

Iridium

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Iridium

by [Libellule11](#)

Summary

The Lyon Regime expands slowly inflicting their tyranny across a country crippled by a totalitarian monarchy. Mollie is a pawn within a fight for power and a fight for freedom. But when she falls into the world of the Lyon family and into the awaiting hands of young prince Micah Lyon, she soon realizes that lions don't hunt in solitude, they hunt as a pride.

Blog: <https://thelyonchronicles.tumblr.com/>

Chapter 1: Hydrogène

There was something off about the weather that Thursday morning.

The usual grey skies carried with it a more foreboding chill and the cobbled sidewalks of quaint and isolated Chartery seemed ever more narrow and ominous, the slick dampened streets twisting and turning like a metastasized tumour at peak angiogenesis. November was fast approaching, and disgruntled misanthropic commuters lined up along the decrepit underground railway, clutching their bags to their chests and keeping their eyes glued to the peeling legend haphazardly strewn across the ceiling of each interior tube.

To any regular commuter aboard the tube at that hour, nothing would have seemed particularly out of place.

But if one were to look closer, to glance backwards even for a fraction of a second longer than they usually would, they would have noticed the young lanky brunette at the back of the tube, her thin legs curled up on the peeling leather seat as she stared forebodingly out the dark grimy window.

But one does not indulge in such scrutiny in the midst of early November. After all, there is too much else to re-consider and re-evaluate in one's own reclusive life.

The tube came to a sharp jolt sending Mollie Mayeson careening into the dusty seats in front of her. The girl lurched forward in surprise clutching the cold rails of the seat handles to keep herself balanced. Thankfully, the compartment had cleared significantly at this point in time and her sole witness stood against the window adjacent to her seat, his face shrouded by the town's local newspaper, *The Chartery Free Press*. Mollie could see only the top of a thick black bowler hat behind the newspaper along with clean cut pinstriped trousers. He was rather short in stature, then again at five foot ten, most people were short in comparison to her. He didn't even spare her a glance as she dusted herself off and grabbed her tan brown rucksack before stepping out of the dusty humid compartment.

The dingy apartment Mollie shared with her mother in the North end of town came into view as she trudged her way up the narrow street towards her apartment. The landing was complete with a rickety staircase and an out of use fire extinguisher, the broken glass pieces dusted to the corner of the yellowing wall of the landing, out of place and out of mind.

When Mollie entered her small apartment her nose was assaulted with the pungent scent of lit cigarettes and lingering lavender. It had seemed someone had attempted to mask the smell with a cheap scented lavender candle, a poor attempt really. A low sensual moan came from the room across from Mollie's, followed by a series of gasps and heavy panting. Mollie narrowed her pale brown eyes and loudly placed her bag onto the chipped wooden counter that served dual purposes as a food prep and dining table.

Mollie couldn't care if they had heard her or not, she was exhausted and irritable after her commute from the bakery back home. The sounds muted for only a moment before hasty shuffling and the sharp sound of a zipper could be heard. Mollie rolled her eyes. This wasn't

anything new for the girl. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew Mollie's mother was a whore. Mollie just hoped that tonight would be one of those nights that she wouldn't have to be witness to another one of her mother's spectacles.

As Mollie poured herself a cool glass of water she noticed the television was on and muted as the late news channel droned on. Mollie glanced upward at the television where a big bolded headline read "LYON MONARCHY ACQUIRES OWNERSHIP OVER AUTO INDUSTRY."

Mollie couldn't stand the monarchy. And why shouldn't she? The monarchy had unprecedented control and influence over not only political affairs across the country but with various governments in neighbouring vicinities. Each with the same intention to maximize their profits at the expense of the working class. Mollie watched the screen in grim silence as Sir Hartley Lyon stood on stage alongside his three sons and the royal palace guard. It was always such an ostentatious display when Hartley held events. The most expensive food, clothes, dining. Money that could be allocated to much more productive avenues in Mollie's opinion.

Of course there was the odd protest here and there but nothing much ever came of them or of the participants. Some presumed they were paid off by the Lyons and higher government officials to stay quiet, others suggested that members were locked away in a bunker, and some even suggested they were secretly executed. Nonetheless, protest participation was a dangerous involvement and Mollie had no intention of associating with them.

She was allowed to internally despise the monarchy with no consequences...as long as she kept her true feelings confidential.

She watched as the camera panned over Hartley as he stood tall and ever so distinguished on an elaborate platform at the heart of the city's affluent neighbourhood along the southern border. He wore a crisp slate grey suit tailored to his lean and tall figure. His hair was fawn coloured but peppered with a speckle of grey and neatly styled in a loose side parted wave. Mollie had always thought he seemed very young, almost too young to have 3 adult sons. He couldn't be over fifty. When questioned about his age at press events, he always laughed off the question and managed to expertly avert giving a definitive answer. That was a skill in of itself.

Mollie watched him now as he stood on the stage and zeroed in on his eyes. They were dark, they seemed almost black on the television and something about them sent a chill down Mollie's spine. Although he wore an award winning smile, his smile didn't quite reach his eyes and seemed plastered and rehearsed, much like this entire ceremony.

His sons stood parallel to him on the stage in a line, each dressed in dark tailored suits and each slightly taller than their father who stood at a cool 6'2".

It was hard to avoid hearing about the Lyon sons in the city. They were the talk of the monarchy within the media and their photos, although always reviewed by the monarchy itself prior to public release, were plastered everywhere from large banners downtown, to the walls of young fantasy-indulged girls. It was almost cult-like how people followed them and Mollie couldn't quite understand the obsession.

The photos were primarily of Hartley Lyon's older two sons, James and Rowan. James was 32 and in a fit position to take over the royal duties of his father when he passed. Mollie doubted that would ever happen as Hartley didn't look much older than his eldest and seemed to thrive in the public eye both as a royal and as an entrepreneur.

James showed a stark resemblance to his father with thick chestnut locks neatly combed into a side part and angular features reminiscent of Hartley. There was no mistaking him for anyone other than a Lyon. His eyes however were light brown and his nose thinner and more defined. His physique and charming looks made him almost as popular as his father around town. He wore a lazy crooked smile on his face that gave him a slightly cynical appearance. Although his physical features allowed him a certain degree of popularity amongst the general public, he didn't quite have the same warm reception shown to him at most events like his father did.

The second one was the skinniest and slightly shorter than his monstrosity of a brother. He stood directly between James and his father. His dark hair seemed shinier and he wore thin glasses over his slender nose. He too had physically appealing features like his father and brothers but with a more regal aspect to it. He was an academic and spent most of his time within the palace indulging in research and "novel innovations" as his father put it. He shared the same light brown eyes as his elder brother and stood tall on the stage, his face apprehensive.

When Mollie turned her eyes to the last brother she felt her insides churn. He certainly had a reputation.

Micah Lyon stood at the end of the stage his hands stiffly in his blazer pocket and an annoyed expression on his face. He had a more boyish look than his brothers and a pale complexion that contrasted sharply with his siblings, who all inherited a more sunkissed complexion. To compliment his pale skin were waves of loose dark caramel coloured brown hair with streaks of gold that fell across his smooth forehead. His nose was straight and sculpted and complimented by pink bow lips framed by deep dimples and sharp features. If it weren't for the height and sculpted nose, Mollie would never have assumed he was a Lyon. But the most defining feature of the youngest Lyon were his eyes. He was staring a little past the camera at something in the distance, a frown still etched on his face but his eyes were light, pale, almost translucent in the camera and Mollie couldn't quite tell if they were icy blue or light green.

The youngest Lyon was far from active within the media unlike his older two brothers and Mollie wondered whether that was a personal choice or not. He always seemed irritated or unsatisfied at these events, the odd time he did appear, and his father remained tight lipped about him. In fact, Mollie was surprised Micah Lyon was in attendance and figured the event must have been grand to have demanded his presence.

The camera zoomed back to Hartley where he began speaking into the microphone positioned on the podium. Mollie could practically hear his voice through the muted television as he spoke at the event. In fact she couldn't forget it. He had one of those deep baritone voices that radiated professionalism and authority. It was an apt trait considering his position of power.

The door opened with a creak and her mother appeared before her in the dim lighting carefully tying the thin robe she had carelessly thrown over herself only moments before.

Mollie could practically smell the stench of sex that emanated around them from the kitchen and she glued her eyes to the table unpacking the goods she had brought back from work earlier that day.

The man behind her mother was shrouded in the darkness of her apartment but from a quick glance out of her peripheral vision Mollie noted that he was tall. Very tall, well over 6 feet and muscular. He was an absolute unit. He swiftly left without a second glance throwing a thick stack of wads onto the same table in front of Mollie, once again washing her in the scent of their love.

Mollie had also caught the swift scent of something more earthy. *Patchouli*, Mollie thought bitterly. She had smelled that scent before, by snooty affluent customers at the bakery she owned.

Being surrounded in a baker's environment since she was three, Mollie had a heightened and profound sense of smell. As a toddler she would spend a great deal of time opening spices within the kitchens in the back rooms sniffing her way through cinnamons, nutmegs, and cardamom as she waited for her grandparents to finish with their clients.

Life had seemed so easy back then.

Her mother stood wordlessly near the door, the thin gown doing little to hide her plump breasts and exposed legs. Her mother was a tiny fragile black woman with thick dark ringlets that framed her diamond shaped face. She was pretty, very pretty, which is part of the reason she was able to continue doing what she did for extra cash now and again despite her age.

These men preferred the young ones, but her mother had a way with men, she could convince even the most stubborn man that a night spent with her would surpass even their wildest dreams.

Mollie had left it at that, she didn't need to know the details.

After the unknown visitor had left, her mother scuttled to her side in a huff flipping through the cash on the table, swiping the bills one by one in a hurry between her sweaty swarthy fingers.

"This is enough to pay for the lighting and water for the next two months!" her mother said excitedly her dark eyes sparkling with delight.

Mollie stared back at her mother wordlessly as she scuttled to the back window of their apartment and stuffed the money inside the window seat chaise.

"We would have had enough regardless," Mollie said tonelessly her fingers leaving imprints in the fresh bread she had brought back with her for dinner. Mollie heard the sharp exhale from her mother and grimaced internally. She shouldn't have voiced her thoughts.

"Don't be ungrateful Mollie Mayeson."

The fluctuation in her mother's tone always tensed Mollie and she knew she was walking on eggshells when that tone seeped into her mother's voice.

"I birthed and breastfed you into this world. Don't you forget that." Mollie could see her mother shaking near the window. Her mother's figure trembling as she turned her gaze onto her daughter.

Fuck.

"I'm sorry Mum," Mollie said quietly.

"I-"

"I appreciate everything you do for me."

Her mother suddenly stopped trembling and a familiar look of blankness crossed her face. Her eyes turned glassy and Mollie knew in these moments, that her mother was no longer with her in the present. She was far away in the own recesses of her mind, a lost figure amongst her colourful and chaotic past life.

Mollie found it best to let her be in these moments as she finished plating their modest dinner.

"You look like him you know," her mother said quietly prompting a sharp glance from the girl at the table.

This was new.

Her mother never mentioned her father. *Ever*. And god forbid Mollie ever ask her mother to talk about him. Mollie had done that only once before as a child and the events that followed prevented her from ever repeating that mistake.

All Mollie had to go off on, was that he was white, and this too Mollie deduced by herself. Mollie had a deeply bronzed complexion, a caramel tone with a light spray of freckles across her round face. Her eyes were a pale brown and her lashes and eyebrows naturally thick in nature. Her hair was a deep chestnut brown and wavy, a stark contrast to her mother's tight black ringlets but with the same thickness and texture.

Mollie knew her mother was ill, mentally and physically, but not only were the treatment fees too expensive, her mother was a stubborn woman. She refused to address any one of her myriad of problems. Mollie could only do so much for her.

Mollie remained quiet, letting her mother drown in her troubled and turbulent thoughts.

"He was tall like you," she mused. Her knees knocking against one another slightly.

If the situation hadn't been so grim Mollie may have found her mother's stance highly comical. But the look in her mother's eyes and the desperation in her tone made her stomach flop and her skin grow cold.

"And with those same eyes. Those pale brown orbs."

Her mother lurched forward suddenly grabbing the ashtray full of used cigarettes and flinging it to the ground in one rapid movement.

Mollie flinched at the sound of the crystal shattering but released a silent sigh of relief when she saw the light return to her mother's eyes. Almost instantaneously, her mother slid gracefully into the stool across from her daughter in one fluid motion and proceeded to pull the ragged tattered sleeves of her gown up towards her elbows .

Her mother picked up some bread and a butter knife in her slender fingers and gave Mollie a tender smile.

“How was your day at work sweetheart?”

Chapter 2: Hélium

Chapter Summary

Mollie's life of solitude may be coming to an end but will it be for the worse or for the better?

It was unusually busy at the bakery that day.

Mollie had been given double orders on almost everything and she was struggling with the orders. She had barely slept that night after her mother had relapsed into a particularly bad episode. As usual, Mollie was left to deal with her issues.

Mollie wiped her brow as she continued icing the hundredth cupcake of that morning.

“Those are the vanilla bottoms Mollie,” a sharp voice echoed as Mollie jumped in surprise. She looked up into the bright blue eyes of her co-worker and grimaced. Phoebe was nice... nosey, but nice. She was good at what she did and that was more than enough for Mollie. As long as this bakery kept running efficiently and earning money, Mollie could deal with the external uncontrolled variables.

“Rough night?”

Mollie rolled her eyes. “Something like that.”

Mollie applied more pressure to her icing packet and carefully outlined the edges of the vanilla bean cupcakes. The clients had initially asked for 200 and just this morning decided to change their demands to 400. It had caught Mollie and the rest of her staff completely by surprise but she couldn't lose these clients. Not only did they pre-pay, but they requested her bakery especially.

“Who are these clients anyway?” Mollie muttered. She hadn't had a chance to review the names on the order. Her stray curls had fallen out of her messy sock bun to trail around her chin and she was constantly flicking her hair back to keep them at bay.

Phoebe stared at her incredulously as more customers filed into the bakery. Phoebe giggled as she packed up banana bread for the clients at the counter.

“Oh Mollie you can be so clueless sometimes.”

Mollie finished the last cupcake and placed it on the ornate dessert tray on the counter. She had been icing since 4 that morning and her knuckles were exhausted and her knees weak.

“If you're not going to tell me Phoebe, then drop the subject.”

She flicked her stray hair back one last time with her forearm and with a huff realized she had scraped her cheek with powdered sugar.

Mollie heard Phoebe snort as she took the rest of the cupcakes to the back for packaging. Mollie shook her head as she turned her attention to the next customer.

Mollie glanced up to the till and with a jolt, realized the bakery was completely empty except for one lone figure staring at the picture on the adjacent wall. It was a picture of her grandparents the day the bakery opened 32 years ago. The figure had its back to her but upon closer inspection she realized it was a man in a long tan trenchcoat. He was tall and bulky and his hands were casually in his pockets as he regarded the photo closely.

Mollie felt deeply uneasy at his presence especially since he was the only one standing in the bakery at this moment. It was just her and Phoebe till noon until they were relieved by their evening staff later that day.

“Can I help you?” Mollie asked loudly enough to catch his attention but with enough courtesy to remain colloquial.

He turned around slowly and when Mollie realized who he was she felt her stomach drop to the floor.

He wore navy and silver, the official colours of the royal guard and he stood straight and alert before her. He didn’t look much older than she but the stern expression on his face exuded maturity.

He kept a stern frown on his face and didn’t smile when Mollie’s eyes met his. Not that she expected him to. She averted her gaze quickly.

“May I speak to the owner?”

His voice was rough and hoarse and Mollie was wary of him instantly.

“I am the owner.”

Mollie had said that with more force than she intended and she noticed his jaw flex and his eyes narrow ever so slightly. She cringed. She could get herself publicly punished if she wasn’t complicit.

“Good.” His eyes flickered to the wall behind her briefly before he continued.

“Take a look at these closely. And pay heed to the due date.”

Mollie opened her mouth to reply but in seconds he had dropped a thick file onto the counter and sauntered out of the bakery, his coat billowing behind him.

Mollie froze when she saw the intricate seal engraved in the middle of the package. Could it be?

“Who was that?”

Mollie glanced behind her to see Phoebe poking her nose from the back room.

Before the girl could respond Phoebe had already pushed her way to the front and gasped when she saw the file.

“Mollie! That’s a royal invitation!”

Mollie took a deep breath and stared at the fancy file. The outline of a silver lion on the seal of the scroll gleamed sharply in the setting sunlight and Mollie hated how ridiculously intricate and conceited it was. Phoebe had begun to chatter excitedly about what this could mean for the future of the bakery but Mollie was hesitant.

“What’s up with you?” Phoebe had interjected suddenly pulling Mollie from her thoughts. “Are you not going to open it?”

Mollie rolled her eyes at her colleague for the second time. “Mind your business Phoebe.”

Phoebe put her hands on her hips and faced Mollie head on. The girl had no filter.

“This is my business. I’m your primary baker which pretty much makes me your second in command.”

Mollie laughed at that. “Self-appointed second in command.”

Phoebe shrugged and picked up the file again in awe.

“Why would they send this to us though?” Phoebe thought out loud to herself. “I mean there’s like a dozen other bakeries across the city.”

Mollie felt goose bumps prickle against her skin as she stared at the engraving on the file. Even if she didn’t want any association with the royals, it wasn’t up for negotiation. An engraved seal by the Lyon’s was not an invitation. It was conscription and Mollie didn’t like it one bit.

Mollie had done a good job of hiding the invitation from her mother as she continued her routine of commuting to the bakery and commuting home after a long day spent in the kitchen. If there was anyone who despised the monarchy more than her it was her mother.

Mollie found it was best to keep her mother at home due to her mother’s highly erratic nature. Anything could come out of her mouth and Mollie couldn’t risk losing her mother to the authorities or witness her mother go through another public punishment. Mollie was tired of nursing her wounds, both her physical and emotional ones.

These days, even the smallest grievance was enough to trigger her mother and Mollie simply didn’t have the time to console her and manage her work.

To make matters worse, she couldn’t let anyone know about the profound mental deterioration her mother was suffering. They would send her straight to the looney bin and

Mollie would most likely never see her again. In fact...Mollie *would* never see her again. At the back of her mind, Mollie would often think *that wouldn't be such a bad idea*. But she quickly let those thoughts evaporate from her mind and shuddered at the prospect of considering such a thing.

The file had requested her baked goods at the Lyon's Questershire Manor which was a good few days commute from Chartery. Mollie didn't generally cater for big events, but had to figure something out and soon. She would be gone for 2 weeks and paid a handsome sum of money with lodgings and basic expenses covered. It was a tempting offer but Mollie knew nothing good ever came from close associations with the monarchy. Every other local company that had worked for them or even associated with them in some way shape or form either suffered a hostile takeover, a white knight, or were monopolized by the Lyon family.

She had to keep her safe distance, get this stint over with and return home as soon as possible.

She had a due date to abide by and as the date loomed closer Mollie began to panic. She had no idea how she was going to hide this from her mother and Mollie feared her mother's reaction immensely. Her panic had even seeped into her work and she was forced to stay extra time to redo a dozen macarons after leaving them in the oven for too long.

Mollie had grudgingly agreed to take Phoebe with her after Phoebe's persistent questions and requests and her colleague was elated. Although the invitation had requested for Mollie alone, she figured bringing her primary baker wouldn't be too much of a problem, especially if they expected her to bake for hundreds of guests.

The night before the trip Mollie was at the bakery instructing her other colleagues on their schedules while her and Phoebe were away.

As the day came to a close Mollie hung up her apron and let her curls loose from the sock bun she usually sported during the day. She had let her grow long mainly due to lack of maintenance but she didn't care.

Phoebe came around the corner after hanging her own apron up and tied back her strawberry blond hair in one fluid motion. Mollie used to tease her that she looked like a dessert when they first started out and that she was meant to work at a bakery. Her intuition was certainly right, Phoebe was an expert at her job and without her bubbly coworker, their customers wouldn't be flowing in like they do.

"So have you thought about what you're going to tell your Mum?"

Mollie grimaced and Phoebe started at her in shock. "You still haven't told her?"

Mollie sighed in exasperation swiping a hand through her dark curls. Phoebe knew her mother was....difficult, but not the true extent of her madness. She didn't like people knowing her business. It was bad enough that her mother had a reputation of sleeping around. She didn't need to add mentally unstable to the mix.

"I'll tell her tonight." Mollie said wanly eliciting a sharp exhale from Phoebe.

“That woman is something else.” Phoebe muttered picking up her bag prompting a warning glare from Mollie. Phoebe knew when to not overstep her boundaries with Mollie, but she was also the only one who could get away with pushing her to her limits without any consequences.

“Last sleep before our adventure,” Phoebe said with a wink before pushing open the door of the bakery and sauntering into the night. Mollie stared after her in silence, a dark foreboding feeling coming over her.

Chapter 3: Lithium

Chapter Summary

Mollie's dreadful day finally arrives and things naturally take a turn for the worst.

Mollie had managed to convince her mother that she was taking a 2 week break to help Phoebe nurse her sick father in Aldurough a good 16 hours from Chartery. This was plenty of distance to placate her mother and liberate her corrupt mind from any suspicion, although her mother seemed strangely paranoid these past few days but Mollie had done her best to keep her subdued.

Mollie had hoped to travel to Aldurough one day with her mother and escape through one of the fjords into the mountains, away from the Lyon regime, away from society, and most importantly away from the constant threat of punishment and retribution. She was close, she was almost there. A year or two more of keeping her head down and running her bakery and she'd have enough to leave and sustain the two of them on their road to freedom. Mollie was *so* close.

Like all days filled with dreadful anticipation (which were most for Mollie), this one had finally arrived and her day had begun miserably. The royals were all about fickle personas which included high fashion and a face full of makeup for the women.

Mollie had nothing that was currently in fashion and the few cosmetic products she owned (and were permitted to buy) were dusty and crumbling. To top things off, her hair was uncooperative and frizzing in the humid moist air so Mollie had resorted to a classic high bun and a slick of peach gloss for her lips. She opted for a pale pink chunky sweater that resembled a kind of dress and tied a neat belted bow to her front the way the fashionable women did. It was a feeble attempt, but it was better than nothing.

Her mother had destroyed all the mirrors in the house in a previous fit of rage and Mollie hadn't had the chance to replace them. She hoped for the best and with a small travel bag, she left her dingy apartment and her mother behind her. Mollie fished in her pocket for her status card and her bakery license and made sure she had easy access to both. Her status card was like all the others in her area albeit a few minor differences.

Status: Primary

Surname: Mayeson

Birth: Riverton

Race: -

Well, her status card was *almost* the same as everyone else's. Her race was ambiguous and, thankfully, that was about the only thing the authorities questioned her about. Apart from that she was just like all the other primary ascribed citizens: commoners born into poverty attempting to work their way up the status ladder. Like an mRNA strand transitioning to a tRNA, statuses were based off a similar mentality with quaternary status the highest one could achieve, and primary the most primitive. It was foolish to think one could work their way up to quaternary status, especially when they were born into primary status, no matter what Hartley Lyon exhorted and falsely envisaged about economic and social mobility at his many elaborate events. Mollie stuffed her card back into her pocket and made the arduous journey to the station.

When Mollie finally arrived she nearly walked right past her friend and would not have recognized her had it not been for her fierce bright hair.

Phoebe had done herself up elaborately and could certainly pass for a woman within the elite circle of individuals that paraded with the Lyons. Phoebe had insisted Mollie looked great but she doubted it.

They caught many nervous stares as they were paraded through the crowds of downtown Charterly mainly due to their overt entourage navigating them through the throngs of people, as well as the fact that this was a largely Primary status area. The only time royal guards made a spectacle here was for a public punishment. Mollie had never been outside Charterly let alone on a train and she couldn't quite discern whether her nervousness or excitement would predominate as they neared their transportation. Phoebe kept shooting her nervous smiles as they boarded the long and luxurious vehicle complete with a first class, middle class, and back room cabin. Mollie made an immediate beeline for the low class cabin before Phoebe pulled her arm sharply.

"Mollie," she whispered sharply shooting her a stern look. "We're in the company of a Royal guard."

Mollie stared at her. "So?"

Phoebe seemed awfully put out and turned her gaze toward the strict formal royal guard who had a similar expression on his face.

"It means we're not sitting with the commoners." Phoebe smiled politely at the guard who shook his head in annoyance and led the girls down the narrow hallway towards the front of the vehicle.

Mollie felt deeply uncomfortable as she noticed the changing landscape before her the farther along the hallway they continued.

The chipped tile flooring slowly became a soft velvet carpet and the crew in this part of the train wore neatly pressed uniforms with sharp collars atop blood red vests and pants with a sharp gold trim. The crew nodded once to their temporary guide before leading them to a private compartment equipped with deep mahogany tables, a crisp white tablecloth and delicate china.

Mollie noticed the spark in Phoebe's eyes as she took in the luxury that surrounded them. Phoebe was absolutely enraptured by the opulent setting and the five star treatment they were subjected to. Mollie remained apprehensive as they were tended to by the crew and tried to catch her friend's eye to no avail.

"Shall I show the girls to their private compartments?" a sharply dressed crew member asked from the entrance to their carriage. Their guide nodded and Mollie hesitantly turned to her friend.

"Maybe we should stay together," she whispered as Phoebe brushed past her. Phoebe rolled her eyes at her.

"Relax Mollie."

She flicked her strawberry blond hair over her shoulder and blew her friend a kiss.

"Enjoy this moment. This may be the only time in our lives where we get to experience life like the elite!"

Mollie frowned as her friend sauntered off with a member of the crew, her blonde hair vanishing from sight. She couldn't care less if she sat in a first class cabin decorated with gold trimmings or a rickety low class wood cabin without a roof, they'd both reach the same destination regardless.

More importantly, Mollie didn't like the prospect of being separated from Phoebe, even if it only was for one night, but the free spirited girl gave her no choice. She was off before Mollie could even warn her of any potential dangers.

"Mollie Mayeson?"

Mollie turned her gaze to their guide who slowly closed the door to the carriage sealing himself and Mollie in the quaint ornately decorated compartment. He kept his shoulders stiff and his uniform straight and crisp as he moved brusquely to close the heavy door. Mollie surveyed him quietly, following his movements as he crossed the room.

"Tea?"

He had taken his cloak off and placed it neatly on the chair next to him and Mollie finally had the chance to look at him clearly. He was an older man, in his late fifties or early sixties, with curly black hair transitioning to grey and deep ebony skin that glowed in the dimly lit room. A thick black moustache covered his wide features and extended upwards to meet his thick sideburns. Beads of sweat lined his brow and Mollie was immediately on edge. It was a little too cold outside to attribute his perspiration to the weather. His eyes were dark and hooded as he scrutinized the young girl closely.

Mollie kept her head down as she had been taught when addressing a member of the royal guard. Her hate for the monarchy welled inside her, bubbling up till it simmered on the surface, but she kept her self in check. The punishment for not adhering to the rules was

costly and Mollie was only 19 with the whole rest of her life to live. She couldn't afford to jeopardize her future on the mere basis of poor impulse control.

"You're a smart girl you know?" he said quietly after a long pregnant silence ensued. Mollie stared at her tea, mistrustful, as the guard took a long drag from the delicate china. She didn't trust anything anyone offered her. She didn't even trust the gifts her best customers dropped off at the bakery during public holidays. She had her mother to thank for that. The women at the best of times had even accused Mollie of trying to poison her.

"You follow the rules, keep your head down, keep a low profile," he mused swirling the remains of his tea in his cup.

"And you are young."

Mollie met his eyes when he said this, her uneasiness spiking as the guard held a strange expression on his face.

"I want to see your credentials," Mollie said suddenly her voice turning icy. Mollie had her doubts about this whole situation from the start, and could curse herself for not asking about the legitimacy of this man sooner.

He laughed then, his voice reverberating around the room.

"It's a little late for formalities isn't it Ms. Mayeson?"

Mollie's insides turned to ice and her hands began to sweat as the weight of the situation rained down upon her. In an instant, Mollie lurched to her feet and lunged for the door knocking the table and delicate china to the ground. The china shattered with an ear splitting crack sending delicate splinters of glass everywhere. Mollie panted as she fruitlessly attempted to open the door. With a growl the guard lunged for her knocking her to the ground and sending her pummeling to the hard carpeted floor.

He chuckled close to Mollie's ear as he held her in a tight grip on the ground his fists clenched around her torso as she coughed into the rough carpeted fibres that brushed her cheek.

"This is good, I like a little spunkiness," he panted his fists clenching around her tighter as Mollie thrashed in discomfort. "But if you want to keep your friend alive you better acquiesce to all of my demands."

Mollie went limp when she heard this and her blood turned cold. She stiffened as the guard slowly rolled her over and released her, her cheek pressing into the rough fuzzy carpet. In any other circumstance she would have taken her chances, but the threat directed at Phoebe prompted her to submit.

Mollie picked herself up off the ground and shot the man a hateful glare.

"What do you want from me?"

She was absolutely fuming, but her voice was muffled by the thick dusty carpet. *How could she have let her guard down?* Mollie prided herself on her ability to sense danger and tense situations from miles away. Sure, she hadn't been expecting this turn of events, but she should have *known* better, she should have foreseen that something wasn't quite right...

The man had risen and stood behind the fallen table a cigar in his hand as he fished in his pocket for a lighter.

Mollie looked up at him from the ground and noticed it was an expensive cigar, the contraband kind that could get you publicly punished. If Mollie remembered correctly, it was 12 public whips for contraband.

He blew the smoke casually out of his mouth as he observed her from above, his expression unreadable and his stance completely at ease.

"My demands are reasonable," he started, "and the reward is... liberating."

Mollie pushed herself to her feet, the hate inside her welling dangerously close to combustion.

"I don't think I follow."

He smiled when she said this, taking another long drag from his cigar and gazing out of the train window. Mollie hadn't even realized they had already started moving and were well on their way out of Chartery and into the green landscapes toward the Southern Border.

His skin glowed in the candlelight near the window, the wrinkles pronounced on his forehead, his uniform silver and navy, and the badge of the royal guard glinting in the darkness. Mollie's eyes were drawn to it as he turned to look at her.

"Blood before others granted others will fall, but blood after throne and the throne before all."

Mollie instinctively touched her hand to her heart. It was an involuntary response, and she listened in silence to the man recite the oath of the monarchy. These words had been ingrained in Mollie's mind since she was a young girl and God forbid she ever forget it. The Lyon regime predicated upon these words since the early centuries and every member of society was entrusted with branding it in their minds.

Mollie narrowed her eyes as the man continued puffing on his cigar and the girl couldn't help but glance around her in fear. The monarchy were always watching, their eyes the sky and their ears the walls. They learned this from a young age. It was verboten to access certain luxuries if you were below a certain class standing, and yet this guard was so brazenly breaking code. In fact, his actions were so audacious, so inexplicably intrepid, that Mollie had an inkling that he wasn't at all who he claimed to be.

Mollie stood up taller and faced the man standing across from her in the palatial room.

"Who do you work for?"

He didn't break eye contact with her as he took the cigar from his mouth and placed it on an ashtray on the small marble countertop near the compartment window.

"I think you already know the answer to that Ms. Mayeson."

Mollie glanced around the room again, waiting in fear for some form of government authority to burst into their compartment and put an end to all of them. However, the compartment door remained closed, the train continued to charge through the flowing expanding greenery and the tea continued to boil.

She knew exactly who this man was, she could kick herself for not seeing through him before. He was part of the Insurgency. Mollie had known they existed, deep underground for centuries since the royals embarked on their first quest thousands of years ago to establish sovereignty over foreign lands and create the foundation for their eventual empire.

The Insurgency would meet in secret, in underground railroads, isolated islands, and most infamously within clock towers to discuss their plans to dismember the growing monarchy. They had been largely dormant ever since Hartley Lyon had risen to power. Hartley had been the youngest Lyon to ever inherit complete power of the monarchy at only sixteen years of age. Mollie had truly believed Hartley had achieved what his ancestors couldn't; to permanently eliminate the Insurgency. It had seemed she was mistaken...

"I sought you out for a very particular reason my dear," the man said quietly making his way across the room to pour himself a fresh glass of brandy from the wine fridge.

Mollie swallowed uneasily as he paced back and forth across from her, carefully stepping over the overturned table as he observed her.

"I've done nothing wrong," Mollie said assertively. "I've kept to myself, I follow the rules, and I live my life in peace." She paused as she took in his reaction.

"And I plan to continue to do so."

She had no idea where Phoebe could be at this point and could only pray the girl was okay. She had to play it safe, her friends life could depend on it.

The dark haired man laughed to himself when she finished and this only further infuriated her.

"You are good, for the most part" he chuckled. "But we'll have to work on that sharp tongue of yours."

The man took a deep breath and a long sip of his drink before he launched himself into his proposition.

"For all of the reasons you have just listed my dear Mollie. For that is exactly why I have brought you here."

Mollie stared at him as he continued.

“You are the key, the missing loop we will use to transform this parasitic regime into something more...” he paused as he thought about his next words carefully. “Mutualistic.”

He began to pace again and the young girl followed his every move closely.

“You do follow the rules, impeccably so might I add,” he continued raising his glass towards her in a gesture reminiscent of a congratulations.

He breathed deeply through his nose and swirled his glass around, his dark eyes liquifying as he carried on.

“You make a modest but adequate living running a bakery, you don’t have many friends but you prefer it that way. Your mother is a common street whore and you keep to yourself out of embarrassment or shame...”

Mollie grit her teeth when she heard what he had called her mother but she didn’t interrupt.

“Perhaps both?” He added with a questioning stare.

“So you’ve been following me, watching me?” Mollie snapped. Her face flushed and her hands curled to fists.

This wasn’t new to Mollie. The authorities were always watching. But for a member of the Insurgency to admit to doing so in such a casual manner pushed her over the edge. Now that she thought about it, 12 whips for contraband seemed mild compared to the ignominy of life imprisonment or execution.

“Someone is always watching you,” he answered darkly his badge sparkling in the moonlight. The train hit a bout of brief turbulence sending Mollie lurching forward and instinctively the man went out to help her.

“Get away from me!” she screeched.

Her voice broke through the room in a high pitched squeal and the man doubled back in surprise.

“I’m not trying to hurt you.” He said sternly keeping his stance formal and straight as Mollie balanced herself on the unsteady surface.

He sighed as he downed the rest of his drink in a single gulp and for the third time that night looked her straight in the eyes with his dark enigmatic gaze.

“I’m going to bring down this monarchy Mollie. And you’re going to help me do it.”

Chapter 4: Bérylium

Chapter Summary

More truths are unfolded but can Mollie keep track of all of them when she harbours so many lies of her own?

“Let’s go over this again shall we?”

Mollie sat still in a soft plush velvet chair, the same colour as the crimson carpet that covered the room. Her hands were tied behind her with one of those sharp metallic handcuffs that only the royal guards had access to. It was for “safety precautions,” as the men had put it. Mollie discounted that claim immediately. She was convinced it was just another reason for these men to exert their dominance over her, they seemed to get a kick out of it.

Mollie had been listening to the dark haired man all night and she was absolutely exhausted. He had told her his name was Caleb, one of the many leaders of the Insurgency.

The more Mollie thought about it the more it made sense. It was unlikely the Lyons themselves would invite a low income bakery to cater at one of their events. They kept Primary status civilians in their own isolated area of the country, away from their world.

The other man stepped forward and introduced himself as Isaac.

He too sported a royal uniform and Mollie would never have assumed he was a rebel against the monarchy. Unlike Caleb, Isaac was younger, maybe a couple years older than Mollie, and playing his role well. Similarly to Mollie, he had been sought out and hand picked to join the underground association. Mollie wondered if he, like her, was actually given a choice or not.

“I think we should go over this again,” Caleb said pacing for the hundredth time that day.

“I know it already,” Mollie snapped jerking her wrists forward and proceeding to chafe them with the sharp edges of the cuffs. She was sick of hearing about this plan. Her stomach hurt from a prolonged lack of food and her leg had a bruise from when she hit the floor early last night.

They both looked at her sharply and Mollie swore internally.

She had fucking done it again.

“Mollie.” Caleb said sternly running an arm across his perspiring forehead. “You cannot -*You absolutely cannot* address a royal in that manner. You will be killed and your body thrown into...” he trailed off after that shaking his head in disappointment.

Mollie sighed. She knew. There were a couple things that could happen to her. She could get burned alive, stoned to death, or buried alive. If she was lucky they would kill her quickly then throw her body in the ocean.

“Caleb she understands.”

Isaac had stood up and straightened his uniform and Mollie had turned her head towards the window and watched as the train began to slow down.

“We’re here anyways. If she doesn’t get it now then that’s that.”

Caleb swore and placed his hands on the small mini bar beneath the window. Isaac frowned at him and Mollie examined their interaction closely. There was a certain layer of trust between them and Mollie speculated that they had been working together for some time now. There was a degree of friendliness yet deep respect between the two of them, reflective of the kind of relationship between a boss and employee at a firm.

“So that’s it then?”

They both turned to look at her as she glanced at both men coolly.

“I do what you ask, get the information you need, and you ensure that when the time comes I and my mother get our free passes through to Aldorough unharmed and undetected.”

“Those are some steep requests Mollie,” Caleb said flatly his dark eyes narrowing. “You must uphold your end of the bargain as well as succeed if you want all your requests completed.”

Mollie rolled her eyes.

“There’s not even a guarantee I’ll make it out of there alive!”

Isaac interjected at this point when he noticed Caleb was on the verge of losing his patience again.

“We’ll have your back Mollie,” Isaac said with a hand on his heart. “I swear on my grandmother’s grave.”

Mollie stared at him as the train slowly came to a stop and the whistle sounded through the air signalling that their destination had been reached.

“We look after each other Mollie,” Caleb said quietly exchanging glances with his colleague. “And after this mission, you will be one of us.”

“Lucky me,” she said bitterly.

The two men exchanged glances for the second time before Isaac ventured forward and freed her wrists.

“I do apologize for this,” he said quietly as Mollie rubbed her chafed wrists. “It was just insurance to make sure you didn’t harm us or yourself.”

Mollie didn't answer as the men quickly straightened their shirts and centred their badges in preparation for sporting their false personas.

She noticed how Isaac eyed her curiously as she straightened her sweater dress and belt and fixed her messy hair.

"Is that the best thing she has to wear?" Isaac asked Caleb as his eyes travelled from her chest to her feet, his brow furrowed with concern.

Mollie was itching to reply with a sarcastic comment but she had to show them that she had at least some kind of impulse control. Plus, she had survived this long without any sort of punishment as Caleb had noted earlier, she knew how to carry herself out in the company of higher status citizens and more importantly in front of the authorities. She was a survivor, she could do this.

"The less attention she gets the better," Caleb said gruffly stepping closer to place his hands on Mollie's thin shoulders.

Mollie stood tall despite the heavy weight from the man in front of her.

"I want that contract Mollie."

Caleb's tone was flat and bleak and he was staring hard into her eyes. The grip he had on her shoulders was becoming uncomfortable. If Mollie didn't know any better she would assume this man had gone through this before, multiple times. His eyes didn't scream determination, they expressed a deep desperation.

"You get your hands on that contract and bring it to us, we can expose Hartley Lyon and his disgusting family and show the citizens what kind of man he really is."

Caleb was visibly shaking and Mollie was struggling under his heavy weight.

"I know you can do it. I know we have a chance this time. I can feel it."

"Caleb." Isaac said in a warning tone, his hand on the door and his expression one of concern.

"You're hurting her."

A flicker of surprised flitted across the older man's face and he quickly recoiled.

"He wasn't actually but I appreciate the concern," Mollie said stiffly fixing her dress.

Isaac smiled genuinely when she said this and suddenly he looked youthful and innocent and completely at ease. It was the first genuine emotion she had seen from him and she found herself shooting a small smile back.

"Mollie," Caleb said again breaking the moment and forcing Mollie's eyes back to his.

"There will be someone on the inside who you can trust. We won't send you in there alone."

Mollie nodded as he fished in his pocket for his pocketwatch. He glanced at it briefly before snapping it closed with a sharp flex of his hand.

“You said the contract would be in Hartley’s quarters,” she started as Caleb looked at her.

“How will I even be able to gain access to that part of the mansion? I don’t think the Lyons are stupid enough to let anyone... let alone servants into their private quarters.”

Isaac’s face paled when she asked this and she saw the men exchange another glance at each other, this one looked extremely uncomfortable.

“Not servants...,” Caleb trailed off with a dark look and Mollie felt her stomach drop to the floor when she heard this.

“No,” she said suddenly her previously calm demeanour evaporating like water on a stovetop.

“No!” she said again more forcefully slamming her hands on the now upright table between them.

Caleb rolled his eyes and Isaac looked perplexed.

“What do you mean *No*?” Caleb said with a huff, perspiration building on his brow again. “I’m assuming your mother taught you well?”

He had taken out a handkerchief to wipe the sweat off his forehead and all Mollie wanted to do was take that damn cloth and wrap it around his neck.

“Why else do you think we chose *you*?” he said with a humourless laugh.

Mollie felt numb and humiliated and drew her gaze to her hands instead.

She didn’t have the heart to tell them that she was nothing like her mother, not in personality and definitely not in recreational pursuits. In fact, Mollie had never been with a man in her life. She had no reason to be and living with her mother why *would* she?

Mollie was beginning to feel that dread pool in her gut again. She wasn’t ready for this mission at all. They were throwing her into a pool of ravenous sharks without even teaching her how to swim.

Caleb had turned towards Isaac and began giving him instructions in a low muted tone. Isaac kept his eyes trained on Mollie and he had an odd expression on his face. She wondered if he had observed her reaction and deduced what she simply couldn’t hide.

They nodded to each other and Isaac left the compartment abruptly leaving Caleb and Mollie once again alone in the room.

“Focus on the reward Mollie,” he said taking his handkerchief out one last time to blot at his forehead.

“It’ll be worthwhile to you, to me, to everyone.”

Mollie had given up asking about her friend at this point. The only thing they told her was that she would be safe as long as Mollie abided by their terms and did what she was told to do. She had no doubt in her mind that their threat against her friend extended to her mother and the few others she did care about back home.

Thankfully those she did care about were few and far between.

She was stuffed into the backseat of an uncomfortable black carriage and flanked by Isaac and Caleb as they made their way from the station through a densely green forest to the infamous Questershire Manor. Mollie had seen photos of the sprawling gargantuan monstrosity of a property in the paper and on the news. It was one of their more private headquarters along the southern border.

Mollie couldn’t see who the driver was from the back and she had no idea if he was with the Insurgency or not. Neither Caleb nor Isaac spoke, and Mollie proceeded to hold herself stiff and formal the entire bumpy ride to the property. There were multiple checks along the way and Mollie internally marvelled at how at ease and expertly professional Caleb and Isaac were. The real royal authority barely even spared her a glance when informed of her Primary status.

They must all assume I’m the help, Mollie thought as she saw the mansion come into view. *Nothing new there.*

When they pulled up at the front of the mansion Mollie couldn’t help but stare. The home was built on top of a massive hill that overlooked the forest and railway station below and Mollie realized just how far up the incline was. The house was made of dark wood and dark brick with a botanical garden taking up most of the front of the landscape. There were bright lights coming from the grand centre window of the house which Mollie deduced was the lobby and the rest of the rooms appeared dark, the French pane windows revealing nothing but an empty abyss behind them.

“It’s something ain’t it?” Caleb said with a somewhat vexing tone. “If you think it’s big now you should see it when it snows,” he added with a humourless laugh. Mollie swallowed uneasily and prayed she wouldn’t be here long enough to see it by the time the snow came around.

She noticed Isaac exchange a few words with a guard and she glanced around uneasily. There were numerous guards that lined the property and Mollie noticed that the security seemed more heightened than usual. Mollie wondered why, there didn’t seem to be another home let alone other civilians or residential areas in sight.

“Send it with the others then.”

Mollie turned around when she heard this and with a sickening lurch realized another guard was referring to *her*.

Isaac and Caleb stood still and formal in a similar fashion to the numerous guards that surrounded them. They didn't make eye contact with her as she was pulled away harshly from the carriage, her belongings left behind as she was led towards the left side of the expansive house. She was gripped tightly by a guard as they descended down a dark staircase along the back entrance of the property. Mollie scanned her surroundings as best she could, finding certain monuments to mark a spot in case she ever needed to navigate her way around the property herself.

Mollie felt the last bit of warm sunlight fade away against her back as she descended down a dark staircase tactfully obscured from view and wondered at the back of her mind whether she'd ever feel the warmth of the sun's rays pierce her skin again.

Chapter 5: Bore

Chapter Summary

Mollie finds out more about the Lyon's unorthodox interests and economical pursuits.

Mollie's tongue felt heavy and dry in her mouth as she struggled to find her bearings in the pitch black room.

She was parched, starving and breathing heavily. Her eyes were not accustomed to the darkness and her limbs were stiff and clumsy after such a prolonged period of time being confined and non-mobile in a cramped space. The girl shuffled forward her arms in front of her and her back straight. As she ventured forward further into the darkness she felt her ankle hit something low to the ground and with a cry she tumbled forward bringing whatever was standing in front of her down along with her.

There was a brief yelp from whatever Mollie had hit and she scrambled up again in surprise. She was not expecting to encounter anyone else in the dark space and she was instantly on edge.

"Somebody turn on the damn lights."

The voice had come from somewhere beyond Mollie and she noticed the voice had a Northern twang to it. This person was definitely not from around here.

There was a groan and murmur that surrounded Mollie and she tensed as the sound of heavy gears echoed across the room and the lights quickly flooded the room. The intensity of the light burned Mollie's eyes and she recoiled at the brightness rubbing her eyes before gazing around her.

The first thing she noticed was that there were a number of people surrounding her and most of them were naked. As Mollie stared around her in awe she also realized that the throngs of groups around the room were all female. As a matter of fact, they all appeared to be of Primary status. Mollie had an inkling of what was going on and she felt sick to her stomach. They had all groaned when the lights had turned on and some of them were shooting Mollie irritated glares as they helped each other to their feet.

People began to stare at her as another petite mousy girl with cuts on her knees and elbows meekly helped the girl she had charged into onto her feet.

"Watch where you're going *salope*."

Her voice came out sharp and hateful and Mollie doubled back in surprise. The girl had a messy pixie cut with her dark brown hair splaying in different directions. She had a very

pretty face with rosy cheeks and full features and Mollie figured she could be really pretty, when her face wasn't contorted in a fit of rage.

"It was an accident K," the smaller girl said. Mollie stared at her as she helped the girl with the pixie cut dust herself off. That girl couldn't be more than 15 and Mollie felt an instinctive protectiveness toward her. She shouldn't be here, none of them should.

"Where am I?" Mollie stuttered. There was an echo of giggles and whispers in the crowd and Mollie turned to look at the rest of them.

"Who are you assigned to?" another girl asked quietly stepping in front of the others and addressing Mollie directly.

She was completely naked and at ease as she stood before Mollie, hands on her slender hips and her head tilted to the side in concern. Mollie tried not to stare at her round full breasts and wide hips as the girl stared at Mollie. They must have been around the same age.

"Assigned?"

Mollie didn't like where this conversation was going at all.

"I'm not assigned to anyone," she said more forcefully than she intended. "I'm here to cater for an event."

Some of the other girls had started to giggle and Mollie glared at them. Pixie girl was the only one with a frown on her face and when Mollie met her eyes she sneered.

The bare young girl in front of her had a sly smile on her face and Mollie was instantly defensive.

"Let me see your status card."

The other girls had begun to cluster around Mollie and the woman across from her, and Mollie was finding it harder and harder to breathe in the nearly filled room.

"Primary like the rest of all of you," she snapped forcing some of the girls around her to take a step back.

Mollie wasn't very good at making friends and this had always been the case since she was young. At first Mollie didn't really understand why, but as she grew older she began to realize it must have been due her complete lack of docility and resting bitch face.

The other girl whistled lowly, a slightly condescending tone in her voice.

Mollie had to get herself to the dining quarters. If she could sneak into the kitchen quarters from her current position she might be able to disguise herself as one of the kitchen attendants and proceed from there. She would die before she became a submissive sex slave for a spoiled, rich, haughty and impertinent family like the Lyons.

“One of you,” she spoke loudly addressing the numerous women in the room. “Get me to the kitchen’s quarters and I’ll reward you for it.”

Again there was a murmur of giggles and whispers through the crowd and many of them turned to look at each other, some full of disdain and others mere confusion.

“We can’t leave here unless we’re called upon by His Grace or any of the young masters,” the same mousy girl piped up wrapping a woolly shawl around her flat chest.

Mollie noticed the door at the other end of the room was slightly ajar and she looked back at the mousy girl in confusion.

“I don’t understand. The door is open, why not just leave...?” Mollie trailed off her eyes on the sliver of light coming from the opposite end of the door.

“No you mustn’t,” another young girl said, pure terror overtaking her youthful features.

Pixie girl rolled her eyes and pushed past some of the others.

“Let her go,” she said with an air of superiority. “I have no qualms with it. She can be rid of us all by the hour and I’ll still sleep like a baby tonight.”

The girl turned and sauntered towards her little corner where a single pillow, blanket, and book lay in a neat pile on the floor. She pulled the blanket around herself and turned the other way her back facing Mollie.

“I can help you.”

Mollie watched as a few of them turned to look at her, their silence speaking volumes.

“If you help me I can help you... all of you,” she repeated this time with more fierceness and volume in her tone.

The silence that followed was a long one filled with desperate glances and obvious agitation. Mollie half expected someone to speak up and oppose her, or even tell her to get lost, but everyone simply returned to their previous positions and continued on as if there had been no interruption in the first place.

Everyone quietly returned to their previous positions and Mollie glanced around her in confusion.

The only girl still standing and paying any heed to Mollie’s presence was the petite mousy girl with the flat chest and scraped knees.

Without even asking she took Mollie’s hand and led her to the far corner of the room directly adjacent to the open door. Mollie swallowed uneasily as she looked at the dirty blanket and faded used pillow that lay on the cold floor. These abhorrent conditions weren’t even suitable for a dog let alone a human.

“Is this how they keep you?” Mollie asked through gritted teeth her tone laced with hate. “Owning a whole fucking palace and keeping you here like pigs before a slaughter?”

The girl jumped at Mollie's tone and disdainful words and her brow furrowed with worry. Mollie regretted swearing in front of the young girl but she was too infuriated to care. The girl reminded Mollie so much of a younger version of herself with her light freckles and wavy mousy brown hair that refused to stay down. Mollie instinctively brushed the waves that had fallen into her face from her forehead and the girl quietly looked up at Mollie.

"This is where we sleep," the girl whispered as the lights began to flicker off once again. Mollie looked around her. She had arrived here mid-afternoon to the Lyon residence, why would they be sleeping? It couldn't be past 16:00.

The girl took in Mollie's confused expression and proceeded to explain.

"We work throughout the whole night." She explained as the girls in front of her began to sleep. "This is the only time of the day where we can catch some sleep."

Mollie couldn't help but feel sick as she looked around the room. Suddenly her thirst and hunger didn't seem as important anymore.

"What's your name?" the girl asked suddenly. She had pulled out a piece of jerky and began to nibble on it. She offered Mollie some of her meagre meal which Mollie declined gently.

"Mollie." She said quietly brushing the hair out of the young girl's eyes again. The girl smiled at Mollie.

"I like that name," the young girl said crossing her legs again.

"I'm Zeta," she said excitedly as Mollie observed her.

"Zeta? Like the alphabet?" Mollie added with a smile.

The girl stared at Mollie, not quite understanding the reference.

Mollie felt an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach as the girl furrowed her brow trying to understand Mollie's comment.

"What did you say that girl's name was again?" Mollie asked her voice wavering.

Zeta turned to look at the girl behind them, the one with the pixie cut who had turned over to face Mollie and Zeta, her eyes open and angry as she stared at the two of them in disgust.

"Who K?" the girl asked. "That's Kappa. Don't mind her, she's always been a hot head, but her heart is in the right place."

Mollie suddenly felt very ill. "What about the others?" she pressed.

Zeta began scanning the room and pointing out the girls that she knew well to Mollie.

"That's Eta, and that one there with the black hair is Xi, and the twins, those two are Rho and Phi..."

Mollie was beginning to piece things together and the hate she felt boil within her began to fume.

“Who gave you these names?”

Zeta faltered and paused as she took in Mollie’s change in demeanour and flat tone.

“Master Lyon of course,” she said uneasily watching Mollie’s reaction closely.

Mollie narrowed her eyes. “Which one?”

Zeta sighed. “I’m not sure,” she said quietly. “I can’t remember his name...the tall one with the brown hair.”

Mollie sighed.

All of them were tall with brown hair.

She sat back as the girl finished off her jerky and folded the packet neatly before placing it gingerly back in her pillowcase.

“What colour were his eyes?” Mollie asked suddenly her fingers laced together. Zeta looked at her.

The girl thought about it for some time before she responded. “We’re assigned to young Master Lyon of course,” she continued explaining to Mollie as if Mollie knew exactly which one she was referring to.

“He puts us to work.” Mollie paused when she heard this. “He has dark eyes,” she concluded.

Zeta suddenly looked straight at Mollie her face blank and Mollie felt her hands begin to sweat. This only happened when she was extremely nervous.

“His eyes are a lot like yours,” she mused. “But...I think darker,” she said her eyes trained on Mollie’s irises.

Mollie remembered the eldest Lyon, the one that looked like his father with the dark brown eyes and chestnut hair against pale skin. Seemed like something he would come up with.

Zeta’s face suddenly blushed and she began to twist her blanket around her. “Sometimes if I do my work really well the pretty Lyon gives me a reward,” she said excitedly her eyes bright.

“The pretty Lyon?” Mollie questioned.

“The one with the emerald eyes,” she said shyly her cheeks pink.

Micah.

Mollie dropped her gaze and placed her hand gently on the young girl’s face.

“What does he make you do Zeta?” she asked worriedly bile rising in her throat and her face hot with frustration. Her palms were itchy with fury. “What do you mean he rewards you?”

Mollie needed to get a grip on herself before she scared the girl off and cut herself off from gaining any more information.

Zeta looked uncomfortable.

“He gives me extra meals,” she says with a shrug. “And he lets me play with Theo. Theo only likes me. Nobody else.”

Mollie stared at her as Zeta yawned and brushed her overgrown fringe from her eyes. Things were getting stranger by the minute and the more Mollie found out the more confused she became.

“Theo?” She questioned. “What is that?”

Mollie would just about lose her shit if Theo ended up being another person.

“Theo is a puppy,” Zeta said with a giggle. “Theo is the cutest.”

Mollie was a little dumbfounded. Mollie was convinced that either the girl had no idea what a dog really was or perhaps the Lyons really did own a dog. The thought seemed strangely erroneous in Mollie’s mind and something didn’t quite add up.

“Zeta,” she said. “I need you to do something for me. This is very important.”

The girl blinked away her tiredness in an instant and she perked up as Mollie placed both hands on her cheeks. The more Mollie looked at her, the more convinced Mollie was that she was a little fawn personified into a human child.

“Do you know your way around the house?” she asked carefully observing the girl closely. The girl nodded. “I was born and raised here.”

Mollie swallowed uneasily and continued.

“Do you know what room in the house Theo is in?”

Zeta nodded right away. This was important. Mollie didn’t want to enter a room to find some sick creature inside waiting to devour her whole. She had her doubts about “Theo the puppy.”

“Of course, Theo is in Master Lyon’s chambers.”

Mollie refrained from rolling her eyes in front of the girl. She couldn’t believe she was saying this.

“The pretty Lyon’s chambers?” she asked dully.

Zeta nodded and giggled once again.

Mollie sighed and ripped a piece of fabric from the inside of her dress and laid it down on the floor in front of her. She then fished in her pocket searching for a pen and encountered a tiny little vial. Her hand froze when her fingers met the cold metal and she tensed instantly.

Caleb was staring hard at her as the moonlight loomed in through the window casting a spotlight over the two of them.

“Do you know what this here is Mollie?”

He had fished into his breast pocket and pulled out a tiny little vial with a hole in the top and a clear glass tube in the centre. The glass tube was filled with a small amount of powder that left residue on the inside of the tube.

Mollie stared hard at what he was holding.

“I have no idea.”

He paced briefly up and down the small space before walking straight up to her and looking her in the eyes.

“You ever heard of anthrax Mollie?”

Mollie glanced sharply at him. Of course she had, there had been a big outbreak a couple years back that the authorities quickly dealt with in no time.

“Yes, the kids sometimes get it on their hands when they dig in the farmers field,” she continued. “It gets cleared up with a single dose of antibiotics.”

Caleb nodded in agreement.

“Yes of course. One litre of anthrax is nothing to fear of course.”

Mollie wondered where this was going as he slowly turned the vial in his dark fingers.

“Bacillus anthracis,” he said after a brief silence. “The causative agent of anthrax.”

Mollie stared at him.

“Is that what you have in there?” she asked curiously his fingers continually twisting the vial back and forth.

“Too right you are,” he said with an odd glint in his eye.

Mollie didn't like where this was going. A fight and even a gunshot she could still make it out alive...but biohazardous material, now that was a different ballgame altogether.

“You know what's great about these little buggers?” he said casually tapping the vial so the powder inside fell from the sides to the bottom.

“They make spores. One of the smallest, and most difficult entities to kill on this planet. Those microbes even survive an autoclave at 121 degrees Celsius at tremendously high pressure...resilient nasty fuckers.”

Mollie closed her eyes briefly. She knew about anthrax, the government had used it as a bioterrorist weapon against neighbouring states during the early days of land claiming and sovereignty. Then they banned it altogether...or so they claimed as a new approach to peaceful settlement and negotiation.

“1 L of this stuff, won't kill you...but 1000 L of milled powdered anthrax is enough to wipe out an entire village.”

“If things don't go well for you in the utmost dire circumstances Mollie, and you are absolutely sure of yourself that there is no way out, take one of them down with you with this. We all carry one with us just in case...”

Suddenly the vial weighed a thousand pounds heavier and she quickly released the vial from her grip and let it drop to the bottom of her pocket. She hoped she would *never* have to use it, even in the most severe of situations she encountered.

“What are you doing?” the girl squealed when Mollie took a thin pocket knife she kept wrapped around her thigh and slit the side of her wrist to create a small laceration.

“Making ink,” she replied pouring the blood that flowed down her wrist into the plastic wrapper that came with the jerky.

Zeta watched wide eyed as Mollie accumulated as much blood as she could muster into the small packet then looked at the girl. She pushed the packet towards the girl and looked down at the cloth in front of them.

“Make me the best map you can Zeta,” she asked the girl quietly. “And I promise...” she paused. “I swear to you I'll get us both out of here.”

The girl seemed to have warmed up to Mollie and nodded her head in understanding. Mollie wasn't quite convinced that the girl had grasped the weight of her words or the gravity of the situation but Mollie needed her now more than ever.

The map was clumsy and smudged more than Mollie had liked but it was a solid start.

The blood had dried into a purply colour but the material of the dress had held the liquid well. Mollie had guessed it must have been going for dinner time as Mollie heard some of the women around them begin to wake up.

According to Zeta's map the door from their current room led into a hallway which then broke into 3 more hallways, one leading to the kitchen and the other two somewhere else?

There were so many rooms on the maps with question marks Mollie was having a hard time even keeping track of even the basic cardinal directions let alone the hallways.

Mollie would have to take her chances by the time she got to that split landing and she prayed she wouldn't run into anyone suspicious. According to the girls, they hadn't been working for several days now as the Lyons had been away on business. They only returned to the manor for family gatherings altogether at certain times of the year. It seemed no one else was currently in the mansion and Mollie hoped she'd be able to make it to the kitchen quarters before they or any other royal member crossed her path.

The more Mollie examined the map the more hopeless finding her way seemed. This was going to be extremely risky but she couldn't ask any more of this girl.

"Perhaps I should come with you?" Zeta asked as Mollie gingerly stepped over several sleeping bodies towards the arched doorway.

She hesitated.

"No, I can't afford for you to get into trouble because of me, if we do end up getting caught."

"We won't get caught," the girl said quietly.

She slipped her hand inside Mollie's and pulled a cardigan over herself and the thin white dress she had on.

Mollie was adamant, but she needed the girl if she were to find a way out of here.

"Thank you...again," Mollie said genuinely.

The girl just smiled at her and tugged her along.

Chapter 6: Carbone

Chapter Summary

Mollie has her first encounter with the Lyons.

The mansion really was something.

If Mollie hadn't been so stressed out she would have stood still and appreciated all that the mansion had to offer from the golden trimming along the ceilings, to the ornately lit chandelier, to the plush fur rug that spanned the entire lobby. Mollie found it incredibly bizarre that there were no guards, no people...nothing but empty unused space throughout the massive residence.

Each room was lavishly furnished and everything seemed to be placed in a particular spot for a particular purpose. It was unsettling in the most unpleasant of ways.

There were leather sofas lined with thick blankets that hadn't looked like they had ever been used, delicate goblets behind glass cabinets that looked like they hadn't held a drink in years, and most of all an eerie silence that ensued as she dashed along tiled corridors, the only sound that reverberated off the walls being the young girls bare feet slapping across the marbled floor.

Mollie stopped suddenly when she heard voices from behind them. They were far from their starting point and Mollie was beginning to panic. The young girl in front of Mollie suddenly pushed the wall in front of them to reveal another smaller corridor lined with torch mantlepieces along the wall.

How did she even know about this?

"The kitchen is through that corridor and down the right staircase," Zeta said with a nod of her head before glancing behind her.

"Thank you so much Zeta," she whispered swiping her hand across her cheek in a gesture of affection. The voices were growing and Mollie knew they needed to leave immediately.

"Do you know your way back? Will you be alright?"

The girl nodded and scampered back the way they had come her footsteps echoing for a moment before the silence overtook her and the mansion became still once again.

Mollie entered the corridor and closed the door firmly shut behind her. As the darkness enveloped her she began to hear the tinkling of glassware and the exchange of a conversation.

Her hands began to sweat and her heart rate increased as she sped up her pace in the dark hidden corridor towards the noise.

Could it be?

Mollie had begun to sense that it had gotten increasingly cold in the corridor and realized it was situated at a slightly lower elevation than the main level. The sounds began to level out near her ears as she slowly approached a crack in the thick aged brick that lined the walls. Mollie had also picked up on a pleasant odour that resembled fresh saffron and crisp mint leaves. If Mollie hadn't been so stressed she would have doubled back at the smell of fresh food and produce that saturated her olfactory receptors. Ignoring the knot in her stomach and the lump in her throat she slowly pressed her eye into the crack in the wall and peered into the room before her.

The first thing she noticed was **Red**.

Red walls, red carpet, and red tablecloth that lined a dark mahogany table situated in the centre of the room.

She could see 5 members directly across from the table facing her and 3 others closest to her with their backs directly to her. She eyed them closely one by one and her heart leapt to her throat when she eyed the individual in the centre of the table. Mollie swallowed uneasily when she saw them and her heart beat increased rapidly. She had thought they wouldn't be back for another day or two. Yet here they were, conversing, dining, and so utterly present.

Hartley Lyon sat still and poised in the centre of the table in a midnight blue waistcoat with a cream coloured shirt underneath that clung to his muscular arms like a second skin. His dark hair was combed and teased into a side part and a flashy expensive silver ascot was tied intricately around his neck above a long silver chain bearing the Lyon insignia. His eyes were trained on the goblet of red wine in his left hand and he swirled it slightly as his handsome face remained blank and his posture stiff.

Food was being brought in by numerous royal servants and Mollie had lost track of how many servants and how *much* food had been brought in to line the table.

Her eyes travelled to James and Rowan who sat next to each other in similar attire to their father a clear liquid in James' goblet and red wine in Rowans. When Mollie trained her eyes on the last Lyon she felt her blood turn cold.

Micah Lyon sat still and casual at the very end of the table his arms folded on the rich wood as he swirled whiskey in a glass, his eyes fixed on the drink in front of him like his father. He sported a snowy white dress shirt with the collar up and stiff around his neck, and what appeared to be slim dark trousers held tightly by a belt bearing the Lyon insignia. His hair was lighter than Mollie had first assumed, and Mollie wondered whether that was due to the southern sun. His caramel locks seemed lighter, the gold streaks within them slowly overtaking the brown. His hair was thick and lustrous around his head and Mollie could tell from his messy part that he ran his fingers through it quite frequently.

James was leaning in to listen to something his brother Rowan was telling him and Mollie noticed that they seemed to be more in sync with each other than anyone else at the table. Micah remained stoic and cold at the end of the table unperturbed by the conversations happening around him.

Laughter erupted from the adjacent end of the table and Mollie's eyes flickered to the man sitting on the opposite side of Hartley. He had honey blond hair that was stylishly gelled into a wavy up-do and a pale complexion similar to Hartley. Mollie speculated that they may have been business partners or extended family of some sort. None of the Lyon's reacted as the blond one raised his glass amongst a burst of laughter from the 3 members on the opposite side of the table whose faces Mollie could not see.

"Where is she?" the blond man drawled with a slight accent Mollie had never heard before. "Bring her in please!"

Mollie held her breath despite her deeply uncomfortable position, and watched as servants quietly and quickly brought in a young girl. Mollie had recognized her from earlier, she was one of the twins....

"Rho!"

Mollie's eyes flashed to James as his deep voice filled the room.

"Poor thing looks half starved."

James snapped his fingers and quickly a dish was prepared and plated with various delicacies from across the table and an extra chair brought to the end of the table.

The girl didn't look scared or frightened in any way and she wore a similar plain white dress that Zeta had sported earlier.

The blond man surveyed her with a grin on his face that irked Mollie instantly.

The girl had only taken a couple bites of her food when the man brought her to her feet and peeled down the front of her dress so she stood bare and exposed to all at the table.

"Mmm," he moaned as he cupped a breast in one of his hands.

"Let her finish her meal before you start yours Logan," another voice called from the other end of the table before a wave of laughter echoed across the room.

The blond man named Logan snickered at the man.

"I don't mean to indulge in dessert before dinner is over but I find myself drunk on the whiskey far before the soups and salads arrived."

Mollie noticed how nonchalant Hartley appeared at the centre of the table as he poured more red wine into his goblet. He didn't spare a single glance at the nude girl standing before them. It was as if she wasn't even present at the table.

Mollie also found it strange that no one had really touched any of the lavish food that filled the tables. It was as if the food was there for show, to be displayed and appreciated but not sampled.

Mollie felt sick as Logan latched onto the right breast of the girl and sucked as the young girl jerked at the sudden sensation.

There was a look of raw unfulfilled passion in the man's eyes as he clutched the girl's other breast that had begun to leak droplets of milk from the pressure exerted on her from his fist. This continued on for quite some time, the previously quiet room bombarded by the sound of sloppy suckling and high pitched moaning.

The man released the girl's pink nipple with a sharp pop, then proceeded to down a fresh glass of whiskey as the girl collapsed into her seat sweating and breathless.

"Nothing like a little sweetness to obscure the bitterness of aged whiskey," he murmured as he too collapsed in his seat and addressed the man across from him with a sharp nod.

Suddenly he turned and cast his eyes towards the opposite end of the table, where James and Rowan sat conversing, their heads turned inwards towards each other, and Micah remained at the end, halfway through pouring himself another glass of whiskey.

"I've been kind enough to leave some left over dessert for my favourite nephew."

The table had gone quiet after this and Mollie watched, not daring to breathe, as many heads began to turn toward the end of the table.

The young girl had straightened up silently and sensually walked past the long table bearing the exuberant display of food, her full milky thighs swaying as she made her way towards the youngest prince.

Mollie was drenched in sweat at this point and her knees were aching from holding such a long uncomfortable position for so long but she couldn't tear her eyes away from what she was witnessing.

"May I indulge you Master Lyon?" she asked playfully brushing her hair over her shoulder.

Mollie immediately noticed the shrewd smile on James' face as he observed his youngest brother and wondered what inside joke she was missing out on.

Hartley glanced at his youngest son once before turning to another member of the table and nodding his head in agreement of something, already dismissing the events occurring on the other end of his table. Rowan watched his younger brother with a bored expression for only a brief moment, before opting to take out his pocket watch and fiddle with the dials.

Mollie couldn't quite get over the blatant carelessness of these men. Such acts of vulgarity were strongly frowned upon in society yet these men, the masterminds behind the rules of their society, the enforcers of these rules, so dismissively engaged upon these derogatory acts in such a blasé manner.

Mollie watched as Micah's eyes finally separated from its fixed position on his whiskey glass to meet his supposed uncle at the opposite end of the table. The blond man was staring hard at the young prince and Mollie wondered whether this was some sort of initiation or challenge. Even if it was, the prince didn't reveal anything as his face remained blank, composed and utterly sublime.

He slowly lifted his arm towards the young girl beside him and trailed his fingers up her exposed arm, a subtle invitation for her to initiate. The girl immediately lowered herself down onto the prince, wrapping her legs around his waist as he planted a soft kiss on the edge of her breast. Her head fell backwards, long black hair obscuring the prince's face from Mollie's view as he latched onto her other breast and proceeded to feast from all the girl had to offer.

Milk had begun to drip down the girl's chest and she had begun to moan and mewl before him. Mollie knew the tone of her whines and could attribute them to the orgasmic pleasure she must have been experiencing as the prince suckled her. Mollie caught a glimpse of the young prince's face over the girl's pale shoulder as he continued to suckle and please her. Suddenly his eyes flashed open as the girl moved against him to wrap her thin arms around his neck and his eyes landed solely on Mollie's in an electrifying whirl of green on brown.

Mollie recoiled immediately proceeding to slam her head against the back of the tight narrow corridor. She ducked as hastily as she could clutching her stomach with one hand as bile threatened to rise up and spew from her trembling mouth and using her other hand to hold the bruise beginning to form on the back of her head.

Had he seen her?

Mollie was visibly shaking and she gulped down air as quietly as she could despite the cold dusty air that surrounded her. Her head was throbbing and her knees aching, but by the time Mollie placed her eye against the crack in the wall once more, the seat at the end of the table was empty and Micah Lyon was nowhere to be seen.

The young girl had returned to her chair at the other end of the table and was swiftly finishing her meal, her dress back on and her eyes fixed on the plate in front of her. Mollie couldn't help but draw her eyes back to the vacant chair at the far end of the table, where 2 empty glasses stood side by side along the red tablecloth, the only indication that someone had indeed occupied that seat only moments before.

His absence bothered Mollie more than it should have.

It could have been her imagination playing tricks on her when his eyes met hers, or perhaps he had simply looked somewhere beyond Mollie. The more she tried recycling these scenarios in her head the less viable they became.

Without wasting any more time Mollie slipped past the crack on the wall and as quickly and as quietly as she dared, made her way to the end of the corridor, the events that she had just witnessed flashing in her mind like a reel equipped with infinite film.

Chapter 7: Azote

Chapter Summary

Plans begin to come to fruition and actions are taken by both sides.

Mollie was hungry, tired, and severely dehydrated and her vision was blurring around the edges. She had managed to finally find her way to the kitchen quarters.

She could hear the constant dispense of water into basins and the clanging of dishes and cutlery. She knew she was close. She felt her way around the tunnel walls to aid in guiding her to the light around the corner. Mollie could see the beginning of marble floor appearing before her and as she pulled herself along she felt a sharp tug from behind her. Before she could scream her mouth was covered and her hands tied behind her.

He had found her.

Mollie squirmed and twisted her body in attempt to loosen the iron grip around her torso. There was a grunt as she gave a hard kick backwards.

“Mollie!”

The familiar voice in her ear brought her back to her senses and she immediately dropped her defensive position.

“Isaac?” She whispered in shock. The hand was swiftly removed from her mouth and she twisted her head around to come face to face with the sandy haired boy.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Isaac grinned at her as they both stumbled their way into the nearest room which turned out to be a spare unfurnished pantry.

“We told you we wouldn’t send you in here alone didn’t we?”

Mollie gave him a weak smile then looked away swiftly.

She had a torrent of thoughts weighing her down and she just wanted to leave the Lyon premises as soon as possible.

“I’m trying to find my way to the staff quarters,” Mollie explained.

“I figured.” Isaac said with a grin.

Too soon, the smile was wiped from his face and a familiar expression of concern spread across his features.

“It’s a good thing I found you before then. The staff quarters are not the place for you.”

Mollie narrowed her eyes at him.

“But you were fine leading me into a basement full of sex slaves?”

Mollie’s voice raised a little louder than she intended and they both cringed when they heard footsteps approaching their covert location.

When the footsteps disappeared Isaac immediately turned on her.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Isaac’s face was a mix of concern and disgust and Mollie wondered how much him and his ridiculous Insurgency truly knew about the Lyons.

“You’re telling me that you’re unaware the Lyons are running their own sex slave empire?” Mollie hissed trying her best to keep her voice down.

Isaac paused for quite some time before turning back to Mollie and addressing her head on.

“Oh we had our suspicions,” Isaac said with a frown. “We just had no evidence to prove that it was true....till now.”

Mollie looked sharply at him.

“You’ve been there, you’ve witnessed it!” Isaac said excitedly. “That’s more than anyone else has ever accomplished so far.”

Mollie certainly didn’t like where this conversation was going.

“Even if I did get evidence who the hell are you going to show it to and who is going to believe it?” Mollie asked crossing her arms across her chest.

“The Lyons have too much power. They’ll have us all killed if we try to expose them.”

Mollie took a deep breath as she continued her rant.

“Not to mention they’re buddies with all of the internal authority and external authority outside of their monarchy which extends to all the other countries that border us.”

Isaac was mirroring her with his arms crossed across his chest, his uniform pressed and the Lyon insignia pinned on the side of his chest. Mollie couldn’t help glancing at it every time he addressed her. Mollie didn’t even want to think about what the Lyons would do to him if he got caught...

“Mollie.” He said quietly. “Let us decide how we’re going to expose the Lyons. That’s our job. Focus on your tasks.”

He paused again as Mollie angrily turned away from him. She wanted more information about both the Lyons and the Insurgency and she wasn’t getting her way. It was making her blood boil.

“You are doing beautifully by the way.”

Mollie’s eyes flashed to Isaac, surprise lacing her features as he stared back at her with genuine admiration.

“I knew you could do it. I *told* Caleb you were more than capable.”

He was beginning to murmur now and Mollie had to lean in closer to hear him clearly.

“There was something about you. Something fierce.”

Mollie cut him off. She had heard enough.

“I’m not staying in that basement,” she said with strong finality in her tone. “I’d rather sleep outside.”

Isaac sighed when he heard this.

“Mollie, you’ll stand out like a sore thumb in the kitchens quarters. The Lyons don’t have just anyone working for them in their kitchens, those people are fiercely loyal. You’ll be compromised and exposed all within the hour.”

“Then what exactly do you suggest?” Mollie asked with her arms crossed.

Isaac looked at her, appraisal lining his features.

“I think I’ve got an idea...”

It was a long, tiresome, and monotonous day for Esperanza. She had prepared the Lyon Questershire residence for guests and spent the afternoon ordering the kitchen staff around. As the longest serving and surviving member of the Lyon family’s immediate staff, she had seen her fair share of events throughout her lifetime. But Esperanza was an expert at compartmentalization, she had mastered it at a very early age in her career and that was the reason why she was alive and well today.

Oftentimes the mature woman thought about running away and never looking back, or perhaps letting herself fall over the cliff just beyond the mansion into the cacophonous turmoil of jagged rocks and strident waves that threatened to pull her under. But then she thought about her children and the beautiful future that lay ahead of them because of her sacrifices, and she immediately let those thoughts evaporate from her mind.

It was worth it. For them.

That was what she was promised. Her family would never want for anything and awaiting them would be high class jobs entrenched within societies composed of only the elite. They would never know what it meant to be a Primary citizen, like she was all those years ago. They would never have to experience the repercussions of ingrained ascription or the implications associated with social mobility. These thoughts are what guided her through her most darkest days and allowed her the privilege of overcoming the crippling insomnia that had plagued her during her early days as a royal servant of the Lyon monarchy.

On some days like this one, her insomnia did get the better of her and she preferred to step outside into the cool early morning air and walk to the cliff's edge to watch the sun rise in the distance. The walk to the cliff in reality was much farther than it first appeared from the Lyon mansion, but Esperanza enjoyed the walk. It cleared her mind and kept her sane.

As she approached the cliffs edge she saw a figure standing near the edge draped in a rich velvet cloak its attention focused on the still dark sky.

"Master Lyon," she greeted quietly, curtsying involuntarily. "I was unaware you would be here so early. I shall leave you in peace."

The prince turned his head ever so slightly to acknowledge her and Esperanza quickly dropped her gaze. It was forbidden to look directly into the eyes of a royal, especially given her position and Esperanza took these rules extremely seriously. After all, her life and her children's lives depended on it.

"No," he murmured. "You can stay."

He turned his gaze back to the sky and Esperanza sighed internally.

He has grown so much.

Esperanza had always harboured a soft spot for Micah Lyon and she knew deep down he did for her as well. After all, she was there to take him in her arms when he gasped his first breath as a new born, his mother still and unblinking as she lay ripped apart on crimson stained bed sheets. Esperanza was the one who nursed him and was present when he took his first steps. She was the one he cried to when his brothers decided to unleash their horrors on the small child, though those days never lasted long and the boy learned quickly. He had always been a child of few words and she saw that even in adulthood that was a trait that remained unchanged.

"What of the transaction this morning?" he asked quietly his gaze locked on the sky in front of him.

Even from his side profile Esperanza could see the luminous haze from the prince's bright eyes. She always found it strange how so *unlike* his mother the boy looked.

"Completed Master Lyon," she responded promptly. "The goods were sent out late last night."

He nodded once and remained silent, his back straight and his face blank.

They stood like that for an immeasurable amount of time until the first haze of the sun crept into the blanket of the night sky, its rays piercing through pummels of cirrus clouds to illuminate the expanding horizon.

With dexterity that would put even the most experienced dancer to shame, the prince turned silently on his heel and disappeared into the canopy of green foliage behind them as the sun unleashed its full rays onto the older woman's face, the heat enveloping her, and the first chirps of the birds signalling that her day had now begun.

Mollie had managed to keep her mouth in check and she internally praised herself at her great fortitude so far.

The idea of remaining on the roof was a brilliant one and she hated that she hadn't come up with that plan for herself. The mansion was so large and monstrous that she had plenty of space to remain mobile and ample coverage from the towers to keep herself hidden as well as to lay out a bird eye view of the entire residence. Furthermore, she could keep track of who was leaving and exiting the mansion.

Isaac had slipped her some food and some water that would last her several days and keep her from having to sneak into the kitchens quarters. She had already seen James Lyon exit the mansion and leave in an expensive black automobile into the dense foliage ahead. She felt a bit more comfortable knowing he wasn't present in the mansion. There was something about him that radiated turpitude and Mollie felt most unpleasant when she regarded his dark eyes.

There was an event happening in the mansion that night and Mollie could tell from the bustling of servants at the far end of the tower. It seemed they were having guests and Mollie figured this was her best chance at getting into Hartley Lyon's chambers.

Isaac had managed to steal her a Lyon servant's royal uniform and Mollie was thankful for it. Her dress had been reduced to tatters and was doing little to serve its purpose at covering her skinny body. She gingerly slipped the little glass vial into the breast pocket of her uniform and managed to coax her dark brown curls into a long thick plait down her back. Her hair was almost to her waist and she desperately needed a haircut, it was becoming almost too much to maintain especially given her current state of affairs. It certainly wasn't as neat or groomed as the few other royal guards she had seen around the mansion but it would suffice. At least she wasn't as conspicuous anymore.

Glancing quickly at the sun's position in the sky Mollie deduced it must be close to 14:00. She reckoned it would be best to make her way to the tower where activity seemed to be at an all time high.

Mollie would be lying if she said she wasn't nervous. In fact she was terrified. Despite having a better grasp of the different locations around the premises, the prospect of running into a Lyon or some other awful higher authority kept playing through her mind and she tried

her best to swallow those thoughts away. Mollie wiped her sweaty hands on the front of her uniform and with a deep breath began to navigate her way towards the West tower.

Chapter 8: Oxygène

Chapter Summary

Mollie's undercover antics prove to be more cumbersome than she ever imagined

The rich smell of rosemary, oregano, and zaatar filled Mollie's nose as she shuffled past a throng of servants carrying in produce from a large grand vehicle outdoors. As swiftly and as covertly as she could manage she grabbed an apron and slipped it on. It was red and bearing the Lyon insignia like most objects around the mansion.

Mollie believed it was another artful tactic of the Lyons to promulgate their dominance and spread their pervasive influence over *everything* and *everyone*. The thought made her nauseous despite the pleasing aromas that surrounded her.

"Why are you just standing there?" someone snapped at her from behind. She turned around and came face to face with a plump older woman carrying in a large barrel of freshly picked tomatoes. Mollie had made her way to the produce room and she knew there was a direct door from this room into a main part of the mansion.

Her face was red with exhaustion.

"Get in there and setup," she snapped again brushing past Mollie and giving her a purposefully hard shove to the shoulder.

Mollie frowned at the woman and took another glance around the room. Everyone did seem to be fairly pre-occupied so she felt it wouldn't hurt to take a peek inside...

Mollie could immediately tell from the doors that it was not the same room she had seen the Lyons dining in the night before. This one was grander, larger, and more opulent. It resembled more of a ballroom than a dining room and Mollie focused on steadying her ragged breaths. As she pushed open the door the first thing she saw were people. Throngs and throngs of people dressed in elaborate silks and sophisticated clothing.

"*Just great,*" she thought as she navigated her way through the crowd.

People completely ignored her for the most part and this worked out well for Mollie.

She was instantly drawn to the dessert table where cakes, cupcakes, macarons and various other delicacies lined the table. It reminded her of the bakery and Mollie wondered how her other colleagues were faring. She noticed jars full of sugar were lined along the table and she was instantly drawn to the jar full of brown sugar.

It looked vaguely familiar to her and she suddenly had an idea...

Mollie had already circulated the room several times but had encountered nothing useful nor suspicious. She figured it wouldn't hurt to take a look around the dessert table, she was a baker after all.

As Mollie approached the table she was instantly drawn to the Malva pudding. Her grandmother used to make it all the time when she was younger and the memory brought an instant pain to her chest. She found it a curious delicacy amongst the other dishes, as it was a dish famous in Atoria, which was not a country within the Lyon regime. They must have visitors from elsewhere at this gathering.

Curiosity got the better of Mollie and she scanned the crowd carefully which had grown substantially since she entered the ballroom. She spotted the mayor of Chartery in a corner dressed in a silk maroon suit laughing with other members of the elite. She gritted her teeth and continued searching the room. She never liked the mayor of her hometown and now she had a valid reason to back her speculations.

Fucking sellout

She didn't see any of the Lyon's present and Mollie wondered what kind of hosts didn't show up to converse with their own guests. Then again, the Lyons were not typical people to begin with.

Out of the corner of her eye Mollie began to watch as royal servants quietly filed out of the room one by one in a rehearsed manner. It was as if they all had some pre-determined routine in their head as they joined into the centre of the room and single file exited the ballroom.

"It must be for business," Mollie thought as she scrambled to join the others.

They probably didn't trust having servants in the room... and they had every reason not to trust them.

Mollie was clumsy and struggled to catch up with the others who kept their faces blank and their eyes down. As she burst out of the Lyon ballroom she was met with an empty marble hallway.

Where the hell did everyone go?

Mollie's hands began to sweat and her breathing began to increase as she whirled around looking for the others. She could hear footsteps approaching from the hallway to her left and she quickly took her chances and dashed for the opposite arched doorway. Before she could even scan the room she burst inside and slammed the door behind her.

Mollie was gulping down air to calm her rapid heartbeat and shaking hands.

That was too close.

She had gotten distracted and her pre-occupations had nearly exposed her. As she breathed again she felt a cold creeping feeling make its way down her spine. She slowly opened her eyes and tried her best to keep her heightened nerves at bay before turning around slowly.

He stood in the middle of the room as still as an island in a hurricane and as cold and motionless as the marble statues that lined the Lyon residence.

She had walked straight into the lion's den and she had done so willingly and naïvely.

The silence in the air was palpable and went on for far too long. Mollie had seen him several times in the news and heard about him even more from the starstruck females in her hometown. But she had never expected him to look even *better* in person. And she realized now, what little justice photography portrayed him to be than in actuality.

He had a midnight blue cloak draped over himself adorned with threads of silvery material that looked like constellations against the rich fabric. He wore tall leather boots adorned with fur lining along the top that matched the fur around his collar. His hair was loose in its usual wavy fashion, with a caramel coloured curl or two falling over the side of his forehead. He looked ethereal and Mollie felt small and exposed standing before his unwavering gaze.

Mollie also noticed that he was *very* tall and realized that it really did make him look more threatening.

The silence was prevailing for far too long but Mollie was not going to be the one to break it. She didn't trust herself enough with what might come out of her mouth.

Mollie was quite tall herself and it didn't take much for her to meet his eyes. Mollie didn't fail to notice how his jaw flexed when she did so. He was incredibly handsome with his sharp features and pale green eyes but there was something incredibly off about his aura that set Mollie's hairs on end.

His lips had parted ever so slightly when she had entered and she couldn't quite deduce his expression which appeared to be a mix of surprise and appraisal.

No words were exchanged apart from Mollie's heavy breathing and Micah Lyon's eerily intense gaze.

As quickly as she could muster the girl turned on her heel, flung the door open and fled down the hallway. She was running at full speed as fast as her long legs could take her and didn't stop until she had reached the open window in the East wing leading to the roof and her temporary safe haven. Her lungs were burning, her hair a sweaty mess against her face, and her heart was beating too fast for her to comprehend.

She had just broken the first and most important rule of her mission.

Don't let them see your face.

Chapter 9: Fluor

Chapter Summary

Mollie experiences some troubles along the way that may hinder her mission

Mollie hadn't stopped running.

She had managed to run all the way to the East tower undetected and had discarded the red apron around her along the way, but she couldn't shake that cold biting feeling over her shoulder that someone was following her. She scrambled onto the roof of the house and began to navigate her way across the treacherous landing as swiftly and as steadily as she could manage.

Her hair was tangled around her face and her thick uncomfortable tunic was twisted around her chest in the most unpleasant of ways. Mollie had jumped from tower to tower and could see her temporary haven in the distance shrouded from view and concealed by a thick layer of vines. There was a large space between her hiding spot and her current position along the roof but the girl had done this before and with ease.

Although she had made this jump several times before, her previous encounter with the youngest Lyon had hindered her usual quick reflexes and sharp thinking, and in her haste she had simply forgotten to propel herself forward with the usual extra force she usually mustered.

As she felt herself descend, she felt her ankle hit the barrier of the wall with a loud crack. She cried out in pain as the jump sent her shooting over the barrier and straight into the adjacent wall where her elbows met concrete and her torso the rocky border of the mansion.

The crash had knocked the air clean out of her lungs and the force exerted on her body from the wall left her crumpled and broken on the rough flooring.

The pain hit her afterward like a deep carnivorous black hole squeezing her lungs with compression and twisting her bones like a mincer. She groaned as her vision began to blur and dark spots appeared at the corner of her vision.

Mollie had definitely broken something and she couldn't even move her right ankle let alone feel the other. With one last gasp the darkness overtook her and she let herself fall into a chasm of shadows.

It was unusual for Esperanza to finish her work early especially after a full days' worth of entertaining guests, but she welcomed the free time thankfully. This meeting was a

particularly grand affair and she had watched Hartley and his sons engage with their guests and entertain them lavishly, as always.

Well, almost all of his sons.

It wasn't unusual for Micah Lyon to be absent during business meetings but his attendance was required and he did not show. Esperanza was nervous for him but she knew the boy could handle himself.

As she took her usual walk around the gardens in front of the mansion she felt something in her gut that wasn't right. As she gazed upon the looming mansion she noticed a dark object flying in the wind. Despite her age and weathered skin, the woman's eyes were still as sharp as an eagle's and she zeroed in on the foreign object. Without wasting any more time the woman exited the garden and made her way towards the unidentified figure.

It had taken several attempts before Esperanza made it to the roof and towards the unknown figure. When she finally made her way towards it she couldn't help but gasp in shock.

It was a girl, no, a servant girl who appeared to have had a terrible accident.

Her leg was bent at an awkward angle and her arms were covered in cuts and bruises. The girl had full thick luscious locks that was splayed out around her youthful face in a cascade of curls.

The girl looked sixteen with smooth sun kissed tanned skin and a light layer of freckles around her perky nose. Esperanza had never seen her before and she was immediately suspicious. The girl was such a pretty little thing and she reminded Esperanza of her daughter but with a slightly deeper complexion and much longer legs.

She was a little too pretty and too young to be a part of the royal staff.

"What happened to you darling?" she whispered as she touched the girl's cheek then proceeded to check her pulse. Although it was faint, it was there and Esperanza breathed a sigh of relief.

The girl was not one of the slaves, the shipment had left early the previous night and Esperanza knew which ones were permanent residents of the Questershire mansion. It was as if she fell from the sky in a heap and was left out for the next poor unfortunate soul to find.

Her uniform puzzled the old woman but she decided it was best to question the girl about it when she was healed. As gingerly as she could muster, she lifted the girl in her arms and brought her to her quarters.

The girl was incredibly light considering her height and Esperanza was immediately concerned. She could feel the girl's ribs poking against her chest as she walked and could feel the abnormally high heat radiating from the girl's skin.

She was running a fever.

As she rounded the corner she spotted Master Micah Lyon conversing quietly with another guard, his face bored and his arms crossed. His sharp eyes immediately zeroed in on Esperanza then flickered down to the frail body in her arms.

It was as if he was expecting Esperanza.

Interest flickered within his green eyes bringing his usual placid face to life.

He walked up to the older woman abruptly, leaving his previous conversation behind him, his long legs closing the distance between them.

As he looked down at the young girl a slow secretive smile spread across his youthful features.

“I see you found the little mouse.”

Chapter 10: Néon

Chapter Summary

Mollie's nightmare begins and her dreams of the future seem more distant than ever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The first thing Mollie felt was pain. A sharp needle like pain that spread from her lower leg up to her temple. The pain was sharp and crippling and she could hear herself moaning from the prickly sensation.

There was music playing in the background.

A dark, foreboding but painfully familiar melody that Mollie recognized immediately. She couldn't quite remember where she had heard it, but she knew it. She most definitely knew it. She had heard it many times before within a memory that she had thought was previously inaccessible.

Mollie perked up when she heard the pleasing melodious tune and she slowly opened her eyes.

She was lying on something soft but cool and her leg was slightly elevated. Her ankle was swollen and her skin had a blossoming purple bruise where it had hit the barrier. Her elbows were bandaged and a cool towel was laid out against her forehead.

Mollie had remembered what had happened and she suddenly felt a pang of raw terror run through her. Her eyes met a beautiful mural circled around the centre of the ceiling into an inward dome. It was very Romanesque and Mollie was drawn to it. Mollie wasn't sure how long she had been unconscious but she didn't feel parched or nauseous. Rather, she felt a little hungry.

She gazed around her and realized she was in a bedroom.

It was dark and dingy and there were no windows. The room was illuminated by candlelight and a fireplace was situated near the front of the room its embers crackling in short periodic spurts. It was cold and eerily quiet and Mollie suddenly felt a sharp pang of claustrophobia engulf her.

As she looked down, she noticed that she was dressed in one of those familiar thin white dresses that did little to cover her body and little to retain body heat.

Where was her uniform?

As her eyes scanned the room she spotted a lone figure against the door, the posture stiff and the stance still. It resembled one of those creepy human sized statues that lined the gardens at the front of the house.

Still, silent and colder than a winter's night.

He could see her, that much Mollie knew and she brazenly stared back.

If I'm going to die anyway I might as well go down with a fight.

The tension from their previous encounter was nothing compared to the straining potency between them now. And this time Mollie wouldn't back down.

He slowly approached her, his footsteps imperceptible between the crackling fireplace and soft melodious music, his stare never breaking.

He was gazing down upon her now, his light caramel coloured hair tousled about his forehead and his eyes pale, almost glowing amongst the dark ambiance.

He wore white like he did that day in the dining room, the buttons loose around his neck revealing a peek of his smooth sun-kissed chest. His pants were typical black dress pants that were complimented by tall leather boots that Mollie noticed were typical of equestrians.

He was gazing intensely at her, emanating a dominating aura as he looked down at her, a cold calculating look on his handsome features.

For the first time ever, Mollie could see the blatant resemblance between the youngest Lyon and his father.

Mollie shivered under his gaze despite the heat from the fireplace and could feel the thin fabric of the dress press against her. It stopped just barely over her thighs and she felt more exposed than ever.

However Micah Lyon's eyes never left her face.

"Not a sweet little mouse," he murmured suddenly as his stare intensified.

Mollie's jaw locked and her stare turned into something that resembled pure repulsion.

He smiled when he saw this, dimples deepening, and Mollie wanted nothing more than to slap him.

"You're too capricious for a mouse."

He was musing in a soft voice, almost taunting her, daring her to make a move.

"More like a fawn."

Mollie's fists were clenched and her heart was pounding.

“Skittling away when you see you a predator...yet shaky and unpredictable.”

He must have been referring to their previous encounter and Mollie stared back with deep enmity.

In some other world or distant reality she would have found him incredibly charming but given their current circumstances she wanted nothing more than to wrap her hands around his smooth throat and press as hard and as deeply as she could manage.

He noticed her discomfort as she jerked suddenly at the pain in her leg and his eyes flickered to her ankle.

“Poor fawn had a little accident on the roof,” he said in a mocking tone a smile still playing on the corners of his lips.

“That’s quite an incredulous idea to galivant among the rooftops of my home....did you come up with that yourself?”

Mollie was repulsed by the little nickname he had for her but she kept her mouth firmly shut.

“I find it most endearing that you truly believed you were concealed,” he said slowly brushing a cool finger against her cheek.

“A pretty face like yours doesn’t go unnoticed...”

His voice trailed off and Mollie felt that prickly feeling begin to envelop her.

Had he known along?

He carefully took the towel off of her forehead and gingerly brushed her damp stray curls back. His hands were cold, so cold.

“*Like death,*” she thought as his eyes began to slowly scan the length of her frail body. She wondered how many lives those hands had taken and she suddenly felt sick.

His hand had lingered down to the girl’s chest and was now cupping a breast though her thin white linen. As Mollie glanced up at him she saw that his eyes were fixed on hers.

With a sharp pinch he squeezed a nipple sending a jolt through Mollie’s body and a gasp escaped her lips.

His face was impassive and Mollie was unsure of what was running through his mind. His hand had suddenly drifted back to her face and he slowly parted her lips with his fingers observing her closely.

“Are you thirsty fawn?” he asked, false worry lacing his tone.

Mollie didn’t respond as he slowly walked to the other side of the room to remove a large glass bottle from the cabinet, filled with a dark crimson liquid.

“The blood of his victims,” she thought bitterly as he returned to her side.

In one fluid motion he had poured the contents of the bottle into an ornate silver goblet and held it close to Mollie’s lips.

Mollie pursed her lips in defiance and she saw a predatory smile spread across the prince’s features.

Mollie had no doubt in her mind that drink was either laced with poison or some other gruesome liquid that would bring her to an untimely end.

“Obstinate little thing I see,” he said with a chuckle. His eyes had suddenly darkened as Mollie glared at his face.

“That’s quite alright...I do fancy myself a challenge now and again.”

His breath had come out ragged and Mollie was sickened to see that he appeared slightly aroused from her stubbornness to comply.

With a force she didn’t see coming Micah Lyon compressed her cheeks painfully with his hand eliciting a groan of pain from the frail girl.

“It’s benign I promise,” he said with a smirk as if sensing her reason for not complying.

“I wouldn’t dream of poisoning anyone...that would be too easy don’t you think?”

Mollie suddenly jerked and stared at the prince. How much he knew about her was still up in the air but his comment had irked her beyond all of his other actions so far.

As if proving his truth he brought the goblet to his lips and took a long sip of the dark liquid. The liquid stained his pink lips red and Mollie thought he looked more alien than ever amongst the dark ambiance and candlelit environment.

Cautiously and painfully slow he lowered his head to hers and pressed his lips against her own. His expensive cologne enveloped Mollie and she could smell a strong hint of musk mixed with something more citrusy. It was an interesting combination but it was as alluring as ever. She would have enjoyed the scent, had it been on anyone else but the man standing before her.

Mollie had no room to avert her head on the long sofa that was holding her captive. His lips were cold, like his hands, but they were surprisingly soft and smooth against her own.

For the second time, he pressed her cheeks forcefully, forcing her mouth open, and she felt hot warm liquid enter her mouth as he emptied the contents of the drink from his lips to hers.

She choked as the liquid trickled down her throat and spluttered as he forced her mouth closed, his eyes blank and his grip strong. She could see his muscles straining against his snow white shirt as he forced her to swallow all of what he had given her from his mouth.

She noticed a glint shining from his chest and saw that like his father, he too wore a necklace that was engraved with the Lyon insignia, but unlike his father's, his was gold and sparkled against his bronzed chest.

"A branding," Mollie thought as Micah gazed thoughtfully down at her, his caramel waves tumbling against his now rosy cheeks.

"A lion is always ten steps ahead of its prey," he said quietly after Mollie had painfully swallowed.

And with that he turned on his heel and left the room without a second glance behind him, the candlelight flickering from the passing air, only to become still once again, the wax melting down the cylindrical column like trails of salty tears.

Chapter End Notes

The music is Prelude in D flat major Op.28, No.15 (Raindrop) by Frédéric Chopin

Side Note: It's one of my all time favourite pieces to play on the piano!

Chapter 11: Sodium

Chapter Summary

Mollie begins to understand the true extent of the Lyon Regime as well as the true nature of Micah Lyon.

It had been a little over two weeks since Mollie's last encounter with Micah Lyon and she prayed it would be her last.

Mollie had slowly regained her strength with the help of the kind old servant lady who had been nursing her back to health within the dark recesses of the Lyon's Questershire Manor. She was curt but gentle with Mollie and the girl could tell from the old woman's expression that she was instructed to be so. Her features expressed one of great confliction, especially when Mollie would ask about her whereabouts.

Mollie watched her now as the old woman brought a delicate glass bowl to her lips so Mollie could drink the hot broth inside.

"When can I leave?" she asked quietly.

The woman dropped her gaze and removed the bowl from Mollie's lips.

"When Master Lyon permits it."

Mollie's heart sank when she heard this. She had asked this same question everyday since she first opened her eyes and the answer had remained unchanged.

"But it has been weeks!"

Her anxiety had steadily increased during her stay at the mansion and she was dangerously close to a breakdown. She feared the prince may leave her here forever and Mollie couldn't even begin to fathom what that kind of future would have in store for her.

"Miss me already?"

The soft low voice that Mollie had chosen to forgotten sounded through the room and she whipped her head towards the entrance to the chambers.

The old woman beside her quickly leaped to her feet and curtsied murmuring her greetings.

"I'll take it from here Esperanza," he said brusquely with a wave of his hand, prompting the older woman to shuffle away quickly.

The door closed with a sharp clang that echoed throughout the cold room.

Micah Lyon smirked as he approached Mollie who could now support herself on the hard sofa.

His eyes flitted over her body briefly before he returned his gaze back to her eyes.

“You’re almost as good as new.”

He was dressed rather casually in comparison to how Mollie usually saw him.

He wore a simple white dress shirt with black pants and Mollie could see his cheeks were rather flushed. It appeared as if he had engaged in some recent exertion only moments before.

Her ankle still ached and a constant throb still echoed at the back of her head but she was in much better condition than she was weeks ago.

“Are you ready to speak fawn?”

His eyes were bright and excited, giving off a luminosity of their own, and Mollie could tell he had something to share.

She stared him down ignoring his last question.

“Still refusing to speak?”

He chuckled lowly at this and regarded her with amusement.

Mollie hadn’t expected it, but in a flash he leaned his hand and all of the weight of himself onto her bad leg and she cried out in pain as he pressed down harder, his eyes not showing even the slightest hint of remorse.

“Your name?”

Mollie had felt the pain propagate from her leg to her head and silent tears began to fall from the brim of her eyes.

In a flash Micah removed a gold trimmed dagger from his side pocket and proceeded to point the jagged edge towards Mollie’s neat and still fragile stitches. She had a small but deep laceration where her ankle had met the concrete but it had begun to heal quite well over time.

She glanced up in horror at the prince who had the dagger pressing soft enough into her bruised flesh to not elicit accumulated blood flow, yet hard enough to threaten penetration.

“Mollie,” she gasped as the dagger pressed harder ever so slightly. “Mollie Mayeson.”

He tilted his head to the side observing her closely then slowly began to pull out her status card from his front pocket.

He was just messing with her.

He smiled as he read it his eyes flickering back to hers. Mollie dreaded to think what would have happened had she decided not to tell him the truth.

“Mollie Mae,” he said lovingly.

She watched him remove the dagger from her ankle and walk toward the fireplace at the front of the room. Within minutes he had a fire blazing and casually tossed her status card into the burning logs, the flames curling around her only way of escaping.

“You won’t be needing this anymore.”

She kept her face blank despite the screaming chasm within her as Micah turned to take in her expression. She wouldn’t let him see how much that affected her.

“Let’s get you cleaned up shall we?”

As if she were made of glass, the prince effortlessly lifted her into his arms and together they walked out of the room and into a dark torch lit corridor.

Mollie was confused at his gentle touch considering how he almost threatened to gauge her wound with a dagger only moments before. His transient moods were alarming and Mollie was instantly reminded of her mother.

Mollie was unsure how much time had elapsed since she had arrived, but she knew her mother would know something was up when Mollie didn’t return.

Mollie’s eyes wandered as his cologne engulfed her and her cheek inadvertently pressed against the small expanse of exposed skin on his chest.

