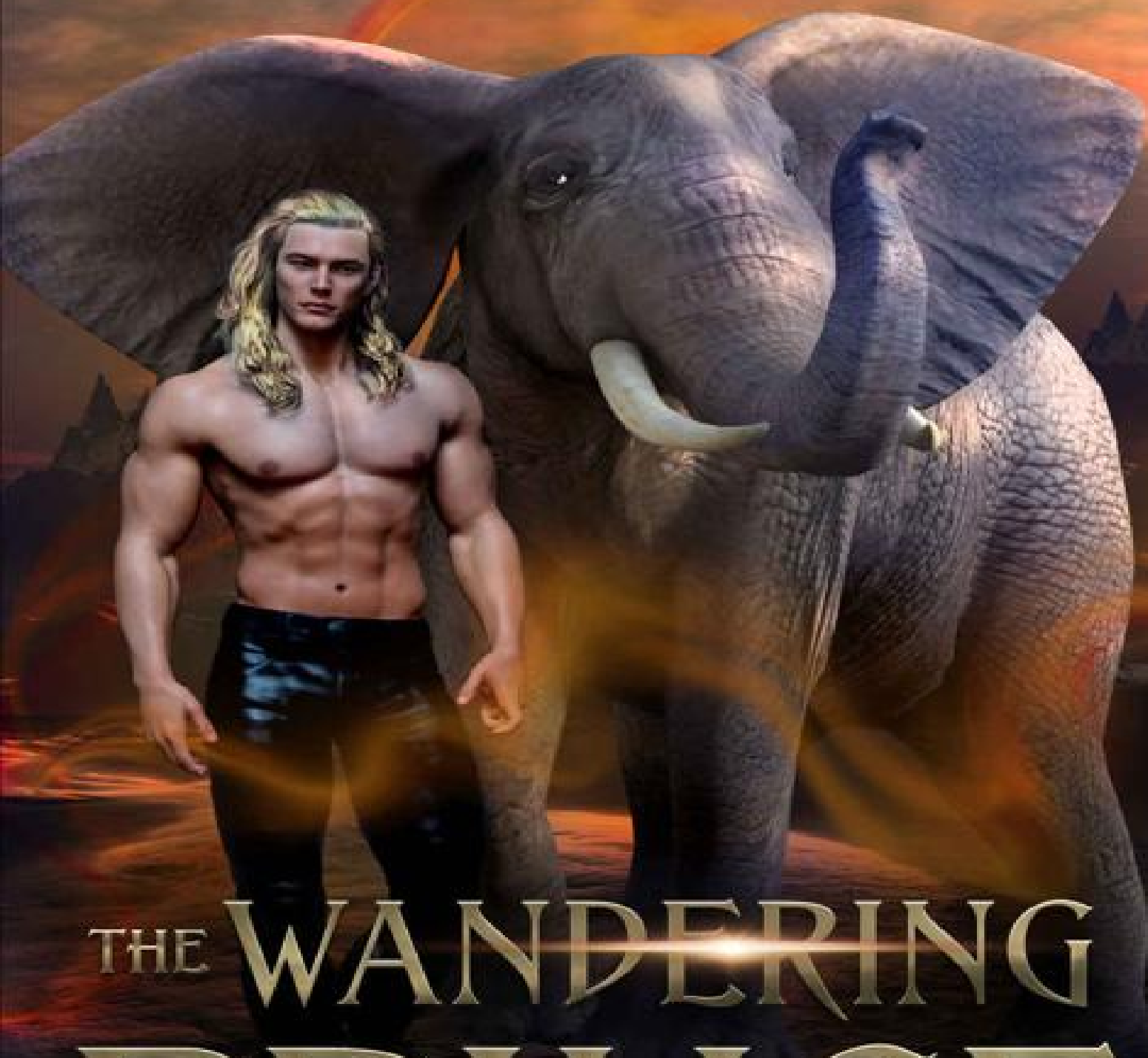


H.L DAY



THE WANDERING
PRINCE

THE WANDERING PRINCE

13 KINGDOMS #3

H. L. DAY

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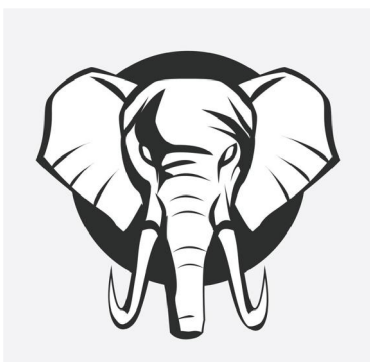
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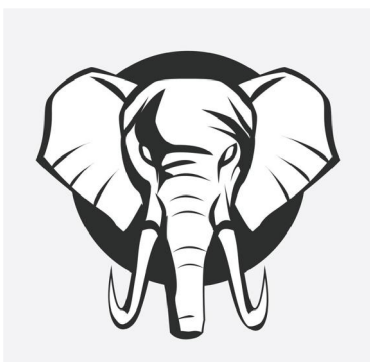
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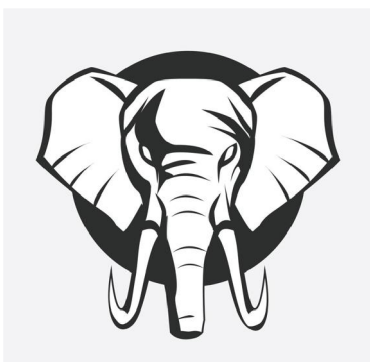
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BLURB

An ailing father. A missing healer who might have the cure. Now would be a really bad time for Jack and Sebastian to be at loggerheads.

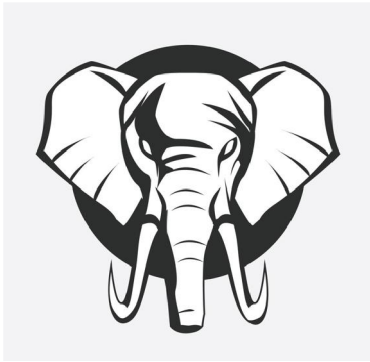
Jack never saw the truth coming. And knowing Sebastian has been lying to him changes everything. Yet, despite his misgivings over whether their relationship can be repaired, he finds himself on a ship to Padora, Sebastian's homeland. Awkward isn't the word. And peril, as ever, is just over the next wave.

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The Wandering Prince is a 101k finale to Jack and Sebastian's humorous MM fantasy adventure that started with The Reluctant Companion and

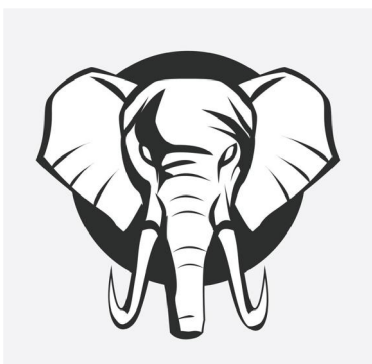
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MAPS







CHAPTER ONE

SEBASTIAN

A mixture of emotions surged through my chest as my mother squeezed me tightly to her bosom and refused to let go. Regret, because it had been years since I'd last seen her, and that made me a bad son. Confusion, because of all the places I'd ever expected to see her, Riverbrook would have come last on the list. But most of all, there was fear. Fear about whether this would drive a wedge between myself and Jack when things had been practically perfect between us since our return from Askophai, where we'd finally come clean about our feelings toward each other.

Of course, I should have told him who I really was. And I'd been planning to... one day. Only, that day had never come, and I'd thought I had more time. No one could have predicted the queen of Padora suddenly turning up unannounced, least of all me. But here she was, and all I could do was deal with the fallout. I attempted to extricate myself from my mother's embrace with the intention of turning to see the expression on Jack's face, but my mother wasn't letting go any time soon. "Mum... I need to breathe."

She clutched me all the tighter, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “You’ve had years to breathe.”

I frowned. “It doesn’t really work like that. It’s something you need to keep doing.” Jack always complained I hugged too hard. Had I inherited that from my mother? Current evidence suggested I probably had. It was almost enough to make me feel guilty, except it was Jack’s fault for being so damn huggable. Although, I guessed embraces between the two of us were going to be in short supply in the immediate future. After today’s revelation, it was doubtful Jack was even going to be talking to me.

My mother finally relaxed her grip, but before I could make my escape, she’d cupped my cheeks with impressively strong fingers, the blue gaze so like my own scouring my face. In search of what, I had no idea. “My baby boy!”

I treated her to an eye roll. “No, that would be Laurence.” It was hard to talk, I discovered, when someone was squishing your cheeks.

My mother made a very unqueenlike sound in the back of her throat. “Just because you’re not the youngest doesn’t mean you’re not my baby boy. All three of you are my baby boys, including Troy. And your sisters are my baby girls. And no amount of argument will ever get me to say anything different.”

Like I’d bother to argue with my mother. Even if she hadn’t been queen, it would have been a fruitless exercise. I’d learned that the hard way years ago. It was one of the reasons why leaving Padora had seemed like the only option. “Fine.”

My mother was still gazing at me with a huge smile on her face. “Look at you. You’re such a sight for sore eyes. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.” I had. Her and my father. Just not enough to want to return to Padora. With one last little tremulous sigh, my mother finally let go. I turned to see what our audience was making of our little reunion. Leofric looked amused, but then having grown up with me, he knew my mother almost as well as I did. Jack’s brother Dillon looked like he’d received a huge shock, his mouth hanging open. He was going to catch an awful lot of flies if he didn’t remember how his jaw worked soon.

And as for Jack.

Well... there was no Jack, only an empty space where he’d been standing. My heart sank all the way to my knees. That didn’t bode well. That didn’t bode well at all. Despite my concern at Jack’s disappearing act, I forced a smile, crooking my elbow, and offering it to my mother. “I expect you’ve had a long and tiresome journey. Won’t you come inside and sit down?”

She returned the smile and let me lead her inside, her lady-in-waiting and one of the guards following at a distance. Dillon and Leofric joined the procession, Jack’s tiny kitchen seemed even tinier once it was crammed with so many people. I ushered my mother toward one of the kitchen chairs, regretting it when her dress turned sitting into quite a procedure, the lady-in-waiting having to kneel at her feet and do something beyond my comprehension with the layers of silk before my mother could find a semi-comfortable position.

Once seated, my mother looked around the kitchen with an air of someone finding themselves completely out of their depth while doing their best to pretend they weren’t. Ironically, it reminded me of Jack in the palace of Chastershire. “Is this your house, darling?”

I took the only other chair, which left everyone else standing around awkwardly. “No, it’s Jack’s.”

My mother’s brow furrowed slightly. “Jack?”

I looked to Leofric, who gave the tiniest of headshakes. “I never said why you were here, only that this was where I assumed we’d be able to find you.”

Well, that was something at least. Although, I’d be having words with Leofric about his habit of pointing people in this direction. First Frederick, and now my mother. My mother turned to Dillon, his eyes going wide at finding himself the focus of her attention. At least he’d managed to close his mouth. Had that still been open as well, he would have resembled a fish. “Is this Jack?” my mother asked.

“No, that’s his brother, Dillon.”

Dillon darted forward and performed a clumsy bow, narrowly avoiding headbutting the kitchen table. “Your Majesty, it’s such a huge honor to meet you.” He performed another bow, this one slightly smoother. Worried he was going to go in a for a third, I interjected. “Dillon, in the absence of Jack, do you think you could possibly make us all some tea? My mother has travelled a long way. She must be parched.”

“Yes. Of course.” In his haste to follow my request, Dillon whipped round and walked straight into the guard. “So sorry.” While trying to move away from him, he trod on the lady-in-waiting’s skirt. “My apologies.”

“Dillon?” He turned my way with a quizzical expression. “Take a deep breath.”

Even that was a mistake, Dillon inhaling so long and hard that I was worried he was going to keel over before he ever got around to exhaling. It was a shame Jack was missing this. He would have enjoyed seeing his

usually stoic brother almost suffering a panic attack simply because there was royalty present in Riverbrook.

“Who’s Jack?”

My mother’s question had me looking to Leofric again, but he simply raised an eyebrow. I knew what I should say, what I wanted to say, but it wasn’t quite that straightforward, which I assumed had been why Leofric had remained silent about my reason for being in Riverbrook. I leaned forward and patted my mother’s arm. “Never mind that. What are you doing here? I find it hard to believe that you came all this way just for a social call.”

A dark cloud passed across my mother’s face, my gut dropping into a free fall. I should have known that something serious had to have happened for her to leave Padora and come all this way. “Your father is ill.”

“Ill?”

She nodded. “He...” She paused to clear her throat, sitting up straighter. “He may not have long to live.”

For a moment, I didn’t know what to say. When I’d left Padora, my father had been hale and hearty, the man as strong as an ox. Quite literally, seeing as his magic gave him the strength of ten men. Despite that having been years ago, it was hard to imagine him being on his death bed. He wasn’t that old, he and my mother in their early fifties. “What happened?”

My mother stared down at the tea that Dillon had deposited in front of her. Thankfully, Dillon had recovered from his attack of nerves for long enough to perform the task with the reverence the charged moment deserved, the whole kitchen having fallen silent. She shook her head. “He... we don’t know. One day he was fine, and then the next... Every day he deteriorates.”

I reached out and took hold of her hand, her fingers tightening around mine. “What about the palace healer?”

“He’s tried everything he can.” She lifted her head and held my gaze. “And when he ran out of ideas, we invited every healer in Padora to visit the palace. Spells, poultices, good luck charms... You name it, someone has tried it. Not only can they not heal him, but they can’t work out what’s wrong with him.”

I squeezed her hand harder. “There are other healers. You could—”

“Don’t!” She shook her head sharply. “You sound like Troy. That’s what he keeps saying.” It wasn’t often that I agreed with my older brother. In fact, I wasn’t sure it had ever happened before, but there was a first time for everything. My mother’s face settled into a plaintive expression. “So... as you can see, you need to come home.”

Even though it had been obvious where this conversation was heading, hearing the words uttered so starkly weighed on me. I sat back in my chair, and my mother leaned forward to combat the distance I’d put between us. “You’ll come home, won’t you, Sebastian?”

I took a sip of the tea Dillon had left by my elbow, wishing that it was ale. Saying yes should be easy, but it wasn’t. It meant returning to everything I’d been eager to leave behind. And there was Jack to think about. Seeming to sense she wouldn’t get an agreement out of me as easily as she’d probably hoped, my mother rose from her chair, the procedure much easier than sitting had been. She went over to the window to stare out over the farm. “It’s very pretty here. Very rural.” She squinted at something. “Are those cows?”

Dillon leapt forward. “They are. Would you like to see them?”

She offered him a smile. “Do you know, I think I would. Would it be too much trouble to escort me?”

His face lit up, and he held out an arm, my mother taking it graciously. The guard and my mother’s lady-in-waiting fell into step behind them as they left the kitchen. I bided my time until I was sure my mother was out of earshot before asking Leofric the question on my lips. “Where’s Jack?”

One corner of Leofric’s mouth quirked upwards as he took the vacated chair. “He left as soon as he’d worked out the truth. He didn’t even stop to put on a shirt, or shoes, come to that. It was almost like he wanted to be as far away from you as possible.”

I winced. “Be nice to me, would you? I’ve just found out my father is ill, and it’s entirely possible that my lover hates my guts.”

Leofric rested his chin on his hand and stared at me without blinking. “And whose fault is the second part of that?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You don’t know what Jack is like whenever the subject of royalty comes up. He has a complex about them being better than him. How was I supposed to tell him the truth once I’d discovered that? What was I supposed to say, ‘Hey, Jack, not a lot of people know this, but I’m a prince.’ He would have hated me.”

“And instead...”

I pulled a face. “Yeah, he hates me more because I didn’t tell him.” I finished the last of my tea, pulling a face at it having gone cold, and still not being ale.

Leofric tipped his head to the side and studied me. “And apart from that, where are the two of you? Still pretending that you don’t have feelings for each other?”

I laughed. “That was a very long time ago. We’d only just met.”

“So things have moved on?”

I threw him a scathing look Jack would have been proud of. “He loves me. I love him. Words have been exchanged. Many times. Happy now?”

“Yet, you didn’t tell your mother who he was?”

I let out a noisy breath. “It’s not that straightforward. You know that. There are complications.”

“Which I assume you haven’t told Jack either?”

“Of course not. If I’d told him that, I would have had to move back to the house at the end of the village, the one missing half a roof.”

Leofric shook his head wearily. “Bass, you need to speak to him.”

“I know, but he’s...” I waved my hands about in a way that was meant to explain Jack far more clearly than words could.

“Scary?”

I smiled fondly. “Sometimes.”

“I notice we’re not talking about your father.”

A stab of pain hit me in the chest. “I can’t even think about that until I’ve spoken to Jack. One thing at a time.” Leofric nodded understandingly, and we both sat in silence for a moment. “Can you find him for me?” I waved a hand at the window, the action meant to demonstrate that my mother was outside, apparently having gained a hitherto undiscovered interest in cows. “I can’t disappear on her yet. She’s only just arrived.”

Leofric let out a sigh. “You want me to wander around a place I don’t know, to find a man who when I last saw him seemed almost as annoyed with me as he is with you?”

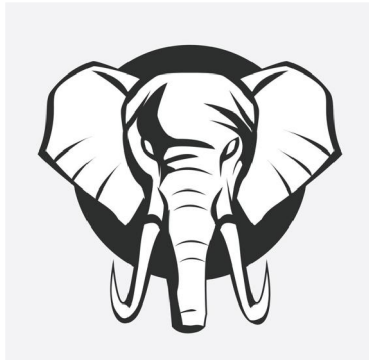
“Please.” I treated him to my most imploring look, adding an eyelash flutter for good measure. “He’s probably at his mum’s house. I can’t think where else he would go half-dressed.”

Shaking his head, Leofric stood, bracing his arms against the back of the chair. “Do you know how much easier my life would have been had my parents not answered the door to the people from the palace searching for a companion of a similar age for their spoiled young prince?”

My lips twitched. I’d heard it all before. Many, many times. “Your life would have been boring.”

Leofric rolled his eyes. “Assuming I can find him, what do you want me to tell him?”

Now that was an excellent question. What exactly could Leofric say that might calm Jack down and have him agree to talk to me?



CHAPTER TWO

JACK

I found my mother exactly where I expected her to be—in front of the stove, the kitchen full of the delicious smells of baking that always took me right back to my childhood. I hadn't had this destination in mind when I'd made my escape from the situation unfolding at my house. *My house!* And didn't that rankle, that I'd been forced to flee my own abode. Nevertheless, I'd had to go somewhere. And here had seemed as good a place as any. I needed time to wrap my head around what had just transpired, and if I'd stayed, who knew what I might have found myself doing or saying. I was grateful that I hadn't gone so far down the path of anger and disappointment that I'd been prepared to humiliate myself in front of royalty and their entourage.

The more I thought about it, the more it all seemed like some sort of bizarre dream. The man who I'd fallen in love with, the man who'd been by my side for close to six months, was apparently a prince. Which begged the question, what he was doing in Riverbrook with me? Riverbrook was no place for a prince. It had been no place for Sebastian even before I'd been

aware of his status, but those constant reassurances lost any credibility with the revelation of his true identity.

My mother spared me only the briefest of glances as I let myself in without knocking, before going back to stirring whatever it was she was stirring. I took a seat at the kitchen table, my chin resting on my hands. “Don’t ask me why I’m not wearing a shirt or shoes.”

She gave the slightest of shrugs. “Okay, darling, I won’t. This is your home. You don’t have to stand on ceremony here.” She shot me a mischievous look. “Besides, I’ve seen it all before.”

“Not for many years, you haven’t.”

She gave the statement some thought. “True.” She upended the bowl to pour the mixture into a baking tin. I guessed it was some sort of cake. “Is Bass not with you?”

My lip curled. “He’s busy. With a queen.”

My mother gave an absent-minded nod, most of her attention on redistributing the mixture in the tin so it was even. “That’s nice.” She tucked a stray strand of hair back behind her ear. “I can’t tell you how happy that I am that you’ve found such a good man.” She gave a weak smile. “At least something good came of Annabelle’s disappearance.”

“How do you work that one out?”

“Well”—she lifted the tin, heat spilling out of the oven as she opened the door to deposit it on the shelf—“if you hadn’t left to find Annabelle, you would never have met Bass.” She slid another tin off the shelf below, giving it a poke with her finger. Seemingly satisfied, she pulled it out of the oven and placed it on top of the stove.

So, it was Annabelle’s fault. Good to know. If I ever saw her again, which was looking increasingly unlikely as more time passed, I’d make

sure she knew that.

“Bass is such a lovely man. You were very lucky to meet him.”

I let out a long and plaintive sigh. I should have known that coming here would be a mistake. My mother was a fully paid-up member of the Sebastian appreciation society. As far as she was concerned, he could do no wrong.

“Sebastian is a prince.”

My mother smiled. “Aww. That’s such a sweet thing to say. It’s lovely that you hold him in such high regard.” She rested a hand on her hip as she turned my way. “I used to say things like that about your father.” Her gaze took on a faraway look. “That’s when you know you’ve found the one, when you think of them as a prince among men.” She gave herself a little shake as if rousing herself from memories. “I’m sure Bass says the same about you.”

My fingers curled into a fist. Did I want to have this conversation? If I didn’t though, and I kept it all locked inside, I’d likely burst. Besides, the gossip mill would already have started, and I’d much rather my mother heard it from me. “No, you misunderstand me. I’m not saying that I look upon Sebastian as a prince. I’m saying that he’s an actual prince. He just didn’t bother to inform me of that fact, because”—I let out a bitter laugh—“well, because he’s Sebastian. Why tell the truth when you can lie.”

My mother’s brow scrunched. “I don’t know where you’ve got this crazy idea from, but—”

At least someone else thought it was crazy. “Oh, I don’t know... Maybe from the queen of Padora arriving at my farm, embracing him, and calling him her son.”

My mother blinked a few times but seemed at a loss for what she was supposed to say. Luckily for her, my sister Clara chose that moment to come into the kitchen. She gave me the sort of disparaging look that only siblings can manage, her nose wrinkling as she took in my semi-naked state. “Why aren’t you wearing a shirt?” She peered under the table. “Or shoes?”

My mother turned accusing eyes on her. “Shush, Clara, your brother is upset.”

Clara took the seat opposite mine, her eye roll dramatic enough to put mine to shame. “Why? Have him and Bass been arguing again? What’s new? They always argue. They’ll have made up by teatime, and then they’ll be back to making eyes at each other, which is quite frankly sickening to have to watch. Never mind when they leave early because there’s supposedly important things that need doing on the farm, and we all know what that *important thing* is really.”

Clara’s interpretation of mine and Sebastian’s relationship triggered a dull ache in the center of my chest. Before the events of today, I might have laughed. Either that or said something scathing about her being jealous when the only man interested in her was the neighboring farmer, Billy, who was old enough to be her grandfather, and had less teeth than he had sheep, and he didn’t have that many sheep. As it was, all I could manage was a shake of my head.

My mother took a seat at the table, reaching out to curl her fingers around mine and give my hand a squeeze. “It doesn’t have to change anything.”

I held her gaze, misery making a little nest for itself deep in my gut. “Of course, it does. It changes everything.”

Clara frowned. “What have I missed?”

It was my mother who filled her in. “Jack has had a bit of a shock. Bass is a prince.” She stopped, her brow wrinkling. “Wait! It doesn’t feel right to call him Bass if he’s royalty. Should I call him Sebastian instead?”

I laughed, but there was very little humor in it. “There you go, you see... You say it doesn’t change anything, but you’re already questioning what you should call him.”

Clara’s snort cut across the conversation. “Have you two taken something?” She sat forward and peered at my mother. “Did you pick the wrong mushrooms again? You know what happened the last time you did that.”

My mother let out a sigh. “Yes, I danced on the tables in the tavern, and then challenged everyone to a pie eating contest.” Her mouth thinned into a tight line. “I still maintain that I would have won too, if your father hadn’t appeared and dragged me home, insisting I’d regret it in the morning. I wouldn’t have regretted it. I regret not winning. That’s what I regret.”

Keen to get back to what was important, rather than a trip down memory lane, I interrupted. “I wish it was a result of consuming a mind-altering drug, but unfortunately, Sebastian actually is a prince.”

Clara gawped at me for a moment. “And he never told you?”

And there was the crux of it, my sister seeing the situation far more clearly than my mother did, probably because she was less forgiving than my mother. “No, he never told me.”

“Oh!” Clara said.

Silence descended on the kitchen, the three of us at a loss for what to say next. Eventually, I couldn’t stand it any longer. “Where’s Dad?”

My mother’s opportunity to respond was brought to a crashing halt by a sudden hammering at the door. I went rigid as my mother got up to answer

it. "If that's Sebastian, tell him..." She paused for a few seconds, only continuing to the door when she realized I wasn't going to finish my sentence.

Clara reached across the table and laid her fingers on my arm in a supportive gesture, the combative sibling having been replaced by the one that always came to the fore if any of us were threatened by outside forces. "You don't have to speak to him."

"No?"

"No." Her nostrils flared in a way that said Sebastian had not only annoyed me, but he'd annoyed her as well. But then, I supposed I wasn't the only one he'd kept secrets from. He'd sat at this table more times than I could count, and never given so much as a hint about his regal background.

"Is Jack here?" Not Sebastian. I slumped in my seat, relief and disappointment warring to be the predominant emotion. I should have known he'd send Leofric to do his dirty work.

"Jack, are you here?"

I frowned at my mother's question before getting up from the table wearily. "If you're asking me, it kind of gives away the fact that I am."

"Oh!" My mother had the good grace to look sheepish as I joined her at the door. Leofric's face said he was about as happy to be here as I was to see him. Sebastian had a lot to answer for. I waved a hand in his direction. "Mum, this is Leofric. He's a friend of Sebastian's."

She offered him a sweet smile. "I've heard your name mentioned. Bass speaks very highly of you. He's always talking about the scrapes that the two of you got into as children." Her eyebrows shot up. "Are you a prince? Should I be curtsying?"

Well, there was a prospect I hadn't even considered. Thankfully, Leofric shook his head, his lips curving into an amused smile. "Definitely not." His gaze drifted to me. "Can I talk to you, Jack?" There was no need to ask whether Sebastian had put him up to this, not when the pained expression on his face gave it away.

Despite the temptation to say no, I nodded. It was hardly Leofric's fault, and it might prove useful to get some information out of him before I found myself face to face with Sebastian, a scenario which I knew had to happen eventually, no matter how much my gut might be screaming at me to never talk to him again. I jerked my head toward the bench situated next to my mum's rose garden. "We can sit over there."

Leofric made his way over to the bench, my mother gently brushing my arm. "We'll be right here if you need us. Just give us a shout."

I gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, Mum." Clara was peering out of the window to get a good look at Leofric as I made my way over to join him. They might be able to see us, but at least they wouldn't be able to hear us. I sat down, resting my elbows on my knees. "So..."

Leofric cast me a sideways look, his expression grave. "You must be angry."

I shrugged. "I don't really know how to feel. One minute I'm angry, and then the next..." I narrowed my eyes at Leofric. "Is that why Sebastian sent you? Was he too scared to come himself?"

Leofric gave a little laugh. "Would it help if I said yes?" He didn't wait for an answer to his question. "He didn't feel he could abandon his mother so soon. They had things to discuss."

"His mother, the queen." I didn't bother to tone down the bitterness in my voice. "What's she doing here anyway?"

Leofric grimaced. “That’s for Bass to tell you, not me.”

“Oh, well in that case, I’ll probably never know the truth. He’ll either not answer the question or make up a pack of lies.”

Leofric twisted around on the seat to face me, his expression curious. “What *did* he tell you?”

I thought back, trying to piece together all the information that I’d wheedled out of Sebastian over time. “That he left Padora because there were too many expectations.” I laughed. “That one makes sense now. That”—I thought hard, my mouth twisting as I recalled what had obviously been out and out lies—“he grew up in a small village with his brothers and sisters, that his mother was called Kara, and his father, Fergus.”

Leofric gave a nod. “That part’s true, just not the village part obviously.”

“He said his mother was a washerwoman and his father was a hunter.”

A scowl settled on Leofric’s face. “My mother was a washerwoman, and my father a hunter. That bastard stole my background. He just substituted the names.”

“Figures.”

We both stared off into the distance for a few moments, the scent of the roses washing over us. I turned my head to look at Leofric again. “I’m assuming you have a message from him?”

Leofric met my gaze. “Given that he stole my background and passed it off as his own, I’m inclined toward telling him that I couldn’t find you if that’s what you want me to do?”

It was certainly tempting. I shook my head. “He wouldn’t believe you. There are only so many places to look in Riverbrook. I had to be in one of them.”

Leofric gave a faint smile. “That’s exactly what Bass said when I expressed reluctance at searching for someone who didn’t necessarily want to be found, in a place I’d never been before.”

I arched an eyebrow. “So... what’s the message? No need for you to get into trouble for not passing it on when I can just choose to ignore it.”

“Good point.” Leofric grinned at me. “He...” His brow furrowed. “And you’ll have to excuse me if this makes no sense, but I’m passing it on verbatim. He said to meet him in the field closest to the orchard? I have no idea why he thinks a field would be a suitable meeting place.”

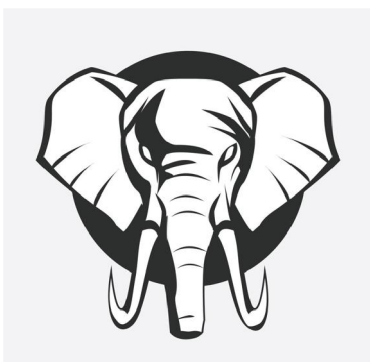
“No sharp objects.”

“Ah!” Leofric looked greatly amused by my answer. “Are you going to meet him?”

I sat back and crossed my arms over my chest. “Not sure. I’ll see how I feel.”

Leofric pulled a red rose close and gave it a sniff. “Give him hell, Jack. He deserves it.”

He wasn’t wrong.



CHAPTER THREE

JACK

I took my time in reaching the field. Firstly, because I still didn't have shoes—although I had borrowed a shirt from one of my brothers—and secondly, because I still didn't know what I was going to say to Sebastian once I got there. It felt like I was on my way to meet a stranger, which I guess in some ways I was. I was on my way to meet Prince Sebastian Beauchamp-Hedges, even the shortening of his last name having been a lie.

A familiar tall figure caught my eye as I passed the field where we kept the horses gifted to us from Chastershire. Glad of the excuse to delay a little longer, I detoured in that direction. "Earl?"

He turned from where he'd been brushing one of the horse's flanks. He didn't smile, but then Earl rarely smiled. It was a common occurrence for him to pop up on the farm, and either myself or Sebastian usually saw him at least once a week. And I had an inkling that there were plenty of other times where he wandered around without our knowledge. He inclined his head in greeting. "Jack."

I went to stand by the fence, Earl on the opposite side of it. The horse who wasn't currently the focus of Earl's attention gave me a gentle butt

with his nose and I reached over to stroke it. “Have you come to steal them back?” When Earl only frowned, I elaborated. “The horses?”

He shook his head and then lifted his gaze to the sky, the sunlight bright enough to make him squint. “I like it here. It’s peaceful. If you want me to stop coming, then—”

“No. I was just making a joke. You’re welcome here whenever you want.” I ran a hand through my hair. “I’m just having a bad day.”

“Oh? Anything I can help with?”

Earl sounded genuinely concerned. I laughed. “Not unless you can snap your fingers and make a revelation go away.”

“A revelation?”

I sighed before relaying the events from earlier in the day, Earl proving to be a good listener. When I’d finished, he stroked his chin thoughtfully. “That explains why the king of Osagezia thought Sebastian looked familiar. He’d probably met one of his parents.”

Leaning on the fence, I conceded that was probably true. There was an awful lot that could be explained by Sebastian’s status. Sebastian seeming at home in a palace. Sebastian being an excellent rider, and an equally impressive swordsman. Sebastian having magic. It also explained why he’d had absolutely no qualms about turning Prince Montgomery’s hand in marriage down. Who needed to marry a prince when you already were one?

Did that make me stupid for not having dug a little deeper to find the answers to those questions? Possibly. But then, I doubted there was any scenario that would have had me guessing he was royalty, whether he’d covered his tracks or not.

That realization had fury bubbling up in me once more. It was at that point that Earl disappeared, either because he’d seen the stormy expression

on my face and decided he wanted no further part in the conversation, or because he'd simply lost the ability to be visible. You never could tell with him.



I found Sebastian sitting cross-legged in the center of the field. He didn't look up until I was standing right in front of him, and when he did, I was sure he could probably tell that I was fighting the urge to kick him where it would hurt. "I hope you're not expecting me to bow."

He shook his head. "Hardly. I've seen your bows. They're not very impressive."

My lip curled. "Yeah well, I don't have years of royal etiquette to draw upon like you do, do I?"

"You're mad."

Halfway to lowering myself to the ground, I changed my mind and straightened up. I had far too much nervous energy to sit. "Mad? Oh, I'm not mad. Mad doesn't even begin to describe it. I'm..." I sought words that might adequately describe the churning mass that seemed to have taken over both my gut and my chest. "I'm incandescent with rage. I'm..." I pointed to a nearby tree. "I'm contemplating how I might uproot that tree so I can beat you with it."

"A branch would probably be better than the whole tree. It—"

I rounded on Sebastian, holding my hand up to stop him mid quip. "Don't!" I was disappointed to see that my hand was shaking.

"Jack...?"

"Don't." I screwed my eyes shut against the pleading expression that had taken over Sebastian's face, the one that said I was being completely

unreasonable. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“Then why did you come here?”

It was a good question. Why had I come here? “Because... you would have blamed Leofric if not, and he already puts up with enough from you. So, I came to say that the message has been passed on, that he’s been absolved of any responsibility.”

“So, *he’s* forgiven?”

I glared at him. “For what? For keeping *your* secrets?”

Sebastian gave a nod.

My laugh was short, and sharp. “I only spent a few days with Leofric, and that was months ago. We’re virtually strangers. And he didn’t lie to me. He just didn’t tell me.” I pointed a finger at Sebastian, managing to keep it far steadier this time. “*You* lied. And not only that, you stole Leofric’s background and passed it off as your own.”

He winced. “I...”

I was just getting warmed up, though, so I wasn’t about to give him the opportunity to butt in. “I invited a complete liar into my home, and you didn’t just lie to me, you lied to my entire family. That’s worse, Sebastian, far worse. I don’t even know who you are. Well, I do...” I let out a disdainful laugh. “You’re a hoity-toity prince who shouldn’t be seen dead with the likes of me.”

“Jack...”

I paused to take a deep breath. When Sebastian didn’t manage any more than my name, I carried on. “And you know what’s worse? I should have known. All the clues were there from the start. The way you speak, the fact that you have magic... It might be present in some common folk, but it’s far more prevalent in royalty... that comment you made about leaving Padora

because of expectations. Who suffers from expectations?” As it was a rhetorical question, I didn’t wait for an answer. “Oh, a prince of course. The fact that you can ride a horse as well as you do, the way you can wield a sword like you were taught by a master swordsman, which I’m guessing you were. No expense spared for the cosseted prince. I really should have pressed you on that one. But then you would only have come up with a lie if I had. Those little comments you made about how things run in palaces, like you knew.”

“Is that all?”

“I’m sure there’s more, but that’s all I can come up with at the moment.” I stared down at my bare toes as they curled into the dirt, the ludicrousness of the situation really hitting me, the fact that I was here to confront my lover of months about his secret identity as a prince. In a field of all places. I threw an arm out. “Why drag me all the way out here?”

Sebastian took a moment to scan the field, his eyes narrowed as if seeing it for the first time. “Because... I knew you would have things to get off your chest, and it was the only place I could think of where we wouldn’t be interrupted. At your parents’ house, even if there was no one in the room, they would have had their ears pressed up against the wall.”

I grimaced at the truth of that statement. “They like you. They have a vested interest in...” I stopped. I didn’t want to say in us sorting things out because that made it sound like it was a foregone conclusion, and the way I was currently feeling, I wasn’t sure that was true.

“You don’t need to say it like it’s a big failing of theirs.”

I rolled my eyes, but didn’t say anything else, and Sebastian took the opportunity to return to his previous point. “And at your house—”

“There’s a queen in my living room.”

Sebastian nodded.

I rubbed a hand over my face. “She must think it so bizarre that you’ve been living there.”

“She’s not like that. My mother is a kind and gentle person. She looks for the good in people. She’s not a snob.”

I laughed. “Your mother is a queen.”

Sebastian let out a sigh.

“Don’t sigh at me.”

He stood, dusting bits of clinging earth from his trousers. “Have you calmed down enough to let me explain yet?”

Had I calmed down? Did he really think it only took a couple of hours to get over the whole bottom dropping out of my world? He probably did. That was how things worked in Sebastian’s world. “Oh, I can’t wait to hear the explanation.” I made no attempt to curb the cynicism dripping from my voice.

“I wanted to tell you.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

Sebastian took a step toward me. I took a step back. I needed to keep a distance between us. Too close, and I might just be tempted to give in to him. “When should I have told you?”

“How about when we first met.”

“You already didn’t want to give me the time of day. If I’d added that piece of information, I wouldn’t have seen you for dust.”

That was quite possibly true. Not that I was going to give him the satisfaction of admitting that out loud. “Later, then. Don’t pretend there weren’t hundreds of opportunities.”

“I was going to tell you once we’d rescued Prince Montgomery, but then you spent so long ranting about royalty, and how dreadful they were, that I was hardly going to put myself in the same category.”

Also true. I lifted my chin. “When we were in Osagezia.”

“There was a lot going on... griffins, and artifacts, and Chastershire’s secrets. And then the mountains.”

“You found time to lie, though.”

Sebastian grimaced. “I will admit that wasn’t my best idea, but...” He trailed off, a pained expression settling on his face.

“But?”

“You’d just told me you’d walk away if I didn’t tell you about my background. I was”—he swallowed—“scared you’d do that anyway if I told you the truth.”

I sniffed and looked away, refusing to let Sebastian’s apparent turmoil worm its way inside me. “Even if I accept that you had good reasons right up to the point where we’d retrieved the artifact... what about after that? We’ve been back in Riverbrook for months. You’ve shared my house, my bed. You’ve spent time with my family. I’ve told you I love you more times than I can count, and all that time, I didn’t really know who you were.”

“Jack... please?” Sebastian reached out with the intention of taking my hand, but I shook my head and stepped out of reach, his hand falling to his side. “A prince is not who I am. It’s just a...” His mouth twisted. “A thing I was born with. A thing I had no say over. As far as I was concerned, I stopped being a prince the day I left Padora.”

I gave a sad smile. “I don’t think it works like that. You can’t just stop being a prince.”

He shrugged. "Maybe not. But it's nothing but a label. It doesn't change who I am. I'm still the man you fell in love with."

Sebastian made it sound so simple. "I'm a farmer."

Sebastian gave a half smile. "I'm aware of that. I don't see how I couldn't be when you constantly rope me into helping you out with stuff I'd rather be a million miles away from." He gave a shudder. "I still haven't recovered from seeing what you did to that cow."

"The calf was stuck. What was I supposed to do, let it die?"

"Of course not. That doesn't mean it wasn't the most horrifying thing I've ever witnessed. I swear I still have nightmares about it."

I rolled my eyes. "You're deliberately missing my point. I'm a farmer. You're a prince. The two things aren't compatible."

Sebastian snorted. "I think we've proved that they're extremely compatible. I love you, Jack, and nothing about this changes that."

I shook my head. "It changes everything."

"Don't say that."

What did he expect me to say? That I could just ignore it, that I could forgive him for all his lies and half-truths just like that? If only emotions could be tamped down that easily. Unfortunately, they couldn't.

"My father is ill."

I jerked my head up to find Sebastian back to sitting, his chin resting on his hands, and a very somber expression on his face. "Oh! What's... wrong with him?"

"They don't know. That's why my mother came here. They've exhausted all the healers they can. She wants me to go home."

"You should."

He stared at me speculatively. "I'm not going anywhere without you."

“Don’t be silly. I don’t even come into this. If your father is...” I stopped short of the word I’d been going to say.

“You can say dying.”

I winced. “You don’t know that.”

“My mother wouldn’t have traveled all this way if she didn’t believe that.”

“Then you need to go, Sebastian. I’ll be here when you get back.”

He lifted his head, his gaze holding mine, a depth of emotion present in his blue eyes. “Will you?”

I gave a laugh. “Of course. This is my home. Where else am I going to be?”

His only response was to shake his head. “I’m not going without you. I could be gone months.”

I ignored the sharp pang in my chest at his words. “I’m not going to Padora. You know how I feel about ships, and even if there was some other way of getting there, I wouldn’t want to go. Palaces are hardly my favorite places either.”

Sebastian’s shoulders slumped. “Then I guess we’re at a stalemate. You won’t go, and I won’t go without you.” He cast a quick look at me from beneath his eyelashes. “And please don’t look at me like that, Jack.”

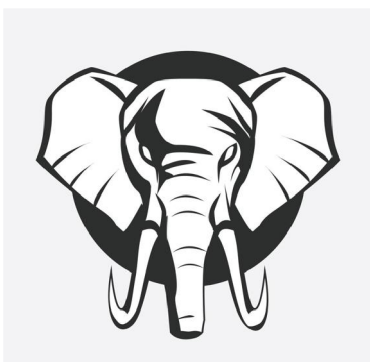
“Like what.”

Sebastian’s pause was long enough to make it clear that he was choosing his words carefully. “Like you don’t love me anymore.”

I bit back on the first retort that came to mind, forcing myself not to lash out and say something I would only regret later. “I still love you.” The relief on Sebastian’s face was short-lived. “I just don’t like you very much at the moment.”

A flash of gold sparks erupted from Sebastian's fingers. They were much brighter than I'd seen them for a while. Did that mean his magic was healing? Within a few seconds, the sparks had transformed into the same bird he'd first shown me on Cassemir's ship, the one he'd told me was native to Padora, with the bright yellow plumage. It fluttered over to me, Sebastian using the same tactic he'd used many times before to great success, where he used one of his animals to soften me up. Despite recognizing the tactic for what it was, I was halfway to smiling when it blinked away into nothing.

Sebastian hung his head. "Shit! I can't even do that."



CHAPTER FOUR

JACK

I'd left Sebastian in the field, resisting his attempts—of which there had been many—to accompany me back to the farm by saying I needed some time to think. It wasn't a lie. I did. Or at least some time on my own. Hopefully, Sebastian would see fit to give me at least an hour before following me. At which time, I would decide whether to stay, or whether to spend the night at my parents' house. There was a third option. I could send Sebastian to my parents' house, but that did run the risk of him batting his eyelashes at them and having them all wrapped around his little finger by morning. I didn't need them taking his side and claiming that not confessing his royal status had been about sparing me from feeling inadequate.

If I wanted to be truly mean, I could send Sebastian back to the dilapidated house at the edge of the village. Except... he was a prince. No prince should live in a house that didn't even have a roof. He had lived there, though. For a few days at least, back when he'd stayed in Riverbrook and ingratiated himself with my family before I'd even known he was there. Given that Sebastian didn't act like a prince, the whole thing was just confusing.

“You must be Jack.”

I jerked my head up to find three pairs of eyes staring at me from the kitchen. A guard, a tiny dark-haired woman who I assumed was a lady-in-waiting, and the queen herself. The queen’s features were so like Sebastian’s that it was strange to see them in a feminine face. She didn’t wait for me to answer before continuing. “I wanted to thank you for your hospitality.”

I couldn’t help it, I laughed. They were crammed into my tiny kitchen, and I, as the owner of the house, had left without bothering to introduce myself. It was difficult to imagine any way I could have been less hospitable, short of spitting in their faces. Stepping into the kitchen, I stood there somewhat self-consciously. At the last moment, I remembered to bow. It wasn’t one of my best, the clumsy attempt only serving to remind me of Sebastian’s quip about how poor they were. I cleared my throat. “I apologize for not greeting you on your arrival. I was a little surprised by it, and I had... things to do.”

“Understandable. Your brother has been very accommodating. He made tea and showed me the cows.”

I said a silent curse at Dillon. “I’m sorry.”

She smiled, her blue eyes twinkling. “Don’t be sorry. The things he had to tell me about you and my son were most enlightening. I fear that without his willingness to share information, I would still be very much in the dark about my son’s reason for being here. And the cows were... interesting.” She regarded me silently for a few seconds, and it was all I could do not to squirm beneath the scrutiny when I had no idea what she was thinking. She tipped her head slightly to one side, her long golden hair brushing the silk of her dress. “How long has Sebastian been here?”

Not the easiest of questions to answer when Sebastian's time here had been broken up by the trek to Askophai. "A while." Hoping she wouldn't be displeased by my vagueness, I seized upon something I'd gleaned from her question. "You call him Sebastian?"

Her lips twitched. "Of course. It is his name, after all. And Prince Bass, well..." The look of distaste on her face was pronounced enough that she didn't need to finish her thought. Her gaze flitted around the kitchen, a slight frown marring her brow as she seemed to remember that we weren't the only two people present. "Ursula, Gideon, perhaps you could leave us for a while. Jack and I have things to discuss. I doubt that assassins are going to spill from the fields to strike me down, and I think I can handle any wardrobe emergencies for the next ten minutes."

The guard gave a curt nod, leaving the kitchen a few moments later with Ursula in tow. I had no idea where they were going, given that my house was tiny, but that was their problem, not mine. Once they'd left, the queen gestured to the empty chair opposite. "Do have a seat, Jack." She grimaced. "Apologies, this is your house. If anyone should need permission to sit, it's me." She waved a hand at the chair she was already perched on, her position not seeming like one of great comfort. I was all out of thrones, though, so it would have to do. "Do you mind me sitting here?"

I let out an embarrassed chuckle, heat rising to my cheeks. "Of course not." It wasn't like I could have said anything else. I was hardly going to demand she stand. I pulled the chair out and sat, a long silence falling between us while I looked everywhere but at her. Given it was my own kitchen, and I knew it like the back of my hand, it didn't take long for me to run out of things to stare at.

Fortunately, she was the first to speak. “Speaking of Sebastian, I can’t help but notice that he’s not with you. When he wandered off, I was sure he must have gone in search of you. I might have assumed that he was up to mischief with Leofric, except Leofric has been gone even longer. Can you shed any light on the whereabouts of my son?”

“I left him in a field.” That sounded terrible.

If she agreed, she didn’t show it, my announcement met by nothing more than the slight lift of an eyebrow. “Still breathing?”

What exactly had my brother been saying in my absence? Perhaps disappearing hadn’t been the best idea. Although, odds were that staying would have proved even more disastrous. The scene that would have manifested between Sebastian and I wouldn’t have shown either of us in a good light. “The last I saw of him, yes.”

She nodded, treating me to another intense scrutiny. “Did he tell you why I’m here?”

I interlocked my fingers together on my lap, before just as quickly separating them again. “He did.” I risked a glance at her. “I’m very sorry to hear of your husband’s ill health, Your Majesty.”

She smiled, but it was laced with melancholy. “When we’re alone, Jack, you don’t need to stand on ceremony. Call me Kara, please.”

“Kara.” I tried the name out for size, the shape of it feeling alien on my tongue. “I’ll... try and remember that.” I might remember it, but it was doubtful I’d use it.

“Do you love my son, Jack?”

The question was so direct that I almost choked on my own tongue. “I... I...” So much heat rose to my face that it may as well have been on fire. I didn’t even know what words were any more, never mind possess the

ability to select some appropriate ones and link them together into a sentence with meaning. It was one thing to tell Sebastian, but to tell a stranger—a stranger who happened to be his mother, and who was also a queen—was another thing entirely. And then there was the small matter of Sebastian not exactly being in my good books. Except, you couldn't just turn love off like that. It was like I'd said to Sebastian, I loved him, I just didn't like him all that much. "Y...yes." The single word was choked out, Kara seeming just as amused as her son would have been. Him being so like his mother made me wonder what his father was like. Would there be any of Sebastian in him?

"And he loves you." Kara said it as a statement of fact rather than a question, which at least saved me from having to offer a response. She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Interesting."

I frowned. "Interesting? In what way? Do you mean because I'm a farmer, and I have absolutely nothing to offer a prince?"

A slight furrow appeared on her brow. "Not at all. I meant more because I am not unaware of the large number of conquests that Sebastian has left in his wake over the years. He might not have returned home, but news does reach me of his escapades. Some from sources I have asked to keep an eye on him, and others"—she gave a slight shrug—"from citizens, who hope to curry favor by offering information they think will be of value to me." She was silent for a moment. Then in a move that left me dumbstruck once more, she reached across the table and laid her hand over mine. "And now I'm afraid, Jack, that despite our short acquaintance, I must ask you for a huge favor."

I stared at her, unable to think of a single favor I could possibly bestow on a queen. Unless she wanted a cow. That, I could do. She could even have

my biggest and best one, the one that produced the most milk.

When I didn't speak, she continued. "Sebastian is very willful." A fond smile hovered on her lips. "He always has been. Even as a child. He could light up a room and persuade the very stars from the sky, but try and get him to do something he didn't want to do, and you had an almighty battle on your hands." She patted my hand. "I understand that you and Sebastian are not on the best of terms right now, and that my son may have hurt you with his reluctance to share certain aspects of himself." Dillon must have talked nineteen to the dozen to have given her so much information in such a short space of time. It also meant that I was incredibly predictable, given that Dillon and I hadn't spoken, and he'd only had the expression on my face at Kara's arrival to go on. Well, that and my sudden disappearance.

"I need to get back to my husband." Her fingers curled slightly around the back of my hand before she made a deliberate effort to relax them. "There's no telling how much he may have deteriorated already in my absence."

"I'm surprised you didn't send someone else."

She smiled, but it was somewhat tremulous. "Do you think I haven't tried that in the past? They were all sent back with a flea in their ear. I figured if I came myself, I might have more luck. Besides, I wanted to see my son. It's been too long." She sat up straighter. "Anyway, I digress... the favor. You're probably wondering what it is I require of you."

I nodded.

"I need you to come with us. I saw the look on Sebastian's face when I asked him to return to Padora. He thinks I can't, but I can read my son all too easily. He wants to be with you. Therefore, unless you accompany us, he will dig his heels in like a mule."

“I wouldn’t stop him from going. I’ve already told him as much.”

She gave a long, slow nod. “Nevertheless, it won’t make any difference. Like I said, he’ll dig his heels in. The only way I’ll get him to return is if you come too.”

“But... his father’s... ill.” I’d almost used the dying word again.

She released a long sigh, the fingers that still lay over mine twitching slightly. “What’s so bad about Padora that you don’t want to see it? It’s a beautiful place.”

“It’s not that. It’s... like you said, Sebastian and I aren’t in the best of places, and then there’s...”

She arched an eyebrow. “There’s?”

“I don’t like ships.” I blurted the words out so quickly they almost came out as one. “I went on one once. It wasn’t a pleasant experience, and I vowed never to do it again. Sebastian knows that.”

“I see.” She removed her hand from mine and placed it back on her lap. She tried for a smile, but there was a slight quiver to her lips that I couldn’t miss. “Both very good reasons, and completely understandable. I’m sorry I had to ask.”

I hung my head, feeling like the worst person in all thirteen kingdoms. Was I really going to stop a son from being reunited with his father for what might be the last time? And for what? Because I didn’t like the sea, and I wasn’t sure where Sebastian’s lies had left us? I breathed in. Let it out again. Once. Twice. Three times. And then I bowed to the inevitable. “Fine. I’ll go. How bad can it be?”

Kara’s smile this time was full of light and gratitude. She reached for my hand again and gave it a squeeze. “Thank you, Jack. Your sacrifice is appreciated.”

It wasn't a sacrifice really, was it? It was just me doing the right thing. But there was no harm in having a queen be grateful to me.



A few hours passed before Sebastian returned, the royal party having departed some time ago to take up temporary residence in Riverbrook's one and only tavern, which was a ludicrous scenario to picture. It wasn't a terrible tavern by any stretch of the imagination, but it was hardly suitable for royalty. Kara might not have come across as snobbish, but I doubted she would find her accommodation quite what she was used to, even if it was only for one night.

Sebastian was swaying slightly when he appeared in the bedroom doorway, which told me all I needed to know about how he'd spent the last few hours. Even so, I asked the question. "Where have you been?"

He looked over to where I sat cross-legged in the middle of the bed we'd shared for months, the same bed where only this afternoon, we'd made mad, passionate love. It might only have been a few hours ago, but it seemed like a lifetime.

He squinted at me like he was having difficulty seeing. "I took Leofric to the tavern."

"Of course you did."

He attempted to remove one of his boots, almost falling over in the process. He righted himself and treated me to a lopsided grin. "Oops. I may have had one too many."

"I would say you definitely did."

He waved a finger at me. Well, almost at me. It was in the general vicinity of where I was. "It was my mother's fault. We were going to leave,

and then she arrived. It would have been rude to leave at that point, so we had to have another drink... or two.” He paused to frown at the buttons on his shirt in a way that said they were guilty of something.

Under normal circumstances, I might have helped him, but these weren’t normal circumstances, and him turning up drunk wasn’t exactly helping the situation. I would have been angry at him if he hadn’t given me some time alone. I was angry at him that he’d given me so much time. I was just angry. “Did your mother say anything to you?”

“She said”—he grinned as he came out victorious over a button—“that I hadn’t changed much over the last few years, and that I was her favorite.” He wrinkled his nose. “She didn’t actually say that, but I knew what she meant.”

“Anything else?”

He gave up on the next button and struck a thinking pose so exaggerated, it looked painful. “She said she liked Riverbrook, that it was quiet... and that the cows are big here.”

Giving up on the shirt, he staggered across the floor and collapsed face-down on the bed next to me. He reached out a hand, but I was already off the bed to stand at the end of it and glare down at him. “Did you leave Leofric at the tavern?”

He shook his head and flung out an arm in the direction of the door. “Downstairs. He said he needed to make sure I got home safe. I told him that I would be fine, that even if I did end up sleeping in a ditch, that Riverbrook is quite safe. No bandits. No trolls. No pixies. Danger-free zone, but Leofric is a good man, and he insisted.”

I headed for the door, pausing for a moment. “Get some sleep, Sebastian.”

He rolled over onto his back, the effort it took reminding me of the way a stranded turtle might try to right itself. The expression on his face was that of someone who had just been dealt a mortal blow. “Where are you going, Jack? Come to bed.” He made a clumsy attempt to pat the space next to him, except he grossly miscalculated how close to the edge of the bed he was and ended up waving his hand in mid-air instead.

I shook my head. “I think it’s better if I sleep somewhere else tonight.”

“Jaaaaack.”

His entreaty was almost a wail, but after the day I’d had I wasn’t about to cave that easily. “Get some sleep, Sebastian, we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

He attempted to sit up, getting as far as propping himself up on his elbows. “We do? What’s happening tomorrow?”

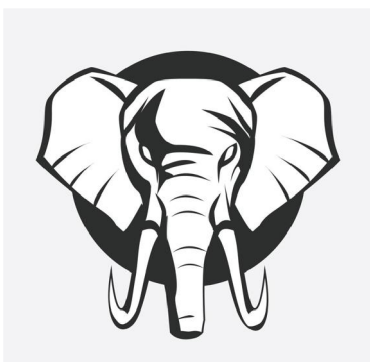
I sighed. His mother obviously hadn’t said anything to him. Perhaps she’d been concerned I might change my mind. “We leave for Padora.”

His face brightened immediately. “You’re coming?”

“It looks like it.”

He lay back down, his head turned my way. “What made you change your mind?”

“I had a talk with your mother, and I realized there are far more important things than me or you, like your father. He needs you. So we’ll go, and”—I shrugged—“As for the rest, we’ll see what happens. You lied, Sebastian, and much as I wish I could just forget that and things could carry on as they were before, it’s not that straightforward. Surely, you must see that?” I stopped talking when I realized that Sebastian’s eyes were closed. “Sebastian?” All I got in response was a gentle snore. Typical.



CHAPTER FIVE

SEBASTIAN

I watched Jack as he caught his first glimpse of the royal ship docked at Moonhaven. It was at least five times bigger than Cassemir's ship had been, and there was no disguising the shock on Jack's face when he saw it. Not that he hadn't attempted to disguise it, the shutters quickly coming down after his initial wide-eyed stare. He climbed out of the carriage, and I went to stand next to him, causing Jack to do the same thing he'd done for the last couple of days: edge away ever so slightly so that there was no danger of us touching. It hurt just as much this time as it had the first time. In fact, it probably grew more painful, not less, with repetition.

I'd hoped that as the days passed, his feelings toward me might soften, but there were no signs of that happening yet. Jack was polite but distant, most of the carriage journey spent with his gaze averted to the passing scenery. He'd answered my mother's questions but hadn't made any effort to initiate conversation himself. It had left me and my mother to fill the somewhat awkward silence, our discourse centered on matters of little importance, like which members of the staff still worked in the royal

household that I might know, and what the weather had been like recently in Padora.

Leofric reined his horse to a stop and dismounted, and Jack took the opportunity to move farther away, the distance taking him out of earshot. He crossed his arms over his chest, his expression unreadable as he stared at the ship.

I let out a sigh, Leofric's eyes narrowing on me without a shred of compassion in them. "You only have yourself to blame, you know."

I glared at him. "Yes, thank you. I'm well aware of that. Have you got any other words of comfort to offer that will help me with the fact that the man I love will barely look my way, never mind speak to me?"

Leofric's lips twitched. "How about if I point out that you're lucky he's here, that without your mother's intervention, and Jack's reluctance to turn down a queen's request, that he would be back in Riverbrook. At least this way, you're going to be stuck on the same ship for days on end, with an opportunity to talk to him."

"That does help. Slightly." I didn't bother pointing out that if Jack wasn't here, I wouldn't be either. Leofric had obviously thought it an empty threat.

Leofric performed a mocking bow that he'd been perfecting since he was eight years old. "There you go, your highness. Glad I could be of service."

I grimaced at the use of my royal title. "Don't call me that. You know how much I hate it."

Leofric chuckled. "Better get used to it, because once you're back in Silverwood, that's all you're going to get."

The reminder made something heavy settle in my gut. I didn't have a lot going for me at the moment. My father was ill and, in all probability, dying. I was on my way back to Silverwood, a place I'd avoided for years. And

worst of all, Jack hated my guts, and not in the way he usually hated my guts. I'd take barbed comments all day long over this... frozen nothingness of him pretending I didn't even exist.

Leofric tugged on my sleeve, his expression earnest when I turned his way. He jerked his head toward where Jack stood, the slight breeze tousling his hair in a way that made me long for it to be my fingers. "You have to tell him the rest, Bass, while we're on the ship. If you don't, and he hears it from someone else, I doubt there'll be any coming back from it. And I wouldn't blame him."

"I know." I stared at the back of Jack's head. "But you do realize he will probably kill me."

Leofric crossed his arms over his chest. "And if you don't, he'll kill you anyway." He slapped me on the back with a huge grin on his face. "Quite the dilemma you've got there, Bass. You certainly know how to pick them. I'll give you that."

I gave a weak laugh. "I didn't pick him. Not consciously anyway. It was just..." I thought back, replaying that life-changing moment where my monkey had scanned the tavern to check that no one was watching before approaching the elf who'd been his target. The man sitting hunched over his ale had looked sad, but also defiant, like he knew that all the odds were against him but was still determined to find a way to overcome them. Even in defeat, he'd been spirited.

