turn I'll help you free the newly minted knight of the flowers."

Elodie narrowed her gaze. Did Lulu mean what she thought she did? "Do the flowers have Cale?"

"Ssh," Lulu said. "Not so loud. A birdie should never tell."

The more time she spent with Lulu, the crazier she was starting to feel. Elodie was plain tired. Exhaustion seeped down to her bones, and she did not have the time or inclination for any more games. Unfortunately, she would have to play them a little longer if she was to save Cale. Why she should exert herself on his behalf, she still wasn't sure, but it felt like the right thing to do.

"Do you agree?" Lulu buzzed by her ear and sat on her shoulder. "Say yes, and I'll give you your heart's desire."

At one time, she'd wanted Cale with everything inside of her. A lot had changed in a short time, but it wasn't so easy to give up on him. Her heart still carried a whisper of hope that she had somehow been wrong about him. What did she have to lose? Oh yeah, her life. She had to take the chance

though. If the flowers were holding Cale hostage, she had to try to free him. He may or may not have betrayed her. Either way, her knight did not deserve to die.

Elodie nodded, “Your terms are acceptable.”

“Follow me,” she said. “And don’t say a word.”

She took a deep breath and did as the bird said. It was time to be the princess in shining armor. Elodie followed Lulu through the flowers. They parted for the bird opening up a path, bending left and right with each step she took. Lulu remained silent and flew through them with ease. They reached the center, and in the middle, Cale laid on the ground with hundreds of tiny white flowers and vines wrapped around him. His eyes were closed and his pitch-black hair was pulled tight between a pair of choking sea green vines.

How the hell was she supposed to get him out of this particular mess without the flowers killing them both. She would ask Lulu, but the bird had made her promise not to talk. There had to be a reason for that. Was speaking a way of inviting them into your mind? Had she inadvertently given the others permission to invade her thoughts, and in turn, the means to kill her? Was that how she had been a fool from the start? The more she traveled through the world, questions built up. No sooner did she get answers to one of her questions than several more pop up.

Elodie glanced at Lulu. The bird hovered several feet above Cale. She looked over at her and nodded. Her golden beak glistened in the sun as she descended over him. She landed on his head, and his eyes flew open. He writhed against the vines, attempting to free himself. His muffled screams filled the area and the flowers tightened their hold on him. His face colored into various shades of red, purple and blue as the air was being squeezed out of him. Elodie had to act fast or he would die soon. Why hadn’t someone told him not to make a noise? His grunts and groans had to have alerted the flowers to his presence. They were more reactionary than anything else.

Lulu pecked his head. It must be her way of trying to get the knight to relax. Elodie rolled her eyes. Didn’t the bird realize that was what aggravated him more? It couldn’t feel good to have something sharp and pokey beating into his flesh. Cale continued to struggle against the vines as Lulu did what she did best—became even more irritating. Her silver tipped wing quivered through the air and created a windstorm around them. Dust blew in every

direction, but it did the one thing Elodie needed. Cale finally stopped moving and watched Lulu warily.

Elodie studied the vines and considered all of her options. She had to cut him loose, but wasn't sure how fast the vines could react. Why hadn't Lulu given her more information to go on? What if she made the wrong decision and Cale ended up dying?

He would die anyway if she didn't figure it out. She pulled out her short swords from the scabbard and moved toward him. The vines slid in her direction, and she had to hop out of their reach. As Lulu continued to hover over Cale, Elodie slid each blade underneath the vines and sliced them. Some of them started to twist around Cale's feet, trying to keep him in place. The knight was not having that. With his sword arm free, he yanked out his weapon and began to chop them into several tiny pieces. It probably was not a good idea to laugh at his vengeance against the plant.

Elodie reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder to still his movements and then held her finger to her mouth, letting him know to remain quiet. She tilted her head in the direction they had to head in order to escape the wrath of the flowers. Cale hopped to his feet, keeping his broadsword at the ready. Ever the warrior, he was prepared to battle their way out of the killer blossom's domain. Lulu drifted over their heads and used her wings to create a path out. Once they were several feet away from the circle of flowers, Elodie sheathed her blades.

She turned to face Cale and waited for him to catch up to her. He had bruises on his face and forearms. The plant had squeezed him rather tight, and the marks were an indication of how much pressure they had put on his body. He moved easily, not showing any indication he was in pain.

"You don't have to put on a brave face," Elodie said. "We're safe enough for the moment."

"How did you find me?" he asked.

"I didn't," Elodie said. She pointed to Lulu flitted above them. "You have the princess of the flowers to thank. If not for her, you'd still be captive."

Cale shuddered and took a deep breath. "I was beginning to think I'd never breathe freely again."

Elodie didn't want to think about how hard it must have been for him. His life had been slowly draining from his body. The squeezing may or may not have asphyxiated him; it was more likely he would have passed out from

other reasons first. There was no real way to know what the plants' aim had been, and she did not really want a second chance to figure it out.

"We have to keep moving," Elodie said. "Have you had enough time to rest?"

Cale nodded. "I'll be fine. Where are we going?"

Lulu landed on his shoulder and nipped at his ear. "Our journey begins and ends through the lush valley filled with the dust of our dead. At the end, a cave will beckon, and through your fury and perseverance will you find what you seek."

Cale's mouth opened as he glanced at the bird resting by his ear. "She talks?"

Elodie laughed. The expression on his face was priceless. Lulu was a little bit to take in. "Cale," she said. "This is Lulu. She's going to be our guide."

"I'm one half of a whole," she said. "To make our way through the Valley of Darkness, we must find the one able to claw her way through."

What the hell did that mean? "And who would that be?"

"We call her Lipsy," Lulu said. "But don't ever say that in her presence or you won't live to see another day. She prefers Queen Kalypso."

Elodie turned to Cale and said, "I guess we are searching for two. The queen and the prince."

He frowned. "Who is the prince?"

She should have referred to him by his name. "Prince Daire of Katriel," she said. "Who else did you think I was talking about?"

Cale groaned. "I forgot he was with us when the flowers weaved their magic. He could be anywhere."

Lulu pecked Cale's ear. Elodie had to wonder why she kept doing things to irritate the knight. Was it a form of affection? She lifted her wings and flapped them until she rose above Cale's head. "Not so hard," she chirped. "He's being held prisoner by the queen. He's fortunate she hasn't killed him yet."

Great. Therefore, Daire had pissed off the queen, and Elodie had to ask her for help. Was this going to become any more difficult? She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and prayed for patience and the strength to find a way out of the hell they had been dumped into.

She opened her eyes and said, "Let's go find the queen and hope she's in

a benevolent mood.”

The three of them started on their journey with Lulu leading the way. Elodie was not sure what she would find when they arrived and hoped they were up to the challenge. Otherwise, none of them would live to see another day.

To Catch a Tiger

Lulu drifted ahead of them as they walked along a path carved out of stone. The walls on either side of them were bronze-streaked rock with a sprinkle of gold flecks glittering the surface. They were several feet high and unclimbable. Once they entered them, they could either keep moving forward or decide to turn around and go back the way they'd come. To put things more clearly, once entered, their choices were extremely limited. Elodie hoped they had not made a mistake in trusting Lulu. So far, she had not done anything that indicated she wished to kill them, but maybe that was because she was playing the long game.

"I don't like this," Cale ground out. "What if we're walking into a trap?"

Things Elodie had considered, but she did not want him to question her decisions. She had her own trust issues to contend with where he was concerned. She still didn't fully understand what he was up to with her stepmother, and if or why he had betrayed her.

"Then we will deal with it when it happens," she replied.

"How can you be so blasé about all of this?" he asked. "We're following a bird. There is nothing normal about anything happening here."

Elodie glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He was so handsome and strong. Why did he have to break her heart? What reason did he have to collude with Fiona and work against her? She had always believed he was on her side and that his agreement to train her was part of his unquestioning loyalty to her. Had all of it been a part of Fiona's plans? Had any of it been real? Until she understood his actions, she could not place her trust fully in him again. She might need him to escape the hellish world they were trapped in, and for that, she was willing to use him. His skills were all she wanted from him. The rest could be damned.

"That bird is the reason you're here walking beside me. Show her some respect," she demanded. "As far as normal—I'm not sure what that even is. I've had to adapt to so much in my short life. This is one more thing to add to that list."

Cale remained quiet. His bodily reactions gave away his thoughts. He clenched his fist at his side and the muscles in his cheek twitched. Elodie was certain if she could see into his eyes he'd have a hard glint reflecting back. She couldn't blame him entirely for that. The world they were trapped in was harsh and determined to kill them.

"Do you know where we are?" he finally asked.

She shrugged. "Not exactly. The little I've been able to ascertain is its some kind of nightmare induced world."

Lulu floated over them and landed on Cale's shoulder. The bird seemed to like the knight and had attached herself to him several times—something Cale had not found amusing. She pecked at his ear and he attempted to swat her away. Elodie giggled at them. Lulu's machinations were starting to grate on Cale's nerves, but for her, they were endless entertainment.

"You find this funny?" he glared at her.

"Enormously so," she replied. "Lulu, can you tell us a little about this world?"

"What do you wish to understand?" the bird asked as she flapped her silver tipped wings blowing Cale's hair over his forehead. He blew out an exasperated breath and brushed the locks out of his eyes.

"Where are we?" Cale demanded.

Why was he so dead set on finding that out? What did he expect to do with the information? It had to be important if he was hell-bent on grilling Lulu for the answer.

"You're in the realm of Malediction," Lulu said. "Many come, some die, others make it their permanent home, and rarely does anyone escape."

"But it *is* possible," Cale pressed.

"To live?" Lulu asked. "Of course, but you must proceed with caution. Dying is easier."

Cale swore under his breath. That hadn't been the answer he was looking for. Elodie was not surprised at Lulu's evasive answer. The bird wasn't big on answering direct questions. Her answers generally led to even more questions. The fact that she had actually given them the name of the realm was something to go on. It was an ill-fated land, and that meant, somehow, they had all been cursed to be there.

"Will Queen Kalypso be able to help us leave?" Elodie asked. "What is her skills?"

“She’s the claws,” Lulu whistled. “Beware her bite.”

That sounded ominous and not human. Was it another animal they were seeking? If so, Cale was going to have a raging fit. He was barely tolerating Lulu. If the queen they sought was equally as annoying... Well, they would see how he reacted. No sense in contemplating what might or might not yet.

“Elle, I think the bird is saying the queen might have us for dinner.” He met her gaze. “And I don’t mean as guests.”

That might very well be true... “It’s a good thing you’re a trained knight with a handy sword at the ready. I’m sure you can handle whatever we have to face.”

He rolled his eyes. “It might be more prudent to forget about the queen and find a different way out of Malediction.”

“And leave Daire behind?”

She might not like Daire, but she didn’t want to sentence him to death either. He had been all right, charming even, since the last time she had seen him. Most people weren’t all bad or all good. They fell somewhere in-between. Daire wasn’t the evil person she’d made him out to be in her mind. He was not any different from her or Cale, and he deserved a chance at a life. The curse they were all stuck in must have been directed at her, and they had been caught in the crossfire. It was enough to give a girl a guilty conscience.

“You don’t actually want to marry that fop do you?”

Elodie stopped, spun and stared at him. Her mouth fell open as she fought for clear rational thought. How should she respond to that? Of course she didn’t want to marry Daire. He had never been her first choice. Hell, he’d never been any choice. Cale had been the one she’d wanted, or at the very least had hoped to spend enough time with to see if they had something worth keeping. No one had asked her what she’d wanted though. Fiona and her other guardian had decided for her that she’d marry Daire as if she was too stupid to know her own mind. Now Cale questioned her as if he had a right? When he was the one who decided to abandon her when she needed him most?

“Does it matter what I want?” she lifted a brow. “It’s not as if you cared enough to find out.”

His mouth formed a thin white line, and the muscles in his cheek twitched in rapid succession. He reached for her, but she backed away from him. “Elle...”

“No,” she spat out. “Don’t look at me like that. You were leaving me, and I don’t owe you anything.”

Elodie stomped forward and caught up with Lulu. She did not want to have that particular talk with Cale. It was too soon, and her heart too raw from the pain of it all. His actions had gutted her in ways she couldn’t describe.

Cale caught up to her in quick easy strides. He brought his hand up and clenched her arm in it. “Stop and listen to me,” he demanded. “You don’t understand”

The arrogant swain... She spun around and glared at him. Why had she wanted to save him again? Oh yeah, because it was the right thing to do. Damn her and her conscience. At that particular moment, she wasn’t feeling especially generous and wanted to leave him to his own devices. The idea of having a little alone time sounded wonderful. The image gave her pleasure but she held back the bloodthirsty urge. It made her question her sanity. Not that long ago she’d been wishing for someone to talk with to decipher the prophecy. Now that she had someone to discuss it, with she wanted him to go away. Nothing seemed to make her happy anymore.

“I don’t want to understand,” she said. “The time for that has long passed. You made your decision, and it is time to live with it. There are more important things that demand our attention. Keep your explanations and regrets to yourself.”

His blue eyes drew her in and sorrow wrapped around her like a cold blanket. Cale’s regrets floated around them, and they stuck to her like glue. There was no shaking free of them. “If I could change things...”

That was the worst part of it all. Nothing could make that happen and dwelling on it did not help them. “It doesn’t matter.” She shook her arm free of his grasp. “What’s done can’t be undone.”

She stomped away and tried to let it go. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. Cale had a lot to make up for, and she was not sure if she’d ever be able to forgive him. For the moment, though she’d concentrate on what they had to do to save Daire. The rest could wait for another day.



* * *

The path inclined until they were walking through a large canyon. The river that had carved it out had dried up long ago. The walls were splashed with a rainbow of metallic and jeweled colors. Emerald green, copper red, silver, bronze, and gold all glittered the sides in a kaleidoscope of shades. It was breathtaking to behold.

In the center of the sparkling ravine, a carved-out cave sat prominently. The sun shined down on it like a beacon announcing the arrival of a queen. An appropriate assumption to make considering who resided in that particular cave. It may even be the reason why Kalypso had claimed it for her home.

“How are we suppose to climb up there?” Cale asked.

He asked as if she had some insight she’d chosen not to share with him. She was as clueless as he was. Several ridges spanned the side of the canyon that, in theory, could be jumped from ledge to ledge—if one of them had the ability to gain the trajectory needed to complete such a feat. Something neither Cale or Elodie had. Of the three of them, only Lulu could gain access easily, but the bird was no match for whatever resided inside. The little hints Lulu had given them told her that much. It was a beast of some sort, capable of killing them all. The climb would be treacherous, but it had to be done.

“Very carefully,” Elodie responded dryly.

Cale turned his head and glared at her. His blue eyes darkened until they almost appeared black. He stared at her for several seconds before he shook his head and turned his gaze toward the rocky incline in front of them.

“It’s impossible,” Cale said. “We will die trying.”