Mollie felt him stiffen and didn’t fail to notice how he held her a little farther away after their brief skin on skin contact.

They appeared to be underground and Mollie was shocked to see corridor upon corridor pass her by as the prince expertly navigated his way around the maze-like compound that surrounded them.

Servant upon servant passed them by and Mollie didn’t fail to notice how each one bowed deeply when Micah passed them by. They didn’t seem confused or concerned that the prince was carrying a small injured girl in his arms and Mollie was beginning to understand that the events that occurred within the Lyon residence were somewhat pervasive and a mutual silent understanding extended to all of those involved.

They approached a large mosaic composed door at the end of the corridor and Mollie realized that they had entered a neat, tile encased facility equipped with a porcelain white bathtub in the centre of the room and a series of jets lining the walls. Everything was white and spotless and it made Mollie’s skin prickle with unease.

Micah closed the door sharply behind them, then placed Mollie carefully into the porcelain tub.

Mollie began to protest as he slowly removed her dress but quieted at the brief warning squeeze he gave her wrist as he quickly disposed of the light linen.

Mollie quickly brought her thick curls over her shoulders to conceal her exposed breasts. She had lost so much weight since she first arrived and she had noticed that her breasts seemed smaller and less plump than they usually were.

Micah hadn't said a word since they arrived but his eyes were trained on her as he opened the taps and let the hot water fill the massive tub.

Mollie hadn't moved from her position as the water began to creep its way up her chest and towards her chin. She wasn't sure what was infused within the water but the sweet smell of English pear and freesia filled her nostrils and the steam was obscuring her vision of everything around her, except the man standing above her.

Carefully, he rolled up his sleeves and gently began to rub a fresh smelling soap against Mollie's smooth back. His face remained impassive and cold, but his hands were tender and soft as they circled around her back, her now wet hair sticking to the front of her chest.

She felt something hard and sharp press against her back as he made his rounds along her body with his hands and she noticed he wore a large silver ring on the middle finger of his right hand.

Mollie's breathing was coming out in ragged breaths and she felt goose bumps form along her chest and arms.

When he had finished, he gently pressed her backwards against the cool tub and pulled her wet heavy hair behind her.

Mollie closed her eyes tightly as Micah's hands inched along her body to rub soap along her chest, taking extra time to massage her breasts. His thumbs rippled over her areolas and Mollie squirmed, disturbing the still water surrounding her. He then used his fingers to sharply pull each nipple, firm and pointed from the chilly air and she shuddered involuntarily. As he pulled each peak Mollie opened her eyes and a low moan escaped her throat.

She looked down briefly and saw that the silver ring on his finger was engraved with 3 letters.

M. Z. L.

His initials.

His hands ventured lower beneath the misty water, enveloping her torso and kneading her lower belly, his skin a pale contrast against her own.

In spite of her disgust at the man above her she couldn't help but sigh in pleasure as he loosened the knots in her muscles and the tension in her bones.

Mollie noticed how elegantly and gracefully the prince always seemed to carry himself out and wondered if his regal demeanour was due to nature or nurture. There was something

painfully aristocratic about his features and the way he conducted himself and Mollie couldn't help but feel uneasy at how *unnatural* it was.

His hands were like those of a marble statue. Pale, elegant, and as smooth as a sheen of ice.

His hands slowly began to creep over her thighs and part her long legs in an attempt to expose her closed rosebud that lay concealed and untouched beneath the liquid surface. Mollie began to breathe heavily as his fingers brushed her opening and her fingers and toes began to curl at the sudden sensation.

With skilful dexterity he parted her lower lips and inserted a single finger into her warm wet centre. She writhed sending water splashing over the rim and attempted to close her legs, the sudden foreign penetration igniting a flame in her belly and sending sparks to her fingers and toes.

Her untouched core was tender and smooth and the single finger within her was enough to make her feel full.

Her constant writhing had splashed the prince with water and his shirt was filled with darkened water spots. Mollie noticed he looked rather perplexed and she feared she may have angered him somehow.

Quite abruptly he pulled his fingers away from her core and proceeded to swiftly drain the tub. The feeling had left her breathless and unsatisfied and she suddenly had a foreign urge to use her own fingers to finish herself off.

As he turned around to grab a towel, Mollie had to subdue the wild id in her psychological conscience that was telling her to make a run for it. However Mollie suspected that was exactly what he expected her to do.

Before she could make up her mind, Micah turned around and began to gingerly dry Mollie's damp face.

"You've never been with a man before."

His voice was low and muted and it came out as more of a statement than a question.

Mollie glanced up at him and she noticed his usual playful smirk was replaced with a look of cold calculation. It sent a jolt of fear through her and her eyes flickered to the dagger he kept in his belt pocket.

"I have," she said softly meeting his gaze. "I have been with a man before."

Her voice was husky and ragged from weeks of being unused, but she saw the interest flicker in his gaze as he heard her speak.

He suddenly leaned over her in the tub, closing her in, his knuckles turning white as they gripped the porcelain edges of the tub with immense strength.

He was close enough that she could feel his breath wash over her face, but she could tell he was being careful not to unintentionally touch her again.

His eyes looked her up and down, and Mollie could finally see how clear they really were. It was as if she was staring into a canopy of green and she blinked several times to clear her head of the mesmerizing stare. She had truly never seen eyes so clear and vivid and she wondered where he had gotten such a rare trait. She couldn't remember how the late queen had looked but she was pretty sure her eyes *weren't* green.

Micah had narrowed his eyes ever so slightly as she stared up at him looming over her.

“Liar.”

Without waiting for a response he pulled her to her feet and lifted her in his arms once again, her damp body wrapped in a fluffy towel as he strode out of the bright room.

When they returned to the basement chambers, he slowly eased her to her feet and Mollie quickly clutched the white towel to her chest in an effort to cover herself as best as she could, shooting him a withering glare.

He ignored her as he opened a chest of drawers at the back of the room and began to pull out an exquisite blood red dress woven with a pearl stitched collar and glittering sequins lining the length. It was short and somewhat flared below the waist. It looked rather short for Mollie but she sat still and stiff along the leather sofa as he walked toward her once again, the dress in his arms. It was a highly unusual outfit to choose for someone of her age but she kept silent.

Young adolescents who had not yet reached puberty generally wore dresses that exposed their legs, but women who had reached puberty generally tended to wear fuller length attire. It was a highly idiosyncratic belief within their society but people abided by it. It was one of many mores within the Lyon regime and failure to acquiesce were met with harsh inimical opposition from a higher authority.

As if she were a child, the prince brought her arms up and carefully slipped the dress onto her skinny frame, taking extra care to button up the delicate clasps along the back.

The dress was short, extremely short, and seemed to have been designed to purposefully expose a woman's legs.

It reached her mid-thigh and Mollie felt a little too exposed in it.

Despite the short length it covered everything above her quite extensively with its long lace sleeves and high collar. It was stiff, thick and scratchy especially along the sleeves and Mollie had never worn something so expensive and pretentious in her life.

He turned her around to face him as he took it all in.

“You look lovely in red,” he said quietly as his hands ventured downwards to wrap around her small waist.

She didn’t answer and he lowered his head to plant a small tender kiss on her neck below her ear. His hands moved upwards along the length of her body and he proceeded to fist a handful of her dark hair that fell in waves behind her.

Carefully he parted her hair to the left side bringing her heavy waves forward and proceeding to admire her new look.

“Why are you doing this?” she whispered as he gazed into her eyes, a look of something resembling deep ardour present within them.

Her question was vague but the emotion in her voice and the way her arms trembled when she questioned him signified that it carried a lot more weight.

It was a question of *why*. *Why* was he keeping her here? *Why* had he not killed her yet?

His gaze never faltered as his lips curved into a dark smile.

“Because you are my escort tonight,” he explained, his tone matter of fact.

Mollie looked blankly at him. “What is that? Like a date?” Mollie noticed how his lip twitched at the term.

“I...suppose.” He said rather dryly. “Thus you will dress accordingly.”

“I don’t understand,” she whispered as he reached briefly behind her and opened a dark tube of ruby red lipstick.

He applied the colour to her lips skilfully and assuredly, his eyes trained on her lips and his fingers firm. His thick lashes fluttered as he carefully applied the dark lipstick tracing the outline of her lips and filling them in with thin light strokes.

He gave her a dazzling smile when he finished.

“Press your lips together,” he instructed her quietly.

Out of fear, Mollie acquiesced. She didn’t forget about the sharp dagger loosely attached to his belt and she couldn’t help but glance at it every few minutes.

“Stunning,” he said as he took a step back and critiqued her fully.

His light eyes ran the entire length of her body resting for more time than she would have liked on her breasts.

“In response to your last question, we are dining tonight, and you Mollie Mae are our guest of honour.”

Chapter 12: Magnésium

Chapter Summary

Dinner is served and Mollie gets a special seat at the head table.

Micah had left the room soon after he had prepared her for dinner and told her he'd return momentarily.

He had also told her to call him Master Lyon in his and anyone else's presence from now on, just like the rest of the staff who worked for the Lyons.

As soon as he left Mollie jumped to her feet and began to search the room.

Her ankle still hurt and she had to be careful not to put too much weight on it or accidentally bump it against something. She needed to be at her best if she hoped to escape from captivity.

Of course the door had locked behind the prince but she continued to search through the entire room including the large wardrobe at the front of the room and the bedside tables that lined the long black sofa that had become her permanent residence for the past few weeks.

For the first time Mollie noticed there was no bed in the room, despite it being comprised of all of the usual accessories a bedroom contains.

"They probably don't even last the night," she thought as she regarded the large room before her. She wondered how many souls had come and passed within the Questershire manor and she shuddered as she flipped through rows and rows of expensive women's silks through the wardrobe and drawers.

She even wondered which young woman like herself had worn the very dress that lay upon her body now.

Micah Lyon appeared swiftly and silently, and had Mollie not kept her eyes trained on the entrance she would never have known he was there.

She was beginning to understand the subtle qualities of the youngest prince, or so she hoped, and she realized that every action that succeeded him was implemented with tremendous thought and purpose.

There was a reason he had healed her, a reason he was keeping her alive and Mollie had a gut wrenching premonition of why this was so.

"Come closer fawn."

He stood tall and elegant in his silver woven midnight blue cloak that Mollie was beginning to suspect was a staple constituent of his formal attire. His caramel hair was combed and meticulously parted like his father, to accentuate his elegant features. Despite his tall stance and authoritative aura, the natural blush in his sun kissed cheeks gave to him an air of false boyish innocence.

Mollie was unsure of his age and she wouldn't dare to ask, but he didn't appear much older than herself. However the way he conducted himself in the presence of his royal staff and his father suggested he appeared much older than he looked.

He frowned when she approached him.

Mollie swallowed the dull ache of hunger in her belly and the throbbing in her ankle and took a stance by the prince's side, sulking at her lack of autonomy.

Despite her height he still towered over her and he made a note of tiling his head downwards when addressing her.

"Scowling doesn't compliment your features Mollie Mae," he said sharply raising Mollie's nerves.

"And let me assure you, my family does not take well to rude guests. It would be in your best interest to remain polite and civil."

His eyes were cold as he spoke to her and she nodded diligently slipping her balled up fists behind her back and out of the prince's view.

"If you do address myself, or anyone at the table in a manner they don't deem fit, there will be consequences."

His tone never fluctuated as he directed the looming threat at Mollie and she kept her eyes down as he slipped his arm in hers and began to lead her out of the basement chambers of the mansion.

Mollie felt as if she were walking to her own execution as she and the prince finally made their way towards familiar marble flooring and high ceilings.

She hadn't seen the sun in weeks and she nearly cried at the afternoon rays streaming in through the French glass windows of the residence.

Micah was swift and speedy as he led her to the dining room and his pace and long strides were making her ankle throb dully at the sudden drastic increase in use.

He stopped outside a dark, heavy, elaborately carved door and paused for a brief moment. Mollie looked up at him in confusion as his gaze seemed to penetrate through the closed doors.

"One last thing," he said, his pink lips turned downwards at the sides.

“Do *not* speak unless spoken to.”

She remained quiet for a moment, childishly turning her head away as if to attempt to separate herself from the closeness of their bodies.

If there was one thing Mollie couldn't stand it was having a finger pointed at her face.

In seconds he grabbed her cheeks forcefully in his hand and jerked her head upwards so her wide brown eyes met his pale green orbs.

That was a poor mistake on her part and tears prickled on the edge of her eyes as his fingers dug painfully into the sides of her cheeks.

“Did I make myself clear Mollie?”

He had *never* used her name so bluntly before and she felt her stomach flop as he stared at her, carefully gauging her reaction.

“Y-Yes,” she stammered as his gaze remained placid and unchanged despite the growing pressure from his fingers.

His fingers dug harder and the tears began to fall onto her cheeks. She quickly remembered her mistake and tried her best to placate the unhinged man standing before her.

“Yes Master Lyon.”

Immediately his grip loosened and his hand curled loosely along her cheek in a fake parody of affection. He thumbed her stray tears away and proceeded to free her trembling bottom lip from her top teeth.

Little did he know they were trembling in response to the hate boiling up inside of her.

His eyes remained pools of blank impassiveness and abruptly he turned forward towards the door and steered her inside.

The first thing Mollie felt was a deep arctic chill that seeped into her bones and froze her insides solid.

The room was definitely a few degrees colder than the foyer and immediately Mollie felt goosebumps erupt along her long exposed legs. She also felt a dozen eyes land on her and tried to keep her breathing regular as murmurs of respectful greetings circulated around the room from all members of the table to welcome their youngest prince.

The table was lavishly decorated as usual but Mollie avoided eye contact with everyone seated at the table.

With a curt nod of acknowledgment to his guests, Micah led her towards the two vacant chairs at the end of the table.

Mollie was plopped down harshly by the prince as if she were cargo being loaded onto a bustling conveyor belt, and her back hit the wooden chair hard. She scowled as Micah lowered himself gracefully into his chair his cloak billowing around him and a painful feeling of envy engulfed her. His elegance was truly unparalleled.

Micah seemed cold and as distant as ever when the dinner officially began, barely acknowledging Mollie beside him as he reached for a goblet and began to pour himself a glass of red wine. The smell of fresh baked bread and an array of exotic spices began to filter slowly into the room and Mollie's stomach rumbled at the pleasant odours. Although an incredulous number of fine dishes lined the table, concealing the red tablecloth that lay underneath, Mollie had enough sense to keep her hands to herself and her gaze down.

Mollie's ears perked up at the conversation and she quickly allowed herself to glance up along the table. She noticed immediately that the seat at the head of the table was absent and she wondered where Hartley Lyon could be. She had assumed he would be here... but then again, she didn't think her presence was of *that* much importance, especially to someone of his status.

It was full of men and Mollie recognized the blond one named Logan seated beside the head of the table. She remembered him clearly from her previous experience in this room and she felt ill. She wondered if all of the men at this table were Lyons or family members of the Lyons, as she had never seen any of them within the press or media growing up.

The conversation had transitioned into agriculture and most of what was being said was foreign to Mollie. Nonetheless she kept her ears perked and her eyes sharp as she stole another glance upwards.

Her eyes were met with dark brown irises that drew her into its bottomless depths and left her feeling empty and cold. James Lyon was seated directly across from her and she realized with a sickening lurch that he had been observing her the entire time.

His eyes narrowed as she looked at him and she frightfully dropped her gaze. Mollie had felt fear since she had arrived at the Lyon residence, but no one elicited a more primal flight or fight response within her than James Lyon.

Her mother would often say that some people were born bad eggs while others were cracked along the way by a higher power who abused their privilege of cultivation.

Mollie had never met the eldest prince but she couldn't help but shake the feeling that he was simply a bad egg.

"Come now Micah," a deep and slurred voice called out from the opposite end of the table. "Since when did you start keeping little pets?"

Mollie could feel the chill in the air as the voices began to quiet. She could feel James' and a multitude of other eyes flicker over to her and Micah but she kept her gaze down like the docile, obedient slave the prince warned her to be.

“He’s becoming a real man now,” another voice called out from the end of the table. An echo of laughter ensued yet Micah remained calm and unperturbed beside Mollie, swirling the bloody wine in his goblet and studiously ignoring the conversation at the end of the table.

“Was she a good fuck?” a different voice called out from the end of the table.

Mollie felt her stomach drop to the floor and what little hunger she did feel instantly dissipated. She didn’t fail to notice how the prince’s knuckles tightened after the question that was thrown at him from across the room.

In spite of his cool stance beside her he smiled and turned his head slightly to the right to address the man on the other side of the room.

“What happens in a man’s chambers stays in a man’s chambers wouldn’t you agree?”

The men chuckled as Micah elegantly brought his goblet to his lips and sipped his wine. Mollie noticed that the grip on his glass never loosened despite the change in conversation.

“Spoken like a true gentleman baby brother.”

The laughter once again died down and the aura of uneasiness in the room slowly began its ascent.

Mollie had suspected the voice of the eldest Lyon to sound as deep and as snakelike as his fathers and she was certainly not disappointed.

“Enlighten us,” James continued with a wave of his hand. Mollie noticed he too wore a ring, several rings, on his fingers and she squirmed in her seat in spite of herself.

“Where did you find such a...peculiar little thing?” he mused turning his dark gaze towards Mollie. “I would have certainly recognized it from my shipment.”

For the first time that night Micah turned his steely gaze toward her and regarded her with something that resembled cool appraisal.

“She is quite peculiar isn’t she?” He said, his tone somewhat breathless.

The table murmured in agreement and Mollie suddenly felt bare and defenceless among the many men that surrounded her in the chilly room.

Micah brought his cold hand toward her cheek and proceeded to tuck her dark curls behind her ear. The liquid green in his eyes solidified ever so slightly and Mollie couldn’t help but feel an odd sense of comfort at the casual gesture.

“No,” she thought as he turned his gaze back to the table. “*He IS the enemy.*” What was she even thinking? Her prolonged state of hunger and thirst must have been affecting her mental cognition.

The dinner dragged on and on and Mollie was feeling tired and groggy from lack of food and the prolonged pain in her ankle. It was a torturous feeling to be present in a room full of fine

dishes and delicacies and be forbidden from indulging in any of it. Although the pleasant displays before her assaulted her senses and sent her tongue salivating, she was forced to swallow her saliva and appear unaffected.

On top of that, she was on edge each time a new conversation erupted and half expected some sick display of vulgarity to occur and interrupt the proceedings of the night. She still remembered the flowing stream of milk that fell in rivulets down the pale slave's chest as she willingly offered herself to the table full of men....

"Is this all there is?" the man named Logan called out as the last few servants removed the untouched food from the table.

"Patience Logan," another man called out. "These things take time."

The man named Logan looked frustrated and Mollie wondered what could possibly cause the grown man to throw such a tantrum.

Mollie was too nervous to make eye contact with anyone and she could still feel the hair tingling eyes of James Lyon on her every time she moved even the slightest inch.

"He used to be lactose-intolerant, have pity on him."

Mollie was surprised to hear the voice come from the middle Lyon who sat casually next to his older brother and another girl Mollie hadn't noticed before. Mollie assumed she must be another one of their female properties, but she did feel a strange sense of comfort knowing there was another female in the room besides her.

The room erupted in a series of laughter and Mollie noticed the man named Logan shoot Rowan Lyon a murderous glare.

"At least I take pleasure from the luxuries bestowed upon me from the *female* body."

Rowan Lyon smiled at this and proceeded to raise his goblet in the air. If Mollie hadn't know any better, she would have assumed the blond man was trying to insult the middle Lyon based on his stance and accusatory tone.

"We each have our own tastes, some slightly more elevated than others."

Logan openly glared at Rowan who unabashedly used his fingers to slip 3 large grapes off the table into his mouth.

Mollie also noticed how, ever so fleetingly, Micah cracked a smile before his face returned to one of utter blankness.

Logan suddenly laughed, a high pitched, eerie and gut wrenching sound that Mollie wished would end at once.

"Oh Rowan, you certainly do know how to please a man," he continued between sharp bursts of breathless chuckles.

“My cock is simply straining at the thought.”

Voices began to overtake the voice of the ostentatious blond man who had begun to furiously down the drink in his right hand.

Mollie wanted nothing more than to disappear from the revolting display before her and never return.

As if on cue, Logan’s blue eyes flickered towards Mollie and a primal and instinctual response welled up inside the young girl as the man leered at her, his expression one of conspicuous arousal. It was as if he hadn’t noticed her presence at the table till now.

“Ah yes,” he sighed, his eyes pinned on Mollie.

“My cock is simply *straining* at the thought.”

Chapter 13: Aluminium

Chapter Summary

Mollie pushes her limits and realizes there's more to the prince than meets the eye.

Mollie had despised him when she first laid eyes on the man and her feelings toward Logan had only intensified since then.

There was something animalistic about him that tipped Mollie over the edge.

“I have a brilliant idea,” he said suddenly his blue eyes blazing with delight.

“Xi, my dear, show our newest guest how it’s done.”

Mollie was bewildered as the people at the table began to stir excitedly in their seats. Dread filled her stomach when she saw that familiar menacing crooked smile spread across James Lyon’s face.

This can't be good.

Micah said nothing as the young girl beside Rowan began to walk towards Mollie, the thin pale pink wrap on her body doing little to contain her assets.

Logan had leaned across the table at this point, his gaze locked on Mollie and the girl beside her.

The girl was petite and extremely beautiful with hair so silver it glinted in the candlelit room. Her skin was pale and complimented by rosy pink cheeks. She looked like a porcelain doll and Mollie stared up at her as she placed a gentle snow white hand on her shoulder.

“What are you waiting for?” James breathed. His dark eyes fixed on the blonde woman beside Mollie. “Put on your best show.”

On cue, the blonde girl unzipped her pale pink slip in one fluid motion and yanked Mollie’s head toward her own.

Mollie gasped as the woman’s hot mouth enveloped her own. Mollie was caught unaware and she squirmed as the girl snaked her hands along Mollie’s neck. Mollie felt the girl’s warm tongue enter her mouth to entwine with her own and she groaned as the girl proceeded to squeeze her clothed breasts.

Mollie could hear the distant sound of laughter behind her and abruptly the girl let her go with a giggle.

The girl's hand ventured towards Mollie's exposed thighs to the space between her legs. Micah had not provided her with panties and the girl sighed in Mollie's ears as her fingers brushed her opening. Quick as a wink she removed her fingers and raised them high in the air so the entire table could see the juices leaking down her fingers above from Mollie's mortified face.

Mollie was breathless and humiliated as she looked upwards at the dozens of eyes on her.

James Lyon looked pleased, while Rowan looked on between her and the girl in disgust at the display that had just taken place.

She was still catching her breath and as she turned towards Micah she noted his locked jaw and irritated expression. He certainly didn't look pleased and she felt uneasiness spread through her.

"You can tell a lot about a person from their first kiss," James said quietly. Mollie was surprised to see that his eyes were locked on Micah when he said this and she shivered.

The girl had condescendingly brushed Mollie's cheek then proceeded to shoot Micah a dazzling smile. He didn't even acknowledge her as he stared down his older brother, a look of blank and utter calmness on his fine features. The girl looked put out as she slipped back into her dress and padded back to her seat, disappointment flooding her face. Mollie felt a pang of satisfaction at this but kept her gaze locked on her hands.

"Fuck!"

She shivered as she heard the breathless moan from Logan across the table and she felt ready to puke. She knew what he was doing underneath the table after her little display with the blonde and the disgust was hard to conceal on her face.

"We're going."

Micah's voice was colder than snow and Mollie immediately jumped to her feet.

Without a second glance he gripped her arm, harder than she found comfortable and she was pulled roughly out of the room. She could feel the eyes of the eldest Lyon burning a whole into her back as she exited and she all but fled the room.

Micah hadn't stopped pulling her until they had burst into a quaint parlour after several twists and turns. Even after several weeks at the manor, Mollie was still as lost as ever.

The door slammed shut behind them and Micah finally let her go taking several strides forward to lean against the dark granite table facing a wide window. The window held the view of a large and treacherous cliff in the distance and something about the angle from her perspective made Mollie feel a surge of trepidation.

Micah's shoulders were heaving with heavy breaths but his back was to her and she couldn't deduce his expression.

As she glanced around the room she caught sight of her reflection in a round scallop trimmed mirror against the wall. She froze when she saw herself.

Her dark tresses were teased and voluminous around her shoulders and her cheeks were pink with exertion or perhaps residual embarrassment. Her dress had creases along the bottom and she could see glistening smears of vaginal juices along her thighs. Her lipstick had smeared across her lips giving her a slightly hysterical appearance and she couldn't help but look at herself with utter repulsion and despair.

No different from a common prostitute.

Her mother's face suddenly appeared before her in the mirror and she averted her gaze quickly. She was unable to separate herself from the entity that appeared in her mother's form and she felt physically ill.

"Master Lyon?"

Her voice sounded small even to her and she cringed as her voice echoed through the silent room.

Her arms were crossed around her body to conserve heat in the chilly room and Micah hadn't moved an inch since they entered.

He slowly turned around when she spoke, his face blank and his posture stiff.

"I have to pee," she lied fiddling with the hem of her dress. In reality she felt miserable and she needed time alone. Away from the person who had caused her unimaginable public humiliation and shame.

He seemed to look through her for a moment before he finally acknowledged her and Mollie wondered what...or *who* he was seeing. He didn't seem at all psychologically present.

"The door on the left," he said emotionlessly before turning back around to lean over the table, his gaze fixed on the setting sun outside.

Mollie shuffled quickly to the door and made a move to close it before the prince intervened.

"Leave it open."

Mollie sighed in annoyance and she noticed Micah turn his head ever so slightly at the sound.

Thankfully the lavatory was out of view of the prince and Mollie used what little time she had to clean herself up. She held her hands to her mouth and sobbed silently sinking to her knees.

A sharp knock at the door made her jump and she noticed Micah Lyon standing in the doorway watching her as she wiped her thighs clean of the offensive juices that had leaked down her legs.

Silently he entered and Mollie recoiled taking a step back. He paused when she did so and looked her in the eye.

Mollie wasn't quite sure what came over her, but in that moment she saw an opportunity she couldn't miss and she went for it.

As if to step closer to Micah she lunged for his torso knocking him off balance for a moment and managed to free the dagger from his belt.

His breath released in a sharp huff of surprise and she thrust her hands outward to block him from any further advances.

Although she had surprised him, his reflexes were much stronger than she anticipated and his other hand grasped her wrist holding the dagger in an iron grip before she could retract her arm.

Quickly she twisted herself counter clockwise and managed to free her right hand and deliver a single sharp slap across the prince's cheek.

His head jerked sideways from the slap and Mollie froze when she realized what she had done.

Tantalizingly slow, the prince brought his head back, his wavy hair coming loose from the momentum of her palm, and his eyes blazing like the pitted depths of Hades lair.

She had lost her hold on the dagger in their scuffle and she looked down in terror to see the prince clutching the blade from the blade's end, his fists flexed in suppressed anger, and the edge cutting into his flesh like butter as blood dripped down his hand.

"You have quite a nerve to lay your filthy hands on royal blood," he seethed proceeding to take his bloody hand and clutch it around her neck.

Had his grip *not* been so tight maybe she would have been able to scream.

She could only see the fire blazing in his eyes as his grip began to tighten. She spluttered and coughed as she tried to move but he had her enclosed within the small space.

This is it. This is how he'll end me.

As she squeezed her eyes tight and her circulation began to cut off she realized that he had wrapped something thin and cold around her neck and she opened her eyes in fear, fresh tears falling down her cheeks.

He had removed his hand from her neck and as she looked down she could see the smears of his blood all along her neck and shoulders.

He moved in closer to her and she stilled. She knew she had pushed it and she knew that at this moment, he *did* hold all the power.

Micah was stiff and shaking almost imperceptibly, and his expression was one of absolute lividity.

“If you’re going to act like a feral uncultured streetwhore, then I’ll treat you like a feral uncultured streetwhore.”

His voice was a stark contrast from his usual playful lilt and for the first time she did regard the prince with raw primal fear.

With a jerk Mollie was brought forward harshly onto her knees and half dragged as Micah pulled on her neck hard with the thin wire. The wire bit into her flesh to create more warm droplets of crimson to mix with the dried blood already on her neck.

His pace was relentless and the more she screamed and cried the harder he pulled. Mollie wondered if he was simply parading the mansion back and forth to prolong her pain and humiliation or if he really was leading her somewhere.

“Please, Master Lyon,” she cried as her knees dragged across more hard stone and her legs left a trail of blood against the white marble floors.

He didn’t even glance back at her as he dragged her up a flight of stairs her nails digging into the floorboards as he walked on elegantly and completely undisturbed.

The pain went on and on and Mollie’s knees were screaming in protest as she clawed at the thin material around her neck.

He stopped suddenly pushing open a smooth heavy arched doorway and Mollie staggered inside, her knees bleeding, her heart pounding, and her eyes streaming. Her knees met soft carpet and she huddled against herself crying quietly.

The door closed with a sharp sound and as Mollie looked around, she realized they were in a grand chamber with walls the colour of the deep sea and carpets the colour of darkened slate.

Everything felt dark and cold, and like most of the rooms in the manor, there were no windows.

She had always believed the lack of windows was a precaution to keep people out but the longer she stayed at the Questershire manor the more she realized it was a precaution to keep people *in*.

Mollie couldn’t help but sob at her predicament.

What did I ever do to deserve this?

She had been good. She had never treated anyone wrong, she had never stolen, she had never killed, she had looked after her only living relative under the most dire of circumstances.

Yet life still decided that she didn’t deserve anything more than the status of a slave and the title of a whore.

Micah began to walk toward Mollie slowly, his glistening dark boots catching the candlelight as he stood in front of her, his knees in line with her eyes.

The opulent dress he had chosen for Mollie was ruined due to his harsh treatment, the beads having fallen off and the intricately woven silks in unwoven tatters. The bottom was stained with blood like the rest of Mollie's skin.

Mollie was breathing heavily through her nose, trying her best to hold in her sobs as the prince slowly lowered himself down until he was crouching in front of her.

With a snap he released the choke hold around her neck and she gulped down as much air as she could muster.

He watched her as she eventually regulated her breathing, one hand clutched around her throat where Mollie could feel a thin clean cut around her neck.

"You just don't know when to draw the line do you?" He murmured. His eyes were blank and glimmering in the candlelit room.

"Did you seriously think you would be able to disarm me?"

His tone was incredulous and he was staring her down as if Mollie were the one who were completely out of her mind.

It was as if this entire situation was comical to him.

"I've been sparring since I was three years old fawn," he said quietly his face in level with Mollie's.

Sparring?

"You're little trick down there was...compelling."

He was looking at her thoughtfully.

"Don't get me wrong Mollie Mae, I like being kept on my guard. It keeps things interesting."

He was musing and Mollie was staring at him, inflicting as much hatred in her stare as she could muster. He obviously didn't care as he continued looking at her in an adoring manner.

"But that doesn't mean I won't punish you for overstepping your boundaries."

His voice was quiet despite the looming threat in his tone.

He reached out with his hand, and wiped her smudged lipstick from her bottom lip and Mollie resisted the urge to bite down on his fingers.

He then gracefully stood up and brushed his cloak behind him.

“I think you fit in well here Mollie Mae,” Micah said with a smirk looking down at her. “You’re just full of surprises.”

His tone was somewhat mocking but Mollie was too injured and fatigued to respond.

“Esperanza will come see to you.”

As he turned for the door he paused with his hand on the handle. His back was turned to her so that his expensive silver woven cloak was on full display.

“I don’t like seeing you like this,” he said quietly, his back facing her. “Despite what you may think.”

Mollie clenched her teeth and continued glaring at him from behind.

Bullshit.

“So be more wise with your decisions next time you implement them.”

With a sharp snap the door closed and Mollie was left in the chambers of her enemy, simply itching for a way to retaliate.

Mollie wasn’t a fan of her new location but it was much better than dark basement chambers that she previously called her temporary residence.

Her new place had an actual four poster bed and a connecting lavatory equipped with the most expensive soaps and toiletries Mollie had ever seen.

Micah had told her that he expected her to take care of herself and Mollie wondered if he had ever taken anyone to the upstairs quarters before.

She hadn’t seen any of the girls from the basement since her first day and Mollie hoped that young Zeta was okay. The young girl had made a huge impression on Mollie and she wanted to see her again.

On a better note, her wounds were slowly healing and she was now able to run following her ankle injury.

Mollie had Esperanza to thank for that.

Mollie quickly figured out that the prince was fond of the servant taking care of her.

He didn’t ignore her like he did the other servants and he always addressed the older woman head on, which was against the protocol of a royal servant relationship.

Mollie didn’t agree with a lot of what the woman stood for but she understood her predicament. Esperanza seemed taken aback when she first saw Mollie in the room with the prince but she quickly recovered and completed her tasks.

The prince hadn't touched Mollie since he had physically dragged her across the floors of the manor but he came in to check on her everyday, even if it was only for a brief moment. He didn't speak, and his expression was always blank.

Mollie couldn't help but feel the prince was planning something, something sinister and she felt as if she were living on borrowed time.

He didn't invite her for dinner with his family again nor did he mention them in her presence.

Mollie grew desperately lonely as the days passed by and she would often talk to Esperanza who was the only other soul she ever saw apart from occasional surveillance from Micah.

The older woman would ignore her when she asked questions so Mollie had resorted to speaking to her.

She would tell the woman about the bakery, about her grandparents, and about her life before they passed.

Mollie was careful to leave out personal details including her feelings and attitudes as she didn't doubt the woman relayed information to Micah.

But Mollie knew if she continued her stance of silence, the cabin fever would engulf her and she would slowly lose her sanity with each passing day.

It was a particularly late time in the evening when Esperanza walked in carrying in a simple but elegant black gown in her arms for Mollie to wear.

Mollie had been on the carpet, re-reading a book from the little library in the room as she had zipped through every book the library had to offer weeks ago.

"You are to follow me downstairs when you are dressed."

Mollie's eyes snapped up in surprise and she quickly scrambled to her feet.

"I can leave the room?" she whispered. She wondered if the woman was playing some cruel joke on her but Esperanza had never ever done such a thing in the past and she doubted she would start now.

The older woman nodded.

"Master Lyon requests your presence."

Mollie rolled her eyes. She despised being summoned and treated like his property, but she had no choice but to subdue her bubbling anger.

Mollie had never dressed herself faster and as soon as she was ready she took the woman's arm and proceeded to exit the chambers.

As they descended a flight of stairs Mollie realized that everything around them was silent, as if there was no one else living in the manor.

Mollie certainly hoped this was the case.

As they walked towards their destination Mollie recognized the door in front of her and realized they were back to the parlour room.

She cringed as she remembered what had happened weeks earlier and took a deep breath before they entered.

When Mollie's eyes met Micah's her stomach flopped and her cheeks flared.

He was in all black like her, his hair combed and styled to perfection. He had a charming smile on his face with his hands resting lightly in his coat pockets draped stylishly over his waistcoat. Mollie was drawn to the patterned expensive ascot around his throat that completed his regal persona.

He looked breathtaking and Mollie found it hard to look away. The candlelight emanated a yellow tone to the air making his caramel hair appear more gold than usual and his eyes more bright and luminous.

He's only pretty on the outside.

She didn't smile back as Esperanza slowly left the room allowing a soft breeze to flicker the candles surrounding them.

He looked pleased with the outfit she had on which featured a thigh high split on the side to expose her long legs. The bodice was tight fitting, highlighting her slender waist and the scallop trimmed strapless top gave her an air of sophistication and maturity. The older woman had also tied her long thick hair into a low demure bun to compliment her slender shoulders and collarbone.

The entire outfit made her look womanly and elite.

Micah had opted for patent leather dress shoes instead of his usual riding boots and she shivered as he walked closer to her.

The last time he had touched her had been in a moment of aggression and anger and she flinched at the memory.

He stood in front of her and carefully tucked a stray curl behind her ear.

"Black certainly looks good on you Mollie Mae."

She frowned as he gently took her arm in his and led her to a long table filled with food and delicacies.

The room was empty apart from the two of them and Mollie wandered why there were no royal guards in the room.

"That you can see," she thought bitterly as he gracefully set her into the chair.

She wondered why he was being so gentle with her and she watched as he elegantly walked to the middle of the table and reached for an ornate dish.

Mollie watched him closely as he proceeded to fill the plate with the food that lined the table. She still hadn't come to any definitive conclusions about Micah Lyon but so far she knew he was different from his family members.

He seemed more alive today, his mouth turned up in a charming smile and his cheeks more rosy than she had ever seen them before. She wondered if it had anything to do with the manor being empty.

He walked toward her and carefully pushed the full plate down in front of her.

Mollie watched as he returned to his seat and reached for a goblet to pour himself a glass of whiskey.

His eyes met hers and she swallowed uneasily.

The room was filled with the warm inviting scent of expensive spices and seasoned breads but Mollie found it difficult to give in to her hunger.

Food had always been sent with Esperanza when in her quarters and she was used to dining alone. Yet to dine one on one with the prince so abruptly was a surprise to her and the girl didn't know quite what to make of it.

"Eat Mollie Mae," he said giving her another charming smile. "You're frailty is concerning."

Mollie looked down at her plate then up at the prince who only had a single goblet of whiskey in front of him.

"Why aren't you eating?"

She hadn't touched her plate yet and she was instantly suspicious.

He smiled at her and his green eyes flickered down to her plate.

"Don't you worry about me," he murmured taking another sip of his drink.

Mollie looked down at her plate and remembered what he had told her before.

"I wouldn't dream of poisoning anyone...that would be too easy don't you think?"

Mollie could tell he was waiting for her to proceed so she began to eat, bringing the first bite to her mouth.

A savoury flavour filled her tongue and she almost sighed in pleasure at how *delicious* the food was. Mollie had *never* eaten anything so opulent and she made sure to pace herself as she worked through her meal.

She was used to making high quality meals at the bakery back home, but it was strictly for her clients. The ingredients were simply too expensive for primary citizens to indulge in.

Micah was watching her from across the table, a contemplating look on his face.

She ate as much as she could and finally put her fork down. He had filled her plate completely and she couldn't manage another morsel.

He slowly got up as she finished and carefully took her plate away.

"Red or white?"

Mollie looked up blankly at him.

"Pardon?"

He laughed and Mollie scowled at him. She didn't trust him and she wasn't about to any time soon either.

"I'm referring to the wine," he clarified. "Most people have a preference."

Mollie stared at him as he walked over to the stainless steel fridge adjacent from them. Gingerly he pulled out a glass bottle and brought it to the table.

"I've never..." she trailed off staring at the bottle.

Wine was a luxury of the wealthy. A staple on the dinner table for Quaternary citizens and royalty. There was no way Mollie would have ever had access to something so extravagant. Surely he knew this?

He looked down at the bottle briefly then swiftly poured 2 glasses, one of red and one of white.

He walked towards her slowly 2 glasses in his hands and held them out for her to try.

She looked at his placid expression before carefully taking the lighter beverage from his hand. She was on edge and she noticed that he strangely seemed extremely at ease. However she knew he was unpredictable and she hoped maybe...if she played her cards right, she could actually find out more about the Lyons and their hidden agenda.

She brought the cool glass to her lips and took a small sip. A fruity blossoming taste assaulted her taste buds and she gently laid the glass down on the table. She didn't mind that one.

She took the other glass from his waiting hand and did the same. A bitter more acidic taste hit her and she quickly scrunched her face in displeasure. She noticed how Micah laughed when she did this and she couldn't help but stare at him in confusion.

Was this really the same person that had mocked her...abused her...humiliated her?

He was a different person, confident, playful, and...seemingly content. Her confusion only increased and if anything it left her feeling more uncertain than ever before.

She gently put the glass with the red wine down and turned to look at him. He had opted for a glass of red wine for himself and stood near the bar his eyes already on her.

“Master Lyon...may I ask you something?”

Something flashed in his eyes when he turned them to Mollie but as quickly as it appeared, his curtain of blankness returned.

“You may, but there’s no guarantee I can answer.”

He proceeded to walk back to the other end of the table and sit back down. His hands rested lightly on the table yet his posture remained stiff and elegant.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she whispered looking up at him. “Why keep me hostage here?”

His expression of placidity never wavered but he did smile for a brief moment as he lightly tapped his fingers against the wine glass. The sound reverberated around the quiet room and Mollie was beginning to feel her palms sweat. She prayed her question wouldn’t trigger him.

“That’s two questions fawn,” he said with a faint smile.

Shoot. He really didn’t miss a thing.

Mollie thought back to the girls in the basement, sleeping on hard floors and surviving on rationed meals. Before she could even comprehend what she was doing she let the question slip from her lips.

“What are you doing with those girls in the basement?”

The prince’s expression didn’t change despite the aggressive manner in which she asked her question.

He paused for a moment before proceeding.

“Conducting business,” he said simply taking another sip of his wine.

His apathy infuriated her and she could feel her fists clench beneath the table. She paused and waited for him to elaborate but he never did. He continued sipping his wine and looking at her with his cold calculated gaze.

“Your family is fucked up.”

She had been itching to tell that to his face since her first confrontation with him and she felt some of her anger dissipate after the release.

He smiled when she said this and his reaction irritated her.

“All families have their share of anomalies,” he said courtly.

“Is that what you call it?” she could feel the blood rush through her cheeks and her anger beginning to rise.

“I saw what you did to that girl in the dining room,” she spat. “I saw how you used her to fulfil your fucked up fantasies.”

His lips tightened when she said this and she could see that she had slightly touched a nerve.

“There’s nothing wrong with worshipping the body of a woman.”

He had stood up suddenly and began making his way toward Mollie. She tensed and reached for the table only to find that he had already removed the cutlery when he took her plate away. She should have grabbed the bloody knife while she had the chance.

“Let me show you,” he breathed as he walked to the chair behind Mollie.

The girl felt a shiver down her spine as the prince brought his cold hand to her neck. The scar was still etched into her skin from when he had dragged her weeks before and he gently brushed his fingers along it.

“He branded me,” she thought feeling the contents of her stomach roil.

The temperature of the room was warm and his hands were a cooling sensation as they travelled down her exposed neck to her shoulders. Gently he brought his hands underneath her arms and lifted her to her feet.

She had on shiny black heels and she realized that she stood almost to his height as he faced her to him. Their bodies were in line, chest to chest, torso to torso, ankle to ankle.

He reached forward and pulled her hair free so her wavy locks fell free along her back. She heard him groan when he did so and slowly, he brought his head downwards to nestle against her neck.

“So beautiful,” he murmured against her skin. She stood frozen to the spot as one of the most powerful men in the country planted soft kisses along her neck to her earlobe. His hands had ventured downwards to hold her waist and he quickly caught her earlobe between his teeth giving it a sharp tug.

“Stop.”

Mollie’s voice wavered. He ignored her and brought her close to his chest enveloping her in his warmth. The familiar smell of his citrus-musky cologne filled her nose and she trembled as Micah continued to kiss downwards, his lips getting dangerously close to her breasts.

With a sharp tug he pulled the top of her gown down freeing a round breast. She squirmed in an attempt to free herself but his grip was impossibly strong.

With a gasp from Mollie, Micah pushed her onto the dining table pulling the gown down to her navel and using his hands to cup her mounds as he breathed in the scent of her chest, his nose brushing her skin.

“Please.”

She was fighting with all her might to keep him off but this only seemed to fuel his hunger for her.

His fingers pinched her tightened nubs and she gasped as the sensation sent heat spreading through her torso towards her heated core.

His thick wavy hair brushed across her chin and she couldn't help but marvel at its lustrous texture.

With a speed she didn't think possible his eyes met hers and his lips followed suit forcing Mollie to cooperate.

His lips tasted bitter, like the red wine she had sampled and he slowly let his tongue entwine with hers. He kissed her deeply his fingers continuing to twist and pull her hardened nipples and she gasped against his lips. He smiled against her mouth as he felt her skin flush and her breathing increase.

“Please!” she gasped, the heat of their moment making her feel faint.

She didn't want this. She didn't want any of it, especially not with Micah Lyon.

“Please what?”

His lips had ventured from her mouth down to her breasts and he slowly closed his mouth over her rock hard nipple teasing the bud between his teeth and swirling his tongue in tantalizing motions.

She moaned as his hands ventured beneath her dress to slide along her exposed leg between the slit of her dress, his ring a cool sensation against her blazing skin.

She didn't know what she was begging for. His sucking had her legs trembling and her cheeks flaring and she couldn't bring herself to think straight.

His fingers inched further up her leg to the secret place between her thighs where the heat of their moment had caused an accumulation of a substantial amount of moisture.

He smiled against her breast as his fingers expertly twisted her panties aside to press the circular button beneath her hood.

“No,” she protested as he inserted his fingers inside of her. The motion sent her jerking against the table and she felt her elbows hit the wood hard. As his fingers twisted between her folds she could feel the orgasm building within her and against her hardest efforts she couldn't seem to dissipate the building climax.

With a high pitched moan she came beneath the prince her gasping transitioning into moans as the prince sucked her neck, leaving dark bruises against her bronzed skin.

She had given up trying to push him off of her and she lay exhausted and utterly spent along the table, her dress pooling to the floor as she lay on the dinner table in nothing but her thin soaked panties. He slowly removed his fingers from within her and she moaned with her eyes shut tight at the peculiar sensation.

He was panting on top of her and she could feel a hard heavy object poking against her torso as she writhed beneath the prince.

Gently she felt the prince insert his fingers into her mouth and she could do nothing but allow him to proceed.

A sharp tangy flavour filled her mouth as she tasted herself on her tongue. Micah sighed against her neck as he slowly removed his fingers from her mouth.

“See how sweet you taste?” he murmured brushing soft affectionate kisses against her neck.

She could barely keep her eyes open as the prince began to delicately slide the elegant black dress back onto her lithe body.

“Mollie Mae,” he whispered against her as he picked her up into his arms.

The last thing that filled her vision were shades of pale green as she fell into a deep slumber against the youngest member of the family she was compelled to destroy.

Chapter 14: Silicium

Chapter Summary

Mollie probes deeper into the history of the Lyon family. Mollie also confirms her suspicions about the eldest Lyon.

Mollie woke up to warm streaming sunlight and soft silk bedsheets. It was the first dreamless night she had spent in the manor and she stretched and brushed her thick messy curls from her face.

She shot up when she remembered the events from last night and she blushed in spite of herself.

She was back in her chambers and she couldn't quite remember how she had gotten there following dinner.

She looked down to see herself in a delicate pink slip dress that did little to cover her thighs.

She didn't change herself into these clothes...

She began to hyperventilate as she felt the small bruises on her neck from where the prince had used his teeth to suck on her most sensitive area.

Had he...Had he slept with her?

Reflexively, she closed her legs but felt nothing out of the ordinary. Perhaps she was jumping to conclusions?

The door opened and she stared at the door as Esperanza walked in slowly. Mollie breathed a sigh relief and she untangled herself from the dark bedsheets.

The woman appeared to have more creases lining on her face and she appeared on edge.

"Master Lyon has permitted me to take you outside for some fresh air."

Esperanza laid out a simple peach dress for Mollie to wear and Mollie watched as she shuffled about the room for some time.

By the time Mollie was dressed and presentable, the older woman was ready to accompany her and together they made their way down the grand staircase to the main level.

Mollie looked around her in search of the prince but the manor appeared as it always had to Mollie, empty and silent.

“Where is Master Lyon?” she asked as the woman gripped her arm lightly and steered her towards the gardens.

Esperanza looked sharply at her and she wondered why the woman appeared so flustered.

“Master Lyon had business to attend to in the North.”

So he wasn't here.

Mollie nodded and kept her arm locked with Esperanza as they walked the gardens together. The gardens must have extended over several acres and she stared in awe at the lush greenery that surrounded them. Each hedge was artfully complete with its own arched rosebushes and a centrepiece of various fountains of flowing water to hydrate the plant life around it.

There were several sculptures around the gardens and Mollie took her time reading the plaques that accompanied them. Most of them appeared to be late male members of the Lyon family.

As Esperanza led her deeper into the foliage she began to notice more female sculptures. They all shared a common quality and Mollie noticed how all of their bodies were twisted in a brutal almost devastating way. This was a stark contrast to the male figures who all appeared erect and elegant.

In spite of this twisted quality, the females all looked painfully beautiful, with full lips, flowing hair, and cold cold expressions.

Roses of numerous colours adorned the female sculptures and Mollie marvelled at the beauty that surrounded her. She may not like the Lyons but they certainly knew how to maintain their property.

As she gazed around her she noticed a particularly beautiful female sculpture that appeared to have its own fountain and pedestal within the garden.

Mollie let go of Esperanza's arm and she heard the old woman tut behind her. Mollie ignored her and walked towards the sculpture as if in a trance. A sweet fragrance filled her senses and she noticed the sculpture was adorned with different flowers, the plants giving off a fresh scent of their own.

The sculpture was of a girl.

She looked no more than sixteen and Mollie could cry at how beautiful she was.

The sculpture resembled a young girl with flowing curls, her cheek resting on her palm and a sweet childish smile on her face.

Although the white sculpture limited her ability to visualize the girl in colour, she could tell there was something significant about the girl for her to have her own secret spot within the Lyon Manor Gardens. Mollie felt a sharp sense of déjà vu as she gazed upon the woman's delicate features and she couldn't help but feel as if she'd seen that face before...

Mollie stepped closer to peer at her name written in fancy calligraphy upon an aged plaque.

Izabel Lyon

Mollie's fingers brushed the plaque that had her birth and death date engraved across its seal.

Sixteen years of age.

She turned to see the old woman staring at her.

"This doesn't make sense," she murmured staring at the sculpture. "How could she have passed away at sixteen?"

Esperanza walked up beside her and Mollie could see there were tears on the old woman's cheeks.

"She was not the boy's mother if that's what you were thinking."

Mollie breathed a sigh relief and continued gazing upon the sculpture.

She had sensed something tragic happened to her and although she despised the monarchy, she felt pain for the loss of such a pure life.

"I still remember it as if it were yesterday," Esperanza murmured. "Logan, Hartley, Atem, Caius, and sweet little Izabel."

Mollie watched as a glazed look fell over the older woman's eyes and Mollie could see she was lost in a flood of memories.

"She loved peonies," the old woman said with a soft chuckle. She used to grab them from the gardens and hide them under her bed..."

Mollie's gaze flickered to the pathway that led them back to the mansion and she wondered if she had a chance. But she decided against fleeing. She seemed to be making progress with Esperanza and she couldn't bring herself to jeopardize their relationship and breach the trust they had created.

"What happened to her?" Mollie asked.

Esperanza sighed and brushed her fingers against her withered cheeks.

"It was an accident..." she trailed off. "A most tragic occurrence."

Mollie rested lightly against the side bushes and looked expectantly at Esperanza.

The old woman had a shawl tied tightly around her thin but strong shoulders and she had a rather bitter expression on her normally kind face.

"I don't think you quite understand the extent...the history...the calibre of this monarchy."

Mollie felt her blood boil at the comment. She knew exactly how this monarchy worked. She had sussed them out a long time ago.

“I think I have a pretty good idea,” Mollie bristled. “An empire built upon the backs of the poor amidst a lavishly funded lifestyle due to the trafficking of sex slaves.”

Mollie crossed her arms and stared at the woman.

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

Esperanza smiled sadly when she regarded Mollie.

“Just as I thought,” she said quietly.

She looked at Mollie and shook her head in disappointment for a while putting Mollie on edge.

“That brash personality of yours will only entertain the prince for so long,” she said suddenly regarding Mollie with distaste for the first time.

Mollie sensed the hidden warning behind her words but she kept her mouth shut. She needed to know more information.

“It was over twenty one years ago. And the Lyons at the time were dividing their regime into sections to be ruled independently by each son.”

Esperanza began to pace around the sculpture of Izabel Lyon as she continued telling her story.

“The Northern regions would be managed and ruled by the eldest son of Malcolm and Cressida Lyon. That was Atem Lyon. The West would be ruled by Logan, the East by Caius, and the South by Hartley.”

Mollie cringed when she heard the name Logan. She didn’t think she would ever forget the face of the drunk blond man she had had the luxury of entertaining only weeks ago. She harboured suspicions that he was indeed a family member. However, she now had her confirmation.

Esperanza gestured around the gardens when she mentioned the South and Mollie crossed her arms around her body to conserve heat. The temperature had dropped and Mollie’s thin dress was not doing much to shield her from the breeze.

“As the regime began to expand and the economy continued to thrive, encroachment into new territories was at an all time high. It became more difficult for the Lyons to partition off certain lands and come to a fair agreement in territorial sovereignty agreements.”

It was the most the woman had ever spoken and Mollie had somehow managed to keep herself silent. Although she was burning with questions she did her best to curb her curiosity.

“It follows that the eldest son who marries first is entitled to distribution of the lands and ultimately holds the power to pass and enforce the laws of his governing nation.”

Mollie nodded at this. They had learned certain rules about the monarchy in school growing up, but it was very vague and convoluted.

“Atem Lyon being the first born was essentially first in line.”

She sighed as she continued.

“But he was deemed too... unstable by other members of government to maintain his position of power... I remember the night as if it were yesterday.”

Esperanza had reached out to brush her fingers against the sculpture of the girl and Mollie figured the woman must have been very close to this Izabel Lyon in the past.

“The brother’s had gotten into a particularly nasty fight. Swords were drawn, threats were thrown and positions were jeopardized.”

Mollie had her suspicions that this was not some typical family quarrel.

“In a fit of rage Atem had intended to stab his younger brother but his precarious nature was too much for even himself to handle. In his state of anger he misjudged his lunge, catching his sister instead.”

The woman wiped her tears as she continued and Mollie put her head down.

“The girls screams could be heard from all the way across the cliffs into the mountains behind us.”

Mollie was shaken as the woman told the story. She had never known about the brotherhood that existed within the monarchy, nor about the death of such a significant family member of the Lyon family blood line.

“How come we never heard about her?” Mollie asked.

“It was too painful for the family to bear. So Hartley being the second born took it upon himself to punish his brother for the incessant and heinous crime.”

Mollie tensed when she heard this.

“So they executed him,” Mollie said wanly staring at the baby blue peonies in front of her.

Esperanza laughed humourlessly.

“No child, they tortured him...for weeks...months...until he finally passed...” her voice trailed off slightly and the wind whistled around them. “Death does not come so easy to those that have sinned.”

Esperanza sighed as she continued.

“Izabel...was the brother’s pride and joy. They loved her...and what was not to love? She was the most beautiful little thing one could lay their eyes on. A spitting image of their mother.”

Her voice had dropped a few octaves lower and Mollie could see the memories flashing through her as her eyes shimmered with unshed tears and her gaze remained glassy.

“Her death was something none of them fully got over. Hartley was never the same after that. And then to lose his wife so quickly after his sister and being new to throne....it was all so much for him to handle.”

The old woman sighed.

“You don’t blame him for being so....frigid.”

Mollie shifted uneasily when she heard this.

“Porphyria Lyon.”

Esperanza locked eyes with her as Mollie’s voice pierced the air. Mollie remembered learning about her in school. She was Hartley’s late wife who passed away well before Mollie was even born.

“She died...from childbirth right?”

Mollie had remembered the annual flower ceremony in late December. In fact...it would be soon if Mollie had kept track of time correctly.

It was a ceremony in honour of the late Queen. Everyone was required to remain indoors on that day. It was a sign of respect to mourn the passing of the queen. Everyone dressed in black and purged themselves of what little luxuries they had for the entire day and night.

Mollie remembered that day quite vividly in her memory from the year before. Her mother had been in a fit of rage and Mollie had spent most of the day trying to keep her mother’s voice from disturbing the rest of her apartment block.

“Yes,” Esperanza said quietly. “She passed away from complications during childbirth...she never even got to hold her son. Not once.”

Mollie looked down.

Micah.

“It’s a difficult thing to live with...being responsible for the death of one’s own mother.”

Mollie shivered at the dark tone to her words.

“Does he blame himself?” Mollie asked quietly.

Esperanza narrowed her eyes at her.

“What do you think?”

She wanted to feel bad for him, she really did...the ache within her was sharp. Her heart was telling her to do so but her brain was telling her the opposite.

How could she? After everything he had put her through, after all the questionable business ventures he condoned, after all the fatalities his monarchy had overseen. She had a right to remain sceptical.

When they returned to the mansion Esperanza ordered Mollie to wait in the hallway as she finished up some of her other duties.

Mollie walked along the grand entrance waiting for the old woman and her mind began to wander. She kept finding herself thinking about Micah. She kept telling herself she was only thinking about him because he had been the one overseeing her for the past couple weeks.

She kept feeling his fingers around her neck, his soft kisses against her cheek and she wondered how someone who had proven himself to be so cruel could have a side to him that appeared so tender.

She wondered if his cruel nature could be attributed to the bitterness he felt at robbing the life of the woman who created him. She wondered if his brothers blamed him for what happened.

She wanted to believe that his true side was indeed his gentle side, and that the cold front he put up was a barrier to protect himself from vulnerability.

She didn't know which part of him to believe...which part of him to trust...

“My my to what do I owe this honour?”

Mollie felt her blood run cold and she felt her stomach churn.

She knew that voice. God she knew that voice.

She turned around slowly and she felt her breath catch in her throat.

The first thing she noticed was his nautical inspired double breasted blue coat complete with large gold buttons. It reached to behind his ankles covering the sharp black suit he wore beneath. He towered over Mollie despite his distance and Mollie couldn't help but feel as if his very presence overshadowed the entire room.

He had that cruel smile etched onto his features and his hair was combed and parted elegantly, his dark waves held in place behind his ears.

Her hate was unparalleled when it came to James Lyon and it took every ounce of Mollie's self-control not to take him down right then and there.

“Master Lyon,” she murmured avoiding his eyes.

She could feel his eyes on her as she kept her gaze locked to the ground.

“Are you ready James?”

Mollie looked up in surprise to see a beautiful woman coming down the staircase. Her hair was long and straight and the colour of a blazing fire. Mollie had never seen hair that red. Her friend Phoebe’s didn’t even come close.

She radiated elegance and Mollie could tell from her outfit, her posture, and her facial expression that she was part of the elitist class. She had that frosty aura to her that was so reflective of Quaternary status citizens. She wore a long flowing dark blue dress that trailed behind her. It matched James’ entire outfit and she wondered...

“Of course my love.”

The woman had a natural blush to her cheeks and as she descended the staircase to slip her arm in James, it was as if Mollie wasn’t even in the room.

“Wait for me in the carriage outside, I’ll be right there.”

She nodded at James who leaned in to give her a chaste kiss on the cheek.

On cue, the woman was escorted outside by 2 guards who flanked her and she disappeared from view leaving Mollie alone with the eldest prince once again.

She couldn’t help but wonder if this woman knew about James...about the family, about their various business expenditures. More specifically about her lover’s involvement in these various businesses. Or if she even cared.

“Are you lost my dear?”

Mollie felt sick and she quietly shook her head. The false concern in his voice was more than evident to Mollie and she looked around her in search of anyone or anything.

There was something terribly sinister about the look on James’ face and Mollie felt like a deer in headlights as she stood in the middle of the massive empty foyer.

He offered his arm out to Mollie. Like his brothers, his movements were graceful and elegant.

“Come, I have something to show you.”

Mollie shook her head and looked behind her.

“I should stay here...I’m waiting on someone,” she trailed off.

James chuckled as she took a careful step backward.

“It wasn’t a suggestion.”

His face remained passive and charming but unlike Micah, Mollie could see the cruelty etched within his fine features, no matter how hard he tried to hide it.

No wonder he wasn't as popular with the public.

Mollie stiffened and hesitantly made eye contact with the eldest prince.

She moved her feet forward, her simple peach dress swaying and carefully looped her arm through his. She really had no other choice.

What does he know?

Her heart began to race as he gripped her arm tightly and steered her down the hallway and towards a descending staircase.

The temperature dropped the further they descended and Mollie wondered if the manor itself was built upon some kind of underground city. She remembered the winding corridors that Micah had taken her through during her first few days here. Could it be possible that James was leading her to the same location?

They reached a dark unlit corridor where a heavy metal door was waiting at the end of the tunnel.

“In.”

James still wore that loose smile on his face and this somehow made Mollie more nervous.

She reached out to grasp the cold steely handle and carefully pulled the door open.

The lights flickered on and Mollie had to grab the wall to keep herself upright when she saw what lay before her.

The corridor was lined with transparent glass cages that were serving the purpose of a jail cell. There must have been over sixty of them in the vast room and each one held a prisoner inside. An equal proportion of men and women were housed in these compartments and some of them were clothed and some of them weren't.

She looked up at James in horror who had a satisfied smile on his face.

“Beautiful isn't it?” he said gesturing to the room before them. His voice was so similar to Micah's and she felt several knots form in her belly.

With Micah, she could push her boundaries and still hope to survive at the end of the day.

But James was the most unpredictable Lyon she had encountered so far. She didn't want to think about the consequences of pushing him to his limit.

“This is what happens to traitors of the monarchy,” he explained his eyes locked on the scene before him.

She gulped uneasily as his hand touched her exposed shoulder lightly but with authority. His fingers didn't hold the same softness as Micah's. They were rough and dry, not unlike his personality.

The prisoners quickly dropped to their knees and began to murmur in unison. Some of them had curled up into a foetal position and all of them averted their gaze.

They all had families once. They all had lives...

Mollie turned to James and in spite of her efforts her voice shook.

"Why are you telling me this?"

Her hands had begun to sweat profusely and she tried her best to keep them clasped behind her.

"All guests of the Lyon Manor are permitted to know."

He stepped even closer to her so his face was inches above her own and Mollie had to dig her fingernails into her palms to keep herself from shaking.

"We know everything about everyone walking about our premises," he breathed staring her down.

He paused for a long moment. His eyes scaled down her body and up to her face, taking in her features.

"And I sure as hell know you're not one of my sluts."

Mollie recoiled at his sudden change in expression. The gentle lilt of his voice never changed but the expression on his face was one of raw animosity and Mollie felt as if she were staring at the devil himself.

"I belong to young Master Lyon."

James laughed humourlessly his breath washing over her face.

"I find it hard to believe my baby brother would keep a slut for himself. It's not... in his nature to do so."

Mollie didn't quite know how to respond so she put her head down and tried to control her breathing.

Pant.

Pant.

Pant.

He had reached into his coat to pull out a small thin object and Mollie saw that it was a slender oddly shaped knife. As if to stroke her cheek in a gesture of affection he brought the knife down and brushed it across the visible bruises on her neck.

Mollie squeezed her eyes tight and prayed to every God she knew to make her death quick.

“I’m sure you enjoyed every bit of it didn’t you,” he breathed sliding the knife from her throat to her breasts.

In one quick motion he ripped her dress down the middle with the sharp edge of his knife. The fabric fell in two large pieces to the ground leaving her in nothing but her cotton panties.

“Please God,” she prayed in her mind as she shut her eyes tight.

Slowly but surely he brought the knife towards her vagina purposefully prodding the sharp end against her skin through her thin underwear.

She was visibly shaking at this point and as she opened her eyes she could see the delight in James Lyon’s eyes as he toyed with her.

He was enjoying this.

The knife was razor sharp and curved slightly at the blades end. Mollie stared at it as James held the object between her legs. It resembled some sort of archaic torture device.

Neatly he stroke the sharp edge against her panties ripping the fabric apart and exposing her nether regions to the cool air.

In a flash he flipped the object into his pocket and proceeded to prod two large fingers into her unprepared and unlubricated vagina.

She cried out at the force of his penetration and felt the pain hit her immediately. She stumbled against him as her long legs crumpled beneath her, the pain a wringing sound in her ears.

He chuckled lowly as the tears streamed down her face and her sobs began to rip free from her throat. The feeling lasted only for a moment but the sudden penetration was enough to startle her and disturb her unprepared canal.

He pulled his fingers away as harshly as he inserted them in and Mollie whimpered against his blue jacket as he looked down at her expressionlessly.

“You fucking liar,” he breathed.

He stepped closer to her and gripped her by the throat with one hand shaking her slightly as the tears smeared across her face.

“The only part of the body that lies are the lips.”

With that he let her slide to her knees on the rough concrete as the tears fell down her face.

“I’ve got my eye on you. Always.”

He quickly adjusted his collar and smoothed down his coat. Without a backwards glance at Mollie he strode out of the room letting the door close behind him with a bang.

Mollie scrambled on her knees after he left and proceeded to bend over and vomit onto the rough floor. She heaved until her stomach was empty and the tears smearing her face dried into a sticky sheen.

Her insides throbbed as she shakily stood up grabbing whatever tatters remained of her dress and tried her best to tie the fabric around herself to conceal her nudity.

She somehow found her way back to the main floor of the manor.

Each step forward initiated a stinging pain in her vaginal canal and she stumbled forward dragging herself upstairs toward her chambers.

She entered and came face to face with Esperanza who Mollie quickly noticed had been pacing the room.

“Where the hell have you been?”

When she looked at Mollie’s face her expression quickly softened and her complexion paled.

“Child,” she whispered taking in Mollie’s outfit, wild hair, and tear stained face. “What happened to you?”

With a pain she never knew existed, the girl dropped to her knees and sobbed into the carpet her cries absorbing into the soft ground.

She finally allowed herself the luxury of purging herself of all of the turbulent emotions that had plagued her since her first night at the manor.

Chapter 15: Phosphore

Chapter Summary

Micah's return to the manor reveals another side to the prince. Mollie feels her time is running out.

Mollie had spent the last couple of days beneath the covers of her sheets, shutting out the world, lost in a haze of her own thoughts.

She had ignored Esperanza's requests for her to eat, to talk, to function...

She would rather remain within the safe recesses of her mind, going through each and every gruesome scenario of picking off the flesh of James Lyon, bit by bit.

Today, the door opened more forcefully than before and Mollie pulled the sheet over her head.

"Child. This needs to stop."

The woman's voice was one of complete exhaustion and in spite of herself Mollie felt bad for her. All other factors aside, she *had* been good to Mollie. No one had ever treated Mollie with the gentleness and kindness that Esperanza had shown her and she owed it to the woman.

She brought her face up from the sheets and watched as Esperanza walked forwards to sit on the bed beside her.

"I can't do this." Mollie said emotionlessly. The weight of her plight felt heavier today than it ever had and Mollie was crumpling under the pressure.

She had been terrified to leave the room, afraid James would be waiting outside the door. Waiting to chop her up with his plethora of various torture devices. She wasn't safe alone in this manor.

As ironic as it was, she wasn't safe here without Micah.

"You don't understand," she whispered trying her best to keep the tears from flowing.
"James...he...he..."

Mollie couldn't even bring herself to explain. The memory was still too fresh.

"Don't tell me." Esperanza held her hand out and averted her gaze from Mollie's. "I neither want nor need to know."

Mollie sighed.

“I can’t do this anymore Esperanza. I can’t.”

The woman was looking at Mollie in an odd way but Mollie really couldn’t be bothered at this point in time.

“I never took you as the self-pitying type.”

Mollie felt her anger surge and she glared at the old woman.

“You don’t know anything about me.”

Esperanza smiled and shook her head and Mollie wanted nothing more than to wipe the cynical expression off the woman's face.

“I knew that fire was still inside you.”

Mollie sighed and looked down at her hands.

“Child, take it from me. There are much worse positions you could be in.”

The woman’s dark eyes were clouded as she looked at Mollie and Mollie could see a flood of memories that lay concealed and hidden before them. She had lived a long and colourful life and Mollie could see a deep sadness behind her dark irises.

She had been through worse, much worse. Mollie had nothing to complain about.

“How do you stand it?” Mollie whispered picking at a thread in the thick duvet. “How do you continue?”

The older woman looked thoughtfully at her for a long quiet moment.

“You find something worth continuing for.”

Mollie bristled and brushed her hands through her frizzy unkept hair. She was expecting to hear advice that was a bit more substantial.

“Maybe you’ll understand some day.”

With a quiet sigh, the woman left the room leaving Mollie to deal with her heavy thoughts in solitude.

Mollie stared at the glass chandelier above her and watched as the candles on each one flickered on to the wall in front of her. Their trembling shadows resembled dark quivering eyes and Mollie lifted the comforter as far as she could manage over her head to trap herself beneath the comfort of her blankets.

When Mollie opened her eyes again she realized she had officially lost track of how much time had gone by.

Her heart ached thinking about her mother, her colleagues, all of the people she had left behind. Her mother couldn't function for prolonged periods of time without Mollie and the girl wondered if she was even alive.

She should feel upset, angry, or even saddened about contemplating such sinister thoughts, but the only emotion that seemed to penetrate through her was emptiness.

She stiffened when she felt soft cold fingers brush over her exposed back.

She rolled over on the expansive bed and her brown eyes met familiar clear green ones.

She hated to admit to herself that she found comfort in his presence. She attributed this profound sense of relief to having been isolated for so long.

"You took your dear sweet time."

Her voice came out harsh and groggy. Micah had a secret smile on his face as he carefully brushed her stray curls from her forehead.

"If I knew you'd miss me that much I would have tried to return sooner."

Mollie rolled her eyes at this.

"Don't flatter yourself," she mumbled pushing herself up from the bed.

He was watching her from his seat at the edge of the bed. His hands were folded elegantly in his lap and he wore a jet black cloak that enveloped his body and flowed down towards the ground.

Mollie suddenly felt self-conscious as Micah scrutinized her from the bed. His outfit and royal attire was fitted to perfection and complimented his tall lean figure exquisitely.

She, on the other hand must have looked like hell.

He frowned when she rubbed her hands over her eyes.

"Don't be so rough Mollie Mae," he said standing up to his full height.

He approached her calmly and she crossed her arms over her chest.

"You should be more gentle with yourself," he murmured rubbing his thumbs softly against her cheeks. His fingers traced the dark shadows under her eyes and his lips tightened.

"Have you not been sleeping well?"

She rolled her eyes at him and pushed his hands away.

"Don't act like you care," she grumbled.

Surprisingly he let her go as she stepped into the vast adjoining washroom to wash her face and brush her teeth.

The washroom was equipped with everything Mollie could possibly need and more from expensive feminine hygiene products, to sweet smelling soaps, and fancy moisturizing lotions that rich people indulged in.

The sweet smell made Mollie sick and she refused to use any of them.

When she returned, she saw that Micah had seated himself in the chaise located in the corner of the room. He remain poised, his posture stiff, but he held something slim and shiny in his hand. He was staring intently at it and Mollie could feel the chill in the air. There was something turning in his mind and Mollie felt as if she could hear the squeak of the gears.

“Master Lyon?” she questioned hesitantly.

In moments like these, when his mind was far away, Mollie knew Micah was at his most unpredictable. She slowly approached him, smoothing down her pink slip and taking a seat on the chair beside him.

He didn’t respond and she took that as being acceptable.

“Master Lyon?” she tried again, her voice softer.

As Mollie glanced down at his hands she saw he was turning over a small pocket watch between his fingers. The device looked familiar to her...like she’d seen it before in a distant memory.

“Those holds photos don’t they?”

She didn’t meant to blurt it out. She could tell she had interrupted a memory but Mollie had issues when it came to certain impulse inhibitions.

He ignored her at first brushing his fingers against the thin circular metal. As Mollie looked closer she could see the insignia of a lion on the cover. Everything in this place was branded.

“Yes.”

She thought he was going to open the watch or expand on the topic but he remained quiet. Mollie then noticed that he was wearing all black. Mollie looked around her suddenly.

A simple but elegant black dress, different from the one she had worn to his dinner weeks ago, also hung across the vanity in the room. He must have brought it in while she was still asleep.

“It’s today,” she whispered feeling like a complete fool. Today was the day everyone gathered together to mourn the late queen. Was it the 31st of December already?

Mollie swallowed uneasily. She wasn’t the best at conveying her emotions. But she knew today must have been hard, even for someone as cruel and as seemingly strong as the prince.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. She went to reach for him, in an involuntary gesture of comfort, but he stiffened and leaned away from her.

Her face flamed and she recoiled slightly. God now she was trying to comfort her captor, she must really be losing her mind.

“Don’t be.”

His voice came out harsh and icy and she kept her gaze locked on her hands.

He sighed and stood up his cloak billowing behind him.

“You don’t have to pretend not to care,” she said flatly. Her cheeks still burned and she averted her gaze.

He turned his pale eyes on her and she saw his features twist in anger.

“I *don’t* care,” he snapped at her. She obviously hit a nerve and she quieted immediately.

This was a topic Mollie realized she should shy away from. She angled herself away from the prince and ostentatiously looked around the room.

“So am I going to spend the last day of this year locked away in a room?”

Her tone came out sounding more sardonic than she intended and she bit her lip in fear.

His shoulders had relaxed since his last outburst but she could still see his fists slowly flexing and unflexing.

“You just might if you don’t change that tone.”

She looked up in surprise but saw that his features were relaxed. He recovered quickly.

“Change into what I brought for you,” he murmured inclining his head toward the vanity. “I have something to show you.”

As silent as a serpent he left the room closing the door behind him with a soft click.

She eyed the dress and felt her stomach flop at his words.

I have something to show you

The image of James Lyon’s predatory smile flashed through her mind and she quickly swallowed the nausea building up inside her gut.

“*He’s not James,*” she told herself.

A phantom pain radiated through her lower abdomen and she grasped the bedframe tightly as the vivid memory of the eldest Lyon passed through her mind.

No

She brushed her hair back and wiped her sweaty palms on her dress. She couldn't let him get to her. She wouldn't. She still had time, time to find the contract, time to bring the monarchy down, and certainly time to make James Lyon suffer.

By god would she make him pay for what he did. She couldn't let Micah Lyon distract her from her duties. At the end of the day, he was still a Lyon.

With one final breath she grabbed her dress from the vanity and felt the Mollie she knew so well disappear behind an expensive gown the colour of a cloudless night sky.

"Where are you taking me?"

They had been walking for almost an hour now and the ends of Mollie's black dress were dusty and muddy after scaling through wet grass and muddy terrain. The prince had said nothing since they had left the manor and Mollie was quite grateful. The exertion of the walk was taking a toll on Mollie and she was struggling in her long dress.

"You'll see."

The Lyon Manor was still visible behind them, a looming overbearing monstrosity that pierced the skyline and blocked the view of the cliff beyond.

As Mollie stumbled over sparse branches along the pathway, Micah was there with a gloved hand to assist her over the various obstructions along the way. He was oddly formal today in his all black attire and neatly combed hair. It was strange to see him traverse the forest in such expensive garments. It was as if he didn't belong in the brash environment that was the forest.

Rather, he belonged within the marble walls of his mansion, protected and shrouded by the luxuries bestowed upon by the rich. He reminded her of a precious painting, protected from the acrid elements of the outside world and pampered with varnish and meticulously maintained for others to appreciate its beauty.

Mollie could see a small building appearing in the clearing and as they ventured closer she could see it resembled a small cottage. It was simple and quaint and something Mollie would have expected to find in her birth town of Riverton. Her memories of Riverton were fleeting but there was something about the flowing rivers and thick foliage atop wooden lodges that cast a painful reminder in her mind.

Micah opened the door to reveal a small but tidy area complete with soft plush settees and an open fireplace. In contrast to the simple exterior, the interior was expensively furnished and the various paintings and set pieces that adorned the room were tastefully selected.

Mollie wondered whether Micah himself designed it. It was significantly more warm and inviting than the manor and it was the first time since Mollie set foot outside Chartery that she felt truly at home.

“This is beautiful,” she breathed taking in her surroundings. “Did you build this place?”

Micah had removed his cloak revealing his black dress shirt and black trousers. He was wearing those familiar riding boots and Mollie realized that he too seemed more relaxed.

He laughed at her question as he untied the black ascot around his throat and tossed it atop of his cloak. He had a rather charming laugh and Mollie wished he did it more often. She preferred his laughter over his impassiveness.

“I’m afraid not. I wasn’t one to study the art of carpentry.”

“I’m sure,” she thought bitterly. His hands were even softer than hers.

Mollie frowned as she watched Micah. There wasn’t a hair out of place as he walked closer to her. Mollie was at a loss for words as to how elegant and polished he appeared despite traversing the muddy seemingly unchartered grounds that existed beyond the manor.

She glanced down at her mud splattered dress and scowled with envy.

Mollie jumped when she saw an older woman enter from another door at the other end of the room. She wore a royal uniform identical to the one Mollie had borrowed from Isaac. The woman looked immediately at the prince when she entered and bowed deeply.

“Everything is ready Master Lyon,” she said in a loud clear voice.

Mollie found it unusual how unperturbed she seemed by the prince. She was used to the royal guards in the manor who overtly avoided eye contact and appeared to shake in their boots at anyone’s passing. It was surprisingly refreshing.

Micah nodded and the guard straightened quickly. Her eyes flickered to Mollie and Mollie saw a hint of curiosity in her gaze.

“I was unaware you were having company today Master Lyon.” Her voice was strict but formal and Mollie could sense a hidden meaning behind her words.

Mollie tensed as she observed Micah’s reaction.

Surprisingly he smirked and reached into his trouser pocket. He pulled out a silk encased object the size of his palm and weighed it in his hand. It appeared rectangular in shape and Mollie was instantly curious.

The woman smiled when she saw this and Micah casually tossed the object toward her.

Her eyes flickered to Mollie curiously again before she slipped the object into her pocket.

“There will be no disturbances tonight Master Lyon.”

Her tone held a note of finality and Mollie watched as she exited through the door she came through closing it behind her with a sharp click.

Micah had already turned towards the fireplace and began lighting a flame to toss onto the piled wood.

Mollie wondered why he had decided to take her here, to this isolated place in the middle of nowhere. She wondered if even people like him, with all the money in the world, sometimes cherished the simpler things in life.

He gestured for her to join him by the fire place and she quickly followed. He had lowered himself onto the soft plush rug in front of the fire and Mollie attempted to follow suit in her dress. Her motions were more clumsy but she managed to follow through.

There was a single circular window above the door and in close proximity to the ceiling that filtered the late afternoon sun into the room.

Mollie followed the prince's movements as he carefully removed his black leather gloves from his hands revealing the pale skin of his fingers underneath. He placed them on the small carved wood table beside him and reached over to pour a glass of cool water in one goblet, and another with dark wine. He handed Mollie the water and she murmured a thanks before taking a long sip.

There was nothing apart from the crackling wood and the occasional spurt of embers from the fire that pierced the quiet room. The silence that extended between them was driving Mollie mad and she felt as if she needed to address the silent tension in the room.

Micah was sitting close enough to her to initiate a friendly conversation but still far enough to maintain a safe distance. He was staring into the fire, twirling the ring on his finger and Mollie watched how the light of the fire reflected in his eyes.

Mollie had remembered what Esperanza had told her only days ago about the Lyon family. More specifically, about Micah's mother. If she died during childbirth, that must mean today....

She gulped and averted her gaze.

She cleared her throat and attempted to ease the iciness she felt between them.

"If it makes you feel any better, my mother used to mourn the day I was born."

Mollie didn't quite know why she was telling him this. Not only could he use this information to weaken her down, he may very well throw it in her face when he feels like it. But Mollie really couldn't care in that moment. Half of her had been waiting for an opportunity to share her home life with someone...anyone. She had kept it within herself for so long, it was about time she addressed it.

The fire danced off his thick caramel waves and Mollie watched as he turned his cold eyes toward her.

There was something dark and impenetrable within those pale eyes, a wall that Mollie suddenly felt determined to break down. She was beginning to peel through the various

layers of the youngest prince and inching ever closer to his uncharted core.

He was quiet for a long moment before he replied.

“Why is that do you think?”

Mollie was now the one who was uncomfortable and she had resorted to picking off the debris that had caught on the bottom of her now frayed black dress. She kept her gaze locked on her knees.

“Because she suddenly had a responsibility...a responsibility she neither really wanted...or expected.”

Mollie was leaving out some very big details but she had gotten the prince talking and she saw this as a success.

“How unfortunate,” he murmured taking a sip from his wine. “Children are supposed to be a blessing, not a curse.”

Mollie watched his movements carefully, the way he brushed a hand through his hair, the way he flexed his long pale fingers, and his constant stiff posture. Even in his relaxed state, he radiated elegance.

“Where were you gone for so long?” she asked hesitantly. Her voice was muffled by the crackling fire but it added a comforting tone to the otherwise chilly room.

Micah paused for a moment before he answered.

“I had business to attend to in the North.”

Mollie stifled an eyeroll and turned her gaze back to the fire.

“So that’s your job in this family,” she asked tonelessly. “To execute business deals while the rest of your family smiles for the cameras.”

Mollie watched his head tilt ever so slightly forward.

“Every person has a role to play in their family Mollie Mae.”

“Is that the role your father gave you?”

Mollie was pushing it, and she didn’t fail to see how his eyes flashed when she mentioned his father.

“You’re awfully curious aren’t you?”

He wore an easy going smile on his face but Mollie could see the tenseness lining his features.

“Do you blame me? I’ve been locked away in a tower for weeks.”

Micah sighed and took another sip of his drink.

“According to Esperanza that was your choice. You are free to wander the grounds whenever you like.”

Now it was Mollie’s turn to sigh.

With James Lyon on the loose that seemed highly unlikely.

“Esperanza *did* take me through the gardens a couple days ago,” she admitted. “It’s very beautiful.”

Micah nodded once.

“The grounds have been a part of this manor for centuries. The burial grounds of my ancestors are here.”

Mollie acknowledged this but she couldn’t keep her wandering mind at bay.

“I didn’t see the late queen within the gardens...I would have thought she’d be there too.”

Micah’s cold eyes met hers and Mollie shivered under the intensity of his stare.

“She wouldn’t be.” His tone was dismissive and Mollie flinched. “Porphyria lies within the burial grounds of her own family blood line. Somewhere far away from here.”

Mollie found it strange how he referred to the late queen in such bland terms. After all this woman was his mother.

“Has your family ever acknowledged that your birthday is the same day as her death day?”

He reached out for a moment to sift the fire, his actions causing more embers so spit from the fire onto the ground in front of them.

“Why should they?”

Mollie could feel his eyes on her and she shifted uncomfortably on the plush rug.

“As I told you before Mollie Mae, each family has their own anomalies...and by the sounds of it so do yours. Perhaps we are not so different.”

“You can’t compare our families *Master* Lyon,” she replied with a frown. “You grew up with everything...you never wanted for anything. It’s not the same.”

There was a brief moment of silence that followed her words.

“I’m sorry that you think that,” he said tonelessly stirring his glass.

Mollie scowled and returned her gaze to the fire. She had struggled, and began working before she turned eleven just to keep food on her table. She couldn’t help but feel bitterness at his words, he never knew what it was like to spend a single night without a full stomach.

“You resent me.”

Mollie met his eyes as he angled his body slightly towards her.

“I could see it in your eyes the first time you looked at me.” His eyes seemed more liquid today, less frosty than she remembered.

“Of course I do,” she responded swiftly. “Your family is the reason so many of us suffer each day. You thrive off the bloody backs of the poor. You promise social mobility and then create a system that indirectly prevents it.”

Her breathing had increased and she could feel her anger being to surface.

“You created your empire on a foundation built upon false promises and blatant hypocrisy. It’s a wonder to me how you sleep at night.”

Mollie was expecting him to react or retaliate in some aggressive manner but if anything, he appeared even more relaxed than before. Although the charming smile remained on his lips she could see the iciness solidify in his eyes.

“Those are some bold things to say to a member of the monarchy...let alone to royal blood.”

He chuckled after this and Mollie had to resist the urge to snap at him.

“It’s a wonder how you’ve gone this long without a public punishment. You must be either incredibly fearless or incredibly stupid.”

He suddenly brushed his hand across her cheek until his fingers held the bottom of her chin firmly between his fingers.

His eyes flickered to her lips before meeting her eyes and Mollie stared ahead into those orbs of green, inflicting as much dislike in her eyes as she could muster.

He smirked and gave her a little tap on the chin before dropping his hand.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” he murmured gracefully getting to his feet.

He offered his hand to help her as any pampered gentleman would and she dutifully ignored it using the ground to propel herself upright. She could sense the smirk on the prince’s face as he led her around the corner into a small but tidy bedroom.

There was a single large bed in the centre of the room and a surprisingly spacious washroom that extended just past the expansive closet. There was also a sizeable circular window above the bed bathing the room in early moonlight.

“I’ll let you settle in,” Micah murmured. “But if you even think about trying to escape...”

He didn’t have to finish his threat before Mollie hastily shook her head.

“You’re reputation precedes you Mollie Mae,” he murmured casually placing a hand on his trouser belt where his dagger hung loosely. “You’ve already broken my trust once... and against my mighty principles I still let you live.”

His eyes hardened and Mollie shivered under his wintry glare.

“If you break it again-”

“I won’t Master Lyon,” she said quietly. She had considered it when she first walked into the room but it would have been a foolish attempt regardless. Not only was the window high, it was facing in the direction of the manor. On top of that, she could sense the threat Micah had put out was not to be taken lightly.

She saw his features relax and she slowly released her breath.

"Good girl." He seemed pleased by her response.

A sharp pattering began to shake the walls around them and Mollie glanced around her worriedly.

“It’s just the rain,” Micah said with smirk. “Yet another reason to stay indoors.”

Mollie swore quietly after Micah left the room and angrily sat down on the bed. He hadn’t let her out of his sight since he had returned. Although she was grateful for the safety bestowed upon her by his presence, she needed an opportunity to get to Hartley Lyon’s chambers. It was her only way of escaping.

She was hoping what the prince had intended to show her earlier would have been within the manor.

But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t shake off the feeling that Micah Lyon was taking her farther away from the things she wanted most.

Chapter 16: Soufre

Chapter Summary

Mollie finds herself unable to escape the clutches of her captor.

She needed to earn Micah's trust and quickly. He was the only thing keeping her safe from the rest of the gruesome Lyon clan.

If she did anything tonight to piss him off she doubted she'd ever return to the manor... that is in one piece.

After Mollie freshened up, she found a pretty navy lace dress within the closet that fit her body type well. Mollie had begun to despise those flowing gowns Micah adored putting her in and preferred the shorter dresses that freed her legs and allowed her to remain more mobile.

Mollie had grown up in a world that rewarded quick reflexes and instant retaliation and being confined within a stiff fitting gown was a direct constraint of those skills.

When Mollie opened the door she was surprised to see Micah outside with a tray of food in his hands.

"Room service," he said with a charming smile that pronounced his deep dimples.

Mollie felt her insides warm and for a moment she wanted to forget he was the prince of a tyrannical monarchy.

He slipped past her at the door placing the tray gently onto the white linen of the bedsheets leaving the alluring scent of his cologne to waft in Mollie's face.

Mollie felt torn as she went to join the prince on the bed. She wanted to ask him questions, delve further into the history of the Lyon family and further into the true feelings he harboured for his family. But there was something telling her to wait...to not ruin the moment.

As they ate together Mollie did her best to observe the various subtleties of the prince. The way he subconsciously brushed his hand through his hair or twirled the ring on his middle finger as he spoke. Mollie studied his face, and more importantly his features. The way he bit his lip slightly when he thought about something from the past, or the crooked smile that appeared on his face when he recalled a memory he was fond of. Unfortunately those memories seemed few and far between.

He was truly exquisite, and Mollie wished desperately in that moment that his heart could have paralleled his beauty.

In this moment, she was not his subject and he was not her superior. He was not her captor and she was not his possession. He was not a prince and she was not a pauper.

They were simply two beings getting to know each other a little better and Mollie found deep comfort in that.

Their conversation teetered on the edges of comfort and unnaturalness but neither of them ventured into the dark waters of their past or the ambiguity of their futures. Mollie told him about the bakery, and about her grandparents. They were the only pleasant memories of her childhood that she had. Most of the time he would ask her questions, but sometimes she would ask a few of her own.

After their conversation died down, the rain picked up significantly and Mollie could physically feel the shaking of the cabin as the rain unleashed a torrent of water upon the small lodge.

Mollie couldn't help but steal glances outside the window and she felt her stomach churn at how menacing the manor looked in the distance. She couldn't help but feel James Lyon's eyes on her, his fingers penetrating through her tender folds, his predatory smile below his dark eyes.

"Fawn?"

Mollie's eyes met Micah's and she could see that familiar look of calculation cloud his features.

"I'm sorry, the rain is putting me slightly on edge," she mumbled unable to eat anything more.

He didn't say anything but stood up swiftly, and proceeded to place the tray on the table across from them.

He was quiet for a moment, his back to her and Mollie wondered what was going through his mind. Had he sensed her unease?

"Why did you come here Mollie Mae?"

His question caught her off guard and she looked at him from the bed completely bewildered. He turned around to look at her and she saw how his soft lips were parted in question.

"It wasn't by choice," she said somewhat truthfully. He seemed to acknowledge that for a moment. He crossed his arms across his chest and observed her closely.

"Are you happy you did?"

She was at a loss for words at his question. She couldn't tell him the true reason for her being here. Surely he would see it as a betrayal and have her executed. On the other hand, she

found it difficult to lie to him. He seemed to already have a good hold on analysing her emotions and his placid expression did a number on influencing her subsequent actions.

He didn't wait for a response, instead he crossed the room in a few strides and lowered himself onto the bed, closer to her than before.

"I can make you happy you did," he whispered brushing a soft finger across her cheek. "I can give you anything you ever wanted Mollie Mae."

The offer was almost impossible to resist as she stared into his clear green eyes, as vivid as the dense foliage that surrounded her hometown.

"In exchange for what?" she whispered. The rain continued to patter outside and she watched as his eyes followed her every movement.

"Why must everything be a transaction?" he sighed. "Why can't you view this as a proposition... an offering."

"Everything you do is a transaction," she insisted. "Your brother made that very clear."

She could see his eyebrows furrow and his gaze dropped to the bed in surprise for a moment.

"My brother?"

His tone went flat and Mollie could feel the tension build in the room.

He slowly straightened his back and Mollie saw that familiar blank expression cross his face. He was staring at her hard and Mollie realized he was waiting for her to explain.

"Your brother...showed me that room where you keep all of your prisoners," she explained her face heating up at the unpleasant memory. "He told me he was always watching..." she trailed off as she saw Micah's hands flex.

"I'm not going to be your slut as he called it," she blurted out, her eyes watering at the memory. "I don't use that kind of currency."

"I'm not my mother," she thought bitterly.

Micah had stilled and she noticed his eyes had glazed over slightly. The sudden chill in the air was palpable and Mollie wondered if he was even aware that she was still in the room.

Mollie shifted on the bed and this seemed to bring him back to reality. His eyes snapped up and he slowly twirled the silver ring around his finger, his movements more conscious...more calculated.

"I see."

His voice was as icy as his eyes and she felt as if his gaze was somewhere beyond her, extending into the darkness of the manor behind them.

Mollie could sense the shift in the air and the evident change in Micah's demeanour. He was back to the cold impassive prince she had grown accustomed to and she wondered if she had imagined his entirely contrasting personality only moments ago.

A part of her wished for that Micah to return, but the other part of her, the stronger part of her, told her to speak her truth. She couldn't digress, not when she had gotten this far.

"James has always been... poor with words," he started. "His bark is worse than his bite." He gave her a smile, one that portrayed false ease and contentment. Mollie noticed how it didn't quite reach his eyes. She had no doubt in her mind that Micah was simply concealing a more sinister truth about his eldest brother.

"He said you didn't...indulge in the same physical pursuits as him. Why would he say that?"

Micah seemed irritated by this but Mollie persisted. "You don't agree with this do you? You know how wrong this entire business is. You just won't admit it."

"That's enough."

His voice was a crack through the air and Mollie went silent instantly. His eyes were as cold and as distant as a corpse and the expression on his face made Mollie wanted to immediately dissipate from the room.

"You don't know anything about me or the businesses we run," he said coldly his lips curling into a sneer.

She shivered under his unforgiving gaze and put her head down.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

She had hoped, god she had hoped that she could get through to him. But her efforts were futile, they always were.

He sighed and stood up running a hand through his hair. His waves had loosened to fall over his dark brow and Mollie could sense his agitation.

He seemed unsure of something and Mollie watched as he walked to the wooden table across the room and poured himself a glass of whiskey.

He turned around to look at her from the table as he held the glass containing the dark liquid in his hands.

"I need you to do something for me Mollie Mae."

His voice was calm, too calm, especially after his outburst and Mollie was instantly on edge.

"W-What do you want me to do?" she hesitated staring at him.

His eyes were dark and utterly impassive as he held the whiskey in his hand. He hadn't taken a single sip from it yet.

“Lie down on the bed,” he said quietly.

Mollie froze and her hands began to sweat as she felt her nerves begin to set in.

“Why?” she gulped as Micah’s eyes remain locked onto hers.

“Because I said so.”

His tone never deviated despite the frostiness of his gaze but Mollie acquiesced. She was afraid of his abrupt change in demeanour.

He had reached for something in the cabinet above the table and Mollie could see from the corner of her eye that he held something small in his hand.

She laid her head on the white pillow and let her hair billow around her as she clenched her fists together and placed them on her torso. She tried to control her breathing as she felt the prince begin to walk towards her slowly.

His face was blank and Mollie squeezed her eyes tight. She felt the bed compress slightly as he sat down beside her.

“Open your mouth.”

Despite the screaming chasm in her mind telling her not to do it, she slowly opened her mouth allowing herself to give into the prince’s demands.

She felt something cool and solid hit her tongue and she sputtered in surprise.

Maybe he really *had* decided to poison her.

“Shh,” he instructed bringing something else to her lips. “It won’t hurt you.”

Mollie choked as something bitter and slightly smoky filled her mouth.

“Swallow it.”

Mollie struggled but managed to push the tablet down her throat. The liquid he had given her burned on the way down just as much as it did when it entered her mouth.

“Master Lyon what-?”

He had begun to unbutton his black shirt and Mollie froze as she watched him expose his toned sun kissed torso. He was quite muscular and Mollie hadn’t noticed before due to the ample layers of clothing he was always wearing. His skin was smooth and pristine and Mollie felt as if she were watching one of the statues from the manor gardens come to life.

Mollie squirmed as he reached for her dress and with a warning squeeze from his hand on her throat she stilled. His eyes were colder than the icy depths of the arctic and she began to breathe heavily as he slowly brought her forward. With ease, he unzipped her dress from behind and pulled the garment away from her skinny body.

He had seen her bare several times before but Mollie still felt a stab of embarrassment at her nudity. He had kept her panties on and she watched as he carefully, as if she were made of glass, brought his hands to her cheeks. His eyes didn't flicker once to her exposed chest.

"I'm going to be gentle with you Mollie," he said, his vivid eyes glistening with sincerity. "I'm aware...you've never done this before."

Mollie couldn't hide the fear that clouded her features and she shot Micah a pleading glance.

Had he planned this the whole time? Had he lured her into a trap? Put on the charming façade as a ploy to simply coerce her into sex?

"Master Lyon, please," she gasped bringing her arms to her chest to cover her breasts. "I-I don't want this."

She felt hurt and humiliated. But most of all she felt foolish for ever believing that he held a sliver of kindness to begin with.

His face remained unchanged but Mollie saw something more glisten within his pale eyes.

"One rarely gets what they want most from life Mollie Mae," he whispered. "That's what makes it so unfair."

He brought his hands from her cheeks down to her breasts and cupped each one in his palms like he had before. His hands were like fire meeting gasoline against her skin and she felt the flames ignite as he thumbed her pebbled nipples. She squirmed in unfound pleasure at the sensation and hated the way her body reacted to his touch.

"Relax fawn," he murmured against her throat as he trailed kisses down to her chest. "Tonight, I will serve *you*."

Mollie was enveloped by his rich scent, the citrus and musk making her normally clear mind a spiralling haze of delirium. The feeling of his lips on her skin sent tingles from the peaks of her nipples down to the tips of her toes and she moaned as his lips met the sensitive flesh of her breasts.

She shouldn't want this. She shouldn't want to spread her legs before someone as loathsome as Micah Lyon.

She could feel the heavy weight of his manhood through his trousers as he leaned over her on the bed. He had brought her arms above her head and held them in place with one hand as he brought his other hand to her opposite breast. He was careful not to put too much of his weight on her.

His warm mouth had enveloped her left nipple leaving her breathless, while her other was pressed firmly between his fingers, the peak hardening at the sudden attention.

"Mmm," she moaned as she turned her head to the side and panted into the pillow behind her. She cursed internally as her body betrayed her.

He sucked hard with his lips pulling her nipple upwards with the suction in his mouth and using his teeth to carefully graze the ultra sensitive skin.

Mollie gasped as his other hand ventured lower, across her flat belly to her concealed lower lips.

Mollie could sense by his confident movements that the prince had certainly pleased women before. He knew exactly what he was doing as he used his long fingers to gently probe her swollen lips through her panties.

Unlike his brother, his fingers were soft and coated in her lubricant making the sensations that radiated through her more pleasant than anything.

He continued sucking at her breast as he fluidly pulled her panties down her long legs in a single motion and dropped them to the ground.

He released her breast from his mouth and trailed his lips down to her belly.

His hands had released her arms from above and had slid downwards to hold her waist in place. Her hip bones jutted out prominently and he used his thumbs to massage the sharp edges of her waist in a circular manner, eliciting several sighs of pleasure from Mollie.

His breathing had increased as well and Mollie could feel his lips begin to brush the top of her pubic area as he lowered his face between her legs.

“M-Master Lyon,” she gasped fisting her hands in the sheets below her as his cool breath washed over her glistening mound. She wanted to stop him, to kick him away from her pure and untouched core but his foreplay had done a number on her body. She just couldn’t bring herself to release the firm hold he had on her body.

“Mmm,” he sighed as brushed his lips against her wet centre. “Your scent is so unique Mollie Mae. So...enticing.”

Mollie was visibly squirming at this point and Micah had his hands firmly on her thighs to keep her somewhat relaxed. Mollie also believed he held her in place to restrict her from “accidentally” kneeling him in the jaw.

She sighed as he nipped her thigh playfully.

“I can’t wait to *finally* taste you.”

With that he buried his face below her and sucked her hidden bud into his awaiting lips.

Mollie gasped at the feeling of his lips on such a sensitive area of her body. Her breathing was so loud she was almost embarrassed at the sound. Her moans reverberated across the room as if in competition with the thunderous rain that pattered against the low ceiling roof.

She panted as his tongue entered her slowly, exploring its newfound territory. Mollie could feel the building climax deep within her lower abdomen and she couldn’t help the low moan that escaped her lips.

“Master-,”

Her lower lips twitched at the foreign sensation as he used his tongue to open her folds wider and penetrate deeper. Mollie could practically feel the impulses of electricity that sent her bundle of hypersensitive nerves on a spiralling relay onto other parts of her body and she could feel the heat building up in her core.

His teeth grazed her clitoris and she brought her hands from the bedsheets and fisted them into his soft wavy locks, pushing his head even closer to her most sensitive spot. He didn't disappoint as he sucked her bud into his lips circling it with his warm tongue. He brought his fingers forward and massaged her outer lips as his tongue ventured as deep as he could explore, sliding against the slick pink walls of her untouched canal.

She could feel her juices dripping down her thighs and with one sharp spasm through her body she came hard, her scream several octaves higher than usual.

“Micah!” she gasped.

Her release was swift and Micah slowly released the firm hold he had on her thighs. She let them flop inwards, riding out the last few waves of her intense orgasm.

Mollie had never felt a pleasure so deep and she finally understood her mother's crippling addiction to this drug-like sensation.

She was panting at this point, her thighs sticky with her vaginal juices and her knees quivering at the potent orgasm. A thin layer of perspiration had accumulated along her forehead and Mollie could feel strays of damp curls sticking against her forehead.

She watched as the prince emerged from between her slick thighs, his chin wet with her lubricant and his pale eyes bright with exertion.

“You're ready now,” he murmured as he began to unbuckle his trousers. Mollie watched through her climax- filled hazed as he dropped his pants and freed his manhood from his dark boxer briefs.

Mollie had never seen the male organ in full unobstructed view before and she couldn't help but stare in wonder at the long thick cock. The utter size of his manhood intimidated her and she couldn't help but involuntarily close her legs at the sight of it.

He shook his head in disapproval and angled himself on the bed so he was in line with her vagina. Mollie was sealed in his iron grip and no matter how much she writhed beneath him, he had her trapped.

Micah shot her a charming crooked smile. “Don't be nervous,” he whispered brushing his hands tenderly across her heaving bosom.

He pushed her head back gently and enveloped her mouth with his own. She could taste herself against his lips and she could feel his hands cautiously creep up her ribcage stopping to gently thumb the underside of her breasts.

Mollie's head was spinning and the skin to skin contact of his hardness against her thighs was almost too much for her to take. She felt his hands slide down her body and cup one of her thighs from beneath her. With a light squeeze he brought her thigh forward and pulled it over his hip gaining a more suggestive angle and giving him better access to her most intimate area.

Micah kissed Mollie, more softly this time as he once more pressed himself against her. He pulled Mollie's leg more tightly around his hip angling his erection towards the desired location and met her eyes one last time.

"It's going to hurt you," he whispered as Mollie writhed beneath him. "But only for a moment."

Mollie felt his tip press against her as he began to inch his way past her slick walls, painfully slow.

With one final grunt he buried himself within her in a single sharp thrust. Mollie's scream was muffled into Micah's bare shoulder.

The pain was sharp and sudden and her walls ached as he sheathed himself fully inside her.

Micah began to pepper her chest with kisses, along her neck, her jaw, her breasts.

Mollie believed he was trying to distract her from the tearing sensation but not even his promises or his gentleness could have prepared her for the sudden ripping pain that engulfed her lower body.

"Mollie Mae," he groaned against her throat as he lay still for a moment, allowing her to accommodate his size.

Mollie could feel the moisture accumulating in her eyes as the tears fell from her damp lids.

He kissed the tears that fell down her cheeks before pulling out and pushing himself back into her.

