



*THE PUPPET QUEEN*

*A Tale of the Sleeping Beauty*



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PART ONE



*Sunset*



## *Chapter One*

The black and white striped arches blurred and bobbed dizzily as I scrambled up the twirling tower stairs. “Auralia!” I cried.

As I whirled into our chamber, a gale of a girl, my twin sister Auralia raised her head serenely and with equal sedateness lowered her book. Even her seat was perfect: legs crossed to the side with sky-blue skirts draped just so. There was a reason why she was always indicated to me as the paragon of a young noblewoman. She marked her page and watched me with composed expectation.

I was well-known around Aquia City, a dark haired girl in fine, torn tunics. Although my parents were the Emira and Emir-Consort of Aquia, vassals of Queen Erina of Ghalain, and could ascend to the throne after her death, people hailed me with comfortable recognition. Even when I tumbled into trouble, I was always lucky, golden-tongued, with such a honey-smooth way with words that I could wiggle out of most trouble. In those days at least.

I plopped down beside Auralia, ignoring the dirt on my tights that rubbed into the white silk coverlet. Loose strands of hair, like stray straws of a bird’s nest, poked out of my braided ebony coronet.

“I found the most delicious spot in the Letern Woods,” I announced merrily. “Near the creek, there’s a bent plum tree with a canny crooked elbow that’s perfect for sleeping. And such sweet plums, tiny but juicy!” I smacked my lips. “Heavenly.”

With my youngest sister, Gieneve, or my older brothers, I spent my days skulking on the plains, wandering through hills, or exploring the banks of the Menander River that snaked all the way to Ghalain’s capital. Nothing was unfamiliar to me and no one was unfamiliar *with* me. Yet, Auralia was far more content here within the Mehal Palace. Usually, I had to expend the entirety of the gold of my tongue to convince her to join me.

She looked at me impassively, but I could spot the twinkling amusement behind the veneer.

“You may have to change,” I said, doubtfully eyeing her garb. “Nurse Beya would have a fit if you ruined that lovely gown.”

Auralia sighed but obligingly stood up. Bound in an intricate braid, her crackling gold hair swung about her hips like a climbing vine. “You’re sixteen for Seasons’ sakes. Someday, you should try acting like it.”

“Fifteen,” I maintained. “Our birthday isn’t until next week.”

“Sixteen,” Auralia said firmly, but an amused grin cracked through.

“Rory, this will be the last time I ever venture into the woods,” I vowed dramatically. “I promise you, but only if *you* promise to come with me today.” I stood on the bed, my legs spread wide, one hand clasping my heart, the other reaching for the sky.

“Oh, be quiet,” she laughed, throwing a pillow at me. I tumbled over. “You’ll never do that.” I opened my mouth to object, but she continued. “And I wouldn’t want you to either. I’ll come with you of course.” She dimpled. “Consider it my birthday gift.”

“Aye! That’s a nice way to wiggle out of purchasing me a proper present!”

Shedding her blue silk, Auralia pushed herself into a green gown of durable linen and slipped on my extra pair of leather boots. Pearl earrings glinted through her hair. “How do I look?”

I stared at her incredulously. “Like you’re going on a picnic.”

“Excellent.” She flounced ahead, but turned back with an impish grin. “And Lina, I have news I think you’ll like.”

“What?”

“Lord Ferdas is visiting.” Auralia watched closely for my reaction.

I blushed and then cursed myself for the pinkness staining my cheeks. Ferdas was the swarthy son of a respected statesman from the emirdom of Aawset who frequently visited Aquia on important diplomatic business. I thought him very handsome.

Auralia paused, momentarily emotionless, but then her face split into a wide smile.

“Are you quite certain?” I said, attempting—and failing spectacularly—to approximate indifference.

Auralia wound her skirt tightly around her fingers until they blanched. “Oh yes.”

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Giggling and gossiping and kicking the water with its rippling veins of sunshine gold, we lingered at the creek for hours. We feasted on fruit tarts and biscuits, stuffed grape leaves and flans and plums plucked from the bowing branches.

Auralia spun long yarns, detailing the latest rumors she had gathered from the court. As we lambasted that count for his drunken confessions of love to this lady married to that lord, Auralia’s smile sparked with as much mischief as my own.

As evening stretched into night, we started back to the castle by the light of scattered stars, our soaked clothes sticking uncomfortably against us. Letern Woods yielded to the amber plains that ringed Aquia City’s high hills and with darkening shadows ushering in the coolness of the Autumn night, our teeth chattered in the chill. Each vagrant breeze rattling through the tall grass seemed a personal assault and was met with moans of consternation. The city of Aquia, with houses and shops winding up the hills all the way to the palace walls, twinkled quietly against the lilac dusk. And it seemed oh so far.

Something snapped.

I grabbed my sister's elbow. "Auralia, did you hear that?" I stood silently and tried to pick out the noise again.

Auralia turned her head towards me, the braid snapping like a wet whip. "What, Lina?" Her voice dipped to a frightened whisper.

A twig cracked and leaves rustled as if a man were moving through the woods, disturbing the usual silence. "Dear Seasons, that! Someone has followed us. Rory, run!"

Hearts and imaginations racing, we scampered up a rise. Flaming torches wove above the grass.

"It's a whole party of bandits, Rory! Or—" I whitened at the horrific thought, of those fey people. "It could be pariyan!" I quickly began hissing instructions. "Remember, they only warn you once, but you *must* not take anything and—"

Auralia pulled me low. The long wands of grass masked us.

My mind leapt to the possibilities. Perhaps we would be sold as slaves. Perhaps we would be killed. Perhaps we would be abducted into the Otherworld. Perhaps we would be held for ransom—or worse. *Well if anyone hopes to do any such thing to me, it will be the most miserable experience of his life.* Lost in envisioning the confrontation between myself and my supposed captor, I was shocked out of my reverie when I heard a man's voice.

"Captain, Captain, I see them! There they are! On that rise!" shouted a man whose familiar violet and white uniform I recognized even from the shadows of the field.

Auralia and I looked at each other. Blood rose to my cheeks.

"You idiot." Auralia could hardly suppress her not unkind laughter as she stood up, fastidiously brushing away the dirt clinging to her skirts. She wiped smeared mud from my cheek. "It's the guards, you goose!"

"How was I to know?" I grumbled, abashed. "They never come after me, *and* I stay out for days at a time. It has only been a little more than six hours." I craned my neck, trying to spot the retinue of guards.

"Princess Selene, Princess Auralia," yelled the violet-clad guard who had spotted us.

Conscious of our bedraggled state, we approached the regiment.

"Why are so many of you here?" I asked Matiz, one of the soldiers I was friendly with.

"Princess Auralia was missing, and Emira Niobe ordered a search." He rotated brusquely.

I grabbed his shoulder. "But I stay out for days and nobody comes. Why do you come now? It's only been a few hours."

"Some things are not for a simple soldier to answer." He turned away again. I knew, I *knew* there was something behind his words, but even though I wheedled during the walk home, he remained stubbornly mute.

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When we reached the Mehal, Mother and Father buzzed around Auralia, leaving me in the care of our old nurse, Beya. She was a middle-aged woman, whose mousy brown hair could never be constrained by a simple braid, and now her hair was more frazzled than usual. Grabbing my ear, she dragged me to my chamber.

“What-did-you-think-you-were-doing?” Beya asked through gritted teeth.

“I took Auralia to a creek in the woods. What’s all of the uproar about? It’s not as if she has never left the palace before!” But it occurred to me that we had always returned home well before sunset.

She gave me a look that I knew well: one that said she was trying to find the patience in her heart to forgive my trespasses, but Seasons, she was finding it hard.

*Why* precisely my actions needed forgiveness, I wanted to know. “Oh, won't you tell me, Nurse?” I asked, voice silver-sweet, eyes wide and beseeching. I continued in this vein for some time until she drew in a long, resigned breath. “I suppose it’s time that you knew the truth.” She frowned unhappily. “Although it’s not my place to do so. Your parents will have my head for this.”

With a morose shake of the aforementioned head, she began. “I remember it was storming something terrible the night you were born, with sheets of rain blowing into the birthing room and thunder rattling the stone walls. Just as you entered the world, a brilliant flash illuminated the sky. When we looked out the window, the horizon was empty and the great pari Tree was nothing more than a smoking stump. The storm rolled away. Some time later, just as the softest pink of dawn began to streak the sky Auralia was born.”

I could not stop from interrupting. “Mother always tells it, ‘The night was quiet. The warm, spicy aroma of autumn was needled with a sharp hint of winter. There was something haunting to it, a heaviness, a foreboding. It wafted through the open window, into the room where I, the Emira of Aquia labored. The moon was bone-white against the dark sky, just minutes before midnight and it illuminated the Eastern Plains where the First Tree proudly proclaimed its presence with a pale, ghostly light.’”

Beya cleared her throat. “It is not in my place to contradict Emira Niobe, but most folk believe the tale I told you. When it happened, some whispered that your birth *caused* lightning to strike the first tree, but rarely did they think twice about it.

“But the Pari certainly believed the rumors. To them, it was not just *any* tree. They say that when the world was newly created and still heaving from the pain of her birth, she received a gift from the heavens: a small star, which sailed through the dark to heal her. From this small star grew Astero and the Pari hold that on certain, sacred nights, its leaves captured starlight and emitted it of its own accord. But you know all this, of course, if you have paid attention to your lessons.

“When Astero fell, the Pari came together to demand vengeance against your family and Aquia. The Queen of the Pari, Lilianna, commanded that you and Auralia be handed over in

retribution for their loss, which so precisely, too precisely they said, coincided with your births. To them, it could never be anything as simple as coincidence.”

Eyes misty, Beya grew eloquent in recollection. “I was there when it happened on your Name Day. The Queen entered the castle, disregarding the many standing guard. Shuddering winds blew the doors of the Great Hall open. She glided, bold as you please, to the bejeweled chairs where your parents were seated. Her sunset red hair streamed behind her. She was a terrible woman, but with that fey beauty: fine, high cheekbones and ivory skin. I will never forget her—nor the sight of those orange and black butterfly wings, bared by a deep cut in the dress, fluttering proudly from her back. She regarded the chamber with such disdain, dismissing everything and everyone. The force of her glamour was targeted at Emir Riagan and Emira Niobe. Auralia slept unnoticed beside them. You, Selene, were not there for you had fallen ill the night before.

“Her voice was deep and commanding and it filled every corner until the very crevices seemed to shiver. ‘You will give to us what our loss has earned, what your daughters have caused. We have lost something sacred, something precious, and now, it is your turn.’”

The fine hair on my arms stood.

“As she spoke, her gown blazed a headier gold, the jewels gaining their own light, until she was almost blinding in her wrath.

“At this, still weak from childbirth, your mother rose. Her hair was disarrayed by Lilianna’s windstorm, but she was firm. “You will not take my children, Lilianna,” she proclaimed.

“The Pari Queen glared at her contemptuously, her monarch wings flapping slowly. ‘As if you would miss them amongst your passel of brats,’ she spat.

“Your mother, Emira of Aquia though she was, stepped back as if slapped.

“Your father rose then and turned his hands so his palms face the sky, a gesture of appeasement. ‘We are sympathetic for the loss of Astero,’ he said. ‘It was an unfortunate occurrence, one I am sure that you and your brethren feel keenly and one we can never hope to understand, but we are innocent as are our children. And you will not harm them.’

““Your consent is hardly an issue. The Pari will have their due,’ Lilianna said, with a smile so venomous that my arms raised goosebumps.” Beya rubbed her arms in memory.

“Your mother was likely trying to protect her, but when Emira Niobe’s fingers twitched towards the bassinet where Auralia had been lying quietly, it caught Lilianna’s attention.

““What is this, I spy?’ Her gaze seized upon Auralia, who was the most silent, mild of lambs even then. ‘One of your daughters? I was under the assumption it was a pair. Ah well,’ she sighed with chagrin. My blood ran cold at that sound.”

Beya’s voice dropped. “Lilianna said, ‘You, girl, I curse to life until your eighteenth year, whereby you will be felled by a most innocuous thing: a spindle. You, my dear, will die, of course.’ She surveyed the crowd before her and added, ‘And yes, I suppose it is only fitting that the rest of your Emirdom suffer with you.’ Casually, she pronounced, ‘I sentence all those in



Aquia to an eternity of slumber. This is the price for the destruction of Astero and thus shall it be paid.”

“Seasons!” I cursed.

“Mind your language,” Beya reprimanded. “Then, a tight coldness squeezed my breath. As the throttling subsided, the wind grew stronger, sharp and stinging my cheeks, until your mother, clutching Auralia, fell against the Emir, who enveloped them both in his arms. Eyes clenched shut, the crowd huddled against each other, eager to avoid the cutting wind. When it subsided, we uncovered our faces. But Lilianna had disappeared.

“A sinuous figure unwound from the shadows behind the crowd and passed me. He had a form like smoke, at times seemingly solid but then appearing to vanish entirely. In a stomach-lurching flash, he stood before the dais.

“Cradling Auralia close to her bosom, face crumpled with fear, your mother implored, ‘Is there anything you can do, Ambassador? You are, after all, a djinn. Surely there is something in your power...?’

“And when he spoke...his voice was husky and I felt as if my skin was being brushed by hot sand, sweeping away the damp chill Lilianna had brought with her. ‘For the matter I share with your lineage, Cousin, I will do what I can. Only the Pari can completely remove the enchantment. No magic can entirely undo the spells of another, but there is some small work I can do.’

“Such hope kindled in their eyes and your mother and father watched with taut breaths as the djinn unfurled his long fingers over Auralia. Addressing the Emir and Emira, he said, ‘I am afraid there is only so much of the curse I can change. It has been tightly cast and it already molds to your daughter like a second skin.’

“‘Whatever you can do,’ the Emir replied gruffly.

“The djinn’s voice deepened and slowly he began to shiver and shine with power. Whereas Lilianna’s magic had shuddered through me and all of us, the ambassador was focused only on Auralia. He said, ‘You will indeed be felled by a spindle upon your eighteenth birthday, but instead of death, this assault will send you to sleep from which you will be wakened by true love’s kiss. And when you rise, the remainder of Aquia will wake with you.’

The djinn heaved a breath and slumped tiredly. “There. That is all I can do...” After he was done, your parents swore all those in attendance to secrecy. And I have not spoken of it until today.”

Beya settled back in her chair, finished.

“So it was my fault? This is all my fault?” As the story of the curse had unfolded, that had been all I could think. The only Aquian who deserved an eternity of slumber was me. I waited for her to reassure me that I was being silly, hoping she would do so, fearing that she would not.

Beya said nothing and to fill the silence and block my spiraling thoughts, I asked, “Is that why you are all so protective of Auralia? Because of the curse? But isn’t it until our eighteenth

birthday? Surely she can have her freedom until then?” Anything, anything to tell me that I had not recklessly put my twin in harm’s way with today’s heedless adventure.

“Emira Niobe wanted to take no chances that Lilianna would find her and undo the djinn’s work.”

“Does Auralia know of the curse?”

“No, and you must not say anything,” she said sharply and for a moment, she looked frightened. “After it happened, the Emir and Emira decreed it death for anyone to speak of it to either of you. Should your parents speak of it to you, you must feign ignorance.”

I was taken aback by their brutality. “Someone ought to tell her,” I said. Of all people, Auralia had a right to know that her life would come to a sudden stop in two years. I thought of how eager she was to grow up and wondered if she would still feel the same if she knew what adulthood held for her.

“Perhaps your mother and father are doing so right now.”

Yet, how could they have kept such an immense and obviously public event from our ears for sixteen years? It seemed that many people knew, but no one had breathed a word to us. Something twisted in me—betrayal. I was not a child. This was my life, Seasons, it was my doing: I had a right to know. “Do our siblings know? Of the curse, I mean.”

She rolled back her eyes as she reckoned the figures. “It is likely your older sisters have some idea and your brothers as well. They were old enough to remember.”

After she left, I gazed out of the window and tried to piece together what Beya had just told me and carve a place for this tale in my childhood. *Have there been any hints?* As I thought about it, I realized that there had always been indications, even in strange little things like how we had never been taught to spin, although that was a wifely skill all noblewomen learned—if only for appearances. I had never complained of the gap in our education.

Then: *How is the emirdom to function?* And what would happen to the rest of Ghalain? Aquia is a great breadbasket for the kingdom and Queen Erina relied upon the Aquian grain barges that flowed down the Menander to keep Ghalain fed.

Through it all, one phrase resounded in my skull like a deafening heartbeat:

*It was my fault. It was my fault.*

At the thought of a cold, comatose Auralia, her undeniable future, my heart shriveled. Tears hazed and then blinded my vision as my mind conjured up images of each member of my family, prone and unconscious. A small, introspective part of me knew the queerness of my grief. After all, I would be just asleep beside them and even if it were Auralia on whom the breaking of the spell hinged, ultimately, no one would suffer anymore than the other. Yet, that ever-twisting knot between causation and correlation, between my birth and that lightning strike, coiled poisonously in my stomach. Perhaps my parents had been right in keeping me ignorant.

Taking a breath, I pressed my tear-sticky cheeks to the cool window. The burnt stump of the cause of my misery lay faintly beyond. Peering through the blur of my breath on the window,

I thought I saw tall figures winding through the field and circling the immense stump, but when I squinted, only a sliced orange moon loomed in the dark violet sky, surrounded by a halo of stars.



## *Chapter Two*

Over the days following the misadventure, the dispersed members of my family reconverged upon Aquia, spouses and children in tow. Evra and Ceara, both a handful of years older than me, had already been wed, Evra to the heir of another emirdom and Ceara to one of Ghalain's wealthiest lords. In addition to having borne twins, my mother had also birthed triplets, and of Gareth, Necolai, and Danyal, only Danyal was unmarried and still lived with us. While Ceara trained with our mother as heir to Aquia, Gareth and Necolai had enlisted as officers in the army and spent much of their time in Nyneveh, the capital—that is when they were not returning home to Aquia or to their wives' abodes to eat us out of house and hearth. When my time came, I did not know what I would do. Marriage, certainly, but I hoped that wedlock would not be the pinnacle of my achievement.

The days after Beya's revelation, I moped around the palace, avoiding servants and family alike. My parents had yet to officially reveal the news to us, but whenever I met my father's gaze, I thought I read reproach.

"Selene!" Auralia sang out as she entered our room. She did not understand why I had become so quiet and had been doing her best to draw me out of my shell, even suggesting a return to the creek, an idea I had shot down with untoward vehemence. Still, her cheery demeanor did not flag, but I could not help but think that had she known of the curse and my fault in it, she would not have been so concerned with my well-being. "Mother and Father have called a family meeting!"

An icy lump formed in my throat. "Alright."

She lowered her voice. "I wish you would tell me what the matter was, Lina. You have been acting so queer since the night of the creek. What happened?" She had posed the same question hundreds of times in the same warm and concerned voice.

I only bit my lip in response, knowing that I did not deserve such a caring sister.

"Very well," she huffed. I trailed listlessly behind her into the library where my parents lounged in twin leather armchairs surrounded by their children. Built long ago by an Emir of Aquia as a courtship gift, the library was a narrow room, but tall, with grand windows and book-lined shelves for walls. The curtains were drawn against the night and a carefully-contained fire burned in the hearth, throwing up shadows against the dark wood.

With a sense of foreboding, I folded into the soft crimson rug, ignoring Evra's gesturing towards the seat beside her.

"What's toward, Mother?" puffed Necolai. He had recently been promoted to captain and was never far from his uniform. The mustachios were a new affectation and had I been in any other mood, I would have joined Gareth, Danyal, and Gieneve in their mockery.

"Yes, Mother," Gareth said, stroking a pretend mustache and puffing out his chest. Nic affected not to notice.

"Don't taunt your brother," my mother chided, although her perfect lips quirked with laughter. Taking their cues from her, Evra and Ceara hid their smirks behind their hands.

"Wouldn't dream of it, no sir," said Danyal, mimicking Necolai's deep baritone precisely. Nic reddened. "I will have you know—!"

"Boys, boys," Father said seriously, but his indigo blue eyes, which were just like mine, were amused. "We have important family business to discuss today."

"Ooh," chorused my siblings and then promptly broke out into laughter. I remained silent.

"I've birthed a family of jesters!" my mother bemoaned, pushing back a lock of golden-brown hair.

"Yes, and they have inherited it from you!" my father shot back to their enjoyment, but the grin quickly faded from his face. He reached out a hand and squeezed my mother's fingers.

She took a deep breath and spoke. "I am afraid though that there is a very serious matter your father and I need to discuss with you today. Some of you may know some of it—or all of it—but you should hear the whole story from us."

Evra and Ceara nodded with hesitant wisdom, and the triplets suddenly grew serious, but Gieneve and Auralia seemed perplexed, clueless. Auralia tried to meet my eye, but I stubbornly traced the diamond and leaf-patterned rug.

"We should not have waited this long to say something," Mother added, anxiously twisting the yellow silk of her dress.

"But we...we did not wish to cast a shadow over your lives," Father continued. He crossed his legs and his shining black boots reflected flashed red-gold with candlelight.

"Well, what the bloody Seasons is it then?" Gieneve demanded, her doll-like countenance fierce. Looking around, she said, "Seems as if everyone here has a clue as to what's going on except Rory and me."

Auralia glanced my way again and this time, I could not look away fast enough to avoid her. I could read the betrayal on her face. I had never kept a secret from her, especially one that was apparently this immense. She bit her lip and then looked down, locking her attention onto her amaranth gown.

My mother and father elaborated on the story, maintaining the same narrative Beya had established. Evra reached out and held Auralia's hand tenderly when they began speaking of the curse itself.

“Selene had fallen ill that day and so you were the only one at the Naming ceremony, so, I think, the curse would have fallen on both you and Selene, but it ended up being only you,” Mother explained to Auralia.

Father said, “This is also why we tried to keep you as close to the Mehal as possible. We saw how the djinn was able to, thankfully, alter the curse, but what if the Pari found you and reverted it back to its original form—or worse.”

Mother laughed, a brittle sound. “It was lucky that you were the one cursed—we would have had a time keeping Selene within the grounds.”

“Lucky. Yes,” Auralia replied through cold lips.

“Oh, that’s not what I meant, dearest!” Mother cried with sincere regret, but Auralia dashed from the room.

Mother rose stiffly and raced after her. I should have joined her, but I was bound to my place by the questions pouring from my siblings.

Ceara turned to Father. “I understand why you wished to keep Auralia close, but why not Selene? What if the Pari found her and used her to magnify the curse?”

I shivered. Had I been endangering my family with my ramblings?

Father shook his head and cold relief swept through me. “They would know Auralia. After all, she had been marked by powerful magic, both their own and that of the Djinnat. How would they recognize Selene from any other Aquian or any other family member? I acknowledge there was a small risk, but for a life cut short—” Father choked and could speak no more.

“Have you tried breaking it? Finding a way around it?” Evra asked quietly, a sorrowful tone in her musical voice. Her heavy lashes were downcast.

Clearing his throat, Father explained, “We have spoken to counselors, to the djinn to ask them to look further into the curse, but there is nothing they can do. We sent an embassy to the Pari some years back, but they transformed the dignitaries into asses.” He coughed.

“Well, that wasn’t *too* much of a stretch,” Danyal quipped, astonishingly keeping his good humor.

“So, in two years, we shall all be...*asleep*?” Evra said. Her brow quirked.

“Yes,” Father answered heavily. “I am afraid...I have failed you children.”

*No—I have failed you!* I thought in despair.

Eyes shining, Gieneve laid her head on Father’s knee. “It was those bleeding Pari, Pa.”

Necolai twisted his hands in frustration. “I cannot believe that this is it, that we are predestined to this fate. This is how it will end?”

“Not an *ending*,” Ceara said. She had always been the coolest, the most intellectual of us. I had always thought that if she had not been heir to Aquia, she would have donned black robes and lived her life as a scholar in one of Ghalain’s universities. “At the very maximum, an eternity of somnolence, but should Auralia’s ‘one true love’ awaken her, then we can rise much sooner.”

“Yes, I feel much better now, Ceara, thanks,” Gareth drawled.

Ceara’s expression darkened, but in her non-confrontational way, she remained silent.

Gareth turned to me. His dark hair brushed the shoulders of his cream-colored coat. “Looks like it’s all your fault, Len.” He laughed. “Talk about damned terrible timing, eh?”

I choked, turning my suddenly tearful eyes away from my family.

“Gareth...” my father said warningly.

But I was certain I heard a note of accord.



### *Chapter Three*

Auralia and I spoke little after that meeting and my gloom now enveloped her as well. Although I wanted to say something, share our grief now that everything had been revealed, she managed to rise earlier than me, but come to bed later. If I ever made an effort to speak to her in the dark, as we usually did each night before bed, I would only be answered by her steady breaths. Without Auralia, I passed much of my time sneaking into taverns under the amused eye of my brothers or embroidering and gossiping with my older sisters, or cavorting with Gieneve. I did what I could to surmount my depression, to stymie the black fog that threatened to engulf my mind. Every time I turned a corner and saw a familiar face, I could not but wish that I could flee from this guilt, leave this world behind where I had single-handedly destroyed thousands of futures.

Despite this veritable circus of siblings, my days still felt empty without Auralia. This distance certainly dampened our sixteenth birthday festivities. Sixteenth birthdays were special since they announced for both young men and women that they were ready to wed. Four hundred years ago, Felisizia the Great had pushed the age of marriage of all Ghalainis to sixteen. She herself had been wed at twelve to a much-older groom and the marriage had been a famously unhappy one. Most Ghalainis still become betrothed long before that.

For me, this birthday came packaged as a ticking countdown. Whenever anyone congratulated me on my upcoming birthday, my mind could not help but click through the numbers and produce that ever lessening figure: two years and growing closer every day.

In spite of Auralia's avoidance, I thought I would finally have a chance to properly speak with her the evening of our birthday ball.

We dismissed our maids and helped each other dress, something we had done since we were ten. However, Auralia's fingers were stiff and unnatural as she helped me button my silver gown with its belled sleeves—she had a matching one of gold—and my attempts to draw her into conversation were met with short formality.

“Are you excited for the ball, Rory?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think of these new dresses?”

“Lovely.”



Irritated by her rebuffs, I stopped trying to make conversation. When she slipped me a shyly apologetic smile a few minutes later, with a flash of heady anger, I looked her square in the eye and after a moment, looked away with disinterest. I wanted to take it back as soon as I had done it. After all, what right did I have to throw any kind of attitude around with anyone and especially with Auralia?

The air between us grew stonier, cold, like a hard permafrost that breaks spades with its refusal to yield.

Our feet pounded an angry rhythm down the stairs. When we met our escorts at the bottom, I was extremely disappointed to see that Ferdas was waiting for Auralia, while I was saddled with Gwydion, one of the numerous sons of lords my mother had been trying to prospect. He was not bad looking, with a halo of gold surrounding his tan face, apple green eyes, and charm to spare. Despite this personable demeanor, or maybe even because of it, I could not bring myself to fully like him. Who knew what he hid behind his bewitching grin? It did not occur to me until much later that perhaps he had rankled me so much because we were so very alike.

The aforementioned was now snaking his arm around my waist, and I was hard pressed not to extract my painted fan and thwack him across his smarmy face. The boys appeared entirely oblivious to the tension between Auralia and myself, in that way only teenage boys can manage. They provided enough jovial banter between them to compensate for our silence. I was unable to pay even cursory attention. How could I, what with Auralia leaning on Ferdas, as if for support but *actually* doing so to irritate me? His foolish grin at her sweet smiles was enough to chip at my heart.

I was so concerned with glowering at Auralia that I was briefly blinded as the doors of the Great Hall—the same hall in which Lilianna had cursed us—swung open for our grand entrance, revealing a crowd of nobles, friends, and family. Scents enveloped us: the flowery perfume of ladies of course, but also the savory and spicy aromas of roast chicken and lamb, the fresh, sweet scent of bright cut, cinnamon-sprinkled fruit as vibrant as jewels on their silver platters, all laced with sugary hints of cake and sweets. I drew in a deep breath, exulting in the bouquet. Hearing my breath, Gwydion eyed me strangely. His lips quirked. I flushed.

*Well, I will just have to have a smashing time,* I resolved. Determinedly, I avoided the tinny voice in my head that wondered if I deserved this good time, celebrating the sixteenth anniversary of my role as harbinger of Aquia's curse.

Despite my unease with Gwydion, he was a more than adequate dinner companion. His anecdotes left me breathless with laughter, and sometimes, when our gazes met, my heart would jolt, my breath stop. My mood lifted, my rumbling conscience and the nastiness with Auralia temporarily shoved beneath the gleam of gifts and cake. Spotting my enjoyment with that canny knack brothers have for teasing, Gareth and Danyal stretched lovelorn faces in my direction. Had my parents not been present, I would have happily lobbed them with potatoes. Considering the circumstances, I satisfied myself with a discreetly made rude hand gesture, which only invited further cackles.

My father, thankfully not seeing my exchange with my brothers, cocked his head to one side to hear Gwydion finish his story. “Are you enjoying yourself then, Selene?” he inquired, his smile soft. He grasped my hand and beneath the silkiness of my own skin, I could feel the fragile roughness of his palm.

“Oh, yes Father!” I exclaimed. “This has been so wonderful. Thank you so much for doing this for us.” I reached over and gave him a quick, tight hug, breathing in his Father-y scent of cardamom, clean sweat, and something that carried the power of contentment.

My mother leaned into the conversation. “And no gratitude for me?” she asked, humor sparking in her hazel eyes. I marveled at how calmly they could comport themselves despite the expiration date set on their very way of life—but then again, they had near sixteen years of practice. I followed their example as best I could.

“You too, Mother,” I said, grinning and lifting her hand to my lips.

Leaning across the table, disregarding the way her umber gown spilled into the soup tureen, she kissed me on the forehead. Turning to Father, she said, “We have lovely daughters, do we not, Riagan?”

“The best,” I piped.

“Now, let’s not get carried away...” Mother said, straightening her spiked golden diadem which had tipped over her eye. With a sudden twinge, the curse curled its tendrils of guilt tighter around me.

“And you, Gwydion?” asked my father courteously, turning to him “Are you enjoying yourself, my boy?”

“Yes sir,” Gwydion said, smiling genially. “It has been a delight, spending further time with Princess Selene.”

“I am a Marquise in my own right,” I primly reminded Gwydion. “Quite independent of my father’s title, thank you.”

“But aren’t you a Marquise because of your grandmother’s estate in Carez?” Gwydion challenged. His knee brushed against my leg. Once, then twice, then held steady. I tried to suppress my flush. “Not for any great service you performed for Ghalain or Aquia,” he continued, a devilish glint in his eye.

“Touché.” I wondered at how thoroughly Gwydion had researched me. I would be a match of a lifetime for him. While his father was a wealthy lord, I was of an Emirati line and had the chance to one day, possibly, contend for the Bronze Throne.

Father looked on with pleasure, his imagination no doubt misting with black-haired green-eyed babies or blue-eyed blonde-haired babies. *Oh his sad delusions*, I thought, world-wise in my newly minted sixteen years. I ignored my blush.

Standing, Father clapped his hands to draw the attention of the guests. “I would like to thank you for coming and partaking in our joy on this memorable birthday. Let us now proceed to the ballroom and dance in honor of my beautiful daughters, Auralia and Selene.”

Ladies pulled on their gloves, young men whooped, and the assembly clattered to the ballroom, with its high arched ceilings, tiled with patterned mosaics and crystal chandeliers imported from Hademer—very expensive but with an exquisiteness well worth the price. (At least, that was how Mother had defended the purchase to Father.) The musicians strummed their lyres and beat out a jolly tune with their drums. Extending a hand to me and another to Auralia, my father led us into the hall. Once on the smooth marble floor, he dropped Auralia's hand, and began twirling me around. I did not miss Auralia's glare as she partnered with sandy-haired Necolai.

"Oh, my Selene," Father said, his grin sparkling.

"Oh, my Father."

He roared with laughter. "You've always been the cheeky one, haven't you?" His voice grew soft. "I want you to know that I admire you for the strong and intelligent young woman you have grown into—especially in these last few days."

My heart welling, I surreptitiously wiped a stray tear with a gloved finger. "I love you, Father." *I am sorry, Father.*

We applauded politely for the musicians as the song ended. He bowed formally to me before taking Auralia's hand. Briefly, I wondered what he would say to her, whether he would admire her for being strong and intelligent. *Probably more like proper, polite, and decorous.*

I was not left idle for long. Gwydion approached me. Casting a hopeful look at Ferdas, who had already wound his arms around a buxom brunette in periwinkle, I unenthusiastically took Gwydion's proffered hand. He was not a bad dancer and I even felt graceful in his arms, until Auralia shot me another baleful glare and I stumbled against him.

He laughed huskily and I could feel the sound rumble from his chest. "Easy, milady. Please do not try to take my virtue in front of this whole audience. I could never resist such a fearsome suitor as you and my honor could not survive the scandal!"

"Shut up."

The night wore on and as the candlelight waxed low against the golden stone walls, couples began departing. While I once more danced with Gwydion, my ear caught a familiar low chuckle. I whipped my head around just in time to see Auralia leading Ferdas out of the hall. Eyes widening, I excused myself and padded silently behind them, careful not to let my silver heels clack.

My skin clammy, anxiety churned in my gut. *I should turn back*, I thought. *No happiness can come of this.* Yet, I stubbornly persisted until I stumbled upon them behind a tapestry door. Auralia leaned close to Ferdas, her golden hair tumbling around her shoulders, her fingers locked around his neck. His thumb traced her collarbone and whatever she whispered in his ear made him grin. I gasped. Auralia's unreadable gaze met mine through the small sliver of space between the tapestry and wall. Ferdas, of course, noticed none of it. I backed away.

Listlessly, I wandered through the palace halls, occasionally bumping into departing guests and busily tidying servants. I lowered my head and ignored their greetings and well-wishes.

Walking to the garden, I drew my arms around me against the chill. I could understand her anger. After all, it was me. It was me. I had done this. I had been born and lightning had struck the First Tree and the Pari had cursed us all for it.

Moonlight cast the neat hedges and rosebushes in silver. Sitting on a marble bench, the fountain dripping steadily, I kicked the snow-white pebbles at my feet. I needed to make this right—but how?



## Chapter Four

Late into the night, once the last drunk had been bid farewell, my parents summoned me to their sitting chamber. Nervously, I walked in and was instantly bathed in the heat of the changing firelight. The dim light and the warmth made me want to wrap myself in my covers and fall fast asleep. I suppressed a yawn. My parents sat at a small table, no longer in their finery, but in simple tunics and robes.

“Come sit down, Selene,” my father said, indicating a chair. My mother stirred sugar into her cup of tea. The spoon chimed against the porcelain. “What did you think of your party?”

“It was wonderful, thank you very much.”

My mother smiled, deepening the dimples in the corners of her mouth. “You know what a sixteenth birthday announces to the world, dear?”

I knew. *Readiness for marriage*. Something in my chest tightened and I could not say anything. My hands clenched in my lap.

Mother’s hazel eyes were knowing, understanding. “While you were in the gardens, Gwydion’s father, Lord Wiliem, asked for your hand on his son’s behalf.”

I remembered that Lord Wiliem had been a great friend of my father’s from the university at Bahart, where my father had met my mother, the charming heiress of Aquia, at a ball hosted by Emira Corrine. My mother had lost her glove during the soirée (my father had filched it). Using the excuse, he found her the next day, returned the glove, and extended an invitation to walk in the gardens. They were engaged in a month.

“What do you think?” my father asked eagerly

I could think of many things. While Lord Wiliem was one of the wealthiest lords in Aquia, he certainly was not an emir and had not my sister Evra contracted a match with Darsepol’s heir? Ferdas’ face flashed through my mind too, but then I remembered Auralia and banished the thought. However, if the curse would inevitably doom us to sleep, then what could the long-term point of such a match be? But seeing my parents’ expectant faces and thinking of the impossibility of long-term plans due merely to my birth, I replied, “Whatever will please you, will please me.”

In a particular lurch of guilt, I thought, *This is probably one of the few opportunities I have to make my parents happy*. It was the very least I could do.

My mother appeared a touch hesitant, perhaps sensing the spiritlessness behind my response. Father bore it no mind. “Wonderful,” he said excitedly. “Wiliem wishes to see you two wed by the end of the year, and I cannot fault his impatience! Now, off to bed with you, my love.”

Obediently, I dipped a curtsy and left, suddenly a woman betrothed.

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I dove into the wedding preparations to distract myself from my continuously disintegrating relationship with Auralia. After that night, I could not look at her without feeling a tumult of confusing emotions, which added to the already unpleasant cocktail of culpability. Despite his initial role in the breakdown of mine and Auralia’s relations, after my betrothal, Ferdas rarely crossed my mind.

Gieneve and I, under our mother’s guidance, pored over menus and dress designs. We sketched both lavish and ludicrous gowns and there were brief moments during which it felt as though everything in our lives had righted itself once more. I watched Gieneve flit about lightly with a strange, guilty nostalgia. I could see how my family had repressed the secret of the curse for all these years. If it was inevitable and we were powerless in its face, it was senseless to let it dictate our lives.

Occasionally, Gwydion would join in our shenanigans and my heart would jolt uncomfortably in his presence. Sometimes, Auralia would furtively hover at the threshold, while Gen and I howled at the absurdity of our drawings, particularly one which called for a wide skirt, ringed by stiff silver hoops, on which Gieneve insisted would perch tiny animals. “For fertility! For fertility!” she cackled, brushing her black hair away from her face. We collapsed with laughter at the thought of me walking through the temple with a menagerie swinging from my hips. But for all her peeking, Auralia never said a word and I never invited her to join us. If we ever made unsteady eye contact, she would dart away.

A few nights after the engagement, I ventured to the plains, near the huge stump of the Tree. Once, it had been a favorite game of young children visiting the Mehal to sneak outside and wait for the Pari to arrive. Gwydion had once attested that a little pari girl had kissed him, a claim we had all dismissed as empty bragging. Nonetheless, whenever I had lurked by the remnants of Astero, waiting for the Pari, I would fall under the spell of peaceful sleep, visited by glittering and joyful dreams. The Pari may particularly revere the tree, but its power is for all those who walk the earth.

That night, with guilt overwhelming and sleep eluding me, I fell back into the old pattern. Slipping past the careful watch of the guards, I arrived before the stump, which stood wider than a dozen oxen. Despite being shorn, it still towered heads and heads above me. Waiting for peace to come, I shivered in my thin silk gown, which afforded little protection against the insistent breeze. I wished that I had had the foresight to bring a cloak.

On the edge of sleep, in that realm where dream bleeds fluidly into reality, I was approached by a girl of bewitching beauty. She stepped towards me through the mist, her goldenrod wings, striped with black, flapping ponderously behind her. I blinked. *Seasons!* Her face reminded me of Beya's description of Lilianna, although certainly she was too young to be the Pari Queen herself. *Perhaps a daughter*, I thought absently.

"So you, Selene, are the one to marry my Gwydion," she said, her voice lilting musically. The iridescent fabric of her gown fluttered in the breeze. I wondered how she could keep from shivering.

Her *Gwydion*? I eyed her warily. The impossibly tense recent history between my family and the Pari felt heavy between us. "If I am, what is it to you?" I flinched. The words sounded more pugnacious than I had meant them to.

She chuckled unkindly. The sound thundered to my core. "I would advise you to let his father's suit die, for indeed, it is his father pressing this. Why would he seek you when I have wholly given myself to him?"

Uncertainly, I replied, "Alright?" I had never in my life found my mind so leaden and witless.

With a final disdainful look, she walked away, and, to my tired eyes at least, faded into the fog.

Thoughts of sleeping beneath the remnants of Astero were driven from my suddenly enlivened mind as it slowly worked to make sense of the encounter. Already, it was fading away from reality and into dream. The Pari were real, certainly, but why would she seek me out—not to claim retribution for the First Tree, but to frighten me from Gwydion? Shaken, I stumbled back to the castle. Mine and Auralia's rooms had been separated, for it is only proper for a woman betrothed to have her own chambers. It was a provision I was thankful for.

Lighting a candle, I fell edgily into the still-unfamiliar bed. Could it be true? Could Gwydion have a pari lover? It sounded absurd. If it were true, a part of me could not help but congratulate him on his conquest. Quite a coup. Nonetheless, if this were true, I was *annoyed*. He thought to marry me, Marquise of Carez, daughter of the Emira of Aquia, a descendant of kings and djinnat, and then be disloyal? He would not dare. Who was he to think he could get away with that? Ass. Some of my guilt dissipated in self-righteous anger. I felt more myself than I had in weeks.

And then there was the portion of me, always so stupid, that was hurt, that had enjoyed Gwydion's flirtations more than I would care to admit. However repellent I found him, there was a quality which drew me to him like a moth to candlelight. Overblown and dramatized as my relationship with Auralia had recently become, I was eager to start afresh—*But if Gwydion is playing me for a fool, then Seasons damn him*.

*But wouldn't it be fair*, I thought, *if the girl whose birth had caused such strife with the Pari were to have her home and married life destroyed by one of them? A much neater justice than any of Lilianna's curses*.

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The next evening, while the rest of my family was at dinner, I dashed off a letter and instructed the dark-haired maid I used as my courier, "I need you to deliver this letter to Lord Gwydion and tell him to hasten his response."

I wondered if I was doing right. It certainly was not *proper*, but was it *right*? Propriety had never been a problem for me. I knew my parents had arranged the match because they thought it best, that Gwydion and I were well-suited. For moment, I allowed myself to fantasize about married life with Gwydion: building a home together, raising children, making love. I flushed at the last. Yet, the *pari* had shaken me and I was being slowly squeezed by the fear of two years and the smallness of that period. How could something so brief be so important?

A knock sounded on the parlor door and I sat up against the pillows. "Come in."

I scrambled up to sit as Gwydion strolled into my chamber. He was handsome in his customary coat and breeches, a warm brown this time. My breath caught in my throat. Briefly, I reconsidered my desire to end the betrothal...but then he spoke.

"Now, this was something I did not expect to see until our wedding night. Are we a little eager, Selene?"

"Ugh," I cringed, my lip curling with disgust. I felt more sure about my decision. This was a man who really needed no wife other than this left hand. I envisioned our marriage again and this time, it ended within minutes of our nuptials, with him killed by me for his idiocy.

"I must say, I am shocked at this sudden change in sentiment."

"Tell me about that brown-haired *pari* maid," I countered genially.

Had I not been looking for it, I would have missed the flicker of emotion that passed over his face. The flash was enough to momentarily wind me.

He blinked slowly. "I do not know what *pari* you speak of."

I fixed him with a level stare.

He tried again, stroking my hand gently. "I assure you, you have no reason to fear a...lack of affection from me, my love."

"Seriously," I snorted, "do not inconvenience yourself on my behalf, *my love*. Besides Gwydion, you know the two of us could never last together happily. I am ending our betrothal. You need someone milder, who will not rise to your baits so easily." *And who could not eviscerate and emasculate you before breakfast without blinking an eye.* He seemed like the type of boy who could not take a joke at his expense.

His gaze suddenly grew intense and he inched closer until only a breath separated us. My hand crawled to his chest. And shoved him away.

"But, Selene—" he protested.

"But nothing. Leave."



He pursed his lips in annoyance, but he could not countermand an order from me. After all, I outranked him and he was a guest in my home. He departed, declaring, “You are still my fiancée, Selene. I will see us wed.”

I rolled my eyes at his back, my spirit rapidly leavening. Finally, I had done something right. Empowered, I set the wheels in motion for a decision that would shape the course of my life.

From my desk, I plucked a peacock quill and set it to good vellum. Dipping the pen in the inkwell, I began to write.

*Dearest Family,*

*I am leaving Aquia for the time being. I cannot marry Gwydion nor can I bear to stay in Aquia, knowing that my birth will bring you all to such an end. Everywhere I look, I cannot but think I have ruined your life—and yours—and yours. I cannot live like this. I must go.*

*Selene*

I wished I could give them a proper goodbye, perhaps speak to Auralia again, but that was a vain impossibility. I doubted they would have even wished to see me, all things considered. Surely some part of them would rejoice that the curse-bringer would no longer darken their home.

*It will be an adventure*, I told myself. Visions of dancing in taverns, laughing and drinking ale past midnight, and living alone in a humble cottage became increasingly more romantic. I grew giddy at the thought of this new world unfolding before me with its limitless possibilities—and promise of anonymity.

Flinging my wardrobe open, I pulled out gowns in the subdued colors I favored, alongside cloaks, gloves, a riding hat, undergarments, nightgowns, books, jewelry, baubles, money until the pile of “essentials” I had accumulated would have needed a wagon to cart away. Snorting at the image of running away followed by a caravan, I meticulously pared away the nonessentials until I could pack my goods into two satchels and a saddlebag. My heart grew tight at the sight of the worldly goods that would remain to me once I departed. The gleam of adventure faded somewhat. I took a small oil portrait of my family from my dresser, wrapped it in another dress, and stuffed it in a satchel. Wherever I would be, my family’s faces would never be far.

Although it had been a warm day, Aquian autumn nights ran chilly, and I wore two riding dresses, thick stockings, and warm boots. My outer dress was midnight blue to better blend with the night—although the horse I would be riding would likely detract from the camouflage of my dress. I dropped coins into several velvet purses and hid the money about my person. The

amount of money I carried would surely be enough to see me a modest lifestyle for a year. I did not know when I would return.

How many years would I go without seeing my family, no word, nothing? Repercussions tumbled through my mind. It was a heartbreaking prospect, but I stubbornly willed my tears away. Even my family's absence would be better than feeling that my very existence had devastated their futures each time I saw them. *And maybe, I hoped, if the Pari find me gone, they shall lift the curse.* But that was a thin hope.

Shouldering my satchels, I walked with exaggerated confidence through the Mehal. Since it was dinner, the halls were empty and had anyone seen me, I would have said that I planned on camping out by the creek tonight. Nothing would seem amiss. After all, it was not as if I had never done this before: just a few weeks prior, I had camped out with Gieneve and Gareth and had retrieved food from the kitchen. *I am being perfectly normal*, I reminded myself. I paused. What if I were to join them for dinner, one last time...? Capture memories of my family so I could have something to reflect upon after I was gone? I shook my head. It was impossible. If I lingered, I would never leave.

Luckily, I met no one and boldly strode into the inviting warmth of the kitchen. "Nechele," I said to a passing kitchen maid, who often provided snacks for my outings.

She bobbed a short curtsy. "Yes, Princess?"

"Could you please give me a loaf of bread, some meat, cheese, and fruit—autumn apples and pears. Fit it into a covered basket, please."

"You going camping again, your Highness?" she said with an amiable smile, filling a woven basket with flaky spiced meat pastries, soft white cheeses, and ripe fruits.

"Yes," I replied, trying to sound as honest as possible.

She handed the basket to me. "Well, have fun!"

My palms were clammy from nerves. The basket handle nearly slipped through my fingers. "Thank you so much, Nechele!"

Before anyone else could see me, I slipped from the kitchens, out of the Mehal, and to the stables. With each step, I gave thanks for my wayward habits. No one would think it stranger than usual to see me wandering the grounds—or galloping away. I was always pulling mildly absurd stunts like this. The stableboys only echoed Nechele's question about camping as they saddled my mare, Cinnamon. By the time I mounted Cinnamon, my legs trembled furiously, but every time I balked, I thought of Auralia, of Aquia, and of the curse I had brought with my first breath.

As I urged Cinnamon faster, something in my chest came unbound, a silk ribbon waving in the wind, a great weight I was leaving behind in those hills I called home. I let out a wild laugh under the bright glow of the shadowy grinning moon. I was free.



## *Chapter Five*

I had been riding Cinnamon almost without break for two days and was about ready to topple out of the saddle. I could not even fathom how Cinnamon herself was feeling. I had managed to catch snatches of sleep beneath bushes during the night and I could only imagine how I had begun to smell. The path I had taken was discreet, off the main road, but that also made it difficult to follow, for it was not maintained and often overgrown. The ride itself had been mostly uneventful—if tiring, but the number of times I had thought I had heard the hoofbeats of a search party was countless and I was sure that I would have gray streaking my night black hair after this.

In my haste, I had forgotten to pack a basic essential: a map. It had slipped my mind somewhere between the second packing and the third unpacking. As a result, I had only the vaguest idea of where I was going. I intended on staying in the second-largest town in Ghalain, a port city named Clemen, in the neighboring emirdom of Viziéra—although my ignorance of the precise location of Clemen was a gaping hole in my plan. It would be easy to become one of the throng in Clemen.