“Instead of finding ways it won’t work, why don’t you use that brain of yours to find one that will,” Elodie said, exasperated. “I want to go home and not become a permanent resident of Malediction.” She didn’t want to die either, but her choices were limited. If she had to climb the steep rock before her to escape the nightmare she was trapped in, so be it.

“Up is not always the answer,” Lulu flew over their heads. “Although it can be fun if done right.”

The bird landed on a nearby ledge. The silver in her wings blended with the same shade filling the rocky edge. She pecked at the silver until some of it dropped at her feet.

“What are you doing,” Cale demanded. “How is that helping?”

Lulu flapped her wings and sent the wind flying through their hair. “Silence,” she said. “I thought you were smarter than the fool.”

And to think Elodie believed she’d risen higher in Lulu’s estimation since they rescued Cale from the flowers. What would she have to do to become more intelligent and capable in the bird’s mind?

Cale’s face darkened. “Don’t make me kill you.” He reached for his sword. “It would be my pleasure to watch you bleed.”

Elodie lifted her hand and placed it on Cale’s chest, halting his progress. Lulu could be—difficult. They would have to find a way to deal with that because killing her was not the answer. Elodie had to figure out a way to reason with Cale before he did something that could not be undone.

“Don’t,” she warned, and then turned toward Lulu. “What do you suggest we do?”

Lulu preened before them. She fluffed out her chest and held her wings regally against her small frame. The silver tips of her wings were hard to see when she stood that way. The gold of her beak matched the colors in the wall behind her, and then the sun shifted and seemed to focus on Lulu in all her glory. The rocks sparkled behind her, and the silver at her feet floated in the air. It burst into tiny sparkles of glitter and flew up into the cave. They shot inside and a small explosion rocketed the canyon. A roar echoed back in response.

“Who dares disturb me,” a female bellowed from up above.

Cale glanced at Elodie, his face going momentarily white before he regained control of his emotions. The female voice reverberated with power. Elodie couldn’t help the spike of fear shooting through her. What had Lulu unleashed?

“We’ve come for the prince,” Lulu chirped back. “Release him now or pay the price.”

That was not how Elodie would have handled it at all. What game was Lulu playing? Did she not realize that they could die? She had lived in Malediction far longer than they had, and must certainly know all of its perils intimately. Hell, she could fly away from it too. She wasn’t putting herself in harm’s way at all. What did she care if she unearthed holy terror on them? Lulu would ultimately survive, but Cale and Elodie might not be so lucky.

Elodie glanced up to the cave and gasped. A large white tiger with black stripes appeared. The bite and claw marks made sense now that she beheld

the queen in all her glory. She was remarkable, and reminded her of Zelnon's flag. The tiger had always been regal to her people, and now she understood why. Kalypso was magnificent and beautiful.

"He is *mine*," Kalypso roared. "Go now and I'll forgive the slight."

Daire certainly evoked strong feelings in the females around him. Elodie was not sure if it was a good thing or not that Kalypso insisted on keeping the prince. Did she want him because she liked him or planned to have him as her dinner later?

"The prince belongs to no one." Lulu whistled. "As you well know."

Elodie had a bad feeling. Cale moved closer to her and kept his sword in hand. She should pull her blades too, but something was holding her back. Uncertain what to do she glanced over at Lulu once more. The bird stayed on her perch and didn't budge an inch. She'd held the same pose through the entire exchange, speaking when necessary.

"We shall see where he belongs," Kalypso raged and then headed back inside her cave. When she came back out, she held Daire between her teeth. He was more or less hogtied—his legs and arms both secured with rope. His long blond hair flapped in the wind as the tiger held him over the side. Daire tried to wiggle back onto the ledge, but Kalypso's grip was too firm. When she leaped over the edge, his terror-filled scream echoed through the canyon walls. The tiger landed on all fours before Elodie and Cale, then dropped Daire at their feet.

Elodie met the tiger's gaze. She had eyes of the purest silver, and one of her black stripes wrapped around her head like an eye patch. It was quite roguish and dashing. In another world, and if she were human, Kalypso might have presented a striking figure. Danger fell off of her in waves, and it added to her appeal.

With a curtsy, Elodie said, "Your majesty, it's a pleasure."

Daire stared up at her as if she had lost her ever-loving mind. He would be fine, and he'd realize that in time. Elodie had an idea on how to appeal to the tiger's vanity. She thought herself a queen and royalty expected a tribute along with admiration. This was something she had experience with and Daire should have learned a long time ago. While they were both considered noble by birth, they still had to deal with neighboring kingdoms and their arrogance.

"Who are you and where did you find the bravery to tread on my

territory?”

Everything was going well so far. The tiger had not attacked them, and Elodie took it as a promising sign. If she handled everything right, they would walk away with Kalypso’s help and free Daire from her claws. When she had the chance, she had to ask him how he’d managed to come into the queen’s care. He had not been an honored guest by any means. The prince was used to much kinder and gentler treatment. Elodie kept her focus on Kalypso so she would not insult her and give her a reason to kill them. The way her knight kept grasping his sword led Elodie to believe he was itching for a good fight. His honor had probably been hurt when he had been captured by the flowers—poor guy, he did not handle defeat well. It must have been devastating to be felled by several plants.

Elodie kept the smile on her face benign and unthreatening as she met the tiger’s gaze. “I am Princess Elodie of Zelnor, Your Grace,” she replied. “I’ve come to seek your aid and the release of my betrothed from your gentle care.”

The tiger sat back on her haunches and studied Elodie. She opened her mouth and showed all her teeth for them to appreciate. As if they needed the reminder of her ability to tear them to shreds, she lifted her claw and picked at her teeth. It was a gruesome sight to behold.

“You claim this feeble male as yours?” Kalypso finally said. “He’s not worthy of your courage and valor.” The tiger nudged him with a paw, rolling Daire back and forth like a ball. “He’s a puny, inconsequential male. He challenged me and lost.”

Daire’s hair was filling with dust as the tiger played with him. It was almost as if she believed him to be a toy to entertain her at will. Elodie had to admit, it was rather amusing to watch, but entirely unfair. It was time to call this to an end and make a deal with the tiger.

“Your highness,” Elodie began. “Is any male truly worthy enough to grace our presence?” She lifted a brow. “In the end, they all let us down in some way.” She didn’t bother looking at Cale or Daire. No doubt they’d both be glaring at her. Elodie had no desire to find out how much hate they were throwing at her. This was a necessary evil to ensure their survival. Besides, she wasn’t exactly happy with either one of them

Sadly, that had been her experience far more than she liked in her short life. First, her father died and left her in Fiona’s care, and now she had Cale’s betrayal to contend with. Daire, at least, was exactly as he seemed. At least

thus far—in time, he too could end up disappointing her.

“You are wise for one so young,” the queen said. “If he is so contemptible, why do you wish him returned to you?”

This was the hard part. While she did not want Daire to die, she really didn’t want him in her life. Until they returned home, they had to rely on each other the best they could. According to Lulu, they needed Kalypso. Where was that pesky bird anyway? Elodie glanced to the ledge to where she last saw her and found her missing.

“He may be loathsome, but he does belong to me. Will you return him?”

“What do you have to offer me in return?”

She did not have anything of value besides the blades and her locket. She patted her chest to feel the necklace for comfort and gasped. It wasn’t there... Had she lost it somewhere along the way? Her heart broke at the knowledge her treasure was gone and possibly forever.

“She offers you nothing,” Lulu hovered above the tiger. “You know your duty, and it is to serve the true queen. You’re the pretender.”

Kalypso roared and tried to swipe Lulu out of the air. The bird was faster though and flew high into the sky. She hummed as she flew upward and then dropped silver onto the tiger. Popping sounds filled the air around them, and the tiger rolled onto her side. While the tiger was subdued, Cale used his broadsword to slice the ropes binding Daire. The prince rolled to his feet and away from the tiger’s claws. He scrambled to his feet and put as much distance as possible between him and the tiger. His clothes were rumpled and dirty. Daire brushed his hands over his tunic to wipe away some of the dust coating it.

“You’re an evil bird,” Kalypso said. “Why do you keep hurting me?”

Lulu held her beak up in a superior manner. This world was the strangest thing Elodie had ever encountered. How was it possible for a bird to make a tiger cower before her? Shouldn’t it be the other way around? Lulu should have been food for Kalypso, and instead she’d showed her belly faster than Elodie could blink. The bird landed at the tiger’s feet and pecked her nose. One day someone might strangle Lulu for doing that. With the way Cale glared at her on a regular basis, it would probably be him to attempt it first.

“It’s the only way,” Lulu muttered. “Now, heed before we are forced to end your miserable existence.”

This was too easy. Elodie did not like it and glanced around her. At some

point, it would all go wrong, and she prayed they would find a way to survive it. For the moment, she would enjoy it and breathe easier now that she had located both the prince and the knight. Kalypso was the last member of their party. Once she agreed to aid them, they could move forward and escape Malediction once and for all.

The tiger bowed her head and surrendered. “I am at your service.” Somehow, with a little luck and a miracle, they had caught a tiger. Now one question remained. What did they do with her now that they had her?

The River Dance

They exited the canyon and entered a lush valley. The river had not dried up at this part of Malediction. Elodie did not quite understand how it was possible, but magic worked in mysterious ways. Enchantment had created the world and therefore it made its own rules. Too bad no one had thought to write them down somewhere so Elodie could learn them. It would be much easier if she had a guidebook to follow.

“Does anyone know where we are heading?” Daire asked. He carried his bow in his left hand and had his quiver resting in the middle of his back once again. Kalypso had generously retrieved it from her cave before they left the canyon. “Or have a clue where we are?”

Elodie sighed. Had Kalypso told him nothing? “It’s a curse world.”

“That much I figured out on my own,” he said. “When it was taking you under, the knight and I decided to follow you through.”

How could they have known that? More importantly, why would they have willingly followed her to this wretched place? Did they believe her incapable of taking care of herself? Heat filled her cheeks at the thought. “Care to fill me in on what you have figured out? It would save me time.”

She tried to keep the anger out of her voice, but it bled through as soon as she opened her mouth. Daire and Cale had needed her in this world, not the other way around. If not for their mishaps, she may be farther along and already on her way home. Why did men always think that the little female was incapable of handling anything?

Daire shrugged. “Not much. When you were trying to yank the flowers from your head, it became clear what was happening. You don’t happen to know where they came from do you.”

“I picked them myself,” she said, feeling rather stupid. “I didn’t realize they were enchanted.” She wasn’t certain if they had been enchanted before or after she picked them though. What were the chances someone would have magically enhanced them in the hope she’d pick them? Elodie didn’t pick flowers every day or even on certain days. It was completely random. So

either someone had done something to them after she picked them, or they replaced them with new ones.

Daire was quiet for several moments. Cale was walking in front of her with Kalypso and Lulu. At first, she had thought nothing of their arrangement, but now that she had time to consider it—why had he chosen to lead the way. Was it for her protection, or had he decided she needed some quality time with Daire? Either way, she did not like it and she'd make sure to let him know it at the first opportunity. For now, she'd grill Daire and ascertain every bit of information he had.

The silence was driving her crazy. If he didn't start talking soon, she'd find a way to make him. Luckily, she didn't have to wait too long before he decided to speak. He took a deep breath and then said, "I don't think they were when you picked them."

"What?" She tilted her head puzzled. He had been quiet so long she'd forgotten what they were discussing. "Oh, the flowers." No wonder both men believed her to be an idiot from time to time. "What makes you think that?"

"It's not a common spell. There are flowers with magical properties, but on their own, they don't do anything. Those blooms had the capability to absorb magic, but by themselves they are relatively harmless. Someone meant for you to fall into this curse. Do you happen to pick flowers every day?"

She scrunched her nose and thought about it. "No, I don't. Actually, I never pick flowers. I don't know why I got the idea in my head to do so. Usually my maid would worry about something like that to dress my hair."

Leaving the keep, as a rule, did not happen unless she went out in disguise. She'd broken protocol and went out in full view before her scheduled meeting with Cale. She could not even explain why she would have done such a thing. At the time, it had seemed perfectly normal and now—she saw it for what it was. The pattern that led to her falling into a carefully laid trap...

"Would your maid have wished to harm you?" Daire asked.

She shook her head vehemently. "Susanna is the one person I can always trust. This isn't her doing."

Elodie believed that wholeheartedly. There was no reason for her maid to betray her. She was always on her side. If not for her she... Wait, Susanna had encouraged her to go to the ball. She hadn't wanted to go, but her maid

said she should see Cale off. Was she part of it? Elodie didn't want to believe it, but it could be possible. One thing had become clear since entering Malediction—Elodie did not know the people around her as much as she'd believed.

“What about the rest of the staff?”

Elodie frowned. “I'm not on familiar terms with anyone other than my maid. Fiona doesn't like it when the staff mingles with the family. They keep their distance on her orders.”

It had not always been that way. When her father was alive, she would talk to the servants every day. Then he died and her whole world changed. She closed her eyes briefly and reminded herself that soon it would all come to an end. She would escape Malediction and return home. Once she was there, she would wrench control of her lands from Fiona and rule the way she had been raised to. Her people were counting on her, and she would not let them down.

“Look into your heart and tell me who you believe is responsible.”

Daire's gaze met hers, and she realized she didn't want to say it aloud. If she voiced it, then it became real. Her stepmother was his aunt. He would not like hearing her name as the one responsible for putting them in a horrid place. Would he argue against her belief? Did it matter to her what he thought? In some ways, it did. She didn't hate him as much as she used to. That did not mean she wanted to marry him. Was it too much to want to be free to rule her kingdom unencumbered for a little while? She was too young to have so much thrust at her.

“You don't want to know what I think,” she said softly.

The corner of his lips tilted upward. “Princess, you're not as sly as you believe you are. I can probably figure it out all on my own. I'm well aware of your feud with my aunt.”

They hadn't exactly been hiding it. Most people knew Fiona and Elodie argued on a daily basis. She had not wanted to give fodder to the gossips, but it was hard not to when her stepmother was so evil. Elodie reached for her necklace looking for solace and froze. How could she have forgotten? Her pendant was missing...

“I'm sure you like her well enough,” Elodie said. “She's never given me a reason to.”

He shrugged. “Fiona can be difficult to understand, but she means well.

She's not as evil as you think she is."

Elodie wished she could take him at his word, but she'd been living under Fiona's thumb too long to let herself believe it. Fiona had to be the reason they were currently trapped in Malediction. The nightmare world was precisely something her stepmother would think ample punishment for her disobeying her.

"She might be good to you," Elodie conceded. "I haven't had the pleasure of seeing that side of her."

Cale, Lulu, and Kalypso stopped suddenly. The sun was lowering on the horizon and they all stared at it as if they'd never seen a sunset. Elodie turned to Daire and raised a brow. He shrugged in response so they both hastened their stride to join them.

"What's going on?" Elodie asked.