Second to that observation had been the fact that he was extremely handsome. Or maybe, if I was being completely honest, that had come first. And those eyes... I could have composed a ballad about Jack's beautiful green eyes. I hadn't cared who he was. He could have been a necromancer, and it wouldn't have made a damned bit of difference to the surge of

feelings that had risen within me. One glance, and I'd already been lost, my plan for the future altering on the spot.

And now I'd messed everything up. I'd ruined all the hard work I'd put in by not being straight with him, by keeping secrets. I'd been so convinced that Jack knowing my heritage would ruin everything that I'd failed to look at the big picture and recognize that what I was doing was far worse. I felt lost and adrift, and I was floundering on how to put things right. I'd hoped getting drunk in Riverbrook would have given me the courage to find a way, but of course, I'd gone too far and had only made things worse.

Leofric cleared his throat to rouse me from my thoughts. "Ansel's on the ship by the way."

I arched a brow. "Ansel?"

Leofric nodded. "He was desperate to accompany us to Padora, and I didn't have the heart to say no."

"Doesn't your sister need him? How's she going to run everything on her own?"

"She'll manage. I think she'd rather that than have to put up with Ansel moping around the place because she said no. Besides"—Leofric gave a fond smile—"my nephew's a hard worker. He deserves a break. He was just a little kid when we left Padora, and it wasn't exactly his choice to go."

I got the intimation without Leofric needing to spell it out. No, it hadn't been Ansel's choice. It had been my decision that had acted as a catalyst. Leofric, good friend that he was, on learning of my plans had insisted on accompanying me. His sister hadn't wanted to be left behind, and of course, her son came as part of that package. So, the four of us had found the first available ship to leave on. There was no getting away from the fact that my escape from Padora had changed a lot of lives besides my own. And

whether that was for the better or for the worse, who could say? There was no telling what their lives would have been like had they remained in Padora instead of following me. It had been that guilt that had driven me to buy the tavern for them. That, and the fact that it always gave me somewhere to return to that felt more like home than Silverwood ever had.

I watched as the procession with my mother at its head started to make its way toward the ship. She paused to look back over her shoulder, her keen gaze sweeping over Jack, who was still standing at the railing, before settling on me. “Sebastian, are you coming?” The slight furrow on her brow gave away her concern that I might change my mind. I nodded before jerking my head in Jack’s direction, my mother’s frown only growing more pronounced.

We might not have discussed it, but she couldn’t fail to have noticed the simmering tension that existed between Jack and me, especially when, at her insistence, she’d been stuck in a carriage with us. Jack had made it quite clear that he would be happier on a horse, but his protests had been met with steely resolve from my mother, and even Jack wasn’t going to argue with a queen. “Give me a minute.”

I gave Leofric a shove in the back and he dutifully joined the procession, his expression saying “Good luck.”

I waited until they were out of earshot before I joined Jack at the railing. This time, I left enough distance between us that he didn’t need to move away. In some ways, it was like when we’d first met. The thought cheered me somewhat. I’d won him over once. There was no reason I couldn’t do it again. I just needed to work harder. But I could do that. It wasn’t like Jack wasn’t worth it.

He didn't look my way, but then I hadn't expected him to. He'd perfected the art of pretending that I wasn't there. There were hundreds of things I could have said to him. Yet, none of them seemed right. Which left us standing in silence until it got to the point where saying anything was better than saying nothing at all. "It's a nice ship."

His lips twisted into a shape that clearly expressed his disagreement. "I'm not sure the words nice and ship should ever be used together in a sentence."

It was the most I'd gotten out of him in days, so I wasn't about to let the opportunity go to waste. "Maybe not, but you've got to admit that in comparison to Cassemir's ship, it's very impressive."

Jack's fingers tightened around the railing. "Well, it doesn't have Cassemir on it, so that's a huge bonus." His brow wrinkled slightly. "And I assume given its size that the cabins are bigger?"

"They are." I cast a quick glance his way. "Not that I minded being squashed in one with you." Whatever I'd been hoping for—a sharp retort, a fond smile, a glare? None of those things materialized, Jack maintaining that same careful blankness that made me want to shake him until some sort of emotion spilled out. "You're regretting coming?"

He gave a jerky nod.

"I'm glad you're here."

His gaze slid over to me, something sparking in those beautiful green eyes of his that made my breath freeze in my chest. "Glad I could be of service, your highness."

It would seem he'd been close enough to overhear at least part of mine and Leofric's conversation. I shook my head. "Oh, no. No way. You don't get to call me that."

He turned slowly to face me, something of the old Jack in his expression. Except, I was too annoyed to appreciate the thawing. He tipped his head slightly to the side. “Why not?”

“Because...” I could feel my jaw tightening. “I don’t like it.”

Jack pretended to consider it for a moment. “Hmm... a bit like I didn’t like being called farm boy, or...” He trailed off, a dark shadow passing across his face.

“Husband?”

He gave another jerky nod.

“They were different.”

“How so?”

“They just were.”

“They were intended to annoy me.”

“Maybe, but...”

A figure came barreling down the gangplank, Jack frowning. “Is that...?”

At least that was confirmation he hadn’t heard the whole conversation. “Ansel, yes.”

I didn’t get a chance to provide any further explanation before Ansel was on us. To my surprise, he made a beeline for Jack first, sweeping him up into a hug that from the expression on Jack’s face wasn’t remotely appreciated. In typical Ansel style, he immediately launched into a thousand questions, none of which he required an answer to. “Jack! It’s so good to see you again. How are you? Are you well? Leofric said that you and Sebastian were together. When did that happen? Do you love him? Are you going to get married and have children? Can I come to the wedding? I love weddings. Have you seen the ship? Wait until you see the cabins. Can I share one with you and Sebastian? I promise I won’t talk all the time. I do

need to sleep. For an hour or so at least. No point in sleeping the day away. There are too many things you can miss. Don't you think?"

Jack made a noise like he was being slowly strangled, which quite possibly he was. I gave a slight tug on Ansel's shoulder to remind him that I was there. "Hey! Where's my hug?"

Ansel catapulted himself from Jack to me so fast that I staggered under the force of his weight, only just managing to regain my balance before we both tumbled to the ground. I was dimly aware of Jack rubbing at his shoulder as Ansel's stream of consciousness started up once more. "I missed you, Bass. You haven't been to see us for ages. Is that because of Jack? Wouldn't he let you come? That's the problem with having a partner. That's why I'm going to stay single. Are you happy? Well, probably not at the moment because your father's sick. Sorry about that. But, in general, I mean. With Jack? You don't mind me coming to Padora, do you? What's it like living on a farm? Are there lots of animals? Which one is your favorite? Is it difficult to milk a cow? I'd like to try that one day. Can I come and stay with you and Jack? I could milk the cows for you. Once you've taught me anyway."

It took me repeating Ansel's name three times before I finally got through to him. Once I had, I held him at arms' length, taking in his red cheeks and glazed eyes, his body almost vibrating with excitement. "Slow down. We're going to be at sea for days. We'll have plenty of time to catch up."

He nodded so furiously that his whole body shook. "Can I share a cabin with you two?"

At least this time, he waited for an answer, Jack getting in there before I could. "I'm afraid that won't be possible as Sebastian and I aren't going to

be sharing one.”

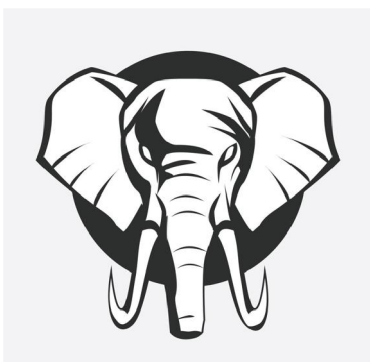
“We’re not?” I couldn’t keep the wretched note out of my voice.

Jack shook his head without meeting my gaze. “It’s not a good idea. I assume”—he threw a glance toward the ship—“that the ship is big enough that I can have my own cabin?”

Tempting as it was to claim that the party accompanying my mother numbered too many now that we’d reunited with the rest of the royal retinue, I had a sneaking suspicion that Jack would refuse to set foot on there if I refused his request. I needed to be patient and bide my time, worm my way back into his good books one small step at a time. “I suppose so.”

Ansel looked at me. And then at Jack. And then back at me, his expression clouding. “Oh! You’re…”

I was glad that for once he was lost for words. I didn’t need anyone spelling out the sad state of my relationship. It was painful enough.



CHAPTER SIX

JACK

The royal vessel couldn't have been more different than Cassemir's ship. It wasn't just the sheer size of it, or the fact that it appeared to have been scrubbed to within an inch of its life, where The Jellicoe had been fifty percent dirt. It was everything. There was no crazed captain shouting insults at his men, the ship seeming to run perfectly without a stream of colorful language. It had a captain, but he was nothing like Cassemir. He was a rather tall man with a bristly moustache and a bearing that hinted at previous time spent as a soldier. He gave curt instructions when needed, but I'd never heard him shout. Even so, the men scurried to do his bidding. It was no doubt regarded as an honor to crew the royal vessel, and none of the men wanted to be viewed as incompetent, especially in front of their queen.

The cabin was also a far cry from the one I'd been forced to share with Sebastian on The Jellicoe. It was at least three times bigger with the added bonus of having it to myself, Sebastian conceding to my wishes to have a separate one far easier than I'd expected him to, which was good. It was good, I reminded the nagging voice that kept me awake long into the night by asking me what I thought I was doing by freezing out the man I was

head over in heels in love with. Because I did miss him. I missed everything about him. His scent. His touch. His arrogance. His inability to take anything seriously. His smile. You name it, I longed for it, with an intensity that was quite simply scary.

And what made the whole situation worse, was that I knew that all I had to do was stretch out a hand of reconciliation to Sebastian, and everything could go back to the way it had been before. We'd only been at sea for a day and a half, and I'd already run out of fingers on which to count the longing looks Sebastian had thrown my way. But being that forgiving was easier said than done. If I gave in that easily, what would it say? That Sebastian could walk all over me and I'd let him?

That was one of many reasons I should have stayed in my cabin. But I'd been hellbent on proving that the Jack of last time, the man who'd refused to go up on deck because he was scared of the sea, was a thing of the past. So instead, here I was, my shoulders squared, and my hands braced against the railing, trying to tamp down on the burning sense of unease that had taken over my gut as the coast of Cerensai grew smaller and smaller until it couldn't be seen at all.

I'd once told Sebastian that I was okay as long as there was a coast in sight. Well, there was no coast to be seen no matter where you looked, and I was still breathing. It was just a little more labored, but hopefully that tight feeling in my chest would ease, and eventually Padora had to appear on the horizon. I just had to ride out these feelings of panic until then. At least I hadn't been as sick as the previous time. Either because the crossing so far had been smoother, or because I'd known what to expect with the constant rolling of the deck under my feet.

Sebastian's mother had largely kept to her cabin, only appearing on deck to take the occasional walk. We'd exchanged a few words but not many. What was there to say when the only thing you had in common was Sebastian, and it was all too obvious that I was doing everything I could to avoid him? Meanwhile, Ansel bounced between the two of us like he was the product of a broken home, and we were his estranged parents. He told me everything that Sebastian had been doing and saying, and I suspected he did the same with Sebastian.

Given the short scale of our acquaintance, I had no idea why Ansel had gained such an attachment to me. He provided an entertaining distraction, though, so I couldn't say I minded. It wasn't just me that Ansel chatted to, the captain often having to field his constant questions while keeping one eye on the constant flurry of movement around his ship. Anyone would have thought Ansel had plans to captain his own ship one day.

Leofric appeared next to me at the railing, his long dark hair more windswept than I'd ever seen it before. It made me glad that mine was short. He wasted no time in revealing his reason for talking to me. "You have to take Sebastian back."

I laughed. Sebastian being Sebastian, he hadn't taken the obvious option of having his own cabin. He'd insisted on sharing with Leofric instead, which begged the question whether they were... I shook my head. I didn't need to go there, and deep down, I knew there was nothing between them except friendship anyway. It was just that my treacherous heart liked to play games and whisper dark suggestions in my ear to make a bad situation worse. "Why? What is he doing?"

Leofric heaved out a sigh. "It's the sleep talking. It's driving me crazy." Despite the mixed feelings I had about the man doing it, I smiled. "What's

it about, orcs?”

“I wish.” I waited, Leofric hesitating before giving a response. “It’s about you and him.” The smile on my face dimmed. “I know things about your sex life I never had any wish to know.”

Something sharp sliced into my chest, but I did my best not to let it show on my face. Leofric was no doubt exaggerating. This was probably something he and Sebastian had cooked up together. I was meant to swoon at the knowledge that I was on Sebastian’s lips even when he was sleeping and fall back into his arms. Well, they would have to come up with something better than that. With that in mind, I called Leofric’s bluff. “Oh, what has he been saying? Anything interesting?”

Leofric’s cheeks reddening slightly should have been warning enough for me to retract my question before he could answer it, but I hesitated too long. He cleared his throat. “You know, the... er... magic thing.” He waved his hand in a parody of Sebastian coaxing the golden sparks from his fingertips. “He’s very descriptive. I never considered that his magic could even be used in that way.”

Heat rushed to my face, my cheeks probably a perfect match for Leofric’s own. I’d been stupid to ask the question, and now I was stuck with what to say in response. I focused on the cabin issue rather than the sex issue. “Make him stay in another cabin. There are empty ones.”

Leofric gave me a look that said my suggestion hadn’t been at all helpful. “You think I didn’t try that? This is Bass we’re talking about. I tried everything short of locking him out, but you could never accuse him of not being persistent.”

He was. Persistent almost to the point of insanity. I shrugged. “Well, I guess you’re just going to have to put up with it then.” I didn’t say ‘or grow

a set of balls,’ but the intimation was there in my voice.

“Can’t you just...?”

I arched a brow. “Can’t I just, what?”

Leofric grimaced. “Make up with him. He’s miserable. You’re miserable.”

“I am *not* miserable,” I said miserably.

“Right.” Leofric sighed. “You’ve held out far longer than I thought you would. Definitely long enough to have gotten your point across.”

“My point?”

He brushed a long strand of dark hair back off his face. “That he did the wrong thing. That he was stupid.”

I sniffed and refused to answer, my gaze fastened on the swell of the waves.

Leofric stood in silence for a couple of minutes, his eyes burning a hole in the side of my face. Eventually he grew tired of waiting for me to look his way, levering himself away from the railing with another lengthy sigh, and walking away. I continued to stare at the sea, the whirling thoughts in my brain even more chaotic than they’d been before his approach.



There was some sort of altercation going on between Sebastian and Leofric on the opposite side of the ship. I watched from my seated position on the deck, while doing my best to pretend I was doing no such thing. I’d never seen them argue before, but there was no disputing from their body language that that was what was happening. Leofric kept throwing his hands in the air, and Sebastian would shake his head. And then they’d both glance my way, which meant I factored into the discussion somehow.

It escalated quickly, Leofric shoving at Sebastian's—shirtless, of course—chest, and when that had no effect, grabbing his arm to pull him forwards. Sebastian dug his heels in, refusing to be moved. Apart from the crew, who were too busy to worry about two grown men acting like children, we were the only three people on deck, even Ansel having succumbed to one of his short periods of sleep.

I gave brief thought to retiring to my own cabin and leaving them to it, but there was a part of me that wanted to see how it all panned out. The longer the argument went on, the more heated it got. There was a brief flash of gold sparks, my groin reacting as if it was completely unaware that Sebastian and I were no longer together, and suddenly Leofric had a face full of octopus. His arms flailed and he staggered backwards, his attempts to peel it off coming to nothing as it suctioned on. Sebastian fought dirty. I had to give him that.

After what seemed like an extraordinary amount of time and must have seemed even longer for poor Leofric under the onslaught of slippery tentacles, he finally succeeded in peeling the octopus away. His expression was about as furious as you'd expect from a man whose arguments had been met by a summoned octopus to the face. He wasted no time in heaving it at Sebastian. Unfortunately, given that the octopus was under Sebastian's control, it dissipated to nothing before it made contact.

Hands clenched into fists, Leofric rounded on Sebastian. He said something heated barely an inch from his face, punctuating it with a shove to the chest, before disappearing below deck. Most of the crew, their gazes drawn by the appearance of the octopus, shook their heads, and got back to work.

Despite knowing it was a bad idea, my curiosity got the better of me, and I made my way over to Sebastian. “What were you arguing about?”

He spun around, his expression passing through several emotions in the space of only a few seconds. Surprise, presumably at the fact that I’d instigated a conversation. Pleasure, because I was talking to him, and then finally, something that looked close to consternation, his eyebrows meeting in the middle. “He was telling me something I didn’t want to hear.”

“So you octopused him?”

Sebastian bit his lip in an effort not to smile. “It seemed like the right thing to do under the circumstances.”

“I suppose I should be glad that you’ve never done that to me when we’ve argued.”

He gave a tight smile. “I don’t think I would have survived.”

“True.”

Silence fell, as thick and as cloying as if it had actual substance. I started to move away, Sebastian calling out “wait” as I did so. When I turned, he wore a pained expression. “I need to tell you something.”

The tone of his voice told me all I needed to know about how I was going to feel about this “something.” “Is this what you and Leofric were arguing about?” He gave a shrug, but it was less than convincing. “And I assume I’m not going to like it?”

He closed his eyes momentarily. “I think that’s a given.” He came closer, peering over my shoulder. “Where’s your bow?”

I narrowed my eyes at him, my heart already beating far too fast with the anticipation of what I was going to be faced with now. “In my cabin. Should I get it?”

He grabbed my arm and steered me over to the side of the ship, away from the stairs that led below deck. “Definitely not.” Fingers still holding me in place, he scrutinized our surroundings. I assumed he was looking for anything that could be used as a weapon. Apart from the rigging on the sails, which I was already eyeing up with the potential of wrapping around Sebastian’s neck should I need to, there was nothing else.

Sebastian waved a hand at the deck. “Sit down.”

“No.”

He frowned. “Why not?”

“I’m not sitting while you’re standing, so that you can lord it over me.” I pulled a face. “Although, I suppose it would be prince it over me.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

I shrugged. “Don’t care.”

He lowered himself cross-legged to the deck. I stood for a moment, and then, making sure my actions demonstrated an amount of extreme reluctance a bad-tempered child would have been proud of, I joined him. When he didn’t speak, I was forced to prompt him. “Well? Spit it out. Then I can kill you. Your mother can have me seized by guards and thrown overboard, and then we’ll both be—”

“Dead.”

My lips twitched. “Sounds like a fitting end if you ask me.”

“A dead Jack would never be a good Jack.”

“At least I’d get some peace.”

Sebastian grinned. “Except... you’re forgetting one thing. I’d be dead as well. Therefore, we’d be together in the afterlife. Forever. Two tormented souls stuck together for an eternity.” He tipped his head to one side and thought about it for a moment. “I quite like that idea.”

“Sebastian?” I fixed him with my best glare. “Can you tell me whatever it is you have to tell me, so that I can go back to not talking to you.”

“You definitely won’t be talking to me once I tell you this.”

I lifted a hand to massage my temples, a faint pounding already starting up. “More secrets. Great.”

Sebastian looked pained. “Just one. And I promise you this is the last one.”

“And you couldn’t have told me whatever this is back in Riverbrook?”

“I was scared you wouldn’t come. I wanted to wait until we were on the ship.”

“And until we’d gone far enough that I couldn’t swim for it, apparently.”

His sheepish shrug said it all.

I steeled myself. “Just... get it over with.”

Sebastian’s gaze fixed on a point in the far distance. “There were many reasons I left Padora, but one of them was that there are certain expectations when you are a prince.”

“Like what?”

“Like...” Sebastian waved a hand airily. “Like how you behave in public, and what you spend your time doing. And”—his gaze returned to mine for the briefest of seconds before skittering away—“who you marry.”

Something cold and clammy settled in my chest, like the octopus had taken up residence there. My lips seemed all wrong when I tried to force them into the correct shape needed for speech. Finally, I managed words. “Are you telling me you’re married?”

“No!” Sebastian’s gaze returned to mine and held it. “No, of course not.”

Well, that was something at least. I wasn’t sure how I would have taken the news that I’d been carrying on with a married man, a married prince at

that. “So...?”

He stared at me in a way that said I was supposed to have worked the rest out for myself. When I only shook my head, he continued. “Remember Princess Surander?”

“Of course, I remember Princess Surander. It wasn’t that long ago.”

Sebastian made a “go on” gesture with his hand. He was determined that I was going to do most of the work. “Sweet girl. Not what I expected a princess to be like at all.”

“And?”

“And what?” This was like rooting around in the dark without having a clue what I was looking for. If I was lucky, my fingers might happen to seize on the right object.

“What did she tell you about marriage?”

“That...” And then it came to me. We’d talked about her not being able to choose her own husband, that expectations had decreed that one was chosen for her, the match designed to strengthen the kingdom. “You’re not the heir, though.”

Sebastian shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. I still had a...” His words trailed away without him having finished his sentence.

“Say it. You owe me that at least.”

“I had...” He frowned. “I guess it’s *have*... These things don’t tend to go away. I have a fiancé. Someone I was expected to marry.”

I laughed, but it was a little too full of hysteria for my liking. My lover was not only a prince, but he was promised to another. Things just kept getting better. “Who is he?” I was surprised by the calmness of my own voice. Did you reach a point where you could no longer be shocked anymore? If so, it seemed I’d reached it.

“He’s a prince.”

I snorted. “Well, of course, he is. A prince must marry a prince. Tell me more about him. Is he handsome? Is he tall? Does he have magic that complements yours? Does your mother already love him? I bet she does, doesn’t she?” I lowered myself to my back on the deck, staring up at the sky. It was a lovely day, the sky about as blue as it ever got. I laced my fingers behind my head and scrutinized a cloud formation that if you squinted a bit looked like a polar bear. A happy one with a big smiling face. The bit that had broken off the cloud rather resembled a fish as well, like the polar bear was showing off its catch.

“Jack?” Sebastian sounded confused. “Be angry at me, but don’t be...”

“Don’t be what?”

“Sad.”

“I’m not sad.” I wasn’t. I didn’t really know what I was. Numb, maybe, like nothing really mattered anymore.

“I’m not going to marry him.”

“Why not?”

“‘Why not?’ Because I love you.” Sebastian’s hand crept across the space between us, his fingers brushing mine. I didn’t encourage the contact, but I didn’t move my hand away either. “And you love me. You might not like me much, but you still love me. You said as much. We’re meant for each other. I knew that from the first moment I set eyes on you.”

“Yet, you never told me you were a prince, or that you had a fiancé.”

Sebastian’s fingers encroached further onto mine, my skin tingling where we touched. “I can’t change the past, and I promise you that I don’t have any more secrets. I left Padora because I didn’t want that life. Any of it. Not being stuck in one place. Not living in a palace. And certainly not being

told who I was supposed to marry. Why do you think I wanted to rescue Prince Montgomery?”

Silly question. “For a reward.”

“It had nothing to do with the reward. If you remember, the reward was to marry him. I just didn’t like the idea of him being forced to marry someone against his will because they’d been the one to rescue him. He could have ended up with anyone. And I realize that was probably a slightly ridiculous stance to take, given that he’ll probably have very little choice in who he marries anyway, but still...”

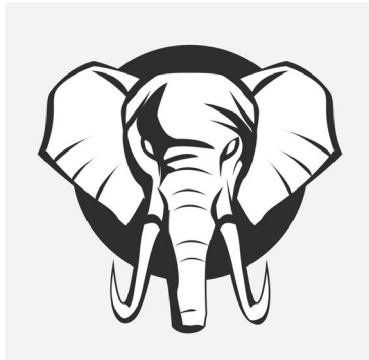
The polar bear had gone, replaced by something that no matter how much I stared at, I couldn’t turn into anything.

“Jack?” There was an awful lot of pleading in Sebastian’s voice. “You’re scaring me. I expected you to throw things at me, or to punch me, or at the very least shout at me.”

I turned my head his way. He did look concerned, but I was still too numb to take any pleasure in it. “Can I have some time alone? I have a lot to think about.”

For a moment, he looked like he was going to argue, but then he gave a jerky nod. “Of course.”

He stood, my hand feeling cold when his fingers slid from mine.



CHAPTER SEVEN

SEBASTIAN

I awoke with a start, sitting bolt upright and staring unseeing into the darkness trying to work out what had woken me. My attempt to poke Leofric and ask if he'd heard it too resulted in me poking nothing but air. He'd gone off in a huff after our argument and had refused to talk to me. As if that wasn't enough, he'd also announced that if I planned to sleep in the same room as him, there was a distinct possibility of me no longer being alive in the morning. He'd been hanging out with Jack too much. He was starting to sound like him. Some people could get so upset about a little octopus.

Given Leofric's determination to sulk, I hadn't had chance to inform him that I'd bowed to his wishes and told Jack about my supposed fiancé. And I also hadn't been able to discuss Jack's uncharacteristic reaction to the news; the strange calmness with which he'd taken it was unusual enough to have kept me awake until late into the night trying to work out what it meant for us.

I lay back against the pillows, convinced that my rude awakening had been nothing but the result of a bad dream. I'd barely closed my eyes when

the ship juddered in a way that said something had hit it, and it became all too obvious what had woken me the first time. I was on my feet in seconds, locating my trousers, and pulling them on. I didn't stop for a shirt or boots, hurrying straight up the stairs and onto the deck.

A scene of absolute pandemonium met me—men scurrying around with lanterns, and shouts ringing out. I was still trying to make sense of it when Jack arrived at my side in a similar state of undress, confusion written all over his face. “What’s going on?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

Something hit the ship again, both Jack and I lurching to the side. I made a grab for him, either to steady him or myself. I wasn’t sure which. I don’t suppose it mattered. The important thing was that neither of us had been flung overboard. We both hurried over to the opposite side of the ship, where a crowd, including my mother, had gathered, the first signs of dawn appearing on the horizon. Leofric was there too. He’d put a shirt on, but hadn’t managed to fasten it, his shirt tails blowing in the breeze.

Our gaze followed theirs to the churning sea below, horror dawning on Jack’s face as he took in the unnatural state of the water. “What the fuck is causing that? And what keeps hitting the ship?” He swallowed, his gaze flicking briefly to my mother. “Apologies for the language, Your Majesty.”

My mother gave a tight smile. “I think under the circumstances, the language is justified, so please don’t apologize.”

Leofric met my gaze, his expression troubled. “It seems we’ve attracted the attention of a leviathan.”

Jack’s head whipped my way, accusation blazing in his eyes. “Why be scared of the sea, you said. The sea’s peaceful. It’s perfectly safe.” He gesticulated wildly at the carpet of sea spray. “Does that look safe?” He

gave a weary shake of his head. “I knew I was right in refusing to set foot on a ship again. I have, and now look what’s happened.”

“Leviathans are rare.”

Jack let out a sigh. “So are griffins. In case you haven’t noticed, *Sebastian*, it doesn’t seem to matter when it comes to us. I think there could be only one of something left in all the thirteen kingdoms, and we’d still manage to bump into it.”

It wasn’t really the time to take delight in Jack’s use of the words “us” and “we,” but I did it anyway. Fortunately, distraction came in the form of another almighty thump, the impact hard enough to send people sprawling, and for the ship to dip low enough that a wave engulfed the deck. I grabbed onto the railing, keeping myself upright with difficulty, strands of wet hair obscuring my vision. My mother’s lady-in-waiting burst into tears as she picked herself up off the sodden deck, her sobs that she was too young to die doing nothing to dispel the panic that had stolen across the assembled throng.

I looked toward my mother, two guards on either side of her holding her up. She might have remained upright, but she hadn’t escaped the effects of the water, her dress sticking to her, and her hair dripping. “You should go back to your cabin, where it’s dry.”

She threw me a scathing look that Jack would have been proud of. “And if the ship goes down?”

It was a good question. If the ship did go down, the worst place to be was below deck. But at that point, we’d probably all be dead anyway. The coast of Padora was still a long way away. It was doubtful any of us, myself included, were strong enough swimmers to reach it. And there were no nearby islands. The only chance for survival would be to be picked up by a

passing ship, which relied on there actually being one, and the leviathan not having eaten us before we reached it. Once you weighed all those things up, it wasn't looking good. For any of us.

"Will it go down?" That was Jack asking, his face as pale and drawn as I'd ever seen it.

"Is this one of those times where you want me to tell you the truth or to lie to you?"

A glimmer of a smile appeared on Jack's face. I appreciated it even if it did only last a couple of seconds. "The truth."

I grimaced. "Then, yes, it's entirely possible the ship could go down."

Leofric provided the rest of the information, apparently willing to let bygones be bygones for the octopus incident, which I guess was something to be grateful for. It was just a shame it had taken a leviathan attack to do so. "At the moment, it's probing us, looking for weak spots. Once it finds one, it will hit harder. Either we'll tip over, or it will create a hole in the ship's hull, and we'll sink."

Jack closed his eyes for a few seconds, his breathing labored. "I fucking hate ships."

I was beginning to come around to his point of view. I searched the throng of people on deck. My mother had taken it upon herself to comfort Ansel. She seemed to be doing a good job of it too. Ursula, the lady-in-waiting was sitting by the bottom of the mast, her knees drawn up, and her face chalky-white. The crew were either busy, doing what they could to stop the ship from tipping over, or stood in a huddle their heads bent together in conversation. One of them was clutching a harpoon but he seemed at a complete loss as to what he was supposed to do with it. Of the man I was looking for, though, there was no sign. "Where's the captain?"

At my shout, heads momentarily turned my way, before they did the same thing I'd just done, gazes scouring the assembled crowd. It didn't take long for them to reach the same conclusion I had. One of the crew stepped forward. He was a stocky man with a long, thick beard, droplets of water shining in it. He gave a somewhat awkward bow that couldn't have been more out of place considering what was happening on the ship. "If I may speak, Your Highness?"

"You may." I could almost feel Jack's lip curling at my side. It was nice to know he wasn't going to let a little thing like a leviathan stop him from expressing his disdain at royal protocol. Although, it was probably more to do with me being the recipient of it.

The crew member gave another awkward bow. "The captain... he is... er... still in his cabin, Your Highness."

"Asleep?"

His Adam's apple bobbed in a way that gave away his distress. "I don't believe so."

Another crew member spoke up. "We spoke to him, Smithy and me..." He jerked a thumb at a wiry man with more than his fair share of tattoos to show who Smithy was. "Captain said he wasn't coming on deck. Wouldn't even open the door to us."

I took a moment to digest that rather odd piece of information. "His ship is under attack." I paused as we were subjected to yet another assault, the ship starting to make a rather disturbing creaking sound, forcing us to grab on to whatever we could in order to stay upright. "And he is hiding in his cabin?"

Smithy nodded. "That's about the long and short of it, yes."

I turned my focus to two of the guards. "Go and get him."

They nodded slowly. “On your order?”

“On my order.” My mother’s tone was less than friendly. “Tell him that if coming on deck is too much trouble for him, I will find another captain for this ship, assuming there is still a ship left to sail by morning.”

Ursula, who had fallen silent, renewed her sobs at that announcement. The guards were only gone for a couple of minutes. When they reappeared, they had the captain propped up between them, his eyes wide and his chest rising and falling rapidly. I gestured for them to bring him to me. They did so, dumping him at my feet, the man falling to his knees and peering miserably up at me. I leaned toward him so he could hear me. “Captain, it appears we’ve encountered a leviathan. Therefore, it would be useful to have your expertise on deck. What is the protocol for such an event?”

The captain’s eyes brimmed over with tears, and he began shaking his head, Jack letting out a snort. He crouched in front of the captain, his eyes intent on his face. “I don’t think there is one. Is that right, Captain?”

He nodded enthusiastically, words falling from his mouth like rain. “I’ve been a captain for twenty years. Never seen one. Heard stories, though. Not from survivors because there never are any. There’s nothing we can do. Nowhere we can hide. It will keep attacking the ship until the ship can’t take it anymore. We have boats, of course, but that would just make it easier for the leviathan to pick us out of the water one by one. They’re useless in this scenario.”

With a timing so perfect the leviathan might as well have been listening, it crashed into the ship once more. This one was harder, the ship tipping, and another wave cresting over the side to drench everyone. Screams rang out, everyone grabbing onto to whatever they could to prevent themselves

from being swept overboard. The ship hung there for a moment, the threat of it rolling over felt by everyone, and then it finally righted itself.

Hands covering his head, the captain was still talking. He didn't seem to care whether anyone was listening or not. "There's nothing we can do. Jump into the sea and it will have itself a feast. Stay on the ship and it will have us in there eventually. Once a leviathan has you in its sights, it's not giving up." He turned his head, his eyes red-rimmed as he sought out the queen. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I've sailed this route for years and never had any problem before. I thought it was safe."

Sorting the captain into a box labelled as useless to the point of being a hindrance, I turned away, bracing my arms against the railing to stare into the sea. I was joined by Leofric on one side and Jack on the other. I took a steadying breath. "So... we have to kill it before it sinks the ship."

Jack's shoulder pressed against mine, the gesture comforting after he'd kept himself at a distance for days. "Sounds easy."

I laughed. "We've faced worse."

Jack grimaced. "Say that enough times and I might believe you." He stared down at the sea, the water still churning. "How big is it?"

"Big," Leofric said. "With sharp teeth and spines." He pulled a long, curved knife from his boot, holding the blade aloft to examine it. "I reckon this should be sharp enough to do it some damage." He looked over at me, and then at Jack. "You two going to just tickle it to death?"

He had a point. Both of us were empty-handed. I waved two of the guards over. "I need your dagger." He passed it over without argument.

Leofric frowned. "I was thinking more of you using your magic."

In the spirit of me being extremely good at not sharing pertinent information, I hadn't gotten around to telling Leofric that there were issues

with my magic. And in retrospect, it had been nothing short of amazing that the octopus had stuck around as long as it had. Fortunate for me. Not quite as fortunate for Leofric. And it certainly wasn't the right time to have that conversation now, the frequency with which the ship was being battered only increasing. It was doubtful it could take much more, and then we'd all be dead anyway.

The ship was hit again, this time from the opposite side. It lurched so far forward that the sea came hurtling toward me at an amazing rate, only the railing digging into my chest saving me from being flung into the water. The guard whose dagger I'd taken was forced to grab onto my leg to prevent himself from going overboard. One of the others wasn't so lucky, the steep gradient of the deck sending him careening past us, his hands flailing as he tried to grab hold of something. I reached out, but I was too late, the guard toppling into the water.

For a moment, as he splashed around at the center of the frothing water, there was relief on his face. But then, just as I'd started considering what we could throw down to him, something rose up from the depths. Something that matched Leofric's description perfectly: dark gray, and covered in spines, its mouth opening to reveal row upon row of jagged teeth.

Jack spoke for all of us when he muttered a quiet, "Fuck!"

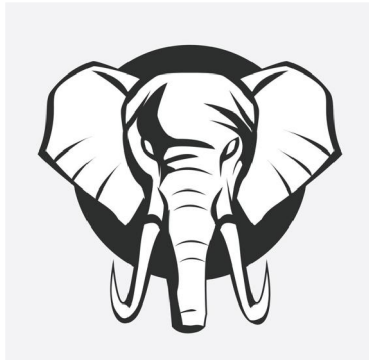
The guard, blissfully unaware of what had emerged behind him, stretched his arms upwards in a gesture that said he thought he could still be helped, that his last moments weren't only seconds away. "Pull me out. Quick."

I looked away as the teeth closed around his head, and he was dragged beneath the water. Jack's indrawn breath in my ear said he wasn't handling the sight too well either.

I was sure of two things at that moment, that we wouldn't get a better opportunity to attack while the beast was busy devouring its prey, and that I didn't want Jack in that water. Unfortunately, short of knocking him out, which would drive a wedge between us that would make the last few days look like nothing more than a tiff, I didn't know how I was going to prevent it.

Inspiration struck and I nudged him, jerking my head toward the stairs that led below deck. "Get your bow. We need you on deck so if that thing comes up again, you can shoot at it. Aim for its eyes. Or its mouth." There was a moment of indecision in Jack's eyes where it looked like he was going to argue, but then he turned on his heel and ran for the stairs. He was out of sight within seconds.

Leofric's face said he knew exactly what I was doing, but he made no move to stop me, already stripping off his shirt and boots. Bare-chested and barefoot, he took a moment to look over at Ansel, something unspoken passing between the two of them before he turned back to face front. Two crew members and two guards joined us, all of them armed. We shared a look and a nod, and then we all jumped, the water engulfing us in its cold embrace.



CHAPTER EIGHT

JACK

Even though I flew down the narrow corridors at breakneck speed, the borrowed lantern lighting the way, it still felt like it took an age. It was stupid to have gone up there without my bow in the first place, but I hadn't exactly been thinking straight when the sickening lurch of the ship had woken me. All my old fears of being stuck in the middle of the ocean had risen up to form a solid ball of panic in my chest, and it seemed I'd been right to harbor such thoughts.

A leviathan!

Even the thought caused my palms to sweat, and my throat to close like I was swallowing a lump of sand. And that was before I'd witnessed it eat a man as if he was nothing more than a quick appetizer.

Bow slung over my shoulder, I skidded back down the corridors, their narrow and twisting nature slowing me more than I would have liked. I took the stairs that led back up to the deck two at a time, the tension that met me once I emerged into the dim light of the early morning so thick it may as well have been a tangible thing.

A cluster of people had gathered around the main mast now, the queen at its center. She had her head held high, looking for all the world like she could have been in the middle of a banquet hall, rather than standing on a ship in imminent danger of sinking unless something was done. The lady-in-waiting had stopped crying and was instead staring into space, her eyes wide and her hands trembling.

Ansel looked... well, I wasn't quite sure how he looked. Only that him being so quiet was jarring when I was used to barely three seconds passing without him having something to say. If he'd run out of words, then we really were in a bad way. I hastened over to where I'd left Sebastian and Leofric, only to find an empty space on the deck where they'd been standing.

Confused, I turned in a slow circle, expecting to see them elsewhere. "Where are they?" I hadn't directed the question at anyone in particular, so it came as no surprise when no one answered. I knew the answer anyway. If they weren't on the deck, then there was only one place they could be. In my head, I called Sebastian all the rude names I could think of, knowing immediately that he'd done it deliberately. It was just the kind of bull-headed heroic gesture I should have known to expect from him.

I rushed over to the railing to stare down at the sea below. Where before it had been churning, now it was thrashing. A head briefly surfaced. Sebastian? No. The hair was dark. And short. So, it wasn't Leofric either. I briefly recognized the man as one of the guards before a tentacle shot out of the water, curled around his neck, and dragged him under far quicker than I could notch an arrow, never mind let it fly. Not that I suspected an arrow in its tentacle would do much to slow it down. It was like the griffin all over again, with the added complication of water.

How were we supposed to beat this thing? Yet, that's exactly what Sebastian and Leofric were trying to do. Someone joined me at the railing, and I turned my head to find the queen next to me, her expression grave. Our gazes met and held. We might have been eons apart when it came to life experience and status, but at this exact moment, we were united in our fear of what might happen to Sebastian, and whether we would ever see him again. Acting on impulse, I reached out and took her hand. She didn't pull away, a faint smile trembling on her lips as her fingers curled around mine and she held on tight. I tried for a smile too. Mine was no more convincing than hers had been, my facial muscles feeling all wrong as I attempted to force them into the required position. "He'll be okay."

She gave a jerky nod, her gaze returning to the sea. "Of course, he will. He's Sebastian. Even as a child, he couldn't stay out of trouble for two minutes. It's just the way he is." She heaved out a breath. "He always came out the other side of it, though, smiling and acting like we'd been crazy to worry about him."

Her little speech might have been more convincing if her voice hadn't cracked in the middle. The next few minutes were some of the most harrowing I'd ever had to experience. Heads would bob up, deep breaths would be taken, and then they'd disappear once more. Once or twice, I caught a glimpse of Sebastian, my heart ricocheting in my chest so hard it may as well have been trying to escape. I managed to unleash a couple of arrows into the leviathan, but I couldn't say that they did any damage.

Most of the fight was happening below the water, parts of the leviathan thudding into the side of the ship at regular intervals. But it was nothing like the sustained assault of earlier, the leviathan seeming to have enough to contend with.

Either that or it figured there was enough to eat in the sea without shaking the people off the large wooden thing. One of the crew surfaced for air, only to let out an agonized scream as the head of the leviathan surfaced at the same time and he was plucked out of the water as easily as someone picking a flower. The only saving grace was that his screams didn't last long, the leviathan tossing its head back and swallowing him in one gulp.

I took the opportunity to aim for the leviathan's eye, my arrow finding a satisfying target in the center of the large, fleshy orb. It didn't like that one little bit if the shriek it let out was anything to go by. If I could only get the other eye as well, it might render it blind. But by the time I'd notched another arrow, the leviathan had submerged again.

Leofric surfaced seconds later, gasping for air, the words out of his mouth when he could speak sending a chill down my spine. "It has Bass. He's trapped. He can't surface. Going to drown." He dragged in a deep lungful of air, and then he was gone again. Without thinking, I dropped my bow to the deck, my shout loud enough to be classed as a bellow. "Give me a knife."

Weapons were shoved my way. I grabbed the knife that looked like it was the sharpest. Shoving it in my waistband, I climbed the railing. The last thing I saw before I plunged into the freezing cold water was Kara's stricken face. She wasn't a queen at that moment. She was just a mother facing the very real possibility of losing her son. Well, if I could do anything to prevent that, I would.

Nothing mattered except reaching Sebastian as I filled my lungs before diving beneath the surface of the water. Not the numbing cold slowing my movements. Not the carnage going on around me. Or the fact that I was in the sea with a beast that could snap me in two and gobble me up in one swallow if he got hold of me. Sebastian wasn't a prince. He wasn't a man

who was apparently promised to another. He was just the man I loved who couldn't breathe underwater, so whose life was down to minutes if I didn't do something.

I kept swimming, following the leviathan's body, but keeping out of the way of its tentacles as they whipped out in search of anything that came too close. And then I saw him. Sebastian had one of the tentacles wrapped around him, his struggles to free himself coming to nothing. The leviathan had him held immobile in a punishing grip. I swam toward him, dimly aware of Leofric grabbing hold of Sebastian's head and breathing air into his lungs before swimming for the surface once more.

Sebastian's eyes went wide as I appeared in front of him, trying to communicate the word "idiot" with just my eyes. I tugged at the coils surrounding him, but they were thick and muscular, and it was like trying to loosen an impossibly tight knot. Sebastian shook his head as I tugged at the rubbery flesh. He jerked his chin upwards, the message no less clear for the fact that it was delivered without words. He expected me to leave him and save myself. I glared at him. Did he really think I'd swum all the way down here just to give up at the first hurdle?

I swam lower to locate Sebastian's hands. His magic might have been inconsistent of late, but it was still worth a try. He was held too tightly, though, his fingers pressed against his body, not even the merest twitch possible. That left only one option. If I couldn't loosen the leviathan's hold, and Sebastian couldn't move, then the only thing left was to convince the leviathan to let go. Either that or kill it, but if it was that easy, it would have happened already. It wasn't like there weren't men trying. I sank the knife into the tentacle, the skin much tougher than I'd anticipated. Not so much as

a twitch. Another stab. Same result. Perhaps it didn't feel pain in its tentacles. I was hardly an expert on leviathan anatomy.

If I wanted it to release Sebastian, I'd have to cut through the tentacle. Leofric returned as I fitted the blade of the knife against the tentacle and began to saw. He sealed his mouth over Sebastian's again, delivering another lungful of life-saving air before swimming for the surface. Leofric wasn't a machine. He would only be able to keep that up for so long before he tired. My own lungs were starting to burn, the surface suddenly feeling like it was a million miles away, and I'd barely made so much as a dent so far.

I trailed my fingers along Sebastian's cheek, my gaze holding his for a second before I started for the surface, hoping he'd gotten the message that I was coming back, that I was only leaving him for a short time. My chest was aching by the time I broke the surface of the water. I dragged in mouthful after mouthful of pure, clean air, and then I dived back down. I knew where Sebastian was this time, so I was far quicker to reach him and continue where I'd left off, the procedure rather like attempting to saw through a thick rope strand by strand.

The whole procedure was complicated further by the leviathan's lack of cooperation, the tentacle constantly being pulled away so that I was forced to swim after it in order to continue hacking away at it. Whether because it was under constant attack, or because it was aware of what I was doing I wasn't sure. Although, if the latter was to blame, I would have been more than happy to stop if it would just fucking let go. I didn't want the tentacle. I just wanted Sebastian. How was I supposed to throw insults at him if he was dead?

Between the two of us, we kept up a constant cycle of breathing for Sebastian—Leofric's job—and sawing away at the huge, fleshy appendage—my job. And all the while, Sebastian stared at me as if pleading with me to stop. Well, fuck that. He didn't get to die on me. His life—or death—wasn't going to be that easy. Not while I was around.

I could tell that Leofric was tiring, the time between his visits gradually growing longer, and no doubt the amount of air he was able to force into Sebastian's lungs getting less. I'd managed to carve my way halfway through the tentacle, my palm blistered where the handle of the knife kept rubbing. No amount of pain was going to make me stop, though. If I couldn't free Sebastian, I'd die here with him. And he could be as annoyed at me as he wanted. I didn't care. I'd never done what he'd told me to do, and I wasn't about to start now.

With my chest on fire, I made a journey to the surface to fill my own lungs. The ocean was red with blood as I submerged once more. The leviathan twisted, its head looming large in front of me, an arrow protruding from its left eye that I'd put there. I lifted the knife with the intention of defending myself, but before I could, there was someone else there, his aim true as he plunged his own knife into the leviathan's other eye and left it there, a stream of red gushing from the leviathan's ruined eye socket to turn the sea even redder. The leviathan reared back, its movements turning frenzied. Was he blind? Would that help? I hoped so.

On my return, I attacked the tentacle with renewed vigor, the flesh seeming to part more easily now. It didn't take long before my chest once again felt like it was being gripped in a vise. I was so damn close, though, so I refused to give up until the job was done. There was no telling when Sebastian would run out of oxygen.

And then finally, the flesh gave way, Sebastian coming loose. The decapitated tentacle floated away as I grabbed Sebastian's shoulder and kicked for the surface. I'd gotten halfway when Leofric materialized next to me to grab hold of Sebastian's other shoulder. Together, we hauled him to the surface, the three of us gasping for air once our heads were above water.

Realizing that we weren't out of the woods yet, I found the strength to kick for the side of the ship, a rope ladder having been lowered. I pushed Sebastian and Leofric ahead of me, my limbs so jelly-like that I wasn't sure how quickly I would be able to climb, and I didn't want to slow either of them down. Not that they were in a much better state, Leofric because he was so exhausted, and Sebastian because he'd been stuck underwater for a protracted amount of time, only Leofric and sheer pig-headed determination stopping him from drowning.

There was still a fight going on behind us, shouts ringing out at regular intervals. There seemed to be more optimism to it now that the leviathan had lost the ability to see, and I hoped that blood loss from its severed tentacle might also have something to do with it.

The climb up the rope ladder seemed to take forever, sapping the last of my energy reserves to the point where when I finally reached the deck, I wasn't capable of anything but lying on my back with my eyes closed, the rapid rise and fall of my chest completely beyond my control.

It wasn't until a cheer rang out that I managed to find the strength to sit up. "What happened?"

"It's dead." The slight tremor in the queen's voice said that she'd had about as much as she could take for one day. That made two of us. I scanned the deck to find Leofric and Sebastian in the same position I'd been in. Okay, it made four of us. Shifting closer to Sebastian, I pulled his head

onto my lap and stroked my fingers through his hair, the state of which he would have been horrified by if he was able to see it. It wasn't only soaking wet, but it had pieces of seaweed in it. I absent-mindedly plucked a large piece out as he stared up at me.

"You should have left me."

My heart rate finally starting to slow, I returned his stare. "I should have done."

"So why didn't you?"

I sighed. "Because..." I knew what he wanted me to say, that it was because I loved him. Well, I was already cradling his head and stroking his hair. The man had to learn that he couldn't have everything he wanted, an attitude that made a lot more sense now that I knew he was a prince. "Because I refuse to let you have the heroic death you seem to have your heart set on. Plus, you did your best to keep me out of the water, and you should know by now that I always do the opposite of what you want."

Sebastian turned his head to where Leofric lay. He seemed to be having the most trouble getting his breath back, probably because he'd been breathing for two for an indeterminate amount of time. Sebastian reached out to pat his friend's chest. "You're out of condition there, old friend. Too much time spent eating pies and drinking ale."

Leofric's glare could have cut through stone. "And by that, I assume you mean, thank you for saving your sorry ass."

Sebastian's lips twitched, and for a moment I was sure that he was going to choose another acerbic comment over genuine gratitude, but at the last moment, he seemed to realize it wasn't wise. "Thank you. I owe my life to you." Sebastian's gaze flicked to me. "Both of you."

"Apologize for the octopus," Leofric said.

Sebastian opened his mouth and then closed it again. It took me saying his name with a great deal of warning in it for him to give in. "Fine. I'm sorry that in a moment of emotional stress, I perhaps didn't make the best choice in expressing my feelings. In retrospect, words might have been better than an octopus." He shrugged. "What can I say, I'm not perfect."

Both Leofric and I snorted in unison, our gazes meeting over Sebastian's head. He frowned up at us, his gaze flicking between us. "What?"

I gently lowered Sebastian's head to the deck and struggled to my feet, my legs still feeling like they belonged to someone else. I stumbled over to the railing to peer down into the sea. The leviathan was floating on the surface of the water, the surviving men's arms raised in jubilation as they celebrated its death. One appeared to be trying to saw the leviathan's head off, presumably to keep as some sort of trophy. I had no idea why. I couldn't think of anything worse than spending the next couple of days on the ship alongside a rotting leviathan head.

Sebastian's mother appeared by my side. She was silent for a few seconds as she took in the same scene I had. Eventually though, her focus switched to me. I didn't turn. It was easier to keep staring at the leviathan carcass. Her voice was laden with emotion when she spoke. "Thank you."

I shrugged. "I didn't do much." I gestured at the men in the water, none of them seeming in any hurry to be back on the ship. I guessed celebrations didn't have a time limit, especially when they were as momentous as this one. "They were the ones that killed it."

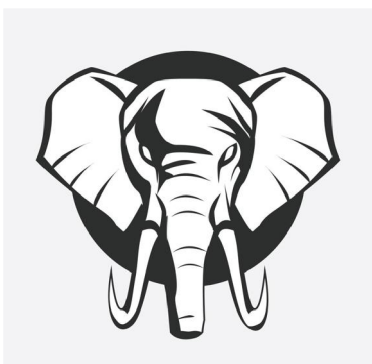
"You saved my son's life. I wouldn't call that not much."

I did turn then, the expression on her face matching her voice. I offered her a smile. "I confess that there was a certain amount of self interest in it."

"So you don't hate him anymore?"

I turned to look back over my shoulder, Sebastian having gathered quite a crowd around him, an emotional Ansel plastered to his side. I didn't answer her question, the words I needed seeming beyond me.

All I wanted was to get some sleep.



CHAPTER NINE

SEBASTIAN

The rest of the day had passed in a blur, the initial euphoria of our close shave with disaster—and in my case, death—having given way to more practical considerations, like the fact that we found ourselves stuck with a captain who, after his cowardly reaction to facing a leviathan, no one trusted anymore. Unfortunately, being six crew members down meant he couldn't be summarily dismissed before we reached Padora, or I'm sure my mother would have done it already.

The shortage of able seamen had meant that anyone capable of pitching in was required to, no matter how strenuous the beginning of their day might have been. Therefore, there hadn't been any opportunity to pull Jack aside and find out whether his saving my life, and having behaved so sweetly toward me afterwards, had been an actual softening in attitude, or nothing more than a momentary aberration brought on by relief at our mutual survival.

It had been no surprise that everyone had retired early to their beds, barely lasting an hour after the sun had dipped below the horizon. For that reason, I was less than enamored of being woken by an elbow in my gut,

one that had no illusions of being gentle. I rolled toward Leofric and despite there not being enough light for him to be able to see it, I treated him to a frosty glare. If I did it well enough, it might permeate the air so that he could somehow sense it. “What was that for?”

“You were doing it again.” Leofric’s voice was husky with sleep.

“Doing what?”

“Talking about Jack. Non-stop.” He affected a voice that sounded absolutely nothing like mine. “Oh, Jack. You’re so pretty. So perfect. Let’s fuck until we’re both so sore that neither of us can move.”

“I did not say that.”

The bed shifted as Leofric rolled over, his muffled voice making it clear he’d buried his face in the pillow. “It was close enough. It was nauseating to the point of wishing I hadn’t saved your life today. If I’d left you at the bottom of the ocean, I could have been asleep now.”

I sat up. “You’d have been inconsolable with grief.” Leofric’s snort wasn’t muffled, meaning he’d turned his head so that I was sure to hear it. I narrowed my eyes at the patch of darkness where I knew he was lying. “You’re just jealous.”

Another snort. “Oh, yeah, I want a lover who will barely look at me, never mind speak to me too. It’s what we all aspire to.”

“He saved my life.”

Leofric made a huffing sound. “And I wonder if he’s regretting it too.”

There wasn’t a lot I could say to that, given it was a distinct possibility, so I stayed silent. I stared into the darkness for a moment, my thoughts a chaotic whirl. It left me with the realization that I was wide awake. Swinging my legs off the bed, I fumbled around in the dark until I located

my trousers. Mine or Leofric's anyway. It didn't matter; we were about the same size. I pulled them on, the rustle of fabric filling the cabin.

The mattress creaked as Leofric shifted. "What are you doing?"

"Going for a walk."

There was a pause. "Do you want me to come?"

I smiled. Leofric and Jack were very alike in a lot of ways. Both outwardly grumpy, but far more amenable on the inside than they led people to believe. I knew without a doubt that if I said yes, Leofric would grumble about it, but he'd do it anyway. He'd walk around with me for hours in the middle of the night if I required it, and I'd do the same for him. "No. Go back to sleep. You can have the bed to yourself."

Leofric mumbled something that sounded very like 'that's what I've been asking for since the beginning of the voyage,' but could have been something else.

I groped my way over to the cabin door, Leofric's voice ringing out before I could open it. "Don't fall overboard."

I grinned. "I'll try not to. I think I've had enough of the ocean to last me a lifetime."

It was a slow process to find my way above deck without banging into anything, but I eventually made it, the night air feeling fresh and clean in comparison to the stuffiness of the cabin. I offered a nod to a crewman at his post as I passed him. There was a skeleton crew at night, but they were required in case of a problem, like, well, happening upon a leviathan, I supposed, even if the chances of it happening twice were about ten million to one.

I was halfway across the ship, my plans not having extended beyond standing at the railing and getting some air, when a familiar dark head

sitting near the mast stopped me in my tracks, his profile illuminated by the swinging lantern over his head. I made my way in his direction, coming to a stop in front of him. Jack looked up, his expression not giving away whether he was pleased to see me or not. “Sebastian.”

“Jack.”

I lowered myself onto the deck opposite him, sitting cross-legged with my hands resting on my knees. Like me, he was shirtless and barefoot. Silence hung between us, and the longing for easier times was like a sharp shard lodged in my chest. I hated this sense of awkwardness, of constantly treading on eggshells when it came to Jack, all my words colored by the fear of saying the wrong thing, the thing that would have him giving up on us for good. Even in the early days of our relationship, when he’d been intent on getting as far away from me as he could, things had never been awkward. Fiery. Volatile. But never awkward. “Can’t sleep?”

He shook his head, restless fingers plucking at the fabric of his trousers. “Every time I close my eyes, I see that... thing.” He shuddered. “I hated the sea enough before. Now...” His mouth twisted into a shape of distaste. He let out a sigh. “I really need to feel something solid under my feet, something that doesn’t constantly move.”

I remembered the last time we’d been on a ship, how Jack had been so grateful for dry land that he’d kissed the ground once we’d disembarked, and that journey had been uneventful in comparison. It made me feel guilty for being the reason he was here. “Sorry.”

He lifted his gaze to mine, his eyes sharp and assessing. “For what?”

I picked up a stray pebble from the deck and balanced it on my palm, the edges smooth and cool against my skin. “Everything.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Everything. So all-encompassing, yet so vague all at the same time. You’re going to have to narrow it down a bit.”

I tilted my hand so that the pebble rolled toward my fingers, curling them at the last moment to halt its progress before it tumbled to the deck, and then I tilted it back the other way, the pebble reversing its route. “I’m sorry I said I wouldn’t go on this journey unless you came. I knew how much you hated ships, so it was unfair of me to put that pressure on you.”

“And selfish.”

I risked a glance at Jack from beneath my lashes. “’And selfish.’”

The corners of his lips twitched. It wasn’t quite a smile, but it was getting there. “If I hadn’t come, who would have sawed a tentacle in half for you?”

“No one.” The word sat there for a minute, feeling like an actual entity, slightly poking at the barrier between Jack and I to see if it could breach it. “I mean, Leofric would have done, but he couldn’t do that *and* breathe for me.”

“No, he couldn’t.” Jack paused. “He’s a good friend. You’re very lucky to have him.”

“I am. And he’s very lucky to have me.”

Jack pulled his knees up to his chest, balancing his chin on the left one. “Ah, there he is, the Sebastian we all know and love with an ego the size of a mountain. What with the apology, and you actually giving me space for the last few days, I was beginning to wonder where he’d gone. I thought he might have drowned and left an imposter in his place.”

“I nearly did drown.”

Jack’s exhalation was less than steady. “I know. I was there.”

I shuffled a bit closer to Jack. He didn’t move away. I took that as a good sign. I held my hand out to him, the pebble lying in the center of my palm.

“For you.”

Jack eyed me, his expression half amusement, and half exasperation. “You’re a prince, and that’s what you’ve got to offer me... a pebble? I was hoping for a kingdom, or at the very least a palace.”

“No, you weren’t. You wouldn’t accept them if I offered them to you, farm boy.”

We both tensed at my use of the name. It had rolled off my tongue without conscious thought, but it seemed like an age since I’d last used it. It was like a reminder of better times, a time when everything had seemed so simple.

“Where do you think the pebble came from?” Jack asked.

I frowned at the strange question.

“You know, given that we’re in the middle of the ocean.”

When I didn’t say anything, Jack patted his pocket with raised eyebrows.

“It was yours?”

He nodded. “So not only is it a rubbish gift, but you’re trying to give me something that’s already mine.”

“Well, I’m offering it back to you, rather than keeping it.”

“So generous.” Despite his words, Jack took it. He stared at it for a moment before lifting his gaze to mine again. “Are you sorry for anything else?”

My words came out in a rush. “I’m sorry for not telling you the truth when I had multiple opportunities to do so. I’m sorry that not telling you involved fabricating lies. I’m sorry that I didn’t handle everything much better. I’m just so damn sorry, Jack.”

Jack made a noise that was half sigh, and half something else I couldn’t identify. He lay back on the deck, stretching his legs out in front of him and

tipping his head back to stare up at the night sky. When I stayed where I was, he patted the empty space next to him. “Come and look at the stars with me.”

As invitations went, I couldn’t think of a better one. It might not be Jack saying that everything was going to be alright, but it was a step in the right direction. I stretched out next to him, taking the risk of not leaving any space between our bodies. Jack stayed put, our body heat mingling where we touched from shoulder to ankle. I stared up at the stars, trying to think of the right words to say. I’d already apologized. What was left?