A short time before noon on the second day, I reached a small farming village. Unloading Cinnamon of the bags, I walked hooded into the village's only inn. I nearly started out of my skin when I heard one of the several men gossiping at a table mention my name. "I heard the Lady Selene up and ran from her wedding!" he laughed. His voice was a singsong peasant drawl. "If my Liza had done that, Seasons know what I would have done with myself."

"She's a wild one, eh? My niece that works at the Mehal says she's a nice girl—but ass-headed stubborn," said a brown-haired man, carefully carving a block of wood. I could discern the faintest shape of a swan.

I prickled at being called ass-headed stubborn, but knew enough to keep my consternation to myself. "Pardon me. Can someone tie up my horse and bring me a meal please?"

The man who had a daughter named Liza gestured for an idling youth. The boy eyed me appraisingly and then apparently decided that filthy and bedraggled was not so attractive after all.

"Saul, tie the lady's horse!" The innkeeper smiled, revealing crooked teeth. "We have a delicious beef stew today, would that please you?"

“Anything!” I exclaimed. I had not realized running away was such hard work, and I had devoured most of Nechele’s basket in the space of a day. (Whenever I grew bored, I would eat an apple, and so on.) “Would it also be possible for me to borrow a room for a moment to wash my face and change my dress?”

“Of course. Narine!” The girl by the door raised her head sulkily. “Get the lady a warm wash basin and take her to the room. It will be an extra copper,” he added to me.

I was taken aback. So much for the courtesy of small towns. “For the mere use of a basin and a few brief moments to change my clothes? Good sir, I would rather remain dirty than be taken for a fool. Call your girl back. I will not be changing. And you may keep your stew. I will not be dining either.” I made to leave, but the innkeeper called me back.

“Fine, fine!” he said quickly. “Stay. You can use the basin for free.”

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I thanked him and sprinted up the stairs to the dingy room and cracked basin with its blessedly steaming water. Compulsively checking my money to ensure that I had not lost it, I stripped out of my riding dresses. My body sighed with relief at its release. Quickly, I sponged myself clean, cringing at the water’s now gray pallor. Garbing myself in fresh clothes, I felt wonderful as I descended the stairs.

As the innkeeper placed the hot beef stew before me, I asked, “Could you oblige me by telling me how to reach Clemen?” The stew might have been basic, but it was hearty and I had appreciated no delicacy whipped up by our palace chefs. I devoured it hungrily.

“Clemen, eh? Not too far from here. A day’s ride straight east down the road. If you take the path right, you should be there with the night. You can’t miss it.”

“Many thanks.”

After I had downed the stew, my ears pricked, registering the thundering of hooves and the loud calls of men. I knew for certain, this time, that it was not imagination, born of paranoia and too much time singing to a horse. Blanching, I stuttered, “How much?” *I should not have stopped. I will be taken back to the palace for certain now*, I panicked.

“One copper, miss,” he answered, and I clamped the coin into his hand. Trying to avoid conspicuity, I walked quickly to the stable, grabbing Cinnamon’s reins from the stableboy.

Beneath my hood, I watched the soldiers ride through the town and for a gut-churning moment I thought they would stop at the inn. But no, they raced through. I stood stock-still until they faded from my sight. I breathed a sigh of relief. North. They had ridden north, towards Nehajan where my father’s older sister Lyra was emira. The path east was open and without a look back, I urged Cinnamon forward.

Just as the innkeeper had said, as night began to fall and the sky streaked from indigo to mulberry to orange, I crested my final hill. I gasped sharply. Lights of every different color twinkled everywhere, holding themselves in the dark like fireflies. From the city itself, my gaze traveled to the pitch-dark sea, where lights flickered from bobbing ships. The city and sea met on the spread of the jutting peninsula. I could only imagine how many thousands of people lived there—and how easy it would be to become lost among them.

Slowly passing through the city gates, I could not help but think, *I will not be able to survive for an instant, and I will die in this mad scheme*. Still, I knew that this, while wandering through a strange town, was no time to be assailed by such worries. *No matter, I shall consider it tomorrow. For now, I will get to an inn, and sleep in a warm, soft bed.*

I finally dismounted in a narrow street, but stayed close to my horse, overwhelmed by the crowding of the buildings, the folk bustling past me—probably going to dinner with their families as I wandered aimlessly, sleepily, searching for some respite.

“We’ll get you a place to sleep, Cinnamon, my girl,” I murmured to the mare. I struggled against my eyelids to keep them open.

A girl a few years my senior whipped around to face me. “Sleep? If it’s an inn that you want, then there is no finer than the King’s Crown. Would you like me to show you?” She spoke with a lower-class lilt, not unpleasant to the ears.

Warily, I eyed her, but decided she appeared trustworthy enough. “That would be excellent...” I sighed thankfully. “Lead the way.”

She fell beside me. “You sure talk fine. Like a lady.”

Mentally, I snatched for dust motes in the air for a response to her observation, ensuring that my hood still cloaked my face. “I was visiting my cousin you see, she works at the palace. In Viziéra, for Emira Quenela. Very fine. How do you know of this inn?” I inquired, desperate to change the subject.

“I work there as a maid.”

Soon enough, we arrived at a neat inn, with freshly whitewashed walls and a sign reading *King’s Crown* that swayed slightly in the late Autumn wind. Beneath that, a little notice swung which said “Rooms for Let.” The girl automatically took the horse to the stables while I walked into the inn and was immediately enveloped by the warm atmosphere, the laughter and herbal smell of roasting, marinated meat. My mouth watered. Men and women sat at wooden tables, dining and dicing. Even through my fatigue, I was exhilarated.

As I suppressed a yawn, shifting my heavy bags in my hands, I was greeted by a woman with thick, matronly curves.

“Welcome to the King’s Crown,” she said briskly. “My name is Abarta and I am the innkeeper here. Will you be having dinner or are you seeking room for the night?”

Overwhelmed by her clipped speech, I managed, “Dinner and a room, please.”

Her face twitched, noting my cultured accent, but she said, “Room and board for one night is a silver denar. Merga will direct you to your room.” She smiled warmly and instantly, I felt more at ease.

Merga offered to take my bags, holding them easily with her strong arms. My riding boots creaked leadenly up the stairs as she led me to a good sized room. It was rather cozier than my spacious apartments at home. However, the wooden floor was swept clean and the bedsheets were a crisp, clean white, and in the corner stood a metal tub, ready to be filled. “Oh, Merga, I would like a bath please,” I said eagerly.

After a hot bath and hot dinner, at long last, I slipped into the cool white sheets and slept away from my family for the first time in my life. It was the easiest sleep I had had since I had learned of the curse.



## Chapter Six

For three weeks, I waded through homesickness in Clemen, renting out a long-term room at the King's Crown under an assumed name. Sometimes, I would wish my family would come and take me home, but my heart still turned to guilty mush whenever I thought about the curse—and of course, there was so much life to live here. Luckily, not a party of searchers had wound their way through Clemen yet. Unfortunately, I was running out of money. My optimistic forecast of having enough money to last me years, proved just that: optimistic. I had run through two months allowance in three weeks and I knew that I needed to replenish my funds as well as decrease my spending, but I had a definite lack of experience in suitable work.

Discussing my financial woes with Abarta, I had subtly hinted that I would not mind working as a maid here and she caught on quickly, offering me work at a decent wage. Despite the menial nature of the position, I was thankful for her offer, but then I was struck by the idea to apply as a governess for some merchants' children. Clemen was a booming mercantile town, and merchants, unlike the nobles of the area, would be unlikely to recognize me as Selene Khamad of Aquia. I could read and write, I had extensive knowledge of Ghalain's history, could do sums and equations in my head with a lightning speed that had awed my siblings and surely my tutors had said something about the economy? I ignored my general antipathy towards children. *Well, I supposed, I made this decision to start a new life and with that comes certain consequences.* With Abarta's help, I lined up interviews with several respected, prominent Clemenite families.

Clad smartly, I stepped off the narrow cobblestone street and knocked at the door of a richly appointed marble house. A dour-looking servant opened the door.

"Good day, sir," I chirped brightly. "Is your mistress within the home?" The man stood silent, staring. "I am here for the governess's interview," I explained.

Without smiling, he let me in. *Well, I certainly can't say much for their hiring tastes.* It was a large home, as far as townhouses went, but would not have comprised even a tenth of the many wings of the Mehal. The servant led me to a gilded sitting room, where my prospective employer, an older woman with a lined but garishly made-up face, awaited me.

"Hello, Miss...I do apologize. I appear to have forgotten your name." She smiled coquettishly, smoothing down the gaudy pink gown and adjusting the large silk rose on her sleeve.

Ignoring how odd it felt to curtsy to a commoner, I bent my knee. “It is Roselyn, Roselyn Dula.” I had been utilizing Auralia’s middle name for a pseudonym and although I knew the risk, it felt right. I felt closer to my family each time someone called me by my sister’s name.

She smiled and indicated that I seat myself. “Well, Miss Dula, you may call me Madame. Will you have tea?” She gestured for a maid to pour me a cup of hot tea. “I must say that I am quite surprised to see that someone so...young has tutored Princess Selene!”

Sipping the tea, but finding it bitter, I cringed. “Oh yes Madame. I even have a letter in the Princess’s own hand recommending me.” I brandished the note which I had dashed off immediately prior to coming here.

“Let us see it then.” She plucked the note from my hand and began reading aloud. “...Miss Dula was by far the best governess I have ever had. It was an honor to know such a young woman so accomplished and I learned a great deal during her tutelage. Her teaching is flawless.” Madame appeared unsure whether to doubt her good fortune or to grasp at it, like a beggar reaching for gold.

Perhaps it had been a *bit* over the top.

I suspected that Madame was the sort who would enjoy bragging that a governess formally employed by the Emir of Aquia was in her employ so I said nothing, letting the letter in her hand do its work. It read as follows:

*Roselyn Dula is an exemplar of a woman, a wonderful instructor who can impart her material in a way that the knowledge lives and breathes before her student. She holds her degree from the university in Bahart and her knowledge is vast and her impulse is to educate—it speaks of the generous, giving spirit that lies within.*

*Miss Dula was by far the best governess I have ever had. It was an honor to know such a young woman so accomplished and I learned a great deal during her tutelage. Her teaching is flawless. All I know, all I understand, the very manner in which I think, can be laid at Miss Dula’s worshipful feet. A brighter, kinder governess will very likely never be seen by Ghalain again.*

*Signed,*

*Her Illustriousness, Selene Lilah Khamad of Aquia, Marquise of Carez, Princess of Aquia*

“What do you think of the Princess’s most sudden and scandalous departure?” she asked, eager for first-hand gossip.

I vaguely considered obliging her. It might sweeten her towards me, but I rejected the notion. “I make it a point to not speak of my students once I have left their employ. Discretion, you see,” I said demurely.



“Ah, yes, of course!” She smoothed her expression, immediately adopting an equally proper air. “Are you experienced with handling older children?”

“Oh yes!” *Well*, I thought, *when I chase my nieces and nephews with slippers I do “handle” them...in the broadest sense of the term.*

She questioned me further, but finally her black eyes gleamed and she announced, “It appears that you come with the highest of credentials and it would be a *crime* not to hire you. Therefore, consider yourself the recipient of this post, should you choose to take it of course. If you do, and I hope you do, my dear, one of the servants should be well able to direct you to the governess’s rooms, let as part of your salary.”

“Pardon me, but what sort of curriculum do you want for your children? And might I meet them? Before I make a final decision that is.”

“Nothing too complicated,” she replied blithely. “A smattering of reading, a bit of writing, just a tad of history, a dose of arithmetic. Nothing a girl of your standards cannot handle. Now, as for children, I have one child.”

Hearing footsteps on the stairs, we both turned to see who had entered. “And as if on cue, he enters!”

I peered around the tall young man who had just entered. “Where is your child?”

“Before you, my dear!” she tittered.

I stared at the youth who had just entered. A well-made fellow, he was certainly not the child I had been expecting. In fact, he must have been several years older than me.

“He is twenty as of three weeks ago,” Madame explained.

I overcame the urge to snort, rising to curtsy in response to his bow. “Good day, sir. My name is Roselyn Dula.”

Genteelly, he lowered himself over my hand. “Corec Wiqf, madame. Pleased to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine,” I murmured politely.

“Now,” proceeded Madame, all business, “besides room and board, the rest of your salary shall be fifteen gold denars, paid at the beginning of every month. Is this acceptable?”

Fifteen gold denars is the monthly income of a moderately prosperous farmstead.

“Perfectly,” and we sealed the deal with a handshake.

“Well then, we shall see you bright and early tomorrow!”

Madame gestured for the grim-faced servant to lead me to the door. Madame’s home was not too far from the King’s Crown so I walked back, feeling at turns exhilarated and overwhelmed by the bustle of the crowd. Unlike Aquia, which was largely farmland, Viziéra made good use of its ports with a booming merchant population and as such, Clemen was always brimming with business and bazaars. Slipping out of the flurry and into the relative quiet of the inn, I could not help but feel relieved although that soon evaporated when Abarta pulled me aside.

“What?” I asked, perplexed.

She spoke in hushed tones. “You recall when you asked me to tell you if any knowledge came from Aquia concerning the noble family or if any Aquians rode into Clemen?”

My stomach collapsed into itself. “Yes...” My fingers curled so tightly that my nails bit into the soft flesh of my palm.

“A riding searching for Princess Selene entered the town today. They are staying at The Lemon Branch, but the innkeeper there told me that they plan to search every inn in the town for her.”

My palm was red with tiny scarlet crescents, imprints of my fingernails pressing into my hand.

She stood in silence for several seconds, but her rotund body could not long hold her thoughts. “Roselyn, please forgive me, but I could not but notice the striking resemblance you bear to the description of Lady Selene being bandied about...and you claim to have worked for her...”

My mind made an attempt at working furiously, yet it could produce nothing to make my likeness plausible. “Yes...well...” *I knew I should not have claimed to have been my own bloody governess!*

Abarta leaned towards me, speaking urgently. “Roselyn...should I be curtsying to you?”

Internally, I debated the benefits of telling Abarta the truth, but decided that leaving her in nominal ignorance would be best for her safety as well as mine. I hoped I could trust her. “I would be much obliged if you could keep me out of sight while the riding remains in Clemen.”

Just as the words left my mouth, we heard the heavy tramp of feet behind us.

“Excuse me, may we speak to the owner of this inn?” questioned the man crisply.

My neck and back prickled with fright and my knees turned to water. Abarta smiled at the men behind me, whispering, “Hide in the kitchens. Constanisa will aid you.”

Drawing a deep breath and not daring to look back, I walked calmly towards the kitchen.

Constanisa, the head cook at the King’s Crown, was standing over a boiling pot of stew, and I quickly approached her to ask her help. Sensing my steps, she twirled around and stuck the hot spoon in my mouth.

“How does that taste, love?”

The stew dribbled down my chin, as I gasped. “Hot!” My scalded tongue formed the words with some difficulty. Fanning my mouth furiously and checking the door for any sign of entry, I mumbled, “Abarta wants you to hide me!”

Without question, as if it were not a strange request, Constanisa took a bowl of flour and began patting it over my hair, face, hands, and garb. She swept it gently from my lashes.

I brushed excess flour off my once-red dress. “What will this do?”

“Make you look like a kitchen wench. Hide in plain sight, you see. Now, there’s a bowl of dough that needs kneading in the back. Get at it.”

Thankful for something to do, I submerged my hands into the sticky dough, rhythmically pushing and pulling. I kept an ear out for heavy footsteps.

The fine hairs of my neck stood as the door swung open. I kept my face bowed, but a nervous flush rose to my face. My pulse pounded in my ears until I could feel nothing but my burning skin and hear nothing but the thundering of my heart. Although I was concentrating on my dough, from the corner of my eye, I picked up a glimmer of blond hair and a man disinterestedly surveying the denizens of the busy kitchen. Not finding what he was looking for, he turned on heel, burgundy cloak flashing through the door.



PART TWO



*Moonrise*



## Chapter Seven

A month passed, and then another. I grew comfortable in my teaching position, and Corec proved to be a clever student. Life in Clemen was harder than I had dreamed it would be in my palace, but it had been rewarding—and the visions of dancing in taverns had certainly come true, although I forged no real attachment to my suitors. Soon, a year had passed, disappeared in the blink of an eye. And then another and yet I could not bring myself to pack my bags and return to Aquia. It was sheer cowardice. I knew now that not only had I brought about, however unintentionally, the curse on Aquia, but now I had compounded my family's worries by disappearing. I could not face their disappointment. I had lived those past two years with a certain fear of being recognized, but independent, I had grown responsible, aware of the world in a way that is impossible when one lives in a palace. I had matured past my initial shock of guilt at the curse. Now, Corec was marrying and my term as his governess was finished, my time in Clemen itself almost up.

On the eve of my eighteenth birthday, I lay in bed, unable to fall asleep. After all, on the stroke of midnight, I had an eternity of slumber to look forward to. I wished I had ridden home earlier in the week for now I had to face this enchantment on my own. I would have liked to see my family one last time. I wondered what Madame's household would make of my irreversible slumber. Would they draw the correct conclusion? I had considered penning a note, but every time my quill touched paper, my fingers seized up in faintheartedness.

I clutched the blankets tightly to calm my nerves, to have something warm touching my skin. What would an eternity of slumber be like? *Shall I dream? Or will the Pari send me nightmares as a punishment? Or will I be conscious in truth, able to think and perceive, but unable to see, to move?* The thought terrified me and I huddled closer into my blankets. How I wished this was a future I was facing alongside my family, with Gen's tenacity, Rory's constant comfort, Gareth's humor, Nic's unyielding pride, Ceara's bright intellect. All qualities necessary to face such a destiny. I eyed the portrait that I had brought with me from Aquia and that I now kept beneath my bed, to be taken out only in response to the deepest homesickness. I had no idea how my family was readying themselves for this blow. A part of me did not even believe something would happen. How could it? How could a whole principality fall into enchanted sleep? It seemed impossible, a magic too big and too insidiously evil to even be possible.

The town bells boomed once to announce midnight. A bolt of terror jolted me upright.

I was awake.

I was *awake*.

*What the Seasons...?*

I scrubbed my eyes, pinched myself. Was I dreaming? Was I asleep? *Well, if this is a dream then it is bloody well indistinguishable from reality.*

“What happened?” I murmured to myself. Swinging out of bed, I rushed to the window. The sky was as dark as ever, nothing was different. I had expected some signal to indicate the curse had been enacted. A great ripple in the harbor, or a gale blowing through the trees. Nothing. The bells were no longer ringing. Then, it struck me. “In Aquia!”

Of course, such a simple loophole. How could we have missed it? But maybe they hadn’t! Perhaps my family had figured out purposefully what I had discovered accidentally. Hope, that I tried futilely to temper, surged through me.

Seasons, perhaps the Pari’s curse had been mere pageantry, an empty threat to frighten us for eighteen years. Yet, even I was not optimistic enough to truly believe that. Nonetheless, with a relieved smile on my face, I fell at last into unbroken sleep.

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“Roselyn, have you heard?” asked Oelphie, her brown eyes twinkling excitedly as she served breakfast that morning. She was the cook’s assistant and because of our close ages and sympathy born of the singular experience of working for Madame, we had become friends.

“I just awoke Oelphie. So no, I have not heard,” I said, still cheery with hope. I sliced bread and fruit for myself.

“That curse, that Aquian curse. It has been fulfilled. Every single person there is sleeping. Not a man, woman or dog awake.”

Her report was like a strike to the face. It was strange hearing of such a long-dreaded reality.

Oblivious, she continued. “All of them except those that had left the emirdom apparently. Seems nobody thought that just leaving could have thwarted the curse, but, I heard from Jaques who has just come from Aquia, that Lord Gwydion, the one that was betrothed to the Princess Selene? Well, he has been out of the emirdom, probably still searching for her. Isn’t that romantic? Anyways, upon hearing that all of Aquia had fallen asleep, including the ruling family and the Thirds Council, he declared himself the Emir of Aquia by right of betrothal and said he would officially renew the search for Princess, now Emira, Selene so she could rule beside him.”

*The ruling family.* My hopes died a mewling death, blackening and curling into themselves like burning paper. “Well. How did Jaques hear all of this?” I managed.

“He heard it from Gwydion’s men themselves. Jaques had stopped at an inn, right here in Clemen, for a cup of ale where Gwydion and his men are staying until the day is over so they can ride to Aquia safely and secure it.”

I tried to take deep calming breaths. But what was I to do?

Why could it not have been anyone else looking for me, some member of my family? Why was Gwydion the one the Seasons blessed with avoiding the curse? And look at how neatly it worked out for him, the bastard. I wondered if he had known from the beginning or if his escape had been an unhappy accident of fate.

“Does Queen Erina not have anything to say about this?” I demanded. I tried to focus my energies on feeling annoyed instead of devastated. At least then I could function, could think.

“Well.” Oelphie pursed her lips in thought. “It would seem that they would need someone to rule Aquia and since Lord Gwydion does have the closest claim other than Emira Selene, should she still be alive...”

The temptation was looming, and after so many years of secrecy, I could stay quiet no more. “Oelphie.” Deep breaths. “I am, well, I was, I suppose, but...”

“Yes?” Oelphie said eagerly.

“Selene. Selene. I am Selene.” A great, chest-binding heaviness evaporated.

Oelphie pumped a fist in the air, shrieking. I tipped backwards in my chair. “I *knew* it! You looked so like the descriptions and you arrived just as she had disappeared.”

I winced. “Do you think anyone else guessed?”

She shook her head. “I do not think anyone paid that much attention.”

“Oh.” I frowned at the thought.

What I had to do became suddenly obvious.

“Just...do not say anything. I need to reach the Aquian border before midnight tonight, before Gwydion arrives there. Once I cross the border, it is only a few hours ride to the Mehal, and once I am at the palace, I would like to see him try to take my birthright away from me, no matter what army of thugs he surrounds himself with,” I announced boldly. From the corner of my eye, a shadow twitched.

Oelphie and I were conversing giddily when we heard a knock at the kitchen backdoor. Thoughtlessly, I answered it.

And there stood Gwydion.

I froze, feeling his eyes rake me up and down. I mirrored him. He had grown taller, and his shoulders and chest had broadened. He looked more mature and quite frankly, very handsome.

I locked the door.

But he was not deterred for he began fearsomely pounding on the door.

“Oelphie,” I hissed. “It’s Gwydion.”

Her eyes widened. “Go to your room. I will not let him in.”

“Who is that?” Madame called irritably. “I am preparing for the wedding and I want no interruptions.”

I frantically thought of an excuse. “Just some beggars, Madame.”

In a very unusual gesture, Madame said, “Let them in, and give them something to eat. Today is after all a wedding day. One would not wish to jinx it by being miserly! I will not have

anyone saying that the House of Wiqf is not generous.” (“Generous when thou wed, bountiful be thy marital bed’ is a common Clemenite saying.)

Ignoring her command, I scurried to my room, heart thumping uncontrollably. I suddenly had a great deal of empathy for hunted and cornered animals. My heart nearly gave out when I looked out the window and saw Gwydion peering in. Every muscle hummed with tension. Should I run? Should I brazen it out? Should I hide? All I wanted to do was close my eyes and will him away. When I opened my eyes next, he was gone from my window, but I knew enough not to let my body sag with relief.

My door was pushed ajar. The sliver widened until Gwydion himself walked through. “My dear Selene.” He hugged me, a little too tightly, a little too hard. In my ear though he whispered, “You cooperate, otherwise I will make certain that you regret it.”

I tried to elbow out of his grasp. “Really. How do you plan on managing that?” I retorted with more braveness than my shaking legs would indicate.

Whipping me around, he kicked the door open. “With them.” He was referring to the ten or so guard that accompanied him. Down to the man, each was fierce and armed.

For the first time I felt a hysterical bubble of fear. *He would not, would he? He would not kill me?*

“Gwydion, I am certain this is some misunderstanding. I...I have lived here without disturbing you for years. I see no reason to change a pattern that has worked so well.”

“I have had this house watched for a while now,” he said. “And when I heard that you had made plans to take Aquia, well, I knew it was time to move. Now, chin up. We both have the same destination.”

Roughly, he grabbed my arm and guided me outside. I wrapped my cloak around me more tightly. Autumn chill was beginning to bite though the air like a crisp apple. I could not shout for help, not with Gwydion surrounded by a band of ruffians. I hoped the Clemen town guard would see me, I hoped someone, anyone would save me.

“You can cooperate and ride on your horse, or, I will bind you to my person and we can *share* a horse.” He gestured towards the white stallion held by one of his guardsmen.

“Oh Gwyd. Where did that charm of yours go?”

With a flourish, he presented me with a posy of yellow and blue flowers. Intently gazing into my eyes, he pressed them into my hand.

I refused to yield to such obvious tactics.

“I assure you, I am still *very* charming.”

I took the blossoms. “Well, I assure you that first impressions are everything and you had better charm me now if you desire my cooperation.”

Gwydion smiled easily. “How can I correct this first impression, my dear Emira Selene?”

Oh, he certainly thought he was such a darling, did he not? Two can play at that game.

“Well.” I fluttered my eyelashes at him, trying to inject the proper amount of simpering. “You



did give me quite a scare you know.” I traced the edge of his jacket with a finger. “Why, I hardly recognized you, you have grown so handsome.”

“Your games will not work, Selene,” Gwydion said, but he smiled.

I looked up at him through my eyelashes. “What games?” I asked innocently. “All I want is to be able to get home comfortably. Would you dreadfully mind ordering me a carriage?”

He preened, seemingly somewhat taken in by my simpering belle act. How long exactly before Gwydion’s canner instincts got the better of him? And how long would I be able to maintain it? Already, it grated on my nerves and pride. Acting as a working-class girl was one thing; pretending to be a vapid minx for *his* benefit made my skin crawl.

“Quite a change of heart,” Gwydion remarked, wrapping a lock of my hair around his finger. Nonetheless, he seemed pleased with himself and the sway he no doubt believed he held over all women.

I abstained from rolling my eyes. “I should like to say goodbye now. Otherwise, they will worry.”

Gwydion consented, but added, “The house is surrounded, do not make an attempt to escape.”

So perhaps he was not as easily lured in as I thought. *Well, thank goodness. That would just be embarrassing.* “As if I would ever wish to escape from your arms now that I have found you again.”

*Ugh.* I had barely managed that without gagging on my words.

I swiftly walked away before he could see the face I had pulled. I certainly could not maintain this façade for long. Every word was like drinking bitter dregs. Gathering a few remaining items, I took one last look at the small, tidy chamber, with its wood floors and dark blue curtains, that had been my home for two years. I would miss it. I would never be so free again.

I rushed to Oelphie in the kitchen. “Gwydion is taking me back to Aquia. And I do not know what will happen from there. I do not know what I will do now, but you don’t worry about that.” I gave her a quick hug. “I shall miss you.”

“Should I call the town guards? Or Corec? That lord cannot take you like this!” She embraced me tightly.

Thinking of the armed men at Gwydion’s disposal, I knew that any altercation would only end in injury for my defenders. “I will be fine,” I lied. “Do not worry. We shall meet again, and in a palace next time, I promise. You will come live with me!” I began backing out of the door.

She giggled with delight. “Don’t tease!”

“I would do no such thing!” I replied, rushing forth for one last hug. “I promise. We shall meet again.”

I left the townhouse as a heavy sadness sank into me. I had been free here, had proven that I could live independently, free of the shadow of the Khamad family name—and the Pari curse. *And if,* I reasoned with myself, shaking the darkness, *I, as a foolish sixteen year old managed to*

*make a good and proper living for myself for over two years, relying only on my wits, I can also conquer this situation.*

“Gwydion...some of my clothes are at an inn here; I should like to stop by and pick them up.” I flipped my hair back in a manner I remembered he liked. I had flirted and danced and more with men at taverns, but there was something more real about engaging with Gwydion like this. Perhaps it indicated a deeper sentiment.

*Or maybe it is because your entire fate hangs in the balance.*

He bowed. “Of course.”

Saying hasty farewells to Abarta and Constansia, I gathered my belongings under their bewildered gazes. Oelphie would explain it to them when the time came. Under the pretense of escorting me out of the inn, Gwydion pinned me to his side. A drop of cold rain slipped through my hair and down my back. Bundling me into the waiting carriage, to which Cinnamon had been hitched, he locked the door.

He smiled.



## Chapter Eight

“Selene.”

I tore my gaze away from the silver raindrops on the carriage window. A berry twilight had settled over the landscape and shimmering stars had begun to replace the hovering storm-grey rainclouds. “Yes?” I attempted to maintain a civil tone, with just a hint of obsequiousness.

Gwydion lounged across from me, one leg debonairly thrown up on the plush seat. He had unbuttoned the collar of his snowy silk shirt and pear-colored wool coat to combat the humidity of the closely-confined carriage. “You have not spoken a word since we first sat down,” he noted.

“Yes, well, forgive me if I do not feel much like talking. It has been a long day.” An understatement. My insides were turning somersaults, performing acrobatic feats which I had not thought possible.

I had not seen my home for two years, and now after the enactment of a curse, I was coming back arm-in-arm with Gwydion. My return to Aquia reverberated with uncertainties: *What will I find there? How can I live in the Mehal without my parents, without my brothers and sisters—and apparently with Gwydion?* Everything was a hazy, uncanny topsy-turvy. I wished I could discuss my foreboding, but I was hardly going to broach the topic with Gwydion. Instead, I kept my attention trained on the woods and my fears to myself.

“I know you must be nervous about going back to Aquia,” said Gwydion, gratingly understanding. “Perhaps I can coax you out of your mood.” Reaching into his pocket, he drew out a box of black velvet and handed it to me. “Open it,” he commanded mildly.

My dislike of obeying him and my curiosity were dueling in my gut (oh! that roiling entity), and finally my interest won out. I extended an unsteady hand into which he dropped the box. It was a great deal heavier than what I would have guessed.

Having already conjectured that it was an engagement ring, I was nonetheless speechless when I cracked it open and found it set serenely against a blanket of carmine velvet. Even in the dull light it sparkled with an ethereal brilliance. Set in white metal, the diamond was roughly the size of a pigeon’s egg and was encircled by a cluster of smaller diamonds. It charmingly reminded me of a moon surrounded by stars.

“Is this *Pari*-forged?” I breathed. Imbued with all sorts of qualities and powers, *Pari*-forged items were quite rare and had grown scarcer still since my birth. While much of the *Pari* is a

general mystery, it is said that Pari-forged items are made from metal that fell from the sky and Pari blacksmiths may only work their craft by the light of the full moon. Moon magic rivals the sun and fire magic of the djinn. The limited work time of the Pari blacksmiths may provide a partial explanation for the rarity of Pari-forged metal.

Summoning my self-control, I continued in a much more nonchalant manner. "Nice, I suppose." I snapped the box shut.

By the grin tugging at the corners of Gwydion's mouth, I knew he had seen through my weak ploy. Well, I would have been somewhat disappointed had he not; after all, this was the fellow who had managed to capture me and thwart my hopes of escape. It would be somewhat insulting if he was dimwitted to boot.

"It's for a special occasion and a very special lady." With those not-so mysterious words, he pocketed it.

Just as sarcastic words stood poised to tumble from the tip of my tongue, the carriage tumbled into something.

My hand flew out against the seat. "Dear Seasons!" I exclaimed. "What was that?"

Gwydion pushed the carriage door open, only to step waist-high into water. It seeped into the carriage, staining the floor. "Damn! Darce, what is this about?" he demanded angrily of the footman. Gwydion splashed out of the water, hauling himself out of the edge of the crater. His riders stood around him, muttering in grim-faced irritation.

Nervously lowering his ale-brown eyes, Darce answered, with a shrug of his massive shoulders, "It appears we have fallen into a ditch, filled by water."

"Well, I can see that," said Gwydion caustically. "Can you get us out?"

Ducking his head, Darce said, "Yes, but it will take me and the driver and your guards time to get it out. Probably into the night. If I may suggest....?"

Gwydion assented with a curt nod.

Darce lifted me out of the carriage. I was thankful, for his courtesy allowed me to avoid the water completely. "If you follow the road for a mile or so, you will come to a little town... Ilac or Cilac or something of the sort. You will find a great number of inns there, some of the finer variety which you and your lady would prefer," he added with a short bow. "If you wish, I can guide you there and pick up some men to help get the carriage out."

"Sounds sensible. Come, Selene."

I stiffened at being called like a hound.

Left unpaved, the flashing rain muddied the road and soon the fine sapphire-blue wool of my traveling gown was stiff with dirt, leaves and gravel. I cursed my choice of fine silk slippers: I certainly had not expected to traverse across the country, and the rocks were tearing the delicate slippers to shreds. Slippers that I had tutored Corec hours to earn. I wished I had brought one of my Aquian fur cloaks from the carriage. The icy rain permeated my hair, skin, dress, shoes. Feeling as wet as a fish and angry as a caged lion I was surprised when Gwydion flung his own

warm cape over my shoulders. *Cannot let your ticket to Aquia die, can you?* I thought acidly, but the consummate aristocrat, I gave him a polite if curt thank you.

Darkness enveloped us and I stumbled more than once on rocks hiding in the blackness of the night. If Gwydion offered an arm of support, I never saw it. (While it would not have been advantageous to let his investment die from the cold, a little injury would only further his plans.) When we finally saw the few gleaming lights of the town, I all but ran to it, leaving Gwydion and Darce to catch up.

Eager to step out of the rain, I headed into the nearest inn, where I found a group of most unsavory fellows fascinated by the antics of a very busy, very low-class woman. Gwydion would have enjoyed the show, I was sure, but I backed out as fast as I had entered it. The next inn, the Pari's Blessing, was much more respectable. Ignoring Gwydion and Darce following me, I went up to the innkeeper, a portly, balding man, with twirled white mustachios.

"Welcome to Illiac, madame."

"Good evening sir. I would like a room for myself and another one for my menservants to share."

"What the lady means," Gwydion said, stepping in smoothly, "is a room for the two of us and if you could spare them, several men to help my footman here pull our carriage from the mud." Gold *denars* glinted in Gwydion's hand.

The innkeeper obliged him readily enough with the latter part of Gwydion's request and called over a couple of fellows to help Darce. "But why does the lady say you are her manservant, if I may ask, my lord?" he inquired with brisk curiosity.

"She likes her jokes," he said conspiratorially, but a taut current of anger ran beneath his congeniality.

"I—" I began in protest.

The man looked warily from me to Gwydion. "If the lady does not wish to share a room for the night, you would do well to indulge her, if you pardon my familiarity. I do not mean to presume of course, but you will have to rent two rooms—unless the lady changes her stance?"

"No, no, I do not," I said firmly, ignoring my bristling skin that advised me to return to my original path of appeasement.

Gwydion's eyes narrowed. "I saw several others inns I could patronize."

Keeping his voice level, the innkeeper replied with surprising strength, "And they are all run by decent men who would do just as I have."

Snorting in exasperation, Gwydion said, "Very well. Separate rooms it is."

A slight flush of victory rushed through me.

"Very wise decision, sir." The innkeeper broke into a warm smile. "You would not want her angry with you. Emelin will show you to your rooms. The very best for you and your lady." He handed the keys to the blond Emelin. "Rooms one and two if you please, Emelin."

As Emelin guided Gwydion way, the innkeeper discreetly caught my attention. “Please, lady a moment,” he said, pulling me to a corner. “I do not wish to pry into your affairs, but if that man bothers you, know that any of my staff are willing to help you.”

My heart warmed at the man’s concern and I patted him comfortingly on the shoulder. “I very much appreciate the gesture, but all is fine. If I may ask you a favor though...have you heard anything of the Aquians?”

“The Aquians!” he repeated, startled. “You would not believe the things I have heard about that lot. They’re asleep—the whole emirdom, from the Khamads to the peasants. Animals are still wandering about, though. Some have even wandered into Viziéra. Give it a couple of days and Aquia will get brigands, thieves, the whole lot. Easy pickings too. According to the fellow I spoke to you, one of his men stepped one *foot* in Aquia and fell straight asleep.”

I thanked him and hastened to join Emelin.

She bent her knee slightly. “If you will follow me...”

As Emelin let me into the room, I asked, “And would you please tell the cooks to send up some hot wine and soup?” Engorged on wine and stew, I fell into a thankfully dreamless sleep.

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I awoke with feathers of sunshine brushing my eyes. For a moment, I peered about startled, not recognizing my surroundings. Memory slowly trickled back as I changed into the wool dress from last night; the slippers were beyond repair. I may as well have gone barefoot.

I opened my door only to be met by an incensed Gwydion.

“What did you mean by not sharing a room? How dare you refute me in public! You shall not do so again.” The threat hung in the air.

“Where is your lauded charm now?” I replied brazenly. “I do believe you forgot to ask me how my night’s rest was. Quite good thank you. And yours?”

Gwydion’s face darkened. I inched away from him, but stars danced in my vision as his fist flew against my right cheek. I could only yelp in surprise. The world flashed distinctly black and white, and I cradled my throbbing cheekbone. Blood rose to hot my face, my vision fuzzed with fury.

“Is that all? My nephews can hit better.”

His hand thundered against my other cheek.

Anger burned and a misty haze of fury descended over my eyes. I launched myself at him, heedless of the disparity of our sizes, our strengths. My nails drew fine lines of blood across his face. Each tear in his cheek, each sharp gasp of pain filled me with satisfaction.

With cold ease, he tightly wrapped his fingers around my wrists. I was gratified to see that the cuts on his face flushed an angry red. *Seasons, I hope he gets an infection.* He threw me onto the bed.

“I do not derive enjoyment from this. Do not give me reason to do this to you again. We will leave now.” His frosty nonchalance was inhuman, perhaps the most disturbing quality of the exchange. “The carriage is outside. You will tell the innkeeper you tripped.” He slipped his rings on.

I buried emotion in my heart, and splashed my cheeks with water from the white washbasin. Without waiting for his say-so, I left the room, avoiding the innkeeper’s kind face as I left. Just thinking of him reminded me of my father, who had affianced me to this monster, but had no idea of what he had wrought. If my father knew, if the innkeeper knew, both would have done something to save me. I refused to weep. The innkeeper *could* do something to save me. Then, I looked around at Gwydion’s hardened companions. Once more, what could a group of untrained men do against them? I was the only one who could save myself now.

My head drummed, light with anger. Dear Seasons, I was ready to tear Gwydion apart with my bare hands. In the carriage, I touched a cool hand to my puffy face, attempting to relieve the pain, to alleviate the heat.

Gwydion jumped nimbly inside, and despite the scratches, his face was wreathed in excited smiles. “Today, we take Aquia.”

I grimaced. *And someday, I take your head.*



## *Chapter Nine*

The Bronze Throne of Ghalain is not hereditary. Rather, each Emirati ruler has a claim to the crown. Thus, the death of Ghalain's ruler is often followed by strife, but despite the messiness, the emirdoms are reluctant to change the system. After all, as it stands, each family has the opportunity to place one of theirs at Ghalain's helm. The current ruler, Queen Erina was aging and the emirs and emiras were growing restless.

Sometimes, even the illness of a monarch spurs civil war.

Since Gwydion had announced that we were nearing the Aquian border, thoughts of thrones and inheritance had been swirling with a vengeance. It was certainly easier thinking about thrones than about anything concerning *him*. Nothing in his manner suggested that he had given a second thought to his battery—but I could not tuck it away so easily. I felt little shame in admitting to myself that fear of him curdled my insides: only a fool would be not be afraid after the beating in the chamber. The man was quicksilver: furious one second, smiling the next: difficult to handle, manage, or manipulate. I wondered if he thought me crushed. It would take more than that to break me.

As the carriage crested a low hill, we emerged from the forest. I had escaped to Viziéra through these very woods, now autumn-gilded crimson and yellow. Memories of riding Cinnamon rustled in my mind, like a flash of falling leaves as the vista broadened to reveal a wide meadow, dotted with tall watchtowers. The border.

*Seasons, seasons, seasons, seasons, seasons, a blighted blizzard of seasons.*

The carriage door swung upon and Gwydion jumped out. He looked at me over his shoulder, but did not proffer aid out of the coach. I stepped out of the carriage, eyeing him coolly. The purple-red bruises splashed across my cheeks diminished the effect.

While no visible line distinguished the border between Aquia from Viziéra, it was easy enough to tell where one emirdom ended and the other began judging by the watchtowers. The history between Viziéra and Aquia is marked with frequent border wars and these watchtowers dated from a war fought one-hundred and twenty years before that pushed Aquia's borders further into Viziéra. Viziéra had been seething since.

From where we stood, one step would send us into Aquia. Taking a quick breath, I leapt across that invisible line, half-expecting to crash asleep.



Gwydion gave me a patiently amused look, the look a mother dog would give an overly rambunctious pup. It rankled. I loped towards the sentry watchtowers to see if the sentries really were asleep, to see this curse for myself. As I climbed the rickety wooden ladder to the top of the tower, I almost thought that Gwydion would shake it from beneath me. But not yet.

My paranoia receded at the sight of the sentries. Two men, of middling age, sprawled on the ground, left exactly where they had fallen. A trickle of blood had dried into the graying hair of one. I swept down beside him and laid an ear against his chest to detect any heartbeat. I heard none: the man was dead, killed by that fool curse as surely as if the Pari themselves had clubbed him over the head. I moved on to the other man. This time, I did hear a heartbeat, faint and slow. I thanked the Seasons, but I knew I could not leave this sentry here to die; no matter how he slept, the cold would touch him even if age did not.

“Gwydion,” I called. “We need men to take these sentries inside somewhere; to bring inside all those lying outside. To bury those who have died. We cannot let them perish of exposure and leave corpses to rot and bloat where they have fallen.”

He shaded his eyes against the bright sun. “It is Autumn yet, my foolish Selene. They are not likely to freeze in these mild temperatures, but the weather is chill enough to stymie any excess rotting.” Delicately, he wrinkled his nose.

“So you would leave them out here like animals?” I asked coldly.

“They are only commoners.”

Oh, how infuriatingly arrogant his voice was. I wished I could let my words fly at him, but I knew I had to tread carefully if I wished to get anything done. That much at least I had learned at the inn in Illiac.

“Commoners are the backbone of Aquia. Who do you think farms the grain, tends the livestock? They may seem useless to you now, but when they awake you *will* need them. We must get them out of the weather before the nights turn cold.”

Gwydion gave such a sigh that I could hear it, high up as I was. “Very well. Once we have the infrastructure set up and securely hold the seat of Aquia, then we shall do as you like with these...good folk.”

Those words were too loose to be binding, but I pressed no further. I took my gains as they came.

Hopping down from the ladder, I landed beside Gwydion. “What now? We came, we saw, let’s move.”

“Very well,” he said brusquely. Tightly clenching my hand, he tugged me towards the carriage. “Aquia City is only half a day’s drive from here.”

“But it is only a two hour ride,” I pointed out. “I, for one, am going to ride. You are welcome to join me, of course. Tell your man to saddle Cinnamon.”

His mouth thinned dangerously, and despite my fatalism a mere moments before, I decided I was tired of his tempestuous temper. Although the pain from my bruises was still bright, I was on home territory; Aquia sang in my blood and that emboldened me. But only to an extent.

“Well?” I said impatiently. Without hearing his response and not waiting for Darce to saddle Cinnamon, I nimbly hopped upon the mare’s back, casually arranging my skirts. I twisted my fingers in her mane. Finding a comfortable seat, I started Cinnamon at a slow canter and followed beside the carriage.

“So, Gwydion, will you join me?” I called. He made no move to stop me and I galloped down the well-trodden path through the swinging high grass of the plains.

After some time riding alone, relishing my liberty and the sight of the unfolding plains of my land, I heard strange hoof beats following me. Craning my neck, I saw Gwydion’s flashing scarlet cloak; a fool dandified piece that would only make him easier to spot by archers. With grim satisfaction, I folded the thought away for later. I spurred Cinnamon on; home was close. I had to cross one more hill that would lead me into the Letern Woods. After an uphill ride through the tangles of the forest and a final dash across the plains, I would reach the City Walls.

I dug my heels into Cinnamon’s side. Her muscles, soft from city-living, rippled fluidly beneath her sweat-gleaming chestnut coat. We reached the base of the hill. The city walls loomed; white shining masses, blinding in the sun, and impossible to climb, polished so that no footholds remained. The first large gateway was closed, but I spotted a smaller side door left ajar. A fortuitous accident. Slipping into a city alley, I firmly locked the gate behind me. My heart bounced— Gwydion’s crimson cloak flashed on the plain. I quickened my pace up the white steps.

Strewn bodies of townsfolk lay here and there across the stairs and streets. All gently sleeping. Horses, mules, and goats wandered the grey streets listlessly. Weaving uphill through the city, past the curving townhouses and bazaar squares, I approached the Mehal. Its strong black iron gate loomed above, boldly throwing its shadow. The bars were too narrow for an armored man to pass through, but I managed to squeeze myself through. I opened the gate, allowing Cinnamon in and then locked it once more. Patting the horse’s nose, I let her go: she would find her way to the stables easily enough.

It was uncanny seeing my city so. My nerves were alert, waiting for the sleepers to rise, as if someone I knew would walk by. Jumpily, my head cocked towards the faint whisper of a breeze. Passing through the great carved door of the Mehal, I raised my skirts to avoid the fallen servants and ran to Auralia’s tower room. Delicately stepping over prone guards, I walked into the chamber, now so unfamiliar that I nearly backtracked out. Where there had been two, slim beds, a large bed lay and new daffodil yellow curtains framed the windows. An unfamiliar dusky rose and indigo rug spread at the foot of the bed. Then I saw Auralia slumped on the floor, her embroidery basket spilled beside her. My knees buckled.

“Rory, Rory. Wake up, wake up!” Of course, it was useless. She sighed softly in her sleep as I stifled my hiccoughs. Unable to leave my hands idle, I tidily swept up the embroidery basket. My finger pricked against something sharp. Yelping, I stuck my finger into my mouth, holding up the offender. A spindle. My mind shot back to the story Beya had told me so long ago. “...*Whereby you will be felled by a most innocuous thing: a spindle.*” If Auralia had been awake,

I would have shaken her. Of all the nights to play with her embroidery! If I had been her, I would worn a suit of armor and sat alone in my room all day. *Try and get a spindle at me then.*

Grunting, I lifted Auralia onto the bed and tucked the carnation pink coverlets under her chin. Her crackling amber-gold hair fanned over the pillow. I examined her face, trying to reacquaint myself with its new smoothed contours. The softness of childhood had fallen away, revealing sharp cheekbones, a fine jawline, and a smooth brow. My fingers traced my own face. She was beautiful in that classic way I could never manage.

Shutting Auralia's door, I stepped into the hall. I took a still-lit torch, lighting wall-sconces as I went. Walking through those familiar black and white arches, home hit me full force. I wanted my mother.

Torch still flaring in my hand, I was surprised to find my parents' chamber completely devoid of sleepers. Perhaps they had gone to the temple to pray and left Auralia, guarded in her room. I could not fathom what had possessed her to embroider. *Magic, no doubt,* I realized. My skin rose again and I looked around carefully, as if some pari, some vestige of magic still lurked in the corners.

I made my way down to the private family temple. It was a small ziggurat, connected to the main palace by a hallway illuminated with instructive religious mosaics. And there...there they lay. The temple's candles threw shuddering, golden light on my sprawling, sleeping family. There lay Evra, Ceara, their children...even their husbands, one of whom had been the heir to Darsepol. I wondered what his father would think now. I saw the collapsed forms of Danyal, Necolai, Gareth, and little Gieneve, her dark hair spilling with abandon. With rising horror, I saw that Necolai's and Gareth's wives lay there beside them, clutching their children in their arms. There were a few children I did not recognize—nieces and nephews born while I was in Clemen. What had possessed them to come? If only they had stayed away....

In the front, lay Mother and Father, Beya. Near the entrance, stretched Matiz and his companions. All praying in vain for something to deter this curse. I wished there had been more cowards in my family so that they too would have fled. Instead, here I stood, the last and least of the Khamad. The guilt that had ebbed into the cracks of my conscience rushed back.