"Rest we must," Lulu said.

"Darkness brings danger," Kalypso added. "Not safe to travel."

Those two were way too cryptic for her liking. Would they ever give her a straightforward answer? In a way, she supposed they had. They told her that darkness equaled danger, and they would know far better than she would. As much as she wanted to keep going, perhaps it was a good idea to listen to them.

"Where do you suggest we set up camp?" Daire asked.

Kalypso ignored him and rubbed up against Cale. What was it about him that both Lulu and the tiger liked so much? Did he give off some weird pheromones they reacted to? Maybe it was better is she did not know...

"Stay away from the river," Lulu said. "It will try to eat you."

Everything in Malediction believed they were edible. Why would the river be any different? Elodie sighed and decided the best thing to do was lay in the middle of the valley, far away from anything that might want to find out if she was as yummy as she looked.

"Do you want company?" Daire asked as Elodie sat on the green grass beneath her feet.

"I believe the field is big enough for all of us." Elodie shrugged. "Pick your favorite green patch and rest."

Elodie glanced up and caught Cale's gaze. His face hardened as he watched her and Daire. He had chosen to ignore her. Why was he so angry? She could not let him get to her or she would lose her mind.

“I’ll take watch,” Cale said and turned his back to her.

If he wanted guard duty, far be it from her to deny him that privilege. She owed him nothing. Ignoring her knight the best she could, she lay down and closed her eyes. The next day would be soon enough to try to decipher her traveling party.



* * *

Heat spread over her body in waves. Sweat accumulated on her brow and trailed down the side of her face. Elodie blinked her eyes open and found a fire pit a few feet away from her. Cale had a large stick in his left hand, stoking the blaze higher. She did not question the how or why he had built it. The night air had a distinctive chill to it, but when she’d closed her eyes, it had been the furthest thing from her mind.

She should thank him for being considerate and having the sense to build the fire. A part of her did not feel like being so generous though. That part of her ruled most of her thoughts and more often than not won. Bitterness still stung her heart like a blade sliding through it with each breath she took. He was the reason for that.

“I know you’re awake,” he said. “Sit up and face me.”

“I’d rather not,” Elodie ground out. “The ground is more welcoming.”

He dared to order her around as if he had the right. Elodie didn’t owe him any sort of allegiance, and even if they were still on friendly terms, his station was below hers. He had been a knight in the royal guard, and assigned to her protection. She was to be his queen, and therefore he was under her command. Or at least he would have been if he’d not planned to leave her... If he hadn’t been so dismissive of her, he’d have realized he meant far more to her than that. He may be a knight, but for a while she’d hoped he’d be more than that.

Cale sighed. “Please sit up so we can have a conversation like normal people.”

“What is normal?” Elodie grudgingly sat up. “Because I’ve not seen

anything resembling it in a very long time.”

Some days it would have been nice to have an ordinary life. Who was she kidding—any day would have been fabulous if it didn’t have Fiona in it. Nothing had been typical since the day her father married the harpy. So Cale could ask for a regular every day type of conversation all he wanted. She didn’t owe him the courtesy of allowing it.

He folded his arms across his chest and glared down at her. She mulishly returned it. If she’d learned one thing over the time she’d been trapped in Malediction, it was to give back everything thrown at her tenfold. Cale wanted to be a numbskull—well, she’d be a shrew in return.

“Why are you being so difficult?” he asked.

“It’s my prerogative,” she retorted. “Why are you being condescending?”

He raised a brow. “I’m not being anything other than what I’ve always been. You’re seeing me in a different light—it was bound to happen at some point.”

Perhaps he was right. She had idealized him for too long. Cale never pretended with her and had always claimed to be a selfish prick. To her though, he had been the savior she needed most. He’d helped her, trained her, and gave her something to hold on to during her darkest hours. Was it any surprise she’d put him on a pedestal he couldn’t live up to?

“It doesn’t leave a favorable impression,” she agreed. “Sometimes I wish the blinders hadn’t been ripped off. I liked you better before.”

Sadly, it had not been that long before she’d had her heart ripped out of her chest by him. The male before her had told her he would not keep any of the promises he had made, and then proceeded to destroy whatever good feelings she’d had for him. Come what may, she would never regret the time she had spent with him. It made her stronger and capable of fighting the battles to come. If not for Cale, she would be a lost and lonely little girl.

“Ironically, I like you more now,” he said and then smiled. “You’re growing into a formidable woman. I almost regret I won’t be here to see it.”

Why did he have to remind her he was leaving? It still hurt to realize he could leave so easily. She’d thought they bonded and would always be close. He was supposed to be by her side as she ruled, and not as the head of her royal guard. In her heart of hearts, she always saw him as her partner, and the male who would rule with her.

She glanced down, refusing to meet his gaze. “We might not make it out

of this world.”

“I don’t believe that, and neither do you,” he said. “If you did, you’d have given up already. There’s still too much fight left in you.”

Elodie glanced up and focused on the river behind them. It raged as if strong winds blew across it, but there was none wafting around her. Waves crashed on the shore, dancing against the breeze. If she were to approach the riverbank, the spray would probably dampen her skin. She had an urge to walk over to it and douse herself in the water.

“Where are you going?” Cale called to her.

She had hopped to her feet without giving it a thought. Slowly, she made her way to the river’s edge. A melody echoed through her ears, calling to her. It whispered a promise of peace and love. *Come to me...* Elodie shook her head and brushed it from her mind. It was hard to fight the lure being cast in her direction. Something in the river wanted her, and it couldn’t be for amicable reasons. She tried to yank herself away from the pull. Her foot slipped on the mud at the edge of the water, and she tumbled forward, falling into a wave as it crashed to shore. It soaked through her, leaving every inch of her dripping wet. Her hair was plastered to her head and hung down her neck like a dead weight.

“Elle,” Cale bellowed. “Back away now.”

“She’s a goner,” Kalypso said. “Let the river have her.”

The tiger must have changed her opinion of Elodie’s intelligence. She was more than ready to throw her to the wolves—or whatever it was hiding in the river’s waves.

“No,” Cale said emphatically. “She’s not dying today.”

Why couldn’t she break free of the spell? She’d managed it before with the tree and the mermaid. What was different now? Cale was determined to save her, but she did not want anyone else to die on her behalf. If she could tell him to back away, she would have already done so.

“Daire, grab your bow and aim for the center of the largest wave,” Cale ordered.

“I’m on it,” Daire replied.

When had he woken? Had Cale roused them all from sleep when she’d started walking toward the river? Where was Lulu? An arrow flew by her, barely missing the side of her cheek and hit the center of the wave growing in front of her. She hadn’t noticed until that moment that it was building in

height until the arrow smashed into it. The river wasn't just water, but an entity all its own. Another arrow whizzed by and hit its target dead on. Whatever magnetic pull had been holding her in place released her and she hit the ground with a *thud*. Someone yanked on her tunic and flung her back away from the riverbank.

"Quick, shoot another one," Cale ordered.

"You need to move," Lulu chirped in her ear. "Or all this will be for naught."

Elodie glanced up and found Kalypso and Lulu at her side. It had been the tiger that dragged her away from the river's edge—maybe she hadn't given up on Elodie after all. Now wasn't the time to contemplate it. Daire launched several more arrows at the river, giving her time to scramble to her feet. She ran toward the fire and stood behind the men. The river raged higher and higher until one final arrow pierced it, and then it deflated into a puddle. She wasn't sure if the arrow hit its mark or it gave up when it realized the prize had been lost. Whatever had drawn her to the river was no longer there though.

"What the hell was that?" Cale asked.

Elodie shook her head. She had no idea and wasn't sure if she wanted to find the answer to that particular question. That had been the worst experience of her life. The other times something had tried to claim her life she had been able to save herself. If Cale and Daire hadn't been so determined to save her, she'd be gone.

"The river monster wanted to dance with a queen," Kalypso said. "Fortunately, it chose her instead of me."

"That's because you're a pretender," Lulu said. "The monster sensed Elodie's royal blood."

Their argument made Elodie's head hurt. Her whole body shook from the cold that breached inside of her and nestled against her bones. She rubbed her arms and moved closer to the fire, but couldn't manage to find any warmth.

"We might have been too late after all," Lulu said. "The sickness is taking over."

Elodie did not have time to ask what Lulu meant before the world started to spin. Her head became a massive whirlwind of scenery and then nothing but blackness. Peace finally filled her, and the cold no longer mattered.

Lost Not Found

Floating on air had to be the most wonderful

experience in the world. Elodie reached out and touched a cloud. Her hand went through it and came back holding nothing. She stared at her palm for several seconds. How was it possible she had touched one of the white fluff balls blanketing the sky yet felt not a thing?

She stared at the blue sky around her and quickly forgot about... Elodie blinked several times. Why couldn't she remember what she'd been doing? It didn't really matter. There were far more important objects she could entertain herself with. Hovering at the skyline and dancing in the sky held so much appeal. She could do those things for days and days and not tire of them.

"Ellie," a male voice said.

She turned to see who was calling her. There was no one around her. Perhaps she had been hearing things. It certainly would not be the first time she'd done so. She was about to move on and see if she could go higher in the sky when the male voice called out to her again. "Down here, child."

She frowned and looked below her. A man stood on the grass near a riverbank. Something about him seemed rather familiar. There was one way to determine why she felt a kindred for him. She had to go down and get a closer look at him. However, the sky called to her—she was torn. Should she glide through the sky a little longer or discover who the man was. Making a split decision, Ellie dove for the ground and landed lightly on her feet before him. She stared at him for several moments and took in his appearance. He had dark brown hair and blue eyes. His clothes were pure white with light silver threading along the collar of his tunic.

"It warms me to see you," he said. "But you have to go back."

"To the sky?" she asked. It *had* been wonderful and peaceful up there. "If you insist." Elodie bent her knees to launch herself upward. He brought his hand to her arm holding her in place. She met his gaze and said, "But you told me to go back."

“Not up there, dear,” he said sadly. “You have to find a way to go home.”

She tilted her head and studied him carefully. After a moment, it hit her why he was so familiar to her. Standing before her was the first man who had let her down—Jonathan Kendrick, former King of Zelnor. “Daddy?” she said hesitantly.

“Ah,” he said, then smiled. “You’re waking up from its pull.”

Confusion filled her in waves. Her stomach rolled and her head hurt something fierce. Something was banging at it with a hard object. When she found out who, and with what, she planned on returning it tenfold. “Why do I feel so bad?”

She should be asking him how he was standing before her, but it had been hard enough to push those words out of her mouth. Feeling better topped her list of concerns, but as soon as she cleared up her malady she’d be questioning his existence.

“The river monster dosed you with its magic,” he explained sadly. “It is trying to bring you into the fold, so to speak.”

Her body heated almost as if her blood was boiling on the inside and trying to find an outlet. Sharp needles stabbed her skin, and the pain spread down her arms and through her whole body. At that moment, she’d give anything to feel weightless again, or to erase any or all sensations. This torture was slowly killing her.

“Help me,” she begged. “It hurts so much.”

“I wish I could.” He frowned. “Unfortunately, I’m not really here. I’m a figment of your imagination.”

Wasn’t that her luck. She was completely and utterly lost and had no one around to help her find her way back. There had to be a way out of this mess. Her father might not actually be there, but he seemed capable of answering her questions. Maybe the river monster wanted her to know what was happening to her, and this was its way of communicating with her. That was terrifying to wrap her mind around, but she hoped, in a strange way, she was right. The more information she could gather, the better her chance would be of escaping. Otherwise she’d be stuck in this existence for the rest of her life.

“What can you do for me?”

“I can comfort you as the change takes root.”

That didn’t do anything for her. She didn’t want soothing of any kind, especially from a form that pretended to be her father. There had to be a

better way to find the answers she sought.

“What change?” she asked.

“Your body is accepting the magic.” He tilted his head. “When it’s done, you will either be one with the river or dead.”

She didn’t like those options. “Would it be too much to ask for a third option?” Elodie clutched her stomach in her arms and bent over as a new wave of pain rocked through her. She bent over and lost the contents of her stomach. It took every inch of her strength to stand back up and face her false father. “Remember, I have to go home.”

“Right you are,” he agreed and then smiled. “There is one other possibility, but you won’t like it any better than the rest.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Why was it so hard to get a straight answer in Malediction? Now that she saw clearly, she realized that this was another trick the world played on her mind. The river had tried to destroy her, and it still might if she didn’t find a way to fight it.

“Tell me,” she ordered.

“The magic is a part of you now,” he told her. “It can’t be released. You have to keep it inside of you or the balance will shift.”

She scrunched up her nose. Why should she care about any of that? Having magic as a part of her sounded awful. “What happens then?”

“The world explodes and all who inhabit it will die.”

Well, that wasn’t an option either. For a moment, she’d hoped it was a way to escape Malediction and find her way home. She didn’t want to die, nor did she want magic taking root inside of her. Her choices were rather limited, and she had to make a decision fast.

“How do I accept the magic and not become one with the river?”

“You’re already doing it,” he replied. “You’re fighting the river’s pull. Your body is burning from the inside out as it lets the magic bleed into your soul. If you survive the process, you will have abilities you never imagined before.”

That was why she didn’t want anything to do with magic, and if she could find a way to dispense it, she would. Her fake father seemed to think it was the only way to survive. It sucked all around, but she had to keep fighting.

“How long will this take?” Sweat was dripping down her brow and chills started to crawl over her skin. She shook hard and goosebumps formed on her arms. The combination of hot and cold was overtaking her. Her teeth

chattered as she said, “When will I know?”

“It is unknown,” he answered. “This has never been done before.”

Maybe death wasn’t so bad after all. Elodie stared at the ground and contemplated laying down and giving in. The pain would stop and she could be at peace. She started to close her eyes and let go, but her body began to rock back and forth. Small quakes rolled over her and shook her from the inside out. Explosions followed soon after and bright light flashed behind her eyes. She was stunned into silence for several moments, and then, as fast as it all began, it was over.

Elodie looked at the apparition that resembled her father and said, “Am I dead now?”

“No,” he replied firmly.

“Then where am I?” She glanced around her and realized she was still on the ground. The sky continued to beckon her, but she resisted the urge to float once again. “Why did the pain stop?”

It couldn’t be that easy. She had been ready to give in before the worst of the pain had taken over. In truth, a part of her still wanted to. Loneliness had never been a close friend of hers, and a counterfeit father did not count as company.

“Someone cares about you very much,” he replied. “They are trying to help you battle the magic brewing inside of you. Time will tell if their efforts are for naught.”

“Who is helping me?” More importantly who had the skills to do it? She didn’t understand and she had so many questions... That seemed to be her status quo of late.

“Love is a powerful motivator.”

That was all he was going to say. She wanted to know so much more than that. She glared at her false father and said, “Tell me something more useful.”