“Tell me about your childhood, Sebastian.”

I stilled. “The truth?”

“Oh, definitely the truth. If you ever tell me another lie, I’m going to...”

I turned my head his way when he didn’t finish his sentence. “You’re going to what?”

“I’m thinking.”

“You could...” I cast about for something horrific enough to appeal to him. “Make me watch you deliver another calf.” He gave a little chuckle. “Or banish me from the tavern in Riverbrook for a whole week. Or...” A great wave of sadness swept over me. “Refuse to be near me and not talk to me.”

Jack’s sigh was decidedly gusty. “That wasn’t about punishing you. I just...”

“I know. I do understand.”

“Do you?”

“I’m not completely insensitive. Why do you think I left you alone? Did I do that when we first met?”

“No. You stuck yourself to me like a leech and refused to be rebuffed. I couldn’t go to sleep without waking up with you wrapped around me like a...”

“A leviathan tentacle?”

Jack’s chest shook as he laughed silently. “Now that you mention it, there were similarities. I should have sawed through your arm.” He gave me a nudge. “Childhood. Start talking.”

“Well, I grew up in Padora, obviously, in the palace of Silverwood. It was...” Jack might think this was easy to talk about, but it wasn’t.

“It was what?”

“I had everything I could ever wish for. I was your typical prince. I ate the best food. I had the best clothes. As you already guessed, I was taught to ride, and to wield a sword as well as any man. I didn’t want for anything.”

“But?”

Jack knew me too well not to have picked up on the underlying current beneath my words. Now that I wasn’t spinning a yarn, I couldn’t hide it. “It never felt right. Any of it.”

“You weren’t happy?”

It was a good question, and I took a moment to think about it before answering.

“I wasn’t unhappy. It just wasn’t what I wanted. My siblings were all so much better at it than I was, like all that sitting and watching events, and being constantly polite to strangers came naturally to them. And then there was me. I couldn’t sit still for more than five minutes at a time, and I didn’t understand why anyone would want to watch an archery contest when you could take part in one instead. Doing is always far more fun than watching. In the end, I think when I was about seven, maybe eight, my parents gave

up on making me take part in official functions. That's when they started searching for someone of my own age to keep me company. That's where Leofric came in. And it did help. I was far happier. My brothers and sisters spent time being the perfect princes and princesses, and Leofric and I..." A smile crept into my voice.

Jack finished the sentence for me. "Caused havoc and made people go prematurely gray."

"Pretty much. I used to tell people that I'd been swapped at birth. One of my tutors taught me about changelings. After that, I always claimed that I was a changeling, and that the fae would return for me one day."

Jack gave a low chuckle. "I bet your parents loved that."

"They tolerated it. I think my mother even found it amusing. I guess the fact that I look so much like her didn't make it remotely believable. She might have been a little less enamored of my tales if that hadn't been the case."

"What about your father?"

I let out a sigh. "My relationship with my father is a little more complicated. His take on my behavior was that I would grow out of it. His patience ran out once I'd reached fifteen and still hadn't shown any signs of settling down. He put his foot down and everything changed."

"In what way?"

I could feel Jack's gaze on me, but I refused to look his way, the not so pleasant memories clamoring to be heard. "He made it clear that I needed to stop behaving like a commoner... his words, not mine, that I was too old for adventures, and that they needed to come to an end with immediate effect." I stopped talking as I realized that Jack was laughing. "I'm glad my painful memories are amusing to you."

“It’s funny, though, isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

“Yeah. You were told at fifteen that you were too old for adventures. You’re twenty-nine now, and you still haven’t stopped. And I doubt you ever will. It’s who you are. Your father must look back and think how fruitless that conversation was. He probably wishes he hadn’t wasted his breath.”

“I tried to be what he wanted. I really did.”

Picking up on the note in my voice, Jack’s tone turned serious. “What happened?”

“Five years of playing the perfect prince.” I made no attempt to keep the bitterness out of my voice. “Sitting there in silk, uttering platitudes I didn’t mean to people whose names I didn’t even know, and likely wouldn’t remember if I ever saw them again. I saw very little of Leofric. It was hell, Jack. For me, anyway.”

Fingers entwined with mine and I grasped on to them like they were a lifeline. “I can imagine it was. You can barely keep a shirt on, never mind dress as befits a royal.”

I gave Jack a little nudge with my elbow. “In case you haven’t noticed, you’re not wearing a shirt either.”

“A habit I picked up from you.”

I grinned. It really was. When I’d first met Jack, he’d been far more uptight, even going so far as to turn his nose up at my habit of being shirtless. Now here he was lying on the deck of a ship, not giving a damn.

“How old were you when you left Padora?”

I grimaced. Those were the worst memories of all. “Twenty-one. I felt like I was being slowly suffocated. Things were bad enough, but then they

decided that the solution to all my problems was marriage, that it would help to ground me, that all I needed was a good man by my side and everything else would fall into place. Wedding plans had been set in motion. I had no say in any of it. Not in who I was going to marry. Not in what I was going to wear. Not in where the ceremony would take place. Not in where I would live afterwards.” I squeezed Jack’s hand. “I felt like a puppet. I was just supposed to look pretty on the day and smile. And then I was supposed to travel to a different kingdom and devote myself to a man I’d never met.”

“I can’t imagine that would ever have worked.”

“It would have been...” I couldn’t even find the right words to express the sheer horror I’d felt at the time.

“So you left?”

“I left. And I took Leofric and his sister with me.”

“Did you even say goodbye?”

“To my mother, yes. Not to my father. I’ve no doubt that he’s probably sore about that to this very day. It should make seeing him again interesting.”

“Didn’t your mother try and stop you from leaving?”

I thought back, trying to recall that last conversation without dredging up any of the negative emotions that came with it. “She was worried about me, but I think she knew that I was going to do it with or without her blessing. She cried, but she didn’t try and talk me out of it. I think in the end, she just wanted me to be happy.”

Jack’s fingers slipped from mine as he rolled onto his side and propped himself up on one elbow, his gaze searching as he scrutinized my face.

“And you haven’t been home since?”

I shook my head.

“Have I ever told you, Sebastian *Beau*...” I loved Jack for the emphasis he put on my shortened surname, so that there could be no doubt that it was a deliberate choice. “... that you are an idiot?” That, I didn’t like quite so much.

“Many, many times. More times than I can count.”

“Good. Because you are.”

I turned to face him, mirroring his position on one elbow so that our faces were close together. “Why?”

Frustration bloomed on Jack’s face, the dim light from the lantern throwing it into stark relief. “Because you’ve kept all of this bottled up when you could have shared it with me. You could have helped me understand... Because I would have done if you’d told me, rather than finding out when your mother made an unannounced visit. Therefore, you’re an idiot. Of the highest order.”

It felt good to hear Jack insult me again. Like things were slipping back into their natural place once more. “So all I had to do was tell you what a terrible prince I used to be?”

“Yes!” Jack was smiling. Not a small smile either, but one that made his whole face light up, my heart skipping a beat at the welcome sight. “A good prince would never be with me, but a terrible one, that’s a whole different thing. I can work with a terrible prince.”

Something fluttered in my chest, hope racing through my veins to leave me breathless. “Can you?”

He nodded, and I took the opportunity to shift forward slightly, so that our breaths mingled. “I’ve missed you, Jack Shaw.”

His stare went on for so long that I thought he wasn't going to speak, but finally, he let out a breath that seemed to signify—at least in my eyes—the last vestiges of his resistance slipping away. “I’ve missed you too.”

To test out my theory, I closed the space between us, and I kissed him. And he kissed me back. In many ways, it felt like our first kiss all over again. That one had taken place in the rain and was forever etched in my memory. Jack had instigated it, driven partly by relief at our escape from Mad Dog Keaton and the rest of the bandits, and partly by... well, I’d never been too sure, and I’d never asked. Gratefulness that I’d come to rescue him, maybe? Jack finally giving in to the chemistry he’d been fighting from the very first moment our eyes had met? It didn’t matter. All that mattered was that it had happened, and nobody could ever take that moment away. Just like this one. I cupped his chin with my free hand, and I put everything I had into the kiss. It was sweet and sensual. It was familiar, yet new. It was heated, but also measured.

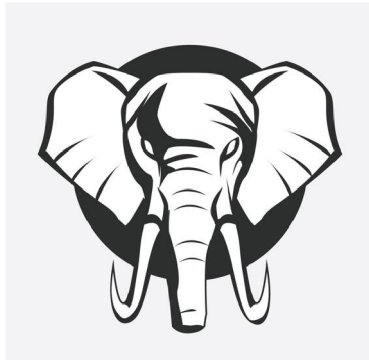
It was perfect, because it was Jack and I loved him. And he loved me back. And hopefully, he liked me again. Although, I wasn’t going to push things too far by asking for confirmation of that fact. Not today anyway. Today was for kissing, and for celebrating still being alive when there’d been a point earlier where that had seemed extremely unlikely.

Jack’s eyes were glazed when we finally separated, both of us breathing hard and sporting matching bulges in our trousers. He swallowed, the action seeming labored. “Sebastian?”

“Yeah?”

His eyelids lowered, his tongue moistening his bottom lip before he spoke, seduction oozing from every pore. “Take me to bed.”

I wasn't sure I'd ever moved so fast, my concern that he might change his mind at any given moment driving me to have him over my shoulder in less time than it would have taken for him to say my name again. A laugh rumbled out of him as I headed for the cabins, remembering to change direction at the last minute when it occurred to me that Leofric wouldn't thank me for dumping a horny Jack on top of him. And I wasn't sure Jack would be all that happy either.



CHAPTER TEN

JACK

I chuckled as Sebastian dumped me unceremoniously on the bed in the dark cabin. I reached out, frowning as my fingers grasped at empty space where there should have been warm, muscled skin. “Sebastian? Where are you?”

His voice when it came was farther away than it should have been. “One minute.”

And then he was gone, the bang of the cabin door signaling his exit. I sat bolt upright, my erection dwindling as I stared into the pitch-black. What the fuck? Sebastian was meant to be making up for days of sexual abstinence, not disappearing. Had he changed his mind? Did I want to change my mind? I was surprised to find I had absolutely no wish to.

I was tired of being at odds with Sebastian. I was tired of fighting my own feelings toward him and staying cold and detached when all I wanted to do was reach out and touch him. And most of all, I was tired of working so hard to dislike him. Which brought me right back to questioning where the fuck he’d gone. It was pointless either liking him or disliking him when he wasn’t there to suffer the effects.

The cabin door swung open once more to reveal Sebastian framed in the doorway with a huge smile on his face. And the reason I could see that was the lantern dangling from his hand. “There was no way this was going to happen without me being able to see you.”

A sudden lightness in my chest had me feeling like I could float up to the ceiling. “And you couldn’t have said that’s where you were going?”

He hung the lantern from a hook on the ceiling, its gentle swing casting flickering shadows across the cabin. “That would have taken an extra second or two.” He clambered onto the bed, pushing me onto my back, and straddling my hips to stare down at me. “I was eager to leave so I could get back.” He braced his arms on either side of my head and devoured me with his eyes, his lips slowly curving into a smile. “I’d forgotten how incredibly gorgeous you are, farm boy.”

I did my own share of looking, letting my gaze travel over the swell of Sebastian’s muscles, taking in the perfect biceps and triceps of his arms, the rosy, pink nipples, and the clearly defined abdominal muscles that I did so love to trace with my fingers. Only once I’d looked my fill did I let my gaze travel lower to the bulge straining at the front of his trousers. Anticipation was a ravenous beast between us, one begging to be set free from its leash. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Not so bad.” Sebastian’s words were delivered in a mocking tone as he dipped his head to brush a soft kiss over my lips. “You damn me with your faint praise.”

I lifted my head and stole another kiss before Sebastian could move away. “It’s what you deserve, prince.”

Sebastian froze, the look on his face cautious as he scrutinized my expression for clues.

I gave him a wink and nodded. "You call me farm boy. It's only fair I get to call you prince." I left a pause. "Just to be clear... I won't be calling you Prince Sebastian, and I won't be calling you your highness, and I certainly won't be bowing to you. Either now or at any time in the future. If you want any sort of deference, you've come to the wrong place."

Sebastian let out a breath, sagging against me until our noses almost touched, his eyes glittering with amusement. "Will you call me idiot?"

"Most certainly. At least once a day, if not twice." I grinned. "Prince idiot has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

Sebastian's answer was to kiss me, his mouth exploring mine with such focus that had I not been lying down already, I would probably have needed to. It was an achingly sweet kiss that managed to speak of both lust and love in equal measures. I wound my fingers in his hair and I melted, giving in to the inevitable. How had I gone without this for so long? How had I kept him at arms' length when my love for him was so all-encompassing? Sebastian was it for me, and I'd been fooling myself if I'd thought that there was any scenario in which we wouldn't be together. I pulled my mouth from his, my words coming out on a gasp. "I'm sorry."

His brow furrowed. "For what?"

"For..." I shook my head, the words seeming so difficult to say. "For punishing you, for pushing you away, for pretending that my feelings for you weren't as strong as they are."

"Oh, Jack..." Sebastian's words were colored with a mixture of wonder and regret. "You could never push me away. Even if I had to go and live in the field with the cows, you wouldn't be able to get rid of me. Why do you think I refused to leave Riverbrook without you?"

Pushing down a wave of emotion that threatened to be so intense that it was possible I might drown under its onslaught, I screwed my nose up. “What have the poor cows done to deserve you encroaching on their space?”

“They moo loudly.” Sebastian’s gaze dropped to my chest, his lips following seconds later, the touch like a heated brand on my skin. He started at my collarbone, pressing kisses to first one side and then the other. “Anyway, I don’t want to talk about cows.”

Neither did I. I just wanted to lie back and remember what I’d been missing for the last seven days. Seven days? Was that all it had been? It felt like months, years even. It had been a terrifying glimpse into a future without Sebastian. Even so, I couldn’t stop myself from getting one last dig in. “You should have told me.”

He lifted his head, his gaze boring into mine. “I should have. It was a huge mistake on my part, and one that could have proved costly. Do you forgive me?”

I let the seconds tick away before answering. “Yes.”

The grin that lit up Sebastian’s face was bright enough to rival the sun at the height of summer. “I don’t deserve you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’ve got that right. You don’t. But...” I studied his face. “Promise me that I know everything now, that there’s no other nasty surprises lurking in the background.”

Sebastian’s brow furrowed as he thought hard. “I don’t think so.”

I let out a slow breath. “We should probably be thanking that leviathan. Its intervention was certainly timely.”

Sebastian pulled a face. “You’ll have to forgive me if I’m not quite at the point where I can offer my gratitude to the slimy bastard who was

determined to drown me. Besides, it's dead. It wouldn't be able to hear it anyway. Thanking dead things seems like a bit of a slippery slope to start down."

I laughed and craned my neck up to kiss him. "Make love to me, Sebastian Beauchamp-Hedges. Show me that there's only one man for me."

Sebastian's smile was loaded with wickedness. "I thought you'd never ask."

When our lips met this time, there was far more heat in the kiss, both Sebastian and I giving our all to it. Trousers were removed in record time to leave us both naked and straining against each other. It was a given that I wouldn't last long, but then first times between Sebastian and I were always like this, the flame of lust needing to be dampened before we could go at it in a more leisurely fashion. It was both a blessing and a curse. I reached down and took Sebastian's cock in my hand, capturing his moan with my mouth as I stroked the sensitive flesh just the way he liked it. His hands weren't idle either, fingers stroking and squeezing as he relearned every inch of me.

I urged Sebastian onto his back, his blue eyes heavy-lidded and his cheeks flushed as he stared up at me with an expression that could only be classed as adoration. "Are you going to fuck me, Jack?"

"I certainly am." I pushed his thighs up, letting my gaze trail over the more intimate parts of Sebastian revealed by the change in position. I loved every part of him, but I'd be lying if I denied that there were certain parts of him that I loved more than others. I leaned forward, licking a heated line up from his thigh to the crease of his ass until I found my target, Sebastian jerking and letting out a loud moan at the first stroke of my tongue against the sensitive skin. He tasted salty. Probably as a result of his extended

immersion in the sea earlier that day. His moans increased as I went to work on him, Sebastian's hands lowering, his fingers tangling in my hair as he pressed me more firmly against him. I gave the task my full focus, using my tongue to drive him crazy. At least until something occurred to me, and I was forced to pull back to release a laugh.

Sebastian lifted his head to stare at me, his brows knitted together. "What in the world could possibly be funny at a time like this?"

I stared at him, unable to rid myself of the grin on my face. "You're a prince."

"And?"

"I'm..." I gestured at the spit-slickened area I'd just given the very best of my oral ministrations. "I've just had my tongue buried in a prince's ass. It's funny."

Sebastian let out a sigh full of exasperation. "Yeah, hilarious." He wrapped his fingers around my biceps and tugged me up his body. "How about fucking a prince?"

"No, I've never done that."

He rolled his eyes. "No, I meant how about doing it now before I spontaneously combust." He produced oil from somewhere on the bed that he must have sourced at the same time as the lantern. He smoothed it over my cock, the slide of his hand over my shaft making my eyes roll back in my head. "Just... if you could manage not to succumb to a fit of giggles in the middle of it, that would be nice."

I lined my cock up, pressing against Sebastian's hot center. "I can't make any promises." He could hardly blame me, surely? I'd fucked him many times, but never knowing who he really was. What he was. It gave the

whole thing a rather surreal edge. Jack Shaw, a small-time farmer from Riverbrook, was about to bury his cock in a prince.

“It’s just me.”

“Just you. Got it.” I pushed forward, both of us releasing a moan as I slid in, Sebastian lifting his hips to wrap his calves around my back. He felt good. In fact, he felt more than good. This part of our relationship had never been a problem. Well, unless you counted me being so determined not to let it happen at the start, and then failing miserably. I lowered my lips to Sebastian’s as I started to move, wanting to kiss him at the same time as I fucked him.

I didn’t laugh, the deep throb of pleasure through my body ensuring that I could think of nothing else for the next few minutes except for the rising heat in my body as I tried to stave off my orgasm for as long as I could. It occurred to me at one point that we’d gotten quite loud, and sound carried easily on the ship. Hopefully, everyone was asleep, or there were going to be a few people tomorrow who wouldn’t be able to look us in the eye. What if the queen could hear us?

My hips stuttered at that thought, Sebastian delivering a stinging slap to my ass. “No.”

“No, what?”

“Whatever it is that you’re thinking, stop thinking it.”

I did. Even if she could hear us, the damage was already done. Sebastian came first, his head thrown back, the tendons in his neck standing out as he spilled onto his abdomen. My orgasm followed shortly after. I buried my face in Sebastian’s sweaty neck as I rode a wave of pleasure that seemed to go on for quite some time before I finally came back to earth to find Sebastian’s fingers tracing soothing patterns on my back. I threw a leg over

his and burrowed closer, my hand coming to rest just below his nipple. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I couldn’t see his smile, but I could hear it in his voice.

We were silent for a time until I struggled up onto one elbow to stare down into his face. “Sorry about the... er... laughing. You know when I was er...”

Sebastian’s fingers stilled on my skin, his lips twitching. “What man doesn’t want an enthusiastic tonguing to be interrupted by a bout of hysterical laughter?” His expression turned more serious. “But... honestly, you need to forget about it, Jack. I do. If I’m honest, part of not telling you was probably to do with the fact that saying it makes it true.”

I considered what he was saying. I guessed it made a sort of twisted sense. He’d certainly never acted like a prince in all the time that I’d known him. Although, there was that slight habit he had of sitting around and watching while I did things. Like when tents needed to be put up, or food needed to be prepared. Almost like he’d grown up being waited on hand and foot. I decided that was a conversation for another day. If I was clever, I might even be able to turn it to my advantage. If he was so eager to prove that he wasn’t at all prince-like, he could start by doing his share of the tasks. “I think it’s going to be impossible to ignore, given that we’re heading to Silverwood.”

Sebastian grimaced. “I’m aware of that. Why do you think I’ve never been back?”

I laid my head on Sebastian’s chest, contemplating what the next week might bring once we reached Padora. My distaste of palaces was no secret, and I didn’t think for one moment that this one would be any different. “I’ve been thinking about your fiancé.”

Sebastian's chest went rigid beneath my cheek. "Oh!" There was a great deal of care taken with that single word, a fact that made me smile.

"I've decided that he can't have you, that you're all mine. And if he thinks that he can take you from me, then he better be prepared to fight to the death."

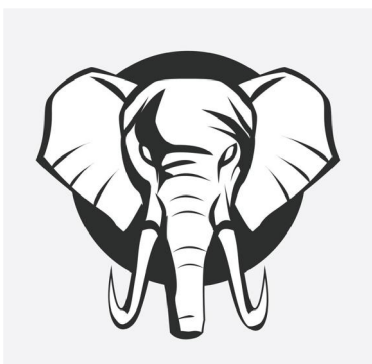
"To the death?" Sebastian sounded highly amused. "I wouldn't have thought an idiot like me would be worth that?"

I finger-walked my way across his chest. "Oh, you're not, but... I don't share very well. Ask my mother. She'll tell you all about the time that I shoved Dillon's head in a puddle because he tried to take one of my toys."

Sebastian laughed. "So, I'm your toy, am I?"

I shrugged. "Something like that." Smiling, I closed my eyes, the rigors of the day finally catching up with me and exhaustion settling like a blanket over me. "Need to sleep."

A hand came to rest on the back of my head, the gentle pressure reassuring. As were the lips that followed it to press a gentle kiss to my brow. "Go to sleep, farm boy. I'll be here when you wake up."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

SEBASTIAN

Silverwood

Despite having been warned how ill he was, the first glimpse of my father was somewhat jarring. He was propped up amongst a sea of pillows, his complexion almost as white as the bedding that surrounded him. My mother had insisted on me seeing him alone, stating that it would do us a world of good to speak in private. She'd also insisted on the meeting taking place almost as soon as I'd set foot in the palace, before the inevitable gossip could reach his ears. It was for that reason that I still had the salt of the sea clinging to my clothes as I stepped inside his bedchamber.

There was a moment where the king of Padora stared at me with no sign of recognition on his face. Had I changed that much? Or was his illness so advanced that it had affected his cognitive skills? The latter was a question I probably should have asked prior to entering the room, but as usual, my mother had known just the right buttons to press to get me to do her bidding.

My father's brow creased, and he attempted to situate himself higher on the pillows, the effort triggering a choking fit. I rushed to his side, steadying

him with a hand on his back, and lifting the glass of water by the bed to his lips so that he could take a few gulps. Once he had, he settled back on the pillows, his brow beaded with sweat. I retrieved my hand, the skin of his back hot through his pajamas. Whatever this illness was, it had left him a mere shadow of the man he used to be. Although, I supposed you couldn't discount time as being a factor, given that years had passed since I'd last seen him. "Do you know who I am?"

Blue eyes, very much like my own, fastened on my face as he turned his head my way. "I may be dying, Sebastian, but that doesn't mean I'm a complete nincompoop."

"Are you?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Dying, or a nincompoop?"

"Dying." The word stuck in my throat.

He let out a sigh. "Your mother seems to think so, which is not exactly a vote of confidence. Hence her insisting she rush off and drag you back here. I don't plan on doing it any time soon, though, if I can help it." His gaze trailed slowly over me, a keen intelligence still present in his eyes despite his poor physical condition. "I didn't think she'd find you. Or even if she did, I didn't think she'd convince you to return. Not after all these years."

I held my arms out to the side. "Well, here I am."

A slight smile appeared on my father's lips. "Here you are. A man, not a boy."

I pulled a chair to the side of the bed and lowered myself into it. "Don't think I haven't noticed that you haven't answered my question."

My father gestured to the small table at the side of the bed where a cold compress lay. "Can you...?" I obediently lifted it to his forehead and held it there. He let out a small sigh of pleasure. "Which question?"

“The one about whether you’re dying or not.” I wasn’t sure what I was angling for. Perhaps I was hoping he’d tell me not to be so ridiculous, that I was a fool to have come all this way. Whatever our relationship might have been in the past, he was still my father.

“Much as I hate for your mother to be proved right, I think I probably am. I’ve been in this bed for months, and I only grow worse, not better. No matter how many people poke and prod me, and no matter how many things are smeared over my skin or poured down my throat.” The words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I was grateful for my father changing the subject before I was forced to come up with a response. “Where did your mother find you?”

“Riverbrook. It’s in Cerensai.”

“Never heard of it. What in the blazes were you doing there?”

Should I tell him about Jack? I was torn. While that was another piece of information it would be better to hear from me, there was a high possibility of it triggering an argument. Did I want to be the son who returned after years of absence only to fall into an argument with his dying father at the first opportunity? Not really. Therefore, I settled for a shrug.

My father waved a hand and I removed the cold compress, placing it back on the table in its original spot. He cleared his throat. “How was the voyage?”

“Fine... Well, apart from the small matter of the leviathan determined to sink the ship and eat everyone on it, but as you can see it wasn’t successful.”

My father seemed to perk up slightly. “What happened to it?”

“It’s dead.”

“You killed it?”

“A few of us did, Leofric included.”

“Ah, Leofric.” My father gave a fond smile, and I did my best not to care that no such smile had come my way. “How is he?”

“He’s good.”

“And his sister and nephew?”

“Also good. His nephew is here. I’m sure he’ll pay you a visit at some point. Just be warned that when he does, he talks a lot. You may need to feign sleep to get him to stop.”

My father nodded. “And how are you?”

I bit back the urge to respond with, ‘Do you care?’ settling for a shrug, and a casually thrown out “I’m okay.”

Keen blue eyes scrutinized my face searching for the lie in my words. He heaved himself a little higher on the pillows, succeeding this time. “Why did you leave the way you did?”

I sighed, any hope of getting through this reunion without dredging up the past dashed. But then, I should have known that illness or no illness, my father wouldn’t have mellowed that much over the years. “The way I did?”

My father’s mouth twisted. “Suddenly. Without a word. Under the cover of darkness. Not leaving so much as a note behind. Your mother cried for days.”

Nothing about his feelings. Just my mother’s. “You know why I left.” Would he deny the truth of that statement? If so, the argument I was trying so hard to avoid probably wasn’t going to be that far away.

There was a long silence before my father spoke. “Leaving just because you didn’t want to get married was a little extreme.”

He made it sound so simple. I regarded him steadfastly, refusing to blink. “I was twenty-one-years-old, and you gave me an ultimatum.” My father opened his mouth, but I didn’t give him a chance to interrupt. “And don’t try and dress it up as being anything other than an ultimatum. You basically told me that either I got married, or I would be a huge disappointment to the family. So that disappointment made life easier for you and removed himself from the situation.”

“I didn’t mean for you to...” My father trailed off, struggling for words. “You needed a steady hand, that’s all. Someone to calm you down. And not Leofric. He tried, but you walked all over him. You knew exactly how to twist him round your little finger. Prince Esteban would have been a perfect choice. You could have at least hung around for long enough to meet him, but no, you had to sneak away and break your mother’s heart instead.”

“I didn’t want to get married at twenty-one.”

“There were a lot of things you didn’t want to do.” Another sigh. “Why couldn’t you have been more like your brother?”

I let out a breath. It was hard to believe that after nearly eight years, we were still having the same arguments. Time didn’t heal some wounds, apparently. And I was still being compared to Troy. Perfect Troy, who never put a foot wrong, and was the ideal heir to the throne. “Is *he* married?”

My father frowned. “Not yet.”

“So he’s not married at thirty and that’s fine, but I’m the dreadful son for refusing to get married at a much younger age?”

“Troy is very different to you. He’s always been more sensible and mature.”

I stared down at my lap, fighting the urge to say something I’d probably regret. When I had myself under control, and there was no risk of the words

escaping, I lifted my head to find my father staring at me curiously. He'd no doubt been expecting me to storm off. That's what the old Sebastian would have done. Well, I'd show him sensible and mature. I was very different to the person who'd left this palace so many years ago. "You should count yourself lucky that Troy and I were born in the order we were. Imagine if I'd been the heir to the throne."

To my surprise, my father's lips twitched. "I think I've had that nightmare a time or two."

I met his gaze. "So have I."

For a moment we shared something dangerously close to amusement, and I couldn't think of a time when that had ever happened before. My father looked away first. "You would be a good ruler in many ways."

I stared at him incredulously. "Wait! Did you just say something complimentary about me?" I leaned forward. "This, I've got to hear. Go on. In what way?"

"You're more laidback. Your brother is..."

"An uptight prig?"

"More... serious. And you always cared about people. That's the mark of a good ruler."

It seemed the list had come to an end, and I knew I shouldn't be disappointed that it had been such a short list, but I was. My father reached out to lay his hand over mine, forcing me to notice how heated his skin was once more. "I only wanted to see you settled."

"And I couldn't think of anything worse at the time."

"At the time?" My father lifted his head from the pillows and fixed me with a stare. "I know you've done nothing but rove the thirteen kingdoms since you left. Drinking. Gambling. Warming the bed of whoever took your

fancy. It wasn't appropriate behavior for a prince. A prince shouldn't spend his life wandering aimlessly around."

I smiled. "Ah, but that was the beauty of it. I wasn't a prince once I left here. I was just Bass."

My father grimaced at the name. "Denial doesn't make things go away."

"No, but it stops it from being obvious to anyone else. Do you know, not one person ever asked me if I was Prince Sebastian Beauchamp-Hedges?" I didn't add that there'd been a few close calls, such as the king of Osagezia, who'd taken one look at me and been convinced that he knew me. I could only assume he'd met my parents or Troy at some juncture in time, my brother resembling me in looks, even if our personalities were completely different.

"Why did you say 'at the time?' That makes it sound like something has changed. Has it?"

I tapped out a rhythm on my thigh. "I thought you were provided with constant updates about me?"

"We are, but your mother always paid more attention than I did. I got sick of hearing the same thing again and again."

I raised an eyebrow. "The drinking, the gambling, and the... rest?"

My father nodded.

It seemed we were doing this. Well, we were never going to see eye-to-eye, so what did it matter? And Jack was here in the palace, so it wasn't like news of our relationship, especially now that we were reconciled, wasn't going to reach my father's ears eventually. "I met somebody. Somebody who matters a great deal to me. He's..." I smiled as I pictured Jack. "Well, he's impossibly stubborn and drives me absolutely crazy, but I wouldn't

have it any other way. I wasn't interested in settling down until I met him, but now I can see its merits."

"And he doesn't care about your past?"

I laughed. "I wouldn't go as far as to say that he doesn't care, but we're working our way through any issues that arise." At least we were if threats of violence, stony silences, and having sex until we'd both forgotten about whatever had caused the argument in the first place counted as working through things.

"Is he a prince?"

That question had me snorting out loud. "No, thankfully. He's about the furthest thing from a prince you could imagine. He's a farmer." I raised my chin, daring my father to display the sort of attitude that Jack always expected people to have when it came to his status.

"But he makes you happy?"

"He makes me extremely happy."

"Is he here?"

I nodded, and my father grimaced. I narrowed my eyes at him. "I don't need your blessing."

"It's not that. It's..."

"It's what?"

"Prince Esteban is here."

The words didn't make any sense. "Why would he be here?"

"He heard about your possible return. He wanted to be here for it so he could finally meet you."

"Why?"

"Why do you think?"

I thought about it long and hard, only one possible reason coming to mind, but that was so ridiculous that I didn't want to say it out loud. "He can't have waited."

My father shrugged.

"It's been years. Are you seriously telling me that he's waited all this time? What kind of..." I narrowly avoided using the word fool. "...man does that?"

"A dedicated one. One who apparently thinks you would be a good match."

I ran a hand through my hair while I tried to marshal my thoughts. "He can't be here. Jack's here. And if Jack finds out that he's here, my life won't be worth living. Someone needs to get rid of him before Jack finds out."

"You would probably be the best person to do that."

I rose from my chair and strode over to the door, pausing once I reached it to look back at my father. There was more color in his cheeks than there had been when I'd arrived, as if the verbal sparring had done him some good. "I'll come back later."

He nodded. "I'll be here. Try not to create too much drama. You'll give your brother an ulcer."



The brother in question was waiting for me in the hallway. We both stared at each other in silence for a few moments, me taking in all the silk finery he wore, and him probably wondering how long it had been since I'd washed my shirt. Which was a fair thing to ponder, given that it had once been white, but was now more of a dull gray color. I was surprised my father hadn't mentioned it. He must be slipping.

Troy hadn't changed that much, a few more lines around the eyes maybe, and his hair was a bit shorter than the last time I'd seen him, but apart from that he looked exactly like the brother I'd always had a fractious relationship with. I gave a quick nod of recognition. "Troy."

He returned the nod. "Sebastian." He came a few steps closer, studying me like I was an interesting bug he'd found in the palace gardens. "So, the rumors are true then, and you're back."

"Either that or you're seeing things."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "You better not have upset Father."

I rolled my eyes. "Or... you'll do what? Will you tell Mummy? That's what you used to do when we were children."

"Only when you deserved it, and you refused to listen to common sense, which granted, was the majority of the time."

I shook my head. Both conversations so far had been like being transported back in time. My father was still obstinate and hung up on the fact that I'd up and left without his permission, and my brother was as annoying as he'd ever been. It didn't bode well for the rest of my time here. I attempted to step around Troy, but he blocked my way. "Why are you back, Sebastian?"

"Why am I back?" Of all the ridiculous questions. "Why do you think? To see Father, of course. Why else would I be here?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm asking."

I stared at Troy, trying to work out what was going on in that head of his. "And then I thought I'd murder you and steal the throne for myself."

"Ha!" He held up a finger and pointed it in my direction, his eyes glittering. The gloating was short-lived, his expression clouding. "Wait! You never wanted the throne before. Do you want it now?"

I pushed past him and set off down the corridor with Troy hot on my heels. He was like an annoying fly that was impossible to get rid of. “That’s right. I spent years determined not to come back here, but after five minutes under this roof, I’ve decided that it should all be mine. I’m going to marry Prince Esteban, despite the fact that we’ve never met and I’m a little worried about his sanity when he’s apparently been waiting for me to come back. And then the two of us are going to be extremely happy together, stuck forever between these four walls. I expect we’ll have a lot of children just so we’ve got something to do during the day.”

“You’re being sarcastic.”

I bit my lip to stop myself from laughing. Coming to a halt, I turned to face my brother. “And you’re still just as slow on the uptake as you always were. If I compiled a list of top ten things I don’t want out of life, sitting in Silverwood and being king would be at the top of my list.”

Troy lifted his chin. “What’s wrong with Silverwood?”

“It’s a palace.” I sounded like Jack, the thought making me smile.

Troy’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What’s so funny?”

I sighed. “You wouldn’t understand.” I shook my head. “Anyway, I don’t have time to deal with your paranoid delusions right now. I need to find Jack.”

“You were the one that said you were going to murder me.”

“It was a joke!” Troy stared at me without blinking. I had a suspicion that he was waiting for me to apologize. He was going to be waiting a long time. I wasn’t some palace employee trying to ingratiate myself with the man who would one day be king. I was his brother. To prove the point, I gave him a little shove. “Where’s Jack?”

“Jack?” Troy’s eyebrows knit together. “Who’s Jack?”

I set off walking again. “Jack, Jack. I’m assuming you were introduced to him once I’d left. Dark hair. Green eyes. Atrociously bad bow. You must have noticed that, surely? He has this thing where he seems to believe that bowing lower makes up for the lack of elegance. Don’t tell him I said that, though.” Something suddenly occurred to me. “Oh, he may have forgotten to bow altogether. He has a habit of doing that as well, or not doing it should I say.” I cast a quick glance back over my shoulder to find that Troy’s look of confusion hadn’t waned in the slightest. “Honestly, Troy, you need to get a lot better at remembering people once you’re king. It’s bad form to forget your subjects’ names two seconds after meeting them. Not that Jack is one of your subjects, but you know... it pays to practice.”

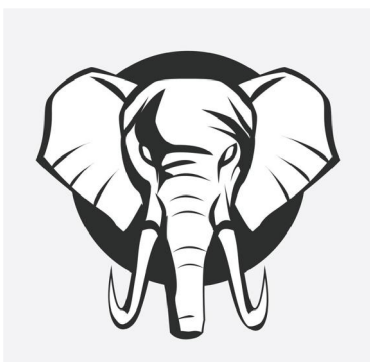
“I can remember people’s names. Far better than you can. And I don’t even have to sleep with them first.” I let that one go with only a slight twitch. “But I wasn’t introduced to a Jack. And I didn’t see anyone who matched that description. The only person I was introduced to was a young man named Ansel. He was...” Troy paused, presumably working out how to put it delicately. “A rather lively young man. He didn’t have green eyes, though.”

I stopped dead. “You weren’t introduced to a Jack?”

Troy shook his head. “I said so, didn’t I?”

“Then where is he?”

Troy blinked. “I have no idea. But then, I still don’t have any idea who he is either.”



CHAPTER TWELVE

JACK

I hadn't been sure whether to be relieved or disappointed that once we'd reached Padora, our journey to the palace had taken less than half a day. Despite my protestations to the contrary, I'd been consigned to a carriage again, Sebastian and I sneaking heated looks at each other while his mother pretended not to notice. She'd probably been yearning for those bygone days of me refusing to even look in her son's direction.

When I did manage to tear my eyes away from Sebastian, it was hard not to notice that Padora was just as beautiful as Sebastian had always described it to be. It was far more picturesque than Cerensai, with its lush greenery, bright flowers, and bustling wildlife. I'd even spotted one of the same birds that Sebastian had conjured on Cassemir's ship and had tried to recreate in Riverbrook with dire results. It had flown so close to the carriage that I'd been able to see every detail on its tiny wings.

The palace itself was just as breathtaking. It resembled Arrowgarde in being hewn from white rock, but where Arrowgarde had favored white and gold, Silverwood had... well, silver. The clue was in the name. It also resembled Arrowgarde in being situated at the center of a sprawling town,

in comparison to Chestershire where the inhabitants had all been housed within the safety of a high wall. I was becoming quite the expert at comparing royal houses. Not that that was a skill I'd ever wished for.

The arrival of the carriage at Silverwood had caused quite the stir, citizens lining the road in the hope of catching a glimpse of the queen. The more people that gathered, the lower I'd sunk in my seat, hoping the narrowness of the windows, and the speed at which we were traveling—which was far too slow for my liking—was enough to keep me out of sight. Sebastian, of course, had displayed no such reticence, sitting up straighter to smile and wave, people doing a double-take as his identity registered. The queen had waved too, hers more restrained, and far more regal than her son's greetings.

Once we'd reached the palace, things had only grown more chaotic. I'd begun to think that there was no such thing as arriving quietly at a palace, that palace employees believed they weren't doing their jobs correctly if they weren't both industrious and ever so slightly manic. It was all big hand gestures and a pace no man should have to suffer unless he was running away from something.

I'd lost sight of Sebastian somewhere in the hubbub—memories of Arrowgarde coming flooding back. At least this time—as I stood on tiptoe and searched for Sebastian above the heads of the crowd without success—I had the steadfast presence of Leofric at my side. He'd managed to stick close, his hand sometimes grabbing my arm to steer me in a particular direction when there was a danger of us being separated. I turned his way, Leofric raising an eyebrow at my scrutiny. “I should have dumped Sebastian and made a play for you instead.”

The eyebrow hitched a little higher, surprise eventually giving way to a smile. One that said he knew I wasn't serious but would play along anyway. "You should have. Imagine how much more peaceful your life would have been."

I pasted a wistful expression on my face. "It would have been all hot springs and mature conversations."

Leofric's smile grew wider. "And I never kiss any of my past lovers. Mainly because they won't let me, and their numbers are far fewer."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What exactly has Sebastian been saying?"

Amusement shone in Leofric's eyes. "Oh, not much. Just that you get upset when other people touch him, that you can be a little possessive on occasion."

I shook my head wearily. I'd given up on ever getting through to Sebastian that the way he interacted with people from his past wasn't normal. No matter how I phrased it, he struggled to grasp the concept.

The crowd in the room had thinned somewhat, enough that I could see the front of it, which was dominated by a lot of tall, blonde people—male and female. There was no disputing that they were all incredibly beautiful. I frowned at one of them, his resemblance to Sebastian unmistakable. Well, if Sebastian ever cut his hair short and dressed in silk. I nudged Leofric and jerked my head toward the focus of my attention. "Who's that?"

Leofric followed my gaze before leaning in to whisper in my ear, the room no longer as loud as it had been previously. "That's Troy. He's the heir to the throne of Padora, and of course Sebastian's older brother. They look alike, don't they?"

"Are they alike? Apart from looks, I mean?"

Leofric let out a quiet snort. “Not even slightly. Sebastian was always the black sheep of the family.” His gaze shifted to the left. “And the three women over there are Sebastian’s sisters, Amelia, Jasmin, and Lily.” He inclined his head to a willowy young man who stood surveying all the fuss with a slight smile on his face. “And that’s Laurence, Sebastian’s younger brother. Sebastian’s father is obviously not here due to his illness. Official introductions will happen in a few minutes once the joy at the queen being back has died down.”

Official introductions! I couldn’t think of anything worse than being introduced to three princesses and two princes. One was bad enough, but five of them? I turned my head to the side, noting the proximity of the open door to where I stood. I edged a bit closer to it, Leofric frowning when he noticed what I was doing. I gestured to the door. “I might just...”

“Jack!” There was a warning in his voice. “Don’t make me tell Sebastian I’ve lost you. The introductions will be fine. A few minutes and then it will all be over. No one finds it fun, but you just grin and bear it and try not to trip over your feet.”

“Yeah, I...” I didn’t waste any more time talking, turning on my heel and making my way into the long corridor that lay outside the room. Knowing that turning left would take me back the way we’d come in, I turned right. I might not be up for enduring formal introductions, but I wasn’t quite at the stage of fleeing the palace altogether. I did, however, want to find Sebastian. Introductions with him by my side were very different to introductions where he’d left me to fend for myself. Also, there was the not inconsequential matter of Sebastian having disappeared before we’d established what we were to each other within the realms of Silverwood. His mother might know the truth, but that didn’t mean he wanted his

siblings to know. It seemed an important thing to clarify before I went introducing myself to people. Therefore, the plan was to find him, and berate him for not having realized that. After all, Sebastian was still meant to be on his best behavior following our short separation, not gallivanting off to wherever the urge took him.

I'd half expected Leofric to pursue me in the hope of dragging me back, but a glance over my shoulder revealed an empty corridor. That was a wise decision on his part. He would have been wasting his breath.

The palace was just as opulent as Chastershire's had been. It was crazy to think that the same Sebastian that had slept rough, and had seemed to embrace the experience—certainly to a far greater degree than I ever had—had grown up in a place like this.

I came to a stop by a painting that stretched all the way up to the ceiling, its sheer size making the subjects immortalized in oil on its canvas twice as large as they would be in real life. Even though this was a much younger version of her, the queen was immediately recognizable. I studied the face of the man by her side, who was presumably the king, for signs of Sebastian. It was there in the shape of his nose and his chin, even if most of his coloring seemed to come from his mother.

All five children were in the painting. I started with the youngest, Laurence looking no older than about seven or eight, his short stature meaning he was front and center. Sebastian's sisters seemed much happier to pose than any of the boys did, their respective heights seeming to suggest that there was very little age gap between them. As the oldest child, Troy was the tallest. Even at that age, he had the look of a boy all too aware that he would one day be king, his posture a carbon copy of his father's.

The same couldn't be said for Sebastian, a slight smile coming to my lips as I took in the painted version of him, one I calculated to be around the age of sixteen. The faraway look in his eyes said that he was posing for the portrait under extreme duress, that he would rather be somewhere else. If I'd ever doubted him saying that he'd never fit in—and who could blame me for doubting him, given the other lies he'd spouted—then the proof was right in front of my eyes. He might be dressed the same as his siblings, and his hair might be shorter, but his body language reeked of a boy who would rather be out adventuring.

Casting a quick glance around to make sure no one was watching, I reached out to touch the painted version of Sebastian, running my fingers lightly over his cheek. The painting was so realistic that it was almost a surprise that it wasn't warm to the touch. Closer scrutiny revealed a few more differences between Sebastian and his siblings. He was far more tanned than they were, like he spent most of his time outdoors. I wondered whether he'd ever gotten into trouble for that. Probably. His mother's hand was on Sebastian's shoulder, and only his, the grip firm enough that it wasn't difficult to imagine that rather than it being a loving touch, she was pinning him in place. She may as well have been trying to hold on to smoke.

Pulling myself away from the painting, I continued my search. I stiffened as a pair of uniformed palace employees passed. But if either of them found a stranger wandering around the palace odd, they didn't confront me about it. Emboldened by their lack of care, I peeked into rooms as I passed. A ballroom. A dining room, the table big enough to seat half the population of Riverbrook. A luxurious drawing room. Another ballroom, the fact that there were two impossible to wrap my head around when I couldn't think of

a single situation that would require a spare. There was one thing that all the rooms had in common, though. None of them contained Sebastian.

The next door I opened revealed a room that housed nothing but shelves, each and every one full of books. I'd never seen so many books in my life. I stepped inside the room, turning in a slow circle and taking in the sight. It didn't matter that I couldn't read. It was still awe inspiring. Where had all the books come from? I reached out a hand to the nearest shelf and ran my hand over the leather spine of one of the books.

"Hello!"

I jumped, spinning around to find a man eyeing me curiously from where he sat at a small table in the corner, one of the books open in front of him. "Er... hi." He was a very handsome man, his dark hair falling over his brow, and his brown eyes large and expressive as he stared at me. I cleared my throat. "Sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you. I didn't realize there was anybody in here. I'll"—I pointed to the door—"be on my way and leave you to your book in peace."

The man smiled. "Oh, please don't. I'm only in here to avoid all the fuss. The queen is due to return today, and everyone has worked themselves up into such a frenzy that I didn't really know what to do with myself. Excitement is so very tiring, don't you think?" It must have been a rhetorical question, as he didn't pause for me to respond. "So, I slipped away and came in here." He gave the book in front of him a loving pat. "Books are always a marvelous escape from the things going on in the world." He gestured to the empty seat opposite him. "If you would like to rest your legs for a moment, then please do feel free to join me."

"I wouldn't want to intrude."

His smile grew brighter. He had a nice smile, one that came across as completely genuine. “Oh, you wouldn’t be. I haven’t had many people to converse with in the last few days. You’d be doing me a favor.”

Well, in that case, it seemed rude to refuse the offer. And I had to admit that the room was rather peaceful, as if there was some essence that leached from the books to lend the atmosphere a restful calm. I took the seat that had been offered and stared at the man curiously. Who was he? His words had given the impression that he didn’t live in Silverwood. But if so, what was he doing here? The man held his hand out, his fingers long, graceful, and very smooth. “Esteban.”

I closed my fingers around his, very aware of my own calluses, and shook. “Jack.”

Esteban lowered his gaze to the book. “Do you like to read, Jack?”

I shook my head. I was reluctant to admit that I couldn’t read. It wasn’t a skill that had ever been required of me in Riverbrook. And quite frankly, the cows didn’t care. But here, surrounded by books, it made me feel somewhat inadequate. “I don’t have a lot of time to read.”

“No?” Esteban’s eyebrows arched in confusion. “What do you spend your time doing, if you don’t read?”

He’d said it like the idea of doing anything else was ludicrous. “I... er... farm.”

“Farm? You mean like animals and crops?”

I stifled a smile. “That’s the usual definition of farming, yes.”

“Interesting.” Esteban leaned closer. “Aren’t you scared?”

“Scared?” I scrutinized his face, trying to work out whether he was joking. When there wasn’t so much as a glimmer of a smile, I realized he was serious. “Of what?”

“The animals.” Esteban waved his hands in an expansive gesture. “Some of them are so big. I saw a cow up close once. It was huge. Quite some beast. I don’t mind telling you that I was relieved that I was in a carriage and it was in a field. One glimpse was enough. I asked the driver to go a different way the next time. I was concerned that the cow might escape. The fence did look quite rickety. I didn’t know what we were supposed to do if we found it blocking the road.”

“Lead it back to the field.”

“Oh, really.” Esteban’s brow furrowed. “You make it sound so simple.”

Keen to change the subject before I blew Esteban’s mind completely, I gestured at the book. “What are you reading about?”

A gleam dawned in Esteban’s eye. “All manner of creatures.” He turned the book to face me and tapped his finger on the picture. “Do you know what that is?”

I stared at it. It was a great bull-like thing, only instead of being on all fours, it stood upright. And it had a man’s chest, instead of a bull’s, its muscles even more defined than Sebastian’s. Great white horns curled out from either side of its head. I shook my head.

“It’s a minotaur. Half man. Half bull. I find things like this fascinating.”

It was a strange choice of reading material for a man who’d professed to fear cows. “Have you ever seen one?”

He clasped a hand to his chest. “Oh, goodness, no. I think I’d die on the spot. What about you?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. I expect one will pop up any day now, but so far, my life has been minotaur free.” I dipped my chin toward the book. “Any griffins in there?”

Esteban turned the book back to face him and flicked through the pages until he found what he was looking for. He turned the book to face me once more so that I could see the picture. I frowned. “Well, that’s not right. It was far bigger than that, and that one looks almost friendly, like you could feed it a couple of large worms and it would be perfectly happy.”

Esteban’s eyes went wide. “You’ve seen one. Not up close, though?”

“It was pretty damn close. Too close.”

“How did you escape?”

“We put a house between us and it. That seemed to do the trick. And then an entire battalion of soldiers hunted it down and killed it.” I decided to skip the part about having to crawl through tunnels to sneak under its feet.

“Gosh!” Esteban was back to clutching his chest. He dropped his gaze to the drawing in the book again. “And I thought the picture was scary enough. Have you seen any other creatures?”

“A troll.” There was a flurry of page flicking and then another picture was thrust in front of me. I gave it a quick glance. “That one’s pretty accurate, beard and all.” I thought for a moment. “Oh, and basilisks. Well, I didn’t see them, or you’d be talking to a stone statue. But they were all around me, and I could hear them, the hissy bastards.”

Another flurry of page flicking, Esteban frowning once he’d reached the page. “Oh, there’s no picture of a basilisk.”

“Makes sense, given that no one can look at them unless you happen to have magic where you can view them through the eyes of an animal. Someone should get Sebastian to draw one. Or... at least describe them to someone who’s capable of drawing. I’m not too sure he is.” Earl came to mind. He was definitely capable of drawing, or at least he had been before

the curse that affected his ability to stay visible had been placed on him. The ceiling of Chastershire's throne room had been a testament to that.

"*Prince* Sebastian?" I looked up to find Esteban with his head cocked to one side, the expression on his face rather strange. "Do you know him?"

What was the best way to answer that question? "I... might. Why do you ask?"

Esteban leaned conspiratorially close, looking right toward the door—which made sense—and then left to where there was nothing but a bookshelf—which made less sense—before speaking. "Between you and me, he's my betrothed. He was promised to me years ago, but then he"—his brow furrowed—"well, I guess there's no other way of putting it, except to say that he disappeared. There must have been some sort of misunderstanding. I waited for him, though. When I promise myself to another, I don't break that promise."

Well, fuck me! What were the chances of me happening to sit down for a cozy chat with my lover's intended? You couldn't make it up. And even worse than that, he was nice. How was I supposed to hate him when he'd been nothing but sweet? I sat back in my seat, doing my best not to let my face show any of what I was feeling. "So, you're Prince Esteban?"

He nodded eagerly. "I am. Third in line to the throne of Ebitus. And in case you're wondering, I kept myself pure."

I certainly hadn't been wondering that. I inhaled too quickly, and ended up choking, the prince shuffling closer when my choking fit showed no signs of abating to hammer on my back with the flat of his hand.

"Here." He passed over a glass of water and I drank from it gratefully, not stopping until it was empty. All the while, Esteban stared at me with a

solemn expression that wouldn't have been out of place on the face of a loyal dog.

“Do you think...?” How was I supposed to say this and keep a straight face? I tried again. “Do you think that Prince Sebastian has also kept himself pure?” Images sprang to mind of how Sebastian and I had spent the last three days of the voyage. Suffice it to say that after our reconciliation, we'd done an awful lot of making up for lost time. There was no part of Sebastian that could be described as pure. I should know. I'd had my tongue in most of those parts.

Esteban blinked a few times. He laced his fingers together in front of him, his movements restless. “I have heard stories.”

“Stories?”

He shot another glance to the door, not continuing until he'd ascertained that it was still firmly closed, and that we were alone. “Stories that Sebastian is not particularly discriminate with where he focuses his attentions.”

Well, that was an especially polite way of saying that he'd heard that Sebastian couldn't keep it in his trousers.”

“But you still didn't... you know? You didn't think that gave you permission to... experiment maybe?”

Color flooded into Esteban's face, even the tips of his ears going red. He really was quite adorable. “The stories might not be true. I felt I should talk to him first. Everyone should be given the benefit of the doubt, don't you think?”

That had never been my policy. Not even close. Prince Esteban was a far nicer person than I was or could ever aspire to be. “It's an admirable belief to have.”

A faint smile appeared on Esteban's lips. "I'll admit that I'm quite nervous to meet him."

"So you've never met?"

He shook his head, his cheeks managing to find another level of fieriness. If he went any redder, he'd be in danger of self-combusting. If there'd been a bucket of water nearby, I would have been tempted to throw it over him. Esteban gave an embarrassed little shrug. "What's he like, Prince Sebastian? Is he intimidating? Does he share my love of books? Will we be able to talk about philosophy until late into the night? Does he have strong feelings about the role of princes and princesses who are unlikely to inherit the throne, and how they fit into the hierarchy of the kingdom?"

"Erm..." There really was no good way of answering Esteban's questions without crushing the image he'd built up in his head. "Sebastian is more..." Esteban leaned closer, hanging on my every word. "Well, he's more a man of action."

Esteban's brow furrowed and he sat back in his seat. "Oh!"

"You should probably just meet him and make your own mind up about him."

He nodded sagely. "You're right, of course." He paused as if choosing his words carefully. "But now that we're friends, do you think you could put a good word in for me?"

"A good word?"

"Tell him what a good husband I would make." He sat up straighter and started ticking things off on his fingers. "I'm intelligent. I'm a good listener." He waved a hand over the book in front of him. "I know a great deal about many things. Please don't think that all I read about is monsters. I know about architecture. I know about the flora and fauna of many of the

kingdoms. I can recite the names of all the royal families in order of age without forgetting anyone, apart from Xuvecia, maybe, because that family is huge and it's so hard to keep up with who they've disowned and who they've accepted back into the fold. It changes so frequently. I can..."

I stopped him before he could go any further. "I'm sure Sebastian will be very impressed with the breadth of your knowledge."

"Really?" A huge smile lit up Esteban's face. "That is such a relief. I hope you can be there when we meet, for moral support, I mean."

I nodded, feeling slightly guilty for the fact that I hadn't been honest. "I hope I can too." I gestured to the door. "I should probably..."

Esteban stood, his chair almost tipping over with the sudden motion. "Oh, of course. I shan't take up any more of your time. And thank you, Jack, you've made me feel so much better."

The funny thing was I felt better too. Sebastian and Esteban were so incompatible that it was ridiculous. Whoever had come up with that match had either been an eternal optimist, or just hadn't cared enough to look beyond the fact that they were of a similar age and both princes.

I left the library and continued on my way. I'd barely rounded the next corner before one hundred and eighty pounds of Sebastian bore down on me and enfolded me in his arms in what he liked to think of as a hug, and I considered more of a necessary thing to have to endure in order to be with him.

He buried his face in my neck and squeezed even tighter. "There you are. I've been searching for you."

Words were quite difficult to get out, but I struggled on gamely. "I... wasn't... the... one... who... disappeared."

“I had to see my father before he heard that I was back in Silverwood from someone else’s lips. Sorry, I should have said something.”

He shifted slightly to the side, and I caught my first glimpse of the man standing behind Sebastian: Troy, Sebastian’s brother, who was, of course, the future king of Padora. Therefore, it didn’t seem appropriate to be locked in an embrace with Sebastian while Troy watched, the expression on his face nothing short of perplexed. I shoved at Sebastian’s chest. “Sebastian, we’re... not alone.”

Sebastian rubbed his cheek against mine, the faint rasp of his stubble making me go weak at knees. “That’s just Troy. He keeps following me. Don’t worry about him. He’ll get bored and go away soon.”

“Or...” I wrenched myself away from Sebastian, the movement so rapid that for once I succeeded. “You could introduce us.”

Sebastian waved an airy hand at his brother. “This is Troy. Troy, this is Jack.”

I held out a hand, and then remembered at the last moment that I was supposed to bow and did that instead. Unfortunately, I still had my arm stretched out in front of me.

When I came back up, Troy’s brows were knitted together. “Oh, you were right about the bow. I’ve never seen one quite like that before. It could definitely use work.”

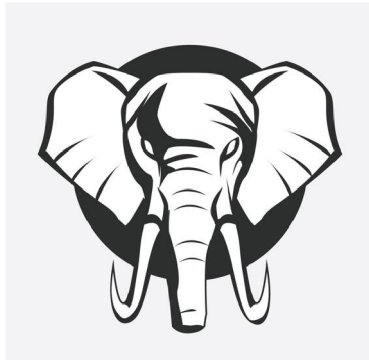
“Or...” My words came out from between gritted teeth. “People”—I aimed a glare Sebastian’s way to make it clear who I was referring to when I said ‘people’—” could stop forcing me in front of royalty and then I wouldn’t have to bow.”

Sebastian wrapped an arm around my shoulders and dragged me closer to him, dropping a kiss on my cheek before turning back to Troy. “Jack’s the

love of my life. My life changed when I met him, and now, I wouldn't be without him."

Troy looked like someone had slapped him in the face with an extremely wet fish. No, strike that, he looked like he was the fish, his jaw dropping open and hanging there for so long that I was tempted to reach out and close it for him. When he finally managed words there were only two of them. "I see."

He didn't look like he saw at all, and Sebastian made the most of his brother's confusion to grab hold of my hand and tug me away down the corridor. I offered Troy a somewhat apologetic shrug as I was pulled away that hopefully said "what can I do?"



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SEBASTIAN

Worried more interruptions might come our way if I dallied, I kept up a brisk pace until I reached the room that had been my destination. Once there, I dragged Jack inside, backed him up against the closed door, and kissed him to remind myself that we were no longer at odds, and I was allowed to do it. Jack's fingers burrowed into my hair, his body pressing against mine as he kissed me back.

Kissing Jack was one of my favorite things in the world, my blood quickly diverting to a lower part of my body. We kissed for far longer than I'd intended, neither of us seeming willing to be the one to end it. And just when one of us seemed to have mustered the willpower to pull back slightly, the other would chase the kiss and it would continue. Jack's lips were like witchcraft. And it was a spell I hoped would never be broken. "I need to stop kissing you," I mumbled against Jack's lips.

"Why?"

Why indeed? That was an excellent question. Why exactly did I need to stop kissing Jack when it felt so good? Brain addled by lust, I found it difficult to recall what had seemed so important that I'd spirited him away.

Ah, wait... that was it. "I need to talk to you about something. Something important."

"We are talking." And then Jack slanted his mouth over mine and kissed me again, all rational thought fleeing once more as we continued kissing. It was only when Jack's hands strayed to the fastening of my trousers that common sense reared its ugly head once more.

I grabbed hold of his wrists to stall his movements. "Wait! There's something more important that I need to tell you."