Seeing them there, for the first time in two years, opened the sluice gate of memories from a more idyllic past. The time Danyal, Gareth and I had gone to a tavern in Aquia when I was fourteen and they had gotten me roaringly drunk; Father had tanned their hides so sore that they could not sit for a week. Another: Ceara sat with me, late into the night, polishing out the finer points of my history and philosophy; Smiling Evra patiently stitching up my new gown that I had torn after having gone exploring by myself and torn it through despite Beya's admonishments. I remembered holding Gieneve for the first time and feeling so grown-up and responsible. Nic's stern veneer cracking through with a broad grin when he had received his captaincy and how proud I had felt of him. I recalled standing beside my mother when I was very young and hugging her skirts and knowing I could never be safer. Father twirled me around a ballroom at my first dance when I was thirteen and told me that I had become a lady—even as mud smudged

my cheek. Auralia and I, so tiny that we had to hop to reach our beds, curled together under the blankets during a thunderstorm that shook the entire palace with its ferocity. A life. They were my life.

“Tragic, isn’t it?”

I whipped around in surprise, my fists reflexively balling up. Gwydion walked in, surveying the scene with cool calculation, flanked by his troop of men.

“You know Gwydion, the fact that you cannot travel anywhere without a posse at your back suggests that you, are, in fact, a bloody coward,” I observed, immediately bracing myself for a strike that did not come. Before he could retort, I changed the subject. “How did you get in?”

Chuckling softly, he said, “My dear Selene, you could not have believed that I had not already made a move to secure Aquia. Before I left, I ascertained a few paths for reentry.”

I had not known that, actually. He had known then—or guessed—that leaving Aquia might circumvent the curse. Perhaps the pari girl with goldenrod wings had told him. *And he had not told anyone.* “What will you do now?” I demanded. The bruise on my face throbbed.

Carefully, he snaked through the tangle of bodies to stand closer to me, but I dodged towards the door. “By next week, emissaries will begin arriving from the other emirdoms, from the queen herself. You, of course, will be the one they meet as Emira Niobe’s only sentient heir. Oh and of course, we will be married *very* soon,” he added as an afterthought.

I attempted to stay steady, but it was hard knowing that he had had some foreknowledge of how to avoid the curse and had selfishly kept the information to himself. “Have your people move them to their proper places, will you?” I asked sweetly. I seethed that I had to make requests of him in my mother’s own palace, *mine* own palace now, but with aches and injuries pulsating, I knew I had to be careful—especially when I was calm enough to remember the lesson. Racing to reach the city had probably exhausted his goodwill for the day.

“Of course,” he agreed, winding an arm about my waist. I was proud I did not cringe.

He motioned for his men to carry my family to their rooms. After they departed, he said, “Now that we are alone, I have a surprise for you.”

“Oh, whatever could it be?” I deadpanned.

Sweeping down to one knee, he retrieved the box he had shown me in the carriage and offered it before me. “Emira Selene, will you take me as your husband?”

I stared at him. I did not understand his need to frame the command as a question. My answer was inevitable, outside my control. My hand unconsciously drifted to the bruises on my cheek. A dangerous man to cross. “Yes.”

Eagerly, perhaps a touch avariciously, he slipped the ring onto my finger. Taking my arm once more, he escorted me back to the main palace.

“We have to make wedding plans,” I pointed out suddenly, formulating the most haphazard plan known to man.

“What?”

“Plans,” I explained, waving my hands as if to outline my comments. “A dress, clothes, bridesmaids, grooms, seating, invitations, food. If we are to marry, I expect nothing less than a fine event. It has always been my dream, you know,” I said a touch pleadingly. I would not wish him to see through my plans as clearly as I had through his.

He looked at me with misgiving. “Change of heart?”

For this play, I threw all of my cards into the mix and caution, truth, and subtlety to the wind. “Oh Gwydion!” I declared. “You must know I love you. That with every breath of mine I have longed for you. And when I could not see you for these past few years I thought my heart would burst with need. And I only took a separate room out of propriety.” When he still appeared nonplussed, I closed my eyes and brought my lips to his for a kiss and found my fingers twining through his hair of their own volition. After a few moments, I drew back, breathing heavily. I hoped he took my flush for enthusiasm, not embarrassment.

“I never knew you felt that way.”

I stood silent.

Gwydion actually seemed shaken. “Selene...I never knew you felt this way. You shall have your wedding, but we will officially wed today.” He stroked my tangled, unwashed hair.

I bore his ministrations as best I could. “Today?”

He chuckled my chin. “Do not think for a moment, you minx, that I am ensnared by those blue eyes of yours,” he chuckled, dropping the affectation of unsteadiness like a disposed cloak. “I know very well you have never been madly in love with me. I am not going to let you escape so easily.”

“Gwydion, I would *never* flee from you. I love you.” The words were bitter in my mouth, like the aftertaste of a citrus peel. “I only desire to have the sort of wedding my family would have wished for me.”

He burst out laughing. “Your overtures at intrigue and half-truths are quite amusing although not at all convincing. Where do you think I have been the past few years? *I* have been living by intrigue and military strategy in the Court of Hademer across the sea, not cooling my heels in Clemen with peasants. I hope that wasn’t your best effort.”

Hademer lies across the Middle Sea from Ghalain. At the dawn of history, Hademerians invaded Ghalain and intermarried among the native Ghalainis. Now, their country is known for the deadly intrigues of their courtiers and kings. Poisonings and assassinations are too common there to elicit even a raised eyebrow.

He shook his head ruefully. “I am afraid I am in for a dull lifetime with you.”

I bit my tongue.

The guards stepped aside as we entered the palace’s great hall. And there was the memory of my birthday dinner, of laughing with Gwydion and my father, of dancing with them. Who would have thought that this would have been the result two years later? This time, Gwydion took Father’s seat. I bristled at his presumption. He was no one. He was not the heir to the emirdom, of the Khamad line. But I sat silently beside him, mechanically chewing the cold

chicken and hard rice that were doubtlessly leftovers from last night's dinner. Gwydion drank deeply of his wine goblet. I favored my water.

"Pray tell, who will be wedding us," I finally asked.

"Antony, in my retinue, is of the order of fighting priests and he has been most obliging."

Nodding, I pushed my food around my plate, appetite extinguished. As much as I detested admitting it, the prospect of marriage to Gwydion frightened me. Frightened me so that I could hardly choke down the chicken. My fork shredded the white meat.

Gesturing towards my plate and goblet, Gwydion advised with a wink, "Finish up Selene. You should bear up your strength for the wedding and the following festivities."

I wanted to tear his eye out.

Smiling brightly, I announced that I had finished. He grinned back, equally artificial.

Again, we walked past the temple's glinting mosaics that depicted long-dead ancestors lighting pyres, blessing harvests. *Seasons*, I wished one of them could shake free of the gold-and-lapis tiles and rescue me. But the wishing was pointless and soon enough, the rough warrior-priest was reading out the blessings and we were reciting our replies.

As I signed the contract, my fingers trembled, as became a bride.



## *Chapter Ten*

“Ready?” Gwydion said as we walked towards my rooms.

“For what?” I blinked, the personification of wide-eyed innocence.

“Do not toy with me, Selene.”

I straightened to my full height, the top of my head level with his eyes. “You can beat me, but you cannot force me. And tonight is not the night.” We had reached my chambers, but I refused to open the door until he left.

His jaw clenched. “I can find my pleasure elsewhere,” he replied dismissively. “Your sister for instance is quite lovely, even in repose.”

“You unspeakable bastard.”

He chuckled. It was a corrosive sound. “You know your duty then.”

I thought quickly. Huskily, I whispered, “Tonight I invite you to seek your enjoyment...” I slipped through the door. “In a brothel.” I secured the lock. Even Gwydion was not repulsive enough to do what he had just threatened.

After his footsteps had faded down the corridor, I slipped out of the itching blue gown and stepping into the tall copper tub in the alcove, I turned a few select knobs and was rewarded with hot water pouring down my back. My stiff muscles loosened. After bathing dreamily, I pulled on a nightgown two years out of fashion and very reminiscent of that era with its short bell sleeves. It was lovely and homey in its datedness. The soft linen smelled of the lemon verbena soap the washerwomen used and the scent filled me with homesickness for the past.

Listening at the door to make sure neither Gwydion nor his men loitered outside, I quietly padded to my parents’ chambers, where they had been carefully arranged by Gwydion’s men. Light with grief, as if in sadness my density in the world had grown less certain, I crept into their bed and lay my head on my mother’s chest. Her heartbeat lulled me softly to sleep.

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After a breakfast of leftover spiced potatoes—apparently in Gwydion’s whole band of marauders, there was not a single man who knew how to cook—I visited Auralia. I straightened her sheets and smoothed away hair plastered to her brow. Dropping a kiss at her temple, I opened the wardrobe wide.

“Your dresses are so lovely!” I said to her, running my hand down the fine fabrics. “All this silk! You would have laughed to see me in Clemen. Wearing fine woolens like a goodwife and working for a living! A governess. To a boy four years my senior.”

Chatting with her as if my rambling would reanimate her, I decided upon a narrow orange dress which bared my shoulders. The color complemented my bruises. I shimmied into it, pulling it over my hips with some effort. Sitting at Auralia’s side, I brushed my hair and exhaustively divulged my story to her sleeping form, speaking about Viziéra, my fear of Gwydion, my dread for her and our family’s well-being, my aspirations for Aquia.

“You see Auralia,” I said, “I do not know how I will take care of Aquia. Everyone is asleep, but we cannot let everything *freeze* or swelter, die and rot for a hundred years. Perhaps I will try to invite people from other emirdoms to till and manage the land, but then what happens when you lot wake? We cannot boot them out with a thank-you card.

“But I know what else I *must* do: I *will* find the person to break your curse. Although you would have made things easier for everyone if you had found him on your own.” I laughed wanly. *And what if he too sleeps?* I refused to entertain the thought.

Someone softly clapped. I jumped around defensively. I did not relax when I saw it was Gwydion. “What do you want?” I snapped.

“I am glad you see the difficulty that arises from this curse. It is necessary you and I consult with our advisors about the most pressing issues.”

“What advisors, exactly? All I see are your cronies.” I ushered Gwydion out, closing Auralia’s door safely behind us.

He ignored my question. “A stack of wedding invitations is being drawn up for you to sign as we speak. By this time next month, we shall be officially invested as the rulers of Aquia.”

*Oh, is that what he thinks?* I was tempted to push him down the stairs. “I cannot plan two lavish functions without maids, ushers, servers, seamstresses and the like. We shall have to invite foreign farmers, craftsmen, and servants to Aquia. I doubt that even your retinue could orchestrate a wedding doubling as an investiture—despite their noted skill at *coups d’etat*—without any resources.” I sketched a wry bow.

In the Grand Hall, standing beside the dais were two of Gwydion’s friends, Lord Kay and Count Farzal. I assumed they had arrived in the night. I raised an eyebrow and invited them to sit at the long table. Lowering myself into the gold and onyx seat of Aquia, I relegated Gwydion to the Consort’s chair. Where he belonged.

“We need to invite people from other emirdoms and even from across the seas from countries like Hademer and Avarain to fill the gap,” I began without preamble. “They will come and they and their descendants will farm and work the abandoned lands through the future and garner all the profits of their labors. Once the curse is lifted, twenty acres of land will be guaranteed to the oldest child of the family to do with as they will. But can Aquia supply these twenty acres to so many so easily?” I squirmed in my tight gown, inadvertently drawing the attention of Farzal and Kay. Uncomfortable, I cleared my throat. “Well?”



“What do you think, eh Gwyd?” said Kay, hands thrown up behind his head. I half-expected him to kick his legs onto the table. “Er, I mean Lord Gwydion?”

Gwydion glared at me irritably. I smirked.

Kay flipped through some papers and scratched out figures on parchment while we waited patiently. “Given a marginal rate of error in our calculations, Aquia can quite readily provide lands for these new settlers as well as the native Aquians for at least a generation. Beyond that, it no longer is our problem.”

Although I knew it was irresponsible to leave such a burden on my descendants, I also recognized that this was the most expedient option available. “Very well then. Spread the word of the opportunity available in Aquia.” I struck on another problem. “How exactly do we decide which lands will be given to the folk who come to answer your call? And, do we not need new nobles to govern the lands? I am vassal to Queen Erina and I report to her, but I need my vassals who will report to me.”

“This one is tricky.” Gwydion steepled his fingers. “We cannot grant titles to new nobles when those nobles who are sleeping own those lands. Perhaps you have an idea?” He indulged me with a smile.

I thought for a few minutes. “Suppose we...we find the most able newcomers and leave them and their family the rights to rule the land until the curse is lifted, after which the Mehal will grant them three hundred acres of land *or* an advisory position.”

“Seems a lot to give a load of rowdy peasants.” Farzal wrinkled his nose gingerly.

However, Kay in a stroke of intelligence, perceived my motives. “What the Emira suggests is giving the power to help govern the land and a good bit of land itself in exchange for their tenure as ‘lords,’ if you will. But will they still be called lords? It may give them some illusions of superiority.”

I decided I rather liked Kay, Gwydion’s crony or not.

“We will give them a title later...Lord-Seat or something to connote the temporariness of the affair. That’s of little consequence. The initial and most important issue is to ensure that the lands are governed well and wisely. Who knows,” I added, “it may be that some of our Lord-Seats will be more adept at the business of governing than some of our lords.”

Gwydion straightened in the Consort’s chair. “Thank you for your ideas. Indeed, you have helped us greatly today. You should now rest, perhaps take a walk about the gardens. We can handle the rest of the business between ourselves.” Looking at his chair, he laughed. “After all, it is the duty of the Consort to ascertain that his Lady does not wrinkle her clear forehead.”

Farzal joined in his laughter, but my humor thinned.

“Oh no. I believe I am quite fine where I am,” I said firmly. “The business of Aquia cannot proceed without me. After all, I am the Emira-Regent.”

Gwydion’s smile was sour as spoiled milk. “My dear wife, you appear to be under a misapprehension. Your role here is as nothing greater than an accessory, an ornament. You should acquaint yourself with this reality immediately: I am the power in Aquia.”

Kay and Farzal sat awkwardly at the table. Kay rifled too-loudly through his papers and Farzal stared intently at the tiled floor.

Sniffing, I did not dignify his comment with a response. I addressed Kay and Farzal. “Well, then. Divvy up attendants and send out the invitations. When do you suppose the influx will begin?”

“We will send messengers this very day,” Kay said quickly, appearing thankful that the subject had turned. He ignored Gwydion’s baleful glare. “I should guess the first few, from neighboring emirdoms, will begin entering Aquia as early as next week.”

“Very well then. Is that all the business you have to present before me?”

Once Kay nodded, I left the dais. I could feel Gwydion’s angry eyes on my back. I knew the business of ruling would not be so simple once settlers arrived and became the populations we so desperately needed. Whatever Gwydion said, he could not change the truth that I was Emira-Regent, and he would have to do more than talk down to me to quell that certainty. I was made of sterner stuff than could be quashed by a few bruises.



## *Chapter Eleven*

That night, Gwydion began visiting my chamber. It was more enjoyable than I would have expected, given the river of animosity that ran between us—perhaps it was more pleasurable for it. But I had more important business than his nocturnal calls.

For one thing, my search for Auralia’s love was proving fruitless. I could not have strange men pawing at my sister, but nor could I find any indication of a love amongst Auralia’s things. If she had love letters or tokens they were hidden somewhere I could not find. What’s more, bandits had begun raiding Aquia’s border, about seven great marauding bands, who were roping up the wandering livestock. As Winter settled into Aquia, our mercenaries from Avarain, the northernmost country of the known world, managed to subdue most of the bandits, who were largely loosely organized troops of thieves. The rest had fled, but not without torching abandoned farms along the way.

What I had not expected, but certainly should have, were the marauding bands of *cousins*: those emirs and emiras of neighboring principalities, who, seeing Aquia struck low by the Pari’s blow, decided to press their own claim. Viziéra and Darsepol, emirdoms situated upon our border, were steadily pressing inward. I had arranged a meeting for today with the Emira Quenela of Viziéra, and the Emir Hadil of Darsepol.

My new maid, one of the gallions of imports of the past few months, had lain out a simple gown of the sort I had grown to favor over the past years. Today however, I would not give Quenela and Hadil the opportunity to see me as anything less than regal and I pulled on a silk gown of a deep wine red. Without the maid, I struggled to match the ruby buttons marching down the back. Clipping an emerald barrette into my tousled raven waves, I slipped gold bangles studded with large beryls onto my wrists.

In the front room of my apartment, I found Gwydion reclining on a couch. I had left my parents in the official bedroom reserved for the Emira and Emir. I hoped that my reign would only be a brief placeholder. A fire crackled warmly—it was already deep into the ice of winter.

“Finally,” he exclaimed, leaping out of his seat.

“I was having a touch of difficulty with my gown.” It was uncomfortably tight—we had finally found a proper cook and he feasted us nightly. I turned around. “So, if you will milord?”

Gwydion examined my back. I could not help but twitch uncomfortably at his scrutiny.

“Selene, you are still having a touch of difficulty with your gown,” he said, amused. “Has your maid gone blind? I have never seen so many mismatched buttons.”

“Shut up. Fix it quickly otherwise Hadil and Quenela will invade Aquia from sheer boredom after their tea grows cold. You did arrange for tea and wine, did you not?” I asked as he buttoned my gown. His fingers worked nimbly, no doubt from the practice that he had received over the course of his voyeuristic career. My back twitched away reflexively at his touch.

“Yes of course,” he replied coolly, his teasing tone suddenly frostbitten. “You know I do not bungle matters of state, although serving the tea and such niceties should be the woman’s job.”

“Shut up,” I repeated tiredly. “Nearly finished?”

He patted my back. “Do not forget what I have told you to say.”

I stiffened. Since I was the one recognized as Emira-Regent, Gwydion could not speak at a meeting, while I remained silent. That did not stop him from instructing me, however.

Leaving the apartments, we traversed down the great flight of marble stairs to the audience hall where we met with delegations of import. As we entered the room, both Hadil and Quenela rose to greet us with hugs and murmurs of “Cousin.”

Their own attire was simpler than mine, indicative of the fact that they had been on the war trail. Quenela looked very pretty though, despite the simplicity of her neatly pressed grey linen gown. I had seen her many years ago when I was a child and she newly instated as the very young Emira of Viziéra. The years had only matured her beauty. With her wide-set blue almond eyes, sharp against her deep copper complexion, we did not appear related at all, although our lines linked extensively through marriage. The distinctive slanted blue eyes of the Viziéri Emiratis are courtesy of a period of frequent intermarriage between their line and the imperial family of Xanjo, a country that lies west of Ghalain, across the Green Sea.

Hadil, on the other hand, bore a definite familial resemblance with his tanned skin and large eyes, which was not flattered by his cherry-brown wool tunic.

Cousins though Quenela and Hadil might have been, they were not to be trusted. That much would have been clear to an infant with hay for brains.

I gestured for a servant to pour wine into the goblets and drank deeply. I needed to steady my nerves.

“Milord,” I reached out to Hadil. “My deepest condolences for your son. You and I have a shared grief.” His son, Kisam, was my sister Evra’s husband and he now lay beside her in repose in Evra’s childhood bedchamber. Hadil had lost his only child and grandchildren to the curse.

Hadil swallowed and for a moment, I felt sympathy. I would have hoped that family ties would encourage him to stay his hand. “If you would be so kind, I would like to take my son and his grandchildren back to Darsepol.”

Gwydion shook his head slightly.

“You may take Kisam, of course, but I know that my sister would not wish to be parted from her children, even in sleep. Less than she would wish to be parted from her husband, I

should think. Nonetheless, Evra is Aquian and will remain here as will her children, but I will have Kisam sent to you immediately.” I indicated for a servant to take care of the matter.

“Very well,” he acceded, graying head bowed. “My thanks.”

Gwydion glowered. I too was afraid I had misstepped.

“It is I who should thank you—and Quenela as well. Thank you so much for bringing your army to help us in our time of need. The gesture has been ever-so-appreciated, especially for keeping order around the borders, preventing some of our less scrupulous cousins from raiding. We truly are family. Your actions have once more reminded me of the depth of our blood bonds.” I raised my chalice to toast them.

Their smiles froze.

I smirked coldly. “Your armies certainly have been helpful in keeping bandits at bay, but we could not allow you to do us this favor without feeling as if we had caused you to abandon your own emirdoms. I insist that you return to tend your own lands and let us manage ours.”

The two sat uncomfortably in silence. Although they were not yet in alliance against me they both sought the same thing.

“Congratulations on your nuptials,” offered Hadil weakly.

“Thank you,” said Gwydion. “You are both invited to the formal ceremony, of course.”

Again the silence. I had given Quenela and Hadil an opportunity to honorably slip away, to scatter like the carrion-eating crows they were. I willed them to take it.

“Once your men have returned home, you are welcome to stay at the Mehal until the wedding. Anything to help those who have come to us so valiantly in our time of need.” I was not completely able to suppress my sarcasm.

Quenela spoke for the first time. “Thank you, no. Let us speak frankly. With this curse, Aquia has been weakened. You are too green to be a real threat,” she sneered, “I have come so that you may peaceably offer surrender, Cousin. I stand ready to Aquia.”

Hadil harrumphed loudly. “Indeed, *we* do.”

“You will take your armies and you will leave if I have to take a stick and prod you along the whole damn way,” I growled. The wine danced in my head.

Gwydion crunched my hand in a hard grasp.

Hadil started at my pronouncement and Quenela stood up, shaking her skirts angrily. “If you think—”

“If I think what, Cousin?” I said sharply. “If I think that you are violating a dozen treaties and accords and refuse to surrender to your bullying? I have already apprised the Queen in Nyneveh of your actions. Rest assured, if your army makes any further move in Aquia, I will send Gwydion and our mercenaries to settle you. *I offer you* this chance to withdraw peaceably. I suggest you take it.”

Quenela sniffed. “I see the impetuosity of youth is not to be reasoned with. You will find, child, that in this world, if you make threats, you need to be able to make good on them.”

As Quenela glided from the room, Hadil followed her. “Adieu, Emira Selene, Lord Gwydion,” he said, always the amiable courtier.

I eyed him poisonously. “Your son awaits you in your carriage, milord.”

Quenela and Hadil had come under the Flag of Arbitration. Therefore, as much as I wanted, I could not throw the pair of them into prison—although it would have saved me a great deal of trouble later.

After Hadil had left, Gwydion’s mouth twisted. “Seasons! What possessed you to give Hadil his son without securing something else in return? I doubt you could have bought off Quenela, but you had the man’s son in your hand! This is why I must direct you. Without me, you would bungle everything in sight. Without me, you would *give* Aquia away. Look at all I must do for you.” He kicked the chair; it clattered to the floor. “We should have met with them separately, or, at the very least, if you had played them better, they would have turned on each other.”

I flinched. As soon as I had said it, I knew I had erred. “I had hoped that he would see the good-will in my gesture and reach the decision of his own accord.” Even to my own ears, it sounded weak, the move of a naïve child, not an emira. No wonder Quenela had been so dismissive.

He laughed scornfully. “That may have worked very well for a governess in Clemen, but the stakes are higher now than an arithmetic book.”

He was right, but little did I know that the stakes had only begun to rise.



## *Chapter Twelve*

A few hours after sunrise, I held court to hear the grievances of the new Aquians. Bleary-eyed, I sat in the stiff seat that had been my mother's. The watery morning light fell through the high windows, illuminating the faces of my supplicants. They were a largely uncomplaining lot and after half a dozen petitions, I was finished for the day. If only Quenela and Hadil were so easily satisfied. It had been several weeks since our meeting and although they had yet to make a move, I knew it was only a matter of time before one of us attacked the other. Even as I sat here addressing petitioners, my mercenaries were beginning to move towards the borders.

As my last petitioner backed away and I gestured for a blond manservant to pour a cup of tea, a black and silver garbed messenger entered the hall.

"Your Highness," he murmured, kneeling before me. "I bring you news from the capital. Queen Erina has called an Assembly to select her heir. The time has come. Your presence—or that of an envoy—is required in Nyneveh as soon as possible."

My eyes widened. I had not even properly managed Quenela and Hadil and now this. A brief dream of contesting for the throne, and perhaps even winning it, flickered to life in the back of my mind but was quickly doused. I had a mountain of responsibilities, both magical and mundane here in Aquia and as I had proven at that meeting, I was not as clever at statecraft as I had imagined.

"Thank you," I told the black-haired boy. "We can arrange for a room and a meal for you, if you like."

"I'll take the meal, marm, but I must swiftly journey back to Nyneveh." He bowed and departed.

I wondered on whom I could pawn off the task of going to Nyneveh and voting in the Assembly. If Gwydion could be trusted to not start trouble, this would be a wonderful opportunity to push him out of Aquia—maybe even before he realized what I was doing. I smothered a smile. That was too marvelous a possibility.

My plan may have worked, but the next day, news of an entirely different sort arrived in Aquia.

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Gwydion and I were eating breakfast, a mélange of potatoes and long green peppers with flaky bread, when a courier entered.

A young lad, he doffed his cap, revealing shaggy brown hair. “Emira-Regent Selene, Lord Gwydion. I bring news from the eastern border, from the garrisons set up to facilitate the transfer of sleeping bodies. It appears that Emira Quenela and Emir Hadil have aligned since the meeting and have taken Fort Ondil and bought the mercenaries guarding it.”

My mouth dropped open. I was not too surprised though. I had know it would only be a matter of time: Quenela was not one to make idle threats. Well, neither was I. “We must take reinforcements to the fort and force them out. Siege or open battle, this must be answered.”

Gwydion crossed his legs. “No Selene. You will go to Nyneveh, to the Assembly. I shall go to the front. I suspect it will be a brief matter: Quenela and Hadil will wish to focus their attentions on the Bronze Throne. After you have secured the crown for me, I will meet you in Nyneveh.”

I stared at him blankly. “Secured the crown?” *For you?*

“Why of course,” he answered blithely. “Do you not think that as my queen you could improve the lives of the beggar children and peasants you are constantly nattering about? More importantly, would you really allow Quenela or Hadil the Bronze Throne?”

My reeling mind took in the ramifications of his proposal. If either Quenela or Hadil won the the throne, they would immediately take the opportunity to oust me out of Aquia. Another thought struck me: *If I were Queen, as a ruler with diplomatic rights among the Pari, I could leverage Lilianna into lifting the curse. She can ignore an Emira, but she cannot disregard the Queen of Ghalain.*

“We cannot abandon Aquia, my family,” I said. “Someone needs to take care of them.”

“I will leave Farzal as steward of the city while I am gone, which will only be for a fortnight, if that, worry not. Your trip will likely take months though. Pack thoroughly.”

I was hard-pressed to ignore the fact that it was *my* role to name the steward. I had been dismissed. As I stood, the room quivered with vertigo. I caught my balance heavily against Gwydion. “We must still continue searching for a means to break the curse.”

He removed my hand from his arm and replied, “Very well. I will have Kay look into it.”

I very nearly said thank you, as if I were a supplicant and he the ruler. He had me so fully in his grip, directing me, ordering me, that I could not even wriggle without some sort of repercussion.

*Perhaps I can manage some independence away from him when I am away in Nyneveh.*





### *Chapter Thirteen*

As the carriage trundled through the streets of Nyneveh, my face was plastered to the window like any bona fide rustic. Heavy books on economic and political theory, genealogies, histories, all that I needed to review prior to entering the arena, crushed into my side. I would not be taken for a fool again.

While Aquia and Clemen were both large cities, they could not rival Nyneveh. Just the sheer amount of people that packed the paved streets made it nearly impossible for the horses to pull us more than inches at a time. The marshy-wet smell of the Menander River permeated through the carriage. Buildings, with arching windows and intricate carvings, surrounded us, so high that they threatened to block the sun. There, I saw the towering ziggurat, which housed the temple priest and gleamed bright with gold, scarlet, and blue. On the corners, men hawked pies and schnapps. Women buzzed about, selling ribbons and mirrors (and no doubt other wares as well). I wished Auralia or Oelphie could have been there to gawk at it all with me. As we crawled through the streets, I studied faces closely, and on a few embarrassing instants, was caught staring. A school of children surrounded the coach, tapping the windows and making faces. At this, my footman leapt down, waving his fist around handily and scared the swarm away.

The door opened slightly as the footman ducked his blond head inside. “Five minutes to the Palace, Emira-Regent.”

“Thank you,” I nodded, and quickly turned to making myself presentable. I had traveled in a gown of black georgette lined with cotton, meaning that no wrinkle or stain would show, and thus making it eminently suitable for travel. I combed out my raven’s nest of hair and clipped on heavy silver earrings. Lightly, I applied rouge to my lips and cheeks. No woman who had just traveled a week through midwinter frost—or had been battling a bout of the flu—could be expected to look any better.

As soon as the carriage halted in front of the Alhazar Palace, I leapt out. After the rollicking ride, I was eager to leave the infernal carriage and walk on my own two feet. With brightly-colored glass domes and its famed thousand towering minarets, the Alhazar dwarfed the other structures in its vicinity. Stepping back, I tipped my head to better see the Alhazar in all its glory. I could not help but gawp.

A man cleared his throat.

Two men stood before me: one breathtakingly handsome with sharp cheekbones, the other ordinary, but he watched me with an amused expression. Both were clearly noble.

“Emira Selene,” said the handsome one smoothly, bowing over my hand. Rubies glinted in his ears. I had never seen the trend before. I would have thought the style absurd but it suited him.

Unable to stop ogling, I curtsied.

“Emira Selene,” said another voice, infinitely more beautiful. Startled, I realized that it came from the plain face of the second lord whose ears also shimmered with stones. Sapphires, unless I missed my guess. “Now that you are finished fondling the stonework?”

Flushing, I repeated with another genuflection, “My lords.”

The plain one spoke again in his beautiful voice. My stomach swooped. *Carriage sickness*, I told myself.

“Queen Erina requested that we guide you to your rooms and make you as comfortable as possible. I am Kershid and this is my brother Liem, Emir of Tirahm.”

I nearly gaped. Those were the names of Erina’s sons...and they were brothers. The two looked very little alike, but I now noticed distinct similarities. Both had dark hair, straight noses that curved slightly at the end, and the honey-colored skin and eyes that the Tirahmi line was famed for.

“Well, if you will...?”

I followed the brothers through the marble halls of the Alhazar. The light shone through the immense stained-glass dome, casting crimsons, marigold, azure mosaics of light on the floor. The smaller domes were painted with minuscule flowers woven into an intricate pattern.

With my attention on the ceiling, I nearly stumbled several times only to be stabilized by Kershid. His eyes crinkled with amusement as if saying, ‘Oh you country bumpkin.’

“It’s marvelous, this place,” I breathed, too awe-struck by the grandeur of the halls to care what the refined sons of our Queen would say. The Mehal in Aquia was beautiful, famously so, but this was architecture on a much grander scale.

“Built centuries ago by one of our mutual ancestress, the illustrious Felisizia the Great,” said Liem, bowing politely.

In addition to raising the marriage age and building the Alhazar, Felisizia drove the Hademerians from Ghalain and created the treaties by which we lived with the Djinnat and Pari today.

“Would you take some refreshment before you rest, Emira-Regent?” he added.

“That would be wonderful. Lead the way.”

The room they brought me to was cozy with its carved wood paneling, fine silk rugs, and wide windows that gaped over the curling streets of Nyneveh. The small table groaned with fresh fruits, gooseberry tart, fresh-baked bread, and a nutty white cheese.

“Ah, this looks delicious,” I breathed, taking a helping of a curious chartreuse fruit flecked with black seeds. I found it sweet and tangy.

“How many others have arrived for the Assembly?” I asked after a few bites.

Answered Kershid in his lovely voice, “You are the last one actually. Your arrival will cause quite the stir—and a few lost bets.”

“I myself have won sixty gold denars,” said Liem good-naturedly.

I sipped my punch. The last one. My arrival heralded the beginning of political wrangling that would only end once the next ruler of Ghalain had been selected.

Let the games begin.

“News has reached Nyneveh of your marriage,” Liem said, interrupting my thoughts and kissing my cheeks twice. “Congratulations on your nuptials, Cousin! Now, who is it that you married? I freely admit I have no head for names and leave that sort of thing to Kershid.”

“Thank you, Emir Liem. My husband is Gwydion, Lord Gwydion that is, of Altus in northern Aquia.”

Kershid smiled. “We have also heard the romantic tale of your wedding. The maidens of Nyneveh have been sighing since. Your husband had been searching for you for years and finally found you the day the curse fell, swept you home, wed you, and made you Emira of Aquia.”

“My heart pounds just to think of it,” Liem fluttered in a high-pitched drawl.

I grimaced. “Oh, there was more to that than that.” I wondered how bruises would figure into the romance of the tale.

“And how are you handling the curse?” said Kershid.

My face grew still and I answered mechanically, “It is a difficult socioeconomic situation to be certain, but we are managing it quite well, given the circumstances.”

Kershid’s eyebrows arched. “I meant with your family.” He appeared surprised that I had not immediately grasped his meaning.

“Of course it is difficult, but everything will play out as it will.” I smiled blandly. I had not shared with anyone how I felt having my whole family enchanted, their lives hanging on a silly stipulation.

Kershid shook his head slowly. “I do not believe I could be able to bear up so strongly if I were without Liem. Like your Auralia, he is my twin.”

It was clear where all the beauty had ended up in that pair. Guilty at my ungenerous thought, I said, “So you understand then. Somewhat. At this point I know not what to do...I hope if I leave it to ferment for a while, some brilliant idea will spring up.” I opened my hands wide. “As you can tell, nothing yet.”

“Why did your husband then tear you away from your family, whom you are clearly devoted to and send you to Nyneveh?” asked Liem concernedly.

Blinking bemusedly, I replied, “Well, Emir, there is an Assembly called here...”

Waving a hand dismissively, he corrected himself. “I meant why did you not stay there and why did he not come in your place?”

In mock shock, I pressed a hand to my chest. “What? You would rather have his company than mine?”

With a gallant grin, Liem said, “Not at all. I only meant that any kindhearted person would not part you from your family at such a terrible time. The whole of Ghalain grieves for you.”

“I would not be so confident of that.” I tried not to roll my eyes. “Gwydion remains and I come because of an imminent threat on our borders in the form of two of our very respected cousins, Quenela and Hadil.” I took another sip of the plum punch. “The only thing they grieve for is that Gwydion is an able military leader and was able to hire a good number mercenaries to supplement the soldiers recruited from the other emirdoms. He is needed for the army and I, at the moment, am relegated to politics. Perhaps if you could convince your mother to shackle Quenela and Hadil for breaking the Queen’s peace...?”

“If only we could, Emira,” said Liem. “Alas, you can understand why our mother cannot turn her attention to the Aquian troubles.”

“More is the pity,” I murmured into my chalice.

Kershid heard my words and glowered. “You must be tired from your trip. Come, let us show you to your rooms. Liem.”

We strode up the white steps that glittered in the generous sunlight, past rich hangings of silver and silk, and through the maze-like halls. Every now and then, I stopped at a wall to admire a tapestry or a painting, exasperating impatient Kershid. But I could not be weighed down by his evident disapproval, not now that I was at last free of Gwydion. Liberty was a heady emotion, and I fought down the grin that promised to conquer my face.

“How is your mother the Queen faring?” It was the question that had been playing in the back of my mind since I had entered the Alhazar.

Immediately, both men stiffened, their postures almost identical in discomfiture.

“She is...well...the physician says there are months yet,” muttered Liem.

“I pray for her recovery.”

Kershid shot me a look, which clearly said, *Oh, I am sure.*

Well, Kershid was not the one I had to convince of my sincerity. There were nine other Emirs and Emiras to whom that duty fell and Seasons, I hoped I was ready to meet it. They fought for the throne; I fought for my family.



## *Chapter Fourteen*

The chandelier caught sunlight in its crystals, scattering it like so many pearls on the floor, on the table, and on the faces of my fellows emirs and emiras. The bright sun belied the Winter season. As we waited for Kershid, who was Arbiter of the Assembly, my cousins floated amongst each other, speaking, gauging.

Trying to seem like I was only interested in tracing the table's inlay, I furtively observed my peers. Peers. Suddenly, these men and women, who had been so vastly my superiors a mere months ago, had become my equals. In a few months, it was very likely one of them would become my sovereign; a frightening thought if only for Gwydion's reaction to my failure.

There was Fyodor of Murban, a soft-eyed man with a full dark beard; my mother's second cousin. He was chatting genially with the golden-haired belle Lyra, Nehajan's emira, who had seen forty-five summers, although I would have otherwise sworn she was no older than me. My grandfather's heir, she was my father's older sister. I knew her only formally, but had always found her kind. Lyra gave me a small smile. I swept her a low curtsy.

"How are you doing, my dear?" she asked. As she came closer, I could see the fine creases around her eyes and lines of laughter around her mouth.

I sighed. "As well as can be expected. And you?"

She laughed weakly. "I miss receiving your father's weekly letters. It is strange to start my week without them." She stroked my cheek. "You look so like our mother—and you have your father's eyes. Oh, you are too young to be thrust into all this. It's a dangerous world, my love, but if you need counsel, consider me a poor substitute for your father."

A few spans away, the softly wrinkled Emira of Bahart, Corrine, Kaladus of Chandon and the Emir of Ariya, Idrees stood in a tight knot. Quenela and Hadil had their heads stooped together, avoiding my gaze. I longed to run up, flapping my arms, and scatter them like the vultures they were. The Emir of Tirahm, Liem, had not arrived yet; he would be coming with his younger brother.

Alone stood an envoy for Emir Luix of Aawset, one Lord Ferdas. My breath hitched in my throat. For a moment, it was as if it were once more the night of the birthday ball, Auralia before him again, and... He spied my unlatched mouth and approached me with a grin. "Why, Selene, how long has it been?"

When I finally managed control over my mouth, I croaked, "Two years."

“Amazing. Two years!” he replied as though he had never heard of such a thing. “Where did you run off to, eh? I heard tell of Viziéra...?”

Much as Auralia’s features had done, his had sharpened and grown finer and all the more handsome. His nose was a touch too large, creating an imperfection in what might have been a perfect face. That and the fact that he barely managed to be taller than me, barred him from being as handsome as Liem or even Gwydion.

What sort of rumors *had* he heard? Something else, no doubt, extolling Gwydion’s romantic heroism. “You heard rightly. I lived in Clemen, working as a governess. And what of you? You look well and grown, Ferdas!”

“Thank you, and you are radiant! City life has suited you.” He smiled with such guilelessness that a sudden wave of nostalgia, a foggy fondness, crept through me. He paused seriously. “Tell me, how is your family?”

I stiffened. “As well as can be expected.”

“And Auralia?” he said, concerned. “Surely you miss her the most. How goes the search for her love?”

I had been in Aquia for so long and yet made no real headway in breaking the enchantment. I realized by now that Gwydion would not commence any sort of comprehensive search in Auralia’s name. Should the curse be lifted, he would lose all power in Aquia. No, I could not wait to find the man who would break the curse. For my family, everything hinged on me winning the crown. “It is early days yet,” I said shortly. “Seasons willing, I will see this resolved.” My tone brooked no further conversation.

He looked as if he were about to say something, but then seeing my resolution, stopped himself. “Seasons willing,” he echoed.

As clouds darkened the high windows, Kershid and Liem entered. Quickly, we found our seats again, each ruler as eager as the next to begin the arduous task of sovereign selection.

At the head of the table, Kershid rapped a gavel and intoned, “Emirs and Emiras, I call to order the 114<sup>th</sup> Assembly of Ghalain, in the twenty-fourth year of the reign of the Queen Erina of Ghalain in the Season of Winter the Assembly of the Emirdoms. Our work here is to select a ruler for Ghalain who will do the best for our land, defend us against her enemies and keep us strong and united. I, Kershid Abedin Raelf of Tirahm, swear to uphold these tenets.”

Up and down the table, we all swore. My breath caught. It was truly beginning.

“Each of you who rule an emirdom has a vote and may press yourself or anyone else as a candidate,” Kershid said. “Whichever candidate gains a majority will be our new monarch.

“The initial question to discuss is not who we want for a ruler but *what*,” he continued. “No doubt each of you feel that you would make the best ruler but let us distance ourselves from the situation and answer, in an unbiased fashion, what would be best for our country.”

Lyra responded first but only after silence had echoed through the room. She rose, revealing a fine gown of redcurrant velvet, lined with gold ribbon and pearls. “We need a ruler just and wise. But any bard can you tell these things. Times are shifting; our land is no longer

what it had been under our grandfathers. The power of trade has exploded, merchants have prospered as have farmers. We need a ruler who is forward-thinking. One who can deal with both merchants and peasants as people not servants. One who can defend the rights of all people, but can also balance the prerogative of the monarchy as the world changes. And this, I believe, narrows our field greatly.”

Leaning forward, Liem asked, “Why do you say that? The latter part.”

Lyra’s mouth opened, but I interrupted gently, “May I Aunt Lyra?”

As she nodded her acquiescence, I turned to Liem although I addressed the whole assembly. This was the first time I was speaking to Emirs and Emiras in a formal capacity since the diplomatic debacle that had been my meeting with Hadil and Quenela. My mouth was dry, but I was able to gather myself sufficiently to recall what I had read in my mountain of books and piece it together with my personal experience.

“As Aunt Lyra says, of late, the Merchant Class has begun growing in wealth, power, and numbers. Some would seek to halt them, but in truth, they are some of the strongest forces of success for our land. I have seen that for myself. Many peasants still toil the land, but more and more are drawn to the cities by the promise of mercantile success—and their wealth adds to the coffers of Ghalain. We cannot have a ruler who is so ingrained in the old ways that they fail to grasp the importance of *the* most powerful allies we have within our borders. Rather, we need a ruler who can foster a close relationship with the bourgeois and nobility.”

“What of experience? Should that not be counted amongst the most pivotal requirements for a ruler?” asked Idrees of Ariya. A swarthy man, he leaned forward on the table, his wiry arms covered with a fine silver brocade coat.

I found myself responding, “While some modicum of experience is integral, less experience should not necessarily bar an individual from the throne granted that the King or Queen be clever and have, in earlier days, a few trusted advisors.” I suddenly felt that I were speaking too much but I suppressed the desire to sit back and bite my lip and look altogether like a chastened schoolgirl. I kept my back straight and my face serenely interested.

“Less experience would be the downfall of Ghalain, lass!” exclaimed stringy-haired Kaladus. His watery blue eyes watched me with dislike.

“What if the advisors gain undue influence?” Corrine said.

It was hard to keep the chastened expression from my face. These men and women had been my elders and superiors for so long. Who was I to think that I had an opinion of any merit? But questions had been posed and Auralia’s sleeping face swam before my vision. I had to. Under the table, I wrapped my fingers tightly around each other to cease their trembling.

“My suggestion that little experience need not be a complete block stems from the point Emira Lyra raised. We need a ruler who looks forward, not one who is so entrenched in the past. Although,” I allowed fairly, “I do not doubt that some of our older and wiser heads can be just as or even more modern in their outlook than younger rulers. And, as for undue influence, we need

a ruler who is strong-minded enough not to let themselves be hoodwinked, but one who is willing to listen to *good* advice.”

Corrine and Idrees nodded sagely, no doubt imagining themselves in the place of those who would impart this good advice; that is, if they could not be king or queen.

Kershid murmured loudly, “And I suppose you imagine yourself the one most well-equipped to bear this burden?”

My eyes cut to his sharply. “You asked for what we believe a successful ruler needs. This is what *I* believe one needs. But thank you for thinking that I possess these qualities.” I smiled, trying to seem sincere.

“I would support Emira-Regent Selene for the throne,” said Ferdas unexpectedly and stoutly.

A gently prodding, embarrassed heat climbed in me at Ferdas’s support.

In a most pugnacious manner, Kaladus hollered, “No doubt you would support her as far as your bed! No chit will rule us, and if this is the will of the Assembly, then Chandon will oppose.”

Leaping to my feet, I was poised to reprimand Kaladus when Kershid slowly rose and in his sonorous voice announced, “That is quite enough Emir Kaladus. Emira-Regent Selene is a married woman and Lord Ferdas an envoy for your equal. Your insults are unbecoming of your rank and breeding and of the work of this Assembly. You are suspended from this Assembly, until Emira Selene sees fit for you to return. For the first time in years, we are attempting this process peacefully and no disruption will be brooked.”

This was a slight exaggeration on Kershid’s part. At the end of each reign, an attempt was made to call the Assembly, but it usually crumbled into conflict and feuds before it could even begin. Nonetheless, this was the first time in two-hundred and forty years that all ten Emirati rulers had managed to converge upon Nyneveh and sit an Assembly meeting together.

“Do any of you oppose me?” He glared.

The emirs and emiras looked on in shock. Evidently, Kershid was taking a *very* strong stance on decorum.

Kaladus glared at me, and while he made no protest, his rigid back and shoulders spoke tomes of his disgruntlement. The sudden erectness of his posture, so martial in bearing, reminded me that Chandon was a great military power—and its ruler was not a man to be treated lightly. I almost wished Kershid had not reprimanded Kaladus for my sake, humiliating him before all. I feared that I may have just made an implacable enemy. *And at the first Assembly meeting!* That did not bode well.

Once Kaladus had exited, we continued in our previous vein. We debated the benefits of married monarch, a free monarch, a King, a Queen, young, old, nearly every topic beneath the moon. In the middle of a heated argument about whether the monarch should be from the Eastern or Western coast, the noontide bells began to sound cheerily, signaling lunch and the end of the day’s debates. I sighed audibly with relief and Ferdas winked conspiratorially. However



scintillating the discussions and however intelligent the partakers, at some point I was reminded of the tedium of schoolroom life.

*Perhaps I am not the best one to rule Aquia after all...* I took a deep breath and expelled it, forcing such thoughts out of the way as well. My insecurities were perhaps the pettiest part of the equation.

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Later that week, to enliven the monotony of ceaseless power wrangling, Kershid and Liem hosted a small dinner and dance on Queen Erina's behalf.

Entering the turquoise and gold tiled chamber, I greeted Kershid and Liem and the other emirs and emiras. Walking past Quenela, I tried to overhear what she was saying to Hadil, but she fell silent as I neared. Kaladus sneered as I took my seat at Ferdas's left at the long oval table. "Do you think Queen Erina will attend?" I asked Ferdas, craning my neck as if expecting her to process through the wooden double doors.

He shook his head. Rubies, which matched his bright crimson tunic, twinkled in his ears like drops of blood. "I doubt it. She's been ill for a while. I do not think she has been seen in public for months."

I sighed, disappointed. I would have liked the opportunity to speak with her. I considered if there were some way I could convince Kershid or Liem to permit me to see her. They jealously guarded their mother's health, allowing little disruption of her days.

"Do you think Liem will contest for the throne?" I asked, watching the handsome man at the head of the table.

"Have you not heard?" Ferdas said, surprised. "He has announced that he would exempt himself and help Kershid mediate."

I *had* been wondering how fair it was that the Arbiter was brother to a would-be claimant.

Ferdas began cutting through his rosemary roasted chicken with relish, but I could not touch a bite of it nor the savory pheasant stew. I was so nervous that the very aroma made me want to reach for a basin.

I elbowed Ferdas and discreetly indicated a woman clothed in coat and breeches, her brown hair bound into a tight braid, who was speaking with a group of nobles. "Who is that?" I had never before seen a woman in pants.

Ferdas swallowed his chicken. "That is General Niara, the army's newest general. She is currently in Nyneveh, acting as a liaison between the Queen and the army."

I nodded in interest. There was a time in Ghalain's history when a ruler could not ascend to the throne unless they were backed by the army or its three generals. Our country had changed much since then, but the king or queen was still obliged to work closely with the army.

Every so often, a noble would approach me to speak, skirting issues like the curse and Quenela and Hadil's war. Although I listened to their concerns and suggestions attentively, I

could not keep my curious attention from the head of the table where a group of six men and women sat clustered together. They were well-dressed, but not exorbitantly so; their clothes were simple, neat and pressed. One or two even wore gems in their ears.

I nudged Ferdas. "Who are they?"

"The merchants and peasants of the Thirds Council." He looked at me knowingly.

I squinted as I examined them. One of them, an older woman in canary yellow woolens with silver in her hair caught my eye. Embarrassed, I dropped my gaze. "Excuse me," I murmured to Ferdas. Slowly, I approached the knot of men and women and curtsied deeply. "Good evening, good sirs and good ladies."

"Good evening, your Grace," they replied. Each introduced themselves. I lost track of their names after the first two and resorted to polite nods.

My mouth was dry. They might not have been noble, but they were some of the most influential men and women of the kingdom. I did not know what to say, but the hawk-nosed woman whose eye I had caught saved me.

"You were employed at the home of an Esadora Wiqf in Clemen, were you not, Emira?"