The pain had somewhat subsided and Mollie began to feel a familiar dull warmth spread through her vaginal walls as they fell into a regular rhythm. Mollie supported herself on the soft linen bed sheets as Micah tilted her hips slightly higher to hit a particularly tender spot deep within her.

The sensation that was building inside of her was overwhelming and Mollie was beginning to feel the pleasures of their labour. The feeling left her raw and gasping for breath and she opened her legs wider to accept even more of his length within her.

The intimacy of their union touched upon a part of Mollie she never knew existed and she sighed in pleasure as Micah buried his face within the thick curls of hair around her neck and pressed her sensitive bud with his thumb.

Her walls clamped down hard and she screamed her pleasure as Micah groaned against her neck. With one final thrust and a sharp squeeze of her hips, Micah came. His torso jerked

hard against her and she felt a rush of his hot liquid fill her quivering lower walls.

He pumped within her several more times, emptying himself within the deep confines of her vagina before pulling himself from inside her. She felt the warm liquid of his pleasure trickle down her thighs and she shivered .

Both of them were panting at this point and in a surprisingly loving gesture Micah flipped Mollie over so that she lay panting against his chest, his slowly softening member pressing against her slick thighs.

Mollie had caught a glimpse of the prince's back before he turned them over and failed to notice the blossoming purple bruises spread out along his back...had she done that?

His usually cold skin was blazing and Mollie collapsed against his warm chest as they both caught their breath.

Mollie's vision began to blur as she felt the heaviness of her lids begin to weigh down upon her. The prince was murmuring something in her ear but Mollie was too far gone to hear it.

With the gentle stroking motions of his hand against her back and his warm body below her, Mollie pressed her sweaty face into Micah's hard chest and fell into a deep sleep, the repercussions of what she had just done melting away into the blanketing darkness that pulled her under.

Chapter 17: Chlore

Chapter Summary

A large info loaded chapter ahead. A lot more information about Mollie's situation is revealed and Mollie begins to get to know Micah on a more personal level.

It was the sharp knocking coming from outside the room that woke Mollie from her deep slumber.

She groaned as she woke, her muscles feeling like jelly. She felt a sharp pain between her legs as she stretched followed by a lasting soreness that radiated through her lower limbs. Her eyes snapped open when she remembered last night. Her eyes were met by a bright light that filled the entire room. She was alone in the large bed, the sheets wrinkled and tangled around her and the door to the room slightly ajar.

He had taken her last night and she had allowed him to. Worse, she had taken pleasure in it.

Her face felt hot as the memories came crashing down on her. She wrapped the white sheet around her body and made her way to the adjoining washroom.

After a long shower under the hot water, Mollie slipped herself into a simple white dress from the dresser and managed to coax her tangled dark brown curls into a single neat plait down her shoulder. The dress was adorned with daisies and gave off a very youthful aura. It was a stark contrast from the more mature outfits Micah enjoyed picking out for her. Mollie found that she enjoyed challenging him, even if those challenges were as trivial as picking her own clothes and her own style.

She padded barefoot outside of the room and looked around. Had he left her alone?

As if on cue the door to the cabin opened and the prince entered. Although he wore a simple white dress shirt and dark trousers he still managed to give off an air of authority when he entered the room.

“Good you’re up,” he said with an easy going smile. She watched as his eyes spanned the length of her body, zeroing in on the short dress she wore. She noticed how his eyes narrowed ever so slightly when he made it to her legs.

“Would you join me outside when you finish?”

He gestured to the food that lined the table and Mollie’s stomach rumbled when she saw the large array that had been set out. It was bright and sunny outside after a night of continuous rain and Mollie had never felt more well rested. It was almost as if the manor sucked the very

life out of you the longer you stayed there. She felt as if she were re-energizing herself, and re-absorbing the strength she had lost after so many dreadful and sleepless nights.

Mollie nodded and watched as Micah left swiftly, the door softly closing behind him.

When Mollie finished her breakfast and ventured outside, she was met with the fresh scent of wet grass, clear blue skies and a soft ray of sunlight on the darkening Green. She closed her eyes for a moment and stood there imagining that she were beyond the mountains that bordered the Lyon regime. Surrounded by nature in its purest form, where business no longer mattered, money had no true value, and land had no true owner.

The knocking began again and Mollie noticed a clean cut pathway leading to another small building beyond the cottage. She hadn't noticed it before and the prince was nowhere in sight. The pathway of soil and mud was damp from the previous rainfall but Mollie didn't mind as she made her way towards the property. It resembled a kind of barn and Mollie was surprised. She hadn't expected a property like this one, on Lyon territory to be so...simple. It was out of character. Then again Mollie was learning new things about the Lyons every day.

"So you're the little minx."

Mollie whirled around and scrambled backwards. That voice was so familiar.

He stood tall and formal in a light grey waistcoat and tight form fitting pants. His dark hair was combed and teased lightly to give off a more relaxed vibe. He was not wearing his glasses and Mollie could see the resemblance to his brothers within his handsome features.

"Rowan Lyon," he said with a small bow. "You must be Mollie?"

Mollie could only stand and stare, brown eyes meeting brown eyes. The last time she had seen him had been at that horrible dinner she was only too keen to erase from her memory. Her face flamed when the events of that night re-surfaced in her mind.

He blinked and drew his gaze downwards towards her exposed legs and bare feet which were buried in the damp soil. Even if he was surprised, he did a remarkable job of concealing it.

He seemed incredibly perceptive and Mollie couldn't help but feel as if he knew something she didn't. He was the academic after all.

Rowan chuckled at her reaction. "You're not supposed to look a royal directly in the eyes." Mollie quickly dropped her gaze to the ground and shifted uncomfortably.

"*Shit*," she thought. She should have known that. She now realized there was some truth behind Micah's words. He *did* give her many liberties.

Rowan still wore that easy going smile on his face but Mollie didn't trust him. He was cut from the same cloth as his brothers and so far, their first impressions were not at the top of Mollie's list.

He laughed again. "But I think we're past that point though aren't we."

He walked up towards Mollie and offered his arm out to her. "Take a walk with me?"

He played the role of a prince beautifully and Mollie was on edge. With James, she knew where her place was and with Micah she could push the limits. With Rowan, she found herself in uncharted waters and this made her more nervous than anything.

She nodded and shuffled towards him putting her thin arm through his long sleeved one. He seemed relaxed as they walked back towards the cottage. His polished black shoes squished on the wet grass as Mollie clumsily walked beside him. His strides were long and she struggled to keep up.

"You seem to have caught my brothers eye."

His tone was conversational but Mollie could hear the tautness beneath his words.

For some reason, the path seemed much longer on the way back than it did on the way there.

"Which one?" she asked, her tone sour.

Rowan paused at her question before he chuckled lowly.

"You tell me."

Mollie frowned.

"My brothers are quite the force of nature Mollie," he said. "I personally find it entertaining when they go for each others throats, but our father is against it. He wants us to be one happy family. Isn't that simply delightful?"

Mollie was surprised to hear this. Micah did not seem like the type to initiate a fight. She couldn't imagine it. Although all the brothers were incredibly tall in height, James was an absolute monstrosity. Mollie guessed he must have been at *least* six foot six. He towered over both of his brothers and she cringed thinking about lean and delicate Micah in combat with his brother.

"I don't think you're aware of the rivalry between my brothers," Rowan said with a wide grin. "The enmity that runs between them is unprecedented."

Mollie was repulsed by the amusement on Rowan's face. He seemed genuinely pleased at the animosity between his older and younger brother. Mollie had no siblings of her own but, she was under the impression that hatred was certainly not something that was commonly shared between siblings.

There was a brief moment of silence as they continued down the florally decorated pathway. There was a soft carefree smile plastered on Rowan's face as they walked and Mollie couldn't help but think about how many horrible incidences that smile had witnessed.

"Micah is not one to keep a slave of his own," the prince said curiously. His eyes had flickered to Mollie's.

“So I’ve heard,” she muttered.

Mollie could see the smile playing at the corners of his lips. He was enjoying seeing her squirm.

“I’m not going to lie I was curious. I was expecting something more... genteel... but consider myself underwhelmed.”

Mollie ignored the insult. She didn’t consider herself “genteel” as he called it, and she certainly didn’t care about Rowan’s taste anyway.

“I was under the impression women in general weren’t your type.”

Mollie had seen him that day at the dinner table. His hand had been curled around another man’s hand beside him in an almost loving gesture. She also remembered the look of disgust on his face as she was courted by another female slave of the Lyons household.

Rowan’s face froze for a moment, and as quickly as it appeared his face melted into a wide smile.

“Ah. I bet you’re referring to Solanio, the charming dark haired fellow by my side.”

Mollie didn’t answer. She felt the conversation had taken a somewhat insidious turn.

“He’s quite handsome don’t you think?” His arm tightened ever so slightly around Mollie’s and she hesitated.

“I was so smitten with him the first time I laid my eyes on his. He has the kind of voice that puts you into a trance, the kind of lips that can suck a cock dry.”

Mollie squirmed but Rowan held on tight. “But don’t get me wrong, I enjoy a woman now and again. There’s something so hypnotic about a woman’s body. The gentle curves, the flowing locks, the secretive slit.”

Mollie’s breath had picked up as the prince launched into his escapade about women. His grip was tight, far too tight and Mollie felt like prey locked in the jaws of a predator as Rowan all but steered her toward the cottage.

“Women are experts at inveigling the opposite sex. That’s why you keep them at a distance, you keep them subdued, and you keep them fucking satisfied.” His tone had taken on a harsher tone and Mollie could sense the layers of vindication that lay beneath.

They were steps away from the cottage at this point and Rowan slowly dropped her arm to walk in front of her. He stood to face her, blocking her way to the door.

His height was high enough to block out the sun and his figure created a looming shadow in front of her, the sun like a halo surrounding him.

“But I did not mean to divagate from the subject.” He chuckled for a moment. “Forgive me.”

His eyes zeroed in on Mollie and she dropped her gaze. He was testing her.

“You’ve made quite a name for yourself since you’ve arrived here...and I commend you for that. But I sense that you lack full knowledge of the exigencies associated with the monarchy.”

“I’m a quick learner,” she replied tersely.

“I don’t doubt that,” Rowan said with a sly smile. He looked like James when he did this and she shivered. “But I must warn you Mollie, your ties to this monarchy are now set in stone. You will never leave this place.”

Mollie’s ears pricked and her hands began to sweat.

“You have no family, no friends, no real ties to Charterly, so I’ve been told.”

Mollie looked at him, completely baffled.

“That’s not true, I have my mother to support...my bakery to run-”

Rowan smiled when he heard this and raised his hand to stop her.

“Those matters are trivial. Your mother on the other hand...your relationship is somewhat turbulent is it not?”

Mollie was fuming. Had Micah told him? She had told the prince that in good faith. She should have known he would use it against her. She should have seen this coming.

“She’s still my mother, and I can’t abandon her. You can’t keep me from her.” Her teeth were gritted and she was visibly shaking.

“Oh but we can,” he said with a smile.

He grasped his gloved hands together and looked at her closely, as if he were memorizing her every feature. His eyes flickered to the cottage for a moment before resting back on her eyes. It seemed as if he were re-thinking what he was going to say.

“How *are* you and my brother getting along? I do hope I didn’t interrupt the... honeymoon.”

Mollie narrowed her eyes at the prince, her blood simmering.

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

She had never been more relieved to see Micah as he slowly but coolly appeared behind his brother, his posture stiff and his face impassive.

“There you are,” he murmured looking at Mollie his eyes flickering to his brother.

Rowan laughed and turned to glance at his younger brother.

“I like her,” he said with another chuckle. “I like her a lot.”

Micah's face remained blank as Rowan continued his laughter. "Now I see why you're so smitten Micah. I certainly wonder who's dominating who in this relationship."

Mollie cringed at Rowan. She almost found him more despicable than James....*almost*.

"Why are you here?" Micah asked glancing around them. "Where is Solanio?"

Rowan sighed.

"There's been a situation I'm afraid which demanded that I come find you at once. I've sent Solanio to help manage things in the West, he will arrive tomorrow."

Micah seemed tense and Mollie watched as he ran a hand through his hair. He looked sharply at Mollie and then briefly at his brother.

"We'll discuss it inside," he said quietly. In a flash he grabbed Mollie's wrist and began to pull her behind him back toward the cottage. She yelped at his grip and stumbled as Rowan glided behind them, his dark eyes observing their interaction closely.

"Wait in the hall," Micah ordered releasing her wrist. She began to protest but the look Micah shot her made her silent at once.

She turned away miserably and made her way around the corner, away from the Lyon's. She waited until Micah had disappeared into the kitchen to silently retrace her steps. The two of them were talking quietly, Rowan with a severe look on his face and Micah appearing frustrated.

"You can't continue this Micah. He knows, he knows everything."

Micah paced the small kitchen as Rowan continued his musing.

"You can't run away when things don't work in your favour. You have a responsibility."

"I'm aware."

Mollie cringed at the iciness in Micah's tone. She had been on the receiving end of that tone one too many times.

"What of the West?" Micah asked.

"Uncle is dead."

There was a brief moment of silence and Mollie held her breath as she pressed herself even closer against the wall.

Rowan shook his head in annoyance. "The idiot had no progeny. His seat will remain empty until someone fills his spot. It's absolute chaos there. I couldn't wait to leave."

"Someone needs to take charge," Micah responded. "A vacancy is a sign of irresponsibility. The Insurgency will thrive on this. They'll indoctrinate the crowd, and turn them against what

is best for them.”

There was a slight pause as the brothers faced each other, a pregnant silence ensued and Mollie ventured closer, her heart in her throat and her hands as sweaty as ever. The Insurgency had spread to the West. This was certainly news to Mollie.

“Father wants you to fill the spot.”

Rowan looked rather smug and Mollie watched the anger darken Micah’s usually placid expression.

“I have no inclination to travel to the West.”

“That’s no longer your choice baby brother. With Uncle gone, the citizens are rebelling. The Insurgency is building there and they are set on igniting a rebellion.”

Micah swore and continued pacing, his features laced with stress.

“That reckless bastard,” he muttered. “He ruined everything. *Everything.*”

Rowan sighed and placed his palms on the table. “You don’t have an option. James left late last night...he’s all too willing to initiate.”

Micah glared at Rowan.

“I’m sure he is.”

They continued talking for quite some time, well into late afternoon about topics Mollie knew next to nothing about. Yet she continued her sleuthing and watched the exchange between them, trying her best to place the source of their issues.

“The gala is tomorrow Micah,” Rowan said as he straightened up and tightened the stiff collar around his pale neck. “Your presence will be required.”

Micah looked away sharply. His gaze was drawn towards the wall where she stood and Mollie quickly laid herself flat, praying he didn’t see her.

“You know how those events bore me Rowan. I have no interest in that kind of fraternization. That’s your area of expertise.” Micah’s tone was rather dry and she could just picture the frown etched across his features.

Rowan scoffed.

“The gala is being thrown in your honour. Your future wife will be there after all.”

Mollie listened carefully to this, making sure to tuck away this information into her mind. This gala might work in her favour. She may be able to escape...

“I’ll handle my own responsibilities. Thank you Rowan.”

Mollie had flattened herself against the wall at this point and waited for the door to shut. Quickly she scuttled forward into the hall and threw herself into the nearest chair, crossing her arms against her chest.

She glanced around the corner just in time to see Micah coming towards her, his features lined with fatigue and his lips turned downwards in a frown.

“Is he gone?” Mollie asked innocently bringing her knees to her chin. Micah stared at her for a moment.

“Yes.”

He stood in front of her, his finely pressed collar folded upwards and his hands resting lightly in his trouser pockets. Mollie watched as he slowly inched forward. His long riding boots didn't make a sound as he crossed the wooden floors.

“I know you heard everything.”

Mollie's eyes snapped up but surprisingly Micah didn't appear angry, in fact he looked rather amused.

He took out that silver pocket watch he always kept with him and toyed with it in his fingers as he leaned across the wall in front of Mollie, a secretive smile on his face.

“I do find it quite entertaining when you try to deceive me.”

His eyes met hers and Mollie hated how he always stared at her with the utmost intensity. It was as if he were searching the depths of her mind and shuffling through her haphazard memories with the sole purpose of causing disarray.

“There's no need to hide anything from me Mollie,” he said softly closing the distance between them. Mollie curled her legs upward and leaned away from the prince as he sat down next to her in the velvet chair. He pretended not to notice and took her hand in his.

His fingers were so soft, like malleable cake batter, and Mollie watched as he interlaced their fingers. His skin appeared so pale next to hers and Mollie found herself tracing the curves of his hands up to his wrists.

“If you are honest with me Mollie, I will certainly return the favour.” He brought their hands up to his lips and planted a tender kiss against each of her fingers.

Honesty.

Mollie swallowed uneasily. Her very purpose for being here went against every law she could think of within the Lyon regime. Her dishonesty was the only thing keeping her alive.

“I heard everything,” she told him as he breathed in the scent emanating from her wrists.

“That's a good start,” he murmured brushing his lips up towards the inside of her elbow and back to her wrist. He had moved his other hand to her knee and had slowly inched his hand

up her exposed thighs. Her lower abdomen still ached from the night before and she squirmed nervously as his fingers inched closer to her sex.

“Your brother,” she blurted, desperate to shift the atmosphere. He continued trailing kisses along her wrist his eyes shielded by his caramel waves. He continued this circuit for quite some time before he decided to respond.

“What about him?”

His tone was curt but Mollie pressed on.

“You two seem...to get along.”

Micah’s eyes snapped up and Mollie could feel his grip tighten slightly. Questions about his family always seemed to trigger him and she knew she had to tread lightly.

“What are you asking me Mollie Mae?” His tone held a note of amusement but Mollie knew better.

“I want to know about-” she hesitated as he once again stroked his pale fingers against her thighs. “I want to know more about you and your brothers.”

Mollie watched his expression carefully as he brought his gaze back to her. She couldn’t see any sort of danger within his expression, only pale impassive eyes within a cold sculpted face.

“I see you had the pleasure of meeting my elder brother earlier,” he said quietly. He had removed his hand from her thigh and Mollie let out a silent sigh of relief. He had also dropped their arms but continued to interlock their fingers. “Rowan is a diligent member of our family, and I trust his judgment wholeheartedly.” He paused for moment before continuing. “It was Rowan’s idea to invest in solar energy to provide electricity to the cities of the South. He took into account the climate, the population density, and of course the efficiency of the system. He plans to implement this same system in the East, if the climate permits that is. ”

Mollie listened intently. She had heard about this new phenomenon within the news back home. Solar energy as a clean renewable source of power. It was an ingenious idea but also incredibly expensive.

“Who’s in charge of funding and managing such a grand project?” she asked. Micah smiled at her and continued rubbing his thumb against the inside of her palm in a surprisingly comforting gesture.

“I am.” Mollie looked sharply at him as he continued speaking.

“Revenue comes in many forms, from our partners overseas and of course from taxpayers dollars.”

“Partners overseas?” Mollie asked with a questioning look.

“Imports and exports,” he replied tersely. Mollie winced. She knew exactly what kind of imports and exports they were doing. Mollie truly had no idea of the magnitude of this business, of exactly how much money the Lyons made behind closed doors, particularly from their trafficking alone.

“Those underground businesses are amoral,” she mumbled.

“Business is amoral Mollie Mae,” he said with a chuckle. “That’s the first rule of economics I’m afraid.”

“And what about James?” she asked.

Mollie didn’t fail to notice his how lips tightened when she said his name. Mollie swore the hall had gone even more silent and Micah had stopped his circular motions on her palm with his thumb. It was as if the very mention of his brother was enough to freeze the entire room solid.

“I was unaware you two were on a first name basis.”

His tone was flat and Mollie’s spine stiffened as she realized her mistake.

“I didn’t-,” she started as Micah’s eyes darkened before her. “That was a mistake,” she whispered as Micah’s face took on that dead lifeless look. God she *hated* when he stared at her like that.

He leaned in close to her, his eyes burning holes into her own.

“The only thing you need to know about James, is that he is next in line as leader of this monarchy and as of today, crowned sovereign of the West.”

His tone was as lifeless as his eyes and Mollie felt her stomach clench in fear. For a moment, Mollie thought he was going to hit her, or perhaps punish her but he simply sighed and a brushed a hand through his thick locks.

"My uncle... he was killed by members of the Insurgency early this morning on his regular commute to his Estate."

Mollie felt uneasy at Micah’s words. James gaining more power sounded like a disaster waiting to happen and she couldn’t help but feel as if Micah knew this. There was a veil in his eyes whenever the topic transitioned to politics and Mollie could see the blatant hostility within them at even the slightest mention of his eldest brother. He didn't seem too upset about the passing of his uncle but she could see the venom in his eyes when he mentioned the Insurgency. She shifted uneasily in her seat as her hands began to sweat.

"How do you know the Insurgency was responsible?" she asked innocently.

Micah laughed humourlessly at her question and she bit her lip in fear. "Because it was messy. A complete massacre. Only the Insurgency would come up with an idea as barbaric and as self crippling as that."

"What did they do?"

Her heart was pounding and she could hear the blood rushing through her ears. Micah's eyes flashed to hers.

"Anthrax," he said curling his lip in disgust. "Seems to be their new preferred weapon of choice."

Mollie suddenly felt horribly ill and she hastily brought her knees up to her chin to rest her uneasy stomach.

"It wiped out everyone in the area. Women, children..." Micah trailed off and she could hear the raw disgust in his tone. "All for one man."

Mollie couldn't help the shiver that went down her spine. She had hidden her vial of anthrax somewhere within the grand hall of the Questershire Manor weeks ago...well before the prince had captured her.

Where had she hidden it?

Mollie felt sick to her stomach. She knew the Insurgency were radical with their ideas, but she had no idea of the true extent to which they would go to achieve their goals. Mollie felt more confused and more betrayed than ever. There was no reason for the prince to lie. She knew Caleb had sent her on this mission for a purpose and she felt as if time was running out. She remembered Caleb's words in her mind.

"If you fail Mollie, we'll be forced to intervene...I want that entire Lyon bloodline wiped out."

She hadn't had any kind of interaction with any members of the Insurgency since she was whisked away by the prince months ago and she began to fear the worst. Without contact they had no idea of Mollie's progress...whether she was still even alive. Then again, the prince was never supposed to take notice her...he was never supposed to know primary status and bakery owner Mollie Mayeson ever even existed.

Mollie trembled as Micah's eyes zeroed in on her exposed legs. Her thoughts were in complete disarray but she couldn't reveal anything to Micah, not even the slightest inkling that she had ties to the Insurgency. She stiffened as he once again brushed his palms against her thighs.

"You know fawn," he murmured sliding his fingers along Mollie's exposed skin. "I appreciate your...unique... sense of style, but do dress more appropriately when in the presence of others."

She frowned as Micah brought his hand to her cheek and traced her bottom lip with this thumb.

"I'll have Esperanza send the tailor in for you. She'll make you anything you want...seeing as its appropriate of course."

She bit her lip as he leaned in closer, his breath fanning over her face.

“You’ll be perfect,” he whispered. “I can’t wait to see how you’ll look in green.”

Mollie squeezed her eyes tight as he leaned in for a quick peck on her lips. She hated how he treated her like his life sized mannequin to doll up and parade around the house for his family to see. It was not in Mollie’s nature to be so docile but she had no choice but to play the part of the meek obedient slave.

“Come Mollie Mae,” he said lifting her gently to her feet. “You haven’t eaten since this morning.”

Mollie watched the prince in silence. She was seated across the kitchen counter from Micah as he expertly navigated himself around the kitchen. She was surprised by how comfortable he seemed in this environment and found herself watching how gracefully he moved from one countertop to the next as he laid out a beautiful platter for them to enjoy. She would have thought a prince would never have needed to know how to find his way around a kitchen. Wasn’t that what servants were for?

“Enjoying the view?”

Mollie blinked out of her reverie to see Micah looking at her from across the counter, a crooked smile on his face as he rolled his sleeves up. She hadn’t realized she had been staring so overtly. Her newly acquired information about the Insurgency was bothering her and she couldn’t seem to push it to the back of her mind.

The prince had a somewhat boyish smirk on his face and for a second she forgot he was the same cold hearted prince of one of the most powerful empires in the country.

She was tempted to say something snarky back but he was in a good mood and she planned on keeping it that way.

“I’m just wondering why you look like so comfortable around the kitchen.”

Micah laughed at this and she dropped her gaze to the food in front of her. Mollie had grown up surrounded by luxury foods and was more than familiar with the art of baking. She could instantly tell when a person was comfortable in their skin around the kitchen and Micah certainly appeared that way.

“I spent a lot of time in the kitchen as a child,” he said with a soft smile. “There’s a bit of an age gap between my brothers and I, around ten years.” Mollie watched his movements as he filled the aged kettle on the counter with water from the sink and set the machine boiling. The gurgling sound of bubbling water filled the quaint kitchen. It was such an informal and domestic thing to do Mollie was still wrapping her head around it.

“I was too young to train with my brothers at the time, so Esperanza would take care of me while she completed her duties. She spent most of her time here with me. When my father deemed I was old enough to begin my training, I began to spend more of my time away from the manor, preferring to travel for business and establish connections with neighbouring

cities.” He paused as the kettle elicited a high pitched screech indicating the water had reached boiling temperature. He swiftly grabbed two porcelain mugs and proceeded to pour the hot tea into each, his eyes fixed on his work.

“I guess I learned a thing or two during my time here and it stuck with me.” He flashed Mollie a dazzling smile. He gingerly pushed the tea towards Mollie and she held the mug in her hands, letting the heat dissipating from the mug warm her fingers.

Although the prince seemed honest in his answer, she didn’t quite believe that was the full reason for him being so comfortable in the kitchen. She had noticed how careful and calculated Micah’s movements were, even that day he had dined with her in the parlour. Mollie found it odd how he didn’t touch a morsel of food from the table. It was almost as if he was mistrusting of everyone around him; so mistrusting that he preferred to do even the most tedious of tasks himself, including meal preparations and something as simple as making tea.

She said nothing as he sat across from her gesturing for her to begin eating. She carefully picked a piece of soft bread from the table and dipped it into the swirling liquid of fresh olive oil mixed with balsamic. Mollie brought the bread to her mouth and let the savoury flavours enrich her tastebuds. Mollie chewed thoughtfully as the prince brought his mug to his lips, taking a small sip from the scorching liquid.

Mollie swallowed and met the prince’s gaze, his pale eyes giving off an aura of their own.

“This is sourdough bread,” she said quietly picking up another piece in her hand. Micah’s gaze dropped to the food and then back to her in a second.

“And?”

“It didn’t rise enough,” she murmured looking at the other pieces on the plate. “Can you see how flat it is?”

She picked up a piece in her hand and observed it closely.

“The dough wasn’t kneaded enough between rises. This limits the ability of the yeast to penetrate through the different layers of the dough.” She flips the piece over in her hand observing the inward deflation of the crust. “Therefore, the only food source available to them is the flour that lays on the surface. When that supply is depleted the yeast can’t flourish and then the dough sinks...”

Micah was quiet as he listened to her. Mollie realized she had been musing and she quietly put the bread down. She could feel her cheeks heating up. She doubted the prince even cared about something so inconsequential.

“You miss it,” he said quietly.

Mollie sighed. She didn’t want to talk about the bakery, it was still too painful.

“It doesn’t matter,” she mumbled turning her face away. The memories of her bakery seemed like lifetimes ago at this point and she couldn’t bring herself to think about it. She wondered if it was still even in business.

“A passion is not something trivial fawn,” he murmured leaning closer to Mollie across the table. “It’s something to be celebrated, something to put on display for the world to see.” He was leaning over the counter at this point and Mollie could see the desire within his eyes. “I can see your passion Mollie Mae,” he whispered. His pink lips had curved into a charming smile and Mollie found herself pressed to her seat. His lips were inches away from her own and she could feel his breath against her lips as he stared adoringly into her brown eyes. “I could see it the very first day I laid my eyes on you.”

Mollie could practically smell the arousal in the air and she shivered as the prince brought his cool hand to her flaming cheek.

“Kiss me Mollie,” he whispered. “Show me how much passion you have to give.” Mollie’s face was all hot and she couldn’t bring herself to match the prince’s profound stare. His eyes seemed to smoulder before her and she hated how his words made her insides crumble with fear and desire all at once.

“Master Lyon please,” she whispered as his hand ghosted down to her neck. She felt Micah’s hand close around her throat and she swallowed in fear as he began to increase the pressure.

“Then please,” he responded pressing his fingers firmly into her pulse point eliciting a sharp gasp from Mollie. Mollie could sense the looming threat and quickly brought her head forward towards the youngest Lyon. Swallowing her fear she pushed herself up onto the smooth counter and carefully pressed her lips against the prince’s.

His lips were surprisingly cool against her own and Mollie could hear him groan as he deepened the kiss. With a speed she didn’t see coming, he pushed the plate of food off the counter in a single fluid motion and lifted her onto the counter, pinning her below his hard muscled body.

The platter fell to the ground with a clattering bang and Mollie squealed as he pushed her against the cool granite of the counter. She gasped as her head hit the granite and his lips met hers for a second time. He was more forceful this time, allowing his arousal to consume him as he entwined his tongue with hers, forcing her mouth open.

She felt his hands slide her thin straps down and she twisted beneath him.

“Master Lyon, I can’t,” she gasped as he pulled the dress off of her body leaving her in nothing but her thin panties. “Please don’t.” She was terrified that he would penetrate her. Her vaginal canal was still tender and aching from the previous night and she feared the worst as he held her tight.

“Shh,” he whispered as he trailed his lips over her breasts. “Focus on the pleasure Mollie and the pain will subside.” Her nipples had hardened in the chilly air and she could do nothing but gasp as Micah used his tongue to tantalize her most sensitive areas and leave her moaning in unwanted bliss.

She could feel him laugh against her chest as he brought his fingers down to her soaking slit, his fingers probing through her damp panties.

“Already so wet for me,” he whispered nipping her left breast playfully. “In time, you will learn to enjoy this.” Mollie closed her eyes as tightly as she could as Micah rid himself of his snowy white dress shirt. “And I promise you here and now, that I will always strive to put your pleasure before mine... that is if you become mine.”

Mollie could do nothing but moan as he ripped her panties from her legs and bared her slit to the cool air.

She moaned as his fingers slid through her wet entrance, his fingertips massaging the inside of her tender canal. She bit down hard on her lip as his fingers twisted within her spasming pussy. Mollie whined as he removed his fingers from her clenching insides, her arousal drenching his fingers and leaking onto the smooth granite table.

Mollie could see the pale moonlight streaming in through the high ceilinged window in the kitchen and she watched as it illuminated the light blond streaks buried within the prince’s tousled waves. She could feel his rapid breaths against her throat as he dropped his trousers and positioned himself at her slick entrance.

Mollie focused her vision on the crescent moon through the window and imagined she were somewhere far away from where she was, beyond the mountains, and past the treacherous cliffs of the Questershire Manor.

She gasped as the prince slipped something hard and solid through her trembling lips. Mollie had figured this was some sort of pregnancy preventing pill and she eagerly swallowed it down. The last thing she needed in her situation was to end up carrying an illegitimate child...let alone an illegitimate heir to the Lyon Regime.

She knew what was coming next, or rather, she *felt* what was coming next. With her eyes fixed on the thin crescent shaped moon shining through the kitchen window and with one last desperate groan from her burning lips, Mollie felt the prince penetrate through her delicate petals, his sighs of pleasure filling her ringing ears. Mollie stared at the moon in the sky through the high ceilinged window letting the pale moonlight wash over her heaving body as Micah writhed deep within her. Their moans were the only sound in the otherwise silent cabin, entwining together like their molded shadows reflected on the silvery backplash of the kitchen wall, and dully illuminated by the slowly dissipating moonlight.

Chapter 18: Argon

Chapter Summary

The annual White Ball takes place and the monarchy is in dire need of bureaucratic adjustments.

The ride back to the manor was a quick and silent one. As usual, Micah was absent when Mollie had woken up and she was immediately loaded into a carriage and taken back to the manor as soon as she was ready.

Mollie was a deep sleeper. Her mother used to swear her growing up for her inattentiveness throughout the night, especially when there was commotion outside the apartment, which happened to be every other day. It was no wonder Micah was able to enter and leave the room so easily without her knowing.

Mollie was taken straight to what she had now deemed “her quarters” after the short commute to the manor and she was happy to see the familiar wrinkled face of Esperanza waiting for her inside. The woman seemed genuinely pleased to see Mollie but she had an apprehensive almost nervous tone to her features.

She clicked her tongue in disapproval when Mollie freed her rebellious curls from the messy bun she was so fond of sporting.

“What you need is a good grooming,” she said sharply hastily unbuttoning the pretty mint green dress that had been chosen for Mollie to wear. Mollie had bristled when she saw the handwritten parchment note waiting for her atop the dresser that morning in slanted and painfully elegant calligraphy.

Wear this.

She could just imagine the expression that would be on his face as he uttered those words.

Esperanza continued to cluck in disapproval as she expertly peeled the dress from Mollie’s thin body. Mollie yelped as the chilly air hit her and she involuntary brought her hands to her chest to cover her breasts. Esperanza rolled her eyes and ushered Mollie into the huge white luxurious washroom.

“Master Lyon has asked me to prepare you for the gala tonight,” she explained placing her weathered hands on Mollie’s shoulders and pushing her into the steaming tub. Mollie spluttered as the old woman pushed her head under water. “And it looks like this is going to take *much* longer than I originally anticipated.”

By the time Mollie was finished she was utterly exhausted. She had been shaved in every place she could possibly think of and her skin felt smooth and soft to the touch. Her hair had been blow dried and styled into loose curls, and her makeup applied to accentuate her large doe eyes. When Mollie's eyes landed on the dress in front of her she found herself cringing.

"I can't wear that," she whispered staring at the rich expensive material before her. Esperanza waved her off.

"You will wear whatever Master Lyon sees fit." Mollie gulped as Esperanza steered her towards the long flowing crisp white gown. Mollie avoided wearing white...for a multitude of reasons.

"Why must it be white?" Mollie muttered as the delicate bodice was fitted onto her breasts and the pearl buttons were fastened at the back.

"It is the White Ball tonight," Esperanza replied tightening the corset around her waist until Mollie gasped in pain.

"The White Ball?" she managed to ask in between spurted breaths. The dress was extremely tight around the waist and Mollie was already struggling to breathe in deep breaths.

"Yes," Esperanza said as she circled to Mollie's front to style her hair. "It's tradition. A grand gala is held at the Questershire Manor and everybody wears white. It happens at the end of every January."

Mollie felt her stomach flop after hearing this.

The end of January.

That must mean she had been at the Questershire Manor for a little over three months already. She was supposed to have been home and back at the bakery after only two weeks.

"Stop your fidgeting child," she said sternly twisting Mollie's small waist in one direction then the other. "You'll crease the dress."

Mollie sulked as Esperanza saw to every little detail around her from her cleanly shaven underarms to her daintily pinned curls. Mollie was never one to indulge in her looks, she couldn't have even if she wanted to, her mother hated having mirrors in the house.

Esperanza sighed as she came to stand in front of Mollie. She looked a bit taken aback but then she smiled and Mollie saw the warm motherly figure she was used to seeing in the older woman.

"You look breath-taking," she said quietly clasping her hands together. "I'm afraid the prince won't be able to keep himself away from you."

Mollie frowned when she heard this as the woman carefully went to the dresser to retrieve 2 long elegant silk gloves.

“For now,” Mollie thought sourly as the lightweight gloves were slid onto her slender arms. “Until he gets tired of me and ships me off to some remote location never to be seen again.”

“You must be quite the special one for the prince to create a custom made gown for you,” Esperanza murmured.

Mollie turned her gaze to the old woman.

“I’m assuming I’m not the first?” Mollie asked more harshly than she intended. The women quickly dropped her eyes and took a step away from Mollie.

Mollie could see the secrets that swirled within the cloudy eyes of the older woman and she despised how reticent the woman was. Surely she understood Mollie’s plight?

Esperanza sighed. “It’s not my business to say.” Mollie watched the old woman’s features as she struggled to express herself. She seemed conflicted and Mollie intended on using that brief moment of vulnerability to her advantage.

“Why me?” she pressed as Esperanza shuffled towards the dresser. “What does he want from me? What could I possibly give him that he doesn’t already have?”

Esperanza shot Mollie a frigid glare.

“I’ve told you this before child and I’ll tell you again. You’re ideas of who...of what occurs within this monarchy are seriously misinformed.”

Mollie stared back unabashedly.

“This monarchy doesn’t just revolve around one person making the rules and enforcing it. It goes through many levels of government and oftentimes the end result is the same...nothing much changes.”

Mollie could hear the slight bitterness in the woman’s tone.

“Yet it is always the person currently in power who bears the brunt of the public disapproval and has to face the consequences of their predecessor’s mistakes.”

Mollie was quiet as she stood uncomfortably in the middle of her room, in the long flowing white gown that was so artfully chosen for her tall figure. She watched as several emotions flitted across the older woman’s face as she continued to speak.

“Despite what you may think, young Master Lyon is not the real enemy here. In fact, it is quite the opposite.”

Esperanza had proceeded to seat herself on the edge of Mollie’s bed and Mollie watched as those sad eyes re-visited one of the many dark memories of her past.

“There have been many commoners to come and go from this manor. Very few leave, and far fewer last.” Her eyes flickered to Mollie.

“I’ve been here a long time child, and never have I seen a slave last more than 24 hours with the youngest Lyon.”

Mollie felt her blood run cold. It made sense now why her presence sparked so much attention...so much controversy.

“Last?” Mollie asked quietly. “What do you mean?”

Esperanza sighed.

“Young Master Lyon doesn’t keep slaves for himself.” She glanced at Mollie and gave her a withering stare.

“Or so I thought.”

Mollie felt her face flush.

“He sends them away immediately. Off to the East, the North, wherever their work is required. He manages the business sector of this monarchy after all...and he doesn’t like to mix business with pleasure.”

Mollie listened intently. She was beginning to piece the puzzles together as she listened to Esperanza speak.

“These slaves...” she started ignoring the pressure of the corset on her waist, “they’re trained aren’t they? They’re taught how to please.” There were rumours that circulated every now and again amongst the commonfolk. Of underground slave tunnels and artful torture chambers of civilians who disobeyed the laws. Most of it was laughed off but Mollie knew there was always a little bit of truth behind a joke that ominous.

Mollie could see the slight sadness in Esperanza’s features. Mollie believed it was a woman’s secret power to sense another women’s pain, even if it was only for a brief moment.

“Yes. They are trained. Slaves of the palace are a high commodity as they are so well-disciplined and are expertly taught the art of pleasing a man. They teach them early...the earlier the better.”

Mollie felt her stomach lurch. She could only think about wide brown eyed Zeta and the future that lay before her. Mollie couldn’t bring herself to fathom it.

“He knew,” she whispered suddenly. Her corset was really impairing her breathing and she twisted herself uncomfortably in an attempt to loosen the firm compression of the material on her waist. “He knew I wasn’t a slave the first time he came to see to me.”

Mollie’s voice was a low whisper as she recounted her memories of Micah, the way he had bathed her, inspected her, fingered her...

He had known since then and unfortunately for Mollie his eldest brother was now aware of this too.

Esperanza stared at her in confusion as Mollie quickly breathed in more air. She felt herself grow increasingly hotter in the stuffy room.

“Is she ready?”

His voice echoed down the hall and Mollie watched as Esperanza leaped to her feet and bowed her head in respect. Mollie watched as the prince appeared beneath the arched doorway and she couldn't help but stare.

He was dressed in a crisp snow white tuxedo that in addition to his combed and styled hair made him appear more angelic than anything. The suit contrasted sharply with his dark locks making his sun kissed skin appear as smooth as a sheen of ice in the dim light and his eyes as bright as Polaris within the blanket of a night sky.

“A devil disguised as an angel,” Mollie thought dryly.

His dark locks were growing long and Mollie observed how they curled upward beneath his ears. Mollie watched his lips curve into a cool appraising smile as his pale eyes locked on hers. He was truly the real life version of the prince from a child's fantasies with his charming smile, his handsome features, and his tall authoritative stance. But there was something lurking behind those eyes, something as dark and as tumultuous as midnight oil that threatened to spoil that picture perfect image in her mind.

“You are a sight to see Mollie Mae,” he said softly stepping into the room and extending his arm to her. Esperanza quickly bowed and shuffled out of the room leaving the two of them alone. Mollie watched her go with frustration. She was tired of the old woman's secretive ways.

Mollie looked away from the prince's clear intense stare. She couldn't bring herself to look into those eyes and lose herself to the man standing before her. He would be the death of her, both literally and figuratively. He shifted as he stood in front of her using his glove covered fingers to brush her heated cheeks. Mollie could hear the prince hum as he stepped closer to nuzzle her neck.

“People will be so curious about you Mollie,” he whispered against her blazing skin. “You are not to respond to any of their...inquiries.”

Mollie stepped back as the prince opened his eyes, the irises like two precious emerald gems before her.

“You'll follow my every move and wait by my side for the duration of the night like the obedient escort I taught you to be.” Mollie kept her gaze directed downwards. “This is an important night for all of us with guests from cities across the regime joining us for the event. It must go perfectly.” His tone had become progressively more severe and as Mollie glanced up, she could see the frostiness in his eyes. “I know you won't disappoint me Mollie,” he breathed bringing his hand to her throat.

Mollie was slowly realizing that Micah enjoyed doing this to her. It was his way of exerting his dominance over her. The thin scar around her neck was there to stay and she felt the

prince brush his gloved fingers over the puckered line that circled her throat. His cologne filled her nostrils as he leaned in to delicately plant a kiss on her exposed neck.

“You’ve proven yourself to be somewhat precarious Mollie Mae.” His tone had shifted and Mollie watched as he stepped back to firmly grasp her silk covered hand against his own. Mollie could picture in her mind the coolness of his skin against her blazing one and for a moment she yearned for that contact.

“I can’t afford any mistakes from you tonight. If you do anything to displease me or any of our guests...you will be punished and I cannot help you.”

Mollie nodded stiffly as Micah regarded her closely.

“I won’t Master Lyon.” It took every ounce of self control for Mollie to utter those words as meekly and as quietly as she did. Mollie wouldn’t dream of doing anything at the gala, it was far too risky.

He smiled and brought his thumb to her lip.

“Re-apply your lipstick Mollie,” he said sternly before leading her out the door. “Poorly applied lipstick is a reprehensible *faux pas*.”

Mollie could hear the clinking of glasses and the continuous murmur of chatter through the grand ballroom of the Lyon Manor. She was ordered to stand behind the prince and play the part of his shadow as the night went on. She knew the rules.

No speaking to the prince unless he addresses you directly

No speaking to other members of the event without consent from the prince himself

No eating or drinking at the event unless the prince allows for it

No scowling. It is unbecoming of a woman.

Out of all the rules she had been forced to learn, the no scowling would be the hardest for Mollie to accomplish. She was not the warmest. She never had been. Even when she finally gained ownership of the bakery after her grandparents passed, her frigid exterior was a known trait amongst her colleagues.

“Prince Micah,” a guard murmured as they stood outside the ballroom. Mollie could hear her heart pounding in her ears as she stood behind the youngest Lyon, her eyes facing his stiff back.

With a single step backward, the guard bowed deeply before opening the door with a firm push.

The first thing Mollie noticed was the humungous chandelier that hung in the middle of the grand ballroom. *No*. Mollie gazed upward and noticed there were *three* that hung in the

middle of the room with the centre one being the grandest and the largest. Each golden arch of the ornament was adorned with thousands of little crystals that lined the circular piece like precious pearls. She gulped when she saw what appeared to be thousands of eyes turn their gaze to her.

Mollie could feel her cheeks flare and she prayed she wouldn't stumble in her long gown and her thin stiletto heels. The heels rested uncomfortably on her stitches and no matter how hard she tried she couldn't shake the itchy throbbing feeling it elicited on her lower ankle. The resounding hush that echoed through the room when the prince entered was inescapable and Mollie could hear the whispers and coughs that ensued as the guests parted for the prince. The guests were dressed extravagantly and Mollie noticed how the women blushed and curtsied and the men tipped their hats or nodded their heads in respect as Micah passed them by. It was quite a sight to see, with everyone wearing white amongst the gold and red interior of the ballroom. Out of the corner of her eye Mollie could see a painter with his stand before him. His brushes were clutched in his hands as he worked hard on the canvas in front of him to depict the incredible visuals that lay before him.

She looked up to see an elevated stage where two gem encrusted seats were placed. Above the thrones was an enormous painting of the King himself surrounded by his three sons. Mollie could see the photo must have been taken quite a few years back as Hartley hadn't yet sported his peppered grey hair. Rather, he had his dark locks combed and parted neatly to display his hard and handsome features. He was seated on the same throne that lay below the painting, with his right hand clutching a large ornate sceptre embedded with emeralds, amethysts, and numerous other precious jewels. The top of the sceptre held the infamous lion insignia, the head of the creature installed with a huge intricately cut ruby for each eye. His other hand lay neatly on his lap clutching several scrolls of parchment. To his right stood a much younger James slightly behind the throne of his father and with that same plastered smile he wore for the cameras. Rowan stood to the right of his father his smile less wide than his elder brother and his glasses resting on the bridge of his nose. Mollie was drawn to the young boy standing to the left of his father, a small silver pocket watch clutched in his left hand and his other hand resting lightly on the arm rest of his father's throne. He looked no more than fifteen with his youthful features and rosy cheeks. Mollie noticed how luminescent his eyes appeared in comparison to his brothers. Those pale eyes were impossible to miss, even within the various colours soaked into the canvas of the painting. Despite his youth Micah still wore that cold emotionless expression on his face that Mollie had grown accustomed to. Apart from his father's thin line of a mouth Micah was the only one in the portrait who appeared unsmiling.

As Mollie turned her gaze to the opposite wall she saw many more paintings that lined the grand ballroom with each subsequent portrait appearing more aged and cracked than the last. Mollie quickly realized each painting was a traditional family portrait of the Lyon family over several generations. Above the arched entrance to the ballroom and between the two gold plated columns of the entryway was a massive photo of a beautiful woman.

The late queen.

There was no mistaking those large dark brown eyes and that long slender nose that lay upon her diamond shaped face. Her chestnut locks were parted in the centre and tied back into an

intricate up-do with two thick strands to frame her pretty face. Her expression was relaxed and peaceful and Mollie could see traces of James and Rowan within her sharp features. But no matter how hard she tried she couldn't seem to find a trace of Micah within her. Perhaps the lips?

Mollie struggled to follow Micah as he promptly navigated his way through the throngs of guests in white to make his way towards the front of the stage. He stopped just short of the wide stairs that led to the elevated platform and Mollie watched as he gracefully sunk to one knee. Confused, Mollie directed her gaze upwards to the stage where two previously unoccupied seats now held a single individual.

Mollie felt her stomach drop when she saw who occupied the throne on the left. She had seen him in person only once before, that night in the dining room with his sons. She had never seen him after that anywhere in the castle and Micah had never mentioned him. She was familiar with Hartley from the news, the press, and the media. It was impossible not to be, he was the most powerful man in the entire region extending from the Cincinnati city in the west to the Ophian River in the east. However, what was truly remarkable about Hartley Lyon, was his ability to radically transform the monarchy once appointed as official ruler. He was young when he rose to power and yet he accomplished what the previous Lyon monarchy could never do. He turned the monarchy from a government institution that enforced the rules, into a monopolizing empire exerting his influence on not only authoritarian figures, but businessmen and economists alike.

Hartley sat cool and collected before his guests, his dark emotionless eyes staring straight ahead as a brief moment of silence overcame the room. Hartley was one of those men that commanded attention just by his domineering presence alone. Mollie quickly followed the actions of the other guests and, rather clumsily in her long gown, brought her knee towards the cold marble floor. She recognized that same slim sculpted nose on his face and could see Micah had taken that prominent feature from his father.

“Good evening to all.”

His voice was so deep and so commanding Mollie felt as if it penetrated through her very bones. Immediately people began to rise to their feet as Hartley scanned the crowd before him. He wore a silvery white three piece suit and a silver lined white ascot around his throat. In true Lyon fashion, he wore silky white gloves that extended all the way to his forearms.

“Tonight is a celebration as much as it is an adversity,” he continued as a brief murmur rippled through the crowd. “Many might interpret this statement as an inherent paradox, but I beg to differ.” He spoke so smoothly and charismatically Mollie was truly in awe. She had heard James's speeches many times on the news at home, but not even he came close to the resonating tone and echoing vigour that emanated from his father's lips.

Mollie had never felt any inclination to attend any one of the Lyon's notoriously famous speeches growing up. Chartery was a fairly divided state from an economic point of view and far from a popular hub. Mollie's home was directly in the centre of Chartery, inching closer toward the Northern part of the city known for its lower class citizens. The divide between those who supported the Lyon monarchy and those that didn't was quite apparent in Chartery and Mollie was situated in an area where there was a thorough mix of both.

Mollie always found it rather strange how the Lyon's always made a point of visiting these small dispersed cities within the regime such as Chartery. Mollie would have guessed they would visit only the capital cities as they were more densely populated and were allocated with more resources than the less developed cities. Someone had once told Mollie growing up, that the Lyon's put in the effort to visit these small cities as a publicity stunt. In reality, they only visited the wealthy parts of these cities in an effort to maintain their affluent supporters while turning a blind eye to the rest of the citizens. Despite the huge imbalance in numbers between the rich and the poor, the Lyons still managed to assert their power over each and every city within the Lyon regime.

Mollie blinked as Hartley continued to address his guests. The more Mollie watched his impeccably rehearsed movements, the more unsettled she became. Everything he said and did appeared so cultivated...so...practiced. It was the most unnatural thing.

His voice radiated throughout the hall and Mollie watched as the guests glued their eyes onto their King, their faces full of respect and unabashed admiration.

"There can be no happiness without sadness just as there can be no rich without poor. They are simply two entities existing on polar opposite ends of one another, just as the north is to the south and the sun is to the moon. Our businesses, this monarchy is no different. In order for us to win... there have to be people who are willing to lose."

Many guests raised their glasses of rose champagne in the air as Hartley delivered his speech. If Mollie didn't know any better, she would have assumed he was preparing for something big...something grand.

Hartley continued speaking, delving into his time as ruler of the monarchy and paying his respects to the people for their support and their trust.

Mollie was in awe as Hartley regarded the crowd. He acted as if they truly *did* choose him to be their ruler and he was *grateful* for their support. Mollie was utterly bewildered.

"I also want to pay my respects to my friend, my confidant, my brother....Logan Lyon."

Mollie's head snapped up when she heard this. She would never forget the look in Logan Lyon's eyes as he watched Mollie from across the long dining table. He had those dark blue eyes, like the murky depths of a polluted ocean. She had remembered the look on Hartley's face as he observed Logan. It was far from the look one would bestow upon someone they regarded as their friend.

Mollie had suspected he was related to the Lyon's but his blond hair had thrown her off. She assumed he was a close partner or some close business connection.

He was their uncle...he was the one who had died. Mollie bit her lip in concern. The Insurgency had proven themselves to be quite strong to have accomplished this feat. It's no wonder Hartley had gathered his posse of rich executives and totalitarian enforcers to this event. It was certainly not for a "celebration" as he had put it. He had plans to implement. He needed the power to be close to him at this time of vulnerability. And he certainly needed to make some big changes to how things were going to effectuate from here on out.

“The rebels in the West have killed their leader, my brother, and have wreaked irreparable havoc across various cities in the West. They killed our citizens, our women who work so hard to keep this population thriving, our men who work day in and day out to sustain their families and our thriving economy.”

He paused after this, as if in harrowing sorrow.

“And our children. Our leaders of tomorrow, who were so horrifically robbed of their promising futures.”

The only sounds that filled the room were the chilling words of Hartley Lyon’s speech as he pressed on. Mollie noted how skilfully Hartley was able to feed continuous lies into the ears of his guests. Not only did he adopt a rather ingenious ethos approach by challenging the methods of the Insurgency, he incorporated aspects of the logos and pathos in perfect combinations to gratuitously achieve the rhetorical triangle of persuasion.

“The safety of our citizens is my utmost priority in this time of grievance and change.” Mollie noticed how he always remained standing during his speech and he never dropped eye contact with the people before him. It was as if addressing people was second nature to him.

“And when change occurs we must adapt to these changes in parallel approaches.” He paused after this and a prolonged hush fell over the crowd. “As my closest partners in business... in friendship...in life. I am telling you all now, that in this time of vast political unrest and turmoil, a more forward approach in this monarchy is required bureaucratically...and economically.”

Suddenly the crowd began to mutter in hushed whispers. There were several gasps of surprise from the women and many questioning stares as people looked around them. Mollie kept her gaze fixed on Micah who appeared rather bored. She glanced to the corner of her eye to see Rowan speaking quietly with a tall handsome man by his side. Rowan appeared rather placid as he placed his hand gently on the shoulder of the man beside him. The man to his right had his raven tresses brushed into a neat demure ponytail and Mollie recognized him from that dinner she had attended several weeks ago. That must have been the infamous Solanio.

As her eyes brushed past the two of them she made eye contact with her least favourite person on the planet. Beside him in a white silk gown with a flowing train was his red headed escort, her long flowing red locks coiled on her head in a fancy elegant style. Her gloved hand was clutched on top of James, almost as if she were keeping him in check. She wondered how she could possibly manage having a partner with a heart so black and vile. James had a smug almost satisfied smirk on his face and he gave Mollie a chilling smile when they met stares. The girl turned her head away as quickly as she could manage.

“Leaving no bloodline to carry on his legacy, it is with pride that I elect his majesty James Gallus Demetrius Lyon to succeed his uncle as ruler of the West.”

There was a grand applause from the crowd and several more toasts as James nodded his head in acknowledgment, his face transforming into the calm charming façade of a kind and courteous prince. Mollie watched as the men nodded in respect to the newly appointed King

of the West and the women gazed adoringly at their new leader. Mollie turned her head away in disgust.

Hartley swiftly raised his hands to silence the crowd and immediately the noise slowly dissolved into silence.

“I put great trust in my sons to carry on this legacy and fulfil their duties to this monarchy to the best of their ability.” Mollie looked up in confusion when she heard Hartley’s words.

Sons?

There were several cheers and clinks of glasses as Hartley smiled at his guests. Mollie looked over to Micah who seemed to purposefully be avoiding eye contact. She kept wondering why Hartley wasn’t exiting the stage. He appeared to be finished delivering his speech.

With an ever so delicate tilt of his head she saw the current King of the Lyon Regime tilt his head down towards Mollie and she felt her insides freeze solid.

Why would he look this way...unless...

“To finish off this delightful night, I would like all of you to stand and give a toast to your new CEO of Lyon Enterprises...my clever and incredibly gifted youngest son....his majesty, Micah Zacharias Lyon.”

Chapter 19: Potassium

Chapter Summary

Mollie questions Micah's attitude and Micah retaliates. Mollie gets an opportunity she hasn't had since her first days at the manor.

Mollie was certainly not the only one in shock.

The guests had gone silent...completely silent and Mollie watched as the youngest prince snapped his head up and looked into the eyes of his father. The surprise lasted for only a millisecond before a frigid impassiveness overtook Micah's features.

Mollie held her breath as their stare-down continued for an extended period of time. Micah's face was as blank as ever but his eyes seemed to quiver in suppressed emotion as he regarded his father who stared back with the same strength and vigour that he had expertly maintained since the early parts of the evening. It was almost as if he was challenging his son...daring him to retaliate.

Quite abruptly Micah stood up and turned around to face the crowd behind him. The shock was still on many faces but several guests seemed to have gotten over their brief moment of surprise and slowly began to clap. Mollie turned her gaze towards Hartley who wore a placid smile on his face. Mollie noticed how his eyes never strayed from Micah. It unnerved her completely. Hartley slowly brought his hands together and began to clap. Many got the message and joined in, some more hesitantly than others.

"The coronation shall take place in three weeks time," Hartley said as the murmurs began to start up again. "It would be my honour to witness my sons take over these duties and pursue their destinies, and continue on our prosperous legacy."

Quickly he reached beside him where a single glass of dark wine lay within a holder in his throne.

"To the throne," he bellowed raising his goblet to the air.

"To the throne!" the crowd echoed.

Mollie didn't miss the pure poorly concealed venom that oozed from James Lyon's emotionless stare. The woman beside him smiled at onlookers elegantly but Mollie could see her thin fingers were imperceptibly shaking as she dug them into her escorts arm.

Immediately the crowd began to disperse and swarm around the Lyons as many rushed to congratulate Micah and his brother. Mollie struggled to follow behind Micah as he made a

beeline for his brother Rowan who appeared to be the only Lyon with a genuine smile on his face.

Mollie was confined to the edges of the stage as people began to cheer and celebrate around her and she looked around her in a panic.

“Are you alright?”

Mollie whirled around at the sound emanating so close to her and came face to face with a petite and attractive blond. Her dress was ruffled and strapless and featured a daring slit to show off her pale milky legs. Mollie found the dress quite flirtatious and she wondered who this girl was. It was rare to see a female at a party without an escort. Mollie could immediately tell she was of Quarternary status based on her style, her dress choice, and her snooty aura.

“Fine,” Mollie said brusquely dismissing her. She neither had the time nor desire to converse with the guests.

Mollie suddenly felt a smooth invasive hand on her shoulder that with surprising force twisted her back around.

“I wasn’t finished.”

The girl’s previously sweet demeanour dissipated and was replaced with a cold unforgiving glare that annoyed Mollie instantly.

“I noticed you entered the ballroom with the prince. What is your affiliation with him?”

Mollie couldn’t help but stare at the girl. Was she being serious?

“Why do you want to know?” Mollie responded with the same iciness in her tone that the girl had addressed her with.

The blonde girl gave Mollie an incredulous look which quickly transitioned into undisguised contempt.

“Is that supposed to be funny?” she sniffed narrowing her blue eyes. “Do you not know who I am?”

Mollie had to suppress the laugh that threatened to escape her lips. She reminded Mollie of the pretentious upper class females who stayed at home all day painting their nails and feeding their babies while their husbands worked. Phoebe and her used to make fun of them all the time growing up. Never did she think she would come face to face with one.

“Should I?” Mollie asked. Ironically, Mollie had to tilt her head downwards to address the girl and she didn’t miss how the blonde girl’s face flushed red after hearing Mollie’s question.

“Ladies ladies, do I sense a cat fight brewing?”

Mollie looked up into the amused eyes of Rowan Lyon.

“Prince Rowan,” the blonde girl said quickly sliding into a well-practiced curtsy. Mollie barely stifled an eyeroll.

Rowan chuckled as he observed the young women before him.

“Lady Tamzin,” he said with a nod. He turned towards Mollie with that amused smirk on his face. “And the still so prickly Miss Mayeson.” His eyes scanned her body through his glasses and Mollie could see the way his eyes widened in surprise at the expensive garment adorning her figure.

He paused for a moment looking between the two women and then directed his gaze back to Mollie.

“It pleases me to see you opted on wearing some shoes tonight,” he said dryly.

Mollie sighed.

“How... quaint... it is for me to find the two of you... conversing. Are introductions in order?”

Mollie wanted nothing more than to leave this conversation behind her but she was obligated to stay put. She couldn't even see Micah anymore and she dreaded to think of what would happen should she be found alone without an escort.

He turned towards Mollie.

“This here is Lady Tamzin Menestratten of the Eastern peninsula in Devonis.”

The girl named Tamzin maintained her frosty glare directed at Mollie and this only seemed to further spur the prince on.

“And this is Mollie. Mollie Mayeson of...?” He trailed off looking at Mollie with a curious gleam in his eye.

“Chartery,” she mumbled suppressing a sigh.

“Oh dear,” Rowan said with a chuckle. “How unfortunate.”

The little blonde girl giggled and Mollie wanted nothing more than to ring her dainty little neck.

Rowan turned to the blonde girl swiftly, his eyes hard.

“Miss Mollie here has been keeping my little brother quite busy these past few weeks.”

Immediately, like a snowflake hitting an ocean, the smile was wiped off her pale face.

“Come Miss Mayeson,” he said holding his arm out. “Micah must be wondering where you ran off to. He's told me you're quite the volatile one.”

Mollie was too grateful to leave the disaster of a conversation behind her and grabbed the middle Lyon's arm quickly leaving the fuming blonde in the ballroom as they left towards a door on the opposite side of the opulent room.

"Correct me if I'm wrong Mollie, but I was under the impression you were forbidden from speaking to any of the guests," Rowan drawled as several guests in close proximity shot them apprehensive stares.

"She spoke to *me*," Mollie argued as Rowan dragged her along.

"I'm *sure*," he said rather cattily.

Mollie turned her head away from Rowan and what she saw next nearly made her heart stop.

He was standing straight like the rest of the guards lining the wall, his uniform pressed, the lion insignia gleaming against his left breast and his eyes glued to the opposite wall.

She saw his eyes flicker to her once then away then straight back to her as recognition and shock clouded his features.

Isaac.

Mollie couldn't help but feel an overbearing sense of relief to see that he was alright. A million emotions flitted across his face and Mollie noticed that he had inched forward ever so slightly. His mouth was hanging open and Mollie shot him a pleading glance as she was forced to keep up with the long strides of Rowan Lyon. She could do nothing but follow the prince as she walked straight past his gaping face and further along the dark hallway.

As they turned the corner and into a small concealed room space she saw the familiar towering frame of James Lyon, his expression one of absolute lividity. Thankfully, it was not directed at her. Micah stood still as an ice sculpture as his brother fumed before him, his expression blank and his body language as frosty as ever.

"Ah," Rowan said pleasantly as if his siblings were not glaring daggers at each other. "Good to see everyone is present." Mollie was frozen to the spot as James and Micah continued their deathly stare-down. It was as if she wasn't even in the room.

James turned towards Rowan and Mollie watched how his lip curled in anger.

"Did you have anything to do with this?" he hissed jabbing a finger at Rowan.

Rowan still wore that placid smile on his face. He seemed undisturbed by his elder brother's ferocious actions.

"If I remember correctly, my name was *not* called on that podium...hence the benefit was *not* in my favour so I would suspect any involvement on my part would be close to null."

James leered at Rowan as Micah remained still. His eyes never left James.

“Don’t be coy Rowan. I was given very strict instructions and I intend to carry out every last one of them. Irrespective of my new position,” he added.

“Marvelous!” Rowan said with a smile. Mollie was lost as the conversation ventured further into the unknown. She wondered if their frostiness had anything to do with Micah’s new role within the monarchy. She would make a note to ask him later...if he would indulge her.

“Had I a glass in my hand I would have toasted to that. But seeing as there is neither wine or whiskey in this dusty excuse of a room and seeing as my other arm is currently occupied I’ll simply say congratulations.”

Mollie cringed as James shot his brother a look of utter distaste. He then turned his gaze back to Micah and curled his lips into a false smile, venom lining his features.

“I believe the congratulations are in order for Micah. He is after all our new CEO of the business, the youngest one ever might I add.” James chuckled humourlessly as Micah stood still. Mollie wondered how he maintained his composure as his brother loomed over him. “I’m sure the citizens will be thrilled to entertain the novel ideas coming from a whimsical twenty three year old prince.”

"Twenty three," Mollie thought. He was only four years older than her. Mollie suspected he was somewhat younger than his brothers, but she didn’t expect him to be *that* much younger. He appeared so much older when he spoke. She remembered what Micah had told her about the large age gap between himself and his brothers. It must have been at least ten years... James was in his thirties. It made sense now why so many of the guests were rendered speechless by Micah’s new position of power.

Mollie watched as James brought his hand forward to cup his younger brother’s face in his palm.

“But you can handle it right?” he whispered squeezing hard enough to flush Micah’s cheeks. “Take it from me. Running a business venture is as easy as... shelling peanuts.” He grinned after this as if enjoying some undisclosed joke. “I’m sure everything will go swimmingly for you. Father always said you had a mind quicker than a bolt of lightning.” Mollie watched in trepidation as Micah met James’ eyes and for the first time ever she could see the uncontrolled ferocity within those pale orbs. She had *never* seen him look at anybody like that before.

With one last predatory smile at his youngest brother, James left the room letting the door creak loudly as he disappeared around the corner. Mollie realized she had been holding her breath since James had first leaned over Micah and she quickly released it, letting her shoulders relax.

“Micah,” Rowan said sharply turning to his youngest brother. “This one looks like she’s had it for the rest of the night,” he said giving Mollie’s arm a light squeeze. On cue, Mollie stumbled gripping Rowan’s arm even tighter to keep herself balanced. God she *hated* stilettos. Rowan shot her a rather dull look. “Unfortunately her relationship with shoes still appears to be somewhat problematic. I’d skip the dancing with this one if I were you.”

Micah seemed rather preoccupied but he nodded at his brother.

“We’ll take our leave.”

As if she were an expedited parcel Rowan brought Mollie forward so Micah could replace his brother’s arm with his own.

“Will you be returning to the party?” Rowan asked a secretive smile on his face. “I’m sure there are numerous guests waiting to exchange a word or two with their new CEO.”

“Should I?” Micah asked shooting his brother a smirk as he gingerly led Mollie out of the room.

Rowan laughed, his voice echoing through halls.

“No brother. Most certainly *not*.”

Mollie’s ankles were throbbing by the time the prince and her returned to the upper landing and Mollie desperately wished this manor had some sort of lift system in place to avoid the stairs.

Micah was leading her down an unfamiliar corridor and she followed him silently, taking in her surroundings. Everything was dark here with the torchlights that lined the walls providing the only source of illumination amongst the foreboding ambiance. Mollie had realized that she had never ventured into this part of the manor before. Mollie suspected her room was somewhere in the West wing but the lack of windows in her quarters made it difficult to confirm. As they rounded a corner she was surprised to see several guards lining the walls. She watched as they bowed deeply when they spotted the prince.

“Master Lyon,” the closest one said straightening from his bow. “Your presence is required in the parlour.”

Mollie noticed how all of them were men. She also wondered why five guards were needed to relay a simple message. They seemed on edge... Mollie noted the glinting armour that adorned their shoulders and realized there was a distinction between the common guard and the royal guard. The common guards wore a more traditional attire equipped with silk and cloth lining. These were royal guards and not only did they sport the insignia bearing uniform, they were adorned with precious metal and badges to represent their rank.

Micah paused as he addressed the guard who had spoken. Micah matched his stare icily and tilted his head upwards in a motion of dominance. He towered over them despite his youth and he had a stony expression etched across his features.

“I’m afraid I have other needs to attend to tonight.”

Mollie saw his face tilt towards her slightly and she felt her stomach flip.

Micah made a move to step forward and Mollie was surprised to see the guard block his advances.

“My apologies Master Lyon but this meeting is not optional. As head of Lyon Enterprises it is your duty to report to these assigned meetings whenever the rest of the executives deem it necessary. Surely you are aware of the written statutes associated with this position and the responsibility it entails...”

Even Mollie could hear the poorly concealed scepticism laced within the guards tone and she quickly looked at the expression on the other guards faces. They all looked uncomfortable and when she looked at the prince she soon realized why.

Micah’s eyes had zeroed in on the guard in front of him and when Mollie looked at his expression her blood turned to ice.

In a flash the prince had the guard on his knees as he whipped his beloved dagger from his belt only to aim the sharpened material towards the guards unprepared face.

Mollie couldn’t help but scream as the prince swung and retracted his arm in seconds, the guard sinking to his knees with a blood curling scream as rivulets of blood pooled to the floor. Mollie heaved as she looked at the bloody hole that now remained on the side of the guards face.

Micah had an impassive disinterested expression as he looked down at the sobbing guard in front of him. The guards hands fruitlessly cupped the empty socket where his right eye had previously been as the blood flowed and the tendons flapped across his cheek.

Mollie watched in horror as the prince bent down slowly so that his eyes were in level with the screaming guard in front of him.

“Last time I checked the statutes, it claimed a CEO may re-schedule a meeting whenever he sees fit as long as it falls within 48 hours of the previously established one.”

His voice was a chilling whisper amidst the sobbing cries of the guard and Mollie struggled to subdue her nausea as the prince brought his blade forward towards the guards bloodied face.

Mollie could barely swallow as she looked at the round glistening eyeball that protruded from the end of the knife. The long wet tendons hung loosely around the scarlet tinged blade and Mollie could see the dead blank cloudy iris that had once been a vibrant blue now appearing as a sickly milky grey.

She retched in the corner as Micah looked coldly at the whimpering guard.

“Either you are unfamiliar with the rules of this monarchy or your perception of the statutes are highly misconstrued.”

The prince’s murmur was a calm eerie sound as the guard before him swore and whimpered and struggled to balance on his knees. The other guards held their heads down, avoiding eye

contact with the prince as they stood quietly behind their comrade.

“Your eyes deceived you this time Lucio. Perhaps you’ll take more care in using the only other one you have left.”

Mollie had witnessed many public punishments growing up, but most of the time it had been fingers, toes or a the common whipping now and then. But this...she had no words.

She had clutched the wall and struggled to steady herself. For the first time, Mollie was thankful she had an empty stomach or she surely would have emptied its entire contents onto the cold wooden floor.

She watched as Micah used the silk cloth of the guards uniform to wipe his dagger clean. He then carelessly dropped the grey eyeball onto the hard floor with a splat.

Without another word he grabbed Mollie harshly and walked her down the hall and past the other guards who wordlessly granted him access as their comrade continued to howl in pain.

Mollie was cold and shivering by the time they made it to a quiet upstairs landing. Everything here seemed more grand... more ornate.

The prince opened a large heavy door that slowly creaked open and Mollie winced as the sound echoed through the silent spacious landing.

Her eyelashes were wet with unshed tears and her forehead sweaty from her traumatic experience. She couldn’t get the image of the guard out of her head and all over again she felt the nausea twist in her stomach.

Micah seemed unperturbed and she stood still as he held the door open.

“In.”

His tone said it all and Mollie quickly shuffled forwards.

When the door shut behind them Mollie felt Micah take her arm in his. He was far gentler with her now than he was in the hallway and she struggled to control her breathing as he led her towards a midnight blue chaise on the opposite end of the room.

If Mollie hadn’t been so shaken she would have marvelled at the beauty of the interior design of the room. The room was huge, much larger than Mollie’s quarters, and the walls were painted deep blues and deep greys conveying a very melancholic aura. Apart from the four poster bed and the ornate dresser, the room was mostly empty space and Mollie felt nervous just being inside of it. It was too neat and too untouched to the point of being unnatural. Mollie noticed there was pale moonlight filtering in through some large French glass windows that led to a rounded balcony.

Mollie watched as Micah quietly lit the candles that were placed along the walls allowing the hazy yellow light to brighten up the blanketed room.

Micah's white suit displayed not a single drop or stain and Mollie wondered how this was even remotely possible given the gruesome events that had just occurred. He had lightly tossed his dark blood soaked gloves onto the top of the dresser before walking over to Mollie.

"Are you alright?" he asked observing her closely.

Mollie looked back at him frigidly.

"What the hell do you think?"

Mollie saw him frown and she quickly realized her mistake.

"Watch your tone with me Mollie Mae," he said sternly.

"Or what?" Mollie asked harshly. "You'll take my eye out too?"

Micah stared expressionlessly back at her and she worried for a moment whether she had angered him. Instead, a rather thoughtful look spread across his face and a secretive smile played along his pink lips.

"No Mollie," he said slowly, seemingly amused by her question. "I wouldn't take your eye out. Even if I did, you certainly wouldn't use the other one any better than you did with both."

Mollie shot him a withering glare and he matched her gaze with a crooked smile.

"You know why Mollie Mae?"

He sat down softly beside her and she shivered as he began to run his long fingers through her thick curls. He was quiet for a long time. The only sounds that echoed across the room was the whistling wind through the half open doors leading to the balcony.

"Because you lack insight. You dismiss the world as bluntly as one dismisses the face of a stranger."

"I do not!" she said hotly glaring at the prince. He simply continued staring at her with that same playful smile across his lips.

The prince's motions were comforting as he threaded his fingers through her thick strands but Mollie still couldn't escape the vivid images of the violence that had just occurred moments ago. Micah seemed to have dismissed those events so quickly...yet he had the nerve to tell *her* that she was blunt.

"You were the epitome of perfection tonight," he whispered bring his lips close to her ear. "The guests couldn't keep their eyes off of you."

Mollie stifled an eyeroll.

"That wasn't the reason for their stares Master Lyon," she replied tersely. "Or should I say Mr. CEO."

Her tone was caustic and by the stiffening of the prince beside her she knew she had touched a nerve.

Angrily he pulled her hair sharply eliciting a gasp of pain from Mollie as he brought her face close to his own.

She trembled as his hard eyes pierced hers and she saw the angry frown that laced his features.

“Actually Mollie Mae, if we are keeping up with formalities, it would be *President* Micah Lyon to you.”

His grip was hard with intention of inflicting pain but Mollie swallowed the pain reverberating around her scalp. In spite of his change in mood, Mollie had come to a confirmation that had been bothering her since the ball earlier that night. The prince was not pleased with his promotion. She could see the fire in his eyes when she brought it up.

“Well then congratulations,” she all but sneered as he pushed her harshly backwards.

“Save it,” he snapped.

He turned his gaze away from her and Mollie watched as he slowly flexed and unflexed his fingers. He seemed to be trying his best to keep himself restrained and Mollie observed him closely.

The whole conversation was incredibly childish but Mollie couldn’t help herself. Something about Micah set her blood boiling but she knew...somehow she knew there was a barrier with her Micah refused to cross, even when he was incredibly cross with her. He afforded her many liberties, too many for her to still have been alive to this day.

The sound of ringing bells and loud cheering erupted from the floor beneath them and Mollie watched the prince’s reaction.

His face was blank his posture stiffened as the noises below them only increased in frequency. She heard Micah sigh and watched as he stood up and smoothed down his white tuxedo. He seemed irritated and Mollie wondered why he suddenly felt the need to leave and attend to his business.

Mollie regarded him bleakly as he glanced up at her from beneath his loose tousled waves.

“I won’t be long.” He looked around the room for a moment before matching Mollie’s eye once again. “Feel free to make yourself at home. No one will disturb you as long as you remain in here.”

“Wait Master-,” she called before trailing off. She wasn’t sure whether he was serious about the whole formality thing and she quickly bit her lip. “...what if someone comes inside... I mean why can’t I go to my old room?”

He half smiled at her question as he took one final glance around the room.

“This is my room. No one will disturb you. You have my word.”

His tone was a stark change from his previous one and Mollie nodded as he silently opened the door. Mollie could have guessed from the meticulous setup and tasteful interior of the room that it was his. Not to mention, like his face, it too seemed cold and utterly expressionless.

Mollie had waited until his footsteps had faded away to slowly rise from the chaise in the corner and make her way to the door. This was too good an opportunity to miss, especially with all the Lyons occupied with their guests downstairs. Mollie couldn't let this moment escape her.

As silently as she could muster, she opened the door and slipped outside letting the flickering torches lining the hallway illuminate the long corridor.

Mollie had been running in circles.

She was confused and disoriented and the more twists and turns she completed the more lost she seemed to be. She had arrived right back outside the heavy arched double doors of Micah Lyons chambers and she cursed at her rotten luck. In a huff she pulled off her ridiculous stilettos and sunk down against the rough stone wall.

“All of these corridors look the same!” she muttered. The tight corset fitted on the interior of her dress certainly didn't help Mollie's situation and Mollie found herself stopping more often than not to catch her breath due to her dress. As Mollie leaned her head against the lone side table she had passed 4 times before, she suddenly noticed something she hadn't before.

Mollie squinted and realized the walls that she had been using as support the entire time were all slightly curved. She found it strange as it had seemed all this time as if she had been walking in a straight line.

"I wonder..." she thought as she swiftly straightened up. Carefully, she brought herself to her feet and took off the lion statue that had been standing on the table. Mollie then pushed herself up and stood on the table to give herself a better view of her surroundings.

“Fucking bastards,” she whispered as she looked at the scene before her. Mollie could have cursed herself for not thinking of this idea sooner. From a first glance, Mollie was taken aback by the architectural ingeniousness of the design before her. The walls had been strategically curved at very specific angles to give the illusion of a person walking through the corridors as if they were traveling in a straight line. However, as Mollie looked closer she could see that the overlap between one wall and the adjacent wall concealed a staircase at each vertex that led to the level below. As Mollie turned around she could see the landscape of the upper level resembled a maze much like the lowest level of the mansion and she cringed.

Mollie often prided herself on her sharp and quick memory and she quickly laid the foundation and landscape of what she had just seen in her mind. Quickly, she jumped down

from the table and felt her way along the stoned corridor wall before reaching the end. Instead of turning left like she usually would have done, she pressed herself against the corner and inched herself along the wall. As she reached the edge she pulled herself to the opposite wall and was met with a staircase that led down to the lower level. Although Mollie was relieved, she also knew she had wasted a lot of time and hoped Micah wouldn't be back before she returned.

As quickly as she could Mollie raced down the staircase and whipped herself around the corner. Mollie found herself on another level and with a start she realized she *hadn't* made it down to the main level. She looked around her in confusion as similar stoned corridors surrounded her. The layout mirrored the one above her and she felt her stomach flop in fear. Mollie still had to find her way back to Micah's chambers and if she continued running along without some sort of reference, she may find herself lost permanently. The exact size of the manor was still highly debatable but Mollie certainly knew it appeared much bigger than it even appeared from an exterior perspective. Mollie had nothing on her except for the smooth expensive fabric that adorned her body. Carefully, Mollie lifted her skirts to reveal a smooth silky under layer that rested below the white fabric. She used her fingers to tear the under layer into small strips of fabric and proceeded to place them in hidden corners around walls she passed as a reference point. At least this way, she could navigate her way back to the upper level when she returned. She was careful to place them in inconspicuous locations and was thankful the corridors were dimly lit to begin with.

Mollie tried her best to remember the twists and turns Micah had led her through earlier on the above level and felt her way along the walls in a similar fashion. As Mollie turned to round a corner she heard voices on the other side of the hall and she hastily pressed herself against the nearest wall and waited for the voices to pass. Her heart jumped to her throat when she saw two burly guards pass her by. She felt her blood pulsing through her veins as her adrenaline peaked. However they passed swiftly and silently and she breathed a sigh of relief as they walked further out of sight. Mollie could hear brief bouts of clinking glasses and spirited laughter and she calmed her shaking nerves. Quickly, she smoothed her dress down and stepped out into the corridor. Mollie had suspected based on the setup of this level that it would lead her to the quarters of another royal. It had the same ancient and foreboding atmosphere as the corridors leading to Micah's and she felt hopeful that she was on the right path. She felt herself growing closer to the entrance and she prayed luck would somehow grace her soon. If this was indeed the corridor to Hartley's chambers, she may find herself on her way out of the Lyon manor much sooner than she ever anticipated.

As Mollie approached the next corner she took a deep breath and closed her eyes briefly. She waited for a moment to make sure no one was there and she stepped into the wide corridor.

At the end of the hall were ceiling to floor double doors furnished with a massive gold Lions head on both handles and a red carpet that slide from the exterior into the interior. Mollie gulped and took another look around her. Mollie had assumed all the guests including most of the guards were still at the ball taking place downstairs and she saw no better opportunity to enter through those doors than now. With the way Micah kept a close watch on Mollie, she also figured her best chance was now or never.

Mollie slowly made her way to the end of the hall towards the looming doors and she cautiously placed her hand on the cool smooth handle. Mollie had no doubt that all the lion heads that lined the manor were made of pure and several carats worth of gold and she shivered. This piece of gold alone would be enough for her, her entire apartment block, and the ones next to her to live comfortably for the rest of their lives.

As gently as she could muster, Mollie placed her hands on the cold opulent door handles and pushed on the double doors before her. A loud eerie creak echoed across the hall and Mollie cringed at the loud noise. She stood still, trying her best to still her trembling hands. She hadn't heard any noises for quite a while from the lower level and she prayed the party hadn't come to a close. She felt her time was more precious now than ever and she pushed herself through the small opening letting the heavy doors close behind her with a loud reverberating *thud*.

Mollie looked up and saw that she was standing before three arched doorways. Mollie sighed with exasperation as she found herself contemplating which one she should choose. In rather bleak terms, the essence of the manor was one giant convoluted maze and Mollie felt herself losing her patience rather quickly. She had no more time to spare and she took her chances pushing the door nearest to her on the right. With a soft creak the door opened into a dimly lit room.

Mollie quickly grabbed a torch from the corridor in the hall before going inside to better illuminate her path. The room was a complete monstrosity with blood red walls surrounding a canopied bed bigger than Mollie's entire living room back home. The bed was gold and dressed pristinely with the crimson coloured sheets covering the lined edges and the bed curtain that matched the duvet brushing ever so gently against the marble floor. The bed was on an elevated platform and Mollie lost count of how many pillows adorned the sprawling furniture. Mollie was convinced she had found Hartley Lyon's chambers, there was no one else in the entire manor apart from him that would have chambers this extravagant.

The curtains were shut tightly bringing little light into the already dark room and Mollie found herself shivering at the frigid temperature. The marble floor was cold against Mollie's bare feet and she quickly stepped onto the soft plush rug that adorned the platform where the bed stood. Mollie brought her torch higher above her to the enormous painting above the opulent bed. Mollie gasped when she looked at the portrait above her. The similarities were so overwhelmingly striking even Mollie was taken aback by the complete accuracy of the skilled painter who had completed the masterpiece. The portrait was of a young smiling girl seated in a gold throne. She had a beautiful smile with deep dimples on the sides of her blushed cheeks and full pouty pink lips that complimented her round youthful face. Her dark blonde hair was in a deep side part and fell in carefree tousled waves around her face and her hands were clasped in her lap in an almost playful manner. She wore an ornate pearl encrusted collared dress that pronounced her elegant neck and pale complexion. She radiated youthfulness and child like innocence and Mollie couldn't tear her eyes away from the painting. Her eyes were the most vibrant shade of green and she knew of only one other person with eyes that alluring. Not only could she see Micah within those pale green orbs, but also within the soft blushed dimpled cheeks and careful edges of her elegant face.

Who was she?

The girl was exquisite and Mollie wondered why *her* portrait and not the late queens was the one that was given the spotlight in Hartley's chambers.

Tearing her gaze from the portrait she shuffled over to the dresser and began to pull open drawers searching for some sort of safe or key. Mollie wondered where someone like Hartley would keep his most precious files and she searched the room closely. As suspected many of the drawers were locked and Mollie began to look under the bed and the soft velvet furniture in the hopes of finding *something* that would give her some sort of lead. She made her way to the bedside table where a single drawer was built into the bedside table and pulled sharply.

Mollie had pulled the handle rather harshly in her rush and she swore as the drawer pulled out completely, sending the cabinet piece tumbling to the marble floor with a crash. She looked around her in panic and noticed several papers scattered around the floor along with numerous sketches. Mollie also noticed a fancy key engraved with a delicate flower amongst the rubble and she quickly slipped the key into her corset. She quickly placed the torch onto a stand on the nearest wall and sunk to her knees to clean up the mess.

She quieted for a moment, waiting for footsteps or someone to come storming into the room but nothing followed except for an eerie overwhelming silence. Mollie gathered the papers quickly and thumbed through them searching for information. A lot of them appeared to be old mail about transactions to and from the Lyons and Mollie found nothing too suspicious about them. They were all company names that Mollie had seen countless times back home. As Mollie shuffled the papers in her hands she saw several sketches fall out and she carefully placed the other papers down to take a closer look at the photos.

The sketches were of places, places Mollie had never seen and she wondered who had drawn them. Hartley didn't strike as her as the artistic type and she noted how intricate the photos were. Although they were outstanding, there was something a little immature about the style, as if the person who had drawn them was inexperienced but had a vision that surpassed most people at their age. The sketches were always of the same woman with dark hair, drawn from the back, standing in various locations. One was at the edge of a clifftop, another in the middle of a crowded marketplace. Mollie found something rather melancholic about the sketches and she wondered not only who had drawn them, but why Hartley had decided to keep them. Mollie shifted beneath some more files, elegant handwriting etched onto several loose pages of parchment of names and places Mollie had never heard of from Apollo to Chapman and places that stretch from Cortez to the peaks of Darien.

As Mollie turned back to the files something familiar caught her eye. She noticed a list of famous companies listed in straight formal writing on what appeared to be an official document. Mollie paused as she stared at a list of various company names listed on the files.

Izabel's Milk

Hunter's Meats

Mountain Inc

As Mollie looked closer she suddenly felt her face go hot and her hands trembled as she saw in the tiniest lettering a single sentence that sent her lungs spasming out of control.

Parent Company: Lyon Enterprises

Mollie realized with a sickening lurch that what was universally believed throughout the regime to be independent companies selling independent products were all really subsidiaries of one single parent company.

The Lyons owned everything.

They had monopolized the regime and tricked their civilians into thinking competition in the marketplace existed. Mollie was fuming and her hands were shaking as she took in this information. The more Mollie thought about it, the more it made sense. She herself was a struggling small business and she could barely make enough money to keep food on the table for her and her mother. And she knew of so many people who had failed to compete in the market due to the overwhelming success of various other companies, which she now realized, were really just companies that operated under the management of the conglomerate Lyon Enterprises.

Mollie fumed as she saw another list of names of other companies that had been bought over by the Lyons and the hefty sums of money they paid out to the owners of those smaller businesses. Mollie realized at that moment that the Lyons sought more than just money. They sought ultimate power and this was through not only the government but through the marketplace as well.

The papers trembled in her hands as she tried to control her rapid breathing. The papers were signed by Hartley Lyon as the CEO. She dreaded to think about how much worse things could get when those papers would begin to bear the signature of his youngest son.

At that moment, Mollie heard shuffling from outside. She looked down at the papers in front of her and as carefully and quickly as she could folded them neatly and tucked it away into her corset. Mollie realized now that she had no reason to find the contract the Insurgency coveted so deeply. This was enough to prove the Lyons were exploiting the public and enough to prove that they were inherently deceiving the people they claimed to value so much.

Mollie lurched to her feet tucking the rest of the papers into the drawer. She hitched her dress up and padded over to the door making sure to grab her torch with her on her way out. The room was blanketed in darkness once more and Mollie quickly slipped back outside and stifled her torch. She was drenched in darkness almost instantaneously and she held her breath as she heard shuffling from the farthest door in the small corridor. Mollie also realized that her palms had begun to sweat uncontrollably due to the rapid surge of epinephrine pumping through her veins and she cursed as she felt the sweat trickle down her wrists.

With a tantalizingly slow creak, the door slowly began to open. Mollie stood tense and shaking in the far corner and held her hands out in front of her the way the kids back home used to whenever they got into fist fights in the alleyways. She squeezed her eyes tight as a torch light from the opposite side of the room illuminated the tiny corridor. Even if she wanted to, there was no place to hide. With a sickening lurch Mollie took a deep breath and turned herself around to await her fate.

Chapter 20: Calcium

Chapter Summary

Mollie has new goals to achieve. Mollie's relationship with Micah appears to become increasingly feeble.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Mollie?”

Mollie’s eyes snapped open. She knew that voice.

“Oh my god Mollie.”

She opened her eyes to see the familiar youthful face of Isaac staring at her, his blue eyes wide and his mouth gaping. Mollie was beginning to think that this was something of a permanent expression. However her relief was boundless. She had truly thought it was the end.

“Isaac,” she whispered as he pummelled towards her and embraced her in an uncomfortably tight hug. She wasn’t expecting the gesture and she stumbled backwards. He smelled like fire and Mollie realized he held the torch in his hand dangerously close to her back.

“Isaac, the torch,” she said quickly unwinding his arms from around her. Mollie had never been one to hug, and she hadn’t received many growing up in her household. She shifted uncomfortably as he slowly released his arms.

“Sorry,” he mumbled quietly retracting his arms. “I was just... so happy to see you. I thought you were...”

He trailed off and Mollie dropped her gaze.

“You thought I was dead,” Mollie said monotonously. She couldn’t help the disappointment that welled up inside of her.

Isaac looked distraught but Mollie couldn’t be swayed.

“It would have been nice if you hadn't assumed that. I’ve been trapped in the upper quarters of the West wing for months.”

Isaac’s brow furrowed when he heard this.

“The West wing? That can’t be right. That’s where the guest quarters are. The Lyons would never put slaves there.”

Mollie’s fists involuntarily flexed whenever she heard that despicable word.

“Are you listening to me or not?” she said heatedly narrowing her eyes at the young man. “Micah Lyon hasn’t let me out of his sight since my first few days here. That’s why I couldn’t make contact for all this time.”

“Micah Lyon?” Isaac said confusedly his lips curling at the name. “Micah Lyon does not keep slaves. And what the hell are you doing with Micah Lyon? You’re supposed to be focused on Hartley...”

Isaac trailed off when he saw the furious expression on Mollie’s face.

“Sorry sorry,” he mumbled. “Fuck,” he said after taking some time to digest what Mollie had just told him. “How did you get caught up with Micah Lyon? The man is unhinged.”

Mollie swallowed uneasily and looked around her quickly. If she didn’t leave soon she may just face the wrath of unhinged Micah Lyon.

“Well just to fill you in, Micah is the new CEO of Lyon Enterprises.”

Isaac looked stunned and Mollie gauged his reaction nervously. Only a select number of guards had been granted access to the throne room during Hartley's speech earlier, and Mollie figured the news of his sons promotion still needed to circulate.

“Since when?” he asked, his voice cracking.

“Since today. It was announced at the ball earlier.”

Isaac brushed his sandy hair back and looked around him in awe.

“Why? Why would Hartley do this?” He was biting his lip and Mollie could see he was deep in thought. She was itching to know what was going through his mind. “That’s...it...it doesn’t make sense.”

“Why?” Mollie questioned. “Why doesn’t it make sense?”

“Think about it Mollie,” he said crossing his arms in frustration. “Micah is barely in his twenties yet he’s going to be taking over a multi billion dollar company from his father despite his father having two *far* more willing and *far* more capable options.”

It *did* seem strange to Mollie but she knew little of the internal conflicts between Hartley and his sons.

“Rowan did tell me that Micah and James don’t get along. Maybe this is Hartley’s way of pitting them against each other?”

Now Isaac was the one to laugh tonelessly.

“Don’t get along is putting it lightly,” he said with a frown. “The two of them could barely be in the same room without one of them pulling a dagger out on the other.”

“Why?” Mollie questioned staring at Isaac.

“I would have thought you’d know the answer to that since you spent so much time with his royal iciness,” Isaac said rather irately.

Mollie shot him a wintry glare.

“Yeah well, he doesn’t open up very easily. It takes him a while.”

Isaac listened carefully...then suddenly his eyes lit up and Mollie felt dread pool in her stomach.

“Mollie. This...this could work in our favour.” Isaac had begun pacing and Mollie shot a longing look at the door. She had been gone for long. Too long.

“With Micah as CEO, Hartley’s issues are trivial....you have to get the prince to open up to you. If you gauge information from him, anything about his family or about his father, but more importantly his business...we could take them down from the inside out.”

Mollie scoffed.

“That is the most radical impossible idea I’ve ever heard,” she said seething. “Micah is slyer than a fox and he isn’t stupid enough to reveal anything about his family or his business to me. Not now and not ever.”

“That’s what everyone used to say about the Insurgency when we first formed,” Isaac said quietly. Mollie watched as his blue eyes quivered at the memory. “And look where we are now. We’ve put one of the longest ruling Lyons six feet under. Permanently.”

Mollie dropped her gaze. She didn’t like where this was going and she wanted desperately to just run...escape. Mollie could have earlier. She could have taken the corridor down and attempted an escape and be free from the countless strings tying her to the Lyon manor.

But she had carried out her mission. She was holding on to that promise that maybe, just *maybe* the Insurgency *could* free her from the world of misery she was currently held captive to. But it seemed to Mollie that the closer she got to her freedom, the more steep the demands became. Mollie was only one person. She couldn’t bear this burden on her own.

“Look Mollie,” Isaac said gently stepping closer. “I’m going to let Caleb know that you’re okay, that you’re more than okay. You’ve done...so well. You’re one of our most important members now. We protect our own.” He paused after this to place his hands gently on Mollie’s bare shoulders. “I won’t give up on you and neither will the others.”

“Isaac I can’t stay. I have to go-“

“Mollie wait,” he said clutching her arm. “You still have a lot of explaining to do.”

“Isaac let me go,” she argued pulling her arm from his grip. Mollie saw him tense and she saw the hurt cross his features. But she had no time to feel sorry for him. She had to make it back before Micah...

“Who’s side are you on Mollie?”

Mollie had made it the door and she stopped dead when she heard the question Isaac had directed at her.

“What kind of stupid question is that?” she snapped facing him angrily. “I’m putting my life on the line to do what she you need me to do and now you decide to question my motives?” Her voice had risen several octaves and she was struggling to keep her voice down. “You have no idea what the hell I’ve been through. You have no *idea* the shit I’ve had to put up with. Yet you stand here and have the nerve to question *me* about *my intentions*?”

Mollie had lost her nerve and all of the swallowed fear, burning anguish, and pent up bitterness that had been stirring inside her and risen to dangerous heights and released in a torrent of hate filled fury onto the unsuspecting man standing before her.

He stood quietly as Mollie tried to control her breathing and she inwardly cursed as she felt the pinpricks of moisture accumulating at the edges of her eyes.

Mollie reached into her corset and pulled out the papers she had stuffed there only moments before. “Here are your goddamn documents,” she said tersely stuffing them into his hands.

“I want nothing more to do with this.”

Mollie sniffed and wiped her hand across her face where betraying tears had made their way down her cheeks.

“Mollie wait,” she heard Isaac say as he once more grabbed her arm, albeit more gently this time. She turned to him and when she saw the sadness mirrored in his eyes. She knew she wasn’t the only one in a position where self-autonomy was threatened.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I just...I had to ask. Seeing you with the prince I...I didn’t know what to think. I had to make sure.”

Mollie winced.

“It’s not what you think,” she said quietly rubbing her bare shoulders. “I know how it looks... how it may seem...but I need you to believe me.”

Isaac looked at her, taking in her makeup, her curled hair, and extravagant outfit and sighed. He looked down at the papers in his hand and clutched them tightly in his fists.

“I do trust you Mollie,” he said firmly. “And whatever is going on. I’m going to fix it, I’m going to get you out of here.”

Mollie couldn’t face him when she heard this. She knew, deep down that an escape seemed like the farthest scenario in her realm of infinite possibilities that could ever exist.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep Isaac,” she sighed.

She noticed Isaac frowning at the corner of her eye and she saw his frown deepen as he read the files in his hands.

“Mollie...did you see this?”

Mollie sighed.

“Yes. I saw.”

“Fuck,” he muttered shuffling through the papers. “I knew the Lyons were greedy motherfuckers but I didn’t think it was to this extent.”

“Were you able to find anything else in his other rooms?” Mollie asked glancing around her.

Isaac shook his head.

“Nothing. Just papers upon papers of useless information. Nothing as good as what you found. Mollie...this is brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. Caleb will be over the moon.”

Mollie frowned when she heard this and suddenly she felt a compelling urge to grab the files and keep them close to her. She hadn’t forgotten what Micah had told her about the Insurgency. It was something that had been gnawing at the back of her mind since the prince had first told her.

“Isaac. What exactly happened to Logan Lyon?”

Isaac looked at her and within his eyes she saw the faintest glint of pride and it made her stomach flop.

“The Insurgency killed him. It took years to carry out, many more months to execute it but we finally did it. We’re one step closer to dismantling the Lyons Mollie. Crushing the very foundations of this monarchy.”

“And what about the others?” she asked heatedly. “What about the civilians who died as a result of the attack.

“Attack? Mollie what are you talking about? We took down one of the most bloodthirsty members of the Lyon clan. Who cares about how it happened. He’s dead now.”

Mollie laughed humourlessly.

“Your precious Caleb didn’t tell you about the collateral damage did he? About the women and the children who died as a result of *your* vicious tactics.”

Isaac seemed perplexed. “Collateral? I’ve heard of no such thing. Who told you that? Was it the prince?”

She saw Isaac's face flush in anger and she sighed. She was tired of these games of lies. She didn't know what the truth was anymore. All she knew was that she was done with this. All of this.

"Those Lyons can't be trusted. Not even Micah Lyon."

Isaac's expression had turned sour and the flush in his cheeks only deepened.

"Reel him in Mollie, don't let him reel you. And by God's hell don't fall for him."

Mollie looked sharply at Isaac when he said this and she took in his locked jaw, his frigid glare and his shaking fists.

"I'm guessing I'm not the first girl you stole away and sent out on a mission to gather secrets from the Lyons."

Mollie watched as Isaac averted his gaze.

"I don't know what it is about that Lyon," Isaac grumbled his knuckles whitening around the torch. "But all our girls...even those we believed were our best lose their wits around him. People say James is the one to watch out for. But it's Micah. Something not right about him."

Mollie sighed. "I don't know Isaac," she murmured, her thoughts focused on the prince. "I get the feeling Micah didn't want to be CEO. He seemed...just as surprised as the guests when it was announced."

Isaac was shaking his head before Mollie had finished.

"Please Mollie," he said with a shake of his head. "Who *wouldn't* want the power to control an expanding wealth accumulated empire?"

Mollie suddenly heard a clattering of footsteps from the floor beneath her and she nervously looked around her.

"Isaac. I *must* go. I've been out for far too long."

She saw him nod and she quickly bunched her skirts around her and made a move for the door.

"Mollie. Listen. Every month, on the third Friday of the month, there is a ship that comes to the Questershire Manor to load off valuables, food, essentials. Caleb has connections on the boat. Whenever things don't go our way we send people on that ship to be taken back to the mainland."

Mollie watched as he grabbed a piece of parchment and an ink-pen from his belt and proceeded to scribble a date on the slip.

"If you find yourself in danger or feel you must leave. Tell the guard that *the roof has caved in*. He'll know what that means and he'll grant you private access on the ship."

Mollie saved this at the back of her mind and nodded at Isaac as he handed her the parchment.

“One more thing Mollie,” he said gripping her wrist. “The boat leaves at midnight. Don’t be a minute later you’ll miss the ride.”

“I’ll remember,” Mollie murmured her arm on the door.

“Now go,” he said giving her push towards the door. “And never forget the real reason why you’re here.”

With her heart in her throat and her legs the consistency of melted candle-wax Mollie wrenched the door open and ran as fast as her long legs could take her.

Mollie had never run so quickly in her life.

By the time she made it back to Micah Lyon’s chambers the moon had settled high into the night sky and what had previously been a cacophony of clinking glasses and cheering men that permeated through the many levels of the manor had dissipated into a slow and imperceptible hum.

The room was empty when Mollie returned and she all but sunk to her knees on the cool floor not quite believing her luck. There were no clocks in her quarters nor within the bedroom chambers and Mollie had to rely on the suns location in the night sky to deduce the time.

Mollie guessed she had been gone for a little over an hour and she carefully felt around her bosom for the fancy key.

She had not handed Isaac the key and she carefully toyed with the small delicate object between her fingers. The key was incredibly small, too small to open even a lock or small chest. Mollie guessed it opened some sort of locket or delicate jewellery. The mouldings and engravings that surrounded the tiny piece of metal was really something to see and Mollie absentmindedly continued to twirl the object within her fingers.

Mollie’s mind was preoccupied with Isaac’s words to her earlier. Her feelings towards Micah were more scattered than ever. Although her dislike for the prince overshadowed most of her other feelings towards him, she still felt an incessant need to *understand* him...to get to know him better. She yearned to unearth the many secrets and thoughts that he harboured about his family...about her...about himself. He was so reluctant, so careful. Mollie wanted to see him set himself free and disconnect himself from the cold expressionless exterior of the prince he so avidly sported. She had seen a glimpse of that person for a brief moment, within the small warm cabin where he had proceeded to take her virginity. Mollie wondered if she would be able allow him to open up once again.

Mollie had stood up and made her way to the round balcony letting the cool breeze swirl through her curls. It was unusually chilly out for typical southern weather and Mollie found herself folding her arms over her chest to preserve body heat. She felt a piece of rough

parchment clinch around her chest and confusedly she glanced down. She fished out the parchment from the stitch in her dress and stared at the scribbled note.

Friday. 00:00.

It was the note Isaac had handed to her before she had returned to Micah's chambers. He had said the third Friday of every month. That gave her some time.

But would it be enough?

Mollie sighed and found herself lingering on faded memories of her mother's smiling face as she ran across a black sand beach. She found herself thinking about her mother's weathered hands as she showed Mollie how to knead dough, how to look after herself. These were precious times. Times when her mother remembered who she was and could remember that her only daughter was more than just an unwanted burden given to her by a man who betrayed her.

She let the parchment slip from her fingers on the balcony and swirl among the manor walls before disappearing amongst the foggy film that had begun to form above the rough ocean waters. It was too dangerous for her to keep. She couldn't take any further risks... especially not tonight.

Mollie lost track of time as she stood on the balcony. She found solace in the cool midnight breeze and the rushing sound of water hitting the rocky jagged shore that lined the uneven land. She had taken grave risks tonight and somehow she had come out unscathed. She couldn't keep her mind off the woman in the portrait of Hartley's chambers. She was itching to know more but she had to remember to hold her tongue. Hartley was obviously infatuated with this young woman to have a grand portrait of her above his bed, taking up most of the wall space within his palatial quarters. Did he even love the late queen at all? What was this young woman's connection with the Lyons? These thoughts swirled through her mind as Mollie stood on the chilly balcony. In spite of the warm green illusion that painted the perimeter of Questershire manor, Mollie could feel the inching threat of winter upon her, the frost performing its secret ministry at this untimely hour. The dark haired girl tapped her fingers against the rough stone pillars and had to remind herself that she could not reveal to Micah that she knew anything of what she had just witnessed that night.