She was about to ask him something else when suddenly she was ripped from that world and thrust into the reality of Malediction. His voice echoed on the wind as she left. *Locate the three lost objects; otherwise, you will not be found.*



* * *

Elodie was losing her mind. She and pain were becoming one with each other. Darkness filled every corner of her mind and wouldn't release its hold on her. Voices echoed in the distance, and she had to concentrate hard to decipher them.

"When will she wake?" Cale asked. "I don't like her color."

"If she wakes..." Kalypso started to say.

"She *will* wake," Cale bellowed.

He didn't like that answer. Was he the one who cared enough to fight for her? Her imagination could have been making up that entire exchange with the replica of her father. Malediction liked to mess with her mind, and what better way to do it than present her with a person she missed terribly.

"Calm down," Daire said. "Let them talk. If we want to help her, we have to understand what is happening to her."

A loud *crack* echoed through her ears. Something was being smashed or broken. *Boom, scrape, bang...*

"Breaking the logs into a thousand tiny shards won't help," Daire said dryly.

"I don't care," Cale shouted.

Elodie wanted to smile. If her body wasn't frozen in place, she'd have given into it. Cale and Daire were trying to save her. It was hilarious to think about—two men she barely trusted were to be her saviors. Her world was coming together in the strangest ways.

"None of it helps," Lulu whistled. "Both of you are fools."

Elodie was starting to think that bird thought everyone was an idiot. She had a high opinion of herself, but thus far she'd been helpful. Her knowledge could be what they were using to save her. If not for Lulu, both Cale and Daire might be dead. Kalypso was being helpful because of the bird. She was the glue that was holding them all together.

"This wasn't supposed to happen to her," Cale said. "They promised me if I left she'd be protected."

What did he mean by that? Who had he made a deal with? He hadn't wanted to leave her... She would make him talk when she found a way to wake up from whatever held her prisoner. In her floaty world, her father had said her body was absorbing the magic inside of her. So far, she felt trapped

inside her own mind. If there was magic bleeding through her, she didn't have a clue how to detect it.

"Now isn't the time for regrets," Daire said firmly. "And quit chopping that log. Throw it on the fire to help keep her warm. Can't you see the bumps forming on her arms. She's freezing."

Silence greeted that pronouncement. If it was cold, Elodie couldn't feel it. Her body was numb to everything around her. She had to take Daire's word on that accord. Why couldn't she open her eyes? Listening to them without letting them know she could hear them was so damn frustrating.

"There, are you happy now?" The popping of the log catching fire filled her ears. At least that is what she assumed it was by Cale's statement. "Oh hell, you're right. She does look cold. Do either of you know where we can find a blanket or something to warm her with?"

"Blankets we don't have," Lulu sang out. "Body heat to be offered if you're willing."

Was Lulu suggesting they all cuddle with her to keep her warm? That seemed—weird. There had to be a better way to give her the heat she needed to survive.

"She was so hot before, and now her skin is like ice. Are you sure she will be all right?" Daire asked.

Daire's voice was so close to her. He must be right next to her. That had to be the reason she could hear him so well. Every other time, she'd had to strain to make out who was talking.

"She had to fight to live," Kalypso said. "The magic running through her is strong. It depends on if she is more powerful than it is. Unfortunately, time will tell which one wins in the end."

This all echoed what she had already learned. Why was she reliving it all? What did she have to gain from listening in to their conversation? Was her subconscious trying to tell her something? Perhaps she should continue to spy on their discussion and figure out what it all meant later. If she could laugh at the ridiculousness of that thought, she would have. It was not as if she could suddenly open her eyes and say 'Boo, I see you.' She had no choice but to lie there and snoop on them in silence.

The quiet around her started to make her nervous. Had they abandoned her? Why were they no longer talking? Oh gods, had she gone deaf?

"We all can't help but worrying," Cale said. "In our own way, we all care

about her.”

“Even the crazy bird and the killer tiger?” Daire asked.

Cale chuckled lightly, “Even them. They are an unusual pair, aren’t they?”

Elodie rather liked them. It wasn’t every day that a bird and a large cat worked together toward a common goal. The way she saw it, they evened out her odds of beating whatever Malediction threw her way—if two unlikely animals could come together then anything was possible.

“No odder than you and I.” Daire’s voice had a strange edge to it. “We’re on opposite sides too.”

What did that mean? Opposite sides of what? Did that statement have something to do with Fiona or her? Damn it. If there was ever a time she needed her voice it was now.

“For the moment, we have a common goal. I can set aside my feelings for the greater good.” Cale said. “Elodie’s survival is more important than anything else.”

So not Fiona? Still, what was the differing side they were on? Did they have different ideas on how to escape Malediction, or was it more personal than that? She wanted to participate in this conversation. This was so irritating to listen to.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Daire said. “As far as the tiger—I can’t get away from her soon enough.”

Cale chuckled. “Try being strung up by flowers of all things. This world is dreadful, and I have a bad feeling it’s going to get worse from here.”

Hello! It’s already worse, you moron. Elodie wanted to scream at them both. She was frozen in her own mind. How much worse could it get?

“Be careful,” Daire said. “That’s a sure way to jinx us.”

The spiteful part of her couldn’t help hoping it was one of them that got the brunt of what decided to plague them next. This sucked royally.

“I don’t think it matters,” Cale said. “This is a curse world. We’re already climbing an uphill battle.”

Sadly, his words were true even if she didn’t want to admit it. By its very definition, Malediction was designed to damn them all. If they didn’t find a way home, they could die or worse. It was getting harder and harder for Elodie to focus on what they were saying. She didn’t want to get lost again, so she fought hard against the desire to fall back into the darkness. Warmth

filled her and the numbness started to wear off.

“That’s the truth. This is a little slice of hell we have found ourselves in.”

“As long as Elodie survives, I’ll fight every step of the way. She has to return to Zelnon, or I fear she won’t have a kingdom to return to,” Cale said. “We have to figure out who enacted this curse.”

That was something she really wanted to know too. Who would do this to her and why? She thought it was Fiona, but that didn’t really make sense. Why would she do something so elaborate to her? Wouldn’t killing her be more effective?

“Do you think my aunt is responsible?” Daire asked.

“I don’t know,” Cale said. “It would make it easier for her to rule. If Elodie is incapacitated, she could keep the crown longer.”

That was an angle Elodie hadn’t considered. She still believed it would be easier to kill her, but maybe Fiona was holding that card for a later date. Hell, how were they going to figure it all out?

“Get some sleep,” Daire said. “Once Elodie awakens, we can discuss it. She might have some insight to add that we haven’t considered.”

“You’re right,” Cale said. “The bird said it would keep watch next, and I’m tired.”

That was the last thing they both said. Elodie gave into the darkness and let her body heal. When she woke, she would have a ton of questions for them both. Who knew that a magic sickness would give her the clarity she needed to figure out what her next move would be?

Blind Man's Bluff

Elodie's eyes were gritty, and opening them proved near impossible. She gave up, left them closed, and tried to ascertain what was going on with the world around her. Her muscles ached something fierce and moving brought on even more agony. Memories flooded her mind of the weird floating world and the conversation she'd had with her false father. She tried to sit up, but fell back abruptly. Her breath was a painful rasp deep inside her throat. After several tries, she managed to wrench her eyelids upward. Bright light rocketed through her like gold floss threading the eye of a needle and stabbing her irises.

Elodie moaned and rolled to her side. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten, but whatever was left inside her stomach threatened to come back up. Misery had nothing on her—she was the epitome of anguish and torment.

“How are you feeling?”

She lifted her head and met Cale's gaze. His dark hair was pulled back, but one lock fell forward and framed his face. Even his clothing somehow seemed to be more pristine than it had been earlier. It was perhaps her imagination because there was a small tear in one of sleeves. Maybe he was just...cleaner. Elodie closed her eyes and forced herself to take a deep breath. It was painful to move in any capacity but she had to clear her mind. Her eyelids opened slowly and she looked at him again. No, there wasn't any mistake. He was gorgeous. There was a calmness to him she hadn't noticed before. That was what was different. He no longer had that blank face devoid of emotion. Everything was there for her to see, and she gloried in it for a moment. This Cale she didn't have the privilege of seeing often. It made him that much more appealing and her heart ached because of it. How could he possibly look so damn good when her entire body was being ripped to shreds before him? “I hate you,” she gritted out.

His lips tilted upward in response. “That good?”

As soon as she gained the ability to stand, she was going to slice him with

one of her blades. If the jelly that used to be her muscles were any indication, she had a long way to go. How was she going to escape this hell if she could not even manage to sit up?

“Can you lose the smile,” she retorted. “It’s offensive. What has you so damn happy anyway?”

“It was touch and go for a while,” he said gravely. “We thought we lost you.”

She had started to believe she was going to die too. If not for her ingrained fighting instinct, she would have been a goner for sure. The weird hallucinations had to mean something. When she was feeling better, she would tell Cale about them.

“Where is everyone?” She asked, changing the subject. Discussing her almost death wasn’t a topic she wanted to address yet.

“Daire and Kalypso are hunting for breakfast. They are like two children constantly griping at each other. I’d be amused if the tiger wasn’t capable of killing him with one swipe of her claw,” he said, then paused. “No, I take that back. I don’t really care if Daire meets an untimely death. He knows what he’s arguing with and deserves whatever consequences come his way. I have no idea where Lulu flew off to. It’s been rather peaceful without them around.”

Elodie didn’t want anyone to die. When they returned, she’d have a private conversation with both of them. She didn’t know either of them well enough to say if they’d go too far or not. After she talked to them, she’d have a better grasp on the situation. Daire seemed reasonable enough—Kalypso was an unknown quantity.

“How much time has passed since they left?” She did not really want food, but she’d feel better if they returned. “I don’t think we should stay here too long.”

“Are you sure you’re up to walking?” He lifted a brow. “You don’t exactly look fit at the moment.”

Truer words had never been spoken... She would do what she had to. Survival was her highest priority, and if she had to limp her way home, she’d find a way to manage it. Her body would adjust because it had no choice. Nothing was broken and unusable—it was one invisible bruise bleeding into the next one.

“At this point, a herd of deer could come running over me and I wouldn’t

feel any worse,” Elodie said with a groan. “Why do I feel like I’m barely hanging on?”

“The magic is still working through your blood,” Lulu said as she hovered above her. “Lucky, you are. Expected you to wake much later.”

Her silver tipped wings glistened in the sunlight. Elodie’s eyes were beginning to adjust to the brightness, and the piercing pain was receding. The more she moved, the less her muscles ached too. Perhaps she would be able to walk unaided later. It was really too bad she had been felled by the river. They should already be well on their way.

“What did the river do to me?”

None of it had made sense. It was difficult for her to make heads or tails out of the experience. Something inside of her was different, but she could not put her finger on it.

“It made you in its own image,” Lulu said. “How that translates will be up to you.”

That did not help her at all. Lulu was too damn cryptic, and it was getting on every last one of her nerves. “Have mercy on me,” Elodie begged. “And explain it in simple terms.”

Cale chuckled. “I think the statement is simple for that particular bird.”

Elodie glared at him. “Don’t pick on Lulu.”

She needed “that bird,” and for now she would remain Lulu’s protector. If she proved to be a traitor of some kind—well, that would be a different story. No one else would be able to explain what was going on inside of her body. For that alone, she’d deal with Lulu’s capricious nature. Elodie took several deep breaths and attempted to sit up. It took a number of tries, but she finally managed it. Everything started to spin around her, and her stomach clenched in response. She probably would not be able to eat anything for a while. Her body would probably reject it anyway. Elodie lowered her head into her hands and counted to ten. Each breath gave her more control until she was able to lift her head once more. The spinning stopped and she saw everything around her with crystal clarity she hadn’t had before. Was that the magic running through her blood?

“You have my thanks,” Lulu said and sat on Elodie’s head. “But I can protect myself from the Knight of Doubt.”

Elodie lifted a brow and met Cale’s gaze. “Why is she calling you that?”

Lulu flew above them, flying in circles in the blue sky. Elodie smiled and

watched her happily glide around. The bird went high and disappeared into the clouds. After a few seconds, Elodie returned her attention to Cale. Lulu would be back when she was done playing.

He shrugged. "I may have, for a brief moment, thought you were going to die. She won't let me live it down."

"That's fair," Elodie said. "It wasn't easy fighting my way back. I could've easily died."

The muscled in his jaw twitched. "Don't do anything of the sort. I won't forgive you if you do."

As if she had control over when she died... The gods were the ones controlling everything. Choices were a luxury she didn't have in abundance. The wrong one could end her life. If her luck held out, she'd find a way home. Until then, she would fight every step of the way to keep living. Cale had said some things when he believed she could not hear. She should ask him about them, but she was not so sure she was ready for the answers. Her feelings for him had not gone away, and she questioned his perceived betrayal. Strange forces were at work, and someone was determined to destroy them.

"Well," she said. "It's a good thing I don't need your approval or forgiveness." Elodie rolled to her knees and then stood. Her muscles screamed from the exertion, but she refused to give into the pain. She turned to meet his gaze. "My life is my own. It's not yours to dictate to one way or the other."

"Why do you have to be so stubborn?" He stomped around brooding for several moments and then came back to face her. His dark eyes were filled with emotion she couldn't identify. She tilted her head and studied him in silence. He felt something for her, but she wasn't sure if it was affection, concern, or anger. All of those emotions seemed to flash over his features. Cale scrubbed his hands over his face and then said, "Promise me one thing."

"I don't know if I can give you any assurances," she said.

"You can give me this," he insisted. "I realize that we have to find a way back. In another life, we might have had a chance for something..." He took a deep breath, met her gaze, and said with unwavering certainty, "I wish more than anything I could be the guy for you, to be by your side and fight every adversary that comes your way. It could have been us against the world, but you were made for something greater than I can offer you. As much as I want

to, I can't stay, and the gods know I certainly cannot make you do a damn thing you do not want to. But I'm begging you to at least try to be careful."

It was a pretty speech, and for a moment, it had made her remember what had drawn her to Cale in the first place. It was his denial that he couldn't be the male for her that ended any happy feelings she had brewing inside of her. "There are no guarantees in life. If I have learned one thing over the last day or so, it's that anything that can go wrong does. I would like to make those promises to you, but I would be doing us both a disfavor if I did. This is the beginning, and there will be more gruesome battles along the way. I don't need you to protect me from them, but I wouldn't turn you away if you wanted to fight alongside of me." She looked him in the eye and hammered home her point, "Either way, I'm moving forward with or without you."

She turned her back to him and prepared to leave the riverbank. Daire and Kalypso would catch up to them, and Lulu flew directly above. She had to put as much distance between her and the river as she could. Cale would come around because he had no choice.