My brow quirked in surprise. "Yes, I was governess for her son, Corec for two years. How...?"

The woman, who had introduced herself as Calenda and sat with a straight-backed posture that would have put even Auralia to shame, explained, "I have handled numerous investments for Madame Wiqf."

A stern-faced man, dressed in blues and creams, peered down at me and boomed, "Do you mean to say that you have *worked* and that you have worked for a *merchant* family. As a *governess*?"

A defiant flush rose to my cheeks. "Yes, I did," I answered, meeting his brown eyes firmly.

He sat back in his seat. A pensive smile spread across his face. "Interesting, very interesting."

Another man, this one a peasant judging by his clean if plain tunic, was more to the point. "A noble who has not been swaddled in privilege their entire life and has actually worked." He exchanged a significant look with Calenda. "How did that come about?" he asked, cocking his head to the side. His shaggy brown hair nearly reached his elbow.

Suddenly, I saw it from their point of view. A noble who had lived as a commoner was a novelty, but a good one. And if that noble could be queen...

At last, I found my wits. "A rebellious youth," I replied. "I do not regret it, though. It provided me with an experience that I doubt any of my peers have, who have never looked at a merchant or a peasant but to see an inferior." I laughed self-deprecatingly. "It's hard to see someone as an inferior when they put the bread on your plate and the roof over your head. I will always be indebted to Madame, and any friend of hers is a friend of mine," I finished. Let them make of that what they would.

Calenda grasped my hand. Hers was dry and firm. “This has been most enlightening. We must meet again.”

I inclined my head. “As you say. You have but to call upon me.” Nodding at the other Council members, I rejoined Ferdas. As the heady, golden buzz of success filled me, I was hard-pressed to not break out in a jig. They did not have a vote, but they had *influence*.

“I know what you were doing,” Ferdas murmured in my ear. I could hear his smile.

I bowed my head demurely, but could not stop the grin from spreading across my face. “One of them knew an old friend.”

“The others, I know Quenela for one is seriously contesting for the throne, perhaps that old vixen Corrine, and possibly Kaladus, but they have yet to make overtures to the Thirds Council.”

“It is early days yet. Of late, I have felt more at ease with commoners than aristocrats. I merely wished to speak to them. And what makes you think I am contending for the crown?” I asked sharply.

He chuckled, displaying teeth white against his tanned skin. “I can read it in your face at every Assembly meeting. Auralia would get that same face sometimes: determined, stubborn. You look her sister more than ever at those times.”

The music of drums and flutes wove through my surprised silence. “Did you know Auralia well? I...didn’t know...” Memories of a sixteenth birthday party fluttered in the corner of my mind...

But he answered with natural ease, “After you departed, Luix of Aawset named me co-envoy to Aquia with my father—a means to progress my training. I spent a great deal of time there and became well-acquainted with all your family, better than I had been, but Auralia and Gieneve in particular.” He stopped. “I think they were the two who felt your absence most sharply. Emir Luix had summoned me back to Aawset from Aquia a few weeks before the curse. My father was stricken. I was saved.” His thin, rosy lips tightened and he waved a long, elegant hand, indicating the company in their silks and velvets, the iron torches reflecting against the polished marble floors, the high walls and domes arching above. “Had he not been cursed, I would not be here.” His voice became gruff. “I would...” He could speak no more.

I patted his hand soundlessly. I had not noticed if Ferdas’s father had been strewn among the sleeping, but I assured him that they all had been put into beds, as safe as we could make them.

Ferdas’s face blazed with fervor. “You must find a way to lift this curse, Selene. If I could, I would leave Nyneveh right now and —!”

My reply was lost in loud exclamations. Courtiers pointed madly at the window, delighted as young children.

“Snow!”

Excitedly, I looked up. The first snow of the Season was gently blowing on Nyneveh, just a few occasional white sparkles caught by the torches outside. Although Winter was cold in Nyneveh, it rarely snowed, only occasionally and when the Season was more than halfway

through. I knew if I stepped outside, the air would bite and the flakes would catch on my eyes, bright against my smoky lashes. I smiled as wisps of memory crept through me: sledding with Nic and Gareth; slicing through ice-solid Menander River on skates with Auralia, Ceara, and Evra, their long golden hair streaming behind them; waging snow wars with Gieneve and Danyal; snuggling with my nieces and nephews while they were placated with hot apple cider; sloughing through the snow in Clemen with Oelphie, arm in arm, to reach the tavern...Tears pricked for this lost world of memories.

“Are you alright?” It was not Ferdas’s voice, but a light feminine one that rang in my ear.

With a bashful laugh, I dabbed away the tears. “Quite fine, thank you.”

The woman came closer, leaving a knife-nosed man behind. She smiled, lighting up her white-gold hair and bright blue eyes. “I notice that you have not touched your meal. Was it not to your liking?” The question was not prying, but posed with a professional interest.

I looked down at my plate and immediately wished I had not. The scent of pheasant swimming in cream and its own juices was nauseating. A spasm wracked my body but I suppressed it.

“Are you sure you are quite fine?” she asked again with concern.

I hesitated. I looked and over and saw Ferdas engrossed in conversation with Fyodor.

Seeing my pause, she assured me, “Before I wed, I had some little training on my father’s estates as a doctor. Of course, trade, no matter how learned and privileged, is not suitable for a nobleman’s wife. I still advise the ladies of my acquaintance and the court, though. I would be honored if you would confide in me.”

Something in her smile was reassuring. “I have been ill for sometime, occasionally unable to keep food down. The illness does not desist and yet I grow fatter!” As I said it, pieces clicked together in my mind and I suddenly felt very stupid. The woman’s emerging smile only confirmed my guess.

“What of your moon cycles?”

“Ah. Perhaps...four, five months ago?” I felt faint. I was thankful that I was seated otherwise I was sure that my legs would have quite given out under me.

“Congratulations, milady! Now, be sure to eat well,” she advised. “Otherwise, consult with a midwife or myself if something worries you. Do you have any questions?”

I had so many but could produce none, merely shaking my head ‘no’ again. Once more that night, even the memory of words escaped my mind.



## *Chapter Fifteen*

Over the following days, the news of my condition dug further into my heart and I hovered somewhere between ignoring it and acceptance. I had little time for such personal considerations, for Calenda had called upon me promptly. She invited me to the impressively appointed Shipping Guild House. A stained glass dome rose from gilded and engraved white marble. In the major trade cities, each business has its own guild house, where members hold their meetings and court potential clients. The opulence of the guild house depends on the wealth and statures of the businesspeople. Calenda was a member of the Shipping Guild, one of the most wealthy in Aquia.

In a private sitting room, we discussed our mercantile ambitions for Ghalain. (We both desired to increase foreign trade, but also strengthen Ghalaini manufacture by raising taxes on imported goods. We agreed the future lay in export, particularly of manufactured materials.) Calenda had served moist lemon cakes and sugared violets. Sweetness, it seemed agreed with me. That became apparent after the first meal she had provided, spiced duck and mussels in butter sauce, had been met with a retch.

“I am so sorry,” I apologized, embarrassed, thankful, at least, that I had caught the bile in my own hands and had not let it stain the exquisite carnelian rug. “I mean no offense.”

Servants immediately appeared to whisk away the offending meal.

Calenda regarded me sharply. “I know a woman suffering in her first months of being with child. I take no offense.” She laughed, and the sound seemed odd coming from such a stern-seeming a woman, with her tightly knotted fading auburn hair and austerely high cheekbones. “If you could be what I think you could be, it would take a lot more than a little vomit to shake me off. And the rest of the Thirds Council too, once I speak to them.”

“And what exactly do you think I will be?”

“A queen with a merchant’s mind and a peasant’s heart,” she answered simply.

I smiled and bit into a violet. The sugar flaked onto my lap. “Then I think you may be right.”

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Returning to the frost-bitten Alhazar, I heard a voice chirp. I recognized the pink cheeks of the boy from Aquia who had delivered the news of the Assembly.

“Emira.” He sketched a low bow. “I have two letters for you: one from an Oelphie of Clemen and another from Emir Gwydion.”

So he had styled himself as ‘Emir’ Gwydion? Bloody insufferable bastard.

My frozen fingers latched onto the thick folded parchments and anger dissipated. Knees weak, I staggered against a pillar. I thought I had lost him. I had hoped he would forget me. Certainly, I had thrust him out of my mind. Yet here he was, once more pushing his nose into my life like an insistent dog. I did not want to open the letter. When had anything from Gwydion ever brought me anything but grief?

“What is it?” asked Kershid, striding out of nowhere. I vaguely recognized the very blonde, very pretty young woman on his arm.

Startled, I straightened and the folded sheafs nearly slipped from my numb hands. “Nothing,” I stuttered. “A letter from my husband. Good day.” I fled up the stairs to my room and flung myself onto the fire-warm cobalt bedspread. I lay spread-eagle until, finally, my panting subsided. I peeled the seal open with a fingernail.

*Selene,*

*I suppose it is only polite to begin this letter by asking after your health. How is it? Mine is quite well, thank you. I write to inform you that Quenela and Hadil aligned last week and penetrated further into Aquia. With the Avarainian mercenaries I hired, I was able to repulse them to the edge of Aquia’s borders, although they remain a threat. I will be making a second attempt against them, likely as you receive this letter.*

*Do not fear for your family and servants: I have sequestered them. You, though, have not written a single missive describing how your quest fares and I only discovered that you had reached Nynaveh safely through alternate sources. As for our goals, do not consider yourself above using your feminine wiles to gain the throne. We both must do our part.*

*Your Husband,  
Gwydion*

My heart throbbed in my ears. What I would not give to thump their heads against a spiked wall. Gwydion, Quenela, *and* Hadil. The paper trembled in my angry hands. I reached for paper and ink to pen my response. My numb, quivering hands had trouble forming the letters.

*Gwydion,*

*I am well. As for the Throne, negotiations are beginning and we are drudging through formalities and foundations. I recently spoke to a representative of the Thirds Council and I believe she liked me. Keep me apprised of how it goes against Quenela and Hadil's forces. I hope you are keeping yourself faithful.*

*Your Wife,  
Selene*

I snorted at the final sentence as I wrote it. Gwydion was about as faithful as temperamental summer. No doubt he had taken up with his pari paramour before the Mehal gate had closed behind me. The image filled me with righteous irritation. He signed his letters *Husband* and I signed mine *Wife*, yet our marriage was not an abiding bond, but simply something I could not worm out of. I wished I could divorce him, set myself free, but I was too much in his power—and it seemed I always would be.

With an exasperated sigh, I waved the letter dry, deftly folding and sealing it. I wrote another, much warmer missive to Oelphie, with whom I had been corresponding since I had arrived in Aquia; occasionally, I even received notes from Corec. Oelphie's life was much the same, although Madam had taken new airs after learning that her governess Roselyn Dula had in fact been the Emira-Regent of Aquia in hiding.

"Your Grace, do you require my services?"

I looked around in surprise. A petite, neat-looking woman dressed in maid's clothing was waiting my reply. Her dark hair was swept up tidily beneath a crisp white mobcap.

"Pardon?"

"My aid to prepare for the meal this evening, Emira?" she repeated.

I crinkled my eyebrows. I had not brought my maid from Aquia, knowing there was too much work to be done there and thinking to hire a new one in Nyneveh. Unfortunately, I had not had the time to interview any candidates. "What is your name?"

She dipped her knee. Her grey gown skimmed the floor. "Reyal, your Grace."

"Who has sent you?" I wagered on Quenela.

"Lord Kershid, if it pleases your Grace."

I pursed my mouth. Although I did not doubt that she was a spy, I did require a maid. *And if she is competent, I could buy her loyalty.*

Reyal proved efficient, buttoning my silver gown and skillfully styling my hair around a diamond and emerald diadem—one of my mother's. I asked her to summon Gwydion's messenger and after depositing my letter into his small hands, I dismissed the pair.

I stepped quietly down the hall. Passing Quenela's room, I heard the murmur of conversation within. Holding my breath, I pressed my ear closer to the door and prayed that no one would see me. I could hear only snatches.

"...Mercenaries have yielded to that boy...rubbish...hire more..." That was Quenela's voice.

There was a low rumble, a man speaking, but the door blurred his words to indistinguishability, but I thought I recognized Hadil's cadence.

Her laugh pierced through wood and raised the hair on my arms. It was so clear that she might have been standing an inch from me. "...Clemenite merchants...wealthy...can hire as many mercenaries...too sweet...opportunity...let pass by being miserly...Aquia...green girl...boy...playing dress up...Queen...ill."

I pushed nearer. If the door were to open, I would tumble in, heels over head.

The man spoke again, but I could pick up only phrases of Quenela's response. "Yes...Kaladus does not like her...believe he can be persuaded..."

I started. So Quenela was trying to court Kaladus, and unless I missed the mark entirely, she was trying to court him to join her—against me. Well then, I would have to reach him first. Footsteps beat louder, closer on the other side of the door. Heart pounding like a thousand drums, I raised my skirts and fled down the stairs to dinner.

To my surprise, I was greeted at the hall's entrance by Kershid.

"How are you feeling, Emira?" he inquired.

"Quite well," I replied, trying to catch my breath. I fanned my red face.

He lowered his voice, his tawny eyes bright with sympathy. "This afternoon, you seemed so pale. I sent Reyal to you to help you. Did you like her?"

It took me a moment to remember what he was talking about, but when I did I was taken aback. It was one thing for the maid to say that she had been sent to me from Lord Kershid, but quite another for him to mention it to me. Had I misinterpreted his gesture? Was she not a spy but a...gift, a token of esteem? "Very much so, Lord Kershid."

"I heard that you met with Calenda of the Thirds Council this morning," he said casually, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his dark blue breeches.

Ah. "Yes. She and I have some mutual friends," I explained, parroting what I had told Ferdas.

Something new kindled in his eyes—respect? I suppressed a pleased flush and took my seat beside him at the shining lacquered table.

I watched the door and sure enough, a few minutes later, Quenela and Hadil entered together. Instead of taking the seat marked for her beside me, Quenela approached Kaladus. She bent her head and whispered something. His eyes lit with interest and flickered towards me.

Bells clanged in my head. I may have just let an important opportunity slip. *Seasons damn it all, intrigue moves too fast here.* As if hearing my thoughts, Quenela smirked at me. Even I was forced to admit, at the game of court intrigue, Quenela was a more than adept player, one who outclassed me by far.

*Still,* I reminded myself, trying not sink too rapidly under dejection, *you have Calenda's the Third Council's support.* Another voice reminded me, *But they do not have a vote. Kaladus does...* But did he? Was he not suspended until I chose to forgive him? I smiled. I still had a move or two left in me, it seemed.



Quenela curtsied slightly to Kaladus and without glancing my way, took her seat beside me.

“Quenela, Cousin, I received the most interesting news today.”

Her lips curved coldly. With studied disinterest, she turned her head away so that I could only see her shining brown hair and the stiff back of her cobalt gown.

But Emir Hadil on her other side was not so fastidious. “What word?”

“Your armies in Aquia were recently defeated by my husband Gwydion Aperine.”

Quenela deliberately turned her neck and meticulously lay down her fork. “I would not grow content with the news of one victory. This is only the beginning.”

“Tell, me, if you do win, who will rule Aquia? You or Hadil?” I asked sweetly.

Hadil darted a quick, frustrated look in Quenela’s direction.

“That’s none of your concern, child,” Quenela said evenly. “When that comes about, you and your family will be nothing more than comatose peasants.”

I regarded her with ill-concealed disdain, but tried to bear Gwydion’s counsel about tact in mind. “Better a peasant than power-mad.”

“Listen girl,” she hissed, an angry flush rising under her copper skin. “I see through your weak attempts at manipulation and let me assure you, your time as Emira is running short and as long as there is breath in my body, you shall not be Queen.”

I raised my wine glass. “Likewise.”

I turned from Quenela to Kershid and Ferdas. Kershid, however, was occupied with staring at a vaguely familiar woman down the table. Ferdas and I exchanged curious looks. Ah! It was the woman who had spoken to me at dinner, who had so adroitly discovered my malady. Kershid’s eyes devoured her. Other than a small, friendly smile she sent his way, she seemed impervious to his attention, engrossed as she was in conversation with another man.

I nudged Kershid. “Who is she?”

Kershid did not reply, but Ferdas supplied the answer. “She is Lady Avera, daughter and heir of the Emir Luix of Aawset.”

Kershid’s mouth twisted. “Lord Ferdas has also failed to mention that she is my wife.”

Sudden awkwardness filled the space between us. Hoping to break it, I managed, “And to whom is she speaking?”

“Viscount Illyich. Her latest lover,” he added bitterly. “Whose company she much prefers to mine.”

Despite feeling the contrary and startled at being so suddenly taken into his confidence, I said, “I am sure that is untrue.”

He snorted. I did not blame him. She was never improper, but her every gesture towards the viscount was imbued with intimacy.

Sympathy for Kershid welled up in me. The mere thought of Gwydion’s lover had bothered me and I did not even love him as Kershid professed to love Avera. I leaned close to him, flirtatiously whispering in his ear, “Follow my lead, hmm?”

He stared at me in surprise. I pulled him up by the arm, laughing loudly, flicking a glance over at Avera who had turned to see what the fuss was about. “Oh Lord Kershid, you do flatter me!” I said loudly.

“Come on, smile,” I urged, and he grinned hesitantly. Avera’s kind eyes crinkled. The others watched as if we had gone rather mad. Giggling and leaving a bewildered Ferdas behind us, we disappeared from the bright hall to a dim passageway.

“You are out of your mind,” Kershid laughed.

“If she is your wife, then how is it that your love is not returned?” I asked, surprising myself with my boldness.

Kershid pulled me further from the hall, up a flight of stairs, past shimmering crystal and golden marble and into a large apartment’s overwhelmingly scarlet sitting area.

“This is a tale which requires a seat away from prying ears. And an open mind.” He settled himself into the leather ouch and produced a cut-crystal jar from which he extracted a pinch of a glittering dried green qunab. It filled the room with a sweet, earthy scent. Adeptly, he crumbled it and gently packed it into an elaborately carved ebony pipe. He lit it and took a deep draught. “If I may ask, how do you like your husband, Emira Selene?” He passed the pipe to me.

I had enjoyed the experience of smoking qunab a few times before in Clemen, but I was by no means an expert. I breathed in deeply. A hacking cough originated in my throat.

“Easy, easy,” Kershid murmured, handing me a beaten gold chalice.

Sipping the carmine wine, I pondered my response: truth or fib. Striving for middle ground, I replied, “He is a clever, brave and handsome man.” All of which was true of course. I had found that I was an unconvincing liar when all was said and done. A mark against my bid for Queen.

“Yes, but how do you *like* him?” he insisted as I took another breath of smoke. He pulled his chair closer.

“We are mental equals.” Another deliberately unclear response. I started to feel dizzy and passed the pipe to Kershid.

Realizing that I would not be transparent, Kershid began to unravel his tale. “My marriage to Avera was arranged by our mothers. They had been friends as young women. Her mother wed Luix of Aawset and Avera was their only child, making her heiress to an emirdom. Had she wanted, she, instead of your friend Ferdas, could have represented Aawset in her father’s place. My mother immediately latched onto that; that and the fact that Avera was renown for her beauty. Mother assumed that made me amenable to marrying her. Both Avera and I—I do not know why I am telling you all of this.”

Transfixed by the cat-like ocher of his eyes, I made no response.

He laughed. “Beginning my marriage with Avera, I was young and foolish and spoke boldly of things I had no real understanding of. I told her that I would freely marry her and be kind and caring, but she should not expect love—but we would be free to seek it elsewhere. Initially, she was shocked but eventually conceded. As the days of our marriage marched on, I,

like any other who has met her, fell deeply in love. But what could I do? I had set certain conditions when we began our marriage and I could not impugn my honor by changing them.” He paused, embarrassed.

I was mesmerized by the violet stones glinting in his ears, feeling that I could watch them for hours, that eternity, that a universe that stretched on and on was to be found somewhere in their depths. A light flush dusted his cheeks, like stars at sunset.

I smiled, prompting him to continue.

He rolled the chalice between his hands. “She had taken my words to heart and began engaging in affairs here and there. Yet, our marriage soldiers on, for in her own way, she cares for me. And of course, there is her emirdom.”

To me, the answer seemed simple. “You should tell her what you feel. Let her make her own decision, but let her know your feelings.”

And then I promptly forgot what we had been talking about.

I marveled at how time seemed to slow, but my life was still continuing at a normal pace. Just as my thoughts threatened to spiral into a mire of fool’s philosophy, Liem ambled into the room, a wide grin plastered on his handsome face. An answering smile tugged on my lips. Seeing me and Kershid, Liem halted and mumbled something. Kershid shook his head with a laugh and invited Liem to join me on the couch. He handed Liem a freshly loaded pipe.

I slid over. My skirts created a hair-raising screech against the couch. I recalled our original topic of conversation. “I think you are very lucky to have at least been in love with her, to have experienced it.”

Liem turned sharply to Kershid. “Are you speaking of Avera? You should not, but you *will* persist in being a masochist.”

“Possibly,” Kershid said noncommittally after a puff.

He passed it to me. Ash fell on my belly. It had yet to gain the full roundness of pregnancy, but had begun to hint at the wideness it would soon reach. I wondered what it was like to be a child in a womb, if she or he could hear us, what it was like to swim in the dark womb, like a ship lost at sea. “What of you, Liem? What woman has your heart?” I said with fastidious slowness.

At that, they burst into uncontrollable laughter like a pair of ten-year olds with a secret, yet their giggling was contagious and I could not help but join them although I was lost as to why.

“That’s a tale for another night” Liem chuckled.

Heavy and warm, I let my eyelids flutter shut, listening to Liem’s and Kershid’s philosophical discussions, occasionally raising incongruous points and mindlessly eating the platter of sweetmeats Liem had procured. Surveying them through half-closed eyes, I happily decided that I had found in them two friends. How funny. Who would have thought it?



## *Chapter Sixteen*

“Who wishes to contest for the throne? We are past hiding behind theory. Declare your intentions.”

For a moment, the Assembly sat in silence. I sneaked a glance at Ferdas. He was as bewildered as me. In three brief sentences, Kershid had brought the dawdling Assembly to heel. Immediately before this, we had been discussing whether mules could sire offspring (it had been tangentially related to a discussion about farming).

I was not ready for this. I desperately wanted to return to mules.

Hadil broke the silence by announcing, “I nominate Quenela, Emira of Viziéra as the next Queen of Ghalain, recommending her for experience and long years serving in the office of Viziéra.”

“Emira Quenela,” Kershid said.

Quenela nodded, her cheekbones suddenly higher, her whole more queenly. “I accept the honor of Emir Hadil’s nomination. Would anyone contest me?”

Silence reigned. Mentally, I urged someone, anyone, to declare their support for me. Refusing to peer about, I fixed on an unassuming spot upon the wooden patina of the table.

“I call for a vote then,” said Kershid. “You have before you slips of papers, quill, and ink supplied. Simply write ‘Yes’ or ‘No,’ fold your ballot and drop it into the bowl.”

“Wait!” exclaimed Idrees of Ariya, his pale grey eyes, startling against the duskiness of his skin, snapping with indignation. “Ye or Nay at this point is presumptive! Surely there is another claimant.” I remembered that Quenela had famously jilted Idrees’s suit for marriage, many moons ago. It suddenly seemed likely that there was someone else in the room who did not want Quenela as Queen.

“Will there be anymore nominations?” Kershid asked.

“I nominate Selene as Queen,” announced Hadil.

Incredulity carved itself into everyone’s faces, except for Quenela who watched with nonchalance.

“You do recognize that you nominated Emira Quenela as well?” Liem said in mild disbelief.

“Certainly. And I believe Selene deserves the chance to answer questions, but I am confident that her responses will inevitably prove that Emira Quenela is the better of the two, and Emira Quenela’s talents will make her worthiness plain to all.”

Although Quenela appeared satisfied by this explanation, I was not alone amongst my peers in my confusion...Perhaps Quenela wished to humiliate me before the rest of the Assembly and thought that an open contest for the throne was the most public forum to do so. Still, I drawled, “As dubious of a nomination this is, I accept.” Appreciative laughter rippled through the room.

Then, the noontide bells rang, ending the day’s meeting. But there it stood. I, Selene Lilah Khamad of Aquia was a claimant for the throne.

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In spite of the strides made during this Assembly meeting, we found ourselves mired once more and months passed as we navigated the labyrinthine swamp of politics and intrigue. Quenela was nominated. I was nominated. Corrine was nominated then refused. Idrees tried to win a nomination, but found no support. Fyodor tried to convince Aunt Lyra to press her claim, but she subtly shifted her support to me. But there was still so much left to address, and with the Queen still alive, the Assembly was content to let it drag. Winter was a dull Season anyways.

“Selene!” A warm voice jolted to me to reality. I blinked owlishly as a young woman in red velvets bore down on me. Despite trying to maintain my distance for Kershid’s sake, I found that he was right—to know Avera was to love her and we had grown close over the past months. In between studying political treatises and Assembly meetings, I spent a great deal of time with her.

“Good morning, Avera.”

She shook out her hair, a white-gold courtesy of her Hadmerian invader forbearers. “How do you feel?”

By this point, which I figured to be approaching six months, the burgeoning bump was obtrusively evident, but other than a few days of aching and sickness, I felt as well as ever.

Avoiding silver-brown rain puddles, we meandered through the blossoming garden. The manicured hedges, carefully pruned trees and graceful statuary were no match for the vine-tangled Letern Woods. Sometimes, I wished I could scamper back, climb up that plum tree with a book and remain there until the end of my days. But Emira-Regents and claimants for the crown do no scamper and they most certainly do not tramp about overgrown forests.

Avera’s crimson jacket was sodden and no doubt her feet had lost feeling as well. I, in comparison, was dressed warmly in a long blue wool coat and envying Avera her trim waist.

She shivered against a burst of wind. “Come up for a cup of tea?”

“Yes, please!” However well-wrapped I was, I could no longer feel my nose.

In her warm, sitting chamber, we shed our many layers and revealed gowns of matching raspberry.

“The silk bazaar near the temple?” Avera said knowingly.

I wrapped my hands around the hot porcelain cup, letting the steam warm my face. Once our cups were empty, Avera said, “The Queen wishes that I bring you to her. Do you care to come?”

Cautiously, I replied, “I thought the Queen was indisposed to receive visitors.” However, this opportunity thrilled me. I had been dropping hints about how much I would appreciate an opportunity to speak to the Queen to Kershid and Liem for the past month. The Queen’s blessing, if I could win it, would go a long way in helping my case for the throne. And simply speaking to her, this woman who had reigned over a stable Ghalain for near thirty years would doubtlessly be highly edifying.

“Mother Erina does not make public appearances anymore, but family is free to see her. Come! Don’t be nervous.” She turned to me as I lagged. “She is a fierce lady, but gentle. After my mother’s death, she became like a mother to me. You have nothing to fear.”

Flitting ahead, Avera led me through a pair of silver and green tapestries to a guarded staircase. Clambering up the squeezed passageway, we finally burst into a glare of light that revealed a sprawling room with high windows and dangling crystal chandeliers. It smelled strongly of fragrant, out-of-season roses

I followed Avera into Queen Erina’s bedroom. I held my breath against the sweet and sour stench of illness that sat heavily in the air.

“Hello, Mother,” whispered Avera to the lump of mauve blankets. She dismissed the attendant beside the queen with a firm flick of her hand.

There was some stifled muttering and the covers shuffled as a head of pure white emerged, crowning a startlingly unwrinkled face. The silvery curtains were drawn against the white winter light, swathing the Queen in shadow. “Who have you brought Avera?” Her voice was surprisingly strong, not the feeble, sickly croak I had expected.

Beckoning me, Avera said, “Mother, this is Emira-Regent Selene. She is a friend of mine and your sons.”

I neared the Queen’s bedside. “Good morning, your Majesty.” I curtsyed for good measure. She might have been a bedridden old woman, but she was the Queen. She reached out a claw-like hand and felt my face, my stomach. I tried not to flinch.

“Ah. And who might be the father?”

It was a rudely posed question, but then again, she was queen. “My husband, your Grace. Lord Gwydion, son of Wiliem of Altus.”

“A wealthy match,” she said frankly.

I nodded.

“An ambitious family.”

“Indeed.”

She coughed, a scratching, hacking sound. The handkerchief crumpled in her fist shined with clumps of blood. I fought the urge to cover my mouth.

Once her fit had subsided, she asked, “And what brings you here, Selene?” Despite her illness, she was briskly businesslike, a queen to her core.

“I come to visit you. I come to Aquia for the Assembly.”

“And is your business ruling or reproducing?”

As my mouth worked soundlessly against the air, like a fish futilely trying to draw breath, Avera came to my rescue. “Emira Selene is much respected for her brightness. Calenda of the Thirds Council was more than suitably impressed.”

The Queen turned her attention to me. “Tell me, Selene, for while your acumen may be admired, you are no great hand at court intrigues and I can tell exactly why you have come here, how would you handle a bad harvest year?”

Trying not to think that my chance at the throne, the opportunity to break the curse, may very well rest on this quiz, I choked down a feeling of nausea that had nothing to do with pregnancy. I answered slowly, my mind flicking back the pages of the ponderous texts on economics I had studied. “I would lower taxes at varying increments for each socioeconomic class, granting relief to those at the bottom by creating jobs for road repair and forestry and the like, depending on how bad the harvest had been. Once farming became able to support the people, I would lower the accessory work forces.”

Nervously, I watched for Erina’s reaction. While Avera dimpled in support, it was Erina’s budding smile that told me I had passed. On this question at least, for the Queen peppered me with a dozen scenarios, testing my problem-solving abilities. If my answers were not lifted from books, then they were extemporaneous inventions, but they appeared to function, to impress.

At the end of the examination, she pronounced, “You display a sense of government, a good foundation to learn on, that few possess even with years of experience. And I like you better than that cat Quenela and that dunderhead Hadil and the other idiots who want to rule Ghalain. Seasons know that none of the other have made any real effort to seek my approval.”

She sighed bitterly and in that moment, I perceived a woman who had once been the center of power, relegated to a dark corner by the mere and inevitable passage of time.

*Seasons, may I never know that grief.*

“You have my blessing and support. I hope we shall speak again.”

A wide grin stretched my lips and cheeks, an almost pain spreading across my face. Softly, I pecked the Queen’s cheek. Her ochre eyes widened.

“Of course, your Majesty. Thank you, your Majesty. Thank you.”

Her gnarled fingers grasped my chin. “I knew your grandmother as a girl. We kept in touch until her death, Seasons rest her soul. She always spoke highly of you.” Erina coughed again. “But if I learn that you are unsuitable in any way to rule Ghalain, I will rescind my endorsement, and you would be twice damned a fool if you think you could recover from that.”

“Of course, your Majesty. I understand.”

“I hope you do,” she answered. “You are dismissed.”

Not weighed down by Erina's admonishments for too long, I nearly skipped out of the room, arm-in-arm with Avera.

"You were excellent!" she squealed.

"Thank you," I grinned.

With a chiming laugh, Avera departed with a promise of a walk tomorrow after lunch.

As Avera disappeared around the bend, Liem appeared from where Avera had vanished.

He beamed. "Avera just told me of your victory with Mother. I commend you, Selene!"

Laughing excitedly, I enveloped him in a friendly hug, which he returned with an affable squeeze.

"Why Selene. You do manage to become...entangled with the most odd people."

I froze and then leapt away from Liem's grasp at the sound of that most familiar voice. I was utterly shocked, surprised, horrified to see *him* before me, and I knew for a fact that all those emotions played openly upon my face, which would inevitably lead him to draw his own conclusions.

There he stood, sardonic smile splintering: Gwydion.





## Chapter Seventeen

Cheeks flushed, blond hair windswept, Gwydion crumpled his saddlebags in his large hands. His breeches and shirt were rough with travel.

I lunged forth, my fingers curling around Gwydion's arm and smiled at him with all the warmth I could muster from my shock. "Oh Husband! I did not know you would be arriving or I would have—"

"Would have what?" His eyes, brightened by the ride, snapped dangerously, hovering between absolute wrath and that courtier's façade he had been bred to maintain. Wrath vanquished veneer, and his mouth disappeared into a thin sneer.

Liem snatched the tense moment between us to slip away, but I halted him with an introduction. "Liem, this is my husband, Gwydion. Gwydion, this is *Queen Erina's* son, Emir Liem."

Gwydion bobbed a terse bow, a calm mask swiftly displacing fury. "I am honored to make the acquaintance. Later, I invite you to join me for a glass of wine but for now I beg you, Emir Liem, to leave me and my wife. It has been many a moon since I have last seen my bride."

Ever innocent, ever oblivious, Liem obliged Gwydion with a nod and a complicit wink. "The romantic hero returns. Of course."

Gwydion followed me into my room. I urged Gwydion to make himself comfortable on a bronze velvet chaise.

He grabbed my wrist. "I see you are pregnant. Why didn't you mention it?"

I wrenched my hand away. "I did not wish to commit to it to paper before I knew for certain that the child would be healthy." I pulled the curtains open wide to reveal a panorama of Nyneveh sandy stone houses, gleaming temples, and zigzagging streets. I dodged away in search of the maid, thanking the Seasons for the brief respite to collect my nerves. I took a steadying breath, mentally filing back Gwydion's few letters; none had made any mention of a visit and yet here he was.

"Where are you hiding, Selene?"

Reyal finally appeared, cap skewed and chest heaving. The sight of my irritated face sent her stuttering. "I apologize your Highness, I apologize. What do you need, Emira?"

“I pay you to be available within a second’s notice during certain hours of the day and I pay you well, do I not?” I chided waspishly. “Does it seem utterly unreasonable for you to keep your part of the bargain?”

“No, your Highness.” She ducked, shamefaced.

“Do not let it happen again.” I smiled to take some of the sting from my reprimand. “Now, bring me some warm wine, tea, cheese, bread, chicken; enough for two and search out Miri and tell her to turn the bedsheets.” Miri was a second maid I had employed.

As Reyal rushed out the door, Gwydion came in, clapping mockingly. “Very well done. Taking queenship to heart I see. Glad of it.”

“Bugger off.”

Candidly, he added, “You will not have much say in governing at any rate. I hope you have not forgotten in these passing months, that I shall be running Ghalain.” He pinched my cheek. “Don’t worry. The household will be all yours to manage.”

“Oh, thank you so much.”

He pulled off his boots and sank tiredly into the bed. “Tell me, what you have been doing in Nyneveh. Whose support do you have?”

I had spent the last several months paddling in the deep pool of court intrigue, struggling not to drown. Frankly, I was satisfied that I had not yet sunk. “Ferdas is representing Aawset and I believe he shall vote for me. Aunt Lyra seems likely as well.”

Gwydion snorted with disgust. “You have been here for three months and all you have managed is a friend from childhood and your father’s sister—and them not even for certain? I cannot imagine why I thought you could have handled this on your own.”

I was stung. I would welcome advice, but Seasons, his belittling was unnecessary. My father had never spoken so to my mother, however they fought. “Emir Liem seems likely as well, and he’s the Queen’s son!”

He raised an eyebrow. “So, two young men and your own aunt, all three uncertain. It appears that I misjudged you: you truly are a mastermind of intrigue.”

“I have won the support of the Thirds Council and of Queen Erina as well!” I protested. How could he not see that I was slowly building up support, shoring the weaknesses that came with my age and lack of experience by winning the approval of important Ghalainis? And I told him as much. Gwydion might not have thought so, but I needed Queenship and was serious in my pursuit.

“Yes, yes, as wonderful as all that as, neither Erina nor the Thirds Council have a vote. Most people are betting that Quenela will be Ghalain’s next queen. Tell me, whose support does *she* have?”

I felt like a petulant child. “Hadil is her firm supporter and Kaladus almost certainly as well.” I brightened. “But Kaladus has not attended an Assembly meeting for months—Kershid suspended him from the first one for being rude to me and gave me the right to invite him back.”

“So. Quenela has behind her Viziéra’s immense mercantile wealth, Darsepol’s mines, and Chandon’s army of fighters. And you have only possibilities—and weak ones.”

“Yes, but Quenela cannot have Kaladus’s vote. At least, I hold him in my hand.”

“There is that,” he said fairly. “And something else.” He smirked.

I opened my mouth to ask, but there was a quiver of sorts in my belly, a languorously furious movement, both luxurious and urgent. I gasped in awe. “It moved.”

Gwydion scanned the room alertly, eyes bouncing from painting to bench to rug in search for the cause of my shock. “What moved?”

Laughing, I grabbed his hand and placed it upon my stomach. There was another tiny thrust. “That! Look, it knows its father.”

Shadows of suspicion skittered across his face, shattering the light mood. “Its father or cuckold?”

My elation soured. This was Gwydion after all. I looked at him levelly. “Of the two of us, I am not the one who has issues with monogamy.”

Perhaps he too thought of his pari lover and grimaced. His frown changed into a smile when the babe jumped beneath his hand. “A little warrior.”

“A fine heir,” I said, feeling that with Gwydion’s royal aspiration no better comment could be tossed in. The hunch was proven correct when Gwydion pulled me down onto the bed and kissed me tenderly on the mouth. It was unlike anything he had ever imparted, replete with respect and sudden affection. While many a wife would have melted beneath her husband’s apparently loving ministrations, my mind was calculating how to best use this newfound affection. I had to take my advantages where I could. And I knew better than to trust him.

Reyal and Miri entered, one carrying glasses and a jug of warm wine, the other a platter of cheese, bread, and roast chicken. They disappeared as quietly as they had materialized.

“That one on the left was quite a pretty thing. Where do you suppose she sleeps?” he asked around a mouthful of bread and cheese, dispelling the moment between us as easily as he had brought it to be.

“I do not know if the Queen would approve of such an arrangement,” I responded primly, turning a slice of tangy cheese between my fingers.

Taking a draught of the wine, he said, “Ah, Seasons bless the Queen but I do not know how much longer her opinions will matter.”

It was rude, but it certainly wasn’t an incorrect assessment. “And how is it that you have left the front to attend upon me in Nyneveh?”

From his seat, he swept a dapper bow and unfurled the package in his hand: the war standards of Viziéra and Darsepol. “I come to you, Emira Selene, with word of victory against the combined forces of Quenela and Hadil. With the two of them here, it was only a matter of time before the leaders in their stead failed. I am proud to announce that following a glorious charge at dawn, led by yours truly, we crushed their combined forces. Ballads will be sung of it,

I'm sure. I left the forces under Kay and Farzal's control to bar against any future incursions—although I do not think Quenela and Hadil will try anything for some time.”

“Do Quenela or Hadil know?”

His smile matched my own. “I believe, milady, that you are the first to receive this news.”

Although the three of us had been in Nyneveh, besides my brusque conversation with Quenela at dinner months ago, we never addressed that our forces were pitted in war, electing to maintain a polish of cool politeness.

I so desired to break that mask.

I grabbed Gwydion's hand. “Caught by surprise, we can probably maneuver a pretty treaty out of them.”

I ordered a carriage from the stables and the obliging driver took us to Quenela's newly purchased townhouse in a posh Nyneveh neighborhood. A thin gloss of late winter ice still varnished houses and streets. Under the cold burn of the sun, the effect was blinding. Gwydion used the ride to lay out his instructions. My puppet master had returned.

The driver stopped before the small marble palace that was Quenela's townhouse.

“We should not be too long!” I called as I strode up the frozen steps.

He grinned, his green eyes crinkling. “At your pleasure, milady!” He waved a packet of papers. “I've got letters from my sons to pass the time.”

I rang the large brass bell, which was answered by a tall, thin maidservant. Straight grey hair slid out of her mobcap. “Good day, marm.”

“Is Emira Quenela within?”

“Yes, milady.”

“Please tell her that Emira Selene and Lord Gwydion are here to see her on urgent business.”

Opening the door wider, she stepped aside to allow us entry. “Of course. Please wait inside.” She indicated a small sitting area where gilt and mirrors were arrayed as if they were the plainest mortar and brick.

“She will probably keep us waiting for hours,” I complained, pulling off my woolen gloves. Gwydion impatiently tapped the hilt of his ceremonial saber.

I was wrong. She kept us waiting for one hour, during which time I was hard-pressed to resist the temptation to pocket the jeweled baubles and trinkets that littered the tables. At least the maidservant had lit a fire in the stonework hearth.

“Emira Quenela will receive you now.”

Gwydion and I followed the maid deeper into the house, through a thick walnut door that opened to reveal a full set: Quenela, Hadil, and Kaladus, seated in comfortable armchairs before the great glass windows. A large fire crackled, illuminating a rich band of books that lined the mahogany bookshelves. Gwydion and I exchanged looks. I stifled a grin. *Perfect.*

“Emir Hadil, Emir Kaladus, Emira Quenela,” I boomed. “Have you received word from the front?”

Hadil's knuckles whitened around his teacup. The dark liquid trembled. "No, we have not, Emira Selene."

"My husband has recently returned bearing news. Gwydion, dear, if you will tell the good people." A part of me knew that I should not gloat so, but I could not help it. After having been a thorn in our side when they should have been our friends and helpers, it was good to see their feathers plucked. My grin was even harder to suppress, but I managed it with herculean effort.

Dramatically, Gwydion unfurled the standards of Darsepol, striped gold and white with a scimitar-bearing lion in the center, and Viziéra, all blue and dotted with yellow stars.

Hadil's sharp intake of breath and Quenela's tight lips betrayed their shock. Kaladus eyed his new allies shiftily.

"Two dawns ago, we met your armies on the Field of Maidan. After hours of bloody warfare, after the death of hundreds of good men who will never return to see their families for the sake of *your* follies your captains gave me your pennants in submission," I declaimed. I had to say, I was enjoying the drama.

"In light of this victory, let us move towards a peace. We can hammer out a treaty at this very moment. Our terms will not be heavy—we are not asking you to rebuild Aquia. I have no desire to beggar or punish the either of you." That was a lie, but a diplomatic one. "I want to show you that I am sincere in my good will. We demand reparations, the precise figure we will have our stewards send you, paid over five years, and an oath to never attack Aquia. In perpetuity."

Quenela finally unfroze and whispered instructions to a waist-coated servant. "The reparations are a natural component of the treaty, although once your steward sends a figure, we will negotiate. However, I cannot vow that my emirdom will not attack yours long after our deaths, even after our memory fades from the lands."

I made a show of pondering as I watched them. Hadil's bluff features had fallen into an almost comical dejection. Kaladus seemed bored by the proceedings but I wondered if I read a twitch a regret; perhaps he thought he had thrown his lot in too hastily. Quenela's expression, however, was bitter, her trouble swallowing the end of her aspirations for Aquia readable. She sat rigidly in her high-necked gown.

She called for a carafe of warm, spiced wine and for the next hour, we argued over figures and amounts and duties. The men would contribute occasionally, but it was ultimately a contest between mine and Quenela's wits. Gwydion was content allowing me to conduct these proceedings and I found coming into a situation at an advantage rendered negotiations almost delectable. In Quenela's tilted sapphire eyes, I could read the same thirst for rulership that was beginning to kindle in my own breast. Despite what hinged on this agreement, what had led up to it, she was enjoying this process as much as I was, eager for the satisfaction of a bargain well-struck.

If she wasn't such a cow, we might have had a lot in common.

“Very well then,” I finally agreed. “A peace to exist between our principalities, good for one hundred years. As for the reparations, three hundred gold denars for the family of every man killed, one thousand for every farm razed and a figure for the amount lost in revenue. I shall have my stewards send you the precise numbers.”

It was not as much as I wanted, but it was more than I had ever thought to get from Quenela. And it was a mighty step up from the debacle of our first meeting, months ago.

“That seems...reasonable. But if the figure is exaggerated, I will demand reexamination,” she warned.

I drew Kaladus aside, away from Quenela’s ears. “I bear you no ill-will, Cousin and I should very much like it if Aquia had Chandon’s support in days to come.”

His weaselly face lit with understanding. “I see. Yes, I believe it is possible that Chandon can look upon Aquia favorably.”

I sank into a curtsy. “Then, I look forward to seeing you at the Assembly this week. Think kindly of Aquia and me in the coming days, Cousin.”

Kaladus’s mouth tightened. “Thank you, Cousin.”

I bowed to Quenela. “If we are finished here, I will take my leave. Good day to you.”

Her haughty face set with chilly dislike, Quenela nodded her farewell.

Flushed with victory, and with Gwydion’s gratingly approving gaze at my back, I signed the accord, ending the conflict between Aquia and Viziéra.

Or so I thought.

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We had driven a little ways from Quenela’s townhouse and were cutting through a narrow alley to reach the main thoroughfare when the carriage halted. The closeness of the walls and roofs mimicked a most convincing night.

“Has the horse thrown a shoe, do you think?” I asked Gwydion.

A cry rang out, echoing against the tight walls of the alley. The hairs on the nape of my neck rose.

Gwydion looked out the window and immediately unsheathed his saber. He pushed me into a corner of the carriage. “Don’t leave.”

I could only nod in bewilderment.

He leapt out and the door snapped locked behind him. Shouts reverberated down the thin street. It sounded like dozens of men had squeezed themselves in. My skin flushed icy.

*What in the name of Seasons is happening?* The carriage rocked dangerously and my hand flew out to grip the burgundy velvet seat. My breath came in rapid puffs. I was torn between wanting to huddle beneath the seats and wait for everything to go away and curiosity to see what was happening. Curiosity won out and I sidled to the window. My fingers trembled almost uncontrollably as they drew back the curtain only to reveal the slightest sliver.

The driver was nowhere in sight, but Gwydion's blade flashed in the shadow. His back was to the carriage as he fended off dark figures, too indistinct for me to distinguish. Surely there were guards somewhere? I considered calling out for help, but knew it would be futile and only draw Gwydion's attention from the assailants. I numbly scrabbled for something, anything I could use as a weapon. Gwydion was an ass, but I could not leave him to be shredded before me—and he was my only defense against these men. I came up empty. I squeezed my eyes shut willing the scene to disappear.

The door flung open and for a golden, grateful instant, I thought Gwydion had returned and everything was alright. The figure who hurtled in destroyed my optimism. A long knife glinted dangerously in his grip. With a terrified shriek, I blindly swung out and if the crunch of my knuckle was any indication, I made contact. He stepped back with a bellow of pain, clapping a hand to his eye. I looked at my throbbing finger. My Pari engagement ring was smeared with blood. Another moment, he fell limply, crushing me. Something hot and viscous ran down my dress. Gwydion stood in the carriage, his blade crimson. I shoved the dead man from me, stifling a hysterical sob. The salt and iron stench of blood filled the carriage.

Panting heavily, Gwydion unceremoniously kicked the body out of the carriage and onto the ragged cobblestones. The sleeve of his coat was torn and his arm hung limply at his side. His red cloak was redder with blood. His gaze lingered worriedly at my stomach. "Are you alright?" He sounded dazed.

I managed a nod.

"There were three other men. One I dispatched, the other fled, and the other came in here. They killed the driver."

"Oh no!" My mind worked hard, trying to make sense of what had happened, but it was slow like struggling against a deep current. "Here, give me your hand." The cut was deep, jaggedly gouged from the sleeve of his coat and bleeding freely. With my teeth, I ripped a swathe from my cloak and bandaged his arm as tightly as I could. My hands came back drenched in his blood. He grimaced, but nodded his thanks.

Legs trembling, I stepped outside. Gingerly, I lowered myself and with a cold methodology that surprised me, I sifted through the fallen man's pockets. My hands steadied. No sign of a name, no love letter or handkerchief with initials, but I did discover a heavy pouch. Opening it, I was startled to find it filled with Ghalaini gold denars. Gwydion searched the other man and came up with an identical bag. I looked at them again. Their garb was too poor to be carrying around sacks of gold so casually.

"Looks like someone was paid to attack us," I realized. My mouth was frozen. I was surprised I could even speak.

"Not us. You. Those men were determined to get past me. And one did." He looked frightened. The expression was so foreign on his face, fear jolted through me again.

Gwydion stood slowly and leaned unsteadily against the black lacquer carriage. "Help me get the driver into the carriage. I will have to drive us to the Alhazar."

I eyed his slack arm and drew myself up. “I think I will do the driving.”

He was too tired to argue. Clumsily we shifted the poor driver’s body into the bloody mess of a carriage. A ribbon of blood dripped from his throat. I murmured a soft prayer and gently closed his green eyes.