The sharp slam of a heavy door hitting the door frame broke Mollie from her reverie and she nearly jumped out of her skin at the loud sound.

Mollie knew something was wrong the minute the door slammed against the doorframe and immediately, she trembled in fear. Mollie felt as if icicles were being slid against the warm flesh of her exposed back and she slowly turned to face her captor.

Micah had stormed into his chambers and Mollie stood frozen to the spot as he paced the room his shoulders stiff and his hair in loose tousled waves. Mollie had been holding her breath since he had entered and she couldn't help the gasp that escaped her lips as he slammed his hands against the door frame in anger. Whatever it was that was on his mind had him absolutely fuming and Mollie watched as he unsuccessfully tried to subdue his trembling

arms. The sound emitting from Mollie's lips alerted him and she saw him slowly turn his head towards her.

Was he upset with her? Did he come to check on her and she wasn't here?

Mollie was met with familiar cold green eyes. His white tuxedo was a splash of brightness in the otherwise black room. Mollie shivered in the cool breeze as he stalked toward where she stood, rooted to the spot on his vast balcony. Isaac's words reverberated in her head and she felt the sweat begin to accumulate on her hands. He was not the usual controlled prince she was used to seeing. This was someone who was teetering on the brink of self-destruction.

Mollie was paralysed in fear as she saw him pause and turn his head towards the bed where everything lay completely untouched....as if no one had been in the room at all.

Mollie gulped.

There was a long painstakingly extended silence that followed as the tall prince stood frozen, halfway through the balcony doors towards the skinny girl in white. Mollie could practically hear the gears in his mind clicking as his loose waves fell atop his forehead to shield his icy gaze. He didn't brush his thick hair back like he usually did and Mollie could see nothing except for the deep frown that formed his full pink lips.

Slowly, as if she were a stacked glass tower of champagne he pulled her against him. Mollie's head fell just beneath his chin and she tried to control her breathing.

Mollie felt an uneasy feeling in her stomach. She couldn't help but feel as if the grip Micah had on her was just a touch too tight. She had to do something...some sort of damage control. The uncomfortable silence was becoming too much for her to bear.

"I fell asleep on the couch," she lied gesturing to the chaise in the far corner of the room where previously, they had been arguing. "I didn't have anything to change into..."

Her voice shook against her will and she inwardly cursed at her foolishness. The room looked as unused as it did when Micah had brought her in and he clearly noticed that nothing much had changed.

His face was utterly blank as he pulled back to stare at Mollie and she felt the pit of fear in her stomach clench.

Mollie shivered under his unwavering gaze and she felt her face grow all hot. Mollie could tell from his stance and his hard gaze that he was aware something was off. Mollie just prayed that his scepticism would lead to inconclusive answers.

When he spoke again Mollie felt the muscles in her legs weaken.

"I suppose we'll have to fix that then won't we?"

His voice was painstaking identical to the tone he used to address the guard whose eye he took out without a second thought. In spite of his tone, Micah had a smile on his face as he

regarded Mollie but the girl was far from convinced. She didn't like the way his shoulders remained stiff and his eyes remained hard.

"Turn around," he ordered quietly keeping his gaze fixed on Mollie. She obeyed miserably and prayed he didn't do anything to punish her. The coldness of his tone said it all and she trembled as he began to slowly unbutton the delicate gown.

Mollie's heart began to race as the prince slowly exposed her back to the cool air. She had the little fancy key held in her corset and she swiftly pulled it out of her bosom and let it drop with the rest of her gown before Micah could notice.

As if he'd done it a million times before he began to untie the tight restraining corset that had hindered Mollie's breathing for most of the night. She sucked in beautiful deep breaths as she felt the heavy material drop to the floor to join the rest of her garments. She stood naked on the balcony with only the pale illumination of the moonlight to showcase her little curves and statuesque height. Mollie was suddenly lurched forward and she shrieked as the prince pushed her against the freezing stone pillars of the balcony.

He was looming over Mollie so her stomach grazed painfully against the rough stone and her exposed chest throbbed from the pressure exerted on her from behind. She was dangling over the balcony inches away from falling down towards the jagged rock laden shore below as Micah boxed her in with the threat of letting her fall.

She couldn't see his face but she could tell from his rough grip and his sharp exhales that he was angry. Mollie was shaking and she was too terrified to even say one word in case that triggered him enough to end her right then and there.

He had been angry when he walked in from matters that Mollie had no control over, and now his anger *was* extended towards Mollie and her little stunt tonight did nothing to help her case.

Her long hair dangled below her face to caress the exterior pillars of the balcony and she closed her eyes tight.

She felt Micah's cool breath on her ear and she shivered. She felt his fingers inch towards her neck as he tilted her head down to the murky waters below them.

"There's nothing more upsetting to me Mollie... than people who take me for a fool."

Mollie squeezed her eyes more tightly and felt the tears accumulate at the edges. She was stupid. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*, for thinking the prince wouldn't notice her absence. She had made a mistake this time around and now she had to pay the price.

She realized he had been testing her from the beginning. He had been dangling the bait when he told her he was leaving. And like a blindsided fish she had taken it.

He pressed her more forcefully and she groaned in pain as the rough stone began to scrape into her flesh. From a distance it may have appeared as if two intimate lovers were entangling in an act of love. But the truth of the matter was far more sinister.

“Why do you keep *lying* to me Mollie?”

Mollie winced at the frustration that laced his tone. He seemed genuinely confused and Mollie squirmed beneath his grasp. This only tightened his hold on her and caused him to drop her lower. She began to cough as the rough ocean waters sprayed her face.

Mollie was shocked by the roughness of the waves. They were metres upon metres away from the water and yet... the waves pummelled against the shores with such a force that it reached the high windows that lined the towers on the cliffs edge.

“You asked me questions. I gave you honest answers. Yet I find your truthfulness...your dedication to me to be unreciprocated.”

His voice was a low foreboding murmur and she tried to clutch at the man standing behind her.

“I’ve tried my best to make this better for you...”

Mollie paused as his voice dropped even lower and she had to struggle to hear him better over the crushing waves of water hitting rock.

“But you’ve given me no choice. I won’t be disrespected like this Mollie. I won’t allow it.”

His voice was as icy as the rough showers that splashed her face and abruptly she was pulled backwards and whipped around to face the prince.

His eyes were blank and lifeless and she let the tears fall freely as he began to remove the expensive white tuxedo from his body. Within seconds he was left with only his pants resting tightly against his defined hips. His muscled body glinted in the moonlight and she couldn’t help the tears that leaked from her eyes at the prospect of what would follow. He ignored her tears, venturing back into his room for a moment before returning to the balcony where she stood.

“Stop crying Mollie,” he said sharply wrapping his cold fingers around her wrist. She bit her lip hard to stifle her sobs and she watched as he brought a wet cloth strip forward and pressed the material against her upper arm. The sharp burning odour of alcohol filled her nostrils and she watched as the prince brought a thin needle forward with the intention of piercing her.

She gasped and tried to wrench herself free. Mollie had *hated* needles since she was a young girl and she would often have had to get held down by multiple people before the doctor had even the slightest opportunity to prick her.

She was shaking and inched herself as far away from the dark haired man in front of her and pressed against the balcony as the prince stood in front her, an obvious expression of great irritation on his face.

The frown that had become a permanent part of his expression for the night deepened as he approached Mollie with the syringe in his hand.

“If you move Mollie, I will hurt you. But if you stay still, I will hurt you less.”

She couldn't stop her body from shaking as he brought the needle closer to her arm. His grip was firm and his movements confident and Mollie squeezed her eyes as tightly as she could manage.

"This is for your own good after all," he murmured.

The needle pierced her skin and she whined in pain as the briefest feeling of pain erupted then subsided. Micah was quick with his movements and she slowly opened her eyes to see him swiftly dispose of the used syringe. He returned and Mollie watched as he slid his formal trousers off his body.

"This was supposed to be a night of passion," he said slowly reaching for Mollie. He sighed in disappointment, as if Mollie were a disobedient child incapable of learning from past mistakes. "But you had to turn it into a night of punishment."

His grip was painfully tight and Mollie didn't like how rough he was being with her. It was out of character. Tears still stained her cheeks and she watched as he brought his face closer to hers and held her gaze for a long time. She hadn't noticed his dark tousled hair and deep frown when he had entered. It *wasn't* just her that had upset him tonight, this she was sure of.

There was something more that was stirring up his anger. Something that had absolutely *nothing* to do with her.

He brought his fingers up to wipe away her tears.

Mollie saw the briefest flicker of emotion line his features before his face returned into that same impassive expression.

"I've told you before Mollie," he said quietly bringing her closer into his embrace. "I don't enjoy seeing you cry."

Her tears trailed down her cheeks to fall against his chest and she found the strength to look up at him.

He had brought his fingers down to her hips and he gripped her hard as he pushed her once again against the balcony. She gasped as he clutched a hand against her thigh to wrap around his firm waist. He did the same with the other and before long she found herself straddling him as his pulsating cock brushed her cool outer lips.

"There's something about you," he groaned into her ear as he slid himself inside her. "That I can't get enough of."

Mollie cried out in pain as he sheathed himself fully into her. She wasn't fully prepared and she knew that Micah was aware of this. This pleasure wasn't for her to experience and he made that clear.

He hoisted her up onto the edge and she gasped out in pain as he repeatedly thrust within her unlubricated walls. His pace was ruthless and his grip too tight as Mollie tightened her hold around the prince. He held her dangerously close to the edge of the balcony. When he lifted

her up once more he exacerbated his movement so she hovered perilously far from the balcony's edge.

"Master Lyon!" she cried out clutching Micah's shoulders. He was panting against her neck and she felt him chuckle as he circled his tongue around her rock hard nipple.

"You see how it feels Mollie," he said mockingly leaning her down farther. "To have your trust for someone probed and queried before your eyes after so willingly handing it over to them."

Mollie was terrified as the waves of the ocean began to spray her back. Between Micah's relentless thrusting and the biting rough edges of the stone against her lower back she couldn't distinguish between which pain was worse.

She cried out as he harshly tugged on her breasts in a manner that was far from pleasurable.

"Do you know what could happen to you here if you disobey me...if you try to deceive me?" he asked her harshly finishing his sentence with a painful thrust that sent Mollie biting into his shoulder to muffle her screams of pain.

"Are you going to betray my trust again Mollie?" He asked her sternly like a parent scolding a child.

She hesitated and she felt Micah push her backwards fully so she fully dangled over the edge. She screamed as the cool air enveloped her back completely and the cool spray of the ocean became a shower of droplets.

Her gut instinct was telling her, screaming at her to obey and acquiesce to the cruel man keeping her from plunging to her death. But underneath that primal instinctual feeling that persuaded her to give in, was a bubbling dangerously combustible rebel surge that spiked Mollie almost as much as the adrenaline that pumped through her veins.

He seemed frustrated and if Mollie didn't know any better, she would have thought she saw a flicker of fear within those clear eyes. Fear for *her*.

"You wouldn't," she whipped out through her lips as she clutched the prince. The inside of her lip burst with blood as she bit down on it hard to keep the pain pulsing at her back and knees at bay. "You wouldn't drop me even if I betrayed you three times over."

Another large wave hit the edge of the cliff sending water showering onto Mollie from below, the icy cold waters splashing against her back.

Mollie didn't even have enough time to gauge his reaction.

Micah retaliated quickly and before Mollie knew what had happened she was slapped across the face so hard and so rapidly her vision blurred before her head was roughly brought forward so her nose touched the prince's.

"Do you really want to test that theory out?"

The look of blatant anger in his eyes paralyzed Mollie and she watched as he inched her lower over the edge. Her head was still ringing from the tight slap she had received and she groaned as more icy ocean water began to soak her from the back.

“You need to stop playing cat and mouse with me Mollie,” he seethed. “Not every animal has nine lives to spare.”

His fingers dug into her waist and she squirmed in his grasp but his grip was as cold and as tight as iron. Her squirming was futile and only caused his cock to rub faster against her walls.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered harshly as Micah thrust even harder into her, reaching into the very depths of her pulsing vagina.

“You can do better than that Mollie Mae,” he said tonelessly tilting her down another a few degrees so the only thing keeping her from falling into the waters below was the prince. She was clawing at him now and she felt tears brim the edges of her eyes once again.

“I’m sorry Master Lyon,” she stumbled between her whimpers of pain. It was a huge blow to Mollie to have to give in to the prince’s cruel treatments. But she had played with her life enough for one night. She had no more fight left to give.

She heard him sigh against her neck as his grip around her slackened. His cock was held loosely within her walls but Mollie didn’t release her tight grip around his shoulders. If Micah’s grip had been even a tad looser than it was, Mollie would no doubt have dropped from the balcony to join the rest of the bodies that lined the bottom of the ocean floor.

“I had thought I had subdued that wild streak within you during your first punishment,” Micah murmured as he carried her back inside his room and proceeded to lay her onto the massive bed. He smiled secretively to himself. “But I suppose father was right about certain things. Recidivism is inevitable.”

Mollie shivered as he placed his palms on either side of her head his cock twitching within her. Mollie was sickened by how turned on he was at this moment. He pushed himself into her over and over and Mollie cried out as he took her viciously and harshly. Mollie could see a wall within his eyes. It was the same look he had that day in the parlour. The look that showed a man drowning in his convoluted thoughts... a man that was miles away from his present self.

“Micah,” she groaned as he slammed her hard into the thick comforter of the bed. Her vaginal canal had lubricated slightly since he had first penetrated her but not enough for Mollie to take pleasure from his relentless pummeling.

Although he was lean, he was incredibly strong and Mollie gasped as his rock hard body slammed against hers and his biceps flexed as he supported himself on top of the skinny girl.

The moonlight did little to illuminate the room and the candles had long since burned out.

Micah's hair had come loose from the neat styled part he had worn earlier and his eyes were shielded from the tousled waves that fell over his forehead. Mollie could no longer feel the pulsation of her lower lips and her breathing had transitioned into painful gasps of air. Her lower abdomen was a ravine of wet, empty numbness.

Micah was usually so controlled and so careful when he had taken her. The change in his persona was so abrupt, so sudden, and so unexpected that Mollie was rendered speechless as he continued to brutally penetrate her. The pain was a tight and never ending spasm between the space in her thighs and Mollie couldn't help the tears that fell from her lids. It was becoming too much for her to bear.

"Micah!" she cried out as felt the hot spurt of warm semen spread through her ravaged canal. He was panting above her and despite the ripping pain that had engulfed Mollie's lower body, her spasming pussy still decided to clench itself around the cock of the man above her, squeezing as tight as it could and ejecting wave after wave of warmth from within her.

He jerked after Mollie had called out his name and she whimpered in pain as he abruptly slid himself free from her dripping and trembling hole.

Mollie watched him hazily from the bed as he slid on his pants and quickly made his way to the dresser where several beautiful and neatly laid goblets stood side by side on an elevated platform above the dresser. In one fluid motion he lifted his arm and sent all the beautiful goblets and delicate pieces surging to the ground where they shattered into a million tiny crystals.

Mollie curled up as she heard glass after glass hit the floor and she squeezed her eyes tight as the prince continued to bring every delicate ornament that adorned his room crashing to the ground. She pressed her face deeper into the duvet to drown out the sound of glass hitting glass and prayed the prince's outburst would end soon. The shattering reminded Mollie of a vicious and devastating hurricane that wiped out everything in its presence and she clawed at her ears as the ear piercing sound of shattering glass echoed through the spacious room.

It seemed like an eternity before silence finally settled upon them. Mollie had decided to hold her breath and count to one hundred before making any kind of move. She felt the sting of fresh tears form in her eyes and she carefully pushed herself up from the bed. Millions of glass shards and precious gems and crystals lined the floor and Mollie slowly brought her eyes forward to the heaving figure on the opposite end of the room. Micah was now leaning against the opposite wall from Mollie and she could see him trembling as his back faced her.

Mollie couldn't help but inhale sharply when she saw the deep silvery scars that lined the prince's back. Mollie couldn't see a single spot on Micah's exposed skin where a past laceration or long faded bruise hadn't existed. Many of the scars had long since healed, but Mollie could see numerous thin puckered lines of skin decorated across various sections of his back that were there to stay. Mollie knew scars like that were caused by deep lacerations and her stomach recoiled when she thought about what could have caused such trauma.

The moonlight provided poor lighting in the dark room but Mollie could see lines of fresh red bruising along Micah's sharp hip leading around to his torso. He was breathing heavily and Mollie froze as she saw him slowly stiffen into an upright position. His fists were flexing and

unflexing and Mollie was terrified. He was always under control, always so composed and refined. But something, *something* had triggered him so deeply and so traumatically that Micah Lyon himself reached his breaking point.

Mollie tried to move and felt the sticky feeling of cold wet fluid drip down her legs and she shuddered at the repulsive sensation. She attempted to slide off the bed and stand upright, but as she reached the ground Mollie found her legs were the consistency of jelly and she fell to the ground hard, her lithe legs crumpling beneath her. The pain within her vaginal canal was enough to prevent her from standing, and she yelped in pain as she felt several glass shards pierce into her knees.

Her vision began to darken as she clawed around the glass covered floor before her. Mollie was fading away into darkness as she felt two sturdy arms lift her into the air and she fell slowly into dreams of bloody wounds and sliced flesh where wave after wave of crimson liquid surged through her heaving throat threatened to keep her under for good.

Mollie heard the faint sound of waves crashing against the rocks. The sound of rushing water was always comforting to Mollie and vivid flashes of green foliage and muddy riverbanks flooded her mind. Mollie always questioned whether these memories were real or simply a figment of her imagination. But the images were so vivid and so detailed Mollie knew she had been there before.

She groaned as bright natural sunlight filtered in through open doors of the balcony and she stretched her arms above her head as the heat from the sun fell onto her sleeping form. The pillows were so soft and the duvet so thick and warm. She inhaled slowly as the scent of fresh citrus and earthy musk filled her senses.

That *scent*.

She gasped in surprise when that familiar scent, etched within the sheets that wrapped around her body, reached her nose and she rolled over onto her stomach only to feel a sharp painful pull from her lower belly. She bolted upright when she remembered the events of the previous night. Mollie felt a strange twist from her stomach and she moaned in pain as she clutched her abdomen. As she pushed back the sheets she stared in horror at the grisly mess that covered the once snow white sheets. There was no way Micah had punished her *that* badly. Blood soaked the sheets around her and Mollie stared in horror at the murder mess that covered the sheets and her inner thighs. When she saw the mess of dark clotted blood she heaved a sigh of relief. She had forgotten about her cycle and she cringed as she realized that she had begun menstruating.

The door to the room opened and Mollie clutched the sheets around her in an attempt to cover the absolute massacre that surrounded her.

Micah entered slowly and Mollie stared in fear as he slowly closed the door behind him. His hair was tousled in loose curls and he had on a cream coloured long sleeved shirt beneath his dark waistcoat. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows giving him an air of relaxation. A

dark neatly folded ascot adorned his pale elegant neck and in his arms was a crystal bowl filled with a steaming liquid and a tray of various assortments.

His eyes flickered to Mollie and shifted quickly to the duvet which Mollie had tightly pulled around herself. She saw his face flush and he shifted uncomfortably as he made his way towards her. Mollie stared in surprise at the clean and spotless room that only hours ago had been decorated in pieces of precious gems and shards of scattered glass. It was so clean... Mollie wondered if she had imagined the entire events of last night. Had it been a dream?

The painful surge of firing nerves that erupted from between her legs however, reminded her that it was all too real.

The prince placed the bowl and the tray beside Mollie and she watched as he awkwardly cleared his throat. Had Mollie not felt so miserable, she would have found his obvious discomfort greatly amusing.

He was purposely avoiding her eyes and Mollie watched as he carefully unfolded the garment he had draped over his arm and laid it out for Mollie on the chaise in his room.

“Get dressed Mollie Mae,” he said quietly.

The sublime, elegant and painfully cold prince was back on display for Mollie to see and she stared at him. Mollie didn't think it was possible but his face had gone even more pink as he finally met her eyes. “I'll be back in a moment to take you down for breakfast.”

With another brief glance around the room Micah left her to her thoughts and the door to his quarters closed with a snap.

Mollie lay there for a few moments longer letting the events of last night settle in her mind like suspended sediment after a turbulent vortex. She looked at the glass bowl the prince had brought in that came equipped with a soft cloth rag and several thin towels. She looked gratefully at the tray he had brought and eyed the delicate steaming liquid that simmered within the delicate china. Mollie couldn't reach for the tea fast enough and she downed the herbal tea in several quick gulps. Her mother had told her that herbal tea was a classic remedy to subside menstrual pain and she felt herself blush at the prince's gesture.

He had taken his frustration out on her last night and Mollie was shaken. Whatever had happened earlier the previous night was enough to send him into a crippling rage that usurped all of his usually meticulously composed emotions. On top of that, Mollie fuelled his anger by lying to him. Although he appeared calm and utterly composed when he walked in only moments ago, Mollie could still see the glint of poorly concealed frustration in his eyes.

Instead of taking steps forward with Micah, she had taken ten steps back and she had to find a way to get herself back on track. Mollie hoped she hadn't ruined her chances for good. Micah always appeared displeased, but the look on his face today when he had entered the room showed signs of something more... it was a look of fatigue and utter disappointment and she felt her throat swell. She needed to focus now.

She had a new goal in mind, one that was even more radical than the first, and god help how she would possibly find a way to mend her fragile relationship with the new CEO of the Lyon Regime.

Chapter End Notes

I'm considering making a playlist for the story. Any suggestions?? Also, has it seriously already been 20 chapters?! This is nuts.

Chapter 21: Scandium

Chapter Summary

Mollie is willing to do anything to get the answers she deserves.

Breakfast was a swirling mixture of plain awkwardness and painstaking silence.

Micah barely said a word and shut down any sort of conversation Mollie tried to make. Mollie suspected he was still fuming at her brazenness from last night and she avoided eye contact. She also had her reservations about what went on before Micah's outburst. Mollie was convinced his foul mood was attributed to tensions between other members of the royals and his promotion.

The words exchanged between them were curt and short and Mollie watched out of the corner of her eye as Micah opted for only a single glass of brandy. Mollie couldn't remember a time when she had seen the prince eat in public and she wondered if it was some sort of tradition she didn't know about. Regardless, Mollie found it immensely unsettling.

Mollie found herself being escorted back to her original quarters in the West wing. The prince didn't accompany her.

It had been over a week and Mollie was losing hope. Esperanza seemed more tight lipped as she returned to oversee Mollie and the girl felt as if her stay at Questershire Manor would soon be coming to an end. The coldness radiated off of everyone she passed through the manor and she felt the hollowness of a great depression set within her. She had memorized every wall, edge, and vertex that surrounded her and she found herself going through the wardrobes and the drawers as a way to stifle her unbearable boredom.

One morning, Mollie was attempting to re-read a certain novel from the little library she had already gone through thrice over, and in her rage she threw the book against the wall. Her seclusion was eating away at her psyche again and she hated what the prince was doing to her. She knew he was just prolonging her torment ever since their toxic confrontation on the night of the White Ball. She had thought he had put her through all she had to endure that night when he roughly forced her to submit to him. But she knew Micah was aware of how much she dreaded being locked away and he was proving a point.

He had complete control over her and he could make her life a living hell if he saw it fit.

She sighed and miserably went to pick up the book from where it had hit the wall and fallen somewhere behind her bedframe. Mollie placed her hands on the heavy bed and pushed. The

sound of metal grinding against floor echoed through the air. As she went to move the frame forward she spotted an interesting marking that had been chipped into the wall. Mollie was ever so curious, and after several failed attempts at pushing the four poster bed forward, she had managed to push it far enough to squeeze herself in through the back and get a closer look.

The chippings seemed childish. They were markings reminiscent of youthful handwriting. Mollie brushed her fingers over the markings and read what had been engraved into the wall.

Belle Lyon

As Mollie looked closer she saw that the Lyon had been scratched out and another name put underneath.

Belle Sommer

As Mollie inched even closer, she saw this too had been scratched out. Mollie continued on through the list until one single name was left with the idle handwriting appearing more delicate and more fancy. Whoever had etched these names into the wall had spent more time on the last one.

Belle Raiden

Mollie brushed her fingers over the name. It appeared as if whoever this Belle was had been deciding on surnames. The juvenile nature of her handwriting suggested she had also been very young.

Mollie felt her chest constrict painfully. Maybe she wasn't the only one who had been a prisoner of this room. She wondered if all those unfortunate souls before her ever regained their freedom again. With her stomach in knots she freed herself from behind the bed and took a couple of breaths.

She pushed the breakfast Esperanza had brought for her earlier to the side and held her head in her hands. She had lost her appetite.

Micah hadn't come to see Mollie in over a week now and he never came to check on her either. Instead of feeling relief she felt a cold tremor run down her spine. Without him, she was suspended bait among a swirling circle of ravenous sharks.

Perhaps she had seen too much and he decided to lock her away forever. She would be no different from those people James had shown her in the basement. Her fate was not unparalleled to theirs. Or maybe he had plans to kill her quietly, by someone else's hand. He could easily arrange for that with only the snap of his fingers. There was not even a window in her room to tell if it was night or day outside and Mollie simply sat in the middle of the spacious room absent-mindedly running her fingers through her too long hair and going over scenario after scenario in her head. She desperately needed a cut, her thick locks were brushing her hip bones at this point.

Mollie had a week till the supplies ship came to Questershire Manor and the girl grappled with her options.

If she did leave, she would be considered another failure. She would be another statistic of the Insurgency that couldn't quite achieve what they had hoped and for some unknown reason, the prospect of leaving this legacy behind her bothered her. She had reached the pedestal after a treacherous journey and she had ruined it in less than a second with her overconfidence and her fearlessness. Micah had told her the first time he held a conversation with her that she had been capricious. And though Mollie hated to admit it, he had been right.

Esperanza had come in to her room as she had been pacing and Mollie watched as the old woman bowed her head and avoided eye contact. Mollie was tired of it.

"Where is Mic- I mean the prince?"

Esperanza looked at her sternly as she scooped Mollie's various scattered clothing from the week into her overfilling basket of cloths and linens.

"Master Lyon is attending to his business. He has lots of work to do now that he manages all of the finances of the company," she sniffed.

Mollie thought about this carefully. She had formulated an idea, a dangerous one, but she had little choice. Staying another day pacing her cold bare room and going over countless scenarios would push her over the edge of insanity.

"What business is he attending to?" Mollie asked Esperanza as the old woman began the transition of changing her sheets.

Esperanza gave her a warning glare.

"Are you playing twenty questions with me child?" she asked sending a gust of wind towards Mollie as the woman dusted her duvet.

Mollie frowned.

"It's not like I have anyone else to play with," she replied with a scowl.

The older woman ignored her and continued to clean up the mess in Mollie's room. Mollie was used to keeping her clothes and her belongings in one single place. She had grown up having to do that in her small apartment that barely had enough room for two. All this extra space she now had access to was daunting and foreign to her.

The young girl perked up when she saw the thin light filtering in through her normally closed bedroom door. "Maybe we can take a walk outside today?" Mollie asked hopefully as Esperanza continued making her bed.

The old woman regarded Mollie closely and Mollie felt as if her stare lingered a little too long.

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” Esperanza murmured. She bunched the old sheets together and proceeded to stuff them in in her overflowing basket of linen that she had carried around with her.

Mollie looked at the woman challengingly.

“Master Lyon said I could walk the grounds anytime I wanted to. All I had to do was ask you.”

Mollie heard the sharp exhale before she had even finished her sentence and she felt a small bit of triumph within her.

The older woman approached Mollie slowly and Mollie was surprised when the woman brushed a tender stroke against her cheek. She was expecting the woman to have her usual tight lipped frown on her face but the expression lining her features was one of gentleness and motherly warmth.

“You remind me so much of my Pénélope,” she said with a sad smile. “She must be around your age by now. She was quite a handful. Very free spirited like you.”

Mollie swallowed the lump in her throat as the woman dropped her hand from her cheek. Mollie could tell from the first time she had met the older woman that she was a mother. These things you could just tell. There was a warmth to them that other woman didn’t have. Mollie had never known what it was to feel that comfort, that affection from her own mother. She had been robbed of that all her life.

“I have one more room to finish then we may stroll the gardens. In the meantime wait for me in the parlour.”

Mollie watched as the woman paused for a moment before adding another comment.

“Oh and child, please keep to yourself this time. You attract enough attention as it is.”

Mollie had grown accustomed to the parlour room by now and she circled the room observing the details more closely. Esperanza had rummaged in the wardrobes of her room through the layers upon layers of gowns and dresses that hung within Mollie’s room. She had found a pretty pale yellow cloak with a hood for Mollie to wear and insisted she wear it when she went outside to brave the light wind.

It looked as if it hadn’t been worn in years when Esperanza found it at the back of the wardrobe and shook out the dust that had settled on the top of it. The cloak appeared a bit juvenile in Mollie’s opinion but it was undoubtedly beautiful. Within the cloak were intricately threaded sparkles and a silver design that glinted in the sunlight.

As Mollie looked closer she saw that lining the silvery material that threaded through the cloak were real stones and precious gems. Mollie was able to identify citrine, chrysoberyl and several yellow diamonds and sapphires. The other gems that lined her collar and edges of the

cloak were a mystery to her. Mollie believed it may have belonged to one of the girl or girls that had previously occupied the room.

It was an expensive garment that Mollie would never have been able to afford. Esperanza clapped her hands together when Mollie had tried it on and insisted the bright colour made her skin glow.

It fit her perfectly and Mollie was a bit taken aback. Usually everything Mollie wore was short on her due to her height, but it was as if the cloak were made for someone with legs as long as Mollie's. The pockets of fur lining the inside of the cloak were the softest Mollie had ever felt and she figured it must have been made of sable or chinchilla. The thought made her frown but Mollie decided to wear the garment nevertheless.

Mollie took a look at the wide windows that faced in the direction of the cliffs and she shuddered. Why anyone would think of building a monstrosity of a home on the edge of a cliff was beyond her.

Mollie heard voices from outside the room in the foyer and she quickly shuffled towards the closed door. The voices were muffled but one of them sounded vaguely familiar to her. She pressed her eye against the key hole and saw long towering legs leading to the figure of a well dressed dark haired man. His back was to her and Mollie recognized the chuckle that erupted from the man with his back to her.

Rowan.

He was conversing with that man she kept seeing at all of these ridiculous extravagant Lyon events. His name was Solanio if Mollie remembered correctly.

Mollie watched as Solanio leaned in to brush a tender kiss along the neck of the second oldest prince and she felt her eyes narrow. If she remembered correctly she could have sworn she saw Rowan getting hot and heavy with some of the higher class women when she followed Esperanza down to the kitchen quarters one evening. Now he was back with his man caressing and kissing him like he was the only person in the world he yearned for.

"Maintenant?" the raven haired man said with a gasp as he clutched the arm of the prince in front of him.

"Ouias," Rowan said with a soft peck at his neck. *"Pourquoi pas?"*

Solanio sighed against his lover and fisted his hand in the neatly combed hair of the second Lyon.

"Un autre chose," he added. *"Peux-tu prendre soin de mon chat pendant mon voyage au Mont Blanc demain? Lui faire des câlins?"*

Rowan chuckled for a moment and Mollie stared at the scene before her.

"Toujours mon amour," Rowan whispered trailing kisses down the other mans cheek.

Mollie rolled her eyes as she saw Rowan grip Solanio's manhood firmly between his fingers for a brief moment and palm him through his trousers before planting another tender kiss on the other man's lips.

"What a manwhore," she muttered to herself as she watched Solanio wink at his lover and walk in the opposite direction. Mollie could have guessed Rowan was a standardless slut but the extent of it was still a question to Mollie.

Although she hated him, Mollie had a plan and she couldn't let her disgust for the Lyons, any of them, get in the way of it.

With a single huff she pushed open the doors to the parlour and cringed when they slammed against the outer wall with an echoing thud.

Mollie cursed internally. She was *already* off to a poor start.

Despite the raucous sound she had created to disturb the peaceful silence of the foyer Rowan turned himself around to face her slowly.

He didn't seem surprised to see her and Mollie saw that sly glint flicker in his eyes as he looked her up and down. He did so in a brash manner and Mollie could see his brow raise slightly when he took in Mollie's attire.

"Getting a taste of the luxuries the Questershire Manor has to offer I see," he said with a smirk. "Always a slight improvement in appearance when I come across you Mollie. You know how to make quite the entrance."

Mollie blushed despite the disdain that laced through her. He looked handsome today in his dapper navy waistcoat and matching ascot. His cheeks were tinged pink from his previous engagement and Mollie looked away.

"You certainly look the part, but you still have work to do in acting the part," he said with a chuckle eyeing the doors she had so clumsily swung open. "But baby steps I suppose."

Mollie ignored him and shook off the humiliation. Rowan always had a way of making her feel like a grass stain underneath his shoe.

"What were you doing in there all by yourself" he said softly eyeing the room behind her curiously. "Snooping again are we? You're more like a mouse than I ever thought." He tucked a dark brown curl that had fallen free from Mollie's neatly combed hair behind her ear. The cool leather of his glove swiped her cheek and she watched as his lips curve upwards. "*Une petite souris.*"

Mollie felt an icy feeling overtake her as his dark emotionless eyes bore into her own. Did he know something she didn't? His eyes seemed to go a shade darker as he intensified his stare. She felt as if he were undressing her with his eyes. It made a horrible stringy bile rise in her throat and she swallowed with difficulty.

“Were you snooping on me Miss Mollie?” He said with a grin that made Mollie’s knees tremble in fear. “Baby brother couldn’t satisfy your womanly needs after all?” He laughed at this and Mollie grit her teeth. He walked closer to her so his frame towered over and he had to tilt his head down to address her. “I didn’t think so. Micah fucks like a virgin on her wedding night.”

Mollie cringed at his tone and she squirmed uncomfortably. She desperately needed to turn the conversation over.

“I...I wanted to ask you something...Master Lyon,” she added dropping her gaze in respect.

Mollie saw interest flicker in his dark eyes and she felt her palms begin to sweat. He took his time before he answered, but his eyes never left her face.

“How lovely. How can I be of assistance?”

Mollie wondered how Rowan still managed to turn her question into a question before she could even ask her question.

“I was wondering if you could take me to Prince Micah’s quarters,” she said feeling pleased when her voice came out clear and tremor free.

Rowan paused after he heard this and Mollie watched the curve of his pink lips. He looked like a doll with his painted smile and blank eyes and Mollie knew there were several gears turning in his mind in spite of his placid expression.

“I see,” he said after some time. He had a shrewdness to his features and Mollie saw curiosity gleam in his dark eyes. “I’m not sure if you are aware Mollie, but only royals have the privilege of demanding to see their subjects.”

Mollie felt her blood run cold and she felt foolish. His expression didn’t change and Mollie felt the heat flood her cheeks for the second time during their encounter.

“I just...need to talk to him that’s all,” she said wanly.

“Ahh,” Rowan said with a nod of his head, as if he understood her plight. “You’re not the first to demand a meeting with the youngest prince one on one.”

Something solidified within Rowan Lyon’s dark eyes and Mollie couldn’t quite place the emotion.

He leaned in even closer and Mollie could feel his breath brush against the top of her forehead.

“Women just throw themselves at him. It’s all just a game to him really. A game that gets boring rather quickly.”

Mollie had the feeling Rowan was referring to himself with that last comment more than he was his brother and she clenched her jaw in irritation.

“And why wouldn’t a prince take advantage of such opportunities? He is free to do whatever he so desires.”

Mollie stayed silent.

“What’s the matter Mollie? Has the honeymoon phase come to a close?”

His smile had widened into something more ominous but Mollie chose to ignore his taunts and jabs.

“I have no interest in those kinds of matters with the prince,” she said hotly feeling an ache within her nether regions. “My concerns with the prince are...business related. He is the new CEO of the monarchy after all.”

Mollie wasn’t sure why she decided to settle on business as a matter of conversation, but it always seemed to work. She had an inkling that business would be the last thing on Micah’s mind when it came to her.

Rowan poorly suppressed a smile as he regarded Mollie. Whatever Rowan was feeling at the moment, he was doing an expert job at concealing his emotions. Mollie could see nothing but a soft display of courtesy and indulgence across his sculpted face.

“A commoner wanting to discuss business with a prince,” he stated amusedly. “If you insist.”

Mollie winced as he brushed his pale fingers against her warm cheek and she shifted uncomfortably under his watchful gaze.

“But what will I get in return Miss Mollie?” His hand had lowered towards her neck and Mollie froze as he lifted a lock of her dark hair and twisted it within his fingers.

Mollie was a little stunned by his question.

“I...I don’t have anything to offer...” she stumbled as she shivered under Rowan’s relentless gaze. “I don’t own anything-,”

Rowan brushed her response off quickly. “I’m not talking money,” he said dismissing the topic immediately, “I’m referring to what *you* can do for *me*.”

Mollie stared at him, completely bewildered, as he smiled down at her. He seemed to enjoy watching her stumble and blush under his gaze and she looked up at him with a sharp exhale, trying her best to mask her frustration.

“There’s no rush *ma chérie*,” he said with light-hearted laugh. “I’ll let you think about what a good exchange for this little arrangement may be. If I require my payment sooner than expected I’ll know exactly where to find you.”

Mollie felt the dampness accumulate on her palms and she quickly slid them across her dress as the prince held an arm out for her.

She always felt on edge in the presence of Rowan and she could feel the goosebumps erupt against her skin as she placed her hand on his gloved one.

Mollie walked alongside Rowan as they exited the foyer and entered another longer corridor lined with faded portraits. Mollie's eyes jumped from wall to wall as she took in the different faces that lined the corridor. She had never been down this corridor before. She spotted the entrance to the dining room and felt a tingle down her spine. She *had* been here before, just below ground. Most of them were of older men with a scroll in their hand or their hands placed gently on their laps. Some were of woman too, in long flowing gowns and beautiful sparkling crowns atop of their heads. She could feel Rowan watching her out of the corner of her eyes and she tried not to appear overly inquisitive.

Mollie was surprised when Rowan walked them through two fancy doors to their right that lead to the manor grounds. Mollie looked at him confusedly and Rowan simply smirked.

"I thought Master Lyon was in his quarters?" she said confusedly looking back behind them as Rowan continued guiding her across the lush green landscape of the grounds.

He chuckled lowly.

"You thought wrong."

Mollie really didn't know if she could trust him and she hoped she hadn't signed off her signature on her own death sentence. Mollie had yet to see a side of Rowan that was as masochistic as James or as unpredictable in nature as Micah. She hoped she would never have to.

The fresh air was a relief to Mollie as the wind stroked through her dark brown curls and Mollie was thankful the old woman had insisted she wear a cloak. There was a light chill in the air that flooded through the dense foliage every now and again but the coolness was a relief on her heated skin.

Rowan had extremely long strides and Mollie stumbled once or twice as she tightened her grip on his arm.

"S'il te plait, fais attention où tu mets les pieds."

Mollie scowled as he chuckled lightly.

"Peux-tu parler français Mollie?"

"What do you think?" she muttered as Rowan laughed beside her. French was a language of the wealthy. She had picked up on enough of it at the bakery to get by, especially when consulting wealthy customers who preferred french over "tainted" english. The rich were willing to do anything to distance themselves from the poor.

"In time you will learn...that is if you stay long enough."

Rowan and Mollie had stepped past the clearing towards the rocky terrain just a stretch further from the Lyon gardens.

As Mollie squinted in the distance she spotted the youngest prince. He was dressed quite casually in a loose white dress shirt and slim black trousers. His caramel locks were loose and flowing in the light breeze. His back was facing the two of them and it looked as if he were waiting for something near the forest edge.

“Tread lightly Mollie,” Rowan whispered as he caressed the back of her neck. “Play dangerous games win dangerous prizes.”

Mollie took a deep breath as Rowan left her at the edge of the clearing. Mollie watched his figure grow increasingly smaller as he disappeared into the greenery lining the Lyon gardens until his figure was just another speck amongst the grey skyline.

Mollie sighed as she turned towards the clearing. She took a deep breath and with her heart in her throat she shuffled forwards.

Micah seemed deep in thought as he stared into the forest in front of him. Mollie hesitated at the edge of the pathway, teetering on the brink of indecisiveness for some time before she decided to approach him.

“Master Lyon,” she said quietly.

Mollie watched as he took a deep breath. He still had his back to her and Mollie felt her hands begin to sweat. He didn’t respond but Mollie knew she had heard him.

It was the most casual Mollie had ever seen him and he seemed strangely calm.

He whistled into the forest and Mollie picked her head up. She heard the padding of something large and heavy making its way through the trees and she stood absolutely paralyzed, as the largest animal she had ever seen charged full force straight for her.

Mollie was absolutely stunned and she stumbled backwards blindly as the creature snarled at her before becoming submissive by a quick hand gesture from the prince. Mollie yelped as it bared its teeth in her direction. She had taken several steps backwards and unknowingly, they had led her deeper into the muddy pathway disappearing into the thick foliage. She was as far away from the manor as she'd ever been since her first day here in mid November.

She could escape.

She looked behind her and back at the prince who was watching her. He had a pale hand resting lightly on the head of the beast beside him. Its ice blue eyes were fixed on Mollie. Mollie thought it looked like an abnormally large dog at first, but the more she stared it the more doubtful she became.

Her eyes flickered to the prince.

There was something in Micah’s stance that was eerily inquisitive and a darkness in his challenging stare. He was too casual, too relaxed, with his other hand resting lightly in his pocket and his thick locks playing with the light breeze.

He wanted her to run.

Mollie stiffened slowly. The call of freedom was a desperate whisper in her ear but the consequences of her actions played through her mind. Her gaze flickered to the beast that curled its lip when Mollie looked it in its eye. She had no doubt that beast would have her for a snack if it caught her in its grip.

She held her ground as Micah turned his attention to the creature beside him. He murmured something to the animal which once again took off, this time in the direction of the manor. Mollie watched quietly as its thick coat rippled with every stretch of muscle that flexed as it scampered across the open fields. It was beautiful, its silvery grey coat sparkling like a pearl within the sandy depths of the ocean floor. It disappeared around the perimeter of the Lyon gardens and Mollie was now truly alone with the prince.

He wore that frown she resented so much on his fine features and she bit her lip. Although he appeared frigid in stature, he was lucid and this was enough to placate Mollie.

“We need to talk,” she said bluntly folding her arms around her body.

He raised an eyebrow when she said this and Mollie watched as he took in her attire. There was nothing but the cool wind whipping through their hair and the sigh of the great oak trees around them to contribute to the gnawing silence between them. Micah closed his eyes and Mollie noticed some colour was back in his cheeks.

She hated how she noticed these things. She hated how much she cared about them.

The prince’s tone was harsh and prickly when he responded.

“You take liberties Mollie, even after all this time.”

Mollie jerked at the sound.

He seemed irritated but Mollie was not to be swayed. She went through too much for her to be dismissed once again.

“I had to see you,” she argued trying to justify her position. “Seeing as you wouldn’t see me.”

Mollie saw his chest expand and relax slowly. He seemed to have recovered his fiercely pedantic qualities.

He was in control.

This was her chance. Her opportunity to get the answers she had so desperately craved since their first chance encounter.

“I’ve been...preoccupied,” he said smoothly. He sounded so formal, so rehearsed. He had slipped both his hands into his pockets at this point and had turned his body towards Mollie so he was fully addressing her. He slowly opened his eyes. “I didn’t forget about you if that’s what you were thinking.”

Mollie frowned.

“It sure seemed like it,” she said bitterly, looking at everything around her but the prince. “It’s horrible,” she muttered remembering how slow the days seemed to go when all she had for company were four large walls. “It’s horrible being held prisoner in there like some sort of animal.”

He had a half smile on his lips when he said this as if he were enjoying some secret joke.

“Punishments aren’t supposed to be enjoyable Mollie,” he said matter of factly.

Mollie didn’t want to bring up their last disaster of a conversation. She was desperate to move past it, to see if maybe she still had a chance at cracking the tough exterior of Micah Lyon.

“What do you want from me?” she asked stepping closer to the prince. He opened his eyes when he heard her shoes crunch against the crispy leaves below them. She had alluded to this question in the past and Micah always managed to rebuff her.

They were far enough from the manor that the underbrush and fallen leaves of the forest littered the green grass below them. They were beyond the boundaries of the manor and maintenance of the grounds simply did not venture all the way to the forests edge.

Mollie felt stronger here, as if she had nature on her side. The artificialness of Questershire manor didn’t exist here. And neither did her status. As long as she was beyond the reach of the manor, her autonomy was hers to dictate.

Micah’s eyes mirrored the green foliage around her and she was drawn into its very depths. His gaze was softer now...less steely than when she first approached him.

“I would have thought you’d know by now Mollie.”

Mollie shot him a questioning stare. He sighed as he approached her and she watched as he held an arm out for her.

“May I?”

He appeared so charming...so refined...so elegant and Mollie felt herself blush.

“Reel him in Mollie, don’t let him reel you. And by God’s hell don’t fall for him.”

Isaac’s words fluttered through her mind as she found herself staring at the handsome man standing in front of her, his arm extended, waiting for her to join him.

Think about the other woman. All the other woman he has used and abused.

Mollie swallowed uneasily and slipped her arm through his. His cologne wafted towards her and she struggled to maintain her composure. She knew how those arms felt around her waist, how his hard body felt when it was moulded against her own. She suddenly felt as if she were boiling in her new cloak despite the chill in the air. She *didn’t* like him and she *wouldn’t* fall for him.

“You never asked me how I knew where to find you,” she said conversationally as they began their walk back to the manor. She hoped he didn’t notice her blazing cheeks and too warm temperature of her skin against his.

Micah smiled.

“Indeed,” he said helping her over a patch of uneven ground.

She glanced up at him in confusion. He was always so mysterious. It drove Mollie crazy. She wished he were more straightforward, more frank and unfiltered...like her.

“You’re not curious?”

“Not at all.”

Mollie fell silent after this as they continued their trek up the green rolling hills. The manor was growing larger and larger in the distance, like a tsunami reaching its greatest peak in the sky.

“Let me guess, you already know.”

Her tone was sour and Mollie hated the smirk on his face.

“It’s forbidden to leave the grounds without alerting another member of the monarchy of a royals whereabouts,” he explained.

Mollie was surprised. She was under the impression royals were able to do whatever they pleased.

“Forbidden?” Mollie emphasized. “What would happen if you did it anyways?”

Micah shot her a look.

“It would be foolish to do so. These rules are in place for our own safety.”

He paused for a brief moment when he said this.

“Safety?” she questioned.

Micah sighed.

“From the day we were born, my brothers and I, all being potential heirs to govern the monarchy, were overseen, monitored and shadowed every day of our lives. Trust is not something that is taken lightly within the monarchy.”

Mollie listened quietly.

“When we come of age these rules become less stringent. There is more flexibility between what we can and cannot do. But at the same time certain laws...certain traditions must still be held.”

If Mollie had remembered correctly, Rowan had told her a prince was free to do what he pleased.

“But Rowan said-,”

“Never mind what Rowan says,” Micah muttered. That irritation was creeping into his tone again and Mollie watched as he brushed his fingers through his hair. “Not everything Rowan says is applicable to every situation.”

“So he lied?” Mollie pressed as they began their ascent up the rocky vine laden staircase to the manor. She should have known by now that artifice was second nature to the second Lyon.

“No,” Micah said curtly as he matched her pace on the stairwell. “Rowan’s circumstances are different from my own, different from James. He isn’t responsible for the same duties as I am. Some of us have more freedom in different pursuits than others.”

Mollie considered this carefully. It seemed as if Rowan had the most flexibility within the monarchy at the moment. Mollie would have believed the second Lyon to be bitter at neither leading any corporation nor governing any segment of the regime. No wonder he seemed so pleased at the Ball that night...he was enjoying all the fruits of the monarchy without having to make sacrifices himself.

“I thought the responsibilities of the monarchy were based on birth order,” Mollie asked as they rounded a corner.

Micah frowned when she said this and she wondered what was going through his mind. He was quiet for too long and Mollie wondered if she had angered him.

“Apparently not,” he said brusquely.

They rounded another corner and Mollie heard the faint sounds of clattering dishes and heavy footfalls from above. It sounded as if the scullions were being put to work hard. They were inching closer and closer to the manor.

“What about you Mollie Mae?” he asked after some time fixing those green eyes on hers. “Did you have siblings?”

Mollie didn’t like when the conversation took a turn about herself. There was something uncomfortable about discussing the sad less than mediocre life one lived, with someone who lived a life of luxury.

“There’s nothing much to know about me,” she murmured tucking her windblown hair behind her ears. “I don’t have siblings. It’s just been my mother and I since I was four.”

“And before that with your grandparents, correct?” Micah asked.

Mollie dropped her gaze. She had forgotten that she had told him these things weeks ago. When they had spent the night together at the cabin in the woods.

“Yes, I lived with my grandparents on my mothers side,” she continued. I was born in Riverton, we lived there for some time before other matters forced us to migrate to Chartery.”

“Riverton,” Micah repeated with a smile on his face. “The countryside. I didn’t know you were a country girl Mollie Mae.”

Mollie stifled an eyeroll. That information was written on her status card which the prince had burned the first night he met her.

“And what of your mother now?” he asked.

She felt the clamminess begin to set in within her hands and she hated the intensity at which Micah was staring at her. She wondered why he even cared so much in the first place.

“I..I’m not sure,” she stumbled. She was being honest with him. She didn’t know whether her mother was okay...whether she was dead or alive. Mollie felt guilty for not thinking about it more but the bitterness she still harboured in her heart towards the woman was undeniable. “I haven’t seen my mother since I left home.”

They had reached the grand entrance of the manor where the warm glow of the setting sun brushed the tips of the expansive forest that lay just beyond the perimeter of the fortress. The sun cast strokes of pink and orange across the sky and Mollie admired the various splashes of colour that were painted across the blue canvas.

So much beauty lay just outside the walls that held her captive.

“This view is breathtaking,” she murmured. “It’s incomparable.” The various colours in the sky were mirrored in the still waters that lay below the cliffs edge making it seem as if the sparkling water was filled with gems that splashed and glittered across the rough rocks with each growing tide that lingered and receded.

Mollie jumped when cool fingers made their way under her pale yellow cloak to stroke her stiff shoulders that lay concealed upon her many layers of clothing.

“I beg to differ,” he murmured planting a soft kiss against her neck. He stood directly behind her, his chin brushing her head and his firm torso against her back. She could feel his eyes on her as he kissed in circuits against her pulse point and Mollie felt her insides clench. Whether it was with fear or desire she did not know.

Mollie didn’t turn to look at him. She was afraid of what emotions would bubble inside of her. She had to hold on to that raw burning hate that she had fed and nurtured for so long. She had to replay in her mind all of the things he had done to her in the past. The horrible things.

But he had been good to her too.

“Stop thinking so hard fawn,” he whispered bringing her long dark hair behind her to fall against her back. “Savour the beauty of the moment. You never know if you’ll live to see another.”

Mollie shivered as he slid his hands around her waist and rested his chin lightly on the top of her head. They stood like that together, watching the wide semi circle of the sun disappear beneath the canopy of the leaves until the first stars of nightfall began to dot the darkening sky.

Something caught Mollie's eye by the thin stream near the gardens that emptied into the estuary on the banks of the giant residence. It was the giant dog and Mollie watched as it lapped heavily from the cool stream, its thick coat billowing in the breeze.

"Is he yours?" Mollie asked as the prince tightened his hold on her waist.

"Yes," he said quietly. "She's mine. My brothers and I came across the pups during our time spent in the North. There were four...but the youngest one didn't make it."

Mollie listened to his musing. He had a soothing slightly husky voice when he was relaxed. She liked hearing him speak.

"What kind of animal is she?" Mollie asked as she watched the creature chase the birds that had settled to graze on the grass behind it. It looked carefree and a little playful. Mollie felt silly for having been afraid of it before.

"She's a Wolamute," he said softly. "A true product of the North."

Mollie now understood why the animal was so large. These creatures were half wolf and incredibly rare. They could only be found within the harshest conditions of North, where temperatures were well below -30 degrees Celsius. But no one in their right mind would even attempt to tame a wolamute, it was like trying to tame a lion and keep it as a pet. The concept seemed ludicrous to Mollie.

"How did you tame her? That must have taken years." Mollie was truly in awe. She saw how submissive it had been with the prince earlier. It respected him and it guarded him as if he were her own kind.

Mollie felt Micah's chest shake against her back as he laughed at her question.

"I don't really regard it as taming," he said after some time. "When we came across the pups all those years ago, we brought them back to the fortress. We found their mother days later. She was a rare polar white wolf. She had been hunted and her furs stripped of the rich pelt. Her meat had been extracted and her blood splayed out on the snow. The snow was stained red for days after."

Mollie felt her heart ache at his vivid description.

"Father was against us taking in the pups. He believed it disrupted the natural processes of life." Mollie felt him smile from behind her. "But Rowan was able to convince him otherwise. He can be rather persuasive."

Mollie grimaced against him.

"Father allowed it under the condition that we take full responsibility for the animal. It would be ours to train, ours to nurture, ours to command."

Mollie was tempted to turn around and observe his expression but she held herself still. She didn't want him to stop speaking.

"I was thirteen at the time. James and Rowan took the two male pups who appeared stronger and sturdier...I took Theo as my own. She was small and sickly at first, but she blossomed beautifully."

Mollie watched as the wolf hybrid suddenly stopped scampering across the grounds and had settled on curling herself up near the clear stream. Mollie estimated she must have been at least 175 pounds.

"Where are her brothers?" she whispered, watching as the beast closed its eyes and sighed in content.

Mollie felt Micah stiffen behind her ever so slightly.

"James' wolf accompanied him to the West. Rowan's enjoys roaming the mountains. Its curiosity is difficult to subdue."

He gave Mollie a little squeeze when he said this and she shifted to look back at him. His eyes were fixed on her and she felt her face warm in spite of the cool breeze hitting her cheeks.

He peppered kisses against her forehead, and squeezed her comfortingly. He made her feel as if she were the most beautiful thing in his world. He checked every box and Mollie understood in that moment why every girl before her had succumbed to the advances of the prince. He was a master in the art of seduction and coquetry. That much she knew. But he was also a master in the art of temptation and this terrified Mollie more than she wanted to admit.

Caleb had been wrong. He hadn't thrown Mollie to the sharks to be eaten and pulled apart flesh by flesh by carnivores who relished in the gustation of its victims. He had placed her in the centre of a courtship ritual and demanded she ignore the incessant mating calls of the covetous critters that surrounded her, the circle getting smaller and smaller with each passing day.

Chapter 22: Titane

Chapter Summary

The state of the Lyon monarchy is up for question and Mollie learns a truth about Micah that changes everything.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Esperanza had finished her work early and she sighed as she slumped to her quarters below ground.

She couldn't remember the last time she had finished her duties before 23:00. She exhaled once again when she entered the common room where the other royal staff members quickly jumped to their feet. Esperanza gave them all a nod and they all cut off their previously chirpy conversations.

Esperanza liked to think that they did this out of respect for her, but she knew their fear of her was the predominating factor when it came to their submissiveness. She was the longest running member of the royal family since Paisley passed away 8 months ago. She had formed a close and rather intimate relationship with the elderly woman. With the older woman gone Esperanza found no one else she could trust. She had lost her only confidant and the burdens she would share with the woman were now hers to bear alone. Esperanza would be lying if she said she wasn't bitter. These new staff members were lazy in Esperanza's opinion and they always finished hours earlier than their designated scheduled time slots. It drove the older woman mad with frustration. She had worked and laboured for years, even during her youth.

However with Paisley gone, Esperanza found herself of more interest to his Grace. He had requested all of his staff to refer to him in this manner and it had become habit to the old woman. He sent his personal guard to see to more of Esperanza's demands and all her children now held managerial positions and were able to move from their small village into the bustling hub of the wealthier cities in the South.

Although Esperanza's pay remained stagnant, her treatment had certainly improved over the years. Her quarters although still small were not as cramped as her colleagues and her meals had been of much higher quality than she was used to. Under regular circumstances, Esperanza would have been pleased at these changes, but instead the changes made her deeply uncomfortable.

The Lyons did nothing out the kindness of their hearts.

They wanted something from her. They needed her. Esperanza had a hunch that loyalties were being greatly questioned. It was no secret that turbulent times were fast approaching. Hartley's desire to venture into the East had not gone over smoothly.

The East had always valued their independence and recently, they had managed to partition off land that had previously been under royal rule. The Eastern monarchy had transitioned from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one.

When the Lyons were presented with the same offer they had refused.

Esperanza was no silly woman, she could feel the tension emanating from the walls of the castle. The West was static, maintaining its current state of disarray despite the eldest son of his Grace taking over the duties from the late Logan Lyon. In spite of Logan Lyon's notoriously promiscuous reputation, he ran his businesses profitably and it was through him that the Lyons were able to accumulate such a grand amount of wealth in such a short period of time. Esperanza had yet to see the dynamic leadership seen in Logan Lyon reflected in Hartley's eldest son. The rebellion in the West was dangerously strong and no amount of reassurance from His Grace appeared to be easing the tension of his people.

Esperanza was aware that Hartley had been reluctant to elect his eldest son to relieve the duties of his brother. It was common knowledge. The boy and his father were as compatible as oil and water.

It was also no secret that his Grace favoured his youngest son.

Micah had received special treatment from his father since he was a young child. Now this wasn't to say that he treated Micah with more tenderness than he did his other sons. No. Hartley was not a tender man, he was as callous and cold as a frozen lake in the middle of an arctic winter. He was so terribly stoic in fact, Esperanza wondered if the man was capable of feeling physical pain at all.

His actions spoke much louder than his words and he would often reward Micah with more leisure time than his brothers ever received. He allowed the boy to draw, to train his beast, to master the art of fencing. Leisure time was a privilege in the world of the monarchy, even for someone at Esperanza's rank. Somehow, Hartley justified the boy's position. She wondered if it had anything to do with the boy growing up without a mother. However she had her doubts about this...Hartley didn't seem like the type to make amends for things he could not prevent.

She had remembered how severely Hartley had punished James the one time as children when he force fed poor Micah hazel nuts from the hazel trees that surrounded the property. The way James terrorized that boy, the woman would never forget it. Perhaps James was unaware at the time his youngest brother had such a life threatening allergy to the food. But at the back of her mind Esperanza always wondered if he secretly knew.

Either way, James was taken to the Lighthouse for his punishment. Esperanza guessed it must have been almost five full days before Hartley decided to remove him from the awful island. After that incident, Paisley and herself were sworn to secrecy about the condition of young Micah. They were forbidden from ever speaking of it again.

The common room, although on the lower levels of the manor, still had windows that lined the ceiling. Esperanza looked out of the nearest one and she felt her throat swell just thinking about that cursed place. It was a good two hour boat ride from the manor to the island where the lighthouse stood, but somehow the wind carried the screams of its captors all the way back to the property. Paisley and her were the ones to see to the children following their punishments. The boys never said a word but they always came back with deep lacerations that stunned the women into silence.

Esperanza had cried the first time Micah had been sent to the Lighthouse. He must have been three years old and Esperanza couldn't help but sob as she cleaned his wounds following his return. He was such a bright and pleasant child. Esperanza couldn't possibly imagine what must have been so horrible for a three year old prince to have done for Hartley to condemn him to that hellhole. The light flickered as Esperanza watched the Lighthouse from a distance and she shuddered.

More of the servants began trickling into the small cramped common room and Esperanza had moved herself to the opposite side of the room towards the crackling fireplace. Gruel lay steaming in a cauldron over the fire and she watched as the thin watery layer in the bowl began to sizzle and foam over the heavy black stone.

It was habit to speak in hushed voices within the castle walls and Esperanza watched as the women removed their uniforms to reveal their thinner robes that lay beneath. Esperanza kept quiet but she still kept her ear open to the gossip that circulated around the house. She had to. Master Micah expected her to relay all of this information straight back to him.

Most of it was useless gossip, the woman knew better than to speak of forbidden things around Esperanza. However the servants came from very particular villages around the regime. They wrote to their families and sent them money on a daily basis and oftentimes, they would complain about certain grievances within their villages or their overall attitudes towards the monarchy. This was the information she kept her ears open about and this was the information she relayed to the prince. Her own husband had passed away when Esperanza had been pregnant with their third child. On top of this, it was forbidden for a widow to remarry.

Nonetheless, Esperanza was not bothered by this law. She had loved her husband and the love that remained in her heart for him were to be spent on her children. Her loyalty to the monarchy was not unnoticed and all three of her children worked for various companies across the regime.

Although the old woman had worked hard to ensure her children would never have to question their tertiary citizenship, she worried about her youngest daughter.

Unlike her older two, Pénélope was raised without her father, and with Esperanza working far away from their village, the girl was shuffled from relative to relative all her life. She held a bitterness in her heart towards the old woman and no amount of money or apologies seemed to put her youngest daughter at ease. She had that fire in her eyes that unsettled Esperanza, the same fire she saw in that young pretty slave Prince Micah insisted on keeping.

Esperanza sighed again when she thought about the poor girl in the West Wing. The gossip about her around the manor was never ending and Esperanza felt nervous conveying the things they said about the girl to him. She was under no false illusion that Micah was unaware of this gossip. Either way he appeared stony faced whenever whispers of her crossed his path.

Esperanza had gotten to know the girl better over these last few months. The girl was young, still in her teens, and if it weren't for her long legs Esperanza would have guessed she was no more than sixteen. Esperanza had seen the way Prince Micah looked at her. It was the look her husband used to give her before he lay her down on the table and fucked her till she saw constellations forming from behind closed lids.

It was nothing more than lust.

She had wanted to explain this to him but her position restricted her. It was not in her place to understand or condone his recreational activities. However, now that he had placed the girl under her primary care, Esperanza's position was blurring the line between restriction and exemption.

There was no doubt the girl was beautiful. She was a "country beauty" as they called them back home. Only the country girls had that dark hair and those long legs. The country folk kept to themselves. She wondered how the girl managed to weasel her way into the world of the monarchy. She remembered how she'd found the girl, legs bent out, hair splayed out and head resting against the rooftops of the manor, as if some deity or higher form had dropped her from the sky into the materialistic world of human beings to seek repentance.

She was not a reared slave of the Lyon manor, this much was obvious. However, Esperanza was still suspicious of her. She brought these concerns to the prince the minute he decided to take her in. She mentioned to young Micah that the girl may have been sent by the rebels to spy, or that she may have been a runaway slave from a previous shipment. The prince was unperturbed by her grievances. Rather, he seemed quite excited by the turn of events...

As much as Esperanza's position demanded that she remain impassive and detached from her work, she had still grown a little towards the girl. She had an innocence to her the old woman hadn't seen since her young Pénélope was a little girl. She seemed lost, confused, yet still... hopeful.

It was an odd combination and Esperanza was drawn towards it. She had no doubt Prince Micah had taken a great deal of pleasure from this girl and as much as Esperanza doubted whether the pleasure was reciprocal, it was what it was. Men simply couldn't help themselves.

The girl had been reluctant to allow Esperanza to cleanse her the other night. She seemed embarrassed at her nudity, embarrassed that Esperanza knew what she and the prince had been up to. It was comical to the older woman and she found it refreshing. She was different from the girls the Lyons chose for their trading businesses. Those girls were trained to please

a man and they showed not the slightest bit of embarrassment at their nudity or their acts of pleasure.

Esperanza moved to her favourite chair in the corner of the common room and eased herself down. Her years of hard labour were catching up with her and she hated how much her bones ached these days. The warmth from the fire permeated through the room and she closed her eyes briefly enjoying the sensation of the heat on her skin.

Although Esperanza would never admit it, she worried for the fate of Prince Micah. It was a shock to the monarchy, to the people of the regime that night during the dreadful White Ball the Lyons hosted every year. There was something more to this, Esperanza knew that much.

Esperanza also knew the prince well. She knew him better than anyone in the castle, daresay, Esperanza believed she knew him better than his damn father. The prince was a master in the art of deception and he knew how to play the role his father laid out for him perfectly.

Too perfectly in Esperanza's opinion.

She sighed as she looked down at the newspaper on the table. It was from the previous morning and the front page was plastered with photos of the youngest prince. She sighed as she stared at his frowning face on the front page. The boy hated the media, hated being in the public eye. He was able to avoid it for so long, playing the part of the man behind the scenes. But His Grace had the final say -- he always did.

She had seen them the other night by mistake, on her final rounds in the upper levels of the manor. She was the only one with access to these levels and most of the time they were empty.

But that night, they had been there.

Prince Micah had been on his knees outside His Grace's corridors as Hartley stood over him. The boy looked wounded, his face wet, with tears or exertion Esperanza could not tell. Yet His Grace looked as he always did, regal, elegant, and utterly composed. Esperanza had fled the minute she saw them from across the hall and didn't stop running until she reached the kitchen quarters. She never interacted with His Grace directly.

Everything went through a hierarchy. Sir Hartley would never be caught dead looking or even remotely addressing an individual below tertiary status.

As she sat in her chair and enjoyed the heat of the fire, she replayed that scene in her mind over and over again. Her throat swelled when she thought about it.

Prince Micah had already delayed his coronation-- twice-- since the White Ball had taken place and the old woman knew he would have no other option. He would make the permanent move to The Fortress in the North and pursue his new position from there. Straight away he would be married to his bride and their armies and wealth would be merged together and contributed to the already prosperous Lyon Regime. His Grace had done the hard work setting up his son for the position. It was just a matter of Prince Micah carrying them through to completion.

She looked sadly at his photo in the paper.

“Another one happened last night!”

The harsh whisper lurched the older woman from her memories and she turned her head to the side towards the two women huddled in the corner of the low ceilinged room.

“How do you know?”

“My mother saw it. They were waving their flags on the street, shouting death threats at the King. It was a nightmare.”

Esperanza turned her head towards the two maids huddled in the corner. Their backs were facing her and they seemed to have forgotten that she was in the room.

“And what did the royal guard do?” the other girl whispered.

“They dispersed the protest as passively as they could...so they say.”

“And the prisoners?” the girl whispered back, her eyes wide. “What of them?”

The other girl turned around and her eyes widened when she saw Esperanza.

Esperanza watched as her face turned red and she quickly shuffled away and out of the room, her friend following on her friend's heels.

Esperanza had known the protests were happening more often, the fighting escalating to new heights. But she knew how the Lyons operated and they always managed to dissipate the tension in tactical ways.

They didn't like to use force -- they preferred to orchestrate plans with the purpose of manipulating their audience. She had listened to many speeches of Hartley over many years and she was aware of his ability to coerce a crowd into thinking one thing while in reality referring to something that was completely opposite.

He took advantage of the equivocation and inconsistencies within the English language. He threw terms around such as *Multifaceted Theories of Social and Economic Stratification* in full awareness that his audience lacked the knowledge to understand him. He toyed with them, and he did it with ease and grace everyday.

She shifted in her chair and she felt a sharp object press uncomfortably against her torso. She felt in her pocket for the disturbance and her face paled when her fingers met smooth brass. She took the ornate object and held it close to her face. The writing was so small it would seem like a chip in the metal at a first glance but Esperanza knew. How the girl managed to get her hands on the little key baffled the old woman. She brushed her fingers over the initials.

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Esperanza pushed herself up from her chair and shuffled forwards to the exit. She'd have an early morning tomorrow and finish her chores well before noon. The sooner she completed them, the more time she could spend with Micah's little pet. She had a lot to discuss with the girl...

"I never noticed those doors before."

Mollie stared in surprise as Micah drew the curtains that extended from the open balcony in his chambers to the opposite wall. He had a secretive smile on his face when Mollie admitted to this.

"That's because you're not as observant as you think you are Mollie."

Mollie frowned.

She certainly begged to differ. She believed she had been a pretty good sleuth since she had been forced into the manor.

It was dark outside and Mollie watched the rough ocean waters caress the rocky shore through the spacious balcony of Micah's chambers.

She had a week.

A week before the supplies ship would reach the isolated Lyon manor and a week for her nightmare to be over. She could board the ship and be free from all of this...

Mollie shivered as cold fingers inched their way up her skinny arms towards her face. She hadn't even heard him cross the room and make his way towards her. He had been hostile at first when she had approached him earlier that day. But he had become increasingly more pleasant in demeanour, his shoulders relaxed, his hair loose and tousled.

Mollie preferred him in these moments.

He had shown her that he did harbour a gentler side.

Mollie found parallels between the prince and the ocean that surrounded them. He had the ability to be so desperately passionate, so serene, and so genteel like the sandy shores of a coarse white sand beach.

Yet she had seen him at his most volatile, like the eye of a hurricane, he was equally as vicious, torrential and explosive. Mollie had remembered how he had put her pleasure before his that night at the cabin. But in her memory was also the time he had viciously taken her right in this very room as she screamed her apologies over and over.

"Always so deep in thought Mollie Mae."

The dark haired prince had smoothed his cool fingers over her thin arms and she winced as he passed his fingers over a particularly sensitive area of her arm.

“Still tender are we?” he murmured with a chuckle. “You’ll have to get used to monthly injections Mollie.”

He had begun to inch his hands further down her body so his fingers stretched across her flat stomach.

“We wouldn’t want to be the creators of illegitimate children of the monarchy. There’s enough running around as there is.”

Mollie perked up when she heard this.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

She had turned her head to the side so Micah’s bright green eyes burned into hers.

He had a smirk on his face that made Mollie’s blood boil.

“They work hard to keep this monarchy robust. They make up most of the royal staff you know.”

Mollie felt sick when she heard this. No wonder loyalty wasn’t something the Lyons were afraid of. They reared their own goddamn servants right on these grounds.

“You seem proud of yourself,” she sniffed. “How many of them did *you* father exactly?”

There was something in his eyes that hardened slightly but just as swiftly a smile broke across his face and he laughed.

He was laughing in her face and Mollie resisted the urge to kick him where it hurt most.

“Oh Mollie,” he said adoringly giving her a soft peck on the cheek from behind. “Wouldn’t *you* like to know.”

She squirmed as he pressed himself against her from behind.

“It has been done for centuries, don’t look so surprised.”

His blunt indifference frightened her and the more he told her, the more ill she felt.

“My late uncle must have fathered hundreds before he passed. The boys join the navy, the women join the staff. They are neither corrupted or influenced by the public and they are given everything they desire. What more could they ask for?”

Logan Lyon seemed exactly the type to have indulged in unprotected sex with many women. Mollie always found it odd, despite his wealth, status, and handsome looks he could never keep a woman. Maybe it was simply that the women themselves couldn’t stand to keep *him*.

Micah’s hands had slid upwards towards Mollie’s chest and though she yearned to peel those long pale fingers away from her, she let him do as he pleased. He was opening up...finally... and Mollie had to play the game. This time she wouldn’t fail.

“So you grew up with a lot of half siblings I’m assuming?” Mollie asked breathily as the prince slid his fingers underneath her pretty silk dress. She was itching to keep him talking. She bit her lip hard as his fingers circled around her flat stomach, cool wintry skin caressing her blazing one.

“Perhaps,” he murmured sending a trail of wet kisses down her neck. “There’s too many of them to truly differentiate between those who are blood-related and those who aren’t.”

“You never bothered to find out?” Mollie pressed as Micah fisted his fingers in her thick hair. Mollie could feel him smiling against her neck as his nose grazed her cheek.

“No. I had plenty of other... more pressing matters to occupy my time with growing up.”

His fingers felt soothing against her flat belly and although she was waiting for them to venture lower he kept things fairly chaste. Mollie was annoyed at the wall Micah kept putting up between them. Hadn’t he toyed with her long enough? Why did he still feel the need to remain so elusive with her?

“I wish you’d tell me more about yourself,” Mollie murmured as Micah pressed his lips to her bare shoulder. He paused after she said this and Mollie felt his breath halt against her shoulder.

She tensed waiting for him to snap at her but he didn’t. Instead he turned her around to him slowly so that she was facing him. She had to tilt her head up slightly to look him in the eyes and she shivered at the blankness within them.

Mollie didn’t like the frown that lined his features and her eyes nervously wandered as he stared her down. She couldn’t deduce what emotions were pulsing through him at that moment. For all she knew he could decide to remove the dagger from his belt pocket and slice a limb right then and there.

“I don’t like visiting the past Mollie,” he said slowly taking a lock of her hair and twirling it between his long fingers. “It takes away from planning for the future-- from living in the present.”

Mollie hesitated as he pulled her even closer to him. She could sense from his sombre demeanour that something in his past had weighed him down heavily. Whatever the prince had been through was something he struggled with. He dismissed it rather than addressed it and for once she saw someone else apart from that cold, austere prince she was accustomed to. She saw someone who carried with them a childhood of darkness, a man robbed of the simple things in life. Mollie knew how it felt to swallow painful memories. She knew how it felt to cling to the few moments of happiness one has experienced amongst a lifetime of sorrow.

She was so close to him now that she could feel his cool breath against her parted lips. Instead of looking into his eyes and seeing a spiral haze of confusing foliage, she saw flashes of her home, her real home. The green forests of Riverton and the lush fields of wet healthy farmland.

The prince lay a finger against her cheek, and against her better judgment the girl pushed herself up and pressed her lips against his. The motion took him by surprise and Mollie could feel his arms tighten around her as he deepened the kiss. The moonlight shone through the open balcony and the events of their somewhat peaceful evening pulsated through Mollie's mind. Mollie had wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled free the silk ascot he had so skilfully tied around it. It reminded her of his father and she preferred him in his most simple attire. He lifted her up and immediately she wrapped her long legs around his defined hips. She moaned as he reached beneath her legs to pull her underwear free and toss it to the cold floor.

"I missed you," he purred against her ear as he trailed his tongue back towards her mouth. "Distance certainly makes the lust grow fonder."

Mollie gasped as he gently laid her on the bed and in one fluid motion ripped the silky dress she wore in half. The cold assaulted her blazing skin and she whimpered as Micah freed himself from his clothes and rested his cool naked body against her own.

There was a certain part of her, way back in the deep recesses of Mollie's mind that condemned her behaviour. She was no harlot, yet here she was...throwing herself at the prince -- *lusting* over him because for the first time since her arrival at the manor, she realized Micah did have aspects to him that proved he was as human as her.

She hated herself for it.

She wanted to scream at the id in her conscience that succumbed to her own lust as Micah kissed his way towards the apex of her thighs.

She hated how a small part of her enjoyed that he put her pleasure before his.

She despised how her body moulded to his like a lock fitting a key.

She was weak like her mother always told her she was. Her actions proved that.

The prince certainly had a way with his tongue and she groaned as he sucked, kissed and nipped at the most sensitive area of her body. He continued his tantalizing motions until she was a quivering mess on the thick duvet of his bed and the climax she felt sent her head pounding and her limbs flailing.

"Ah Mollie," he whispered as he kissed his way from her thighs to her throat. "Your body simply craves my touch...I can see it-- I can *feel* it."

Mollie panted against his neck as his icy fingertips squeezed at her nipples and she brought her fingers against his cool pale back. In her climax filled haze she grazed her fingertips against his flesh and in her ear she heard a sharp gasp of pain.

Mollie eyes flashed open and she recoiled against the headboard, her head hitting solid wood. She had felt it before she had seen it -- a deep crevice amongst what was supposed to be cool smooth flesh. She stared at him questioningly as he pushed himself up from the thick duvet.

“Your-Your back,” she whispered, shocked.

Mollie caught a glimpse of the ravaged flesh as he pushed himself upright obscuring her view. It looked worse than before.

“Don’t worry about it Mollie,” he said with a tone of irritation as he reached for her once again.

“Don’t worry about it?” She repeated in awe as she pushed his hand away. “You’re bleeding!”

She saw the blood on her fingers and she hesitated as he frowned at her.

“Who *did* this to you?” she questioned.

He didn’t answer at first and Mollie watched as he carefully brushed his tousled waves backwards.

“Micah?” she whispered leaning in closer. His eyes flashed to hers and for a moment Mollie felt a foreign and inexplicable compulsion towards him. She wasn’t sure what this feeling was? Concern? An evolutionary maternal instinct? Natural curiosity?

Micah reached for his white dress shirt that lay on the floor with the rest of their discarded clothes and carefully pushed his arms through the fabric. He regarded her coldly and she felt a creeping darkness settle over the room.

Mollie only realized her mistake after she committed it and she bit her lip. She wasn’t supposed to refer to him by his name directly. She wondered if he was about to punish her for addressing him so brazenly without a title but he didn’t. Instead he leaned over her and grabbed her wrists firmly in his grasp. She protested immediately but quieted when he brought them towards the red, inflamed skin on his back.

The fabric of his dress shirt concealed the bruises from her eyes but she could feel everything as she knelt in front of the dark haired man on the bed. She sat frozen and trembling as he forced her fingertips to feel every scar, bruise, and laceration that lined his pale skin. Her fingers ghosted over scars that were permanently etched into his skin and others that felt sickeningly fresh.

“Battle scars Mollie,” he whispered as he finally dropped her hands back in her lap. His lips were curled in a half smile but Mollie could tell he was doing what he did best: dismissing what Mollie was beginning to realize were the dark more sinister aspects to the cold and privileged prince of Questershire manor.

Mollie swallowed uneasily.

“Now I know why you’re always wearing a cloak,” she managed through dry lips.

Micah had stood up from the bed and walked towards the window, his back to her. The cool breeze was refreshing in the heated room.

Mollie could see the outline of his scars beneath the thin fabric and she trembled. What could possibly drive someone to mutilate someone in such a horrid way? She had no doubt his awful father had something to do with it and the hatred she had for the man intensified.

Micah was quiet for some time and Mollie watched him from her position on the bed. She watched him as he turned his head slightly and listened as his husky voice permeated through the room.

“If we truly have autonomy over our lives...how come we lack the ability to choose the families we are born into?”

Mollie was caught off guard by his question and she opened her mouth in surprise as he faced her, his green eyes glistening.

He smiled after this and his gaze drifted back to the balcony. The smile didn't reach his eyes.

“Some things are beyond our control I suppose,” Mollie said quietly shifting uncomfortably on the bed. “I used to ask myself the same question every day,” she murmured bringing the bedsheet across her naked chest.

Micah laughed humourlessly at her response. “See there,” he said suddenly turning towards her. “That's where you're wrong.”

She watched as he approached her again, his weight on the bed pressed her forward and she fumbled in surprise as he reached for her chin.

“It's not a matter of choice, it never was.” His voice wavered ever so slightly and Mollie could feel the emotion pulsating through him. It put her on edge.

It's a matter of purpose,” he whispered. “We serve a purpose in the families we are born into, and that's where our control manifests from. What we do with it...that's in our hands.”

His words sounded recited and Mollie had sworn she'd heard something along those lines before. In fact, she was *positive she'd heard it before*.

“Spoken just like your father,” she whispered back matching his intense gaze.

Mollie watched the liquidity in his eyes freeze solid and she felt chills erupt down her spine as his frown slowly turned into a predatory knowing smile.

“Uncanny isn't it?” he breathed, his breath fanning Mollie's face. “How much you resemble those you despise.”

Mollie could feel the strain in his voice and she pushed herself closer to him so that their noses touched.

“He did this to you didn't he,” she murmured her lips almost touching his.

He brought his hand forward and clutched the sheet Mollie was holding tight against her chest and pulled it downwards so her breasts were bared to the slowly chilling room.

“You’re going to have to be more specific fawn,” he whispered. His fingers ghosted across her nipple and he squeezed the sensitive flesh between his thumb and forefinger. Mollie gasped at the sensation as her tender flesh turned red between the soft pads of his fingers.

“Your father gave you those scars,” she breathed as his tongue swiped her chapped lips.

She gasped in pain as he pulled hard on her swollen nub, the pain overtaking the pleasure for a brief moment.

“For all intensive purposes, I refer to him as my father,” he murmured pressing his lips against hers briefly. “But in reality, he’s simply a man who aided in the process of giving me life.”

Mollie moaned as he rolled her stiff nub between his fingers and brought his nose between her small breasts.

She was struggling to keep the conversation going as Micah teased every nub and crevice of her body that his fingers could find.

"What do you mean?" She gasped as he moved his hand to the other breast. He chuckled lowly at her question.

"Assisting in the sacred act of creating life doesn't make you a father Mollie. It just makes you a man. Fathers raise their children. Men procreate. There's a difference."

“I never met my father,” she managed between her breathy gasps. She was desperate to keep him talking but she could feel his arousal against her thigh...and she knew it was only a matter of time before he acted on these imminent urges.

Mollie breathed deeply as he laid her down on the soft bed, his head pressed between her breasts as she tried to control her breathing. His thick hair tickled her chin.

His voice was muffled from beneath her but she could hear him clear enough.

“I never met my mother,” he said tonelessly. He had teased her nipples to the point of numbness and she simply groaned as he shifted on her chest to make eye contact. “Maybe things would have been different if I had.”

Mollie watched his movements as he brushed kisses against her belly and she felt her emotions surge inside of her. Gingerly she placed her hands on his chest and inched her way outwards to peel his shirt from his body. Mollie heard him groan as she spread her fingers against his back...

When Micah finally pushed his thick member through her slick walls, she didn’t feel the remnants of pain like she usually did. She felt a deep satisfaction. As if she had been starving for days and was now the guest of honour at a feast.

His lovemaking was passionate yet gentle and Mollie felt every vein and muscle of his organ against her pulsating walls. Their time apart seemed to have affected the prince and he spent

less time than usual on the foreplay, jumping straight into his eagerness for their intimate connection.

Mollie felt him roll to her side after he emptied himself within her, his thick creamy load filling her to the brim. The mixture of their juices seeped down her thighs and she trembled as he inched his way toward her, his strong arms engulfing her from behind.

It took some time before Mollie could catch her breath and ignore the uncomfortable feeling of cold semen dripping down her thighs. As she attempted to close her eyes she heard a soft whisper from behind her.

Micah's voice was low and husky as he pressed his lips to Mollie's ear. Mollie wasn't sure if he was aware that she was still awake but nevertheless he spoke.

"This was never one of my desires Mollie," his voice was so low and so quiet she had to halt her breathing to hear him over the sounds of the waves from outside. "I never wanted to lead this monarchy...this life. I never wanted...this....any of this."

His voice was conflicted...scared...hesitant. Every quality the prince wasn't.

Mollie was paralyzed against him as she listened to his ragged breathing finally slow down into deep consecutive breaths.

Mollie's eyes dropped to the floor and she stared at the glinting dagger in the moonlight that lay discarded with the rest of Micah's clothes. She could so easily take her chances – grab the knife and stab the prince in the chest just as she imagined doing all those months ago when Micah held her captive in the underground lair of the manor. Maybe she would have done it had it been any other night but this night.

Yet she remained in his grasp, his soft exhales against the back of her neck as he held her against him. Mollie lost track of how long she lay within the prince's embrace, her eyes locked on the dagger in front of her as she grappled with her swirling emotions.

The emotions that consumed her were frightening and Mollie knew she'd be full of regrets by the time the morning came around. She just hoped the clarity she so desperately craved would transpire by the time it finally arrived.

Mollie awoke from her slumber the next morning feeling deliciously relaxed.

The tension that usually swamped her sore muscles was nowhere to be felt. The only part of her body that felt tender to the touch was the bare cleft between her legs. She pushed herself up from the bed when she remembered what had happened and dropped her head into her hands.

"God damn it Mollie," she cried out as she bunched her thick hair in her fists.

She was supposed to tease him a little, extract information from him. But her poor lust-deprived self had selfishly taken pleasure from Micah's advances. He was so different last

night. So delicate...and broken at the same time. He had been so willing to engage her, so talented with his tongue --and his caresses against her body...

She jumped when the door to the room opened.

Micah was dressed quite formally in a dark waistcoat and his favourite midnight blue cloak. It must have been close to 7 in the morning and already he had meetings to attend to. He shot Mollie a secretive smile as he closed the door behind him. He seemed a little *too pleased with himself*.

“Good Morning *ma choupinette*,” he said airily removing the cloak that surrounded him.

Mollie watched him silently as he walked across the room to hang his beloved cloak in his mahogany wardrobe and proceeded to pull a sharp object from his belt pocket. Mollie watched the silver pocketwatch he carried around with him bounce against his torso and she felt dread fill her stomach when she realized he had removed his dagger. Fresh blood stained the metal and she watched as he carefully placed it on his dresser. Mollie had an inkling the meeting did not go as pleasantly for others that were in attendance. She shivered just thinking of it.

She eyed the dagger he placed on the table and watched him make his way to the white washed en suite on the opposite end of the room.

“I’m in meetings all day today Mollie,” called out, his voice echoing off the tiled walls.

Mollie couldn’t see him from around the corner but she had no doubt he somehow had a way of watching her even from his position. The tap was running and she figured he was washing something...his hands maybe?

“I won’t be able to see you till much later tonight. Perhaps we can have a late dinner if you are up for it?”

Mollie swallowed uneasily from the large bed. She was watching the blood drip down the thin metal of the blade and accumulate on the marble tabletop.

He appeared suddenly at the entrance to the en suite. He leaned across the door frame and met her gaze as he slipped pale hands into his dark velvet lined gloves.

“Or maybe I’ll take you somewhere more remote. A break from these walls may be nice. I have to travel to town tomorrow anyways. Father is addressing the public, and he expects all of us to be present.”

Mollie nodded as he fixed his blank stare on her.

“I’d like that. I’d like that very much.”

He smiled at her, his dimples deepening as he crossed the room in short strides and planted a kiss on her cheek.

“Whatever Mollie likes, Mollie gets,” he whispered swiping a cold finger against her heated cheek.

She watched as he elegantly crossed the room and cleaned the blood from his dagger before returning it to its rightful position. With a quick wink in her direction he left the room, the door closing with a sharp snap.

When his footsteps faded Mollie buried her face in the pillows and cried as shame, guilt, and disgust wrenched through her quivering body.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize about the huge delay in updating. This whole pandemic has been hard for me to deal with especially with so much family scattered around the globe. I hope you're all hanging in there and thank you for understanding. Merci beaucoup xx

Chapter 23: Vanadium

Chapter Summary

Plot. Plot. And more plot this chapter!

Chapter Notes

The playlist is complete! There were so many suggestions..so many. I was so floored by the reception, you guys are unreal. I had so much fun listening to all of the submissions. So many of them made me cry and so many were SO accurate. Love you guys xx

<https://zella-11.tumblr.com/post/615448691369721856/its-finally-out-thank-you-to-everyone-who-gave>

The Lyon Family Tree. Will come in handy dandy for this chapter and subsequent ones.

<https://zella-11.tumblr.com/post/615448389331648512>

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The morning passed in a blur and afternoon seemed to set in only minutes after.

Mollie found herself in the parlour once again, sitting at a table by herself. Her reflection stared back at her through the immaculate glass windows of the parlour, the large windows making her feel more inferior than she already felt.

The tables were lined with lavish food and freshly baked goods Mollie could only dream of serving in her bakery. She missed the feeling of fresh dough between her soft knuckles, the feel of a smooth wooden rolling pin between her fingers.

She missed home.

She used to imagine when she was younger about buying one of the many cakes that lined the table in front of her. Just a small morsel. What it would feel like to taste something so expensive. Now that she had six in front of her, she couldn't even bring herself to try one.

Instead she stared out the glass pane windows of the Questershire manor. There was an island in the distance, like a white speck amongst the dark blue sky with a single flashing light. She wondered what it was....

“Mollie?”

Mollie whipped her head around to the door when she heard that voice. Esperanza stood in front of her, her expression stern and her hands crossed. The woman rarely called her by her first name and it had taken the young girl by surprise.

“Esperanza,” she said quickly standing up. She hadn’t seen the old woman since yesterday and she felt guilty. That was the second time she had left the woman waiting for her, only for Mollie not to return.

Mollie watched her eyes scan Mollie’s empty plate and the plethora of food that lined the table.

“Have you eaten?” she asked eyeing the girls plate.

Mollie nodded. She hadn’t eaten much. Her stomach was too uneasy for her to truly indulge.

“Come with me.”

Mollie cringed at the womans tone and she quickly shuffled behind her. They had gotten off to a rocky start but Mollie had taken a liking to her. She respected her and Mollie was attracted to the genuine maternal nature of her.

The woman led Mollie down a flight of stairs she had never been down before. It wasn’t marble like the rest of the manor. It was dark and rickety and hidden behind bookcases at the entrance to the library.

Concealed like most things in this place.

There was a man standing by the staircase and Mollie felt her hands sweat when she saw his expression. He was a tall, older man with grey tinged hair cropped short and large coal black eyes. He had a scar that ran from his forehead down his eye and across his cheek to finally connect with the edge of his pursed lips. His features alone were menacing and Mollie immediately felt on edge when she noticed him. His stature seemed familiar to Mollie and she swore she had seen him somewhere before. Perhaps at the white ball?

His expression was solemn as he stood against the wall in his royal uniform. When he locked eyes with Mollie, the look he gave her was one of such raw overt hatred Mollie recoiled in shock. She ran to keep up with the older woman and felt her heart surge to her throat.

No one had ever looked at her with such malice -- such contempt like that before. Ever.

Although she had quickly passed him on her way down she could still feel his menacing stare burning a hole through her back as she stumbled through the dark narrow hallway.

Mollie was on edge now as she glanced around her nervously. Servants in uniform stopped in their tracks to stare at her and many of them did little to hide their surprise. She must have been the talk of the underground as whispers surrounded her unabashedly. They were mostly females down here and the majority of them were rather short. Mollie towered over them as she stumbled beneath the low ceilinged servants quarters.

Esperanza led her to a small but comfy room with a plush velvet settee on either side of a simple wooden table. She closed the door tightly behind her and quickly shuffled forwards to close the blinds that looked out into the gardens of the manor.

Mollie had never seen the woman move that quickly and she noticed how tense Esperanza seemed. Mollie regarded her closely from her trembling hands, to her dusty shawl, to the loose strands framing her face.

“Are you alright Esperanza?” she asked nervously glancing around her. The closed blinds bathed the room in darkness and Mollie watched as the woman ushered her down and slid herself into the soft settee across from Mollie.

The woman stared at Mollie for quite some time, long enough for Mollie to blush and look away. She was a little tired of people looking at her like she was some sort of alien from another planet.

The woman leaned over suddenly and brought a small familiar object towards Mollie’s face.

“Where did you get this?”

Mollie felt her hands immediately begin to sweat as she stared at the small key in the old woman’s withered palm. She had let it drop into a small crevice on the stone balcony in Micah Lyon’s chamber. The woman must have found it while picking up Mollie’s clothes the morning after.

Mollie swallowed the lump in her throat.

“Don’t you dare lie to me child,” she said crisply, her voice giving the crackling fire a run for its money.

Mollie sighed. She was used to hostile confrontations. She could handle this.

“I found it,” she said slowly folding her hands on her lap.

Esperanza placed her fingers on her temples and rubbed slowly. It was the same thing her mother used to do after having one of her fits.

“Where did you find this Mollie?” she said quietly closing her dark eyes.

Mollie shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“What’s this even about Esperanza?” she said harshly. “It’s just a stupid key.”

In reality, Mollie’s heart was racing. Her honesty could be the demise of her at this moment in time.

“Do you know who this belongs to Mollie?”

Mollie shook her head in confusion. She feigned oblivion though she had a faint idea of its origins. She assumed it belonged to the woman in the portrait in Hartley’s chambers. The one

with the dark blonde hair. Mollie suspected she was his mistress but she couldn't be sure. There was something elegant and regal about the key, something too expensive and intimate to give to just anybody. However she couldn't share her knowledge with the woman.

"This was the key to Izabel Lyon's locket," she said coldly narrowing her eyes at Mollie. Mollie looked up at her bewildered.

"How you came by it is irrelevant at this point," the older woman said with a sigh. "But this has been missing for years. How it came to be in your possession is beyond me."

"Hartley's sisters locket?" Mollie questioned with a raised eyebrow. She was convinced the key belonged to a lover, not a family member.

Esperanza nodded.

"He had given it to her when she was a child. They were close. She was wearing it the day she passed..."

Esperanza stopped short when she said this and a long foreboding silence followed.

"I believed it to be buried with the body but I suppose this manor certainly has its fair share of secrets."

Mollie watched the woman closely. Her skin seemed to have gone paler and Mollie noticed a thin line of perspiration lined her withered forehead. Something had jogged the woman's memory and she seemed ill. It was way too cold down here to attribute her sweat to the heat of the fireplace.

"What really happened to her Esperanza?" Mollie asked leaning in closer to the woman. "Is she really dead?"

Esperanza narrowed her eyes at Mollie.

"Of course she's dead," she snapped. She had taken out her handkerchief to dab at the sweat around her forehead. "I saw the blood that lined the floors upstairs in that ballroom."

Mollie bit her lip. There was still something the woman was not telling her.

"When did she die?" Mollie asked picking at a rip in the velvet fabric of the chair.

Mollie felt bad for taking advantage of the woman in her vulnerable situation. But her curiosity was too much to subdue. She was invested in the history and she wanted --needed to know more.

Esperanza was visibly shaking at this point as she hastily brushed her thin greying hair back away from her face.

"There was so much death that day," she continued, her voice shaking. "The war had ended, Atem was sentenced, Hartley came to power, the youngest prince was born, Izabel passed..." She sniffled and dabbed the now soaked handkerchief at the corners of her eyes.

Mollie waited patiently as the woman folded and refolded the fabric in her hands, her fingers shaking with unease. But Mollie was getting impatient and she resisted the primal urge to snatch that ragged handkerchief from her face.

“And then?” Mollie whispered leaning even closer.

“Well,” Esperanza started. “Porphyria died giving birth the same day too. It was quite shocking. There were so many bodies to bury, so many new successors into positions of power.”

“Wait,” Mollie interjected. “Porphyria died on the same day?”

Esperanza nodded casting her eyes downwards at the floor.

“Does that not strike you as odd?” Mollie continued, her mind racing. “Atem being imprisoned, Izabel dying, Porphyria dying, Hartley becoming the new leader...” Mollie didn’t mention that this was all conveniently before the new year began.

Esperanza stared at her silently.

“What happened to Atem’s wife?” Mollie asked biting her lip. “Did she mysteriously die too?”

“No of course not.” Esperanza sighed in exasperation. “Princess Isla lives in the West with their daughter. Please now child, don’t go digging into the secrets of this manor. You’ll only find yourself more riddled and confused.”

“It’s a little late for that,” Mollie thought bleakly as the old woman pushed herself to her feet.

She heard Esperanza sigh and grasp around for her master key. Mollie watched as the old woman stowed the ring of keys in her front pocket. There must have been at least thirty keys on that single ring and Mollie wondered what other secrets doors of the manor they would open.

“That day marked the end of one era and the beginning of another.”

Mollie snapped her focus back to Esperanza who had made her way to the little door in the heated room. “That was the end of our late queen,” the old woman murmured wiping the last remnant of tears from her dark eyes. “She was a strong woman and her contributions to this monarchy are unmatched to this day.”

“Was Porphyria’s marriage arranged?” Mollie asked quietly.

She couldn’t help but remember the condescending blonde she had met at the White ball that awful night. Mollie found it strange how the monarchy “arranged” marriages. If Micah ended up with that girl Mollie really didn’t know which person to feel more sorry for.

“Of course dear,” Esperanza muttered. “All marriages of the monarchy are. In fact, Porphyria was handpicked for Hartley to marry by his own grandfather,” she chuckled for a moment

recalling a memory. "Even superseded Hartley's father's choice. That was no easy feat. King Malcolm had quite the temper."

"And Hartley? What did he say?"

"Sir Hartley to you child," she said sternly crossing her arms.

Mollie resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

"He could say nothing I suppose. His grandfather was King and had the final say..." Esperanza paused for a brief moment, as if contemplating whether she wanted to share her thoughts. Mollie could see the hesitation on her face and she seized the opportunity

"And what of their relationship?" Mollie breathed, prompting the woman forward with her unwavering interest.

"Well..." Esperanza started, her face clearly conflicted. "I believe the relationship between Hartley and Porphyria was certainly more business related than anything..." she hesitated again after this but gradually found her composure. "But I suppose you culminate a certain layer of affection after a period of time together."

Mollie had her doubts about that.

Affection and Hartley did not fit into the same sentence. In fact, she was convinced Hartley had been infatuated with another woman long before Porphyria even came into the picture. It was that beautiful dark blonde haired girl with the light eyes. The "mistress" as Mollie had opted to call her. Why else would he keep a portrait of her in his chambers and not of his late wife?

Mollie shifted uncomfortably. Dead people couldn't tell their side of the story but she had a feeling the relationship between Hartley and Porphyria was not one culminated even the slightest bit by love or genuine affection.

Mollie had remembered what Micah had told her about his late mother. It hadn't been much but he had said that she was not buried on these grounds.

"They never buried her here though," Mollie murmured watching Esperanza attempt to make her self presentable once again.

"No," the older woman sighed. "And what a shame that was too, she would have wanted to be buried next to her child."

Esperanza stopped dead when she realized what she had said and Mollie froze when she heard this.

Mollie heard the woman's breath stop short and Mollie swallowed the lump in her throat that had formed before she responded.

"There was another Lyon?" she murmured inching her fingers into the ripping fabric of the settee.

Esperanza was frozen solid, the look of surprise etched onto her withering features.

"But that's impossible," Mollie muttered standing up. "There was only ever Hartley's three sons. That's universal knowledge!"

"Hush Mollie," Esperanza snapped. She looked around her rather alarmingly and quickly flitted across the room to douse the crackling fire.

"I've said too much. I've said too much."

The woman was cursing herself as she flitted to and fro in the small cramped space.

Mollie was stunned. This must have been some grand coverup the monarchy orchestrated. Why they decided to hide this from the rest of the public was still a mystery to her.

"What happened to the child?" Mollie asked pushing herself up from the soft velvet of the chair.

"I should take you back to your quarters," Esperanza murmured as if in a trance.

"Wait Esperanza," Mollie called out as the woman held the door open for Mollie to exit. The woman was shuffling backwards and forwards, her face etched permanently in a look of terror as she looked wildly around her. Her paranoia was unnecessarily hyperbolic and Mollie had enough. Unbeknownst to the old woman, Mollie had grown up with a crazy woman her entire life and she was somewhat familiar with their break downs. She was unperturbed by Esperanza's act. It was simply a distraction, something to prevent Mollie from digging deeper into the root of a problem, or in this case a secret Esperanza had evidently been harbouring for years. The old woman was good, her theatrics on point, but her distraction wouldn't work on Mollie.

"Just *tell* me!" she burst out, her voice echoing around the room. The woman went still and Mollie stared her down. "I have nothing to gain from telling anyone anything," she said sharply, struggling to lower her pitch. "I'm just as much a prisoner here as you are!" She sighed and collapsed back into the sinking seat across from Esperanza. "Can't you see that?"

For a long time, Mollie thought the woman would ignore her, drag her out...change the subject maybe. But Mollie knew what secrets did to people. Especially ones that you take the grave. They pick at you, like a parasite beneath the skin, inching closer and closer to the surface...till they eventually break the skin, and Esperanza had certainly broken hers.

"There...there were two Lyons born the night of December 31st," she said quietly. "A boy and a girl."

Mollie sat as still as possible as she soaked in every word coming from Esperanza's lips.

"Both infants...they had breathing problems," Esperanza paused for her moment, her gaze turned towards the windows near the ceiling where rock and foggy air clouded most of the view. "There was only one ventilator."

Mollie held her head in her hands when she heard this. Esperanza didn't have to say it. She already knew how this stuff worked. She was aware of society's warped mentality, the harsh prejudices that existed, the vast gender disparities that seemed most overt in lower class communities but was really more prevalent amongst the rich. It was of no great miracle that Micah was the one to receive the ventilator. After all, sons were the ones to carry the family name. Sons brought honour to the family. Sons ruled a kingdom. That's how it was. That's how it was supposed to be.

Mollie felt bitter. Her enmity for the Lyons had heightened but her tenderness for those they had killed certainly had too. She felt for the little girl. Mollie knew from the moment she was born, she had everything against her. Like most girls in this regime, this little girl wasn't given the same chance as her male counterpart for reasons that were simply beyond her control.

Control. Something Micah had his own thoughts about.

"We serve a purpose in the families we are born into, and that's where our control manifests from. What we do with it...that's in our hands."

Perhaps it was her purpose to die so early. Micah would certainly believe so.

The woman had opened up, finally. But Mollie was still curious. She wasn't yet satisfied.

"There's still one thing I don't understand," Mollie hesitated, watching the old woman's reaction closely. "How could there only be one ventilator? I mean surely -,"

"No more questions Mollie."

The severity in her tone said it all and Mollie bit her lip and averted her gaze.

"I should return you to Master Lyon," Esperanza said quietly turning towards the door. The tone of finality ran through her voice and Mollie kept quiet.

Before she could exit Esperanza lay a calloused hand on her soft wrist.

"And for the love of god, keep your conversations of the monarchy to this room and this room only...for both our sakes."

Mollie's mind was buzzing as she waited for Micah to return. Esperanza had left her at the entrance to the gardens where she had requested to wait for the prince.

She hated being inside that dark empty mansion and she would take any opportunity necessary to be rid of it. She had six days. Six days until she'd be free. She'd see Phoebe again, her colleagues...her mother. Mollie shivered when she thought about it. That is if any of them were still alive.

Mollie's laced boots crunched against the frosted grass as she walked past familiar marble statues. Something in her heart told her that her friend was okay. As long as she did all she

could do here... they wouldn't harm Phoebe....right? Mollie chewed on her lip as she thought about various scenarios in her mind.

She thought about the look that would be on Caleb's face when she arrived back in Charterly. Another girl, another loss, another failed mission. He would be furious but Mollie could take that. At least she'd be far away from this dreadful place.