* * *

Dark green foliage grew on either side of the path they were heading down. The plants—if they could be called that—towered over their heads. If they had actual trunks she'd consider them trees. They had long reed-thin stalks that shouldn't be able to stand tall without bending. Nothing in Malediction surprised her anymore. As long as they weren't trying to eat them, she'd let them be. Still, it paid to be wary of any possible danger, so she made sure to keep alert as they ambled down the path. The echoes of someone or something pounding the ground as it moved in their direction didn't go unnoticed. Elodie was hyperaware and waited for its approach. When it became apparent who it was behind them she breathed a sigh of relief but didn't bother to voice her unwarranted concern.

"You could have waited for us," Daire said as he ran to catch up to her. He had cleaned up while she slept as well. His clothing was still in a disarray

from their skirmishes, but relatively intact considering. He'd tied his golden locks back out of his face. It made his too gorgeous face stand out even more in the sunlight.

Elodie refrained from rolling her eyes. He was more upbeat than Cale, but she was having a difficult time not being irritated all the same. Her body hummed with unspent energy. Once she had started moving around, the pain dissipated, leaving her filled with exuberance. Fast, smooth strides helped her burn up the unending supply of stamina. Even if she had wanted to, she did not think she could have held back and waited for Kalypso and Daire to return.

"You caught up," Elodie said. "Quit whining."

A nasty streak had curled up inside her and spread its wings. For once in her life, she did not feel like pulling her punches and reveled in the impact they landed.

"Point she has," Lulu said skipping across first Elodie's head, then Daire's, before landing on Cale's. "You reached our encampment as they were walking away. No harm done."

"No breakfast either," Daire grumbled. "My stomach is on the verge of revolting. Isn't there any food in this horrid place? We looked everywhere and found nothing."

"Scarce to find," Lulu answered. "But it's there if you're willing to search for it. Bad luck nothing there before we left."

Lulu and Kalypso did not appear to be in a hurry to help them look for any. It was a good thing she wasn't hungry or that might irritate her. She might have energy in spades, but her appetite had yet to return. It was almost as if whatever the river had done to her erased her need to eat. That kind of assumption could lead to her destruction. Until she found out otherwise, she would go on with the belief her body needed food to survive. Nothing could last long without a fuel source to survive. Even if her circumstances had changed, they hadn't for Cale and Daire. She had no clue what Kalypso or Lulu needed to survive. Malediction was a strange place, and anything was possible.

"Lulu, why don't you be a dear and help us locate something to eat," Elodie coaxed. "A brilliant bird like you would be able to find something before any of us."

Cale shot her a wry look. The smile growing on his face gave her an

indication he was aware of her strategy. If that was not enough, his next words said it all, “I certainly don’t have your skills.” The doe-eyed expression he flashed Lulu was almost sickening to behold. Elodie didn’t think he had it in him to play coy. “I’d appreciate it if you could help my poor stomach out.” As if on cue, it grumbled loudly.

The urge to clap at his exaggerated performance filled her. It wouldn’t help their cause for Lulu to realize Cale was playing her like a well-tuned fiddle. Her white chest puffed up at Cale’s attention, and her silver tipped wings flapped excitedly as she mooned over him. Whatever spell Cale had weaved over the bird was working beautifully. Of course, it helped that Lulu seemed attached to him from the start.

“Oh, yes,” Lulu exclaimed. “I’m a good gatherer. I can find you something in no time at all.”

“Thank you,” Cale said humbly. “I do appreciate your efforts.”

Lulu drifted away to search for food. Elodie shook her head in disbelief. She’d seen it all in a short time. This was a new side of her knight. He had never been playful with her. When they trained, it had been all business—well, except for the last time. The kiss had changed things enormously. Had that been when he’d decided to leave her? Would things have been different if she hadn’t been bold enough to press her lips to his?

“Now that you flirted your way to a meal,” Elodie said. “Perhaps we should discuss strategy.”

“That wasn’t what I was doing.” Cale frowned. “I was being nice and persuasive. We do need to eat, and for some reason Lulu likes me.”

Daire fell back and joined them, leaving Kalypso leading them down the path. Lulu had disappeared. “Did I hear you correct?” he asked amusement filling his voice. “You sweet talked that termagant into finding us vittles to eat?”

“Hopefully whatever she brings back is actually edible,” Cale said ignoring the tone in Daire’s voice. “What she thinks of as food might be horrible to us.”

He had a point. They had no idea what Malediction offered as a food source. Perhaps it was time to ask Kalypso for insight. She would have a better idea of what Lulu might bring back for them. Elodie started to ask her, but stopped short when she noticed what the tiger was doing.

Behind the tiger was a large bluff filled with the color of the sun. In front

of her was a very old man. He had snow-white hair that fell down his shoulders in waves. His face was a series of wrinkles that had no beginning or end. In his left hand, he held a long, hooked stick with several notches. It was hard to tell if he were short or tall from his current position. He sat on a large rock with his legs crisscrossed. His eyes were closed and his face tilted toward the sky. Kalypso moved forward and laid her head in his lap. He reached up with his right hand and patted her head.

"I'll be damned," Daire said. "That man tamed the beast."

Elodie had to meet him and find out what his secret was. Their dealings with Kalypso were tenuous at best. Somehow, Lulu kept her in line. If something happened to the bird, she didn't think they'd be able to rein her in.

"Hello," Elodie said as she approached.

The man opened his eyes and turned to face her. She sucked in a breath. Emptiness greeted her, and she did not have a clue how to react. Instead of irises, he had a blank canvas yet to be painted on—all white without an ounce of color. If he had eyes before, Elodie didn't know if she wanted to find out what happened to him.

"Hello, child," he replied.

Cale and Daire drew up beside her. Their silence echoed hers. None of them seemed to have a clue how to proceed. Kalypso decided for them, lifting her head to meet their gaze. "This is the Athair," she said. "What are you waiting for? Pay your respects or pay the price."

Athair? It sounded eerily like he might be considered a god... "My apologies," Elodie said as she cleared her throat. "We didn't mean to be rude."

"Don't worry yourself," Athair said. "You couldn't have known. Be at ease."

If he was this world's god, he might be able to answer some of their questions. Like what was going on inside of her and how to feed themselves, more importantly how they could find their way home.

Elodie curtsied even though she wasn't sure if he could see her. "How do you do?"

"Have a seat, children," he said earnestly. "I have a feeling we've much to discuss."

Elodie certainly had many questions. Cale and Daire probably would too. Kalypso laid down at the man's feet and closed her eyes. It was the most at

peace she'd seen the tiger at since they first encountered her. What was it about this Athair that calmed Kalypso's inner beast?

Daire stared down at the tiger in awe. He hadn't liked Kalypso much since she'd held him hostage and only agreed to work with her to ensure their survival. It had to have been hard for him to willingly hunt with her. His skills with a bow made him the best choice to accompany her, so he bore it with grudging acceptance. At least that is what Cale had told her. She hadn't witnessed the discussion to know for sure.

"Do you think it's wise?" Cale whispered to her.

"I'm blind," the man said. "Not deaf."

So much for keeping things to themselves. "We meant no insult," Elodie said. "We're not familiar with the customs of this realm."

"Have no fear," the old man said. "I mean you no harm. Rest, and I'll tell you the tale of how this land came to be. You have a while to wait until Lulu returns with your meal. There is much you must understand if you wish to survive."

Was that his gift and why he was called the Athair? Was he omnipotent, or psychic in a similar fashion to Paige? Elodie sat down in front of him and waited expectantly. Daire and Cale appeared reluctant to join her, but after a few moments, they sat. Cale on her left, and Daire on her right, as if they wanted to flank her for protection—silly men. Didn't they realize she was more than capable of taking care of herself?

Clue-by-Four

Lulu came back some time later carrying a large leaf filled with berries. They were not like anything that Elodie had ever seen before, and she wasn't entirely sure they were edible. Cale and Daire flashed them a wary look, neither one reaching for any. At the rate they were all going, they would all starve to death before they made it home.

Elodie picked up one of the berries and rolled it in the palm of her hand. It was a dark blue and shaped like a rounded triangle. Tiny seeds dotted its outer edge and a small leaf nestled the curved top. It was not any bigger than her fingertip. She brought it up to her nose and drew in its scent. A vibrant aroma tickled her nostrils and tempted her to sink her teeth into it. It was similar to one of her favorite berries that grew along the edge of the forest. It was red in her realm and succulent on a hot summer day. After careful consideration, she decided to try it. If Lulu wanted to harm her, she'd had ample opportunity. She would not likely poison her at this late date.

The berry's flavor exploded over her tongue. Its juices coated her mouth and filled her with pleasure only the most succulent of foods could arouse. She moaned and popped another one between her teeth and savored it with delight. Cale and Daire stared at her with odd expressions on their faces. She tilted her head and said with a raised brow, "What?"

Daire shook his head and snatched one of the berries. "Give 'em over. No hogging the climax-inducing berries." He tossed one in his mouth and closed his eyes. "These are good."

Cale frowned. "You two are either brave or complete idiots." He shook his head. "Somehow, I think it might be a combination of both."

"Shut up," Elodie said and shoved some berries at him. "Eat or you'll pass out at some point. Then what good will you be to me?"

He glared at her but started eating the berries. Lulu flew over to his side and sat on his lap. The Athair sat on his perch, and in a strange way seemed to be watching them enjoy the berries. His blindness was a part of him that seemed almost normal. He functioned with an ease Elodie admired. She was

barely capable of putting one foot in front of each other some days.

“Athair,” she said. “Will you tell us about Malediction now?”

He smiled serenely. “Of course, child.”

The old man tilted his head toward the sky. The sun’s rays shone over him like a spotlight illuminating his presence. Elodie sat up straighter and prepared to listen. Kalypso continued to sleep peacefully at the Athair’s feet. Cale and Daire munched on berries and appeared content to let her lead the conversation. Lulu did what she did best—annoying Cale. Her infatuation with the knight was amusing, but his reactions to her were the real entertainment. One day he might explode and really use his broadsword on the bird.

Elodie returned her attention to the old man. Serenity filled him as he sat on top of the rock. After several moments, he started to speak, “Many years ago, more than I can recall—a wizard decided that a place must be created for all the darkness in the world.” He paused and opened his eyes. “In his infinite wisdom, he believed it was a way to bring balance to all realms. Nevertheless, he failed to realize that without evil, good would not be able to thrive. True balance has to have an opposite, and without it the scale tips unfairly in favor of one over the other.”

Was this the long version? There had to be a simple way for him to tell her about the way Malediction came into existence. “What does that have to do with this realm?” she asked.

“Patience, child,” he said. “It’s a long story, and each detail is important.”

Elodie closed her mouth and made herself sit still to listen to the old man’s story. If he believed each element was significant, she had to take note of it all and file it away for a later date.

“My apologies,” she said demurely. “I’m ready to hear the rest.”

He nodded and continued. “In retrospect, everything is much clearer. If we all could see what our actions would bring about beforehand, perhaps we would make different choices, but in this, I digress. You want to understand Malediction. For that, you have to understand its foundation.”

Sadness etched through his voice and his subsequent silence was even more profound. After several moments, he cleared his throat and continued, “A curse is only as powerful as you allow it to be. Unfortunately, Malediction was created to destroy a curse that the wizard believed would bring about the biggest evil in the world. In its creation, it formed into something even more

prevailing than he could have imagined. It became the evil he had been hoping to avoid, and through his magic, he breathed life into it.”

“What happened to him?” Elodie asked.

“Someone has to police the realm and continue to keep order in place,” the old man said. “It was his mistake and his burden to bear. Regrettably, it took him away from those he loved, and in time, he became numb to the loss.”

That was the saddest thing Elodie had ever heard in her life. She was sequestered at the castle, and the only friendship she had was with her maid. Cale had become an important part in her life, but even he planned to leave her. The wizard must have been incredibly lonely living in Malediction without someone he loved to keep him company.

“Did he die?” Elodie asked.

She did not have a clue how long a wizard could live in the realm or any world for that matter. However, the old man had said it was so many years ago, he had lost count. Elodie tilted her head and studied him. Perhaps the answer wasn’t so far for her to find...

“The wizard died many years ago, child,” he said with much sadness. “The man he was ceased to be after ruling over Malediction for so long. Some things can’t be recovered from.”

Cale wiped his hands on his pants and asked, “Is there a way out of this realm?”

That was the question she should have been asking, but she’d been caught up in the wizard’s tale. It was so lonely, and it spoke to her on so many levels. She felt as if she was a part of it somehow.

“There are many ways to leave,” the old man said. “It’s finding them that is difficult.”

“If you had to pick one,” Daire jumped in. “Which would you choose?”

“I can give you some clues that will aid you in your search,” the old man said. “If you can figure them out, you will be on the path you need to escape.”

Elodie sat up higher. She hated clues. Sure, they would ultimately lead her the way she had to go to leave, but it would be so much easier if someone would tell her, “*Go over that yonder hill, beyond the forest, and there you will find the portal home.*” Why couldn’t it be a straight shot and a clear goal?

“In losing something, dear, and finding it when you least expect it, will you find the correct path home.” The Athair clasped his hand together “Crossing a heated ring might bring salvation or it could alter your soul.”

He stopped talking after that. Elodie wanted to scream in frustration. None of that helped, and she was even more lost than she was before. How was she going to make it home with so little to go on? Fiona was probably already declaring her dead and taking over Zelnon.

“That is two clues,” Cale said. “What are the other ones?”

“Right you are, child,” he said. He lifted a brow. “Or are you?”

“I’m positive,” Cale replied. “What game are you playing?”

“Helplessness is an affliction you don’t abide well,” The Athair stated. “When you accept that you need someone to survive, your heart will be open to happiness, and then you will realize a life is worth living.”

Cale snorted. “Is that another clue?”

“If you like,” the old man said. “You’re a rare case, Sir Griffin. There is so much uncertainty in your heart. You have a need to save the world but don’t believe you have what it takes to do it. Stop fighting yourself and maybe you will stand a chance of surviving the battle ahead.”

Elodie was awestruck. The more the Athair talked, it became abundantly clear to her who he was. The wizard was not as dead as the story foretold. He was sitting in front of her and dishing out advice like a bad fortuneteller. She had one problem though. The message’s obscurity made it too difficult to decipher. If she had the capability of decoding it, the damn thing might prove useful.

Daire stood and started to pace. “If we count your advice to good ole Cale, that makes three clues.”

“If you like,” the old man said. “I offer you one last piece of information. Deception happens as often as breathing. Sleight of hand is commonplace. Trust, while earned, is in itself a lie. Nothing is what it seems, yet it is precisely what it presents itself to be.”

Kalypso’s eyes fluttered open and she stretched her claws out. She roared as she yawned and smacked her mouth together in slow degrees. “What did I miss?” she asked.

“Not much,” Lulu said. “Only everything important.”

“One day I’ll rip your beak off,” Kalypso promised.

The last thing they needed was for the two of them to start bickering.

They had a lot on their plate already. The old man's clues were a launching off point. Elodie needed the two animals at their best if they were to move forward and find a way to escape Malediction.

"Oh, do be quiet," Elodie snapped and turned her attention to the old man. "Can you tell us where to go from here?"