The horses were thankfully unharmed—just a little nervous. After I managed to calm them, I took the reins and drove forth. As we entered the sunshine of the main thoroughfare, shocked eyes followed us. Beggar children, who would have otherwise flocked to a royal carriage, stepped back nervously. I looked over at Gwydion. His shirt and breeches were wet with blood and I could feel it drying stickily on my face and gown.

“We shall have to alert the town guard immediately,” I said, trying to ignore the gawping around us.

He snorted. Some of the color was returning to his cheeks. “The only thing I want to alert immediately is a bath. And someone to look at this arm.”

I could hardly disagree. “Still, they will need to remove the bodies—and find out who they were. That poor footman.”

Gwydion raised an eyebrow. “They won’t find anything on those bodies. Anything we left, don’t you fear, some beggars are stripping them right now. The town guard won’t find anything but naked corpses.”

“And the man left alive?”

He leaned back, wincing as his arm shifted. “You tell me how they will find a brown-haired, brown-eyed man in Nyneveh. Nay, he is gone, disappeared into the earth. But they are not who we need to fear.”

I shook my head. I could not forget the blankly staring eyes of the footman, who had been unlucky enough to join us on this day’s sojourn. I promised myself that I would find his family—he had said he had sons, the poor man—and settle them properly. Gold and land would not diminish the loss—had my inheritance of Aquia lessened my grief?—but it would make their lives easier.

“If they had reached you, you would have joined the footman in the carriage.”

I shivered. That close. Just a wisp of chance separating me from life and death, a well-placed strike with a Pari-forged ring. Magical properties, indeed. “But why?”

His voice became low. “Someone wants very badly for you to not contest for the throne, to not stand in the way of their plans. They have failed now, but the longer this Assembly is drawn out, the more chances they will have to be successful.”

Asking “Who?” was a very foolish question indeed.





## *Chapter Eighteen*

As the Queen had promised, I was invited to attend her later in the week. A guard pushed the door open and my heels sank into the silken carpets as I stepped forth. The chamber revealed fine stone carvings, which even the gaudy pink and gold hangings could not disguise in the sunlight. Seeing the Queen in the bright light for the first time, I was struck by how her cheeks had hollowed, revealing cruelly sharp cheekbones. Yet, at her bedside stood a curled stack of papers. Even as the claimants contested for the throne, abandoning Erina, she did not abandon her duties.

“Come sit,” she whispered.

I took the chair at her beside, facing a portrait of a young man with ornately curling hair, raising an imperious eyebrow. I cocked an answering eyebrow.

She caught my glance. “My husband, Jalad of Murban, an uncle of Fyodor’s. Died in the Second Hademer War soon after the twins were born. A hero.” She closed her eyes wistfully.

“And,” her voice barely managing above a whisper, “a mere four years after that, I became Queen. I was forty then and have ruled for these twenty-four years. And now I pass...” She regarded me through rheumy eyes. Even foggy, her cat’s eyes were cutting. “Sometimes I wonder if accepting the throne was the best choice, but then I think I could not have passed my life without being Queen. As if my soul were tied around it.” She stopped tiredly before continuing. “I have heard some disturbing news. Is it true that you and your husband were attacked in Nyneveh’s streets.”

“Yes, madam.”

“And who...?”

“We think it was Quenela. We were returning from her home after delivering news of a setback for her. Unfortunately, two of the men were killed and the other fled. Our driver was murdered. She denies any involvement utterly and so we stand.”

“What utter savagery.”

“Indeed,” I agreed fervently.

“There was a time, before I grew ill, that such actions would not have dared play out. Not on the streets of Nyneveh, not on the fields of Aquia.” She grew quiet. I waited for her to speak. “Why do you want to be queen?”

There were Gwydion's threats, there was the leverage I would have against the Pari, and then there was this: the thrill of my negotiations with Quenela, the satisfaction of convincing the Thirds Council, the Queen, and the Assembly that I could rule Ghalain, of producing a solution for a thorny problem. Whatever Gwydion said, after this was done, I could not retire from political life, whether I be Emira of Aquia or Queen of Ghalain.

She raised a trembling finger. "That glint in your eye."

I laughed softly.

"Pardon." A manservant bowed. "I bring your afternoon medication, Majesty. And some refreshment for the Emira." Unsteadily, he served her a dark tea that released a strongly bitter scent. I wrinkled my nose. I did not envy the Queen her medicine.

Queen Erina raised a shaking a cup. "To queens."

By the end of the night, she was dead.



## *Chapter Nineteen*

It was as if the Alhazar Palace were a child's dollhouse that had been turned upside down and badly shaken. I could hear the flurry of footsteps outside my door as servants rushed from one wing to another. The wails of Nyneveh's mourners, gathered outside the Alhazar's gates, sounded even through stone walls.

"But how?" I insisted to Gwydion, who had woken me before breakfast to tell me the news. A queer trembling sounded through my memory. "I had just spoken to her yesterday." It seemed so strange. She had been there, alive and breathing, right there mere hours before. She had been unwell, but she was fiery. I had half-expected her to defy the turn of the Seasons through the sheer force of her own will. If I could have believed it of anyone, it would have been her. A titan of a woman. My vision clouded. It was hard to believe she was no longer there, as if someone had torn out an entire wing of the Alhazar.

He shrugged, thoroughly disinterested. "She was old. She was ill. It is not as if her death comes as an immense surprise."

Tears slipped through my lids and dripped down my cheeks. He was right; it had been expected, but that did not lessen my distress over the woman who had been Ghalain's devoted sovereign until her last breath. At the thought, the tide of tears deepened. I buried my face in my handkerchief.

Utterly obtuse to graver sentiment, Gwydion continued, "But now that the Queen, may the Seasons rest her soul, is gone, it will not be long before the Assembly elects a new ruler. And you must do everything to solidly convince them that backing you is their best and only option."

"Let the woman cool for a moment!" I protested. My throat was tight. The words came out as a croak.

He shook his head. "There is no time for that. You have made strides with the Thirds Council and Queen Erina's support of you is well-known. People are sympathetic after the news of the attack; you have never been a more appealing candidate." Gwydion tapped the window with his good hand. His other arm hung in a clean white sling. I wondered whether the reason for his sling was medicinal or whether it was to serve as a silent reminder of that day. "Once this is over, once you are Queen, you will be able to return at last to your proper business."

At his words, I emerged from my foggy grief. "And what do you propose be 'my business'?"

He flicked his fingers airily. “Childrearing. Child birthing. Doing charitable works. Hosting parties. Leaving the ruling to the stronger heads. We have been over this. Don’t be dense.”

While I supposed those were honorable occupations, I certainly did not want myself limited to such a role. That was not how I had been raised. My grandmother had not taken special care to train me simply because I was her granddaughter. Auralia too had been Marquise but Grandmama would discuss accounts and affairs with *me* whenever she visited Aquia.

I could hear her voice in my ears as if it had not been years since her funeral. *“I see in you the world and while the world might be more taken with your sister’s fair looks have no doubt that you too are beautiful and are intelligent, perhaps even more than her.”* When I had protested this statement—after all, it seemed sacrilege that my twin not be my equal—or superior—in all things—Grandmama Elina had replied, *“No? Perhaps I misspoke. Like you, Auralia is very able, there is no doubt in my heart of that—throw her in any situation and I have faith that she would acquit herself admirably. Yet, she would be just as happy thrown into a life of home and motherhood. Not you. Beneath all that willfulness and melodrama, there’s a real hunger that can only be satisfied by what lies outside the bounds of hearth and home.”*

But in Gwydion’s estimation, my purpose was best served as a figurehead. A puppet. A perfect little queen, firmly beneath his control whom he could parade around at his whim to his parties—when she was not otherwise occupied birthing his heirs of course. In the doleful sea left in the wake of the Queen’s death, my heart held no place for his nonsense.

“If you will excuse me, *Gwyd*,” I said, rising. “I should pay my respects.”

I rinsed my face in a basin of cold water, washing away the chapped redness in my cheeks and eyes and left the room. The servants were busy, draping mirrors and furniture in black velvet. A maid stopped in the middle of her work to stare out the window, biting her lip to stay its quivering. In passing, I reached out and squeezed her shoulder. Her sorrowful brown eyes met mine. Much of the Assembly might have ignored Erina in her final months, but for the folk of the Alhazar, life would never be the same. I pressed a handkerchief into the woman’s hand.

When I reached Avera’s chambers, the curtains had been pulled shut, lest any ray of milky light pass through them. Her head bent, Avera sat with other ladies all of whom had drawn white veils over their hair. Seeing me, she rose gracefully.

I embraced her. “My sincerest condolences, Avera,” I whispered. “Queen Erina was an exemplar of a woman. Ghalain shines less brightly for her loss.” My mouth trembled.

She nodded her thanks. “Kershid would speak with you.” Her voice was husky with shed tears, but folded in somewhere between her grief, I thought I heard a note of remonstrance.

I drew a startled breath and racked my mind, attempting to remember some misstep that would have induced Kershid to want to speak to me. *Stop. You’re being silly. He mourns his mother; he likely wishes to speak to a friend.* Trying to remain calm, I asked, “Do you know about what?”

She shook her head. “He seemed to think it urgent. When you leave him, tell him that I will be with him soon.” She clasped my hand.

Recalling what she had said about Erina being like a mother to her, I hugged her again. “If ever you feel the need to speak to anyone...I know how you cared for her and how she adored you...I am always here.”

Avera’s eyes were bright with tears as I left.

Upon returning to my rooms, I found Gwydion lying in the center of the tawny rug, surrounded by the vines and flowers which crawled freely within their silken confines.

“What are you doing?”

He twitched, startled. “You know,” he said conversationally, “for a woman who is roughly the size of a cow you move with an eerie quietness. Are you sure you are not part Pari?”

Irritable with the foreboding Avera’s words had inspired, I snapped, “And I’m sure you know all about the Pari.”

Observing me from beneath lazily hooded eyelashes he chuckled softly. “What do you know about me and the Pari?”

I sat down beside him with a loud sigh, leaning against the dark wood of the bed’s curved footboard. It fit my aching back perfectly. “Oh, I have met your paramour. Charming lass.” The sarcasm dripped from my lips: I was surprised it did not puddle at my feet.

Swiftly, he rose to his knees, his hands clasping my shoulders. “What do you mean that you have met her?”

With a flare of exasperation, I said, “Generally, when you meet someone it is when the two of you, or it may be a group, happen across each other and make some form of conversation, usually with introductory overtures.”

He swore quietly, worriedly. Worried for me. And that frightened me more than anything, for if this man, who regularly compromised my safety was worried then surely I was in danger. A surprising warmth flashed for Gwydion but it was abruptly doused by his next words. “I do not want you to hurt her, you understand?”

I repelled a far-off sense of betrayal. As evenly as I could manage, I said, “Forgive me Gwydion, but she was the one who threatened me. You well know that she possesses powers which, I assure you, my petty human abilities cannot rival. Your ladylove need not fear me.” The uncomfortable feeling dissipated; it was nothing more than I expected.

And there were other issues I needed to tend.

Freeing the lavender ribbon wound around my head, I ran a silver-backed hairbrush through my hair. I began unbuttoning the pearls at my back. Silently, Gwydion helped me slip the dress off. (My maids had an uncanny talent of never being there when I needed them.)

Underneath, I was clad decently enough in my shift.

“My this is a pleasant surprise,” he growled, but I smacked his snaking hand away from my waist.

“I have to see Kershid. Besides, what would you want with a cow when you have your lovely lithe Pari?” From the mother-of-pearl inlaid wardrobe I retrieved a cloud-grey gown. I

possessed no white mourning dresses to fit my current size. Again, Gwydion was at my side, clothing me as easily as Reyal. I wound the lavender ribbon around my hair again.

“Why are you visiting Kershid?”

“We are having a clandestine affair which I intend to continue on the day of his mother’s death,” I said caustically and then sighed. “No, Avera said he wishes to see me. I think I am in trouble,” I added guiltily and then noted his dapper green suit. “Really, have you no decency? Change into something more suitable. We still have a great deal of work ahead and you looking like you’re about to go picnicking won’t help.”

The halls, which had been so bustling before, had fallen eerily silent. My footsteps tapped on the marble, a lonely echo in the quiet. A distant keen sliced easily through the glass-like silence.

Arriving at Kershid’s door, I steeled myself for the punishment that would no doubt be meted. *You are not four*, I reminded myself. *You have not hidden away the apples Beya gave you for a snack in favor of cake. You are an Emira(-Regent).*

Drawing meager heart from those words, I stepped into Kershid’s room. Like Avera’s, it was dark, casting the furniture and walls into deep shadow. Not even a candle burned to keep the gloom at bay. Upon the seat that he had first entertained me, sat Kershid, nursing a glass of what looked suspiciously like gin.

“Hello, Kershid,” I whispered. I pulled a chair closer to him, sinking into the yielding leather. The clatter in my mind grew louder, a misty remembrance that refused to solidify.

His golden eyes, his mother’s luminous cat eyes, narrowed. “I have heard that you were the last person to see the Queen last night, before she passed.” His words cracked like a whip. “Is this or is this not true?”

“I did not know I was the last person, but yes, I did speak with her last night.” I answered levelly. The hair on my arms prickled. I did not like what he seemed to be hinting.

“Inquiries will be made in regards to your presence.” His voice was brittle, his face a thin, hard mask.

I tried to be gentle. “I had merely stopped in at her request to speak to her. There was a servant as well, who brought her medicine and drinks. When I left, she seemed tired, but well.” Gently, I touched his knee. “I am afraid it was nothing more than the simple course of nature. May the Seasons rest her soul.”

Blazing with fury, he cried, “Here you are, with your husband and all the others, waiting like vultures. Well, there is your carcass, why are you not feasting?”

“Oh, Kershid.” I enveloped him in a hug. My heart welling with sympathy, my lips found his. I tasted the bitter gin and salty tears on his lips, their softness. His fingers ran through my hair and the lavender ribbon floated like a feather to the floor.

I broke the kiss. If something in this world had shifted slightly, if neither Avera nor Gwydion stood between us, perhaps something more than deep and abiding friendship would have been conveyed through our embrace. In all things, he was utterly dissimilar to Gwydion and

maybe in another life, a kinder life, I could have loved him. The vestiges of his rage had vanished, replaced by a frank sadness that carved itself into the grieving lines of his face.

I caressed his cheek. “My deepest condolences for your loss. The throne of Ghalain will never see her like again. She could not have been a more brilliant Queen. You and Liem are a credit to her.” I took a breath. “Now, it is your duty to ensure her memory.”

He glanced at me sharply. “What do you mean?”

Softly, I replied, “Your obligation is to carry on her legacy of peace by brokering the succession and bestowing the crown upon someone who would genuinely strive for Ghalain’s prosperity. She lived a great life and you are honored to have been her son. Dwell not on her death, but on the results of her life.”

We sat in silence, until Kershid gathered himself.

“You are right. There is work to be done and the grief cannot be given into yet.” His throat caught. “The greater the lag the more chance that Mama’s legacy is splintered.”

“It has been a hard day on all of us, but you especially. A good night of sleep and a brandy before bed should make you feel better. Or perhaps a pipe?” I watched him worriedly.

He smiled sadly and shook his head. “Not tonight.”

“Avera wished me to tell you that she would be coming to see you soon.” Gathering the skirt of my grey dress in a clammy palm and picking my ribbon from the floor, I walked towards the door. Twisting the ribbon around my forefinger into a silk-soft noose, I said, “I shall see you tomorrow then. Your loss breaks my heart, dear one. All of Ghalain mourns with you.”

“What did you do?”

“What did I do when?”

“What did you do when you found about your family? How did you cope?” Kershid said. His clamped jaw trembled furiously.

I tried to recall precisely how I had managed after the realization that everyone I held dear, had not seen for two years, was comatose and would be until some ridiculous requirements were met—if they ever were. My lips stretched into a crooked grimace. “Life goes on. Throw yourself into the life that continues. Ignore the reality of her void as much as you can. And when you are prepared to examine the truth, it will always be there, ready. Reality has nowhere else to go. Find Liem. At least your twin still draws breath beside you. He is you and you are him. Take comfort in each other.”

Quietly, I closed the heavy door behind me. Despite my care, the frame reverberated with a dull thud and even through the thick wood of the door, I could hear Kershid’s ripping sobs.

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“What did Kershid want?” asked Gwydion as I entered our bedroom after spending the rest of the day sitting with Avera and grieving with the ladies of the court. Like the servants, they remembered the Queen before her illness, when she had been vibrant and ever-present. While we

Emirati nobles knew her only by reputation and formal relations, they knew her personally. It was a hard loss and even the most weathered heart would have cracked at Avera's broken grief.

Gwydion was lying beneath the bedspread, his muscled chest bare. His injured arm rested beside him. Propped up against the cushioned backboard, he was reading a book whose binding looked vaguely familiar. The wall sconces and small lamp on the ornate bedside table provided ample reading light. I was glad that Gwydion seemed as unmoved as ever. After a day of woe and lamentation, Gwydion's insouciance was a welcome respite.

"I do not think I have ever seen you read before," I commented as I scanned the wardrobe for my nightgown.

"There are many things you have never seen me do, my dear," he replied mildly.

"And for that, I thank the Seasons everyday," I retorted, changing into the diaphanous garment. I was too emotionally exhausted to do anything more with my grey dress than kick it to the side and leave for Reyal or Miri to sort. I climbed into bed beside Gwydion. "I have not eaten all day," I hinted.

He rolled his eyes. "Oh please. Allow me to get you something. By the by, while you were gone, a guard came in to announce that the Assembly will meet tomorrow."

I regarded him steadily until he shrugged and reluctantly left the bed. I was thankful to note that while he was shirtless he had not completely disregarded the concept of pants.

"There should be some food in the front room." Reaching over to the slim leather-bound volume he had been engrossed in, I was startled by the contents of the title page:

*The Diary of Selene Lilah Khamad, Princess of Aquia*

*DO NOT READ*

*Offenders Will Be Persecuted*

"I think you meant 'Prosecuted,'" he called.

Blood flushed to my cheeks and forehead. "Oh no—I meant 'Persecuted.'"

I tried to scrounge up what I had written in this one. Very likely something mind-numbingly embarrassing and slightly incriminating: in short, not something I wanted in Gwydion's hands.

Balancing a silver tray of bread, sliced meat, and cheese, Gwydion returned. Seeing my shock, he smiled. "What do you think? The author has a certain witty charm to her style, but overall, I find the contents vapid, despite some interesting insights into her psyche." Setting down the dish, he started assembling a sandwich.

"I wrote this when I was thirteen. I cannot even begin to fathom why you would want to read it. I am afraid to see what you may have read."

Grinning lopsidedly, he brushed his fingers free of crumbs and stretched for the book. My grip tightened as I pulled it away. "Don't you want to know why Kershid wanted to see me?" I dangled the offering temptingly.



“That knowledge will be with you forever. I am afraid that as soon as I fall asleep, this beauty will be thrown in the fire,” he grunted, wresting the journal from me. In return, he handed me the sandwich.

Folding my arms, I changed tactics. “I can’t see what pleasure you could derive from this. I have read everything you wish to parade in front of me.”

“Yes, but have I ever read it aloud to you?” He thumbed through the pages and affecting a falsetto, began to read. “*I do think I love Lord Ferdas. Whenever I see him, I go all shivery-like and Rory has confirmed my symptoms. I’ve dreamt of him thrice in a row now.* And what sort of dreams were these, Selene?”

I groaned into my sandwich.

He continued. “*Meanwhile, Rory maintains that Lord Gwydion is besotted with me, which is truly hilarious because Lord Gwydion is already involved with someone: himself! Alas, this is a union I fear will produce no heirs for Lord Wiliem; very disappointing for all involved.* My, were you not clever? A wit! I am afraid, my dear, you do betray yourself. Throughout this journal, I am mentioned quite often and very much derisively: a common *symptom* to use your terminology of love at this age.”

Sardonically, I answered, “Oh yes, of course. How could I have mistaken my deep and abiding affection for you as dislike! When you cornered me in Clemen, I was not attempting to flee because I did not like you, oh no, it was because I could not handle the depths of my love. Ugh. Why do you even have that?” I made a half-hearted snatch for the journal.

“Know thy enemy.”

“I would say you have already achieved that,” I quipped, gesturing towards my belly.

He snorted. “It does my heart good to see that ever-biting wit live on.”

Extinguishing the sconces, he plunged the room into semi-darkness. The only light was the flickering lamp, which cast obscene shadows across the room, distorting colors and shapes. The bronzes and blues were sickly, bruising and the shapes were vague shadowed monstrosities. Stretching over Gwydion’s bare chest, I quenched the light, and the room fell into merciful darkness. A refuge from the rising panic. Cocooning myself in my blankets and with my head nestled in the crook of my pillow, I tried to fall asleep, but an eerie rattling would not stop echoing through my mind. It was the sound of the trembling cup Erina had raised the night before.

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A few hours later, after I had dozed off, I became vaguely aware of two voices in the room. Slowly floating to consciousness, I heard the conversation through a dreamlike haze.

“Milord, you told me to come immediately if the *other* lady arrived. Her servant has just notified me that she is staying at The Warring Hawk.” The voice was familiar, if hushed.

“Yes, yes. Thank you.” Gwydion’s voice. Even quieter. His hand brushed against my hair. An accidental graze? A deliberate gesture of affection? Apology?

Gwydion’s weight shifted off the bed and the door hissed shut. Again, I was asleep.

The next morning, Reyal’s jostling awoke me from the deadest of sleeps. “Your Highness, the Assembly meets in two hours!” she exclaimed, her straight dark hair brushing my face.

That announcement jump-started me awake and groggily, I peered around the dark room for Gwydion. His side of the bed felt cold. “Do you know where Lord Gwydion is?” I asked, meeting her excited brown eyes.

Shaking her head, Reyal hurriedly produced a white gown with an amethyst-encrusted bodice. Miri opened the curtains to let dull light pool in the room. The sky was grey and overcast and rain tumbled down in steady silver sheets as if the heavens mourned the passing of Ghalain’s queen.

“I let this out yesterday afternoon for your Highness.” Reyal shook the dress out and lay it carefully on the bed.

Touched by her work, I grinned my thanks. Hastily, I washed my face with lukewarm water from a small copper basin. The splashes solidified the division between sleeping and waking, pulling me down from drifting and firmly into the realm of the awake. Waves of panic quickly followed.

“Oh my Seasons!” I exclaimed, my voice muffled by the dress being pulled over my head. This was it. With Erina dead, the Assembly would dally no more. I would not have been surprised if by the end of the day, Ghalain had a new king or queen. The thought chilled me to my core.

“Milady, have some breakfast.” Miri entered the room, carrying a tray of warm bread, fresh fruit, steamed milk, and hot tea.

“Oh no, I could not!” I protested, too anxious to eat.

“You must maintain for strength for today,” Miri ordered firmly. “Just a little bit.”

Although the food was ash in my mouth, I swallowed the sliced plums and honeyed bread. To calm myself, I mentally listed the nobles whose support I had gained through the last few of passing conversations and promises. Lyra and Ferdas had been almost ascertained from the very beginning. Then, once Erina’s messengers had rung her support for me throughout Ghalain and Idrees had pledged his support. Three. A paltry three of the nine I could have gained and five I had hoped to. And of course there was Liem. I was partially convinced of his endorsement. And Kaladus stood in my debt, although I was not so foolish as to count him certainly in my camp. Five of ten, then, including myself. Listing my supporters was not quite the calming ritual I had hoped for. Downing a cup of warm spiced milk, I took a deep breath as Reyal laced my gown and attended to my make-up.

“Reyal, do you think I should be Queen?”

Reyal's hands retreated from my face, and carefully, she placed the jars of powder onto the lacquered dresser. "Your Highness, I have only known you for your months here in Nyneveh. I cannot reliably grade your character."

I frowned. "I do not deserve it, do I? I abandoned my training before I turned sixteen. I am barely eighteen. I am enceinte. No one in their right mind would support me for the throne. Lyra does so because we are family; Ferdas because he and I were childhood friends and Idrees... well, I am unsure why Idress threw his lot in with mine, but I don't believe it's because he thinks me capable of being a strong leader. Who know why he does anything? I wish Gwydion would be more of a help, if he must be with me in Nyneveh."

"Are my ears ringing?"

Groaning slightly, I accepted Gwydion's cordial kiss on my cheek. A slight iciness shivered down my spine.

"You look lovely, Selene. Very...regal." He spun the word out with a satisfied caress. "Someone will be here soon to speak with you."

Mystified, I raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

Smiling his secretive smile, he moved past me and rummaged through my dresser. He withdrew the beige velvet case which housed the laurel coronet of an Aquian emira: an heiress's headpiece, not that of the ruler. This had belonged to Ceara. That I had left with my mother in her room. Removing it gingerly from the box, he held it aloft so that the small diamonds embedded in the laurels captured the watery light before placing it on my head.

My eye twitched.

There was a knock on the door. For a brief moment, most oddly, I was confronted by the specter of my father. It was as if I were seeing him out of the corner of my eye, a memory of a memory. A feeling in my chest, warm and cold all at once, welled and the scent of cardamom and iron and ink that I associated with him overwhelmed me. As soon I was taken by memory, it puffed out of existence, as if blown away by a breeze. I did not know what triggered that memory but for the briefest of moments, I was with my father again. I drew heart. "Reyal, escort our guest in."

Reyal opened the door. Out from behind her stepped Fyodor of Murban. Fyodor of Murban whose army was second only to Chandon's, whose emirdom was said to run with streams of gold. My breath stopped; I could hardly dare hope.

"Your Highness," he said with a bow. A white flash of teeth glimmered from beneath his dark beard, but he emanated a sense of gravity, as if this decision had not come easily but in the end, it was what he figured to be best for Ghalain. At least, that was what I hoped.

Bending my knee in graceful obeisance, I met his coal-black eyes with more confidence than I felt. "Emir Fyodor," I said, stepping towards him, arms outspread. "This *is* a surprise. Can my maid bring you something to drink? We have some very fine wine brought by my husband from Aquia. A vintage from the time of my great-grandfather."

Fyodor cleared his throat, straightening his dove grey coat. His eyes were vague, but his voice firm. “I thank you for your kind offer, milady, but I am afraid there is no time. The Assembly shall commence soon. My business with you is brief—but of some importance. Emira Selene, I have come to offer you my support for the throne of Ghalain.”

Within, it felt as if everything had frozen. As if my lungs had stopped moving, my heart had halted its beating, my blood ceased its flowing. Time had momentarily stopped, caught like a flitting insect in amber. But my mind buzzed furiously. Six of ten. A majority. I could sing. Suddenly, my sorrow at Erina’s death, my general and abiding irritation with Gwydion, the heaviness of the curse, were vague, cloudy outlines, dimming in the brilliance of the possibilities of the future. I grinned.

“Emir Fyodor, I thank you for your support. Now, will you accompany me to the Council?”



## *Chapter Twenty*

Once an emir or emira has been selected to rule Ghalain, they abdicate their emirdom in favor of their heir. In my case, with no siblings or issue, should I win the throne, I was left with two options. I could either choose someone to assume my place as regent—but there was no one. I had no doubt that Gwydion would have some opinion on the matter, some crony he wished to reward, but I intended to maintain possession of Aquia. After all, I held the emirdom in trust for my mother who would repossess it once the curse was lifted—which I would accomplish, without doubt, once I became Queen. Somehow, in those days, the sum of my problems melted away with the coronation with all righting itself once the crown touched my hair.

Walking into the meeting room on Fyodor's arm, I was gratified to see Quenela's face slacken in shock and Hadil's darken with displeasure. No doubt their minds were churning the same figures and arriving at the same result. As I took my seat beside Kershid, I swept a quick sidelong glance at him. His face was impassive, impregnable as stone. Liem seemed more relaxed but unprecedentedly steely. I could not imagine the strength it had taken to rise the morning after their beloved mother's death, prepared to manage the business of Ghalain.

I was glad Fyodor and I were not the last to arrive: moments after, Corrine of Bahart straggled in. *At least it is not someone who supports me*, I thought. In fact, I did not know *whom* she supported. She took the last open seat, near Liem. The grey taffeta of her pink-lined gown scraped loudly against the seat. The sound was magnified by the expectant hush that prevailed over the chamber. The scent of her rose-doused perfume reached me in wafts.

Kershid nodded at the guard who promptly closed the door behind him, sealing the Assembly: it was not intended to open again until we had decided upon a ruler. Baskets of food were piled in the corners, but for my most pressing concern, the lavatory, there was a recently constructed hole in the floor surrounded by a curtain. Quite dignified for a person as they were pursuing the throne, to be surrounded by the pinging of their own piss. As the day proceeded, a crowd would gather below the windows and it was to them we would present our choice of the ruler first; until then, the windows remained shrouded by golden curtains.

In his mellifluous voice, Kershid said, "Emirs and Emiras, the Queen is dead. I intend that by the end of this day, we will have a ruler. By virtue of our positions, we are bound to this room until a future for our nation is decided. The time has come. If you wish to rule Ghalain, present your case."

Quenela wasted no time. “I have made no secret that I would be the next Queen of Ghalain. I have ruled Viziéra for a decade, leading it to great prosperity and while our kingdom is greater than an emirdom, I will bring the same steadiness to queenship. I am still young, but that gives me the vitality and energy Ghalin requires to carry it forward—but for my youth, I also have experience. I know there are others even younger who wish to rule Ghalain, but have only a few months experience in their position. The kingdom is not something that we can throw into the hands of a novice. Ghalain requires a strong, knowledgeable hand, and if you would have me, I would rule Ghalain.” She bowed her head respectfully.

It was bloody well done. *I* was almost moved to support her, *Seasons damn it all*. “Emira Quenela.” Rapidly, the attention of the room devolved onto me. My toes curled in my black silk shoes. “Why do you desire to be Queen?”

“Why would anyone wish to be Queen?” Quenela replied easily. “Because they believe they can take care of their nation.”

“And how would you accomplish this?” followed Lyra quickly.

With the confidence born of ten years of successfully ruling the wealthiest emirdom in Ghalain, Quenela elaborated on a business-minded philosophy. After all, her years in Viziéra had driven into her the importance of trade and innovation, and the benefits that support for these endeavors could reap for Ghalain as the world changed. Hadil nodded along pompously. Although our views were alike, we differed in one key respect: I favored encouraging prosperity among the commoners. Her plan strove to retain wealth for only the very upper echelons. She was a convincing orator, and her plan was well-thought out, with an appeal to those who wished to maintain their superiority. I had no doubt she would find supporters with it.

With compulsive nervousness, my fingers began picking apart the violet embroidery of my dress.

My cousins began to toss out questions with alarming speed, but Quenela handled them with her customary cool deftness. In her place, I doubted I would have been half so collected. *Seasons*, soon I would be in her place! I imagined the queries directed at me: How to improve relations with Hademer? What to do about the smuggling in the North? And finally, how to handle the situation in Aquia?

“I would send emissaries to the Pari to try and resolve the matter diplomatically. Moreover, I would create incentives for others to come and work in Aquia until the curse is sorted out. I would advise Emira-Regent Selene to attempt to lure capable managers to come work for Aquia, to ensure that it becomes the fertile and prosperous land it generally is.” She gritted her teeth at me, in an imitation of a smile.

“In short,” cut in Kershid, “the very plan Emira Selene has already implemented.”

Quenela nodded cordially. “Certainly. Emira Selene has adeptly handled the affair for her young age. As she grows older, I look forward to seeing her capabilities flourish as ruler of the emirdom.”

“One might argue,” I inserted quietly, “that even as my capabilities have only begun to grow, I am already an able ruler and I would make a vigorous and clever Queen for Ghalain. One might argue.”

“Emira Selene, tell us: how do you plan on ruling while you are to have a child?” Quenela demanded with a venomous glance at my midriff.

My blood boiled but calmly, I responded, “I do not see how the birth of a child should remove me from the whole of my duties. Even as I coalesce, I will be able to study paperwork and meet with advisors. I should hope you are not implying that a woman is inherently unable to divide time between her child and work, for the ruling of this country, its improvement, its maintenance, *will* be for the sake of my child, for your children, and the children of our people.”

*Very nice*, I thought. I saw Idrees smile.

“As we asked Emira Quenela, how do you plan on ensuring the success of Ghalain?” said Lyra.

As I had done many times before, I elaborated my simple but straight-forward plan that I had discussed with Calenda, one which strove to promote the prosperity of Ghalain through support of her merchants, craftsman, and farmers, but unlike Quenela’s plan, one that intended to give power into the hands of those who formed the backbone increasing learning and thus ingenuity, and pull Ghalain steadily towards a future that held success for more than the wealthiest.

Ferdas nodded enthusiastically. Other than Quenela’s coterie, the assembly seemed interested.

“How will you see the curse lifted from Aquia, Queen or no?” asked Corrine of Bahart, as if I had not answered the previous question. She was far too clever to be won over by a few words.

Before I could stop myself, I breathed, “Do you think if I could do that I would be sitting here?”

Quenela grinned, a cat with a mouse in her sights. She quickly smoothed her face so that only I spotted her reaction. “I think the Emira-Regent, despite her sweet tongue, has revealed her age. My dear, you cannot ignore that as Queen issues you consider personal will become public domain. If you cannot handle speaking of an already publicly-known matter among your peers, how will you manage when everything is known by everyone?”

As quickly as I had won them, I could feel the Assembly slipping away. My family would be locked in slumber forever. And Gwydion’s reaction: an icy shiver rippled down my spine as I imagined his violent response.

Perhaps Quenela was right: I was a fool girl and did not deserve Ghalain—what kingdom, what populace deserved a puppet queen? Oh, the strings I was bound to: my family, the curse, Gwydion. I was not independent. I could not put the kingdom first. Quenela *would* be better for the crown. At least she *was* a puppeteer. Yet, there was my family, my family whom I couldn’t fail, even if Ghalain would burn. On some level, I despised my selfishness.

*No. No. You are not selfish. Consider Quenela, who wants Aquia, who wishes to press forth industry, but not see any returns given to the common people who support it. Everyone has selfish reasons for wanting something: it's what you do when you have it that counts. Your reign will not begin and end with breaking the curse.* I pushed away my doubts.

“Would it be such a terrible thing to have a ruler who was passionate? Who cared so deeply of matters that she could not coat them in honey and spoon-feed them to you? Surely those are honorable traits, not for the weak-minded, but for those with conviction.”

Chuckling, Idrees of Ariya sipped his amber wine.

“What is the matter?” asked Liem.

Idrees grinned and lifted his glass to toast me. The wine danced merrily in his goblet. “Merely that Emira Selene has shown a remarkable adroitness in spinning an occurrence to reflect the best of the matter, which, I would argue, is a useful skill for any ruler to have, king or emira. And the Thirds Council supports her. Good relations between the monarch and the Council are essential to a successful Ghalain.”

“Surely slickness of tongue is not enough for the election of Ghalain?” sneered Hadil. “Or perhaps we are such great fools that we would be taken by a pretty face and pretty words as the late Queen was?”

The chamber grew tense, and Kershid’s voice dropped to a perilously hushed low. “Pray sir, tell me what you precisely mean that? And when you speak, be careful with the words of which you are so contemptuous.”

I thought I saw the faintest glimmer of fear quiver in Hadil’s eyes. “I simply meant that the late Queen did declare her approval of Emira-Regent Selene, and while that may seem to be in her favor, we cannot forget the weak state the blessed Queen Erina was in by the end of it. The whole of Ghalain sorrowed with her, but I am afraid that this young charlatan did very much overwhelm her with charm, and I would hasten to argue, take advantage of her. Your mother was very much her victim, her pawn, as you, and I, and the whole of Ghalain are at threat to become if we select her to be Queen!”

It was very still, no breath was audible, nor a shuffle of dress. They were waiting for me to reply yet, how could I conceivably defend my position? Oh, Hadil was wrong in casting me as some master villainess, but my motives for Queenship were utterly selfish and yes, the Queen, Ghalain—they would be my pawns in curing my family of the curse and breaking free of my own curse, Gwydion.

“See!” Hadil crowed. “See, how she hesitates. She knows it for the truth. We should suppress these heedless fancies: choosing a young, dynamic ruler is a romantic idea, but stability and experience, which we find in Quenela, that is inestimable.”

“I cannot see how either you or Emira Quenela would have any idea of how my mother was before she died, since neither of you bothered to call on her, thinking her dead before breath had even left her body,” Liem growled. “I know how much Queen Erina enjoyed Emira Selene’s company and that cannot be contrived.”



“I came to the Queen searching for guidance, and found a very great lady who reminded me of my grandmother,” I said softly. “Perhaps Emir Hadil sees something sinister, because that is how he would have behaved in my place.”

Hadil’s fist clenched.

Quenela spoke, her voice so quiet, gentle and brimming with self-satisfaction. “Tell me, is the most estimable Emira-Regent Selene even eligible for the Bronze Throne? She is, after all, merely a placeholder for her mother, the Emira Niobe.”

I was stumped. Quenela was right. I did not know whether I was even within my rights to contest for the crown. And I felt a damned fool that it had not even occurred to me—or Gwydion. That at least was a small satisfaction. Quenela could not even hide her smirk. I wondered how long she had sat on that egg.

“In fact, what research I have done of Ghalain’s laws seems to indicate that a regent cannot pursue the throne. There was a case some three hundred years ago when a mother, an Emira-Regent of Chandon, attempted to gain the throne for her young son, but was told she could not.”

I found my tongue at last. “This is a markedly different situation, with my family spelled to slumber for an indefinite period. What, if the curse is never broken, then no Emir nor Emira of Aquia may ever sit the throne again, since they will always be technically holding the title from my mother? If you have found a case that addresses a pari enchantment of eternal slumber on an emirdom, then please, I would have you tell us what the law says.”

She fell into silence.

I turned to Kershid. “Perhaps you can make a decision, one that will set a precedent that others may look to in the future.”

He considered the question and then ponderously announced, “As the Arbiter, I set forth that given the extenuating circumstances surrounding Emira-Regent Selene, she is indeed an eligible candidate for the Bronze Throne.”

I covered my mouth to hide my satisfied grin. “While we are speaking of laws, I wonder if Emira Quenela could enlighten us on a certain other matter I have been reflecting upon.”

Quenela watched me through suspiciously slitted eyes. They looked like slivers of lapis almonds. “Of course.”

“What is the proper protocol of punishment and retribution when one claimant for the throne attempts to murder another one, oh say, in the middle of the street in the daytime?”

She paled. I could feel interested eyes digging into me. Everyone had heard of the attempt on my life the week before—even if it had been quickly overshadowed by the Queen’s death. If they had not connected it to Quenela previously, they could not fail to do so now. Gwydion had been right: there was no way to truly prove that it had been her, but the doubt might be punishment enough.

Recovering her composure, she spoke snake-sleek. “It is a common enough occurrence, and usually, if the offender is brought to justice, then he is stripped of his lands.” Her face

collapsed into pious despair. “Such low tricks are beneath the dignity of any who would wish to sit on the Bronze Throne.”

I speculated who among my peers was foolish enough to believe her farce.

Before I could construct a reply, the door creaked open and a small page nervously tiptoed in. We, the emirs and emiras, gaped at the flagrant breach of custom. The page cowered at the sight of our scandalization. How the guard could have allowed him into this most private of conclaves, I did not know. Surely he was bringing to us some essential information of some disaster? I grew worried: what could be so important?

Plastering his brown eyes to the thick, cerulean rug, the page muttered, “I need to speak to Lord Kershid and Emir Liem in private, please.”

Premonition slid her icicle fingers down my back.

“Nothing is private in the final council!” protested Quenela. Her complaint was echoed by Lyra and Kaladus.

Kershid’s lips pursed unhappily. “We will speak to the boy privately. Take this to time dine on the provided refreshment.”

He, Liem, and the page, drifted to a corner and the rest of us, following Kershid’s advice, congregated around the food. Despite a sickly, waning appetite, I nibbled on a biscuit. Shamelessly, we watched Liem and Kershid. I exchanged a look with Lyra who shrugged noncommittally.

“What do you think the matter is?” I whispered in her ear.

“We will just have to wait and see.”

The page handed the letter to Liem, who gave it to Kershid. As their eyes scanned down the paper, their mouths gaped in horror. They had never appeared more like twins. The poor page seemed more uncomfortable than ever.

“What do you reckon the page interrupted us for?” asked Ferdas through a mouthful of beef.

Not trusting myself to speak, I mimicked Lyra’s shrug.

Liem squeezed Kershid’s hand before speaking. “The servant, who Emira Selene mentioned to Kershid last night, was found trying to steal a horse from the stables this morning. When questioned, he revealed he had played...some part in the Queen’s death at the behest of a noble, but could say no more. His words seemed to indicate that in some way, the murderer is...related to the Assembly.”

A discontented murmur met these words. I felt suddenly faint. The servant...I had been there. I had seen him administer poison. Blood rushed away from my cheeks, leaving my face clammy. I could have been murdered just as easily...I slid a glance at Quenela, who was examining me with a similar suspicious light in her eye. If it had been her, surely I would have been the one be served the poison...unless the servant had bungled it...

Surprisingly collected for a man who had just discovered that his mother had been murdered, Liem said, "It is very likely that one among us here is a murderer. If there are any who have some inkling of evidence, please speak immediately."

A memory echoed through my mind and a shadow passed over my heart, and perhaps something of it showed on my face, for Quenela immediately declared, "You say that Emira-Regent Selene told you of this servant. And we have all by now heard that she was at the Queen's bedside last night. Surely she is the one to suspect."

"I..."

Aunt Lyra came to my rescue. "I do find it interesting," she said sweetly, "that you are so quick to blame Selene. The Queen had already indicated some support for the Emira of Aquia; why would she wish to have her killed? You, on the other hand, may have wished to silence the Queen before she could further advocate for Emira Selene. And we well know you are not above attempting murder."

Now, it was Quenela who was dumbstruck as she met suddenly hostile glares. "But...I...never..."

Abruptly and in spite of everything, I felt very sorry for Quenela.

Massaging his temples, Kershid bowed his head and Liem spoke in his stead. "We will have to gather again at the end of this week, after the Queen's funeral. Seasons willing, we will have resolved the issue by then." His voice grew hard. "And if anyone flees from Nyneveh, his or her lands and title will be immediately confiscated and they will be brought to trial for the murder of Queen Erina. Good day."



## Chapter Twenty-One

I stormed into my rooms and found Gwydion lounging in a chair, one booted leg swung up on the chair's arm, book in hand. His nonchalance, from which I had drawn heart the week before, infuriated me. I wanted to tear the book from his hands and hurl it out the window. Locking the door firmly behind me, I hissed, "You beast!"

He closed the book patiently and looked up at me with the utmost innocence. "Whatever do you mean?"

"You poisoned the Queen!" I breathed, my voice almost too soft to be heard, but the words shook.

"Oh that. Yes," he answered, clearly bored.

A shrill sound clawed from my throat.

"Figured it out have you?"

"Liem and Kershid announced it to the whole Assembly that the Queen had been murdered. I...think many suspect Quenela."

Gwydion smiled with satisfaction. "Good. She seems like the type, so haughty and unlikeable." He grew grim. "And she did attempt to murder you—and me—and she did kill that footman. If she suffers for the Queen's murder, so be it. She walked away clean from attempting yours."

I keened again.

"I do not know why you are so put out," he drawled. "It was the charitable thing to do. The poor Queen was so weak and miserable in her last weeks."

And then: "Don't be a fool. I did this for you."

I looked up, aghast. Was the Queen's death my fault then, just as the curse had been? *Don't be a fool*, a voice hissed in the back of my mind. *Don't for a moment think this isn't for his own sake, for the power to pull your strings if you become queen.*

I began pacing the room, heaving and wringing my hands. "What will I do? What will I do?" Gwydion was right: it would be expedient to let Quenela be punished for the Queen's murder—it was not as if she were innocent. But it went against my very fibre, that concept of right and wrong my mother, father, and Beya had worked so hard to instill in me. When a new idea struck, a means to rectify the situation, my knees gave way and I melted into a puddle on the floor. I buried my face in my skirts.

I could hear the pitying disdain in his voice. “There is nothing for you to do, of course. Let them think it was Quenela. In fact, I will ensure that by tomorrow morning, everyone will think it was Quenela. Think: your main rival removed.”

“Whatever else she may have done, I will not let her die for *your* sin,” I cried, raising my head.

“I thought you hated her?” he asked, kneeling beside me.

“That is beside the point!” But my heart was no longer in it. I could only think of this man, who had fathered my child, who had saved my life, and yes, who had struck me and manipulated me to an inch of it. I could set all this right, but at what cost?

“If you worry that this will come back to you, do not trouble yourself.” He patted my shoulder kindly with his good arm. “I will take care of it all.” I cringed away from him.

“If you cut that servant’s throat to conceal your own misdeed, I will turn you in myself.”

He seemed unfazed, so secure in his hold over me. “He is meant to die anyways. Besides, I would not be cutting his throat myself. Someone else would be doing it for me.”

“Another person who could be induced to reveal your secrets?” A shiver rippled through me. *This may be the last time I will see him free.* Something about his face, perhaps a passing frailty which I had never seen before, decided the matter for me. I thought of how he had looked after the attempt on my life, bleeding and worried. Something strummed. Roughly, I grasped his golden hair and brought his lips to meet mine.

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Afterwards, we lay in the quiet and for a moment, the barriers were down, our hearts open for the reading. Did he know it was a singular instance?

“Do you love me?” I asked, raising myself up on my elbow. My stomach knotted, awaiting his answer.

“I...” It was his turn to be rendered speechless by a question. “Do *you* love *me*?”

Stung—and relieved—by his inability to answer his question, I replied, “I do not see why I should. Particularly after the way you treated me after we were first reunited and more or less every day after that. You bloodied me, bruised me, treated me in a way that even prisoners are not treated,” I said flatly.

“Damn it, Selene, I did what I did out of necessity. I did what I did for you.”

I laughed hoarsely and pulled my dress back on. “Get out, Gwydion. Get out. I will see you after the funeral.”

“Selene...”

I was resolute, forcing myself to not feel his warmth beside me nor the comfortable bulk of his body. For a moment, his hands tightened and I steadied myself for the coming strike, but it did not come. His arms hung loose at his sides once more.

I gathered myself, finding some fount of firmness, and commanded, “Leave.”

He lingered at the door. “Is it because I do not love you?”

I sighed heavily. As in so many other things, it was fruitless to hope that Gwydion would understand my mind. “No, it is not that.”

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At the end of the week, with the other Emirs and Emiras, I followed Erina’s funeral procession through the avenues of Nyneveh. My boots were sodden from the puddles and my hair was plastered thickly to my skull. White-clad mourners swelled through the streets like cresting waves, throwing snowy petals as Erina’s body passed. Shivering, I pulled my cloak tighter as the rain drip-dripped steadily from the coffin bearing the Queen’s remains. When I closed my eyes, it sounds like drops of blood hitting the cobblestones. Gwydion was somewhere behind me, but I could not think of him, not now. Kershid was somewhere in front of me, but I could not think of him either.

We approached the immense ziggurat, the Great Temple of Nyneveh. Even in the dreary grey rain, the painted lapis and carmine of the temple gleamed. Lights glittered through the windows, readied to greet the departing spirit of the Queen. Sweet incense smoked. Within, the walls gleamed gold, but despite the riches surrounding them, the acolytes were dressed in somber whites. They easily took the coffin from the pallbearers and after lifting her from the coffin, placed her, wrapped in a simple, white sheet upon the altar.

A priest stepped forth and bowed to Kershid and Liem. “You have done well, my children in bringing the mother of our kingdom home. You must leave her now, so that her body might rejoin her soul in the ephemeral cycle of the Seasons. May the Seasons bring us all home.” He bowed again. Kershid’s face tightened, and Liem and Avera held on to his arms, guiding him out of the temple as we followed.

We passed through Nyneveh in a gloomy blur; most of the citizens had departed and the petals underfoot were bruised and torn almost beyond recognition. Entering the Alhazar was a warm embrace and I was not alone in sighing with relief. I wrung my hair out and followed Avera, Liem, and Kershid into the great hall where fires burned and mourning servants stood ready with hot, honeyed mead. Kershid sat down heavily and buried his face in a goblet of golden liquid.

I knew that I would have to speak now, otherwise I would remain forever silent. I knew this confession could save me—or destroy me. I could very well be saying farewell to the Bronze Throne—but if I lied about this, kept silent to maintain my chance at the crown, then I was truly as terrible as the worst incarnation of my self I feared to be.