Jack gave me a seductive look from beneath his eyelashes that tested my willpower to its limits. "More important than this?"

Was it? It could wait until after, surely? I loosened my grip on his wrists, Jack's eyes flaring with triumph. I tightened my grip again. "No! Stop seducing me, with your eyes, and your lips, and your hands." Jack's lips quirked into a smile as I hastened to get the words out before I changed my mind. "No secrets, remember. And I'll be the one who gets it in the neck when you find out that I knew something for longer than five minutes that I didn't tell you. So... behave yourself."

I let go of Jack's wrists and he obediently crossed his arms over his chest. "You don't normally want me to behave myself. That's usually the opposite of what you want."

I let out a sigh. A horny Jack was a very difficult Jack to turn down. I curled my fingers around his biceps and held his gaze. "My father told me something important. Something that you're not going to like. Promise me you won't get mad."

Jack frowned. "I can't possibly promise that without knowing what you're going to say, but I promise to *try* not to get mad."

Knowing that was as good as I was going to get, I pressed on. “You’ve got to realize that there was no way I could know this. My mother didn’t say anything, I promise. I don’t even know if he was here before she left for Cerensai. I’m assuming not, and I don’t think he was invited by anyone. I think he just turned up.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Get to the point, Sebastian.”

“Prince Esteban is here... He’s—”

“Your betrothed, I know.”

“How?”

“I met him. Just now.”

I stared at him. He seemed extremely calm about the whole thing. “And what happened?”

Jack’s lips twitched. “I murdered him with the biggest and heaviest book I could find, and then I buried him in the palace grounds. We don’t need to concern ourselves with him anymore. I’m hoping his family won’t be too upset. But if they are, and they come for me demanding retribution for the loss of their son, you’ll protect me, right?”

I lifted one of his hands and checked his fingernails for dirt. There wasn’t any that I could see. I checked the other hand. Same result.

Jack watched me with great amusement. “What are you looking for?”

“Dirt.”

“From what. Oh, from me burying him, you mean?”

I nodded.

“I wore gloves.”

“Right.” This wasn’t good. A prince being murdered in another kingdom would cause no end of scandal. I needed a plan. We’d have to leave immediately. We could escape over the border into Theoporia, and from

there, find a ship to return to Cerensai. We might even be able to convince Princess Surander to help us. She would be in the neighboring kingdom of Theoporia by now, with her new husband, one of the princes of Theoporia. Her family did owe us for the retrieval of the artifact, and she'd obviously liked Jack. Some might even say she'd had a bit of a soft spot for him. It would be fine. Even if we lived as outlaws for the rest of our lives, we'd be together, and that was all that mattered.

Jack erupted into laughter, and I stared at him. "You actually believe me, don't you? Of course, I didn't murder him. There really wasn't time for that even if I wanted to. We just talked."

Relief fluttered through my chest, making me feel ten tons lighter than I had only moments before. "You talked. About what?"

"Books. Minotaurs. Griffins. Basilisks. Oh, and you."

Mirroring Jack's posture, I crossed my arms over my chest, regarding him steadily. "You seem very calm about him being here. You do realize that my parents probably still harbor hopes of seeing the two of us married, don't you?"

Jack gave a long, slow nod. "I'd kind of worked that one out. However, now that I've met him, I know that won't happen. They'd have to drag you kicking and screaming down the aisle." Jack levered himself away from the door and pushed past me to go farther into the room. He let out a long, low whistle as he got his first proper look at it. "Is this your room?"

He set to work on his boots, unfastening them and shedding his coat before throwing himself into the center of the bed, which was even bigger than I remembered it being.

"It used to be. I'm assuming they haven't given it to anyone else in my absence."

Jack gave a little bounce, spreading his arms wide. “Well, there’s no one else in the bed, so that’s a good sign.”

Copying Jack, I shed my own boots and coat before joining him on the bed, Jack’s words about Prince Esteban still ringing in my head. He rolled my way as I propped myself up on one elbow, his eyes glittering with amusement. “Go on, ask. You know you want to.”

“Ask what?”

“Ask about your fiancé.”

“He’s not my fiancé.”

Jack let out a snort. “He thinks he is. Why do you think he’s here? He’s very eager to meet you.”

My stomach went into freefall, and I searched Jack’s face for signs of emotion he was trying to hide. But there was nothing except for that slight smile, and the twinkle in his eyes. “I won’t meet him if that’s what you want. I’ll avoid him. The palace is big enough that our paths never have to cross.”

“Oh no, you should definitely meet him. In fact, I insist.”

I frowned. “What am I missing here?”

Jack’s smile grew wider. “You two are so mismatched that it’s comical. I don’t know who originally came up with the idea that you’d make a good pair, but I can only assume that they’d never met either of you. Either that or they were high on Moombat at the time. You walk straight into danger. He’s scared of cows. You can’t sit still for five minutes. He spends all his time with his nose stuck in a book. You’ve slept with half the population of the thirteen kingdoms. He... well—hasn’t. You would be bored to tears within a week.”

“He’s scared of cows?”

Jack nodded. “He saw one once and has suffered great anxiety ever since over what might have occurred should the cow have ever found its way out of the field.”

“He sounds...” I couldn’t think of an appropriate term without insulting him.

“Exactly. But”—Jack propped himself up on his elbow so that we were on the same level—“in spite of all that, he’s rather sweet. Naïve and extremely sheltered, but sweet. And handsome of course. Big brown eyes and long eyelashes.”

Fingers curled around my guts and squeezed. “Sounds like you’re rather keen on him yourself.”

Jack’s gaze held mine in a way that said he was deciding whether to tease or not. “Not at all. He just wasn’t what I expected. So”—he reached across and cupped my cheek, green eyes boring into mine—“you should meet him, and you should be polite and very patient. And you should let him down gently. Or even better, you should tell him stories of all your adventures so that he decides for himself that being with you would be a fate worse than death. That way, he’ll convince himself that breaking the engagement was his idea.”

I nodded. If Jack was right, his words made a lot of sense. “If that’s what you want.”

Jack smiled. “It is. Trust me.”

I narrowed my eyes at having the words I usually liked to say to him thrown back at me. “Like you do with me, you mean?”

“Exactly.” Jack’s smile dimmed. “How’s your father?”

I grimaced as I rolled onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. “Not good.” I let out a sigh. “I’ve never seen him like that, with so little physical

strength. Mentally”—I rolled my eyes—“he can still argue with the best of them, but physically, yeah...” I turned my head so I could see Jack. “I told him about you.”

“Yeah?” There was genuine surprise in Jack’s voice. “You didn’t have to.”

“What? You thought I was going to bring you all the way here, and then hide you from my father?”

Jack shrugged. “I might not have liked it, but I would have understood. He’s ill. He needs rest. Not to be faced with his son’s relationship with a farmer.”

“He was fine about it.” Had he been? He hadn’t said anything derogatory, which with my father basically equated to the same thing. “He was the one who warned me that Prince Esteban was here.” I cast a sideways glance Jack’s way. “Not soon enough to stop you from bumping into him, though, but then I could hardly have anticipated you going walkabout.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Couldn’t you?”

I laughed. He was right, of course. I’d known how much Jack hated any sort of formalities, so him slipping away to avoid the official introductions really shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Maybe I’d assumed that Leofric would keep him in line, but then I was assuming Leofric capable of something that I myself wasn’t.

We lapsed into silence for a few moments until Jack shuffled closer, the press of his warm lips against mine announcing his intention. I barely had time to enjoy it before he recoiled with a grimace. “Sorry.”

I blinked at him. “Why are you apologizing for kissing me?”

He rested his forehead against mine. “We just spoke about your father, and how ill he is. It seems... I don’t know, inappropriate.”

I studied his face, his words sincere. “I haven’t seen my father for close to eight years. It’s sad that he’s ill, but life goes on.” It was my turn to grimace. “Does that sound callous?”

Jack shook his head. “It sounds... pragmatic.”

I threaded my fingers through his hair and brought him closer. “Besides it’s just you and me, and we’re on a bed. What else are we going to do to pass the time?”

Jack was still smiling when our lips met. We sank into it easily, lips and tongues moving in tandem, heat building once more. It wasn’t long before Jack rolled on top of me, one of my hands straying down the length of his spine to curl around Jack’s delectable ass. My other hand delved beneath his shirt in search of taut, muscled skin. It wasn’t enough, the need to possess rising like a tidal wave. I rolled us both, trapping Jack beneath me, taking a few precious seconds to enjoy the flushed cheeks and the desire turning his eyes into fiery green orbs, before recapturing his lips. Buttons were unfastened without either of us breaking apart, hands exploring the bare skin it revealed.

And then there was a loud bang, somewhat reminiscent of a door being flung open, both of us freezing, Jack’s eyes wide as he stared up at me. “What the fuck was that?”

I didn’t get a chance to answer before a voice came from the side of the bed. “Oh! I guess I should apologize. It seems that perhaps this wasn’t the best time, but when Mother said you were back, I told her that I didn’t believe it, that if you were back, there would be no way that you wouldn’t have bothered to come and say hello, given how long it’s been since you last set foot in the kingdom. I told her that no brother of mine would ever be so rude. Not even Sebastian.”

I turned my head to meet my sister's gaze. Expecting her to have politely averted her gaze, I was somewhat thrown to see that no such thing had occurred, her eyes narrowed as she scrutinized what little of Jack she could see beneath me. When she'd seemingly run out of things to examine, her blue eyes returned to my face.

"Lily," I said, from between gritted teeth.

She smiled sweetly. "Sebastian."

I rolled off Jack, making sure to tug the corner of the sheet over him as I did to hide his arousal from the prying eyes of my sister. "Jack, this is my sister, Lily."

Despite looking somewhat shell-shocked by the interruption at such a delicate time, Jack still managed to display enough presence of mind to accept the hand that was offered to him and deliver a kiss to the back of it. He cleared his throat. "I would bow, but..." He dipped his chin in a gesture meant to denote that he was lying on a bed, as if any of the three of us weren't aware of it.

I sat up and regarded my sister coolly. "You didn't think to knock?"

Lily placed her hands on her hips. "Oh, well, excuse me for being excited to see my brother."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "You've never been excited to see me before. Not once."

She pressed a hand to her chest, her mouth opening in a parody of hurt shock that I didn't believe for one minute. "You've never been gone for years before. And had I known that I would find you tongue deep in someone"—her gaze slid across to Jack, who was too busy trying to refasten the buttons on his shirt to notice her scrutiny—"else's mouth,

obviously I would have. But it's mid-afternoon. How could I possibly have predicted that you would be busy doing *that*?"

She said "that" like I'd been caught fornicating with the stable boy in the middle of a royal procession. "This is my bedroom, Lily. I thought it was a private space. My mistake."

"And I thought you would have locked your door."

I sighed. If I could turn back time, I most definitely would have. I'd let Jack distract me, though. Plus, I really would have expected anyone who thought about paying a visit to knock, but then I'd forgotten quite how annoying my siblings could be. Just as I thought that, more figures appeared at my sister's back. They were all there, my brother Laurence, and my two other sisters, Amelia and Jasmin. The only one missing was Troy. I groaned. "Why don't you all come in?"

"What are we looking at?" Amelia asked, her hand lifting to wind one of her blonde ringlets around her finger.

Lily pointed at the bed, the sea of faces all following the gesture. "This is Jack. Sebastian was rolling around with him. It seems that all the stories we heard about him were true."

Laurence stepped closer to the bed, his expression curious. "Who's Jack?"

He'd changed the most out of all my siblings, but given that he'd only been thirteen when I left, that was to be expected. He'd been rather gangly the last time I'd seen him, all arms, and legs. At some point he'd grown into them, filling out to be far more muscular. "Jack is—" I didn't get far with my explanation before the man himself interrupted me.

"Jack is wondering if this is the usual way things are done here. If so, Jack, is beginning to think he should have stayed on the ship with the

leviathans.”

“Leviathans?” Jasmin’s eyebrows shot so high that they disappeared beneath her fringe. “Did you see leviathans?”

I climbed off the bed and started ushering them toward the door. It was reminiscent of the way I’d seen Jack herd sheep. Who knew that farming skills would one day prove useful with my family. “One leviathan. Not plural. One was enough.”

“Goodness! What happened?” asked Laurence.

“I’ll tell you later.” I herded them another couple of steps, Amelia doing her best to stand on tiptoes to see Jack over my shoulder. “But you haven’t introduced us. That’s very rude, Sebastian.”

“I’ll live with it.” I hustled them all outside the door and then closed it firmly, still close enough to it to hear Amelia ask if I should be rolling around with another man with my fiancé in the palace. Thankfully, I didn’t hear the answer. I locked the door and then turned back to face Jack. “So... that was my family.”

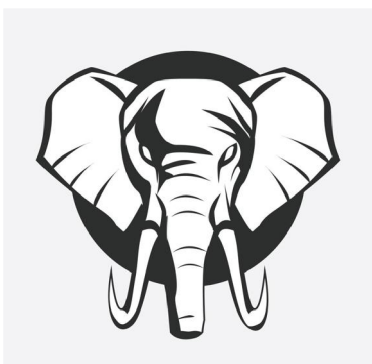
He sank back against the pillows. “They’re as bad as mine.”

I smiled. There were definitely similarities between the two. If they should ever find themselves in the same room, I wasn’t sure whether they would all get along famously, or whether battle lines would be drawn. Hopefully, I’d never have to find out.

Jack propped himself up on his elbows and regarded me from beneath his eyelashes with a look I recognized only too well. “Are you coming back?”

I closed the space between us in only a few strides to dive on top of him, scattering kisses over every inch of skin I could find until I eventually reached his lips. Jack paused mid-kiss. “The door’s definitely locked, isn’t it?”

I liberated a button, which by now was probably growing quite confused whether it was meant to be fastened or not. “The door is definitely locked.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JACK

A meeting had been called by Troy in one of the dining rooms. I hadn't exactly been invited, Sebastian's family still not seeming too sure what to make of me. But as I hadn't *not* been invited either, I'd tagged along with Sebastian anyway, too curious as to the subject to pass up the chance to eavesdrop. While Sebastian headed over to the large wooden table polished to within an inch of its life at the room's center, I took up a more covert position at the edge of the room. The large window I'd stationed myself next to provided a rather breathtaking view of the palace gardens, a few gardeners hard at work plucking and pruning. Either Sebastian's siblings hadn't noticed my presence, or they had no issue with me being there. I chose to believe it was the latter.

They were all there, Troy taking up a position at the head of the table with Laurence and Lily on his right-hand side, and Amelia and Jasmin on the left. Meanwhile Sebastian clambered on the table and sat facing Troy with his legs crossed and his chin resting on top of his clasped hands. Troy threw him a filthy look. "Perhaps you might consider sitting on a chair like

a normal person, Sebastian?” He waved an arm at the sea of empty chairs. “There’s plenty to choose from.”

Sebastian gave a slow blink. “I could...” He left a long pause. “But I don’t want to. I’m comfortable as I am, thank you.”

Troy opened his mouth and then closed it again, seeming to sense that this was a battle he had little chance of winning. “Fine. If you want to sit like an uncouth barbarian, then who am I to stop you?”

I turned away to hide my smile in case anyone looked my way, only half listening as I watched one of the gardeners carefully pruning a rose bush, its flowers a deep red color. It was interesting that the queen hadn’t been invited to this little soiree, which I assumed had been intentional. What did they want to talk about?

I didn’t have to wait long to find out, Troy launching into a little speech without further preamble. “I’ve called this meeting to talk about Father. As you all know, his condition grows worse with each passing day, and we’ve consulted all the available healers in Padora. Mother, understandably, is far too upset to be thinking clearly. Therefore, as the oldest child, and the heir to the throne of Padora, I feel it is my duty to take charge.”

“Take charge?” That was Sebastian. I didn’t have to turn to picture the eyebrow raise that would have accompanied his question. “What does that mean?”

“If you’ll let me finish, I was about to tell you.” There was a sharpness to Troy’s voice that didn’t surprise me at all. It was clear that Troy and Sebastian had a long history of being at loggerheads. One that stemmed from them being very different people despite their similar looks. Where Sebastian was untamed and carefree to the point of recklessness, Troy was far more rigid and proper.

Troy let out a weary sigh before continuing. “As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, we may have consulted all the healers in Padora, but it is my belief that we should not give up so easily.” There was a mumble of assent before Troy continued. “After all, Padora is but one of the thirteen kingdoms. Mother’s absence over the last couple of weeks gave me the perfect opportunity to carry out some preliminary investigations.”

“What sort of investigations?” Laurence asked.

“Investigations into healers whose reputation is second to none. One name kept coming up.” He left a dramatic pause, most of his siblings leaning in. “Magdalena Rohan.”

A few beats of silence met Troy’s announcement until one of Sebastian’s sisters finally asked, “And who exactly is Magdalena Rohan?”

Troy smiled. “Apparently, she is the greatest healer in all thirteen kingdoms. There is no ailment, no curse, no affliction, apart from old age, that she is not capable of curing.” Troy held his arms aloft like he was giving a sermon. A flair for the dramatic definitely ran in this family. “We find Magdalena. We bring her here. She cures Father. And life carries on as it should. With Mother and Father still the safe pair of hands that Padora needs. While there is no doubt that I would make an excellent king, I’m sure that none of us, myself included, wish that to happen prematurely.”

“Find her?” asked Sebastian.

“Ah, yes.” Troy rubbed a hand over his temple. “There is the small matter to contend with that no one seems quite sure of Magdalena’s current whereabouts. A year or so ago, she was in Theoporia, but then her trail seems to have grown cold.”

“So how are we supposed to find her?” asked Lily. “And who exactly is ‘we?’”

Troy gave a nod. “Very pertinent questions.” He threw a glare Sebastian’s way as his younger brother was unable to hold back a snort. “Something to say, Sebastian?”

Sebastian waved his hand in a ‘go on’ gesture. “Oh no, carry on. I can’t wait to hear how you’re going to track this woman down.”

Troy narrowed his eyes at him. “She has a brother, Bartholomew. He’s one of the richest men in Ebitus. If anyone knows where Magdalena is, he will.”

Sebastian’s snort was louder this time. “In case you’re not aware, *brother*, Ebitus lies at least three weeks travel from here.”

Troy’s eyes flashed. “I am well aware of the geography of the thirteen kingdoms. Unlike some, I actually applied myself to my lessons growing up rather than sneaking away to roll in mud.”

Sebastian sat up straighter, looking decidedly affronted. “I did *not* roll in mud. I’m not a pig.”

Lily chimed in. “To be fair, it always looked like that’s exactly what you’d been doing when you returned. You brought half the forest back with you. Do you remember when you came back with that squirrel tucked in your shirt, and we all assumed it was a summon, and nobody said anything until it ran across the banquet table three days later? Mother and Father were not at all happy. You were banned from bringing any real animals back after that.”

“It was injured,” Sebastian said. “It needed a place to recuperate. What was I supposed to do, just leave it there to die?”

Jasmin let out a soft sigh. She was the quietest of Sebastian’s siblings. As such, they all tended to listen to her when she did speak. “Can we get back

to what's important?" She turned to Troy. "If this man is all the way in Ebitus, how are we meant to make contact with him?"

Troy's eyes gleamed. "Because in a couple of days, he will be in Theoporia. Have you heard of the festival that Theoporia holds every year?" There was a chorus of agreement, only Sebastian staying silent. "Well, he's going to be there. I will go to the festival. I will speak with Bartholomew, and then once I know Magdalena's whereabouts, I will find her and bring her back here so she can cure Father."

"You're going to go?" Laurence's question was somewhat hesitant.

Troy's gaze turned his way. "Of course. It's my idea. Therefore, it's my responsibility."

"What if it's dangerous?" Lily asked.

Troy's chest puffed out. "It's a festival. How dangerous can a festival be? Besides, I can look after myself."

Numerous voices all piped up at the same time, the fact that they were all speaking over each other making it difficult to hear what was being said from my position over by the window.

"You can't go." Sebastian's announcement cut through the chatter, everyone falling silent and staring at him.

Troy placed his hands on his hips and gave his brother a decidedly frosty look. "And why is that?"

Sebastian sighed. "Because as you've already pointed out, you're the heir to Padora. It wouldn't be appropriate for you to put yourself in any situation where there might be danger. It may be a festival, but that means there will be hundreds of people there. Can you vouch for the intentions of all those people?" He didn't wait for an answer. "No, I didn't think so. And what about once you've discovered Magdalena's whereabouts? Who's to say

where she is. Tracking her down may not be as easy as you think.” I already knew where this was heading, Sebastian’s next words not coming as any great surprise. “I’ll go. Jack and I. This is what we do. Retrieve things. People. Artifacts.”

Troy’s brows knitted together, and he shook his head. “No. I want to do this myself. It’s my idea.”

“Troy”—Jasmin’s words were soft and cajoling—“he does have a point. Sebastian is far more qualified to succeed in this mission. He’s spent the last few years traveling. Whereas...” She didn’t finish her sentence, but everyone in the room, even me, got the subtext. Troy was far more used to life in the palace. His was a life of creature comforts and servants to do his bidding.

“Do you think I’m not capable?”

Jasmine met his gaze head-on. “Not at all. I’m sure you would do a wonderful job, but what if something does happen to you? Where would that leave us?” All eyes turned to Sebastian. From the looks of slight discomfort on their faces, they were picturing a scenario where, as second in line to the throne, Sebastian ended up as king. Nobody found that thought more horrifying than I did. Apart from Sebastian himself, maybe. He’d certainly gone pale.

There was one small matter that they hadn’t considered, though, and as it looked like Sebastian wasn’t going to say anything about it, that left me to speak up. “What about Sebastian’s magic?”

All heads turned my way. There were no looks of shock, so they’d obviously been aware of my presence. “What about it?” Laurence asked.

“Jack!” The warning in Sebastian’s voice said I should stop talking.

I ignored him. “No. They’re your family. They deserve to know.”

“Know what?” Troy asked, his expression curious.

“Sebastian had an incident in Askophai. It affected his magic. He hasn’t been able to use it in the same way since. His animals tend to disappear before they’re supposed to. It leaves him far more vulnerable.”

From the way his sisters covered their mouths, you would have thought I was discussing Sebastian suffering some sort of erectile dysfunction. Magic was obviously a big thing in this family, which made me wonder what the rest of them could do.

Amelia turned to her brother. “Oh, Sebastian, I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

He frowned. “It’s not a big deal. It’s not like I can’t protect myself without it.”

Troy crossed his arms over his chest. “So, I should go then, as originally planned.”

“Go where?” The voice came from across the room, Kara standing by the door that no one, including me, had noticed opening. “And why wasn’t I invited to this meeting?”

Troy cleared his throat, puffing his chest out and tilting his chin up. “I’m leaving tomorrow to locate a powerful healer who goes by the name of Magdalena Rohan. She will be able to heal Father.”

The queen gave him a frosty stare. “No, you’re not. I expressly forbid it.” Her gaze skimmed over Laurence, Amelia, Lily, and Jasmin. “And that goes for anyone else who thinks this hare-brained scheme is a good idea. Your father would never forgive me if anything happened to you.”

Troy wilted so quickly that he may as well have been a flower robbed of water. “But...”

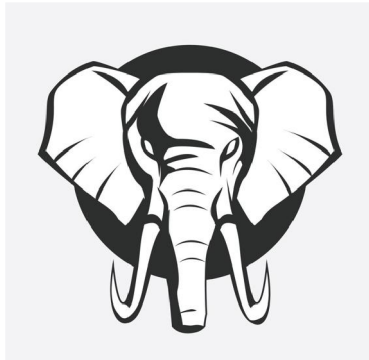
Kara lifted an eyebrow, and he fell silent, his gaze dropping to the floor. Sebastian slid off the table and came to stand in front of his mother. “What about me? Are you going to forbid me from going?”

She studied him for a moment before letting out a sigh. “Would it do any good?”

For a moment they stared at each other, Kara’s lips twitching when Sebastian eventually gave a slow shake of his head. “Then, I won’t waste my breath trying.”

Sebastian smiled. “Then, it’s decided. Jack and I will set off tomorrow for Theoporia.”

I noticed that I didn’t get any say in this. But then, Sebastian was probably still smarting because I’d come clean about his magic. He really needed to work on his ability to share information with people.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SEBASTIAN

Jack had been in a suspiciously good mood all morning. I glanced across at him to find a small smile playing on his lips. “Okay, what’s going on?”

He turned his head my way. “What do you mean?”

“The smiling.” I waved a finger in the direction of his lips. “It’s most unnerving.”

“You would rather I be grumpy?”

“It would be more natural. I just don’t know why you’re in such a good mood.”

“I don’t know.” Jack tipped his head back and squinted at the sun. “I guess it’s just nice to be out of the palace. We’re back to it being just you and me, where I don’t have to watch what I say, or worry about what your family thinks of me. It just seems”—he shrugged—“more us.”

I grabbed hold of his arm and brought him to a stop, Jack amenable enough to let me. “You should have said if you were miserable.”

“I wasn’t miserable. I just don’t belong in a palace. And I’ve told you that numerous times.”

“That makes two of us.”

Jack chuckled. "You really are a terrible prince."

I fluttered my eyelashes at him. "Thank you. That means a lot."

Jack made his way over to a nearby wall and hoisted himself up, his feet left dangling above the ground. "Are you still upset that Leofric isn't accompanying us?"

"No." Jack's green gaze continued to bore into me, in a way that said he wasn't buying it. I rolled my eyes. "A bit. An extra person might have proved useful." Leofric's reasoning had been that if he came, Ansel would want to come too, and that his sister would never forgive him if Ansel ended up in any sort of trouble. I hoisted myself up next to Jack, sitting close enough that our thighs pressed together. "Do you think it was really about Ansel, or do you think he still bears a grudge about the octopus?"

Jack's lips twitched, and he gave a one-shouldered shrug. "You know him better than I do." His gaze raked my face. "How did it go this morning, by the way?"

"How did it go?" I knew exactly what Jack was referring to, but as it wasn't a question I was particularly keen to answer, I played for time. If I was lucky, a dragon might swoop out of the sky and carry me off before I could offer a response.

"With Prince Esteban?"

I squinted at the sky. No dragon yet. There wasn't even a griffin. "Do you think it might rain? It looks a bit cloudier than it did earlier."

"Sebastian! You did talk to him?"

I tore my gaze away from the sky. Jack obviously wasn't going to be distracted that easily. I found it very odd and quite disheartening that he'd gone from wanting to fight the man to the death for me, to championing him after one short meeting. I shrugged. "I was busy."

“Doing what?”

“Saying goodbye to people.”

“Oh, you bothered to do that this time, did you?”

I turned accusing eyes on him. “Don’t you start. I expect to get that from my siblings, but not from you.”

For once, Jack looked suitably chastened. He nudged my knee with his and gave me a pouty look that almost had me smiling. “Sorry.” There was a silence of a few seconds. “Why are you avoiding Prince Esteban?”

“I’m not avoiding him.”

“You’ve been under the same roof for three days. Even the law of averages would state that at some point during those three days, your paths should have crossed. Unless you were taking steps to make sure that didn’t happen. So... I’ll repeat my question, why are you avoiding Prince Esteban? And this time, I want a proper answer.”

I pulled a face. Nobody could accuse Jack of lacking persistence. “I don’t understand why I have to meet him. Can’t he just take the hint and go back to Ebitus? That would be far better.”

“For who?”

I shrugged.

Jack snorted. “For you, maybe. All you need to do is meet him and be yourself. He’ll soon see what a terrible pairing you’d make.”

“Will he, though?”

Jack’s eyebrows knitted together for a moment before dawning comprehension crept into his face and he smiled. “Oh! You think he’s going to be so bowled over by your”—he waved a hand along the length of my body—“physical attributes, that he won’t give a damn about your personality.”

He didn't have to find the concept so funny. "Why not? You were."

Jack's jaw dropped so low that I was worried a passing bird might fly in.
"I was not!"

"Yes, you were. You almost devoured me with your eyes the first time we met. I was concerned for my virtue."

"Your virtue!" Jack had gone a very fetching shade of pink. He went that color during sex sometimes, the thought causing my trousers to suddenly feel a lot tighter. "Your virtue is such a faint memory that I doubt even the most powerful wizard in all thirteen kingdoms could come up with a spell strong enough for anyone to be able to recall it. Your virtue was dead and buried and decomposed to nothing long before I arrived on the scene. Your virtue is the stuff of legends as to whether it ever existed in the first place. I would have been quite happy to walk away and never see you again."

"Would you?" I turned my head and held Jack's gaze.

"At the time, yes. In retrospect..." He leapt off the wall and resumed walking, forcing me to jog to catch up with him.

When he didn't finish the sentence, I bumped him with my shoulder. "In retrospect, what?"

"You know."

"Doesn't mean I don't want to hear it."

"Well, you can't have everything you want."

I smiled, partly at Jack being Jack, and partly because he'd forgotten all about Prince Esteban. With any luck, he would have left before I returned to the palace. It might have been somewhat cowardly of me, but my avoidance of Prince Esteban was partly for the good of mine and Jack's relationship. He could hardly have issues with my so-called fiancé if we hadn't even

been in the same room together. He should be thanking me for not going anywhere near him.



Early evening found us reaching the small village of Rosevale. There were a few double-takes as I strolled through the streets, people frowning as they tried to work out whether I really was who they thought I was. Jack either didn't notice, or more likely refused to give me the satisfaction of mentioning it.

We walked on for a few more minutes before Jack grabbed my arm and pointed to the tavern across the road, the sign proclaiming it as The Misty Oracle. "There. That one."

I looked back over my shoulder and frowned. Something had been bothering me for the last couple of hours, some sixth sense that no matter how hard I'd tried to shake it had stayed with me. Under normal circumstances, allaying my suspicions would have been a simple matter of summoning a hawk. But this was a new world, one in which I was trying to adapt and get by without my magic wherever I could. Therefore, I was relying on other senses, like instinct, the prickling between my shoulder blades only having grown worse over the past hour.

"Are you even listening to me?"

I glanced back at Jack, catching a glimpse of his scowl before returning my focus to the corner of a building where I was pretty sure a dark figure had just slipped out of sight. "No, I'm not."

"Are you serious?" Jack's voice rose to a screech. "At least lie."

"You told me not to lie."

“About serious things. You still need to tell me what I want to hear sometimes, even if it’s not true. That’s how relationships work. Everyone knows that. If you can’t manage that, being with you is going to be impossible at times. So when I ask if you’re listening, please have enough sense to tell me that you are.”

“Okay. I was listening.”

“What did I say, then?”

“Something about...”

Jack’s fingers fastened around my chin, turning my head until I was looking into pretty green eyes. Granted, they were currently blazing with annoyance, but they were still pretty. “I’m over here, Sebastian, craving a moment of your attention if you can possibly drag your eyes away from the house you appear to have fallen in love with. Be aware that it’s not going to suck your cock or let you fuck it.”

I dipped my head until my lips hovered just above Jack’s ear, keeping my voice low. “I’m pretty sure we’re being followed. My fascination is not with the house, but with the man I believe is lurking just around the corner from it.”

Jack went still as he processed my words. “Followed by who? Why?”

“I don’t know, but I intend on finding out.”

Jack moved in a bit closer, tipping his head to one side in a way that would appear to any onlookers like we were about to kiss. “How?”

I jerked my head in the opposite direction to the tavern. “If I remember rightly, there’s an alleyway behind those houses with a sudden right turn. It would provide the perfect opportunity to set up an ambush.”

“What if there’s more than one? Won’t we run the risk of finding ourselves trapped with no means of escape?”

I patted my hip, the sword I wore there a recent acquisition from Silverwood, Lily having presented it to me with the touching words “You know, because your magic is screwed, and Jack might need you to not stand around looking useless if you run into danger.”

Jack’s gaze dropped to it, and he nodded. “You are pretty good with it.”

“I am. What was it you once said, that I must have been trained by a master swordsman, which I took to mean that you were calling *me* a master swordsman too.”

“You would take it as that, but for the record, I didn’t use those words.”

“You implied it.”

“You twisted the words in your head and shaped them into what you wanted them to be.”

I tucked my arm through Jack’s and steered him in the direction of the alley. “Don’t look back.”

“I wasn’t going to.” His brow furrowed. “Won’t it look rather strange that we bypassed the tavern to sneak down an alley?”

“They’ll probably think that we’re going for a quick fuck.”

Jack blinked. “Right, because who wouldn’t want to pass up a nice comfortable bed in a tavern, to fornicate against a wall down a dark, dingy alley. And for the record, I resent you making me look like that sort of person.”

“Can you resent me for it quietly?”

“There’s not the slightest chance of that.”

“I didn’t think so.” Despite my previous experiences with Rosevale having been brief and few, I was right about there being an alley.

Jack and I took the narrow turn, the high walls on either side blocking a lot of the light to create some interesting shadows. Jack’s fingers had

automatically strayed to the string of his bow that—as always— was slung over his shoulder. “Don’t put an arrow through their heart until we know who they are.”

“You think they might be friendly?” Jack sounded perplexed by the idea.

I shrugged. “It’s always possible.”

“If they were friendly, wouldn’t they just have approached us? Why would they be following at a distance? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“No idea.” Despite me telling Jack not to, it was becoming increasingly difficult not to look back. I would have given anything for that hawk, and my fingers even started to curl in anticipation of trying it anyway.

We reached the sharp turn I’d described, a handy bush just happening to be there. Jack pulled me into the center of it, the spines scraping my skin. I was glad that, for once, I was wearing a shirt. It was a tight squeeze, the bush not really made for two. Or for anyone really. I pressed my lips against Jack’s ear, my voice no more than a whisper. “You bring me to all the best places.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Technically, *you* brought me here. I was all for downing a pint of ale in the tavern. Now, shush.”

I shushed, the two of us standing there in complete silence, save for the occasional rustle of leaves when the wind blew, or when one of us shifted slightly. I was about to give in to the urge to say something when Jack cocked his head to one side like he could hear something. And then I heard it too.

Footsteps.

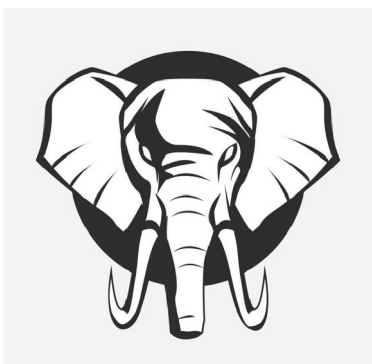
Getting louder.

I held up one finger to demonstrate that it was the sound of one person, Jack nodding to say he agreed. That was good news. Unless they were a

wizard, or a dragon-shifting knight, Jack and I should have no problem dealing with a single person. We had a bow, and we had a sword. And failing that, I could always get Jack to cut them down to size with nothing but his tongue. I smiled at the thought, Jack throwing me a quizzical glance.

The footsteps came to a halt just short of the turn. Did they sense the trap? If not, what were they doing? Were they listening? Jack seemed to think the same thing, going impossibly still next to me, neither of us even breathing. The footsteps started up once more, and I lowered my hand to the hilt of my sword in preparation, reminding myself to heed my own advice, that I needed to find out who it was before I ran them through.

They rounded the corner. It was a man. I could tell from the build, the figure too tall, and the shoulders too broad for it to be a woman. Apart from that, there was little else to be discerned, the man's clothes completely covered by a dark cloak with the hood up. He slowed, his head lifting slightly to peer down the length of the alley, no doubt wondering where we'd got to. Well, he wouldn't have to wait long to find out. Jack's gaze found mine and we exchanged a nod. And then we both sprang into action.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JACK

I let Sebastian take the lead because, well... he was Sebastian, and if there was one thing that Sebastian appreciated it was glory. Far more than I did. Plus, there was the small matter of his sword requiring him to get up close and personal, whereas my bow gave me the luxury of maintaining distance. So while Sebastian charged at him, the pointy end of his sword finding a resting position just over the man's heart, I notched an arrow, sighting along the length of it to aim at the man's head. One tug of the string would have the arrow embedding itself in his skull. That would teach him not to follow people without their knowledge.

Finding himself at the wrong end of both a sword and a bow, the man immediately flung his arms in the air. Sebastian wasted no time in yanking the man's hood back to show his face. I frowned at what had been revealed. It was an old man. Very old by the looks of it, his face so wizened that it was more wrinkles than anything else. He was slightly stooped, his eyebrows and hair a snow-white color.

Arrow still locked on its target, because I'd learned the hard way not to underestimate an enemy—three-foot magical trolls a case in point—I

advanced, keeping pace with Sebastian as he used his blade to drive the man backwards until the wall at his back meant he could go no farther. “Is this one of your ex-lovers, Sebastian?” I asked.

The old man chuckled, his wrinkled face creasing even more. Sebastian didn’t laugh. “Not funny, Jack.”

“Well, you can never discount the possibility, so I thought it was best to check. I needed to know whether I should steel myself for the two of you to start kissing.”

“There’s definitely not going to be any kissing.” Sebastian sounded distinctly unamused, something in his tone telling me that there was more than met the eye to the little tableau unfolding in front of me.

“Do you know him?”

“Yes, I know him.” Sebastian pressed the sword tip a little harder against the man’s chest, the man’s expression turning pained.

“Ow! Don’t do that. You’ll draw blood.”

“It would be no less than you deserve.” Sebastian eased up slightly but didn’t take the sword away altogether. “Change back. Now.”

Change back! I was still trying to make sense of the words when the air around the old man began to sparkle, the golden color reminiscent of Sebastian’s magic. The man’s features turned indistinct, like they were nothing more than a blank canvas, and then suddenly, there was someone quite different standing there.

Not an old man. No snow-white hair. No wrinkles.

In his place was a tall, blond-haired man who bore a remarkable similarity to the one holding him at sword point.

I lowered my bow so the arrow pointed to the ground rather than at his head. “Oh! I see.”

Troy grabbed Sebastian's wrist and pulled it away so that Sebastian was forced to lower the sword. "Just in case you're tempted to stab me anyway, *brother*."

"Don't tempt me." Sebastian sheathed his sword and scowled at the man now leaning casually against the wall. "Why are you following us?"

Troy's brow creased. "I'm not following you. I just happen to be going the same way. You know, given that this whole journey was my idea in the first place."

The explanation might have been convincing if it wasn't for the fact that he'd walked straight into our ambush. There was no reason for him to have been in the alley, and future king or no future king, I wasn't about to let him get away with bullshit without calling him on it. "You were definitely following us." His gaze turned my way and I smiled sweetly at him. "Just saying."

Troy visibly bristled. He crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his chin defiantly. "Well... what if I was following you. I made it very clear that I would be carrying out this mission." His gaze flicked across to his brother. "It's hardly my fault if people chose not to listen."

Untethering the arrow from my bow, I placed it back in its quiver, and slung my bow back over my shoulder, tamping down on the feeling of disappointment swirling in my gut. It wasn't like I would have shot an old man, anyway, was it? Well, not unless he proved dangerous. Regarding Troy through narrowed eyes, I spun my finger around in a circle meant to represent his entire being, curiosity getting the better of me. "So, your magic is that you can change your appearance? Can you turn yourself into anyone?"

Troy nodded. “As long as it’s someone I’ve met. I can’t create a person out of thin air or combine features of different people.”

Interesting! It seemed that Sebastian had a shape shifter for a brother. “So who was that guy?”

“That guy,” Sebastian interjected, “used to be the stable master at Silverwood. The fact that he died a long time before I left Padora was a bit of a giveaway. I was hardly going to think that he’d faked his own death and managed to live to the ripe old age of a hundred.”

Troy shrugged. “I like to be Reginald. He commands respect. You don’t like me being Reginald?” His eyes held a challenge. “Fine. How about this?” The sparks appeared again only to leave behind a perfect copy of Leofric. I leaned closer, peering at him to try and discern any slight differences, but apart from the way he was dressed, Troy’s clothes staying the same, it was a perfect facsimile of the man himself. “Or this?” Even Leofric’s voice was perfect. More sparks, and Leofric was replaced by Ansel. That form only lasted a few seconds. “Or this?” Troy’s lips quirked up in amusement, the reason becoming clear when I ended up staring at myself.

“That... is disturbing,” said Sebastian.

I had to agree. Troy smiled, my own voice coming out when he spoke. “I know. I’ve got it. The one person that Sebastian appreciates more than any other, the man he can’t take his eyes off, that can never be replaced in his heart.”

My heart sped up slightly, my fingers curling into my palms. He’d already taken my form, so who else could Troy possibly be referring to? Sebastian had promised that there were no more secrets left between us. Had he lied again? Was I about to be confronted by the image of a past

lover he'd never mentioned, someone who would turn his insistence that there'd been no one of consequence before me into nothing but words meant to keep me tethered to him? If so, I didn't know if there would be any coming back from it. There were only so many times I was prepared to be made to look a fool.

Gold sparks. Nausea had me regretting the hearty breakfast I'd eaten that morning. I couldn't breathe as Troy's features once again flickered out of existence. And then relief flooded through me, sharp and sweet, my chest feeling a hundred times lighter as I took in the two Sebastians standing in front of me, one of them grinning like he'd just told an extremely funny joke, and the other one scowling so much that he looked like he was about to commit grievous bodily harm to his brother. It was a good thing he'd lowered that sword, or I would have feared for Troy's safety.

Gaze not shifting from his brother for even a second, Sebastian held his hand up in my direction. "Don't laugh, Jack, you'll only encourage him."

I tried to stop laughing. I really did, but I couldn't. "He is right, though. That is your favorite person." Sebastian's scowl came my way, and I did my best to look remorseful. "Which as a trait has really grown on me, and I wouldn't have you any other way. Promise."

Somewhat mollified, Sebastian's focus returned to his brother, Troy still in the form of Sebastian. Sebastian's lip curled. "Go home, Troy. You can't be here." He punctuated his words with a little shove to the chest, which I had to admit was a rather strange thing to witness, like picking a fight with yourself.

Gold sparks, and then Troy was back, his expression indignant. "I can be anywhere I damn well like."

Sebastian leaned forward, his stare calculating. “Did you tell Mother that?” A muscle twitched in Troy’s cheek. “Or did you sneak out when she wasn’t looking?” Troy stayed silent, Sebastian’s lips slowly curving into a smile. “Thought so. You realize she’s going to send guards after you.”

Troy tossed his head back, the short blond hair providing nowhere near the same amount of drama as it did when Sebastian performed the same action. “What are they going to do?”

He had a point. Even if Kara did send guards after him, they weren’t going to touch the future king. Not even at the queen’s request. All that would happen was that they’d follow him around and ask him nicely to please return to Silverwood at his earliest convenience. Troy would ignore them, and the whole thing would become some ridiculous stand-off with no solution in sight.

Troy’s expression suddenly turned pleading, as if he’d realized that his aggressive stance would only serve to rile Sebastian. “I just want one little adventure before I’m king, Sebastian. Is that too much to ask? You’ve been roaming around the thirteen kingdoms for years. Do you think I would have got away with that?” He didn’t wait for a response. “We both know the answer. It’s a big, fat, no. I wouldn’t even have made it as far as the ship before Mother and Father appeared to drag me home. Why? Just because I happen to have been born first, and I have to be the responsible one. No fun for me. Just duty.”

He lay a hand on his brother’s shoulder, his expression beseeching. “All I’m asking for is one little adventure. Something I can look back on when I’m on the throne. A fond memory if you will.”

Sebastian was softening. I could see it in his face. All Troy had to do was find the right button to press and Sebastian would give in.

Troy seemed to sense it too, pressing forward, his fingers curling around his brother's shoulder, the earnestness on his face almost overpowering. "Is it so terrible to want to spend some quality time with my estranged little brother who's been gone for years?"

Sebastian reared back, Troy's fingers falling from his arm. I winced. *Wrong button, Troy. Wrong button.* Sebastian's eyes narrowed. "It has absolutely nothing to do with that. We've never managed to be in the same room without wanting to at least maim each other."

Troy's shrug was unrepentant. "Maybe not, but that was years ago. Maybe, we've both changed. How will we know if we don't at least try? What do you say?"

"You did say that an extra person would be helpful," I offered.

The glare that met my statement from Sebastian was particularly venomous. I really wasn't doing myself any favors with Sebastian by siding with his brother, but even though Troy was laying it on a little thick, I could see where he was coming from, and Sebastian would too if he stopped to think about it a little more rationally.

Sebastian sighed. "I said that when the extra person would have been Leofric. Leofric does what he's told. Leofric listens. Leofric isn't annoying."

Troy cocked an eyebrow. "But he can't change into other people, can he? What useful skills does he have besides being a good fighter, and the strange ability to put up with a never-ending amount of crap from you? Just think about it for a minute. Think how useful I could be."

It was me that broke the silence that followed Troy's latest plea. "It is just a festival, Sebastian. How dangerous can it be? And if you don't agree, he'll probably just keep following us anyway. Isn't it better to know where he is?"

How do you know he won't find himself in trouble if he tries to return to the palace alone?"

Sebastian closed his eyes in a way that said he was trying to gather strength from somewhere. When he opened them again, there were no words, just a slightly weary headshake that told of his capitulation.

Troy grinned, hooking one arm around his brother's shoulders, and one around mine to pull us both close, like the three of us were the best of friends. "We're going to have so much fun." He seemed to catch himself. "I mean... we do need to remember the sad circumstances of why we're doing this, but I'm sure we can make the best of it if we put our minds to it. Every cloud has a silver lining."

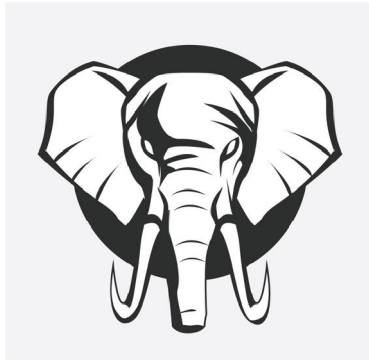
He leaned my way. "I'm looking forward to getting to know you, Jack, to finding out how you managed to convince my brother to be with only one man." A slight frown marred his brow. "Assuming, that is, that's how your relationship works. If it doesn't, and you both regularly lie with other people, then that's absolutely fine. I'm very liberal. I don't make moral judgments. Just, maybe don't do it in front of me. A future king can't be associated with orgies."

Sebastian let out a noise that sounded like he was being slowly strangled. "Troy."

Troy turned his head Sebastian's way. "Yes?"

"Stop talking."

"I can do that," Troy said.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JACK

In order to enter the tavern without causing a stir the likes of which I doubted Rosevale had ever seen before and probably never would again, Troy had taken on the identity of someone who apparently used to work in the palace kitchens. Therefore, whenever I looked across at him now, I was confronted by a very pleasant-looking, but all too easily forgettable young man with brown eyes and sandy-blond hair that seemed to have a mind of its own. Troy frowned again as he tried to smooth down a particularly stubborn lock that insisted on expressing its own individuality by pointing in a different direction to the strands that lay next to it.

It was Sebastian who'd chosen the face, pointing out that his brother needed to become someone who wouldn't stand out too much and raise suspicion. Although, I was beginning to think that the real reason had been the hair, as Sebastian was doing a very poor job of hiding his smirk every time Troy's hand lifted to tackle the errant lock.

We weren't calling him Troy. That would have been too obvious, especially when the ongoing whispers and covert looks from the tavern's clientele left no doubt that Sebastian had been recognized. Instead, Troy

had become Galien, a name the two brothers had argued over for far too long, when if you asked me—neither of them had—it really didn't make the slightest bit of difference.

Sebastian had clearly been intent on choosing a name that would annoy Troy, and Troy had refused to stand for it. In the end, Galien had been something of a reluctant compromise. I didn't know who they'd borrowed the name from, and to be honest, I didn't give a fuck. All I wanted was ale and food, closely followed by a comfortable bed and some alone time with my lover.

Unfortunately, it hadn't taken long to realize just how sheltered Troy's previous existence had been, his wide-eyed wonder at absolutely everything in the tavern quickly putting paid to any hope of him not standing out. And that was coming from me, someone who had grown up on a farm, and who could easily have been accused of the very same thing. But I'd never been this bad. Not even close.

I cleared my throat to get his attention as Troy yet again reached out to touch someone's clothing as they walked by. "Galien!"

He jerked his hand away without having made contact. "What?"

"Stop touching. You're acting like you've never seen people before."

He threw a condescending look my way. "Don't be silly. I've seen people. Of course, I have, but they usually have to keep their distance. And I've never seen such an interesting array of clothing before. So much more variety in terms of style and fabric."

I let out a sigh. Had I really thought that Troy accompanying us wouldn't be a problem? What had I gotten myself into? "Welcome to the real world, where people don't all dress in silk." Actually, I was surprised Troy hadn't turned up in silk. Lord knew where he'd gotten the plain black trousers and

white shirt from, never mind the cloak. But even they were the clothes of a noble. Hence, his fascination with the fabric of the common man. Or woman. Troy was kind enough not to discriminate on account of gender, which without his royal status was likely to earn him a slap if he wasn't careful. And so far, Sebastian either hadn't noticed what his brother was up to, or more likely had decided, as was his habit, that it was my issue to deal with. So, deal with it, I would. "Sebastian, stand up."

Sebastian turned his head to pin me with a look that said he didn't want to do any such thing. I narrowed my eyes at him, and he finally stood, even if the action was accompanied by a sigh that came all the way from his toes. "Swap places with your..." I stopped myself before the word brother left my lips. This subterfuge thing was hard. "Your good friend, Galien."

"He's no friend of mine," Sebastian muttered under his breath. Despite his reluctance, he did what I'd asked, moving out of the way, and then shoving Troy in the space he'd vacated so that rather than sitting at the edge of the table, Troy found himself sandwiched between the two of us, where even the longest arms wouldn't be able to reach.

Prevented from touching anyone, Troy turned his attention to the tankard of ale sitting in front of him instead. Wrapping both of his hands around it, he lifted it to his lips and took a long swallow. What followed was a coughing fit so long and protracted that every single person in the tavern stopped their conversation and turned our way. Inwardly grimacing, I lifted my own tankard in a silent toast to the audience, offering an apologetic smile. "Excuse my friend. It went down the wrong way." Reaching across, I pounded Troy on the back, the action perhaps a little harder than it needed to be.

Troy finally stopped coughing, his eyes watering. From the way he stared at the tankard of the ale in front of him, it may as well have been a small goblin. “It’s so strong.” He lifted the tankard again and gave it a sniff before taking a far more delicate sip, his whole face screwing up. “But I like it.” He went in for another sip, and I grabbed his wrist to still his movement before the tankard could reach his lips. “Okay. Slow down. The last thing we need is you getting drunk.”

Troy’s brow scrunched up. “Why?”

“Because, *Galien*...” I put extra emphasis on his name to remind him who he was supposed to be. “I’ve seen Sebastian’s magic when he’s drunk, and it loses a lot of finesse. It really wouldn’t serve us well if you start flickering between different people, or you suddenly grew a nose out of your ear. People might start asking questions. And if they do...” I let the idea hang there for a moment. “You will need to return home immediately. No more adventures. No fun. Just...” I frowned. “Doing whatever it is that you do in the palace.” I tipped my head to one side and regarded him curiously. “What do you do?”

A slight smirk settled on Sebastian’s face as Troy thought hard. “There are plenty of things to do.”

“Like?”

Ignoring my question, Troy turned to his brother. “Is he always like this?”

Sebastian’s smile grew wider. “Yes. In fact, he’s usually worse. Do you want to go home yet?”

Troy sat up straighter and shook his head. “No. I just...”

His fingers crept toward the tankard, and I pinned him with a steely glare that dared him to complete the movement. “Slow. Down.”

He huffed out a sigh, his fingers retreating to the edge of the table. “So, I have to ask for permission to take a drink?”

I nodded, my lips curling into a slight smile at the look in his eyes. It was somewhat reminiscent of a young boy who had been told that he needed to go to bed and was determined to stay up.

He lowered his voice and leaned closer. “You do know that I will be king of Padora one day?”

I bit my lip to stop myself from laughing. “I’m aware of that fact, yes.”

Sebastian leaned in. “You’ll find that Jack has little regard for royalty. It’s one of the things I love about him. You should talk to Prince Montgomery of Arrowgarde. He has an interesting weasel story to tell. One that if you heard it, you would be very relieved that all Jack is doing is regulating your alcohol intake.”

Troy’s expression turned suspicious. “What did you do to him?”

I threw Sebastian a reproachful look. “Nothing that didn’t need doing. It’s just that Sebastian has a nasty habit of letting me do his dirty work for him.” The only response I got to that statement was a slight shrug from Sebastian. At least he didn’t deny it.

With the arrival of food, a tentative peace stole over the table, Troy treating the pie like it was an unknown entity as he poked and prodded at it. It didn’t stop him from eating every last scrap of it, though. I let him have some more ale once he’d finished his food, figuring that at least he’d lined his stomach. Plus, the hour was getting late, and once we retired to our rooms, Troy losing control of his shape wouldn’t be a problem.

I leaned back in my seat so that I could see behind Troy’s back and performed an exaggerated stretch, accompanied by a very noisy yawn.

Sebastian met my gaze, the corners of his lips lifting. “Ready for bed, Jack?”

The words might have sounded innocent enough, but the heavy-lidded gaze and the way he’d said it, left no doubt what he really meant. “Do you know, I think I am. Going to kiss me goodnight?”

Sebastian’s gaze stole slowly down my chest in a look so heated, I could almost feel it. “I think that can be arranged. I could also...”

And then Troy sat back, effectively blocking our line of sight and bringing the flirtation to a sudden and premature end. He patted his stomach, a stomach which was notably more rounded than Troy’s real one was. I guessed the kitchen worker whose form he’d taken on got to sample quite a few of the kitchen wares before they were sent out. “There needs to be more pies in the palace. I’ll have a word with the kitchen staff when I get back.”

I let out a huff of frustration, Troy’s head turning my way with a frown. “You have something to say about pies, Jack?”

I shook my head. “I have absolutely nothing to say about pies.”

Sebastian leaned forward and gave me a look that said you brought this upon yourself. Truth be told, I was already regretting having convinced Sebastian to let Troy tag along. It was a little like babysitting a child. A child who seemed completely oblivious to the fact that they were in the way.

When Sebastian sat back again, there was a woman standing beside the table. She was very pretty with long, dark hair, and managed to look both shy and confident at the same time, which was quite a feat to pull off. Troy and I might as well have been invisible for all the attention she paid us, all her focus reserved for Sebastian and Sebastian alone.

She wrapped a tendril of her hair around her finger and gave him a coquettish look from beneath her eyelashes. “Excuse me, I hope you don’t think I’m being impertinent, but would you happen to be Prince Sebastian?” She jerked her head in the direction of a table in the corner, where a young man sat, watching her. “My brother says you can’t be, because Prince Sebastian hasn’t been seen in Padora for years, and that he must surely have been eaten by wolves a long time ago, and the royal family just don’t want us to know.”

I let out a snort at that one, the woman’s gaze not shifting from Sebastian in response to the noise. She carried on. “Could you settle the argument for us?”

Sebastian’s brows knitted together. “I...”

Knowing how likely it was that he’d lie, I got in there first. “He is.”

The woman’s face lit up, and she dropped into a quick curtsy. “I knew it! I have to tell you that you were always my favorite. You know, on account of you being so handsome.” She giggled. “Oh, I didn’t tell you my name, did I. Begging your pardon, Your Highness... I’m Loretta, named after my grandmother.”

Sebastian sat up straighter and I rolled my eyes. I should have let him deny it. At least that might have brought an end to the conversation. Now, I’d be forced to listen to her simper over him.

Troy twisted around so that he faced the woman, and I was left looking at the back of his head. “I’m assuming you mean that Sebastian is your favorite *after* Troy.”

Loretta looked momentarily confused. “Er... no. I always liked Prince Sebastian more.” She punctuated her sentence by throwing a smile in Sebastian’s direction.

Troy's shoulders stiffened. "But Troy is *very* handsome, don't you think? And he's going to be king one day. If it was me, I would choose Troy any day of the week. He has so much more going for him."

"Erm..." Loretta didn't seem to know what to say. She cast a quick glance at Sebastian before speaking. "Troy is very nice. I certainly would never speak ill of your brother."

Sebastian waved a hand. "Oh, please, don't stop yourself on my account. I can take it." He leaned toward Loretta conspiratorially. "I promise that I won't tell him."

Loretta let out another giggle. "Well..." She lowered her voice. "Troy is... how can I put this?" She exhaled noisily as if being honest was taking a great deal of effort on her part. "He always seems very uptight. And a little bit snooty. Whereas you come across as a lot more approachable. I'd be too worried about wrinkling Troy."

"Anything else?" Sebastian asked cheerfully.

A slight flush appeared on her cheeks. "Well..."

"Perhaps, we shouldn't be speaking negatively about the future king of Padora," Troy interjected. "Especially in a public place where anybody could hear us."

Sebastian gave him a pointed look. "Lighten up, Galien, you shouldn't interrupt a lady when she's speaking. Let her have her say." He turned back to her with a raised eyebrow. "Apologies for the rudeness. Please do continue."

She leaned forward again. "I was just going to say that I think that Troy is possibly one of those men that has a secret mean streak. I'm guessing that's why he's not married yet."

“Perhaps the explanation is a lot simpler and far less sinister than that, and he just hasn’t met the right woman yet,” Troy said with an edge to his voice.

Loretta considered the suggestion for a moment and then shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. Not with all the choice he has. My friend Mary thinks...” She cast a quick glance around to check that no one was listening in on the conversation. “She thinks that he probably has a secret dungeon.”

“He lives in a palace. All palaces have dungeons,” Troy offered, his tone so dry that had there been even the slightest spark, it would have caught fire in seconds.

“Not like a normal dungeon. Like a”—Loretta swallowed, her voice dropping so low that I had to lean in to hear her—“a sex dungeon.” Her cheeks took on a pink tinge.

I nearly choked as Sebastian sat up straighter with a gleam in his eye. “A sex dungeon! How interesting. What do you think he’s got in his sex dungeon?”

Troy exhaled noisily. “I don’t think we need to be speculating about sex dungeons.”

Sebastian smirked. “Oh, but I’m interested. I never realized how much my brother had changed in the time I’ve been away. I want to know everything.”

“Well...” Loretta leaned closer again. If she got any closer, she’d be in Sebastian’s lap, which was probably her intention. “Probably whips and chains. I bet he’s got women there now, chained up and moaning.”

Sebastian’s lips twitched. “Women? Not a woman? You think he keeps more than one down there?”

Loretta nodded eagerly. “He’s bound to. There was a woman who went missing from the next village. Very young. Very pretty. Mary thinks she’s probably in Prince Troy’s dungeon.”

I’d stayed fairly quiet up till now, but I couldn’t resist joining in. “Mary seems to know an awful lot about Prince Troy’s dungeon. Is she hoping to experience it one day?”

Loretta bit her lip. “I don’t think she’d say no. She likes a mean streak in a man. I keep telling her that it’ll get her into trouble one day, but she just smiles.” She shrugged. “What can you do?”

I held her gaze. “Imagine how many more women Prince Troy is going to be able to put in his dungeon once he’s king.”

Loretta pressed a hand to her mouth, her eyes wide. “Imagine!”

Troy’s fingers were wrapped so tightly around the edge of the table that his knuckles had gone white. “I would think he would be too busy. There’s a lot of work that needs doing when you’re king. Or so, I hear.”

I disguised a smile as a cough behind my hand when it became clear that no one was listening to him.