Winter was setting in and Mollie felt her heart constrict in fear.

She hated winter.

Even back home. She wouldn't have the same luxuries of spending her time outdoors like she did now. She could see her breath form and fade in the chilly air as she walked slightly deeper into the dense vegetation around her.

Mollie was lost in a whirlpool of thoughts and emotions, her mind filled with the images of a green eyed infant. She thought about Izabel Lyon, her locket, the key. There was something about that locket. Something important enough for Hartley to keep for all these years and something that reduced the usually composed Esperanza into a trembling mess. Hartley was no sentimental person. He wouldn't keep the locket out of love, he was keeping it for a reason...a purpose.

Mollie felt her way around the shrubs and vines that surrounded her, her feet guiding her long before her mind could process where they were leading her.

As she turned the corner she came to a familiar sculpture, one isolated from the rest of the Elgin marbles that speckled the manor garden.

The fresh scent of peonies still saturated her senses despite the cold weather and Mollie inched forward till she was inches away from the beautiful creation.

"Could it be?" Mollie muttered as she pressed herself closer to the sculpture.

As carefully as she could manage, Mollie hoisted herself up onto the elevated platform so her eyes met the swan like neck of the marble encased sculpture. Izabel Lyon's statue stood tall and regal in the middle of the gardens, her presence still so apparent, years after her death. Mollie traced her features, the sharp jawline, the thick flowing locks designated by slabs and slabs of intricately carved marble. Mollie tried to picture her in colour. She wondered if she had those same dark eyes as Hartley, was she blonde? Brunette? Even in statue form her features were utterly sublime, from the full lips to the rounded cheeks and large innocent eyes. Mollie drew her eyes lower and she felt a tremor go down her spine. As predicted, she saw the faint outline of a delicate necklace against the throat of the statue. Mollie ghosted her fingers over it, feeling every outline and crevice of the cold stone. Mollie felt a sharp indent beneath the locket, a perfect place to insert something --something very much like a key.

There was a whisper to the wind, something swift and piercing that echoed through the air and Mollie felt her breath cut short as the sound began to intensify. Mollie froze as the whistling turned into panting and the panting turned into pounding. Something was lurking

within the high walls of the seemingly serene gardens and Mollie felt her stomach drop when the leaves began to shake and the water in the fountain began to ripple.

Mollie turned herself around and huddled beneath the smiling form of the marble statue as the wind whistled past her hair and the thudding became the only thing in her auditory vicinity. As she closed her eyes and dropped her head into her knees something so big and so powerful pounded against her and Mollie found herself screaming as she tumbled to the ground.

To catch her fall she had thrown her hands out and immediately she felt something sharp and prickly pierce her skin. She had fallen into one of the many rose bushes lining the garden and her palms had pierced the stems of the blood red flowers.

She grunted as something heavy once again pushed her forward so her hands pressed deeper into the thick thorns of the bushes. The weight of what had made contact with her was double Mollie's body weight and she struggled to bring herself to her knees.

Mollie gasped air into her lungs and turned herself around as quickly as possible. As she scrambled backwards, the largest most menacing animal she had ever seen snapped at her, its teeth bared and its yellow eyes glowing with ferocity.

Mollie couldn't find her voice as she swung her wrist to the side to keep the animal from snapping at her exposed flesh.

The creature barked and snarled as she inched as far back as she dared, ignoring the blood dripping from her palms. The animal seemed distracted by the blood as it lifted its snout into the air and violently shook its thick dark brown fur so droplets of water sprayed Mollie. This was another one of the Lyon's beasts... but this was not the same silvery one that belonged to Micah. This one was dark and fierce with a cunning glint in its eye.

"Paris?"

A voice called out in the distance. Mollie vaguely registered it but she was too distracted by the beast pacing in front of her.

"Paris, viens ici maintenant, qu'avez vous trouvé?"

The animal turned its head at the sound and that's all the time Mollie needed.

She took off in the direction she came as she heard the creature snarl behind her. She didn't look back. She didn't dare to. She ran as fast as she could ignoring the burn in her throat and the pain in her legs. As she rounded the corner she hit something hard and solid and fell to the ground for the second time that day.

"Mollie?"

The voice was sharp and recognizable and Mollie scrambled up before strong pale hands helped her to her feet.

The sharp angled features of Rowan Lyon came into view alongside an equally tall gentleman. Mollie immediately recognized the man from his side profile. He had been at the Lyon dinner table. He had been arguing with Logan Lyon about something all those nights ago.

Mollie remembered the argument getting rather heated.

Before Mollie could respond, the beast that had been the height of her problems emerged from the gardens. Mollie watched it silently as it scampered past her without a second thought to lovingly brush against Rowan Lyon's leg, calm and completely submissive.

Rowan's lips were pursed in disapproval and Mollie matched the chilly stare coming from the man beside him.

"If you'll excuse me Mr. Raiden, I have some other...rather abrupt matters to attend to."

The man nodded once and regarded Mollie with an air of disgust before stiffly turning around and heading in the direction of the manor.

Rowan carefully smoothed his chocolate brown coat down before placing his gloved hands on Mollie's shoulders.

"You've just interrupted a very important client of mine Miss Mayeson."

Rowan's dark eyes narrowed ever so slightly and Mollie clutched her cloak tighter around her body. She had torn the delicate fabric at the bottom of her dress when she had fallen and grass stains riddled the end of her cloak. She was an absolute mess.

She watched the animal pant happily beside its owner and Mollie felt heat flood her cheeks.

"Your dog tried to attack me," she said from between clenched teeth as the animal regarded her lazily with large seemingly innocent yellow eyes.

Rowan stared coldly at her and took his time to look between his pet and Mollie. The wolf sat tall and elegant like its owner, any traces of ferocity eliminated from its features.

"On the contrary it's a Wolamute Mollie. And Paris would never. His diet is more refined than that."

Mollie didn't like the secretive smile on his face when he said this as he carefully stroked the beast's head beside him. The animal purred in approval and Mollie glared.

"I know what that thing is," she retorted tucking her wild hair behind her ears.

"You look awfully worse for wear," he paused when he said this, his dark eyes scanning Mollie's body closely. "But perhaps that's in the nature of you countryfolk,"

Mollie stiffened.

"I never told you I was from the country," she said hotly pushing his hand off of her shoulder.

Rowan chuckled lowly.

“You didn’t have to *ma chérie*.”

Mollie scowled as Rowan motioned with a pale finger for her to come closer.

“What were you doing in the gardens...by yourself?” he asked her.

Mollie didn’t like the curiosity that gleamed in his eyes. Her insides always seemed to twist in convoluted motions whenever she was in the presence of Rowan Lyon.

“Enjoying some fresh air,” she said rather bluntly averting her gaze.

Rowan simply smiled and stepped closer to her so his full towering frame dominated her lithe figure.

When he looked down at her the playful glint in his eye was replaced with something much more ominous.

“Don’t play games with me Mollie... I’m not Micah.”

The change in his demeanour was so sudden and chilling Mollie found herself cringing as she grasped her arms around her chest. The wind seemed even chillier in that moment, piercing her to the bone.

“I was...well...I,” she fumbled on her words as Rowan stared her down, his eyes blank.

Rowan suddenly clicked his tongue in disapproval as he took one of Mollie’s bleeding hands in his own.

“Looks painful,” he murmured.

Mollie winced as he brought his cool glove encased hands and held hers firmly in his grasp.

“The only thorns in our garden come from the rose bushes. The ones surrounding my late aunts sculpture.”

He was silent for a moment, his dark eyes glistening as they bore through Mollie’s.

“Her pretty face caught your eye didn’t it? She was like a sister to James and I you know. Only 6 years my senior.”

Mollie fell silent as he led her towards a beautiful vine covered white bench near the water fountain. The wolf padded behind its owner and curled up beside him on the ground. Its eyes never left Mollie.

Mollie met Rowan’s dark gaze and she watched as he picked out the thorns that had torn into her flesh. His expression shifted towards something unreadable and Mollie watched his steady motions closely. His movements were sure and firm -- surprisingly coordinated...as if he had spent a lifetime cleaning wounds.

“She was so beautiful you know. Like a ray of sunshine. My father absolutely adored her.”

Mollie was silent as Rowan continued to tend to her wounds.

“When she died a small part of my father died with her. He was never quite the same after that.”

Mollie watched as he removed a handkerchief from his coat pocket to wrap around Mollie’s palm.

“What happened to her?” Mollie asked as he wrapped the thin fabric up and over her hand.

“She was murdered...so they say.”

Rowan had a smirk on his face when he said this and she felt a tremor run through her spine.

“But who knows what really happened... except who was in that ballroom.”

Rowan’s dark musing voice took on a soft lilt which put Mollie even more on edge.

She cleared her throat quietly before she spoke again.

“I thought -- I heard it was an accident?” Mollie whispered as Rowan leaned in closer. His hands still clutched hers and she shook as his face loomed over her, his nose brushing hers. Their lips were inches apart.

“Then why was she all chopped up into tiny little pieces by the time the guards came around hmm?”

Mollie gasped in pain as Rowan squeezed her hands before placing them back on her lap.

“Didn’t hear that part of the story did you?”

He was so close his breath touched her lips and Mollie was frozen as his scent engulfed her.

“The blood soaked through every crevice, every crack in that ballroom. But ironically her face was intact.”

The wolf growled as Mollie jumped to her feet and she regarded Rowan coldly as he gracefully rose to his feet and tucked a dark stray curl behind his neatly gelled hair.

Rowan laughed at her reaction and she felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment.

“I apologize Miss Mayeson, was the visual a little too gruesome for your pretty mind to comprehend?”

“Hardly,” she muttered brushing her thick dark hair away from her face. His condescending nature was something Mollie was getting used to. But it didn’t make her any more submissive.

“Because you know what I think Mollie,” he said reaching into his breast pocket to retrieve his glasses. “I think my dear aunt knew something. Something... someone didn’t want her to reveal.”

Mollie swallowed uneasily as Rowan placed his glasses lightly on his slender nose.

“Really?” Mollie questioned. “So you’re saying one of your own family members tried to kill her?”

Rowan smiled when she said this.

“Well, wouldn’t be the first time that’s happened.”

Mollie watched as he glanced behind him at the serene view of the manor before switching his eyes back to her. She had a faint feeling Rowan was alluding to something.

Something that occurred in the past that was much closer in time than the death of Izabel Lyon.

“In my dear aunt’s case that person succeeded.”

Mollie narrowed her eyes at Rowan as he stroked the humungous head of his gigantic rabid dog. She didn’t like his tone and she didn’t trust him. The way his dark eyes flickered between her and the manor, the way his voice rose and fell in alternating peaks of multiple crescendos. As if he was trying to plant a seed in her mind.

"Izabel was a rather skilled woman. She was good with her hands. Bright too. She was a woman who traveled alongside her brothers during their expeditions overseas. She loved visiting new lands. Frowned upon...but Izabel got away with it."

He paused for a moment taking in Mollie's reaction. He was smiling to himself, a distant memory resurfacing in his mind.

"I suppose a pretty face gets you far enough," he winked at Mollie and she deftly looked away.

“You know who killed her?” Mollie asked before Rowan could turn around.

He had turned halfway at this point, his coat billowing in the breeze but Mollie saw him turn an ear toward her.

“Of course he knows. We all do.”

Mollie nearly jumped out of her skin as a low familiar voice drifted to her ears.

Micah Lyon was standing a good distance from Rowan and Mollie and she felt her face heat when she saw him. He looked good in that cloak. That midnight blue cloak decorated with silvery threads that seemed to radiate elegance and bring out the expensiveness of his attire.

He moved silently through the vine covered pathway and Mollie wondered how long he had been standing there for.

“And he paid for it with his life.”

His voice was as lifeless as his eyes. Cold and dead, like the surface of an icy pond.

“So they say,” Rowan repeated through pursed lips.

She assumed they were referring to their uncle...Atem Lyon, if she recalled correctly. Hartley Lyon’s eldest brother...the “*accident*.”

Mollie watched the tenseness radiating from both of them. She picked up on certain differences and congruencies between Rowan and Micah, how similar they were in their stances but how differently they conveyed their emotions.

Micah’s eyes flashed as he took in Mollie’s dishevelled appearance and quickly he turned his gaze back to his brother as if in question.

Rowan was smiling as the wolf beside him took off at a speed, its figure blurring in a streak of brown as it disappeared over the hills.

“I suppose playtime is over isn’t it Miss Mayeseon?” he said with a dark tone. “I do rather enjoy our little talks.” With a single tilt of his head, he sauntered off towards the manor his dark eyes glistening with satisfaction as he disappeared from view.

Micah was silent, his eyes trained on Mollie as his elder brother left them alone in the chilly gardens.

He seemed colder than he did this morning. Mollie was tempted to delve deeper into the Lyon history...Micah's history. She had learned a lot more from Esperanza than she ever expected, and to her surprise from Rowan as well. But something in the stiffness of Micah's stance made Mollie want to tread carefully. She was still reeling from his outburst only weeks ago. Mollie doubted she'd ever get over it. At this point in time Mollie had a feeling Micah wouldn't kill her...not intentionally of course. Had he wanted to, he'd have done it a long time ago...he had ample opportunities in the past to do so. But it didn't mean he wouldn't harm her and this she knew. Although the questions -- the *curiosity* burned in her mind, she knew she had to choose her time wisely. Her safety was paramount at this point in time...especially with the promise of her freedom being so near.

The silence continued as Micah zeroed in on her with his eyes. She felt naked under his gaze, as if he was looking into her mind, tracing her recent actions -- her recent thoughts with those green orbs of his.

She felt obligated to break the silence, to keep her own anxiety at bay.

“I fell in the gardens,” she blurted tucking her hands beneath her yellow cloak. The bottom of it was washed with a light grass stain and she looked hopelessly at it.

The prince on the other hand did a million things in one day...and somehow he still looked as good as he did at the very start of his day.

“That was her cloak you know.” He ignored her last comment and swept his gaze over her clothing. “It matched her hair.”

Mollie felt her face flood with embarrassment as she fisted her hands in the beautiful cloak. Esperanza had found it for her in the dark depths of her room...wait.

Belle...Izabel. That was her. This was *her* cloak. Mollie had been staying in *her* room. She was Belle Lyon.” Mollie could kick herself for not figuring that out before.

“I’m sorry,” she stuttered. “I...I didn’t know. Esperanza had--,”

Micah held up a hand to silence her and she quickly trailed off. He didn’t seem upset but Mollie was treading extremely carefully. He seemed off, not the pleasantly cordial person he had been this morning.

He shifted on his feet as his eyes flickered to the manor and back to her. “I have one more thing to finish before dinner. I wanted you to accompany me.”

Mollie was surprised at the offer, and even more at his formality. However she knew better than to think she had a choice in the matter.

“If... that’s what you want,” she managed squeezing her hands together beneath her cloak. She winced as the flexing of her palms saturated the handkerchief with fresh blood.

“It is what I want.”

His reply was strained and Mollie felt her stomach flop. Like he always did, he gently looped his arm through hers and guided her back to the manor. Mollie’s legs felt like jelly but she swallowed her fear and walked alongside the prince.

He never smiled. Not once.

Chapter End Notes

My idea for the prince...and quite honestly Mollie and Micah's rather tumultuous relationship really came into my mind after listening to Prince Arthur by Coeur de Pirate. It tells a beautiful, heartbreaking story.

Link: <https://zella-11.tumblr.com/post/615491415443652608/can-you-provide-the-translation-for-prince-arthur>

Chapter 24: Chrome

Chapter Summary

Mollie sees some familiar faces. Micah draws some disturbing parallels to his family.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mollie knew this place. She had been here before, with James.

The underground corridors beneath Questershire manor swept past Mollie, the cold unusually biting for this winter seeming summer's night. She was physically shaking as Micah tightly guided her through the underground maze, his fingers biting into her arm even through the thick layer of his gloves. There weren't many people around and she could see her breath release in puffs of air as the coldness of being so far below ground sent goosebumps forming across her legs and arms.

Eventually Micah stopped, releasing the firm grip on her arm and gestured for her to enter another more darker chamber. She looked at him with wide eyes but his face remained carefully stoic. He simply tilted his head for her to enter and she did so diligently, her legs shaking beneath her cloak.

The first thing she saw were chains. Metal chains that lined the floor and made the already cold room seem even more frigid. Micah walked past her airily as if he were simply taking a stroll through the gardens. Mollie followed the long line of chains from the entrance, across the large windowless room towards their origin. On the opposite end of the absolute monstrosity of a room were six people. Their arms and legs were chained to the wall and Mollie could see that five out of the six of them wore uniforms. Uniforms she had seen before many times. The one with the Lyon insignia on the chest.

The one *she* had been wearing when she first encountered the prince.

Mollie was finding it difficult to breathe as her eyes slid past the six prisoners. The first one was a girl like Mollie, maybe a little younger. Mollie recognized the white dress on her thin body. She was a slave. The other five were men. Men she had never seen before. Her eyes scanned the room with her gaze landing on the one at the end, his arms shuffling as he tried to free himself from his chains, his sandy hair long and overgrown, falling into his eyes.

Mollie felt her throat swell up when she saw him. They were all done for. He must know. Micah must know. If he didn't know before then he certainly knew now. Mollie was a traitor, a member of the Insurgency and like the prisoners before her, her fate would be the same.

Micah had turned back around to watch her, evaluating her reaction. Mollie stood frozen, her eyes glazed and her legs refusing to move. She felt as if a pile of bricks had been set upon her lungs, preventing her diaphragm from rising and falling in regular rhythmic motions. Isaac had his head down at the end of the wall. His overgrown fringe preventing Mollie from looking into those warm eyes.

“Come here Mollie.”

His voice echoed through the room and Mollie tried her best to grasp her bearings. She knew Micah. He wouldn't kill her just like that. He'd make a spectacle out of it, draw it out until she was begging for mercy...begging for death.

Stiffly she forced her legs to move, one in front of the other as each of her steps echoed throughout the room. She averted her gaze from the farthest prisoner as much as possible. She had no idea if Micah had tortured them already -- if he extracted all the information he needed out of them and had initiated plans for their execution. She wondered if Isaac had sold her out. There were too many unpleasant scenarios for Mollie to consider.

If there was anything Mollie had deduced about Micah so far, it was his ability to evaluate a room full of people. She had watched him over these couple of weeks, the way his eyes flickered between her and Esperanza at dinner, to the way he watched members of his cabinet exchange glances...write notes...drink wine. Mollie believed it to be an intimidation tactic at first, but the more she observed him the more she realized he was watching...analysing...calculating every movement of every individual around him. And he was *very* good at it.

More so than Mollie could ever be.

As he had been watching her and the others around him, she too had been watching him. But his emotions were so well concealed...so ambiguous she couldn't come to any definitive conclusions. The only thing she was able to find out about him was that he was left handed, like his father. She had suspected when she first tried to disarm him that day in the parlour. She had initially lunged right expecting him to keep his dagger in the right side of his belt pouch like most people did...and that had been her first mistake. He had also attacked with his left hand, his right one holding her down. But she had seen him sign papers from the little window in the parlour as he saw to his duties and she had confirmed her suspicions.

She knew already Micah hid his emotions well...when he was in control. But she had also seen him when that control was lost. And it was chaos. Madness. He became something else altogether. Something dangerous and capable of doing anything. He became unpredictable...and this frightened Mollie more than anything.

By the time she made it across the cold frost bitten soiled floor of the room she was right beside Micah, his cologne wafting towards her and enveloping her in its sharp powerful musk.

Mollie shook in fear as Micah slid his arm through hers elegantly and walked her past each prisoner. None of them made eye contact with her as he strode past each one, painfully slow. Each bowed their head down in respect as Micah walked past them, his expression

unreadable. Mollie felt her throat burn when they made their way to the last prisoner. Isaac's head didn't lift despite Micah's presence before him and Mollie felt her stomach drop.

Micah paused as if in waiting and Mollie felt a horrible sinking presence in her chest. She dreaded what was to come.

"Still not cooperating are we?" Micah said pleasantly his grip on Mollie tightening. "It's quite alright. I brought someone that might change your mind."

Isaac's head still didn't lift as Micah pulled sharply on her arm making the girl stumble forward.

"Mollie, this here is Isaac, a citizen turned traitor who is part of the Insurgency militant group."

Mollie could see the way Isaac's chest halted its regular motions when he heard Mollie's name. She just prayed he didn't do anything stupid. Anything to get them into even deeper of a sinkhole than they were already in.

Micah was introducing them as if they didn't know each other but she could feel the iciness radiating from both his eyes and his posture. This was it. This was the start of the show.

Isaac's head lifted and when those familiar blue eyes met hers, Mollie felt a surge of emotions flow through her. In fear of the unpredictable man beside her she kept her face blank.

"Mollie told me all about your little group," Micah mused, a playful smirk on his pink lips. "She let me know all the ins and outs of your plan. She's such a good little mouse," he continued swiping a gloved hand against her wintry cheek. Mollie didn't dare make eye contact with Isaac but she could feel his blue eyes burning into her face.

"Please *ma chérie*, reach into the pocket of this one here and retrieve an item for me. It's rather small, well hidden....quite delicate...but I believe you know what I'm referring to."

The soft husky lilt of his tone made Mollie's legs turn to ice but she complied immediately. She knew *exactly* what the prince requested of her, and quickly she bent down to Isaac's level. His breath fanned her face and Mollie spread her fingers against his chest searching for the hidden compartment within the uniform. She knew it was somewhere here...in the chest area. She had worn this outfit before. Her fingers brushed against Isaac's scalding hot chest until her fingers made contact with a little glass vial. She brushed her fingers tenderly across his bare chest before she carefully retrieved the vial and gingerly pressed it into Micah's waiting glove encased palm in a single fleeting motion.

Her eyes flashed to Isaac and she could see a hundred emotions pulsing through them. She saw relief...fear...anger...but she also saw scepticism and this frightened her. She had told him. She had made herself so clear to him that she was on his side that night in Hartley's chambers. He couldn't let Micah's mind games break that. He had to believe the truth...

"*Parfait*, thank you Mollie."

With exaggerated movements Micah shook the powdery substance in the vial and watched as it slid against the thin glass walls of its container and fell in small grains to the bottom of the vial.

The smile that spread across Micah's face was purely predatory in nature and Mollie watched as Micah's cold eyes flickered between herself and Isaac.

"Hmmm."

Mollie turned towards Isaac as Micah sauntered off to the side for a moment.

When he returned he had a dark orange liquid in his glass and Mollie watched as he sipped his drink quietly, his pale eyes glistening. He still clutched the vial of anthrax in his hands and Mollie felt a prickly feeling shoot up her spine.

"Prufrock," he said quietly swirling the dark liquid in his glass, "please give these fine men and the young woman something to drink."

Quickly, a broad burly guard swept past her, a large metal encased jug in his hand filled with a sloshing liquid. Mollie watched as he began to pour the water onto the prisoners faces. Mollie watched as the girl struggled to lick more water in her mouth, her cracked bleeding lips a testimony to her debilitating dehydration. The men seemed stiff, mistrustful. Isaac didn't even flinch.

"Anthrax," Micah mused weighing the vial in his hand. "Small yet so incredibly effective."

Mollie could practically feel the ferocious heat radiating off of Isaac and she stole a glance in his direction.

The look on his face was one of absolute lividity directed straight at the prince and she watched as Micah's smile widened. This is what he wanted. He wanted a reaction... and Isaac was feeding right into it.

The other prisoners averted their eyes, preferring to keep their gaze locked on the floor.

A cold glove covered hand caressed Mollie's neck and she trembled as Micah closed her in from behind, their bodies only an arms length away from Isaac.

"They would have gotten away with it if it weren't for you Mollie," he murmured loud enough for the prisoners to hear.

God No. No. He's lying. Can't you tell he's lying??

Mollie was shaking as Micah planted wet kisses against her neck from behind. The sharp scent of whiskey filled her senses and she tried to control her breathing as he bit into the tender flesh below her ear.

"Clever girl. Hiding the vial next to the kitchen quarters. Right at the heart of the manor," he whispered into her ear, only for her to hear. He knew everything. God he knew the entire time.

Mollie could feel Micah shift against her from behind as he reached into his cloak and from above, lowered something before her eyes.

"Open it," he whispered into her ear.

Mollie felt her blood run cold as she looked at a familiar piece of aged parchment paper in front of her eyes. She hesitated, her fingers shaking as Micah tightened his grip on her waist. With trembling hands she took the parchment from him and opened it, the crinkling of the material seeming much louder in the large echoing room.

She could hear the smile in the prince's voice as he addressed his prisoners.

"Well well well," he said with a chuckle from behind Mollie. "Looks like someone's been going through the family archives."

He paused after this and Mollie felt her knees begin to shake. She had given that document to Isaac weeks ago. He should have been long gone at this point... somewhere on his way back to Caleb. It was the most incriminating piece of evidence against the Lyons and Mollie watched as the precious item escaped from her grip. Something happened...someone betrayed them.

Isaac was looking between the two of them, a perfect poker face on his features.

"Tell me," Micah started looking dramatically around the room. "To whom do I charge the crime of larceny?"

The room was quiet. The prisoners keeping their heads down and their eyes trained on the muddy floor. Nobody moved a muscle, nobody flinched, hell nobody even seemed to breathe.

The silence mused on and Mollie could practically feel the tension in the room increase. She felt faint.

"I see," Micah said quietly, his voice losing all traces of humour. "I suppose I *could* just... charge all of you with perjury."

Mollie turned around to see Micah nod his head towards the guard standing by the prisoners. Mollie hadn't noticed before that the guard had something else in his hand besides the water jug, something that had missed her eye until now.

It only took a second. Mollie didn't see it coming, she didn't even have a chance to scream. Out of the cover of a long thick object in the guards hand slid the largest blade Mollie had ever seen. In a flash of silver it hit the second prisoner precisely at the neck as Mollie recoiled in horror.

The cut was clean and the head bounced off the wet spongy ground once before it rolled forward and stopped by her feet. Mollie was too frozen, too in shock to react but she heard the shrill scream from the girl in chains against the wall. The blood didn't spray out like she expected it too. Rather, it bubbled to the surface of the torn flesh, the veins and arteries rushing to pump blood towards the head that no longer existed. She clutched her chest as she

watched the body crumple to the ground, the crimson liquid running down the wall into a glowing pond of red.

The young female prisoner sobbed as she watched her fellow prisoner come to an untimely end at the hands of the cruel prince. Mollie could see the terror on the other prisoners faces. She had seen that look before, on many citizens before a public punishment.

If it weren't for Micah's strong grip on her hips Mollie probably wouldn't have been able to keep her long legs from buckling beneath her. With unsettling precision she watched the guard flail his machete once before walking slowly towards the next prisoner, ignoring the sobbing slave for a moment. The young man began to twist and shout in his chains as he flailed his chained arms and looked desperately at the prince.

"I didn't do this," he gasped, his throat scratchy and raw from over use. It sounded as if his vocal cords had been through a meat grinder the night before. "I swear your highness I had nothing to do with this. On my mother I swear!"

The guard was standing beside him, his blade ready for use, his eyes waiting for the approval of the prince.

Mollie could feel Micah's breath against the back of her neck as he took another sip of his whiskey, his pale frigid eyes on the red faced prisoner.

"Prove it," he said softly the one hand on Mollie's waist moving upwards towards her abdomen.

The prisoner hesitated for a second, his eyes flickering towards the blood stained blade at his right ear.

"I have other information," the prisoner gasped. "Information that will be especially pertinent to you winter prince."

Winter prince?? That was a term Mollie hadn't heard before. However it seemed fitting...tastefully apt in her opinion. Yes, the prince was born during the winter months..but there was something more to that term. From the moment she had met him, the prince seemed to embody the cold itself, from his pale icy exterior to his abnormally cold skin. The thought alone made her tremble.

Mollie winced as Micah brushed his lips against her neck. He was giving off an air of distraction but Mollie could feel the tenseness of his breath against her shoulder. Micah remained unresponsive his lips against her throat as the prisoner looked around him wildly, waiting for a sign to proceed.

"They have it," he gasped his chains rattling behind him. "The Insurgency acquired it. But-but rumour was that they-they had gotten it pure, but the Ophians...they...they fucked with us. Told us it could be synthesized on Southern land organically but...but that wasn't the case."

Micah had stilled completely behind her and Mollie looked between them in fear. What was the prisoner referring to?

"I saw it with my own eyes," the prisoner continued, eyes wide and his pupils frightfully dilated.

"The Ophians you say," Micah murmured releasing his hold on Mollie.

Mollie held her breath as she watched Micah release her and walk towards the prisoner. He was close enough to reach an arm out and touch him but far enough to keep a respectful distance. The other prisoners were panting hard and Mollie could see the stony expression on Isaac's face. Whatever the prisoner had brought up had washed a quiet foreboding hush on the entire room. The slave girl still whimpered in far corner, the left side of her pale leg dark with the blood of body that hung on the chains beside her.

Micah stood still and tall, his rich cloak glinting in the darkness. He held his drink loosely in his right hand with the other hand resting somewhere beneath his thick cloak. "And where can it be synthesized?"

Mollie knew that tone. She felt her throat seize up on her.

The man had tears that were accumulating at the edges of his eyes and she could see the defeat, the horrid feeling of unfaithfulness surge through him. He was betraying his people, in front of his people. There was no worse humiliation, no worse deed to commit.

"Don't tell him."

The raspy voice from the prisoner at the end of the wall snapped Mollie's attention and she felt her heart sink when she heard who it was coming from.

Isaac was glaring at the prince, disgust on his features and as quickly and as swiftly as the death of the first prisoner, Isaac was hit hard in the side of the head with the blunt handle of the machete by the guard with the water jug.

He grunted in pain as the force of the object brought him to his knees, his face contorted in pain.

"Do not speak to the prince unless spoken to!" The guard barked kicking Isaac in the stomach with his heavy boot.

Mollie could feel the gasps of air rush from her lips as she watched Isaac roll in pain against the wall, rivulets of blood running down the side of his forehead towards his neck.

She turned her head towards Micah who remained in the same position as before. He hadn't even turned his head to acknowledge the prisoner at the end of the wall. He kept his blank stare on the second prisoner in front of him, his gloved fingers tapping against the glass in his hand.

"Continue," Micah said briskly as if uninterrupted.

The prisoner gulped, his face going paler. "It..It cannot be synthesized on these lands," he said bleakly. The sweat was running down his white forehead and Mollie could see the fear all over his face. "The...conditions here are far...far too tame for such a rare thing. It must be

moulded on Ophian ground, exposed to the elements...all of them. You cannot trust the East. They...they are coming. And they are coming in fast. They'll kill us all. It is only a matter of t-time."

Mollie watched the exchange from behind, her feet locked in place and her body shaking.

"I swear, you highness...I *swear* that is all I know. That is all I overheard."

The man had dropped his head in defeat and began to pray. Mollie could see the heaving motions of his chest and the fleeting motion of his lips as he prepared for the worst.

"I believe you," Micah said softly his voice barely audible as the man began to openly weep.

Mollie waited tensely, waiting for some other horribly gruesome action to occur but the prince simply moved on. His next destination clear.

Isaac had managed to force his head backwards as Micah looked at him from a distance, his expression rather indifferent. Mollie watched Isaac blink the blood out of his eyes and grit his teeth at the man standing above him.

Mollie watched from behind as Micah casually tossed the parchment paper into the muddy blood soaked earth beneath their feet. It fell just out of reach of Isaac and she watched as the brown parchment soon withered in on itself as it soaked in the blood that had begun to spread down the length of the platform where the prisoners stood.

"Better luck next time," the prince murmured with a soft smile. "I can't wait to see what your little rebel group comes up with next."

Micah turned swiftly and flitted to Mollie's side a rather complacent look on his face.

Mollie watched as Isaac spat a glob of blood onto the spongy ground in front of him and directed his look of loathing at the prince.

"Who's to say we haven't already planned our next move prince? After all, *she* was mine before she was yours."

The stiffness from the figure beside her told Mollie everything she needed to know and she quivered as Micah stood unmoving beside her his expression blank, his features frozen in time. He remained like that for a couple seconds before his face melted back into something familiar. It was the same look he gave Mollie right before he dragged her across the floor of his mansion by the neck. He hadn't looked at her too much, hadn't addressed her really since she had entered the room. Now, Mollie felt as if a thousand eyes had turned on her as Micah looked at her from beneath his long dark lashes, his body still in the process of turning towards the exit.

Quite abruptly he turned back around to the prisoners, a half smile on his face directed at Isaac.

"Is that so?" Micah's voice held a tone of amusement but beneath his layers of false joviality was something cold and biting. She could see the way his fingers pressed hard into the glass

in his hand...the amber liquid inside quaking with each tremor.

Mollie felt hot and sticky despite the frigid temperature in the room and she couldn't look at the men in front of her. She remained silent, forcing her eyes on the floor, away from everyone who had turned to stare at her.

She watched Micah slowly place his drink on the platform beside Isaac before making his way towards her. In seconds Micah was behind her, his chest heaving as his breath fanned the back of her neck.

"You want to test that theory out?" he said calmly his arms encircling the hunched girl in front of him.

Mollie gasped as he untied her cloak from her shoulders and let the garment drop to the floor.

"What-what are you doing?" she quaked as her voice whipped out in a terrifying whisper.

When Mollie turned her gaze back to Isaac she soon realized the answer to her own question.

Isaac was trembling as he watched Micah hold Mollie against him. She could hear the chains rattle as his fingers flexed and his legs shook. His blue eyes were quivering and Mollie could see a glaze of emotion obscuring the clearness that was usually present. His anger was consuming him and it was clouding out everything else, including his common sense.

Micah's grip on her body was as strong as iron and she protested as he fished his gloved fingers beneath her dress to cup her round breasts.

She whimpered in pain as he pinched her nipple hard, a warning for her to acquiesce to him quietly. When she turned her head towards the prince, his eyes were fixed on Isaac, his lips set in a permanent smirk.

Mollie realized quickly that this wasn't for his pleasure, nor was it for hers. Micah was flaunting his possession for the prisoners to see, dangling Mollie as bait in front of the most vulnerable one and watching him squirm under his relentless gaze.

Micah's hands went lower, skimming her lower abdomen and she could feel the tears prick her eyes as his gloved fingers dipped lower to stretch her panties to the side.

Her eyes darted to the other prisoners who had all turned to stare at Mollie. The humiliation was too much to bear and she let the tears fall freely as Micah inched two of his gloved fingers into her moist slit.

"Still as wet as the first time Mollie Mae," he said with an air of satisfaction. His comment tipped the edge of the seesaw and Mollie shut her eyes in fear as Isaac snarled and his body recoiled from the force of resisting his chains.

"That's not what I meant you *sick* fuck," he shouted, his chains rattling against the wall behind him.

Isaac's voice trembled with poorly suppressed emotion and Mollie shook her head at him as the tears fell down her cheeks. Micah laughed against her throat as his fingers caressed her slit.

Micah was enjoying this, completely unperturbed by Isaac's derogatory language. "I'd say she belongs to me. You may have had her...but you certainly didn't *take* her."

Micah's fingers dipped into her heated pussy and Mollie couldn't help how violently her body reacted to his motions. She whimpered and trembled as he pumped his fingers in and out of her as Isaac thrashed and hurled obscenities at the prince. If anything, it seemed to spur Micah on even more.

"Do you like that Mollie Mae?"

Mollie could feel her body betray her as her pussy clamped down around his fingers as he caressed and explored the wet crevices and grooves of her pulsating canal. Her eyes fluttered and her breathing came out in short spurted gasps as Micah released his fingers with a quick *shlick* only to press them against her throbbing clit.

"Stop—No—please."

Micah silenced her with a sharp tug of her hair, turning her face towards him as he enveloped her mouth with his own.

She groaned against his mouth as his fingers pressed her swollen nub and his tongue pushed its way through her lips. She could feel his other hand release her jaw and reach beneath her thin slip of a dress so he could squeeze and palm her small but full breast. It was an incredibly vulgar display of power and Mollie squeezed her eyes shut, her ears assaulted by the gasps escaping from her own lips in the otherwise deathly silent room.

The sharp bitter taste of whiskey filled her mouth as Micah's tongue twirled against her own. She could do little to resist him as the familiar sensation of heat began to flare up her core and rise threateningly towards her muscles and trembling waist. Mollie's breathing was already shallow from her approaching climax and the lack of air from Micah's mouth against hers was doing little to aid her aching lungs. With a precise pinch of his fingers against her sopping swollen button Mollie cried against his mouth as her orgasm flooded her. She shook and jerked from the overwhelmingly powerful vibrations racking her body and fell to her knees in a heap.

As she crumpled to the ground she felt Micah remove his fingers from her throbbing cunt and she watched in horror as he admired the juices that hung in strings along the leather fingers of his glove.

Isaac had gone silent at this point and Mollie watched from the ground as he shot a loathing stare at the prince, his chest rising and falling and his eyes glistening with unshed tears.

Mollie heard footsteps from behind her and she could barely hear the breath escape her lips as another burly guard filed into the room to join his partner near the prisoners.

“Proceed,” Micah’s husky voice brought her back to reality and Mollie screamed as the two of them began to slit the throat of the others prisoners that lined the wall. It happened so quickly – so suddenly Mollie didn’t ever hear the machete slip free from its casing. The blood splattered the earthy floor and Mollie could do nothing but cry and sob against the ground as Micah watched the show from behind her in silence.

When the guards reached Isaac at the end of the wall Mollie could not stay silent any longer.

"Stop! Please!," she stumbled to her knees, her dress crinkled and creased as she turned towards the prince.

The guards continued to place Isaac against the wall and pull his head backward to expose his neck and grant them access to the heated pale skin.

“Micah! Micah don’t please,” she was sobbing and gasping as the tears fell down her cheeks and her screams came out in a strangled tortured cry. “Don’t kill him. Please Micah. *Please!*”

Mollie watched in pure horror as the guards brought the knife to Isaac’s neck and began to glide the blade against his neck.

Mollie shut her eyes and covered her head in her hands as she sobbed violently into her hands, unable to watch the bloody spectacle in front of her.

She trembled and sobbed, into the ground, her nose hitting wet earth as she stifled her cries into the soft ground. She waited for the soft spray of blood to hit her...but the only sound filling her ears was the sound of her own strangled whimpers.

With a heaving chest she opened her eyes to see the guards had halted their movements. The blade was against Isaac’s throat but when Mollie turned to look at Micah she could see his hand was up, a gesture to halt their motions. The bodies of the other prisoners had accumulated a large pool of blood on the ground and against the wall that had begun to seep into the earthy ground and stain the soft spongy floor a horrible shade of crimson.

Micah’s face was unreadable as his pale eyes bore into Mollie’s red tear-stained face. She was shaking, unable to halt her quivering muscles as flashes of blade against flesh pierced her mind. He turned his dead gaze towards Isaac and Mollie waited for the worst.

“Take him upstairs.”

Micah’s voice was low and quiet but loud enough for the guards to hear. Surprisingly efficient, the guards gagged and released Isaac from his chains and wrestled him to his knees before they dragged him out of the room and out of sight.

Mollie’s vision was blurring as she watched Micah approach her slowly. Her throat was filled with mucus and salty tears and she could feel her stray hairs sticking to her wet cheeks.

He reached for her and she recoiled, her hand flashing backwards to catch her fall only for her palms to sink into blood soaked soil.

The prince bent down towards her, elegantly, his leg bent down to meet the ground and the other elevated to keep him upright. His cloak rested lightly behind him and his tousled waves shimmered in the dark lighting.

"You're trembling," he whispered observing her body closely.

"Don't," she managed her hands out in front of her to place distance between them. She heard Micah exhale sharply.

Mollie had seen many things throughout her life. Things that would traumatize even the most mentally sound of people. But to witness, in such close proximity a person murdered in front of her...to feel the warmth of their blood on her naked skin...she couldn't dissipate the vivid images from her mind nor the odour or sensation of crimson staining her skin.

Micah's husky voice in the silent room pulled her from the horrific images that ran through her mind and she snapped her head up.

"The penalty for treason is death," he said coldly. "Don't look so surprised Mollie."

She clenched her jaw as she regarded him, her fiery gaze directed at his glacial exterior.

"I know the fucking rules," she responded shifting to her knees and feeling a sharp uncomfortable tingle in her nether regions.

She could hear Micah's jaw lock immediately after she swore but he turned his gaze away for a moment. The irritation was evident in his features but he took a deep breath before he returned his gaze.

He was maintaining control.

"I don't...expect you to understand or agree with my decisions Mollie, but in spite of this...unfortunate situation I was incredibly altruistic."

"You permitted the murder of five people," Mollie cried tears spurting from her eyes. "With a machete! How could you possibly -,"

"Five guilty people," he said sharply cutting her off with a menacing stare.

"It doesn't matter!" Mollie cried wringing her hands. "That was completely barbaric."

"You really think so?," Micah questioned his fingers inching towards Mollie's which were submerged tightly in the wet soil. "Would you prefer I keep them locked away underground till their bodies rot? Would you prefer I hang them by the flesh of their bones for the crows to feast on? Would you prefer I hand them over to James?"

His last question hung in the air and Mollie fell silent. Mollie didn't want to see things from his perspective. The more she distanced herself mentally from the prince the easier it would be for her.

"It doesn't matter," she whispered dropping her gaze towards the stiff collar beneath his dark waist coat. "You're still a Lyon. You're no different from the rest of them."

Micah shrugged and looked at the bodies behind them, his expression rather disinterested.

"There are worse things to be."

They sat there in silence after that for a lengthy period of time. Mollie watched as Micah idly twirled the large silver ring on his finger his mind somewhere far away from here.

"Why didn't you kill me too?" she asked suddenly, her voice still garbled from her previous exertion. "I was with them. I snuck into this castle for the same reason as them."

Micah simply stared at her his expression thoughtful but his eyes as impassive as they always were.

"I know," he said softly his green eyes liquifying as he took in her rebellious retaliation. "I had originally planned to."

She stared at him hard, inflicting as much hatred into her expression as she could muster.

"I wish you had. I wish you had killed me when you first found me. I wish I had reached for that anthrax the day I saw you in that parlour."

Micah's smile widened when she said this and Mollie felt her fists well up in anger. It was a sly smile.

A smile that screamed "*you could have tried.*"

"Oh Mollie," he whispered, his voice heavy with emotion.

She stared at him in shock and confusion as he fisted his hand in her hair and brought her lips to his once again.

As he sealed his lips on hers and kissed her deeply, she could feel his heart pounding against his chest as she placed her palms against him. She pushed with all her might but his strength was too much for her to overcome. His adrenaline was through the roof and Mollie could feel the heat emanating off his normally cool skin. He was getting a rush...a high off of this entire situation and Mollie felt sick to her stomach.

"Yes my little fawn. That is exactly why I didn't kill you. The look in your eyes, that hatred...that enmity. No one looks at someone like that and doesn't plan to end their life."

He hummed as he nuzzled his face under the curve of her neck his lips tracing the curves of her jaw. His tongue darted out to lick the salty trails of tears along her cheeks.

"Hate is the antithesis of love Mollie. To hate someone so much requires the same amount of passion...the same amount of vigour as it takes to love them."

“What do you know of love?” she whipped out jerking her head away from him. “You’re so out of touch with the basic principles of human nature, love would be impossible for you to even *remotely* understand.”

He tilted his head in thought as Mollie lashed out. Her voice was still quivering with poorly repressed emotion but she managed to keep her words clear enough.

She was expecting him to taunt her, maybe even slap her but he just shook his head in annoyance and deftly pulled free the ascot around his throat. She watched him as he laid the material carefully on his lap and inched closer to her while pulling free his gloves.

Mollie attempted to unsuccessfully pull away as he brought the silk material towards her face. She watched him as he dried her tears, pulled free the wild strands of her dark hair that had plastered towards her cheeks, and mopped the smeared mud and blood that had accumulated on her hands when she had brushed her tears away.

He hadn’t responded to her for some time and Mollie figured he had simply chosen to ignore her. She watched his irises contract and dilate in the poorly lit room as he zeroed in on her features, his light eyes a vibrant speck in the otherwise shadowy room.

“I’m a prince Mollie,” he said softly as he cradled her cheek in his cool hand, skin touching skin. “my...position... tells me I will never truly understand love.”

She watched his movements, so sure, so confident – so elegant – so programmed like his elder brother.

“And if you weren’t a prince? What then?” she said tersely, the wetness on her lashes a stark remembrance of her current situation. She tried her best to ignore the *drip drip* of blood leaking from the walls into the accumulating pool of liquid beside them. She tried to forget the bodies of five people laying around herself and the only other living person in the room.

“Then it would be a contingency– an intense state of euphoria that I have yet to experience.” His tone was dismissive -- a silent conveyance of disinterest.

“I don’t believe you.”

Mollie locked her jaw as she said this. Swiftly, Micah removed his palm from her cheek. He turned away from her rather quickly and slid his gloves back on, rising to his full towering height.

“I have no reason to lie,” he said rather cattily, the hidden accusation in his voice impossible to miss.

Mollie scoffed and pushed herself shakily to her feet. It was moments like this, these hidden moments with her when the prince showed his true age of only twenty three years, the veil of his hidden interior, cracking in more places than one. He did it well. He hid it well. But he was only human. They all were.

Mollie jumped when he returned to her side lightly draping her cloak over her shoulders, substituting it for a shawl.

“I’ll tell you this,” he said slowly looking down at her. “My mind tells me, that I should not love, but my heart...my heart tell me I’m not destined to. That I’m not meant to.”

Mollie went silent when he said this. She furrowed her brow as those glassy eyes stared back at her. She doubted Micah even had a heart to begin with. Something about him wasn't right. She felt it the first time she saw his face on that small television in her barely one room apartment.

“I don’t understand,” she murmured feeling sick from the sharp metallic scent of blood and rust in the air.

“I know,” he said faintly turning her away from the bodies that lay behind them.

Mollie jumped when she heard another gruffer voice from just beyond their position, towards the entrance. She hadn’t even registered that someone else had entered the room.

“Shall we dispose of the prisoners Master Lyon?”

Mollie shivered when she saw the guard with the scar on his face ask the question. Mollie hadn’t forgotten him. She didn't think she ever would. That hostile stare was still fresh in her memory. She turned her head away fixing her gaze on the prince instead.

“No,” Micah said curtly stealing a glance behind them. “Leave it.”

The guards bowed their head in acknowledgment before disappearing back into the underground corridors beneath the manor.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” he murmured against her ear clutching her arm tightly in his. “We can’t have you in the dining hall looking like this. Father wouldn’t allow it.”

Mollie felt her heart sink even lower to the ground when she heard this. The last thing she wanted, was to be a guest at Hartley Lyon’s dinner table and see the despicable man face to face.

“Micah no, -- please.” He brought his finger to her lips and pressed hard enough for Mollie to fall silent quickly.

“It’s not up for discussion,” he said coolly his voice strained. Mollie swallowed the lump in her throat and ignored the gnawing sensation of hunger in her belly. She had lost her appetite completely. He loosened when he saw her expression and Mollie saw his brows relax slightly. “You have nothing to fear Mollie. My father doesn’t look Primaries in the eyes.”

Mollie just stared back at him, her lips turned in a sullen frown. She didn’t want to tell him that was the least of her fears but she dropped it. She knew how dinners went at the Lyons and it was one of the more unpleasant experiences she had witnessed in the manor. “It’s not for discussion for me either I’m afraid,” he added rather caustically.

Mollie understood his position but she found it hard to sympathise with him, especially after he just killed five people in less than a minute while pulsating his fingers through her tender vagina.

Her pussy throbbed in pain just thinking of the memory and she shuddered. She wouldn't – couldn't forget the look on Isaac's face as he watched the prince toy with Mollie in ways she wished weren't so. The look on his face...it would haunt her forever.

"Where did you take him? The last prisoner?" she asked suddenly, her voice quiet but still trembling.

Micah's eyes dimmed ever so slightly and she could practically feel the fluctuation of emotions churning within him.

"Someplace where he can't escape," he said softly.

Mollie bit her lip as Micah tugged her alongside him towards the arched entrance of the low-ceilinged dingy room.

As they exited the now silent room into the dark narrow corridor of the underground layer of the manor Mollie spotted a flash in her peripheral vision.

She jerked as a familiar snow white tail brushed past her exposed legs. She stepped to the side quickly, the sensation startling her only to side step into the strong solid body beside her.

"Theodora," Micah called out softly as the wolf turned its ice blue eyes towards its master. He motioned towards the door they had just walked through with a swift tilt of his head.

Mollie walked forward, her arm locked in place with the dark haired man beside her as the sound of pounding paws and heavy panting filled her ears. She had an eerie premonition of why the animal was lurking about, its eyes wild and its pearly white canines wet as it salivated at the metallic scent of blood that saturated the air.

"Dinner."

Chapter End Notes

There's been a lot of plot lately, this chapter and even in the last one. I promise more character interaction is coming up guys! xx

Chapter 25: Manganèse

Chapter Summary

Mollie learns about the importance of a certain element. Mollie is a guest at the Lyon dinner table. Will things go smoothly?

Chapter Notes

This is a LONG chapter. Enjoy xx

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

He bathed her the minute they reached his chambers. She was unsurprised to see Esperanza absent from the ensuite. The woman was a complete wreck today. She probably needed time for herself -time away from Mollie.

Mollie stayed silent as Micah took his time caressing every bone, ridge, and muscle of her body. He liked doing it. Mollie had realized this. He spent extra time near her breasts spreading his pale fingers up and down her breastbone, tracing circles around the spongy skin of her areolas. His expression was rather solemn and Mollie watched him from within the porcelain tub. She watched his muscles flex beneath the rolled sleeves of his white shirt, she focused on his lips, the way they pursed when he was deep in concentration.

Neither exchanged any sort of conversation following the events of earlier afternoon. Mollie was silly to think that she could reason with the youngest prince of the monarchy. He killed people everyday. Mollie's reaction was unfamiliar to him. His justifications for his actions proved it.

Mollie squirmed when he skimmed near her lower abdomen, closing her legs on reflex. She looked down and noticed something shimmering in the water, something she hadn't noticed before. It was faint but conspicuous enough to catch her eye.

Micah followed her gaze and slowly he brought his hand up, taking his time to skim his fingers along her wet torso.

It was the ring. That large protruding ring he always wore on his finger.

He had noticed her staring and deftly he caught her gaze with his own.

“Family heirloom,” he murmured. She could see his initials glinting off the pristine metal. “My father gave one to each of us.”

His tone was rather languid and Mollie watched as he brought his fingers to her neck, laying the metal against her heated skin.

The metal was cold, so so cold despite being submerged in the warm water surrounding her for so long. Mollie shivered as she felt the coolness of the metal begin to dissipate slowly towards her blazing skin. The small patch of skin where it lay began to cool and Mollie gasped as the sensation sent her nerves spasming.

Micah quickly removed his fingers and leaned over to drain the tub.

“Iridium,” he said quietly lifting Mollie from the deep tub. “The most precious metal on the planet.”

Mollie looked up in surprise as Micah wrapped her in a towel and guided her towards a large wardrobe in another adjoining room.

She shuffled behind him, her hair plastered to her back and the towel pulled tight around her skinny frame.

“Iridium?” she repeated her eyebrows furrowed. “That’s just a myth.” Or so, that was what Mollie had been taught to believe.

Micah ignored her, his silence speaking volumes.

Mollie drew her gaze back to his fingers where the thick metal danced in the candlelit filled room of the prince’s chambers.

“Small aliquots of iridium glow blue in salt water.”

He continued as if uninterrupted, fluidly removing a flowing pale pink garment from the wardrobe in front of him. “It reacts with trace metals in the liquid emitting blue light.”

Mollie lowered herself into the chaise by the bed as Micah gestured for her to stand, a gown on his arm.

“But pure iridium...” Micah murmured.

Mollie stiffly stepped into the gown as Micah expertly set the expensive silk on her thin frame.

“Pure iridium glows red. But only in distilled water.”

Mollie sighed as he turned her this way and that, admiring the way the gown looked on her body. She heard him hum quietly to himself as he observed her closely.

“So your ring would glow red in DI water,” she clarified as Micah turned towards another grander wardrobe that was trimmed in gold.

Micah chuckled at her question as he pressed his ring into a small incision near the handles. Mollie watched the wardrobe open to reveal a wide array of expensive clothing from silks and bowties, and vests to cloaks, and coats, and cuffs.

“No Mollie,” he said with a smile reaching for something at the back of his wardrobe. “This ring is not pure iridium. It’s an alloy, so its mixed with other metals. Pure iridium cannot be found in these lands.”

He closed the wardrobe and Mollie heard the lock click into place.

“Where is it found?” she prodded watching him sift through the meticulously organized files atop his desk.

“In a place far away from here called *Devonis*, ” he explained loosely, his attention somewhat divided.

Devonis? That place sounded vaguely familiar to her.

“What’s so special about iridium?” she asked folding her hands in her lap.

Micah paused what he was doing and turned to look at her.

“The question Mollie Mae...is what makes someone special when in *possession* of iridium.” Mollie watched as he placed a heavy box on the table in front of him, his dark tousled curls falling over his brow as he fiddled with the object in his hand. “Iridium by itself isn’t special, it’s what we do with it...how we *wield* it that makes it special.”

Mollie furrowed her brow.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered watching him run his hand through his thick hair.

Micah smiled.

“Perhaps I can explain,” he said softly. He opened his palm towards her and Mollie watched his pale skin glisten in the candlelight. “This ring by itself is harmless,” he mused brushing his fingers against Mollie’s exposed arm. “But if I were to soak this ring in arsenic, throw it into the fire maybe, submerge it in snake venom...it absorbs that element. It harbours it... *sequesters* it.”

Mollie was staring hard at his hands as he slowly moved his fingers down her wrist to interlace his fingers with hers. An involuntary shudder went down her spine as she started accusingly at the metal band that lay on his pinky finger.

“How do you know all this?” she whispered lifting her eyes to his.

“The power of iridium is no secret Mollie,” he said with a sigh. “It’s been studied for years.”

“So that’s what Rowan does all day?” she pressed prying her fingers from his.

He chuckled darkly when Mollie said this and she watched as he promptly turned around towards the doors to his chamber.

“Oh Rowan is simply one of many who study the wonders of iridium. And he certainly won’t be the last.”

Mollie frowned when she heard this. Things were beginning to piece together for her. She had remembered what that prisoner had said before Micah killed him. Something about the Insurgency knowing...but not being able to obtain it? Mollie was convinced they were referring to iridium. But why? Why couldn’t they synthesise it on Southern land? Why hadn’t the Insurgency mentioned iridium when they had sent Mollie here?

But the Ophians...they fucked with us...told us it could be synthesised on Southern land organically...but that wasn’t the case.

Mollie knew of the Ophian Empire. They were a small subset of the Eastern population who lived on the westernmost point of the Eastern peninsula. They were a militant creed. A dying race but somehow in possession of iridium. Mollie could only *imagine* what kind of politics must be occurring now that iridium was an element native to their land. No wonder the Lyons were always making trips to the East. They sought iridium. And it sounded like they weren’t the only ones after it.

“What you said before...” Mollie murmured, “About altruism...what did you mean by that?” She was in the middle of bunching her thick hair up into a bun, and she watched as Micah paused for a moment and perched on the edge of his desk, his interest reignited.

“Leave it down,” he said softly.

Mollie stopped her movements and quickly lowered her arms, their gazes entwined as her hair fell thick and heavy down her shoulders.

“A quick death is a luxury in these lands Mollie. No matter what kind of citizen you are.”

“But that one prisoner helped you,” she argued her fingers flexing. “And you still killed him – even after *everything* he told-”

“He was weak,” Micah said flatly. He had reached over and began to tie a silk blue ascot around his throat. “And there’s no place for the weak here.”

Mollie was at a loss for words as she stared fiercely at the prince doing little to hide her frustration. Micah continued his motions fluidly, taking his time to adjust his collar, straighten his cuffs and smooth his hair all while coolly ignoring her.

“It’s useless,” the voice in the back of her mind told her. *“It’s useless arguing with someone who refuses to see the wrong in his actions.”*

Micah gave her a rather sly look as she braced herself against the soft cushioned chair.

“You’re simply delectable when you’re angry Mollie Mae” he said with a soft laugh. Mollie frowned as he walked swiftly to the door his sharp features on full display as he brushed his

thick hair to the side.

Micah rapped his knuckles sharply against the doors to his chamber which opened swiftly to reveal two young female servants. They each bowed deeply before bringing in several platters of stainless steel silverware and trays towards a large but fairly long table on the opposite end of Micah's spacious quarters. He dismissed them with a wave as they scuttled out of his room as swiftly as they entered. The enticing scent of warm bread and roasted herbs filled Mollie's senses and she felt her stomach growl. She still felt rather ill from what she had witnessed earlier in the day but Mollie needed to stay strong. And that meant taking any opportunity offered to her to maintain her health, even if she had to swallow it down with revulsion.

Micah was quick as he set up a dish for her at the table and guided her towards a chair. Mollie had grown accustomed to the prince's rather... unconventional meal schedule and she said nothing as he sat opposite her from the table, the only thing in front of him his black leather gloves. In spite of knowing some of his bizarre habits she still felt obligated to question him. It felt wrong not to.

"Are you not eating anything?" Mollie asked the prince as he seated himself opposite from her on the small table.

"I'm fine," he said dismissively turning his face away from the food.

Mollie looked down at the plate in front of her. Her plate was filled as usual with more food than she could possibly finish. No matter how much she protested, Micah was hellbent on filling her up, always commenting on how frail and skinny she was.

"Why don't you eat in public?" she asked curiously twirling her fork in the pureed vegetables on her plate. "Do you have something to hide?"

Mollie saw his lips turn into a half smile as he regarded her across the table.

"Everyone has something to hide."

Mollie bit her lip as she considered this. He was changing the subject, gradually but definitively.

"Sure they do," she said casually bring a forkful to her mouth and chewing slowly. She swallowed as Micah watched her, his eyes soft but calculated. "But you didn't answer the question. In fact...you didn't answer both questions I asked."

Micah sighed when she said this and she watched as he reached forward for the two lone goblets in the middle of the table.

"I have a very...particular way I like my meals prepared..."

Mollie watched him pour himself a glass of wine from the bottle that was placed at the centre of the table. The dark red liquid flowed into the ornate glass and Mollie watched his movements. Not a drop was spilled as he closed the bottle and reached for the second goblet.

The colour of the wine reminded her of blood – deoxygenated blood, a few shades darker than its oxygen filled counterpart. She remembered the blood that had lined the walls of that horrible underground prison...the texture...the *smell*.

Mollie's eyes flashed to his and she was shaking her head as he reached for the second goblet.

"None for me," she mumbled, the wine reminding her of flowing blood. He had offered her red wine before and she disliked its bitterness.

Micah laughed when she said this and she watched as he opened a second bottle and poured another clear-ish liquid into the second goblet.

"Red wine does not go well with fish Mollie," he said as if her refusal of the drink was to be expected. "It is complimented well by white."

She sat quietly as he lifted himself from his seat and brought the goblet towards her, placing it beside her plate.

He had a knowing smile on his face.

"You dislike red. I remember."

Mollie believed he was referring to their previous dinner in the parlour.

Mollie turned her gaze back toward her food and watched him return to his seat. He had a smug look on his face.

"You were saying?" she said tersely suddenly emboldened by his calm demeanour.

His lips pursed but he remained jovial.

"I have a preferential way of planning my meals...what I eat, when I eat. Differences in the way certain foods are conventionally made."

Mollie found herself fighting a smile when she heard this in spite of herself.

"So you're basically saying you're a picky eater?"

Micah paused and she quickly gauged his reaction. His half smile had returned.

"I suppose you can say that."

Mollie felt as if there was another layer beneath his statement but she let it go. She didn't want to push it.

"You...owned a bakery if I remember correctly," he said softly taking a sip from his goblet. "What were your specialties?"

Mollie had finished picking at her meal at this point and she carefully set her cutlery down. The bakery brought back a lot of memories for her. Memories she'd prefer not to re-visit... but she supposed it was a two-way street and no good deed went forgotten... especially with the prince.

"Well-," she started, her eyes glued to her plate. "Our specialty was macarons. People used to line up for hours outside. Oftentimes we just had to turn them away after we sold out."

She trailed off and looked up at Micah. His brow was furrowed and he seemed interested. It was hard for Mollie to tell.

"What was your favourite thing to bake?"

Mollie laughed humourlessly at his question. "I'm surprised you care enough to ask," she said airily tucking her curled hair behind her ear.

Micah didn't seem perturbed and he responded back swiftly.

"I'm surprised you think I don't. I thought you a better judge of character than that Mollie."

She frowned at his response and fixed her eyes on his goblet instead. She shifted under his gaze, choosing to ignore the comment.

"I liked the croissants," she said eventually, opting to answer his question from before. "I liked making the sweet ones over the savoury," she explained flexing her knuckles. "There's so much more to explore with the sweet ones...whether you'll ganache them, fill them...coat them."

She bit her lip when looked across the table. He had the most intense stare, it made her feel bare and self conscious.

"What about you?" she asked quickly shifting in her seat. "What desserts do you like?"

Mollie told herself she didn't really care about the personal preferences of a spoiled prince, but she needed to shift the conversation away from herself. She worried when he put her on the spot like that. She tended to let her mouth run loose before her mind could process what she was saying.

Micah tilted his head softly to the side when he considered the question.

"I don't care much for sweets," he murmured tapping his fingers against the goblet in front of him.

Mollie listened to him tap the glass for some time as she ate, the clinking echoing through the room as a soft breeze billowed in from the open doors of his balcony. When he spoke again, his voice had gone even softer.

"My father once told me my mother was rather fond of *croquembouche*. I suppose if I were to choose a sweet dish, that would be it."

Mollie looked up at him with surprise. He never mentioned his mother. It was a topic that Mollie had quickly figured out was dangerous territory. Yet here he was, throwing his mother into such a casual conversation with Mollie.

“Does your father talk about her much?” Mollie murmured her brown eyes locked on the pale knuckles surrounding the prince’s goblet.

“No.”

Mollie swallowed uneasily at the sharpness of his tone.

“Shall we?” he said brusquely slipping on his gloves and adjusting the cloak around his neck. “You’re done eating.”

Mollie sighed and pushed herself to her feet, the silky pale pink gown sliding down her long legs.

“Wait.”

Mollie froze at his sharp tone as Micah approached her from behind. She could feel his cool breath on the back of her neck and she glanced in the round mirror beside the grand wardrobe as he brought his gloved hands to her bare shoulders and squeezed lightly.

“You’re almost ready,” he breathed against her neck.

Carefully, as if she were made of aged glass, he brought his arms above her and placed something thin and cold against her neck. Mollie looked down to see a beautiful silvery blue necklace against her bronzed skin. At the edge of her collarbone above the arch that lead to her breasts was a single letter.

M.

Mollie stared at the jewellery in the mirror and she shivered at the coolness against her blazing skin. She didn’t want to think about how expensive this must be.

The prince turned her around and admired the necklace that glittered on her chest.

“*Ça te va bien,*”* he murmured giving Mollie’s shoulders another firm squeeze. “Now the world will know who you belong to.”

Mollie turned to look at him, her throat constricting. She touched her fingers to the *M* and felt Micah’s gloved fingers mirror her actions, his gloved hand pressing down on her own against her chest. Mollie stared at his glazed green eyes in the mirror but what she saw filled her with a strong sense of anger...frustration. His eyes radiated possession, authority...dominion. She didn’t...she *couldn’t* seem to find an ounce of tenderness within them. She swallowed thickly and felt heat course through her veins. He had branded her once already, with a scar etched into her neck that was there to stay...now he wanted her to wear his initial around her throat? This was too much.

“It belonged to my mother,” he said suddenly his green eyes glistening. “She had it made for me before I was born.”

Mollie felt her breath catch in her throat when he said this and all of the furious things she had planned to spew at him fell with it. Micah didn’t have to say how he felt about his mother, his voice and his body language told it all.

Mollie felt a lot of emotions course through her. Her cheeks blazed and her stomach flopped in spite of the gesture. He had...caught her off guard.

“Mic-,” she stopped herself as she started at the glimmering *M* in the mirror. “Master Lyon... I can’t...I can’t wear this.”

He turned her around and Mollie felt her chest constrict at the expression on his face.

“Of course you can,” he murmured. “And you will.”

“Why?” she whispered.

Why would he give HER something this precious? Why didn’t he save it for his future wife? What did Mollie have that made him so enraptured with her? She was just a regular country girl after all.

“Because you’re mine,” he whispered. He placed a light lingering kiss at the corner of her mouth. “Wear it proud Mollie Mae, not everyone gets the privilege of wearing such precious heirlooms of the Lyon family...” Mollie shuddered at his soft musical tone and the longing hungry glint in his pale eyes. “But I’ll make an exception for you. Your beauty is unparalleled, and it shouldn’t be hidden, it should be put on display for all to see.”

His eyes met hers in the mirror across from them as Mollie’s breaths caused their hands to rise and fall with each motion of her chest.

“We’re a perfect match Mollie,” he breathed. “You...You make me feel...” he stopped and Mollie watched as he struggled to piece his thoughts again. His grip loosened ever so slightly and Mollie tensed beneath him. “You make me *feel* again.”

The emotion in his voice stirred something deep within Mollie, something she didn’t want to acknowledge. He had turned his gaze away from her, his thick waves obscuring her view of his face.

“For so long...I felt...empty...hollow. But you...there’s something about you Mollie... something that just..”

His breaths had picked up and Mollie could feel him tremble behind her. He was silent... silent for so long...breathing her scent in, alternating between squeezing and smoothing her bare shoulders.

“Micah?” she asked tentatively, her voice breaking the silent aura that hung around the room.

“Hmm?” he responded swiftly his nose brushing her jaw.

“Why were you upset that day...that day in your chambers when-?” Mollie trailed off as she struggled to complete her question.

That day you almost threw me off your balcony and fucked me till I screamed. The day your back was covered in bloody scars.

Micah sighed. The memory must have been resurfacing in his mind as well and Mollie bit her lip as he took a step back from her. The necklace bumped lightly against her chest, the metal still cold.

He walked slowly towards the centre of the room, his steps not making a sound in spite of the cool tiled floor.

“My father returns tonight,” he murmured quietly. “And with his return comes my acquiescence.”

“Oh,” Mollie said quietly. She wasn’t quite sure how to respond to him but the dull lifeless tone in his voice conveyed a lot more than his few words. Mollie suspected he was building up to something, still deciding whether he wanted to divulge that information to her. She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. “He doesn’t let you make your own decisions?”

Micah let out a short humourless laugh. “That’s putting it lightly Mollie Mae,” he said with a slight shake of his head.

Mollie pursed her lips for a second before she responded. She dreaded the dinner this evening and Micah had told her earlier that his father would be present.

“I guess it would be wishful thinking to hope he doesn’t make it back tonight,” she said dryly.

He looked at her for a moment and she quickly gauged his reaction.

“If only,” he murmured moving away from her to perch on the edge of his wide desk that spanned the west side of his chambers. He faced her casually, his gloved hands lightly resting on the dark wood as his cloak fluttered behind him from the open windows of his balcony. The breeze played with his dark locks and Mollie noticed he was losing the light streaks that were there when she first saw him. His hair seemed darker now...creeping on the edges of chestnut like his brothers.

Mollie didn’t want to admit it, but at that moment... she felt something towards Micah... something stronger than the primal urge to hate him. It was there and she could feel it no matter how hard she tried to deny it. There was something...*something* deep inside her that wanted to protect him... and another part that wanted to pummel him to the ground and bury him six feet under. It was conflicting but Mollie knew what she had to do.

She had to let go of him, and the emotions she harboured towards the prince, regardless of whether they *were* good or bad.

She would be gone in a matter of days and the sooner she left without any loose ends and feelings the easier it would be for her. Once she was beyond the borders of the Lyon regime

she could finally live her life.

The taste of freedom was so near.

Mollie *should* keep quiet, let her last few days here be as painless and as insensitive as possible. Now, at a time when it was most prevalent for the prince to stay silent he was speaking. If she were smart and proactive she would keep her mouth shut...stay silent and obedient as Micah wanted her to be.

Or did he?

That silent voice in her mind kept creeping back and casting a shadow of doubt on her ability to make sound decisions. Mollie remembered how aroused Micah got when she challenged him, how he nipped at her breast when she got to “mouthy” with him. Perhaps there was some truth to those hidden feelings.

She should stay silent and insensitive. Silent and obedient...she shouldn't let her mind wander....she should *not* ask any more questions -

“What will happen to you after all of this?”

He blinked at her for a moment and his brow furrowed slightly.

“After all of what?”

Mollie internally kicked herself. She had started digging the hole and now she had to finish it.

“I don't know...” she hesitated. “For the future I guess. Would you ever get married? Move away from here?”

The question was forward and hung in the air for quite some time. Mollie had killed her persona of not caring...if it even ever existed at all.

“We all reach that point at some time in our lives don't we?”

Mollie looked away and shifted on her feet, her heels digging uncomfortably into her ankles. She had never imagined that kind of life for herself. She persevered through the hardest parts of her life on her own and she would continue to do that on her own. She didn't need anybody but herself to carry her through.

“You told me the other night...that you didn't want this...any of this—that you didn't want to lead this monarchy. Did you mean that?”

Mollie was getting more bold as the late afternoon lapsed into evening and she watched Micah's eyes flit from hers towards the open sky.

“Did I?” he asked softly. He sounded distracted and Mollie figured this was his way of deviating from the subject.

“You did,” she said flatly tucking her hair behind her ears. “I remember.”

He didn't respond and Mollie watched as he played with the silver pocketwatch on his waistcoat.

She wondered why he always carried it around. She wondered what was inside of it. She had seen fancy pocketwatches in the windows of the wealthier parts of Charterly and many of them held photos or other gadgets when unclasped. She was sure Micah's did the same.

"Why don't you just leave?" she said with frustration slamming her hands forward on the small vanity table. The mirror rattled slightly at the force of her action and she saw Micah's head turn towards her.

He was a prince. *A prince.*

Mollie had no doubt there was some kind of leverage or power he could use to further his own needs and wants. There must be. Why he hadn't acted on them yet baffled her...angered her.

Micah was still and gracious as he watched her. Barely acknowledging her burst of anger.

"You ask all the wrong questions you know that Mollie?"

She locked her jaw and crossed her arms when she heard this. His voice was so calm and lulling, like he was almost making fun of her. She narrowed her eyes at him.

He brushed his collar briefly and adjusted his cloak so it fell behind his shoulders lightly, resting just below his long leather boots.

"Being born into the Lyon family means you are obligated to put certain monarchical duties before your own. We have our freedoms to a certain degree, but in some...rather seemingly conventional aspects-- we don't."

He paused and Mollie regarded him warily. Her attitude was still sour after he lambasted her only moments before.

"I always wanted to live away from the spotlight, away from the heart of the city...in the country side maybe," he looked at Mollie when he said this and swiftly away towards the setting sun. "Own a farm...harvest my own crops...live a simple life...enjoy the riches of what the natural elements of the earth have to offer."

Mollie was silent as she listened to him muse. She felt her face grow all hot as she listened to him. Had she read him wrong from the beginning? She had to pinch herself to make sure she was hearing these same words from the same heartless prince she had grown accustomed to.

"Is-Is that why you didn't want to be CEO?" she asked carefully. She was cognizant of his emotions as she asked her question, ensuring his features remained placid.

"Yes," he said warily running his gloved fingers through his hair. "Puts my own desires a little farther down the list," he added rather tiredly.

“But...maybe...maybe it *could* still happen,” she said quietly refusing to make eye contact with him. “I mean if you somehow hand the position over to someone else.” Her eyes had fallen to the plush rug that lay in the middle of the frigid marble floored bedroom, the only sliver of warmth in the otherwise wintry room.

Micah smiled at this.

“To whom exactly?” he asked, the amusement apparent on his face.

“I don’t know,” Mollie hesitated. She was not familiar with the rules of the monarchy, particularly when it came to how power was distributed. “Your brother perhaps? He seemed like he wanted it anyway.”

Mollie was referring to James. She didn’t even like saying his name out loud, the feel of it like acid on her tongue.

Micah cocked his head to one side when he heard this.

“What makes you think that?”

His tone was curious, not conveying even the slightest morsel of animosity.

“I saw him in the ballroom that day,” she explained, those dark menacing brown eyes flashing in her mind. She remembered the way his lips curled in disgust when Micah’s name was called out on that podium. “He looked like...like he wanted to... lunge for your throat.”

Mollie was surprised when Micah laughed out loud. He seemed to enjoy watching Mollie choose her words when it came to the topic of his family.

“You have a gift for expression Mollie Mae, that’s for sure,” he added with another short laugh.

Mollie felt her cheeks blaze but she didn’t back down. She knew what she saw, no matter how much Micah downplayed it.

“I suppose I could always hand the position over to an heir,” his voice had softened when he said this and Mollie watched his eyes flicker back to her. The laughter had faded and something in his expression put her on edge. She felt uncomfortable and she looked away, her palms had begun to sweat.

“That night,” she said abruptly playing with a loose curl that had fallen over her shoulder.

“Yes that night,” he said monotonously. “I had a disagreement with my father.”

He stopped there and Mollie could tell by the firm shape of his lips that he wasn’t going to expand on it.

Mollie could only *begin* to imagine what elaborate punishment Hartley must come up with. After all, it was *his* idea to deter bad behaviour in society with public punishments. Mollie

also remembered the pride that shone in Hartley's eyes when he spoke about his ancestors, particularly the ones that developed the *guillotine*. It made Mollie sick to her stomach.

"I'm assuming that doesn't happen very often," Mollie said softly, so softly she wasn't even sure if he heard her.

He straightened up rather quickly and looked outside briefly before walking towards the door of his chambers.

"As you know Mollie Mae...you break the rules you get punished. Simple as that."

His tone had turned hard and Mollie bit her lip when he said this and decided to leave it at that. She wondered why he always tried to justify such reprehensible actions. It was as if Micah Lyon teetered on the edge of ethics and wrongdoing with full knowledge of the repercussions of both avenues. Yet he continued to lean towards the side that hurt him the most.

She shook her head and filtered these thoughts out. It was not the time to decipher such matters. She had a Lyon dinner to get through and a prince breathing down her neck. She had to play it smart. She knew what to expect this time and with Hartley at the table she couldn't mess up.

The prince stood by the door, still, sublime, and as cold as the glacial winds that swept through the north. His arm was held out, an invitation for her to join him. Mollie took a deep breath and pushed herself forward.

"And I reckon by now you *know* the rules Mollie."

Mollie sensed the hidden threat in his words and she looked down glumly at the floor and nodded.

It was going to be a long night.

As usual Micah was one of the last to join the guests at the table and Mollie mirrored his every action as he slid into his regular spot at the end. Mollie was seated to his left and she was quick to glue her eyes to the dark wood and avoid making eye contact with those on the opposite end. At the edges of her vision she caught site of the full table and ignored the stares that followed her as she sunk into her seat. The murmurs stopped and began again once Micah had reached for his goblet.

"*Ma chérie.*"

Mollie knew that soft mocking lilt and her eyes met the deep dark gaze of Rowan Lyon.

"How's the hand?"

His tone was far from soft and concerning but Mollie still looked at Micah before responding. He was speaking quietly with someone to his right and Mollie shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“Fine,” she said caustically. She was obligated to respond to a royal if addressed directly and she figured meeting his gaze was acceptable.

When she looked at him she stole a glance to his left and spotted an older greying man beside the prince and an empty seat to his right. She swallowed thickly at the empty gold goblet and vacant seat beside the middle Lyon.

James.

He wasn’t here yet but Mollie still found goosebumps erupting on her arms just contemplating seeing him again.

“Father is that way Mollie,” he said with a predatory smirk. He had changed clothes from when she had seen him earlier. He had an airy navy collared shirt on along with dark slacks. His gloves, although a shade darker than his shirt, complimented the coat that hung lightly from the back of his chair. He also had his hair tousled today, a change from the usually carefully gelled and styled hair he opted for.

She frowned at him as he winked at her and she dropped her gaze, trying instead to listen to the other conversations around the table. It was a mixture of French and English and Mollie was straining to listen. Maybe they’d say something about the prisoners? Something about Isaac? Something about the Insurgency? But if only she could filter out the unnecessary chatter and hone in on what she wanted to hear.

If the Insurgency could see her now, she wondered what they’d think. She was at the heart of what they craved. Directly in the middle of conversations between the elite and the leaders of the regime, no doubt discussing plans that would be of utmost important to them. And yet here she was... alone, and unable to use any of her advantages to further theirs or her own pursuits.

“Don’t worry Mollie, a little glance won’t hurt. I’m sure Father won’t notice.”

Her head snapped up again at Rowan’s whisperings from across the table and she shrunk backwards in her chair.

“Go on,” he whispered leaning in closer. The darkness in his eyes were pools of molten coal and the candlelit table did little to lessen the insidious ambiance.

“Take a look.”

His whisper was harsh and Mollie flexed her fingers beneath the table. She had her wits together, she could handle him.

She met his gaze as fiercely as she could and turned her eyes to the right towards the centre of attention in the room.

Hartley Lyon had an aura to him that exuded effortless sophistication. Even in the heart of the aged shadowed dining room did he seem to radiate light and garner attention. Mollie had only opted to steal a glance but she found herself staring as his full pink lips curved into a smile as

he turned towards the person on his right. His thick dark hair was styled and combed into a neat side part atop his head and he wore a gold and maroon coloured waistcoat adorned with velvet lining, silk ties, and lace trim. The crimson coloured ascot around his throat reminded Mollie of blood and she felt her stomach clench in knots. His dark lifeless eyes were set on the man to his left and Mollie watched as he placed his hand atop a scribbled piece of parchment on the table, his long pale fingers tapping the document lightly making the many rings that adorned his fingers glimmer in the tinted room. In spite of herself Mollie found herself drawn to the person sitting beside Hartley, to his left.

The first thing Mollie noticed was that she was a woman, the only other woman at the table apart from her and she perked up. The woman was beautiful with a large jet black afro that framed her sharp features and smooth rich skin the colour of deep mahogany. She was also dressed in gold, with a slinky gown that held her full breasts and displayed her prominent collarbone. The woman reminded Mollie of her mother in the most bizarre of circumstances and she felt tears prick her eyes. A sharp squeeze of a hand on her thigh startled her and she was quickly met with frigid pale green eyes. The anger was there but almost immediately, his brow furrowed and Mollie blinked the dampness away. The hand on her thigh loosened ever so lightly and Mollie felt a soft squeeze replace the hard knuckles that were digging into her flesh. It was hard to say whether this was an act of comfort by the youngest prince or whether he was simply adjusting himself as he turned his attention back to the guests seated at the table. Regardless, Mollie felt significantly calmer.

The empty seat on the opposite side of the table seemed like an elephant in the room and Mollie didn't miss how men kept turning their gaze towards it as if someone were sitting there. Mollie would never forget the blond hot-headed Logan Lyon. In spite of his death, his presence still felt stronger than ever.

The elegant lady at the head of the table was murmuring quietly to Hartley and Mollie wondered what they were discussing and what her business here was. She was not from these parts...but her dressing and her natural graciousness suggested she was rich...elite.

"Bof! There he is!"

Mollie felt her heart sink when her least favourite person entered the room. He nodded as several men stood up from their seats to acknowledge his presence. James was swift and composed when he entered and his all black attire gave him a threatening ambience. Micah didn't even turn his head and Mollie watched from beneath her lashes as he took his seat beside Rowan and began to shake hands with the man to his left.

"No wine for me?" James asked jovially his dark eyes meeting another guest across from him as he gestured to the empty goblet in front of him.

*"Ah! Je me charge de ça."**

Mollie followed his movements using her hair as a screen for her vision and watched as the man across from him filled his goblet with a liquid as dark as his suit.

*"Quoi donc?"**

“Malt,” said another raspy voice from an older white haired gentleman at the end of the table.

“*Et là?*”

“*Eau de vie.*”*

There were so many people speaking at once with so many transitions in language and Mollie could feel her head swimming. James didn’t steal a glance at her in the slightest and it was as if she weren’t even a speck of dust on the table. Mollie preferred it this way and she stayed silent, feeling most out of place as these rich people bantered back and forth.

Mollie instead watched the youngest prince. He had settled on his usual drink of choice, the dark whiskey in his glass, but Mollie figured this was more for show than anything. He spoke when spoken to and remained silent much like her, his pale eyes following the men around the room.

Mollie felt her breath catch when the man at the head of the table put his hand in the air, a gesture to halt all further conversations.

“*Silence.*”

It was as if time stood still itself and Mollie held her breath as the eldest member of the Lyon monarchy addressed his guests.

“Now that we are all present there is quite a lot to discuss.”

His tone was crisp and sharp with any remnants of his accent disappearing at once. There was a soft murmur that resounded around the table and Mollie watched Rowan’s eyes flicker between James and his father.

“Why don’t you fill us in James?”

In spite of his cordial tone Mollie sensed a hint of coldness in Hartley’s voice and she quickly flitted her eyes to James, his smile going stale.

“Of course. Gentleman, *Monsieur, Mademoiselle Rineau.*”

James’ tone was identical to his fathers with a hint of huskiness which Mollie attributed to his tardiness. He seemed frustrated... if not a little forced and Mollie watched as he tucked a loose dark curl behind his ear.

“There has been little turmoil in the *Soirée Crest* these days since I have taken over my late uncle’s duties. In spite of this transition, I still feel it necessary to limit access in and out of the West for at least another 6 months-“

He was cut off by another man across from him who Mollie realized quickly seemed to have quite the short fuse.

“*On ne peut pas attendre!*”*

Mollie realized the man's face had gone red and he looked as if he were ready to jump out of his seat. James' mouth twitched slightly at being interrupted but he continued nonetheless.

"We *must* wait. Exports and imports can continue... but crossing the borders is strictly prohibited until *I* deem it acceptable."

The man slammed his glass on the table and faced James with a menacing stare.

*"Ces tactiques indignes n'ont pas marché par le passé, pas plus qu'elles ne marcheront à l'avenir."**

James narrowed his eyes and Mollie could see him slowly losing his cool.

*"Permettez-moi de dire que je ne partage pas ces deux points de vue."**

James's voice was icy and blunt and she watched the man across from him retreat slightly. His chair squeaked as he returned to his seat.

*"En Anglais s'il vous plait."**

Hartley's voice dominated over them all and she watched as he placed his non-gloved hand atop the table and rested his gloved hand delicately atop the woman beside him. The woman had a smug expression on her face and Mollie wondered what warranted such a reaction from her. She seemed completely at ease, as if she conversed with testosterone fuelled men on a daily basis and was confident in her ability to win them all over.

"Your border issues do little to placate me James. My interest is in the shipment."

Mollie's ears perked up when she heard this and she saw Hartley's eyes turn to his middle son.

On cue, Rowan turned towards his father, his voice clear and confident.

"Shipment is much harder from *Devonis* to the South. It makes sense to keep the material as close to its origins as possible."

The rest of the guests had gone silent and Rowan's eyes flickered to Micah's for a split second before resting on his father's.

"It would be more practical...more *prudent* to send it North."

James fist slammed down onto the table and Mollie jumped at the sudden noise.

"No."

He did nothing less than snarl at his brother but Rowan kept his cool demeanour. He looked rather shrewdly around the table before resting his brown eyes on his youngest brother.

*"T'en penses quoi, Micah?"**

Mollie could feel the eyes of every person at the table turn towards the youngest prince and she felt her throat constrict.

Micah turned to his father and Mollie could see the coolness radiating off Hartley's impassive face. He was staring deadpan at his youngest son, his rings glinting in the candlelight. He had one similar to Micah's on his forefinger but with a large ruby in the centre, the colour of fresh blood.

"I think we should negotiate with them directly," Micah explained smoothly, his eyes meeting those around him. "Touch down on the shores of the Obsidian Desert and pick up our shipments directly. It's about time the Ophians stop calling the shots."

James laughed bitterly before Micah could even finish his sentence.

"What a brilliant idea dear brother," James said mockingly his lips curling into a sneer. "The minute our ships come in close proximity to those barbarians they'll obliterate us, just as they did to our ancestors."

There was a quiet murmur of agreement from the crowd as James shot his brother a withering look.

"That was a long time ago James," Rowan mused quietly taking a sip of his wine.

"Some things don't change. You should know that better than anyone Rowan."

The chiding remark came sharply and Mollie watched the icy exchange between Rowan and James. The tension in the room was unmistakable.

"I can negotiate a deal with them," Micah said swiftly his eyes on his father.

"Forgive me young prince," another quiet voice added from the table. "But this has been attempted before and we reached no agreement. In fact, we ended up on worse terms with the Ophians than before...."

"*Oui,*" said another man with a heavy accent. "They are not interested in negotiation. *Seulement le pouvoir.*"*"

The conversations around the table began to increase once again as disagreements erupted from several guests.

"We go with *my* idea," said another man more forcefully. "My army is quick, they'll pick up the shipment in no time."

"*Non. Il n'y a aucune garantie là dedans!*"*"

"*Donc, mon roi, que proposez-vous?*"*"

The conversations died down as the guests turned to look at Hartley.

He smiled secretively to himself, his dimples deep and pronounced on his cheeks. Mollie suddenly knew where Micah got those traits from.

“That’s a question you’ll have to ask the man in charge of trade.”

Mollie could practically hear the doubtfulness hanging in the air as many turned towards Micah. Some of them had poker faces but many looked sceptical.

“*Verdict?*”

“We make the trip to Obsidian Desert, ourselves, and pick up the shipment from their land,” Micah said crisply.

“And what if they mobilize before then?” said another voice from beside the prince.

Micah smiled at this and Mollie saw a glimpse of his father within his sharp features.

“Have you ever been to the Obsidian Lands *Grigoire?*”

The man looked quickly at Micah and his colleagues before he responded.

“*Bien sûr!* Many times my prince. Treacherous journey there and back. Damn near lost my life. Those wretched volcanoes and that dry cracked land is no place for the living.”

Micah paused as many men agreed with *Grigoire’s* statements.

“*Bien.* Then you’ll know the volcanoes border the perimeter of the land yes?”

“*Oui,*” said the man with a nod. “I suppose you can say that.”

Micah turned his attention to the others at the table who slowly inched their heads forward to hear what he had to say.

“Instead of previous attempts that involved docking on Ophian territory prior to negotiation, I propose our men anchor their ships close enough to their land so that they can see the border, but are far enough away from the land that they are adequately concealed by the volcanoes that border the perimeter.”

James scoffed when he heard this and Mollie watched as Micah turned his head to his brother, his eyes as deadpan as his fathers.

“And if they decide to initiate? Then what?”

“Surely you know that they have the high ground James,” Micah said smoothly. “They’ll wait for *us* to initiate.”

“But someone must still go and negotiate.” *Grigoire* argued. “If our fine men are on these ships-- far enough away from the dock...then they will not be able to make it in time to rescue those who decide to dock first...and if things go sour that’s a death sentence. The Ophians don’t take prisoners...those fucking barbarians.”

He slammed his fist on the table and muttered in a foreign language. His face was contorted in frustration and Mollie watched the silent apprehensive faces of the others around him.

Mollie was pretty sure the Lyons didn't take prisoners either but she sat still and quiet as she listened to these men formulate a plan.

"So who will go first and negotiate?" asked another dark haired man at the table.

"I will."

There was a collective gasp around the table as Micah spoke. "I, along with two other guards will dock first and negotiate with the Ophians. That way they will feel less threatened, perhaps be willing to sit down and strike a deal with us. It is much more beneficial to make them allies than it is to have them be our enemies as it has been for decades."

"Allies? They obliterated our men...and we theirs. What could possibly prompt them to ally with us?" asked another.

"My prince this is madness," said *Grigoire* with a shake of his head. "It is folly. You cannot dock with a mere two guards for protection. You won't make it to see another day my prince."

"No..." Rowan said slowly reaching for his glasses. "It is not implausible." He paused as he stared at his younger brother the gears in his mind working. "Micah is now CEO of trade, that constitutes him as a political leader. Killing him would be a direct initiation of war and the Ophians are a constitutional monarchy not an absolute one."

James was staring hard at his father as Hartley listened in silence, his eye movements the only sign that he was not just a statue at the table.

"They couldn't initiate a war even if things *did* go sour...not immediately anyway. It would have to go through several layers of red tape before that happened -- and that would take hours at least, days on average, a week at most. It would give us time to close in on them if things did go south."

There was a hush around the table as people considered this.

It was a good plan in Mollie's opinion and she listened intently to these men as they weighed these options against their own.

"We've tried negotiations in the past," James said slowly bringing his gloved hand to his brows in frustration as he rubbed his temples. "It didn't *work*."

"Of course it didn't," Micah said sharply addressing his brother. "You were the one negotiating after all."

James stood up and leaned over the table in a single fluid motion thrusting his dagger deep into the table with a sharp crack and shattering the goblets around them.

Mollie recoiled quickly, the wine splashing her skin and hair as she trembled at the scene taking place in front of her.

Micah stood up as quickly as his brother as James leaned over the table, his enormous frame shrouding the opposite end of the table in darkness. Their noses were inches apart and Mollie could see the ferocity glint within James' eyes as he eyed his brother hatefully, his nostrils flaring.

"I suppose we have it," Rowan said coolly ignoring his brothers and turning towards Hartley.

"Micah will negotiate with the Ophians on our next shipment and hopefully subsequent ones if things go well enough. We'll assemble our armies over the next few weeks and prepare for the travel."

"Perhaps it is best to make the travel from the North?" *Grigoire* asked promptly, taking a swig from his goblet. "I believe our weapons are in highest number in *Icedalar*."

"No," Micah said slowly easing back into his seat as he addressed the man. "We go from the South. Take the *Granar Strait* through *Les Crêtes de Bellême* mountain range. It is less treacherous."

"But a much *longer* journey is it not young prince?"

The voice brought a hush over the table as the woman in gold began to speak. Her lips were painted a dark red and matched her nails that were complimented by long slender fingers. She tapped her glass lightly as she spoke.

She looked at Mollie suddenly, her eyes staring deep into Mollie's, before turning back to the prince.

"I believe time is not in our hands at the moment, it might be best to go from *Icedalar*."

Micah was silent as he listened to the woman speak. She had a strong voice despite her slender frame.

"But you promised my people passage through your lands," Micah said curtly his pale eyes narrowing.

"And that I will honour," she said swiftly taking a sip from her goblet.

"You spent much of your childhood in the North did you not? Your training was there?"

"Yes," Micah said coldly.

Mollie could feel him stiffen beside her and she wondered why Micah seemed so keen to avoid the North. He seemed to be going out of his way to prevent any sort of travel from that place.

"You are the progeny of December am I right? Winter is in your bones young prince. You are better off making the journey where you trained. You know those lands better than anyone at this table."

There was a pregnant silence that followed this and Mollie watched as Micah toyed with the goblet in his left hand. His eyes were blank, void of all emotion-- but Mollie knew he was processing the woman's words, going over one plausible scenario after scenario.

"My people will send our forces to accompany you to the Obsidian Desert. Numbers will not be an issue."

She paused for a moment as people around the table murmured and whispered.

"We'll discuss my payment after this... negotiation takes place. For now, you have my word that our armies will merge for the duration of this journey."

Micah was quiet as the woman turned towards Hartley, her dark eyes shimmering in the shadowy room.

"I want to take the passage from the South," Micah said quietly his green eyes glinting as he turned towards his father.

Mollie could hear the strain in his voice and she watched as Hartley turned his emotionless eyes on Micah. She felt a clenching fear in her gut at the way Hartley's eyes bore into Micah's, as if he were taking him apart piece by piece from the inside out.

The room was more silent than ever, the only sound the constant *drip, drip* of wine hitting the floor from the spilled drinks splayed across the table.

"You will go from the North dear boy," Hartley said tonelessly, his voice soft and lulling and his lips barely moving. Mollie felt her insides turn to ice as she watched him speak. It was as if his lips were separated from the rest of his facial features and moved on their own accord. It was most unnerving and Mollie could feel her breaths stagger as she attempted to breathe normally. In spite of his soft lilting tone, Mollie would have preferred he snap the words at the prince. It was even more ominous when he spoke softly and Mollie felt as if each layer of his words carried with it a more foreboding chill.

"As *Ophélie* has mentioned, time is not on our hands. It would be best if you left for *Icedalar* tomorrow morning. I will ensure all arrangements are made."

Micah nodded at his father and turned his gaze towards his goblet, his gloved fingers tightening around the gold stem of the glass.

"I suppose a toast is in order. Our newest leader of the monarchy is off on his first journey after all."

James had a sinister smile on his face and Mollie disliked the way his fingers drummed against the wood.

"To our prince," James said a fresh goblet in his hand as he raised it to his brother. "May his journey be safe, his health in good hands, and his sword always be a stained blade."

Micah was quiet as his guests toasted in his honour before they happily drank from their full glasses. The gloved hand on Mollie's shoulder couldn't have come sooner and she happily

rose to her feet, grateful to be free of the stares of several foreign men around her.

“Micah,” said a swift voice from across the table. Mollie recognized Rowan’s voice and she heard a faint tinge of urgency within it.

His eyes flickered to Mollie and she could see the scepticism in his eyes. It was a look of overt mistrust and she looked back at Rowan coldly.

*“Un moment s’il te plait mon frère.”**

Rowan gestured for Micah to step outside and she was automatically pulled by the arm as Micah clutched her wrist firmly, dragging her away from the frigid dining area and out into the cool spacious atrium.

After turning several corners Mollie almost walked straight into the prince as he faced his brother against the hallway adorned with old paintings. There were no guards here as far as Mollie could see and she shivered at the dark hallway in front of her as Rowan glared at his brother.

“I hope you know what this means Micah,” he said coolly his usually easy going demeanour replaced with something hard and cold.

Micah said nothing as his brother confronted him. He sighed as he let go of Mollie’s wrist.

Rowan’s eyes flickered to Mollie and for the first time she saw the blatant look of distaste in his eyes.

*“Elle doit partir Micah,”** he said sternly his eyes fixed on his younger brother.

Rowan didn’t look at Mollie again but she had a faint feeling that whatever the subject matter was, had nothing to do with Micah’s position anymore and everything to do with her. Her French was limited but she was slowly picking up on it the more time she spent here. Micah ran a hand through his hair and Mollie watched his thick hair fall over onto his brow as he acknowledged his brother.

*“Cela a assez duré,”** Rowan said coldly.

Micah seemed irritated and Mollie looked between the two of them in trepidation, unsure of what was to follow.

“Why the sudden interest Rowan?” Micah said rather disinterested.

Rowan narrowed his eyes at Micah’s stiff reply and Mollie watched his frown deepen.

“You know why.”

Voices began to filter in from further down the hall and Rowan’s eyes flickered upwards then back to Micah in seconds. Mollie could see his displeasure increase tenfold.

“Father won’t be happy,” Rowan murmured softly his thick brows furrowing. “There are too many ways this will end badly brother, mark my words.”

Micah smiled softly and Mollie winced as he wrapped his gloved hand around her own.

*“En effet, trop de fins possible...mais toutes les mêmes,”** Micah said softly his face inching closer to his brother.

*“Cela signifie?”** Rowan said softly raising an eyebrow.

*“Qu’il n’y a qu’un seul dénouement auquel il ne s’attend pas,”** Micah said promptly. Mollie watched in silence as Micah stepped even closer to his brother, their noses almost brushing.

“And I like those odds.”

With that he pulled Mollie forward sharply and began dragging her behind him, his footsteps echoing through the hall as Rowan watched them disappear into the dark hallway, his expression unfathomable and his stance as still and as discernible as a flickering lighthouse in the eye of a raging storm.

Chapter End Notes

Translations in Order:

*It suits you

*I'll take care of it

*What's that?

*Eau de vie = Cognac

*We can't wait

*These unworthy tactics have not worked in the past and will not work in the future

*I beg to differ on both points.

*In English please

*What do you think Micah?

*Only power

*There is no guarantee for that

*Then my King, what do you propose?

*One moment please brother

*She has to go Micah

*This has gone on long enough

*Indeed, too many endings...but all the same

*Which means?

*There is only one ending that he won't expect

Just a reminder this is fiction and iridium does NOT have all the properties depicted in this story

Chapter 26: Fer

Chapter Summary

Mollie is desperately awaiting her freedom from Questershire. But her time spent with Micah reveals something a lot more sinister is at play.

Mollie was trying to steady her breaths.

She had only *just* gotten her bearings following the rather eventful dinner before Micah had pulled her into a secluded room in the manor and slammed her against the gold trimmed wall. He didn't even wait for them to make it back to his quarters.

She could barely catch her breath as he unbuckled his slacks and bunched Mollie's dress around her hips to expose her from the waist down. There was a desperation to his actions and Mollie was frozen as Micah maneuvered her into the room. He rested her head between two paintings on the far wall and inserted himself between her thighs so his cock nestled against the space between her legs.

"Micah," she breathed as he groaned against her neck. His body was pressed tightly against hers, his sharp narrow hips fitting snugly against her lean skinny frame. Mollie was suddenly struck by how well their bodies fit...*moulded* against each other and she couldn't help the sigh that left her lips as he brought his cold gloved hands against the blazing flesh of her thighs.

Mollie shuddered as Micah brushed his two fingers against her slit, the moisture leaking onto her thighs. She looked up into the dead blank stares of the painted faces that were staring at her from around the room. They all had that cold, indiscernible look to them --the same one she saw in Hartley's eyes and the same one she saw in the man in front of her. It made her skin prickle with unease. She told herself they were just paintings...but something about their eyes, and their stiff stances made Mollie feel as if each of them were watching her now. Judging her...shaming her.

"*Mollie Mae*," Micah breathed his cool breath fanning her chest as he sunk his fingers into her wet centre.

"Micah," she said more forcefully. His fingers were making the pleasure waves wrack her brain and leaving her disoriented. "St-Stop.."

He slapped a hand harshly against her lips, the feel of cold leather against her face snapping her out of her pleasure induced haze.

His eyes were hard and solid as they bore into hers and she could feel his hard insistent cock pressing against her lower abdomen.

“Bite,” he said softly. The smooth leather of his gloved fingers inched closer against her lips and slowly he began to trace the outline.

Mollie acquiesced out of fear and she gently bit on the edge of glove to free his hand of the expensive material. His fingers brushed gently against her cheek and she closed her eyes as he switched hands so his exposed fingers pressed against her slit and his gloved one returned to cup her head.

Mollie looked fearfully at the open doorway, her fear of getting caught overtaking her desire to succumb to the pleasure.

“Micah,” she whispered as she writhed against his hard lean body. His fingers were like icy raindrops against her flesh and they slowly inched their way deeper and deeper into her slick channel.

“*Micah*,” she whispered more forcefully stiffening under his touch. This seemed to get his attention and Mollie watched as he opened his eyes and stilled in front of her.

“Someone...” she hesitated. She felt whoreish standing there in front of him with her cheeks blazing, her legs straddling him, and her dress bunched haphazardly around her hips. Mollie knew there was a reason he always dressed her *sans* underwear. He revelled in being able to expose her so readily. “Someone might see.”

Micah looked behind him, as if only realizing now that the door to the barren room they had entered was wide open. He looked back at her, his expression unreadable and Mollie braced herself against the wall.

“Does that make you nervous?” he whispered. His fingers were still halfway penetrated in her folds and she moaned as he twisted them sharply before pulling them out slowly. She squirmed and sighed in spite of herself and the motion jerked her legs tighter around his frame. He smirked and brought his wet fingers towards her lips. “Are you afraid someone might see us?”

She narrowed her eyes and smacked his hand away from her face. She tensed, unable to determine how he’d react and relaxed when he laughed at her reaction. “Don’t worry Mollie Mae,” he purred tracing her lips. “They know who you belong to. There’s no shame in displaying that affection.”

She frowned and pushed herself up from the wall pulling her dress down as quickly and as discreetly as she could.

“Well *I* have shame,” she replied harshly folding her arms tightly across her chest. “I’m not a slave Micah.”

Her words were a bit more caustic than she intended and she watched as his lips tightened ever so slightly.

“Of course you aren’t,” he said quietly, his eyes darkening. “A slave knows better than to be so carelessly audacious.”

She bit her lip when he said this and tensed when he approached her again. She looked up in surprise when he removed his cloak to drape it around her shoulders.

“Perhaps we should go somewhere more private then.”

Mollie watched him silently -- unsure but careful as he gently lead her out of the room and across the marbled floors of the colossal Questershire manor.

When they reached the outdoors Mollie felt a liberating sense of freedom. She wished she appreciated the outdoors more. Growing up, she had grown accustomed to being stuck in a small kitchen... but still, she relished in the feeling of wind through her air and sunlight touching her skin.

The sound of guards shuffling behind them interrupted Mollie’s thoughts and she watched as Micah grasped her hand firmly in his and pulled her towards the outskirts of the forest. His pace was quick and his speed had caught her off-guard.

He was running. He was *actually running*.

Mollie was struggling to keep up with him as he tugged her along. She would have to remember never to try to outrun the prince if the opportunity ever came along. The warm breeze combed her hair back and billowed Micah's thick cloak behind her. If Mollie didn’t know any better, she would assume he was running away from the guards, away from the manor --away from his obligations.

“Where are we going?” she gasped as he guided her through the thick underbrush that covered the forest floor. The last remnants of the sun were disappearing behind the thick sweeping darkness of the night sky and Mollie looked concernedly above them. It would be pitch black in a matter of hours and she worried whether they’d be able to find their way back. Micah seemed confident however and she followed grudgingly, still slightly wary of him.

Mollie looked down in front of her to see that the long grass they had previously traversed through had transitioned into rocky terrain. Micah had slowed his steps in front of her and Mollie took a step forward apprehensively. Just beyond the narrowing ground was a steep menacing cliff complete with jagged rocks and crushing waves at the bottom.

