

Chapter 2

“Princess, let me go,” your closest personal guard, Steve, steps forward. He’s a tall, muscular man, wearing his royal armour. Instead of the silver armour the rest of the guards are wearing, Steve’s armour is a matt black with gold patterns. He was the commander of the guards when the previous king reigned. He’s still their commander, but now he’s seen it his duty to be your personal guard as well. How he manages both roles, you have no idea. Steve has a tough exterior but can comfort you when he realises his tough love approach isn’t working.

The other guards quickly followed suit in volunteering themselves to go. How rude of them to think you will not go yourself. This is the perfect opportunity to show the people you will happily go on a journey to lift the curse, to show everyone that you are a hero. “Thank you, but they said it was for me to prove myself. I don’t think it’s going to work if I don’t go myself.” The guards look at each other uncertainly.

“Princess, it’s not a good idea for you to go. We don’t know who this stranger is and if he is powerful enough to cast a curse on this entire kingdom...” Steve trails off, letting the implications hang in the air. “We have no idea what he is capable of.”

“I have to go. I will not let him ruin Christmas for everyone.” There is no changing your mind on this. The servants around you exchange careful glances, clearly not liking the idea of you going after him.

“Then we’ll leave in the morning. According to the map, we need to travel quite far,” Steve says, studying the map in your hands.

“Oh, no you’re not coming with me,” you say, putting the map in a pocket in your dress. Yes, your dress has pockets! Steve looks at you confused. “But princess, you cannot possibly mean you will go alone? He said you could bring one person. I will go with you.”

You shake your head. “No, you need to stay here and be in charge. Someone needs to step up while I’m away, and I don’t know when the queen is coming back from her trip.”

“Princess, this is a terrible idea,” Steve runs his fingers through his hair, clearly displeased with your decision. You shake your head and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “I trust you.”

“But you cannot go alone. I’m not going to let you go without one of us,” he says, gesturing to him and his knights. You smile at him. “Don’t worry, I am not going alone.”

After several minutes of convincing Steve you will be fine, and asking the servants to prepare some things for your trip, you make your way out to the courtyard. Outside cannot be more gloomy. The sky is sad and grey. The beautiful snow that had blanketed the ground is now melted by rain, leaving slush all over the courtyard. You had taken the time to change into proper adventuring clothes: some comfortable pants with plenty of pockets, a bag over your shoulder with the food and other essentials the servants had gathered for you, a comfortable shirt, and a black hooded cloak to top it all off. You pull the hood over your head to protect your hair from the rain and make your way

through the courtyard. Walking around, you can clearly see the effects of the curse. All the excitement from earlier is gone, the decorations are on the ground, coated in dirt and slush. People try to smile politely at you as you walk past them, but their smiles never meet their eyes. Mostly, though, people are just hurrying to get out of the rain.

“No, you need to kiss it and make a wish before you toss it in. And you need to really mean it, otherwise it won’t work,” you hear a familiar voice say as you reach the fountain. There, you see dark red, wavy hair sticking out from a forest-green hood. She is holding an arm around the shoulder of another girl who, like everyone else today, seems like she has seen better days. “If enough of us do this, we will be able to appease to the great Polishia and we will all get back to our happy selves. There you go,” she says as the girl closes her eyes, kisses a coin and tosses it in the fountain. You cross your arms as you watch this, holding back a snort. “The great Polishia?” you ask, raising an eyebrow.

Mira looks up as she hears your voice, a knowing smirk playing on her face. “Ah, princess,” she greets you and makes her way towards you. “Yes, you know... the great goddess of good will and happiness.” You roll your eyes at her audacity. The curse has just been cast and she is already taking advantage. “And how long until they realise those coins are not in the fountain?” you ask as she reaches you, your voice low enough for only her to hear. Mira grins. “Ah, but you see, that’s just Polishia accepting their offerings.”

“Do you think I’m going to let you keep that money?” You look towards the fountain where there’s now a queue of people kissing and tossing coins into the fountain.

Mira’s grin changes into an annoyed expression at your words. “And to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?” She asks, crossing her arms. “I’m sure it’s not just to reprimand me.”

You explain the situation to her, and she listens attentively. Once you finish, she takes a moment to think about what you said. “Ah, so that’s why everyone and everything is all gloomy...” she says thoughtfully. “Welp, good luck on your journey,” she gives you a pat on your shoulder. “I hope it’s not a trap. But if it is, it’s been okay knowing you.” Mira says and turns to walk away. Before she gets too far you grab her wrist, stopping her in her tracks. “No, you’re coming with me.”

Mira laughs and turns to face you. “You’re kidding. You think I’m gonna go with you on a fool’s errand? Do you even know where to go?” You show her the map with the X on it and she whistles. “Damn, that’s far.”

“Yes, so get your things ready and let’s go.” You say, tucking the map back into one of your pockets.

“You’re seriously saying that you have this potentially dangerous journey to go on, you can bring one person, and you choose me? Not a guard member? Are you insane?” She looks at you as if she’s sure she’s misunderstood what you mean.

“The guards need to stay behind and guard the place, and someone needs to take the lead while I’m gone.” To be honest, that isn’t the real reason you don’t want to pick one of the guard members. You feel lonely and you want an opportunity to not be the princess for a while. If a guard comes with you, you will not get that. Mira, however, won’t care. She won’t treat you like a princess; she will

insult you as if you are just another friend... Sorry, acquaintance. They're just friendly insults though, some friendly banter. She doesn't actually intend to be mean...you think.

"Yeah, but you can spare one guard. Pernille, they are specifically trained to keep you safe from danger. And I'm sure they were all too eager to volunteer as well." You can't deny that. It had not taken long before they started volunteering.

"They were powerless against the warlock's magic, stuck behind some invisible wall. He could have easily hurt me, and the guards wouldn't have been able to stop him. You, however, might have a better chance against him," you say remembering her shadow powers.

"And why would I do this? What's in it for me?" she uncrosses her arms and puts her hands in her pockets.

"The pleasure of my company for the entire journey," you smile brightly. "And you get to help lift the curse."

Mira shakes her head. "Forget it, I'm not going. I'd like to stay alive a little bit longer." There is something in her look you can't quite place. Something that tells you that might not be the only reason she doesn't want to go.

"Okay, if you don't want to come then I can always just have you arrested for conning these poor, cursed people." Mira looks surprised at first, then laughs. "Princess, did you just threaten me? That's cute." You don't answer her, you just raise your eyebrow. She sighs, "Fine, I'll go with you."