Loretta dropped into another quick curtsy. “I think I’ve taken up enough of your time, Prince Sebastian, and I really appreciate you giving me the time of day.” She paused, her fingers plucking at the folds of her skirt in a gesture meant to look like she was nervous. I didn’t buy it for one second, not when it was accompanied by a gleam in her eye. “I wonder, Your Highness, if I might make a somewhat bold request?”

Sebastian frowned. “Please speak freely.”

“Well...” She was back to winding her hair around her finger. “If I were to tell Mary that I had gotten a kiss from Prince Sebastian, she would be green with envy. As would my sisters. In fact, all my family would.”

“Oh!” Sebastian managed to look both pleased and surprised at the same time. “I think that can be—”

“No!” I said the word so loudly that the people from the next table, who hadn’t batted so much as an eyelid during all the talk of sex dungeons, turned their heads my way.

Loretta’s gaze fastened on me, the look on her face reminiscent of someone who had found themselves confronting evil in its purest form. I met her gaze head-on, refusing to blink. “I’m afraid that *Prince* Sebastian cannot just kiss anyone who asks. If he were to do that, it would be extremely unlikely that he’d find time to do anything else. Therefore, I’m afraid that his lips are out of bounds. To you. To anyone.” My look dared her to challenge my statement, and for a moment she looked like she might.

She quickly regained her composure, dropping into another curtsy. “My apologies, Your Highness.”

Sebastian smiled. “No apologies needed. I’m flattered that you asked.”

She withdrew from the table to return to her brother, Sebastian turning to me with a huge grin on his face once she was out of earshot. “You’re so possessive, Jack.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You can keep telling yourself that, or you can realize that anyone would be annoyed at having to watch their lover kiss other people.” In a bid to bring the conversation to an end before Sebastian could get even more smug and self-satisfied than he already was, I climbed to my feet. “And on that note, I’m going to bed. I’ll see you in the room.”

The room itself was a far cry from the one at the palace, and I appreciated it all the more for it, the stark furnishings making me feel far more at home than I had in Silverwood. It might not be my bedroom in

Riverbrook, but it would do. It had been such a long day that we'd foregone the offer of a bath. Therefore, the only thing I needed to do was strip. Naked, and about to slip under the covers, I paused, grinning to myself as I arranged myself seductively on top of the bed instead. And then I waited, glad of the roaring fire in the hearth to keep me warm. Goosebumps were never sexy.

I didn't have to wait long, footsteps and voices sounding outside the room only a few minutes later. I pasted the most seductive expression on my face I could manage as the door opened. I'd already imagined the scenario. Sebastian would take one look at the tempting feast laid out before him, and he'd come running—literally. He'd dive on top of me, and we'd fuck until the need for sleep finally overcame lust.

None of that happened. Instead, I found myself staring at Troy in the doorway, still in the form of Galien, his keen gaze taking in every inch of me, and seemingly in no hurry to look away. I'd recovered my composure enough to be scrambling under the covers by the time Sebastian followed him into the room and immediately started taking his boots off as if nothing unusual had transpired. "Why is he here?" My voice came out as more of a high-pitched squeak.

Sebastian paused from pulling his left boot off. "Who?" He looked around the room as if expecting to see someone other than the three of us.

"Troy!"

Sebastian frowned. "I'm hardly going to let him out of my sight, am I? Wherever we go, he goes. I need to keep a close eye on him."

"I'm not a child," Troy grumbled. "You seem to be forgetting that I'm your *older* brother. If anyone needs an eye kept on them, it's probably you." Gold sparks surrounded his body, and then he was back to being Troy. He

reached up to massage the back of his neck like maintaining another form took its toll physically. “That’s better.” He walked over to look in the mirror, smiling at the sight that met him. He was probably pleased to be back to having obedient hair. “I told Sebastian that I would be absolutely fine with a room of my own, but he wouldn’t hear of it.” His gaze strayed my way, a smile blooming on his lips. “It’s good that I get to see more of you. Although, I wasn’t counting on seeing quite so much, but...” He shrugged.

I gave him my frostiest glare. “I wasn’t expecting you at all, obviously.”

Now naked himself, Sebastian pulled the covers back, and climbed in next to me. Frowning, Troy came to stand by the side of the bed, looking down at us both. “I’m not going to fit. One of you will need to give up your place.”

Sebastian and I shared a look. I lay back on the pillow and laced my fingers behind my head. “Not me, I’m afraid. I’ve had my fair share of sleeping on tavern floors, and I don’t intend to go back to it.”

Sebastian gave me a fond smile. “I remember those days. Me tucked up in bed. You tossing and turning all night on the floor because you couldn’t get comfortable, and then lying through your teeth the next day to say that you were fine while barely being able to stay awake. And all because you were worried you couldn’t keep your hands off me.”

I frowned. “A mostly accurate take on the situation until that last part. I had no problems keeping my hands off you.”

“You say that, but—”

“Troy cut in, his gaze having moved to Sebastian. “Do you think your little trip down memory lane could wait until later?”

“It could, but—”

“Great.” Troy cleared his throat.

Sebastian fixed his brother with a look of concern that wasn’t remotely convincing. “Are you ill? Perhaps you should return home.”

“I’m perfectly well, thank you. I’m just waiting for you to get out of bed.”

Sebastian copied my position, tucking his hands behind his head. “I don’t think so.”

Troy’s brow furrowed. “Why not?”

“I hardly think you and Jack sharing a bed would be appropriate. What if he got confused in the middle of the night and mistook you for me. That could create no end of awkward complications.”

Troy’s gaze strayed back to me, the way it lingered on the blankets draped over my lower body making it clear that he was recalling the fact that I was naked beneath it. I freed my hands to make a little grasping motion. “I do get a little handsy when I’m half asleep.”

Sebastian nodded. “He does. I’m all for it of course, but you...”

Troy spun on his heel and strode over to the bare patch of floor in front of the hearth. “So, I just... what, sleep here?”

“You do. You’ve got the fire, and you’ve got...” Sebastian’s gaze strayed around the room. “Well, not much else... But, you’ll manage. It’ll build character. You said you wanted some new experiences. Think of this as one of them.”

Having slept on the floor, I perhaps had a little more sympathy for Troy’s plight than Sebastian did. Therefore, I tossed a pillow and a blanket his way before lying back down.

Troy muttered something no doubt uncomplimentary under his breath as he laid them out in front of the fire. He made quite the production out of

removing his boots and cloak, but left everything else on, either for modesty's sake, or because he was concerned about being too cold. Sebastian waited until he was about to climb under the blanket before asking him to extinguish the lanterns. Troy shot him a venomous glare before backtracking to do as he'd asked. Of course, then he had the unenviable task of needing to locate his makeshift bed in complete darkness, a loud "ow" ringing out as he bumped into something, Sebastian laughing silently.

A rustling sound signaled Troy climbing beneath his blanket. And then there was silence. I turned onto my side, Sebastian shifting at the same time so that we rolled into each other, our legs tangling together, and our noses touching. It was a natural progression from there for lips to meet, tongues to explore, and hands to glide over bare skin.

"I *can* hear you, you know." We both froze, Sebastian's warm breath ghosting over my cheek once he lifted his lips from mine. "I assume you can go one night without..."

"Fornicating?" That was Sebastian's suggestion.

"Yes!" There was a sound like Troy was punching the pillow. He was probably pretending it was his brother.

"It will be difficult," Sebastian said.

"Well, please try. For my sake."

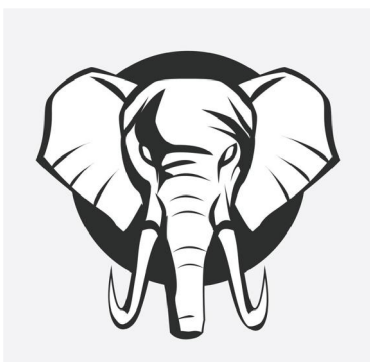
Letting out a sigh of frustration, I turned over, Sebastian plastering himself to my back and resting his chin on my shoulder. I'd barely closed my eyes when Troy spoke again. "A sex dungeon! Can you believe that? Of all the ridiculous things. How do people come up with these ideas?" And then more quietly. "Do you think other people believe that as well?"

Sebastian was too busy shaking with silent laughter to respond, so I answered for him. “Only if they’ve met Mary.”

There was a rustling of blankets like Troy was turning over. “I’d like to meet this Mary.”

“She’d like to meet you too,” I said.

Sebastian laughed even harder and I joined in, neither of us able to keep it silent. Troy made a huffing sound that told us he didn’t appreciate us finding the situation amusing in the slightest. Unfortunately, it didn’t stop it from being funny.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SEBASTIAN

We'd crossed the border to Theoporia that morning. From there, it was a simple matter of just following the crowds, who couldn't have been heading anywhere but the festival. Unfortunately, that did mean that our pace had slowed to a crawl, Jack letting out a weary sigh every time we came to a complete stop.

Troy was in a different form today, one that I didn't recognize. My suggestion that it might be wise to stick to the same one as the previous day hadn't gone down at all well, Troy offering me a glare that would have rivaled Jack's even on a bad day and muttering something about hair that hadn't made the slightest bit of sense. He might have only spent one night sleeping on the floor, but it already seemed to be doing untold damage to his mental state. Did I feel sorry for him? Not even slightly.

Despite Troy wearing a different face, we were still calling him Galien, because trying to remember yet another name was a surefire recipe for disaster. It was difficult enough to have to remember not to say Troy.

Whoever's form it was that Troy had taken on, was getting more than a few interested looks from both men and women, his dark hair with a slight

curl to it, pale blue eyes, and sharp cheekbones an arresting combination that invited a person to look twice. I had no idea where Troy had met this man, but he wasn't someone currently at the palace, or I would have remembered seeing him in the last few days.

Jack bumped me none too gently, almost sending me staggering into an elf clutching a baby to her chest. "Maybe, you should go and find him once we've found Magdalena and she's healed your father."

I apologized to the woman and righted myself, before turning to find Jack regarding me with a look that was all too familiar. It was the one that said I'd done something very wrong indeed, and he was going to make me pay for it. Only, how that was possible when all I was doing was walking, I didn't know. "Find who?"

Jack sniffed. "You know who."

I shook my head. "I really don't."

Jack treated me to the very best of his oh-so-expressive eye rolls. "Right! Next, you'll be denying that you keep looking at him."

"Who? Tr..." I quickly corrected myself. "Galien?" Despite Jack's body language portraying all the approachability of an injured wildcat, I leaned closer. "You do realize that's my brother."

Jack narrowed his eyes. "It's not, though, is it? It's someone else. Someone that exists somewhere in Padora. Hence me suggesting you find him once this is all over. I'm sure you'd make a beautiful couple."

I never knew whether to be pleased or in fear for my life when jealous Jack came to the fore. For that reason, I considered my words carefully as we shuffled a bit farther forward, the line of people having slowed once more. "I can look at a man and find them attractive without wanting to do anything about it." The slight stiffness in Jack's shoulders said he wasn't

convinced, and I was going to have to do better. “I only want you.” At the slight softening of his stance, I pressed on. “I worked far too hard to get you in the first place, and far too hard to win you back after all the...” I waved a hand. “You know, the secrets thing, to ever risk ruining it for a moment of madness.”

“Ever?” Jack asked.

“Ever,” I assured him. “It’s you I love. No one else.” For a moment we just stared at each other. I would have given anything not to be stuck in a crowd of people, so I could have taken Jack up on the promise in his eyes. Especially after Troy’s censure had meant I’d spent the previous night unable to do anything more than hold Jack.

I’d obviously tempted fate by thinking about Troy, the man himself leaning in to ruin the moment once more. He waved a hand up and down the length of his body. “If this form is creating problems, I can change?”

“Not here, you can’t,” Jack said. “Not in the middle of all these people. Besides, you took that form because you wanted attention. You and Sebastian are more similar than you know. Neither of you can survive if people aren’t looking at you.”

“Not true,” I said at the same time as Troy, the two of us glaring at each other.

Jack laughed. “See! You even say the same things at the same time. What more evidence do you need?”

Neither of us gave him the satisfaction of answering.

It was close to another hour before we reached the high gates allowing access to the festival, the funneling of the crowd through the narrow aperture the reason we’d been moving so slowly. Both Jack and I stared at Troy until he took the hint and pulled out a money pouch to pay the

entrance fee for all three of us. He was still grumbling about it as we walked through the gate.

Once inside, we were met by a sea of noise and color, Jack's expression caught somewhere between awe and the need to run as far and as fast as he could in the opposite direction. There was music and colorful tents. There were jugglers and acrobats, donkeys, and hawks. There were stalls, the vendors all shouting over each other as they competed to lure people to buy their wares. You named it, I suspected we'd probably have no problem finding it, if we only looked hard enough.

Jack turned in a slow circle, his face drained of all color. "This is a lot. I didn't think it would be so..."

I grinned at him. "It's not quite Riverbrook, I'll give you that."

He gave a slow shake of his head. "How are we supposed to find one man in all of this?"

It was a good question, and one I referred to Troy, given that he never missed an opportunity to remind us that this had been his idea in the first place. His pretty—borrowed—face took on a slight flush as I turned to him with a raised eyebrow. He opened his mouth and then closed it again, his brow furrowing. He scanned the crowd, his attention briefly snagged by a man juggling fire at the center of a circle of onlookers, before he continued his scrutiny. When he turned back my way, he gave a sheepish shrug. "I have no idea."

Jack sighed. "Well, that's just great, isn't it?" He threw an accusing look Troy's way. "I thought when you said you had a plan, you actually had a plan." His gaze swept over me. "But I should have known better. That's apparently something else you two have in common, the ability to plunge headfirst into something without the slightest idea what comes next."

Troy scowled. “Now, wait just a moment.”

Tempting as it was to let Troy suffer the full force of Jack’s displeasure, there were far more important matters that needed dealing with. I grabbed Troy’s arm and shook my head. “I wouldn’t waste my breath if I were you. Not unless you can prove you have a plan after all.”

Troy fell silent for a moment, his gaze downcast. “We could... ask people.”

Jack’s eyes flashed. “Ask people?” He waved an arm at the throngs of people. “What, all eight hundred of them? Sure! That shouldn’t take long.”

I dropped a quick kiss on Jack’s lips. It did strange things to me when he was angry at other people, making me wonder if any of the tents were empty, and if so, whether anyone would have any objections to us borrowing it for a short amount of time. But then, I doubted that Troy would be amenable enough to stand outside and wait. And there was no way I was prepared to risk losing him in this crowd. Which meant that Jack would unfortunately have to wait. Even so, I stole another kiss. “Wait here, and keep an eye on Galien while I work out the best way to proceed.”

“Sebastian!”

There was a low note of warning in Jack’s voice, but I was already walking away, the crowd quickly swallowing me up. I talked to a few people, checking back over my shoulder to see if I was in Jack’s eyeline when a young man who couldn’t have been any older than twenty suggested that he could tell me anything I needed to know *after* we’d spent the afternoon together. The way he’d perused my body had left me in no doubt that we wouldn’t be spending it playing cards. I turned him down and quickly moved on.

I did a fair amount of eavesdropping, nothing remotely interesting coming up in conversation unless I wanted to know about the state of Martha's bunions, or how scandalous it was that the price of ale had gone up in The Restless Parrot, wherever that was.

It was getting to the point where I was facing having to return to Jack and Troy with nothing useful to show for my time away, when I caught sight of the poster attached to one of the tents, a slow smile creeping across my face as I read it. I dutifully took my place in the line, waiting patiently until I reached the rather surly-looking man who looked like he'd rather be anywhere else but here. He peered up at me through his glasses, the lenses so thick that they made his eyes appear abnormally large. "What event do you want to take part in?"

"What events have you got?"

He sighed and pushed a piece of parchment toward me, looking bored as I perused the list. Luckily, most of them included a brief description of what the event entailed, because you certainly wouldn't have known it from the name. I waved a hand at the poster. "And the winner of each event is presented with the prize by Bartholomew Rohan?"

Mr. Surly didn't spare the poster so much as a glance. "Says so, doesn't it?"

"Can I enter other people as well as myself?"

He lifted his gaze to me. "You can enter whoever you want as long as you hurry up. There's a line of people behind you. Most of whom have bothered to find out what the events were prior to their arrival today." He reached up and adjusted his glasses, pushing them more firmly on his nose. "And be aware that if they're not present when their name is called out, they'll forfeit their place. No second chances."

He brandished the quill in his hand in a way that said it made him very important, letting it hover over the piece of parchment as he stared at me expectantly. I ran my finger down the list, choosing the event for Jack that he was least likely to kill me for being entered in, and using the exact opposite reasoning for Troy. If he didn't regret inviting himself along yet, he would by the time I'd finished with him. Once I'd chosen their events, I picked one for myself.

All that was left to do then was to ascertain where the events took place. Once I'd gotten that information out of my not so chatty and clearly impatient friend, I returned to Jack and Troy. I found them exactly where I'd left them, Troy applauding a knife throwing routine enthusiastically while Jack looked less than impressed. "He missed three," he told me in explanation. "If you're going to show off, at last get it right. If he was throwing them at a person, we'd probably be looking at a major head injury by now. Or at the very least a few missing fingers."

I filled them both in on what I'd discovered, Jack's expression growing stormier by the second. "What do I have to do?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, but it sounds like archery." I gestured at his bow. "It should be easy for you."

Troy seemed less concerned about what his event might entail, not even bothering to ask. But then, he always had held the belief that he was good at everything. I couldn't wait to see his face when he discovered what it was that he had to do.

I led the way to the event square, Mr. Surly's directions proving far better than his disposition. Jack grew quieter and quieter until I was eventually forced to ask what was wrong.

He sighed. "I can't help thinking that there's a far easier way of doing this. You're a prince. Who's going to deny you anything? Why don't you just ask to see Bartholomew?"

I wrapped an arm around him and tugged him close enough that I could kiss his cheek. "Maybe. But this way we get to have some fun as well."

He stared at me. "This is like the troll, isn't it? Where you could have taken the nice, safe route, but instead you're determined to make it as difficult as possible."

"This is nothing like the troll." I waved a hand at the crowd of people. "Do you see any trolls?"

Jack looked around. "Well, no, but..."

"Jack—"

"If you're about to tell me to trust you, don't bother. That statement is almost always followed by you pulling some ridiculous stunt that proves I shouldn't trust you in the slightest, and that I'm incredibly stupid to keep going along with whatever the latest madcap scheme is that you've come up with. We almost always end up running away or fighting for our lives. Or —"

I smiled. "Married."

Jack raised his eyes to the sky. "We are not—"

Troy leaned in, his eyes as wide as I'd ever seen them. "You got married? You can't get married. You need Mother and Father's permission. And I don't think..." His gaze strayed over to Jack, his cheeks turning slightly pink. "Not that there's anything wrong with you. I'm sure that you're a perfectly lovely person to be around most of the time. And you must be something of a saint to put up with Sebastian..." I frowned at that comment, wondering what Troy could possibly mean by it. "But..." Troy

was obviously struggling for words. “Things are just done differently where we come from. Permission must be given. Not to mention that certain arrangements should have been made. You can’t just get married whenever you feel like it.”

Jack’s look of amusement had only grown during Troy’s little speech. “You can stop working yourself up into a frenzy. We’re not married.”

I cleared my throat. “I think you’ll find...”

There was suddenly a finger in my face. Jack’s finger. “We’re not starting this again. You’re only doing it to rile your”—he took a quick look around, only continuing when he saw that no one was paying the slightest bit of attention to us, everyone’s eyes fixed on the events field as they waited for things to get underway—“brother up.”

He turned his attention to Troy. “There was an incident in an orc camp that involved lots of mind-altering drugs and the possibility of an orc marriage ceremony that no one can remember. If no one can remember it, then in my mind, it didn’t happen. The only person who doesn’t seem to be able to wrap their head around that concept is your brother. It amuses him to call me husband. I thought he’d finally got bored of it”—he cast a quick, scathing glance my way—“but apparently not. Sebastian needs to remember that I’ve only just taken him back, that it would be very easy to reverse that decision.”

I interrupted at that point. “Would it?”

Jack’s gaze dropped to the ground, the answer written all over his face, even though I knew it wouldn’t be the one he’d say out loud. “Very easy. Incredibly easy. Probably the easiest thing I would ever have to do. If you must know, Leofric and I talked about running away together.”

I grinned at him. When he narrowed his eyes, I only smiled more. “I love you too.”

He turned back to face the field. “Shut up.”

“Shutting up.”

Troy seemed to have grown bored of listening to the two of us bicker, his attention firmly on the field. He lifted a hand to point. “Look! Pigs. Lots of them. What do you think they’re going to do with all of them?”

“No idea,” I lied, Jack shooting me a quizzical look that said he knew I wasn’t telling the truth. Some of the pigs were small enough to be carried. Others were large enough that they were led in with a rope around their neck. Fences had been erected to keep the pigs within a certain area, and buckets of water were being emptied onto the ground to make it muddier. In each corner of the fenced-off area, there was a smaller enclosure, each with a different colored flag, presumably to make it easier for the competitors to identify their area.

Troy stood on his tiptoes to get a better look. The form he’d chosen might have been handsome, but it didn’t leave him with the height that Troy would normally have had. “What do you think they have to do?”

I stayed quiet, letting Jack answer. “I assume the winner will be the one that captures most pigs and puts them in their area.” He laughed. “Good luck to whoever is doing this event. Catching pigs is difficult at the best of times, but they’ve obviously oiled them as well. It will be like trying to keep hold of an eel. Only the eel will be heavy as well as slippery.” He turned to me. “Very wise of you not to have entered me in this event.”

I gave him an innocent look. “I would never enter *you* in an event like this.”

An officious-looking man with a roll of parchment in his hand stepped into the arena. He made his way to the center of the enclosure stepping delicately over the muddy puddles. A tall box was put in place, and he was helped to stand on it. Once he was safely ensconced on the box, fences were erected in a square around him to keep him separate from the rest of the enclosure.

Troy was bouncing up and down on his heels, barely able to contain his glee. “I can’t wait to see this. This should be hilarious.”

I smirked. “It should be. It’s definitely going to be something to remember.”

The man on the box cleared his throat, and the whole crowd fell silent, save for a bit of fidgeting, and a few children who didn’t seem quite sure what was going on. “Good evening, ladies, and gentlemen. And welcome to the very first event in the annual Theoporian festival. I hope you’re ready to have some fun.” He paused to let the crowd offer the requisite reaction of cheers and catcalls. Once it had died down, he hoisted the parchment higher. “Let’s meet our four brave contestants who think that they can get the better of our porcine friends. And the prize for this first event is...” He paused again to build tension. “Two gold coins. Which is an increase on last year’s prize” There was a chorus of whoops from the crowd. “So, without further ado, let’s welcome our first competitor.” He peered closely at the parchment. “Renovan Balsair. Where are you, Renovan?”

A huge man detached himself from the crowd to more cheers and made his way over to the enclosure.

Troy shook his head. “He might be strong, but he’s not going to be very fast.”

He pointed to where Renovan was being stripped of his shirt and covered in oil. “That’s going to make it more interesting.” Once Renovan was deemed event-ready, he was led over to the corner with the red flag.

“And our next competitor is... Michael Barlow.”

Michael Barlow was quite short, Troy deeming him as “fast, but he was going to struggle with the larger pigs.” Michael was given the corner with the green flag.

The third competitor was a thin, wiry elf who went by the name of Olas Rahund, Troy announcing him as “the one to beat unless the fourth competitor was something special.” Olas was given the corner with the yellow flag.

“And our very last competitor of the first event is...” The announcer leaned forward to look at the parchment again, his brow furrowing. “Hmm... no last name. It just says Galien. Where are you, Galien?” He lifted his head to survey the crowd.

Troy went very still. “Please tell me that there’s another Galien, that you didn’t enter me in an event where I have to take my shirt off and chase after slippery pigs.”

I bit my lip to keep the smile off my face and failed miserably. “I wish I could tell you that, but I’m afraid I can’t. I thought you’d enjoy it. You said you wanted lots of new experiences. Well”—I waved a hand at the enclosure—“here’s one you won’t forget in a hurry.” I pinned Troy with the most earnest look I could muster. “Remember, you need to win. Our audience with Bartholomew depends on it. So, whatever you do, don’t let those pigs get away from you.”

Troy fixed me with a stare, the look in his eyes cold enough to wither a plant. I knew exactly what he was going to say. He was going to point out

that he would be king one day. Therefore, he couldn't possibly take part in an activity like this. Before he could, I stuck my hand straight in the air and waved it around. "Galien's here! He's just a little shy." At the same time, I gave my brother a shove in the back that sent him stumbling forward. The crowd parted, leaving Troy with little choice but to take the path that had opened up for him, even if the look in his eyes said I would pay for this later.

It didn't take long for the helpers to divest Troy of his shirt and oil him up.

He bore the indignity with the look of a man regretting all his life choices. Jack leaned in, his lips close to my ear and his voice low. "I can't believe you just signed the future king of Padora up to chase pigs around."

"I can't believe he's actually doing it." In all honesty, I'd expected Troy to balk at the idea and refuse point blank. The fact that he was doing it either meant he was far more committed to finding Magdalena than I'd thought, or that he had something to prove. If it was the latter, I wasn't quite sure what he thought he was going to achieve.

"Do you think he can win?" Jack asked.

I laughed. "Not a chance."

Jack frowned. "That's putting an awful lot of pressure on either me or you to win our events. If we all lose, we're back to square one, and no closer to getting the information we need from Bartholomew."

I gave Jack a look, and he let out a snort. "Right. You haven't even considered the possibility of losing your event, have you?"

I shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with having confidence in yourself." Jack looked like he was about to say something, but I shushed him. "It's about to start. I don't want to miss a single second of this."

The four competitors were sent to their separate corners, most of the pigs wandering aimlessly around in the center of the enclosure. There was a flurry of

last-minute bets made, most of them seeming to favor the elf. A bell was rung, and everyone, including Troy, who seemed to be taking it far more seriously than I'd expected, sprang into action.

There was an early pig capture for Renovan, the piglet he grabbed not seeming to know what was going on and just standing there, even the amount of oil on it and Renovan's chest not proving any impediment to him getting it into his enclosure. Next to capture a pig was Olas, and then Michael. And then to my surprise Troy managed to get one too.

"One pig each," announced the man in the center somewhat redundantly. Someone dutifully selected the correctly painted numbers on a piece of wood and hung them next to the corresponding names. Olas got another one, closely followed by Renovan. And that seemed to be the end of the pigs who were prepared to go quietly, the rest far more skittish. They didn't care how they got away from the men who were after them, as long as they did. The crowd let out an enthusiastic "ooh" as a pig dived right between Michael's legs and evaded capture.

Troy got hold of a pig, but it managed to wriggle free before he could get it into his enclosure, leaving muddy streaks all over his chest. He took off after another one, but it was far too fast. Olas got another pig, taking him up to three. And then Troy caught the same pig again, the proximity to his enclosure, as luck would have it, meaning he managed to manhandle it in to bring his total up to two pigs in comparison to Olas's three. Renovan was already breathing hard, his lack of stamina becoming all too apparent. Troy took off after another pig, his arms and legs working furiously. He made a

dive for it, the pig wriggling out of his arms and pitching him headfirst into a muddy puddle.

My laughter stood out in the crowd of people all ready to offer sympathy. Even Jack looked a bit pained as Troy came up on his hands and knees, spitting mud in all directions, his entire face obscured by mud. To give him his due, once he'd gotten over his initial shock, he was back on his feet and after the pigs again. From that point, it was complete carnage, with pigs squealing, mud flying everywhere, and competitors getting in each other's way, sometimes intentionally and sometimes by accident.

With five minutes left to go, the scoreboard had Olas in the lead with six pigs. Troy was his nearest competitor on five, Michael lagging with three, and Renovan, who had all but given up, still on two. The crowd let out another collective gasp as Troy took yet another tumble into a puddle of mud. This time, though, he managed to keep hold of the pig, pinning it with his body weight, and somehow, while still on his knees, managing to maneuver it over to his enclosure, half rolling it, and half lifting it over the fence.

"He could win this," Jack said.

But Olas had already chased down another pig, the pig proving no match for Olas's technique, and putting Olas back in the lead. There was a crash of heads as Renovan and Michael ran into each other, both left rubbing their scalps, and looking slightly stunned. Troy had hold of another pig when the bell rang to say the time was up but hadn't managed to get it into his enclosure. He let it go, rolling onto his back and lying there in the mud, the rapid rise and fall of his chest making it clear just how much effort he'd exerted.

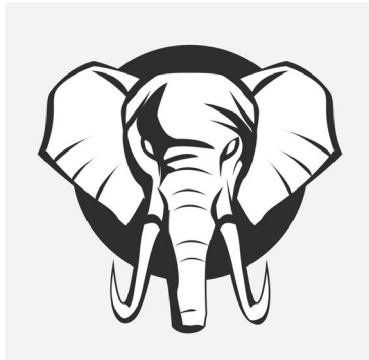
“And the win goes to Olas Rahund,” reported the man with the parchment.

Troy clambered to his feet, nearly every part of him plastered with mud. The crowd parted again as he made his way back to us. It was strange to see my brother looking like that. Even as a child practicing sword-fighting, he’d barely broken a sweat, and had always remained pristine. He stood there, the brighter blue eyes staring back at me making me realize that at some point he’d transformed back to his true self. Luckily, the covering of mud ensured that no one was going to recognize him as the future heir of Padora.

“That was...” he said. I waited to feel the full force of his wrath, surprised when he broke into a smile, the white of his teeth particularly bright against the dullness of the mud. “That was surprisingly exhilarating. I might even go so far as to say it was fun.” He ran a hand through his hair, bits of dry mud flaking off to fall at his feet. “I nearly had him as well. Did you see that?”

Jack stepped forward to clap him on the back. “You did really well, Galien. Far better than I thought you’d do. Didn’t he, Sebastian?”

Painful as the words were to force out, I had to agree. Maybe there was hope for Troy after all.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

JACK

My event, when I was called for it, turned out to be nothing like archery, Sebastian refusing to meet my eye as I was led toward a basket of wooden balls with numbers on one side and a green painted spot on the other to identify them as mine. Like Troy's event, there were four of us.

A tall, bearded man stepped forward to explain the rules, which basically consisted of throwing the wooden balls at containers so far in the distance I had to squint to be able to see them. The balls had to stay in the containers for points to be awarded. Bonus points were awarded for lots of reasons which were so complicated that I stopped listening halfway through the explanation to avoid getting a headache. The game was over when you ran out of balls, and the person with the highest score was declared the winner.

I'd be lying if I said it was my idea of a good time, but at least there were no pigs involved and I got to stay clean, Troy still looking like he'd spent half the day wallowing in mud. Two of my competitors were women, and the other was Renovan again, the man seeming to have entered himself in as many events as he could. He hadn't won any of them yet, which I assumed would make him more determined to win this one. I picked up a

ball with a number one on it, figuring that until I got the hang of it, it would be better to start with the lower numbers, the maximum points scored determined by the number on the ball. Or at least, that's what I'd understood.

"Come on, Jack!"

I turned my head to glare at Sebastian, both him and Troy having managed to work themselves to the front of the assembled crowd. I bit down on the urge to throw the ball at Sebastian rather than at the containers. Even though this was a stupid game and completely pointless, I did intend to try and win it. It was doubtful I'd succeed but you never knew.

A cheer went up as Renovan got his first points on the scoreboard, six of them. Both women were yet to score. I threw the first ball and watched as it rolled away to the side of the playing area without scoring a single point. It wasn't until ball number five that I got on the scoreboard, Renovan having pulled out a lead of fifteen points by that time, both women also on the scoreboard, but with lower numbers.

A few more minutes passed, the balls in my basket rapidly dwindling. I was twenty points behind Renovan when I caught the flash of gold sparks in the crowd. I narrowed my eyes at Sebastian, but all he did was smile. What was he up to? I didn't have to wait long to find out, the monkey that crept toward my basket to drop one of the high scoring balls back into it that I'd already thrown a dead giveaway.

Expecting a roar of outrage to go up, either from my fellow competitors, or from the crowd, I was surprised to find that no one had noticed what the monkey was up to. Monkeys were native to Theoporia, and the festival was full of animals, so it did blend in far more than it had in Cerensai.

Three more balls were delivered back to me in the same fashion, again all high-scoring numbers, Sebastian obviously directing the monkey to the best balls he could find. Renovan was fifteen points ahead of me when he ran out of balls. He glanced across at my basket, a frown appearing when he saw how many I had left. He was right to be confused. If I hadn't been cheating, I would have been down to my last ball or two, instead of having six still in there.

Cheating!

Even the thought left a nasty taste in my mouth. Sebastian might be only too happy to bend the rules, but it wasn't the way I usually did things. And now, without having had the good sense to check with me first, he'd dragged me into it, leaving me with quite the quandary. I could concede the game, but that would leave us relying on Sebastian to win in order to get our audience with Bartholomew. Which I guessed was the reason he'd taken steps to give us a better chance.

The monkey was still there, sitting a distance away, watching me, his head cocked slightly to one side. That was odd. Nothing Sebastian had summoned since the incident in Askophai had stuck around that long. His magic must be getting better. And it had to be the monkey, didn't it? Just to add insult to injury. Sebastian knew how much I hated that damn monkey. He'd probably chosen it just to rile me up even more. It wasn't enough that he was luring me over to the dark side. I had to do it with the most annoying creature in all thirteen kingdoms as my accomplice.

Bowing to the inevitable before the audience began to wonder why I was just standing there, I picked up the first ball, aimed, it and then heaved it in the direction of one of the containers. The cheer that went up told me it had gone in, and the scoreboard changed to reflect that. I was only ten points

behind Renovan now, both female competitors out of balls, their scores less than Renovan's and mine. Which meant I was the only one who stood a chance of beating him, even if it was through less than honest means.

I missed with the next two balls. The one after that went in to score ten points, leaving me neck and neck with Renovan on points, with only one ball left to throw—for the second time. Tension had my shoulder stiffening as I balanced the ball on the palm of my hand and prepared to throw. How bad would it be if I'd cheated and I still didn't win? I'd never hear the end of it from Sebastian.

Taking a deep breath, I brought my arm back and let the ball fly. It thudded into the container and stayed there, the crowd erupting.

“And the winner by twelve points is Jack Shaw. Well done, Jack. Don't forget to collect your prize of two gold coins from Bartholomew Rohan at the prize-giving ceremony later.”

I was hardly going to forget when that had been the whole purpose of the exercise. We had—or at least I had—an audience with Bartholomew later. And all it had taken was a complete abandonment of my morals. It had better be worth it. Making my way back to Sebastian, I grabbed him by the arm and tugged him out of the crowd. Bits of mud dropped from Troy like flakes of brown snow as he followed us.

Dragging Sebastian behind the back of a tent where it was a lot quieter, I confronted him. “What the fuck, Sebastian. I don't cheat. You know that.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Well, current evidence would suggest you do.”

Knowing how much he hated it, I poked him in the chest. “You didn't leave me with a lot of choice. Now I'm as bad as you. The next thing you know I'll be robbing people and offering my body to anyone that wants it.”

Amusement glittered in Sebastian's eyes. "I might have something to say about the latter."

"Might?"

He smiled. "If they touch you, I'd have to kill them. Is that better?"

"Much better." As it often did, my anger toward Sebastian melted away so quickly that it might as well not have existed in the first place. And all that was left behind was the urge to kiss him. Forgetting the presence of Troy, I smiled and leaned in, my actions only curtailed by something tugging at my trouser leg. I looked down, my lip curling as I was confronted by the monkey. I sighed. "You can get rid of it now."

Sebastian's gaze followed mine, his brow furrowing. "I thought I had."

He waved his fingers, and nothing happened. I looked at his fingers and then at the monkey. The monkey that was still there. And still tugging on my trouser leg as if he had something of great importance he needed to tell me. I shook him off my leg, the monkey making that chattering noise that I so hated as it jumped back a step. My reprieve only lasted a few seconds before it pressed forward again, once more grabbing hold of my trousers. "Not funny, Sebastian. Get rid of it."

"I can't."

There was something in Sebastian's expression, something I'd never seen there before which in another man I might have thought was fear.

Troy must have seen it too, the lines on his forehead only accentuated by the mud still caked there. "What's wrong?"

Sebastian lifted his head and looked at his brother, and then at me. "My magic... it's gone."

Despite the thudding of my heart, I laughed. "It can't have gone." I pointed at the monkey. "It's there. Trying to climb up my leg."

Sebastian shook his head, his expression haunted. “I have no control over him. I did, but not anymore. It’s just... gone.”

If it wasn’t for the desolation on his face, I might have thought that this was a prank he was carrying on for too long. After all, it wouldn’t be the first time. Sebastian lived to wind me up, and it didn’t usually matter where we were or what we were doing. I was still desperately searching for something comforting to say when Sebastian’s name rang out from the event square. “Do we have a Bass here? Bass?”

Sebastian turned in the direction of the announcement. Before he could take so much as a step in that direction, I grabbed his arm. “You don’t have to go. I won my event. I can talk to Bartholomew.”

Sebastian shook his head. “It’s fine.” He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. “I’m fine.” He flashed an unconvincing smile. “The distraction will do me good.”

Troy and I exchanged a look that said that neither of us believed a word of it as we trailed after him. When the monkey tried to follow, I shooed it away. This time it listened, disappearing between the crowd’s legs until it was out of sight. Hopefully, that was the last I’d see of it.

Sebastian’s event turned out to be hand to hand combat with a long wooden stick, where the winner of the round automatically went through to the next one. My brief concern that it wasn’t a sword, and therefore the skills might not be transferable, were quickly dispelled when he won his first round in less time than it had taken me to get points on the scoreboard in my event.

Troy leaned in with a smile. “We were trained in all sorts of weapons growing up.”

“Of course, you were.”

Ignoring the slight edge in my voice, Troy shrugged. “Annoyingly, he was always better than I was. Probably because it mattered more to him, like he always felt he had something to prove.”

“Sounds like Sebastian.” Keeping one eye on Sebastian to ensure he wasn’t about to have some sort of delayed meltdown from his loss of magic, I seized on the opportunity for a private conversation with Troy. “So... were you and Sebastian always like this?”

He frowned. “Like what?”

“At each other’s throats. Finding any opportunity to throw the other one headfirst into mud.”

Troy’s lips twitched. “I’d be lying if I said we weren’t. Although, the mud is a new thing, but probably only because there’s not that much of it to be found in Silverwood.”

Sebastian was ready to start his next round, his shirt already off. Along with the rest of the audience, I admired the play of his muscles as he brandished the stick. It was strange that no one here seemed to have recognized him. Whether that was because royalty wasn’t expected to attend a festival, or because we were in Theoporia, I wasn’t sure. “You could try getting along.”

Troy raised a mud-encrusted eyebrow. “Maybe you should tell Sebastian that. I haven’t entered him into a pig chasing contest or talked him into taking on the form of a man with the most annoying hair I’ve ever seen or experienced.”

He raised a good point. Sebastian had certainly demonstrated more ill will than Troy had. My loyalty was to my lover, though, rather than his brother, so I wasn’t about to admit that.

“Sebastian thinks I’m an uptight prig,” Troy continued.

“And are you?”

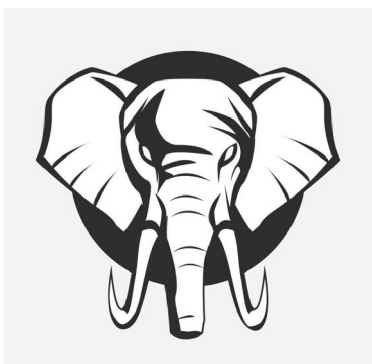
Troy gestured at his mud-spattered clothes, which I had to admit didn't look that comfortable now that the mud had dried. “Do I look uptight?”

I smiled. “Not currently. And if it's any consolation, you're far less annoying than Prince Montgomery was.”

Troy looked pleased by that comment as we both gave the ongoing event our full attention, Sebastian fighting his way through a few more rounds before he inevitably reached the final. He made short work of his opponent, the man no match for either Sebastian's technique or his sheer physical prowess. Troy let out a sigh as Sebastian was announced as the winner. “I guess I'm the only one, then, who doesn't get an audience with Bartholomew.”

He looked so crestfallen that I felt bad for him. “Only because Sebastian set you up. And I had to cheat, remember. Or should I say that Sebastian cheated for me. Anyway, it doesn't matter who speaks to Bartholomew as long as we get the information we came for. That's all that matters, right? That we know Magdalena's whereabouts by the end of the day before your father gets any worse?”

Troy gave a reluctant nod, and I had to stifle a smirk. The poor prince wasn't used to losing. That was another thing he had in common with Sebastian.



CHAPTER TWENTY

JACK

The prize-giving ceremony was due to take place inside a large white tent situated at the center of the festival. The winners of each event, including myself and Sebastian, were lined up outside it to wait for admittance to collect our prize. As friends and family weren't allowed, we'd left Troy at an easily identifiable landmark, Sebastian giving him strict instructions not to move from there until we returned.

Given Sebastian's unusually silent demeanor as we waited, it was clear that something was on his mind. Either he was concerned that Troy might wander off without one of us there to babysit him, or the loss of his magic was weighing heavily on him. While there was nothing I could do about the latter, there was a solution for the first. "I can stay with Troy if you want?"

Sebastian shook his head, but that was all I got from him.

I tried again. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

I bit back a sigh. "I find that hard to believe."

"Why?"

“Because...” I waved a hand at him. “How can you be fine? It was difficult enough when your magic wasn’t working properly, but I can’t even imagine what it must be like not to have it at all. Your magic was part of you. You don’t have to pretend it doesn’t affect you, especially not to me.”

Sebastian was quiet for a moment. “Hitting people with a stick helped.”

I smiled. “I bet it did.”

We both fell quiet as the tent flap was pulled back, and we were ushered inside. There was no sign of Renovan, who must not have managed a win from any of the numerous events he’d entered himself in. Which made me feel kind of bad about having cheated him out of the one he should have won. There was a little congregation waiting for us inside the tent, a portly gentleman, who I assumed was Bartholomew, between two guards.

I was proved correct as he launched straight into his speech. “Welcome, welcome. Do come in. Firstly, I want to thank you all for joining in so robustly with this fine festival. My name, as you probably already know, is Bartholomew Rohan, and I have been the official sponsor of the Theoporian Festival for the last few years, and I hope to continue to be for as long as they will have me.” There was a polite titter of laughter from the audience, neither myself or Sebastian joining in.

Bartholomew smiled. “Now, I’m sure you didn’t come here to listen to me talk. You’re keen to have your hard work and ingenuity rewarded.” Another polite titter of laughter. “Well, the good news is that you don’t have long to wait. The prizes will be awarded in event order, and you’ll be called forward individually to collect them.”

Sebastian stuck his hand straight up in the air, prompting a frown from Bartholomew. “Yes?”

Sebastian jerked his head my way. “We traveled together. Can we collect our prizes at the same time?”

Bartholomew’s frown deepened. He glanced at one of the guards, the guard simply shrugging as if to say that decision had nothing to do with him. Bartholomew’s gaze drifted over both of us, sizing us up. We’d known that Bartholomew was far too important a man for us to be allowed to have weapons in his presence, so my bow and Sebastian’s sword had been left with Troy. I made a special effort to appear as harmless as I could as he scrutinized us. “I don’t see why not.”

Another man stuck his hand up. “My wife won the sheep-wrestling contest. Can we collect our prizes together as well?”

Bartholomew let out a weary sigh. “Yes! Anyone who is here with someone else can receive their prizes at the same time. Anything to speed things up.” Seeming to remember himself, he cleared his throat and pasted a sunny smile back on his face. “Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes. I have some very exciting news to share with you.” He lifted his hand in a dramatic gesture meant to showcase the deep red curtain that lay behind him. “Behind that curtain, I have a very special helper. Someone who I’m sure you will be over the moon to meet.”

I looked to Sebastian, but he seemed just as much in the dark as I was over who it might be. I couldn’t say I cared much, as long as they didn’t get in the way of the questions we needed to ask Bartholomew. A wait followed, Sebastian and I fidgeting as they went through the winners of the events prior to mine. The good news was that the guards stayed outside the curtain.

Everyone so far had left the curtained area smiling, so I had to assume that the special guest was someone quite impressive. When my name was

eventually called, and we were ushered into the private space, I found myself smiling too as Princess Surander rushed forward to take hold of my hands before I could even think about bowing. Her smile was as beatific as ever. “Jack! It is you. I hoped it was when I saw the name on the list.” Her gaze drifted across to Sebastian, her smile growing wider. “And you two are still together. I’m so happy to see that.” A glint appeared in her eye. “And still bearing the unmistakable signs of being in love.”

I grinned somewhat sheepishly and quickly changed the subject. “What about you? I assume you’re married now. I guess that’s why you’re here in Theoporia. How’s it going?”

“It’s...” Princess Surander tilted her head to the side and looked thoughtful for a moment. “It’s going well. He’s handsome. And he’s very sweet and considerate.” She leaned closer, speaking in a low voice so that only I would be able to hear her. “While we may not have been each other’s first choices, we’re discovering more and more things every day that we have in common.” A little louder, she said, “It will be a good marriage for both of us.” Her gaze flicked back to Sebastian, her lips twitching. “We may not burn as brightly as you two, but I think few people do. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Sebastian’s wink in response prompted a laugh from Princess Surander, and a scowl from me. A polite cough came from behind Princess Surander, Bartholomew looking somewhat put-out not to be the center of attention. Luckily, Princess Surander was polished enough in social occasions to quickly paper over that crack by bringing him into the conversation. “Bartholomew, I’d like you to meet Jack and Sebastian. The kingdom of Osagezia owes them a great debt for single-handedly masterminding the

return of Chastershire's lost artifact. We would have been lost without them."

Bartholomew raised an eyebrow. "Oh, I see! How very impressive." He gave a slight frown. "And now you're here, taking part in Theoporia's festival. You certainly get around."

"Actually," Sebastian interjected smoothly. "We're here because we wanted to speak with you."

That seemed to throw him slightly, Bartholomew glancing around the small, enclosed space as if he expected assassins to spill from the shadows. When none did, he relaxed slightly. "And what is it I can help you with? I'm afraid I don't give personal loans if that's what you're after."

"We don't want a loan," I stated. "We're trying to track down your sister Magdalena, actually. Some important people in Padora would like an audience with her."

"Important people?" Bartholomew looked momentarily uncomfortable. "Then it is with great regret that I must inform you that my sister is in poor health herself and is taking a much-needed respite from helping others. I'm afraid she will be unable to assist. I'm sorry I can't give you better news."

"That's..." I'd been about to say that it was indeed sad news, but before I could, I caught the slight frown on Princess Surander's face. She checked that Bartholomew wasn't looking her way before she mouthed "lie." I'd forgotten her ability to read people's emotions, including being able to tell when they weren't telling the truth. It was a good thing she was here. Without her, Sebastian and I might have taken what Bartholomew was saying at face value and left with nothing to show for it.

"What's wrong with your sister?" I asked.

Bartholomew frowned as he busied himself with counting out the gold coins for our prizes. He was probably hoping to get rid of us quickly. “I’m afraid that’s family business, and I can’t possibly discuss it with strangers.”

“Is Magdalena back in Ebitus?” Sebastian asked. Either he’d seen what Princess Surander had mouthed, or he’d caught wind of what I was up to.

Bartholomew gave an enthusiastic nod without looking up. “She is.”

Both Sebastian and I looked toward Princess Surander, the princess giving a small shake of her head to signify another lie. Fury boiled up in me as Bartholomew handed the coins over and I placed them in my money pouch with short, sharp movements while I tried to weigh up the best way to proceed. All we wanted was information, and for some reason, Bartholomew wasn’t being straight with us. Sebastian would no doubt have some calm and collected way of finding out what we needed to know, but I wasn’t Sebastian, and I wasn’t exactly known for my patience.

One solution did come to mind, but it was something no one was going to approve of, especially Bartholomew. Therefore, it deserved at least a few moments of thought. I contemplated it for at least three seconds, decided that the idea had definite merit, and then reached down to my boot and pulled out the knife that I used for gutting fish that the guards hadn’t known was there. One step forward, one quick movement, and I had the edge of the blade pressed against Bartholomew’s throat, the man suddenly going very still, as people tended to do when any movement was likely to draw blood.

“Jack!” Sebastian didn’t sound too happy about the situation.

Ignoring Sebastian’s protest, I concentrated on Bartholomew. He’d gone a very fetching shade of red, his eyes bulging. His mouth opened, presumably to shout to the guards just outside the curtain. I pressed the

blade harder against his throat. Not hard enough to draw blood, but enough for him to know I was serious. “I wouldn’t.”

His mouth snapped closed, and he held out the money pouch. “Take it. It’s all yours. Just don’t hurt me or the princess.”

I let out a sigh. “We don’t want your money. And—”

“I’m not sure I’d go that far,” Sebastian said.

I took a moment to shoot him a look of reproach.

He shrugged. “Just saying.”

I focused all my attention back on Bartholomew, the man even more flushed. Any redder, and there’d be tomatoes jealous of his rosy complexion. “As I was saying, we don’t want your money. And we certainly have no intention of hurting the princess.” I glanced Princess Surander’s way, surprised to find her looking like she was having the time of her life. “Do you feel under threat, princess?”

“Oh, not at all. You do what you need to do.”

Sebastian crossed his arms over his chest. “Just a suggestion, but you might want to speed this up before anyone becomes suspicious and draws back the curtain to see what’s taking so long.”

I glared at him. “I suppose you had a better idea.”

His lips twitched. “Well, I would probably have waited until later. When Bartholomew was on his own, maybe, rather than surrounded by guards, and in the company of a princess. But”—he gave another shrug—“that’s just me.”

My fingers tightened around the handle of the knife. Sebastian might have raised a good point, but I wasn’t about to admit that. Besides, we needed Princess Surander. Without her, we had no way of telling whether

Bartholomew was being honest or not. I leaned closer to Bartholomew. “You’re lying to us. You need to stop. Do you understand?”

Bartholomew went for a nod, realized at the last moment that it wasn’t a good idea with a knife pressed to his throat, and aborted the movement to let out a meek little “yes” instead.

“Mr. Rohan, you’re taking a long time with these prizes. Do you need assistance in there?” The voice that came through the curtain was gruff. I presumed it belonged to the taller of the two guards, the one that had looked like he’d be able to break coconuts with nothing but his bare hands. I doubted he would stop to ask questions should he discover his charge with a blade pressed to his throat.

I tilted my head to bring my lips as close to Bartholomew’s ear as I could without touching. “Answer the man, and think carefully about what you say. Make sure it’s convincing.” I wasn’t used to threatening people—Sebastian didn’t count—but I was warming to the role, maybe even enjoying it slightly. It was certainly interesting to watch all the emotions play across Bartholomew’s face.

Bartholomew swallowed, his throat convulsing against the metal of the knife. “I’m fine!” His voice was a little high-pitched, but apart from that he didn’t sound too different. “We shan’t be much longer. Just a few more minutes.”

“What about you, Your Highness?” the same gruff voice asked.

“Me! Oh, I’ve never been better, thank you,” answered Princess Surander. “I didn’t expect that assisting with the prize-giving would prove so entertaining.”

Silence returned, and I scrutinized Bartholomew. He withered under my stare. “Wh...what... d... do you want to know?”

“Your sister. Where is she really?”

“I told you. She’s in Ebitus. She’s not been well.”

Princess Surander gave a little sigh, and I bared my teeth at Bartholomew. “One last chance to tell the truth.”

“W...what w..will you d...do t...to me if I d...don’t?”

That was a good question. What was I going to do if Bartholomew didn’t spill the beans? It wasn’t like I would kill the man. But then, I didn’t need to actually kill him, did I? He just needed to believe I would. I leaned in again. “I’m going to press this blade so far into your neck that it will slice your head clean off.” Sebastian made a sound a little too close to arousal for my liking. I frowned but didn’t look his way. “And then I’m going to—”

“Okay... okay.” A vein pulsed in Bartholomew’s forehead. “Take the knife away and I’ll tell you everything. Just don’t draw blood.”

I was poised to inform Bartholomew that he could just as easily tell me everything with the knife still at his throat, when Sebastian’s fingers closed around my wrist, and tugged gently at my arm. It was possible I was getting a little drunk on power. Remembering I was a farmer rather than a bandit, I lowered my arm.

Bartholomew rubbed at his neck, his face still bright red. “Magdalena was kidnapped.”

I blinked. “Kidnapped? By who?”

“Pirates.”

I looked to Princess Surander to find her frowning. “What’s wrong? Another lie?”

She looked thoughtful. “Not quite. It’s mostly true. Let’s call it twisting the truth slightly.”

“What pirates? And how long ago?” asked Sebastian with a glance at the curtain that told me he didn’t expect us to remain undisturbed for long. No doubt the people still waiting for their prizes were getting restless.

“It happened six months ago, in the middle of the night. Close to Glimmerfield. There’s always been pirates in that area because of all the small islands that lie off the coast. It’s said that they use one of those islands as their headquarters. Magdalena said we would be safe, but obviously she was wrong.” He sighed. “Poor Magdalena. I do miss her so.”

Princess Surander’s brows arched in a way that said that last statement had been a lie.

“And they haven’t brought her back?” I asked. Bartholomew shook his head, his expression sad. I narrowed my eyes at him. “Why lie? Why claim she was ill?”

Bartholomew’s gaze dropped to the floor, Sebastian jumping in before the other man could respond. “I would assume because Bartholomew hasn’t paid vast sums of money to get her back. Is that right, Bartholomew? Do you love your money more than you love your sister?”

He lifted his head to glare at Sebastian, his nostrils flaring. “That is a preposterous accusation to make, and completely unfounded.” He pulled himself up to his full height and squared his shoulders, actions that might have been convincingly confident if they hadn’t been accompanied by a glance at the knife in my hand. “Now... I’ve told you what happened to my poor sister. There’s nothing else I can tell you.”

“Not quite true,” Princess Surander said. “There is something else you know. What is it?”

Bartholomew gave her a look like she was a traitor, and then seemed to remember who she was, his expression turning apologetic. He gave a little

bob of his head. “Only what I was told in the aftermath of the... incident, that Magdalena was spirited away by the crew of The Crimson Wolf. They’re apparently a fearsome lot. Not as bad as the crew of The Navarino, whose captain is said to possess magic, but bad enough. There have been numerous attempts to bring them to justice over the years, but none have proved successful. I expect that poor Magdalena is already dead, and no amount of money can bring her back to life.” He paused. “Well, unless you employ the services of a necromancer.” He shuddered. “But dear, sweet Magdalena deserves better than that.”

The curtain was suddenly ripped back, the guard’s gaze immediately dropping to the knife in my hand. I didn’t need Sebastian’s fingers tugging at my elbow to know it was way past the time where we should have been nothing but a memory.

Sebastian’s elbow in the guard’s gut caught him by surprise, and he let out a loud “oof,” his step back providing us with enough of a gap to slip past him before he could grab hold of either of us. “Bye, Princess, it’s been lovely seeing you,” I shouted on my way out. “Thank you for your help.”

“It’s been lovely seeing you both as well,” she shouted after us, the smile in her voice audible. “There’s never a dull moment when you two are around. I can’t wait for our paths to cross again.”

Sebastian was running at full speed through the tent now, dodging people left, right, and center, with me following closely in the path he’d just cleared. A guard appeared out of nowhere, his fingers brushing Sebastian’s shirt but not managing to get a good enough grip as Sebastian wriggled out of harm’s way. That left the guard directly in front of me, giving me no option but to barrel straight into him, the impact sending him flying. It was enough to slow me down, but not enough to stop me, Sebastian glancing

back over his shoulder to check that I wasn't in trouble before he exited the tent.

The crowds outside were a problem. Luckily, our pursuers—who hadn't given up—were experiencing the same issue and weren't gaining on us. I increased my speed, pulling alongside Sebastian. "We appear to be running. Again."

Sebastian's grin was full of unrestrained joy. "We do, but you can't blame me for this one. I wasn't the one who pulled a knife."

"We needed the information. We got the information. Job done."

"If you say so, farm boy. If you say so."

If it hadn't been for the rather angry guards chasing us, Bartholomew no doubt sending as many as he could muster at short notice after us with a heartrending tale of my violent actions, I would have taken Sebastian to task. But it would have to wait.

We'd left Troy by a tall tree with bright red flowers to make it easier to find him. It did, the tree towering above the heads of the crowd. We zig-zagged that way, our need to escape the festival as quickly as possible superseded by not being able to leave him behind. "He better be there," I panted out.

Sebastian shoved someone out of the way, ignoring the angry expletives that spilled from the man's mouth. "If he isn't, you've got my permission to stab him. There would be two benefits to that—no more having to put up with Troy, and..."

I glanced across at him as we both leapt over a sleeping dog, the tree now in sight. "And what?"

"And it would be hot."

"You're a very sick man. Do you know that?"

“You can punish me for it later.”

I had an answer for that, only the sight under the tree as we neared it, banished it from my head. “Is that...? Is he...?”

“Yes, and yes,” said Sebastian with something that sounded very much like reluctant admiration in his voice. “I believe he is.”

Troy was there, but so was someone else, a someone with long, dark hair down to her waist, Troy’s arms wrapped around her while he ravished her mouth, the fact that he was still covered in mud apparently not bothering her one little bit.

“Troy!” My shout fell on deaf ears, Troy far too busy to stop what he was doing. I tried again, almost screaming it. This time, he at least lifted his head, his brow furrowing as he spotted us barreling toward him. “Run, Troy!”

He blinked. “I can’t. I...” His gaze dropped to the woman in his arms who was staring at him with a look of adoration. Perhaps she had a fetish for mud.

“Troy!” I put all the urgency I could into my words, and Troy finally let out a reluctant sigh, kissed the woman’s hand, gathered up the weapons at his feet, and then fell into step beside us as we passed.

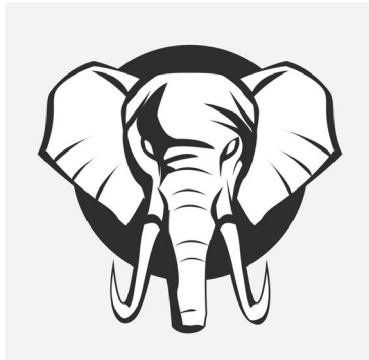
He looked across. “Why are we running?”

Sebastian smiled. “Jack did Jack, but with a knife.”

“Oh!” Troy could have at least summoned a bit of surprise rather than just sounding resigned. “I see. Did you at least get the information we needed?”

The entrance to the festival was coming up. We vaulted the fence in single file, paying no attention to the interested stares. It wasn’t until we’d run for at least another ten minutes with no sign of anyone following us,

and we were able to slow, that I answered Troy's question. "Of course, we got the information. Sebastian and I might not have the most orthodox methods, but we get there in the end."



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SEBASTIAN

Troy stared around the clearing, his face an absolute picture. “What do you mean when you say that we’re going to sleep here?”

“What do I mean?” I lowered myself onto the log next to Jack, who wasn’t making any attempt to hide his amusement as he watched Troy. “I thought the words were fairly self-explanatory.”

“But...” Troy turned in a slow circle like he was searching for something he’d missed. “There are no beds. There are no washing facilities. There’s no food. And there’s certainly no table service.”

I met Troy’s genuinely puzzled gaze, working hard to keep my expression suitably grave. “You didn’t have a bed last night.”