He had led her to the edge of a fucking cliff.

She yelped and took a step backward just as Micah turned to steady her.

“Relax Mollie,” he said. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. Let me show you.”

Mollie narrowed her eyes and stood still in front of him, refusing to budge as he attempted to pull her forward.

“What? So you can push me to my death?” she said bitterly an edge of hysteria to her voice.

Micah chuckled and tightened his grip on her arm despite her persistence.

“No *ma chérie*,” he said with a smile. “A fall like that would most likely maim you than it would kill you.”

She stiffened as he walked beside her looping an arm in her own.

“Come.”

Mollie shuffled forward reluctantly as Micah led her closer to the edge. She gasped as he lifted her forwards onto a rather jagged edge of the cliff and felt Micah’s arm tighten around hers so she could maintain her balance.

“How do I –“ she trailed off. The dark sky wasn’t helping her vision any more and she flayed her arms out in an effort to keep her balance. As he guided her down that first step she felt her foot meet soft lush grass.

“Just lie down...yes – just like that.”

Mollie followed his orders. She didn’t have much choice and although she didn’t want to admit it...she *was* rather curious.

She huffed as he aided in gently laying her down so her head fell against the soft grass. She watched in silence as Micah elegantly brought himself down from above and slid into the little crevice beneath the cliff. The space was tight but somehow they both managed to fit their bodies onto this secluded piece of land.

The grass hung over the edges of the rock creating a little cave, blocking out the cool breeze and providing a shield against the natural elements of the Southern weather. Mollie looked around her where little baby breaths and daisies surrounded the cascading edges and she was shocked to see such a stark contrast of beauty hidden beneath what first appeared to be dry rocky terrain. Micah laid himself beside her, rather cosily and she was at a loss for words at the sight that awaited her. In front of them was a pale pink sky fading into creeping navy where the last shrouds of the sun were disappearing behind a vortex of dark blue. On the opposite side were the beginnings of a large full moon slowly becoming more pigmented as the evening bore into night.

“Wow,” Mollie said quietly staring out at the vision in front of her.

Mollie never really got to see the sun or the moon. Not in Chartery and definitely not from her dingy old apartment. The only view she got were of beggars setting up camp for the night in the back-alley ways of the city or of the odd public punishment across the town square. On top of that, the smog that covered the city made it seem like the town was entrenched in a permanent bubble of grey smoke. It was rather industrial and no one came to Chartery...not for pleasure at least.

To see nature in its purest and most clear form was something for the girl and she felt her insides warm just staring at what was in front of her. It was a view she would never get tired of and a view she would remember forever.

“How did you find this place?” Mollie whispered feeling the warm breeze ripple through her thick curls.

Mollie looked over to see that Micah had closed his eyes and was laying still beside her. His hands rested lightly on his abdomen as his chest rose and fell in rhythmic motions. Although he *appeared* asleep Mollie knew he was simply resting, his ears and his reflexes as sharp as they always were. Not that she’d try anything now. He seemed to put at least *some* trust in her.

“*La Pointe de Noire*,” Micah said quietly, his soft voice enough to fill the small secluded space they were sharing. Mollie didn’t even notice his lips move. “I come out here all the time. Helps clear my head.”

“Black point,” Mollie said suddenly piecing together bits and pieces of the language.

His eyes were still closed but she saw Micah smile when she said this. “That’s right. I’m glad to hear you’re picking up on the language.”

They sat in silence for some time, Mollie feeling the most sane she’d felt in a long time. She needed this, probably as much as him. Time away from those who sucked out your energy and left you with a gaping void of hollowness. Maybe Micah was right, maybe he *did* crave simplicity and isolation. Maybe as much as she did. But would he be willing to risk everything for it? His title? His position? His family? Mollie had nothing to lose...but with Micah it was the complete opposite. He had absolutely everything to lose.

Although the colourful sky made its slow transition into an inky blue, Mollie had her eyes on the man beside her. She was suddenly struck by how... well...*young* the prince looked. His eyebrows were dark, thick like his hair and they made his pale skin and defined features appear even more sharp. His cheeks were slightly blushed from the cool breeze and he had an almost imperceptible spray of freckles atop his nose. They had long since faded but Mollie realized he must have had them when he was a young boy.

Just like her.

“What are you thinking about?” Mollie asked quietly as she tightened Micah’s cloak around her skinny body.

“Lots of things,” he murmured, his lips barely moving. “Work...travel...business...you.”

Mollie frowned when she heard this and pulled the cloak tighter around her body.

“You can’t be thinking about all of those things at the same time,” she muttered.

Micah simply smiled.

Mollie hesitated before she began speaking once more.

"When do you plan on returning...after your trip?" she asked quietly glueing her eyes to the silvery threads scattered across the navy cloak.

It wasn't Mollie's business and it certainly wasn't her concern, but she was curious. She didn't like how much of a burden Micah had to take on, especially now that he was CEO and especially now that she knew how much he *didn't* want the position.

"I can't give you a definitive answer for that question Mollie," he said.

"So you may not make it back is what you're saying?" she asked softly, trying her best to keep her voice as clear cut as she could.

Micah smirked when he heard this.

"That's always a possibility, for every trip I make."

Mollie swallowed uneasily at this comment.

"But then why were you so adamant to go North? Is there something bad up there?"

Micah sighed audibly before he responded.

"There's nothing inherently bad about the North," he said slowly running a hand through his dark locks. "I spent the majority of my time training there."

He went quiet after this and Mollie figured he was collecting his thoughts...or perhaps planning on what exactly he wanted to tell her.

"*Château de Glace* is the citadel in the mountains of *Icedelar*," he explained. "It's more of a fortress really, militant in nature."

"So you didn't grow up here?" she asked completely baffled.

"No," he said quietly. Mollie looked over at him and saw that he was speaking to her even though his eyes were closed. He seemed jovial enough to indulge her curiosity tonight.

"I'd come down and spend my summers here at the manor when I was very young. Sometimes even longer if I was lucky. I found it...difficult to leave after that, especially after spending months at a time here. So I thought it best not to come back at all."

He didn't say it out loud but Mollie knew what he was alluding to. *It was less painful that way*. She also realized why he was barely in the public eye growing up. It made sense now. He must have preferred to spend his time training in the North rather than running things here in the South. Mollie had heard many stories about the North. Some of them were downright terrible and others so incredulous she doubted they were real. She remembered hearing stories about the man who ran the coin shop across from her bakery who took a job in one of the northern cities for a year. Lost all of his toes and his pinky finger in one night after getting stranded en route back to his chalet. The elements were harsh and unforgiving. Damn near inhabitable some said. Mollie remembered vividly how the man had cried and kissed the ground after seeing the sun through the smog filled sky in Chartery when he returned. He

claimed daylight was not a concept in the North. Only grey and black skies in equilibrium with each other...in a state of constant alternation. She shuddered just thinking about how awful it must have been to grow up in a place like that.

"You seem to like the South a lot," she said suddenly feeling the breeze whip the soft grass against her knees. "Why stay North and train when you could be here full time?"

Micah was quiet. Quiet for too long after this and Mollie figured it must have been a whole 6 minutes before he finally decided to give her an answer.

"It's my birth town Mollie," he said quietly. "And a difficult city to navigate. It's also one of the closest cities to Ophian territory. Not many train in the North due to the harsh elements, but I regard it as a lifelong skill. No one knows the streets of the North better than I do. Not even my brothers."

"I always thought you were born here," she whispered her eyes flickering to the sky. Esperanza never explicitly told her Micah's birthplace but the old woman knew a lot more than she let on to Mollie. That must mean his dead sister was born in the North as well right?

But *wait*.

Esperanza had told her that Porphyria had wanted to be buried next to her baby and that was *here*, in the heart of Questershire. Something didn't quite add up and Mollie was determined to get to the bottom of it. The crazy senile old lady was just full of secrets. She would have to approach her again before she left this place for good.

Micah had certainly indulged her inquisitiveness but she still felt as if there was something he *wasn't* telling her. Something that demanded he adopt a fierce intransigent stance about returning to his birthtown. She was aching to know. Were the rumours concerning the North really true? Or was there something more insidious about it...something more than the bitter winters and biting cold that drove men to drop to their knees and weep when they spotted glimpses of the sun.

Mollie remembered Rowan's face earlier in the evening. The way he looked at Micah after suggesting they send this "special" shipment North. James seemed strongly opposed to it...almost as opposed to sending it North as Micah had been. Things only seemed to be getting more confusing for Mollie. Esperanza had been right about one thing. The more secrets of the Lyons she found out, the more befuddled she became.

"What was Rowan talking about earlier...after the dinner."

Mollie's voice was meek when she spoke but Micah didn't seem to react too much to the question.

"Business as usual," he said brusquely.

"He doesn't want me here," she said, her tone matter-of-fact.

"It's not his concern," Micah said furrowing his brow. Thankfully his eyes remained closed but Mollie could sense the slight irritation in his tone.

He came here to escape from his responsibilities and yet here was Mollie, bringing them right back up as if he were still back in that dining room. Her curiosity would have to be subdued for now. He never disagreed with her though and Mollie was no fool. She heard their voices, the way Rowans cold eyes looked her up and down with overt distaste. He needn't worry. She'd be well on her way soon.

Instead, Mollie continued watching him. He looked so serene, so calm...so...free. Mollie felt that even slight movement from her part would ruin the moment, disturb him in some way. So she settled on remaining still by his side, watching him rest under the stars, his chest rising and falling in consecutive motions. His hair was windblown and thick, falling halfway over his brow with the rest laying loosely against the soft grass. Mollie felt a sudden overbearing urge to run her fingers through it, to feel the silkiness between her fingers and she quickly shifted so her bottom rested over her hands and she fisted them beneath her.

"Are you done staring?"

Mollie snapped her eyes back to his face where she met clear green eyes staring into her own.

"I wasn't staring," she said hotly turning her head towards the pale moon in front of them.

He didn't respond and Mollie saw that he had returned to his resting position, eyes closed and lips pulled in a crooked smile. She sighed.

Mollie's attention was diverted when she saw a flickering light in the distance a couple miles out into the open sea. Mollie squinted, and inched forward slightly to get a better look. It was a building with a little shore all to its own. The walls were peeling off what Mollie assumed used to be a thick rich white that had faded into a papery grey. The light was dazzling but the windowless building held a more foreboding tone that put Mollie on edge. She noticed a rickety brown boat bobbing against the shore and she felt a stomach lurch. Why did the rope attached to the boat look so...new?

Was that a lighthouse?

"Micah?" she hesitated, unsure if she was disturbing him.

"Hm?"

"What's that building out in the open sea? The flickering one?"

She saw Micah's eyes flash open and she shivered. His lips turned into a frown and Mollie didn't like the way he perched himself forward so he rested lightly on his elbows. His gestures were not so fluid anymore, not so carefree. He was stiff again, his cold persona back in an instant.

Mollie bit her lip. *Why couldn't she just keep her mouth shut?*

"It's a lighthouse."

His tone was rather lifeless and she wrapped his cloak around her tightly. It smelled so much like him, a mix of something rich and earthy with a hint of citrus.

“Oh,” she said softly trying to diffuse the tenseness. “For ships... of course, that makes sense.”

He didn't say anything and she awkwardly looked away.

Mollie turned sharply when she felt cool fingers begin to inch their way around her wrist. The pale digits slid up and down her bronzed skin and she felt her skin tingle at the feather-soft sensation.

“Will you lie down for me?”

Mollie met his gaze and for a moment she could feel the longing desire within them, a sudden desperation that she hadn't seen before.

“Why?” she asked as he began to push her chest down so her head hit the damp grass behind her.

“Because I said so.”

His tone had hardened slightly and Mollie watched as he began to remove the silk ascot around his throat and free himself from the expensive rich fabrics that covered his muscled body.

“Is this secluded enough for you Mollie Mae?”

She had no answer for him and knew what he wanted from her...what he expected. There was no point delaying the inevitable.

He had laid her down adeptly so her body was atop his rich cloak and not in contact with the grass. He was quick and urgent in his actions as he freed her of her pink slip of a dress and let the pale moonlight wash over her naked body. She was lying on her back, facing the cool wind that ruffled her hair and pricked her erect nipples. The feeling of the cold air on her naked slit sent her gasping and she nearly convulsed as he crawled over her, his body blocking the moonlight and shrouding the small patch of grass beneath the cliff in even more darkness than before.

Micah's naked body against her own was like ice meeting her skin and she marvelled at how *cold* his skin was even amongst the warm southern ambiance. He didn't even feel human. She groaned as he brought his icy finger tips to her breasts and squeezed. Mollie bit her lip hard when he began to roll her nipples between his fingers and the feeling of the cool wind between her thighs was doing little to pacify her already frenzied nerves. She shuddered as he pulled her nipples harshly the action making her slap her hips against his hard body hovering above her.

“Relax yourself Mollie Mae,” Micah whispered sliding his palms across her mid-drift and down to her thighs.

“Micah,” she breathed as he inched her legs open even wider. God he was so good with his fingers...so good at making her feel a pleasure so deep and fulfilling it made her heart skip a beat and left her brain in a state of utter delirium. Her eyes snapped open when he grasped her hand in his and brought it slowly to her leaking hole.

Wait.

Mollie protested as Micah guided her fingers inside of her.

“Relax,” he said cutting her off. She quieted as he inched their intertwined fingers in and out of her slick channel. Mollie grunted in pain for a moment as her canal stretched to accommodate the unusually large size. Mollie could feel the stretch of her vaginal walls as he guided their fingers in and out of her as she writhed beneath him.

This was different, very different.

Before she could take a breath Micah’s lips met hers and she moaned against his mouth as he continued moving their fingers in and out of her. Mollie was breathless, her thoughts an intangible mess of pleasure and disgust.

He continued this for some time his fingers pressing against her pulsating clitoris as he continued his movements...in and out. Mollie was clumsy, her fingers doing little to stimulate herself as she relied on Micah’s dexterous fingers to take the lead. She was so close...so close. She could feel the heat inching up from her abdomen to her torso, her orgasm a rising flame that was reaching its peak. She had closed her eyes at this point, anticipating that feeling of pleasure that would soon consume her from the inside out.

Micah had brushed his lips down to her throat and chuckled against her neck. He seemed to be enjoying some sort of inside joke and Mollie felt self conscious as his smile widened against her neck.

“Is this your first time pleasuring yourself Mollie?”

His voice was husky and soft but Mollie could hear the amusement in his tone. Her eyes flashed open and she nearly whimpered in disappointment when his fingers came to an untimely halt near her longing pussy.

Was it that obvious?

“No,” she said immediately feeling her cheeks burn at his question. She was still breathless from her near orgasm and she tried to hide her irritation at not reaching it.

Micah dropped his eyes to her body and slowly brought their wet fingers up to her face so she could observe the slick that dripped down her wrist.

He simply raised an eyebrow and Mollie felt her skin tingle with embarrassment.

“Mon dieu,” he said softly smearing her juices against her quivering thighs. “You poor thing.”

Mollie scoffed at him and pushed his hand away. He was teasing her and Mollie felt the blush extend to her hairline.

"It's not the first time," she said heatedly staring hard at him as he hovered over her. Mollie knew it was futile lying to him, even when her body made it so painfully obvious of her current sexual state. But she hated admitting he was right.

"Right," he said off-handily the sarcasm in his voice unmistakable. "Perhaps I'm just *that* good."

He had a smirk on his face and Mollie resisted the urge to knee him in the crotch. Before she could turn over, she realized the prince was as naked as her...his hips bare from the waist onwards.

She gulped as she met his eyes, the look of raw unfulfilled satiation present within them.

He had a curious glint in his eye as he looked at Mollie and she wondered what was going through his mind.

"Turn over," he said suddenly rolling her body forward. Mollie gasped at the sudden transition and felt her breath leave her chest as Micah quickly turned them over so she now hovered over him. His head was atop the lush grass and his pale body was a stark contrast against the navy cloak. It gave his skin a luminescence and Mollie felt her elbows give way as she struggled to keep herself balanced above him.

Mollie felt Micah snake his hands up her naked chest and down towards her hips as pressed himself upward so his thick cock brushed her wet opening.

"Why don't you take the lead this time *ma choupinette*? I think I've taught you well enough at this point."

Mollie writhed above him, her fidgeting a pathetic attempt to free herself from his firm grasp.

"I..I don't...I can't...I'm not sure what-."

Mollie stumbled over her words as Micah squeezed her hipbone tightly the cool ring on his finger feeling like an ice block against her naked hip. The necklace dangled down beneath her chin, the precious silver glinting in the darkness.

"Don't overthink it Mollie," he whispered taking her hand in his.

She released her breath when she felt Micah wrap her fingers around his hot pulsating cock.

"You're a smart girl," he said dropping his head back to the ground and closing his eyes in anticipation. "You'll figure it out."

His condescending comment irked Mollie but she didn't see a way out of it. Grudgingly she grasped his member firmly in her hand and decided to stroke it, feeling its girth and texture beneath her soft fingers. She couldn't see too well due to the darkness but she could feel every bit of it, the weight...the heat...the *size*.

Micah groaned beneath her and she figured she was doing something right. She continued this for some time, her fingers dampening more with each subsequent stroke as the tip began to leak a clear liquid substance.

“Oh *Mollie*. ”

The disappointing tone of his voice startled her and she yelped freeing her hands as he perched himself forward so he sat in front of her, his cock pressing against her inner thigh.

He brushed his hair back, his dark curls making his skin seem even more pale in the darkness. Even his eyes gave off a bright green aura of their own.

“Not like that,” he said with a sigh, his voice sounding rather...fatigued. “The foreplay is over *Mollie*,” he explained in a huff. *Mollie* could feel his cock soften against her thigh and she cringed. “Just...”

Mollie felt a surge of emotions flow through her and before she could properly process her thoughts she pushed the prince down so his head hit the ground with an audible thud.

Mollie heard him swear but before he could retaliate she had already straddled him and grabbed a hold of his long thick cock.

“You want a good fuck? Is that what you want from me?” she hissed straddling her hips taut against his own.

He froze beneath her and as fluidly and as quickly as she could she squeezed his member and positioned her trembling limbs above him. *Mollie* knew how this was done... in theory. But the promises she had made to herself and her ideologies about sex had been something she had carried with her for a long time. And in that moment, she was about to throw them all away.

Mollie tightened her grip and sunk down on the hardening cock as Micah clutched at her wrists folding them into her chest. He was breathless, most likely rendered speechless by her frigid response and she yanked his palms up so they cupped her small breasts.

If this was what he wanted so be it.

Her own boldness surprised her but *Mollie* was not one to be ridiculed. The penetration left *Mollie* panting as he snapped his hips up to meet hers, her knees digging into the soft fabric of the cloak below them as their slick bodies slapped against each other. The prince seemed to have regained his bearings and *Mollie* cried out as he increased his pace and his depth. He slipped so far into her she couldn't even hear herself scream as his swollen member caressed her cervix. The tears were flowing down her face --out of anger...out of shame...out of desperate passion? *Mollie* had no clue.

Mollie was clutching his forearms as he continued his thrusts, their moans entwining as her thick curls bounced with each upward motion of the dark haired man below her. He was quiet as he fucked her, the only sounds emitting from his soft lips that of breathless moans and

pants. Mollie looked down to see that his eyes were fixed on her chest— his eyes following the movements of her breasts as they bounced with each upward motion of his hips.

Mollie arched her back and shook as he hit something deep within her that reduced her to breathless sobs with each thrust of his hips. Her hands dragged down his muscular forearms to slap against his pale chest and she mewled in pleasure as the rush of adrenaline combined with her raw approaching orgasm absolutely consumed her. This angle hit differently and Mollie felt as if her belly was resting on hot coals. His cock was like a raging flame within her slick walls, red hot yet ice cold all at once and as smooth as the skin on his chest. His fingers pressed at her swollen clit, inching her closer and closer to her climax. Mollie's body was in a state of hypersensitivity and she all but whined as he pinched her clit once...twice before dragging his fingers back towards her hips, leaving a trail of wetness along her bronzed skin. Her legs felt like jelly and her arms like brittle twigs as Micah groaned into the cloth covered ground but not before releasing a thick stream of white into her spasming pussy.

In one last huff of breath Mollie collapsed onto him, his length still fully engulfed within her twitching walls as she fell against his neck. His usually cold skin was warm for once and she felt the tears smear against her cheeks as she let out a long guttural moan into the crook of his neck.

They lay like that for some time, both of them catching their breaths as the full moon shone its pale illuminance onto their intertwined bodies.

She felt Micah chuckle against her ear and she lifted her head in time to catch his gaze. His stray curls were stuck damp against his forehead from exertion and his cheeks were pink from the cool air.

"I was going to suggest we make love Mollie Mae," he said softly, his voice still breathless. "Not fuck into the next dimension beneath the cosmos."

Mollie still couldn't speak, her own actions were as much of a surprise to her as it was to him. Perhaps it was the little voice in her mind telling her it could be the last time she'd be near him...make love to him. He left tomorrow after all. And little did he know Mollie would not be here by the time he returned.

She should be happy. She *would* be happy.

She stilled as Micah cupped her cheeks in his and kissed her, his cock still engulfed in her hot centre. He made a low noise in his throat as he shifted beneath her and Mollie fumbled as he held her jaw open to entwine his tongue with hers and lick into the deep caverns of her mouth.

Mollie lost all concept of time and space as he continued the deep kiss right until the moment Mollie was gasping for air. Only then did he release her, letting her tired head loll against his hard shoulder blade. She felt his cock slide out of her as he nestled to her side pulling the cloak out from beneath him. The pale moonlight shed light over them and Mollie watched as Micah expertly pulled his pants up and proceeded to drape the cloak around Mollie's naked form.

She pulled it tightly around herself, the warmth of the cloak taking her by surprise. The cloak was a direct replica of the night sky with the rich navy material and the silver stitches intricately woven into the thick but flexible fabric. She remembered Micah telling her the stitches were made of six different silks –all of which were produced from the webs released from the spinnerets at the end of a spiders abdomen. She ran her fingers across the priceless fabric feeling the different textures against her skin. She liked running her fingers against the silvery lining surrounding the perimeter of the cloak. This one was made from the silk of a golden orb spider – stronger than steel yet 50 times lighter than the actual element. The craftsmanship was beyond comparable and Mollie marvelled at its beauty.

“Look Mollie,” Micah whispered against her forehead brushing her thick hair to one side. “You see that?”

Mollie groaned as she flipped herself to lay on her back like the prince, her eyes on the starry sky above them. It was a pleasant cloudless night out, thankfully, but there was still a cool breeze that sent goosebumps erupting against Mollie’s skin.

She waited expectantly as Micah pulled her closer against him.

“That there is *Polaris*, the North Star.”

Mollie followed his gaze towards the bright round star in the sky that seemed to be slightly below a freckle of others above it.

“How do you know that?” she asked tiredly, turning to look at him.

“The same way you know how to bake,” he said smoothly glancing briefly at her. “Someone taught me how to read the night sky.”

She considered this as Micah’s eyes flickered across the specks of light dotting the blanket of darkness above them. He seemed to be reading the sky as if he were reading a book and it baffled Mollie.

“Why?” she asked curiously only seeing random specks of stars above her. “What’s the point in that?”

Micah was quiet for some time before he responded.

“It’s a helpful tool Mollie,” he said softly. There was no judgment in his tone and Mollie was somewhat grateful for that. “In case one is ever lost, without a map, a compass, or something to use as a navigational tool, they can always rely on the night sky to lead them back to their desired destination.”

He was explaining quietly to her and Mollie listened intently. He was good at that -- explaining things--as much as Mollie hated to admit it. He made complex concepts seem so straightforward and she took advantage of this in these moments. Mollie wouldn’t go so far as to say that she soaked information up like a sponge...but she certainly learned quickly. It’s that skill that had gotten her this far.

“Like the sun, the stars migrate across the sky from east to west. If you keep track of which direction they appear to be moving you can easily determine which way you are facing. If you desire something a bit more precise, you look for *Mintaka*. It is located on the right side of Orion’s belt. It’s one of the few stars that rises close to true east and sets close to true west.”

Mollie was being lulled to sleep by his gentle voice but she wanted to stay awake. She wanted to keep him talking.

“The stars appear so much brighter in the North,” he mused. “But it’s just an illusion. The white landscape contrasting against the black sky gives it a more fantastical aura. I’ll take you out to see it on a clear night.”

Mollie snapped her eyes open when she heard this and in spite of herself she shifted sharply feeling her hip collide with the prince’s. Micah turned his head towards her and Mollie could feel a heavy pressure begin to rise in her chest.

“What did you say?” she asked, her voice wavering.

Micah sat up slowly his pale chest appearing even paler in the white light of the moon.

“I said I’d take you out to see it...that is if you have an interest.”

His voice went rather dead after that and Mollie felt her lips tremble.

“Where?” she asked, hating the way her voice broke into a whisper as the hard heavy truth weighed down upon her.

“In *Icedalar*,” he said calmly. “The trip is a long one Mollie Mae. But I promise, the view of that sky is worth the travel. You’ll simply adore it.”

Chapter 27: Cobalt

Chapter Summary

The treacherous journey to the North begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mollie didn't feel like herself.

She was dressed and standing awkwardly on the Questershire grounds, her thick ice blue coat buttoned up to her neck. Her curls were lush and healthy, cascading down her back in a pin up style and her feet sunk uncomfortably in the moist grass as she shifted restlessly. She froze when she caught sight of her reflection in one of the glass windows of the manor. She certainly didn't just feel different, she well...looked different. Almost unrecognizable with her smooth skin, glossy hair and expensive clothes.

She looked...*rich*.

Her appearance unsettled her immensely and she looked away quickly and continued waiting as instructed on the grounds. There was a large ornate carriage further down the road that made the ones that circled around Chartery seem like a wagon on wheels. Mollie wondered why they settled on a carriage for transportation. The Lyons were more than capable of using an automobile.

Micah hadn't come yet and Mollie was waiting outside with a guard who looked less than pleased to be watching over her. His scowl deepened when Mollie made eye contact with him and she turned towards the carriage further down the pathway instead, feeling her heart ache.

"Maybe he won't come," said some small voice at the back of her mind. *"Maybe he decided to delay till next week?"*

Mollie jumped when the guard shuffled forward, a step farther away from her and turned towards a noise coming from just beyond the gardens. It echoed out across the clearing.

"Wait here one moment," he said gruffly.

Mollie watched as he shuffled towards the entrance to the gardens his hand on the hilt of his sword. Mollie stood and waited. She looked around her and bit her lip as she weighed her options. Maybe she could make a run for it now, maybe she'd have a chance-

Mollie saw a shadow begin to gradually grow as a figure appeared in the arched entrance of the manor and she quickly straightened up. She tensed, expecting one of the Lyons to stride

forward. Instead, she was taken aback when a little girl began running outside into the fields followed by a big white wolf. Mollie stiffened for the briefest moment, the surprise tanking into her like a lightening bolt hitting the ground.

Mollie went into full fight or flight mode launching herself towards the girl as the wolf padded behind her. She didn't even think twice, she simply reacted. She stopped abruptly when the wolf began licking the girl's face as she screamed and giggled on the ground.

The girl looked no more than four or five to Mollie and she had an innocence about her that pulled at the strings of Mollie's heart. The girl was cute, her chocolate brown hair in two long pigtails complete with red ribbons that matched her dress. She looked mousy from the back...familiar to Mollie and she couldn't help but stare at her as the little girl bounced and played with the animal in front of her. The little girl seemed to realize she wasn't alone and Mollie watched as she quickly straightened up and dusted herself off in a rehearsed and frantic manner. She looked at Mollie with wide eyes and Mollie felt her body jolt.

"Zeta?" she whispered, the wind stealing her words away.

No. That couldn't be right. This girl was dressed like one of those poster babies they had in store windows within the wealthier parts of town. She was healthy and vibrant and the little bracelets that adorned her chubby wrists suggested she was from a rich family. But her face...that face could have been an exact replica of that little girl Mollie first encountered in the manor.

She had wide blue eyes that met Mollie's and the girl quickly curtsied at Mollie and looked down as if she had done something wrong. Mollie was frozen as the girl shuffled over to her, the wolf nudging her side with its snout as it tried to get the girl to continue playing with it.

Mollie was convinced the girl was the offspring of one of the Lyons and she felt her stomach roil with disgust. The girl could have belonged to Micah, maybe James...definitely not Rowan, but the eyes threw her off. Why were they blue? She swallowed uneasily. She wouldn't even be surprised if the girl belonged to Hartley himself.

"Please to meet your acquaintance," she said timidly with a high pitched squeaky voice reflective of a young child.

Mollie realized with a start that the girl thought she was a quaternary citizen like herself and she hesitated.

Mollie recognized Micah's wolf standing behind the little girl and she didn't like how it bared its teeth when she met its eyes. She wondered who this girl belonged to. She felt her stomach roll thinking of the possibilities.

"I like your hair," the girl said timidly clasping her hands together. She had a little blush to her cheeks and Mollie found herself smiling back at her in spite of herself. "I wish I had curls like that."

Mollie took a breath, unsure of how to respond. Was she even allowed to be speaking to this girl?

The girl seemed put out Mollie hadn't responded and she cocked her head to the side.

"*Parlez-vous Anglais?*" The girl said suddenly staring up into Mollie's face.

"I'm sorry..." Mollie started glancing around her. "Do you live here?"

The girl perked up when Mollie answered and she hesitated as Theo the wolf lay down only metres away from where she and the girl were standing. Its blue eyes never left her.

"Used to," she said rather sadly glancing at the manor. "But Papa is making us move and I hate it."

Mollie felt her throat go dry when she heard this.

"Why is your Papa making you move?" Mollie asked looking around.

"I don't know," she said with a shrug. "But *Maman* isn't happy about it."

Mollie felt her insides coil hearing this and she frowned as the girl began to pick at the grass near their feet and twirl the pieces in her little fingers.

"*That doesn't last long,*" Mollie thought sadly watching the girl chatter to herself as she plopped down on the grass near the wolf. Especially in a place like this.

She stepped back when several people filed out of the arched doorway of the manor towards the field. The guard from the gardens was making his way back slowly too, an annoyed expression on his face. But Mollie had her eyes on the prince, directly in the centre of the large group of men approaching her. There were about six or seven and they were all speaking quickly, chattering in French and English as they honed in around Micah, creating an almost impenetrable bubble around him. Mollie could see the men were careful not to touch him but still the prince looked irritated. He wore a jet black coat with large brass buttons along with his staple black gloves that extended slightly past his wrists. Mollie blushed as she spotted the navy cloak billowing behind him as the men around him struggled to match his pace. He barely responded to the conversations around him and he hadn't quite made his way close enough to notice that Mollie was waiting for him.

The little girl had stopped her chatter when she heard the men approach and Mollie saw her leap up with delight when she spotted them.

"Uncle Micah!" She cried out in a shrill voice running towards the prince. The men took a step back and Mollie watched as Micah smiled at the girl as she ran towards him. He lifted her effortlessly into his arms and held her as he continued his walk towards the carriage.

Uncle?

He was murmuring to her as she smiled and giggled in his arms. When Micah's green eyes finally met hers she saw his smile widen into something dazzling.

"You are a sight to see today Mollie," he said quietly as the little girl turned in his arms to look at her.

He was standing only a short distance away and Mollie watched as the men behind the prince stopped a little farther down the grounds. They didn't bother to hide their frowns as they looked at Mollie.

"Isn't she beautiful Nina?"

He turned towards the girl and she looked shyly at Mollie fisting her hands in Micah's rich cloak.

"Beautiful?" she said questioningly turning to Micah with a furrowed brow.

"*Belle*," he said softly as if in explanation. "*Comme toi*," he said quietly as he put her down.

Mollie was surprised. Micah didn't strike her as the paternal kind and she was quite taken aback by the interaction. He seemed to genuinely care for the girl and the girl seemed rather fond of him herself.

"*Va chercher ta mère*," Micah said quietly as she scampered away over the grounds.

Mollie watched as she ran on her little legs towards the entrance her pigtails flying behind her. Mollie couldn't help but feel as if little Zeta were looking out of her through those eyes. What different lives they lived despite being around the same age...despite living on the same grounds. It made Mollie sick.

"She's cute," Mollie said coolly. "Kind of like the slave girl I met on my first day here."

The smile on Micah's face dropped immediately and she gasped in pain as he grabbed her wrist sharply jerking her forward.

"Behave yourself Mollie," he said tightly digging his nails into her arm.

She frowned at his coldness and watched as he flicked his wrist forward for his entourage to follow.

Mollie was bitter. Bitter that things hadn't gone her way and frustrated that Hartley Lyon put a fork in her plans without even batting an eyelid. She would have been able to escape from here if it wasn't for him insisting Micah left today.

Micah loaded Mollie roughly into the carriage and she hung her head miserably against the window as he turned towards the men behind him. The interior of the carriage was luxurious, and painted in tasteful pastels along with soft pillows and a beautiful arched window. Mollie couldn't care less. She was in a sour mood and she dreaded the journey that awaited her.

"Would you review these papers Master Lyon?" said another man before Micah could slide himself in.

Mollie stared out of the window as she waited and spotted James in the distance. He seemed to be arguing with someone. Mollie recognized that long red hair and she inched forward in interest. The red headed woman looked agitated as James ran a hand through his hair in

frustration. The little girl was tugging on her fathers coat and Mollie watched as James sighed and picked her up.

When Mollie looked closer she got a shock when she saw the red rimmed eyes and pale skin of the red headed woman. She looked so different from the first time Mollie had seen her. She was so glamorous...so put together. But now...she looked like any regular woman from the street. A regular woman in distress. Mollie knew that look. It was the look of having cried your eyes out for the entire night. Mollie was openly staring from her view in the carriage and she watched as James smiled with his daughter and carried her inside as the woman outside sunk to her knees and wept.

Her view was obscured as men from what Mollie assumed to be Micah's cabinet shuffled past the carriage to speak one last time with the prince before he departed. It seemed as if another hour went by before the prince finally slid in across from Mollie in the tight space. The sun had risen over the lush grounds of the manor casting a warm orange glow over the garden and onto the aged stone of Questershire Manor. They took off immediately and when Mollie looked back out into the distance the red headed woman was nowhere to be seen.

The carriage was a little bumpy but nothing compared to the ones she had been in back home. Micah had documents in his hands and he seemed to be engrossed with whatever was written across them. She leaned her head against the window and sighed. The manor grew smaller and smaller in the distance as they left, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake.

Mollie didn't sleep well last night. She must have fallen asleep out at the cliff with Micah. When she woke up her head hurt and so did her knees and she was somehow back in the manor. Esperanza was absent so Mollie was prepped and dolled up by another younger servant who was as silent as Mollie. To add to her problems, Mollie was convinced the old woman was purposely avoiding her. Maybe she was afraid Mollie had told Micah what she had told Mollie in good faith. But Mollie wasn't the type. Surely the woman knew this? Unless something happened to her? She chewed on her thumbnail as she considered this.

"Mollie?"

She jerked and looked forward to see Micah's eyes on her. He had a blank expression on his face, the one he had during meetings.

"À quoi tu penses?" he murmured.

She pouted and looked out the window ignoring him.

She knew it wasn't really his fault, but she couldn't help but feel as if a heavy cloud of despair had rained upon her. The North was not pleasant. Rumours always started from somewhere and she had heard her fair share.

Mollie did not like the cold. She was a southern girl after all, who had spent a chunk of her childhood running through warm green fields and gathering water from streams. She was

familiar with the feel of the sun shining on her back and the liberation that came with loose dresses and airy blouses. She was not *built* for the cold.

Mollie was lucky in the sense that Chartery had short winters that never really surpassed the -5 degree mark. But her lack of experience bothered her and she feared what was to come.

Micah didn't speak to her again for a long time as the carriage continued rolling forward. Mollie watched as they passed green sprawling hills and fresh open land and the occasional border of an ocean.

Lyon Land Mollie thought bitterly. They owned all of it.

Mollie alternated between resting and staring out of the window of the carriage as they passed from town to town. Micah would rouse her occasionally to eat and drink but never initiated another conversation and to be honest, Mollie was glad he didn't. It must have been a full two days of nonstop travel for them and Mollie had slowly gotten used to the rocking, unsteady motions of the carriage as it passed through cobbled roads, dusty sand, and unpaved gravel.

Mollie dozed off again after some time and when she woke up the carriage had stopped and she was alone in the tight compartment. She jerked awake and frantically looked around her. She heard shuffling from above her and she recoiled as the door opened to reveal a rather elderly guard in his uniform.

"Ah you are awake now," he said in a gravelly voice, his thick beard muffling his words. "Master Lyon is out by the shore if you care to join him." He paused, his eyes looking Mollie up and down.

He had a rather soft and polite voice and it was one of the rare moments a guard didn't look at her as if she were a primary citizen. He held no judgment in his eyes, only slight curiosity and a stance that suggested he knew his job well. He had a thick accent on top of his beard that made it difficult for Mollie to understand him.

She sighed as she considered it. It was better than staying in the carriage for another day or so. She might as well get some fresh air while she could and stretch her sore muscles.

She shuffled forward out of the carriage and hopped down onto a dusty cobbled road. There was a sharp wind that pierced the air and Mollie pulled her coat tighter around her, thankful that she was dressed warmly. She could already feel the vast difference in temperature from when they left Questershire.

"Suivez-moi Mademoiselle."

Mollie shuffled nervously as the guard took her arm in his and led her a little ways down the road. She tensed when she realized there were two other guards following them a couple metres behind and a couple metres ahead. The bulked up security sent a tingle down her spine and she looked around her uncomfortably. Flashbacks of Logan Lyon went through her mind.

This was how he died wasn't it? Travelling from one city to another. Mollie was pretty sure another brother died in the same way too...what was his name?

She spotted Micah at the start of a rotting wooden boardwalk that ventured far towards a murky green sea. He was speaking with someone, a guard it seemed. It was cloudy and chilly wherever they were with a foggy green haze that seemed to settle around the town. It was a poor town, Mollie could tell from the little stone shacks and dirty cobbled roads.

The guard bowed once before the prince as he tipped his hat back onto his head. He seemed to purposely avoid looking at Mollie and made a point of fully walking around her instead of past her as he followed the cobbled road back to town.

"Have you eaten?"

Micah's voice had a stiff formal tone to it and Mollie felt uncomfortable speaking to him with all these guards within hearing distance. It felt incredibly intrusive. It made sense now why he valued his alone time so greatly. Those moments were few and far between.

"No," she said softly glancing behind her. "I'm not really hungry."

In fact Mollie had lacked an appetite since they started the trip what must have been a couple days ago. Her dread about the impending North had stressed her out to the point that she was neglecting her basic physiological needs.

"You won't be able to keep your strength if you don't take care of yourself Mollie."

Micah's voice was sharp and reprimanding as Mollie inhaled slowly.

He stepped closer to her and smoothed out the collar on her expensive coat. He leaned in so his voice was as swift as the wind around them. "And you're going to need all the strength you have when we arrive."

Mollie felt as if he were giving her a private warning, to be on her guard. His eyes shimmered in the foggy haze as she looked down at her shoes, her boots sinking in the wet sand.

"It's a good thing you were able to get some fresh air," the prince murmured tucking some loose strands of Mollie's hair behind her ear. "We won't make another stop until we reach *Le Chateau* tomorrow evening."

Mollie knew they were close. There was a sharp chill in the air and there was not a single flower or fragment of plant life that Mollie had seen for a while. Everything seemed...dead. As if time itself was as frozen as the surface of the sea in front of them.

"Damien, viens ici pour un moment."

Micah turned quite abruptly leaving Mollie alone on the shore as he stepped back to discuss something with the guard that had brought her here. There were boxes being unloaded from the carriages that followed them here. Boxes of sealed packages that seemed oddly mysterious. Mollie was tempted to venture closer to investigate but before she could move the guard had inserted his arm within hers and guided her back towards the carriage.

Mollie fumed as box upon box was loaded onto the edge of the port where the prince stood. He looked calm and at ease as he always did, watching the operation unfold in front of him. Whatever was going on Mollie knew it couldn't be good. Nothing good came out of business transactions with the Lyons. Even so, why would a poor town like this one be of any interest to the Lyons in the first place?

Mollie couldn't see anything across the frozen expanse of water except for a hazy green smog and thick stratus clouds spread across the grey blanket of the sky. She tightened her coat and slipped on her gloves as she trudged back to the carriage her heart as cold and as grey as the atmosphere that surrounded her.

Mollie woke up in a shiver, a chilly prickling sensation that electrified the hair on her arms and reverberated past the periosteum layer of her bone to sink past the spongy cancellous layer directly into her marrow. She felt it in her core and she saw her breath release in puffs as she stared in shock through the carved window of the carriage. There wasn't a single colour in sight except for pure blinding white. It was like a heavy weighted blanket that continued to shed its fluff upon every surface it touched. There was a whistling to the wind, almost as if God himself was blowing His mighty breaths against the layers of lint that shed from what lay upon His land.

It must have been sometime late in the evening —maybe even past midnight but the rolling of the carriage made it hard for her to see if there was yet a moon in the sky. Maybe they were close? Mollie was getting restless and the walls of the carriage were no less than the equivalent of a jail cell to her. She had been trying her best to keep the question from sliding past her lips, but she had asked the prince twice already and his answer had been the same.

"Soon."

They would get there soon. But to Mollie, soon still felt like an eternity away.

"Micah?" She whispered tearing her eyes away from the window. The carriage was dark, the single ornate candelabra hanging from the low ceiling ignited with less than half of the candles it usually adorned. It casted the faintest softest tones of yellow along the small space.

The prince's face was mostly shadowed except for the faintest shroud of candlelight and Mollie cringed when she realized she had roused him from sleep.

She hesitated as his eyes blinked open slowly. He remained still and upright, never once suggesting that he had relaxed his stance in any shape or form, even while resting.

He said not a word but raised an eyebrow in question — an invitation for Mollie to proceed.

Unlike her, he was used to this trip. The familiarity was evident in his rehearsed demeanour. Mollie couldn't even begin to imagine making this trip multiple times and she understood then why he would rather *not* travel back and forth. Although the luxury of the carriage offered some comfort, it did not outweigh the longevity nor the loneliness of the travel.

She bit her lip as he stared at her. Waiting. He was waiting for her to ask her question and she figured it was better if she backtracked. She didn't need to show him she was as much of a nuisance as she felt.

"What...what time is it?"

Even she couldn't help but cringe at the pathetic nature of her own question. Yet it was better than her robotically demanding how far it was till they arrived.

"Late."

His blunt answer made her blush and she swiftly dropped her gaze. His eyes had closed again and she found herself shifting on the cushioned seat across from him. Her legs cramped from the lack of movement and her mind wandered as they passed white landscape after white landscape. The temperature continued to drop and Mollie found herself tightening the buttons on the collar of her coat. Micah was still across from her, the only indication that he was still a living form being the soft rise and fall of his chest. He was also a light sleeper--the opposite from Mollie who slept like the dead once she eventually cycled through the non-REM stages.

"Here."

Mollie jumped when she saw the prince quickly reach below their seats to grab a thick fluffy blanket that he promptly plopped onto Mollie's lap. She had thought he had fallen back asleep but his quick movements had alerted her otherwise.

"You're cold."

He said it as more of a statement than anything else and Mollie wordlessly tugged the material around her, sighing as the warmth of the material pressed into her skin.

"Better?"

His eyes had softened somewhat when they scanned over her beneath the blanket and she nodded.

"Good," he murmured inching closer across the cramped space.

His sharp features were on full display beneath the candlelight and Mollie found herself tracing his sculpted jaw, up past his slender perfectly shaped nose towards those painstakingly vibrant green irises. His lips parted, the soft pink a beautiful delicate addition to his aristocratic features. She clenched her fists beneath the blanket, her anger from the unfairness of her situation still simmering somewhat inside her.

He was studying her now, counting how many times she turned towards the window, ran a hand through her hair. Mollie even believed he was keeping count of how many times she bit her lip in anxiety as she turned to stare out the window once again.

How befitting it was that they called him the Winter Prince. Now that she was aware of it, she could not — she *would* not be able to see him as anything but. He craved the freedom and the warmth of the summer, yet he belonged in the North. *No*, he craved a lot of things...this

Mollie knew. But would he ever allow himself the liberties of indulging in them? His features were cold and icy -- his personality nothing short of strictly obdurate...no different from the qualities of winter but... his actions mirrored them too. Micah was principled, more so than his brothers; but Mollie figured this was more of a personal choice than it was an acquiescence. He had broken through this barrier only twice. When he escaped with Mollie to the cottage and the night before when he took her out to the cliffside. But every other time...he was indeed the perfect prince. The perfect Lyon. The perfect heir to an equally icy empire, colder than the glacial cliffs that encompassed the surrounding mountains.

Mollie blinked in surprise when he fluidly shifted so he now sat beside her on the soft cushioned seat of the carriage. His eyes were burning a whole through her own and she leaned away as he brought his fingers towards a sliver of exposed flesh on her neck. The cool leather touched her skin and she shivered feeling the coldness blossom against her sensitive flesh.

"Hmm," he breathed.

Micah wasn't wearing even half of the layers she had piled on yet somehow, he seemed at ease where they were. The cold didn't seep into his bones like it did for her.

His hand moved delicately down her neck and across her chest to rest lightly on her abdomen for a second. The movement of the carriage seemed like a backdrop in an old fashioned film as he slid his hand further. She could barely register the bumpiness or slight sway of the transport; she could barely even remember what had been tugging at the edges of her mind only seconds before. Micah's fingers slid past her layers of clothing with ease and she stiffened as he brushed the cool leather against her shaky inner thighs.

"What are you even-," Mollie stopped short when he pulled the glove off his hand and returned it back beneath her dresscoat.

Mollie gripped the edge of the wall beside her as her lashes fluttered and her jaw clenched. Her body shuddered as he dipped a long slender finger into her slit, the sensation melting into her body like ice against hot flesh.

"S-Stop," she breathed tightening her thighs.

She could have been mute for all he cared. Mollie believed his antics to be strictly lubricious in nature but the more he looked at her, with that raw unobscured passion, the more convinced she was that it teetered on the verge of the profound.

Her nails dug into the thick wood surrounding the window as the tip of his finger moved to draw tight circles around her clit. The movements made it damn near impossible for Mollie to argue and she whimpered and tilted her head back as he increased the pressure.

Mollie's body felt more tense than ever and she bit her lip when Micah shushed her, unaware that she had been making any noise at all. His free hand came up to settle tightly over mouth and she squirmed as he turned her face towards the window, away from him.

Mollie felt as if this was somewhat of a retaliation after she had pushed him down against the hard ground several nights ago. Her head hit the carriage wall with a prominent *thunk* and had she been free of his restraint...she would have gladly reciprocated the gesture.

His gloved hand on her mouth tightened and she cried out against it as he bit her neck hard and inserted another long finger into her wet canal. He was whispering something into her ear, with that familiar dark husky murmur she had grown accustomed to. Her breathing was too loud and too muted beneath his palm and she could do nothing but writhe against him as he toyed with her cunt.

"That's it," Micah said softly against her neck. His sounded as breathless as she did as he continued murmuring through her choked gasps. His fingers moved in and out of her drenched pulsating cunt and Mollie felt as if the buildup of pressure within her belly would rip her apart completely. "Almost there," he purred against her throat giving her clit a good twist as the words left his lips. "Let-Let it go Mollie Mae, *Donne m'en une bonne.*"

Mollie had never felt this way before. The cold should have left her shivering with goosebumps spread across her sensitive skin. But instead, she felt beads of sweat begin to dot the edges of her hairline and she felt an incessant urge to rip apart the heavy material of her dresscoat. Her head hit the back of the cushioned seat hard and she moaned as her body squeezed tightly around his fingers. Her fingernails dragged down the wood on the wall and she slapped her other hand against his thigh, squeezing it as hard as her body did his fingers. Mollie felt Micah's breaths against her ear urging her forward, closer and closer and closer...until her back arched and she was left convulsing in pure utter bliss. His fingers were flooded as he praised her into the crook of her neck. She should feel utterly disgusted; repulsed by his audacious display of vulgarity. But the sensations that filled her were like nothing she had experienced before.

Mollie was breathing heavily against his palm, the moisture of her breaths seeping up against her cheeks as she all but sobbed against it. She was waiting for him to release her from his hold and let them continue their travel together in silence. But Micah had other plans.

Instead the grip on her mouth tightened and she tensed as his finger pressed her clit once more, the others returning to her slit to spread apart her lips for the second time that night.

"One more," he whispered. "Give me one more."

Mollie didn't think she had it in her...didn't believe her body had the capacity to capitulate to such an outrageous demand. But she felt betrayed in more ways than one when her body erupted in another blazing hot wave that sent her body spasming rhythmically against the man beside her. Mollie felt as if had been wrung completely dry as her pussy clenched and unclenched against his slick deft fingers and she whined openly making him slap his palm even harder against her mouth to stifle her cries.

It felt like a whole fifteen minutes went by before Mollie felt her breathing return to normal. She was slowly coming back to reality, the sparks within her body simmering to a low heat before they sizzled out completely. Micah was still beside her, holding her against him until she regained her bearings and was able to twist her head towards him. He let her and she all but collapsed against the pillows, her head too heavy for her to hold on her own. He had a

smirk on his face, that crooked smile that was all too pleased. She gasped when he slid his fingers from within her. She groaned pitifully as he took extra time to slide his soaking fingers across her thighs and down over the curve of her knee.

Mollie couldn't even form words as she watched him slide to the opposite side of the compartment once again. He was so elegant in his actions, as if he had simply crossed the compartment to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, not to stretch his wandering fingers deep into the caverns of her concealed folds. She tried to avoid looking at him, especially at his bare hand that lay damp and glistening against his knee.

"Why...Why would you-," Mollie croaked as she struggled to form a coherent sentence.

Micah seemed distracted again, his eyes returning to the window. He didn't look at her as he spoke.

"Go to sleep Mollie. The cold shouldn't be a problem anymore."

The fatigue *was* pulling at the edges of her vision and she all but snapped her mouth closed when she heard those words leave his lips. He was right. She *didn't* feel the cold anymore. Instead she felt numb and immobilized with an uncomfortable dampness that seeped into her layers of clothing and left her sitting with nowhere to move in a puddle of her own cum. It was as if this pleasure was a punishment for her in some bizarre twisted way.

Disturbed, uncomfortable and deeply agitated, she turned back towards the window and laid her head against the cool glass letting the warmth from her hips spread out towards the rest of her exhausted body as she tried to ignore the unpleasant wetness that spread along her thighs.

There was a loud screeching sound that echoed throughout the carriage and Mollie woke up with a start, her forehead hitting the cold glass with a sharp *pang for what felt like the hundredth time*.

The prince was sharpening his blade, the screech of metal on metal echoing through the small interior yet seeming completely appropriate for the setting Mollie found herself in.

Micah didn't look at Mollie but she knew that he was aware of her, watching her out of the corner of his eye.

The wind whistled again from outside giving the term bone-chilling a whole new meaning as Mollie tightened her coat around herself. The cold penetrated through everything, even with all the protection in the world, it still managed to seep its wintry grasp through all of those barriers to caress the warm dermal layer of skin making the blood run cold. She stretched herself out as best she could and felt heat flood her face as her sticky thighs pulled apart. She looked at Micah from beneath her lashes but he seemed pre-occupied. His eyes were fixed on his blade. The gems along the handle glimmered against the wintry ambiance and she quickly turned her gaze someplace else.

Mollie felt her throat run dry when she saw throngs of men standing outside what appeared to be an absolute fortress. Only the slits of their eyes could be seen amidst all the armour and clothing as they wore the Lyon Insignia proudly on their chests and stood still and attentive outside the walls leading up to the monstrous castle before them. The fortress was a blue-black in colour, composed of stone and steel and what Mollie guessed was some kind of insulating barrier in between the crevices of stone. It looked as cold as the white landscape that surrounded it and Mollie doubted it would be any warmer inside than it was out here.

Mollie was surprised to see several carriages in front and behind them; all of them exact replicas of the one Micah and her were in now.

It was quiet, apart from the guards. There were no swarms of people, no flashing cameras, nothing to even suggest that there was a town that existed here. It was a drastic change from when the Lyons visited cities close to Mollie's town. It was near impossible to even get a glimpse of the prince over all those people. Yet here she was now, in a royal carriage directly across from him. Those people back home knew nothing. They didn't know the truth about this family, about what their hard earned money went towards. They were caught up in a swirling mixture of lies, greed, money and power.

But the Insurgency did.

Mollie could feel her meal from the night before coming up just thinking about them and she felt a cold sweat run down her back despite the frigid temperature.

Would they even believe her anymore? Did they see her as one of their own?

She was under no false illusion of what Micah had portrayed her to be. In their eyes it appeared as if she were just another star crossed lover who had fallen for the prince. She bit her lip, unable to shake that feeling from her mind.

She felt like a puppeteer, her strings being pulled one way by the powerful grasp of the Lyons and the other by the desperate tugs of the Insurgency. But what she wanted, what she truly wanted was to free herself of those strings; cut herself loose and find her own path, one where she had autonomy over her decisions. One where she was free of those who reduced her to nothing less than the daughter of a street whore.

Mollie watched as they passed under an archway of stone, hints of black seen beneath the thick duvet of white. The wind had died down slightly and Mollie could make out hazy figures standing along the stone barrier that surrounded them as the carriage rolled across the cobbled snow thickened road.

The carriage rolled to a stop and Mollie looked up into two glowing orbs of green. Micah had leaned forward to link his hand in hers. His expression irked her. He didn't well...look like anything really. Mollie tried to see through his blankness for something. Apprehension? Irritation? Uncertainty?

As Mollie stared back at him she felt that icy feeling come over her again...the feeling of being watched closely. That feeling of Micah studying her, dissecting each twitch of her lips,

counting every blink of her eyes. She felt as if he was going to tell her something, warn or maybe? Or perhaps instruct her on how she should behave.

Instead he squeezed her hand and leaned over to whisper into her ear.

“Welcome to the North Mollie Mae.”

Chapter End Notes

Nothing...literally nothing happened this chapter. But answers will come I promise!

Chapter 28: Nickel

Chapter Summary

Mollie gets a taste of the north and meets many new faces along the way. Questions get answered and Mollie grows ever more agitated at the significance of her role to the prince.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He fucked her the minute they entered his grand chambers.

Mollie hadn't even had the time to register her whereabouts nor take in the opulence of the room around them.

Immediately following their departure from the carriage she was ushered through an underground tunnel that led deep into a dungeoned area of the fortress.

If she thought Questershire Manor was a maze, then this place was a goddamn labyrinth.

The tunnels were lit with torches and the multiple rooms she passed were illuminated by candlelight. There was a chilly unfriendly haze that hung heavy over the walls that made Mollie feel as if she were in an abandoned penitentiary.

The walls were not interiorly decorated like the manor --rather--the same stone that made up the exterior of the wall was mirrored throughout its interior. In spite of the coldness, there was still something quite beautiful about *Château de Glace*. There were several open windows in the towers where ice had inched its way into the castle to spread out against the wall like a natural mural. There were places in the castle where there were no ceilings and a light layer of fluffy snow lay untouched and smooth against the floor, as if time had stilled in those parts of the fortress.

Mollie had been caught off guard when Micah led her up a long flight of stairs to a tower with large ceiling to floor double doors. He had pulled her inside swiftly, the buckle of his belt clattering onto the grey icy floors.

He was so swift and rehearsed, as if he had done it a million times – freeing himself of his cloak and quickly heading to the opposite end of the room to start a fire.

Mollie had gasped when he flitted back to her side to lift her up against the dresser and pound himself repeatedly through her slick lower lips. Mollie groaned as he bit softly at her neck, his pale hand resting against the back wall to keep his balance as his cock pumped in and out

of her. Mollie clutched desperately at his shirt as he exhaled sharply against her neck, his hips slamming against hers as he tightened within her.

He was rushed and frantic when he took her against the wall -- then the edge of the bed -- then somehow onto a plush woollen rug on the floor.

He didn't give her a chance to breathe. It was as if the several days of travel had accumulated a certain level of pent up lust that he simply couldn't withhold any longer.

"Cum for me," he whispered giving a particularly hard thrust. Mollie gasped when he gave her thick hair a sharp pull from behind as he threaded his fingers in between her dark curls. He flattened her against the rug, his other hand kneading her shaped but slender thighs.

Mollie felt locked down as Micah hovered over her in the cold room, her vision going in and out of focus while white hot debilitating pleasure ripped through her. She felt her pussy clamp down around him and her spine followed suit straightening as he guided her hips against him. With a sharp cry Mollie convulsed beneath him as she clawed at the floor, his load filling her as his breathing stuttered against her neck.

Not even the crinkling fire could drown out their heavy breaths as Mollie slowly regained feeling in her legs and abdomen. Mollie felt absolutely spent, she almost didn't notice when Micah gripped her thighs tightly, his chin resting somewhere between her legs so he could watch her fluttering hole drip his white liquid down her thighs.

She made a motion, to roll herself over but she felt Micah's hands tighten against her quivering flesh.

"No," he murmured giving the inside of her thigh a soft nip. "Don't move. Keep your legs spread for me."

"Micah," she groaned giving her escape another attempt. The sharp pinch of his fingers on her thighs made her yelp in pain and she realized with fear he was being serious.

"I said don't move," he whipped out, his voice still breathless from their previous exertion.

Mollie stilled immediately, trying her best to ignore the sensation of cold semen pooling at the apex of her thighs.

She waited like that for some time, with her hair splayed out around her on the soft rug catching her breath as she turned her head into the thick fibres.

"Micah?" she breathed inching her head upwards.

She was nervous to move, unsure of whether she was permitted to do so.

"What?" he responded breathlessly.

His cheek was resting on her thigh, his loose dark curls tickling her stomach as his nose brushed her lower belly.

He suddenly jerked upwards for a second as if realizing their sudden position and looked down at Mollie.

"Are you cold?"

The question threw her and she blinked up at him in surprise. She had forgotten about the cold at this point, and the dots of sweat that lined her forehead suggested her body had well acclimatized to the temperature at this point.

"Well...no," she mumbled, suddenly timid under his fierce gaze. "I...just...I'm...", she trailed off when her eyes caught a beautiful canvas on the wall. Her attention was immediately diverted and the strokes and lines of the sketch sparked a sharp recognition in her mind.

"Did...did you draw that?"

Now it was Micah's turn to blink at her in surprise and he turned his head around to follow her gaze on the wall.

"Yes," he said somewhat impatiently. "A long time ago."

"Who is she? That woman?" she whispered. Relief flooded her as Micah pushed himself off of her. He ran his hand through his hair, the curls loose and tousled as they fell over his dark brow.

"I don't remember," he replied, brushing her off and standing to his full height.

Mollie bit her lip and carefully lifted herself to her knees. Her skin sunk into the plush wool.

"Who's Phoebe?"

Mollie jerked her head up and stared at him for a moment.

Her knees were still wobbly and her head swam from the exertion he had put her through but she managed to keep herself relatively steady.

"How-How... do you know about her?"

Micah looked down at her for a moment, his expression unreadable.

"You talk in your sleep."

Mollie felt her face flame and for some unknown reason this intrusive knowledge about her triggered her more than a lot of other things Micah had previously told her.

"I do?" she asked baffled. This newfound knowledge made her slightly hyperaware of her surroundings and she averted her gaze, dread pooling in her stomach. "What did I say?"

Micah smirked. "Nothing you need to be overly concerned about. It's a rather... peculiar trait."

Mollie frowned and pushed herself up to her feet. She wobbled slightly, a dull ache between her sticky thighs as she gripped the bedframe for balance. She gave the prince a withering look as she stood. Even if he noticed, he didn't react to it.

Instead, he pulled out his pocketwatch to check the time and swiftly returned it to his waistcoat pocket.

"Allow me to show you around the the rest of our chambers Mollie."

Mollie squirmed and protested the entire way as Micah ignored her feeble attempts to free herself from his grip, after he tossed her over his shoulder following her refusal. Only the looming threat of him fucking her well into the night quieted her enough to give up resisting him.

Mollie felt as if they were venturing down, past the main floor of the castle towards a deeper level. It wasn't a long trip, but something about the concealment of the room made Mollie shiver.

The light was sparse here and she trembled as Micah gently pushed on a heavy door that emitted an eerie echoing creak.

When Micah lowered her down she felt her hip meet a cold familiar porcelain edge.

She watched as he fluidly lit several candles around the room so light was returned to the pitch black room.

The warmth from the candles offered little relief from the chilly air and she trembled as he let the water from the tub run.

There was a permeating silence in the air and when Mollie turned around she caught sight of Micah staring at her, his eyes washing over the curves of her body in what little light was shed upon it.

His gaze was hungry...unsatiated. Mollie was worn out from their session only moments before and she couldn't understand the unobscured lust that still remained in his eyes.

"Look at you," he murmured taking a step closer so his cool breath fanned her forehead.
"*Éhontée.*"*

He stood in front of her in the dark room, covered by layers upon layers of clothing while she stood inches apart, in nothing but the thin necklace that lay delicately upon her collarbone.

His lips were parted, his eyes on her chest as he delicately traced a circular arch over her aching nipple.

Mollie whimpered at the sharp pull, the cold making her body that much more sensitive to every prickle of sensation. She looked up at him stiffly, her frown deepening as his smile widened.

Gently he lifted her naked body up and settled her into the scorching tub filled with oils, scents and rose petals. Mollie expected her skin to burn at the contact with hot water but it was quite the opposite. She noticed that there were windows in the bathroom...floor length windows that made Mollie feel as if she were in a fishbowl. But when she looked outside; the only thing she could see were snow covered mountains in the distance and what appeared to be an endless expanse of white.

“I won’t return till much later tonight,” Micah said tersely buttoning his cloak before slipping his gloves back on.

Mollie said nothing as she sat in the bubbled bath water staring at the rose tinted water around her.

“You won’t be alone. I’ve asked Cécily to see to your every need from now on. She’ll be more than happy to assist you.”

Mollie snapped her head up at this and watched as Micah combed his fingers through his hair and adjusted his belt.

“What?” She said baffled stirring in the water. “I don’t need that,” Mollie argued glaring at the prince. “I’ll be just fine on my own. There’s nowhere for me to even go,” she said miserably stealing a glance at the window.

“*Dieu merci,*” * Micah muttered, adjusting his collar.

She was pouting, like a child who’s parents refused them candy at the circus. The loneliness she felt at the manor was nowhere near what she was feeling now. At least she was able to venture outside, knew a familiar face or two in the manor. But here...any chance of escape was a death sentence and she knew absolutely no one here but Micah. At least she even had *Esperanza* before...but here. She was truly alone.

Cold leather fingers closed around her chin and Mollie jerked in surprise to see Micah standing right above her.

He curled his hand around her face and stared down at her, his expression stoic as she sunk down lower in the tub.

“You’ll like her,” he said softly rubbing his thumb in soft circles against her cheek. “You’ll need her to guide you around, take care of certain things around the *château*. She’ll be your lady in waiting—*votre soubrette*.”

Mollie was quiet as she listened to him speak. She wasn’t keen on having a “lady in waiting” in the first place. Did he forget that she was not a quaternary citizen? She’d never have had one, certainly not in this lifetime, not in the caste she was born into.

“I don’t need one.” She said firmly looking up at the prince fiercely. “I can take care of myself.”

“Yes,” he said coldly, the grip on her jaw tightening. “Yes you do.” She winced as he leaned down so they were eye level to eye level.

“This isn’t Questershire Mollie,” he said monotonously, his eyes narrowing slightly. “This fortress is big--bigger than the manor and many of the rooms have been turned into training rooms for soldiers, and meeting rooms for negotiations. It is not a home.”

Mollie kept silent as he continued speaking in his strict and formal tone usually reserved for his business associates.

“I know you can take care of yourself,” he said quietly taking a string of Mollie’s wet curls and twirling it around his finger. “I like that about you. But precautions must be taken. Especially when it comes to you.”

Mollie remained sullen as he pressed his lips softly against hers before straightening up.

“Where will you be gone for so long?” She asked quietly placing her chin on her wet knees.

Micah ignored her as he walked towards the door.

“Don’t forget to sift the fire when you’re finished,” he said softly. “It gets even colder when night falls.” He made a motion to move but retracted slightly as if he remembered something. “And do be vigilant on your way up the stairs, it gets icy at the top.”

With that he closed the door with a sharp click behind him.

Mollie sighed and swallowed her simmering anger as she sunk down into the hot water. She sunk until her bottom hit the hard flooring of the tub and the water rose to just above her chin. There was an eerie silence throughout the fortress that put Mollie’s hair on end.

As she sunk beneath the water she tried her best to isolate her mind from her body and float somewhere beyond these walls. She imagined she were back in Riverton, submerged in the sweet river that flowed through the dense green foliage just behind her grandparents quaint cottage.

She could picture it so vividly – the current whipping her hair backwards, the scent of clean honey tinged air mingling on the forest edge --the warm summer breeze...the feel of the sun on her back. She remembered her grandparents faces, their skin weathered from years spent in the sunny countryside. She could hear them calling her name as if they were only just beyond the sunflower field behind the cottage. She remembered that song they used to sing to her when she was just a little girl -- the haunting tune that still lingered in the back of her mind.

Her mother forbid her from ever singing it after her grandparents passed and they were forced to migrate to Chartery. But the words were still as fresh in her mind as the day she first heard it. Mollie remembered that long walk from the green fields of Riverton to the grey cobbled roads of Chartery as if it were yesterday. She had cried the entire way.

She had never cried so much in her life.

She hummed the tune as she slipped her head beneath the fresh scented water, letting her hair expand around her as the soft swoosh of water filled her ears.

Will you come back with me back to the king?

Past mountains and fields past the forest of bane?

Shall I wait for the cross or the cry of a gull

Do I follow the path or the winds of the south?

These seasons they change not a moment too soon

If we meet at the brink of the last golden rain

Will you come back with me back to the queen?

Past penultimate storms and the prairies of grain?

Are they white are they black are they shades of blue-green?

Or are somethings concealed, unseen to be seen?

These seasons they change not a moment too soon

If we meet at the brink of the last golden rain

Will you come back with me back to the prince?

Over bridges of tears and the river of Morte

Will the dead let us come will they walk by our side?

Sliding arm through the arm as a groom to his bride

These seasons they change not a moment too soon

If we meet at the brink of the last golden rain

Will the king seek our foes will he be our white knight?

Can we set it in stone, like Arthur to his blade?

The sailors, the abbot, the squire they know

Their fates no different from Shalott's sinful glow

These seasons they change not a moment too soon

If we meet at the brink of the last golden rain

Mollie spluttered as her head emerged from the water and she gripped the edges of the tub in fear. The water splashed over the edge of the tub and hit the floor with a loud splatter that echoed through the chilly bathroom. The temperature of the water had dropped to the point that the liquid had gone ice cold. Mollie shivered in the freezing water and choked fresh air into her lungs. The candles had long since burned out and the wax had left stringy fingers of hazy white snakes dripping down the edges of the walls. She was in complete darkness and she turned in fear to the right towards the windows. The sky was black and scattered with clouds, obscuring any possibility of seeing any stars in the night sky. The snow on the ground had thickened and risen quite high along the window and Mollie couldn't help but feel a cold sweat begin to start down her back.

Mollie must have fallen asleep in the tub and she wondered how long she had been out. It must have been longer than she had originally thought. The smell of wax was overwhelming in the room and she carefully pulled herself up from the tub. She cringed as her thick wet hair splat loudly against her back and sent water spattering down onto the cold tiled floor. She inched her arms out for a towel and reached blindly in front of her.

When her hands met the dry material she hastily wrapped the soft fabric around her damp body and climbed clumsily over the slippery white surface. Before she could take a single step forward she heard the clear undeniable sound of knuckles against glass.

Mollie froze.

Her back was to the window and her front was only inches away from the slightly ajar bathroom door. Her throat constricted and her legs shook as a million goosebumps erupted across her skin. She pulled the towel tight around her body and whipped around to face the window grabbing the edge of the tub for balance. Her eyes scanned the open snow desert, in search for the eyes she had felt watching her only seconds ago.

She saw nothing but black skies amidst a white landscape. Silently, she let out the shaky breath that had caught in her throat. She exhaled slowly and ran her fingers through the knots in her damp hair.

She was being silly. Unnecessarily paranoid. It was understandable.

She was in foreign territory, a different way of life completely. This response was natural. She took another deep breath before tightening her towel and using the walls to inch her way toward the door.

It was the flash -- the shadow that had alerted her this time and Mollie knew for sure she had not imagined it.

She felt her blood run cold as whatever was behind her cast a shadow against her back, obscuring the white reflection that danced on the walls of the bathroom. Mollie was wide eyed and still as the shadow eventually moved forward across the room before disappearing completely. Mollie counted to one hundred twice before she felt comfortable enough to turn around.

When she did she felt as if she were going to be sick. Outside the glass windows etched deep into the untouched snow were the unmistakable prints of large footprints that led straight towards the window. Mollie hadn't checked the ground until now and she felt faint. How had she missed those before? What if this person had been watching her while she slept? What if they had been there the whole time?

She didn't want to fathom it.

As quickly as she could she threw herself towards the door and flew up the slippery flight of stairs, heedless to the sting of her barefeet against the chilled stone. She slid herself into the master bedroom and slammed the door behind her. The cold assaulted her skin and she buckled as the sharp drop in temperature knocked her dripping legs together. She swore as she made her way towards the fireplace, ignoring the fact that she was dripping water everywhere on the floor. Micah had warned her to start a fire before nightfall and now she understood why. Mollie was shaking as she searched the ledge above the fireplace for a match and attempted to light a flame.

She could feel her breaths rushing past her lips and she fumbled with the match clumsily between her fingers before they fell to the ground with a clatter. Before she could bend down to pick them up another shadow hovered in the doorway casting an unnatural yellow light into the dark room. The figure headed straight for Mollie and she couldn't help but scream when she saw it approaching.

The figure stopped abruptly and Mollie's fear dissipated slightly when she heard a soft feminine voice coming from it.

"Hush now. There is nothing to be afraid of."

Mollie had hit the ground hard when she stumbled backwards and she clutched the towel to her chest as she stared in shock at the figure in front of her. Quickly it came closer bringing the torchlight down towards the girl and she was surprised to see a young woman with wide blue eyes staring back at her. The woman had a thick accent but she had kind features that put Mollie at ease.

She looked to be in her early thirties with simple features and light mousy brown hair tied back into a neat simple bun.

"Don't be afraid *Mademoiselle* Mollie," she said gently bending down towards the girl. "My name is Cécily. Cécily Lemieux. I'll be your lady in waiting for the time being."

Mollie placed a hand to her forehead and groaned. She hadn't even been here for a full day and she already felt unhinged.

"I thought...I thought I saw someone outside the window in the bathroom," she said softly, her eyes flickering to the large double doors behind the woman.

Cécily furrowed her brow as she helped Mollie to her feet.

"The floor length windows can be daunting *Mademoiselle*. But they're an important part of *Château de Glace*. What little sunlight creeps through the clouds during the day time helps maintain a warmer temperature in certain rooms of the *château* – particularly the back rooms that aren't as exposed to daylight. The heating system here is poor. That is why we must be diligent and aware of how we establish room temperature in these parts."

Mollie watched the woman quietly as she laid out a warm long sleeved dress for Mollie to wear and started a warm fire in the room. Although Cécily tried to placate her, Mollie was still shaken from what she had just witnessed.

"I saw footprints," she croaked. "There were footprints at the window..."

Cécily dropped her gaze and gently walked over towards the door that led down the staircase to the massive bathroom. She moved gracefully for a maid and Mollie was slightly envious of that. Grace and dexterity seemed to come so easily to these monarchical subjects.

Mollie quickly dropped her towel and slipped into the dress that was laid out for her. She bunched her damp hair into a simple plait and quickly padded down the staircase behind Cécily.

Already Cécily had relit several of the candles surrounding the tub giving the room a soft warm glow.

Mollie frowned at the spot outside the floor length window where the footprints had been before. Of course it was snowing-- but it seemed as if the snow had piled high on the previously traversed ground eliminating any evidence that someone had been there.

"They were there," she said angrily stepping closer to the window and gesturing to the spot where she had seen them. "I know what I saw."

Didn't she?

Cécily was quiet as she observed Mollie. She didn't appear annoyed, and even if she was she didn't show it. She seemed almost...solemn.

"I'm not denying what you saw *Mademoiselle*," she said carefully, choosing her words wisely. "The snow plays tricks on your mind, especially this far up North. I find it unlikely a person would be walking...outside...at this part of the castle. It would be very odd. You may have just mistaken the light striking the snow reflecting back to the sky. It does that sometimes, especially with a fresh snowfall. The prince did not make any announcement that

he would be arriving today. We weren't expecting him for another month or so. Maybe the travel has given you anxiety."

Mollie sighed and placed a hand against her head.

But the footsteps?

Was she losing her mind already? If this was happening to her on her first day in *Icedalar* Mollie would be a goner pretty quickly. She had to get herself together.

"You're right," she said wanly straightening up. "You're right...it...it must be the travel."

She smiled weakly at the woman who swiftly led her out of the bathroom and back towards her large quarters.

Mollie perched lightly against the huge bed as Cécily sauntered around the room, closing the curtains, dusting the tabletops, and lighting the various candelabrams scattered around the room.

Mollie paused when she approached her and jerked as the woman placed a soft hand against her forehead. She moved at an impressive speed, from one place to another.

"You're a little warm, *un peu trop chaud*," she added to herself scrambling to grab a cloth from another adjoining room.

There was something youthful and genuine about Cécily that Mollie didn't see with Esperanza. The old woman from the manor was too careful, too aware of who was around her and a bit too loyal for her own good.

Mollie wondered whether Cécily was as willing to lay her head along a platter for the Lyons as the old woman in Questershire was. She'd have to find out.

Cécily returned promptly and placed a chilled mint tea atop the small bedside table next to the enormous bed.

"This will help lower your temperature," she said assuredly giving Mollie a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

Before she could turn to leave Mollie called out to her.

"Wait...um...thank you," she said hesitantly unsure of how to address the woman.

Cécily laughed as she turned to look at Mollie.

"You do not have to thank me *Mademoiselle* Mollie," she said. "It is my job to see to you."

Mollie bit her lip as the woman bent towards the fireplace to sift the fire and bring more warmth into the room.

The candles aided somewhat but it was still chilly, even though Mollie had a thick padded dress on.

“You work for the Lyons?” Mollie asked, hoping to start a conversation.

“*Oui,*” said the woman cheerfully sifting through the wood as it crinkled. “*Depuis longtemps.*”

“You seem happy,” Mollie noted watching Cécily’s expression carefully. “They treat you well?”

Cécily turned to look at Mollie this time and Mollie saw her lip tighten ever so faintly.

“*Je suis content,*” she said crisply rising to her feet. “I know the prince well. I trust him.”

Mollie blinked in surprise at the honest answer. She was expecting the woman to evade it in some way...to be as elusory as Esperanza.

“You...you know Micah well?” she repeated blankly.

“Of course,” she said gesturing for Mollie to finish her tea. “He is the one who promoted me after all. I used to work the stables. Constantly on my hands and knees, scrubbing floors, cleaning excrement. Not a pleasant job. *Pas pour une femme comme moi.*”

“And your family?” Mollie probed suddenly interested.

Cécily laughed again as she turned towards Mollie.

“Master Lyon told me you were a curious one,” she said with a knowing smile. “Perhaps he was being a bit too modest.”

Mollie blushed and dropped her gaze for a moment.

“Do not be ashamed,” Cécily said with a hint of a smile. “It is not a bad quality, just a dangerous one. You must learn to keep it subdued.”

Mollie shifted uncomfortably as the woman came again to drop a soft fur blanket across her shoulders. She doubted that was something she’d ever be able to do.

“What else did he say about me?” Mollie asked quietly glancing up towards Cécily.

It was the first time the woman had paused before answering a question and Mollie saw her features contort slightly as she busied herself with the ornaments on the bedside table.

“He said you were from the country,” she said suddenly her movements halting for a brief second. “It is something us two have in common.”

Mollie watched as she pulled the curtains closed tightly and headed for the bedroom door.

“Is that all?” she murmured so faintly she wasn’t sure Cécily had heard her.

Cécily paused, the torches from the hallway casting a warm halo behind her.

“He’s never brought a woman to *Icedalar* before,” she said quietly with a soft chuckle. “I suppose this is as much new territory for me as it is for you.”

Her comment confused Mollie more than it should have. Perhaps she hadn’t been over-imagining the stares, the whispers, and the distasteful glances she had been the victim of since the start of the trip. Everyone was curious of her, and this drew attention...unwanted attention that would only make life more difficult for Mollie.

“*Dormier bien Mademoiselle,*” Cécily said quietly inching the door open. “I will be here tomorrow morning to assist you.”

Mollie waited until Cécily exited the room and her footsteps faded into silence before she ripped the blankets from her body and went straight for the small bag she had carried with her from Questershire manor. She sifted through the few items she had before she grabbed the soft freshly laundered yellow cloak and draped it snugly around her skinny body.

This had belonged to Izabel Lyon at some point and Mollie felt stronger whenever she was wearing it. The young Lyon wasn’t given justice for her death and Mollie felt as if her loneliness paralleled that of her own. Her heart ached for the young Belle who at one point would spend her days locked in her room carving out surnames of suitors her father would arrange for her to meet. She had also been told that Izabel had been strong, preferring to go on precarious trips with her brothers--wanting to be more than what her status of a woman had reduced her to. Mollie needed that strength now and she flipped the hood up over her head as she slipped her feet into her soft boots and laced them up tightly.

As swiftly as she could she slipped past the thick double doors of the luxurious bedroom and into the dark chilly halls of the notorious winter fortress.

Mollie tightened her cloak as she descended a third flight of stairs. She had nearly run headlong into three guards pacing at the end of the flight of stairs leading to her room. She dreaded having to return later...her return may prove to be more cumbersome than her escape.

She could still feel the icy cold stone through her boots and she breathed into her hands in a desperate attempt to warm her numb fingers.

She had heard a sliver of voices echoing down a hallway before but the ice that covered the ground was too daunting for Mollie to traverse. The last thing she needed was a fall that left her unable to move.

Instead Mollie followed the torches and candelabums that were set up along the hallways. Some of them had been recently used and she navigated her way through the cold tunnels from wall to wall, inching her way closer to the voices she had heard lingering above and below her.

Mollie gulped as she passed an empty barren room covered in a thick layer of snow. It was bare except for a rope hanging in the middle of the room, a single loop on the end. She hurried her pace and felt along the walls until she heard a sharp gruff tone from around the corner. This corridor was significantly warmer than the others and Mollie could physically feel the temperature transition as she crept along the hall, the air becoming more heated the closer she got. She paused and flattened herself against the wall as she listened to these guards.

“You have a cigar?”

They appeared to be pacing up and down and Mollie held her breath as the clinking of their boots against the floor rattled sharp in her ears.

“Nope,” the other one replied popping the p at the end of the word. “But I could use one too, it’s fucking cold.”

“Mmm,” the other murmured. “One of them French cigars, nothing quite like them. They really are the best.”

The other scoffed and Mollie heard the pacing had come to a stop.

“How long do you think this event will last? I mean we ain’t supposed to be on duty and we ain’t being paid anymore to be here. I have a wife and eight children to feed. Christ.”

“Well who asked you to make her pop out so many?” the other one said annoyed.

“That ain’t the point,” came a heated reply.

“Aren’t you supposed to be on babysitting duty? We don’t need two guards to keep watch of a room where there are already guards inside. I mean none of this even makes sense.”

The other groaned and Mollie heard slight shuffling before the conversation continued.

“I ain’t watching that *salope*. Plus she locked in a tower now. She ain’t a threat.”

Mollie stiffened.

“We were given strict orders to watch it,” the other said, significantly more sternly than before.

“Drop it. She’s just a little girl. Little girls don’t know nothing. Believe me I know. I have six daughters. The only threat she poses is crying her eyes out and fussing when the bathwater ain’t hot enough.”

The other paused before he answered.

“Sounds more like your wife is the problem, not your daughter.”

The bickering continued for some time and Mollie figured she’d try to find another way into the room. She had no doubt Micah’s trip here was just a stopping point before he continued to

Ophian Land. He was short with her before, showing clear disinterest in discussing business and negotiations. At least with her.

She had heard what went on at the meeting a couple nights ago. Micah was due to negotiate with the Ophians and Mollie found herself growing more interested in iridium and its significance. Sure it was powerful...but she felt as if there was something more to it, something that made people so desperate they were willing to sacrifice their kingdoms for it. The Lyons and the Ophians had a bloody history. Something that went beyond utter distaste and poor negotiation. It was personal, this much she had deduced.

Mollie stepped closer and froze when her cloak hit the back of the candelabra. The candle holder hit the wall with a soft screech and she felt her throat swell up.

The chatter stopped abruptly and she braced herself against the wall swearing herself at her foolishness.

“Did you hear that?”

The men had gone quiet and Mollie clutched her cloak tightly around her and slithered along the wall as silently as she could.

She could hear the footsteps approaching fast and she quickly scampered behind a jagged edge of the *château* wall and crouched. Her cloak swept the floor and she was thankful the yellow colour of her cloak danced off the wall like candlelight against the snow.

The guards were bickering again, only steps away from where she had been and she prayed...prayed they didn't turn around and see her around the corner.

“Gentleman.”

A deep baritone voice echoed across the hall that sent Mollie's stomach plummeting to the ground. It was deep and authoritative and painstakingly familiar.

Mollie heard the guards sink low to the ground.

He was here. Why was he here?

He moved silently, like a snake creeping on its next meal and she heard the shuffle of the guards as they let Hartley pass through the large double doors of the hallway.

Mollie had splayed herself against the far wall, concealing herself as much as possible. She winced when she crouched, the space in between her thighs still tender as her heart pounded in her chest. It was the closest she had ever been to him and her adrenaline had spiked almost immediately. It was an innate reaction, something that dated back to the early days of civilization. An unprecedented increase in blood pressure when danger was fast approaching.

Mollie exhaled slowly and slid farther and farther in the opposite direction of the guards.

Perhaps she could go around...around where if she was lucky, there was a chance of there being less guards...

“Going somewhere *fillette*?”

Mollie turned blindly and grabbed the nearest crevice in the stony wall to keep her balance.

She’d seen him before. This man – back in Questershire Manor. He was part of Micah’s cabinet... a high ranked elite member of the monarchy.

His expression was stony, hard and utterly displeased. Now that Mollie was only a few metres ahead of him she could see the distorted indented scar that ran from his hairline all the way to his lip. His voice was ragged and harsh. As if it had grown accustomed to being used so forcefully the vocal cords were permanently damaged.

Mollie had last seen him in the dungeons with Micah. He hadn’t even batted an eyelid as the prisoners throats were slit one after another.

Mollie hesitated and faltered as she took several steps backwards. The guard was huge, blocking out any possibility of an exit that lay just on the other side of him.

“Little birdies shouldn’t come out of their nest if they don’t know how to fly first little girl.”

The raspiness of his tone made his threat seem even more ominous and Mollie felt her palms begin to sweat.

He began to take casual steps forward, each one bringing him that much closer to Mollie. His eyes wandered angrily over her cloak and she pulled the clothing tighter around her shoulders.

“Where did you get that? That belonged to...”

His voice tightened in an unmistakable manner. Something in the way his brown eyes flashed made Mollie even more nervous.

“If you hurt me....Master Lyon won’t be pleased,” she squeaked pressing herself against the backwall.

The man tilted his head to the side for a moment, as if he were weighing his options carefully.

“I don’t hurt meek wandering concubines.”

Mollie’s cheeks blazed at the term but at the back of her mind she knew there was some truth to it. She often forgot how her affiliation with Micah seemed from an outside perspective. Sure he told her that she wasn’t his slave, but to everyone else, it really did seem that way. Furthermore, Micah knew how much it upset her to be called one. It hit a little too close to home.

His lips pursed for a moment in a cunning smile that made Mollie’s heart jump to her throat.

“Though if I did turn you in...I’m quite sure Master Lyon would be *equally* displeased.”

Mollie frowned and shot the guard a look of overt dislike. Something in the back of her mind told her that the guard couldn't hurt her even if he wanted to. His intimidation was good, but she had leverage over him in this situation. Whether he liked it or not. Her eyes flickered to the crest on his chest where she saw several high ranking badges as well as a clear distinguishable name tag just slightly below the Lyon insignia.

Gibbs.

When she spoke, she made sure to add a hint of a challenge in her tone.

"I'm sure his displeasure would be nothing compared to him knowing I escaped even *with* the guards right outside my door."

The guard named Gibbs narrowed his eyes, his expression immediately turning dangerous.

"Are you threatening an elite *Garde Imperiale* member?"

Mollie hesitated, her eyes zeroing in on the way the man flexed his knuckles.

His lips curled making his scar appear even more threatening.

"You really think you're something special don't you?"

Mollie swallowed and crossed her arms protectively over her chest.

They stood like that for some time, the grown man towering over her frail figure from across the hall, the heat of their breaths meeting somewhere in the centre of the chilly dark corridor.

If looks could kill...

Maybe it was him...maybe he had been the one spying on her earlier.

"But you don't understand," he said quietly after some time elapsed. The scar on his face moved with every slight facial expression and Mollie found it hard to focus on anything else but the angry pink indentation. He sounded...put out --his threatening aura dropping momentarily.

"Understand what?" she asked.

The guard's tone had gone less hostile, but his expression remained strict and severe.

"I could show you," he said in a muted tone. He seemed to be thinking very carefully about something, looking Mollie up and down as he came to a decision. "Make this worth your while."

Mollie was mistrustful. The man was scary, no doubt about that... but Mollie was not a regular slave. This much was obvious enough. Her treatment was vastly different from the first time she had met the prince several months ago. The necklace Micah had put around her throat seemed much heavier against her skin now and she could feel the sharp ridges of the

cold metal dig into the space between her collarbones. The only other option she had was to return to her chambers in the tower and for Mollie...this was not an option.

“Make it worth my while?” Mollie said slowly taking a step back. “You’d help me?” she asked baffled.

“I said I’d help you understand,” Gibbs clarified with a frown. “You seem like a smart girl. Street smart maybe...but a little... enlightenment wouldn’t hurt. I’m sure you miss your home.”

Mollie exhaled slowly and wiped her sweaty palms on the inside of her cloak. She took her time considering what he had to offer. Even such a fleeting mention of home made her insides clench painfully.

What if it’s a trap? Could she trust him?

“What exactly are you going to help me understand?”

Before Mollie could argue any further, he had turned around and began walking in the opposite direction.

“Follow me.”

Mollie didn’t have too much time to weigh her options and despite her rational mind telling her to return to her room obediently – she went with her gut.

They had been circling the perimeter of the fortress for half an hour already and Mollie was agitated.

Previously, Mollie didn’t really believe *Icedalar* could get any colder than it already did during the day...but as she trudged through the thick wet snow that gripped at her poorly covered legs she realized just how wrong she was.

“Through here,” Gibbs said roughly brushing a thick blanket of snow from a stone archway leading into a damp dark tunnel.

Mollie tensed immediately. The hall resembled a dungeon and not a single torch or candelabra was visible down the corridor.

The guard sensed her hesitation and gave her a hard but firm push on the back closer to the entrance.

“We don’t have much time,” he said tersely. He ushered her inside quickly and led her along the hallway until they reached a sharp curve in the wall.

Mollie gasped in pain as her arm snagged a jagged edge of rock but continued forward nonetheless.

The dread that had accumulated in her stomach began to lessen when the sounds of clinking glasses and soft voices began filtering through the walls.

“What is this?” Mollie whispered as the man pulled her forward. “Where are we?”

“Smugglers tunnel,” he responded. “Every fortress has one.”

As Mollie followed the guard around several twists and turns she was shocked to see a thin sheen of ice blocking the entrance to a vast and snowy courtyard. The space was massive and allowed a stunningly clear view of the room across from where she stood. So far, Mollie had seen a rather dreary side to the castle apart from her lavish bedroom quarters. But the sight that was before her was truly spectacular.

The nature of the room itself put even the opulent Questershire Manor Ballroom to shame. The natural ice sheens that had formed over many years created pillars of glaciers on the outside of the room and gave the illusion as if the room itself were made of cyan blue glass. The floor was a rich blue, the colour of aged ice and spread from one side of the fancy hall to the other. The windows were floor length like the ones in the bathrooms on the main floor of the fortress. The glass was thin, allowing for a clear view into the interior. There weren't many people present but there was no doubt a meeting that was taking place.

There was a long table spread from one side of the room to another with three men and two women occupying seats on both sides. A single chandelier hung in the centre of the room with three gigantic layers of sharp sculpted icicles. The room was surrounded by lit quillicks casting a warm orange glow around the room in spite of the frigid temperatures that surrounded them.

Mollie barely had time to really take in the beauty of this part of the fortress, her eyes were scanning the room for one person only.

When she saw him she felt her lips go numb.

Micah was there, his rich navy cloak spread out behind him as he spoke with a man dressed in thick furs. His right gloved hand was stiff and resting elegantly against his hip. The other was slipped in between the arm of another. His thick dark hair was carefully combed to the side to display his sharp handsome features. Even from this distance Mollie could see how much he radiated elegance. When her eyes flickered to the woman standing beside him she felt her blood run cold.

Mollie recognized that ice blonde hair.

Tamzin Menestratten.

The girl had been oddly threatened by Mollie, which had been the first and last time they had encountered each other. The girl was undoubtedly beautiful, her icy locks carefully pinned up into delicate ringlets. They contrasted starkly with her blood red lips which were curved into a smug rehearsed smile.

Mollie felt her blood prickle as she watched them together. Micah had a smile plastered on his face, his dimples deep and his grip on the arm of the woman firm. But that smile didn't reach his eyes. In fact, his posture was so painfully stiff it was hard to spot the constant rise and fall of his chest. The girl on the other hand had an award winning smile...not entirely different from a cat that had caught the canary. Mollie figured she knew nothing about the man beside her.

Micah was enchanting in the most profound way. His grace, his smile, his boyish charm...it was all an act, something he wore to fit the persona of a privileged wealthy prince. It was a mask he wore to hide the damaged, imprisoned boy that lay under all those layers of expensive silks. Tamzin believed she was betrothed to a prince. Little did she know what exactly lay in store for her once she signed her life over to him.

Micah smiled politely at the man speaking to them. He placed his hand gently on the back of his fiancée, playing the part of the perfect gentleman. Tamzin fit the role of a princess well with her delicate long sleeved periwinkle gown. She seemed besotted with the man beside her.

"Master Lyon...Prince Micah is already making things difficult for this kingdom. He doesn't want to be king."

Mollie looked sharply at the guard whose eyes had finally lingered to rest on the scene before them.

"How do you know that?"

"It's quite obvious," said the guard. "His lack of participation in the courts, his refusal to attend his own promotion -- his coronation delay. It adds up and it does not go unnoticed."

Mollie listened but there was still something that she did not understand.

"What makes you think he'd be a good king?"

The guard looked at Mollie closely as he answered.

"I've been here a long time. Seen my fair share of good leaders and...not so good leaders. A lot of people think leadership is a cocktail of these superior qualities -- loyalty, charisma, persuasion. But it's much simpler than that really. A good leader is someone who is willing to separate their emotions from their tasks. A good leader knows not to mix emotion into their work. A good leader knows how to *compartmentalize*."

The guard gave Mollie a knowing look, his side profile shrouding the scar that ran along the lefthand side of his face. Mollie hadn't realized how much the scar took away from his features. Without it, Mollie figured he must have been quite an attractive man at some point. Whoever gave him that scar made sure it would stay there etched into his skin for the rest of his life.

"You've gained yourself a bit of reputation these days...", he trailed off for a moment his eyes flickering back to the hall across from them. "I just want you to know that you are a

distraction to the prince. Master Lyon's future is neatly laid out for him and no matter what he tells you or how many promises he pledges to keep, he cannot—he will not abide by them. His position simply does not allow it.”

Mollie bit her lip as she listened. Micah had made it abundantly clear to her how much he despised the role he had been born into...how he craved to escape from the duties he was obligated to complete. But it was these people, those who only saw that single part of him that refused to acknowledge that there may be more to him than meets the eye.

“The prince doesn't want to be king,” she said flatly turning toward the guard. “It doesn't matter how great of a king you believe him to be. Nothing you say will change that.”

“It's not his decision to make,” the guard said between clenched teeth. “Sir Hartley always favoured that boy, even trained him differently than his brothers. It was always his responsibility irregardless of his attitude towards it. And the boy will not disobey his father. He knows better than that.”

“Why?” Mollie challenged looking the guard sternly in the eye. “Micah is the youngest Lyon son, he should be third in line to takeover, following his two older brothers. Succession to the throne is determined by birth order and gender.”

The guard laughed humourlessly. “If the Lyons always followed the rules they wouldn't be half of what they are today.”

Mollie harboured her suspicions about Micah from the start—from his birth to his hometown to his rather controversial role of chief executive officer of the Lyon Empire.

“You see?”

Mollie jerked as the guard moved closer to her. She hadn't realized that his eyes had been on her the entire time as she watched the man who had enslaved her flaunt another leading lady on his arm.

“This...this is what is meant to be *fillette*.”

Mollie watched the prince and his bride- to- be together for an immeasurable amount of time. She watched as they mingled with elite diplomats from other cities, clinking glasses, laughing lightly. Her fingers and toes were numb to the point of unfeeling and her ears were ringing from the cold wind. Her chest was tight from the cold air and yet she felt a horrible void of emptiness in fill her.

Gibbs' rough voice pierced the air again snapping Mollie back to reality.

“Master Lyon's coronation will happen soon enough and afterwards he can officially take over the duties his father has laid out for him and rule the North as king. That is the way things will be.”

The man seemed confident in his words, as if he were repeating them to himself to further their validation. Mollie didn't really know what she was expecting to see. Regardless,

whatever this guard had showed her was nothing she didn't already know. But the humiliation of having to see it with her own eyes was debilitating in the worst possible way. It made her feel inferior, worthless -- of little value. It made her feel as if she really *were* Micah's distraction. Something he could dump his problems on when things got too tough to handle... a person whose legs he could spread when he craved a warmth no blanket or fur coat could offer in these harsh lands.

"If what you said were true," she murmured, hating how thick her voice sounded. "Then why won't he let me go?"

Mollie heard the guard inhale slowly.

"Lust is the strongest adjunct of temptation. Prince Micah is aware of this and he will overcome it, just as he has overcome many adversities throughout his life. He is the king we all need. It is just a matter of pushing him there."

"You seem so sure," Mollie whispered, the wind taking most of her voice away with it.

"I want what's best for my kingdom -- and that warrants electing a good leader. I do hope you understand *fillette*. It would benefit us both. With Micah as king, we normal folk get to live our lives contentedly...and you...you get your freedom."

Mollie wasn't aware of Micah's public status with the people but based on what she was now hearing it sounded as if he were slowly rising in popularity.

"You'd rather have him as King," Mollie said suddenly understanding the guards perspective. "That's your goal isn't it? You'd be willing to do anything to ensure the Northern kingdom doesn't fall victim to James Lyon."

Gibbs stiffened before he spoke.

"Micah is CEO but he is not yet king. That would only happen once Micah completes his coronation and that would be...following his marriage."

Now Mollie was the one to stiffen.

Things were beginning to fall into place...and things that didn't make much sense before began to slowly clarify. Micah had told her this before...that day they had walked together on the grounds. He had told her so blatantly what the rules were.

"From the day we were born, my brothers and I, all being potential heirs to govern the monarchy, were overseen, monitored, and shadowed everyday of our lives. When we come of age...these rules become less stringent. There is more flexibility between what we can and cannot do."

"It's still his choice," Mollie realized. The wind had picked up but she no longer felt the bone-chilling temperature seeping into her skin. "Hartley may have favoured him...maybe even handpicked him as a successor...but with James and Rowan still alive and fit to rule..."

Micah still has the ability retain some morsel of his autonomy. That's why he could delay this coronation for as long as he wanted to...unless..."

Mollie went through scenario over scenario in her head. God she had been so *blind* before. Micah must have been planning this since Hartley had made him CEO. He wasn't only delaying because he didn't want to be king...he was delaying to buy himself *time*. But time for what? To escape? Time to retaliate against his father?

Mollie had a feeling Micah had no intention of becoming king...ever. Did it have something to do with her? Was that why he had brought Mollie along in the first place?

"What about Rowan?" she questioned. "Why can't he be King?"

"That *homosexuel*!?" The guard spat on the ground in disgust and Mollie cringed. "*Une telle comme ça est blasphématoire.*"*

The conversation Rowan exchanged with Micah before they had departed for the North suddenly resurfaced in her mind. Rowan had seemed... uncharacteristically agitated. As if something had not gone their way. Whatever was going on...Mollie knew Rowan and Micah were in on it. They were planning something, and whether it would work or not was still up in the air.

She swallowed stiffly. This newfound knowledge suddenly felt like a sudden pile of bricks on her chest. The Insurgency wanted to overthrow the Lyon empire completely and the people wanted James out of power. James had been limiting access to the West not because of protests related to Logan Lyon but because of *him*. The North and the South did not want him as their ruler and they were retaliating. It was all too much to process.

"Micah had been so upset that day..." she murmured mostly to herself as the guard stared at her. "The night of the ball...the promotion...the same day Logan Lyon had died."

She was talking to herself, piecing together what had been right under her nose.

"With Logan Lyon gone and with no heir to take his place... that left the West and the North without a ruler. Had Logan not died, he would have ruled the West and the North accordingly. It would have been...perfect for them..." Mollie trailed off, realizing what this situation would have entailed. As far she knew Hartley had no intention of withdrawing his power in the South, but he was pushing Micah to claim the North for his own, even over his eldest son.

Had Logan not passed...there would have been no need for any promotion and Micah would have never been in the situation that faced him now.

It made sense why James resisted Micah coming alone to the North. The West and the North were under the same jurisdiction, but Hartley appeared to have plans to change this. It was theoretically James Lyon's territory at the moment...and she doubted he put any trust in Micah to play fairly. He feared Micah might usurp his autonomy. He must not know Micah's true intentions. He must not know Micah did not seek the crown as dearly as he did.

Mollie felt a strong sense of catharsis after piecing together what had been bothering her since her early days at Questershire. But even knowing all that she knew now, it still didn't explain why Mollie was here. Mollie was clever enough to realize that Micah did not do things without thorough meticulous planning.

He had brought her along for a reason and that reason was not strictly sentimental, at least not at the crux of it all.

What about her did he need? What role did she play in his plan and why did Rowan not agree with it?

"Take me back," she whispered. She felt as if she were about to vomit. Mollie could no longer feel the cold, only a tense eviscerating numbness.

The guard nodded and gestured for Mollie to follow. He had been quiet, listening to Mollie's musing but not saying a word. In some strange twisted fashion, she felt more at ease beside this man she barely knew than she ever did around Esperanza. It was as if he put up that cold menacing aura because he had to. You hid your weaknesses in these unforgiving lands.

Her fingers dug into the rough stone of the pillar she was leaning against and she couldn't tell whether her shaking was due to the extreme cold or her own hyperactive body.

Gibbs said no more and neither did she as he led her back into that damp twisted corridor.

The laughter continued to permeate from across the courtyard but Mollie didn't look back. She found solace in the darkness and navigated her way through the dark corridor. The comforting drip of ice water trickling down the walls was unusually peaceful and Mollie found herself humming the haunting ballad of her past as the guard returned her to her chambers, the fleeting tune echoing through the fortress like the bells of a church on a mountain range.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was...incredibly difficult to write. But I made it extra long because it's been a while since the last update.

Translations in Order:

*Shameless

*Thank God

*Such a claim is blasphemous

Chapter 29: Cuivre

Chapter Summary

Mollie finds her leisure time suspended indefinitely. Mollie's relationship with Micah reaches a level she never could have anticipated as barriers crumble.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The weeks followed by in a manner that was becoming routine to Mollie.

Questershire manor was massive, with its lush green gardens and open airy courtyards. But the harsh icy weather in these parts was limiting in what Mollie was able to accomplish. She had learned so much in the span of such little time and for the first time in a while, she was itching to speak to Micah. *Really* speak to him. She knew he harboured a softer side. She had caught brief glimpses of it in Questershire – the offhand moment he kissed her forehead before she fell to sleep -- or when he brought her out to the cliff side to admire the night sky. She just wished those moments weren't so fleeting.

She didn't see the prince for the majority of the day and she hadn't seen Gibbs since that night. Mollie only saw Micah very late in the night when he'd creep into her room and fuck her hard and passionately into the sheets. He was never there when she woke, not so different from when she had been a prisoner in Questershire manor. The more intimate they were, the more Mollie picked up on. For one, Micah liked being in control, and his lovemaking was fierce and structured, no different from how he liked to run his business.

But Micah was making things difficult for her.

He spoke less to her now, their short conversations centred mostly around Mollie's health and wellbeing – or what little she had of it. She couldn't tell if it was her causing him to sink into a deeper layer of obscurity, or if the pressures of running the profitable aspect of his empire was getting to him.

Micah had instructed Cécily to keep her busy during the day with various activities that were usually bestowed upon those of a higher class. She had French lessons with Cécily three times a day, was forced to attend etiquette classes with some of the other female courtiers of the castle – which Mollie despised—and she was fitted into gown upon gown in a manner that was quickly becoming cumbersome to the girl.

It left Mollie with little time to pursue her own agenda and even in times when she sought solitude, Cécily was always just around the corner.