He smiled. "Fate must decide for you. But if you find the fire and slip through the ring, you might yet make it home this day."

That was something to go on at least. She turned toward Cale and Daire. They each nodded their head in silent understanding. The time for resting had ended and they had something to go on. What had Lulu said before? They had to cross the valley of the dead, and they needed Kalypso to help them with it.

"Lulu," Elodie said. "Do you still remember where we are going?"

She nodded. "Of course. Do you wish me to lead the way now?"

"Yes," Elodie replied.

"Be careful," the old man said. "Remember what I've said and heed with caution."

Elodie did not want to hurt his feelings and tell him she had no idea what any of his clues meant. She hoped that, in time, they would become evident and that, when they did, she would not be too late in understanding them. Prophecies were difficult at best and downright annoying the rest of the time. She hated them with a passion that could not be defined. It would make her life a hell of a lot easier if someone just said "Do this and avoid that." Could that possibly happen? No, of course not. They gave her a riddle to solve, and she was starting to believe she didn't have the mental capacity to unravel it.

They started down the path again with Kalypso and Lulu leading the way. The old man had given them valuable insight, and at the same time nothing at all. It was starting to get rather frustrating. Home seemed so far away and impossible to find.

"Do you trust him?" Daire asked.

"He said deception was commonplace," Cale replied. "It would be foolish to take even him at his word."

Elodie chewed on her bottom lip. She forgot to ask him about her affliction. Something was so off about her, and she was almost afraid to find out what it was. That was part of the problem. If she put a voice to it, then everyone would realize she was not the same person. What if both Cale and

Daire looked at her differently? Did she care if they did? She must, if she had kept it to herself and had trouble admitting.

“Cale is right,” Elodie admitted. “I think that was part of his warning. Even he is corrupt, and we have to weed through his words to find the truth.”

She took a little comfort in saying that. If she had asked him what was brewing inside of her, it might not have been the truth he gave her. In time, she would figure it out, and then she’d deal with it.

“You seemed to take in every word he uttered,” Daire stared at her as he said, “What do you think of it all?”

Everything he had said was clouded with mystery. “He has been in this world since its existence. I think he might believe what he told us. It might even be true, but we do not have anything to gauge it by. We have to explore it, and through that will we come to realize what is truth and what isn’t.”

Cale nodded. “I agree. Where do you suggest we start?”

Elodie remained quiet for several heartbeats. It was nice that they were asking for her input for once. She was sick and tired of their arbitrary handling of her and what they believed was best. Maybe there was hope for them after all. Cale was acting more like the knight she had come to care about. Daire was being charming and helpful. For the first time in a long time, she didn’t feel completely alone.

“With the valley of the dead,” Elodie said. “Then maybe we can find this fire-filled ring. For some reason, I think they are connected.”

They walked in silence for several moments. The heat of their bodies enveloped hers. The sky started to darken once more. A whole day was wasted with her sickness and then listening to the old man’s tale. It hadn’t seemed that long, but now it was clear hours had passed them by without notice. They would have to take a break again and hope nothing else befell them in the meantime.

“I hate this place so much,” Cale muttered under his breath. “I swear the days are shorter and shorter.”

“Perhaps they are,” Daire said. “What do we really know about how time passes while we are here? It could even pass differently in comparison to home. What if every day here is a month at home?”

Elodie hadn’t even considered that possibility. There was no way of telling if seconds, minutes, hours, or even days passed at the same rate. What if, when they returned, no one remembered who they were? Why hadn’t they

thought of that prospect sooner? The urge to run was filling every muscle of her body. Cale must have anticipated her doing that because he clasped his hand around her arm. She turned to meet his gaze, and he said one word, “Don’t.”

Elodie gulped down a lump in her throat. For the thousandth time, she thought about the events that led up to her imprisonment in Malediction, and she wished she had made a different choice. Paige had warned her if she made the wrong ones, the result would be her trapped in an endless nightmare.

“I have to go home,” she ground out.

“We all do,” Daire said. “This isn’t just about you and your kingdom.”

Her selfishness had reached a new height. He had family and lands to return to as well. For all she knew, he did not want to marry her any more than she desired the match. Not once had she given him the opportunity to tell her what he wanted. It was time to stop thinking of herself and listen to everyone around her.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “It seems so hopeless.”

“It’s in those times that you must fight the hardest,” Cale said. “Because if you give into your greatest weakness or moment of doubt, they win. Never let them beat you.”

Elodie took a deep breath and nodded. She had a head full of worries and a heart full of grief, but Cale was right. Running home without a plan in place would leave her at a disadvantage. Besides, she couldn’t very well do that without finding the correct road to lead her there. They had to do this the hard way or not at all. Malediction would not have it any other way.

“Sometimes I let my feet lead me where my head or heart dares not tread,” Elodie said. “In those moments, you’re my voice of reason. I may not say this often, but thank you for all you’ve done for me over the last year.” She glanced up at him and smiled. “And for following me in a nightmare that we might never escape from. You being here makes this easier to bear.”

Cale looked away from her and kept silent. Elodie wanted to lash out and hurt him for not acknowledging her apology and heartfelt gratitude, but held it inside. The more time she spent by his side in Malediction, the more she started to understand him. He was quietest when he was the most moved and uncertain what to do. Her knight was a man of few words, and his actions told her all she needed to know.

Between Cale and Daire, she had two people she could lean on if she had to. They were as different as two people could be, but proved to be the fiercest of allies. Between the three of them, they would find a way out of Malediction. What more could a princess ask for?

On the Ropes

No one wanted to settle in for the night. Realistically, Elodie realized that they had to rest or they'd never make it through the trials ahead, but after the debacle with the river the dark sky brought a new set of fears. Cale went in search of wood for a fire and Daire kept an arrow nocked and ready to launch if anything bothered to intrude.

Lulu did what she did best and flitted around them, bringing cheer or what she believed to be merriment and fun. The bird was a whirl of activity that was hard to stomach. No one was that congenial all the time. Lulu had moments of bitchiness, but for the most part, she was upbeat and hyperactive. Moonlight illuminated her stark white body and the silver tipped wings glistened brightly. At least she would be easy to spot...

Kalypso prowled along the edge of the valley, roaring at some invisible force. They had traveled until they reached the veil of the dead. Elodie still did not fully understand what that meant, but expected she would receive a crash course when they crossed over. The tiger dug her claws into the dirt and snarled loudly. The fur on her back stood up high and her gaze was glued to some unfathomable object. Elodie shivered as she watched her.

Where the heck was Cale? She could use a good fire to keep her warm as they waited out the night. Sleep might prove impossible, but she had to attempt it. Daire glanced in her direction and nodded. His hand clenched tightly along the edge of his bowstring. Being so close to the edge of death had them all about to jump out of their skin.

A loud *crack* echoed through the area, catching all of their attention. Elodie turned, trying to figure out what had made the noise. Daire was by her side in an instant, his bow poised and ready to launch.

"What is it?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I can't tell."

Cale stepped out of the trees and held up his hands, dropping a stack of wood to the ground. "You may not like me much, but please refrain from shooting me."

“Give me a reason not to,” Daire replied.

The knight glared at him and retorted, “Because if you shoot me, I’ll kill you. Wouldn’t want to mess up that pretty face of yours. Otherwise, what will you have left?”

“Try me,” he threatened. “It would give me great pleasure to lay you flat.”

Cale did not give into the taunts. He shrugged and said, “It’s not worth it, prince. Lower your guard so I can build the fire.”

Daire lowered the bow to his side, but did not relax. His mouth was tight and his eyes glistened hard in the moonlight. Elodie brought her hand up and placed it on his forearm. He glanced over and met her gaze. “We’re all nervous, but you’re about to lose it. What is going on with you?”

He frowned. “Something isn’t right here.” He looked up at the sky as Lulu flew overhead. “Even the bird isn’t resting—not that she does it often—but even she has moments of stillness. The animals know something they aren’t sharing with us.”

Elodie had to agree with him. The way Kalypso kept growling at anything that moved and Lulu’s constant actions did not add up to anything good. “What do you think it is?”

Cale finished picking up the wood and created a fire pit. He lifted a brow and said, “Do you honestly think one of us would know the answer to that?”

“No,” she said. “But it doesn’t hurt to guess.”

Cale snorted. “And it doesn’t help to make suppositions either. Stand guard and do whatever we can to survive the night. Lulu and Kalypso are on high alert. If something requires our attention their shrieks of dismay will be our first sign of trouble.”

Elodie bit her lip and glanced at the tiger. She kept stalking back and forth, her attention completely on the valley. Cale made a good point. Between Kalypso’s prowling and Lulu’s high vantage point, they had a good system in place. For whatever reason, the animals were fully on their side—she hoped that it stayed that way until they left Malediction for good.

“I hate to agree with the knight,” Daire said, “but in this case, I must. Let the animals be our first defense. They know this world far better than we do.”

“You’re right,” Elodie agreed. “I know you are, but I don’t like it. Even they are unknowns when you think about it. Some things have been too easy. I don’t trust anything we don’t have to work for.”

Cale laughed and sat down by the fire he had roaring to life. “Don’t beg for trouble, Elle. You might just get it.”

“Quit saying things I have to agree with,” Daire said grudgingly. “Besides.” He directed his gaze at Elodie. “I don’t call almost dying from a magic infusion by a river monster easy.”

They didn’t understand. Even that had been easier than it should have been. Someone was setting them up to fail, but she had not figured it all out yet. They were dangling on a rope, and if they did not tread carefully the last thread would snap. Some unseen force was pulling their strings and directing them across the board. In the end, the question would be if they captured the prize or became it.

“When I was fighting the river monster’s clutches it was almost as if I was in a different world entirely,” she said. “I can’t explain it, but I think there are different layers to this realm.”

She didn’t tell them about her fake father in the other world. It was hard for her to think about, let alone discuss openly. She missed him so much it hurt deep inside. The vision had brought joy mixed with pain and anxiety. Her father represented so much in her life, but the sting of his death still brought her to her knees on a good day. Lately, those were few and far between.

“If what you believe is true, how will we know if we truly escaped it?” Daire asked. “What if we jump from one version of Malediction to the next and never find our way home?”

That was Elodie’s fear too. Reality was so hard to hold on to, and Malediction made her question everything. “I don’t have the answer to that. I’m hoping that after we cross the valley of the dead and find the fire ring we will have the answers we seek.”

Cale used a stick to stoke the fire larger. “Do we even know what that ring is or will do?”

Elodie shrugged. “I’m not sure if it is a literal ring of fire or a piece of jewelry. I suppose that is something we will recognize when we see it.”

Lulu drifted down and rested on Cale’s shoulder. She pecked at his ear and he swatted at her. The bird’s attentions toward Cale were becoming so commonplace Elodie barely noticed them. Something in the bird’s demeanor caught her eye though.

“Lulu,” she said as she stepped closer. “Why are your wings different?”

“What do you mean?” Cale said and stared down at the bird. Lulu lifted them high for the knight to examine. “Ah, I see what you mean. The white is disappearing and being replaced with silver.”

Daire came closer and examined her too. “That can’t be good.”

Elodie nibbled on her bottom lip. “It’s the valley, isn’t it?”

Lulu nodded. “The dead spreads the silver throughout.”

What did that have to do with anything? Why did it need the silver to take over? Nothing made sense, and Elodie was beginning to believe it never would. “I think you need to explain a few things to us.”

“It’s time,” Lulu agreed. “Before the sun comes up and we head into the unknown.”

Daire sat down by the fire and stared across at Lulu sitting on Cale’s shoulder. Elodie sat in-between the two men and focused her attention on the bird. Lulu let her wings fall to her side and met Elodie’s gaze.

“It’s no accident that you’re here,” she said. “I’m sure you’re aware.”

Elodie nodded. “It crossed my mind a time or three.” Like every waking moment until she was driving herself mad. “Do you know something about it?”

“Some,” she chirped. “But not all.”

Cale reached up and stroked the bird. She preened under his attention and Elodie could not help being enthralled by the action. For the most part, the knight seemed to be irritated by the bird, but his actions spoke of affection. Was he starting to care for Lulu?

“Tell us everything,” Cale coaxed. “Leave out no detail, no matter how minute you think it might be.”

Lulu crooned as Cale pet her. “The flowers bade me to lead you here. The knight fell into the trap, but he was bait for a bigger one.”

Elodie feared as much. “As I said earlier—too easy.”

“What is the trap?” Daire asked. “And how can we avoid walking into it?”

The bird looked down and remained silent and demure. Her wings were almost entirely silver now. She closed her eyes and sighed. “I’m afraid that is the part I do not know.”

“Why are your wings silver?” Cale asked. “What is the significance?”

“Until I pass over the dead they have a hold on me. The silver won’t ever leave me.” She held up her wings. “They make flying harder but not

impossible.”

“What happens if your feathers become all silver?” Elodie asked.

She wasn’t sure she wanted the answer to that question because she wouldn’t like it. Lulu remained silent for several heartbeats. That made her realize she definitely wouldn’t like what the bird would say next.

“If silver runs through me, it will end me,” she said quietly. “It’s affecting Kalypso too. It’s why she roars so frequently.”

Cale and Daire turned to stare at the tiger. Elodie kept her focus on Lulu. Kalypso wasn’t in danger of turning entirely silver yet. Lulu’s predicament was too precarious for the moment. The tiger had silver eyes and had a little time before she gave into the silver, and her life came to an end.”

“What can we do for you?” Elodie asked. “How do we stop it, or at the very least, delay it?”

Lulu shook her head sadly. “There is nothing you can do for me, princess. Until we are away from this place, it will continue to run through me.”

Elodie leaped to her feet. “Then we move on now.”

Cale and Daire remained seated. Their gazes met and Cale nodded. They had some sort of silent communication going on and left Elodie in the dark. It was moments like this one when she wanted to punch them both in the face.

“What are you two waiting for?” She placed her hands on her hips. “Let’s go.”

“We can’t allow you to take that risk,” Cale said. “You’re too important.”

Oh... Elodie clenched her hands into tight fists and glared at the two males. Daire was on Cale’s side, so he wasn’t any better. Cale though—he would pay for talking down to her in that manner of his. Wasn’t that like him to think he knew what was best for her. She was so sick and tired of his arbitrary decisions. Lulu needed to move past this place, and Elodie was willing to take whatever risk was necessary to see her survive. It was her life, and she should be able to make that decision without a male thinking he could veto it.

“Listen to him,” Daire said. “It’s too dark to travel, and we have no idea what we might walk into. Lulu said there is a trap waiting for us. Why would you willingly walk into something if you could prevent it?”

Elodie drew her eyebrows together and crossed her arms across her chest. Why did they have to make sense? She really hated it when she had to agree with them. It gave them a swollen head and an arrogance that was

insufferable.

“And if Lulu dies?” she asked. “That’s something you’re willing to live with?”