“No, but”—Troy pointed at the sky—“at least I had a roof over my head. This is...” He shook his head in a way that said the concept was just too vast for him to express adequately in words.

Jack smirked. “Welcome to life outside the palace, your highness, where people sometimes have to make do.” He said “your highness” in a very different way than when he used it with Princess Surander. Like Jack needed a lot more convincing that Troy had done enough to earn the title.

Troy continued to look perplexed. “We can’t be that far from Rosevale. Why don’t we just go back there?”

“Because...” Jack said, “there are probably still guards searching for us. “I held a knife to the throat of one of the richest men in all thirteen kingdoms, and I think he was a little upset by it.”

I let out a snort. “Just a little.”

Troy’s sigh was heartfelt as he lowered himself to the log opposite, looking about as miserable as I’d ever seen him. Although, there was the time when he’d been told he couldn’t wear his favorite crown to an event. That had definitely come close. He pulled at the front of his mud-stained shirt, the fabric having dried as stiff as a board. “What am I meant to do about this?”

I cocked my head to one side. “What can you hear?”

“Birds. The wind.” He finally got what I was getting at, comprehension dawning on his face. “Water. There’s a river?”

I nodded.

“Won’t it be rather cold?” Troy asked.

“Think of it as another new experience.”

Troy let out another sigh. “And what about the rest? What about food?”

I jerked my head toward Jack. “If you speak nicely to Jack, he might be able to catch us something with his bow. There must be rabbits around here.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “How did I know that would be my job?”

I offered him a sweet smile and fluttered my eyelashes at him. “You love a chance to show off your hunting prowess.” I lifted my gaze to the sky, the sun already starting its downward trajectory, which meant there weren’t that many hours of daylight left. “It’s getting late. You should probably go now.”

Jack clambered to his feet. “Maybe collect some firewood before you go to start the fire. Troy will need it to get his clothes dry when he returns from the river.”

Jack turned to stare down at me, the glint in his eye a warning that I’d said something wrong. “While I’m making a fire and hunting, what are you going to be doing?”

“Supervising. Listening out for predators.”

Troy’s head jerked up at that, his eyes wide. “Predators? What sort of predators?”

We both ignored him, my gaze locked on Jack’s as he tilted his chin in challenge. “You know what you’re acting like, Sebastian, don’t you?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “No. But I’m sure you’re going to enlighten me.”

He nodded. “Oh, I will. Don’t you worry about that. What kind of lover would I be if I wasn’t prepared to offer some harsh truths when they’re needed?”

I flashed him a toothy smile. “It’s why I married you.”

He opened his mouth and then closed it again, lifting a finger to point it at me. “You’re not going to distract me with that argument. Not when we both know the truth. You’re acting like a spoiled prince. Someone who thinks they can just sit here and be waited on hand and foot.” He waved a hand in Troy’s direction without looking his way. “I mean no offense to any other princes in the vicinity.”

“What kind of predators?” asked Troy. “Are we talking small ones that can easily be dispatched, or larger ones that might prove life-threatening? Because if it’s the latter, I really think I should go and stay in Rosevale. After all, it’s not me that the guards are after, and Cora, who was the

woman I was getting better acquainted with before we were so rudely interrupted, just in case you're interested, might possibly have mentioned that she lives there. It would give me an opportunity to apologize for my rudeness, and to make amends." He let out a wistful sigh. "She did have beautiful..."

I rose to my feet so that Jack and I were on the same level, Troy still talking, but nothing more than background noise as I concentrated on what was important. "That is a terrible accusation to make." I pressed a hand to my chest just over my heart. "You may as well have grabbed your knife and stabbed me right here." I gave my chest a tap for good measure.

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Don't tempt me." He crossed his arms over his chest and regarded me steadily. "So you're denying that you have a habit of letting me do all the work? Because that's just what a *prince* would do. A *prince* would expect things of others. A *prince* would think that things were beneath them. A *prince* would—"

Pressure rose in my chest. "I am not a prince. Take that back."

"Well, technically you still are," offered Troy. "Mother and Father would have needed to disown you for the title not to belong to you anymore. And although Father was very upset at your sudden departure, as we all were, I don't think it ever occurred to him to go as far as pretending you'd ceased to exist. So, you're still a prince, I'm afraid."

I turned to glare at him. "You're not helping."

He raised his hands in mock surrender. "Oh, so you can still hear me. I was beginning to wonder." He flicked a hand in the air. "You two start your foreplay, or whatever it is that you do... Quite honestly, I'm still trying to work it out. And It's like nothing else in the world exists. I'm surprised you

haven't both been eaten a long time ago, which reminds me"—he stood, placing his hands on his hips—"what predators?"

I pointed in the direction of the river. "Go and bathe, Troy. You look like some sort of mud monster, rather than the heir to Padora."

"And whose fault is that?" Despite a lot of grumbling and muttering about the possibility of being eaten by something that no one would even tell him about, Troy did head in that direction, leaving me alone with Jack for the first time in what felt like days. "I lost all my magic," I said. That wasn't what I'd intended to say, but once the words were out of my mouth, there was no taking them back.

Jack's face immediately softened. "I know. And I'm sorry. Truly, I am."

He stepped forward to wrap his arms around me, the action stunning me into silence. Jack never initiated a hug. If I wanted one, I usually had to employ emotional blackmail, or take him by surprise. And even then, he escaped sometimes. I slid my arms around his waist and held on for dear life, burying my face in his shoulder and breathing him in.

"How do you feel about it?"

It was a good question, but not one I felt I could answer. Given I hadn't intended on bringing it up, but had blurted it out anyway, I could hardly deny that it was at the forefront of my mind. But the threads of emotion felt tangled, like there were too many competing with each other to separate and make sense of. "I don't know."

Jack disentangled himself from my arms and guided me back to the log. "Understandable." He delivered a soft kiss to my forehead. "It will take some time to sink in. You should sit here, and... I don't know, probably take it easy."

I stared up at him. "What about the fire?"

“I’ll do it.”

“But you need to go hunting. If Troy doesn’t get to eat, he’ll probably cry.”

“I’ll do that as well.” He delivered another kiss to my forehead before backing away to start collecting firewood. He had quite a pile before something occurred to him. “How are we going to light it?”

I winced. I expected this would be the first of many tasks that had become more complicated than they used to be. Normally, I just summoned a small dragon. One little puff of flame was all that was required. But no magic meant no dragon.

Jack added more wood to the pile. “Well, in the absence of a flint, we do it the old-fashioned way. Rub two sticks together and start with dry grass as kindling.”

I eyed him curiously. “Do you know how to do that?”

He gave me a look that said I was an idiot, which to be honest I was used to, but this one seemed more pointed than usual. “Of course, I do. I might be a bit out of practice, though.”

As it turned out, Jack wasn’t out of practice at all. It might have taken longer than with a dragon, but he had a roaring fire going in no time at all, and long before Troy returned from the river. Although, that probably wasn’t a fair comparison. No doubt my brother was still trying to work out how exactly you went about washing clothes.

“I love you, Jack Shaw.”

Jack lifted his head, with a smile on his lips. “Because I can start a fire?”

“Because you’re you.”

He rolled his eyes, but his smile grew noticeably wider.

I decided to push my luck. “Have you got anything to say to me?”

He added another log to the fire before straightening. "Yeah, I'll see you later. I'm going hunting."

"I'll miss you."

I didn't get a response.



Jack had outdone himself with four rabbits caught in record time. He quickly set to work on skinning and cooking them over the fire, a very damp-looking and shirtless Troy huddling close to the fire as he watched with a mixture of revulsion and awe. After a somewhat slow and hesitant start, Troy seemed equally as impressed by the taste as he had by the preparation, gobbling his share, and then asking for seconds, Jack handing it over without argument.

It was only when our stomachs were full that we got around to discussing the events of the day, Troy asking the question that had been on my mind too. "How do you find a pirate ship that presumably doesn't want to be found?"

I grimaced. "I'm working on it."

Jack propped his chin on his hand and looked thoughtful. "At least we have an area to start looking in."

Troy nodded. "So, we go there, and I guess we ask around, and see what we can find out."

"*You* don't," I stated firmly.

Troy frowned. "What do you mean?"

I gave him a hard stare. "You go home to Silverwood. Attending a festival is one thing. Messing about with pirates is another thing entirely. It's far too dangerous."

Troy's gaze flitted over to Jack, but if he was expecting help from that quarter, he was to be disappointed, Jack simply shaking his head.

"I want to help," Troy said.

I held his gaze. "And you can help, by returning to Silverwood so that I know you're safe."

Troy still hadn't given up. I could tell by the belligerent look on his face. "What about your magic, the fact that you don't have any? You need me."

I held his gaze. "I need you safe."

Troy's lips twitched. "That's really sweet, little brother, but—"

"It has absolutely nothing to do with me being sweet, and everything to do with you being the future king. If anything happens to you, I would be king. I can't be king." Even the thought of it brought on a cold sweat, Jack shuffling closer to take hold of my hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. I squeezed back. "So, for that reason, you need to go home. Please."

Troy stared moodily into the flames for a moment, the sky now completely dark. "I don't think you've ever said please to me before."

"Well, that just shows you how much I mean it. You've had your adventure. You stayed in a tavern. You attended a festival. You rolled in mud. You kissed a pretty girl, and you slept rough. Or at least you will have done before the night is through. That's got to be enough for you, surely?"

Troy's sigh sounded like he had the whole weight of the world on his shoulders, and I guess in a way he did. He had the weight of a kingdom on them, and all the responsibility that came with it. And it was a responsibility I would crumble under, which in many ways made him a braver man than I was. Time was making me look at him in a different way, with a respect I'd never had for him before.

“Fine,” he finally spat out, reluctance oozing from every pore of his body. “I’ll return to Silverwood tomorrow and update everyone on what’s been happening.”

I leaned forward, Jack’s hand still clasped between both of mine. “Promise me you mean that. Promise that you’re not just saying it so you can follow us.”

Troy rolled his eyes. “I promise. I don’t think I’d do well around pirates anyway. I’ve heard they’re quite the barbarians.” His lips quirked. “You should fit in perfectly with them.” It might have been a barb, but it was delivered with a lot less heat than one of his remarks would usually have been.

Jack seemed to think so too. “Aww, look at the two of you getting along.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” we both snapped at the same time, Jack letting out a throaty laugh.

Any other comment I might have made was forestalled by a rustling in the bushes, all our heads turning in that direction. I went for my sword, and Jack for his bow, while Troy just jumped to his feet and looked alarmed. “What’s that?”

I shook my head. “No idea. Another rabbit, maybe.”

Jack let out a snort. “Well, I hope he’s not come looking for his friends. I hate to be the bearer of bad news.”

Another rustle. Jack notched an arrow and aimed it at the bush. And then a head popped out of the foliage.

Not a rabbit. A monkey. My monkey.

Jack didn’t lower his bow. “I suppose you’ll get upset if I shoot it anyway.”

“I would, yes.”

He sighed and plucked out the arrow, returning it to his quiver and propping his bow against the log. “Why has it followed us?”

“Perhaps it didn’t know where else to go.” I dropped to my haunches and held out my hand. “Here, pretty monkey.”

Jack’s lip curled. “Don’t encourage it.”

Just like the last time, it didn’t seem remotely interested in me, all its focus on Jack. It ran forward a few steps, chattering excitedly, forcing Jack to take a few steps back to keep space between himself and the monkey.

“What does it want?” Troy asked.

Jack snatched up a long stick from the ground and held it out in front of him, poking the monkey in the chest when it tried to come closer. “To upset me.”

I frowned. “I don’t think that’s true. I kept trying to tell you that he liked you.”

The monkey took another step forward, Jack giving it another poke to keep it at bay. “Well, the feeling isn’t mutual.” He gave it a harder prod, the monkey jumping away from the stick. “That’s it,” Jack said, “Shoo!” He stamped on the ground, the monkey startling and running back into the undergrowth. “And don’t come back,” Jack shouted after it. “Not unless you want to be the next thing on the fire.”

Excitement over, I retook my seat on the log. “You’re not eating it.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Oh, yeah. Try me.”



After a protracted grumble about the lack of a bed and bedsheets, and a pillow, and anything really, Troy had fallen asleep surprisingly quickly. He was already snoring quietly on the opposite side of the fire when Jack took

my hand and led me away into the trees. It was pitch black, the faint hoot of an owl somewhere in the distance the only sound apart from the crunch of leaves beneath our booted feet. When he'd deemed that we'd gone far enough, Jack wasted no time in backing me against a tree, his fingers already in my hair as his lips came down on mine, hot and urgent.

I responded with the same enthusiasm that I did for anything that involved Jack, tugging his lower body closer so that I could feel his growing hardness against mine as our kisses ramped up in intensity. I loved the way that Jack kissed. He kissed like there was no tomorrow, like if he didn't get his fill of me, he'd die.

Although it hadn't been that long since we'd last been intimate, it felt like it, my brother's presence proving as successful as an icy pool of water in dampening ardor. Therefore, I was fully on board with this plan of Jack's to sneak away. This far from camp, there was no chance of Troy just happening to wake up as things were getting interesting and demanding to know what we were doing.

"I love you, Jack Shaw."

Jack's lips curved under mine as we both worked on freeing the buttons of his shirt by touch alone, the light of the moon present, but struggling to have much of an effect through the thick canopy of the trees.

"You're tolerable."

"Tolerable." I trailed my mouth down over his collarbone, his skin fiery-hot. "You didn't always think so."

Jack leaned his weight more fully against the tree. "That's true. There was a time where I would have given anything for you to leave me alone."

Sinking to my knees, I pressed a quick kiss against Jack's abdomen, the muscles fluttering beneath my lips. "Want me to leave you alone now?"

Fingers tangled in my hair to pull me closer to him. “I don’t think so. There is something I want, though.”

I went lower, my chin brushing Jack’s waistband, his treasure trail rasping pleurably against my skin. “What’s that?”

“Your lips wrapped around my cock.”

It never failed to send a thrill through me when Jack said the word “cock.” There was just something about the way he said it. Keen to do exactly what he’d requested, I made short work of the fastenings on his trousers, his cock just as eager to be released as I was to take it down my throat.

He let out a lusty groan as I slid my lips over his satiny length, my fingers wrapped around his hips to pull him in deeper. I sucked him just the way he liked it. Not too fast. Not too slow. Just on the right side of sloppy. More noises spilled from his lips as I really went to town on him, driving Jack close to orgasm, his chest heaving, and his fingers alternately clenching and relaxing in my hair. Only when he was on the brink did I pull back. And even then, it was only to spin him around so he was facing the tree and yank his trousers down further, the muscular globes of his ass like a siren call as I freed my cock.

“Hurry, Sebastian.”

I was hurrying, but of course that wasn’t enough for Jack. Bossy, impossible Jack wanted it faster, like I was only here to do his bidding. I pressed myself against him, Jack tilting his head to the side to give me better access as my lips found his neck. “No oil.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he panted. “Use spit.”

I did, lots of it, pushing inside him mere seconds later. Jack let out a groan so loud as I entered him that I could picture Troy sitting bolt upright

and trying to work out what animal could have made the sound. I started slow, one hand sliding around the front to fist Jack's cock as I fucked him. Slow soon built to a furious rhythm, both of us up on our toes as I thrust into Jack's more than willing body time and time again. Jack came first, his cum spilling over my fingers. A few more thrusts and I followed him, my shout muffled in his shoulder. Save for the harshness of our breathing, we were both content to be quiet for a while, sharing a lazy, satiated kiss as Jack sought out my mouth.

I had to disengage eventually, turning Jack in my arms and resting my forehead against his. "I needed that."

He laughed. "Of course, you did. Poor Sebastian Beau can't go without sex for too long or his balls will shrivel and drop off."

"Good thing I've got you, then, to keep those special parts of me in good working order."

Jack's voice dropped to a husky whisper. "It is." He rubbed his nose against mine. "Earlier today I realized one thing that I love about Padora."

"Yeah? What?"

"We haven't bumped into a single one of your ex-lovers."

I contemplated his words for a moment and had to concede that it was true. "That's because of all the kingdoms, this is the one that I took great pains to avoid."

Jack set about putting his clothing back to rights. "We should get back. Before Troy wakes up and realizes we're missing."

I sighed at the mention of Troy, but did straighten my clothing, the action taking a lot less time than it had for Jack since I'd barely done anything more than pull my trousers down to release my cock. "Of course, we wouldn't want to upset Troy, would we?"

Jack grinned, his teeth flashing white in the darkness. “He’s your brother. You love him, really.”

I made a sound that could neither be interpreted as agreement or disagreement as I intertwined my fingers with Jack’s, and the two of us made our way back to camp hand in hand. “You didn’t say it again.”

“Didn’t say what?”

I bumped him with my shoulder. “You know what.”

I couldn’t see it, but I could picture the eye roll that would accompany the sound of exasperation he made. “You know I love you.”

“It’s nice to hear it.”

“Fine. I love you. Happy now?”

I pulled him close and kissed his cheek. “Yes. Much happier.”

“Good. Now shush. Let’s not wake Troy. Or he might pick up exactly where he left off and start moaning about the sheer torture we’re putting him through by making him sleep without silk sheets.”

The fire was still burning brightly by the time we got back, the light it cast enough to reveal an empty spot where Troy had lain previously. I stopped dead, Jack almost walking into the back of me. “Where is he?”

Jack’s brow creased as he carried out his own scrutiny of the patch of empty ground, the grass flattened in the clear shape of a person. “I don’t know.”

My heart rate doubled as I hurried forward to crouch next to the flattened grass, Jack joining me. I wasn’t sure what I was looking for. Some sign of a disturbance maybe. Or blood. There was nothing, though. Just grass.

I was still crouching next to Troy’s makeshift bed when a rustle in the undergrowth had both Jack and I turning our heads in that direction.

Someone muttered an epithet very unsuited to a future king, and Troy appeared out of the darkness seconds later, rubbing his head.

Relief surged through me. Troy might only have been missing for a short time, but it had been long enough to imagine all manner of horrific scenarios: Troy kidnapped by goblins, pixies, bandits, orcs. Maybe even a mixture of all of them. I forced myself to breathe slowly. The sooner Troy was back in Silverwood where he was safe, the better.

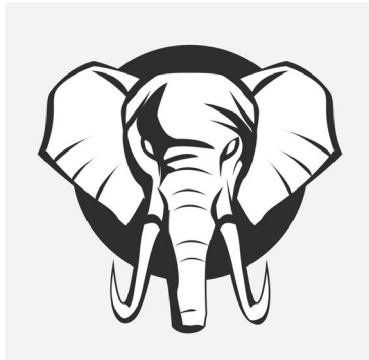
He stopped when he saw us, his brows drawing together. “What are you doing?”

“Looking for you.”

He gestured back at the trees. “I had to go and water the plants. I figured it was best to do it away from the...” His lip curled. “I assume the appropriate word is camp.”

He lay back down on the same patch of grass. “Where were you two, anyway?” He glanced from me to Jack and then back again. “Actually... don’t answer that. I think I can guess what you were doing. I suppose I should be grateful that you left, and I didn’t wake to a sight I would never have been able to eradicate from my brain.” He tucked his hand under his head and closed his eyes. “I’m hoping that you two are going to sleep, rather than crouch there and watch me all night, because I’ve got to tell you it’s a little creepy.”

I climbed to my feet, tugging Jack with me, and we retired to the opposite side of the fire. I made sure to pick a place where Troy was still in my eyeline. The scare had been enough that I intended to sleep with one eye open.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JACK

We'd only just left the woodland in favor of open ground the next day when the thunder of distant hooves had signaled the approach of a sizeable group of men. There'd been a few moments of trepidation as we'd waited for them to come into view. All three of us had no doubt been thinking the same thing, that Bartholomew Rohan had managed to find us, and was bearing far more of a grudge for a few minutes of having a knife pressed to his neck than was warranted. The man needed to learn to tell the truth if he didn't want people to take extreme measures. If he had, all the nastiness could have been avoided. That was my take on the situation, anyway. No doubt Bartholomew's was a little different.

Therefore, it had come as a great relief when we'd spotted the blue and silver banner of Silverwood at the head of the procession. Or at least Sebastian and I had been relieved. The slight sagging of Troy's shoulders had said he didn't necessarily share our feelings. We'd waited for the party to reach us, the lead soldier dismounting from his pristine white horse, and performing a perfectly executed bow to Troy, the likes of which I could only dream of. After the briefest of hesitations, he'd done the same to

Sebastian. It had been on the tip of my tongue to ask where mine was, but I'd held it back for fear he might take me seriously. And then both of us would have been left embarrassed.

The soldier cleared his throat, the expression on his face somewhat pained. "Your Highness, please forgive my impertinence, but I come bearing an important missive from the queen." He extracted a rolled-up parchment from his pocket and held it up, waiting for Troy's nod of permission before unrolling it and proceeding to read. "Dearest first-born son, heir to Padora, and historically, the most sensible of my children. You clearly didn't hear me when I forbade you to leave the kingdom. I can only assume that you must be suffering from some sort of affliction which results in a blocked ear canal, as the alternative of you choosing to disobey me does not bear thinking about. You need to return to Silverwood today with the escort that I have provided for you. Not tomorrow. Not when you feel like it. Today."

The soldier paused, the tips of his ears turning pink. "I feel it's worth mentioning that the queen has gone over the word 'Today' a few times, and that it is also underlined." He turned the parchment around so that Troy could see it, Sebastian and I both leaning in as well. I winced, the soldier's reading of the situation an understatement. I might not be able to read, but even I could tell that the queen had gone to town on that word, her frustration at Troy not having done what she'd said only too clear.

"Is that it?" I asked.

The soldier shook his head as he turned the parchment back to face him. "No. I'm afraid there's more." The horse at his right shoulder shifted restlessly as he continued to read, the expression on the other soldier's faces suitably blank, as if they weren't witnessing their future king being taken to

task by his mother. “We will have words about this when you get back, which as previously stated should be today. Many words. And if you happen to have found Sebastian, and he is with you, then please let him know that I will be having words with him as well when he returns, that his absence from the kingdom in recent years does not exclude him from the requirement to give a full and detailed explanation as to why he didn’t send you back immediately, especially as he was there when I made it clear that you were not to leave the palace. Perhaps, your condition is contagious, and he too has been afflicted with the same loss of hearing.”

Sebastian stiffened next to me, and I reached out to rub his shoulder. I could certainly sympathize with being on the sharp end of a mother’s tongue. Especially, when Sebastian had tried to send Troy back straightaway, and I’d been the one who’d spoken up in his brother’s defense and persuaded him to let Troy attend the festival.

“Love, Mother,” finished the soldier. “That’s it,” he said, rolling the parchment back up and offering it to Troy. Troy took it, the expression on his face saying that he’d rather burn it than revisit his mother’s words. An awkward silence settled over the group, the soldier who’d been tasked with reading the missive managing to find something fascinating about a nearby rock.

“Well...” Troy announced with an admirable breeziness to his tone. “You’re in luck because I was going to be returning to the palace today anyway.”

The soldier didn’t bother to hide his relief. He’d obviously had concerns about what he was supposed to do if Troy refused. His gaze drifted over to Sebastian and me. “All of you?”

Sebastian shook his head. “No. Jack and I have somewhere else we need to be. Although, if you could spare us a horse, that would be useful. And also...” His brow furrowed slightly as if he was thinking hard. “Any coin you have would be useful.”

“Coin!” The soldier managed to look both surprised and horrified at the same time. “I don’t think—”

Troy cleared his throat and brought himself up to his full height. “I hope you’re not ignoring a direct order from Prince Sebastian. If it helps to put your mind at rest, I can give it myself.” He surveyed the group of eight soldiers. “Empty your pockets. You will of course be reimbursed when we reach the palace.”

The soldiers dismounted, one by one, to offer up the contents of their pockets to Troy, none of them looking that happy about it. Individually, it didn’t amount to much, but as a collective, it was a decent sum. I had no idea what Sebastian wanted it for. He either had some sort of plan, or it was just as likely that he’d never robbed soldiers before, and just wanted to find out what it felt like. Troy was the last to empty his pockets, his contribution to the collection far more impressive, his gold coins sparkling amidst the pile of silver and bronze collected from the soldiers.

Sebastian added it to his money pouch, my eyebrow arching. He knew full well that we shared, but I supposed that conversation could wait until we were on our own. A horse was brought forward, a huge, black stallion, two of the soldiers relegated to sharing. They’d manage. It wasn’t that far back to Silverwood, especially on horseback. And then there was nothing left to do but bid Troy farewell, the two brothers left awkwardly facing each other while the soldiers retreated to a respectful distance.

“Well...” Troy said.

“Well...” Sebastian responded.

I smirked. This was painful and would probably go on for some time if I didn't intervene. “Here's an idea.” Both heads turned my way. “How about you both agree that it's entirely possible you've changed during your long separation. That maybe the relationship you had when you were younger, which might not have been that harmonious, and if you ask me, seemed to be more about getting one over on the other one, could be improved upon. You're both older, and...” I hesitated before saying the next word, knowing it perhaps wasn't the best one to use. Not when it came to Sebastian. I didn't really know Troy well enough to have an opinion about him. But in the absence of a better word, it would have to do. “Wiser.”

Both men looked thoughtful.

Sebastian frowned. “What are you suggesting?”

“A fresh start.” When neither man said anything, I sighed. “So, just hug it out, would you? And then we can get on with what we need to do.”

Sebastian's eyebrows rose slightly. “You're telling people to hug. *You!*”

“Me.” I accompanied the word with a shove that sent him stumbling into Troy, Troy's arms lifting automatically to stop Sebastian's forward progress. And then they were hugging, and I was smiling. It went on for a while, Troy the first to lift his head. “I'm glad I got to spend time with you. You're not as bad as I remember.”

A muscle twitched in Sebastian's cheek. “Neither are you. Sometimes you can even be...” He screwed his face up.

“Tolerable,” I offered.

Sebastian nodded. “Tolerable.”

The two men disengaged, and Troy took a steadying breath. “Be careful, Sebastian. It would be a great shame if you were to go and die on me.” His

gaze came my way. “And you, Jack. Stay safe. I have a sneaky suspicion that you have a lot to do with my brother being a better human being. Take care of him.”

I smiled. “I try. Although, obviously you can’t rule out me being the one to kill him.”

Troy laughed. “True, and completely understandable. I’ll look forward to seeing you both back in Silverwood, with Magdalena. But...” He paused, his expression suddenly serious. “If that’s not possible, don’t risk your own lives. Father wouldn’t want that. And I may never get out of Mother’s bad books should that happen. In fact”—he glanced the soldiers’ way—“maybe you should just come back with me. Pirates are...” He shook his head in a way that didn’t need the sentence to be complete to get his point across.

“We’ll be fine,” I said. “We’ve faced worse. At least pirates are human. You can look at them without turning to stone. And they don’t turn into dragons.” At least, I hoped they didn’t.

Troy nodded, retreating a couple of steps in the direction of the waiting soldiers. He lifted a hand in farewell, looking like he might say something else, but then spun on his heel to make his way over to the horses.

Sebastian smirked. “And good luck with the sex dungeon.”

Troy turned back with an exasperated look on his face. “Still not funny, and keep your voice down.”

One of the soldiers led the black stallion across, Sebastian taking possession of its reins as we watched Troy mount his horse. And then in a flurry of hooves and dust, they were gone. Sebastian turned his attention to the horse as it gave a little whinny and pawed at the ground, stroking his nose. “You’re a beauty, aren’t you?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I hope you’re talking to me.”

Sebastian grinned. "Of course. Actually, he reminds me of you."

I spent a few seconds trying my hardest not to bite, and then gave up.
"Go on. Why?"

"Dark. Glossy. Spirited. A little volatile."

I rolled my eyes.



Sebastian stared somewhat sadly at the pile of coins in front of him. "It's not enough."

"For what?" We'd only made camp an hour ago, deciding that it would be wise to stay clear of taverns until we put a bit more distance between ourselves and Bartholomew Rohan. During that time, I'd been busy, starting a fire and hunting. And Sebastian? Well, Sebastian had made little piles out of the coins, and proceeded to stare at them with a look of contemplation on his face.

Sebastian lifted his head and gave me a look like I should already have known the answer. "For the pirates."

I lowered myself opposite him on the ground and rested my chin on my hand. "You're planning to pay them for Magdalena?"

He threw me a look of disgust. "Of course not." He waved a hand over the pile of coins. "They're hardly going to sell her for this much."

"And I don't suppose we should be buying people anyway." I contemplated my own words with a frown. "Or does it make it alright if it's technically a rescue."

Shaking my head, I moved on with no expectation of an answer. "If that's not the plan, what is?"

The gleam in Sebastian's eye said that for once he did have one. Wonders never ceased. "We travel to Glimmerfield. We find out which tavern the pirates usually frequent. We throw a great deal of money around to get their attention, and we make out that there's plenty more where that came from." He paused dramatically. "They won't be able to resist the opportunity for an easy score, and they'll come for us in the middle of the night." He tipped his head to one side. "We should act drunk as well. That will help. That way they won't find it suspicious when they find it relatively easy to capture us."

I was still stuck on what he'd said about the middle of the night. "What do you mean, they'll come for us in the middle of the night?"

Sebastian grinned. "Kidnap. Which will get us on their ship."

I blinked. "Why are you smiling when you say the word 'kidnap'?"

His smile grew wider. "Because it's a great plan. Foolproof. Except..." He waved his hand over the coins again. "Not enough."

I carried out my own scrutiny of the coins. We had plenty more coin stashed away, but our hoard was back in Riverbrook, neither of us thinking to bring it with us. "We could get more from Silverwood."

Sebastian shook his head. "It would take too long. I don't know how much longer my father has. Taking a detour like that could be the difference between getting there in time, and..."

He didn't need to say more. I chewed on a nail while I thought about it. "We don't actually need to have a lot of money, though, do we? They just need to believe that we do."

Sebastian pulled a face. "We need more than this to pull a ruse like that off successfully."

A familiar chattering noise had my hackles rising and my fingernails curling into my palms. I closed my eyes and refused to even turn my head

in the direction it was coming from. "Please tell me that's not what I think it is, because it can't possibly be..." I waved a hand in the direction of the tethered stallion without opening my eyes. "We rode for two hours. How can it possibly have kept up with us? It's a monkey, not a..." I couldn't even think of a suitable animal that could keep up with a stallion. Sebastian might not have coaxed it into a gallop, but we'd been going fast enough. The chattering grew louder, a surefire indication that the monkey was coming closer. I kept my eyes squeezed tightly shut. "Make it go away."

"It's got something for you." Sebastian sounded curious.

"What, a long tail, and sharp teeth? I'm not interested."

"No, it's a..."

Sebastian didn't get to finish what he was saying before something heavy dropped in my lap. I opened my eyes and stared at the money pouch the monkey had dropped there. I lifted my gaze to Sebastian, and he shrugged. The monkey had backed off a few steps and was watching me with great interest. I dropped my gaze to the money pouch again. "If he's crapped in a money pouch and is giving it to me, I'm not going to be impressed, and I'm definitely going to be eating him, whatever you say."

Exercising a great deal of caution, I opened the money pouch. Frowning, I upended it to show Sebastian its contents, at least a hundred gold coins tumbling out onto the grass. "Is that enough?" I asked.

Looking slightly stunned, Sebastian nodded. "Definitely."

"Then I guess we've got ourselves a ridiculous plan. Although, I'd like it to be on record that I have reservations about the kidnapping part."

"Duly noted."

The monkey sidled closer, and I eyed it suspiciously. "How did you know we needed this?"

He didn't answer. Obviously. Because he was a monkey and he couldn't speak. He did venture close enough, though, that his small, furry body pressed against my knee, and I could feel his body heat. I lifted a hand and patted him gingerly on the head. "Good monkey. Clever monkey."

Apparently, that was all the invitation the monkey needed. He leaped nimbly onto my shoulder and perched there, his tail hanging down over my chest. I froze, not daring to move a muscle as I stared at Sebastian, who would have been wise not to look as amused as he did. "What's it doing?"

"Just sitting there. He really likes you. I've told you that before."

"Yes, but..." Running out of words to say, I turned my attention to the gold coins instead. There was a small fortune there. "Where do you think he got it from? He didn't have it last night, so it can't have been from Bartholomew unless he went back. And he definitely didn't have time to return to the festival *and* keep up with the horse.

Sebastian shrugged. "I don't really care where it came from. All that matters is that it's ours now. We didn't steal it."

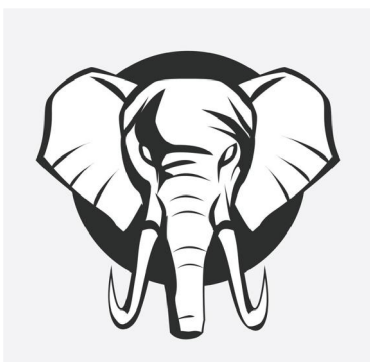
Which was technically true, but I couldn't help thinking that the monkey's previous role in society—Sebastian only using it when he needed to steal something or create a distraction—might have a lot to do with it. It might not be attached to him anymore, but I guess old habits die hard. I reached up and absently-mindedly stroked the monkey's fur. It was surprisingly soft. And warm. Reaching over, I picked up a strip of rabbit left over from dinner and held it up to the monkey. Small pink hands reached out to take it, its actions surprisingly gentle as it took my offering. Still perched on my shoulder, it happily devoured the piece of rabbit.

"So, he's your friend now, is he?" asked Sebastian.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I think he's earned dinner at least."

His lips quirked. “And then what? Do you think he’s just going to hop off your shoulder and disappear again?”

“I don’t know. I ran my hand over the monkey’s tail, the monkey still focused on eating. “I guess we’ll see.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SEBASTIAN

I hated that damn monkey. Over the last couple of days, it had attached itself to Jack, and barely left his side. If it wasn't on his shoulder, it could invariably be found only a few feet away, ready to regain what it saw as its rightful place in less time than you could say Jack's very short, one syllable name. I'd even gone in for a kiss at one point to find the path to Jack's lips blocked by a tiny monkey hand. The monkey was managing to be even more of a passion killer than my brother had been. At least with Troy, we 'd been able to sneak away. Whereas the interfering primate followed us, its obsession with Jack so all-encompassing that it couldn't bear to let him out of his sight for longer than a few seconds. It even slept curled up between us, which was hardly conducive to intimacy.

Even now, on the horse, with Jack's arms wrapped around my waist, it was perched on his shoulder. I let out a sigh. "He has legs, you know."

"You expect him to run alongside the horse?" I contemplated the idea, found a lot of merit to it, decided against expressing it, and settled for a shrug instead. "I tell you what," Jack said in a tone that was meant to sound

conversational but was far from it if you knew him as well as I did. “*You* run alongside the horse, and he can sit where you are.”

“It’s *my* horse!”

Jack let out a snort. “It’s Silverwood’s horse.”

“And I’m a prince of Silverwood.”

“Oh, so now you’re a prince, are you? When it suits you.”

“I was just trying to point out that monkeys don’t ride horses.”

“This one does.” Jack’s tone said that the matter was closed.

I went down a slightly different path. “You hated that monkey two days ago.”

“I can change my mind.” There was a slight pause. “If I never changed my mind, you’d still be lusting after me with no chance of success.”

It was a valid point, but not one I was about to admit to. “You didn’t hate me.” Jack’s silence spoke volumes. “You didn’t.”

“Oh no, I really love men who rob me, pretend they haven’t, look at me in a lascivious manner, and then blackmail me into going along with their plans.”

I grinned. “You do love that man.”

“Now. But not then. Back then I thought you were lower than pond scum.”

The monkey made a noise which sounded suspiciously like a laugh. I turned to look back over my shoulder, the monkey averting its gaze like it wasn’t even paying attention. That was another black mark against it. It was far too clever for its own good.

“He needs a name,” Jack pondered aloud.

“Devil?”

“Something nice.”

“How about... monkey?”

Jack didn't even respond to that one.

“How about... oops, that's where my magic has gone.”

“It's not his fault. He didn't ask to be summoned.”

I sighed. No, it wasn't his fault, but it didn't make me any less sore about the whole thing. Every time I looked at the monkey, it was like a kick in the teeth. I even found myself trying to see through his eyes sometimes, nausea swirling in my gut when I remembered I couldn't. It had been bad enough when my magic was faulty, but living without it altogether was like being a completely different person, one who failed at the simplest of things.

I reined the stallion to a stop, the far-off roofs of our destination having come into sight. “You're clear on the plan, right?”

Jack turned his head toward the shimmering blue line of the sea on the horizon, his nose wrinkling. Maybe if he'd learned to love the monkey, he'd eventually learn to love the sea as well. Although, I supposed our run-in with the leviathan had severely dented the chances of that happening. He gestured down at himself, looking very un-Jack like in the most expensive clothes we'd been able to source at short notice. It wasn't exactly silk, but it certainly gave more of an impression of affluence than our previous outfits had. “I still don't think it's much of a plan. Spend coin like it's going out of fashion. Talk about rich relatives we don't have. Hope that we're being watched by pirates. And then play damsel in distress when they take the bait and come for us.”

Jack had never warmed to the idea of getting kidnapped. Although, I suspected some of that was down to success landing us back at sea. “That's about the long and the short of it.”

“And what if it takes more than one night?”

“It won’t if we’re in the right tavern.”

“You better be right.”

I flashed Jack a smile, ignoring the monkey watching me carefully. I glared at it, moving quickly to drop a kiss on Jack’s lips before the monkey could do a damn thing about it. Even so, it let out a loud screech, and started to dance in circles on Jack’s shoulder, its agitation only too clear. I shook my head and spurred the horse back into motion. If I was lucky, the pirates might want a monkey as a pet.



We obtained the information we needed by asking what tavern we should avoid, the middle-aged female elf we’d stopped only too happy to tell us that under no circumstances should we venture anywhere near the tavern closest to the docks, the one with the oh-so-welcoming name of The Black Skull.

So off we went to The Black Skull on foot, leaving the stallion stabled at a far more respectable tavern, where the pirates would hopefully remain blissfully unaware of its existence. We’d left the monkey there as well, Jack taking great pains to explain to him why he needed to stay with the horse. The monkey hadn’t seemed to be listening but when Jack walked away, it hadn’t tried to follow.

Jack slowed as we grew closer to the tavern, the expression on his face saying that he was taking in the smashed window, the rather dark wood at one corner of the building that looked like someone had tried to set fire to it, and the man who had half stumbled, half fallen, out of the door and was now vomiting his guts up only a few meters away from us. Jack shook his

head. “They’re never going to believe that two rich people would choose to drink here.”

I stepped over the puddle of vomit, the man bent over too far gone to have any chance of either understanding, or recollecting, what we were saying. “They will. Greed will make sure they do. That, and we’ll be convincing. With my charm, and your ability to know the right thing to say, they won’t stand a chance.” I paused with my hand resting on the door. “Ready?”

Jack closed his eyes for a few seconds before opening them and pinning me with his green gaze. “Not even slightly.”

“Great!” I pushed open the door and stepped in. The tavern fell silent as we sashayed our way toward the bar. Well, I sashayed. Jack was a little more sedate. Numerous pairs of eyes followed our path as we traversed the tables, Jack and I ensuring that we acted as if we were completely unaware of their scrutiny.

The tavern didn’t look any better on the inside than it had on the outside, my boots sticking to the floor with every step. There was the occasional crunch of something broken underfoot as well, which at least helped with the stickiness. And there was no welcoming barmaid to greet us once we reached our destination, only a gruff-looking man who looked like his hair hadn’t been washed this month, or possibly ever. He had huge, tattooed arms, and to top off the unapproachable façade, an angry red scar that stretched all the way from his forehead to his chin, the eye it traveled through a milky-white color that said it had been a long time since he’d been able to see out of it.

He’d crossed his arms soon after we’d entered the tavern, and they remained crossed as we came to a stop in front of him, his expression one

of absolute disdain.

“Think y’ might have come to the wrong place.”

“The wrong place?” I said cheerily. “I don’t think so.” I pointed at the sole barrel that rested behind him, the choice of drink in this place apparently ale or ale. “You serve ale, don’t you? Two ales please. One for me, and one for my good friend here.”

The thug’s gaze slid across to Jack, Jack smiling brightly. “Oh, yes, ale please. We’re very thirsty.”

I pulled out my money pouch, and in a move I’d practiced numerous times until I’d gotten Jack’s approval—and let’s be honest there was no harder taskmaster—I opened it in a way that made all the coins spill across the floor. “Oh, goodness me, I’m so clumsy.” Jack and I bent to retrieve the coins, deliberately leaving a couple of bronze ones where they lay, as if they weren’t worthy of stretching that far to pick them up, every move carefully designed to come across like money was no object. It was painful to leave perfectly good coin sitting on the floor, but it was necessary.

When I turned to face the thug again, there was something speculative in his gaze as he poured two ales, the liquid sloshing across the bar, which probably accounted for some of the stickiness on the floor. He pushed the two tankards toward us, quickly divesting me of a gold coin. There should have been change, but I knew there was about as much chance of seeing it as Jack breaking into song. The thug tilted his chin up. “You two come far?”

“From Cerensai, “Jack said, repeating the story we’d come up with earlier. “We both have relatives in Padora. My uncle wanted to show us his new house.” He laughed. “Well, I say house, but I think that’s doing it an injustice.” He leaned forward conspiratorially. “Between you and me, I

think he's trying to compete with Silverwood. Whatever they can do, he can do better. Do you know what I mean?"

"Silverwood?" asked the thug.

"The palace," I said.

"Right," said the thug. "Don't know much about the palace. Not my scene."

That was an understatement. It was all I could do not to laugh as the image of my mother having tea with the thug jumped into my head.

"How long y' ere for?" he asked.

It was obvious what he was doing. He'd already ascertained that we weren't locals. The answer to this question would reveal whether we were likely to be missed should we mysteriously disappear from the premises. "Not sure, yet." My fingers tightened around the tankard, and I brought it to my lips. It tasted like something had died in the barrel. Perhaps it had. Perhaps there was far more to fear in this place than being kidnapped by pirates. Somehow, and it took every iota of acting ability I possessed, I pasted a look of pleasure on my face. "Your ale is simply wonderful. How do you get that depth of flavor?" I leaned my elbows on the bar. "Tell me your secret."

The thug looked at me like I'd asked him to whip his testicles out on the bar and let me have a good look. "Dunno. Don't make it myself, do I?"

"No?" I held the tankard up in a toast and forced myself to take another drink. "Well, compliments to whoever does make it."

Jack, very wisely, hadn't taken a drink yet, his fingers resting lightly on the tankard with an intent that hadn't yet come to pass. He fixed the thug with a quizzical expression. "Do you do food?"

I really hoped not. If they did, it was no doubt roasted rat on a skewer or something similar. It would take all my effort to get enough of the ale down to be convincing. There was no way I could extend that to food as well.

The thug shook his head, relief settling in my chest. “Don’t do food.” He lifted his head to survey the dark confines of the tavern, and I fought the urge to follow his gaze to find out whether we were still the center of attention. “Customers don’t come ‘ere for food. You’ll need to go somewhere else for that.”

Jack gave a sage nod, finally bringing his tankard to his lips and taking the tiniest of sips, barely anything more than a wetting of his lips really. If he thought it tasted foul, he did well to disguise it. He turned my way. “I’m not hungry anyway. How about you, Sebastian?”

I shook my head. “No, the ale is enough for me.”

“We will need a room, though,” Jack announced loudly. “Your best room. No expense spared. We can pay.”

“Our best room?” A thick furrow appeared on the thug’s brow, the concept obviously an alien one to him.

“Yes!” Jack continued, unperturbed, “the comfiest bed, the best lanterns, the warmest blankets, the whole works. We’re not fussy, but when you’ve got the money, it’s stupid to settle for second best, don’t you think?”

The furrow hadn’t shifted, the thug apparently still struggling to wrap his head around what Jack was asking for. He blinked. “Sure. We got rooms. It’ll be four gold coins for the best one.”

The price was ridiculous. We’d stayed in a luxurious tavern in Arrowgarde the night after rescuing Prince Montgomery, and not had to pay anywhere near that amount. And that had been for two rooms. Jack extracted his money pouch and counted out the four gold coins without so

much as an eyebrow raise. It must have been killing him not to make some sort of barbed comment.

The thug swept the gold coins off the bar and straight into his pocket. Jack hadn't finished, though, despite all his earlier grumbling and his lack of enthusiasm for the whole thing, playing his part to perfection, just as I'd known he would. There was no challenge known to man that Jack couldn't rise to. He held up another gold coin with a flourish, holding it high enough that if anyone was still watching, they couldn't possibly miss it. "And this... is for being such a friendly and accommodating host. It's lovely to receive such a warm welcome when you're not from around these parts."

I bit my lip to stop from laughing, all the thug's attention luckily on Jack. When the thug, apparently stunned into silence, didn't immediately take it, Jack shoved it his way once more, the thug finally reaching out to take it with hands the size of dinner plates.

The first part of our performance having been carried out successfully, we retired to an empty table, pretending not to notice as we settled ourselves that even the slightest shift in position caused the table to rock wildly. Actually, that turned out to be an advantage. It was amazing how much of the foul-tasting ale could be lost by one good shove, the liquid slopping over and soaking into a table that already looked like it had absorbed a few gallons over the years. I didn't want to think too much about the darker stains that looked suspiciously like blood.

It didn't take Jack long to lean in, his voice as quiet as he could get it. "I think this is the worst place I've ever set foot in. Like ever."

I turned my head, my lips brushing his ear. "I don't know. You've been in the cow barn."

"The cow barn is not full of unsavory types."

“True. The cows are big and make a lot of noise, but they don’t look at you like they want to sink a knife into your guts.”

Jack’s lips twitched, but he managed to hold the smile back. “Well, I suppose we better get on with this. We can’t kidnap ourselves.”

“We could take it in turns. I’d be only too happy to tie you up in the middle of the night and do all sorts of dastardly things to you. You only need to ask.”

“Sebastian!” It might have been meant as a warning, but I could hear the smile in his voice.

I gestured at his barely touched tankard. “Drink your ale.”

Aware that people were probably watching, Jack managed a smile rather than the face I was sure he wanted to pull. “It tastes like death.”

I mirrored his smile. “I know, but we still need to drink some of it.” I picked up my tankard and held it up in a toast, and then downed half of its contents, smacking my lips together once I’d finished. “So good!” I announced loudly for the benefit of our audience.

“I hate you,” Jack whispered, as he raised his own tankard and did an admirable job of feigning pleasure as he forced a few swallows down.

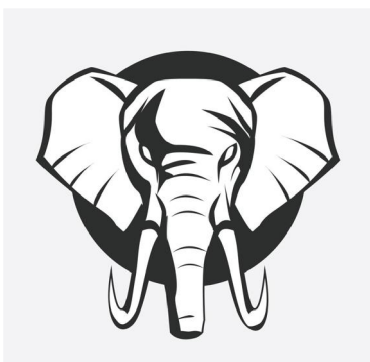
Over the next hour, we were as loud and raucous as we could possibly be. We ordered more ale. We cracked bawdy jokes. We talked at length about rich people who didn’t exist, and how much money they were spending on this and that. We talked about possessions that neither of us had, Jack creating a whole menagerie of animals that dwelled in the grounds of his imaginary house, the peacocks and llamas he described a long way from the actual farm animals that could be found there. We talked about places we could go to, and the most elaborate ways of getting there, including whether elephants could ever be used to pull a carriage. We overpaid for more ale,

getting rid of as much as we could using the precarious table before being forced to drink the rest.

All the while, we kept an eye on the comings and goings in the tavern, of which there were many. The thug behind the bar had lengthy conversations with at least three men, but none of them stood out as looking particularly piratical. But perhaps they weren't that obvious when they were on shore. There were other customers who paid us a lot of attention, but that could have been down to the fact that we stuck out like a sore thumb, rather than any intention to drag us back to their ship and ransom us to our imaginary relatives.

At one point in the evening, I'd even invited myself to join a card game, the effort it took to lose on purpose, and watch my coin going into another man's pocket, downright painful. Jack had played as well, his lack of understanding of the game making it all too easy for him to lose and waste even more money. By the end of the evening, we'd spent a small fortune, and had very little left. Not that we let on, our constant announcements of "there's plenty more where that came from" making sure of that.

Only once it was late enough to ensure it wasn't suspicious, did we play up our level of drunkenness and wish all and sundry good night before staggering up the stairs to our room.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JACK

I sagged back against the closed door and let out a breath. “Well, that was...”

“Yeah,” Sebastian said, but with a smile. The bastard had enjoyed it. Of course he had. Sebastian liked nothing more than to pull the wool over people’s eyes. I surveyed the room where we were supposed to spend the night, the one dim lantern doing little to banish the shadows. Although, from what I could see—bare wooden boards on the floor, a rickety-looking bed with a sagging mattress, no fireplace, and peeling paint on the walls—that was probably a blessing. “Do we really need to sleep here?”

Sebastian sat on the edge of the bed, the uneven springs almost pitching him onto the floor. “Afraid so.” He bounced up and down a little, the bed making a noise like it was being tortured.

He set to work on his boots as I ventured closer to the bed, my steps slow lest a rat should suddenly dart across my path. Thankfully, I reached the bed without having run into any rodents. “I’m not taking my clothes off.”

Sebastian threw a disparaging glance at the bed. “Probably a wise decision. Besides, it’s better to be kidnapped with clothes on.” He gestured

to my feet. “Better take your boots off, though. No one goes to bed in their boots.”

I removed them, if somewhat begrudgingly. And then there was nothing to do but get into the bed, both of us eyeing it like there was a possibility of it snapping closed and engulfing us within the confines of its mattress, never to be seen again.

“Well, bedtime,” said Sebastian.

“Certainly is,” I agreed.

Neither of us moved.

We sighed in unison, and I stepped around to the far side of the bed, gingerly lowering myself to sit on the mattress. Only when I was sure it wouldn’t collapse did I swing my legs onto it and lie down. It was about as uncomfortable as a bed could possibly be, springs poking into several parts of my body that I would have preferred them not to. Sebastian’s fidgeting as he tried to find a comfy position said that his side was much the same. I wriggled forward to wrap my arms around Sebastian as he pulled the blanket over us, a musty smell coming with it. “And people pay money for this.”

Sebastian snorted. “Hopefully not four gold coins. We were well and truly had. And you thanked him for it and gave him an extra gold coin.”

I had. I smiled into Sebastian’s neck at the memory. He smelled a lot better than the bed. “It seemed like the right thing to do when we needed to come across as two rich idiots.” There was a moment of silence while I contemplated the night’s events. “Do you think they’ll really come?”

Sebastian nodded, the bed letting out another wail of complaint at the movement. “I do.”

“But we locked the door.”

“I don’t think it will make the slightest bit of difference. They’ll either get the key or break it down.”

“Marvelous.” I sneezed, the room apparently dusty on top of all the other things that were wrong with it. “I never thought I’d say this, but I hope they don’t take too long to kidnap us, because I doubt I’m going to get much sleep.”

Sebastian chuckled, his hands warm against my back. “I never thought you’d be eager to get kidnapped.”

“Me neither.”

He squeezed me more tightly against him. “Love you, Jack.”

Normally, I would have been reluctant to say it back, but if you weren’t going to say it ahead of getting kidnapped by pirates, when were you going to say it? “Love you too.”



By some miracle, I must have slept, waking with a jerk to the sound of someone in the room, my mind too fogged with sleep to remember where I was immediately. Was that Sebastian I could hear? No. He was in bed next to me, muttering something about monkeys under his breath, his sleep talking oddly reassuring in its familiarity.

I strained to listen, the room pitch black, which was strange when I knew we’d left the lantern on. Someone must have extinguished it.

Whispers. More than one person, then. Unless they were talking to themselves. The creak of a floorboard. A cold chill ran down my spine, my heart rate increasing.

We’d planned for this. What was about to happen was exactly what we’d wanted to have happen, but that didn’t make the experience any more

pleasant. In fact, it might even make it more difficult. What was that saying? Ignorance is bliss. I might have appreciated a little ignorance right around now.

“Get your own man to kiss,” said Sebastian as he turned over. “One with fur and a long tail.” It didn’t seem right that he remained oblivious while cold sweat beaded on my brow, and every muscle in my body was locked rigid in expectation. “Sebastian, there’s—”

I didn’t get any further, an arm snaking across my chest, and thick fingers covering my mouth to block any more words from coming out. Warm breath scoured my neck. It was a natural inclination to lean away from it, but not being able to do so only served to demonstrate how strong my attacker was. I struggled all the harder, instinct taking over. This whole plan was a terrible idea. Who set out to get kidnapped by pirates? Madmen, that’s who. And why hadn’t I just told Sebastian that he was on his own with it? I He could have gotten himself kidnapped, and I could have been curled up with the horse in the stable. It was certainly preferable to being manhandled in the dark.

The breath on my neck grew hotter, the man leaning closer. “Don’t struggle, pretty. You’ll get me all worked up.”

“Pretty!” My blood ran cold as it occurred to me that money might not be the only reason for someone wanting to abduct someone. I wasn’t ready to be a pirate’s sex toy. Sebastian would be good at it, but I wouldn’t.

“Don’t choose a monkey, Jack,” Sebastian mumbled. “I’ve got good hands too. Bigger hands. Let me show you.”

And Sebastian, the bastard, was still asleep. I glared into the darkness in his direction as the hand was removed, only for a wad of fabric to be shoved in my mouth. It was far too big, immediately soaking up what little

saliva I had left. As if that wasn't bad enough, something else was pulled over my head, and my hands were yanked behind my back and tied. Once I'd been rendered harmless, I was pulled out of bed and jerked to my feet. "Walk, pretty."

I didn't walk. I wasn't stupid enough to be that cooperative. Not that it made much difference, my abductor half pushing, half dragging me in the direction he wanted me to go. Had they even taken Sebastian? What if they'd left him and only taken me? Then what?

The walk seemed to go on forever. First stairs. Our room had been upstairs. And then a stony path, my bare feet not appreciating the jagged stones cutting into them one little bit. The stony path gave way to grass, which was far more pleasant to walk on. And then finally wood, the slight rocking a motion I recognized only too well. It seemed we'd accomplished what we'd set out to do. We'd gained access to the pirates' ship. It was a shame I was struggling to feel any joy about it.

I was shoved to my knees, my abductor doing something with my bindings that unfortunately didn't involve untying them. Something landed heavily next to me. Sebastian? I hoped so. My hood was ripped off, and my makeshift gag removed, the light of the full moon bright enough to give me my first sight of my attacker. He was massive, his biceps bigger than my head. It was no wonder I hadn't been able to fight him off. He was ugly as well, his grin revealing numerous missing teeth, just a few hanging on in there for dear life. "Time for a rest, pretty. Cap'n will want to see you soon." Another smile. "Now, don't you go anywhere."

He strolled off with a swagger, and I immediately tried to inch forward, only to discover that I'd been tied to the mast. I turned my head to find Sebastian suffering from the same fate, his pirate captor also sauntering

away. There were other men on deck, but none of them seemed all that interested in their two new acquisitions. They were far too busy making preparations to set sail, which begged the question where they were taking us.

With so many unanswered questions clamoring in my mind, there was only one thing I could do: take it out on Sebastian. “So, you finally woke up then?”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“What do I mean?” I got as loud as I could without my voice traveling far enough to alert the closest pirate, a tall, skinny man with a long, red beard. “I was being manhandled by a man built like a gorilla, and what were you doing? Waxing lyrical about monkeys of all things.”

Sebastian’s frown grew more pronounced. “Why is he calling you pretty?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Why do you think? We had a short but torrid affair while you were asleep, during which I begged him to tie me up, because that’s apparently what I’m into now.”

Sebastian’s frown didn’t shift. “I don’t like it.”

I leaned my head back against the mast and closed my eyes. “I’ll be sure to tell him that the next time I see him. I have no doubt that he’ll take the news with good grace and offer his profuse apologies. Right after he punches you in the face, which I’ve got to say I won’t be too sad to see.”

“That’s not nice.” Sebastian sounded genuinely hurt.

I let out a long breath. “I’m tied to a mast on a pirate ship with the shore growing gradually farther away, yet again questioning why I listen to you. I’m not really in the mood to play nice, so you’ll have to forgive me if I’m a

little tetchier than usual. Very little sleep combined with a heavy dose of danger will do that to me.”

“But... this was the plan all along.” Sebastian’s voice grew more animated. “We’ve got them exactly where we want them now. Magdalena is probably within touching distance.”

“And what a shame our hands are tied behind our backs so that we can’t touch anyone.”

“I meant figuratively not literally.”

“What do you think will happen next?”

The long pause told me that Sebastian was contemplating his answer. “I think we’ll be brought before the captain in the morning. I assume he’s probably sleeping now. We explain that there’s been a misunderstanding, that we don’t in fact have rich relatives who will pay a ransom for us.” I let out a snort at that one, Sebastian releasing a soft sigh. “I’m Bass Beau. Not”—he lowered his voice—“you know who.”

“And then?” I queried.

“Then,” Sebastian announced with a great deal of gravitas. “We will enquire after Magdalena, explain why she’s so important to us, and strike some sort of deal to liberate her from the pirates and procure her services.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“You know what your problem is, don’t you, Jack?”

Amusement pulled at the corners of my mouth, but I refused to give in to it. “No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“You lack the ability to see situations in the simplest way. You turn them into this big, complicated thing that they don’t need to be.”

“Do I?”

“You do.”

I let out a breath. “Well, I really hope it’s going to be as straightforward as you’re making out. I’m no keener to be sold to slave traders than I was the first time. And I have a feeling that these lot are going to be a lot more cunning than Mad Dog Keaton ever was.” My brow furrowed as something suddenly occurred to me. “And just for the record, if it turns out you’ve slept with the pirate captain, I won’t be impressed.”

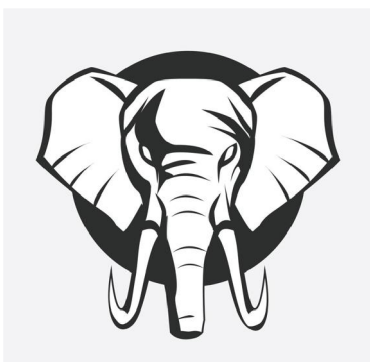
“I don’t think I’ve ever slept with a pirate.”

“Well, Mad Dog wasn’t a bandit when you slept with him.”

“True.”

I jerked my head to the side as a rock came careening my way. Not a small rock either, the crash it made as it hit the deck quite sizable. If I’d moved any slower, it would have hit me. “Quit your talking, or I’ll gag you again.”

I lifted my head to find my abductor glaring at me, the expression on his face one that said he wasn’t joking. Given that I didn’t want that rank piece of fabric back in my mouth, I stopped talking. It was probably wise to try and get some sleep anyway. I’d need all my wits about me for whatever the next day was going to bring.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SEBASTIAN

While I wouldn't say that having my hands tied behind my back, and sitting upright, was conducive to sleep, I had managed to get some in fits and starts. Hopefully, Jack had too. He was volatile enough at the best of times, but prior experience had taught me how much that was magnified if he didn't get at least a few hours of sleep.