It was another late evening for Mollie as she sat at the vintage wooden desk in her quarters overlooking a frost covered window onto the white landscape of *Icedalar*. How long had she been a prisoner of the North? A month already? She felt as if she and the prince were on borrowed time. The words of Gibbs still echoed through her mind as she sat staring at a list of foreign words on the long aged parchment in front of her. She hadn't seen him since that day either.

The sharp *click* of the door opening behind her sent Mollie exhaling sharply as her brief moment of alone time was once again disturbed.

"I'm not finished," she called out straining to keep the irritation out of her voice. She didn't even bother turning around. She focused her gaze back on the words in front of her and tried to filter out her irritation.

However her attempt to focus was promptly intercepted when cool uncovered fingers began to glide along her collarbone.

Mollie jerked back in surprise and was quickly held still as pale wintry palms spread out along her neck to slide past her shoulders and then quickly return to massage her collar bones.

It was early...early for Micah to be back in her chambers at this time.

"You seem to have settled in quite nicely," he murmured pressing softly into the sharp edges of her chest. "I thought you may have been difficult...I anticipated it actually. But you've proven to be quite...understanding. It isn't easy to settle into a place like this, I'm aware of that."

Mollie was quiet, as she usually was these days. Her mind kept wandering back to his clueless fiancée. Mollie wondered if she was aware of what the prince was up to during his off hour times.

"You were so limp last night," he whispered against her ear giving her lobe a sharp tug with his teeth. "It was almost as if your mind was someplace else as we made love."

She locked her jaw and stubbornly looked the other way.

"What makes you think that?" she said stiffly bringing her papers closer to her face.

Micah brushed his nose against her jaw, inhaling her scent as he trailed down her neck to her exposed shoulder. She felt his smile against her skin.

"You tell me."

She chose to ignore him, focusing instead on the scrawled foreign words that lined the aged parchment.

Her bronze hands were suddenly covered by cold pale ones as the prince rested his chin on her shoulder and observed her progress quietly.

“Not bad Mollie Mae,” he murmured into her skin. “You are indeed a quick learner.”

A pale finger scrolled down the parchment, his sharp eyes monitoring her progress like a professor would a struggling student.

His skin had paled so much since they left Questershire. The lack of southern sun was evident in his long since faded sunkissed glow.

“However...there is still much progress to be made. Push yourself a little harder.”

Mollie turned to him angrily, her silent treatment technique immediately dropping.

“Excuse me? That’s easy for you to say, you already *know* another language.”

“And you will too, in time,” he said shortly, his lips gradually turning into a frown. “Relax Mollie, I’m not trying to chastise you.”

She sighed and turned her head the other way. She hadn’t felt this way in a long time. Something about their little dispute felt rather...domestic. It was unnerving.

“Mollie Mae?”

Micah’s cool breath fanned her shoulder and she stiffened as he brushed his nose against her neck. “Repeat after me.”

Mollie’s lip tightened but she wouldn’t refuse him. Not when he had both his arms around her chest and his lips against her throat.

*“Avoir une autre langue c’est posséder une deuxième âme.”**

Mollie rolled her eyes but acquiesced quietly.

Her pronunciation was off, she knew that, but he didn’t comment on it.

“Bien,” he finished with a quick peck to her cheek. *“Vous voyez ma chérie? Vous êtes votre seule limite.”**

Mollie bit her lip as cold fingers began to work at the delicate buttons that lined the back of her dress and she braced herself for the long night ahead.

It was colder than usual in *Icedalar* that evening. Well, as cold as you could call the North on the brink of winter.

Antoine Bordeaux paced nervously outside the hall, his fingers and toes cold to the point of unfeeling as he played with the edges of his status card in his front pocket,

He had arrived only hours ago and no matter how many candles and fireplaces he lit around his room, he couldn’t filter out the chill that seeped through his various layers of clothing.

He cursed as he wrapped his scarf tighter around his neck. He was to meet with an attendant of the Lyon's tonight and he was nothing short of terrified. Not only did his people depend on it, his livelihood did. The Lyon empire had spread so vastly and swiftly like an insidious asymptomatic disease. It surrounded Antoine's little countryside village of Yvoire and he feared for their town. They were humble well to do folk who kept to their business...not unlike the other country side villages that used to surround them before they were taken over by the Lyons. He hoped this deal would offer some sort of extrication from invasion. He just hoped what he had to offer was enough.

Antoine had closed many deals before...locally of course. But this...this was on another level entirely.

He had started out with nothing but three grapeseeds and a hole sized patch of farmers land. But today, he had an entire farmers field filled with grapevines and underground cellars.

He had been fed up with the townspeople pilfering the grapes that grew along his vineyards so he created his own solution with everyday materials in his back shed to ward off the peasants. And it had worked...quite beautifully.

He didn't think too much of it when other businesses began to ask for this "magic" solution, but the letter he received from the Lyons set him on a new track.

"Monsieur Bordeaux?"

The man turned quickly, the deep voice bringing him back down to reality.

"Oui, c'est moi," he stuttered buttoning up his thick coat.

*"Le prince desire vous voir aussitôt Monsieur,"**

Antoine felt his insides flop at the sudden change in plans but nodded in agreement nonetheless. He was in no way prepared to see the prince. Hell, he wasn't even dressed properly. He suddenly felt hot and uncomfortable in his many layers but he stiffly followed the guard down the long corridor towards the large white doors at the end of the hallway.

Antoine was from a very small village on the outskirts of the Lyon border. He was one of the few bilingual labourers at the time but he was a hardworker. He was also one of the few to rise above his secondary status and earn well beyond a regular individual born of that caste.

There were many guards around, pacing, watching, or simply just standing at many different corners of the meeting room and Antoine felt a new chill permeate the air.

He stared wide eyed at the nearly empty room and jumped when he heard his name being called out from just beyond the long table that spread from one end of the room to the other.

"Monsieur Bordeaux. J'espère que votre voyage n'a pas été trop pénible."*

The smooth inviting tone was quite enticing and Antoine was taken aback that the prince even knew his name.

"Votre Majesté," he managed in between quivering lips.

Antoine looked up in poorly disguised astonishment at the man before him.

There was no mistaking the man for anybody but the prince. Unlike the others around him who wore large padded coats, he wore a thick navy cloak that framed his incredibly tall figure elegantly and his dark tousled locks were combed and styled into a classic but fashionable side part to compliment his sharp features. The prince looked so young, barely even twenty Antoine assumed. He must be the youngest one, most certainly. He had never seen the youngest prince, but he looked very much different from his brothers.

On his arm was a stylish blonde woman with dark red lipstick who opted to look at the man beside her rather than Antoine who was only a few steps away.

*"Vous parlez Anglais, il paraît?"**

Antoine stumbled a little bit before he responded.

"Oui...yes. Yes of course."

The prince had the most vibrant eyes, a clear luminescent green that made Antoine feel as if the man were staring straight into his soul.

"Wonderful," he said with a crooked smile. The woman beside him gave his arm a soft squeeze and a coy smile before she sauntered off, her blond locks catching the warm candlelight. The prince's eyes never strayed from his, not once.

"Can I offer you a drink? *Chambord? Pastis? Kir Royale?*

"Oh..er I," Antoine stammered.

The prince didn't waste another moment and signalled for one of the guards behind him to bring Antoine a drink.

Antoine hesitated as a beautiful goblet was offered to him filled with a dark but unknown liquid

The prince was charming as he guided Antoine towards the large table in the centre of the room and took a seat across from him.

He took a small reluctant sip out of politeness as the prince continued speaking.

It was bitter.

"I'm told you have the most prosperous vineyard in *Yvoire.*"

Antoine gave a breathless gasp as he placed his goblet on the table. He eyed the full untouched glass of the prince in front of him.

"It works," Antoine mumbled choosing to evade eye contact. There was something unnatural about the man in front of him. How still...how stiffly he carried himself. He was almost *too* aware of his surroundings and it made Antoine nervous.

The prince smiled at Antoine.

"Your humility is admirable *Monsieur Bordeaux*," but I must implore you take full ownership of your achievements. This solution you use on your crops...tell me about it."

Antoine shifted uncomfortably but continued.

"I was tired of the townsfolk stealing my grapevines...it was getting to the point that I didn't have enough to even make 5 bottles of wine. So I figured, I'd spray the grapes with something strong and pungent to ward off the thieves. I used copper sulphate and lime to make the grapes unpalatable. I'd hoped this would deter them into stealing from my farmland."

The prince looked somewhere far away as Antoine spoke and he hesitated before he continued.

"*Votre Majesté?*" he questioned.

The prince's lips tightened ever so slightly but he kept a pleasant expression plastered on his face, his eyes sharpening.

"Continue."

"Well... Well it turns out that not only did my solution keep the peasants away...it prevented powdery mildew infestations from infiltrating my farmland. It was a complete accident really. I didn't know the combination of these ingredients had potential to do such things."

The prince listened intently and Antoine shuffled in his seat nervously. It was hard to tell what the young prince was thinking. He kept such a placid expression on his face Antoine wasn't sure whether he wanted to help him or harm him.

"This is quite an... inexpensive concoction by the sounds of it," the prince said raising an eyebrow.

"Indeed," Antoine responded with a quick nod. "I make it in many batches and sell it. I..I've told no one else the ingredients."

"Clever man," the prince said with a smile. "This simple little...accident may just make you the richest man in Yvoire."

Antoine smiled weakly and looked down at his still full glass.

He had a question he had been meaning to ask the prince, a question his wife and his homefolk had begged him to convey.

"There is one more thing...your majesty."

The prince suddenly seemed more interested and Antoine saw his eyes pierce into his own and the man swallowed thickly.

“Your Imperial army rests on the border of our lands, just a mile off the coast. We are free peoples. We want no business with the army nor your political affairs. Just peace. Your army grows closer every day and my people...they are concerned. With so much of the countryside having been taken over in the past – *Saignon, Ménéham, Riverton* – we are worried.”

The prince held up a hand and Antoine quickly stopped short. He bowed his head down slightly as a sign of respect and shivered under the intense gaze of the prince.

“I understand your concerns,” he responded crisply. “But my expertise is strictly economical. Any political matters must be taken up with your town’s personal guard.”

“We are peaceful folk your majesty,” Antoine said quickly his tone becoming more desperate. “We don’t have a personal guard. All we ask is that our town is spared from Lyon control. We don’t want any invasion. Please, please your majesty you must be able to do something.”

The prince sighed and turned away for a moment. When he turned around to face Antoine, the man felt his heart thump unevenly in his chest.

He didn’t look pleased.

“The best thing you can do for you and your town is to take this money we are offering you so generously and distribute it amongst your people. Use it to build your town their own guard. Being a neutral peaceful settlement is impractical in these times. If you don’t establish fierce sovereign rule over your own lands, it is up for anyone stronger to take it for themselves.”

The prince stepped closer and Antoine froze under his sharp gaze.

“Understand *Monsieur Bordeaux*, this is the best thing I can do for you. I will take the solution you have given me and I will name it in your honour. Although it will be a product sold under Lyon Enterprises, it will bear your name. I’m sure much of our lands will benefit from what you have created -- just as *Yvoire* has.”

There was an odd urgency in the prince’s tone. A take it or leave it attitude that put the man on edge.

“I...I cannot accept that.”

The dead gaze that overtook the prince’s eyes made Antoine want to slit his own wrists right then and there.

“I’m afraid I will not sell it to you unless you ensure that my town is free of Lyon jurisdiction.”

The prince neither reacted nor appeared angry. Instead his expression was glassy. Almost apprehensive.

“Monsieur Bordeaux, I urge you to accept –“

“Is there a problem gentleman?”

Another deep, rich voice eased its way into the conversation and Antoine nearly choked on his own saliva when he saw who stood beside the prince.

Antoine bowed deeply and then rose, his bravery disintegrating like snowflakes on an ocean.

He didn’t look him in the eyes, he was forbidden to, but the man didn’t look at him either. His eyes were trained on the prince.

“My son is a rather persuasive businessman. He doesn’t let a deal escape his clutches. I couldn’t help but feel a sudden tension here. I do hope everything is going smoothly. You know any grievances you may have can be addressed directly to me *Monsieur.*”

Antoine slowly looked up at the King of the Lyon Empire. He was tall, like his son but with cold cruel features that made Antoine want to drop everything and run all the way back to his country side village.

“Please,” the king said smoothly with a gesture. “Tell me your grievances.”

The prince had stiffened. His already still figure as indistinguishable as the glaciers that bordered the land.

Antoine’s eyes flickered to the prince once before it landed on the King.

His eyes were like two simmering coals, with an impenetrable depth that drew you in and left you feeling bare and vulnerable. He had heard stories...so many stories about the man in front of him. Never did he think he would meet him in his lifetime – and under such circumstances.

Antoine was rendered speechless for a moment, his stuttering getting the best of him. The look in the King’s eyes sent a clear message and Antoine suddenly realized the gravity of his current situation.

“I...I have none,” he said wanly giving another short bow. “The prince and I have come to a fair and suitable agreement. It was...lovely doing business with you.”

He bowed once more averting his eyes and made a beeline for the exit.

“Hold on for one moment Antoine,” came a deep drawl from the table.

Antoine realized in a shock that the room was empty and he felt his stomach lurch uncomfortably.

Was it empty when he walked in?

“Micah, please see this lovely gentleman out. Make sure his departure is satisfactory. It can be a rather...precarious journey back to the countryside.”

Mollie had come to the conclusion that *Icedalar* was the epitome of grief and remembrance.

Something about the howling wind and heavy snowfall reminded her of sharp whispers and manual labour.

She had been told that many bodies of soldiers had died on these lands and that the snow was simply too much for the survivors to recover them. Not only was it too arduous a task to pursue, it was damn near impossible. The snow was too heavy and the bodies were well preserved due to the cold temperature. It was unsettling to think that they were unable to decompose beneath all that snow. Mollie's grandmother had told her that the souls of those who passed without a proper burial scoured the earth in search of closure – desperately seeking another soul to latch onto. She wondered if the wind was a medium – a medium for those lost souls to release their anguish.

She hadn't seen Micah in a week already and her full schedule prevented her from wandering the fortress. Mollie wondered if it was simply Micah's tactical way of keeping her confined to the West wing...as well as keeping her occupied. The prince was adroit that way -- in the sense, that he planned for things well in advance of them occurring.

She had finished her lesson unusually early today and she was hoping to slip out of her chambers and continue her sleuthing. Mollie was a country girl to the core. She couldn't resist exploring places she hadn't explored yet. It was a constant itch at the back of her mind that she simply couldn't scratch.

Quickly-- as to escape Cécily and any guards on the nightshift, she slipped on her boots and her yellow cloak and made a beeline for the doors to her quarters.

She yelped when she slammed into something hard and as solid as the cold stone that lined the castle.

Mollie felt the air leave her lungs in a single *whoosh* and she gulped when she caught site of what she had made contact with.

Micah stood still and silent, the contact not having even an ounce of the effect on him as it had on her.

Mollie stumbled backward, her chest aching as the dread pooled in her stomach. It was in moments like these where Mollie truly believed she had the worst luck in the world.

Mollie had realized her mistake long before Micah's expression had changed. She could already tell from his stiff posture, his cold gaze – his trembling hands that something was off.

She could see his eyebrows furrow and the anger build in his eyes as he realized what Mollie had planned to do and she cried out in pain as he grabbed her wrist sharply and pulled her closer to him with a jerk that snapped her head forward.

“Going somewhere?”

His voice was breathless --almost strained and Mollie recoiled as much as she could.

His eyes scanned her boots and the cloak she had carelessly tossed around her shoulders.

“If you desire some fresh air all you have to do is ask.”

His tone was abrasive and she shuddered as he released her swiftly and brushed past her into the room.

“However I daresay you’ll find yourself with a nasty bit of frostbite without proper gloves and protection.”

When he returned he tossed her a thick padded coat along with snug fur lined gloves for her fingers.

Mollie didn’t like the tone in his voice. In fact, she didn’t like Micah’s entire demeanour in general.

He seemed less robust tonight -- a rather a rare occurrence. She could tell from the deep purple bruises that had formed beneath his vibrant green eyes – a side effect from lack of sleep. His skin seemed less luminescent, more waxy and elastic and he kept flexing his knuckles, almost as if he were reminding himself constantly of something. He had lost all colour in what used to be thick caramel waves painted with streaks of gold in his hair – the lack of exposure to sunlight instead, turning his hair a dark chestnut, closer in colour to his brothers.

“Let’s take a walk shall we?”

Mollie knew better than to think it was an offer.

She slipped her arms into the warm coat and followed the prince down the candlelit hallway.

Micah had gone quiet after she had accompanied him outside and she could feel the ambivalence circulating around his stiff form.

The snow had picked up and Mollie hesitated as they passed beneath an open roofless segment of the fortress. The icy spray of white against her face stunned her for a moment but Micah pushed her forward.

She was... surprised.

She expected some sort of punishment...a lecture maybe?

She remembered how angry he had gotten in Questershire when she escaped from his quarters the night of the White Ball.

But Micah said nothing more on the subject. He seemed rather drained.

“It’s most pleasant in the evening,” he murmured suddenly, guiding her over an icy part of the pathway.

The sun was obscured this far up North, but for some reason, the moon was always the most tangible object in the sky. It gleamed shamelessly bright in spite of it being early evening.

Micah eyed her curiously as she tightened her hold on his arm as he led them out of the fortress into a landscape of white.

He was correct. The temperature was surprisingly pleasant and there was a light layer of fluffy snow that fell from the sky. Mollie wasn’t sure if it was simply a pleasant night out or that she was just adequately dressed for the cold weather – thanks to the prince. A pathway had been cleared around this area of the grounds pushing the snow into a high wall of solid white that resembled circular arches surrounding the path. She loosened the death grip she had on Micah and continued forward.

The architecture from this viewpoint was aesthetically pleasing.

Mollie had never seen so much snow in her life. Charters only received the thin icky snow that quickly melted into grey slush the minute it hit the ground. But in this place, the snow fell and it was here to stay, elegant and clean.

Mollie smiled as the light snow sprinkled her dark curls and pinkened her cheeks in the chilly air. The air was clean here, so different from the smog infused atmosphere in Charters and she took a moment to appreciate it. She had longed to be someplace else rather than in the cold stoney interior of *Château de Glace* and she relished the change in scenery.

She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, the cold present --but not uncomfortable. She could feel Micah watching her out the corner of her eye. He wore a thick double breasted *paletot* coat in navy blue with large silver buttons. It matched the navy coloured waistcoat he wore underneath all those layers.

Mollie could feel the burning eyes of the guards through her back as she walked arm in arm with the prince. It made her deeply uncomfortable but Micah was accustomed to it. Or perhaps...maybe he had no choice but to accept it.

She heard quiet panting from beside her and looked to see Theodora bounding up to her owner with her heavy paws.

The wolf brushed against Micah affectionately, her tail high in the air and her blue eyes sharp. There was something regal about the way she padded beside Micah, as if she were more than a companion, but also a confidant. There was something eerily human-like about the wolf’s eyes that made Mollie nervous.

Micah stroked her head once, her thick white fur almost indiscernible amongst the white ambience. She hummed against him before she bounded forward in front of them and sauntered off into the night, her pawprints disappearing with the next sudden wind.

They continued their walk in silence, past the exterior walls of the manor with Micah moving slightly in front of Mollie to lead the way. The snow dampened her lashes and brushed her skin with soft caresses as the snowfall picked up.

Eventually, they reached a long isolated tower near the southern most part of the fortress. Mollie watched Micah approach the lone guard pacing the entrance and speak to him quietly.

He motioned for her to join him and she hurriedly followed, the thick snow accumulating almost to her knees.

The interior of the tower was warmer than she had expected and she watched as Micah bent low in the dim lighting, hurling a thick black chain downwards to lift the heavy wooden door blocking the entrance to another treacherous staircase.

Mollie frowned when she saw all the steps leading upwards towards the open sky at the top.

“I’m not walking up there,” she said immediately taking a step back from the prince.

He didn’t answer her but only motioned with his head downwards, towards a staircase she hadn’t noticed before.

“We’re not going up, we’re going down.”

He sounded tired in his voice, as if the weight of the snow that glistened like glass shards across his dark locks was too heavy a burden for him to bear.

“How far down is it?” she questioned inching her head forward. She couldn’t see beyond the first couple steps and at that moment she heard Micah sigh heavily behind her.

He reached behind her and grabbed one of the few blazing torches from its place on the wall.

“You ask too many questions.”

The tightness in his voice sounded more reprimanding than it did neutral and Mollie took the hint.

She waited as he took his time lighting the torch-holders that surrounded the circular room around them.

There was a thin crystalline layer of chains that crisscrossed along the wall and Mollie found herself drawn to the minuscule crystals. They shimmered against the black stone, reflecting the white and black surroundings and Mollie felt a sudden compulsion to feel the texture beneath her fingers.

Gingerly she peeled off a glove and delicately touched her fingers against the minute spheres of ice that lined the door. The sensation was no different than brushing her fingers against an open flame and she recoiled with a cry as the metal burned her fingers.

Micah was in front of her in an instant, torch in hand as the girl sunk her singed fingers into her palms and swore under her breath.

Quickly he snatched her hand up and turned it over to observe the red criss crosses that lined the pads of Mollie's three fingers.

"What is that?" she gasped, the sensation making her head pound with its pain potency.

"Ultrachilled metal," Micah murmured. Mollie was surprised to see his expression teeter between exasperation and amusement but the pain was keeping her senses hyperactive. "We use it in the dungeons to deter prisoners from attempting to escape. It's usually manufactured but it occurs naturally too...when the temperature drops far enough."

He paused for a moment flipping Mollie's hand over.

"It's also used during the installation of drilling wells to extract oil from the seabed. It's an interesting material...to admire visually. It's not a pleasant feeling to the touch."

He stepped closer to observe her injury and brushed his gloved fingers gently across her wounded fingers.

"It's not frostbitten and it won't scar," he murmured. "You're lucky the metal wasn't fresh. You'll only lose a couple fingers."

Mollie jerked her head up to see a crooked smile on his face and for a second she was completely stunned.

Did the prince just joke?

She didn't think she'd ever live long enough to witness a moment like that.

As quickly as snow on a windshield, his smile was gone and replaced with the cold unfeeling frown that was more reminiscent of the prince.

Mollie felt as if she were constantly teetering on uncharted lands between the Micah she wanted to know and the Micah she was accustomed to. It always surprised her how tender and alluring he could be in some moments and how utterly cruel and impassive he could be in others. She didn't want to believe that the same Micah in front of her now was the same Micah who had murdered all those people in the dungeons of Questershire only weeks ago.

He was a total wildcard and it made her feel as if she were traversing through a depthless pit of eggshells.

She wondered why Micah was taking her so far away from the fortress. It was as if he didn't want to be seen...or perhaps he didn't want *her* to be seen.

She had thought she had gotten better at picking up on his emotions but maybe she had been reading him wrong the whole time.

She suddenly felt apprehensive and she swallowed thickly before she descended downstairs, the prince on her heels.

Mollie stood tired, cold and sickeningly stiff in the middle of the snow covered dingy tunnel somewhere beneath *Château de Glace*.

There was a soft clinking sound that echoed above them, as sharp and as consistent as a metronome. It echoed above Mollie as she stood in front of the prince. Micah was behind her, his gloved hands resting lightly on her waist as he nuzzled the smooth skin between her neck and her ear.

He stood behind her like that for a long time, his thick curls brushing her cheek as he breathed in her scent, his grip on her waist tightening every so often. Mollie winced when he pushed his hands beneath her thick coat. He brought his hands up slowly over the smooth flat skin of her belly to eventually settle on her breasts.

Mollie inhaled sharply as he squeezed them in his palms, the coldness of his leather against her sensitive skin making her squirm before him. Mollie opened her eyes when his lips brushed her jaw and she felt the air rush through her lips when she caught sight of the markings on the wall.

Mollie figured he had taken her to some kind of underground torture chamber and she barely stifled a scream as Micah slapped his gloved hand against her mouth.

“Shh,” he murmured as Mollie stumbled backwards in horror at the blood stained walls and scratch marks that lined the walls.

He nudged her from behind, any remnant of comfort that existed in his voice diminished immediately.

“Stand up.”

She scrambled on her hands and knees, her hands sinking into earth and snow as she struggled to stand.

She couldn't even speak.

Her eyes were fixed on the blood stained walls and the heavy metal weapons that hung from the low ceiling.

Mollie spotted the fresh blood against the snow, appearing so much more potent than blood seeped into soil. She scrambled on her hands and knees and retched into the snow.

Micah stood in front of her now, hands twisted deep in his coat pockets and turned to face her. He didn't seem surprised or irritated at her reaction.

His expression was rather indifferent and his manner purely phlegmatic. It was as if the easy going prince she had walked with on her way here had been replaced by his wintry hardened doppelgänger.

“You asked me about my father once, a while ago now. Do you remember?”

He ignored her coughs and splutters as that horridly familiar smell of fresh blood assaulted her senses.

“You asked me to tell you more about myself.”

Mollie felt numb. Her legs brittle and unbalanced as she staggered to her feet.

Had he truly brought her all the way out here to speak to her about himself? Did he not trust any of the guards in the castle? They must have been a good few miles from the *château* at this point, and even so, a few good metres under ground.

He turned to glance casually around them for a moment, as if he were simply admiring a mural at an art gallery instead of the blood thickened walls that surrounded them.

“I’m not who you think I am Mollie.”

His blunt statement was enough to pull Mollie back into focus and she stared at him hard as he took a step closer to her.

“Queen Porphyria was not my mother.”

Mollie had harboured her suspicions and she had confirmed this fact before she had left Questershire.

She wanted to start rattling off the many questions she had bouncing around in her head for him, but something told her to let him speak. It was uncommon for him to open up so willingly.

“It wasn’t difficult for me to figure it out -- I looked nothing like her. And my brothers...my brothers had known. They knew from the beginning, long before my father told me.”

His voice was soft when he spoke, but the stiffness of his stance suggested he was working hard to keep himself composed.

“I was told she had died during childbirth, but that was just another lie to cover up what I had known all along. She wasn’t royalty...”

Mollie watched as the torchlight painted his thick locks a lighter shade as he twirled the ring on his finger.

“Illegitimate children are not destined to be princes or princesses Mollie. It is against the royal code. But my father orchestrated quite the intricate plan to make it seem as if I were a child of monarchical status.”

The clanging from above them started up again for a moment and Micah paused, waiting for the sound to lower before he continued.

“I never understood as a child why I was treated differently. Why was it my father flaunted me before his subjects like a prize to be admired only to take me back into the heart of his chambers and beat me till I could no longer stand?”

His fingers flexed as he continued and Mollie could see his head tilt to the side in bitterness.

“Why was it that I was forced to take on the responsibilities of a prince when that title never belonged to me in the first place?”

Micah’s breathing had increased and Mollie could hear the acrimony in his voice.

“Every slap, every whip, every horrid punishment I endured only to groom me for a position that should have never belonged to me.”

Mollie saw the faintest tremor run through him and she suddenly felt overcome with emotion. Overcome with the hidden horror that the man in front of her had lived. To the rest of the world he appeared so privileged, so groomed, so...perfect. Yet in reality, he had experienced such unspeakable horrors that he kept concealed in a dark pit of internal turmoil.

“My father would always make me look at him when he whipped me with his chain -- make me stand straight so he could stare deeply into my eyes, *Verte comme la Terre* he would say. *Ses yeux, vertes comme la Terre.*”

Mollie saw Micah turn suddenly, his eyes glowing in the dark room.

“But I learned quickly. I learned that pleasing him was my way to escape those awful punishments, even if it was at the expense of my other relationships.”

Mollie figured he was referring to his brothers but he continued speaking.

“I watched my father gut a guard for stealing food for his family at six years old. Killed my own at nine. The earlier the better my father would say.”

He paused for a moment, shuffling through his childhood memories that had resurfaced at this untimely hour.

“I was the ideal prince,” he murmured. “I attended every meeting, addressed the public when need be, maintained my impeccable reputation, and excelled in the art of swordsmanship. I did it all because my father demanded it.”

Mollie had always thought she had it bad. Worse than most people for instance. But hearing Micah speak made her feel guilty for ever believing that her situation was worse than anyone else she knew. She had always carried that bitterness deep down inside of her. But even with all of the terrible memories she had of her mother, there was a time when she was loved. There was a time when she knew she was loved and she had experienced what it felt like to be loved. She knew what it felt like to be softly caressed against the cheek, to be pulled so warmly and snugly into the chest of another and feel so protected. Even if that time in her life had been so brief, it was almost fleeting, she had still felt it. She had still *felt* it.

“I’m exhausted Mollie. I’m tired of being the pawn disguised as the queen in my father’s game of chess.”

Mollie had felt tears spill over her lids as she remembered all of the horrible things she had spat at Micah in a rage. She hadn’t known he had been through this...certainly not to this

extent and she suddenly felt a surge of emotions flow through her. The animosity she felt towards Hartley was something cold and biting that ate at her insides like an eosinophil at a nematode. She felt a new hatred towards the man. A dark simmering void that opened her to a different reality. A reality where Micah may have been different, and not the damaged cold hearted person he had been raised to be. Her mind replayed images--images of a young boy running through the fields of Questershire, with light hair, green eyes and sun kissed skin. A boy who believed his freedom would come to him one day in the near future.

Mollie felt a heaviness overcome her. Only days ago she was happy to agree with Gibbs that Micah should be king as he was raised to be -- regardless of whether he liked it or not. But now....now she considered the repercussions of these actions. About the kind of person Micah would become, about what it would do to him. Why should she care so much? Why *did* she care so much?

“Micah,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

“I’m not going to be King. I refuse to be.”

The hardness of his tone echoed throughout the dank tunnel and Mollie shivered underneath his fierce gaze.

The clanging from above began again and Mollie jerked as the sudden noise interrupted the cold silence between them.

Micah looked up briefly -- only registering the sound now.

“My father moved the operational unit of the business to *Icedalar*. He thought it best to setup the industrial aspects of his company in a place away from any prying eyes. It just so happens to be close to Obsidian land as well. Makes any trade deals a lot easier to mediate.”

Mollie breathed heavily through her mouth, the scent of aged blood still potent even in the grimy ambiance.

“People work out here?” she managed to say. Her nose stung with the sharp scent and an odd salty taste was growing on her palate.

“Yes.” Micah’s voice was grim when he responded.

Mollie shuddered just thinking about the deplorable conditions and the people the Lyons employed to do their dirty work. It fuelled her anger.

“They listen don’t they?” she whispered.

Mollie pushed herself up and ignored the pain in her fingers and the odour that saturated her senses.

“They listen to everything you say, everything you do. That’s why you brought me out here didn’t you?”

Micah sighed.

“You can’t trust anyone...” Mollie hesitated. “You don’t trust anyone.”

What happened to you Micah?

She wished she knew. She wished she could understand him better. Understand *why* he was the way he was.

She felt as if she were getting there -- inching closer to the person that existed just behind the visage of the prince the rest of the world saw.

Mollie hesitated as she slowly inched forward, her steps leaving footprints in the light snow.

She was overcome with emotion tonight, in a strange foreign manner. She felt as if Micah’s pain was mirrored in her own and she felt tears prick the edges of her eyes. She didn’t know why she felt this way.

Her emotions had been turbulent for a while now but Mollie figured it must have been a part of the acclimatization process. She had gone from one extreme to the next. It would take a while before homeostasis was achieved.

“Micah,” she whispered closing the distance between them.

She reached out, her hand quivering in the darkness to grip his cool wrist.

He stiffened at the gesture but she didn’t let up. She pressed herself against him from behind, allowing his scent to wash over her.

“Micah,” she breathed again. Her face nuzzled the back of his coat – the thick material rich with the scent of his cologne.

He turned around so he was facing her. His dark tousled hair glistened in the dim lighting and his eyes shimmered. His irises seemed more vivid for some reason, but maybe it was just the lighting.

Mollie hesitated when she saw the wetness on his blushed cheeks.

Were those tears?

“*Me faire oublier* Mollie,” he whispered. “*Juste pour un moment*. Make me forget...”

She was frozen as he fell to his knees, the snow parting around them as the tremors rocked his body, one after another.

His head rested against her lower abdomen as his breathing rushed in and out of him in a way that rattled Mollie to the core.

Here she stood, with the future king on his knees before her, his face pressed against her stomach as his hands fisted at the material covering her waist. He held onto her as if she were a lone lifeboat in the middle of the open sea.

His breathing was ragged, his dark curls loose and unruly as they brushed the sliver of exposed skin on her abdomen.

Mollie lost her breath for a moment and was able to manage two weak inhales and exhales before she let her self sink to her knees in front of the prince.

No words were spoken as she grasped his hands in hers and pulled the gloves from his pale fingers.

Thick blood covered his hands, from the fingertips to the crevices between his knuckles to run in dried rivulets to his wrist.

If Mollie hadn't known the man in front of her...she would have assumed it was paint. Reddish brown paint with deep undertones. But she knew. Hell, she knew better than that.

She lay still as he collapsed into her lap, like a child to his mother. His arms encircled her waist in a tight grip. It was uncomfortably tight but she remained unmoving even when he pressed his face to her belly. She brought her hand forward and ran it through his thick curls.

Mollie looked up at the blood spattered walls, and the white snow beneath them as the sound of metal on metal started up from layers above them.

The moonlight didn't penetrate this far down. But Mollie knew when they made the long journey back to the fortress, it would be plagued by darkness, with only the light of the moon to guide them back onto the path. She could hear the wind pick up from outside, the snow hitting the walls of the tower with a force that rattled the windowsill and extinguished the torchlight.

She no longer felt cold.

Chapter End Notes

Translations in order:

*To speak another language is to have a second soul

*You see my dear? You are your only limit

*The prince wishes to see you promptly Sir

*I hope your trip wasn't too difficult

*You speak English I've been told?

Chapter 30: Zinc

Chapter Summary

Mollie attends her first major event in the North. Some familiar faces return to the North with some unintended consequences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Can you at least *try* to work with me *Mademoiselle*?”

Mollie sighed heavily as Cécily set the bodice tightly around Mollie’s tall frame. Mollie felt bad as the petite woman stood on a stool to reach Mollie’s lanky height.

“You can keep tightening it all you want,” Mollie muttered as Cécily tugged hard on the lacy material. “It’s not going to make me look any curvier.”

“Nonsense,” Cécily grunted with another sharp pull. “I make miracles happen.”

Mollie frowned as Cécily continued her efforts for a minute longer, only to release the material with an exasperated huff.

“*Je ne comprends pas!*” she cried out angrily. “You just fit into this a week ago. You gained some weight.”

Mollie scoffed as Cécily gave up, removing the corset and heading back to the large wardrobe muttering under her breath.

“Maybe we can try this one?”

Mollie turned and wrinkled her nose at the suggestion.

“I’m tired of pink.”

Cécily turned again, shuffling through gown after gown before Mollie caught sight of something that immediately captured her attention.

“That one,” she said quietly.

Cécily paused, her outstretched fingers hesitating halfway between the wardrobe and her body.

“It’s a bit revealing *Mademoiselle*. Master Lyon won’t approve, he insisted you wear the one he specifically chose for you. Maybe the red one in a similar style is more prudent --”

Mollie ignored her and stretched forward feeling the slinky glimmering material between her fingers.

“This is the one.”

Mollie supposed she looked pretty.

She opted to wear her hair down tonight, her thick curls complimenting the slinky figure-hugging gown she wore till it reached almost to her waist. The dress was tight, tighter than she had first assumed and it hugged her breasts in a way that made them seem larger than they were. The slit reached the top of her bronzed thigh and pooled at the back of her ankle in a small but lengthy train.

Cécily had applied her makeup impressively well, honing in on Mollie’s most striking features and bringing emphasis towards them. Mollie wasn’t used to it and felt a compelling urge to rub a hand against her eye or bite her lower lip to the scolding of Cécily. She chatted with the woman as she worked on Mollie.

“Why do I have to be there?” she questioned as Cécily released a pin from her hair.

“Master Lyon wants you there so you will be there.”

Mollie shifted when she heard this...her mind going elsewhere.

“Will his fiancée be there?”

Cécily stopped what she was doing for a moment. She swiftly composed herself releasing Mollie’s thick hair and styling it as she responded.

“I-I’m not sure. It’s not my place to ask him such questions.”

Mollie could already picture it. The chiding remarks, the air of disgust that would follow her as she walked arm in arm with Micah. They saw her as nothing more than his concubine.

“Who else will be there?” Mollie asked. Her voice had a slight tremor and she bit her lip.

“The usual,” Cécily said with a shrug. “Business partners, diplomats, noblemen and noblewomen.”

Cécily attached two glittering diamonds to her ears along with a thin shimmering bracelet around her skinny wrist. She then sheathed Mollie’s skinny arms in snow white coloured gloves that felt like silk to the skin.

The woman took a step back and inhaled sharply as she instructed Mollie to stand.

Mollie hesitated as she stood in front of her, the dress hugging her almost *too* tightly.

“What?” she said after a while, the silence making her tense. “That bad?”

Cécily swallowed loudly before she responded.

“No..No not at all. You look...breathtaking *Mademoiselle*. Truly.”

Mollie blushed and looked away.

She had chosen the dress – a rare occurrence-- and she had chosen a dress with every feature she *knew* would irritate the prince.

She wasn't sure why she did it.

Micah's temper was not to be tested – but she knew...somehow she knew he wouldn't reach a certain limit with her.

And that emboldened her.

It made her yearn to toy with him in the same way he toyed with her. To push each other to the edge...to indulge in a precarious game of roulette...to the point where neither was really sure the other would be able to find solid footing again. But it was that excitement...that anticipation of finding out whether they'd comeback that was most enticing. It was like lighting a match in a room of fresh gasoline and wondering if they'd be able to put out the fire before the entire room went up in flames.

“Turn around *Mademoiselle*.”

Mollie turned.

Her long legs complimented the tight fitting dress well and it hugged her bosom in a way that drew all of the attention to her breasts. And the colour...a deep vivid emerald green.

Cécily zeroed in on her legs and Mollie swore she saw the woman pale ever so slightly. She opened her mouth to say something...seemed to think better of it...and silently closed her mouth.

“Let's get you to the dining hall.”

Mollie stood outside the massive white doors to the dining hall and shivered. It was cold in this corridor and Mollie quickly realized most other women opted for long sleeved gowns for this kind of climate and she suddenly felt foolish for wearing something so revealing. Her nerves were all over the place and her skin prickled with goosebumps.

Mollie hadn't seen Micah for at least two and half weeks already, but she had heard from Cécily that he had returned to *Icedalar* earlier that morning.

She swallowed uneasily, thinking about the prolonged absence between them.

She didn't like having to play dress up for Micah at his beck and call, but she was happy to take any opportunity to leave her quarters. In spite of the spaciousness and opulence of the

West Wing, Mollie still couldn't bring herself to enjoy the riches. Her heart ached for liberation. At the end of the day, she was still his prisoner and he her master. And no matter how much she loathed the idea, people still saw her as the prince's whore.

"Entrez."

Mollie turned to Cécily, who released her arm promptly.

"I feel sick," she admitted, her stomach in tight knots as Cécily urged her forward. Mollie had recently recovered from a cold and she still felt sluggish after days of bedrest. It was yet another reason why she detested winter. Mollie had also woken up with an unusual bout of nausea that morning. But it had passed as quickly as it came and she didn't think too much of it. She was still recovering after all.

"Mademoiselle?"

The guard outside the door looked irritated and Mollie quickly turned around to face the entrance. She saw the guard's face go bright red as he took in her outfit. She didn't miss how his eyes flickered to her breasts then sheepishly away as if he had been caught doing something wrong.

"You may enter," he sniffed, his distaste not going unnoticed by the tall skinny girl.

Mollie took a deep breath and walked forward as the doors opened.

The first thing Mollie noticed was ice.

Ice chairs, ice tables, ice chandeliers.

She had seen this place before, at a distance with Gibbs several weeks ago. But now that Mollie was *here*, she could tell just how restricted her sight was from that distance.

The glass chandelier hung high above the large room and glistened like ripples in water as it caught the light from the torches that lined the walls.

It had gone noticeably quiet when Mollie walked into the hall and she suddenly felt horribly vulnerable as many noblemen and women turned to stare at her.

Their whispers filled her ears and she quickly shuffled over to the back of the hall, careful not to teeter too much in her heels or trip on the train of her gown.

"Du champagne pour la petite dame?"

Mollie tripped over her words as she desperately tried to remember her still mediocre French.

"Um..Non..juste l'eau est bonne...merci."

The guard tightened his lip but nodded and continued around the room.

Mollie glanced around her looking for Micah but she didn't see him...not yet. There were many noble men and women in the room and the women were dressed to the nines...but none of them had a dress quite like Mollie's. She suddenly wished she had allowed Cécily to convince her to change. She didn't need to draw more attention to herself than she already did.

"Well well well, we meet again *fillette*."

Mollie jumped and turned to see Gibbs standing beside her, arms crossed over his simple but form fitting suit. He had a strange expression splayed across his harsh features. Something between appraisal and confusion.

"You do know you're in the North girl?"

Mollie rolled her eyes at the comment.

"No I hadn't noticed," she responded caustically taking the water handed to her from the guard on a silver platter.

"Are you purposely trying to drive the prince up the wall?"

"I have to keep myself entertained somehow," she responded rather dryly. "Where is he anyway?"

Gibbs looked towards the entrance.

The doors opened swiftly, the candles lining the perimeter of the grand room flickering with the sudden gust of wind.

Two guards marched forward first, their badges gleaming on their thick winter coats.

Behind them was a woman Mollie hadn't seen in quite some time.

Why was she here? Why did she come North?

Her long red hair was pin straight and framing her attractive features. She wore a classic long sleeved full length black dress complete with towering heels.

She looked so different from when Mollie last saw her, the makeup artfully applied to her face to make her appear so glamorous. There was something melancholic about her that Mollie pitied.

If she was here...did that mean....

Mollie tensed, a phantom pain shooting through her legs as the man she most deeply loathed followed closely behind Jelena Lyon.

He looked tall and handsome as he walked through the hall, exuding confidence. He wore black and silver, his dark hair pulled back sharply to display his cruel arrogant features. His cloak was jet black, the colour of solid carbon as it billowed behind him. His sword rested

lightly against his hip, all formalities upheld. James Lyon had that self-serving glint in his eyes that made Mollie want to stick him with a dagger to the chest.

Mollie tensed when she saw the nobleman behind him, this one opting for an all-black attire and his stance no different from the man in front of him. Mollie felt her stomach roll when she saw him, his hair gelled and carefully styled to further pronounce his sharp jawline and elegant features. Contrary to his eldest brother, his expression was notably disinterested, bored even, as if this event itself was the most underwhelming thing he possibly could have signed up for. His eyes caught the torchlight like two glimmering stones of jade and Mollie felt herself shiver.

In fact, she couldn't tear her gaze away from them and neither could the rest of the crowd. Immediately they were surrounded by a flood of guests in a frenzy of curtsies and speedy greetings in French and another language Mollie couldn't quite recognize.

James had a cunning smile on his face as his wife joined his arm while Micah stood on the other side his expression blank.

An older man approached Micah and she watched as the prince turned his face to the side to acknowledge the introduction. He must have been an important figure to approach the prince so brazenly. Mollie watched the interaction wordlessly as James smiled at the man giving Micah a soft pat to the shoulder.

The Lyons were incredible actors. Mollie would give them that.

Micah remained placid and civil, not saying too much but nodding when needed to.

"I didn't think you had it in you to be so silent *fillette*."

Mollie glowered at Gibbs, hating to have to tear her gaze away from the front of the ornate hall.

"I have a name you know."

"*Oui*," he said rather bored. "*Mollie c'est vrai?* Such a...bland name. The name of a commoner."

Mollie could feel the irritation running through her and she shot Gibbs a wintry glare.

Mollie was too busy scanning the crowd to give a chiding remark back. She was looking for a petite little ice blonde haired girl.

"Aren't you on duty or something?" Mollie grumbled.

Gibbs chuckled at her as he helped himself to a tray of champagne. Mollie did a double take as he sipped the beverage prompting another chuckle from the man.

"Not tonight," he said with a grin.

Mollie scowled.

“You don’t want a drink?”

Mollie grimaced. She’d recalled the first time she had tried alcohol a little too vividly--the way Micah had pushed it from his lips to hers in that horrible dungeon beneath the manor.

“No thanks.”

“*Pourquoi?*” Gibbs said with a laugh. “You might as well enjoy the riches of royal life... while they last.”

“What’s your story?” she said suddenly turning towards the man. “And don’t give me that *I’m so loyal to the monarchy* bullshit. I know that’s not true.”

Gibbs frowned at her and she didn’t miss how his eyes darkened at her frosty response.

“You are more rough around the edges than I first assumed,” he said with distaste.

Fellow guests of the event sauntered past them and Gibbs nodded his head at them as they passed by.

“Loyalty is earned Mollie. It’s not bestowed.”

Mollie tensed as he stepped closer to her.

He had his eyes on Micah who was speaking with an older high class woman. Mollie noticed the subtleties in Micah’s actions as he conversed with her. The way he turned his head to the side to show how much he valued what she had to say. The soft hand on her back, the charming smile. It was all so... *practiced*.

“My brother and I were born into noble status,” Gibbs explained.

Mollie eyed him distastefully as he grabbed another glass of champagne from the platter.

“My brother, he’s a genius. Has one of the most elevated minds of this generation. There’s no doubt about it.”

Mollie had only been half listening before but news of his personal life finally warranted her undivided attention.

Gibbs continued speaking as he sipped from his glass, his eyes shadowing as he dipped into his past.

“We were comfortable working for the Lyons, our status allowing us relatively easy opportunity for promotions. But my brother...he was just too curious for his own good. Always asking questions, busying himself with things that were not his business. Always desperately seeking answers. I used to warn him all the time. But I guess a mind that brilliant cannot go unstimulated.”

Mollie sipped her water as she listened.

“It didn’t take long for someone to report to a higher official that my brother Quinn had been messing around with things that were not his business. You see the thing about my brother is that he was a peoples person. Could get a man to spill his life story in a matter of minutes. He just had that kind of personality. He’d befriend all types of people --people from his workplace --even random people he’d meet while traveling and returning to our hometown. God how he loved our hometown. Nothing more beautiful, that much I can tell you.”

Mollie stayed silent but she begged to differ. She knew hands down Riverton was the most picturesque place on the planet. But she let Gibbs continue.

“Anyway...Quinn had helped a small family take refuge in our hometown after fleeing persecution in their village. They came from the desert land, part of the Ophian empire.”

“Obsidian Land?” Mollie asked.

Gibbs paused before he answered her.

“I’m not sure. The Ophian empire is big, Obsidian Land is on the western tip, they could have been from the East for all I know...but that’s not important.”

He finished his second glass and Mollie bit her lip.

“All was fine...until the people brought some special object along with them. They used to worship it, do it all. Rituals, folksongs, prayers – you name it. Used to scare the local people right out of their minds.”

Mollie tensed.

“I always admired Quinn for his intelligence, but sometimes I suppose his intelligence could transition quite often into eccentrics. He was all up in arms with the family. They convinced him that this object was the cure to all their problems. They used to call it *Souffle de vie*. They were convinced it had magical powers or something like that. Stole it from their hometown before they left. But I think they stole it and got banished. Ophians aren’t known for exiling their own people.”

“Wait,” Mollie interjected. “Did this object have a name?”

Gibbs sighed.

“That’s not the point of the story *fillette*. Listen and stop interrupting.”

Mollie frowned but stayed silent.

“Quinn’s project with this thing turned into an obsession and he began to neglect his other duties, pouring all of his efforts into some folktale. It turned into such an obsession that he requested termination of his job with the monarchy.”

Gibbs sighed and Mollie could see this part of the story was difficult for him to re-visit.

“If there’s one thing you haven’t already figured out...it’s that you don’t get to choose when you start and finish with the Lyons. Their autonomy is far greater than our own. And Quinn learned that the hard way.”

Mollie felt her stomach flip hearing this.

“They took him away. Locked him up in some tower indefinitely for attempting to fight his way out of his contract. And I’ve been working here ever since to free him. I’ll work till I drop dead if that means they’ll release him.”

Mollie hesitated before she spoke.

“Did they...Did they do that to your brother too?”

Gibbs looked at her, her vague question suddenly registering.

“Oh you mean this scar?”

Mollie felt rude for asking but it was too late to take it back.

“No. I got this protecting the princes from some rogue assassin years ago. Comes with the job I guess.”

He trailed off for a moment.

“I suppose it would be easy to distinguish my brother and I nowadays...we...are twins.”

“Oh.” Mollie said softly looking away. She didn’t want to stare. She had gotten used to seeing it on his face, but the topic still brought rapt attention towards it.

“We used to be identical. Haven’t seen him since they imprisoned him all those years ago.”

Mollie felt anger rise in her stomach as she listened to Gibbs. It appeared no person went unscathed within the Lyon regime. They sunk their claws into every bit of virgin soil and still managed to plow down their own people in the process.

Mollie wondered if Gibbs considered the fact that Quinn may have been killed but the fierceness of his tone suggested otherwise. In fact the next words out of his mouth addressed her thoughts directly.

“He’s alive. I can feel it. I know he is. It’s just a matter of finishing my contract before they set him free.”

“Micah would release him,” she said bluntly.

She didn’t know why she said this so confidently or why she believed it to be so true. But she knew. She knew he would if he was given the power to do so. Micah could be harsh, even savage when circumstances demanded it, but he was not inherently cruel. In fact, from what Mollie had deduced, he was actually quite diplomatic. Mollie knew this to be true. She knew it the day he kept her alive after she attempted to stab him.

Gibbs didn't say anything but proceeded to just take another glass from the table and down it. The story seemed to have taken a lot out of him.

The doors at the front of the hall opened again and Mollie felt the full blast of air hit her as frost and bits of snow filtered in and floated in the air. The chill hit her full force and she shivered, her joints aching.

"Let me guess," Gibbs drawled beside her. "*You* chose your outfit tonight."

Mollie rolled her eyes.

She had turned her head back to the front, trying to catch some sight of Micah and James at the front of the hall to no avail. Micah hadn't even looked her way yet. Did he know she was here?

"It's more of a cloth isn't it?" Gibbs continued in a judgmental tone. "I'd never let my wife be caught dead in an outfit like that, no matter how expensive the garment."

Mollie seethed, the grip on her elegant goblet tightening.

"It looks a bit small," he continued. "Especially around the chest area."

Mollie felt her thin film of civility break and she turned to Gibbs sharply. She knew it was more the alcohol than it was him being so crass but she still couldn't curb her irritation.

"Are you done?" she snapped. "Or would you like more time to scrutinize my breasts? Might as well critique my ass while you're at it."

"Is that an open offer Miss Mayeson?"

That smooth deep voice punctured Mollie with its stark familiarity and she froze, the water in her goblet splashing over onto the blue icy floor.

She turned to her left, her breath catching in her throat as Rowan stared deeply at her, his dark eyes glinting with disdain.

"Gibbs." He said sharply, acknowledging the guard bedside Mollie. His eyes never left her as he did so and Mollie saw Gibbs bow and saunter away back into the crowd, a sly smile on his face.

"Rowan," she breathed, his presence catching her off guard. She hadn't seen him when the others had arrived and she should have known Rowan would find some way to slither himself into a room without being seen.

"The one and only," he said with a strained smile.

He wore black and silver like James, his dark hair gelled flat to his head, the dark chestnut glimmering in the light.

He looked like a more cunning version of James -- his eyes more alive and his lips pulled into a perpetual smirk.

“What—what are you doing here?” she managed to say, her heart racing in her chest.

He ignored her. Instead his eyes roamed over her body, taking extra time to linger at her breasts.

“You look absolutely stunning tonight Miss Mayeson, the men simply can’t keep their eyes off of you,” he mused inching his two fingers up and down her exposed shoulder. “I daresay I’m *almost* jealous.” Mollie stiffened and shivered, his fingers cold like his brothers, even through the thick material of his gloves. “It would be foolish of me not to ask you for a dance.”

Mollie felt the blood drain from her face and she took one step back, her train making her stumble in her heels.

Fluidly, Rowan grasped her arm snugly in his and guided her towards the middle of the floor.

“Do I have a choice?” she muttered as Rowan entwined his gloved hand with her own while his other rested lightly on her waist.

“There’s always a choice Miss Mayeson.”

Mollie could feel many eyes begin to turn towards them and she wondered what Rowan was up to. She hadn’t forgotten the look on his face the last time she had seen him.

“You don’t have to force yourself to dance with me.” she said between gritted teeth as pleasant music began to fill the room. It ricocheted off the glassy interior creating a deeper more defined sound that permeated throughout the entire hall. “Especially considering how much you dislike me.”

Rowan laughed at her frigid response.

“I have no qualms with you Mollie. Besides, what’s not to like?”

He brought her even closer...uncomfortably close and Mollie hesitated as his chest brushed her cheek and his strong cologne engulfed her senses. His scent smelled of frost along with something else she couldn’t quite place. It was foreign...but not unpleasant. She still preferred Micah's.

Rowan certainly knew how to dance and he guided Mollie through the song, moving with lion-like grace and giving her the illusion that she knew how to move. His fingers glided over the tight material on her hips and she looked at him sternly as they moved lower and lower. His smile was mocking.

“Why are you here Rowan?” she asked sharply as the music transitioned into something softer and more fluid.

“I thought a change of scenery would be nice,” he purred, his fingers inching dangerously close to her lower back.

“Right,” she scoffed. “No better scenery than snowstorms and temperatures of absolute zero.”

“Isn’t it?” He breathed giving her a waist a tight squeeze. “I’m glad to see we share the same delectable travel interests. It makes planning any future destinations a lot easier doesn’t it?”

Mollie ignored him, as he twirled her around, in sync with the orchestral sound surrounding them.

She tried stealing glances to the side every now and then, but the only thing catching her eye were the faces of many strangers, their expressions a mix of disdain and curiosity.

“You are so tense Miss Mayeson,” Rowan said with an airy laugh as he swayed her body deftly with his. “Your eyes are wandering around the entire room. Whom do you seek? Perhaps I can be of help.”

She remembered vividly the last time she had asked Rowan for help and she knew it didn’t come without its baggage.

Before Mollie could respond, her eye had caught Jelena Lyon in the far corner of the room. She stared at Mollie, her expression unfathomable. She held a thin glass of champagne in her hand but she seemed somewhere far away.

“That woman,” Mollie said quietly her eyes flickering to the red headed woman. “I saw her the day I left Questershire. She seemed... upset about something.”

Upset was an understatement. The woman had seemed broken that day, but Mollie kept it straightforward.

Rowan’s eyes followed her gaze before resting back on her own.

“Ah yes. Not an uncommon situation. Jelena struggles to bear children. Her body can’t seem to...take on the nine month burden.”

Mollie bit her lip.

“That’s....that’s terrible. But at least she was able to have a child.”

“A daughter,” Rowan said distastefully. “Not incredibly useful from an economical standpoint.”

Mollie looked up at him completely insulted.

“James isn’t happy she hasn’t given him a son,” he explained lowly bringing Mollie closer to him as the music began to come to a close. “And James isn’t the patient kind, if you catch my drift.”

Mollie suddenly looked back at the stage where she had a clear view of James Lyon from her position. Mollie figured he must have been a replica of Hartley at that age with those same hard features and snakelike qualities. He was conversing with some noblewomen who had gathered around him. He basked in the attention, she could tell.

“May I intrude?”

That dark alluring voice of familiarity pierced through Mollie and she suddenly felt heat flood her cheeks as she turned towards the source.

Micah was standing in front of them, his hands behind his back and his expression showing poorly concealed irritation.

“Rowan,” he said stiffly giving him a chilling stare.

“Ah Micah,” Rowan said with a smile running his hands tightly along Mollie’s back. She squirmed at the foreign touch, her arms immediately dropping from around Rowan’s shoulders. “I was teaching Miss Mayeson the art of *Le Baroque*,” he paused for a moment, dark eyes flickering over her lithe figure. “I’ve never quite had a partner who could keep up,” he mused. “Must be those long legs.”

Rowan flashed her a flirtatious smile as Micah gripped her arm tightly. The contact of his chilled skin against her blazing flesh made her shiver as he eyed his brother coldly. He gripped her arm hard, his fingers biting into her wrist.

“Ow!” Mollie protested twisting her wrist in pain.

Micah’s eyes flashed to hers and she could see the blatant fury in eyes.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he said icily, his grip tightening.

“He danced with *me*,” Mollie replied tersely. “He didn’t even give me a chance-”

“That’s irrelevant,” he interjected. “I meant what are you doing in that *outfit*.”

Mollie tugged her wrist from his grip and glared at him.

“I can choose my own clothes Micah,” she said sharply.

Mollie could see the flush in Micah’s cheeks deepen as a well dressed man approached them, his demeanour cool but professional.

“Prince,” he said with acknowledgment. His eyes scanned Mollie and she saw his lip curl slightly. “*Mademoiselle*.”

Micah’s face went blank the moment the man approached them but Mollie could see through the mask...she could see the unhinged rage in his eyes directed at her.

“*Le roi a demandé à vous reconstruire dans la Cour.*”*

Micah turned his head ever so slightly but Mollie could tell he was pulling every last nerve to maintain his cool.

“In a moment,” Micah said shortly.

“Non. Tout de suite.”

Mollie watched the exchange apprehensively. She could feel the tension through the air as the guard placed a soft hand on the prince’s shoulder before walking brusquely back into the crowd of guests.

Micah had stilled for a long time, and Mollie cringed as he slowly regained his bearings and pulled her off to the side.

To Mollie’s dismay he marched her straight across the grand room, past his guest of nobles and out through the large doors into the frigid foyer. The cold hit her like a brick wall and she nearly stumbled as he harshly tugged her around a corner.

Mollie could already feel the anger radiating off of him and her previously emboldened exterior began to crumble quickly.

“Are you *trying* to demean me? Is that your goal?”

His voice shook with anger and Mollie cowered against the cold wall.

His cheeks were flushed and his quick strides had loosened a curl or two from his carefully combed hair. In spite of the ferocity in his glare he was still so utterly sublime and the jet black shirt against his pale skin made him seem that much more ethereal.

“I’m-I’m sorry,” Mollie stammered.

“Don’t apologize,” he snapped.

His cold hand wrapped around her throat and Mollie cringed, flashbacks of the last time he had done that going through her mind. He seemed to think better of it for a moment and consequently dropped his hand to his side.

Mollie could see the agitation in his demeanour. He seemed...surprisingly nervous. Mollie wondered if she was the sole cause for his discomfort.

Micah sighed heavily and Mollie watched as his eyes flickered back to her.

“Go cover yourself,” he said warily. “Before you freeze to death.”

Now Mollie was the one to sigh in relief. Mollie figured whatever was occupying Micah’s mind was enough for him to let her go unscathed in spite of her failure to obey.

“Leaving so soon?”

Mollie felt a horrible chill rack through her spine and she involuntarily took a step closer to Micah when she saw who had appeared around the corner.

James stood far away from the two of them, his dark eyes glittering as he watched their exchange in silence. His height blocked out the little bit of light filtering in through the hall and Mollie felt sick knowing how broad, burly, and dangerous he was even *without* the weapon that was slung loosely on his waist.

“The night is still young. After all this event is in your honour Micah.”

Micah turned towards his brother, his stance immediately stiffening. Mollie felt a sudden pang of fear for him as James strode closer to them.

Micah looked so fragile in front of the eldest prince. His lean frame was no match for the wide overbearing figure in front of them.

Mollie knew in a game of strength who would win, but she doubted James would be the one to dominate in a game of wits.

That was Micah’s territory.

“I’m requested elsewhere,” Micah said brusquely. Mollie didn’t miss how he subtly moved in front of Mollie. The girl would take anything to keep as far away from James Lyon as humanly possible.

“Ah,” James said as if in understanding. Mollie felt her skin prickle at the cunning smile on his face. “I stand corrected.”

Mollie wasn’t sure what he was referring to but she didn’t like his uncannily jovial nature. It was uncharacteristic in more ways than one.

“I never quite got a... *proper* introduction to your leading lady baby brother. But things seem to be progressing quite nicely.”

He chuckled amusedly to himself as Micah stayed silent. His eyes flickered over to Mollie.

“Mollie isn’t it?”

His deep voice filtered into something more breathless towards the end.

“I never thought you’d be the one to find yourself a woman Micah...how very...*soft* of you.”

The tension between the two of them was as icy as the walls around them and Mollie kept her gaze glued to the floor.

“He’s quite the charmer you know?” James said with a smile addressing Mollie directly. The false affectionate lilt to his tone made Mollie’s skin prickle with unease. “Always got a woman on his arm. It takes a special kind of man to be so in sync with a woman, wouldn’t you agree?”

The silence that ensued was stifling and Mollie shifted, the cold suddenly seeping into her bones.

“Let’s get you back to your chambers,” Micah said quietly.

His grip on Mollie never loosened and she shadowed him closely as they stepped around the eldest Lyon to reach the main hallway.

“Oh and Micah,” James called out twisting over his shoulder. “I look forward to your little speech. Let’s hope you’re a bit more convincing this time.”

With that he turned around and walked back into the chilly hall, the sound of music and chatter reaching Mollie’s ears.

“Micah-“

He cut her off and motioned for someone behind her to come forward.

She jumped when Cécily appeared meekly behind them. She looked like she had been crying and Mollie suddenly felt guilt fill her.

“Take her upstairs,” Micah snapped.

He didn’t yell at her, but Mollie could tell he was steaming. She dreaded what was to come.

Jelena had seen her before. She was convinced, she just couldn’t quite recall the exact moment.

Jelena knew every guest in this hall from the oldest gentleman to the young naïve female prospects hoping to snag the middle Lyon for themselves. He was notefully the only single one left anyway.

Jelena frowned when she saw him in the middle of the dance floor, his arms wrapped around a thin statuesque girl in a skimpy emerald green gown.

Jelena narrowed her eyes, and watched her closely. The girl was awkward, her sharp eyes could tell from her clumsy steps. As they turned in the middle of the floor Jelena caught sight of her face and she tensed.

She was...beautiful. Not that typical modern beauty. That simple sort of natural unaware beauty.

Jelena zeroed in on her, especially the way the girl’s jaw clenched when she spoke to Prince Rowan.

Jelena couldn’t stand her eldest brother in law.

He didn't give her the time of the day, not since the first day she had met him and she dutifully spent the years ignoring him right back. Even so, she was surprised to see the girl addressing Rowan in such an impertinent manner.

Jelena would never get away with something like that, not even to her own husband despite her own royal status. From the chatter surrounding her, Jelena had heard fleeting whispers of the girl being a concubine. Jelena figured it was better than being a slave, but it still didn't allow for such brazen behaviour. She was curious.

Jelena's eyes flickered to her youngest brother-in-law at the front of the hall who looked typically irritated. Although that was signature of Prince Micah, he seemed especially stiff. He was staring hard at something, his expression on the brink of anger. Jelena followed his gaze to Rowan and the concubine twirling on the dance floor, both of whom seemed to be enjoying each others company.

Jelena didn't mind Micah. He never spoke to her much, but when he did he was always cordial. She liked that about him. Not that she'd have had much of an opportunity to speak to him much anyway. Micah never came to court. Not willingly at least.

Jelena suddenly tensed when the girl in the middle of the dance floor locked eyes with her. Her light brown irises met Jelena's own blue ones before they quickly dropped and returned to her partner.

People were openly staring, but the girl didn't seem to care all that much.

Jelena envied that quality.

She had always been taught to care, after all, how she carried herself out was of paramount importance to her status.

Maybe the girl was young and still had much to learn. To Jelena, she looked around seventeen, but then again Jelena had no idea where these slaves and concubines even came from or how they were reared and brought to the castle. She just knew they made the Lyons a substantial amount of money.

James re-appeared after a moment, his shoulder brushing her own as he stood beside her.

"James."

She acknowledged her husbands presence with a curtsy.

He ignored her, his eyes on the girl in the middle of the dance floor, like everyone else in the hall.

"Who is that?" Jelena murmured inching her head forward.

Her husband didn't even turn to look at her.

"I swear I've seen her before somewhere...but I can't quite recall."

“Her,” James breathed watching them closely.

Jelena looked at James closely. He looked frustrated, his expression parallel to Micah who had suddenly approached the two in the middle of the floor. The girl looked put out again. Her thick eyebrows were furrowed in anger and her lips had turned into a frown as she twisted her arm in the prince’s grasp.

She had never seen such a display of insolence in front of guests of such respected stature and she followed the two of them out of the hall with her eyes. The girl was lucky the king himself was not present. She didn’t even want to think-

“I’ll see you tonight,” James murmured before leaving her side almost as swiftly as he arrived beside her. She too followed his steps with her eyes out of the hall and past the large doors.

Jelena had been dreading this night for a long long time. She had run her tear ducts dry weeks ago and she just prayed the King took pity on her. She knew this was beyond James, not that he’d help her even if he had the power to do so. But still, she prayed with every fibre of her being that the King was merciful tonight.

Jelena stood at the back of the chilly throne room. She was always a spectator during these meetings, but she had a funny feeling about tonight.

Hartley sat in his throne on an elevated platform in his court in *Icedalar*, his cold blank eyes staring at nothing and everything at once.

The courts in the North always seemed more threatening and dangerous than the courts in the South and the West. Jelena hated it.

The soft sound of leather on tile filled the room and the doors gradually opened revealing two figures in black.

Rowan and James arrived at the same time, their long strides echoing across the cold landing. They each bowed gracefully before their father on one knee before rising to their full heights and standing below the platform where their father sat.

“James. Rowan.”

Hartley’s voice was always so powerful and strong, even when he was speaking softly. Jelena never thought such a feat was possible until she had met him.

Hartley had arranged the marriage between herself and James. Although this was the case, she had never spoken to Hartley one on one. Only within the context of a dinner setting or some fancy event. Jelena preferred this. She was terrified of him and she had a feeling he knew this. Even at his age he was still quite a looker and Jelena wondered how someone so evil could look so painfully beautiful.

There was a silence that followed after Hartley's sons had taken their places across the throne from where their father sat. Jelena didn't make eye contact with her husband. She didn't make eye contact with anybody. It was safer that way. Maybe if she survived this meeting without making eye contact with anyone the King may just move on and her involvement would be close to null.

The door opened and another figure entered the room; the icy air filling the spacious room to reach every corner and crevice in its wake.

"My precious precious boy."

Hartley's voice took on that gentle lilt that made Jelena's skin tingle.

Micah sunk to one knee as he addressed his father before he too joined his brothers across from his father's elevated platform.

Jelena could already feel James' sour mood from here. It was the last thing she wanted to deal with on an already stressful day for herself, but court proceedings always made James hotheaded. Hartley's overt favouritism of Micah always pushed James to the edge and she knew he yearned for his father's approval. She gave up trying to convince him to channel his efforts elsewhere. She now knew better than to advise her husband on his personal affairs.

She wouldn't dare try to do so ever again.

"What caused such a delay in your return? I had worried my shipment may have been intercepted."

Hartley lounged in his chair, his rings glistening as his depthless eyes, appearing almost black in the chilly room, zeroed in on his son.

Micah stood up coolly, his all-black outfit a stark contrast against the snowy backdrop.

"The goods were delivered on time. It was the treacherous passage through the mountains that caused the delay."

"The *Appeley Mountains*?" Hartley smiled. "I do hope you sent my regards to *Monsieur Marchesseault*?"

Hartley tapped his fingers against the gold and emerald plated sceptre that rested in his left hand. His voice was still soft and lulling but Jelena could hear the hint of impatience beneath those layers of false cordiality.

Micah nodded.

"He's not well my King. His condition worsens everyday. It will reach a point where even basic handheld mobility will become compromised."

"I need his mind not his hands dear boy," Hartley murmured with a dismissive wave.

“I disagree,” Micah said smoothly addressing his father. “I’ve seen the work he’s done this far. His dexterity is unparalleled. The nature of his work is volatile, it would be unreasonable to entrust anyone else with such a delicate task --the material itself is too valuable to risk.”

“If I may my King?”

Rowan stood beside his brother, his hands behind his back.

Hartley turned his cold gaze to him.

“Further efforts put forth into this project are useless if our supply of the material is already limited. The sooner we acquire more iridium the sooner we can allocate more resources into this project. Only then do we worry about how exactly iridium will be manipulated to our needs and *who* will do so.”

Micah shot his brother an irritated look.

“Why is this taking so long Micah? Tell me...why are you delaying the inevitable? Your jaded reliance on my ignorance to time is growing stale.”

Rowan turned to Micah, the frown on his face deepening.

“Perhaps Micah is a bit pre-occupied with other matters.”

The King was staring at his youngest son, his expression unfathomable.

“Is this true Micah?”

Hartley’s voice never wavered in spite of his question.

Micah remained silent, his face void of emotion.

Jelena watched the court proceedings from her position and she grappled with the icy exchange between the brothers. Usually at least one of them got along during court. Today it seemed as if all three of them had their daggers brandished at each others throats.

“What do you think of your brother’s elusivity James? Is Micah as distracted as Rowan claims?”

James stepped forward, his cloak billowing behind him.

“I worry for him my King. He spends more time with his concubine these days than he does in court.”

Jelena wasn’t really sure what she expected from Hartley. He was too indecipherable of a man. But she certainly didn’t expect him to laugh at James’ comment in the manner he did. It was unsettling but Jelena watched as the King’s dry laughs faded quickly and a chilling snake like expression crossed his features.

“I’d *hardly* call that a distraction James. Micah is becoming a man now. There’s no shame in that, even if there was a slight delay in reaching that milestone.”

His eyes suddenly flickered over to Jelena and she felt herself begin to perspire.

“How *is* my little one doing? You know I have been waiting long and hard for a grandson.”

The silence that followed was as stiff and as unyielding as the snow capped mountains beyond the borders of *Icedalar* and Jelena felt a bottomless fear fill her gut.

Rowan and Micah had stepped back against the adjacent wall leaving James in the centre of the court space alone.

James hesitated and Jelena felt her skin flame even more as Hartley’s congenial smile went stale.

“Ah... I see.”

Jelena had closed her eyes at this point. She didn’t want to see the look on Hartley’s face when he turned to her. She was useless to him now, and the few traces of acknowledgment he had given her these last few months had just vanished in that moment.

She remembered how falsely gracious he had been towards her when she was pregnant with Nina. At the time, they were convinced she’d birth a son. She remembered how quickly he left the room after the midwives revealed it had been a girl. Jelena had never felt so sickened in her life.

“You never fail to disappoint me James.”

Hartley stood up from his throne and made his way down to the floor, taking his time to swipe his ringed fingers against the frost covered railings. He stopped in front of his eldest son, his head tilted to the side. His fingers rotated around the sharp ragged sceptre in his grip.

“Kneel.”

Jelena gripped the railing behind her. The frost that had built up upon the metal burned her palms with its frigid sheen and she channelled her mind towards the sensation.

She closed her eyes, for once welcoming the oncoming pain.

Mollie writhed in her sleep.

She was having another one of those dreams again. The one where she was surrounded by a glacial cave with a single fire burning in the centre of the cavern while somehow fighting her way through a mountain of snow. The chill of winter seeped into her exposed skin while simultaneously, the heat from the fire seeped against the lower half of her body, inching its red flames further and further up her legs until it penetrated through her folds.

This time the fire spread along her thighs, the red tips of the flame wrapping its heat around her flesh before flickering to pale white. It shot through her and sent her screaming up into the snow haze above her.

Mollie gasped as she jerked upwards. Her thick curls were plastered to her forehead from cold sweat and her legs were tangled in the white sheets of the massive bed. Her eyes immediately shot towards the window where she saw a dark sky specked with dots of silver. It must have still been quite early in the morning.

Mollie managed to catch her breath and quickly she brought her hand towards her forehead to wipe the sweat from her brow. She felt a different wetness swipe her cheek as she swiped her fingers against it. Something sticky....had she...

“Enjoyed yourself did you?”

The soft murmur nearly made Mollie’s heart stop and she immediately turned her head towards the desk on the opposite side of the room.

Micah was sitting there, book in hand. He had a soft smirk on his face, as if he were enjoying some inside joke and Mollie felt her face flame.

She dropped her hand from her face and bunched her fingers in the thick sheets around her. She had never done such a thing in her life. Never.

She narrowed her eyes at the prince accusingly and decided to ignore his question.

“Why are you still up?”

Her voice was husky and thick with sleep but she managed to say it clear enough.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he said softly, pausing to turn a page in his book. She shivered as his green eyes met hers. “It was unusually noisy in this room tonight.”

Mollie didn’t miss the hidden meaning behind his words but she didn’t know whether to sink back under the covers in shame or biting reply.

“Well shows over,” she grumbled turning over so she was no longer facing the prince.

“Pity,” she heard him murmur.

Mollie attempted to close her eyes, waiting for sleep to pull her back under. But Mollie found herself too awake to sink back into sleep. She was still half expecting him to punish her...or yell at her about what happened earlier. But he didn’t bring it up.

Quickly she threw the duvet back and pulled the sheet up over her long sleeved tunic.

“Why couldn’t you sleep?” she murmured bunching her hair around her shoulder.

Micah hadn’t moved and she watched as he twirled a thin pencil in his left hand. His eyes were trained on the page in front of him.

“I was...preoccupied.”

“Care to share?” she murmured, feeling a sudden boost of confidence.

Micah met her gaze, his expression placid.

“Not tonight.”

Mollie watched as he tossed the book onto the table and brushed a hand through his thick curls.

“You must think you're very brave don't you?”

Mollie froze. She had thought too soon. He *hadn't* dropped the subject.

“To flaunt yourself like that...in front of all my guests. Do you understand that those people are noblemen and noblewomen? How am I supposed to make you decent if you keep brandishing yourself like that?”

“Like what?” she said with a frown. “I’m sorry... was that the wrong occasion to wear that dress? Should I have worn it to a *family* dinner instead? Behind closed doors.”

The hypocrisy of his comment bothered her and she *hated* how righteous Micah wanted to be when a situation demanded it.

“Don’t start with me Mollie,” he said with a frown. “I don’t have the energy to fight with you tonight.”

She sighed.

Micah seemed more pale than usual. She had been too busy arguing with him before to look at him. *Really* look at him and she suddenly felt bad. He seemed exhausted. Mollie knew how much energy was expended traveling to and from this horrible place.

“I wasn’t...I didn’t mean to anger you,” she murmured tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “I just...I guess I wanted to make some choices for myself you know? I’m not used to following orders.”

Her explanation sounded weak even to her...and she looked away.

Micah suddenly lowered himself on to the bed. His arms caged her in as his rich cologne engulfed her senses. She felt her skin prickle with goosebumps as the scent went straight to her head.

She shivered as he loomed over her, his pale eyes drinking in her flushed cheeks and hard bitten lips.

“I’m not angry with you,” he said softly, catching her chin before she could turn it away. “I just...worry that’s all. I’ve never...I’ve never felt the need to worry about someone in the past.”

Mollie clenched her jaw as Micah's fingers moved from her cheek to her collarbone.

"You never worried that much about me before." Mollie challenged with a raised eyebrow. "Why the sudden change in attitude?"

Micah laughed. The sound reverberated around the room.

"Mollie Mae," he said lovingly, his thumb moving back up to brush along her cheek. Mollie noticed he did that a lot. It was an interesting form of affection. It made her feel like his pet more than anything. "Your cynicism is truly boundless. You could have all the riches at your fingertips and you'd still be unsatisfied."

Mollie rolled her eyes.

His fingers suddenly went down across her chin and further between her collarbones to the centre of her chest.

She tensed as his finger circled a nipple through her thin tunic, the ripe bud hardening in response to the stimulation.

"You're not keeping me around for show or for a good fuck Micah. That much I know."

This seemed to catch his attention and Mollie felt rather than heard him stiffen.

"Watch that tone Mollie."

The sharpness of his voice was enough of an indication for Mollie to humble and she sighed and dropped her gaze to the tangled sheets around them. She hated how easily he was able to subdue her. It exacerbated her submissiveness and Mollie couldn't stand it.

She jerked as he gave her nipple a hard pinch before pushing himself up and off the bed. The action left her nipple aching with a lingering pain and she scowled as he elegantly picked up his coat off the side table before heading towards the doors of her chamber.

"Where are you going?" she blurted. She hated how domineering he was even in a state of blatant exhaustion.

"Out," he said coldly. "Why? Did you want a good fuck first?"

Mollie frowned as he left the room promptly. The lock clicked into place loudly and echoed around the cold spacious quarters.

His mood was as sour as hers and she bit her lip. The nerves in her breast were still firing from his harsh treatment.

Mollie sat in the middle of the bed, hot, wanting, and deeply unsatisfied as cool pinpricks of sweat accumulated on her forehead.

Let him go

She didn't need him to satisfy her. Hell, she didn't need anybody.

Chapter End Notes

Whoa. The big 3-0. I did not think this story would reach chapter 30. It was a year ago from today where the idea for Iridium began to settle in my mind. This is crazy. Thank you so much for everyone who has continued reading this far. I love you guys <3

Translations in Order:

The King has requested your presence in Court.

Chapter 31: Gallium

Chapter Summary

Mollie grows increasingly suspicious of her participation in Lyon politics and vows to get to the bottom of it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Where is this place?”

Cécily had taken Mollie to another part of the fortress she’d never seen before. It was darker here, but more shielded from the elements in comparison to other parts of the building.

Mollie wore her yellow cloak atop a pale yellow dress as Cécily guided her through the *château*. The cloak was quickly becoming a staple article of clothing for Mollie and she liked running her fingers over the *I.L* engraved along the interior lining.

When Cécily pushed open the two double doors in front of them Mollie felt her heart jump to her throat.

It had been so long. So *long* since she’d seen a room like the one in front of her.

Mollie inhaled the familiar scent of a burning woodstove fire along with the delectable scents of sweets, spices, and warm fresh bread.

The kitchen was empty with clean utensils and fresh ingredients lining the pristine cupboards beside the fully stocked pantry.

It was truly a bakers dream.

Mollie felt her heart ache as she stepped into the room. She had been away from her bakery for so long and as she closed her eyes she almost imagined she were back there. If she closed her eyes she could imagine Phoebe rummaging in the back pantry as usual, Thom barking orders into the mic as he set about packaging their fresh baked goods. It made her throat constrict and Mollie breathed deeply trying not to let Cécily see how much just being here affected her.

“It is a rather slow day. There are no events scheduled so the kitchen is all yours to enjoy *Mademoiselle*.”

Mollie looked at her in shock.

“Really?”

She hoped it wasn't some cruel joke the Lyons had orchestrated. Cécily smiled and nodded.

She bowed before she left closing the doors behind Mollie.

There was only one door to enter and leave the cosy kitchen but Mollie was content. She had no intention of leaving anyway, not when there was a full pantry and the freshest ingredients she had ever seen right within her grasp. There were floor length windows here and Mollie figured they were on the main floor. The airy snowy landscape for once looked beautiful in the distance and Mollie figured this was the royal kitchen.

Never did she think she'd ever have an opportunity to bake in luxury.

Mollie wasted no time deciding on a dish and sinking her hands into the ingredients in front of her.

She knew what she was going to make. She made a mental note to thank Cécily again when she returned to her. Mollie didn't have any expectations when she first met the modest girl, but Mollie quickly realized she was not like the others. She was kind and hardworking and tried her best to make Mollie feel at home and Mollie was eternally grateful.

Without further a due, she got the fire going and delved straight into work.

Mollie must have spent the entire day in the kitchen, yet to her it felt like only an hour or two.

She had tossed her hair into a curly messy bun so several loose curls fell to frame her face as she brushed a drop of sweat from her brow with her shoulder. She had hung her yellow cloak on a peg in the wall and sauntered around the kitchen in her pale yellow dress from one oven to the next.

Mollie figured she might have outdone herself...just a little bit.

She must have made 8 different flavour of macarons on top of the éclairs, the brioche and the petit fours along with fresh savoury bread.

She realized quickly that this was a significant amount of food and she wasn't actually sure what or whom she was baking for, but it didn't matter. She hadn't realized how much she missed it, how much she craved being around the kitchen.

Mollie had been so pre-occupied piping her last batch of macarons she didn't hear the kitchen door open and close.

Only when she had finished and slid her baking sheet into the oven did she realize someone else was in the room.

Mollie froze, the sudden presence breaking her concentration.

“I’m sorry,” said a quiet voice with a thick French accent. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

Mollie didn’t say anything as the tall red headed woman stepped further into the room closing the kitchen doors behind her with a soft click.

She paused as she looked at Mollie and the array of dishes that lined the table. She seemed taken aback for a moment.

“Did you make all of this?”

She sounded shocked and Mollie shifted uncomfortably. She knew who this woman was and Mollie didn’t trust her.

Mollie nodded stiffly.

“*Mon dieu,*” she murmured.

If Mollie had imagined one of the expensive porcelain dolls from the lavish toy store three blocks down from her bakery in Chartery came to life --she’d believe it would have been an exact replica of Jelena Lyon.

The woman was so elegant, in a beautiful airy floor length plum coloured gown. It was so different from the shorter yellow dress Mollie had decided to wear. Then again, they were from totally different worlds.

Jelena tucked a strand of her long red hair behind her ear and looked at Mollie.

“I believe you must have the entire fortress salivating at this point,” she said with a soft smile. “The entire place smells like a bakery.”

Mollie dropped her gaze and turned her attention back to her baking, trying to ignore the fact that she now had company.

Jelena hesitated as Mollie busied herself again. Mollie couldn’t really care if she was disobeying royal protocol or not by turning her back on the woman. Anyone affiliated with James Lyon was an enemy to her.

“This must be...difficult for you. I can’t even imagine.”

Mollie ignored her. She had been moody recently, abnormally moody and she’d already had to apologize several times to Cécily these past few days after getting short with her for simple matters. She had to watch herself this time. She couldn’t make enemies with the immediate princess of the Lyon monarchy.

Mollie just shrugged channelling her focus on taking her macarons out of the oven.

“My daughter loves macarons,” Jelena murmured admiring the different colours that lined the enormous island in the middle of the kitchen. “She’d simply adore these.”

Mollie sighed removing her apron and dusting the flour that had spread along her dress. She felt like a mess next to the polished woman standing in front of her.

“Can I offer you a cup of tea? You’ve been working all day.”

Mollie couldn’t help but laugh humourlessly at the comment.

“I’d hardly call this work.” Mollie hesitated as Jelena’s face dropped slightly. “Plus, I don’t think royals are supposed to be mixing with... commoners.”

Jelena looked at her for a moment, her sharp eyes showing a sudden streak of rebellion.

“I won’t tell if you won’t.”

Mollie raised an eyebrow shuffling forward to grab her cloak.

She was on her guard but from what she could tell, Jelena seemed just as tense as she did. She must be desperately lonely to want to spend time with Mollie...or spying for her husband. Mollie assumed it was the latter.

“I won’t. But I don’t trust that you won’t,” Mollie said sternly flipping her hood over her head.

“Good,” Jelena said with a tight smile. “Then we are on even ground. Now let’s get going before the men return. A man on the lookout for his woman always assumes the worst.”

Jelena turned elegantly and glided out of the room. Mollie stood and observed her for a moment. She was debating whether to let her go and remain in the kitchen until Cécily returned. She felt heavily conflicted.

With a sigh she grabbed her cloak and followed behind the red headed woman closing the kitchen door softly behind her.

The chilliness enveloped Mollie as she followed Jelena down the hall and around the corner to a small parlour.

The room was covered in a light layer of fluffy snow and was several degrees colder than the corridor outside.

Jelena wasted no time lighting the candles around the room before dusting the light layer of snow off the table in front of them. She motioned for Mollie to sit and reluctantly Mollie obliged.

The silence between them was long as Jelena fiddled with the teapot and aged porcelain cups in the corner. Mollie could immediately tell the woman was out of her comfort zone and she got up taking the initiative herself.

“Sit,” Mollie said, more forcefully than she intended.

Jelena paused as Mollie stepped in front of her to take charge of boiling the kettle and arranging the tea.

Mollie knew the rich had servants to do this for them, but she couldn't quite understand how a woman of Jelena's age and supposedly superior knowledge could not understand how to properly arrange a simple tea.

Wordlessly, Mollie returned setting the delicate china in front of them on the table as Jelena sat quietly across from her. Her thin elegant hands were soft, Mollie could tell. They were hands that didn't know the meaning of work.

Mollie slid in across from her and began pouring the tea. She had opted for jasmine -- a flavour that teetered on secondary status. It didn't feel right for Mollie to choose something exorbitant. Not for this occasion.

"Merci," Jelena murmured taking a sip.

Mollie stared at her. She tried her best to look neutral. She recalled in that moment how often Phoebe teased her about her less than friendly ambiance. She was obviously still working on it.

"I..I saw you the other day...during my youngest brother-in-law's formal reception."

Mollie tensed.

"I'm going to be honest," she said with a dainty laugh. "Micah doesn't react much to anything. He's a very...internalized person."

"I know," Mollie replied shortly.

Jelena smiled.

"Yes I suppose you do."

She sipped her tea. Mollie averted her gaze, the silence was quickly becoming awkward.

"How rude of me," she said suddenly tucking her hair behind her ears. "I'm Jelena by the way. Jelena Lyon. My husband is current leader of the West."

"I know," Mollie repeated rather dryly. "I know who you are."

Jelena shifted, suddenly uncomfortable. Mollie's chilly exterior was certainly not going unnoticed.

"So what do you want to know about me?" Mollie asked pushing her untouched tea away from her. "My name? What I'm doing here? My position? My status?"

She didn't know why she spat the last word out. She was so used to the lip curling, the disgust, the antipathy that came with being a primary citizen. She assumed all of these rich folk must want to know at some point and she might as well cut straight to the chase.

Jelena was quiet. She didn't react too much to Mollie's bluntness. Rather, she seemed quite accustomed to it.

"I reckoned you maybe just wanted a woman to talk to," Jelena said with a frown. "I know what it's like to be alone in this place for months. It drives you insane. I wouldn't want another to suffer the way I did."

"How thoughtful of you," Mollie said. Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "I'm sure you understand my situation completely."

Jelena sighed.

"Look *princess*," Mollie said with a sigh. "I'm not interested--"

"I'm pregnant."

Mollie stopped short, the confession startling her.

Jelena had tears shining in her eyes as she looked at Mollie and the girl froze, unsure of how to react.

Mollie opened her mouth and closed it a couple times before she regained her bearings.

"I..." Mollie trailed off. She was completely baffled. "Does...does your husband know?"

"Not yet," she murmured placing a delicate hand on her belly. "It's too early to say anything. I don't want to tell him until I'm absolutely sure."

Mollie swallowed uneasily.

"Erm...congratulations," Mollie muttered tucking her wild curls behind her ears. "I'm sure he'll be very happy."

"I had a scare a couple of weeks ago," Jelena said quietly. "I thought I was having another miscarriage. It's happened so many times I thought surely it was another."

She paused taking a sip from her tea as Mollie sat mutely in front of her.

"James...my husband...he will be happy. I just hope it's a boy this time. My eldest is a girl. It would be nice to have one of each you know?"

Mollie twisted her cloak in her fingers as she listened to Jelena's musings.

"I suppose. I guess your son would be next in line for the throne."

Jelena smiled to herself. Mollie gauged her reaction carefully.

"In the West he would automatically be as James is current leader. But His Grace has control of the South and still maintains control of the entire Lyon fortune."

Mollie paused.

“I thought Micah did as CEO of trade.”

Jelena laughed.

“Heavens no. The king won’t give up his empire until he passes away...” now Jelena was the one to pause as she hesitated across from Mollie. “His Grace pledged to leave this amassed fortune as well as his dominion over the South to his first grandson. It is his wish.”

Mollie stiffened when she heard this. No wonder James wanted a son so badly. He wanted control over as much Lyon land as he could manage. With him ruling the West, and his potential son being primed to rule the South, it would be fairly easy to take over the rest of the land for himself.

The South was abundant in fertility and population, it was the most sought after region in the entire Lyon empire which was why Hartley was so adamant to part with his position of power there.

“I guess nobody was exactly enthusiastic to claim ownership in the North,” Mollie said dryly looking outside the window next to them.

Jelena laughed.

“It’s strange,” she added tucking a fiery strand of hair behind her ear. “His Grace always preferred to spend his days in the North despite being ruler of the South. I would think the weather here would be such a major turn off.”

Mollie perked up when she heard this.

“How often does Hartley come North?”

Jelena squeaked in fear when she heard Mollie’s question. The girl jumped as Jelena’s face paled and her lips went white.

“You call him by his first name so brazenly,” she whispered. “You do know that’s punishable if you’re heard.”

Mollie stifled an eyeroll.

“No one is here right now princess. I’m sure he won’t mind.”

The woman seemed genuinely afraid of him and Mollie found it odd. She obviously didn’t have a healthy relationship with her father in law...if she even really had one with him at all.

Mollie leaned in closer.

“Strange isn’t it? He spends most of his days dangling the enticing Southern rule in front of his sons, but barely spends anytime there. Instead he sits here, in this cursed land that he made his *youngest* son ruler of.”

Jelena blinked at her.

“Your husband wasn’t happy about it you know?” Mollie said with a raised eyebrow. “He didn’t want Micah coming up to the North alone.”

Jelena suddenly flushed and she narrowed her eyes at Mollie.

“How do you know this?”

Mollie stirred her now cold tea, her eyes flickering back to Jelena’s.

“I was at the meeting. The meeting *Sir* Hartley had with Micah, Rowan and your husband.”

“You’re lying.”

Jelena’s delicate features suddenly twisted into something animalistic and Mollie braced herself.

“You would never have been invited-“

“Cut the nice guy act *princess*. *You know what’s going on as well I do,*” Mollie whipped out. “*There’s something in this place, something everyone is desperate for yet absolutely terrified of and I think you what it is.*”

Jelena huffed, her cheeks pinkening even more.

“*Quelle bêtise me dites-vous!*” she responded. “I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

The woman looked shaken and Mollie inched herself backward on her seat, her movement making the woman recoil once again.

Was she playing her?

Jelena looked horrified and Mollie suddenly doubted herself. Was the woman really this clueless?

“Do you not ask your husband about his work?” Mollie asked baffled. “Are you not the slightest bit interested?”

Jelena looked up at her from beneath her mascara thickened lashes and sighed.

“I used to try in the past. But James prefers I do not interfere. He says it is indecent of me to meddle in his affairs.”

Mollie couldn’t say she was surprised, however Jelena’s acquiescent personality certainly surprised her somewhat. She knew of female rulers outside the Lyon regime with grossly successful empires of their own. What made the Lyons decide it was unbecoming of a woman to immerse herself in the world of politics? Mollie felt her blood boil.

The woman really was clueless and Mollie suddenly felt bad for caging her in and accusing her of feigning ignorance.

“I’m...I’m sorry to hear that,” Mollie said rather lamely. Mollie hesitated...unsure of whether she was in the proper position to give advice. However it had been a while since Mollie had conversed with a woman one on one and of her own accord. “Personally, I think you should try to understand your husbands dealings,” Mollie explained with a shrug. “If not for your own peace of mind, then for your future child.”

Jelena dropped her gaze and rubbed her hand protectively over her belly.

“I just want my son to be in good hands and get what is owed to him,” she explained softly. “I don’t want him to end up like James. Fighting for a position that should have belonged to him.”

Mollie nodded as if in understanding. She hoped Jelena understood that it wasn’t anyone’s fault but Hartley’s own warped ideas forced upon his family and his empire.

“I’m sure your son will get what is rightfully his,” Mollie said with a small smile.

Jelena smiled and daintily finished the rest of her tea.

“I should get you back,” she murmured, rising to her feet. “Cécily must be wondering where you are.”

Mollie stood up hastily, having lost track of time herself. Jelena was not as tall as Mollie but she certainly moved quickly even in her floor length gown and Mollie struggled to keep up as she dashed along the corridor behind her.

She hoped she’d make it back before Cécily or someone else found her missing.

Mollie breathed a sigh of relief when she slipped herself back into the empty kitchen, the familiar smell of fresh baked goods filling her senses.

She had only taken two steps into the heart of the kitchen when the door slammed open behind her and Cécily scampered towards her.

“There you are!” she sputtered clutching Mollie’s skinny wrist in her grasp. “Master Lyon is on his way. I don’t know what I would have told him had you not returned.”

Cécily was trying to keep her wits together but Mollie could see she was terrified.

“I’m sorry Cécily,” she said genuinely. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I had just stepped outside for a moment, the heat got to me.”

“Never mind that now,” she muttered scanning the room and looking Mollie up and down.

“Thank you for this by the way,” Mollie murmured. “I hadn’t baked in so long...it was very kind of you to do this for me.”

Cécily hesitated as Mollie squeezed her arm gratefully.

“It was Master Lyon’s idea actually *Mademoiselle*,” Cécily said softly.

Mollie stiffened when she heard this and watched as Cécily scampered to the doors just as they eased open.

Micah walked elegantly into the room, his navy cloak framing his tall figure as Cécily bowed deeply before him. She shot Mollie a quick smile before leaving them alone in the kitchen.

He looked relaxed today. His dark hair was loose and tousled and Mollie saw that he had forgone his ascot today, opting for a dark grey button down and slim black slacks. His dagger rested lazily in his belt pocket and Mollie noticed he wore no gloves – a rare occurrence.

He eyed the goods that lined the enormous island in the centre of the kitchen.

“I see you didn’t hold back,” Micah said with a smirk.

Mollie eyed the dagger slung loosely in his belt. She couldn’t help but wonder who’s blood stained the blade this time.

“I missed it,” she said shortly brushing her hair over her shoulder. “It’s been a while since I’ve baked.”

Micah nodded in understanding.

Mollie watched him as he walked along the table, observing what she had made. His features were carefully blank as he walked slowly around the table.

Mollie rolled her eyes.

“There’s no *croquembouche* if that’s what you were looking for,” she couldn’t help but add as he paused to look at her. “It’s a little too...rich for me. I thought it best to keep it simple.”

He didn’t respond right away, taking his time to turn a dish or two to the side and critique it. It reminded Mollie of the quaternary citizens who came to her bakery and judged her food without even trying a sample.

“I don’t mind simple, every now and then.”

His murmur was so soft Mollie wasn’t even sure she heard him correctly.

Mollie scoffed.

“Try one then,” she said in a challenging tone. She crossed her arms as she stood across from him.

Mollie could see he was fighting a smile as he turned to look back at her.

“Are you giving orders to a prince Miss Mayeson?” Micah asked.

She stood her ground as he took several long strides forward until he stood in front of her.

He took her chin in his fingers and tilted her head up to face him.

His cold fingers sent a shiver down her spine.

“Are you surprised?” she whispered, staring into those cold impassive orbs of green. “You seem to enjoy lecturing me on my utter lack of decency.”

Micah’s lips twitched, perhaps recalling the very same memory that swept past her mind.

“On the contrary,” he said rather dryly. “You never fail to surprise me, *especially* when it comes to your...impudence .”

Mollie frowned jerking her chin from his grasp.

“I wouldn’t want to disappoint,” she said with snarky tone.

Mollie stilled as Micah swept past her towards the door, knocking twice sharply against the wood before Cécily entered with a bow.

Micah spoke softly to her in French as Mollie stood against the far back wall, scowling as their eyes grazed over her several times.

She was fuming and she knew Micah was aware of it.

With a nod Cécily left them and Micah returned to her side firmly looping his arm through hers.

“What were you talking about?” Mollie asked stiffly as Micah led them out of the grand kitchen.

“*Quel malheur**,” Micah said with a chuckle. “And I thought your French was improving.”

Mollie scowled as he led them down the hall.

The late afternoon sun filtered in through the arched windows casting a warm yellow glow over the landscape of snow that completely encapsulated the fortress.

“I was thinking...maybe you’d like to see the town where I was born?” Micah sounded uncharacteristically hesitant and Mollie looked at him in surprise. “The weather is warmer there. It’ll be a nice change of scenery.”

He was right and in spite of herself wanting to make his life a little more difficult... she *wouldn’t* mind time away from the castle.

“I suppose,” she muttered, not trying to seem overly eager. Mollie was suspicious. Micah always had a reason for everything he did and she knew he was not doing this out of the kindness of his heart.

There was always a motive when it came to the winter prince.

“It’s a bit of a distance from *Le Château* but it’s towards the south. The wind doesn’t hit as harshly there as it does here.”

She tightened her yellow cloak around her neck as they stepped outside into the chilly afternoon air.

A carriage was already waiting for them as Micah guided her through the thick snow.

Mollie sighed and slid into the luxurious carriage across from Micah her expression solemn. Her mind was pre-occupied today. The conversation she had with Jelena was circling in her mind like an itch she couldn’t scratch.

She hadn’t seen Micah’s brothers since the eventful reception and she wasn’t sure whether they had returned to Questershire or were taking refuge in some other part of the gargantuan castle. Maybe some time away would be beneficial for Mollie – a way for her to find some clarity in her befuddling life.

The trip was shorter than Mollie anticipated and she perked up when streetlights began to follow along the perimeter of the cobbled road.

The town was startlingly simple – quite humble in Mollie’s opinion. She was expecting a grand city of opulence for the birthtown of a prince. Then again, Mollie remembered who Micah’s mother was and she wondered if perhaps this was also where she came from – simple beginnings. Mollie found it difficult to believe someone as cold, evil and menacing as Hartley could ever father a child with someone below his status. The man built his entire empire on the foundation of corruption and exploitation of the poor. It struck Mollie as odd.

In spite of the simple homes that littered the snowy open fields around the winding cobbled roads of the North – Mollie noticed the transition in ambiance as the carriage continued further down the road towards the mountains.

Before they could incline, they took a sharp turn, the carriage rolling forward down a steep but precarious road bordering a particularly large snowy hill.

The carriage came to a stop outside of a massive circular pathway leading to one of the grandest chalets Mollie had ever seen. Her skin prickled as she read the grand lettering above the arched entrance.

Chalet de Lyon

Mollie tried not to let her jaw drop as Micah slid out of the carriage and offered a hand out for her. *Of course* the Lyons had the most lavish chalet overlooking the best view of the mountains. It shouldn't have been as surprising to her -- but to see the name engraved so largely across the wood still made her skin prickle.

A guard sunk to his knees immediately upon their arrival and Mollie swallowed uncomfortably as he bowed his head at her also.

“*Bienvenue à Courchevel mon prince,*” he said.

“*Léon,*” Micah said with a smile giving the guard a warm handshake.

“Ah Micah,” the guard said with a shake of his head. “*Elle est vraiment ravissante. Les rumeurs sont vraies.*”

“*Vous êtes trop gentil Léon.*”

The men spoke together for a bit as Mollie took in the grand building before them. This place was simply gorgeous. The snow was piled atop of the wooden monstrosity giving the humungous building a rustic touch. The windows were wide and floor length and overlooking the snow capped mountains in the background.

“Follow me *ma choupinette,*” Micah murmured looping his arm through hers.

Mollie watched in silence as crowds parted and the townsfolk bowed and grovelled before the man beside her. Micah was as pleasant and as charming as ever greeting the men who rushed to kiss his hand or the women who blushed and stuttered as he smiled at them.

Mollie felt incredibly out of place as they extended their courtesy to her. She was used to the stares and the looks of disgust directed at her. This new reception was foreign.

“Are you hungry?” Micah murmured into her ear at some point as he brought her towards a long table filled with platters of food.

Mollie was about to respond when she caught sight of the opulent display of food lining the table and felt her throat well up. They were *hers*. All of the dishes lavishly displayed along the table was of the food she had just baked hours before.

She looked at Micah in shock as he smirked at her. She watched as the guests around them ate *her* food. They had no idea – absolutely no clue that the dessert they were devouring was made by someone far below their status.

It was quite an amusing display and she found herself smiling as the platters began to grow progressively more empty. If only they knew...

“See I told you,” Micah whispered snaking a hand around her waist. “Simple is nice now and again.”

Mollie looked at Micah as he observed the display before them.

“You did this on purpose didn’t you?” she said softly as the last of the *petit fours* disappeared from the platter.

Micah shrugged.

“They wouldn’t know the difference if the food was baked in a shack or in a castle,” he said softly.

His green eyes flickered to hers for a second.

“On some rare occasions ignorance is bliss Mollie Mae.”

Mollie shot him a look.

“*Very* rare occasions,” she emphasized as he laughed lightly beside her.

Mollie felt a warmth bubbling up inside of her as she stood beside the prince. He seemed more alive...more human when he was away from the castle – away from his work.

There was a domesticity in this town – a leniency to rules and regulations that Mollie felt the minute she entered. There was a warmth here that wasn’t present in Questershire or in the fortress of *Icedalar*. It almost seemed as if Micah was simply a rich man in a small town and not the heir of a powerful dictator with the power to determine the fates of everyone around them.

People were happy and respectful and there was a definite lack of judgment that radiated around the room. Although this place was certainly geared towards the rich – it wasn’t as apparent – as overt as it was in other places she had been to before.

“Le champagne pour la belle dame?”

Mollie looked up to see a guard with a kind face offering her a tall bubbly glass of rose tinted liquid.

Before she could accept she felt Micah’s grip on her waist tighten as he brushed the guard away.

“What’s wrong?” she asked turning to him.

He maintained the congenial smile on his face but Mollie sensed something stiff about him that he was expertly concealing.

“You won’t like the champagne here,” he said curtly guiding her towards a different part of the room. “It’s fermented differently than it is in the South – it’s less sweet.”

“I don’t mind,” Mollie said with a shrug. “How do you know what I like anyways?” she asked raising her eyebrow.

Micah chuckled gesturing for another guard to come forward with a large array of goblets in his hand.

“Maybe I’m trying to figure that out Mollie Mae,” he said giving her long dark curl a tug. “Try anyone you like,” he said gesturing to the guards silver platter held out in front of her. Mollie felt overwhelmed just looking at all of the different coloured drinks. They all smelled fruity – like juice and she frowned. She wasn’t a child.