Both men remained silent. They probably didn’t want to put a voice to what they were thinking. Lulu was a bird and very much expendable. It didn’t matter that she had helped them to get as far as they had. The first one that dismissed the bird’s importance would feel the sting of her blade.

“None of us wants Lulu to die,” Cale said quietly. “But we have to be smart. Please tell me you see that, Elle.”

She glanced at Lulu who huddled closer to Cale. The bird lifted her gaze and stared into Elodie’s eyes. “I’ve always been here to serve you. Do not feel sorry for me. If this is how it’s supposed to be, I’ve made peace with it.”

Lulu had given Elodie permission to let her die. That was unacceptable. “You will not die today,” she said vehemently. “Whatever I need to do to ensure that will be done. You have my word.”

“Elle,” Cale said.

She interrupted him, “Don’t start with me. I agree we cannot leave yet, so back away right now. Nevertheless, we will leave at first light. Be ready to move as fast as possible across the valley. If we can prevent anyone from dying we are going to do it.”

It would be foolish to cross the valley in the dark. As much as she wanted to take the chance, the two men were right. It grated on her to admit that, even to herself. It would be a bigger risk to them all to walk through an unknown area in the dark. Lulu thought it was a bad idea too. So she would do her best to remain patient and hope the bird could make it through the night. There were a few hours left until dawn.

“It’s the best decision to make,” Daire said. “Try and rest for now.”

She shook her head. “I won’t be able to sleep. Besides, I managed more than the two of you while I was sick last night. You should rest because I’ll need you both at your best when we walk across the valley. In a few short hours, we will find our way home. Let’s make the best of a bad situation.”

They both nodded and laid down. Lulu flew over to Elodie and sat on her shoulder. Daire and Cale closed their eyes, and after several moments their breathing evened out.

“You really don’t know anything about the trap?” Elodie asked.

Lulu sighed. “Its poison, prepared, and lying in wait. The question is who

will ingest it and become something other than what they are.”

“If it’s drinkable...”

“It isn’t,” Lulu said interrupting her. “Poison comes in all forms. This one feeds on a person’s deepest, darkest desires.” Sadness filled her eyes as she stared up at Elodie. “They can even be altruistic in nature, but once it reaches in and grabs them there is no being released from its hold.”

How could she fight something like that? Elodie sighed and said, “Try and rest. We will try to figure a way out of this and save us all.”

She hoped she could live up to such a lofty goal.

A Ring of Fire

Elodie stood at the edge of the valley of death, prepared to make her way across its massive expanse. She stopped and took a wary glance at her traveling companions. Grave expressions rested on everyone's face—well, except Lulu's. She had passed out sometime in the middle of the night. They had to double check to make sure she was still breathing and had not actually died.

The sighs of relief had echoed through them when Cale found a heartbeat. It had been faint, but it was still there. No one wished her death, even at her most annoying. The bird had been helpful and somehow managed to lead them this far. Now she rested in a sling wrapped around Cale's neck and chest. He carried her inside it so he could keep his hands free for whatever they were about to face.

"Do you really think it's as bad as it sounds?" Daire asked.

"Worse," Kalypso responded. "The horror stories run far and wide through Malediction. No one goes through this valley unless they have a death wish."

That was not something Elodie wanted to hear. Lulu had insisted that they needed to cross through it, and the only way they could survive it was with Kalypso at their side. So if the tiger was afraid, what did that say for the rest of them? Would they be able to withstand the trials that were in store for them?

"Have you ever been in the valley?" she asked Kalypso. "Lulu said..."

"I have once," Kalypso answered. "It is a time I wish I could forget. Lulu would likely remember that, and think I'd have some insight. I am here because it is the right thing to do, no matter what that bird says. She doesn't really have any control over me."

That was perhaps the longest statement the tiger had said yet. She was a cat of few words and many growls. It was weird in itself that the animals of Malediction talked. If she wasn't in a magical realm, she might have questioned that possibility. Everything was so much more than expected, and

it was hard to wrap her mind around it all. In the end, it wouldn't matter though. As long as they were able to find their way home the rest would be a distant memory. She hoped it worked out the way they wanted it to.

"Are you two actually friends?" Cale asked bewildered. "I am having a hard time coming to terms with that idea."

Elodie chuckled lightly. "He does have a point. Wouldn't she normally be dinner for you?"

"More like a snack," the tiger shot back. "Can't be much meat on her puny frame."

"I suppose that is true," Daire said thoughtfully. "So what is the bird to you?"

Elodie could not help wondering that much herself. The relationship between Lulu and Kalypso was an odd one for sure. She had thought the tiger's surrender too easy. What kind of large cat gave up so calmly? She had not even bothered to put up much of a fight.

"Lulu is the other half of my soul," the tiger said. "If she dies, I'll follow behind her."

"Let me guess," Daire said. "She's the happy cheerful part and you're the bite heads off and ask questions later half."

Kalypso growled at him. "Be careful, prince, I can always rectify my lack of biting yours off now."

This was turning into a sideshow and had to stop immediately. "No one is biting anyone." That had not sounded quite right. Elodie modified her statement, "Don't hurt each other. We need all our minds on making it through the valley in one piece. Are we ready to take the leap into the unknown?" She lifted a brow. "Kalypso, is there anything we should be aware of before we move forward?"

"We walk in pairs of two," Kalypso said. "The pretty boy can come with me." She snarled at Daire. "I promise to bite if he asks nicely."

Daire stood up straight and reached for an arrow from his quiver. He nocked it and aimed for the tiger. "I will never ask for something so outrageous," he said through gritted teeth. "And if you keep pushing me, you'll be our dinner."

"At ease," Elodie said, placing a hand on Daire's arm. "We need her." He lowered the bow to his side, the arrow still nocked.

Kalypso stepped closer, and if a tiger could grin—she did. It was all teeth

and more menacing than anything she had ever seen in her life. Elodie was not sure if they could keep the tiger in line for long. The large cat seemed to be biding her time for the moment she was allowed to pounce and devour them whole. With Lulu incapacitated, their tether on the tiger's savage nature was slipping. Whatever the bird did to control Kalypso was fading. Elodie hoped they made it to their destination without an incident. She seemed rather attached to Daire. Which, in itself, was strange... The tiger had held him captive in her lair. Had they missed something when they'd gone to rescue Daire? Did Kalypso have some other reason for keeping him tied up and nestled in her cave? All questions Elodie should have considered sooner, but now wasn't the time to broach them. She would set them aside for a later date so she could interrogate Kalypso and figure out exactly what she was up to. Maybe Lulu hadn't had the control over the tiger Elodie had believed.

"Don't play games you can't win pretty boy," Kalypso sneered. "I promise you won't like the outcome."

And the bow was once again raised and ready to go. This time, Cale stepped in and gave Daire a new target. "Grow up, your highness. The tiger had you tied up and ready to roast over a spit once. Don't give her a second go."

"Shut your mouth," Daire shouted. "I can shoot you instead."

Cale rolled his eyes. "By all means," he said mockingly. "Do it and put me out of my misery. This has leaped over from taxing to downright ridiculous."

Elodie brought both hands up and covered her face. Could this possibly get any worse? The two idiots were going to be her doom. Why had she thought they needed rescuing before? They each clearly had a death wish.

"Knock it off," she yelled. "I've had enough of your hissy fits." Elodie pointed at Daire. "You go with Kalypso, and no, you cannot shoot her."

The prince held his bow up and gestured toward Cale. "What about him? He said I could."

"If anyone receives that pleasure, it will be me," Elodie said vehemently. "Now go before I decide to slide one of my swords in your gut."

Daire lowered the bow reluctantly and stepped beside Kalypso. They started their trek through the valley of death. It didn't look like it had the capabilities of killing anyone. Lush, green fields as far as they eye could see spread out before them. Flowers of varying shades glittered over the

landscape, beckoning them to run through them. Perhaps that was the trap itself. It wouldn't be the first time they had come across murderous flowers.

"Would you really stab me?" Cale asked.

Daire and Kalypso were several feet in front of them. They were out of earshot, and it was unlikely they would pick up on their conversation. Elodie was slightly amused he had waited until then to ask. Did he think she had a bloodthirsty streak running through her? On that point, she supposed she did.

"Not unless I have to," she said. "I don't want anyone's death on my conscience."

"Good to know," he said. "I'd hate to figure out what circumstances would require you stabbing me though."

Elodie didn't want to contemplate what any such situation might be. All she wanted was for them to make it through the valley and find their way home. It seemed like a monumental task, and they'd fought through each obstacle. She had a feeling the biggest battle was yet to come. Malediction was toying with them and gathering information—testing their mettle. When it fully understood them, then would it unleash its full repertoire.

"Let's not travel down a road best not crossed," she replied. "One step at a time until we reach our destination."

He nodded. "There are some things you should know."

That was a conversation she was not entirely ready to have. She was already well on her way to forgiving him. He had been instrumental in aiding in her survival thus far. He may or may not have betrayed her before. When they returned home, that might make a difference to her. In these moments though, they were not important.

"Don't," she said. "Tell me when we're safe."

He shook his head. "I'm afraid that is not something you will ever be as long as you're queen."

A valid point. She would always have adversaries. However, she could not let that rule her emotions or prevent her from doing her duty. Her people were counting on her, and she refused to let them down. Escaping Malediction was her only option.

"I was referring to when we left here," she replied. "Whatever is going on in Zelnor doesn't matter until we make it back. Save what you have burning on your tongue for a later time."

Silence filled the air around them once they stopped talking. It was eerie

not to hear anything around them—not even their own footfalls on the ground. Shouldn't there at least be echoes of sound to greet them? Cale remained quiet for several heartbeats. Elodie had started to believe he agreed with her and decided to keep his peace. It would be better if he had, but his next words told her he had too much running through his head to let the matter drop.

"Leaving you was never my intention," he said quietly. "But sometimes life doesn't give you the choices you want."

Hadn't he said something similar before? She could not remember exactly, and really she didn't care. "Cale," she said with irritation. "I don't want to rehash what is, at this point, ancient history. What happened before we landed here will not help us now. What will is us working together toward a common goal. Can I count on you for that much?"

He stopped and glared at her. "This is important, and I need you to listen to me." Cale reached for her hand and she yanked it away. "Please, Ellie, I have to say this."

Why was he being so stubborn? What could be so darned important anyway? He had been planning to leave her. Did the reasons really matter? She thought she'd known him and his deepest secrets. Her feelings for him had consumed her in ways she didn't fully understand. It had been a star burning bright in the sky and shining light down on her in a moment of glory. But all that's dead and gone now. She closed her eyes and remembered for a moment what it was like to embrace those moments of joy. It would be a long time before she experienced anything like it again—if she ever did. Cale would always hold a piece of her heart. It was hard for him not to, considering she'd given it to him willingly and faithfully. She had been prepared to offer it all to him after she reached her majority.

"I wish you wouldn't," she said sadly. "The time for confessions has come and gone. I do not need words. Actions speak far louder."

She stomped away from him and closed the distance between them and their other traveling companions. Kalypso and Daire were quite far ahead after that little stunt from Cale. Elodie quickened her pace and raced toward them. Cale sprinted forward to catch up.

"Don't run from me," he exclaimed. "Please..."

"I'm not doing anything of the kind," she retorted. "Can't you see how far Kalypso and Daire are ahead of us? We can't become separated in here."

She wanted to smack some sense into him. His regrets were no concern of hers. He had made his decisions and he had to live with them. They did not have anything to do with what she planned going forward.

"I'm sorry," he said petulantly. "I didn't mean—"

"You never do," she cut him off. "Stop trying to explain yourself. I understood perfectly. I didn't mean as much to you as my stepmother's plans did. Your choice was clear, as is mine."

She turned away from him and stormed away. He was so frustrating and arrogant. He thought he knew what was best for her. The fool didn't understand a damn thing where she was concerned. How could she have believed she loved him? Elodie stopped short when she realized she could no longer see Daire or Kalypso. Cale ran smack into her and almost knocked her to the ground.

"What the hell," he grumbled. "Why did you stop?"

"Do you see them?"

She had been so angry with Cale and lost track of where she was heading. Had she somehow made a wrong turn? No, that wasn't possible. There were no turns to be made. It was a huge valley—a never-ending one, really. All she could see was green. Measuring the distance to cross it was impossible.

Cale stared past her and shook his head. "They can't have gone far."

That was the thing—they really couldn't have. Were they somehow sucked into a magical storm of some sort? Did it trap them or pull them into a place that made them un-seeable?

"I don't understand," she said. "They were just here."

"I know," he replied. "Malediction has decided to join the party, and this doesn't look good."

Elodie frowned. "Kalypso is our guide. Where do we go from here?"

Malediction appeared to say: *You thought you were leaving. Think again.* Now they had to figure out how to outsmart something that saw everything. She narrowed her gaze and made a snap decision.

"We keep moving forward. At this point, we have no other choice."

Maybe they would find a bit of luck and locate Kalypso and Daire. It could happen. She mentally rolled her eyes. That, and she could find a hole in the ground that would take her home with the snap of her fingers.

"This might sound crazy," Cale said. "But I think we should hold hands."

"So we're not separated?" she asked.

He nodded. "I don't know what happened to them but I refuse to lose you too."

She placed her hand tentatively in his. He clutched it tight and pulled her closer. He stared down at her with a pensive expression. Her stomach pulled tight and butterflies danced across it. He glanced down at her lips and then back up to her eyes. Did he mean to kiss her? Why now?

Cale leaned down and placed his lips on hers. She wrapped her arms around his waist and held on as if she'd fall to her knees without the anchor. It was brief and over before, she had a moment to protest. He lifted his hands and cupped her cheeks in his palms. Something flashed in his eyes and he dipped his head again to capture her lips with his. This kiss was entirely different. A fire engulfed them and kept her enthralled. His lips held a bit of magic of their own. Elodie started to think she could kiss him all day and never tire of it. Then she snapped out of it and pulled away.

"Why did you do that?"

"In case I never get the chance again," he said softly. He lifted his hand and brushed his thumb across her cheek. "Now isn't the time to have any more regrets. For a little while, I believed I could have it all. Now I realize how foolish that was. I promise you one thing—I will do everything in my power to see you out of this world."

Elodie frowned. Just like that, he gave her a reason to love him again. Why did he have to say sweet things and kiss her as if she was the love of his life? That was not the way to put distance between them. She wanted to give in and enjoy what they could have—even if it was doomed to end. Claiming him as hers... She closed her eyes and smiled for a brief moment, rejoicing in the idea of it. When she opened them, she was stunned by the fierce look on his face. Instead of giving in to the melancholy filling her heart, she smiled up at him and said, "We are all leaving this world. I won't have it any other way."

They turned and took a few steps forward. Then her stomach became a knot of queasiness as they fell down a steep incline. The field ended and they were falling down a rocky hill. Pain plastered itself over her body like honey and refused to wash away. When they hit the ground, agony speared through her like molten fire becoming a constant and overbearing ache.