Whether it was the sun showing its face, or the sounds of activity around me increasing that brought me to full consciousness, I couldn't have said. Maybe it was a combination of both. Whatever it was, early morning had me squinting in the light, and trying to take in as much as I could of the pirate ship. Where there had only been a skeleton crew the previous night, the deck was now a lot busier, sails being repositioned to catch the wind, and shouts ringing out. Still no sign of the captain, though. Not unless he blended in to the point where I couldn't tell him apart from his men. And that didn't sound like any pirate captain I'd ever heard of. I turned my head Jack's way to find him awake and watching the bustle of activity with narrowed eyes. "Morning. Did you sleep?"

"I'm not sure it could be called sleep."

At least he sounded a little less irritated than he had the previous night.

Jack cocked his head to one side and frowned. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"I could have sworn I heard the monkey."

"Here? Not possible unless he crept on board last night before we set sail."

"Hmm." The note in Jack's voice said he wasn't discounting the possibility. Neither was I, come to think of it. The monkey was obsessed enough with Jack to have wanted to follow him, and intelligent enough to have pretended to stay put when we'd left him with the horse, while intending to do no such thing. "It..."

My thought process stuttered away to nothing as I spotted the three men making their way toward us across the deck. The man at the center of the trio was undoubtedly the captain, his deep blue tailored coat far more elaborate than that of his companions who flanked him. He was younger than I'd expected, about my and Jack's age. I'd always thought that pirate captains were grizzled old men whose fight to get to that position, and then to keep it, would show on their faces, but this man, while not being classically handsome, was pleasant enough to look at.

Had I met him in pre-Jack times, it wasn't inconceivable that we might have ended up in bed together, assuming the captain's predilections lay that way. Therefore, it came as something of a relief to find that he wasn't remotely familiar. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for the man to his right, whose employment at the palace of Silverwood when I was growing up made him only too recognizable despite the passage of time.

I'd like to have said that it was a surprise to find him ensconced on a pirate ship, but given he'd been dismissed for blatant thievery only a few

short weeks before I'd left Padora for good, it wasn't. That had been a long time ago. Would he remember me? It was unlikely, surely. Even so, it was enough to make my mouth go dry and my heart beat faster, the simplicity of the plan I'd outlined to Jack suddenly not seeming so simple after all.

Picking up on my silence, or perhaps it was the tension in my body, our shoulders touching, Jack turned his head my way. "What? What's wrong?"

There was no opportunity to answer as the men arrived in front of us. The third man was Jack's abductor from the previous night, the one who'd called him pretty. I gave him a slight glare, just because I could, before focusing my attention on the captain and offering him a bright smile. "Good morning! I would shake your hand, but I seem to be a little tied up at the moment. Perhaps you could release me, and we could do this the polite way and clear up whatever misunderstanding has taken place. We're keen to get back to shore as soon as we can."

Jack's abductor gave a throaty chuckle. "I bet you are." My attention was drawn to the long, curved blade pressed against his thigh, the slight flex of his fingers around the handle telling a story about how much he was itching to use it.

As for the captain, there wasn't so much as a flicker of a smile on his face as he stared down at me, his gaze drifting across to Jack for a few seconds before returning to me. "You were drinking in our tavern."

"Your tavern?" I played dumb. There was a technique to releasing information, and we weren't at that point yet. "I do apologize. No one told us we weren't welcome there. Had we known, we would have found alternative accommodation."

"Would you?"

There was cold steel in the pirate's gaze, the laconic lift of his eyebrow telling me that he didn't believe a word of it. He lowered himself to a crouch in front of me, the action bringing us level. "You see, I don't think you would have."

"No?"

He did smile then, but there was no warmth in it. "No. Let me tell you what I think. I think you were there to get our attention. The only people that frequent that tavern are those who..." He paused. "Well, let's just say those who bend the law. Some less informed people might call them criminals." He lifted a lock of my hair with one finger, letting it drop as he leaned closer. "And you don't look like a criminal to me."

"He robs people," Jack offered helpfully. "All the time. And he doesn't feel guilty about it. I'm pretty sure that's a criminal act in most people's minds."

"Do you?" The captain's lips curled slightly. "So perhaps you were after joining my crew. Is that it? Is that what this little charade has been about?"

The crew in question had gathered around, keen not to miss the show, a few jeers coming from them at their captain's suggestion.

I swallowed, the reality of the situation sinking in. We were heavily outnumbered. We were bound to a mast. We were in the middle of an ocean with nowhere to go even if we did escape, and I had no magic. Things weren't looking good. If we survived this, Jack was going to be telling me I told you so until we were both old and gray, and I'd deserve it. I cleared my throat. "Let's start again. I feel like we've gotten off on the wrong foot. I'm Bass, and this is"—I jerked my head in Jack's direction—"Jack. And you are?"

The captain pressed a hand to his chest in a parody of apology. “Oh, I’m so sorry, did I not introduce myself? How rude of me.” A guffaw of laughter rippled around the assembled crew. “My name is Ashton Otto, but you can call me Captain Otto. This is my ship that you’re currently taking up space on.” He jerked a thumb toward the man I already recognized. “This is Jeremy Jenkins. He’s my eyes and ears, the man responsible for feeding back any snippets of information he thinks might be useful to me. You can thank him for your presence on the ship. And the other man is Hooper Derane. Hooper, as you might have already guessed, provides a bit of... persuasion when it’s needed. There are very few men that argue with Hooper.” He turned his head Hooper’s way. “What happened to the last man who argued with you, Hooper?”

Hooper hefted his knife higher, the blade catching the sun, his smile nothing short of chilling. “I carved his heart out.” The words were accompanied by a vivid mime of what the action had entailed. “And then I ate it for breakfast. It tasted delicious.” His smile grew wider. “I bet your heart would taste lovely too.”

There was really no response you could give to a man commenting on how good your heart might taste, so I stayed silent.

Captain Otto tapped his fingers on his bent knee. “You see, Bass, we have a slight problem. I’m not keen on people trying to get my attention in an underhanded way. Especially ones that orchestrate a performance where they pretend to be something they’re not, making up fictitious relatives that don’t exist.”

The game was clearly up, so there was no point in lying. “We didn’t know how else to get close to you, and we were in a rush.”

Captain Otto stroked his chin. “And what is it you want from me?”

“We want to see Magdalena,” said Jack.

Captain Otto returned to standing, his eyebrow arching as he shifted his attention to Jack. “Who?”

There was a split second where I believed him, the captain’s poker face practiced enough for the truth not to show. But then I saw the faces of the crew, who weren’t such good liars. She was definitely here. They knew exactly who Jack was talking about. A flare of elation bloomed in my chest. All wasn’t lost yet. We just needed to talk our way out of the bindings and get on the captain’s good side. “Magdalena Rohan. She’s a healer. We heard that she was kidnapped by you, and that you’ve held her captive for months.”

“You heard that, did you?” said Captain Otto, something hard and flinty appearing in eyes that had been cold enough to start with. “And who told you that?”

“Her brother,” Jack offered.

“Her brother!” The captain was back to stroking his chin. “How interesting.” He turned his head slightly to the side. “Did you know that’s the story Bartholomew has been sharing, Jeremy?”

He shook his head. “I did not. Doesn’t surprise me, though. Fucker’s always been a shifty bastard.”

It didn’t seem like the right time to point out that really Bartholomew was claiming his sister was ill, and that the information about her having been kidnapped had only been gleaned at knifepoint. We weren’t here to stick up for him.

I tipped my chin up and met the captain’s stare without blinking. “We would only need to borrow Magdalena for a short time. Would that be possible?”

“Of course,” Captain Otto said with fake ebullience. “Perhaps you would like some of my crew as well. Or to borrow my ship for a while. Maybe my services could be of use to you. I could”—his gaze drifted down my body, the scrutiny cold and assessing—“launder your clothes for you, maybe.”

“That won’t be necessary. We only need Magdalena.”

The captain laughed, including the two men by his side, and his crew, in his mirth. “Did you hear that? They *only* need Magdalena.”

They all laughed on cue. The captain crouched again, the look in his eye enough to tell me in no uncertain terms that I’d underestimated him. “You come onto my ship, and you think you can make demands?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “No one makes demands of me. We only have one use for outsiders on this ship, and it’s the ransom money that will be paid for their return. Now, unfortunately, this leaves us with a bit of a dilemma, doesn’t it, given that the money you were pretending to have last night...” He held out his hand, Hooper pressing two familiar money pouches into it, mine and Jack’s. He upended them both, nothing more than a few bronze coins, tumbling out onto the deck. “...has run out, and those relatives of yours don’t exist.”

He lifted his head, a gleam in his eye as he addressed the crew. “What do we do to men who are of no use to us?”

The cheer started quietly, and then rose to a crescendo. “Walk the plank! Walk the plank! Walk the plank! Walk the plank! Walk the—”

The captain held his hand up and they all fell silent mid chant. “However, I heard something interesting, didn’t I, Jeremy?”

Jeremy nodded eagerly, and I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or not. It seemed that Jeremy did recognize me. Was that a good thing? Perhaps it was, if the alternative was being made to walk the plank.

Captain Otto grinned, his stillness reminding me of a dog just before it attacked. “Tell me again what you told me earlier, Jeremy.”

Jeremy stepped forward and jabbed a finger in my direction. “This man ‘ere, he’s Prince Sebastian of Padora. I’d recognize him anywhere. Used to work there, didn’t I? Until the bastards took umbrage at me borrowing a few shiny things. Don’t know why they ‘ad such an issue. ‘Ad plenty, didn’t they? More than enough to share. Surprised they missed ‘em.”

“So,” the captain announced with a flourish. “It seems that we have a prince in our midst.” He threw a mock glare at the assembled crowd. “Bow then. Show the prince a bit of respect. We don’t want him thinking we’re a bunch of heathens, do we?”

The bows that followed were mocking to the extreme, some pirates accompanying them with lewd gestures, while others hawked up a mouthful of phlegm. Jack didn’t bother to hide his disdain as one such glistening gob narrowly missed his foot. He raised his chin, the look of rebellion in his eyes familiar. “So, you’re going to ransom us after all?”

There was a slight smile on the captain’s face as he addressed Jack. “Oh, I’m not going to ransom you. You’re not a prince, are you?”

Jack shook his head. “So, what are you going to do to me?”

The chant started up again. “Walk the plank! Walk the plank! Walk the plank!”

Panic seized hold of my chest, the lump in my throat preventing words from escaping the first time I tried. When I eventually managed to force them out, there was no disguising the strain in my voice. I didn’t care. Not when this was Jack, and I was the one who had gotten him into this. “You can’t!”

Captain Otto lifted one eyebrow. “No?”

“No.” I thought fast. “My family, they’ll pay double. They’ll pay for Jack as well as me.”

“Hmm...” The captain considered my words. “In that case, they’ll pay double just for you.” He crouched again, leaning close. Close enough that only I, and possibly Jack, would be able to hear the words. “I’m afraid my men will be very disappointed if they don’t get a little action today. It’s been a while, and they tend to get quite tetchy if I don’t feed their lust for blood at least once a month.”

I shook my head in denial of what he was saying. “We can come to some sort of arrangement. We can—”

Looking bored, the captain stood. “Enough talk.” He gestured at Jack. “Get him ready.”

Jack had said very little this morning, but I guessed he didn’t think he had anything to lose, a stream of expletives and threats spilling from his lips at the captain’s order. “If you touch me, I’ll fucking kill you. I swear it. And if you kill me, I’ll come back and haunt you. See if I don’t. You’ll never get rid of me. You’ll fucking regret this.”

Captain Otto shrugged. “Haunted ships are good for the reputation. You’d be doing us a favor.”

Hooper stepped forward but didn’t immediately reach for Jack. “Can I have him for a bit? Before he walks the plank.”

I struggled against my bindings, but they’d been tied too tightly for my attempts at getting free to come to anything. “No, you fucking can’t. Leave him alone.”

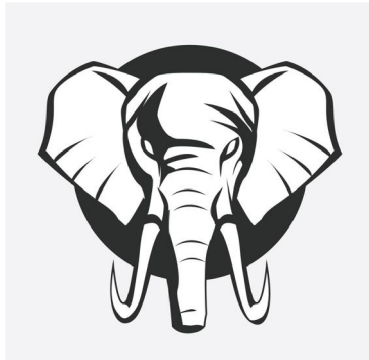
I might as well have been talking to myself for all the attention they paid me, Captain Otto not even looking my way, while Hooper fixed him with a hopeful look.

Seconds ticked by before Captain Otto let out a weary sigh. “An hour. No longer. Then I want him back up on deck. Don’t make us wait.”

Hooper’s grin was all teeth as he crouched to untie Jack from the mast. As soon as Jack was free, he tried to run, but Hooper’s massive arms came round Jack’s chest from behind, pinning his arms to his side and lifting him off the ground so that he couldn’t get any purchase, his legs windmilling uselessly in mid-air. “Come on, pretty. I want to show you my cabin. I think you’ll like what I’ve done with it.”

I continued to struggle helplessly until my wrists were sore, and it felt like my arms might be wrenched out of their sockets as Jack was carried away out of sight. When that didn’t work, I shouted in a bid to get someone’s attention. Anyone’s attention would do. But without a show to watch, the crew had returned to their posts, and Captain Otto was deep in conversation with Jeremy. None of them were interested in the desperate man tied to their mast.

Eventually, I ran out of steam and was forced to sit still and be quiet as I lay my head back against the solid bulk of the mast and tried to think through a cloud of panic. All in all, things were looking rather bleak. I needed a plan, and I needed it quick. All I could think, though, was that if that brute touched Jack, then it would become my life’s quest to ensure that he didn’t live to see the end of the year.



CHAPTER TWENTY- SIX

SEBASTIAN

The hour that passed with Jack gone was one of the longest and most distressing of my life. Even so, it hadn't proved lengthy enough to have come up with a viable plan that would get us out of the predicament we'd found ourselves in, the predicament I'd placed us in. The crew and the captain had continued to act like I was invisible, which had ruled out the possibility of persuading someone to loosen my bindings, or to attempt to get them on side.

When Hooper did reappear, he had Jack slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, Jack's dark hair hanging down to obscure his face so that I couldn't see his expression. Was he injured? It wasn't until Hooper dumped him unceremoniously on the deck—hands still bound behind him but not fastened to the mast—that I got the opportunity to scrutinize Jack's face. Jack was pissed. There was no doubt about that as he met my stare, his green eyes blazing with fury. Apart from that, he looked okay. He was still wearing all his clothes, and there were zero signs of any lacerations or bruising.

I mouthed “I’m sorry” at him, Jack rolling his eyes in response. I was about to mouth something else when movement caught my eye from a stack of barrels a few meters away, a tiny, furry head popping out from behind one of them. Jack had been right; the monkey was on board. Could it help in some way? Jack was already one step ahead of me, turning his body so that his bound hands were closer to the monkey’s hiding place.

It ran out immediately, staying silent apart from the soft pitter patter of its tiny feet on the deck. The monkey wasted no time in setting to work on the rope fastening Jack’s wrists together, Jack twisting as much as he could to make it easier. Despite the nimbleness of the monkey’s fingers, it was struggling, because... Well, because it was a monkey. If I’d been controlling it, the task would have been easier, my human knowledge of loosening knots and the best way to go about it would have provided an advantage, but I wasn’t, and as intelligent as the monkey might be, it didn’t have that prior experience to draw upon.

There was only so long before someone would spot what the monkey was up to. And what if it was successful, and Jack got free? Then what? It wasn’t like he could take on a whole ship full of pirates. Even if by some miracle, he managed to untie me as well, there was nowhere for the two of us to go. We were too far from land for jumping in the sea to be anything but suicide. Maybe that was better, though. If the other choice was life without Jack, then there was no way I wanted to go on living without him. My life would be too boring. Too quiet. Too empty.

Jack’s gaze found mine as the monkey continued to work on the knots. Gone was the antagonism in those beautiful eyes of his. There was nothing but sadness and regret there, the emotions painful to witness. Especially when they told me that he too couldn’t see a way out of this. Why had I

ever thought that this was a good idea? Jack had warned me repeatedly about being reckless, about not thinking things through properly. I should have listened to him.

Heavy footsteps sounded, the monkey skittering back to its hiding place in the nick of time before it was discovered. And then Jack was being hoisted to his feet by two pirates. Our gazes met and held until a black hood was pulled over his head. “Please don’t do this,” I said, but no one was listening to me.

A quiet chant of “walk the plank” had started up again. It increased in volume as Jack was marched across the deck toward the plank waiting on the other side. Nausea swirled in my gut as I searched for Captain Otto, finding him leaning nonchalantly against one of the sails, his arms crossed, and the expression on his face almost bored, as if he wasn’t about to send a man to his death just to entertain his crew. But no matter how intently I focused on him, he wouldn’t look my way.

A shout had me focusing back on Jack. Somehow, his hands were free. The monkey must have loosened the bindings enough that he’d managed to do the rest himself. Hope flared in my chest as Jack took a swing at one of his pirate escorts. With the hood still covering his eyes, though, it was never going to be successful. A loud screech filled the air, the monkey darting out from its hiding place to launch itself at the other pirate.

He cried out as it fastened itself to his face, sharp nails delving into soft eye sockets where it could do the most damage. He lifted his hands, his fingers clawing at his cheeks in a bid to rid himself of the creature attached to his face. Jack struck out again. Despite his blindness, his fist found a target this time, glancing off the cheek of the pirate who wasn’t being troubled by a monkey.

The whole scene was utter pandemonium. Jack lifted his hands to the hood, poised to pull it off. But then Hooper was there, the brute stepping in once more to subdue Jack with his superior bulk, Jack's act of rebellion coming to a premature end. The monkey wasn't faring well either, the pirate having gained the upper hand, his fingers wrapped tightly around its neck to leave it dangling above the deck. It twisted in his grip, the man letting out a loud yelp of pain as sharp monkey teeth sank into the fleshy part of his hand. He let go immediately, the monkey dropping to the deck and scampering away in a blur of brown fur and tail.

Captain Otto's look of boredom had been replaced by one of confusion and irritation. "Where did the monkey come from?" There was a chorus of "dunnos" and plenty of head shaking from the crew, most of them seeming just as bewildered as their captain was to find themselves under siege from a primate. Captain Otto sighed. "I don't suppose it matters. We can find the damn thing later. It's not like it can go far."

The pirate who'd been bitten had his hand cradled against his chest, drops of blood decorating the deck by his feet. "As long as I can kill the little fucker when we do find it."

Captain Otto chose to ignore him. "Let's get on with this, shall we? There's been far too many delays already." He addressed Hooper. "Maybe you can do the honors. You seem to be the only one who can keep him in check successfully."

Hooper grinned, his arms wrapped around Jack in a way that made me want to take a leaf out of the monkey's book and bite him. Only, I'd have to get free first, and that wasn't happening any time soon. I sat as far forward as my bindings would allow, projecting my voice across the deck. "Hey!"

No one so much as glanced my way.

“I know you can hear me.”

Still nothing.

“Don’t do this. We can work something out. I have connections.” Well, I didn’t, but my family did. And I’d try anything if it meant Jack lived to fight another day. “I can get you more money. Or...” I searched for inspiration. “I can get you a better ship. A bigger one. More crew. Whatever you want. All you need to do is let Jack go. You don’t really want to do this. I’m sure that deep down you’re a reasonable man, so let’s sit down together and talk. Man to man.” Without time or the ability to think them through first, words were spilling from my mouth. Jack was usually the one with the silver tongue when the situation required it, but if I wasn’t going to speak for him, who would. “Please!”

Captain Otto finally turned my way, his expression as impassive as ever. “Someone shut him up, would you? He’s going to spoil a perfectly good execution with his whining.”

A pirate swaggered my way, the smirk on his face demonstrating that he had no issues with following his captain’s orders and would have fun doing it. Something damp and oily was shoved in my mouth, ending any further protestations I might have had. Any hope of being able to dislodge it once the pirate had turned his back was dispelled when something was tied around my head to keep the gag in place.

It left me powerless to do anything but watch as Jack was once more led toward the plank. Tears formed in my eyes and spilled down my cheeks as Hooper maneuvered him onto the plank before letting Jack go, Jack swaying precariously. Hooded, and with Hooper standing guard, there was nowhere for Jack to go but forward. And at the end of the plank, there was nothing waiting for him except miles of ocean.

His hands weren't tied anymore. That had to improve his odds, surely? He could swim for it, and maybe, just maybe, another ship might happen along. Jack was resourceful. He wouldn't die easily. I couldn't bring myself to believe that this could be the end. Not after all the other sticky situations we'd found ourselves in. Something would happen. It had to.

Hooper gave Jack a prod in the back, and he took a shaky step forward. Another prod. Another step, Jack's arms stretched out to either side to keep his balance.

"Take the hood off, would you?" said Captain Otto. "I think after all the trouble that our guest has caused, he should be able to see exactly what he's jumping into."

Hooper stepped forward, whipping the hood off in one easy movement, Jack blinking in the light. His gaze dropped to the sea, a muscle ticking in his cheek. "What makes you think I'll jump?"

Hooper laughed. "You jump, or I push you. Nothing personal, you understand. Captain's orders. Isn't that right, Captain?"

Captain Otto didn't deign to answer. He might have accused his crew of lusting for blood, but there was a definite glint in his eye as well.

The pirate who'd gagged me crouched down next to me, his gaze crawling all over my face. "Aww, don't cry, princey. It will be over quickly. The sharks will make sure of that."

I tried to say "sharks?" But with the gag lodged firmly in my mouth, it came out as nothing more than a muffled noise. Even so, the pirate seemed to understand, his smirk transforming into a broad grin. "Yeah, sharks. There are loads of them in this part of the ocean. That's why the captain hasn't bothered tying little Jackie boy's hands again. He probably won't have any... hands, that is, once the sharks chow down on them. Shame

you're tied up. You won't get to see all the blood. Makes it look like the sea is red. If you're lucky, the skeleton might bob up again in a couple of days once the sharks have picked it clean."

He reached over and patted me on the thigh. "If you're nice to the captain, and you cooperate, he might let you keep the skull. He did that with another guy when we threw his wife in. No idea what the guy did with it. I guess you could stick a candle in it or something. Maybe two. One in each eye socket."

Nausea threatened to force the last thing I'd eaten past the gag. I swallowed it down with difficulty. Meanwhile, Jack had been forced right to the end of the plank, his face as pale as I'd ever seen it.

This was it. Time was up. There was no last-minute plan I could implement. I would be forced to watch my lover jump to his death in front of a baying crowd. And Jack, poor Jack, who hadn't even wanted to leave Riverbrook, and had never been anything but vocal about his hatred of the sea, would have it as his grave, his body food for the sharks.

Anger throbbed through me. Anger at myself for having gotten us into this situation. Anger at the pirates for being murderous bastards. Anger at the world for taking the most precious thing I had away from me. I could cope without my magic, but I couldn't imagine a future where I could cope without Jack. I hadn't even had a last opportunity to tell him I loved him. How was that fair? I wanted to close my eyes, but that wasn't right. Painful as it was, the least I could do for Jack was not be a coward, and watch.

The pirates had taken up a new chant now with Jack standing at the end of the plank. "Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump." It was as steady as a drumbeat, growing gradually louder and louder. More tears spilled from my eyes, the

pirate reaching over and wiping my face with his sleeve in a move that was almost gentle.

He patted my thigh again. “Not long now. He just needs to jump.”

The longer Jack stood there, the more restless the pirates became. Finally, it was left to Captain Otto to pull a musket from his belt and hold it up, the muzzle aimed straight at Jack. “This happens sometimes... stubborn people who refuse to jump. Luckily, we have a solution. One musket ball in the back seems to do the trick. Gets the sharks here quicker as well.”

He thumbed the hammer back, my breath coming in harsh pants around the fabric jammed in my mouth. All these pirates would die. Every single one of them. Slowly and painfully. I’d make sure of it. I did close my eyes then, the image of what would happen—the bloom of blood on Jack’s back, the way he’d lose his balance and tumble into the sea—already too vivid in my mind to have to suffer the reality.

“Wait!”

The voice was strident. And female. My eyes snapped open to find a hooded figure striding across the deck to Captain Otto’s side. He didn’t lower the musket, but his finger did ease off the trigger as he looked her way. “Sweetheart, I thought you said you were going to stay below deck this afternoon and catch up on your sleep.”

She lowered the hood, the sun catching her hair and turning it to fire. It was a perfect complement to the eyes flashing with anger. “And *you* said you weren’t going to be doing this anymore. Do you remember, Ashton? We talked about it at length, about how there was a much better way to do things, that the old ways aren’t always the best. Anyway...” She waved a dismissive hand. “That conversation is for later. The important thing is that’s my brother at the end of your plank.”

I stopped breathing as silence fell across the deck, the crew exchanging looks of confusion.

Captain Otto was the first to recover his composure, although his demeanor was rather sheepish, having apparently been caught doing something he wasn't supposed to be doing. "Bella, sweetheart, you must be mistaken. You told me your brothers were farmers in Cerensai. What on earth would one of them be doing here? That doesn't make any sense."

She shook her head. "I don't know, but I'm telling you that's my brother."

I sat forward, peering at her. After all these months of looking for her, had she really sprung up in the most unlikely of places? Except, it wasn't unlikely, was it? Not when the last lead we'd had on her was that she'd set sail. It might not have been on this ship, but it made sense that she could have ended up on another.

And there was no mistaking the fact that apart from the long, red hair, she looked like Jack. Same green eyes and same nose. It was amazing that Captain Otto hadn't seen the resemblance. If it wasn't for the gag in my mouth, I might have laughed. My gaze shot to Jack to see what he was making of this, but Jack was too far away to have heard what was going on. He was teetering on the edge of the plank like a tragedy waiting to happen.

Annabelle seemed to think so too, her eyes widening in alarm as she glanced that way. "Either you get my brother off that plank immediately, or you'll be dropping me off at the next port. For good. And I don't care where that is. Because know this, if you hurt so much as a hair on my brother's head, I won't even be able to look at you anymore."

It was Captain Otto's turn to look alarmed, the fearsome pirate immediately taking on the familiar look of a man used to being brow-beaten

by his significant other. “I...”

She raised an eyebrow, and he immediately withered beneath her pointed look, letting out a weary sigh. “Hooper, grab him! Bring him back.”

Deprived of their opportunity to watch a man die, the assembled crew let out a collective groan as Hooper carefully edged himself across a plank that looked far too narrow for his bulk to reach Jack. He bent to whisper something in Jack’s ear. Whatever it was, Jack nodded, and the two of them started to inch backwards. I held my breath, the fear that he might still lose his balance and tumble from the plank a ravenous beast in my chest as they made their painstakingly slow way back toward the ship, the plank seeming twice as long as when Jack had been forced to the end of it.

Finally, and not a minute too soon, he was back on deck. When he turned, his expression was a study in confusion. His eyes found mine, and I jerked my head in the direction of the woman still standing at the captain’s side. It took a while for recognition to bloom, Jack no doubt unable to believe the evidence of his own eyes. By that time, she was already running toward him, Jack saying her name in disbelief as she flung her arms around him, the two of them becoming locked in an embrace.

Captain Otto ran a hand through his hair as he let out another sigh. “Well, this is...” He didn’t manage to finish his sentence, shaking his head instead. He turned my way, and I shrugged. He waved a hand and, much to my relief, the gag was removed as the captain strode over to stand in front of me, his expression grave. He flicked a glance back at Jack and Annabelle, who had managed to separate but were making up for lost time by talking nineteen to the dozen. “I’m guessing I won’t be allowed to ransom you either. Not if you’re with her brother.”

There was no holding back my smirk, the knowledge of the fearsome pirate captain being brought to heel by a mere slip of a girl just too delicious.

He shook his head again. “Never fall in love. You’ll barely recognize yourself by the time they’ve finished shaping you into what they want you to be.”

My gaze strayed to Jack. Despite having just stared death in the face, he looked happy. Possibly happier than I’d ever seen him. Seeing him happy made me happy too. “It’s too late for that, I’m afraid.”

A look passed between us, a look of understanding that we were both at the mercy of our lovers. Despite Jack making out that Annabelle was a sweet, defenseless girl, I was beginning to suspect she was very much like Jack when it came down to it.

Far too much time passed before I found myself untied, and I could get an armful of Jack. For once, he didn’t balk at being squeezed tightly as I breathed him in and reassured myself that he was alive, and I wasn’t just dreaming it. “I thought...”

“Yeah.” He drew back slightly to see my face better. “Me too.” His brow scrunched up, one finger drifting down my cheek in a touch so light that I could barely feel it. “Have you been crying?”

“Crying?” I pulled a face. “No, of course not.” Jack arched a brow in a way that said he wasn’t buying it. “The wind was in my face, that’s all. And I had a gag in my mouth. Those two things combined made my eyes water.” The brow didn’t lower. “I knew everything would work out okay. It always does.”

Jack laughed. “Right! Of course, you did. Next, you’ll be claiming that you knew my sister was on board The Crimson Wolf, and that this whole

plan was designed to kill two birds with one stone.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” I dropped a kiss on Jack’s forehead, something dark that I’d pushed to the recesses of my mind worming its way back in. Curling my hands around Jack’s shoulders, I held him at arms’ length to get a proper look at him. He looked okay, but that could have just been a front. “Before... when Hooper took you to his cabin. Did he...?” Anger and revulsion had my throat closing without any more words coming out. “If he... I’ll...”

A dark expression settled on Jack’s face, my heart almost beating out of my chest as I experienced a fury unlike any I’d ever felt before, the urge to rip someone apart—and that someone being Hooper Derane—almost overpowering in its intensity. Jack shook his head sadly. “Sebastian, it was awful.”

“Yeah? What did he do?” I pulled him back in, settling his head against my chest and stroking his hair. “You don’t have to tell me now if you can’t talk about it.”

“I can talk about it.” Jack’s words were muffled, his face buried in the folds of my shirt. I steeled myself, willing myself to react the right way whatever Jack said. I needed to tell him that it didn’t matter, that whatever had transpired had been under duress, that, given Hooper’s size, there was nothing he could have done to prevent it, that it wouldn’t make me love Jack any less. Nothing could make me do that. “He read me poetry.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Poetry, that he’d written himself. About the sea. Well, one was about rum, but most of them were about the sea. And it wasn’t good poetry. There was some truly awful vocabulary in there, words that were meant to rhyme and just didn’t.” Jack lifted his head, his expression pained. “No man

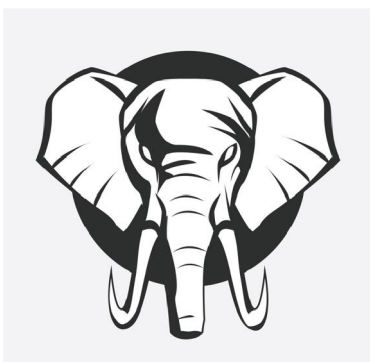
should be forced to listen to that just before they're sent to their death. It's inhumane."

Relief surged through my body. "And that was it, that's all he did, read you poetry?"

Jack's lip curled, his eyes flashing a warning. "You listen to it, if you're such a fan. I had an hour of it. Apparently, none of the crew will have anything to do with it. Very wise men, if you ask me. It was an assault on the ear drums that I wouldn't wish on anybody, not even my worst enemy."

He sounded so indignant, so Jack, that all I could do was laugh. Well, that and press a kiss to his lips. "I love you, farm boy."

All I got in return was a grunt, Jack apparently still replaying the poetry in his head.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

JACK

After the initial euphoria had passed, it was difficult to shake the feeling of wanting to slap Annabelle. After all that worry, and all that heartache, here she was, looking as carefree and relaxed as I'd ever seen her. Some of what I was feeling must have shown on my face, Annabelle narrowing her eyes as she lounged on the narrow bed of the cabin she'd dragged me to so we could talk. As to whose cabin it was, I had no idea. She tipped her head to one side and regarded me thoughtfully. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

My fingers curled into my palms as I shook my head. "What are you doing, Annabelle?"

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

The dam broke, and I couldn't hold back my frustration any longer. "You leave without a single word to anyone. And I find you *here* of all places. On a pirate ship. With a pirate lover. Did you give any of us so much as a second thought? Did you think Mum and Dad would just forget about you? Because I can assure you, they didn't. None of us did. We had all sorts of

nightmare scenarios going through our heads about what might have happened to you.”

Annabelle studied the floor of the cabin in a way that said she needed to collect her thoughts before responding to my accusations. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Wouldn’t I? Try me.”

She lifted her gaze to mine, her eyes brimming with tears. Great! So much for her looking happy. I’d managed to ruin that in a matter of seconds. “You’ve always been happy in Riverbrook, Jack. I wasn’t.”

“You never said anything.”

She gave a feeble shrug. “No one would have listened.”

“That’s not true.”

She wiped at her eyes angrily. “Isn’t it? They would have said that I needed to get married, but who was I supposed to marry in Riverbrook? There was no one.”

“There’s men in Riverbrook.”

She lifted her chin in a challenge. “Who?”

“There’s Marcus. He’s close to your age.”

“The only thing he talks about is breeding animals. That’s not my idea of a good time.”

She had a point. Marcus did have something of a one-track mind when it came to his livestock. There was a reason Sebastian tended to give him a wide berth. He’d once joked that if he spent any more time with Marcus, he’d end up being into bestiality. “Okay… what about… Jacob?”

Annabelle shot me a scathing look. “He’s twenty years older than me.”

I shrugged. “Some people like older men.”

“Some people do, and there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that. I don’t happen to be one of them.”

“Eugene?”

“You mean the same Eugene that Clara has a thing about, while pretending that she doesn’t? Everyone knows that they’ll get married one day, so I hope you’re not suggesting that I should steal my own sister’s man?”

I was struggling to think of anyone else in Riverbrook who was of age, and wasn’t already married. “At least there are straight men in Riverbrook. You had more choice than I ever did.”

Annabelle laughed. “That’s true, but it never seemed to bother you that much.” She sighed. “Besides, it wasn’t about marriage. Not really. I wanted to see the world. I wanted to have an adventure. I thought about telling Mum and Dad that, but they would never have understood.”

She had a point. They wouldn’t have. “I searched for you, you know? I got all the way to Brittleharbor, but then the trail went cold after you boarded The Floating Duck. I was worried about you. Everybody said that ship was a deathtrap, held together by wishes and hope.”

Annabelle smiled. “It was. I got off it as soon as I could. But to be fair, Captain Carruthers was good to me. He took a chance on me when no one else would.” Her brow furrowed. “How did you track me here from Brittleharbor?”

“I didn’t. It was just a happy coincidence that you were on board. I’d all but given up on finding you.” Guilt settled in my stomach as I realized that both Sebastian and I had gotten out of the habit of asking. All those people that had been present at the festival, and it had never once crossed my mind to ask about Annabelle. But then I supposed there was only so long you

could keep asking the same questions when the answer never changed, and there was no new information to be gleaned.

“Lucky for you I was, or you’d be swimming with the sharks now.”

I shuddered. I’d seen them in the water. Great, dark masses, congregating below for their free meal. There was no way I would have jumped. Captain Otto really would have had to shoot me to get me in that water. And he would have done it as well. I’d seen it in his eyes. He would have put a bullet in my back and thought no more of it. “How can you be with a man like that?” The question was out before I could stop it.

Annabelle went still. “Ashton?”

I bit back on the urge to ask how many other men I could be referring to, and simply nodded.

“I know it doesn’t look like it, but he’s a good man really.”

There was no holding back my snort.

“He is.”

“You’ll have to excuse me if I don’t agree. He had us kidnapped in the middle of the night.” I left out the part about how that had been the plan all along. I was sure we’d get to that eventually, but Annabelle didn’t need to know what a reckless fool I’d become under Sebastian’s influence yet. “He tied us to a mast all night. And then when he realized how worthless I was, he was quite happy to feed me to the sharks just to keep his men happy. Sounds like an absolute darling, if you ask me.”

Annabelle’s gaze dropped to the floor. “He’s been making lots of changes recently to the way he does things. We talked at length about the whole walk the plank thing needing to go, and he agreed. It’s just that sometimes he slips back into old habits. I’m not making excuses for him. I’m just saying that everyone needs time to change, that it doesn’t happen overnight.

Some of the other pirates aren't fans of the new regime, and they put pressure on him to return to the way things used to be. I know they do. I've seen it."

"And poor Ashton bows to peer pressure, does he?"

Annabelle winced. "He'll get there eventually. I wouldn't be with him if I didn't believe that wholeheartedly. You don't know Ashton like I do. Underneath that hard exterior, there's a very different man. He just doesn't show that side of him to many people."

I recognized the dreamy look on my sister's face. It was the same one I feared presented itself on my own face when I didn't remember to keep it in check. "You love him."

Color crept into Annabelle's cheeks. She had a pale complexion to go with the fiery red hair, the result of which meant she never had been any good at hiding her embarrassment. Even so, she did her best to ignore it, tossing her hair, and tilting her chin up. "Is that so terrible?"

Was it? A pirate was hardly the man I would have picked for my sister, but given I'd also strayed down the path of falling for an unlikely man, I supposed I could understand it to a certain extent. Perhaps we were more similar than I'd thought. Annabelle's thinking must have strayed in the same direction, her head cocking to one side to study me. "So... tell me about Sebastian."

I shrugged, but I doubted it was that convincing. "What do you want to know?"

Her lips twitched up into a smile. "Everything. Who is he? How did you meet? How long have you been together? He cried for you, Jack, when he thought you were going to die. He's obviously head over heels in love with you." Her brows met in the middle. "I assume he's not really a prince?"

“Oh, he’s really a prince.” I waited while my sister recovered from her initial shock. “I just didn’t know that when I met him. I thought he was just a... vain, entitled show-off who didn’t know the meaning of the word no, and who liked to take things that weren’t his.”

“You love him too.”

I frowned at Annabelle. “How did you get that from what I just said?”

My sister smirked. “Because I know you, Jack, and it’s written all over your face. You get this look in your eyes when you talk about him, a softness that I’ve never seen there before. It’s nice. Surprising, but nice. And I saw how the two of you hugged as well.” Her smile grew wider. “We’re quite the pair, aren’t we? You fall in love with a prince, and I fall in love with a pirate.”

I let out a soft sigh, and we were both silent for a moment. “Is... Ashton”—it seemed strange to call him by his first name, but given that he was my sister’s lover, it seemed equally weird to call him Captain Otto —“still going to ransom him?”

Annabelle flicked a hand in the air and made a dismissive sound in her throat. “Oh no, don’t you worry about that. If Sebastian’s the man you’ve chosen to be with, then he’s practically family. You can’t ransom family. And if Ashton tries, then I’ll...” She thought for a moment. “Well, let’s just say that he’ll find himself unable to access his cabin and having to work very hard to get back into my good graces. There’s no way he’s going to risk that.”

I was beginning to feel a bit of sympathy for the poor, beleaguered pirate captain who my sister apparently had wrapped around her little finger. I guessed it was going to come in handy, though, given what I was about to ask her. I beckoned her forward, Annabelle rising from the bed to come

closer with a slight frown. I kept my voice down. “If you have the run of this ship, then you’ll know where prisoners are kept?”

“Prisoners?” She arched an eyebrow. “Ashton doesn’t keep prisoners. Not unless it’s for ransom.”

My heart sank, both for Magdalena and for Sebastian’s father. Magdalena had been his best hope. Perhaps even his only hope. “I see.”

“Who were you hoping to find?”

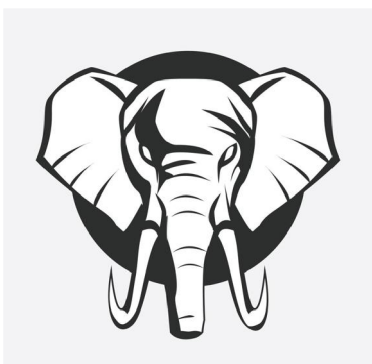
“Magdalena Rohan. She was a—”

Annabelle’s face suddenly brightened. “Magdalena! Why on earth would you think she was a prisoner?”

“Because she was kidnapped.”

Annabelle laughed. “I think you need to talk to Magdalena. You seem to have a few things upside down, and she’d be the best person to put you straight.”

I smiled at my sister, the day suddenly seeming a lot brighter. “I would love to talk to Magdalena. And so would Sebastian. As soon as possible.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

SEBASTIAN

Introductions with Jack's sister had gone well, she and Jack having apparently already covered what I was to him. Either that or it had been only too clear from the way we'd embraced after Jack's narrow escape from death. I'd pretended not to notice the curious glances she kept throwing my way that told me I wasn't the sort of man she'd ever anticipated seeing her brother with, or at least that's how I'd interpreted them.

Annabelle relayed the story of how she'd met Ashton Otto while leading us down into the bowels of the ship, the monkey back on Jack's shoulder. "... and he said if you come with me, I'll treat you like a princess." She threw a sly look my way, her green eyes alight with merriment. "While you're here, you'll have to tell me what treatment I should be getting. I grew up on a farm, not in a palace."

"You sound like Jack," I observed somewhat drolly. "He never misses a chance to tell me he's a farmer. Like I could ever forget that fact when I've seen him with his arm up a cow's vagina."

Brother and sister exchanged a look before Annabelle continued her story. "And anyway, what girl can turn an offer like that down. Well..." She

tipped her head to one side. “To be fair, I did the first time. And the second, but Ashton wore me down in the end. He can be very persistent. We’re talking about getting married one day.”

“Jack and I got—”

I didn’t get any further before Jack rounded on me. “Don’t you dare. Not to my sister.”

I opened my mouth, but when Jack narrowed his eyes at me, I closed it again without saying anything.

Annabelle led us down a long corridor and into a cabin that seemed to double as the ship’s medical space. A dark-haired woman was leaning over a swarthy pirate’s hand, a look of concentration on her face as she probed his hand with a pair of metal tweezers. After a few seconds, she held a wooden splinter up to the light with a flourish. “There! Got it. Pour some rum over your hand and don’t let it get infected.”

The pirate stood, cradling his hand against his chest like he was missing a finger, a look of horror on his face. “Does it have to be rum?”

Magdalena gave him a no-nonsense look. “Yes. It won’t kill you to spare a bit for your finger instead of pouring it all down your gullet. Better you go thirsty than you find yourself having to manage with one less digit.”

The pirate didn’t look wholly convinced of that fact as he left the cabin. Once we were alone, Annabelle stepped forward with a huge smile. “Maggie, I’ve got some people I’d like you to meet.” She held out a hand in my direction. “This handsome devil is Prince Sebastian of Silverwood, and this”—her voice softened—“is my brother, Jack.”

Magdalena straightened, surprise written all over her face. “So, he must have been looking for you?”

Annabelle laughed. “Actually, they were looking for you.”

“For me?” Magdalena’s forehead creased. “Well... I guess you found me. Although I’ve no idea how.”

“Your brother,” Jack offered.

A stormy expression settled on Magdalena’s face, and her lips pursed. “I’d be very surprised if he told you where I was. Very surprised, indeed.”

There was something we were missing here, but I wasn’t sure what. “He had some pretty heavy persuasion.” I jerked my head toward Jack. “Jack had a knife to his throat.”

While Annabelle turned to her brother with a look of surprise, there was something close to admiration on Magdalena’s face. “Oh, I wish I could have seen that.”

“You and Bartholomew don’t get on?” I asked.

“We did,” Magdalena said. “Or at least I thought we did. But him selling me to pirates made me look at our relationship in a whole new light. Now, I can look back and see that he was always jealous of how much attention I got for healing people. It was something his money couldn’t buy. And of course, while we’re on the subject of money, he never understood why I was only interested in helping people and didn’t charge them vast sums of money.”

A glance at Jack revealed him looking just as shocked as I was, while Annabelle just looked resigned, obviously having heard the story before. Jack was quicker to find words than I was. “He sold you? He told us you were kidnapped.”

Magdalena’s lips settled into a straight line. “I *was* kidnapped. Only, it was my brother who told them where to find me. He paid them handsomely to take me away. And of course, pirates are hardly likely to turn down the offer of good coin.” A smile crept onto her face. “Although, I’m afraid the

joke's on my dear brother, because I'm much happier on this ship than I've ever been anywhere else. I get to travel and see the world. I've got a lot less people clamoring for my attention, and"—she reached out to take Annabelle's hand and give it a squeeze—"I wouldn't have met my dear Bella without my brother's intervention, so every cloud has a silver lining."

The two women exchanged a fond smile. When Magdalena turned back to me, there was something more speculative in her eyes as she stepped forward. "I can see why you need my help." She took hold of my hands and stared deeply into my eyes. "Your magic really isn't in a good place, is it?"

"It's gone." The words were thick in my throat, Jack automatically stepping closer to offer me silent support, his shoulder nudging mine. Thankfully, it was the one without a monkey on it.

Magdalena shook her head. "No, it's not gone."

"No?" Even I could hear the hope in my voice.

Magdalena concentrated hard, her fingers curling more tightly around mine. "No. I can feel it. It's buried deep, but it's still there. Damaged, but not irreparably."

"And can you fix it?" Jack asked. "We can pay you." He frowned. "Or at least Sebastian's family can pay you. We spent what money we had on atrociously bad beer, and a place to sleep that will probably give me nightmares for years to come."

Magdalena smiled. "I can try. And you weren't listening, were you? I don't heal people for the money, so there's no need to pay me." She flicked a glance toward Jack. "Although... perhaps you could tell me more about when you held a knife to my brother's throat, how he reacted, what he did, without leaving out any details. I would settle for that as payment."

"I can do that," said Jack with a grin.

Magdalena turned and started to gather some things together, starting with a pestle and mortar, and then unscrewing a few jars, some of which she wrinkled her nose at, screwing the lid back on without using any of its contents, and some of which she tipped into the container.

“Wait!” I said.

She paused to look at me quizzically.

“We’re not here for me.”

She frowned. “No?”

I shook my head. “No. My father, the king of Padora, is gravely ill. My family has consulted many healers, but none of them have been able to cure him. He grows worse by the day, and we don’t know how much longer he has left. We tracked you down in the hope of convincing you to travel back to the palace with us. The royal family of Padora would be eternally grateful for any help you could give.”

Magdalena exchanged another look with Annabelle, the two women seeming to have an entire conversation without the need for words. She returned to what she’d been doing, grinding the things she’d added in the bowl together to form a thick green paste. “What are your father’s symptoms?”

Luckily, Troy had hammered that information into me, making me recite it to check that I didn’t miss anything. At the time, I’d thought he was being ridiculous, but now I was grateful. “Weakness. Nausea. Sensitivity to light. The weakness is the main thing. His magic gives him the strength of ten men, so the fact that he can’t even get out of bed is incredibly concerning. Oh, and he runs a constant temperature as well.”

Magdalena made a considering sound in her throat as she added another ingredient to the mortar, the concoction turning bright yellow, both Jack and

Annabelle leaning forward to get a better look. “And you say that he’s seen many healers?”

I nodded. “All of the ones in Padora. My brother, Troy, was given your name as someone who might be able to help.”

Magdalena gave a wry smile. “I can’t perform miracles, I’m afraid.”

Sadness turned my blood to sludge. “I understand.” I was going to have to return to Silverwood with nothing to show for our journey. My mother would be even more devastated after having been given false hope, Troy would feel terrible that his plan had come to naught, and my father would die anyway.

“But...” All eyes turned Magdalena’s way, waiting for her to continue. “There is one ingredient that can cure anything from a curse to the most little-known of ailments. The only thing it can’t cure is old age.” She lifted her head to pin me with her gaze. “If I had some Haklorn, I might be able to help, but without it...” She lifted her shoulders in a shrug.

“Where can we find it?” asked Jack.

She poured some liquid from another bottle into the mortar and kept stirring the mixture. “Ah, well, therein lies the problem. Haklorn doesn’t just grow anywhere. It has very specific growing conditions in terms of humidity and soil type. The only place you can find it these days is on Beaubel Island.”

Excitement bubbled through my veins. “So, we go there, we get the Haklorn, and we return to Silverwood with it.”

Magdalena’s mouth formed into a line. “If it was that easy, everyone would have it. There’s a reason why no one sets foot on Beaubel Island.”

Jack frowned. “Which is?”

Magdalena took a deep breath. “The small matter of the hydra that lives on that island. And it doesn’t take kindly to interlopers. And when I say it doesn’t take kindly, there’s a long history of people not coming back. In fact, I can’t name one single person who has ever been successful in removing Haklorn from underneath the many noses of the hydra.”

I met Jack’s gaze, the intensity in his green eyes already telling me that we were doing this. It didn’t mean he wouldn’t grumble about it, and call me all the names under the sun, but he would be by my side whatever happened; the surge of love that accompanied that realization almost enough to bring me to my knees.

Annabelle seemed to recognize what was going on in her brother’s head too, closing the space between the two of them to grab his arm. “You can’t. It’s far too dangerous. You’re a farmer, not some sort of intrepid adventurer.”

There was a definite look of amusement in his eyes as Jack faced his sister. “That was the old Jack. The new Jack has confronted all sorts of dangers and come out the other side.”

Annabelle narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Like what?”

“Basilisks,” I provided. “Griffins. Or at least one griffin.”

Jack nodded. “And then there was the troll. Oh, and the dragon-shifting knights, of course.”

I smiled at Jack’s sister. “And most recently a leviathan.”

She blinked a few times and didn’t seem to know what to say.

Still stirring the concoction in the mortar, Magdalena mused aloud. “Of course, you’ve got to reach Beaubel Island first. Good luck persuading the captain to change course and ferry you to where you need to go. Assuming you can, it’s only about half a day’s sail from there. And it would be much

quicker to reach Silverwood by ship. We could just sail right down the coast.”

Annabelle let out a lengthy sigh. “I guess that’s where I come in.” She gave a small smile. “Leave it to me. Give me an hour, and Ashton will be begging to take us wherever we want to go.”

Given that I’d seen that same look of steely determination more times than I could count on her brother’s face, I didn’t doubt it. Annabelle left the cabin as Magdalena held out the mortar to me. “Here you go. All done.”

I took it from her, staring at the murky liquid within its confines that had now turned a very unpalatable shade of gray. In what proved an ill-advised decision, I brought it to my nose and took a sniff, recoiling immediately, and staring aghast at Magdalena. “That does not smell edible. I thought the beer in The Black Skull was bad, but this smells like it’s going to taste far worse.”

Magdalena propped her hands on her hips and gave me a cool stare. “Do you want your magic back, or not?”

“Well, yes, but...”

I brought the mortar to my mouth and steeled myself. There suddenly seemed far too much liquid in there, at least six mouthfuls, which if you asked me was at least five too many. Still, I doubted that the passage of time was going to make it taste any better, and it was probably better just to get it over with.

“Wait!”

Jack’s demand had me pulling the bowl away from my lips. “What?”

His expression was sad as he reached up to pluck the monkey off his shoulder and hold it up high so he could see its face. The monkey seemed quite happy to let Jack do whatever he wanted, as long as he got to be close

to Jack. "I'm guessing that once your magic returns, this little guy will cease to exist."

The words, 'oh, what a shame' threatened to tip off my tongue, but I held them back. "I guess so."

"I didn't even give him a name," Jack lamented. "He deserved a name."

"Perhaps it's better that you didn't name him."

"Perhaps." Jack didn't sound convinced, though. "Just give me a minute." He lowered the monkey so that their faces were close together, the monkey reaching out to rest his tiny hand on Jack's nose. "Hey, little guy. I just wanted to say thank you, you know, for bringing us the money, and for trying to save me from the pirates. I'm sorry I was stubborn about us being friends for so long." The monkey opened its mouth and released a long string of vocalizations that made Jack smile. "Yeah, I know."

I wanted to roll my eyes and make some sort of comment about Jack apparently being able to converse with the monkey now, but Jack looked so sorrowful that I couldn't bring myself to make him feel any worse. Whatever my feelings were on the subject, Jack had formed a bond with the monkey he'd professed to hate, and having to say goodbye was going to be painful for him. And I had to admit that even I'd been impressed by the monkey's loyalty when he'd taken on the pirates. "Tell me when you're ready."

Jack took a deep breath. "Do it."

Bringing the bowl back to my lips, I willed myself to ignore the smell and drink it.

Magdalena smiled. "Come on, don't be a baby about it. No point in me going to all that trouble if you're not going to drink it, is there? Besides,

you're going to need your magic if you're thinking about taking on a hydra."

It was a valid point. I tipped the bowl and drank, the liquid thick and noxious as I took big gulps in order to swallow it before my guts could revolt. It was just as vile as the scent had indicated it might be, but I struggled on anyway. Five swallows and it was gone.

Jack and Magdalena were both watching me carefully. Magdalena raised an eyebrow. "Well?"

I shook my head. "I don't feel any different. Maybe, it didn't work."

"Give it time," she said.

The monkey was back on Jack's shoulder, Jack idly stroking its fur. And it was still there. Still solid. A reminder that my magic wasn't in the right place. "I really don't think it—" And then a wave of heat hit me, burning me from the inside. For a few seconds, I was worried it might turn my veins to ash, so hot were the flames racing through my body. The thought crossed my mind that maybe Magdalena had given me something that wasn't meant to be consumed. But just as quickly as the heat had risen up, it dissipated to leave a reassuring glow behind, a glow I hadn't felt since my tumble down a mountain in Askophai. It felt like my magic was back. Except, how could it be when I was still staring at the monkey?

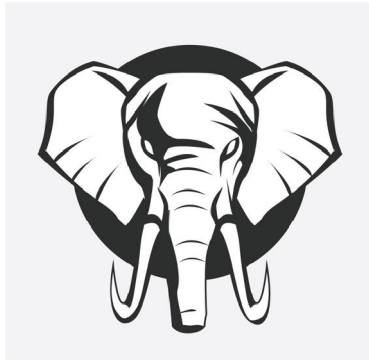
I lifted my hand, the golden sparks coming as easily as breathing, and far brighter than they'd been in a long time. The monkey chattered excitedly, clinging to Jack's hair as it reached out to try and touch them. Except, I was already forming them into the shape of an animal. And then there were two monkeys, the first one jumping off Jack's shoulder to chase the other one around the small cabin, all three of us turning to watch them. "Why didn't it disappear?"

Magdalena shrugged. “No idea. I just heal people. I’d have gone mad a long time ago if I spent time trying to work out the complexities of how it works. Just be glad you’ve got your magic back.”

I was. The power buzzing through my veins made me realize how much I’d missed it. I might have pretended its absence didn’t bother me—although, I don’t think Jack had ever been truly fooled by the act—but it had felt like missing a limb. I pulled the power back into myself, the first monkey chattering in confusion as he suddenly found himself without a friend to play with. He recovered quickly, bounding back onto Jack’s shoulder. Jack smiled. “I guess we have a pet monkey.”

I sighed. “I guess we do. Do you think hydras eat monkeys?”

I found myself pinned by two pairs of eyes, one green and narrowed, and the other black and beady. Neither of them seemed to find what I’d said particularly funny.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

JACK

Annabelle had done an admirable job of convincing the fearsome Captain Otto to do what she wanted, and the ship's course was altered in less time than it had taken for Sebastian to force down the liquid that had restored his magic. And Sebastian hadn't stopped smiling since. Which was fine. I had no issue with him smiling. What wasn't so pleasing was the menagerie of animals he kept insisting on creating, just to prove he could, an action that managed to be both irritating and adorable at the same time.

The captain's voice rang out across the deck, thick with annoyance despite the polite wording. "No elephants on deck, please. We don't need the extra weight, and it would be nice not to sink before we reach the place I never wanted to go to."

I turned to find Sebastian staring up at a massive elephant with a beaming smile on his face. Concerned that Captain Otto's goodwill would only run so far, I hastened to my idiot lover's side, my voice a low hiss. "Get rid of it. You're upsetting him. I don't want to walk the plank again. Once was enough."

Sebastian gestured at the elephant. "But look at it. Isn't it magnificent?"

The elephant threw its head back and let out a loud trumpet, several of the crew startling, turning, and then doing a double-take, apparently having either missed the captain's directive or assumed that it couldn't be an actual elephant. "Yes! It's very impressive. But ships and elephants don't really go together. Maybe wait until we're on land."

Sebastian pulled a face but did wave his hand to make the elephant disappear. I returned to my earlier position, only getting as far as resting my arms on the side of the ship before another disturbance broke out, one of the pirates letting loose a string of expletives. I turned to see what Sebastian was up to now. Except, he'd also turned, both of us staring at the large, bald man who'd appeared out of nowhere to stand next to Captain Otto at the ship's wheel.

Sebastian and I exchanged a look, the word "Earl" forming on both of our lips. We didn't have time to say anything else before the pirate captain came bearing down on us with a look of absolute fury on his face. "I'm going to assume that the man who just appeared out of nowhere has something to do with you two. Because, why not? Elephants. Monkeys. And now men. If your intention is to make me regret ever having kidnapped you, then well done, you've managed it." Ashton thrust his face close to mine. Far too close if you asked me. I had no idea why I was getting the lions' share of his wrath when I had zero responsibility for the elephant, but it seemed that, as usual, I was going to be taking the flack for Sebastian. "If it wasn't for your sister, I'd dump you overboard myself."

I didn't get a chance to defend myself, or to point out that if it wasn't for my sister, he'd already have dumped me overboard, and had in fact only been a few seconds away from doing that exact thing, before he stalked off,

disappearing below deck. Annabelle was taking an afternoon siesta. I sensed it was about to be rudely interrupted.

Sebastian and I both climbed the ladder to reach Earl. His eyes were closed, and his head tipped back to catch the last rays of the afternoon sun, seemingly oblivious to the ire he'd raised in the ship's captain with his sudden appearance. Earl didn't acknowledge our presence as we joined him, forcing Sebastian to initiate the conversation. "Earl! Long time, no see. Did you need us?"

Earl opened his eyes, a furrow appearing on his brow. "Need you? For what?"

Sebastian mirrored his frown. "Okay... I'll rephrase the question. What are you doing here?"

"I've never been on a pirate ship." Apparently, Earl seemed to think that was enough of an answer, falling silent once more as he stared out across the sea. Seconds ticked by before he turned his head Sebastian's way. "Your brother got back to the palace safely, in case you were wondering."

"Good to know," Sebastian said. "So, you've been in the palace?"

"The palace. The festival. And now this ship. I've been following you two for a while."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "And yet you only appear now. Where were you when we needed to escape from Bartholomew at the festival? Or... I don't know, when I was balanced precariously at the end of a plank about to be fed to sharks? Some help would have been good then."

Earl gave a shrug. "Visibility is a problem, as you know."

"Convenient."

There was a flicker of something close to contrition on Earl's face. "Can I help you with anything now?"

“I think we’re good,” said Sebastian. “I’m untied. Jack got both feet back on deck without losing any body parts to sharks. He’s found his sister. I can use my magic again.” His eyebrows arched. “Actually, things have rarely been so good.”

I shook my head. Trust Sebastian to conveniently forget that we were on our way to face a hydra. A hydra that Sebastian had blithely stated he didn’t know the first thing about, including how we were supposed to kill it. “What do you know about hydras?”

“Hydras?” Earl’s forehead wrinkled. “Big snake things with many heads.”

I waited. When nothing else was forthcoming, I prompted him. “And?”

“And what?”

“What else do you know? How to kill them would be particularly useful.”

I let out a sigh as Earl shook his head. There must be someone who knew a bit about hydras. A slow smile crept across my face as it came to me. There was someone. Someone who spent his whole day reading about beasts he never had any intention of coming across. I held Earl’s gaze. “You can travel between places quickly, right? Places you’ve been to before anyway?” Earl didn’t say anything, just continued to stare at me. “I need you to return to Silverwood and find Prince Esteban... he’ll probably be in the library. Ask him what he knows about hydras, and how to kill them. And then bring that information back to us.” Earl was still staring. “Can you do that?”