Unsteady with nerves, I stood and gestured for a servant to bring a chalice of mead. Gwydion stood in the back of the room and he watched me in surprise. It suddenly occurred to me what trust it had evinced when he had told me of his role in Erina’s demise. I squelched the thought. I raised the goblet. “To the Queen! May the Seasons honor her memory as we do.”

The nobles and servants crowding the chamber echoed my words.

“But before we enter this new era, Lord Kershid,” I continued, “the problems of the past must be solved.” My voice resounded through the hall. I wished the hall was louder, my voice quieter.

The glittering, silken mass of attendees became hushed and alert, poised to listen and dissect. I nearly wilted beneath their scrutiny.

“What...do you mean?” asked Kershid uncertainly. I could read the alarm in his eyes.

I wanted to back away. It was too foolish, it was too risky. I was too afraid. I steeled myself and spoke. “I have recently learned the true identity of Queen Erina’s murderer. The killer himself told me, thinking me an encouraging accomplice and seeking my approval.”

Kershid’s hands shot out and grabbed my shoulders tightly. I grimaced; there would be bruising tomorrow. “Who was it? Who was it?”

I paused. The room grew taut, solid in silence. “Gwydion Aperine,” I whispered. The words carried, first from my lips, and then in the buzz of hissed whispers that overtook the room.

Just like that, the crowd descended into clamorous mayhem. Kershid leapt through the suddenly milling throng to Gwydion, whose face went slack in stunned betrayal. Even as fast as Kershid was, he could not best Liem who slammed Gwydion onto the ground with rapid, bloodying punches. Gwydion groaned loudly and made some small effort to protect his face, but with his still-healing arm, he may as well have been defenseless. Kershid stood ineffectually while Liem pounded my husband.

I huddled in my seat. From the corner of my eye, I saw Avera gesture for guards who efficiently separated a bloody Gwydion from a heaving Liem.

“Lord Gwydion, you are under arrest for the murder of the Queen Erina. You will be questioned and brought to trial and if you are found guilty, you will face death,” Kershid announced. His voice had never been more terrible, more musical, like a crashing symphony of thunder and lightning.

Avera came to stand at my elbow, laying a comforting hand on my arm. I could not tear my attention from the scene. As Gwydion’s back receded, my heart wrenched.



## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

Concerned murmurs followed me as I entered the Assembly chamber the next morning. Hesitantly, I met Kershid's eyes. They were red-rimmed with grief, but held no animosity, no suspicion—only deep sadness.

*Surprising.*

Tentatively raising my gaze, I saw that the Assembly members, from Idrees to Lyra looked at me kindly. To them, I had proven my devotion to Ghalain and honor by elevating it above love. Only Hadil, Quenela, and Kaladus examined me with dark doubt.

Ferdas stood up, brushing down his neat tan coat, which emphasized the blackness of his hair and announced, quite unprovoked, "On behalf of the Emir of Aawset, I wish to acknowledge Emira Selene's bravery in turning her husband into the law. We believe that her loyalty to Ghalain should be marked."

The assembly nodded in near perfect unison. Perhaps they too were desperate for the end of months of power-wrangling, ready to return to their homes and tend their lands and if they had to make a heroine out of me then so be it. It was no longer placid Winter, but fertile Spring and their lands needed their attentions.

I wondered, as I had done a dozen times since the funeral, if I had been right in betraying Gwydion's trust. Yes, he had proven himself capable of great malice and unkindness, but I had sent him to his death with words he had spoken to me in confidence. And I owed him a blood debt. He had once defended my life with his own. I had not truly understood the ramifications of that until Gwydion stood on the precipice of his own demise.

As if hearing my thoughts, Quenela remarked bitinglly, "Are we such a load of fools that we will take Emira Selene at her, if you will excuse me, overly ambitious word?" She peered at me frostily, as if trying to summon the truth through the will of her scrutiny. I met her look calmly. *Search away.* Her tightly bounded hair swayed dangerously.

Ferdas, Aunt Lyra, and Idrees immediately rose to my defense, each talking over the other.

"As a child companion of Emira Selene's—"

"—I would be more than willing—"

"—to vouchsafe for her honesty—"



This time, it was hard to keep the surprise from my face. Liem's honey glance fell on me. Gwydion had landed a few blows on Liem's perfect face after all, but the bruise marring his cheek appeared more like a fashionable fancy than an injury.

"Let us allow Emira Selene to speak for herself," Liem suggested mildly. They descended into poised silence.

Forcing myself to not chew the inside of my lip, I summoned from memory the speech I had mulled the night before. Rising, I professed, "When Gwydion confessed his actions, I did not know what to do. I will admit: I considered remaining silent. Yet, Ghalain and justice ultimately trump the affection I bear for my husband. If I could have chosen a final outcome, it would not have been this. I vow to you, by the Seasons and on the lives of my family, I was in no way involved with Queen Erina's death." Palms upturned, I spread my arms wide. "I hope that in spite of all this, this Council will be able to choose the best ruler for our country soon. Ghalain has been headless long enough."

To my chagrin, there was no swell of applause, but there were a few polite smiles. Well, this was no children's tale and I would not win the Council over with a rousing speech that moved the lot of them to tears and convinced them that I was the one to rule Ghalain.

Corrine of Bahart, spoke then, her reedy voice matching her frail, lined appearance, but her delivery was bombastic. "Behind that calculated speech of the girl's, there lies good sense. We should return to the point of this Council. How many months have we been ensconced here without accomplishing anything? I am tired; I know you are tired and we all long to go home before planting season ends. I propose that we do not leave this room without selecting a ruler. We have already preponderated the entirety of the evidence for each ruler; let us vacillate no more. Let us decide."

I was amused to note Ferdas's response of "Yes, marm." It appeared that once Corrine began, she evoked our childhood tutors. Noticing his slip, Ferdas flushed.

I watched Corrine with wary admiration. Had she wished it, I had no doubt she could have snapped the crown away from me or Quenela without batting a paper-thin eyelid.

Fleeting, I was jealous of Corrine. I wished that I had had the presence of mind to galvanize the Council into action to convince them of my ability. *Perhaps you have no ability after all*, a small voice whispered slimily in the back of my mind. *Perhaps you should leave the ruling to those who actually know the business of it—not someone who is merely proficient in the arts of feigning and mimicry*. Even though I knew it was a mark of insanity, I still hissed back, *I am not unwilling to learn and heed my advisors. No one is born knowing precisely how to rule!*

"Lord Kershid, if you will?" Corrine said gracefully. Her large jeweled earrings swayed, catching and throwing light.

Starting, Kershid announced, "You have before you paper and pen. Write down your choice for king or queen. I will pass around this silver jar in which you will drop your choice. I will count them and we will go until a name has been chosen by a majority."

Quills scratched against paper. From the corner of my eye, I tried to spot the telltale snaky “S” of “Selene” being formed under cautious hands. Catching my eye, Quenela smiled unpleasantly. Hastily, I looked away and wrote my own choice: *Selene*. Kershid handed the silver chalice to me. Its intricate carving, molded to depict an elaborate scene of a royal coronation through the streets of Nyneveh, rubbed through my hands. With a swift prayer to the Seasons, I dropped my paper in the goblet and it *hushed* reassuringly against the silver. Feeling sick, I passed it to Hadil and so it went around until arriving again in Kershid’s hands. I could hardly restrain from trying to lean over to read the names alongside him.

Carefully unfurling each paper, Kershid noted the results in a thick leather-bound ledger. Once he was done, Kershid watched us, amused.

*What does this mean? Is this good? Is this bad?*

Clearing his throat, he announced, “I think it is safe to say that each of you voted for yourself. There was one vote for Emir Fyodor, one for Emir Kaladus, one for Emira Lyra...”

We chuckled abashedly like children caught painting the family dog red.

The room fell quiet again. Picking up another slip, I wrote my name again, this time feeling more confident. The chalice was passed around again and again, Kershid counted the names. Anxious to hear the results, we all leaned as forward as the breadth of the table would allow. Sweat pricked on my hands and along my forehead.

“Three for Emira Quenela, two for Emira Selene, two for Emira Corrine, and one for Emir Hadil.”

Quenela shot Hadil a disgruntled look. In response, Hadil shrugged indifferently as if to say, *No matter. Do not worry yourself*. I wished I could take his counsel for myself.

Feeling the cold quiver of disappointment overtake me, I tried to smile peacefully, as if all was going to plan. Nonetheless, I parceled out level looks to my supposed supporters, Ferdas, Lyra, Idrees, and Fyodor. What game were they playing at? At the very least, I should have had four votes. Not two. Not just my vote added to someone else’s vote fighting against Quenela well-assembled opposition.

Quills scratched methodically as we wrote names; Kershid passed around the goblet. We looped through the actions Seasons’ know how many times. Sometimes I would gain a vote, sometimes Quenela would gain a vote, sometimes we would both lose votes. Perhaps Corrine was wrong—perhaps, despite the months of debate, we were not yet ready to decide on a ruler. *Should I vote for Quenela to end this?* I thought, stealing a look at her. I winced. I could not so lightly disregard her preying on Aquia—or her attempt on my life. I knew she returned the sentiment and would be loathe to allow me to walk away scot-free after opposing her so adamantly. The chalice, now warm due to its passage through many hands many times, came to me again. After placing a whisper-thin piece of paper saying *Selene* within, I absently handed it to Hadil.

My stomach felt hollow and I wondered if we would pause this fruitless voting to break for luncheon. As I was envisioning tender strips of beef cooked with translucent rings of green onion

and bright red spices, Kershid received the chalice and counted through the names. Just as I was adding a dash of pepper to the dish, Kershid revealed, sounding surprised, “Six votes.”

The beef disappeared from my mind and I suddenly straightened, looking around in shock. *Well, that is it. I certainly did not win their votes. For Seasons’ sakes, I was thinking about beef! If they knew, they would denounce me for the fraud I am.*

Quenela’s knuckles whitened as her fingers tightened around the edge of the table. Even Corrine’s lips seemed pursed more tightly than before.

“Emira...”

*Oh my Seasons, I am going to faint.* Closing my eyes tightly, I thought of home, of Aquia. Of my mother and father, both constantly busy but warm; of Gareth, Necolai, and Danyal, triplet terrors but the best brothers a sister could ask for; of Evra and Ceara, wise older sisters who were not above teasing; of Gieneve, who was so like me, the sister I would have felt most connected to if it had not been for Auralia...the sister to whom I still felt most bound, for whom I would do anything, for whom I was still pursuing the crown. *Even if Quenela wins, I will not let them stop me. I will concentrate my efforts on Aquia, even if I have to tear down Pari with my bare hands.* Aunt Lyra laced her fingers through mine, giving me a comforting squeeze. Drawing a breath, I forced my gaze back to Kershid. I pushed down the tears of disappointment. I would not let Quenela have that satisfaction.

“...Selene.”



### *Chapter Twenty-Three*

Shock fluttered over every inch of my body like thousands of trembling butterfly wings. I could hardly believe it. I turned to Kershid for confirmation. *I must have misheard*, I told myself, but he nodded magnificently. To my surprise, he clasped his fist to his chest and bowed to me, as subject to sovereign. It was real. I had become queen.

*Shit*. Suddenly, I could feel the responsibilities of a nation dig into my body and I almost sagged with the sheer physicality of it. I do not think that I ever actually believed that I would win and I had been fine playacting, producing solutions to problems that a part of me believed I would never have to solve. I had strived for it, hoped for it, worked for it, but expected it? Absolutely not.

Breaking through the falling cacophony of my thoughts, Liem requested, “Let us move for universal accord. All rise to support Queen Selene.”

I winced at the rhyme. It appeared that I was obligated to bear the couplet until such time as Seasons saw fit to remove my title. *Queen Selene had a very funny feelin’ and a peculiar sheen where nothing should be seen...* Ugh. I could just imagine the undignified butchering. Turning my attention to the matter at hand, I waited anxiously for the emirs and emiras to rise. Ferdas bounded up while Lyra rose gracefully. Fyodor followed slowly as I stood as well. Liem stood tall beside his brother. But who was the sixth? Laboriously, Corrine pushed herself up and stood straight-backed.

Quenela, Hadil, and Kaladus remained seated. Kneeling before Liem, Corrine, Ferdas, Lyra, and Fyodor in turn, I intoned, “I thank you for choosing me and I will serve Ghalain and your emirdom to the best of my ability.” Each insisted that I rise to my feet and kissed me on one cheek and then the other.

Then, I approached Quenela. Difficult as it was to beseech her, I knew that the well-being of Ghalain stood far above my pride and our animosity. Kingdom first. Its people first. That is what it meant to be Queen. The only pride that can be had comes from ensuring the success of the land you rule. “Emira Quenela, you have not stood for me, but I beg you to reconsider and to know that as Queen I will be your humble servant in all things. I ask you support me for the unity of Ghalain.”

Making no move to bid me to stand, Quenela stared blankly at the veiled windows, a hint of a sneer on her face. Irritated as I was, I knew better than to give voice to my discontent and

instead moved to Hadil and made the same plea. I was unsurprised when he too remained seated and ignored me heartily. Kaladus moved his boots away from me as if I were some sort of filthy urchin. It was difficult to curb my temper at that gesture. I returned to my seat. Lyra on my left patted my hand.

Getting to his feet, Kershid formally announced, "Rise, Selene. You have been chosen Queen by this Council and you are bound by the traditional oaths of the Heir-Ascendant until such time as your coronation. You will consult with the Council on any state decision." He smiled.

"I accept," I stated clearly. "And I thank the Council for its faith in me."

While I stood, Quenela, who had remained seated throughout, rose at last. For a moment, I thought she was ready to accept me as Queen. My spirits lifted. I was hopeful that she had last seen the need for unity and I stood prepared to forgive. And then she spoke.

"While this Council may have been bamboozled into making this foolish decision, I refuse to bind myself to the Council's decree. I and the emirdoms of Viziéra, Darsepol, and Chandon declare war on you Selene Lilah Khamad of Aquia and all of your idiot supporters. When I emerge victorious, then we shall see who deserves to rule Ghalain." Quenela made to leave. "Come, Hadil, Kaladus. Let us leave these fools to their folly."

My blood ran furiously hot and then turned icy. "We had an agreement!"

"Oh, this one?" Quenela withdrew the treaty I had been so proud of and shredded it between her long-fingered hands. "Now we don't."

"You declare war on me, you declare war on Aquia and are traitors," I warned grimly to their departing backs. "If I were you, I would reconsider. The punishment for treason lies at the discretion of the monarch, and I tell you now, I will not be merciful."

Quenela turned to smirk. "I know well. We shall see who rules Ghalain at the end of this."

Urgently, I called, "Guards!"

Quick as vipers, Quenela, Kaladus, and Hadil left the room. Three guards immediately fell behind them and I was suddenly thankful. If they could be captured before Quenela had time to make good on her promise of war, then so much the better.

"Chase after them!" I insisted, running after the group. But although the men flanked them closely, they did nothing to impede their escape, although more and more armed men joined their ranks. One threw a scornful smirk in my direction.

"Chase them!" I repeated, but my eye caught the sleeve of his jacket. It was exceedingly tiny, but I recognized the miniature pennant of yellow stars against blue stitched into his sleeve. The colors of Viziéra.

Attracted by the noise, at last, several of the castle's guards appeared. A strong arm pulled me back into the Assembly chamber.

"After Quenela and Hadil!" I ordered but our men had already bared their scimitars. Blades hissed and rang like bells as the rear of Quenela's guards turned to meet the attack. More guards thundered past our door, in an effort to catch up with the traitors. And I was utterly powerless.

Someone moved to close the door against the sounds of clashing sabers, the vision of bloodshed, of men crumpling to the ground. I could hear the moaning of the wounded. Someone tried to close the door.

“No,” I commanded, my arm flying out to keep the door open. “You may avert your eyes. I will watch.” Finally, the last of Quenela’s rear guard folded to the floor and I released the breath bottled in my chest. But Quenela, Kaladus, and Hadil were gone.

Stepping delicately over the dead and injured bodies, the captain of the guards, a tall, wiry man with grim silver eyes explained what had happened. “As they rushed through the castle, their men popped up to defend their exit. A total of four men dead from our side and six from theirs. Double that number in casualties.” A bewildered expression crossed his lined face. “Why did they flee?”

“They chose to defy the Council’s will when it came to the election of a ruler for Ghalain,” pronounced Kershid gravely.

Surprise flashed across his face. “Who?”

I stepped forward. “Me.”

He fell to his knees. “Your Majesty,” he breathed.

I withstood the urge to roll my eyes in awkward embarrassment. Surely this seasoned man felt no respect for me, a young girl whose very election had ripped the country into civil war within minutes, who was the wife of an accused murderer. Still, the devotion in his eyes was true and I was struck at that moment how deep respect and need for monarchy was ingrained into the people, so much so that it lifts a girl who had been a rambunctious governess a year ago to an honorable queen, a goddess on earth.

“Rise Captain...” I fished for his name; I had made it a point to learn the names of all of the Alhazar’s officials. “Rian. Tell your men to fortify the castle and Nyneveh against the traitors and have them search the city. Perhaps they are biding their time until nightfall. I trust orders have been sent for the gates to be closed?” When he shook his head, I quickly said, “Issue the order to close the city gates straightaway and have a double force of your men search the city. Please, see to it that a message is sent to General Niara to meet me in my chambers. And if any of the injured are Quenela’s, question them.” For a moment, I wondered if it were presumptuous of me to command this man like an errand boy but he did not appear chagrined at his use and nodded firmly.

As soon as he was out of sight, I sagged imperceptibly against the doorway, heavy with the knowledge that I had already failed as Queen of Ghalain. I had no idea what to say to the people that had just elected me Queen and had pushed their land to the edge of civil war.

My mind circled back to Quenela’s and Hadil’s emirdoms of Viziéra and Darsepol. Both were fabulously wealthy—especially Viziéra, with its famous ports like Clemen—with more than enough resources to hire a greater number of mercenaries and expand their armies, despite the reparations they owed Aquia. I had done what I could to provide them with a fair deal, leaving their coffers and armies largely intact. Now, the kingdom would pay with blood.

Although Gwydion had managed to defeat them at Maidan, I knew that our victory had been chance as well as poor planning on the parts of their captains. If I knew Quenela, she would not repeat such a mistake. This time, it would be a harder fight, especially with Kaladus's forces thrown into the mix. The emirdom of Chandon was known for two things: its wine and its soldiers. The remainder of Ghalain's emirdoms had the impossible task of meeting their assault. Aquia was in a reduced state, Bahart and Aawset largely agricultural, leaving Murban, Nehajan, and Tirahm. There was Ghalain's army but that was perhaps the size of Chandon's army without the fearsome reputation.

Taking a deep breath, I focused on Liem's warm honey-brown eyes. "While we are all together, we might as well draft a resolution against Quenela."

Fyodor blinked in bewilderment. "Is this not moving too rapidly?"

"I would remind you, Fyodor, that it was Quenela who first declared war against us like a willful child." Corrine snorted. "We were well not to elect her. The sooner we declare that trio traitors to the realm on paper the better."

Kershid produced a large sheet of parchment. "What shall I write, Your Majesty?"

I looked at that blank sheet of paper and felt yet another moment of insurmountable panic. My next words would kill young men and tear apart families. I considered them carefully.

"Write: The Kingdom of Ghalain strips Quenela of Viziéra, Hadil of Darsepol, and Kaladus of Chandon of their royal titles and lands. They are to be arrested on sight to be brought to the justice of the Crown and Council. Anyone who aids them will be charged with treason. If Quenela or Hadil or Kaladus surrender themselves, we will be magnanimous in our justice. If they continue in this folly, we will be wrathful."

Kershid peered at me confused. "That is no declaration of war." Belatedly, he added, "Your Majesty."

"Yes, Kershid."

"But Your Majesty!" objected Corrine.

Deftly, I signed my name to the paper. "If a declaration of war is necessary, I do not fear to declare it. But I do not wish to begin my reign under the ill-omened shadow of war. I will allow the three of them to return themselves to the crown and meet their punishment in peace, but if they insist on war, I am more than amenable to showing them that the will of the Council is not to be trifled with." My eyes narrowed. "Although I fear none of the three are very likely to yield their ambitions."

Even Corrine could not find fault with me. "So much for the impetuosity of youth." I thought I heard a satisfied grin.

Stifling a smile, I inclined my head. Ready to leave and meet with the general, I made to leave the room but not before I took care of the little matter of coronation.

"Lord Kershid, please convey to Lady Avera my wish that she organize the coronation for the end of the week. Deliver my apologies for the short notice and my color choice of silver for my coronation gown. Also, I would like to announce my election as Queen to the populace

within the next two hours.” I felt preposterous ordering anyone who was not a servant to do my bidding. I half-expected him to laugh in my face and tell me to come off it. But he bowed and went on his way.

Despite the lack of official announcement, word had escaped of my rise in fortunes, and suddenly my path was lined with an unusual number of servants, all of whom bowed deeply as I passed. I plastered a warm smile on my face for their benefit although I would have very much preferred to hide under my covers. Lost in dreams of warm blankets, I collided with a mass before my door. Hastily looking around to ensure no one had noticed—thankfully the servants had tactfully dissipated before my door—I peered up to see whom I had bumped against.

“My apologies,” I said abashedly.

“I apologize, Your Majesty.” She bowed, her russet braid swinging past her shoulders. “I am General Niara.”

“Yes, I know. I saw you at a dinner some months ago, but did not have the chance to introduce myself.” I opened the door. “Please come in, General.” I gestured towards a comfortable chair.

Reyal and Miri both appeared. “Your Majesty.” They curtsied in unison, with identical, fiercely proud expressions. Suddenly, they had been elevated to the damsels of the Queen. It was quite a rise for the daughters of a farmer and a cobbler respectively.

I grinned. “Some refreshments please. Pear cider, I think. With the small almond cakes?” I looked in the General’s direction for confirmation.

There were many burdens to being Queen, to be sure, but who did I have to squeal with about my *own* rise? A gaping ache opened in my chest for Auralia or Oelphie. After all this, Auralia and I would have been past petty, youthful jealousies and I could just imagine us leaping around the room in excitement. For a moment, it was as if she were before me.

“Your Majesty?” The General’s brisk voice held a lower-class lilt, so unlike the refined, polished voices I had grown used to. It reminded me wistfully of life in Clemen.

She was awfully young to be a general, and a woman to boot, but the way she carried herself confirmed her rank. We had heard, even in Clemen, the scandal that her promotion over other men had caused. Although women were well-respected in the politics and bazaars of Ghalain, the military remained a stronghold of men. I enjoyed then that my reign would be led by strong, young women, the very forward-thinkers I had pledged myself to during the Assembly.

She coughed uncomfortably. “I know your brother, Captain Necolai. He served under me some years before. A good man.”

I smiled. It warmed me that she knew my older brother, and I suddenly felt much more at ease with her. “Thank you, General. Now, what can you tell me of our military?”

“When Admiral Kharset and General Baswor,” she began, naming the other two generals of the army, “come to Nyneveh, they will be able to apprise you in further detail, however...” With little prompting, she launched into a recital of our forces, our chances, what she thought was the



best way to defend Ghalain, occasionally pausing to sip at the cider. Nervously, I crumbled a cake in my hands, trying to keep everything she told me straight.

An hour later, Kershid appeared at the door. “Your Majesty, it is time.”

Rising, I thanked Niara. “We shall discuss this in further detail tomorrow, General.”

She bowed. “Best of luck, Your Majesty.”

I walked swiftly beside Kershid who guided me to an immense, marble balcony that curved out from the palace and looked onto an vast public square. The plaza teemed with hundreds of thousands of people. Their shouts were deafening and only grew louder as I appeared and walked to the edge of the balcony, flanked by the Assembly. The crowd was a massively colorful blob, squirming and alive and they were mine. I swallowed my fear and waved. The roar was instantaneous. I waited for them to quiet.

“Ghalain!” I boomed. My voice echoed against the buildings, resounding and reverberating. “This afternoon, the Council has elected me as your Queen. I will serve you and I will serve Ghalain to the best of my abilities, leading us to a better, more prosperous future.” I paused. “And those who have betrayed our kingdom will be punished!”

Their cries grew louder, more jubilant, and I was buoyed up by their support. Heavier thoughts could not but sink me to reality. *What have I done to deserve this loyalty?* But more importantly, *What will I do?*



## Chapter Twenty-Four

I sat with General Niara in a darkly-paneled chamber following a meeting with the other general and emirs—we had just learned that an important fortress to the north of Bahart had fallen. The rest had departed, leaving Niara and me to enjoy the warm early morning breezes, heavy with the scent of fresh-turned earth and burgeoning grass.

“After I spent three months in prison for nearly knifing someone when I was fifteen, I came to the realization that perhaps I was heading down the wrong path in life. That and I could not bear to see my ma’s face so heartbroken.” Seeing my shocked look, she quickly elaborated, “He attacked me first, but without a weapon, so my response was deemed unwarranted. Well,” she chuckled, “joining the army wasn’t so much my decision but that they promised to reduce my sentence if I agreed to enlist and serve for a year. As fortune would have it, I showed some talent in that direction, and look, less than two decades later, one of Ghalain’s three generals. Miracles do happen, Seasons help us!”

Smirking, I responded, “Ah yes, the follies of youth. I myself ran away from home and set myself up as a governess right around that age.”

She laughed, revealing white, even teeth.

My answering smile was turned in a grimace by *sharp* twinge racked my lower torso.

“Your Majesty?” she asked, his voice full of concern. “Are you well? You must not exert yourself before your coronation. Should I call someone? Lady Avera? Perhaps you should wait...”

Bearing myself up, I said, “No, General, I am afraid I have lingered too long with you. The coronation is in three hours and I must go to my chambers to ready myself. Lady Avera will no doubt be impatient to ready me.”

We left the chamber and made our way to my room. Spying us along the way, servants bowed low. It was so unusual to see my presence elicit such a dramatic response and I did not think I would ever get used to the sight of figures so low to the ground they seemed almost prone. Once we arrived at my door, she smiled. “Good luck, your Majesty.”

I walked into my room...

...to be greeted by bouncing hullabaloo, servants darting around my chambers, running in and out of the door, being conducted by a calm Avera, who, even with the sleeves of her pansy

pink dress rolled up and tendrils of hair falling before her face, looked like an artist's representation of perfection. Sighting me, Avera bustled over, looking relieved. "I did not wish to interrupt you with the General, but I must say I was afraid you were going to be late. Come, come, sit. I have dictated to the dressers, the hairdressers, everyone, how to make you up."

Laughing nervously, I thanked her and insisted, "Now, you get yourself ready. You can even ready yourself here and we can share people. In fact, if you wish to, I command it." After all, she had thrown herself into the planning of this whole event—the least I could do was let her partake in the ritual dressing with me.

Telling a servant to fetch her gown, Avera also ordered a plain young woman to fetch my own dress. It was neither as grand, imposing, nor opulent as other coronation dresses before it. Or so it appeared. But the dress was of a fine, iridescent silver silk, which shimmered white, gold, or rose depending on how the light hit it, with shorter, fluttering sleeves and a train, which would follow me for yards and yards. As I was laced into my gown, I felt the tell-tale weight of encrusted diamonds, lending an impossible subtle shine of their own.

Half-dressed in her own sea foam green gown, Avera eyed me appraisingly. "You look radiant, Your Majesty."

Grinning, I commented as I was gently pushed into my seat by the hairdresser, "Yes, somewhere between radiant and a cotton ball."

The hairdresser left my hair falling in simple, dark waves, better to emphasize the crown. For this same reason I wore only the Khamad family signet ring of yellow gold with a large black gem set in the middle on my longest finger. It was not Pari-forged, but had been gifted to an ancestor long ago by the first King of Ghalain. It had been a symbol of our house since then. Despite its importance, it was rather ugly and thus very rarely worn. The hairdresser set to work making up my face, and subtly he created contours for my cheekbones, fuller lips, and luminous eyes. *If I looked like this everyday...* I thought wistfully.

The sun was perhaps an hour before its zenith when Kershid arrived with Liem. He goggled at me in surprise, but recovered himself swiftly. "Queen Selene, it is time to go to the Temple."

Reaching across, Avera squeezed my hand comfortingly and followed me as we wound through the Palace. As I walked out into the sunlight, I was nearly blinded by my dress. I did not envy anyone the sight of me in the bright light. Late spring air, equal parts cold and hot, caressed my cheeks. Horns sounded as I stepped down the marble steps to the ribbon-festooned carriage to be pulled by a quartet of white horses, decked with merry jingling bells.

As we rolled onto the street, followed by a fleet of other carriages in which sat the other nobles, and flanked on all sides by a double row of soldiers, I felt... alone. Even as the crowd cheered and whistled, waving scarves and caps excitedly, throwing posies at my feet, as I bestowed coins upon them, I felt utterly alone. There was the obvious absence of Auralia and my family...but Gwydion? I had sent a message to him announcing my ascension and I had ordered that prisoners all around Ghalain be fed a good dinner tonight. In spite of the sheer sum of

everything, a part of me wished he were sitting across from me, smirking and flicking coins from the open sides of the carriage. Whatever else, without him, I doubted I would be here.

“Well, it’s just me and you, Baby,” I murmured, feeling another twinge. I was better at hiding the pain this time, quickly turning it into a smile as I rained more money onto the heads of my subjects.

“Queen Selene! Queen Selene! May you reign long and well!” they chanted in unison, and drawing my spirit from theirs, I summoned a genuine smile to my made-up lips. *Being queen will be lonely work, but I will always have my people.* “I love you!” I shouted to them spontaneously, however unorthodox that was. “I love you!”

The mass of faces, of all colors, sizes, and ages, roared with pleasure.

It was a rather heady bouquet.

The carriage rolled to a stop before the grand ziggurat where we had laid Erina to rest mere weeks before. Here, monarchs of Ghalain had been crowned since time immemorial and within an hour I would join their ranks. Headly indeed. The door of the carriage opened and a strong hand extended to aid me in my descent. “Well met, General,” I whispered, smiling as my heels clacked against the first granite step.

Ready to meet my fate, I entered the temple, dazzled by the aureate luster of the interior walls. Trumpeters lined the path into the temple and when I emerged, nearly deaf, through the doors, I saw the hundreds of men and women, dignitaries and nobles, Djinnat and Pari, who had arrived at short notice to attend my coronation. They rose from their seats and turned to watch me. I fancied I saw Gwydion’s lover, but firmly pushed down the thought of what had happened the last time the Khamads, the Djinnat, and the Pari had come together at a formal event.

A choir of children was singing in tones so unearthly beautiful, that I did a small double-take and realized that intermingling with humans were both young djinnat and pari. The jewel-tone glass windows let the light flood in, staining the whole temple ruby and gold, sapphire and emerald. Down the impossibly long aisle stood the Bronze Throne, carefully transported for the purpose of coronation. The bronze had been polished, and the gems, rubies and goldstones and amber and amethyst winked in the sunlight.

Kershid and Liem stood beside the throne, having entered through a back door. No doubt they had quickly run in after they were safely out of the crowd’s view. In Kershid’s hands rested the crown itself, a heavy piece, created much time after the throne. I knew by memory the intricate and delicate gold swoops, rising to delicate peaks frosted with diamonds.

And then I was before Kershid. Who stood before the throne. With the crown in his hand. For me.

Careful that the diamonds studding my dress did not dig into my knees, I knelt before Kershid. He looked princely and serious in his cobalt breeches and jacket, his hair smoothed down for the occasion. He gingerly handled the crown as if it would catch fire any instant.

“Emira Selene, you have been chosen by the Council to act as ruler of Ghalain. Do you vow to fulfill these duties to the best of your ability?”

“Yes,” I pronounced in a clear, bell-like voice, one that I had been practicing since my name had been pulled from the chalice.

“As the Arbiter of the Assembly and a direct living descendent of the previous queen, Her Majesty Erina Nizeran, I take this crown and with her blood flowing from my veins, crown you Queen Selene Lilah Khamad, Defender of Ghalain, Supreme Ruler of the Western Deserts, Empress of the East, and Protector of the Seas.”

As the sun crested to its zenith, light poured in through the ziggurat’s glass oculus, illuminating me and my shimmering dress, the crown hovering above me. There was a collective intake in breath, as at that perfect moment, the crown slipped onto my head.

And then Kershid was gone from before me, leaving me with the crown straining down on my neck. In his place stood the priest, with a beard so long it could have been tucked into his belt. I winced inwardly, thinking about just how terribly I had neglected my religious duties, and prayed that nothing would go wrong in a divine attempt to teach me a lesson. Standing over me, the priest declaimed words in the guttural language used for religious ritual. He waved incense before my eyes until they stung with tears.

“Queen Selene, dost thou vow to honor the Seasons and our traditions and the traditions of thy forefathers?” asked the pontiff, his sharp green eyes examining me as though determined to pry loose any indecency, any dishonor, any stain that would make me unworthy. “Dost thou promise to uphold the laws of Ghalain, to protect the innocent, punish wrongdoers, and preserve this great country so long as the Seasons turn and thou doth draw breath?”

I met his gaze boldly. “By my honor, I do,” I announced.

And like that it was done.

“The Seasons preserve you. Ghalain! I present to thee thy Queen, Selene Lilah Khamad!”

Cheers and clapping broke over me like thunder, like the crash of pummeling of waves, and I could not help but grin. The priest fell behind me as I stepped towards the Bronze Throne.

My vision tunneled, the light from the oculus, the crowds, the strains of choir music that had begun again, filtered away, drowned out by an otherworldly hum. The hair on my arms prickled. I lowered myself into the throne and when I touched the seat, I felt something, ephemeral threads, which slipped and glittered, brush my skin. *Magic*, I knew intuitively, but this was not something I had been led to expect. I had an innate suspicion of the stuff—who could help that, given what I had just experienced? I did not let my worry show on my face. Warmth flooded through me and I felt myself being bound to the throne. The once-warm threads flashed ice, tying me tightly. As quickly as they had crystallized cold, they disappeared. I was the only one who knew what had happened, the only one who knew that I was now united inexorably with Ghalain and the Bronze Throne.

Then came the swell of nobles and dignitaries. I saw the Pari slip out, apparently believing their political duty had been done. One by one, from Kershid to Corrine, they swore their fealty to me. Each time they intoned the sacred words, hot and cold threads flashed between my hand and theirs, and this time they felt it too.

Calenda approached, followed by the rest of the Thirds Council, offering me their congratulations and promise of support in these difficult times ahead. “Nasty, affected woman, Quenela,” Calenda remarked. “Never liked her.” The dignitaries congratulated me on behalf of their masters, presenting me with small tokens. The Ambassador of Hademer offered me a blocky ring set with starry diamonds, which he explained King Aedrian had taken from his own finger and had, in turn, belonged to one of their most revered ancient leaders. The representative of Xanjo presented me with a tiger cub, offspring of Emperor Diljar’s own beloved tigress. My guards bore the mewling cub away to the menagerie after I had cooed over the present appropriately and slipped King Aedrian’s offering on my finger.

As I offered my deepest thanks to them, a tall figure took their place. Lithe as a blade and dusky, he grasped my hand and his skin was almost like fire to the touch and for a moment, I was transported to a place where the wind blew dry and hot and the sun glared blindingly. The crowd of well-wishers melted away.

“Djinn,” I whispered.

He inclined his long face gravely.

“You honor me and Ghalain with your presence, milord.”

His eyes, light as the desert sky and striking against his swarthy complexion, sought mine. “You and I and your clan and mine are tied, do you know that?”

“It was your people who averted the curse. You have my and my family’s everlasting thanks.”

He made a gesture as if eradicating my debt. “The Pari and Djinn have ancient animosities. To thwart the other is among our chief pleasures. And in lives as long as ours, such pleasures are few and far between.” He grinned slightly, revealing bright teeth. From the gesturing hand, which had been empty before, he produced a chain from the end of which dangled a gold pendant.

It was still hot from his touch when I took it into my palm. I looked up at him quizzically. “A pitcher?” It was rather squat, but, with a spout like that, I could not see what else it could be.

“A lamp. Within this, you have the power for three wishes. Rub it whenever you have need; put your will into your desire for a wish and I will appear to grant you your request. Be warned though: while the scope of our power is vast, we are not omnipotent. My congratulations and my people’s congratulations on your ascension.” With a nod, he stepped back into the light and vanished. Blinking dazedly at where he had stood, I did not even notice the next woman who had jostled up, wringing my hand.

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Do you recognize us? It is I, Madame. I have brought Corec, his wife, and your little friend Oelphie insisted on joining us. I came as soon as I heard. And I told him, I told Corec, that when I took you on, I knew that there was something noble to your bearing, that you would make something of yourself. Oh, we have had a rough time coming to you! The roads between Viziéra and Nyneveh were heavily patrolled, but I would not let that come in the way of seeing you, my Queen!” She nearly toppled over with excitement.

Laughter bubbled in my chest. The sight of Madame toadying up to me, after two years of ambivalence was humorous. I tried exchanging a familiar look with Oelphie, but her eyes were downcast. Keeping a straight face, I beckoned a guard and announced, “This family housed me while I was in Viziéra. Provide them accommodations in the Alhazar for the duration of the festivities. Madame, Corec, Sarine, Oelphie, I would be honored by your presence at the ball tonight.”

As an afterthought I added to the guard, “If Mistress Oelphie consents, please send her to my rooms after I am done here.” I saw Madame’s eyes dart sharply between us, no doubt trying to consider how to inveigle further favors. I made a mental note to grant Corec a knighthood with a fair-sized tract of land. Whatever her quirks, I had been treated kindly paid well while acting as Corec’s governess.

Their arrival was the last notable event of my coronation. Absently, I fingered the chain around my neck, feeling the comforting warmth of the lamp pendant at my throat as the crowds slowly dwindled away. Finally, I accepted the last kitchen boy’s thanks with utmost gravity.

Kershid appeared at my side, offering his hand to help me descend from the throne. He grinned. “Congratulations, your Majesty. Now, we must make haste! The feast and ball begin at sunset.”

The redder than usual hues of the stained glass shadows told me that sunset was not far off. Finding myself more tired than I had thought to be, I leaned heavily, if imperceptibly, against Kershid. Trailed by the queen’s honor guard, I felt my babe move within me.

“It is done,” I whispered.

He smiled at me, somewhat sadly. “Your Majesty, it has only begun.”



## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

Garbed in my gold-embroidered forest-green gown that brought out the luster in her brown hair, Oelphie flushed with pleasure as Miri served her a cup of wine. Oelphie was keeping me company while Reyal helped dress me in my gossamer crimson ball gown. Beginning tomorrow, I would be inundated with a host of young nobly-born women to serve me. A great number had flocked to Nyneveh from the countryside to be ladies-in-waiting to the new queen at her court, but I had insisted that I be attended only by a few tonight. Still feeling slightly ill, I did not think I could stomach the tittering and squealing that accompanies girls as surely as lightning is followed by thunder. Although they would be around my age, I already felt generations their senior—just thinking of them tired me.

“I never thought I’d see you again, Sel—your Majesty.”

Clipping on heavy ruby earrings, I laughed and said, “Selene, please. How cumbersome would our correspondence be if weighed down by titles? It is such a pleasure to see you again, Oelphie, I cannot tell you.”

Miri swept kohl onto my eyelids as Oelphie replied, “Seasons, it is hard to grow accustomed to thinking of you as Queen of all Ghalain. Emira of Aquia was alright; I’d had my suspicions, but this! Seasons!”

I snorted and clasped a heavy ruby necklace around my throat. “You and me both.” I perfunctorily checked myself in the long mirror—the gems of the necklace fell against my chest in a pattern that eerily resembled blood spatter. Rolling my eyes melodramatically, I nestled the heavy crown into my hair. Diamonds winked entrancingly

“And what of Abarta?” I asked, eager to hear news of the innkeep who had been so kind to me in Viziéra. “And Constanisa?”

Oelphie giggled. “The inn is thriving and she is as indomitable as ever. She and Constanisa send their love and congratulations. Abarta wants you to know that when you return to Viziéra, you must rest a night with her.”

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure. Ah,” I said, noticing the deep reds and burning oranges crisscrossing the sky. “Time to go.”

Kershid, who was dressed in an impeccable grey coat and breeches, with gold embroidered cuffs met me at the door. His knuckles stood poised to knock.



He dropped his hand. “You look lovely, your Highness. And you as well, Mistress Oelphie,” he added, peering behind me. I turned to see her blush. I could not help but grin.

Once we left my wing, we were surrounded by an honor guard, who accompanied us to the doors of the ballroom. I could not see past them until they suddenly gave way as the enormous doors swung open, revealing the gilt and mirrored interior. The music of dulcimers and horns broke over us. The assembly rose at my entrance and I could not help but gasp, my elevation in station suddenly very tangibly real to me. Dazedly, I smiled. Kershid seated me at the center of the high table, surrounded by the other—nay, *my* emirs and emiras.

My arrival signaled the beginning of a dance of courses: roasted and spiced chicken, quail stew, lamb with herbs, goat and mint, flat Aquian bread, milk-white cheeses...my mind and stomach reeled from keeping track of the courses as I made pleasant conversation with the emirs and emiras.

At one point, Lyra tilted her head in such a way that so eerily resemble my father that tears stung my eyes. What would my mother and father, who considered me to be such a scapegrace, think to see me now as their queen? I knew that in my adolescent sullenness, I had considered myself to be an afterthought to them, but now older and about to be a mother in my own right, I comprehended just how deeply my parents loved me. It struck me that I had never considered truly how much my running away had hurt them, had worried them. I had assumed that they had not cared, but, in a moment of startling clarity, I realized that I had assumed that because it was easier for me. They were more precious to me than I had known. I blinked back my tears. Now that I was Queen, I would see it all right.

As the dessert courses began and my spoon was poised above a rich ganache, Fyodor leaned across the table and asked, “Your Majesty, have you made any progress on the situation with Quenela and Hadil?”

Corrine, hearing his question, barked, “Give the girl a moment to breathe. She has only just been crowned.”

But, at this point, with the subject broached at the high table, all ears were paying close attention and I knew that I had to provide some explanation. “I do not wish to dwell upon that issue too much tonight, but I will say that General Niara and I have been drawing up plans to address Quenela that we will present shortly.”

Seeing that this only created further disgruntlement, I said, “Please, let us drop the matter for the time being, and enjoy the celebration.” At a gesture, one of the several troupes of dancers in the hall began swaying rhythmically, temporarily distracting the emirs and emiras.

Taking my cue from the entertainers, once their performance was finished and had been applauded enthusiastically, I announced, “Let us begin the dancing! Servants, clear away the tables and musicians, strike a jolly tune!”

They immediately obliged, strumming their strings to a quick-paced popular dancing tune. Men and women rose, each garbed more finely and glitteringly than the next. The djinn dignitary claimed the first dance, swaying me about with sensuous ease. Then, Kershid and Liem,

followed by Idrees and Fyodor. My stomach cramped, but I managed to pass the grimace off as a smile. Breathing heavily after Ferdas had deposited me on my chair, I felt the world wheel around me with drunken unsteadiness. Suddenly, a sticky warmth spread between my thighs. My stomach clenched and unclenched in an agony like no other. My teeth cut deeply into my lip. Panic overwhelmed me. "Ferdas....I must leave..."

I walked stiffly through the dance floor, fearful to part my legs, and refusing to bend to the pain which threatened to render me prone. I gripped Ferdas's arm until my knuckles whitened, but I remained upright and calm. No one need know what was happening, although everyone, even the musicians, had halted to watch my procession. I could not even smile reassuringly, but I heard Liem loudly order the musicians to continue their merry music for the queen's departure. After a few hesitant plucks, notes filled the room. Yet, people were not distracted and I could feel thousands of eyes needling my back as white-hot knives tore through my stomach. Avera, Oelphie, and Kershid, appeared at my side, but, sensing my desire to remain calm, said nothing, until the guards had firmly closed the door behind us.

Kershid raised a warm hand to my clammy forehead. "What is the matter?"

At that moment, I was completely ready to surrender myself to the pain, and be a child in the care of others. "The—babe," I gasped, between contractions. *I should have minded the pains during the day.*

Avera's fists rose to her mouth in horror, but she announced steadily, "I will fetch a midwife. Take her Majesty to her rooms," and she sprinted around the corner.

Leaning heavily against Ferdas, I mewled in agony. Gently and ignoring my incoherent protests, Ferdas swung me into his arms and with a smooth, but quick gait, carried me to my room. Foolishly, I had hoped that once I was lain in bed, the pain would disappear, but it only grew stronger. "No, no," I moaned. "I need to walk." But as I walked, the contractions only grew more painful.

"Selene, we must remove you from this gown," Oelphie said calmly. With a quiet, comforting strength she stripped me, leaving me garbed in only my bloody and already sweat-soaked shift. She delicately removed the heavy the earrings and the necklace. "Thank goodness..." I murmured, but I was unable to complete the thought. Peering up, I saw Kershid fidget uncomfortably, but Oelphie went to him and said, "Bring some rushes for the room, so the pretty carpets are not ruined."

*I would sell every one of them.*

Ferdas, who had disappeared during my disrobing, appeared again, with a towel and water basin. Gently, he bathed my forehead. I squeezed his hand, my nails digging into the tender flesh of his palm.. Although he flinched, his eyes were steady. "You will be fine Selene. You and the baby will be fine." He repeated the words continuously like a mantra. I could not believe his words.

"Gwydion..." I whimpered.

Vaguely, I heard some mutters, someone sounded displeased, then resigned. Time melted away, froze, and then melted again. A new hand gripped mine, calloused and familiar. I opened my bleary eyes. Green eyes, white lips, and a singsong murmur. “She will have your black hair, but my green eyes. Your skin, but my lips. Our stubbornness,” On and on he continued, painting a description of our daughter, helping me ride the waves of pain, until, finally, Avera swept into the room, accompanied by a middle-aged woman, competent of face and clean of hand.

After her arrival, the experience melded into a haze of pain, as I crouched on the rushes and felt my insides clawed apart by steel. Kershid, Ferdas, and Avera took turns standing tense vigil outside, while Gwydion and Oelphie remained steadfast at my side. Between flashes of pain, their faces blurred. The sun ascended and set and rose again, before I was fit to discern anything else. I could hear distressed whispers. I wondered if I were to die, like so many other women before me, in childbirth. I was too exhausted and pained to fear death. It seemed like a tempting dream. The air grew heavy with sweat and blood, which even the rushes and open windows could not alleviate. Finally, after days of bloody labor, the midwife murmured, “The child is crowning. Push, your Majesty.”

With the last of my will, I channeled all of my strength into thrusting the child from womb. After an eternity, she fell, softly, into the midwife’s hand. But the room was eerily silent, unfilled by the squalling of a newborn. The midwife’s back was to me and I saw her pat the child, clean its nose and mouth...loosen the cord around her dainty throat. I reached out to take her from the midwife, but my hands faltered when I saw my daughter, lifeless and blue, the cord wrapped about her neck.

Collapsing, I shuddered with sobs, as the midwife cleaned her off, and handed her to me.

“There was no chance, your Majesty,” she said gently. “Not with the child born breeched and the cord wrapped around its neck. It has...probably been so for a while. You are blessed to have emerged from this with your own life. You will need to recuperate your strength and rest...”

It was not real to me. I saw my daughter, miniature and perfect, with a nose smaller than a clover leaf, in my hands, not breathing. I tried to warm her, rubbing her chest between my hands, filling her little lungs with breath, slapping her bottom as I knew midwives did, but to no avail. Oelphie, Avera, and the midwife watched me with pity. I cradled her and fell into Gwydion’s comforting embrace. Glancing at the midwife, the haze of grief clearing for an instant, I gestured toward the ruby necklace. “It is yours for your services—and your silence. You will not speak of this to anyone else.”

If she was impressed by the benefice, she gave no sign of it, but curtsied deeply. Offering her condolences, she departed. Oelphie and Avera exited with her, but not before, heedless of their clothes, tightly embracing me. And then, there was only me and Gwydion and my grief.

I was struck by a thought and hope breathed in my chest once more. Still clutching my girl, I grasped at the necklace the djinn had given me, so few hours before. Fervently, I rubbed it, thinking of the ambassador and suddenly, there he was, a tall dark figure before me.

“Your Eminence,” I said inclining my head.

“Your Majesty. How may I be of service?”

I thrust my daughter before him and said, “My daughter died before birth. I ask that you breathe life into her once more.”

Every word soaked in sympathy, he replied, “I am afraid that neither I nor my kith have any power over life and death. That rests with a greater power. All I can advise is that you rest. This too shall pass.” Warmly, he grasped my hand, but I could only watch blankly. The room faded into shadow.