Lulu rolled free of the pouch Cale had been carrying her in and landed at her feet—Cale tumbled shortly after. Elodie picked Lulu up to check on her.

For a moment, she'd forgotten about the bird. Her eyes fluttered open and she yawned. The silver on her wings had spread down part of her body and stopped short of her tail. She hopped up and bounced on Cale's head.

"Ouch," he said. "Must you do that?"

"Yessss," she chirped out. "You saved me."

They must be away from the valley of death for her to be so chipper. "Where are we?" Elodie asked.

"It's a dark place," Lulu said. "Up to your feet. We have to keep moving."

Elodie and Cale slowly stood. Every muscle in her body hurt, and she had bruises on top of bruises. If she had a way to look at herself, she would stare at them all and determine which shade of purple looked best.

"Which way?" Cale asked.

Their options were left and right. Lulu hopped down and landed on a paw print. "The tiger went this way. She left a clue with her paws. Only she is strong enough to leave a mark."

That must be why she needed to come along. Lulu had said they needed her claws to get past the valley of death. "Then we go right," Elodie replied.

Cale reached down and took her hand. "I'm not letting go of you for any reason."

He was either being sweet or stupid. She was not sure which. It was probably his overprotective streak running wild, but she didn't blame him. After Kalypso and Daire had disappeared, there was no helping it. They walked for a while. Her feet were so numb she no longer felt pain in them. Lulu fluttered, happily chirping away. She had made it, and for that, Elodie was grateful. Now she wished she could find a way home.

Finally, they stepped out of the pathway into another valley. This one was surrounded by large cliffs on all sides. In the center, a white statue resembled a dragon. Around it, red and orange stone, licked with blue, almost looked like a ring of fire. Could it be what they were searching for? Lying in front of it, Kalypso lounged with Daire beside her. One thing was settled—they had located their missing companions. The rest though, Elodie was not so sure about. It was time to find out if they had located their way home.

Curses Come in Twos

Elodie stepped toward Daire and Kalypso. The prince hopped to his feet and strolled in their direction. His golden locks had come undone and flowed over his shoulders. She glanced down, appreciating how handsome he was. Kalypso had called him pretty, and in that regard, she was correct. His physique was not merely handsome but beautiful to behold. She tilted her head and frowned. Once he joined them, she asked, "What happened to your dragon insignia?" Seeing the statue behind him had reminded her he'd been wearing it the night of the ball.

Daire patted his quiver and frowned. "It's not there," he said absentmindedly. "Where could it have gone?"

Elodie stared at the space where it had been previously pinned. "Do you remember having it when you arrived here?" She was missing her locket and apparently, Daire lost his family crest.

He shook his head. "I don't know." Daire turned his attention to Kalypso and asked, "Do you remember seeing it when you had me tied up?"

She lifted her head up and yawned. Then smacked her lips together loudly as she flashed him a look of annoyance. "Why would I care about a stupid piece of jewelry?"

Daire clenched his fist at his side. Then said through gritted teeth, "Did you see it or not."

Cale stepped forward and put himself between Daire and Kalypso. He placed a hand on Daire's shoulder and leaned down to whisper something in his ear. Elodie wished she could hear what he said. Whatever it was calmed the prince down.

Kalypso licked her paw and didn't bother to look up at Daire. After a moment or two, she replied, "I don't recall. As I said, I don't have an interest in such things."

Daire closed his eyes and sighed. "I wish I had noticed sooner. That particular insignia had belonged to my father. It meant a lot to me."

"I'm sorry," Elodie said in completely understanding. Her locket meant

so much to her, and losing it was a devastating blow. “If I could find it for you I would.”

He brushed away from her. She started to go after him, but Cale blocked her path. “Move,” she demanded.

“No, we’ve all lost too much already,” he replied. “Let him go—he’ll get over it eventually. We have more important things to discuss.”

She lifted a brow. “What have you lost that you can dismiss so easily?”

He glared at her and the muscles in his cheek twitched. Elodie was perverse enough to want to poke at him and see if he would erupt with anger. Cale appeared to be barely hanging on to his control.

“What did you lose?” she asked again. “Why was it important to you?”

“I told you,” he said heatedly. “It doesn’t matter. This place it...” He took a deep breath and then continued, “Things can be replaced, but people can’t. If something happened to you, then I would be devastated. My stupid ring dagger—that is nothing in comparison. I carry it with me everywhere. I had it sheathed at my side the night of the ball.” He frowned. “I noticed it missing immediately but didn’t care. I still had a weapon available.”

Elodie gulped down a lump in her throat. The way he was speaking made her think that every action he took was for her. If that were the case, why would he willingly leave her side? A flash of memory crossed her mind. When she had been sick from the river monster, she had heard him speaking.

“Who did you make promises to?” she stalked forward. “What have you done in the name of protecting me?” She was a bloody fool. He’d tried to tell her everything and she pushed him away.

He stared off into the distance. There was a faraway look in his eyes with a hint of pain reflected in them. Elodie could relate to that a little bit. His perceived betrayal had gutted her. What she did not understand though was what could have driven him to that point. Why would he willingly promise anything regarding her? What did he hope to gain in return? Cale shook his head and finally met her gaze. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you,” he said vehemently. “But right now, if we are all to survive this, we have to figure out Athair’s clues. I promise I’ll tell you it all once we are on the other side of this. I tried to tell you earlier when we had more time. Now time is running out.” He gestured toward the dragon statue. “Do you think that is the ring of fire we need?”

She nibbled on her bottom lip and contemplated his actions and words.

He was always stepping on her toes and preventing her from doing things. One day she would truly put him in his place for his domineering behavior. However, he was right about one thing: they did have more important things to figure out. Home could be in their grasp if the dragon was the key they had been searching for. When they reached Zelnon, she could interrogate him at her leisure. She turned to look at the dragon and the wall of stone fire surrounding it.

"I don't know what it means," she finally said. "It could be what we are looking for. Lulu has been more herself since we arrived, fluttering around without a care in the world. Kalypso seems more or less ready to take a nap. There is something they both find peaceful here. What that means, I don't know."

He nodded. "Do you think we can climb over it and reach the dragon?"

Elodie stared at the wall encircling the dragon. If they found a way past it, would the dragon be the answer they sought. Was this the dragon Paige had been talking about in her prophecy? The wall was several feet high and taller than every one of them. The only one who could actually get over it without much help was Lulu. Elodie glanced up and caught sight of the bird as she flew alongside the wall's edge. "Lulu," she called out to her. The bird's silver wings sparkled as she dipped down toward Elodie.

"Yes, princess," she said. "What can I do you for?"

Elodie tilted her head to the side. "Pardon me?" That was a weird placement of words.

"What do you require?" Lulu asked this time.

Elodie's lips tilted upward. The bird was always so energetic, and more often than not, willing to help. She wasn't sure if they would have made it as far as they had if not for her. The fire-colored wall might be the last obstacle they had to tackle before returning home. Lulu might be the one capable of finding a way for them to get over it.

"Tell me about the ring of fire." She motioned toward the wall and the towering dragon before them. The wall's height was enormous, and the dragon even more colossal. "Is it the one the Athair spoke of?"

Lulu flapped her wings and held herself in the air before Elodie. Then flew up toward the wall unexpectedly—a gust of wind the only reply she gave. Elodie glanced upward and watched Lulu soar. She stopped at the top and landed. The bird wasn't more than a speck in the distance and her actions

difficult to ascertain.

“What is she doing?” Daire asked.

Cale had been right. Whatever emotions he’d been working through had dissipated. The normally jovial prince was back and ready to help.

“I don’t have a clue,” Elodie said. “I asked her about the wall, and she took off.”

What had made the bird decide to travel to the top of the barrier? Was it the answer to Elodie’s question without using words? She hated playing guessing games to figure out what the hell everything meant in Malediction. Taking a deep breath, she turned toward Cale and said, “She likes you. See if you can figure out what is going through that little head of hers.”

Cale nodded and whistled loudly. The bird dove from the wall, heading straight for him. Her trajectory and speed had her falling fast. If she didn’t pull up she’d impale him. As she started to reach him, she flapped her wings wide and floated to his shoulder.

“Yes, my knight?” Lulu nuzzled his ear as if petting him. A weird flutter spread through Elodie as she bore witness to the signs of affection the bird bestowed upon him. Why had Lulu become attached to Cale so fast?

“Can you enlighten us on what all this means?” Cale asked.

Daire stepped closer to Elodie. They both stared at Lulu expectantly, and then at Cale when she failed to answer him. When had Lulu become so closed-mouthed? She was always yapping about something. One little question about the ring of fire and she forgot what words were.

“Lulu, dear,” Cale urged. “Please tell us about it. You’re so much wiser than us, and we wish to understand.”

“The fire is dangerous,” Lulu finally said. “Too risky for you to use. I can’t let you do something so foolish.”

That was something at least. Elodie was beginning to believe the bird would refuse to answer them. What was so dangerous about the wall?

“Explain it to us,” Elodie said, stepping forward. “It’s our lives, and our choice to make.”

“The wall looks fine to me,” Daire said as he stared at it. “Is climbing it what makes it hazardous?”

Cale brought his hand up and stroked Lulu’s back. The bird preened as he pet her. A blissful sigh fell from her beak and she closed her eyes. Elodie was almost jealous watching her knight give the bird attention. It was weird, but

she could not help the feeling.

“Lulu,” Cale said coaxingly. “Tell us about the wall.”

Her eyes fluttered open and she stared at Cale longingly. “The wall itself is harmless. Climbing it could be treacherous, but it isn’t what will ruin you.”

Elodie refrained from rolling her eyes. How many times did she have to explain to everyone that no risk was too big to take? They had to find a way home. “If the wall isn’t the problem, what is?”

Lulu stayed silent until Cale stopped stroking her back. She turned to stare at him expectantly. He raised a brow in response, as if saying, tit for tat. “The ring of fire is in the dragon’s mouth. It has magical properties and is rumored to have the power to traverse worlds.”

Traverse worlds? Those two words were perhaps the sweetest she’d ever had the pleasure of listening to—well, perhaps there had been better, but those were the ones they had been waiting to hear. Elodie practically bounced in place as she stared up at the dragon’s mouth. “Then we need that ring,” she said turning toward Lulu. “How can we retrieve it?” Excitement spread wide through her, and she was having trouble holding it back. The ring was the answer to their problems. If they could claim it, home wasn’t far behind.

The bird shook her head. “It’s not wise to recover the ring. The power is transforming. In order to control it, a person must wear it. Once it is slipped on, the wearer is forever different.”

That must be the part that Lulu was trying to warn them about. Wearing the ring might alter them or something worse. She did not want to think about what that might actually be. She squared her shoulders and said, “It’s a risk I’m willing to take. Please help us figure out how to retrieve it from the dragon’s mouth.”

The bird sighed and flew up toward the dragon. Was she going to get it herself? Oh, what a lovely helpful little bird she was! Elodie grinned wide as she stared up at the sky. Lulu soared higher and higher until she reached the dragon’s mouth. She wasn’t more than a dot entering it.

“Do you think she’s going to actually bring it to us?” Daire asked. “Do we take the risk of wearing it?” Kalypso remained silent and sat next to the prince, waiting with them for Lulu to return.

“Yes,” Elodie said. “I’m willing to risk whatever I have to. My stepmother will not rule in my stead.”

Cale remained silent as they waited for Lulu to return. Seconds ticked by

and grew into minutes. Worry spread like wildfire through her gut. Had she sent Lulu in to die? No, she wouldn't believe that. The bird would come back to them with the ring in her beak. After several moments of sheer anxiety, something exited the dragon's mouth and descended toward them. Lulu's silver and white frame came into view by slow degrees. She landed on Cale's shoulder, and in her mouth rested a silver ring. A small white globe swirled blood red on top of it. Cale snatched it from Lulu's mouth and held it between his fingers.

"Give it to me," Elodie said. "I'll wear it."

She was to be queen, and it was her risk to take. A ruler put her people first and made sure they were all safe. Technically, she wasn't that person yet, but she believed it was still her responsibility.

Cale shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ellie. I can't let you do that." Then he slipped the ring on his finger. His whole body thrashed heavily as the magic spread through him. He fell to the ground continuing to shake wildly as he hit the hard earth.

"Damn you," Elodie screamed. "It wasn't supposed to be you."

Tears streamed down her face as she watched him wracked with unimaginable pain. His face was contorted and turned several shades of red. Breathing was a struggle as he gasped for breath. The sky grew darker with each passing second. Elodie glanced up and then back down at Cale. Was he trying to control it, or was it the power inside overtaking him? There had to be something they could do for him.

"Lulu," Elodie screamed. "Help him."

"He is beyond us now, princess," she said sadly. Her gaze seemed to say: *I tried to warn you.* "Our knight won't be here for long."

"What?" Was Lulu implying that Cale would die soon? "That can't be." As angry as she'd been at him, she never once thought she'd truly lose him. If Lulu's statement was correct, she was on the verge of it. Sadness multiplied inside of her until she was misery personified.

"Don't leave me," she begged Cale. Panic filled her with each breath.

His gaze met hers and he whispered, "I'll always be with you." Then he disappeared before her eyes. The dragon statue and the wall surrounding it vanished with him. None of it made sense, and in a strange way, it did. A roar that put Kalypso's to shame echoed around them. The tiger leaped to her feet and stared up into the distance. The hairs on her spine stood straight as a

shiver rolled down her back.

Tears streamed down Elodie's face and the sky lit up with lightning. The thunder rocked the ground with earsplitting booms. Wings as wide as the horizon filled the sky as it flew over their heads. Elodie's tears were as torrential as the rain falling around them. The magic infused within her from the river monster finally found an outlet. Emotions ruled her and brought devastation on the world around her. Wind and showers punished everything in its path as the storm raged on.

The dragon disappeared from view. Its massive, dark wings nothing more than a whisper of a memory. She dropped to the ground and made a promise to her knight. She'd do what she should have done from the beginning and actually try to figure out the prophecies. Elodie had to find the objects lost and discover who she could trust. Cale was not lost forever and she would do everything in her power to find a way to undo this new curse. No matter what the cost, she'd pay it. He'd done this to save her and she'd not allow his life to be sacrificed.

About the Author

Dawn Brower holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, a Master of Arts in Education, and a Master of Arts in Liberal Arts with concentrations in Literature, History, and Sociology. She works as a substitute teacher and enjoys the flexibility it gives her to concentrate on her other endeavors.

Growing up she was the only girl out of six children. She is a single mother of two teenage boys; there is never a dull moment in her life. Reading books is her favorite hobby. While she loves all genres she focuses most of her writing on historical and contemporary romance.

There are always stories inside her head; she just never thought she could make them come to life. That creativity has finally found an outlet.

For more information visit her website at:

<http://www.authordawnbrower.com/>

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