

## Chapter 1

The holiday season has finally arrived in the kingdom of P. Outside, snow is falling down, coating the ground in a beautiful white blanket, glittering in the sun. You are in one of the many castle halls watching the people around you put up decorations and making the castle look nice and festive. However, they don't seem excited about it. It feels like they are decorating out of necessity. You decide to approach one of the castle servants and ask why no one is excited for Christmas? The servant looks at you uncertainly. She's short with blonde hair brushed tightly back in a neat ponytail. Her uniform is slightly too big for her, and you make a mental note of changing that. Her fingers are fidgeting with her short nails. "I think people are just stressed about getting the presents ready for you and getting all the decorations set up," she says, her legs shifting under her in impatience as if she doesn't have time to be talking to you.

"Presents for me? That's very nice and all, but if people are stressing over it then they have no obligation to give me presents," you chuckle. "And as for the decorations, I'd be happy to help. Decorating for the holidays is half the fun." The servant looks at you as if you have just grown two heads.

"I'm sorry, my lady, but we need to meet the gift quota. And as the princess, you shouldn't be bothering with such lowly activities." You burst out laughing at the servant's words and she flinches slightly at the sudden sound. "And who decided this?" you ask her.

"The king," the servant replies. She explains that the king used the holiday as an excuse to get more than just taxes from people. Christmas was a day for people to line up and give him gifts. If the gifts didn't meet his high expectations, they'd be arrested for failure to meet his requirements. "That is ridiculous," you say, not sure if you believe her. As you look around though, you can see the truth in her words. There's no excitement at all, just stress and... fear? You shake your head. "This won't do at all."

A few minutes later you put out a royal decree and publicly announce that the holidays this year and from now on is all about celebrations and enjoying time with family and loved ones. During this time, people should take some time off work, with no consequences of course, and just do things they enjoy. Maybe bake holiday treats, maybe enjoy the snow. You assure them that there will be no gift quota for as long as you reign. And at the end of the season, you will throw a grand Christmas party for everyone who wants to join. People are confused at first, but eventually they start to understand that this is not a trick. Next thing you know, the bustling around you change from stressing about quotas to excitedly planning what they want to do instead.

Despite, being surrounded by now excited people, you feel lonely. This is your first Christmas away from your grandmother. You think back to the previous years spent in her tea shop eating homemade Christmas treats and drinking hot chocolate. But she is still in Hometown maintaining her shop, and you are here in the capital all alone. The Queen is away on an alliance mission with another kingdom, so you don't have her either. It's ironic how being surrounded by people can make you feel so lonely. You try to suppress these feelings. You don't want to bring the mood down from people's newfound excitement. Instead, you gather some of the servants in the throne room. It is a big, spacious room, with two golden thrones against the far wall, one

throne smaller than the other. Gold, silver and red garlands wrap up, and around support beams. Brown crates containing various festive decorations are scattered across the floor. You face the group of servants you gathered and explain what you want for the party. There is going to be a tall, nicely decorated Christmas tree in the centre of town, decorations all around the courtyard, music playing, and delicious food. The servants nod as you explain, taking notes.

As you cope with your feelings by distracting yourself with party planning, the light in the room suddenly shifts, becoming darker. A layer of black mist settles just above the floor. It gathers in a single spot in the middle of the room, becoming thicker, denser. The guards, who had been standing idly by until now, move their hands to the hilts of their swords, their stances on high alert. Then, the mist completely solidifies and in front of you now stands a hooded figure. You can't see the face of this figure; the hood is shading all its features. They step forward, and everyone in the throne room are dead silent at this intruder, apart from some gasps. The guards draw their swords, about to surround them, but the intruder pushes their arms out to the sides. An invisible barrier forms in front of the guards and servants, hindering them in getting to both you and the intruder. They bang their hands and slash their swords against the barrier, but nothing works. You can see their mouths moving, but no sound is reaching you.

"Well, well, well," the intruder says amused. "What's this I hear about a Christmas party? This kingdom hasn't seen one of those in years." Their voice is deep, but it's an unnatural deep, like they're purposefully making their voice deeper

"Who are you?" You ask, feeling all muscles tense at this stranger's appearance. Your heart feels like it will burst out of your chest.

"I am the great, the terrible, the undefeated warlock. I am the man who will make your life very interesting!" he says theatrically, his words sounding both rehearsed and improvised at the same time. You have a feeling this sounded better in his head. "I have a little challenge for you, princess. A challenge for you to prove yourself." He moves his hands around, forming intricate patterns. Some black, thick smoke forms like a ball floating in the air. He shoots his hands out, and the smoke rapidly grows larger, enveloping the castle, expanding outwards. You and everyone around you shield your faces to prevent the smoke from getting in your eyes and lungs. The mood in the room shifts, as if a sadness befalls everyone.

"I have cast a curse on this kingdom. No one will feel any holiday cheer again! Your days will be sad and grey." His voice is now loud and dramatic, like he's trying, but failing, to be intimidating. He sounds like a typical stage villain you'd see in the theatre.

"Why have you done this? What do you want?" Anger and confusion rise inside you. You have just managed to get people excited about Christmas and now this asshole is taking it all away. "I want you to find me," he says, pausing for dramatic effect. "You must go on a journey. It won't be easy, but if you succeed, I will lift the curse."

"But why? Just to prove myself?" you ask, baffled at this guy's audacity.

"Yes, to prove yourself. You may bring one person with you on this journey. One person, and one person only. Choose wisely, princess," he says before he disappears in that same smoke he

arrived in. Before he disappears completely, you swear you see a hint of a smile underneath his hood. Not a cruel one, nor a wicked one. No, it was a giddy, excited smile, like a child who just gets to play their favourite game. “And how am I supposed to find you?” you yell after him, but he’s gone.

The barrier keeping the guards and servants away from you disappear. Most look confused, some look furious, others look relieved. “Princess,” one of the servants says, picking up a piece of parchment on the ground where the stranger had been. It looks old and torn; the edges burned. You wonder if he used several methods to make it look old instead of actually using an old piece of parchment. The servant brings the parchment to you, and you look at it. You recognise it immediately as a map of the kingdom, with one red x placed in the middle of a large lake, far away from this castle. “I guess x marks the spot.”