“Leave my presence, sir,” I commanded dully.

His dark eyes filled with pity. “My condolences, your Majesty.” He disappeared, but, as a parting gift, he lifted the stench from the room, replacing it with the warm scent of cinnamon and cloves and leaving my own body and garb immaculate. It was as if it had never happened.

His sleeves rolled up from assisting with the birth, Gwydion reached out to me and said softly, “Might I hold her?”

Gently, I placed the cool, stiff little bundle into his arms. Cradling her, looking intently at his daughter, he asked tightly, “What will you do?”

I watched him, holding our daughter, and although the world seemed to crumble around me, I felt a resolution sweep through my tired limbs. Falling into bed, I said, “Today, I will sleep. Tomorrow, we will bury our daughter and I will go to Aquia to rest, to recover, to see my family once more before we march to war. Charge Kershid to arrange it quietly and appoint him my steward in Ghalain.” And in that moment, in the face of death, I trusted him to do as I said.

He set our daughter beside me and stepped out of the room. After a few moments, he reappeared, tenderly kissing my temple and said, “It is taken care of. Kershid will see you in the morning to finalize arrangements, my brave queen.” After a few moments, he asked, “What shall we call her?”

The question started fresh tears. A name denoted a personality, a future, a life, and she would have none of that now. What would she have been like? Would she have been as wild as I had been, or mild but nonetheless very funny like my youngest sister Gieneve, or a rake like Danyal? I looked at the sweet face wrapped in Gwydion’s strong arms and glimpses of Gieneve flashed in my mind.

“Evela, after my youngest sister.”

He curled himself around me and our Evela. I took a long draught of the thick potion the midwife had left at my bedside and soon slipped into sleep.



PART THREE



*Sunrise*



## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

As Selene slept, she dreamed.

She sat in a slender, silver canoe that drifted down a placid milky river lined with willows whose gilded leaves feathered softly into the water. The sky was pure black, but she had no trouble seeing the path unfolding before her like a shimmering and ever-familiar pattern. She was content to let the canoe take her where it would. And from where there had been nothing but unyielding river, suddenly sprang a small dock.

With the greatest naturalness, she stepped from the boat and onto the dock, a new path lit before her, this one as luminous and pearly as a full moon. It wound through a forest of dark trees and disappeared into shadow. She stepped along the path, wondering where it would take her. It struck her to look down at her dress; it was as silver as her coronation gown—a...what? The image of something had fluttered into her mind, but she could not understand what it had to do with her. This gown glowed with an unearthly beauty.

She forgot the gown when she looked up again. An immense palace loomed before her, its spires and towers so lofty that they mingled with the brushstroke clouds and as she came closer it became evident that it was not made of stone or brick or even marble but of pure silver. Amazed, she touched it and snatched her hand back with a hiss. It was hot. Or it was cold. It was something that hurt.

“Do not touch that which is not yours.”

She whirled around, but she could see nothing. It was as if a black veil had been drawn over her eyes. It slowly faded and she looked around warily. Her neck prickled. Something...was not right.

An arched entrance yawned before her and with the path still glittering, even as it disappeared through the ingress. She followed it and then the scene fizzed and something new dissolved into reality. Music first. The piping of flutes and strums of harps. It drew her in, made her feet itch to dance. A golden light crept in, the steady burning of thousands of beeswax candles and as this light illuminated, it revealed a party of dancers, swirling in perfect harmony in a chamber of glass and mirrors.

It also revealed a colored-glass mass of butterfly wings.

She backed away.

Fingers caught her arm. “Ah ah,” a chiming voice chided. “Once you enter, you may not leave until the dance is finished.”

It was a Pari woman who spoke, with goldenrod wings and dark curling hair. The woman seemed familiar—had she not always known her?—but her identity flitted away as soon as Selene seemed to stumble upon it. The pari gave her hand to a man who promptly began gliding with her. He was human and his face was slack with blind enjoyment. Her fingers tingled. This was strange...

From his arms, she went to another man with the same flaccid expression. And then to another, each handsomer and duller than the next. And something...something ever-so familiar flickered at the corner of her eye, but whenever she turned, it disappeared, out of sight once more. “No...no...” Selene gasped. “I must stop.”

The woman with the goldenrod wings was at her side once more. “You must not stop.”

“Oh, but I must,” she insisted. Sharp threads pricked at her consciousness, like a needle poking a bubble. “I am Queen of Ghalain. I will stop if I wish.”

The woman curtsied, spreading her mint green skirts with supreme irony. “Of course. Might I offer your Majesty a drink?” A glass chalice filled with a burgundy drink appeared temptingly in her hands. “Surely your Majesty has grown thirsty from the dance?”

*Do not touch that which is not yours.*

“No...thank you...”

The glass vanished in a wisp of smoke. “Very well then. You must dance.”

Once more, she was assumed into the arms of gliding gentlemen. The familiar flickers grew more rapid, more evident, darting colors that she knew she had known somewhere...But where...Had there been anything but this dance? Her words echoed in her mind: *I am Queen of Ghalain*. What sort of place had that been? Her partner waltzed her closer to the glass wall. And there! There it was! That ghostly flicker! But it did not dart out of her sight, but remained steady. It met her eyes.

*Auralia.*

The word whispered in Selene’s ear, a faint and forgotten memory that was growing clearer and clearer. There she stood, behind a shadowy glass, a hairsbreadth and world away from Selene’s fingers. Other figures began crowding behind her. Her parents. Her other siblings. Beya, their nurse, Matiz the guard. The crowd behind the glass deepened and deepened, filled with faces she thought she knew. She broke away from her partner’s grasp once more.

Selene heard the soft beat of goldenrod wings at her side. “Release them!” she commanded.

The pari smiled. “I cannot do that.”

She beat at the glass, but it remained impenetrable. With the pari following her steps, she ran her fingers along the glass, but found no crack. It was a single continuous piece that curved around the boundaries of the room. “What have you been done with them?” she demanded.

“They are precisely as you saw them last.”

“Let me see them.”

“You may not.”

“Let me see them,” she persisted.

Her lips curled upwards. “If you so insist...” She caressed the glass. It shone blindingly and when the light faded there was a small door. “You may enter.”

Selene almost dashed in but something...something buzzed in her mind. “If I go behind the glass, will I be able to leave?”

Her smile grew wider. “Surely you wish to be with your family once more.”

Her family began hugging the doorway, unable to step forth, but she could hear their soft pleas clearly. “Selene...Selene...”

Willed by their whispers, the haunting sigh of the music, she stepped forward to join them.

“NO!”

She met Auralia’s terrified eyes.

Something cracked.

“Go on then,” the pari said. “You belong with them.”

Her gaze locked on Auralia, Selene backed away slowly. “No...I think not...”

The pari brought her face close to Selene’s. The scent of cloves enveloped her. “Surely you wish to,” she lilted enticingly. “Surely you...dream of it, long for it. Reunion at last. Here, it is yours. Taste it.”

Selene wrenched away from her. She felt fingers at her back, pushing, tugging. And she ran. Something pulled her forward, through the golden mirrors of the hall, the silver archway. The path was no longer moonlit, but as dark and shadowy as the surrounding forest, and more winding than she recalled it. Thorns scrabbled at her tattering gown, vines curled around her ankles. She tripped, she crawled, she ran. The path suddenly ended, right upon the dock. The canoe bobbed in the opalescent river in wait. Clambering in, she pushed off.

She faded.





## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

Evela's body had been conferred to the Temple privately, with no indication where she had come from but accompanied with enough gold to ensure that the funeral rites would be properly met. There was only so long the secret could be kept from the rest of Ghalain. Although I had vowed that night that I would depart immediately for Aquia, I rested for half a week beside Gwydion, leaving the day-to-day of governance largely to Kershid who would confer with me every night. Even that little exertion exhausted me. But with the passage of several days, although my spirits were still low, the immediate pain and tears were subsiding and my body was healing.

In a simple dressing gown, hair plaited down my back, I met with my circle of confidantes in my crimson parlor, curtains swept back to allow the grey, rainy light to filter in weakly. Sitting with me were Kershid, Liem, Ferdas, Niara, Avera, Oelphie, and Gwydion, while Reyala and Miri sewed quietly in the corner. It was a larger group than I would have wanted, but each had proven to me in the past few terrible days that I could trust them.

"In a few hours, I will be leaving for Aquia."

Most of the group had already known that I had decided upon this, but Niara seemed alarmed, candlelight and natural light casting conflicting shadows on her visage. I could understand her agitation. We were in the middle of executing civil war, after all.

"I know it's dreadful timing. I have just become queen and the issue with Quenela and Hadil...However." I nodded towards Niara. "We are in able hands and I will not be away long and will always be readily available by messenger or bird."

"Lord Kershid will act as steward in my stead, but he knows that any major decisions need my approval. As you have been doing, please keep the...unfortunate incident...silent. The public knowledge of my departure should be put off as long as possible. This afternoon, I will make a few public appearances about the castle, let myself be seen. It is essential that my departure be kept hidden—it might be interpreted incorrectly."

Or worse, correctly.

For this last item, I avoided meeting Gwydion's gaze, instead concentrating on Kershid. "Kershid, I understand how difficult it must have been for you to release your mother's...well, Gwydion, but you did this for my grief and let him remain so for my health. You may escort him back to his cell tonight."

Kershid, who had been sitting stiffly as far from Gwydion as possible, relaxed. Gwydion's arm grew hard against my touch. What had he thought? That all would be righted, murder and regicide could be blighted out by a few acts of kindness? A man could repent and redeem himself, but it took much more than that.

"Finally, I wish to thank all of you for your aid in this last week and in the coming weeks. If I have learned anything it is that the burden of rulership is impossible to carry alone and trusted ones are necessary to execute the job well. Thank you, so much. You are dismissed."

Before departing, Ferdas whispered to me, "I hope you feel better. When you see my father, give him my blessing. To your family, as well."

Oelphie stood before me and with the same strength I remembered from those terrible days, "Selene, I would accompany you to Aquia, if you will have me."

I nodded. "I would be thankful for your presence."

Genuflecting, they left, except for Gwydion who lingered, a crease appearing between his eyebrows. I squared myself for a confrontation.

He raised his hands and I could not help but flinch, but he merely placed them gently on my shoulders. I could feel the weight of his hands through the thin silk of my robe. "Selene, I..." A heavy pause filled the air. "Have a good trip," he finished stiffly. It appeared that a miscarriage could not wipe the slate clean between us either. We were too broken, too deceptive, violent, and bitter.

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After my walk with Avera, I waited for nightfall, fretfully ascertaining that all had been taken care of and calling Kershid or Niara to ensure that they understood everything. When the sun descended, filling the sky with rosy oranges and then bluish violets and the stars began to pick their way across the sky, cloaked and surrounded by a small party of guards, Oelphie and I boarded the carriage with Reyal and Miri.

We made the journey swiftly, stopping only briefly to dine and change horses. Some part of me foolishly hoped that when I returned, all would be right with the world again and in that joy, I could forget the sorrow which had been dogging my footsteps. It felt strange to be alone in my body once more, after having had the companionship of my growing child for so many months. Sometimes, I absently, I would reach down to pat my belly and feel the child wriggle within, only to be met by my soft stomach. As each day passed, my body was subtly tautening as if determined to forget that somebody else had resided within. The outward shows of grief were tapering off, but sometimes and without warning, my chest would tighten and my eyes sting. But as queen, I could not surrender to my grief.

After I returned from Aquia, it would be as if Evela had never been. *She never has been*, I realized. I was overwhelmed once again that she would never have a first smile, a first step, a first tantrum, a first dance, a first love... The list was endless. Looking out the window, watching

the panorama of hills and valleys dip past and avoiding the gazes of my companions, I let the tears drip down my face.

I was asleep when we finally reached the outskirts of Aquia, but Oelphie nudged me awake.

“Oh, look your Majesty, look!”

My neck painfully cricked from the angle at which I had fallen asleep. I slowly raised my head, sucking in my breath. We had just emerged from the Letern Woods and we could make out the town blossoming atop the high hills, basking in a glow of golden candlelight, surrounded by thick fortifications. Coming back to Aquia this time was nothing like my return last year. That had been forced and my emotions incased in fear. Now, I was returning home, to my patrimony and relief swept through me. It was as if the warm candlelight bathed my own bones. The city would not be an empty husk this time; peasants and workers of other lands filled my city’s walls. It would be an Aquia of a different flavor to be sure, but I thanked the Seasons it was not a dead Aquia. Pulling down the window, I shouted, feeling the first strong surge of excitement I had since the birth. “Stop!”

The carriage halted and confusion on the faces of my companions. Nervousness hopping around my stomach, I lowered myself from the carriage and strode towards the east, wading through the tall, waving amber grass of the field. Conscious that I was leaving the carriage further and further behind, I finally found what I was searching for there. There, bathed in the moonlight, was the blackened trunk of Astaro, that Pari tree whose destruction had begun all this. Even decapitated, left with only a fraction of its height, it towered over me. With no Pari pilgrimage in sight, it seemed remarkably ordinary, but for the queerness of a wide trunk, in its circumference as immense as a hundred fully-grown trees, sprouting from the middle of a field. I traced a finger over the trunk, recalling the meeting I had had with Gwydion’s lover the last time I had come here and with every rustle of the grass, I whipped around, thinking it was her. It reminded me of something...a dream...

Shaking my head, I circumnavigated the trunk, as I knew the Pari did, quietly whispering prayers to the Seasons: for the health of my family, for the lifting of the curse, for the success of Ghalain, to give me wisdom as a ruler and happiness as a woman, to keep the spirit of my daughter safe. I had never been particularly religious nor particularly spiritual, but I felt comforted, having whispered my heart’s desires aloud. Looking up at the stars, a vast canopy of glittering lights above me, I thought of how one had come and planted itself into the heart of the earth, sprouting this tree in its place. And how my birth had destroyed all that. But there was nothing I could do about that, and the Pari had dealt their punishment. Running my hand over the trunk one last time, I thought I brushed a budding leaf, but when I stroked that spot again, I felt nothing.

Rapidly, I strode back to the carriage and climbed within.

“Are you well, Your Majesty?” inquired Miri.

“Quite,” I replied. Sticking my head out the window, I urged the driver’s haste.

In response, he increased the horses' pace, and I fell back onto the plush seat with a giggle. Clutching Oelphie's hands, I grinned, "Home at last!"

The wheels rolled to a stop before the gates and a voice, with an accent obviously not Aquian, but more suited to the huskier tones of neighboring Nehajan, called down, "Who are you? Name yourself!"

Sticking my head out the window, I jovially yelled back, "Queen Selene of Ghalain, Emira-Regent of Aquia, and her entourage. Let us through!"

"Welcome, your Majesty!" he exclaimed, grinning from underneath his bristling mustache. The gate swung open on its oiled hinges.

Excitedly, I turned to Oelphie, Reyal, and Miri. "Welcome to my home! Ooh, look at these winding streets, hidden corners and alleys. I'll confess—it's not as well-plotted as Nyneveh, but by the Seasons, it's beautiful."

The three exchanged relieved smiles and I suddenly understood how much they had worried for my health. Feeling my upswell of joy, I knew that coming to Aquia, despite all of the tragic history with the curse and family, had been the right thing to do. Unbidden, an image of how this visit would have been were my family uncursed, swam in my mind. Uproarious music to greet me, the castle swimming in light, and my family, the whole troupe of them, ready to meet me with their spouses and children. A wistful smile crossed my face, and I resolved that once I returned to Nyneveh—no, starting tonight—I would begin in earnest my quest to lift the curse. The djinn, in their effort to subvert the Pari's handiwork, had decreed that Auralia needed to be awoken by true love's kiss. I would sift once again through her room tonight, searching for clues to a preexisting love. It would be difficult, but if I would not do it, then who could?

The carriage wound its way uphill through the streets, and reached the Mehal's gates. Greeted with cheers, we were let through once again. Working through the dark grounds, we arrived before the dimly lit castle. Before the carriage stopped completely, I leaped onto the ground, swept past the guards, who bowed perplexedly, and entered my castle, only to be met by Gwydion's flunkies Kay and Farzal.

By their wrinkled clothing, they had clearly been roused from sleep. While Kay seemed fresh enough, Farzal was hard-pressed to conceal his yawns behind a meaty hand.

Sweeping a bow, Kay said, "Your Majesty, welcome to Aquia. What a surprise your visit is!" His tone betrayed some reproach.

"I hope it did not inconvenience you in any way," I answered bitinglly, and he had the decency to appear chastened.

"Of course not, your Majesty," butted in Farzal. "Servants are arranging rooms for you and your retinue as we speak. Until then, come to my parlor. My lady wife is arranging a small supper for you and your companions and we would be honored by your presence."

I suppressed a twinge of irritation at his proprietorial use of possessive pronouns, but I shrugged it off as best I could. However much that they were Gwydion's yes-men, they had done

a superb job restoring Aquia. I knew that all around manors and farms in Aquia men like them were ensuring that the emirdom would not fail, even though it was not the land of their birth.

“Ah, so you married?” I answered genially, unbuckling my cloak and removing my hat and handing them to an obliging footman in violet and white Khamad livery.

He grinned which lent sparkle to his otherwise dull brown eyes. “Two months to the day, your Majesty.”

Kay coughed, shaking his amber hair. “Milady, let us progress onto supper, or Farzal will keep us here singing the praises of his lady all day.”

Finding myself liking them much more than I remembered, I chuckled. I had wanted to visit my family first, but that would inconvenience the others—not to mention that my stomach was beginning to grumble tellingly. I had not eaten properly since Evela’s birth, but I felt my appetite returning at the spicy aroma of Aquian food. I gestured for Oelphie, Miri, and Reyal to follow me. Kay and Farzal had situated themselves in one of the many guest wings of the Mehal, commandeering a total of ten rooms between them. Entering, we saw the room had been prettily set up with vivid crimson and azure tapestries depicting hunts of horned eagles and antlered lions. Mismatched chairs surrounded a broad table, obviously brought in for the purpose of dinner. Suddenly, a blur of perfumed lavender swept a deep curtsy before me.

“Your Majesty, you honor us with your presence!” exclaimed the petite figure, raising her cobalt eyes. “The cooks have produced a small repast for you, and I do hope that you find it to your liking.”

Seated by Kay at the head of the table, I saw that the meal was typical Aquian fare: flat bread, spiced lamb and chicken stews, and tomato and onion salad. My mouth watered as a servant began slicing the lamb and piling it in tender morsels on my platter. “This is perfect, Lady...?”

“Meera of Ariya, your Majesty,” she replied breathlessly, nervously patting her chestnut hair. “What brings you here, your Majesty?” With sure fingers, she folded chicken into the flat bread and popped it into her mouth.

Wiping my hands on a napkin, I replied, “A brief vacation from ruling. I will be gone by the end of the week.”

If anything, the woman’s delicate face appeared crestfallen. “Your Majesty should stay longer.”

Shaking my head, I said, “Unfortunately, my place is in Nyneveh. Even this brief break was difficult to arrange.” Turning to Kay and Farzal, I added, “While I am here though, I will take the opportunity to look over the accounts and ledgers of Aquia.”

Kay nodded. “Absolutely, your Majesty,” he acquiesced smoothly. “All of the appropriate papers will be in your hands by the morning.”

I bowed my head in thanks. The rest of the brief supper was spent in lighthearted discussion. No mention was made of: Erina’s death, Gwydion’s place in it, the curse, and the first

breaths of civil war that were racking Ghalain. Inwardly, I marveled at how much could not be discussed at a polite supper.

Once dinner had been carried away and I had refused an offer of tea, I was escorted to my room. Exhausted, I let Miri and Reyal dress me, not in one of my new, fine nightgowns, but the same pale blue bell-sleeved one I had slept in the last time I had been home. Slipping under the covers and inhaling the lemony scent of the soap the laundresses used, I felt a little of the pain of the past few days recede. Tomorrow, then, tomorrow I would begin to set my family aright.

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Following an early breakfast, I made my rounds to my somnolent parents and siblings. Gently kissing each of their foreheads, I renewed my vow to break the curse. Their bodies were warm, chests softly rising, eyelids flickering dream-furious. I wondered what they dreamed of, whether a part of their spelled minds knew that they were bewitched and was trying fiercely to be released. ...I knew, didn't I? Or perhaps I had and forgotten...

Sighing, an odd foreboding bubbling in my stomach, I proceeded to Auralia's tower bedroom. I took the steps slowly, feeling a fond nostalgia for the Selene who scrambled up the stairs on her hands and feet. As I walked in, I blinked against the white-gold burst of sunlight, momentarily blinded. Once my vision had adjusted, I saw Auralia, lying in her bed, a bulge protruding from beneath the blankets. Rushing to her side, I pulled back the covers, hoping against hope it was a misplaced cushion, something, anything. My mind thrummed, fingers numbed.

She was pregnant.

She was pregnant.

*She was pregnant.*

Anger, bright and strong, searing and ready to scorch, felled me to my knees. My eyes clouding, I screamed, a guttural, throaty sound, loud enough to rouse an entire wing of the palace. Heart pounding, I stormed down the stairs. I wanted to rip, to tear with my bear hands. Kay appeared before me, saying something, seeming concerned. Not hearing his words and possessed of an inhuman strength, I grabbed him by the collar, knocking him against the wall. His head cracked against the stone and when I saw his fear, I did not feel sympathy. I felt vindicated, I felt strong. And since I was his queen, he could not raise a hand to defend himself.

"What have you done to my sister? *What have you done?*" I screamed.

"Your Majesty...I do not know what you mean." The obvious honesty and befuddlement of his voice calmed me for an instant.

"Bring Farzal. *How can it be possible that my sister is pregnant and none know of it?*"

Shock widened Kay's eyes. Raising a hand to his mouth, he said, "Your Majesty, I swear to you by the Seasons that I knew naught of this and that I had no part of it."

Farzal appeared, trailed by a group of servants, attracted by the noise. “What is happening?” he asked softly.

Turning to him and feeling my anger turn to ice in my veins, I spat venomously, “My sister has been impregnated while you manage Aquia.” It had been almost a full year since the curse had fallen. There was no way...No way....

Although he paled, he displayed none of the shock that Kay had shown. Beads of perspiration popped onto his forehead.

“You knew,” I whispered. Fury surged again and I grabbed his hair, yanking him towards me. “You knew.”

Despite being manhandled, he was calm. “I confess your Majesty, I knew. The maids who changed the sheets told me. I assumed it was the product of an, ahem, indiscretion, prior to her bewitchment.”

Trembling with rage, my hands dropped away. “And you did not think it appropriate, regardless, to inform me of her situation?” I breathed malevolently. “You did not think it appropriate to investigate this? Did you not *think* at all?” He opened his mouth to answer, but I continued. “No, you did not think. And for this dereliction, you are stripped of your position as steward of Aquia. All familial holdings in your name are now property of the crown. Be thankful you are not paying with blood, but I swear, you will pay in tears. You and your lady wife have an hour to gather what scant goods you can carry in your hands and depart. On foot.”

Shaking, he bowed low. His forehead nearly grazed the ground. “Your Majesty,” he murmured and scurried off.

As Farzal backed away, satisfaction washed over me alongside the sense that, at the very least, I had control over something. Yet, even as I banished him, I wished I could rescind the order. He had valuable information that Quenela and Hadil would find useful, should he choose to turn his tail to them. *I should have cut out his tongue.* “The rest of you, leave me. Oelphie, I will be in Auralia’s room. Please bring me a goblet of warm wine.”

Turning away, I climbed back up the stairs, laboriously this time. *Perhaps there is some good to be had here...Perhaps Farzal was correct and this child was borne of Auralia prior to the enchantment. Perhaps it is a child of love. And if that is the case, then perhaps if I can solve the mystery of the child’s paternity, then I can find a way to break the curse.* My spirit thus leavened and hope beginning to blossom again, I entered Auralia’s room once more, only to have a moment from the past swim before me, like a tickling mist, gone in an instant, but not before I knew the truth.

*Oh Seasons, no.* I fell to my knees at Auralia’s side, clutching her warm hand. The clouds of optimism vanished replaced by cold darts of fear and anger and impotence. His threats, made that night nine months ago when we had newly arrived in Aquia. *I can find my pleasure elsewhere. Your sister for instance is quite lovely, even in repose.* With sharp and unforgiving clarity, I remembered the sheets. They had been slightly mussed and I had straightened them and not given it a second thought.

It made sense. Seasons help me, it made sense.

I should never have denied him. Why? Why had I been so foolish? Why had I thought he would not have made good on his vilest threat?

Of late, Gwydion had proven to be kinder and more amiable, but I suddenly recalled with merciless sharpness his early cruelty, the violence, murder of Erina, the high-handed way in which he had sought to control my life. In spite of all that, my heart had begun to slowly thaw, but this, this was too much. This I could never forgive and I felt foolish for ever trying. I knew that despite what he was and what he did, we were bonded, but I also knew that he was an unfit, despicable bastard.

I could forgive him his assault on my person, but his attack on my unconscious sister?

Never.

A dark cloud of cold madness settled over me.

Auralia was no longer safe here. I would take her away. Hide her. Protect her. Keep her somewhere no one could hurt her, could find her, without my knowledge.

I would take Auralia's child, and raise it as my own, letting no one know, but those few had already witnessed what had passed.

Oelphie appeared at my elbow with the chalice of warm wine. Downing the drink rapidly, I turned to her. "Pack our bags, order a carriage. You and I are departing from this place. Have it done in secret."

She looked ready to protest, but bit her tongue. She look resolute. "If I may ask your Majesty, where are we going?"

"To the lands Auralia and I inherited from our grandmother, to Carez."

As Oelphie departed, I squeezed Auralia's hand and whispered, "No one will ever touch you again, I swear. I will keep you safe."





## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

The carriage clattered on the cobblestone road that broke unnaturally through drifting desert sand. The hot sun pulsed overhead, melting reality into mirage. Keeping one hand on the reins, I adjusted my wide-brimmed hat. We had been traveling for several days, at a slow but steady pace, and we were approaching the squat fortress that was the abandoned castle of Carez. By horseback, Carez was less than a full day's ride from the Mehal, but by carriage, burdened with a woman with child and a woman recently divested of one, the pace was far slower.

In my grandmother's day, Carez had rarely been inhabited, a glorified trading post more than anything, and after her demise, it had fallen out of use, and, more importantly, out of memory. These lands, home to nomadic shepherds who cloaked themselves in long white robes, were not known for their fertility or riches. Only the most brave merchants would travel into the desert to emerge forth with the beautiful metalwork of the tribes. Of course now, even they would not venture forth. The tribes, like everyone else from Aquia, were fast asleep.

Blinking against the glare of the sun, I thought something flashed, but it vanished beneath the bright light. Then, almost half an hour later, we arrived at the castle, nearly stumbling upon it. Built on a rocky promontory jutting from the earth, it was not a high building, but circular in shape and constructed entirely of smooth, polished granite, with the distinct air of having remained unused for decades. The citadel was surrounded by a circle of dry palm trees and I could make out wells in the earth, which I assumed that, at the very least, the local nomads once used. I had discovered in these past few days that fresh, cool water was nothing to scoff at.

"We've arrived!" I called to Oelphie. "But remain in the carriage while I..."

I walked to the immense door and pushed it lightly with my fingertips. To my surprise, it swung open. I strode in, half-expecting to see it populated by a family of sleeping nomads, but it was blissfully empty—and cool. At its center was an open courtyard, where a once-functioning fountain was shaded by palm trees. Staircases swathed in shadow led to the floors above.

It was perfect. Abandoned. Forgotten. No one would find her here. No one would touch her. I had vowed to keep her safe and I would remain true to my word. Satisfied with my findings, I returned to the carriage. "Oelphie, let's bring her in."

Oelphie's head emerged from the carriage, her face tanned and hair frazzled from the heat. "Lady Auralia has gone into labor," she stated calmly.

My knees weakened, but, *Better now than when we have left.* “Alright. Well then. Let us carry her inside and then...do this.”

Together, we hefted her through the door and lay her in the center of the courtyard. Quickly, I returned to the horses, and brought them, with the carriage, into the shade of the castle. I looped its reins around one of the courtyards palm trees whose yellowed fronds he began to chew ponderously. Then, I darted back and bolted the door shut.

Seeing Oelphie’s bemused regard, I said defensively, “There are no servants to put them in the stables! Or look after the carriage. It is too hot to leave the horses outside, and I would not want to make our presence known to any who may have followed us.”

She shook her head with a smile, which dissipated as Auralia moaned. I froze. It was the first sound I had heard from her in years and it shook me. But soon, it was as if I had dreamed that noise, for the labor proceeded smoothly and quietly. She made no other noise, even when her closed eyes screwed up with pain, eyelids and irises trembling madly as if in the midst of a nightmare. Yet, I gave thanks at the ease of her delivery, after the horror mine had been. Oelphie and I, with no expert training, would have been powerless to help Auralia birth her child had the labor been a hard one.

Within the hour, I held, in my hands a niece, the daughter of my sister and my husband, a beautiful baby girl with brown eyes and fine wisps of golden hair, just like her mother’s, a child named Talia. Her lusty wails quieted my fears.

I cradled the small creature and her wild cries echoed in the hall as her mother’s face relaxed into peace once more. I had lost my own child. I had known my husband to be my sister’s violator. Yet, in the midst of it all, I had found something precious. I was raw and emotionally strained, but...at peace. Tenderly, I kissed Talia’s forehead, rocking her gently.

She was Auralia. She was me. She was even Gwydion, but I hoped she would be better than any of us.

In the meantime, Oelphie had tidied Auralia up, redressed her, and bathed her with a scrap torn from her soiled gown. Looking up at me tiredly, she asked, above Talia’s cries, “What do we now?”

My hand rose to my neck, to the lamp pendant the djinn had given me. It was warm to touch. Slowly and deliberately, I ran my thumb across it several times until it became hot. My vision grew black and when it cleared the djinn stood before me once more. The child grew silent in my arms.

As tall and lithe as ever, his garb blending with the shadows, he examined his surroundings bemusedly. “Good day, your Majesty. I am gratified to see that you are looking well.” He peered downwards at Talia, “And who is this?”

“My niece Talia. Now, your Grace, I have a request of you. A wish.”

Steepling his fingers, he peered intently. “Yes?”

Gesturing towards Auralia in the center, I said tightly, "I need to protect her. I need to ensure that no one touches her again. I wish that you protect her from the world." I shivered as I spoke. But it did not matter. I could never risk her being hurt again, whatever the consequences.

The djinn cocked his head to the side. He raised an eyebrow. Then, we were standing outside, beneath the glare of the sun. Hot breezes ruffled my hair. My vision blurred blackly from being thrown from the shadows of the citadel to the brightness of the desert at midday.

As the djinn concentrated upon the citadel, he raised his hands and slowly, seemingly from the earth, immense tawny crystals began to creep over the stone of the building. The crystals blossomed, interlocking and lacing through each other, like hands cupping, fingers entwining, until the entire citadel was shielded by sand-colored glitter. From afar, it would look like a mirage and when near, it looked impenetrable.

Stepping closer, I delicately extended a finger, running it along the lines of the formation. Rough and sharp, the angles of the crystals formed interweaving petals, mimicking the curve of roses. They were unnaturally cool to the touch, like a block of ice on a summer's day. "What are these?"

"They are called desert roses," the djinn explained, shimmering like a mirage himself. "There is no material forged by man that will be able to penetrate the citadel."

*"And she will be protected by a fortress of roses and thorns,"* I murmured to myself.

Turning to thank him, I was met only by a vista of rolling golden dunes, the jagged Aquian hills far to the west, and endless blue sky. "Thank you!" I called as Oelphie hitched the horse to the carriage. Handing Talia carefully to Oelphie, I went behind the fortress, drawing cold water from the well. I drank deeply before bringing the whole bucket back to water the horse.

After feeding Talia in the shade of Auralia's fortress, I took the reins, ready to make the long trip back to Nyneveh. I turned around one last time to see the mound of crystalline roses glimmering in the sun. Auralia was safe. No one would ever touch her again. No one would find her, and even if they did, they would not be able to break through the barrier of desert roses. I clicked the horse forward.

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Following nearly a week of travel, during which we rested at inns every night so that I could nurse Talia in peace, we entered Nyneveh on a muggy, overcast day. The fog rolled off in waves from the Menander River. The town was quiescent, with no outward sign they knew that their queen had been away for nigh on two weeks. I was thankful. A part of me had feared that the city would be in fearful revolt, thrown into a frenzy by the advent of civil war and the departure of their ruler. At the very least, the latter was no common knowledge. I pulled my hat low.

We rolled up to the Alhazar, the tiled domes and thousand minarets reflecting the heavy white light of the day. Although I had delighted to return to Aquia, the golden threads in my

chest, remnants of the Coronation, hummed with anticipation. I was Queen of this place—and the wider kingdom—but my queenship was felt most powerfully here. For the first time since my coronation, I felt properly Queen of Ghalain, returning home to my patrimony, not just a jumped up marquise turned governess turned emira.

Before I could hop down, we were swarmed by servants as well as Liem, Kershid, and Avera, who wore identical expressions of relief on their faces. I was surprised by how much the sight of them and their concern warmed me.

Kershid pulled me down, hugging me fiercely, before I was grabbed away by Liem and Avera for matching embraces.

In a loud voice for the benefit of the surrounding servants, Kershid declared, “Your Majesty! You should not have gone off into the city, even if it was for a morning ride, without informing someone! More quietly, only for my ears, he added, “We were so worried. When Kay in Aquia sent word you had disappeared, and then you did not reappear, we feared the worst. Seasons bless you for returning, but what possessed you to flee so heedlessly?”

“Childhood habit,” I replied flippantly, fighting free of their arms. Thinking of how I had left Aquia, I inquired, “Was there anything else mentioned?”

“Only that the Lord Farzal had left your service,” Liem supplied.

I nodded, relieved that Kay had remained silent about Auralia. I would see him handsomely rewarded for his discretion.

A servant opened the door to help Oelphie out and I took the warm bundle that was Talia into my arms. She squirmed fluidly against my breast, but did not cry. She was a peaceful, mild baby, so much like her mother.

They fell quiet.

Finally, Avera ventured, “Who is that, Selene?”

More forcefully than I intended, I replied, “She is my daughter, Talia.” Oelphia came to my side, squeezing my elbow supportively. I glared at them, daring them to gainsay me.

However perplexed she might have been, Avera’s large blue eyes were pacific as she said, “Ah. A lovely child. Congratulations, your Majesty.”

Liem and Kershid echoed her sentiments as we reentered the Palace. It was strange being back after my spate of adventures in Aquia and Carez. As I thought of Carez and Auralia, a cold shadow enveloped my heart, but I thrust it away. Hiding her from the world was the best course of action, although a part of me did wonder how that mysterious true love, that djinn key to reversing the Pari’s curse, would come to her. *Only through me*, I decided. I would take no chances again and with only great difficulty, I suppressed my guilt. I had set it right in the end and Auralia need never know of it.

“Have people realized that I have been away?” I asked, drinking in the Alhazar. “This is the Alhazar,” I whispered to Talia. “And I have not told you this, but your mother is Queen! Fancy that!”

She snuffled warmly in my arms. I thought my heart would shatter for love of her.

Kershid peered at us, his dark hair shading a quizzical brow. No doubt he was trying to determine where I had found this new child—and by what means. Vaguely, I wondered where they thought I had found Talia, but whatever their curiosity, they were too well-bred to ask. “We have merely announced that you are sick. Nothing serious, but the doctor had advised you to keep abed due to the child.”

I nodded in approval. “Very well done. I cannot thank you enough. And now, I return to you, prepared to devote myself to Ghalain.”

Liem interjected, “As it should be, your Majesty. The other generals have arrived here and they have been strategizing for days, waiting anxiously for your return. General Niara will tell you more of it, but Quenela and Hadil are on the move; her army has been fighting some small battles—and successfully. Niara has already begun mustering more troops. Had you not come home by this evening, we would have had to send out search parties for you.”

Civil war was on our doorstep then. One nudge, and the whole nation would fall into years of chaos and violence. *And I have been off in Aquia and Carez.* And the guilt of the thought sickened me.

Avera offered, “Shall I summon them then, your Majesty?”

Adjusting Talia in my grasp, I said, “Yes. Command Niara, the other generals, Corrine, Idrees, Ferdas, Fyodor, Aunt Lyra, and yourselves to meet with me in the Room of Mirrors in an hour. Enough time has been wasted. Also, be sure to have the kitchens send up a luncheon.”

Curtsying, Avera hurried to discharge the tasks assigned to her.

Although I was loath to part from Talia—I had not yet been away from her since her birth—I knew a child could not accompany me where I was going next. Gingerly, I placed her into Oelphie’s arms. “Take her to my rooms and wait for me there. There is a bell by the bed to summon servants for a bath and I have numerous books hidden around the room—including a diary from when I was fourteen. Don’t worry—I’ll hire a proper nurse soon enough.” I wished it could have been Beya.

Oelphie shook her head, brown ringlets brushing her shoulders. “Do not fret. Talia is an easy enough child. Now,” she added, laughing, “if she had been prone to tears and tantrums, I would have suddenly found myself unable to help.”

I thought back to Beya’s story of the curse, her description of Auralia as a quiet baby. “Yes, she is like her mother in that,” I murmured. I turned to Liem and Kershid. “Take me to Gwydion.”

Their ochre eyes narrowed simultaneously, but they acquiesced.

“What do you want with that bastard?” inquired Kershid venomously.

“To do what I should have done months ago,” I answered, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

I had never been to the dungeons before, but they guided me there with the quick easiness of those who had been raised in the Alhazar. Deftly answering and deflecting their questions about my trip, I traversed across the marble and glass halls of the castle, gloomy in the heavy

grey light. Servants and nobles, seeing me walking after a long absence, bowed and called greetings, clasping fists to their hearts. Inwardly shaking, I returned their greetings with smiles of my own. It still startled me when people yelled, “Your Majesty!” or “Long live the Queen!” but my discomfort with the trappings of royalty was hardly the most pressing of my problems.

At the end of a long dark hallway, illuminated only by the inconsistent light of torches, we reached a guarded door. Seeing me, the sentinels bowed and allowed us entry. Down a spiral staircase of stone, I could hardly make out the steps in the dark, despite the guttering torch in Kershid’s hand. Although the air smelled damp and my boots slipped more than once on a felt carpet of moss, the dungeons were clean, void of the telltale skittering of rats.

We passed numerous heavily barred doors and every so often, a guard standing prepared. Finally, at the end of the hall, Kershid gestured grimly. His eyes flashed, but he did not voice his anger. He handed me the torch. The wood was warm from his grip and the heat of the light warmed my face comfortably. From a ring he wore at this waist, Kershid produced the key to unlock the door.

I raised my eyebrow. “That is hardly proper procedure.”

He flushed, replying in his mellifluous voice. “I would not permit the key to fall into the hands of an easily-bribed guard.”

Trying not to think of whom he believed would be willing to bribe a guard, I answered gently, “I understand.” More well than he could ever know.

On the cusp of stepping into the door, Liem touched my shoulder. “Would you like someone to go in with you?”

I thought of the heavy door, from which no sound would escape. Although there was a small window to let in some modicum of light, the room was draped entirely in darkness. I thought of Gwydion, as he had been in the beginning, with his violence, his rages, his violation of my sister. Yet, that fear which had shaken me deeply in the early days of our marriage was gone. I knew he could not harm me. He had done his worst, and I had proven myself to be greater than his assaults.

“No, milord.”

I slipped into the cell to see my husband for the last time.

The torchlight cast exaggerated shadows, creating gaping craters from the pockmarks on the surface of the stones. Shading his eyes against the sudden influx of brightness, Gwydion raised his head. “Selene?” His hair and beard were longer than I remembered and he was distinctly gaunter although by no means starving or ill-treated. My heart faltered at seeing him before me. A bouquet of rage and disgust rose in me, but something else wove through it, a thin thread of affection and fondness that was almost powerful enough to dissolve the other two emotions. Almost.

He stood and said with a rueful shake, “My thanks for leaving me to rot down here. Have you come at last with my order of freedom?” He could not disguise the eagerness, even behind a thick layer of irony.

Silently, I started at him, this man that I could have loved. For a moment, fragments of a lost future fluttered and rearranged themselves before me, ones preceded by a past not marked with irreparable missteps. Those lost futures saddened me more than anything.

“Did you rape Auralia?” I demanded.

His face fell, his hard green eyes tightened. “What?” He licked his dry lips nervously.

“Our first night in Aquia. I refused you and you left. Where did you go after that?” I asked roughly.

Mouth curling into a sneer, he replied, “It was not as if she had not said ‘yes’ before.”

*That* revelation was like a punch in the stomach and I was hard-pressed to school my features into repose. “But *that* night she was comatose. You cannot...”

He shrugged. The casualness of his gesture incensed, as if what he had merely stolen a basket of bread from the kitchen. “I did not see it that way.”

I could keep calm no more. “There is no other way to see it!” My arm had grown numb from holding the torch aloft and the light trembled dangerously with my anger.

I had allowed Gwydion so much. His kidnapping, the bruises that had marred my face. His violence against me had been an unforgivable offense and yet I had still made my peace with him, over and over again. This, this assault of my sister’s sleeping person, defended by a flimsy excuse, very likely a lie, was not something I could forgive him.

Opening the door, I told Liem and Kershid to enter and summoned a guard as well.

Seeing me flanked by the three men, Gwydion licked his lips. “What are you doing?”

Focusing on him one last time, I declared, “Before these three witnesses, I announce that you, Gwydion Aperine, are no longer my husband. I divorce you. I divorce you. I divorce you.”

The words hung heavily in the air, falling with their full and immense weight from my tongue. He flinched with each pronouncement. “Don’t...” he pled.

I had been too afraid to divorce him before and then far too busy with the politics of Nyneveh and then only too ready to excuse his evils and try to find some redeeming goodness to him. And I had. I could not deny that a part of me yearned to be with Gwydion, but the mere thought of Auralia silenced those voices to a mewl. Ignoring my suddenly blurred vision, I walked out, back straight, pausing at the door only to say, “You can rot in here until you die.”



## *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

When I returned to my rooms from the dungeons, an odd combination of elation and heaviness percolating through my torso, I was greeted by the sight of dozens of young ladies of impeccable breeding and behavior who rose as they registered my presence. Their faces and bright clothes blended into a mass of color. Taken aback, I sought out the comfortable presences of Reyal and Miri who moved towards me, wearing fine new garb.

“Your Majesty,” Reyal and Miri declared in unison, sweeping polished curtsies. They were hastily mimicked by the coterie of standing young women.

“We are pleased you have recovered from your illness!” exclaimed Miri warmly.

“So pleased!” came a chattering chorus.

Slightly dazed, I asked in a low voice and a tight, plastered-on grin, “Who are they?”

A strained look appeared around Reyal’s black eyes. “They are the new host of ladies-in-waiting sent up by their parents to attend you.”

Seeing the seemingly boundless energy betrayed by their fidgeting and twitching, I quickly began to share in Reyal’s fatigue, but unlike her, I could not appear anything but genial. “Welcome to Nyneveh. I apologize my illness has kept me from meeting you all properly.”

Turning to Miri, I asked, “Where are Oelphie and Talia?”

“They are not here!” piped up a girl, perhaps a year my junior, with long blond curls.

“Yes!” supplemented another girl, sweeping aside chestnut bangs and darting a sharp look at the blond girl. “They went to the nursery!”

They were already trying to curry favor with me, willing to cut each other to attain my regard. I already had a headache and I knew I would have to deal with their nonsense later.

“Thank you,” I said quietly. To Reyal, I added, “Order a quick bath drawn and have the dark green dress with the wide skirt and silver embroidery pressed.” My memory flashed to the verdant gown that mimicked the green eyes of my former husband. Gwydion’s Pari-made ring still glittered on my finger and after brief deliberation, I let it remain. The time would come when I would consign it to the treasury.

Banishing the thought from my mind, I allowed myself to be hustled through a quick bathing and even as my sore muscles yearned for further moments in the hot water, I was efficiently laced into my emerald gown. Whatever else I could say about the multitude of girls, they certainly knew their work well. After placing the arching crown of Ghalain in my black hair,



I, accompanied by a pair of guards and a small retinue of ladies, made my way to the Room of Reflection. It was strange being surrounded by an entourage at all times, but it was an essential part of protocol for a crowned queen of Ghalain while in the Alhazar.

Entering the bright Room of Reflection, a room paneled with sparkling silver mirrors and gilded generously with gold and crystals, I noticed the numerous arms hanging on the walls, the weapons of the past kings and queens of Ghalain. Some, I saw, even emitted the ethereal gleam released only by those rare objects forged by the Pari. My ring was suddenly warm on my finger, as if responding to the presence of its brethren. I was welcomed by a standing group, some of whom I knew quite well, but others, the generals, who were dressed sharply in their dark blue uniforms, were strangers to me. Other than Niara, the generals were older men, with identically shorn hair and well-trimmed beards. Before I could gesture for them to seat themselves, Ferdas rushed to me

Pulling me aside, he asked, “How do you fare your Majesty? How was Aquia? Your family?” He paused. “My father? And Auralia? Gieneve?”

A sudden breath overtook me at the mention of Auralia’s name, but I managed to answer his questions smoothly enough, despite being rather surprised at his unorthodox behavior. “Much better. Aquia was doing well as was my family and your father too.”

“Where did you go after you left Aquia?”

I began noticing the befuddled stares of the generals and I grew uncomfortable. This was not proper behavior for a queen, to leave her War Council waiting as her nation stood on the brink of a war. “Carez,” I answered thoughtlessly, ready to end this conversation quickly.

“Carez?” he repeated. There was something about the spark in his eye I did not like.

At a loss for what to say, I finally replied coldly, “The generals have entered and now we must attend to this pressing business at hand. We can discuss my journey at a later time.”

Finally, I sat down at the head of the table, my back straight in the imperious white chair. As the others sat, I noticed that maps and memos sprawled across the glass tabletop, each marked with provinces and cities of Ghalain: I spotted etchings of Nyneveh, Bahart, Viziéra, Aquia, Darsepol, and Chandon. Most prominently marked was a valley pass between Darsepol and Bahart which would lead to Nyneveh. My finger traced the city.

“Ahem, your Majesty,” rumbled a low voice.

My head whipped up and I snatched my hand away like a naughty child. Embarrassed, I pronounced, “Ah yes. Thank you for joining me today. If the generals would introduce themselves, I would be much obliged.”

The man with the growling voice began. Lanky, with dusky skin and vivid green eyes, he spread his legs out casually beneath the table, drawled, “Beqal Baswor, cavalry, your Majesty.”

“You know me, of course, Queen Selene,” she smiled. “General Niara Sidke, infantry.”

“And I am Admiral Kharset of the navies,” finished a spry old man, with spiky white hair. “In this battle, my particular talents are wasted, but I am ever at your service, your Majesty.”

I smiled politely and stated, “Well, let us get to the business at hand. General Niara, Lord Kershid indicated that you had a great deal to tell me.”

Niara, who had been so confident before, shrank a little, perhaps feeling her junior status. However, she drew herself up again and pulled a map towards her. “Essentially, the combined forces of Viziéra, Chandon, and Darsepol are aligned against us. They, Viziéra in particular, have dipped deeply into their wealth to hire a host of mercenaries.”

“How many?” I inquired.

Admiral Kharset took up the thread of the conversation, his milky blue eyes suddenly sharp. “Viziera boasts 2,000 infantry, 400 cavalry; Darsepol, 1,500 infantry, 500 cavalry, and Chandon 1,000 infantry and 400 cavalry. While Chandon has less soldiers, each Chandonese man is... a weapon. Of the three emirdoms, these have always had the largest and strongest armies. And then they have hired 3,000 mercenaries.”

I quickly did the sums in my head. “So we are facing a total army of 8,800 men?”

Kharset nodded. “Yes, your Majesty. Because of this, they will want the war to be over quickly—I do not foresee them allowing mercenaries to sack the capital for payment.”

“Sack Nyneveh?” I repeated. I had to admit, that military tactics were not my strong suit, but I knew it was important that I be kept apprised of what was occurring.

“Common payment for mercenaries is spoils of the city,” stated Admiral Kharset slowly. “But of course, Quenela wishes to install herself as Queen and desires to engender the people’s good will.”

Taking the potted quail, which smelled strongly of rosemary that Liem passed me, I nodded. His words vaguely conjured up something my tutor had told me, which I had in equally blurry terms outlined to Corec at some point. “And our entire army of course is comprised of 8,000 soldiers, 6,000 foot and 2,000 horse, spread out from the remaining emirdoms as well as Nyneveh’s own force,” I parroted.