He gave a slow blink. “I suppose so.” There was a pause. “Now?”

“Before we face the hydra tomorrow would be good. After that, it will probably be too late, and you’ll have to give the information to our

corpses.” Sebastian made a sound of amusement next to me at my words but didn’t seem to have anything to add to the conversation. Typical. He probably thought he could charm the hydra into looking the other way while we helped ourselves to Haklorn. “While you’re there, you could also...” But in Earl’s inimitable style, he’d already gone. I’d been going to say that he could let Sebastian’s family know that we’d found Magdalena, but I guess they were going to have to wait until we arrived back at the palace. *If* we arrived back at the palace.

Sebastian reached over and smoothed my brow. “It will work out alright, you’ll see.”

I batted his hand away. “You said that about us getting kidnapped.”

Sebastian waved an arm in an expansive gesture around the ship. “And didn’t it work out okay?”

I turned in a slow circle, three pirates catching my eye with what could only be described as a venomous glare. It didn’t take a genius to work out that they would much rather I was in a shark’s stomach. “If you say so.”

Sebastian pulled me close and planted a needlessly noisy kiss on my cheek before I could squirm free. “It will be. I’ve got my magic back now.”

I sighed. “Yeah, unless you use it all up on unnecessary elephants.”



Earl cut it fine with his return, causing Captain Otto—who’d only just mellowed enough to come and stand next to us at the bow as the island rapidly approached—to scowl ferociously once more.

“Well?” I demanded, eager to cut to the chase. “Did you find Prince Esteban?”

Earl nodded. “I did.”

“He’s still there!” Sebastian sounded like he couldn’t conceive of such a notion. “Why?”

I ignored him. “What did he say?” Earl held his hand up, the skin looking far too transparent. “Quickly.” I felt bad for snapping at Earl, but the information would be of very little use once Sebastian and I had been chewed into small bits and were being digested in a hydra’s stomach, or stomachs. I wasn’t sure whether they had one for each mouth, or whether all the mouths led to the same one.

Earl spoke fast. “Chop the heads off. And then burn the stump. If you don’t burn them, the heads can grow back.” No sooner had he finished the sentence than he blinked out of existence.

Annabelle arrived on deck shortly after to stand at Captain Otto’s side. “What did I miss?”

He rolled his eyes. “Not much. They were talking to their invisible friend again.”

“He came back. Did he find out anything useful?” she asked.

I relayed what Earl had said, Annabelle’s eyebrow arching. “I still don’t like the idea of you rushing headlong into danger, but at least you’re more informed than you were.” She glanced Sebastian’s way, lowering her voice. “Is he always this...?”

“Reckless?”

“Well, I was going to be more polite and say self-assured, but that probably fits just as well.”

A murmuring had started up on the ship, the cause of the pirates’ discussion quickly becoming apparent as I focused my attention back on the island. There was another ship moored there, and people already on the

island. It made no sense given how inhospitable Magdalena had said it was. “Are you sure this is the right island?”

Ashton Otto shot me a scathing look. “Are you asking me if I’m capable of navigating from one place to another without getting lost?”

From the look in his eyes, it seemed far safer to deny any such thing, which immediately made me want to say that, yes, I was asking that.

Luckily, before I could answer, Annabelle wrapped a hand around her lover’s arm and gave him a little shake. “Shush now. No need to get spiky. Remember that one day you two will be brothers-in-law.”

I pulled a face. “And I can’t wait for the day when we’re all sitting around the table having dinner, listening to dear Ashton share the story of how he very nearly fed me to the sharks. Oh, how we’ll laugh. Mum’s face will be a picture.”

Annabelle shot me a reproachful look. “It was a misunderstanding, that’s all.”

“A—”

“Looks like we’re too late to kill the hydra,” Sebastian announced, having borrowed a spyglass from one of the pirates.

I turned my attention to him, frowning. “What do you mean?”

He passed the spyglass over and I brought it to my eye, turning my head until I found the right place on the island to look. Four men—mainly because it took that many to carry it—were carrying the charred corpse of something that definitely had more than one neck. Given the hydra’s size, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of relief that someone else had gotten there first. The question was who. The corpse was being transported onto the ship, presumably as some sort of trophy.

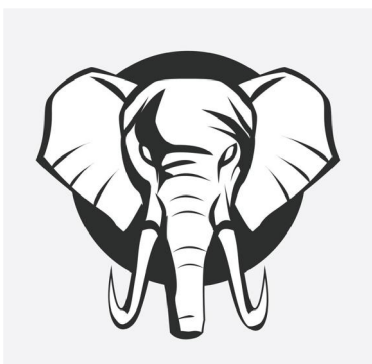
It wasn't the only thing being transferred to the ship, a line of men on the beach passing wooden chests from one to the next. "What do you think is in the chests?" I asked.

"Haklorn," Sebastian said without so much as a pause. "Why else would they be here?"

I'd suspected as much. I lowered the spyglass. "There'll be enough to go around, though, won't there?"

Sebastian's face said it all.

I laughed. "Oh, come on. I'm sure whoever it is that got here first will be perfectly reasonable. After all, we only want a small amount."



CHAPTER THIRTY

SEBASTIAN

I wondered how Jack was doing with his assertion that these were sure to be reasonable men, when no sooner had our feet touched the beach than we were set upon, divested of our weapons, and dragged in front of their leader with our arms twisted behind our back. Their leader happened to be none other than Bartholomew Rohan, his countenance turning decidedly stormy when he realized who we were. “You, and you,” he said in a tone that left no doubt how little regard he had for us. Some people could really hold onto grudges. Anyone would think he’d never been held at knifepoint before.

He waved an imperious hand in Jack’s direction. “Check his boot. That one likes to conceal weapons. I learned that to my detriment.” He rubbed at his neck in a way that said he was recalling the cold kiss of the metal as it had pressed against his jugular. Jack glowered up a storm, struggling to no avail against the captors holding him, one at each side, as another man crouched at his feet to locate and remove the hidden blade with a flourish.

Looking like the cat that had got the cream, Bartholomew stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Do you know, I’ve been looking for you two, but I never

dreamed that you'd volunteer yourselves. What a small world it is that we live in."

"We came for the Haklorn," I stated. I also had two men holding me, their grip tight enough to deliver the message that they had no intention of letting go any time soon.

Bartholomew smiled. It was the smile of someone who was about to deliver bad news and would take great delight in doing so. "Ah, then I'm afraid that I must disappoint you. The Haklorn on this island is now in the possession of Rohan Enterprises." He waved a hand at the ongoing procession of chests that had continued its steady progress toward Bartholomew's ship during our capture. "I left enough for it to still grow, of course... I don't want it running out, but as of about an hour ago, I have claimed this island, and everything on it. Therefore, anyone who sets foot on it without my permission is trespassing. I will be leaving guards whose job it is to ensure that those trespassers are dealt with in a fitting manner."

"You can't just claim an island," said Jack in his most scathing tone. "There are things that can't be bought."

"Really!" Bartholomew arched a brow. "That's not my experience. I have never yet found anything that couldn't be bought."

"What about love?" asked Jack defiantly. "That can't be bought."

There was no hiding the look of surprise I threw his way. It wasn't like Jack to bring up the subject of love. Half the time, I couldn't even get him to admit to loving me, so for him to use it as a stick to beat Bartholomew with was unusual, to say the least. I'd make a romantic out of him yet. Well, assuming Bartholomew didn't have us both thrown in a dungeon for the rest of our days.

Bartholomew's sneer was long and pronounced. "I guess that depends on your definition of love."

Jack didn't miss a beat. "Something that's free, and that lasts for longer than one night is the usual definition, but you do you."

Anger flashed in Bartholomew's eyes as he stepped closer to Jack. "I'm a generous man. I was going to have you imprisoned, but now I think I'd like to see you dangling on the end of a rope."

Jack turned his head my way. "What is it about me, that people take one look, and imagine all the ways they can bring about my death?"

"Probably something to do with your natural charm."

Jack huffed. "Probably." He turned his attention back to Bartholomew. "I'll pass on the rope, thanks."

Bartholomew's gaze swung across to me. "And what about you, are you going to pass on the rope as well?"

Strange question. I was hardly going to jump at the chance to be hanged, was I? I sighed. I was going to have to do something that really didn't sit well with me. I was going to have to use my status as a prince just to get one over on Bartholomew, and to wipe that smug grin off his face. I drew myself up to my full height, which was quite difficult to do when you had a man hanging off each arm.

I could have used my magic, but while that might temporarily earn us our freedom, it was unlikely to get us any closer to our aim of obtaining Haklorn. There was no creature I could summon that wouldn't eventually be beaten by sheer force of numbers. The fact that they'd just killed a hydra was proof of that. Therefore, it was better to pretend that I was defenseless for a while longer. "I wouldn't hang me if I were you."

A furrow appeared on Bartholomew's brow. "And why's that?"

“Silverwood wouldn’t like it.”

The furrow grew deeper. “And what’s it got to do with them?”

I leaned closer to him. “They tend to get upset when their princes are executed.”

He laughed, but when my expression didn’t change one iota, the smile gradually dissipated. Starting at the top of my head, he carried out a slow scrutiny that continued all the way to my feet. “You expect me to believe that you’re a prince?”

“It’s the truth,” Jack said.

Bartholomew flicked him a glance. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

Definitely the wrong thing to say to Jack. “Oh, pardon me for breathing. I was trying to help you out, seeing as your brain power is apparently lacking. Have a think who he looks like.” Bartholomew’s shrug had Jack rolling his eyes. “Prince Troy, maybe? I presume you’ve encountered him at some point on your travels.”

Bartholomew repeated his scrutiny. This time he spent longer on my hair, presumably imagining it being short rather than long, a slight uneasiness creeping into his posture. The two men holding my arms shuffled at either side of me, their grip slackening slightly, their desire to restrain me seemingly waning in light of the new information.

I raised an eyebrow. “Can money solve the scandal that would arise if you had a prince of Padora executed?” I didn’t expect an answer from Bartholomew, not when we both knew it already. It was just a question of how he was going to extract himself from the situation and save face. I didn’t have to wait long to find out, Bartholomew lifting a careless hand in the air, and announcing breezily as if it didn’t pain him in the slightest, “Oh, let them go. They’re not worth the effort.”

Bartholomew's hired goons immediately did as they'd been asked. I brought my arms back to the front and rubbed at the red marks on my wrists where fingers had dug in, Jack doing the same at my side.

"However..." Bartholomew's words were full of a self-importance that must have taken years to perfect. "That does not change the fact that you're trespassing. Therefore, I would suggest that you return to your ship immediately." A sly smile spread across his face. "If you require some Haklorn, I'm sure that Silverwood and I can reach a satisfactory financial resolution at a later date."

The 'later date' part had my blood boiling. My father might not have a later. It was entirely possible he'd already succumbed to whatever was ailing him. Of course, that wouldn't matter to a man like Bartholomew, a man whose very existence revolved around how to turn the vast pile of coin he already possessed into an even bigger pile of coin. As if to back up my thoughts, the procession of chests gave way to four larger loads, the shape and size of them unmistakable as shrouded bodies. It seemed the hydra hadn't gone down without a fight. I doubted Bartholomew even knew the names of the men who'd died under his instruction. He really was an odious toad of a man.

Jack stepped forward with intent, his voice silky-soft. "You're going to give us one of those chests."

Bartholomew let out a short, sharp laugh. "Oh, am I? I don't think so. What are you going to do, hold another knife to my neck?"

Unfortunately, that wasn't an option, or I might have done it myself. Bartholomew might have had us released, but he wasn't stupid enough to have returned our weapons. Although, it was very tempting to see how he'd cope with a tiger clamped to his throat.

Jack cocked his head to one side, a gleam in his eye. “You haven’t noticed what ship we arrived on, have you?” Bartholomew turned his head. There was no mistaking the masthead of The Crimson Wolf as anything other than what it was. A muscle ticked in Bartholomew’s cheek as he took it in. “Am I meant to be impressed that you’re associating with pirates?”

Jack smiled. “Impressed, no. Worried, yes, given which pirate ship it is.”

Bartholomew sniffed. “I have no idea what you mean.”

I took over. “No? You’re not concerned what we might have learned from them, maybe about a certain kidnapping, and the true circumstances behind it?”

Bartholomew’s laugh was laden with contempt. “I would have thought a prince, if indeed you are one, knew better than to trust the word of a bunch of pirates. They thieve. They lie. They say whatever they think a person wants to hear. The clue is in the word pirate. They’re hardly good citizens.”

“So, you’re denying that you had your sister kidnapped?” Jack asked.

“Of course, I’m denying it. That’s a ridiculous accusation to make.” Bartholomew looked around, quite a few of the hired men having stopped what they were doing to pay closer attention to the conversation. Noticing Bartholomew’s scrutiny, most busied themselves again, only a couple brave enough to stand their ground.

“One chest of Haklorn,” Jack demanded. “And we won’t tell anyone your dirty little secret. That seems like a good deal to me.”

Bartholomew seemed to bring out the best in Jack. First threats. Now blackmail. Any hope that it could be that easy were dashed when Bartholomew laughed. “Tell whoever you want to tell. I’m a respected businessman. No one will believe you. Not without any evidence to back up your crazy claim.”

“What about if *I* tell them, brother? Will they believe me?”

We all turned to see Magdalena picking her way carefully toward us across the sandy beach, her skirt hitched up. She wasn't alone, Annabelle and Ashton Otto—although his presence looked to be more under duress at Annabelle's urging, if the tight grip she had on his arm was anything to go by—flanking her. There was also a small congregation of pirates who, while not having ventured onto the beach, had disembarked to form a silent audience next to the ship, the hulking presence of Hooper Derane front and center. It seemed like Magdalena had made a lot of friends during her short tenure on the ship.

All the color drained from Bartholomew's face. “M...M...Magdalena, is that really you?”

She came to a stop, crossing her arms over her chest and regarding her brother rather like he was a rogue beetle she'd found in her shoe. “Well, I'm not a ghost.” Bartholomew took a step toward her, holding his hands out in a way that said he intended to grasp hold of Magdalena's. She shrank back from him, shaking her head. “I can't forgive you for what you did, so please don't ask me to.”

Bartholomew opened his mouth as if to deny the accusation once more but ended up closing it without saying a word. His shoulders were hunched, and he looked thoroughly miserable as he peered at her through his eyelashes.

I imagined it was pretty difficult to be faced with your sister who you'd sold to pirates. Not that I could rouse even the slightest bit of sympathy for him. Neither could Magdalena, if the way her fingers were curled so tightly around her crossed arm that her knuckles had gone white was any indication. She looked like if she uncrossed her arms, she'd probably take a

swing at Bartholomew. She sighed. "I'm guessing that I'd be wasting my time trying to get you to admit it, never mind pushing to know why you did it."

Bartholomew stayed silent.

She nodded. "I thought so." There was a slight tremor in Magdalena's voice. "So, we won't waste time with that, then." She stood up straighter. "Here's what's going to happen. You will hand over a chest of Haklorn to Jack and Sebastian." When Bartholomew looked like he was going to argue, she held up a hand. "That's the price of my silence. If you don't hand it over, I will tell anyone who cares to listen what you did, and drag your name through the mud until there is no one left in any of the thirteen kingdoms who would dare to be seen doing business with you. And if you think that they won't believe me, then..." She paused dramatically and gestured at the pirate captain. "Then perhaps they will believe the person who made the deal with you. Isn't that right, Ashton?"

Ashton's eyebrows drew together as if this was news to him. Annabelle gave him a sharp dig in the ribs with her elbow and he suddenly found his voice. "Yes, of course. I would be... only too eager to..."

He looked to Annabelle for guidance, Jack's sister happy to finish his sentence for him. "Speak the truth to whoever needs to hear it."

He nodded. "Yes, that..." He frowned, probably contemplating how a wanted man was supposed to present the truth to anyone without being arrested for his crimes and brought to justice. Luckily, Bartholomew seemed to have been so rattled by Magdalena's reappearance that his brain function wasn't faring too well. He was a mere shadow of the man he'd been before.

Bartholomew swallowed, the action reverberating down his throat. “How...?” And then he said no more.

Jack leaned forward with a quizzical look on his face. “How what? How did you become enough of a bastard to sell your own sister? Well, that’s the question we’d all like an answer to. Or how do we proceed from here? You give us the chest. We leave. And then...” Jack took in all the watching men with a smirk, none of them pretending to work anymore. “I’d say you have a lot of damage control to do, but don’t worry, someone once told me that there’s nothing that can’t be bought. Hopefully, that includes the ability to make people turn a blind eye to what they’ve heard here today. I suppose there’ll be rumors, but rumors can be quashed.”

I hooked an arm around Jack’s neck to pull him closer so I could plant a kiss on his cheek. For once, he didn’t seem to mind that we had an audience, even going so far as to lean into me.

Bartholomew had been pale before, but now I could have sworn he’d gone slightly green. He had no option. Every man—and woman—on that beach knew that. There was no way a man like him, who relied on his reputation, could afford to have a sister making defamatory statements about kidnap. If Magdalena hadn’t been surrounded by pirates, I might have been concerned for her welfare, when an easy way to solve his dilemma would have been to make sure she couldn’t say a word about anything. But even with the lack of an alternative, Bartholomew seemed to be struggling to accept it, everyone silent as they waited to see what he would do. Seconds ticked by, stretching into a minute. And still no one spoke.

Given that Jack had never been known for his patience, it was no surprise that he was the first to crack. He marched across the divide, and snatched a chest from one of the men’s hands, the action too rapid for the man to have

a chance to protest. Opening the lid, Jack tipped the chest forward so that Magdalena could see its contents. She leaned forward to get a better look before giving a confirmatory nod to say that it was indeed Haklorn. Jack snapped the lid shut, and returned to stand at my side, the chest cradled to his body. “We’ll take this one, thanks.” That last word was dripping with sarcasm, the way he delivered it bringing a smile to my lips. Jack tipped his chin up, his gaze fixed on Bartholomew. “Any arguments? No? Good.” With that, he turned on his heel and started to make his way back toward the ship carrying the chest. I followed him, because... Well, because it was Jack, and wherever he went, I went, even if that did mean turning my back on Bartholomew. Except, I didn’t have to anymore, did I? I had my eyes back, a slight wiggle of my fingers sending the hawk airborne to soar above Bartholomew’s head and provide me with the perfect view of his conflicted expression.

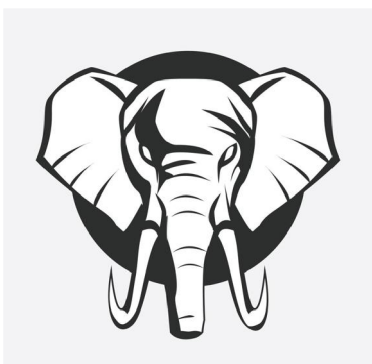
Once I caught Jack up, he leaned into me. “What’s he doing?”

“Staring after us with his mouth open. If he’s not careful, something’s going to drop in it.”

Jack’s smile was slow and malicious. “How much control do you have over that hawk?”

My smile mirrored his. “Jack Shaw, you are an evil, evil man, and I love you for it.”

I already had one hand wrapped around the ladder to climb back onto the ship when all hell broke loose behind us, Bartholomew’s spluttering and retching almost drowned out by the laughter of his audience. There was a story he’d never be able to pay enough to eradicate completely.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

JACK

Silverwood

We were given a hero's welcome on our return to Silverwood accompanied by Magdalena, along with Annabelle. We'd decided that it would be far more prudent for Ashton Otto and the rest of the pirates to remain on the ship. No queen wanted to be faced with the dilemma of whether you could turn a blind eye to your kingdom being overrun by less savory elements for the sake of your husband's health.

Ashton staying behind had prompted a rather awkward exchange where he'd pulled me aside, and in not very eloquent language, peppered with subtle threats of possible retribution, had made me promise to take care of my own sister. As if there had ever been any question of me not doing that. It was difficult to know whether to be pleased that Ashton really cared for Annabelle, or annoyed that he thought I might have so little regard for my own sister.

Troy had seemed particularly pleased to see us. From the way he'd pulled me into a hug, you would have thought we were the best of friends, all my past transgressions while he'd been traveling with us, if not forgotten, then

certainly forgiven. It was nice to feel so accepted by at least one member of Sebastian's family.

The best news, though, was that Sebastian's father was still battling on. According to Sebastian's sister, Lily, he was weaker, but too stubborn to have given up on life yet. Magdalena, armed with the chest of Haklorn and other equipment that she'd brought with her from the ship, had insisted on seeing him immediately.

That had been three hours ago, and the door to the king's bed chamber had stayed resolutely shut ever since, with no word from Magdalena to say whether she could cure him or not. The king's children, including Sebastian, had haunted the corridor outside his bed chamber like particularly persistent palace ghosts for all that time, one of them suggesting every now and again that perhaps someone should venture inside to find out what was going on. They never did, though. Whether that was because they were too afraid it might be bad news, or they simply couldn't decide who it should be, I wasn't sure. All I could do was try and be there for Sebastian, his pacing sometimes coming to a stop for long enough for me to squeeze his hand, or to offer him a hug, his nose buried in my neck for a minute before he resumed his pacing.

The queen was noticeably absent, but I supposed that was understandable. Everyone dealt with things in different ways, and she'd been the one unwilling to go down this path for fear of it providing false hope. And there was certainly hope mixed in with the nerves, even if no one was prepared to voice it aloud.

By mid-afternoon, I was climbing the walls. So much so, that I had to get away, if only for ten minutes. I made the excuse of needing to check on my sister and went in search of her, curious what she'd found to do to pass the

time. I found her in the library with Prince Esteban, the two of them poring over a book with a lurid illustration of a man with the legs of a goat. She lifted her head and smiled when she saw it was me. “Any news?”

I shook my head, and her smile dimmed. “I don’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing that it’s taking so long.”

“Nobody does. That’s part of the problem.” I waved a hand at Prince Esteban, the man still engrossed in the book. “I’m guessing I don’t need to make any introductions.”

Prince Esteban lifted his head with a start, his lips curling into a smile. “Jack! How lovely to see you again.” He gestured to the empty seat at the table. “Do come and join us.”

“I can’t, I’m afraid. I need to...” I’d been going to say take care of Sebastian, but I wasn’t sure whether anyone had filled Esteban in on my role in Sebastian’s life during our absence. It was quite possible no one had. Therefore, it was safer to avoid that topic of conversation altogether. Hoping to get away with being vague, I waved a hand at the door instead.

Prince Esteban nodded understandingly. “Of course.”

“Thank you, by the way, for the information you gave us about hydras. As it turned out, we didn’t need it, but I appreciate you having taken the time to share what you knew.”

Esteban colored slightly. I took it as him being unaccustomed to gratitude until he spoke. “That’s alright. Your friend was most charming.”

“My friend?” I frowned. “Do you mean Earl?” I found it hard to imagine any situation where the word charming could be used to describe Earl accurately. Especially by a prince, who should be far more versed in social etiquette and how to behave in polite society. Although, Esteban did seem

to spend most of his time with his head stuck in a book, so perhaps he wasn't the best yardstick.

Esteban nodded, only catching my eye for the briefest of seconds before ducking his head, his cheeks now a bright fiery red. "Such an interesting man."

I met Annabelle's gaze, my sister making no effort to hold back her grin. She tapped a finger on the page that didn't contain a picture. "Can you read that page to me? I can't wait to find out how a half goat, half man, comes to be."

Satisfied that Annabelle was fine, I left them to it. I was glad that Sebastian wasn't around, or the subject matter under discussion would have lent itself to some gentle ribbing about goats at my expense.

There was a room I'd discovered with a rather lovely view of the grounds during my previous stay in Silverwood. It always made the day seem a lot better when you could spend a few moments looking out over the picturesque flowerbeds. For that reason, I took a slight detour before returning to Sebastian. I realized my mistake as soon as I entered, finding the room occupied for the first time, the queen seated in front of the window.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know you were in here."

Instinct had me immediately backing out, but Kara was having none of it, ushering me toward her instead. "Please don't apologize. Come and join me."

"I don't want to ruin your moment of solitude."

She smiled. "You won't. I just like to come in here sometimes. It helps me think."

I let the door swing shut behind me and went to stand in front of the window. “Me too.” The admission was out before I could stop it. “I mean, I come in here sometimes too.” I gazed out over the green lawn edged by rose bushes. “It reminds me of the farm a little bit.”

Kara gave me a somewhat searching look as I lowered myself into the chair next to hers. “I can see why it would. Less cows, though.”

I nodded. “Definitely less cows.”

She leaned forward slightly. Expecting her to ask for news of her husband, I was surprised when that wasn’t the topic of discussion. “I assume you’ll be taking Sebastian back to your farm once this is all over?”

“Taking?” I smiled at the notion. “I don’t think I’ve ever taken Sebastian anywhere. He generally goes where he wants, so I suppose it will be up to him.”

Was there a possibility that he’d want to stay in Silverwood? His relationship with Troy was much improved. He’d admitted to having several civil conversations with his father. His mother was here, who I knew he genuinely missed. There was no mistaking the fact that there would be benefits to staying in Silverwood.

I couldn’t see it, though. Sebastian had left for a reason. It might have been years ago, and he might have changed—I still refused to use the word *matured*, because it was Sebastian—but Silverwood meant having to be a prince, and all the trappings that came along with that. And Sebastian would go slowly crazy. “I know that I’m not what you would have wanted for your son.” The words were painfully honest, leaving behind a sensation of their corners scraping my chest as I forced them out.

When her husband’s life hung in the balance was a terrible time to be having this conversation, but I’d said it now, and there was no taking it

back. I steeled myself for the rueful shrug that would come my way, for the empty platitude that it was Sebastian's choice not hers.

None of that happened. Instead, Kara twisted to face me, and seized hold of my hands, her gaze impossibly earnest as it held mine. "I can't think of anyone better to be with my son."

"No?" The word came out soaked in emotion, my throat closing as tears threatened to surface.

Kara patted my hand. It reminded me of that first meeting in my kitchen that seemed so long ago. "We should have had this chat before, but there's been so much going on." She sat up straighter. "Although, that's no excuse. I should have made time. I will admit that I may have had my doubts at first. Your background is so very different to his." I couldn't argue with that. "But, on the ship, once you'd risked your life to save his, that all went away. I want what every mother wants. Someone who will wholeheartedly love their child the way they deserve to be loved. And what bigger love is there, than being prepared to die for the other person?"

I cleared my throat to rid myself of some of the emotions threatening to spill over. "I don't tell him enough. That I love him, I mean."

"Pfft... Sebastian would have you saying it every five minutes if he could get away with it. I can hardly blame you for keeping him in check." Her fingers curled around mine, her voice softening. "And just to be clear, you have my blessing for whatever might happen in the future with your relationship."

It took me a moment to work out what she was getting at. "Do you mean... you can't mean..." It was difficult to force the word out, something living that wouldn't stay still having taken up residence in my chest. "You don't mean marriage, surely?"

A slow smile stole across her face. “In the interests of being completely transparent, I should probably tell you that Troy got a little confused when I impressed upon him that he had to tell me everything on his return, and he may have spilled a few secrets that were not his own.” She waited a couple of seconds, and when it didn’t dawn on me, gave me a prompt. “Something to do with orcs.”

“Oh!” I stared at her, heat rising to my cheeks. The only thing worse than my mother finding out about Sebastian and I being off our faces on Moombat to the point of having no memories of what we’d done, was Sebastian’s mother knowing, given that she wasn’t only a mother, but a queen as well. “I... er... don’t think anything happened. I think...” I’d been about to share my theory about Sebastian having stolen the orc wedding bands, but he probably wouldn’t thank me for that. Instead, I just ended up staring at her.

She patted my hands again. “Whether it happened before, or happens in the future, all I’m saying is that I don’t have any issues with it. I mean, I’d obviously rather it was a proper ceremony than something that happened in the dead of night under the influence of drugs and surrounded by orcs. And I’d love to be there to see Sebastian married, but if I’m not... then it will still be okay.”

I felt like someone had set fire to my body, and I didn’t know where to look.

Marriage! Marriage was... I didn’t even know what it was. I’d never envisaged being married, which probably owed more to the lack of eligible men in Riverbrook rather than any strong feelings against it, but even so... What would it be like to be married to Sebastian? Why was my heart racing just at the thought of it?

“I can see I’ve overwhelmed you. I’m sorry,” Kara said. “I wanted to make things better, and I fear I’ve only made them worse. Please don’t misunderstand me. I wasn’t saying that you need to get married.” She grimaced. “I’ve already been down that road once with Sebastian, and it culminated in losing him completely. I was just afraid you wouldn’t think it was an option, you know, because...”

“Because I’m a farmer?”

She nodded.

“It’s...” I had no idea where I was going with that sentence, so it was lucky that the corridors of the palace were suddenly filled with noise. It was the sound of lots of people all talking at once, like something momentous had happened. Unfortunately, there was no way of telling whether it was a happy something or a sad something. There was fear in Kara’s eyes as they found mine. Hand in hand, we clambered to our feet and went to find out, almost running in our haste to get there.

Absolute pandemonium was the only description that fitted the scene outside the king’s bedchamber. There was hugging. There was talking nineteen to the dozen. There were tears. As for the king’s bedchamber itself, the door stood open, a rather thin man leaning weakly against the wall, and looking bemused at all the fuss. Next to him stood a very bedraggled-looking Magdalena, the wisps of hair that had escaped her ponytail making it look like she’d spent time wrestling a crocodile.

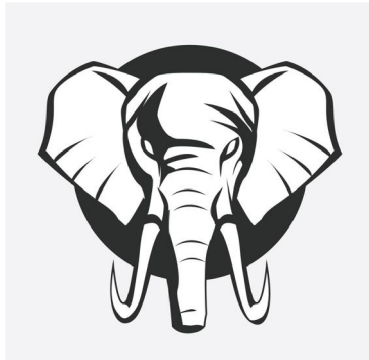
The man spoke, his tone that of someone who was used to being obeyed. “What does a man have to do to get a bit of peace and quiet around here? Anyone would think I was in a marketplace.”

Next to me, Kara burst into tears, and then threw herself—although, it was a gentle throw—into the man’s arms, repeating “you’re out of bed”

over and over again.

I was snatched up into a hug of my own, Sebastian holding me tight. “Magdalena did it. He’s going to be alright. She said it wasn’t easy, but she got there in the end with the help of the Haklorn.”

I closed my eyes and breathed him in, my fingers splayed on his back, one single thought going around and around in my head and refusing to go away. I *could* marry this man, vanity, and recklessness, and all.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

SEBASTIAN

I stared at Prince Esteban across the table, trying to wrap my head around the fact that he'd been my intended for close to a decade. I hadn't wanted this meeting. I would much rather have waited until Esteban took the hint and left Silverwood. Of course, I hadn't admitted that to Jack, using the excuse of needing to spend time with my father instead, the two of us managing to get along surprisingly well. He seemed to have mellowed. Whether that was the huge time gap, or his recent enforced stay in a sick bed, I wasn't sure. It helped that I'd learned not to react when he said something insensitive.

My father was gaining strength by the day, Magdalena having worked a miracle on what had apparently been a curse. Only, no one could work out who had inflicted it in the first place. It was quite possible that mystery would never be solved. Extra security had been put in place as a precaution to ensure it couldn't happen again, my father escorted by double the amount of palace guards at any given time so that no one could get close enough to curse him again.

On the third day of my father's recuperation, I'd introduced him to Jack. The meeting, although short, had gone about as well as I could have expected, both men on their best behavior. Meanwhile, Annabelle had taken to sitting with my mother and my sisters on an afternoon, the group sharing stories as if they were old friends, Annabelle making the necessary changes to hers so that the colorful characters she talked about were something other than pirates.

Unfortunately, Jack had been so insistent on me meeting with Prince Esteban that I'd run out of excuses, and in true Jack fashion, he'd eventually worn me down. So here we were, sitting in the library with just the two of us, the prince staring back at me with huge brown eyes and impossibly long eyelashes. "Goodness!" Prince Esteban exclaimed. "You're very handsome."

"Thanks. I have my mother and father to thank for that."

Prince Esteban's laugh was surprisingly high-pitched. "And funny too. Jack never mentioned that."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What did Jack tell you about me exactly?"

"Oh, not very much. Just that you're a nice man, and that I shouldn't be too nervous about meeting you." Esteban thought hard. "And that you're a man of action." His forehead creased. "I never really understood what he meant by that, though" He brightened somewhat, sitting up straighter. "Perhaps you can enlighten me."

I gave a shrug. "You'd have to ask Jack."

"Right..." Prince Esteban drummed his fingers lightly on the table. "Did you know that Jack has a monkey?" It was hard not to when the damn thing kept crawling into bed and insisting on sleeping in the middle of us. "He's called it Coconut." That was news to me. As of last night, it had still been

simply monkey. That meant Esteban and Jack had already spoken today. The thought of the two of them getting friendlier made something uncomfortable settle in my chest that felt suspiciously like jealousy. The sooner Esteban returned to Ebitus, the better.

“Sebastian...”

“Esteban...”

We’d both spoken at the same time. I waved a hand to signal that Esteban should go first. He carefully closed his book, as if the temptation to read it might become too much, and he was concerned he might give in to it midway through our conversation. “This is very difficult for me to say.” He lifted a hand in a self-conscious gesture to smooth his hair back. “Especially given that I’ve waited for such a long time.” I wasn’t sure whether he was referring to the years I’d been gone from the kingdom, or the two weeks where we’d left to find Magdalena. It fitted either scenario. “So... I’m just going to come out with it. Please don’t hate me.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“Thank you.” Esteban was painfully earnest, my lips twitching with the urge to laugh before I managed to get them under control.

“I find myself wanting to break our engagement.”

“Really?” I cleared my throat in an effort not to sound too pleased by the idea. “Oh no! Why?”

Esteban’s gaze flicked sideways, his cheeks coloring. “I’ve met someone.”

“Here?” Who could it be? My younger brother, perhaps? Had they spent any time together? Troy? No, it couldn’t have been Troy. He’d been gone most of the time that Jack and I had been gone. Who then?

A dreamy expression settled on Esteban's face. "He's very tall. Very handsome. Quite the mystery man, which makes him all the more intriguing. We only spoke for a short while, but we had so much in common. I know that this is terribly rude of me, but I couldn't possibly marry you while thinking of another. I hope you're not too devastated by my rejection."

Another lip twitch to wrest under control before I could speak. "It might take some time, but I'm sure I'll get over it eventually."

Prince Esteban nodded thoughtfully. "Do you think you can love someone the first time you meet them? Or is that a ridiculous notion?"

A man hunched over his tankard of ale came to mind, his green eyes reflecting so many things all at the same time, from defiance to a keen intelligence. "I think it's entirely possible."

"Do you?" There was relief in Prince Esteban's voice. "I have to say, you're being very decent about this, considering."

Jack had described Esteban as delightfully naïve, and I could certainly see where he was coming from. Anyone else would have picked up on my lack of interest from the fact that I'd run away rather than marry him, or the years-long absence, or my inability to find time to meet with him despite both of us being under the same roof, but it seemed that Esteban thought all those things were perfectly normal.

Esteban propped his chin on his hand. "Do you think he's here now?" Bright flags of color bloomed on his cheeks as he answered his own question. "I do hope not, or he'll have heard everything I just said about him. A man should admit his feelings face to face with another man, don't you think?"

I stared around the completely empty library, the realization of who Esteban was talking about taking a long time to form itself into something tangible. “Are you talking about Earl?”

Esteban’s sheepish nod had me lost for words. I sat back in my chair and regarded him silently. It was hard to imagine a more unlikely pair than Earl and Esteban. For a start, Earl was about twice the size of Esteban. Any sexual liaison between them didn’t bear thinking about. But I guess the heart wanted what the heart wanted. I was living proof of that.

Esteban gestured for me to lean forward, and I did so. “I have something else I need to tell you. I hope you don’t think I’m out of line.”

My curiosity piqued, I played along. “Go on.”

“It’s about Jack.”

“Jack?”

Esteban nodded enthusiastically. “He probably won’t thank me for telling you this, but...” He hesitated, biting his lip.

“But...?”

“I think he likes you.”

It was all I could do to keep a straight face. “Do you? Whatever gave you that idea?”

Esteban leaned even closer. “There’s a certain look in his eye when he talks about you.”

“Is there? That’s interesting.”

Esteban looked mightily pleased with himself. “You should... I don’t know, suggest that you spend some time alone or something.”

I nodded slowly. “I should.”

“It will help you to get over me.”

“I’m sure it would.” Memories of this morning where I’d had a naked Jack writhing underneath me as I’d driven him slowly crazy with magic-imbued fingertips embedded deeply in his ass came to mind. “I bet he could be quite distracting.”

We both lapsed into silence. Unless you counted both liking Jack, we had nothing in common. I could ask about his book, except then he might tell me, and I’d have to listen to the answer when I had absolutely no interest in doing so. “So...?”

Esteban cast a longing look at his book, his fingers reflexively twitching as if he was fighting the urge to reach for it. “So...”

Back to silence.

“I should probably go.”

Esteban looked particularly enthused by that idea. At least until he remembered himself and schooled his face into a suitably sad expression. “We could chat more.”

“We could.”

And then we were back to staring at each other. Esteban reached out, pulling his book a little closer, but displaying extreme willpower by not opening it. I turned my head to stare at the nearest bookcase. I’d lived in this palace for twenty years, and I could honestly say I’d never laid a finger on any of its books. Why would I have when there’d been so many interesting places outside the palace to explore? When I returned my gaze to Esteban, the book was back in front of him, his fingers resting lightly on the top. I rose from the table. “I should go and talk to Jack about spending time with him. If I’m lucky, he won’t laugh in my face at the idea.”

“Yes!” Esteban smiled broadly. “Just be polite, and charming. Treat him like he’s precious. And if he says no, respect that, and give him some

space.”

Interesting! Esteban’s advice couldn’t have been further from the actual way I’d gone about wooing Jack. It made me wonder what might have happened had I treated him like that. I suspected Jack would have gotten bored and found himself someone more interesting to spend time with, but I guess I’d never know. “Thank you, I will.”

Esteban nodded, opening his book and poring over the words, my presence already forgotten. I let myself out of the library and went in search of Jack.



There was no getting around it; Jack was acting strangely. He’d been twitchy all the way through dinner and had displayed very little appetite for the veritable feast put in front of him, which wasn’t like him at all. Even Leofric’s attempts to converse with him had only elicited monosyllabic answers. Something was bothering him. I just couldn’t work out what it was.

As soon as dinner was over with, I made excuses for both of us. Ignoring the amused looks of Annabelle, who was enjoying her time in the palace far too much to have returned to the pirate ship yet, as well as the knowing looks of my own siblings, and the roll of Troy’s eyes, I dragged Jack back to the palace suite we shared, determined to get to the bottom of why he was so quiet.

Kissing him hadn’t worked, Jack seeming to go through the motions while his mind was elsewhere. Waiting for him to tell me what was wrong hadn’t worked. Asking him what was wrong hadn’t worked. Therefore, I was left with trying to guess what was on his mind as he stared moodily out

of the palace window while I lay on the bed, studying the back of his head for clues. “Do you want to go home?”

“Yes.”

Jack had answered without turning so I couldn't see the expression on his face. I sat up. Was it that simple? “Tomorrow?”

He turned with a frown. “No, not tomorrow. That would be rude. Your father has only just recovered, and I still need to convince Annabelle to come with us. Even if she returns to Ashton and doesn't stay, she owes Mum and Dad an explanation about why she left.”

“Yeah, good luck with that.”

Jack's glare was nothing short of venomous. “Thanks for the support.”

“I'm just being honest. I really can't see her going anywhere without Ashton, so it depends whether you think your parents are ready to be introduced to the pirate that their missing daughter has fallen in love with and intends to marry and have lots of little pirate babies with.”

The glare grew more pronounced. “You left out the bit about him trying to kill me.”

“You might have to let that go.”

Jack spun round and stalked toward the bed, his fingers curled into his palms. “Let it go! Are you serious? That's like me asking you to shake hands with Ulgan after he tried to strangle you.”

My fingers crept unwittingly to my neck, the ghost of the orc digits that had once been wrapped around it as easy to recall as ever. You just didn't forget being dangled in the air while someone threatened to remove all your fingers and toes, so perhaps Jack had a point. “Ulgan wasn't intent on marrying my sister.” I blanched at my own words. “What a horrific thought.

Why did you make me say that? It doesn't bear thinking about." Except I couldn't stop thinking about it. "Which one do you think he'd go for?"

Jack lowered himself to the end of the bed, answering without a moment's hesitation. "Lily."

I pulled a face. "Why Lily? Jasmin's the quiet one."

Jack snorted. "Right, and orcs love the quiet. You might not remember the end of that horrific thing that they called a party, but you must remember the beginning, with all the bellowing, and the stomping. Yeah, it would definitely be Lily. An orc wife would need to hold her own."

"I don't want to think of Lily holding anything of an orc's, thank you very much."

Jack's smile in response to what I'd said had me shuffling closer and brushing the corner of his mouth where his lips had quirked upward with my fingers. I'd missed that smile today, but I had a feeling it would disappear if I voiced that thought aloud. "Prince Esteban suggested I should spend some time alone with you."

Jack's smile grew wider. "So, he still has no clue that we're together?"

"Apparently not. I guess it's easy to remain oblivious when you always have your nose stuck in a book."

"And how did your meeting end?" There was a slight tension to Jack's shoulders as he asked the question. Surely, that wasn't what had been bothering him all day?

"With him professing his undying love for a man he's only met once, who can only stay visible for a short amount of time. I have no idea how he thinks that relationship is going to work."

"So... you're not engaged anymore?"

“I would say not.” Realizing how vague that sounded, and how open it was to misinterpretation, I reworded it. “No, I’m not. I’m all yours.” Expecting a smile, or a kiss, I was left confused as Jack got up and started to pace. “That was supposed to be good news. You look like someone’s just tied a millstone around your neck, with me being the millstone.”

“You could never be a millstone.”

Well, that was almost sweet. “But?”

Jack ran a hand through his hair, leaving it sticking up in tufts, which was quite honestly adorable. “I need to ask you something, but I don’t know how to say it.”

At least I was getting somewhere. “And this something... I’m guessing I’m not going to like it?”

Jack cast me a sideways glance. “No, I assume you will. That’s part of the problem.” He came to a sudden stop, his eyes narrowed. “I’m just not sure how you say something like that.”

“Just say it.”

Jack resumed his pacing. “I mean, I have thought about it. I’ve done little else ever since the subject came up, and it does make a lot of sense.” His brow furrowed. “At least, I think it does. Your mother has no issue with it. She made that very clear. And I assume she was speaking for your father too. Although maybe I shouldn’t assume that. Maybe I should have spoken to him first.” He let out a weary sigh. “Too late for that, I guess. It would make my family happy as well. At least, once they realize that I’ve forgiven you for the whole not telling me you’re a prince thing. Clara certainly wasn’t happy with you when I left Riverbrook. And then there’s the practicalities of it. I mean, I don’t know how it would work in terms of location. There’s no way I could do it without my family being there. My

mother would never speak to me again. But then, yours would need to be there as well.”

There were an awful lot of words coming from Jack, but unfortunately, very few of them that made sense, and nothing that got me any closer to working out what had gotten him so worked up. I swung my legs off the bed and strode over to him, gripping his shoulders to stop him pacing and forcing him to look at me. “Jack, what are you talking about?”

He rolled his eyes. “Marriage, of course.”

“Marriage!” I almost choked on the word. “Whose marriage?”

“Our marriage.” I suddenly had a finger in my face. “And don’t say we’re already married. Now is not the time.”

My heart was racing, and my palms had become incredibly sweaty. I took a moment to breathe, and to concentrate on finding the right words that wouldn’t have Jack backtracking. “Are you asking me to marry you?”

Jack’s eyes went wide. “I think so.”

As marriage proposals went, it wasn’t the most emphatic. “Well, if you were, the answer would be yes.”

“I know that.”

Right, of course he did. I’d never made any secret of my desire to be married to Jack. Properly married, that was, not just orc married. “So...?”

Jack continued to stare at me.

My fingers tightened on Jack’s shoulders. “You probably have to decide whether you’re asking me or not.”

“You’re definitely not engaged anymore?”

I shook my head. “Esteban is no doubt already packing for his trip home. Either that or reading a book.”

“You could ask me.”

Jack's look was so hopeful that I almost caved into it. "If I did, you'd probably say no."

"Probably."

Silence.

"Jack, ask me to marry you."

A pained expression settled on Jack's face. Anyone would have thought I'd asked him to walk the plank again. "Sebastian?"

"Yes?" I couldn't hold back the note of excitement that had crept into my voice.

"You're grinning like an idiot."

"I can't help it."

"Would you...?"

"Yes."

"You have to let me finish."

"Okay."

"Would you...?"

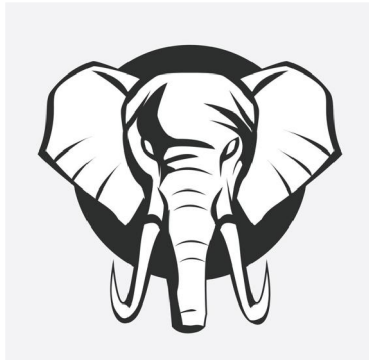
"Yes." At Jack's glare, I let go of his shoulders to hold my hands up in a defensive gesture. "Sorry. I'm just excited. I won't say a word until you've finished. I promise."

"Do you think you could stop bouncing up and down as well?"

"I don't think so." Jack muttered something under his breath, and I frowned. "What was that?"

Jack shot me his most innocent look. "Nothing." He clamped a hand over my mouth, the action serving to keep me still *and* to stop me from talking. "Sebastian...?" I made a muffled sound, but the hand over my mouth was too firmly placed for words to be possible. "Would you..." I made another muffled sound. "Marry me?"

It was only when I released a string of muffled sounds that Jack realized I couldn't answer unless he let go. As soon as my mouth was free, I kissed him. And then I said yes.



EPILOGUE

JACK

The reflection staring back at me in the full-length mirror wasn't someone I recognized, the hair too smooth, and the clothes too expensive. "Are you sure I don't look like an idiot?"

Annabelle gently turned me so that I was facing her rather than the mirror. "You look like a man who is about to get married and has dressed up for the occasion rather than turning up to his wedding shirtless and with straw in his hair."

Something lurched in my stomach at the word "wedding," and I fought the urge to hyperventilate. "Sebastian likes me shirtless and with straw in my hair." I didn't add that he was usually the one responsible for me being in that state. Sebastian never had gotten his head around the idea that tasks actually needed to be done on a farm. But then, I always caved to his attentions, so perhaps I was equally to blame for that.

Annabelle's lips twitched. "I bet, but it's hardly appropriate for a wedding."

"Can you please stop using that word."

She frowned. "What word?"

“Wedding.”

She smoothed a hand over the lapel of my coat, ridding it of a speck of dirt which either had never existed in the first place, or was so tiny that I couldn't see it. “Oh, so we're pretending that there aren't hundreds of people out there, are we?”

“Hundreds!” I searched her face for signs that she was making a joke, my stomach giving another lurch when I failed to find any.

She stared resolutely back. “Jack, it's a royal wedding. You're marrying a prince, in case you've forgotten. You didn't think it was just going to be you and Sebastian, did you?”

I wasn't sure I'd thought about it at all. It had only been a month since I'd proposed to Sebastian, and everything had been a complete whirlwind since then, the organization of the actual day taken off our hands. At the time, I'd been grateful. Now, I was realizing that it left me wholly unprepared for what lay ahead. I forced myself to breathe slowly. “Why did Sebastian have to be a prince? Why couldn't he have been a...?”

“Pirate?” Annabelle suggested. “Be careful what you wish for. That comes with its own set of problems.”

I sighed. I guessed she was right. Wedding preparations had included my family being brought over from Riverbrook, with Silverwood organizing someone to look after both farms so that no one had to stay behind. They'd reached Silverwood a week ago, coinciding with Annabelle's return from spending time with Ashton. At first, the reunion had been everything you could have wished for. Once that initial rush of relief had died down, though, and my parents had started asking questions, it had been rather more fraught, my mum's reaction to finding out that her daughter was consorting with a pirate going down about as well as you would have

expected. They hadn't met him yet, but given Ashton's rather dubious social charms, I wasn't sure meeting him was going to change their minds about him. And that was without me having opened my mouth and mentioned a certain plank-walking event.

As if summoned by my thoughts, the door opened to admit my parents, my mum rushing straight to my side. She grabbed hold of my shoulders, and turned me first one way, and then the other. "Oh, Jack, look at you. You look—"

"Like someone playing at dress up," I suggested drolly.

"Not at all."

A tear had gathered at the corner of my mum's eye, sending a surge of panic through me. "Please don't cry."

She dashed a hand across her face, my father resting a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "I won't. It's just all rather emotional. I never thought I would see the day."

"Me neither." I surveyed my family all gathered around me in their finery. I'd never seen them look like that before, most of them seeming no more comfortable with it than I was. Dillon's hand was jammed down his shirt collar, presumably in an attempt to prevent against being slowly strangled, and my father couldn't have looked more uncomfortable if someone had shoved a pineapple down his trousers. I returned to the mirror and stared moodily into it.

Annabelle appeared at my shoulder, her voice low enough that it wouldn't carry to the rest of my family. "It's one day, Jack. Make your handsome fiancé happy, and then before you know it, you'll be on a ship back to Riverbrook, and you can leave all this behind except for the occasional visit."

I held her gaze in the reflection. “That sounds lovely. It would be even lovelier if you came back with us.”

She pulled a face. “You know I can’t. Can you see Ashton chasing chickens around the farmyard?”

“I once thought that about Sebastian. He managed to find a way to make it work.”

“Well, perhaps Sebastian loves you more than Ashton loves me.”

If it hadn’t been for the glint in her eye, I might have thought she was serious. Before I could give any sort of response, a palace employee appeared in the doorway. “Your transport awaits.”

Another lurch from my stomach had me feeling like there was a distinct possibility I might be sick. What if this was a huge mistake? That question refused to go away as we made our way along the many corridors to reach the front of the palace. The huge carriage that sat outside was expected. What wasn’t expected was the elephant with an ornate seat on its back.

Dillon stopped dead. “Is that a...?”

I stalked toward it, positioning myself where the elephant could see me. “Yes, it’s an elephant.” I narrowed my eyes at it. “What’s this sudden obsession you have with making elephants? Bigger is not always better, Sebastian.”

“It helps, though,” muttered Annabelle as she passed me on her way to climb into the carriage. I did my best to ignore her comment. Today, of all days, I didn’t want to be pondering Ashton Otto’s physical attributes. Actually, there was no day I wanted to be doing that if I could help it. I focused back on the elephant. “I suppose you’ll deny that this is your way of making sure I actually get there?”

The elephant was silent. I lay a hand between its eyes, the skin surprisingly soft. “You think I’d leave you standing at the altar? Is there an altar? I should have asked these questions before, shouldn’t I? I wish we were getting married in Riverbrook, but I guess that was never going to be possible.”

There was a scamper of tiny feet across the ground, Coconut’s leap taking him right onto my shoulder. Sebastian still rolled his eyes at the name, no matter how many times I pointed out that the monkey did look rather like a coconut when it was curled up sleeping. Anyway, the name had stuck. At the monkey’s presence, the elephant reacted as if it had been stung, rearing back, and lifting its trunk in an indignant trumpet.

I rolled my eyes. “Of course, he’s attending the wedding. You seem to have forgotten that if it wasn’t for Coconut, we wouldn’t even be together. I’d still be sitting in the tavern in Riverbrook, sizing up any stranger between the age of twenty and sixty as to whether he might swing my way, and you...” I stopped to exhale noisily. “Well, who knows what you’d be doing.” I glanced toward the carriage, but all the doors were shut, my family respecting my right to have an in-depth conversation with an elephant. “Or should I say *who* you would be doing.” The elephant gave a little toss of its head and I grinned.

“Do I actually have to ride this thing?”

In response, the elephant gradually lowered itself to the ground until it was kneeling. Once I’d climbed onto its back and was holding onto the handle of the seat, it stood once more, my stomach lurching for quite a different reason, Coconut chattering furiously in my ear as if he too wasn’t quite sure why we needed to be so high up. “Yes, I know... I agree that a

horse would have been far better. I would have even preferred a unicorn, but it's Sebastian, so we're just going to have to put up with it."

The carriage set off with the elephant following. It was surprisingly comfortable once you got used to the way it moved and rolled with it rather than against it. Even Coconut quietened down, the monkey seeming more interested in the passing scenery. And I had to say I was glad of the company. It went some way to settling my nerves. It proved a relatively short journey, which was either a blessing or a curse. I couldn't quite decide which.

And then we arrived at the outdoor chapel, its elaborate décor with garlands of flowers festooning every surface, and the sea of people awaiting my arrival bringing the nerves back tenfold. And there was an altar, but it was so far away. Was I really supposed to walk past all these people to get there? How? This was definitely a mistake. I had no idea how I'd ever thought this was something I could do.

I half slid, half staggered off the elephant, the elephant ceasing to be as soon as my feet touched the ground. Even Coconut abandoned me, the traitorous monkey disappearing off my shoulder to scamper after Annabelle. That left me standing there, all alone, my heart beating so hard in my chest that I wouldn't have been surprised if it burst free.

And then Sebastian was there in front of me, his coat the perfect foil to mine, and his hair as perfectly coiffed and as shiny as I'd ever seen it. In short, the handsomest man I'd ever set eyes on. He smiled as he held out a hand to me.

I jerked my head toward the distant altar. "Aren't you meant to be waiting down there?"

“I wasn’t sure you’d ever get there on your own. I thought you might appreciate the escort.”

He wagged his fingers, and I took the hint and placed my hand in his, the skin reassuringly warm. “There’s a lot of people here.”

He turned me to face him, his blue gaze trapping and holding mine. “Don’t look at them. It’s just me and you. It’s always me and you.”

Warmth spread through my chest because he was right. The other people didn’t matter. All that mattered was that I was marrying the man I loved. The feeling of rightness grew, eradicating all the nervousness. I could do this. With Sebastian at my side, I could do anything, had already accomplished feats that seemed impossible. And this wasn’t escaping a ravenous griffin, or besting an underhanded troll, this was just a wedding. Just standing there and saying a few vows.

Sebastian tugged on my hand, and we began to make our way toward the altar. We’d barely gone ten steps before Sebastian broke into a run. I laughed. “Why are we running?”

“To get there quicker. I need the wedding done so we can get to the wedding night.”

That sounded perfect to me. “It’s strange to run when nothing is chasing us.”

“Don’t tempt fate.”

He raised a good point, a point that had me glancing up at the sky in expectation of a dragon swooping down to bathe us in its fiery breath, but there was nothing but beautiful blue sky, barely even a cloud in it. We were both out of breath by the time we reached the altar, the priest looking rather taken aback by the manner of our arrival and taking some time to regain his composure.

Sebastian never let go of my hand as we exchanged vows, the ceremony passing in something of a blur. Every time nerves started to kick in, I concentrated on him, those blue eyes holding mine and reminding me that no one else mattered.

After the ceremony came the party, a flurry of people all congratulating us one after the other. I was surprised at some of the guests. Princess Surander was in attendance with her extremely handsome new husband. Her mother and father, the king and queen of Osagezia, were there too, her father telling everyone who cared to listen that he'd always known who Sebastian really was and had kept the secret for Sebastian's sake. Prince Esteban had made the return journey to Silverwood, presumably to share the news that he was responsible for getting the two of us together, seeing as that was what he was telling everyone. So far, no one had put him straight, but it was probably only a matter of time.

Sebastian's mother and father were the perfect hosts. My family fitted in as well as they could. Although, Dillon was often to be found with his mouth hanging open at different things, whether it be the décor, food, or one of the guests. There was no Bartholomew Rohan—obviously—but Magdalena was the king's special guest, seated on his right-hand side for most of the day, a position she seemed to revel in. Leofric expressed loudly in front of Sebastian that I'd made a future relationship between the two of us more complicated, and we would have to have an affair now, Sebastian just rolling his eyes. And Ansel got rather drunk and talked even more than he usually did.

There was a mysterious man who spent most of the day fiddling with his moustache in a way that said he wasn't used to having one, many of the guests speculating about his identity, and pondering how Annabelle might

have met him, given that she barely left his side. Earl made a short appearance, causing Prince Esteban to turn a bright scarlet color and almost trip over his own feet. The royal family had also traveled from Arrowgarde to be there, but there was no sign of Prince Montgomery, thankfully.

By the time two hours had passed, I was tired of shaking hands, saying thank you, and smiling. Therefore, I offered absolutely no resistance when I found myself thrown over Sebastian's shoulder and spirited away, happy just to hang there and admire the muscular globes of Sebastian's ass as he walked, his wedding trousers predictably tight. The chapel gave way to trees, and the buzz of people talking, to the sound of birds.

Another five minutes passed before Sebastian lowered me gently to the ground, my back against a tree. He moved in close, his hands cupping my cheeks. "Hello, husband."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him not to call me that. Except, this hadn't been an orc ceremony. This had been a proper ceremony that we could both remember, carried out in front of hundreds of witnesses, including both of our families. He was my husband, and I was his. Therefore, all I managed was a grunt, Sebastian smiling broadly at my lack of argument.

"How are you doing, farm boy?" asked Sebastian.

I tipped my head to the side, and I thought about it. "Well, I just married a prince in some elaborate and over the top ceremony where I was the center of attention, so I'm wondering who I am right now."

Sebastian's fingers stroked along the line of my jaw. "You're Jack Shaw. The bravest man I know. The most handsome man I know. You're the man who stole my heart with one glance. You're..."

I laid my finger over his lips. “You love me, I know, which makes you very biased. I love you too. And if you ever needed proof, this afternoon was it. I would never have suffered that for anyone else but you.”

We kissed for a long time, the shadows starting to grow long by the time we managed to separate. I stroked Sebastian’s hair, holding him close, the warmth of his body combatting the effects of the temperature starting to drop. “What happens when we get back to Riverbrook?”

Sebastian dropped a kiss on my forehead. “We live. We’re happy. We carry on as before. Only this time, my family can visit whenever they want.”

I closed my eyes and basked in the warmth of everything. The future sounded good, and more importantly, it sounded relaxing.

“And of course, if anyone needs our help, they’ll know where to find us.”

I opened my eyes again. “Sebastian!”

He frowned at the note of warning in my voice. “What?”

“That makes it sound like you’d be quite happy to tear off at a moment’s notice as long as they have a decent amount of coin to offer for your services.”

A slow smile spread across Sebastian’s face, the glint in his eye speaking volumes. “I’m married, Jack. I’m not dead. But...” He paused dramatically. “I’m not going anywhere without you, so you’ll always have the final say.”

Would I? I’d believe that when I saw it, but there was no point in arguing about it tonight. I had different plans for Sebastian. I pulled him closer, my hands drifting down to that rather nicely proportioned ass of his. “Where’s that wedding night you promised me?”

Sebastian waved his fingers, a black stallion appearing next to us.

“No elephant?”

“Horses are faster.”

All I could do was laugh as he bundled us both onto it, and we took off at a dangerous pace, zigzagging through the trees to return to Silverwood. One thing was for sure, whatever my future might hold, it wouldn't be boring.

Far from it.

The End

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