Kharset nodded in appreciation. “Precisely, madam.”

“Well I cannot say that I often agree with Quenela...” There was an appreciative chuckle as I proceeded, “But she is right—this war must be quick. My reign is too new, and I am too young, for this to be a long drawn out struggle. Where are they now?”

“As far as our scouts and spies tell us they are here.” Baswor pointed to a thick dark line denoting a valley ridged by steep, jagged mountains, which ran from the edge of Viziéra and spilled out into Bahart, two day’s march away from Nyneveh. “They have fought several battles and fortified their position and are now heading towards the Ghazar Pass, between the eastern and western Lariya Mountains.”

“Spies...if we have spies in their camp then surely they have spies in ours,” I realized. “Seasons, since Quenela and Hadil have been in Nyneveh for months they probably have a far more extensive system in place.”

“Doubtless, your Majesty,” agreed Baswor. “However, we have kept our counsel private and frankly, the movements of an army on the march are far easier for spies to discern than

confidential councils. Nonetheless, whatever plans we make in this meeting, we cannot reveal until we must.”

“They will want to move as fast as possible to leave the pass. Although it is the quickest route from Viziéra to Nyneveh it also serves the dual purpose of entrapping them within,” Kharset added, with a dangerous glint.

“Ah,” I said, shaking my head in sudden understanding, their plan suddenly crystallizing before me. “You would like to bottleneck them in.”

“Exactly,” said Niara.

“How long of a march is it?” asked Kershid, speaking for the first time. His voice broke the veil which had settled around myself and the generals, and I suddenly remembered the remainder of my War Council.

“From our scouts’ last report, they have about a two-day journey through Ghazar, until they emerge into Bahart and then two day’s march to Nyneveh beyond that,” Baswor answered.

Corrine’s mouth tightened at the mention of her emirdom but said nothing. I could not blame her. War was hard on a land, and after all, Bahart’s wealth was based on its farmers.

Kharset pointed to a small hill inked into the vellum, some miles away from Nyneveh. “If they reach Nyneveh, we expect that they will fortify themselves here. There is a fortress and it is a good place to defend. I doubt Quenela would let herself be drawn out easily and she knows that we could not let them remain unmolested. Of course, we could lay siege, but...”

“But that would draw the matter out too long,” I completed. “Quite right. Is there any other option?”

“We would have to march rapidly, but we may be able to meet them just as they emerge from the pass. A force of a hundred men could hold that pass—and we have thousands. I will not bore you with the details of troop placement, but that is...it,” Niara concluded. “Then again, if we are slowed or if their pace quickens, we would meet them on open terrain.”

Pursing my lips, I concentrated on the hills edging the pass. “What if we were to position two units of cavalry and archers on the eastern and western hills? Cavalry could gallop down the hills to attack the flanks of the army and harry them out of the pass—where the bulk of our army would be awaiting them and archers could cover their backs.”

Baswor shook his head slightly. “It would be a good idea, your Majesty, except that the Lariya Mountains are difficult to ride down—difficult, but our cavalry is good and I have no doubt we could do it—but near impossible to climb up and we would not have the time to reach them. If we can trap them in the pass, we stand a good chance at victory, although if our cavalry could attack their rear the matter would be more expedient.”

A servant ran into the room.

“What is it?” I asked.

The man gulped. “Your Majesty...Emir Fyodor’s army is gone.”

“Gone?” I could only repeat. The word whooshed through the room, a breathless, worried whisper. I looked around the room. Fyodor should have been there, seated between Corrine and Idrees but the seat was empty.

“Yes, your Majesty. I am not sure for how long, but when Captain Rian went around to Murban’s barracks, they were gone. When he sent a maid to Emir Fyodor’s room, it was empty.”

“Where did he go?” I demanded.

They fell silent.

Baswor cleared his throat. “It would seem likely that he has joined Quenela.”

Corrine tensed, and I considered if she was regretting her decision to stand with me. Fyodor’s army was an immense chunk of our forces. Without him, our prospects had suddenly thinned. With him, Quenela’s had rapidly risen. I had to present a strong front for my emirs, lest any others took the opportunity to slip away and chisel further at Ghalain’s forces. I thought quickly before they could sound anymore of their doubts, before I caved into my own.

Gathering the confidence of a queen, I spoke. “Muster the forces, take them out of Nyneveh and position them as you would to meet Quenela at the opening of Ghazar and on the tops of Lariya. Once my army is almost positioned, send for me.”

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With a curious Niara at my shoulder, I rode out, dressed in a blue wool gown and a shining steel breastplate, to meet the other generals on the field. They had assembled the army as I had requested. I could discern more than a few quizzical faces. I saw Corrine, Kershid, Liem, but I could not pick out Ferdas’s face from the neatly regimented lines. Had he betrayed me as well? The thought was like a knife to the stomach.

Coming up beside Kharset, I smiled hesitantly, my hand going to my neck nervously. “Prepare yourself,” I murmured to him. I ran my finger deliberately over the warm metal of the pendant until it grew hot against my clavicle. I shut my eyes and when they opened again, I saw the brightly shining ambassador. Behind him, I vaguely registered a series of slack mouths. Their surprise made me want to giggle.

“So soon again, your Majesty?” the djinn inquired courteously, dark skin sparkling as it had in the desert.

“How are you, friend?” I questioned, equally courteous, rather enjoying the awe rippling through the army around me. While djinn were not entirely uncommon at state functions, to witness one being summoned by the queen was no doubt a sight to behold.

“Well, and yourself?” he drawled.

“Quite well, thank you. I would ask a favor of you, sir.”

He bowed, the golden embroidery of his black coat blinking. “Your wish is my command.”

Gesturing towards the army, I explained, “Transfer us from here to the opening of the Ghazar pass and to the according tops of the Lariya, just as we are positioned before you here.”

He smiled and the world went black.



### *Chapter Thirty*

My eyes opened to whirling greens, browns, and blues and a vaguely solidifying view of hills and skies. Falling to my knees, I retched. As my vision steadied, I could see half of the army felled by illness. The rest looked around, some perplexed, some horrified.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I slowly staggered upright, as clumsily as if I were once more heavy with child. The metal armor weighed down on my shoulders.

“Your servant, madam,” the djinn pronounced as he vanished, once more leaving stars dancing in my eyes.

“That was quite a trick, your Majesty,” Admiral Kharset noted congenially. “Warning might have been nice though. I think our boys are thoroughly confused.”

I smiled ruefully, righting the crown on my head. “Sir, I myself had no idea it would be like this. I could have used a warning as well!”

Looking around, I marveled at our vantage point. We were high enough to allow a crisp view for miles, but cavalry could gallop down the slope to crush the coming army. Perched on the mountains across from us, the pennants of the other third of our army waved against the clean blue sky. The pass bloomed like a lotus, so that the path at the bottom was narrow, but the surrounding high ridges were perhaps half a mile apart. Further down, the remainder of the army was being reassembled, the lines straightening as if guided by a giant hand.

Suddenly, Niara appeared at my shoulder, pointing towards a cloud of golden dust, which hazed the sun. “There’s Quenela’s army. I have dispatched messenger birds to the mouth of Ghazar and to the other side to warn them if they have not noticed it yet.” Her brow furrowed. “They look much...larger than I expected.”

My eyebrows rose. “Enough to offset our positioning advantage?”

“Perhaps.”

That answer was shocking. “How?” I managed. It would take an impressive force indeed to not crumble immediately upon the double impact of the hills and the crush of spears which would meet them at the mouth of the pass.

“More mercenaries, likely. Also...” Her mouth tightened. “It may be that Fyodor of Murban has joined them already.” She squinted. “But I do not see his banners. If it’s not him, it’s mercenaries, and his force still remains unaccounted for.”

Before I could demand further answers, a pigeon wheeled toward us and as we ducked it was caught gently in the hands of the falconer. Untying a small note from the bird's delicate ankle, he handed the missive to Niara.

After appraising it, she handed it to me in silence.

*Niara, we too have spotted the army. Their increased size might be explained by Fyodor of Murban and his soldiers and it appears that Lord Ferdas has gone with him although Luix's army remains. Let us know if he is with you. I have written to the infantry commander at the mouth.*

"It's from Baswor."

Looking at that vague blur of dust below us, I could not help the bile that rose in my throat. "And Fyodor knows almost everything. I wonder how long he has been for Quenela?" I kicked the earth. Betrayal was bitter. "And Ferdas?"

Niara shook her head. "Likely from the beginning. He was among the last to stand for you, is it not so? She may have bought his support through servants as soon as she fled Nyneveh, but that is not what we should concern ourselves with. He knows our strategy, if not our precise position, but that will be obvious soon enough."

If I were alone and not a queen I would have screamed. As it were, I gritted my teeth in frustration.

Seeing my aggravation, Kharset placed a tanned hand soothingly on my shoulder. "No battle goes off perfectly, your Majesty. If an outcome is predestined, it's not much of a battle is it?"

Fyodor had been among the last to join me, but Ferdas had been a childhood friend, and he had professed his support from the beginning. Out of loyalty to our childhood together, I had thought. Although Fyodor's treachery stung, Ferdas's ached. And now, I could not help but look at the generals around me with suspicion. Niara, who had been so present since I had first been elected Queen—had she only been at my side to feed information to Quenela? What of Baswor and Kharset whom I had known only for hours. They owed me nothing. Why would they fight for me? Much the same. *You cannot give into groundless doubt*, I reasoned with myself. *If they do not fight for you, they fight for Ghalain, for the will of the Council.*

"As best as I can remember," Kharset said, his white eyebrows raised and knocking me away from my fears, "I have not seen Fyodor for a day. That means he may have been marching day and night to rejoin Quenela. His forces will be exhausted."

"But *how* does an emir and his army just disappear?" I insisted, hitching my kidskin gloves further up my wrist. My suspicions of my generals were beginning to subside. *And*, I decided, *if they also decide I'm unfit to rule, then it would honestly be best to acquiesce to their opinion. I do not want to give up, but neither will I push myself where others may perform better.*

“Fyodor has always been quiet,” Kharset pointed out, running his fingers through his bristling snowy hair. In a calm and soothing manner, he recounted, “And he had his soldiers housed away from the main barracks, which is not abnormal. He probably left the night before you arrived and in between your arrival, the move towards war, and his own double-crossing, his disappearance went unnoticed, especially easy with the army divided into three and communications not always clear. Fortune certainly favored him.”

“Well, the Seasons can have him,” I declared spitefully. “Tracherous snake. How is our army?”

“Ready and waiting,” Kharset responded. More sharply, he added, “Ready to take blood.”

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Quenela’s army entered the mouth of the pass and was perhaps a quarter of the in through before someone chanced to look up and see us lurking on the hills above. But if they were to turn back, they would only expose their rear, making it easier for us to attack. Just as the sun was dipping behind our awaiting army at the mouth of the pass and Quenela’s army was almost below us, Niara raised a red flag. A red pennant was raised in response across from us and suddenly, the air was filled with sunlight-dappled dust and the sound of pounding hoofbeats and clinking armor. The pass below was momentarily blackened with arrows and when it cleared below, Quenela’s army was sparser. Then, they were sandwiched between the *mêlée* of our forces, being squeezed forward into the waiting arms of the infantry.

As I watched from above with Admiral Kharset at my side, my heart lurched in my throat but I felt a cool satisfaction, the sort which precedes success. Then, as one, as if answering an unheard command, Quenela’s army raised their shields in the direction of the sun. Polished to shine brightly, when reflecting the sun, they blinded our men. In those moments of faltering, the opposition surged forth, and just as the arrows had felled them, their spears and pike ripped through our soldiers. Even from my elevation, I could see the earth below darken to crimson and then black.

The army at the mouth was now moving forth to reinforce their brothers, but even as they surged forward, they were engulfed. Without speaking, Admiral Kharset grabbed my head and turned it east. Seemingly from nowhere, two prongs of men had come up from behind our army and was slowly working from the back.

“Fyodor’s men,” I breathed, recognizing his green and black standard.

“So it appears,” Kharset responded calmly.

“Seasons,” I gasped, watching powerlessly as our army was slowly shredded from behind. Racking my mind, I could produce no brilliant escape hatch. I had no back-up plan and my powerlessness here reminded me of my feelings when I was faced with my family’s and Auralia’s cursed, sleeping forms. But this time, instead of sleep, my actions had sentenced thousands of men, good men on both sides, with family and friends, to death, to the hail of



carnage. But even as I was giving into despair, I saw Niara frantically waving flags at the skeleton of an army left across the way. Once more, the air was dark with arrows, but now they were aimed at the army attacking our rear. Volley after volley was fired until the army at the mouth regained its momentum, taking advantage from the attack upon their opponents.

Kharset noted, "Our archers are almost useless with everything as mixed as it is in the pass, but Fyodor's men have not been so lucky."

It was a mess below, for now that our line had been broken by their trick with the sun, Quenela's soldiers mixed with mine, fighting in close combat. Fyodor's force was under assault by our archers from their pristine perch, but they still hacked relentlessly at my soldiers who crumpled like dropped dolls. I craned my neck to try and better decipher the blur below, but as I leaned over, a quick heat seared me and just as I thought my bones would melt, and I closed my eyes against the pain, it disappeared and before me stood the djinn.

"I did not call you," I said in surprise.

"I have come to inform you that your hideaway for your sister has been breached." He said the statement with absolute calmness as if reporting on the weather.

"Seriously," I answered tonelessly.

"Unfortunately. I believe he may have had some magical help of his own, perhaps the Pari, perhaps *a* Pari."

My mind suddenly swung to Gwydion's lover, the only Pari I could think of who had any possible reason to go out of her way to bother me further—as far as the Pari were concerned the curse combined had settled the score between the Khamad and them. Even with Gwydion ostensibly out of my life, he was still finding ways to touch it, to harm me. Was it him then? Had he somehow escaped while we were distracted and discovered where I had squirreled away my sister and was revenging himself upon me for divorcing him? The dark cloud of mad foreboding, which had been placated by hiding Auralia in the crystal citadel but not quite silenced, squeezed tighter around my chest.

"I thought the fortress was impenetrable," I protested, my arms and legs trembling. Fear for the army below, fear for my sister, overwhelmed me. My legs unable to support my weight, I crumbled heavily to the ground and gasped as my armor winding me. Momentarily, I pressed my face into the soft palms of my hands.

"To mere human force, yes. To the power wielded by other magical beings or to items impregnated with their power, it is merely a nuisance. Oh no, they cannot destroy the citadel wholly," he chuckled hollowly, "but a man needs only enough space for himself to enter. There is no force on this earth which cannot be defeated, in some small way, by another."

"What will you do about it?" I demanded from below. From this angle, the djinn's sharp, dark profile appeared even more knifelike and whisper thin, almost ready to disappear against the sky.

"I am here to take you with me to Carez to stop it."

A tight breath escaped my lips. How could I leave my army in the midst of battle? Even for my sister. I thought of the doubts I had about the loyalty of my generals. I considered what the sight of their queen, standing high against the cliffs, suddenly disappearing, would do to their morale. But I could not leave her to whoever this Pari abetted criminal was. To Gwydion once more. Memories of Auralia's pregnancy flooded back to me, the fear I had felt, and most importantly, the violation she had unknowingly experienced. I would not let her be harmed again. Shadowy fingers curled around my heart.

*Besides, you're hardly essential to what is happening here anyways,* I told myself, trying to placate my guilt.

"Why can you not remove the intruder yourself?"

"It is an ancient thing, from the time that Djinnat could only exercise our powers when we were slaves of humans and obliging their whims without recompense. Just as we cannot grant our own wishes, we cannot interfere with what our magic has wrought. It is, I think," he added, in a fit of philosophical pique, "in order to ensure that we do not alter the world too far from its natural trajectory."

As the battle raged below, I told Kharset of my departure. He took what I said about Auralia and the citadel with the unflinching steeliness of a military man, but still protested. I stood firm despite my own misgivings. A part of me wailed that I was surrendering my very right to be queen, while a greater portion insisted that family comes before all, even a kingdom, and especially a family whose downfall I had predestined with my very birth. I owed them everything and had given them nothing but sorrow. I was the only one left and it fell to me protect Auralia, just as I would have wanted Auralia to protect me. Even though I did not know who or what awaited me in Auralia's fortress, I was unwilling to take any men with me, but Kharset's will prevailed and I was saddled with a small bodyguard of five men.

"I will be back soon," I said to Kharset. *I hope.* He watched me discontentedly.

"Ready, your Majesty?" asked the djinn as I approached with my retinue.

"This will seem vaguely familiar to you," I said to my companions as I nodded my assent to the djinn. For the umpteenth time, the world went dark and I was once more blended with the hot ether. After a lifetime of being broken and reshaped, I opened my eyes to the reddish desert sunset, the dry air making my eyes water. The mound of desert roses stood before me, glowing orange and crimson. Despite the miasma of evening, I could make out a gaping hole, just large enough for a full-grown man to squeeze through, beat into the front, where the gate had been once. In the dreamy twilight, I could easily imagine Gwydion wriggling through the hole, formed with the help of his Pari paramour.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the djinn part his violet lips to speak, but I, with my small regiment, had already reached to the dark hole and slipped through. One of the men produced a lantern, and the faint smoking light illuminated a glittering rosy labyrinth. Apparently, just as the crystals had formed a shell outside of the castle, the djinn had directed

them to form a cave-like maze within. The sight gave me hope. If we could navigate the maze, there was a chance I could reach Auralia before Gwydion.

Despite the light of the torch, my vision remained obfuscated, as if a shadowy mist obscured the unfolding labyrinth, rendering everything indistinct. Cautiously, we followed the narrow path until it veered to a sharp T.

“Should we split, your Majesty?” asked one of the soldiers. Even in the dim haze, his copper red hair was bright.

I considered the option, knowing that it would reduce the risk of taking the wrong path, but I also realized that we would come to many branches. Moreover and most importantly, I did not know any of these men well enough to trust with my sister, should they find her before me. “No, I think it best we remain together—at least for now.”

So we persevered forth, invoking the Seasons as we chose between different branches and twists of the maze. It was evident that something surreal was afoot. In my memory, the distance between the door and Auralia’s resting place could not have been more than a hundred yards, the labyrinth yawned for miles. We persisted until my shoulders grew taut with bearing the weight of the armor and my legs trembled in fatigue. I paused to catch my breath, wiping sweat-soaked hair out of my eyes and I righted myself once more.

Suddenly, the shimmering walls around us began to tremble, growing effervescent. In fright, I grabbed the burly arm of one of the soldiers and with fascinated horror we watched the shaking walls reform themselves so that the straight path we had stood before suddenly forked into four veins.

Extricating myself from the soldier, I peered down each of the ways. My crown slipped slightly over my brow and I impatiently pushed it up. “I think we are either at the end or Gwy—whoever else is in here, is still in here. This is obviously meant to be a trick for trespassers, which we certainly are not.”

“Which way, madam?”

I frowned in thought. Each of these routes was identical as far as I was concerned. I counted to seven, for Auralia was the lucky seventh child in our family, and so my finger fell on the penultimate lane. “This way.”

Now wary of the treacherous walls, we carefully picked through the path. Luckily, it held undeviatingly true. This steadiness should have calmed me, but all I could envision was Gwydion with my sister once more. My stomach clenched, largely in fear, partly in disgust, and yes, just the smallest, most infinitesimal part of foolish jealousy.

We increased our pace, although it was difficult for me to maintain, armored as I was. Although I was loath to lose the protection, I knew we had to be fleet to reach Auralia in time so I unceremoniously dumped the metal in a shining heap. It glowed of its own accord and I realized that it was Pari-forged and likely priceless. “Ah, Seasons!” I cursed, the parsimonious girl born of the years in Viziéra unwilling to leave something so valuable behind. But what lay ahead was far more precious.

Soon, we lost all sense of time and the torch guttered low. I grew cold at the idea of being lost in the dark in this unforgiving maze, ever-twisting, ever-turning, unable to reach an exit let alone Auralia. Although our stomachs informed us once it was time to dine, other than a few rations, we had nothing to sup on and we did not know how long we would be trapped. When we had started out, I had been optimistic, thinking that the maze could not have been so dense or convoluted. And even the lamp at my throat was powerless to help. In the dark it was only too easy to give into fear, but seeing my unease, or perhaps feeling their own, my small troop broke out into jovial songs, which made the darkness seem a little less dense and impenetrable.

If I let my mind wander in the forgiving dark, it would jump with breathless anticipation to seeing Gwydion once more and no matter how many times I forced my mind towards a more reasonable train of thought, it constantly wheedled itself back into imaginings. My singing trailed off. How would I greet him, then? He was despicable, the lowest form of a person. It would be better for me, I knew, if the trespasser be some random, curious passerby, tempted by the prospect of what lay inside a glittering fortress. Yet, a part of me, small but powerful, relished the thought of reunion. *It will take some time for me to be fully rid of the memory, honeyed in wishes of an ideal in my heart*, I reflected, forcing myself back to my soldiers and joining them once more in song.

The air grew fresher, blowing through the tunnel and ruffling my hair. Soft silver starlight melded with the sparkle of the crystal maze walls. Close. So close. Leaving my guards behind, I surged forth, ready to protect Auralia.

And then I saw him.



### *Chapter Thirty-One*

It was strange that my first reaction to the man bent over Auralia was disappointment. Or perhaps not that strange at all, considering the shredded condition of my heart. It was an instant of a queer, half-hopeful spasm in my heart, followed by a flash of discontent, and finally the balm of relief. The man's breath was heavy and it appeared that he had only been a few steps ahead of us the entire time—but that may have been the magic of the labyrinth. Something on the ground winked back with a cool glow and as I focused on it, I saw an axe, one I happened to recognize, one that usually hung in the Room of Reflection and had been forged by the Pari long, long ago. There they were, haloed in silvery luminescence. The soft light of the moon, my namesake, refracted through dozens of crystals, curled over them, embracing them, pushing them together. And slowly, slowly, he brought his lips to hers. I held my breath.

Her lashes fluttered open heavily and her eyes widened as they beheld her savior, my savior in the dim glitter of the crystal fortress.

“Auralia,” he breathed as if he had never spoken a word more precious in his life.

“Ferdas.” Her voice was a throaty whisper. “I dreamed of you.”

“And I you. Every night.” He ran a finger down her cheek in disbelief. Carefully, she raised herself up and curled a hand around the back of his neck and kissed him once more. They parted.

“I hoped you would come,” she sighed, nestling her head sleepily against his chest.

He held her hand to his lips. “I am sorry I waited so long, beloved.”

Placing a hand on the shoulder of one of my companions, I slowly and silently backed away. It took every fiber of strength to take those steps, to postpone our long-awaited reunion a while longer. I would have stayed, run forth to be reunited with my sister, but I had no place in this moment. In fact, I, twisted by fear, had done all I could to hinder its arrival. Besides, let Auralia have her brief breath of perfection—madness enough waited in the world outside, madness enough had she experience in the years before her sleep.

One step. My regiment followed me, moving silently for men who were still fully armed. Two. Three. I felt the warm, dry air stroke my back. Desert stars dazzled my eyes. My guards tripped out after me.

“Are you satisfied?” asked the djinn calmly. He almost melted into the night sky, as if the darkness was just waiting to swallow him up. His face was cut into its ever-present lines of patience and I wondered if he were ever anything but impassive. Did he laugh? It would seem as

impossible as an ancient tree chuckling, but he, despite his powers, was a being like a human. Surely he felt something other than detachment.

I thought about what I had just witnessed. The curse had been lifted, by Ferdas no less, over whom I had broken my heart over those years ago. It had not even been a year since the enchantment had fallen. The thought boggled my mind. And some would say that the curse virtually left us unscathed, but thinking of Talia, of my own girl, Evela, of the bloody battle being fought between the hills of Lariya I knew that this resolution was hard won, that it was still being won, being lost, somewhere far away.

So was I satisfied. "Quite." A wide grin belied my brisk words. "How long were we within?"

Impassively, he reported, "Seven hours."

Had it felt that long within the labyrinth? Longer? Shorter? Surely it had been longer. The time that we had passed within, the memories and images, were already beginning to muddle and blur. "Return us to our generals then," adding, "Of course, this is not a wish."

A ghost of a smirk flickered across his face. "Of course not."

And once more, we were plucked from the earth, stretched and kneaded and fired like clay. My eyes were closed and I was afraid to open them, afraid of what I might see. I did not hear the sounds of war, the shrieks of horses, the cries of fighting men, the chime of swords. I did not smell fresh blood, salt and iron, nor sweat, sticky and frightened.

I opened my eyes.

As the light steadied, I saw a circle of faces, surrounding a campfire, gaping at me. Familiar faces, friendly faces.

"Your Majesty."

"Tell me what happened!" I ordered, stepping closer to the seated group.

Banked embers crackled lightly in the late night coolness and occasional breezes grazed goose bumps over my skin, carrying the scents of piss and ale.

"Quenela's forces were defeated. It was a decisive victory. The benefit of our positioning was not easily ignored and the men—and women—" Niara added, seeming pleased, "fought valiantly. We took hundreds of prisoners, including Quenela, Hadil, Kaladus, and Fyodor themselves. And another man you may be interested in, Farzal, who was once your steward in Aquia."

I wrinkled my nose in distaste. And then a fear struck me. What if he had told Quenela? It was such an immense secret and so many knew. *As long as Auralia never knows.*

Niara pushed the four forth, their hands and feet bound. They shuffled forward sleepily. Quenela's face was bowed, a deep scratch gouged by the side of her eye. I wondered if she had fought defeat to the last. Hadil swayed, his head bowed. I shook my head. He was my family, my own sister's father-in-law. He should have remained remained loyal Ghalain. I had no attention to spare for Kaladus, who stood straight-backed and defiant, but my gaze lingered on Fyodor, the betrayer.

“When we return to the Alhazar, send them to the dungeons, installed in four separate chambers. They will know their fate once I devise...something suitable.” A wait for their sentence and then reparations, confinement, and being stripped of their titles would serve them nicely. And if they knew of Talia’s true descent, I would not hesitate to find a means to silence them effectively.

I watched Quenela. Every fiber of her being projected resistance. Perhaps something harsher for her. She was the lead traitor, after all. The thought did not sit well with me and I pushed it aside. Whatever Quenela’s politics, I could not but admire the woman her conviction. *Although, she would not hesitate to detach my head from my body had she the chance.*

“Very good, your Majesty.”

I looked around and realized that two very important faces were missing. “Where are Kershid and Liem?” I asked, suddenly nervous.

Niara and Baswor exchanged looks. “I am afraid...your Majesty.”

Lyra patted my hand gently, her eyes starry with tears. “My Queen, it is with deepest grief that I—” Her voice broke. “Liem was killed.”

I clutched my throat. “What? How? No! It cannot be! Say it is not so!”

But no one belied the news.

“And Kershid?” I felt heavy and tired, my head swollen and my throat tight.

“I am here.” He strode into the circle, eyes dark rimmed, still in his battle armor. He knelt before me and kissed my hand. “Your Majesty.” His voice cracked. Heedless of protocol, I enveloped him in my arms as he sobbed into my skirts and my own tears rained on my face for cheerful, good-natured, and devastatingly handsome Liem. Liem who had greeted me on my first day in Nyneveh, who had congratulated me on my wedding, who had been a bulwark of good humor in the dark sea of court life. Who had died for me.

“And precisely where were you?” inquired Corrine as Kershid stepped away and wiped his tears. At my level look, she added a belated, “Your Majesty.”

I lowered myself on the earth and spread my skirts primly and tried my very best to put away my grief for a later time. “I am pleased to announce that the Aquian curse has been lifted.”

There was an outburst of “How?” and “Seasons!” and even “Congratulations!” At the sound of the outcry, there were a few, faint drunken cries of solidarity, cheering whatever there was to be cheered on this night of victory. A few revelers still celebrated, but it appeared that the festival of the soldiers had largely tapered off due to the lateness of the night. Fighting was hard work and partying after the battle really took it out of a man.

I smiled wanly. “Our good friend Ferdas has roused the sleeping beauty.”

“Will your Majesty return home, then?” asked Kershid hoarsely.

I bit my lip. I longed for the peace and purity of Aquia, but my duty was to Ghalain. I could not be constantly disappearing into Aquia. “Home to Nyneveh? But of course. My place is here.”

There was silence.

“Bah!” Corrine interrupted. “The battle is done, the opponents captured neatly. We will be marching back to Nyneveh shortly, you go ahead.”

My attention wandered to the receding figure of Fyodor, being taken by a guard to his tent. I liked Corrine, but I had liked Fyodor. And I rankled at her thinking to give me permission, as if I were her granddaughter and not her sovereign. This war had been won, but if I had thought that would settle me in my queenship before the eyes of all, it only proved my naiveté. There was too much to lose by not riding in with the victorious army, and though I hated it, a slight suspicion uncoiled in my breast. Returning immediately to Aquia was a tempting prospect, one that I longed for, but I shook my head. “When we return to Nyneveh, I will ride in the front. After all, I am Queen.”

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After a day and a half’s march, each step of which pained me with its slowness, we arrived at Nyneveh. The citizenry lined the streets, dressed in their brightest best, cheering and throwing petals. Horns and harps sounded out their tunes, discordant, but too jolly to not be pleasing. The day had been called a holiday and the law of merrymaking prevailed. Before the night was over, I knew that most of the city would be well and drunk, perhaps much of Ghalain. How many babes named Selene would be conceived this night? I chuckled at the thought. I was eager to see my Talia once more.

Scraps of colorful flowers tumbled down on the victorious army. For the cages, hastily constructed for the perpetrators of the war, no fruit was too rotten. I did not feel too badly—they were to have baths immediately afterwards. I doubted that if Quenela were to have won, I would have been alive to experience the ignominy of rotted fruit splashed across my face. I wrinkled my nose. The too-sweet stench reached me, even here at the head of the triumph, surrounded by my generals, emirs, and emiras.

A whispered roar filled my ears, growing louder and more persistent, too deafening to ignore.

“Queen Selene! Queen Selene!”

It was the same heartfelt adoration I had felt on the day of my coronation. I grinned and waved enthusiastically at Nyneveh’s inhabitants. They could not have been more pleased with their new queen, who had overturned a civil war in a single, major battle. Other wars of succession had lasted years. It had not been an easily won battle, many good men and women had met their deaths, sword in hand, but we had emerged victorious.

My finger hovered close to the lamp necklace at my throat. It was luck. It was such a gamble, an absolute game of chance. Whatever skill you had, whatever intelligence, if you did not possess the luck behind it, it would take you nowhere. But with the blessing of chance...anything was possible.





### *Chapter Thirty-Two*

After the echoes of cheers had faded from my ears, the prisoners had been safely locked away and matters of state had been attended to, as if in a dream, I called for Cinnamon to be saddled. A pair of guards, who had been with me in the glittering maze, were to accompany me. Talia and Oelphie would follow in a carriage, but I had waited long enough. It felt so surreal that this curse, which had been dictating my life for the past three years, had at last been removed. I could hardly believe. It would be most closely akin to the sensation of feeling that my shadow no longer dogged my footsteps. Something dark, but part and parcel of my existence nonetheless was no more.

But before I left, there was one last issue that I had attended to. A haggard-looking Kershid had informed me, after the grand feast in honor of our victory that Gwydion was no longer in his cell. He had handed me a letter written on paper which felt queer to the touch. The guards were hale and none could recollect seeing him, although one claimed to have seen a beautiful woman—but he dismissed that as a daydream.

Hearing of this woman, I could not but assume that Gwydion's escape had been the handiwork of his Pari mistress, one of the many specters which had hung between us during the course of our marriage. And so, the Pari took amongst themselves a man who had devoted himself to harming the cursed Khamad twins. But for what he had done to Auralia, I would have wished him happiness with his pari, who at long last had him to herself, but in my heart, all I could wish him was grief. At the very least, I knew that he would never achieve his dreams of ruling the Ghalain or even Aquia through me.

Once Kershid had left, I had unsealed the letter with a fingernail, shutting my eyes against the sudden rush of sparks. The note, the words flowing in a familiar script, had merely read, *We will meet once again*. I had read the note several times over, committing the words to memory before flinging it into the fireplace, watching the golden flames rapidly devour the paper.

As if it had never been

Floating disconnectedly, I leapt onto the mare and sped out of the stables, through Nyneveh's still-milling and raucous streets, towards Aquia, just as I had blindly rushed away from it three years before. Now, I was returning as a woman who had once been a townsperson, had once given birth, had once been a wife, was now queen, but would always be their daughter and sister.

We stopped only to change horses at inns. Sleep? It was sleep that had created the gaping divide. We caught brief naps beneath trees, never too long. The blowing wind and my own excitement would have made deep sleep impossible in any case.

By the end of the second day, I was home.

Passing the merry and crowded gateway, I was hailed with excited cries. “Selene! Selene!” The familiar faces of my childhood walked these streets again, side-by-side with the new inhabitants of the place—although occasional wary looks passed between the two groups of citizens. Their clothes were still wrinkled and some of them staggered on sleep-weak muscles. The air was sweet with wine, the atmosphere jovial with music. I heard loud booms in the air.

“Fireworks, love!” a potbellied man yelled out at me.

In the streets, men and women and children danced and drank with happy abandon, but I could only walk through the merriment as a foggy stranger. My stomach was tight with anxiety, and suddenly, after all these months of wishing, I had gotten what I had desired, but I still longed to run away. I squared my shoulders. No. I would not run away. Never again.

I was at the gates of the Mehal. They were slightly ajar and I slipped through easily.

And then I could wait no more.

Leaving my entourage behind me, I pulled my skirts past my knees and barreled through the gardens, slipping on the gravel walkways. I pushed through the doors. But the entrance was empty.

“Hello! Hello!” I called. “I’m here!” I heard a faint sound and as I followed it, it grew louder and louder, until I was at the library. I nudged the door open.

And there they were. Everyone I loved, whose heartbeats were mine own, whose pain and fears and hopes and dreams were mine. And as they converged upon me, their tears mingling with my own, we bound ourselves tightly, arms and chests indiscernible from each other. I never wanted to be parted from this warm, breathing, heart-pounding huddle. They slowly loosened their grips until it was only me and Auralia.

“Hello,” I whispered.

She kissed me on the cheek. “Welcome home, Lena.”

“Auntie! Auntie!” Ceara and Evra’s children rushed out from behind their mothers’ skirts, embracing me. The beloved faces of my family were pale and drawn, but blessedly vibrant with expression.

My father embraced me. “Ferdas has told us that you have been elected Queen.”

“No!” cried Danyal although he must have heard the news already.

“There goes the kingdom!” called Nic, in a rare attempt at humor.

I laughed longer and harder than the jest warranted—even the slightest provocation could easily tap my joy. “Oh haha. I will have you know I have just come from a victorious battle.”

“Ooh,” Evra cooed, ever-supportive. I flashed her a smile as I swatted Nic. “You better watch out—or I’ll demote you.”

“How did *you* get elected Queen?” demanded Ceara with a grin. “What, was everyone else in the family unviable?”

“Now that you mention it...” I said.

My mother reached out, drawing me to her breast. “You should not have run away from home all those years ago.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “But I’m glad you did.” I curled into her embrace, my heart warming at having her comforting arms around me once more, her warm scent of amber and saffron. I buried my face in her dress. A few tears escaped from my lashes.

“So you are now queen.” Auralia smiled, deepening the dark crescents beneath her eyes. “Any other news?”

*Any other news.* I bit my lip. As ever, Auralia could read my face. “Selene...”

I took a deep breath and met her gaze steadily. “I have a daughter. Talia.”

My nieces and nephews jumped around me. “Where is she, Auntie?” they demanded, tugging at my skirts as if I was hiding the child under my shift.

I chuckled. “She is coming.”

Evra poked my shoulder. “Do you know where my husband Kisam is?”

My face tightened, thinking of Hadil. “Yes, yes I do.” I brought her fingers to my lips. “I will have him sent to you tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, lah-di-da!” declared Gieneve with a grin. Her hair was still molded to the shape of a pillow, a necessary casualty of an almost year of somnolence. “‘I will have him sent you.’ My, are we not fine?”

“*I am* Queen, you know,” I replied in-mock irritation, swiping my baby sister into an embrace. I felt her warm tears on my shoulder and heard her say softly, just for my ears, “I feared you would never come home.” I held her closer.

“Oh Seasons!” declared Gareth. “Will we have to hear about you being Queen *all the time*? Will this be like when you decided you were a djinn and could grant our wishes?”

“Exactly like that,” I shot back, “except now, I actually have the power to do so.”

Guffawing, he clapped. “Oh well said, you cheeky thing!”

But finally, the toll of the ride, the anticipation, and the catharsis of reunion was exacted from my body. I yawned. Danyal regarded me with disgust. “I do not know whether I will be doing that again for a long time. The next time I see a bed will be too soon.”

“I would say something, but for the presence of our mother and sisters and her grace the Queen,” Nic said in a slightly choked voice

Gareth elbowed Danyal and said in a stage whisper, “A year of sleep really can do wonders on a man’s humor.”

I yawned again.

Auralia was by my side immediately. “Oh come now, she’s tired. Let me take you upstairs, Lena darling.”

With goodnight embraces around the room, Auralia and I climbed back up the tower stairs.

“Do you not wish to spend the night with Ferdas?” I asked.

She wrinkled her nose. “Before marriage!” she said with feigned scandalization. “No, dear, I know that you will not be able to linger in Aquia for long. Ferdas can wait.”

I paused on the steps. “Tell me of you and Ferdas, Rory. How long have you loved him?”

She grew quiet. “Very long, even before you did, but I did not say anything for fear of paining you. But then I acted so hurtfully towards you after Mother and Father told us of the curse.” Her voice hitched. “I regretted it so after you left. It drove me...it drove me to foolishness, but Ferdas was always kind and patient beside me. Say you forgive me, Lena.”

I squeezed her hand. “Truly, there is nothing to forgive. What’s done is done. There is no point in regretting the past if you are happy in the present. And you are happy, aren’t you, Rory?”

“Oh yes.” Her eyes were bright. “Very much so. Much more than I have right to be.”

I kissed her cheek. “Then I too am happy.”

Changing into a nightgown, I curled up on the bed, but Auralia sat in a chair by my side. “I’m afraid Danyal was right,” she laughed. “I do not know when I will be to able to look at a bed without shuddering again.”

“Probably when you are once more very, very tired.”

“Probably.” She grinned. “I have so many questions for you; I do not know where to begin. Oh...the Pari! Start with them.” She curled her legs beneath her, still with the same lady-like grace I remembered so well. “What do you think will happen now?”

I gazed up at her from the pillow. “What can they do? The terms of the curse, as altered by the djinn, have been fairly met. If they try anything again, they will have the might of Ghalain to deal with. No, whatever debt they might have believed existed for the First Tree’s fall has been met.”

“And...” Her voice trailed off shyly. “You said you have a daughter. But...who is her father?”

My heart clenched. “Gwydion.”

“Oh? Where is he then?” she asked, mild and unsuspecting and curious to know of the details of her twin sister’s life. And if I could keep some of those most important details from her, I would die to ensure it were so.

I shrugged as much as one can shrug while lying in bed. “Absconded with a Pari mistress after I divorced him.”

She gasped. “Pari mistress? Absconded? Divorced?”

With a rueful grin, I told her of everything that had happened since I had run away, my life in Viziéra, the return to Aquia, Nyneveh, the war, leaving out any bits that would have hurt more than helped. She was the kind of audience that only a twin sister who shared half my soul could be, laughing at all of my wry observations, becoming infuriated with the indignities visited upon me, and clapping loudly as I told of my triumphs. She did not ask why I had moved her to Carez and I made no move to tell her. As the rosy fingers of dawn began spreading across the horizon, upwards and pulling away the warm sheet of night, my voice trailed off in a hoarse mumble.

Auralia pulled the coverlets up to my chin. “You are marvelous, you know.” Ignoring my incoherent protests, she continued. “When I slept, I dreamt happily and even the worst nightmares, where...well, never mind, but even then, I knew all would end well, because somewhere, you were out there, and as long as one-half of me roamed the world, I would always be safe.”

As the golden dawn, at long last, unraveled itself from the dark threads of night, I fell into deep, warm slumber, my hand interlaced with my sister’s.



## *Epilogue*

The Queen had called for three days celebration in honor of the lifting of the curse. With some of the proceeds from her victory in the War of the Two Queens, she had sent casks of crimson wine, amber ale, and green qunab to each of the cities. They toasted Aquia. They toasted Nyneveh. They toasted the Queen. Seasons, they toasted the defeated Queen! By the end of the three days, there was little the people of Ghalain had not toasted. On the fourth day, Queen Selene hosted an open court in Nyneveh for petitioners and if the request was reasonable, she was unlikely to refuse. With the help of the Thirds Council to oversee the efforts, in that day, she began to fulfill the promises she had made when she had been campaigning for queenship to bring Ghalain into the future. Every year afterwards, she held open courts on that day in memory of the battle.

And in one of those years, something of her past reappeared.

A hooded figure lurked until the sun had almost set and most of the petitioners had been attended. He would have wished that he could have met with the Queen alone, but he knew that was impossible. He watched her, happily laughing with Emir Kershid of Tirahm, a title his following the death of his brother. Something jealous twisted in him. Drawing his stained crimson cloak around him, he wondered if the Steward now shared the bed of the Queen. He noted that the engagement ring he had given her, that Pari jewel, an Aperine heirloom, no longer glittered blindingly on her tapered fingers. He could hear her voice now: *What do you have to be jealous of? I am not the one who took off with his mistress the moment he was freed from his wife.*

“Sir?”

Her voice cut through him, like a knife easily slicing through bread. It had not always been so. He stepped closer.

“What is your petition?” Despite the long day of work, her voice was unstrained, patient and warm. He wondered if she had grown queenly only recently or if she had always been so. He had thought himself so much stronger than the woman who sat upon the Bronze Throne, but that was just another thing he had miscalculated. He wondered what life would have been like had he not been so blind.

Still, if not for him, he doubted whether Selene would have ever sat on the throne. Had it not been he who had requested the Pari princess to enchant Fyodor into supporting Selene? She

had spelled him so unwillingly and the glamour had quickly worn out, but not before Fyodor had had the chance to cast his vote for Selene.

“No one may appear masked before the Queen. Lower your hood, sir.” Kershid’s sonorous voice was sharp and the visitor suppressed a swell of dislike.

The visitor dropped his hood and raised his apple green eyes boldly. A parade of emotions marched across Selene’s face; revulsion, hatred, fear, and something, something soft that passed almost before he could register it but gave him cause to hope.

“Seize him,” Kershid ordered flatly.

Selene put a hand on his arm and said sternly, “I am still queen here, Kershid.”

“Yes, your Majesty.” Kershid fell back, chastened.

Selene turned her steely blue gaze on him. It was a cool regard that picked apart everything about him: from the growth of his beard, to the muddied hem of his cloak to his scuffed boots with their Pari-forged buckles.

“You do know,” she said icily, “that I am within every right of the laws of Ghalain to summon a guard and have you carted off to prison?”

“Yes, your Majesty,” he said with uncharacteristic meekness. It had been a chance coming here, but he was willing to take the gamble. He looked up at Selene on her throne. The pay-off would be rewarding.

She was caught off-guard by his diffidence. “So, what have you come to risk your life for?”

He threw himself to his knees. “I beg your Majesty, provide me another chance to be your husband. I swear, I will honor you as I should have.” He would honor her, and they would rule together, and he would be King of Ghalain as it should always have been.

Her lip curled into a sneer, and with a disgusted jerk, she pulled her wide blue skirt back. “Given your mountains of sin against me and the kingdom of Ghalain, I do not think so.”

Another word, another evil remained unspoken between them: *Auralia*.

“Your Majesty...for the love of your child,” he pled.

Her jaw clenched. Two more names: *Evela*, *Talia*. Seeing her discontent, Kershid stood, ready to motion the guards. “Your Majesty, at your command.”

She waved him down, a thoughtful gleam in her eye. “No...Speak plainly, Gwydion. No more of your mysterious and pious circles. What do you want?”

“Another opportunity. Did I not, when you were ill after your coronation, prove my utmost affection and loyalty to you? Did I not obey your commands and wait by your side and be your comfort and strength? I would ask you to remember those days.” He had been moved to true emotion after the birth, but through it all, every action had been laced with a thought to ingratiate himself to her goodwill so that he might be saved from death and ignominy. He was Gwydion Aperine and no kindness was free.

She reflected quietly for sometime and then finally raised a doubtful eyebrow. He recognized the gesture. It was his own. “I cannot grant you an opportunity without forgiveness and in turn I cannot forgive you without redemption. You have committed some of the gravest

offenses known to man. Yet, you are the father of my daughter. But even that, we know, was under the darkest auspices.”

She peered at him closely, her blue eyes almost black with intensity. “And think not you can fool me with sweet words, Gwydion Aperine. I know the very shadows of your soul.”

He could almost believe it.

He wanted to run, to leap away from this folly. What had he been thinking? He knew what he had been thinking. He had hoped forgiveness would be easily bought, with a smile and kind word, as if such petty change could erase a world of misdeed. He regarded Kershid who watched him with an equanimous hatred.

Selene raised her voice. “But for the guards, you must all leave.”

The lingering attendants and petitioners and even Kershid departed. Gwydion regarded it as a good sign.

“You want forgiveness,” she whispered roughly. “Don’t you know that there are some deeds unworthy of it? Murder...rape...”

He fell to his knees. “Surely, there is some way I can convince your of my sincerity. I have come from Pari, where I could no longer remain. The joys left me cold, food turned to ash in my mouth, my sins weighed on me so.”

“I could nearly believe you.” She said it softly, almost wistfully.

Gwydion drew hope. It had been so many years since then. Auralia was happily wed to Ferdas, blissfully ignorant of what had happened to her. What he had done to her. Queen Erina would have died anyways—so what if he had hastened her departure? And there was Talia. From the moment he had stepped back into Ghalain, he had heard tales of the beautiful golden-haired little princess the Queen doted on. He had given her to Selene. However Talia had come, he had brought Selene that great joy in her life. Surely that must count for something? So far as he could reckon, the good he had brought into the world, far outweighed the bad.

“But I cannot find it in my heart to forgive you the gravest trespass of my sister’s person. She may not know, but I know and there are few deeds under the sun that are more evil. And more worthy of vengeance.”

Gwydion could not believe what she was saying. How could she say such things? He knew that in spite of everything, she loved him...didn’t she? Surely she loved him, the man who had defended her life, who had brought her the crown, who had comforted her after the stillbirth...surely she would not then imprison him?

As if reading his thoughts, she said, “No, I will not imprison you.”

He could have sighed with relief, but knew better than to let any emotion touch his face. He was steady and cool, as if impervious to all that happened around him.

She spoke aloud, but Gwydion had the feeling that the words were for herself. “I once vowed that I would take your head.” Her eyes cut to him. “I will not be foresworn.”

Some of the coolness, so studied from the courts of Hademer, fled. Sweat picked out on his brow. “No!” He could not help the cry. It was torn from his throat.



“You will resist your Queen?” The words were icy and careful. Suddenly, he could not see the Selene he had grown up with, the Selene he had wed, whose emotions danced plain on her face and whose rages and sarcasm rose with ease. No, this was a different creature entirely. She was cold and meticulous and with an almost unearthly glow, an avenging goddess.

It was then, that Gwydion realized he was about to die. He braced his knees and found his careless mask again.

“Matiz, your sword,” Selene called to the guard still at the side of the throne. The man loped over easily and handed the Queen his blade, obeying without question.

“Remove your cloak,” she ordered Gwydion. With unsteady hands, he too obeyed without question.

The stone floor was cold and hard beneath his knees.

Selene hefted the blade with both hands. It gleamed dangerously in the sunlight. His pulse bobbed in his throat. The blade lightly touched his neck once. Blood pounded dizzily in his head. And then the cold iron touched his neck again, only to be lifted. The soft golden hairs on his nape prickled. *Perhaps Selene has lost her nerve, perhaps she will let me go, Seasons imprisonment would be better—*

The blade sang in the air.

And so ended the life of Gwydion Aperiene.

Selene handed the bloody sword to Matiz. “Apologies for the mess.” The hem of her gown was stained black with Gwydion’s blood. His head had rolled a few feet from the crumpled heap of his body. Spring green eyes stared blankly at the high ceiling.

Selene walked out of the room without a backwards glance.