Before she could complain Micah had already turned around and began speaking with another guest.

She sighed and waved the guard away. She wasn't feeling it.

Mollie walked over to Micah after some time. He was speaking closely with a woman by the chocolate fountain in the middle of the room.

The woman had that look on her face. The look that made Mollie want to roll her eyes so far up in her skull that it burned a hole through the other side.

The woman blushed as Micah laughed touching his goblet to hers in a friendly manner. The woman wore an expensive gown, a shimmering pearly colour that radiated off of her olive skin.

She brushed Micah affectionately against his shoulder as she left, her sweet perfume lingering in the air long after she had gone.

Mollie rolled her eyes as Micah's eyes flickered over to hers.

"She seems familiar with you," Mollie couldn't help but announce as she watched Micah smirk in amusement.

"Women remain dismally the same throughout the years."

Mollie scoffed. "If you didn't have so many you probably wouldn't be so disappointed."

She paused suddenly, turning her full attention onto him. The guests continued on, enjoying the festivities around them.

He twirled the goblet in his hand as he spoke to Mollie, the ring on his finger catching the dim lighting.

"That was Vivienne Coeur. She recently came into a large sum of money following her marriage to a wealthy Count. She thinks she has what it takes to bring some competition to the market. She'll go through any means necessary to expand this wealth. I have no doubt she made the trip here with the sole purpose of recruiting for her business."

She could see Micah's expression harden into something resembling disdain after the woman had left.

Mollie followed Micah's gaze where the woman was currently getting handsy with another man in an expensive maroon suit. The man seemed smitten.

"It's just a matter of watching how many people fall for her pretty lies and artificiality," he whispered into her ear.

Now Mollie was the one to smirk.

"It must be so boring for you. Being one step ahead of everybody else in the room."

Micah looked at her.

“I suppose it can make day to day activities rather... monotonous.”

“I’m sure,” Mollie said rather dryly.

“It’s mostly just a matter of waiting for everybody else to catch-up.”

She frowned as he brushed a finger against her cheek.

“How dreadfully infuriating.”

“You have no idea,” he breathed stepping even closer to her.

Mollie squirmed as he pressed against her. She suddenly wished she had taken that drink.

Mollie spent the rest of the evening by Micah’s side nodding and smiling when needed and allowing an important monarchical member or two to kiss her cheek every now and then. Micah was always by her side – guiding her from one clique to the next. She didn’t realize how exhausting it really was until he began to guide her out of the main foyer and into the cool open air. Their chalet was the furthest from the main atrium – down a cobbled street towards the mountains. She tightened her coat as he looped his arm snugly in her own, their breaths releasing in puffs of air as they strolled outside.

It was pleasant here – not overly cold but slightly chilly. It seemed appropriate considering the snowy landscape around them. People seemed more friendly here – more inviting and hospitable. Perhaps they took pride in knowing the prince of their monarchy was born on their land. People seemed more well off here – more so than in other places she had visited with the Lyons so far. She wondered if Micah had anything to do with it. She brushed these thoughts from her mind as she walked arm in arm with him.

He had gone quiet as the evening went on – his pale eyes flickering over to her more than usual. Mollie wondered if he was keeping tabs on her ever since her fiasco at his reception the other night. However it didn’t matter to Mollie, at the moment she was in a good mood and she had no intention of letting him spoil it.

“You know *all* those people?” she asked him as he walked casually beside her. To anyone else, they may have looked like any other couple from the North. Arm-in-arm on a breezy chilly night in late June.

“Not all of them,” Micah said with a shrug. “A lot of them are diplomats. They come here and like to claim they’ve been to the North.”

He smirked at her as they passed a simple more rustic chalet where an older couple sat outside – their hands intertwined as they swung back and forth on a simple swing outside their doors.

Mollie suddenly wondered about the outcome of her own future. Would she ever end up like that one day? Hand in hand with a lover?

She averted her gaze preferring to focus on her boots crunching against the snow.

“They don’t make the full trip up to *Icedalar*,” Micah explained as they sauntered forward. “The conditions there are too harsh. They’d rather be here in *Courchevel*, where it’s more...endurable.”

Mollie considered this and she looked out beyond her at the cosy landscape. The sound of children playing near the fields filled her ears and the tall streetlamps that bordered the perimeter of the pathway casted a warm glow over the picturesque landscape.

Although Mollie detested winter –she couldn’t deny the beauty of the prince’s hometown. It reminded Mollie of one of those snow globes they sold at those vintage shops in Chartery. The ones with the children playing in snowy fields as they sipped hot chocolate underneath a pretty snowy balcony. It painted winter as an extension of a utopic winter wonderland.

Micah paused as Mollie removed herself from his grasp to linger towards a hilltop of snow. Her hair ruffled in the breeze and her cheeks were pink from the chilly air but still she found herself drawn to the stunning landscape.

Mollie fell backwards into the soft fluffy snow feeling the dampness set into her back and hair. For once she didn’t mind it.

Micah was frozen still on the pathway, his lips parted in what Mollie figured was surprise.

“Mollie...” the sigh that followed was more than indicative of how he was feeling. “What are you doing?” He asked warily.

“What?” Mollie responded closing her eyes. “You’ve been here all your life and you’ve never jumped in a pile of snow?”

Mollie hadn’t felt free in a long time. Maybe it was the pleasant weather or the fact that she had been given the opportunity to do what she loved after being deprived of it for so long. Irregardless, she felt good—hopeful even. She felt...*alleviation*. It had been long, so long since she’d felt some recourse from her chronic pain and she wanted to soak it all in – even if she was in the presence of the man who had orchestrated the departure of her old life to this new foreign one.

Mollie opened her eyes to see the prince standing where he had been before -- a rather indiscernible expression on his handsome features.

She squealed when she felt something moist and wet press against her ear. She scrambled back, unintentionally nestling herself deeper into the snow as a furry solid mass of white caged her in. Theo's muzzle brushed against her cheek as she sniffed Mollie thoroughly. If it weren't for those bright blue eyes Mollie would have found her near indistinguishable amongst the snow. She hadn't seen the beast in weeks and she assumed it must have accompanied Micah on all of his duties. It was the first time in a while that the wolf hadn't growled or bared its teeth at her. It was uncharacteristically gentle and Mollie squirmed as it began to muzzle at her midriff, poking its snout dangerously close to her -

"Theodora."

Micah's voice pierced the air and the wolf immediately bounded towards him. Her tail was down and she lowered her head submissively as she perched dutifully beside her master.

Micah's lips tightened when Mollie made eye contact with him and he looked away swiftly tightening the cloak around his throat.

He looked up at the navy sky above them once before returning his gaze to her and motioning for her to follow.

"We're not children anymore Mollie Mae," he said softly.

Micah moved forward, his back stiff and his gloved hands straight at his side as his cloak brushed against the snowy roadside behind him. The wolf followed him, her heavy paws leaving prints in the snow.

It was in that moment that Mollie wondered if Micah even had a childhood to begin with. She swallowed thickly and ran to catch up with her company leaving a deep indent in the formerly untouched slowly hillside.

"Stand straighter Mollie."

Mollie resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She still felt the sharp sting on her bottom from when he playfully smacked her rear earlier after she tried to talk back to him. Although he chastised her, she knew he secretly enjoyed it. Micah liked a challenge.

For someone who was always so stiff and rigid – Micah had the hands of an agile natural artist as his fingers glided against the parchment.

"Lift your head higher," he said softly as Mollie locked her jaw and acquiesced.

She tucked a curl behind her ear as his eyes drifted to and from the page in front of him. She couldn't see what he had completed so far but Mollie could feel her legs cramping from holding her position for so long.

His soft strokes of pencil against paper came to a halt and Mollie held her breath as his eyes met hers. Mollie was always so struck by how *green* they were. They were framed by thick dark lashes that fluttered each time he blinked or turned his gaze elsewhere.

"Drop to your knees."

Mollie suddenly felt hot in spite of the pleasant room temperature around them. He had told her to perch on the edge of the bed that was elevated on a thin platform. It was a similar platform that Mollie had seen only once before – within the Kings chambers.

She took in a shaky breath as she lowered herself down – her yellow dress ballooning around her as her knees touched the wooden floor.

“Draw your legs up.”

His voice was so soft and languid that Mollie found herself abiding quite wilfully as his sharp eyes took in every movement of her lithe figure.

His soft pink lips curved into a smile as Mollie brought her knees forward, her yellow dress rising a little past her thighs.

“Spread your legs.”

Mollie’s eyes suddenly snapped to his and she glowered at him when she realized what he had been doing.

She quickly pushed herself to her feet as Micah laughed from his seat at the desk in front of her.

"How very mature of you," she muttered with a frown.

He lazily dropped his sketchbook on the table as Mollie walked toward him.

“So are you going to show me?” she asked raising an eyebrow. “I didn’t stand up there all night for no reason.”

“Why you want a reward?” he asked with a smile. “Because I’ll happily oblige,” he murmured. “I’m sure we can come to some sort of agreement.”

Mollie raised an eyebrow at him.

“I’m sorry,” she said with an air of tautness. “I thought it was improper for a common woman to negotiate with a prince.”

His lips twitched and Mollie knew she had him there.

“Trust me Mollie Mae, you are far from common.”

He watched her from the chair beside her as she stood behind the large desk sifting through his sketches.

His drawings were...incredibly detailed. More so than Mollie had first thought and she felt her face heat as she looked at the one he had just drawn of her. He had captured everything in such a small amount of time from her stray baby hairs that lined her forehead as well as the soft spray of freckles around her nose. Her lips were parted but she could see he even included the indented bite marks within her lower lip from the bad habit she had developed over the last couple months. She was constantly chewing it and the attention he paid to every minute detail of her body astonished her.

She flipped the pages over, her eyes wandering at what else he had captured with his pen and paper.

She inhaled sharply.

“Your drawings-“ Mollie whispered staring at them. There was something so haunting – so painfully melancholic yet so startlingly beautiful about them. It made her heart soar to her throat.

“En français ma chérie.”

She trembled as he wandered over behind her. His cool breath fanned the back of her neck as he brought his large pale hands to rest on her waist.

Mollie shuddered as he squeezed her waist affectionately.

A lot of them were of her. She could tell from the hair and the delicate features. The soft stroke of the pencil as it captured her thick curls as she leaned over the balcony in his room of Questershire – one of her sleeping peacefully on his bed, her chest bare, and her hair fanning the pillow – another of her scowling as she sat alone in the middle of the bathtub.

She swallowed thickly as he stood behind her—watching her flip through the delicate piles of parchment.

“Who’s this?” she whispered ignoring his previous request.

Micah’s hands stilled and Mollie held her breath as she held a familiar sketch in front of her eyes.

She had seen this photo before -- a similar one in his fathers chambers months ago. She had a feeling it was Micah who had drawn it and she had been right.

He was quiet for a long time but Mollie didn’t let down. She wouldn’t let him evade the question. Not this time around.

“It’s the same woman,” she murmured, tracing the outline as she faced away, her long hair billowing behind her. Why was she always facing away? Why didn’t he draw her face? “This is the same woman you have on your wall at the château.”

She felt him exhale behind her and she stood frozen for an immeasurable amount of time, before he carefully lifted the drawing from her numb fingers and held it tightly in his own.

“She’s my mother,” he murmured. His voice rumbled against her ear and Mollie looked up at him.

His eyes remain glued to the drawing, his expression placid.

“Who was she?” Mollie asked softly.

She could feel Micah’s hard chest behind her and she suddenly felt worried. What if he snapped at her? She was too close to him to escape unscathed if she did involuntarily tick him off.

“I don’t know.”

His tone was as desolate as his expression and she felt her throat go dry.

“These are just figments of my imagination. Of what I *think* she may have looked like. My father kept no photos of her. Or so he claims.”

Mollie wanted to open her mouth, but she quickly closed it.

Had he never stepped foot inside his father’s chambers?

Something didn’t add up and it bothered Mollie. The girl was convinced the beautiful blonde woman with those vibrant green eyes in Hartley’s chamber was Micah’s mother. She had been so sure. Had she made a mistake?

No. She couldn’t have. Micah was a spitting image of that woman.

“I like to think she was kind,” he murmured brushing his fingers over the sketched figure. “Fierce but determined. Maybe even a little stubborn – but kind. Always kind.”

Mollie felt irrational tears reach her eyes and she tried to blink them away as Micah continued his musings.

“Sometimes I wonder if she preferred the warmth of summer? Or if she enjoyed the chill of winter? I wonder if she liked to read? Or if she was adventurous? Was she tall or petite? Did she follow orders? Or did she fight for what she believed in? I wonder if she ever got her freedom.”

Mollie could feel her breathing begin to falter and she stiffened in Micah’s arms.

“I like to think she escaped,” he murmured nuzzling Mollie’s ear. “I like to think she left my father in the dust with all his wealth-- his power--his control and never returned.”

Mollie didn’t know why she felt so emotional. She felt in this moment as if she were responsible for Micah. She remembered what he had told her about his father. How his father would stare into his eyes as he beat him hard and cruel. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps Hartley too loved once. Maybe that is what it had reduced him to. Perhaps that is what turned his heart to stone. Maybe Micah feared the same would happen to him.

Mollie could barely keep her voice from trembling as she spoke.

“She’s free now Micah. That’s all that matters.”

Mollie couldn’t even imagine it. Having to grow up pretending that someone you never met and never knew was your mother. She couldn’t begin to fathom it. It was too disturbing – so utterly warped it made her stomach clench.

No wonder Micah had no real interest in the monarchy. Porphyria was nothing to him and his entire life from the very moment he was born, was simply a ploy to cover up for his own father’s wrongdoings. Mollie wondered if Micah was even planned in the first place.

“*Libérer,*” he murmured against the soft skin of her neck.

Mollie stood still as he kissed his way down her neck, his soft lips brushing downwards till it reached her collarbone.

She felt her breath leave her lungs as he suddenly turned her around so she was facing him.

His eyes were bright and glowing in the dimly lit room and she couldn't help but brush her fingers beneath them.

"Your eyes," she murmured.

"Tes yeux," he responded never breaking eye contact with her.

Her fingers moved silently inching downward till it traced the sharp defined shape of his nose.

"Nose," she whispered.

"Nez."

She slid her fingers down across his flushed cheek warming the skin with her heated palm.

"Lips."

"Bouche."

She shuddered when he leaned in to press his lips against hers.

She stumbled backwards into the vast wooden table in the room, sending the papers and crayons crashing onto the floor. Micah couldn't be bothered by it and she whimpered as he pressed himself against her.

Her back hit the table hard and she moaned as his tongue moulded against hers. She could hear him groan in response as his fingers rose delicately to cup her face in his palms.

"Baiser," he breathed into her mouth as he lifted her into his arms and she fluidly wrapped her legs around his waist.

God Mollie hated herself in that moment. How easy it was for her to just melt back into his arms after his cruelty towards her the other night.

But he had made it up to her hadn't he? He'd let her do something that she loved. He had given her a piece of home in a place that was so far from it.

Maybe she really was a concubine. The way her panties flooded and her pussy ached for him...she certainly felt so. She was so sensitive tonight to every slight brush and caress of his fingers against her flesh. His cologne seemed extra strong today and his aura that much more alluring.

Her libido ran through the roof.

"Mmm," she hummed as he flattened her against the large French pane windows that overlooked the snowy landscape.

She was panting heavily as he held her jaw and sucked her bottom lip hard. His tongue toyed with hers as his grip only tightened further.

Mollie was dizzy as he continued his passionate display of affection -- his tongue exploring every part of her mouth it could reach.

She was crowded against the chilly window, completely immobilized against it by his incredibly dominating stature.

Mollie's chest openly heaved between the two of them as he broke away from her lips to suck her pulse point.

Mollie watched as he lowered his chin to watch her rapidly rising and falling cleavage as she struggled to find leverage upon the elevated platform.

Mollie froze as he gave the necklace around her neck a sharp pull before sliding his chilly fingers down until it pulled at the fabric of her dress. Mollie's hemline dipped as his finger slid the fabric down over the curve of her breast.

The moonlight through the window washed over their figures as the prince stood silently panting in front of her as he stared down at her nipple -- stiff and aching in the chilly air.

Mollie closed her eyes, as she clutched at the protruding wall behind her, sinking her nails into the hard wood.

Her breasts had been tender since that morning and she shuddered as he brushed his fingers against them. His touch was so light...as delicate as it could be-- yet it still elicited such an immense response from the girl.

She bit her lip hard as he tested the weight of it in his palm -- gently squeezing the full flesh. His exploration of her body was so slow and calculated-- she could feel the wetness between her thighs begin to increase.

Her stimulation had never been so instinctual before and she gasped as he pulled the fabric down in its entirety, baring both her breasts to the cold room.

Mollie could see his attention was completely enraptured by the visual in front of him and she tensed as he brought his lips toward her left breast, brushing his lips against her hypersensitive flesh.

"Sein," he murmured before he enveloped her aching nipple between his soft lips.

Mollie whimpered as he sucked hard on her flesh. Her fingers found their way into his thick hair tugging sharply as his teeth grazed her nipple, the sensation shooting straight to her core.

She nearly choked when she felt his fingers brush her dampened slit between her thighs.

“Déjà prête pour moi,” he said with a chuckle, his nose brushing her bare breast.

“Micah,” she moaned as he squeezed her other breast in his palm.

“Patience ma chérie,” he murmured.

She squirmed as he ghosted his lips down her navel till it brushed against the top of the coveted space between her thighs.

“Mmmph,” she gasped, her bare back resting against the cold glass behind her. The frost was a swift relief to her blazing skin as she felt Micah’s tongue slide cool and wet against her slit.

Mollie felt her vision stir out of focus as he lowered his head to grant himself better access to her most sensitive area. She was sweaty and shaking as her legs sprawled outward to curl around him.

He sucked her clit into his mouth as Mollie cried out into her shoulder. She felt so hopelessly blissful -- his tongue doing something utterly exquisite to her as he reached upward to squeeze a breast in his palm.

She knotted her hands in his thick unruly hair as he continued to taste her without any real aim or drive. It was as if he was sampling every surface of her he encountered-- lazily lapping once or twice before moving somewhere else in search of something equally succulent.

“I’m going to- I can’t,” Mollie choked as she slammed her hands against the sharp ledge of the window. Her eyes rolled towards the ceiling as her legs tightened around him. His cold hands had tightened around the flesh of her thighs to nudge them open even farther as he continued driving his tongue in and out of her dripping canal.

Mollie came hard in his mouth, screaming her pleasure and disrupting the eerie silence that was so reminiscent of the North.

She felt every fibre of strength leave her body as she sunk weakly against the window, her sweaty palms leaving a trek of condensation against the frosty glass. Mollie whimpered as he continued to caress her swollen pussy with his tongue even after the throbbing had long since passed.

Mollie whined shamelessly as cold fingers dipped into her slit to accumulate the last remnants of wetness leaking from her entrance.

“I..I won’t be gentle,” he managed between heavy breaths.

Mollie opened her eyes to see the head of the prince resting in the space between her breasts as he dropped his trousers to the floor, his body as bare as hers.

“I...won’t be able to,” he managed to say against the skin of her chest.

Mollie simply mewled forcing her legs to tighten around his hips as he guided his rock hard cock towards her entrance.

Mollie couldn't manage even a single word before the prince slammed himself into her slick warmth with a single thrust. Mollie clawed her fingers against his hard forearms as he brushed her hair to one shoulder only to tighten his grip on her waist and push into her with all of his might. Mollie could feel his entire body jerk at the sensation of his cold thick length being fully engulfed by her searing hot swollen lower lips.

"Ma fille parfaite," he groaned as he pounded into her, the glass window pane shaking with each thrust against her body. The sensations penetrated through Mollie like a melting glacier, dripping over her heated flesh and solidifying her internal organs into a sheen of thick ice. Mollie could feel the taste of blood in her mouth as she bit down hard on her lip to stifle the scream in her throat.

Mollie could hear Micah's soft grunts as he continued plowing his hips into hers, ignoring the way she bit her nails into his shoulder blade as he buried his face in the crook of her neck. His scent was everywhere as he filled her up completely -- his swollen shaft moving forwards and backwards so her back rubbed slickly against the frigid glass windowpane. Her hips dragged against his as he planted gentle kisses against her warm neck.

Mollie couldn't hold back any longer. Not for another second and she whined helplessly as her body shook from the force of his lovemaking -- her spine straightening and her legs twisting ruthlessly around his narrow hips as she cried out in utter ecstasy. He was murmuring something to her -- something Mollie couldn't make out as her sense of sound was completely consumed by the rush of blood flowing through her ears.

Mollie could feel his pulsating cock within her -- nestled as deep as it could possibly go as the prince let out a low groan, thin spurts of rosy white liquid filling her as she collapsed against the window.

"Oh Micah," she mewled clutching his soft curls in her fingers as she crushed him to her chest. She was enveloped in his scent, the feel of him around her, as her vision was filled with his dark chestnut locks and the feeling of his cool lips against her neck.

She had no strength to even lift herself up as she flopped against the ice-cold glass, her own curls damp against her neck as Micah supported her in his arms. His cock pulled out from within her heated canal with a soft *shlick* as he lifted her body in his arms and laid her gently on the massive bed. He sealed his lips against hers once more, the taste of her juices still present on his soft lips.

Mollie was blinking back the sleep that threatened to pull her under as she felt his lips press against her feverish forehead.

"Dormiez bien mon amour," he whispered as she felt his dark curl brush the edge of her jaw.

She could feel him moving away from her and before she could process her actions she clutched his hand tighter in hers, pulling him down next to her.

Mollie stirred -- her forehead against his chest as she tried in vain to fight the darkness that was creeping into her vision. It was a losing battle and she fell deep, the sounds of Micah's warm whispers and hand entwined with hers lulling her into a deep but gentle slumber.

Mollie woke up to a warm light on her face as she groaned into the pillow. She was painfully sore, all over her body as she stretched wincing at the sharp pain.

“She’s finally awake.”

The soft murmur beside her stirred her into consciousness as she brushed her unruly curls out of her eyes. She rolled over to face him and blushed.

He wore a soft linen white shirt unbuttoned down the front to expose his pale torso. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows and in his hands were rolls of foreign documents that he lazily flipped through.

He was never shirtless for long and Mollie figured it was to conceal the scars that marred the skin on his back. She felt them every time he made love to her, the indents that were etched into his skin for the rest of his life.

He had a couple purple bruises on his collarbone that she could see making her cheeks flame even more. She must not have been so gentle herself either.

“Tea?”

He handed her a cup of steaming liquid and she hesitated as she pushed herself to her knees to take the delicate china from his hands.

She looked at him suspiciously as he turned back to his work, his sharp eyes zeroing in on the papers in front of him.

It was snowing outside as usual, the falling snow painting shadows of different shapes over the the bottom half of the enormous chalet window they were staying in. Mollie liked how warm it was in here, how protected it was from the elements as oppose to the constant chill that reached her bones back in the fortress of *Icedalar*. It was going to be so difficult to return.

The tea was hot and fruity, soothing her aching bones with each sip that she took.

“You were rather chatty last night,” he said off-handily signing a document before nestling through the pile on his lap. “I thought I’d have to silence you myself somehow,” he added with a smirk.

She ignored him choosing to shift her eyes over to the papers in front of him.

“What are those for?” she asked casually eyeing the documents in front of him.

“Work.”

His tone was hard but not dismissive. He seemed to be in a good mood, she wondered if he was feeling conversational today.

“What language is that?” she asked suddenly. Her gaze was drawn to what appeared to be a map, along with various dotted locations around the crinkled parchment.

“Latin,” Micah responded brushing his fingers over the letters.

“You speak it too?” she asked incredulously. She couldn’t help the awe that had seeped into her voice. At that moment, she realized how little she really knew about Micah – at least in terms of his everyday habits and activities.

He laughed and shook his head quickly.

“No Mollie Mae,” he said with a smile. “I don’t speak Latin.”

She waited expectantly as he signed the bottom of another page quickly before shifting it to the bottom of the pile.

“Many of the maps that were hand-drawn from earlier rulers wrote about their discoveries in Latin. That way if it ever fell into the wrong hands, an academic would be required to translate the information for them. Otherwise, it would be useless to them.”

He explained quietly showing Mollie another handwritten page full of arrows and circles and foreign words.

“Latin isn’t spoken anymore. It’s written and transcribed. It was a way for academics to preserve their knowledge and keep it uncorrupted from the common English language.”

“To keep things secret,” Mollie finished.

“Precisely,” he said.

“So you studied it? You can transcribe it?”

Micah shrugged.

“I know the basics. Rowan is much more competent in the language than I am.”

Mollie watched as he flipped through more documents, his sharp eyes scanning the information at a surprisingly fast pace.

“*Devonis*,” she said suddenly halting the prince’s movements before he could flip the parchment over.

Micah raised an eyebrow as she took the document from his hands and tried to read the information. He didn’t stop her but she could see the amusement in his features.

It was all in French and she struggled to understand the words catching only bits and phrases as she brought the letters closer to her face.

“Oil,” she questioned. “Why are they exchanging oil with you?”

Micah took the paper from her hands and placed it back into his pile of paperwork. He had a smirk on his face as he observed her.

“Actually,” he said. “We are exchanging oil with *them*.”

Mollie frowned.

“Why? I thought the Ophians were sitting on mountains of oil.” She knew *Devonis* were strong economical partners of the Ophians who had a plethora of oil beneath their land. It seemed odd for them to want oil from the Lyons when they had so much themselves.

Micah gave her a look.

“The Ophians have heavy fuel oils beneath their land. The heaviest grade. We’re talking grades four, five, six and even traces of heavy marine fuels. Heavily viscous and minimally volatile. But also the most toxic.”

Mollie listened to him closely as he twirled a lock of her hair between his fingers.

“Here,” he said gesturing to the walls around him. “We have an abundance of light and medium oils which is a lot more practical. It’s quite volatile and evaporates quickly – within a few days even – and with the evaporation goes the high toxicity.”

Mollie placed her empty tea cup next to the table and scrambled forward, her mind itching to hear more about his work.

“The colour of the oil is a good reflection of its grade,” Micah explained. “The light golden yellow is the one we find here in these lands and is much easier to recover. The Ophian Empire is full of heavy oil --the more difficult grade to extract. It’s often coined midnight oil based on how black and heavy the liquid is.”

He smiled at her as he released her curl from his fingers.

“But just because it’s less practical doesn’t mean it’s not useful. Heavy grade oil from Ophian land can be used to sail a ship from Questershire all the way to the West there and back twice over.”

Mollie looked at him thoughtfully as he spoke to her. She wondered...

“How far is *Devonis* from the Ophian Empire?”

Now Micah was the one to look at her. He had a bemused expression on his face.

“Why do you ask?”

“I met someone from the White Ball a couple months ago who was from *Devonis*. It’s in the East I’ve heard.”

Mollie didn’t look at him as she spoke. Instead she kept her eyes glued to the aged parchment on his lap. In spite of her elusivity, she knew Micah wasn’t stupid – and he certainly wasn’t

the type to beat around the bush. She could see his eyes harden ever so slightly even though his tone remained conversational.

“Ah, Lady Tamzin?” Micah said with a crooked smile. “She’s an old friend of the family. Her family has done business with our family for years. Indeed, her city rests on the border of Ophian land.”

“I didn’t specifically ask about her,” Mollie sniffed. She navigated her gaze elsewhere as Micah chuckled darkly.

“You didn’t have to.”

Mollie paused for a moment, a thought suddenly clicking into place.

“Is that why you’re marrying her?”

Micah went quiet beside her and she hesitated as she tried to read him. His face was now carefully stoic.

“She’s from *Devonis*, the city directly outside the Ophian Empire on the Eastern peninsula. Her city is independent but on good terms with the Ophians. If you marry her...it would be much easier to negotiate with them wouldn’t it?”

Mollie didn’t mention that their marriage would also involve Lady Tamzin’s territory falling under Lyon jurisdiction. No wonder Hartley was pushing Micah so hard. He could hit two birds with one stone. Not only would he acquire more land, he would solidify land in the East making it much easier to interact with the Ophians. Mollie’s blood was boiling just thinking about the conniving mind of the King.

Mollie shifted in front of him as Micah sat stony faced in front of her.

“I think you’re lying,” she whispered staring at him. “There’s oil here too. Lots of it. I’ve heard them working at night out in the snow deserts. No one would be working that hard for easy low grade oil as you put it.”

“I’m not lying about anything,” Micah said coldly. The shift in his demeanour was instantaneous and Mollie felt her palms begin to sweat.

She tensed, unwilling to back down now.

“I think you’re trading oil for iridium.”

She could see Micah stiffen in front of her. His jaw locked.

“But they keep refusing.” She continued to grill him, unperturbed. “Do you think the Ophians are stupid enough to agree to that exchange? They could use the iridium they *already* have to make their *own* oil.”

Micah had that dead empty expression on his face as he regarded her. She felt her stomach clench.

“Both are finite materials Mollie Mae. In my opinion, it would be more foolish to deplete something as precious as iridium for something as accessible as oil.... when it *itself* could be used to make something of greater value.”

“Is that why you didn’t want to come here?” she asked suddenly piecing bits of information together. “Is that why James didn’t want you here? Because as much as you downplay the prosperity of the North – everyone secretly wants it for themselves. And you knew coming here would entail having to follow through with your fathers orders.” Mollie felt her blood run cold when she thought about the implications of his actions.

She was overstepping her boundaries – she could see by the way Micah’s jaw clenched and the way his face began to flush.

“That’s why you didn’t want to come. That’s why you wanted to take the longer route here through the South.” Mollie was openly staring at him now. “But you figured out something – you figured out how to get around it.” Mollie suddenly felt sick and she backed away from him. “What do you have planned Micah?” she shot out. Her voice had a tremor run through it and the look on his face made Mollie want to run for the snowy hills.

Mollie watched him as he closed his eyes for a brief moment, his head resting back against the opulent headboard.

She shifted nervously. She felt feverish – hot and feverish. When his eyes suddenly opened -- his green irises unsettlingly bright, Mollie thought she might hurl right then and there.

“You think you have it all figured out don’t you?”

The soft lilt in his tone scared her more than his iciness and she froze as he leaned in towards her.

“That’s why you brought me here,” she whispered. “You need me for something. Something to get you out of the situation you’re in right now.”

God. She had been such a fool. She had been taken up with him – pouring her efforts into the wrong things. This was so much more than Micah wanting to get his freedom. This was about something bigger altogether.

“You can’t use me to further your own agenda Micah,” she said bitterly. “I..I won’t allow it.”

When Micah regarded her now – his expression teetered on the edges of cynicism and amusement.

“Well it’s a little late for that isn’t it,” he whispered giving her cheek a caress. He pressed her harder than he usually did and Mollie gasped at the sudden onset of pressure.

Mollie didn’t know how they had gotten here.

The morning had begun so pleasantly – almost domestically. But before she knew it – they were back at each other’s throats again, their knives out and ready.

“You know what I love about you Mollie?” he whispered bringing his cold hand down to her neck.

Mollie swallowed thickly. She didn’t like the iciness that radiated off of him nor the grinding tone his voice had acquired.

His fingers brushed the edge of her nipple, the flesh stiffening at the touch and she tensed.

In her sudden determination to interrogate the prince – she had completely forgotten about the fact that she was fully naked in front of him.

He was drawing it out – toying with her the way he did when she angered him.

Her breasts were sore – so sore from his insatiable touch the night before and she whimpered in pain as he pulled her nipple hard. It was as if –somehow- he knew of her state of hypersensitivity and was purposefully testing her tolerance to the pain.

“Hm?” he prompted squeezing the hard bud between his pale fingers.

“No,” she whipped out glaring openly at him.

He smiled in response showing off his deep dimples as he brought her head forward to rest against his shoulder.

“Your intransigence,” he said softly. Mollie cried out in pain as he gave her a nipple a sharp pull before bringing his hands to knot between the strands of her thick hair.

“Micah you’re hurting me,” she wailed pushing against him.

“Am I?” he said softly brushing his lips against her ear. “And here I was thinking the pain would be as alluring for you as it is for me.”

He sighed as if in heavy disappointment as he let her go.

She scrambled backwards glaring at him as she lifted the sheet to cover her breasts.

In that moment all she could see in Micah was the king. That dark smile, that false taunting tone of his voice. It made Mollie’s knuckles flex in anger.

“You’re too scared of him,” she whispered. "You're too scared to do the right thing."

Mollie stared hatefully at Micah as he buttoned up his dress shirt the loose smile on his face washing off like rain on a windshield.

A few stray tears had spilled down Mollie’s cheek as she perched on the end of the massive bed, her knees digging into the satin sheets.

Micah didn’t seem affected by her words at first – rather his expression had taken on something glassy and her lip trembled.

He didn't respond, he didn't even fully react to her. Rather he turned as if in slow motion and deftly pushed his fingers between Mollie's knees to swipe at her sore cunt.

She was completely thrown off by his movement, not even anticipating the motion in the slightest.

Micah's cold fingers pressed viciously against her heat sending a shockwave through her body. She cried out as he shoved three fingers into her at once.

"Stop it," she whimpered swiping at his hand. The pain was instant and she cried out.

His fingers curled within her tight canal. It felt horribly invasive and Mollie moaned in pain. He wasn't doing this for her pleasure.

She exhaled heavily as he looked blankly at her before removing his fingers from between her thighs and curling them around her throat, his fingers were dry and she felt more tears drop from her lids.

"The next time you air out speculations about my character," he whispered his breath fanning her ear. "I'll cut out your tongue and feed it to my wolf. Am I clear?"

She bit her lip hard as Micah tightened his hold on her throat.

"I said, am I clear?"

"Yes," Mollie snapped.

"Good girl," he murmured.

Mollie knew this was somewhat of a gentle warning especially when it came to Micah. This was him giving her a sign that she was venturing too far over her boundaries with her boldness and she retracted. She had to. Micah didn't bluff, not when it came to his punishments.

She stayed like that on the bed for some time, her lip trembling and her lashes wet with unshed tears as Micah went about his routine, studiously ignoring her. She knew she had hit a nerve when he reacted this way. She looked up when Micah returned, a rich dark blue waistcoat around his toned torso as he reached for his winter coat.

"Get dressed Mollie Mae or I'll happily do it for you. We have a long day ahead of us."

Chapter End Notes

Translations in Order:

*How unfortunate

Chapter 32: Germanium

Chapter Summary

Mollie comes to terms with her feelings for the Winter Prince. The turmoil in Icedalar appears to extend far beyond the borders of the Lyon empire. Mollie finds herself ensnared once again.

Chapter Notes

*Trigger warning: There are some frightening scenes in this chapter. Please be aware.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Mollie was in a foul mood.

Micah had said little to her since the morning and she had followed suit, only responding with one syllable answers when questioned.

She felt tired in spite of sleeping in that morning and she had no appetite.

He was gentlemanly and exceedingly charming with the crowds that swarmed them as he ushered Mollie towards the carriage they had arrived in the night before. It was a snowless early afternoon with hints of sunlight penetrating through the hazy white atmosphere.

She looked at him in the small compartment of the carriage as they prepared to return to *Icedalar*.

He frowned at her and she happily reciprocated the icy exchange.

They didn't say a word to each other.

“Stop the carriage.”

Micah's husky voice pierced the deafening silence and Mollie felt her blood run cold. Her eyes flickered to the window where an expanse of white flooded the entire thin pane of wood. She felt her insides clench.

“Step out.”

Mollie looked at him. She felt a fear begin to bubble in her belly as his sharp tone sent a tremor down her spine. His eyes were glued to the window but she knew he was addressing her.

They were no where near the fortress yet, they couldn't be. From the looks of it they appeared to be quite frankly in the middle of... nowhere.

Silently, Mollie followed through tightening her thick cloak around her as she slid through the open door. Her legs sunk knee deep into thick snow.

It wasn't snowing. In fact, there seemed to be not even the faintest tremor of movement in the environment.

Everything was still, pristine and untouched. It must have been daytime – Mollie was sure of it but the sun was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps she was wrong and it was nighttime? She squinted into the distance but couldn't see a moon catch her vision either. She felt as if time itself had frozen still and she cringed.

Micah seemed to glide through the snow as he brushed past her, the resistance of the heavy snow seemingly weightless to him.

Micah had moved several steps ahead of her in the snow, his footsteps the only recognizable change amongst the eerily constant landscape.

There wasn't a wind or a drop of snow that fell from the sky. Only thick grey sky and blinding white covered ground beneath Mollie's feet.

"I've made my choice Mollie."

The first thing Mollie noticed was that he had addressed her formally, forgoing any sort of endearment. She didn't know why – but this put her even more on edge.

Micah turned his vibrant gaze to her and she shivered.

"My coronation ceremony is on the second last day of this month. I must marry before then to acquire full autonomy over my rights as prince and CEO of the Lyon monarchy."

Mollie stared at him.

He suddenly came closer to her, his strides too quick and too long for her to observe.

He placed his gloved hands on her concealed shoulders and squeezed tightly as he stared deep into her eyes.

Mollie couldn't see an ounce of warmth within them -- only that gaping void of emptiness that had quickly become a permanent part of the persona of the Winter Prince.

"I want you to be there – beside me."

He seemed to be struggling to put the words together and Mollie suddenly felt her lips go numb.

Mollie shook her head. Her throat felt thick and heavy.

"I don't understand," she whispered.

Micah hesitated.

His grip tightened on her shoulders and Mollie watched him confusedly as he turned his gaze away from her.

"Full acquisition into my position warrants that I take a wife of my own." His soft murmur slid through barely moving lips and Mollie had to strain to hear him. "Only then, can I truly follow through with the position I have been granted."

His words didn't hold the tenderness one would normally possess saying something so moving and Mollie stiffened. She didn't expect it to, but...she didn't expect this from him either.

Her silence seemed to put him on edge and Mollie heard him exhale sharply. His tone went flat.

"You, Mollie." he responded. "I want it to be you."

Mollie couldn't help the shock that jolted through her system.

Wait.

Her lip was trembling, everything was hazy. Why did she feel so dizzy?"

"Mollie?"

Micah's voice was suddenly laced with concern and Mollie barely registered herself sinking into the snow as Micah's strong arms slowed her pace so she fell gradually instead of immediately.

The cold air suddenly felt like acid down her throat and the girl struggled to regain a natural rhythm to her steady intake of breaths as Micah brushed his gloved hand over her forehead.

"You're burning up," he murmured, his voice as sharp as brittle frost.

Mollie couldn't separate her emotions from what he had just told her. He spoke so nonchalantly - as if marriage were nothing more than another menial task on his long list of royal duties.

"You can't...you can't marry me," she whispered.

The entire lower half of her body was stuck deep in the snow but Mollie couldn't care less. Micah was kneeling in front of her, his cloak draped gracefully behind him casting the only

dark foliage amongst the white landscape.

“You can’t,” she said more forcefully as he stared expressionlessly back at her. “You’re betrothed to someone else – I – I’m not – you have rules – its forbidden!”

Mollie was simply ranting at this point but she could see the unmistakable defiance in Micah’s eyes. He meant what he had said.

His expression was gentler now, almost paternal the way he brushed her jaw and she felt her eyes begin to brim with tears.

How could he do this to her? Play with her emotions in such gruesome tantalizing ways. It was only hours ago that he threatened to maim her, now he wanted to make her his wife? No.

She smacked his hand away from her.

She inflicted as much hatred as she could with the stare she directed at the prince.

“I’m not a part of your world Micah. I don’t belong here. I never did!” Mollie could feel the tears begin to spill from the corners of her eyes as her emotions began to bubble to the surface. “I can’t do this. I have my *own* life to live, I want my *own* freedom just as much as you do.”

“And what freedom is that?” Micah whipped out, his brows furrowing. “What life do you want to pursue?”

His response was so immediate she felt herself recoil.

“You were taken away from that life the moment the Insurgency recruited you. That was no fault of mine.”

Mollie looked away. She didn’t have a response for him. She wanted to look at anything else but the man kneeling in front of her.

“None of us will ever really be free Mollie,” he murmured. “You’re a smart girl, you know this.”

His last comment grated her and she pushed him back hard. He didn’t move an inch.

“Maybe you think that!” she snapped. “But I won’t stop fighting for it. I’m not like *you*.”

She could feel her breaths begin to spill out of her as she kneeled panting in front of him. The ends of her curls were wet from the snow and she could feel icicles forming along the tips.

“I can’t marry you Micah...we...we can’t do this.”

Micah sighed running a hand through his tousled curls. He looked up at her almost innocently, his bright green eyes shimmering with some ambiguous flicker of emotion.

“Do we have to pretend that you have a choice?”

“Look at us,” she yelled swiping her freezing hands against her cheeks to wipe away the dampness. “We can’t go a single day without fighting. This...This isn’t a relationship. Not with the way you treat me...not with the things you've done to me.”

Her voice broke on the last word and it only served to infuriate her further as Micah cocked his head to one side.

She wanted him to shout back at her. She wanted him to do something – feel the same way she felt at this moment. His looked of puzzlement irked her. It made her livid.

Could he not see? Did he see nothing wrong between them? Did he not see the wrong in his treatment towards her in the past?

She loathed how genuinely confused he looked.

“I hate you,” she broke out. “I fucking hate you.”

His lips pursed after that and Mollie swallowed the sob that was rising in her throat.

The pale fingers that swiped her jaw came to an untimely halt near her chin and she shut her eyes tightly, letting the tears fall freely down her face.

When she opened her eyes next Micah looked strangely disconnected. He was watching her - his eyes glued to her own -- but his mind was elsewhere, somewhere within the deep recesses of his mind.

Then quite suddenly he gripped her tightly his knees sinking deeper into the snow as he curled his fingers around her skinny shoulders.

He grabbed her, more roughly than she had expected and she gasped as he pulled free his ornate dagger from its sheathed location in his belt and pressed the handle into her shaking fingers.

“Do it then,” he whipped out. His voice was husky -- with emotion or anger Mollie couldn’t quite tell. “Free yourself of me, and finish what you started. *Fight* back.”

The dagger felt like a one hundred pound weight in her grasp and Mollie shook with emotion as she knelt in front of the youngest prince of the monarchy – his dagger in her grasp with the pointed end facing his heart.

"If you hate me as much as you claim, then prove it to me...to both of us."

The anger in her stomach dissipated immediately only to be replaced with utter bewilderment and a state of crippling alienation.

Micah’s expression was impassive, those devastatingly handsome features on full display amidst the still silent ambiance. His eyes bore into hers – those green irises the only splash of colour amongst the alabaster backdrop like a stroke of ink on a blank canvas.

He pulled her closer gently and she heaved with sobs as she brandished the dagger tightly in her hand and let him guide it towards his chest. His fingers curled around her own, his pale skin against her own complexion like snow on a mountain as he pressed the pointed edge of the weapon against his expensive shirt, the sharpness sinking through the fabric.

“Micah,” she cried helplessly as his grip tightened even further.

She heard him inhale sharply and she began to shake with sobs as she saw the first remnants of blood stain the blade and soak into his white shirt.

She could do it now. She could end it. Free herself of him forever.

Isn't that what she had desired for so long?

The object quivered in her hand and she felt her body shake with tremors as she prepared to drill it deep into his flesh.

His cold pale hand was wrapped around her own as he began to sink it further and Mollie began to openly wail.

Why did she feel a pain in her heart as she watched the blade sink deeper into the man in front of her. She should feel elation. She should have tears of joy running down her cheeks. She shouldn't feel the way she felt now.

In an instant, the reality of her situation dawned on her and Mollie recoiled.

“No! STOP.” She screamed. She watched Micah sink his teeth into his lower lip as the blade inched even farther into him, the tip sinking into pale flesh. His hand was as shaky as hers but he kept her fingers tight around the gem encrusted hilt.

Mollie was screaming. She could hear it around her in the distance. A violent debilitating wail that echoed and screamed back at her from all around.

With a broken sob she wrenched her fingers free from his grasp and flung the vile object from her hand and collapsed into the snow.

She broke down helplessly as the prince kneeled silently in front of her, a thin trickle of blood oozing from the wound on his chest.

Why. Why couldn't she do it.

She was given an opportunity. He had given her a chance at her freedom. A chance to pursue her *own* freedom. She would have been hailed a hero by the Insurgency. She'd have been the one and only girl from hundreds to have succeeded in a task that had gone unfulfilled for decades.

And yet...she couldn't do it. She refused to do it.

Micah's green eyes quivered as he bent down to her level where she sobbed helplessly into the ground. Her abdomen was heaving and her cheeks were numb from the cold. The dagger

lay beside them, staining the snow a deep crimson.

She wasn't sure how long she sat in the middle of the frozen wasteland, her knees digging into the deep wet snow as she wailed into the silent air.

Micah brought his palms – somehow the same temperature as the frigid snow- against her wet cheeks, his expression vacant and his eyes as solid as a block of ice.

“This is why we do not love Mollie,” he whispered as she bawled shamelessly in front of him. “Love is a detritus that infiltrates and sequesters our strength. Love is a disease that feeds off of us like a parasite at our flesh. It sequesters every morsel of our energy, dampens every inkling of our willpower and blinds every facet of our sharp intellect so it can make weaklings of us all.”

Mollie shook her head fruitlessly from side to side. Her vision was blurred from her tears but she could make out the prince in front of her, his expression unchanged.

“I don't...I don't love you.”

Her voice came raspy and garbled as she sucked in shaky breaths.

Micah smiled inching her forehead closer so it brushed his own.

She cried softly as he inhaled her scent, brushing his nose against hers.

The prince nodded slowly, his thumbs swiping the fresh tears that fell from the corner of her eyes.

“I know what it feels like Mollie,” he whispered his pink lips caressing her tear stained cheeks. “I know what it feels like to harbour a hate so deep it gnaws at you, clawing its way through every layer of your flesh from the inside out.”

Mollie whimpered as he tucked her damp curls behind her ears.

“I can share that pain with you. I can understand what it feels like to carry that pain like no one else in this world can.”

She stared at him as the tears fell silently down her face.

“I may be a perfect prince but I'm far from a perfect man.”

Her gaze diverted to the blade that lay several metres away from them, the blood sinking deep into the blanket of layers that lay beneath the snow.

“Listen.”

Micah stopped and closed his eyes for a moment. “It was never my choice...nor my intention to see you suffer.” He spoke in a forced even voice. “But regardless of what you think, or how you feel about me, I *care* about you Mollie. I've tried not to, since the first day I saw

you I tried not to.” His fingers had curled into fists at this point and Mollie sat frozen as the cold unyielding prince of the North finally shed his impenetrable barrier. “But I *do* care.”

His voice broke after this and Mollie watched in silence as Micah exhaled slowly, his cheeks flushing a deep pink. “I know I can,” he hesitated smoothing his hands on his lap and resting it lightly on her own. “I know that I’m... *capable* of it.” His voice was barely a whisper now and Mollie had to lean in just to decipher what he was saying. “I know I have it in me to. I’m not like my father...”

His voice trailed off completely after this and Mollie shuddered as he withdrew his hands from hers.

Shakily, Mollie pushed herself up and off the ground. Everything from her waist down was soaked and her cheeks were numb from the tears that had left an icy sheen across her tender flesh.

She looked down at the prince whose knees were still deep in the snow. White specks of snowflakes dotted his dark curls and he was still and unmoving, his head still turned downwards at his hands.

She followed the thin trickle of blood that left a vivid trail down his pale chest with her eyes.

“Then prove it.”

The fierceness in her voice surprised her.

Her thick hair lay heavy on her shoulders as she made her way back to the carriage, letting the cold sting of winter peel at the dampness on her cheeks.

She didn’t look back.

“Come again Rowan?”

Jelena nervously sipped her water as her husband sat stiff and frustrated beside her. Hartley was sitting at the head of the table, little Nina on his lap as he observed his middle son with a cold blank stare.

Rowan remained quite placid in spite of the fierce gaze directed at him from the people seated around the room. It was an intimate dinner with immediate family only. The empty chair at the end seemed like an elephant in the room and Jelena was waiting for the moment someone would address it. She just hoped she’d be gone before that happened.

“The results were inconclusive. I repeated the trials multiple times to account for any statistical errors that may have occurred. There also doesn’t appear to be any further errors affiliated with systematic deviations in the norm and I accounted for any potential experimental errors when I –“

“So it didn’t work is what you’re saying?”

Jelena looked sharply at her husband who had a cool unimpressed look on his face.

“Skip the fancy terms Rowan and get to the point. Your research proved to be futile...*again*.”

Rowan sneered at his brother as Hartley turned his emotionless gaze between the two of them.

“I wouldn’t expect *you* to understand the intricacies of scientific computations James. Some lack the skillset to comprehend it.”

“Boys.”

Hartley’s voice was soft and lilted but both fell silent as he bounced his granddaughter on his lap.

Jelena had warned her daughter to be on her best behaviour and she eyed the young girl strictly. The girl bit her lip and looked down.

“I received papers this morning informing me that Madame Coeur has agreed to the deal. I am awaiting signatures from the both of you still.”

James looked up sharply and Jelena watched the iciness that took over his features.

“*Vivienne*? She won’t be arriving here until tomorrow evening. I was supposed to negotiate a deal with her in the West.”

“Indeed,” Hartley said rather dryly. “You were *supposed* to.”

The goblet in Jelena’s father-in-law’s hand slammed down onto the table so quickly and suddenly she felt her stomach drop to the floor and she cringed as Nina jerked in her grandfather’s arms. She prayed the girl sat still and quiet – no matter *what* happened.

“*Coeur* will put her revenue towards businesses in the North. Your brother met with her last night.”

Jelena grimaced. She had an inkling this would happen.

She could tell James was fuming beside her. She was suddenly glad Micah was absent from dinner tonight. She couldn’t deal with another Lyon dinner fight.

“*Je veux du jus*.”

The small childish voice interrupted the tenseness that had begun to circulate around the room and Jelena inhaled sharply as Hartley turned his attention to his granddaughter.

“*Qu’est-ce qu’on dit?*”

Nina looked up at her grandfather and bit her lip before answering.

“*S’il vous plaît*.”

He nodded once and reached across the table for a tall carafe and began to pour the liquid into a short glass.

There was a silence that radiated around the table as Hartley took his time seeing to the little girl on his lap.

Rowan and James seemed to be involved in their own stare down and Jelena found herself drinking more water than she intentionally meant to.

The grandfather clock at the back of the room seemed to be the only sound echoing across the tense dining room. It was the sole source of consistency amidst the turbulent atmosphere.

Tick

Tick

Tick

Tick

Jelena could feel her stomach doing flips just contemplating what would happen next.

“Her English is poor.”

Hartley was looking at Jelena when he spoke and she suddenly felt her face grow hot.

He was waiting for some sort of response and she grimaced as Rowan and James turned their gaze to her.

“I’m working closely on improving her English Your Grace. We practice everyday.”

Jelena’s voice always had a tremor when she spoke to Hartley. She tended to focus her gaze on the space behind his ear rather than look him in the eye. She didn’t trust herself enough to do so and manage a complete sentence at the same time.

“Work harder.”

His tone was blunt and she bowed her head down as he set the little girl on her feet.

The girl stepped forward once to make a move towards her mother but stopped short when Hartley’s pale hand came to rest on her tiny shoulder.

“She’s tired,” Jelena blurted inching an arm out towards her daughter. She recoiled as James shot her a glare that sent her sinking back into her seat.

“Please,” Hartley said with a stiff smile that made Jelena's skin prickle. “I’ll take her. God knows she may be the only grandchild I ever get.”

The subtle insult did not go unnoticed and she fell silent as Hartley left the room promptly with Nina closing the door sharply behind him. The *sub rosa* that hung from the grand door

swung from side to side several times before it remained still and unmoving once more.

Jelena hadn't told James she was pregnant yet, she was waiting - waiting for the right moment...until she was absolutely sure she was far enough in her pregnancy to avoid any major mishaps. She knew this would be her saving grace. She knew it deep down.

Rowan had flung his glasses on the table and swiped a hand across his forehead. It was one of the rare times Jelena had seen him without his pristine combed locks and pressed suit and she knew he was under much stress at this time. Everyone was. War was in the air, she could feel it.

"How could you let *Vivienne Coeur* go James? She was supposed to invest in the West. She would have provided ample opportunity for you to kick start the economy after such a turbulent year."

"Fuck *Vivienne Coeur*."

James reached over on the counter and proceeded to pour himself a glass of the bitter whiskey that seemed to be on every corner table of this goddamn castle.

"I'll just have to get the Count to agree to invest in my business instead of Micah's. We know he won't invest in the same business as his mistress."

Rowan raised an eyebrow.

"You're going to get *him* to sign *your* contract."

Jelena swallowed uneasily. She knew about the Count. He was a notoriously promiscuous playboy, not so different from the late Logan Lyon, but with much more...fluid tastes.

James curled his lip as he stared at his brother.

Rowan laughed. A short humourless sound that echoed once around the vast cold dining hall.

"What are you going to do James? Micah won't be here much longer to suck cock for lucrative contract deals. *Someone* needs to step up."

James suddenly smiled, a stiff sinister smile that made Jelena sick to her stomach.

"Maybe *you* should step up this time Rowan. At least this task won't be as tedious for you as it was for our baby brother."

Rowan smirked.

"What makes you think I haven't?"

James stiffened and Jelena saw Rowan laugh and take another long sip of his drink.

"We all pull our weight in this family James." Rowan's eyes brushed over Jelena for a split second before returning to James. "Some more than others it appears."

Jelena frowned.

“Well, this has been a treat as always,” Rowan murmured buttoning his expensive blazer.
“*Bon soir et adieu.*”

Jelena watched him saunter out of the room and only then did she finally release the pent up air she had kept locked in her chest. She was waiting. Waiting for the day that Rowan's insufferable pride and grandiose ego finally caught up to him. When that day came, rest assured, she would be the first to rejoice.

“Mmm,” Mollie groaned as Micah slid himself free from between her legs with a long guttural moan.

“*Tu es parfaite Mollie Mae,*” he murmured into her neck as a sharp bounce of the carriage sent Mollie's legs tangling with his.

Mollie's mind was still pre-occupied with the events of what had happened only hours before.

Did she love him?

She felt Micah's sharp exhales against her ear as he slowly worked to steady his breaths once again.

She couldn't kill him, but that didn't mean she loved him. Did it? She was just lonely that's all. Starved of any other kind of human interaction apart from him.

“*Regardez-moi.*”

Mollie shifted and turned her head to face him.

In this moment he seemed so sublime, so gentle, so passionate. So *ethereal*.

Could she be with him?

His soft lips were turned up into a half smile as he stared adoringly into her eyes. He entwined his hand with her own as he lay his head against her heaving chest directly above her heart.

They lay silent like that for some time. Micah's normally cool body matched her body's own temperature, as their body heat merged into one.

“Did you mean it, earlier today?”

Mollie's hesitant voice broke the comforting silence of the carriage as it rumbled on over the rough snow ridden gravel.

There was a slight pause before Micah responded.

“Mean what *ma chérie?*”

Mollie bit her lip as he drew circles with his finger across the skin of her chest.

“Did you mean what you said about...feeding my tongue to your dog.”

“Theo isn’t a dog,” Micah said curtly, his finger tracing the soft skin around her nipple.

“She’s a wolf hybrid.”

Mollie rolled her eyes.

He shifted slightly to glance up at her as he continued brushing his fingers against her heated skin.

“I mean everything I say Mollie Mae. That I can assure you.”

She fell silent after this, gently brushing her fingers against his pale ragged back. She couldn’t imagine how painful it must be. She knew scars that deep elicited a pain that never really went away, even after the skin had long since healed.

“Though I must admit...it would be rather tragic to lose a voice as lovely as yours.”

Mollie scoffed.

“My grandmother had a nice voice,” she murmured. “A lot nicer than mine. She loved to sing, about everything and...anything.” She hesitated. “I miss her.”

Micah was quiet, his fingers stroking up and down her belly as she lay as comfortably as she could manage in the tight space.

“What did she sing?”

Mollie shrugged.

“Lots of things. *Sweet is the Budding Spring of Love, Toll for the Brave, Black eyed Susan, The Last Golden Rain.*”

Micah lifted his head from her chest abruptly and she froze as he stared at her, his arms on either side of her slender frame.

“What did you say?”

His voice was suddenly sharp and Mollie recoiled.

Had she angered him?

No...in fact, the prince appeared rather... stunned.

“You can’t know that song,” he murmured more to himself as his brows furrowed. “That’s a royal ballad. *C’est impossible.*”

“What are you talking about?” she questioned with a frown.

“The Last Golden Rain,” Micah repeated flatly.

“Of course I do,” Mollie protested. “My grandmother sang it to me all the time.”

Mollie lapsed into the first verse, her voice shaking slightly as she sang the first stanza of the ancient ballad.

Micah’s face paled after she had finished and Mollie admittedly had to say it was the first time she had ever seen the prince at a loss for words.

Micah looked gravely uncomfortable and Mollie was instantly curious.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

Micah exhaled slowly, his muscled chest rising and falling as he ran a hand through his dark locks.

“That’s an ancient ballad. It’s been ingrained within monarchies for centuries. My great grandfather taught it to my grandfather who taught it to my father who taught it to me. Everyone who grew up in a royal family knows that song. I’m surprised that...you know it.”

Now Mollie was the one to stare at Micah in bewilderment.

“Do you know the true meaning behind that song Mollie?” he asked, once again pressing his chest against her own as he lowered himself gently on top of her.

Mollie shook her head slowly. She had no idea what he was alluding to.

“I thought it was about some people on a fictional journey to some fantastical land in search of something...until they fall victim to a bout of bad weather.”

Micah shook his head.

“It’s not about the weather,” Micah murmured. “It’s referring to the Last Golden *Reign*. The Reign of a Kingdom.”

Mollie stared at him.

“The song isn’t even really a song at all, it’s a riddle. A riddle that supposedly leads the person who solves it to the coveted *Souffle de vie*.”

This captured Mollie’s attention and she sat ram rod straight. She tucked her wild curls behind her ears and stared at Micah, her wide brown eyes glassy with shock.

“*Souffle de vie*,” she repeated. She had heard Gibbs mention that before. Did that mean what Micah was referring to was... real? “Do those places exist?” she whispered. “The forest of bane? The river of *Morte*?”

Micah sighed.

“I don’t believe so. I’ve never heard nor encountered such places in my life. It’s an ancient ballad that’s been around for centuries. I believe its intention is to incite those who hear it and believe in it to partake on a quest that leads to nothing. People have spent years trying to decipher its meaning. If it were real, I believe someone would have long since figured it out by now.”

Mollie couldn’t keep her thoughts at bay. Should she tell Micah what Gibbs had told her? He seemed reluctant to continue with the conversation so she let her questions dissipate for now. She made a mental note to ask him about it later.

Micah smirked suddenly tapping her on softly on the nose.

“Your mind is working hard Mollie Mae,” he said with a laugh. “I can tell. Don’t dwell on it. These are ancient matters of the past.”

Mollie sighed and lay back down as Micah leaned in to plant his lips against hers. His voice was a husky murmur in the air as he ghosted kisses along her jaw towards her ear.

“Let us focus on the future.”

Mollie could feel the air becoming chillier as they made their way back to the icy fortress in *Icedalar*.

She threaded her fingers through Micah’s thick locks as she crossed her legs around his waist. In this moment Mollie could not deny that her feelings for the prince had descended into a layer of incertitude. The feelings she felt towards him frightened her more than anything else she had encountered at the hands of the Lyons.

She wanted the Micah in these moments. The one that saw clarity in times when she didn’t. The one who opened up to her and expressed the tenderness he kept bottled up inside. The one proficient enough to display his affection. Mollie wanted to keep him, shelter him, and protect him from the Micah she knew existed only a blink away from the one she cherished. The one who was capable of descending almost instantaneously into the fearsome Winter Prince.

She wanted to keep his mind clear from the impurity spewed upon him from his father, to shield him from the abuse of his brothers, and prevent him from spiralling into a man capable of unmitigated self-destruction.

And in this moment she had him.

She had him between her legs as he held her head in his hands and kissed her till the snowy landscape around her became nothing but a blur of white and the biting cold became nothing but a soft caress against her skin.

It was absolutely frigid outside by the time the carriage arrived back on the cold cobbled steps of *Château de Glaçe* and Mollie was exhausted.

She could barely keep her eyes opened as Micah guided her back into the candlelit corridor of the lobby.

The two guards at the entrance bowed immediately upon seeing the prince and Mollie watched bleary eyed as Micah turned to the one standing at the entrance to the second landing.

“Escort Mollie back up to her room.”

The guard stiffened, his body language rigid as he eyed Mollie distastefully.

The pause seemed to catch Micah's attention and Mollie watched in trepidation as the prince casually dropped his hand to the hilt of his dagger his demeanour turning frosty.

“I have no obligation to do so,” the guard sniffed maintaining eye contact with the prince. “Plus I may lose my position if I do, I’ve been given strict orders by Master James to adhere only to-.”

“You may lose your head if you don’t.”

Micah’s voice was more frigid than solid ice and the guard’s lips went white as he bowed immediately and gestured for Mollie to follow him.

Mollie watched as Micah dropped his arm from around hers and turned on his heel to head in the opposite direction towards the throne room. It had taken a couple months but Mollie had finally managed to navigate her way around certain parts of the fortress.

He seemed to notice that her eyes were still on him as he reached the end of the corridor. Before he could disappear around the bend, he turned his head in her direction. With a soft smirk and a quick wink he disappeared around the bend.

Mollie felt her stomach flutter with butterflies and her cheeks burned as she quickly moved to follow the guard who was scowling as he began the journey up the flight of stairs to their bedroom.

Maybe there was hope after all.

Mollie groaned as she made a move to clear the candlewax that had gathered near the floor of her headboard.

Cécily seemed excited to see Mollie again and took extra time in seeing to her needs following the long journey back from *Courchevel*.

Mollie had to admit, even though she had only been gone for a single night she had missed the girl too.

Her back ached as she straightened up to dump the leftover wax into the thin metal containers that lay below the candelabra. Mollie never got backpain. She figured Micah's treatment of her body during the ride back to the castle had been a bit more vigorous than she had first assumed.

She sighed when she saw the last of the matches had been used up on the edge of the fireplace. She knew the cabinet was just around the corner on the first landing near the kitchen and she figured she might as well go herself. After all, Cécily had done nearly everything for her since she had arrived.

Her nightgown was thin and she grabbed her yellow cloak on her way out, making sure to drape the warm material fully around her body as she slipped her feet into her boots. She would be quick...

Mollie was lost.

She was sure the cabinet was around the first corner of the landing and she shuffled forward brushing her fingers against the rough corridor walls in the hopes that the familiar mahogany cabinet would appear in her vision.

It was quiet on this landing. Unusually quiet and Mollie felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

Something wasn't right.

She flipped the hood of her cloak up over her thick curls and made a move to return down the same hallway she had walked down earlier.

She'd do without candles tonight. She felt a sudden fierce compulsion to return to her room as the wind whistled eerily from outside. She began to quicken her pace as the sharp squawk of a crow echoed from above her.

As the familiar staircase leading up to the second landing appeared at the end of the corridor Mollie spotted something at the edge of her vision that sent her previously speedy jog into an untimely stumble.

Mollie jerked to a stop, her brown eyes widening as something large, furry and menacing filled her vision.

The animal was jet black with fur darker than burning coal and its razor sharp teeth were bared as bright yellow eyes turned its gaze on the only other living being in its path.

Mollie felt the air leave her lungs as her flight or flight response kicked in faster than she could have anticipated. Her legs moved on their own accord as she raced in the opposite direction of the corridor, the torchlight flickering as the air whooshed past her.

She could hear its jaws snapping behind her and Mollie felt dread pool in her stomach as the pounding of heavy paws behind her grew closer and closer.

In a blind and frantic panic she threw herself around the corner and ran straight into something tall, monstrous, and draped in black.

The figure stiffened and Mollie cried out stumbling as the wolf scampered around the corner, its eyes flashing like a predator at its prey.

Mollie felt her heart surge to her throat as James Lyon turned around his expression transitioning from hellish anger to something far more unsettling.

“My my,” he said raising a dark eyebrow as the wolf snapped at Mollie from only metres behind the eldest prince. “What do we have here?”

Mollie couldn’t speak. Her voice was frozen, paralyzed somewhere in her trachea, unable to make the transition to her lips.

She was shaking, her legs like jello as James waved away the man he had been speaking to before Mollie’s grand entrance.

It was the second time Mollie had been nearly pounced on by a beastly pet of the Lyon brothers, but even she had to admit, Rowan’s wolf seemed tamed compared to the beast that stood in front of her now.

“Assis Napoléon.”

The wolf sat down immediately, its tongue lolling from its mouth as it looked eagerly at its master.

James turned to her, the smile on his face re-surfacing a memory Mollie wished she could forget.

“What are you doing wandering the castle at his hour...so- *alone*?”

He looked around dramatically, as if expecting someone else to come around the corner.

James clicked his tongue as his gaze returned to Mollie.

“Did you run off?” James sighed stepping closer as Mollie braced herself against the rough wall. “Did Micah scare you off? He can be such a...*bastard* even at the best times.”

James chuckled after his comment and Mollie swallowed slowly. Her throat had gone dry.

“I must say, I’m surprised you’re still up and about –strutting around these ancient walls like you own the place. I find it quite amusing.”

Mollie often found it hard to see past the handsome charming faces of the Lyon men. But when it came to James, Mollie saw the ugliness that filled him from the inside mirrored on his outside. She found nothing about him even remotely appealing.

Without another word the eldest prince grasped Mollie harshly around the arm and pulled her down the corridor, as the wolf watched from behind, its yellow eyes trained on the stumbling

girl.

Mollie felt sick to her stomach as James pulled them into a cramped low ceilinged room with a single window overlooking the west tower. The light from the tower was the only shroud of light in the otherwise black room.

Snow spilled off the edge of the frame and Mollie began to pant as James caged her in.

His scent engulfed her and Mollie resisted the urge to cough at the spicy overwhelming odour that emanated from the man above her.

He was just so large and intimidating. Mollie stood no chance.

“How irresponsible of the Winter Prince to leave his little pet all alone at the dead of night.”

Mollie was quaking with fear. Her knees were knocking against each other and she braced herself against the stony wall, her nails digging into the rough stone.

James reached with his hand towards her and Mollie choked, her head recoiling to hit the stony corridor wall.

“Don’t.”

Her voice came out hoarse and desperate and she squirmed as far away from him as she could manage.

James smiled, his lips curling in a way that resembled a snake more than anything.

“Why do you shy away from the most powerful man in the country? There are woman who spread themselves for me everyday. You should be grovelling on your knees. Many would trade their lives to be in your position.”

Mollie was disgusted and she exhaled sharply as James flipped her cloaked hood down to expose her face.

His brown eyes bore into hers and she stared at him in unabashed fear as he scrutinized her features.

“What *is* so special about you?” he murmured.

His fingers reached down to cup her cheek and Mollie squeezed her eyes tightly as his breath fanned her lips. He had bent down to observe her features more closely and she stiffened as his hand ventured upward to thread through her thick locks.

Slowly, his fingers crept down to slowly unbutton the clasps at her throat and Mollie felt the tears prick her eyes as he gradually began to expose her front.

He paused as his fingers brushed beneath her chin to rest at her neck.

He chuckled darkly and Mollie snapped her eyes open to see an eerily delighted smirk on his face.

“Looks like you had fun today,” he whispered thumbing the bite marks that lined her neck. “Who knew Micah had it in him to be so...sensual.”

“Please,” Mollie gasped as she trembled in front of him. “Please just...let me-“

“Let you go?”

James voice had taken on something mocking and Mollie trembled against the stone, the jagged ends digging into her back.

“Why would I do that?” he murmured. “A country rose such as yourself are hard to come by these days. Especially one in full bloom.”

Mollie braced herself against the wall as James leaned in to brush his nose against her jawline as his fingers curled around her throat. His body pressed against her like a heavy dumbbell against her chest.

She felt another insistent nudge near her belly, something that made her blood run cold the minute it made contact with her body.

She had to do it. *Now*.

With her eyes squeezed shut and her arms splayed straight against her sides Mollie lifted her knee at the precise moment James grazed his teeth against her earlobe and kneed the man in front of her with as much force as she could muster.

The grunt of pain filled her right ear as Mollie took off for the door running faster than she ever thought possible. She could hear the roar behind her as she bolted for the staircase at the end of the corridor which she knew led in the direction of the entrance.

Another voice was echoing down the hall. A regal sharp sound with a hint of disdain in that tone.

She halted when she heard it.

That voice. She *knew* that voice.

Mollie didn't think twice – she didn't even pause to think through her actions – she just ran allowing the epinephrine running through her veins to take full control.

“*Rowan!!*” she all but cried as she ran in the direction of the voice.

She spotted him down the corridor speaking to a guard she knew only too well.

He jerked immediately when his name was called. Mollie didn't even register that she was calling him by his first name. At that moment, informality was the last thing on her mind.

“Mollie?”

“Rowan!” she cried sprinting even faster.

He seemed surprised—very surprised to see her and she all but ran into his arms, the fear taking control of her lungs. She was literally gasping as she clutched the expensive cuffs around his wrists.

He was frozen as she clutched at him too afraid to turn around and see what fate awaited her.

His hands curled around her shoulders and he stood her upright as he looked down at her. His expression was difficult to read. He was certainly surprised to see her but Mollie could also see something else lurking behind those dark irises. Something sinister.

“One dance and you’re already running into my arms,” he said with a laugh. The smile didn’t quite reach his eyes and she cringed when she saw the glowering face of Gibbs in front of her. She had run straight between them.

Gibbs gave her a cold glare and she turned her face away as Rowan brought her chin upward to face him. It was something Micah did to her all the time and she cringed at the equivalence.

“What has you running through the corridors of *Château de Glaçe* at his hour of the night?” he said softly brushing his thumb against her blazing cheek. “You just couldn’t resist me could you?”

“James,” she all but cried as she buried her face in his chest. Rowan’s brow furrowed and on cue the eldest Lyon himself appeared at the entrance of the corridor, his stance taking up the entire doorway.

“Ah James!” Rowan said suddenly placing a hand on Mollie’s shoulder. “You came not a moment too soon. Your signature is required on these documents Gibbs has handed over to me.”

James ignored his brother and stalked towards them, his dark eyes staring hatefully at Mollie.

“I want that bitch buried six feet under this fortress.”

Mollie cringed as Rowan’s grip tightened around her shoulder.

“Now now James,” Rowan said with false gentleness. “That’s not how we speak to our guests.”

James’ eyes suddenly flickered to Rowan’s.

“Is that what she is? A guest? Might as well extend our warm courtesy’s to the chambermaids as well.”

He sneered at her as he spoke. His face was flushed and Mollie could see the hellish murder in his eyes.

He stepped even closer and Mollie was suddenly grateful Rowan was here. She didn't want to think what would have happened had she'd been alone.

"Tell her what happens to unsupervised sluts that roam the castle off leash." he said softly, his dark eyes transitioning into something twisted and vile.

"Ça suffit James."

Rowan's tone was flat and hard and Mollie watched their interaction in fear.

"I promise you Rowan. The next time Micah's whore comes anywhere near me without an escort I won't hesitate to gut it myself."

Rowan sighed as Mollie trembled in front of him.

"There won't be a next time James. Rest assured."

James shot one last glare at Mollie before he stalked down the corridor, his black cloak billowing behind him like a cloud of smoke.

The hand on Mollie's shoulder suddenly felt firmer and stiffer than she liked and she made a move to step forward. Rowan's fingers tightened and Mollie suddenly felt her face go hot.

"You're *very* indebted to me now Miss Mayeson."

Rowan had leaned down to whisper these words in her ear and she felt her heart soar to her throat.

Gibbs had kept that same indiscernible expression on his face as he watched their interaction in silence.

"Come with me."

Mollie didn't have much of a choice.

Rowan marched her down the corridor and around the back towards a door leading to the outside.

The chill hit her hard as it broke through her yellow cloak to sweep through her thin nightgown.

Gibbs followed behind them as Rowan dragged her through the snow. Mollie realized quickly that Rowan was leading her farther and farther away from the château and she began to squirm out of his arms.

For all she knew, he could be leading her straight to her death. She feared she may have escaped the lions den only to jump into the shark tank.

She did the only thing she knew could save her.

“Micah!” she screamed as Rowan clamped his gloved hand firmly over her mouth.

It was almost as if Rowan knew this was coming and he didn’t hesitate to press hard on her mouth stifling any further chance of making sound.

She stared at Gibbs who looked on wordlessly. Wasn’t he loyal to Micah? Didn’t he see what was happening?

Mollie felt her tears begin to fall as Rowan proceeded to drag her hands together and lift her effortlessly into his arms.

“You may thank me for this one day,” he whispered as she began to scream and thrash against him.

Mollie squirmed and screamed against the cloth covering but it was useless. It was too tight and insulated for her to do anything. Instead she cried hopelessly as the middle Lyon led her further and further away from the fortress.

Mollie must have fallen asleep at some point as a sharp incline had her head knocking sharply against a sturdy chest.

The cloth was off of her face and as she opened her bleary eyes she caught site of a group of people head to toe in black standing at the edge of what appeared to be an icy ocean. She was freezing and she felt herself shaking as Rowan carefully disentangled himself from her.

She felt groggy and ill as Rowan placed her on her feet. She struggled to find her balance as Rowan removed the scarf from around his neck and proceeded to wrap it like a shawl around her shoulders.

“Delivered. All in one piece this time. Just as you requested.”

Mollie’s eyes shot up in shock as Rowan daintily dusted himself off and addressed the people who stood behind her.

Mollie was weak and frozen to the bone and she felt her vision go blurry as a strong leather clad hand curled around her shoulder and yanked her toward them. There must have been four or five of them and they all wore masks -- balaclavas that concealed their faces. Mollie had a terrible feeling she knew who they were.

“I believe this is more than enough of a reward to ensure my...immunity.”

Rowan’s soft tone had an edge to it and the large man that had his grip around Mollie nodded once stiffly.

“Lovely,” Rowan said with a small bow. “I will take my leave then... as well as my reward.”

Mollie watched in silent horror as he picked up a parcel handed to him by one of the figures dressed in black.

Before Rowan could walk away he paused turning to the group behind him.

“Shall I not make it back,” he mused, his voice taking on a dangerous tone. “Rest assured your boat will fail to dock at its final destination. I hope I make myself clear.”

With one last smile the middle Lyon left, the only reminder anyone was ever there in the first place being the deep footprints etched into the snow.

“Come with us little lady,” said a gruff voice as Mollie felt herself being roughly maneuvered into an old but modestly sized boat as the icy northern waters splashed up over the rickety transport. She gasped in pain as the water hit her ankles. The water was so cold it felt as if a dozen needles had pierced her and she stumbled falling fast and hard.

All she saw was black.

Mollie cried out as her knees hit the wooden floor hard.

The boat was moving, fast and dangerously as the tables in the dark room Mollie found herself in shuffled from side to side.

She had barely regained consciousness when she found herself being brought hard to the ground.

“Qu’est-ce qu’on va faire avec elle Cap?”

The rough voice was right above her, the sword in his hand inches away from her neck.

The blade pricked her throat and Mollie squeezed her eyes tightly. She couldn't look.

She didn't even have the chance to scream as the man tugged her hair hard and pulled her forward.

She moaned in pain as her stomach clenched and her head ached with the sudden abrupt motion.

Thick lace boots suddenly filled her vision and Mollie jerked as a rough calloused hand cupped her chin and jerked it upwards.

Her vision, although slightly blurred was somewhat tangible. Deep midnight blue eyes stared at her from a deeply tanned face with sharp features that seemed vaguely familiar to her. His mask was off. The man was dressed no different from the people who had brought her here—black long sleeved tunic and dark slacks. The only sliver of brightness came from the honey blond hair that covered his weathered forehead. He was young in the face with a light faded scar on his left brow. It gave his boyish features a rough touch.

He stared at Mollie for a moment, with harsh overt hatred and she gasped as he released her hastily his lip curling in disgust.

“So *you’re* Micah’s little pet hm?”

He was quite muscular, his biceps prominent even through the black tunic he wore.

“You may be more useful than I originally anticipated.”

Mollie couldn’t even speak, her throat was too dry and raw.

Mollie realized that the other man who had addressed the blond man as "Cap," had spoken French. Were they a part of the Lyons monarchy? No...that was impossible. Whoever they were, they were important figures. Important enough for Rowan Lyon to have done business with them. Mollie felt another roll of nausea wash over her.

The guard holding her head suddenly came around to face her, his nose touching hers as he jerked her harshly from side to side.

“Speak when spoken to girl,” he cried out.

It was too much for Mollie to take, and she suddenly knew with horrid realization what was about to happen.

Ontop of the motion sickness of the rickety boat, Mollie felt her stomach clench and she retched, vomit spewing out of her mouth and directly onto the person in front of her.

Mollie heard him howl and drop her neck instantly as he backed away. The other one – the blond one with his mask off seemed irritated and he cursed and walked to the other side of the room as Mollie emptied whatever was left in her stomach onto the old creaky floorboards.

The nausea had hit her so instantaneously she didn’t even have time to process it.

“You stupid cunt!”

Mollie folded herself in, waiting for the punishment that would await her but heard instead a sharp door slamming open.

“Where is she?”

Mollie felt as if the nausea again would hit her full force when she heard that voice.

She looked up in fear to see the man that had brought all of her worst nightmares to life come true and she screamed. She screamed and screamed as she felt a sudden presence beside her trying to calm her down.

But she couldn’t. How could she? He was there. He was *right* there.

The man seemed concerned as he looked at Mollie but she couldn’t see reason. She only saw *him*. He had taken her and he was going to kill her. That was it.

She was staring straight into the face of Hartley Lyon.

Chapter End Notes

This is it guys. This is the turning point in the story where secrets will begin to unfold and new characters will make their presence known. There will be a slight delay in the release of next chapter as I have already addressed on the tumblr. Thank you all again for reading this far into the story. You have my word things will begin to get real interesting from here on out...

Chapter 33: Arsenic

Chapter Summary

Mollie gets reunited with the Insurgency. Mollie struggles with her feelings for the Winter Prince and her own internal turmoil. Her journey to Ophian Land begins.

Chapter Notes

Plot, plot and more plot.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“When will she wake up?”

This voice was female for sure and Mollie could hear it faintly through the buzzing.

“She should have woken up a day ago. Perhaps she reacted differently.”

God Mollie had never felt so terrible in her life. Her back ached, her head ached – everything hurt and she felt as if she may puke again.

There was a hard calloused hand that swiped her head and she groaned as it brushed against a tender spot on her forehead.

“She’s awake. She’s waking up.”

“*Shh*, not so loud Araya,” said another sharper voice.

“Should we tell her? I think we should.”

“No.”

This male voice was sharp and authoritative and Mollie squirmed as she slowly opened her eyes. She blinked several times to see a bright white light shining down on her.

“Not yet. It will be too much to take in. Take it slowly. Day by day if we must.”

“In fact, it’s better she *doesn’t* know. That way we can use it to our advantage...”

“How can she *not* know?”

There was a silence that followed and Mollie clutched at the warmth enveloping her body. She was almost too warm now. Could she not acclimatize to anything these days?

“Where am I?”

Her voice came out more croaky than anything. She squinted in front of her. Her vision was blurry and her lips dry as she struggled to focus. There was a sudden shifting sensation and Mollie had forgotten that she was, as of now, somewhere in the middle of an ocean on a ship. Her memories began to filter in.

“Safe. You’re safe.”

Mollie blinked open to see familiar dark eyes staring at her.

Mollie’s jaw nearly dropped when saw him, but she knew he was real and he was in front of her.

“Caleb?” she breathed. She blinked a couple times more to be sure but there was no mistaking it.

He gave her a half smile. It seemed strained and tired but it was there.

“Hey kid.”

She turned to the person beside him, into the eyes of a pretty girl with big brown eyes. She had caramel hair chopped into a short bob and a tanned skin tone. She seemed unnaturally dark, as if she had spent a long time in the sun and her skin had simply darkened to maintain its integrity.

She gave Mollie that same stiff smile.

Mollie groaned as she clutched the side of her head.

“Where are we?”

Caleb turned to look at the girl beside him before turning his dark eyes back to Mollie.

“Halfway to the Ophian Empire.”

Mollie swallowed uneasily. *Micah. James. Rowan. The boat....* it was all coming back to her.

“Rowan,” she whispered her eyes going wide. She felt her jaw flex and her blood boil just thinking about him. “He...he did this. He’s working for you?”

Caleb exchanged glances with the girl again. He seemed unsure...almost mistrustful and he reached over to pat Mollie’s shoulder gently.

“I’m sorry you had to wait so long.”

Mollie turned to him suddenly.

“You were never supposed to be taken away from Questershire. We...we would have never allowed that.”

“What are you talking about?” Mollie whispered.

He hesitated as Mollie felt tears fill her eyes again. But these were not tears of sadness nor tears of physical pain. These were tears of betrayal, tears of gross injustice.

“You’re... *sorry*?”

Her tone had gone bleak and Caleb put his head down. The girl also avoided eye contact and Mollie wanted nothing more than to hurt them. Hurt them in the same way they had hurt her. She had been abandoned and forced into the role of a concubine. Where were they when she was being pounded into the sheets? Where were they when the Lyons had brandished a dagger at her throat?

“Yes,” Caleb said forcefully. “We are truly sorry. But...understand Mollie. We can’t trust you yet, not when you’ve been in contact with the Lyons for such a long period of time. You may still be the enemy-“

“Go rot in hell,” she responded. “Get out, both of you.”

Her voice had taken on a dangerous fiery tone and she felt her knuckles flex as she stared hatefully at Caleb.

A voice in the back of her mind wanted to tell her -- *remind* her that this wasn't his fault entirely. But her anger was surpassing all of her emotions. It was consuming her and she wanted to lash out. She was *thriving* off the hurt and despair that had accumulated inside of her.

“Get. *out*.”

She didn't have to repeat herself again as they both quickly scuttled out of the room drawing tight the thick curtain that acted as a barrier to the other parts of the cold empty room. Mollie stared at it for some time until their footsteps disappeared entirely, letting her intangible thoughts of hate, despair and betrayal build within her as it brimmed over the corners of her heavy aching heart.

Mollie lost track of how much time she spent alone in her isolated corner of the rusty underground level of the rickety transport vessel.

Every once in a while someone would drop in to slide food and water under the curtain. At first Mollie had rebelled. Kicking away whatever they gave her – refusing to speak to anyone who wanted to talk to her. But her rebel nature had been exhausted. For how much longer could she keep up with this? It wasn’t doing her any benefit to let her anger block her common sense.

She had spent most of her time staring at that thick of wall of curtain in front of her, letting the sound of heavy water hitting the vessel become a constant lull in her mind. She was losing track of the days -- no different than when she had been a prisoner of the winter prince. The construct of time and space had become a bitter enemy to Mollie these past few months. It seemed to creep up on her like a benign tumour...only to metastasize once it reached its full potential, leaving her vulnerable and bewildered in a land that predicated on the ideals of natural selection.

Today was no different from the day before or the day before that for the skinny frail girl as she sat alone with her chin on her knees on the low firm bed in the back corner of the third floor of the moving vessel. She rocked slowly on her knees, the fuzzing threadbare quilt sinking into her skin when she noticed a tall shadow outside the curtain to her little space.

Her lack of interaction with people had made her somewhat anxious and she tensed as the figure stood elegantly outside, awaiting her approval before it slowly inched the curtain to the side.

Pale fingers inched backwards the thick material posing as a weak concealment to Mollie's cramped room as a voice permeated through the air.

“Can you spare a minute?”

That soft lilted voice jerked Mollie from her light slumber and she clutched the sheets tightly.

Mollie looked up into that face...a face that sent a horrible chill down her spine and made her blood run cold.

She felt her throat swell up and she froze as the man walked casually into her little makeshift room. Mollie figured he was trying his best to come off as non-threatening as possible but there was no denying who he was. His features were too defining.

“What..who..how...”

Her voice trailed off and she stiffened as he stepped closer to her.

She was already reaching out from beneath the blanket on top of her towards the bedside table, for something – anything to put between her and the man coming toward her.

“I’m not who you think I am.”

His voice was cool and collected, with that same air of authority but also... different. There was something warmer here...something less demanding.

“See?”

He stepped even closer, testing the waters out before he felt entirely comfortable.

Mollie was frozen, the fear still gripping at her like damp moss on the banks of a swamp.

“Look closely Mollie.”

He wore an airy dark blue shirt that hung loosely over black pants. Mollie was struck by how common...how *unroyal* it was.

As she observed him more closely, Mollie could finally see there *were* differences. Differences that she hadn't noticed the first time.

His hair was blond. Much blonder than the man she knew and he seemed younger around the edges of his face. He had kind blue eyes but that same sharp nose and sculpted jawline.

Could it be?

"Don't be afraid Mollie," he said softly. He lifted his hands up anyways as if to show he had nothing in his pockets or anything else that could potentially harm her.

"May I?"

He gestured to the chair in front of her bed and she looked blankly up at him.

Mollie realized with embarrassment that he was awaiting her confirmation and foolishly she nodded.

He was handsome, very handsome in an odd older mature kind of way and Mollie found herself blushing as he leaned forward on the bed to look her in the eyes. He too was tanned but not so much as the girl she'd seen the other day. His was a nice kind of tanned - the glowing bronzed kind.

His muscles strained against his shirt, a testament to years of training and he seemed concerned, not for himself but oddly enough as if it were for her.

Mollie brushed her wild curls away from her face as he leaned in to address her directly.

"My name is Caius," he said softly.

Mollie stared at him in shock.

"You're dead," she whipped out.

He half smiled at her when he heard this.

"Supposedly."

"I don't understand?" Mollie felt ridiculous tears begin to well up in her eyes again and she looked away as they began to trickle down her cheeks. She didn't know why she was crying. She shouldn't be. It was ridiculous. The man hadn't even said anything triggering as of yet. It was as if she couldn't keep a hold of her emotions and she began to hopelessly sob as the tears kept on flowing.

"There there," he said softly.

He leaned in and wrapped his strong arms around Mollie as she cried and cried.

“It’s alright now. You’re alright now.”

He murmured soft words of affection as she openly broke down. Mollie had never had a man do this to her or treat her so kindly. She almost didn’t know how to react to it as he brought a handkerchief from his pocket and delicately dabbed at her tear stained face.

“From the bottom of my heart,” he said quietly rubbing a comforting hand against Mollie’s cheek. “I’m so sorry for all you’ve been through. I couldn’t be more sincere when I tell you this.”

He paused as Mollie sniffled and tried to quiet down her heavy breathing.

“No apology will make up for what you’ve experienced. I know this,” he said. Mollie saw his eyes flicker to her abdomen before snapping back to her face. “But you’re in safe hands now.”

He gave her another re-assuring squeeze as he stood up. He was tall – all these Lyon men were – but for once it wasn’t intimidating. It felt protective.

“Zen, come in here.”

Mollie watched as the boy that had been particularly cruel to her during the transition from the boat to the ship entered.

He looked like a younger version of Caius and Mollie squirmed as he narrowed his eyes at her. He was still as chilly and as unfriendly as before and Mollie figured he hadn’t had a change of heart.

“What?”

His tone was stiff and unwilling and Mollie averted her gaze.

“Change the dressing on Mollie’s wound and fill her in. The sooner she knows how things work around here the better.”

“Why me?” Zen asked grudgingly shooting her another distasteful glare. “Ask Araya to do it. She’s been the one doing it for the past few days anyway. The concubine-”

“Her name is Mollie.”

Caius’s tone had gone hard and cold and she shivered as the young boy went silent.

“S’il vous plait mon fils. Pour moi.”

Mollie watched the boy roll his eyes but drag himself forward as his father gave Mollie another re-assuring smile before leaving the room.

Mollie wiped the remaining tears from her face as the boy looked at her with poorly concealed revulsion. Mollie wished she could say she was used to it, but it still hurt.

“You can go,” she said brushing her tear stained curls from her face. “I can take care of myself.”

The boy frowned at her and narrowed his eyes.

“I’m following orders. I don’t care if you can do it yourself.”

His voice came out hard and rough and she recoiled at the animosity. He didn’t even try to hide it.

“Tilt your head back.”

Mollie kept silent and leaned back till her head sunk into the soft pillows behind her.

The boy although hard and cold from the exterior was soft when he attended to her.

He didn’t talk to her again and he avoided eye contact.

He was quite muscular and about the same height as his father. His golden locks lay messily on his forehead and he too had a deep tan as if he had spent days out in the sun. Mollie moaned in pain as she shifted, feeling a particular painful throb in her belly. She’d been feeling it for a couple days now but she figured it was stress related.

The boy’s eyes suddenly flickered to hers and she felt her face flame.

“You better not hurl again,” he muttered putting a fresh bandage on her forehead. “That was disgusting.”

She didn’t feel nauseous today. Not at all, in fact she was starving. And almost as soon as the thought came into her mind she heard her stomach growl.

If she was embarrassed before, Mollie was now mortified.

It seemed to echo in the chilly room and Mollie watched as the boy froze, the sound taking him by surprise as well.

Mollie watched him quietly as he exchanged the old dressing on her forehead for a new one and she followed his movements as he moved towards the small basin beside her to wash out her old cloth dressing. His eyes reminded her of the glaciers in Icedalar. Cold, blue, and eerily reflective.

“That should do.” He muttered getting up from the bed quickly. “Araya will come in to see you later.”

He was out of the room faster than Mollie could respond and she slapped a hand to her forehead in defeat. She winced as her fingers brushed the cut on her forehead.

Her memories began to flood back slowly and instead of the fear that had gripped her since the moment she had been dragged onto this boat, she felt raw anger fill her.

She wondered if Rowan had returned to the chateau? Surely by now Micah must know she's missing.

And Cécily.

Mollie suddenly felt sick thinking about her. It wasn't her fault, not in the slightest and she prayed nothing happened to the girl. She had been Mollie's saving grace through all of her horrors at the fortress. She wondered if Micah would know. Would he know the truth? He certainly didn't know that Rowan was a backstabbing conniving greedy asshole who had been working with the Insurgency. Mollie figured for some time too.

She still had the necklace around her neck. The necklace Micah had given her and she touched the delicate silver gently.

She should take it and throw it. But something in her stopped her from doing it. Instead she left the precious metal dangling from her neck. Everyone saw her as Micah's concubine anyway. There was no point hiding the evidence. She sighed and collapsed into the pillows. She wished she never felt so tired...

"More?"

Mollie looked up in embarrassment when she realized she had finished her plate well before everyone else had.

She made a move to shake her head but heard another girl click her tongue in annoyance.

"Why would you ask her?" she snapped chastising another member of their group. "Just give her more. She needs it anyway."

Caius shot her a look and the girl sheepishly looked at Mollie.

"You're far too skinny. You need it."

Mollie thanked her quietly as she began to dig into the food. It was an intimate but also rather awkward gathering. It was also the first time Mollie had ventured out of her room and come into contact with anyone other than the people who had previously come to visit her. She could feel people staring at her when they thought she wasn't looking and Mollie tried her best to ignore it. Her hair had been neatly plaited into a long braid that flowed down her shoulder and she had taken to absent-mindedly twirling the end of it to avoid making conversation with anyone.

Caius sat at the head of the table, he hadn't eaten all that much but he had more so than his son who sat stony faced beside him and across from Mollie. He hadn't touched his food at all and seemed more intent on making Mollie feel insignificant and out of place than she already felt. Mollie quickly began to see that Arayalynn – the girl she had seen on her first day here – was kind. She treated Mollie like one of their own and went out of her way to make her feel better.

“So... where are you from Mollie?”

Arayalynn asked, breaking the painfully awkward silence.

Mollie grimaced. She hated having to be put on the spot when she already felt like an outsider.

She picked at the steamed vegetables on her plate, the hunger pains suddenly subsiding.

“Why don’t you ask Caleb,” she mumbled shooting the older man a glare.

Caleb sighed deeply. Mollie couldn’t help but harbour a personal vendetta against him.

Arayalynn frowned.

“Alright how about I start then? Someone’s got to break the ice at some point.”

She addressed Mollie directly and tucked her short bob behind her ears.

“I’m Arayalynn Lyon. I was born and raised in Questershire where I spent much of my childhood before Hartley and his goons put a bounty on my family’s head. My mother and I barely escaped... but the Ophians were kind enough to offer us refuge in their lands.”

She spoke extremely quickly and Mollie had to struggle to keep up with her. She was overly confident and Mollie could tell the others were slightly wary of her.

“We’ve been working long and hard to bring down Hartley and his empire,” her eyes brightened when she locked eyes with Mollie. “But now that we have you I know we’re that much closer.”

“Arayalynn.”

Caius’ warning tone made the girl falter and she scowled at the man seated at the head table.

“Slowly,” he warned in a stern but comforting tone. “Mollie is still recovering. She doesn’t need an information dump just yet.”

“Calm down,” Arayalynn scoffed with a dramatic eyeroll. “Mollie and I are going to be the best friends, I can already tell.”

Mollie lurched forward abruptly, a sudden wave of vertigo hitting her.

“Mollie!”

“I got her!”

Mollie felt a strong hand grip her as she wobbled on her legs.

She had no idea how Arayalynn was able to make it to her side so quickly.

“I’m fine,” she brushed off steadying herself. This had been happening to her a lot lately. These random bouts of nausea and dizziness. She just hoped it was a side effect of her chronic stress.

Arayalynn hesitated looking back at Caius.

The movement of the ship was making Mollie’s situation worse and she felt as if she were going to vomit again.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” she gasped, clutching onto Arayalynn’s arm.

“To the top deck we go,” muttered the girl as she helped Mollie up the stairs.

Mollie was sprinting by the time she made it the top deck and she all but emptied her dinner into the rough icy waters.

Arayalynn helped hold her hair back as she vomited over the railing.

She groaned as she slid down the metal railings to her knees the dizziness consuming her.

“How long till we get there?” Mollie muttered wiping her mouth.

Arayalynn sighed.

“Not for another 2 and a half weeks...and that’s with *good* weather.”

Mollie felt her heart sink. She already felt claustrophobic running into everyone on the boat and she glumly looked down.

“Hey come on,” Arayalynn said giving Mollie’s arm a gentle tug. “The less you think about it the faster time will go.”

But Mollie couldn’t keep her mind off of it. Not for one second. She couldn’t keep her mind off the icy landscape of *Icedalar*; the feeling of cold tile against her bare skin --the gentle smirk and the soft wink from the lush green eyes of the winter prince.

It was the last time she had seen him. With a jolt Mollie realized it may have been the last time she ever would see him.

And for some reason her heart ached at the thought.

She felt as if she had brought Micah Lyon back to life, made him see a reason to continue forward. He had been so empty and void of feeling when she had first met him. Little did she know there was a person, a soul that existed within him. A soul that needed to be coaxed and enticed. A soul that needed to be nurtured to remain viable.

“Mollie?”

Mollie looked up abruptly.

Arayalynn bit her lip. But instead of pulling Mollie up to her feet and guiding her back below deck, she plopped herself down beside the girl and let her legs dangle off the railing. It was still quite cold out, and they both wore heavy cloaks over their clothing, but Arayalynn didn't seem to mind all that much.

"Yellow's your colour Mollie," she said with a grin. "You wear it well. Just like her."

Mollie looked at Arayalynn.

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly.

Arayalynn sighed brushing a hand through her choppy haircut.

"Caius isn't my father you know," she said quietly looking out into the distance.

There wasn't much to see apart from small icebergs scattering the open sea and a heavy grey fog hanging in the air.

"He's my uncle."

Mollie looked at her in shock.

"My father...was Atem Aemilius Malcolm Lyon. True king of the Lyon Empire. He was king for probably an hour or less give or take."

Mollie listened silently. Her head was still spinning but the cold air offered some comfort to her blazing skin.

"You were there weren't you?" Mollie whispered. "You were there when Izabel..."

Arayalynn put her head down, choosing to stare at her dangling legs.

"I was young. But yes. I remember that day quite vividly."

She sighed clasping her hands together. The girl was toned and muscular, an odd figure for a woman of her age and status, and Mollie noticed she had scars that crisscrossed across her arms as if she had been in combat. She looked down and turned her gaze away as Araya began speaking.

"For the longest time it was just James, Rowan and I in the Questershire manor. We were young, around 5 maybe. We only had each other for company, we didn't really mix with anybody else."

Mollie cringed.

Arayalynn smirked at her reaction.

“Come on. Give me *some* credit Mollie. You really think I’d let those two sticks in the mud get away with bullying me? Please.”

Mollie smiled lightly. Arayalynn reminded her of Phoebe with her free spirit and boisterous nature.

“James used to play rough. Always did. I used to beat his ass each time we engaged in a fight. He couldn’t stand it since I was a girl,” she seemed proud as she told Mollie about her memories. “I think it hurt his ego just a little bit.”

Mollie didn’t return the smile this time. The memories she shared of James Lyon were too traumatizing to sift through. She wanted her to change the subject.

“What about Izabel Lyon?” Mollie asked tightening the cloak around her. “What was she like?”

Mollie didn’t know why, but she felt so strongly for the deceased young girl and her tragic story. Everyone seemed to have adored her – cherished her. Mollie wanted to know why. She wanted to know what it was like to know someone as soulful and kind as Izabel.

Arayalynn hesitated before she spoke.

“To be honest with you Moll, I didn’t see her a whole lot. She was always gone with my father or Hartley on some royal expedition.”

Mollie felt her cheeks flare at the nickname Arayalynn had used for her. The girl barely knew Mollie but as she sat here beside her, Mollie felt as if she’d known the girl her whole life.

Mollie was a little disappointed to hear that but Arayalynn continued speaking as if sensing the girls dejection.

“She was really pretty though,” Arayalynn said with a smile. “Pretty and elegant. She was always well put together you know? And she gave the best hugs. She had this long thick hair...blonde I think,” she said biting her lip. “She was the best. Gave a whole new meaning to what it really meant to be a Lyon.”

Arayalynn trailed off a bit after this and Mollie joined her in staring out at the horizon. The sun had long since settled and Mollie could make out the slightest navy colour making its way from the top of the fog towards the innermost layers.

“I guess that makes you a princess doesn’t it?”

Arayalynn laughed at Mollie’s comment.

“Trust me, that stuff doesn’t matter out here Mollie,” she said with a chuckle.

Mollie shivered in the cold and Arayalynn turned toward her watching as the girl tightened her cloak around her shoulders.

“We’re going from one extreme to another you know,” she said with a sigh. “Ophian land is known for its harshness. A *different* kind of harshness.”

Mollie looked at her confused.

“It’s a desert wasteland,” she explained. “The North is bad..I agree. But with the cold, you stand a chance at survival. The cold doesn’t kill you right away. It settles in your bones first...and permeates through the layers of your body slowly... sucking the life from you hour by hour.”

She paused for a moment her tone suddenly lifting.

“You lose a couple toes and fingers but...at least you’re alive. In the East, the heat doesn’t wait.”

Mollie bit her lip.

Arayalynn hesitated.

“You get heatstroke. Not coldstroke. There’s a reason for that.”

Mollie half-smiled at her attempt to lighten the mood.

Arayalynn chewed her lip as she looked at Mollie and Mollie knew the girl was burning with curiosity. Arayalynn had opened up quite readily to Mollie but Mollie had been through a lot...she didn’t know if she was ready to divulge just yet.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” Arayalynn started picking at the thread on her sleeve. “But most people who bottle things in end up breaking apart later. It helps to talk about things before that happens.”

Mollie sighed.

“I know,” she said rather warily.

The silence wore on and Mollie came to realize the girl beside her couldn’t really keep quiet. She was a full on chatterbox.

"I'm happy to see that you finally decided to join us today. I was worried you would never leave the third floor of this vessel and get to see what else is onboard the *Alastor*. She paused for a moment before continuing in her quick chirpy tone. “Though I should probably tell you about the others...considering we’re all going to pretty much be roomies for the next couple of weeks.”

Mollie frowned.

“Caius is in charge of course. He wanted to make the trip out personally. Caleb is second in command. Julien is in charge of steering the vessel and his wife Pauline manages the kitchen. Joël is in charge of the operational and training facility on the third deck. You haven’t met him yet. ”

“Let me guess,” Mollie interjected. “The blond one and his partner are the musclemen?”

She still wasn’t happy with the way they had thrown her onto the ship on her first day aboard the vessel and she noticed how Arayalynn grimaced at the memory.

“I’m sorry about that,” she murmured tousling her short bob once again. “Zephyr is emotional and Caden just... feeds off of it.”

Her voice dropped lower and Mollie had to lean in closer to hear her.

“Zephyr has been in a foul mood ever since the rotten Winter Prince captured Isaac.”

Mollie stiffened.

“Isaac is sort of the baby of the group,” she explained. “It hasn’t been the same without him.”

She balled up her fists and Mollie quickly felt a wave of nausea wash over her again.

“We’re going to get him back,” Arayalynn said hotly. “And when we do we’re going to rain down hard on the fucking Lyons.”

Mollie hesitated before she spoke.

“Are you all...related?”

She was desperate to change the subject. Her guilt for getting Isaac captured gnawed at her. She felt responsible.

Arayalynn laughed lightly.

Mollie realised she seemed a bit...embarrassed but she continued speaking anyways.

“Well...not exactly. Isaac and Zephyr *are* my brothers.”

Mollie paused.

“I thought you said Caius wasn’t your father.”

Arayalynn went red.

“Yeah,” she said scrunching her face. “He’s not.”

Mollie suddenly knew the root of her discomfort and she quickly dropped the subject.

“I guess technically we’re half siblings, but in our group, everyone who is on our side is family. That’s a fact.”

Mollie nodded as if in understanding. She swallowed the uncomfortable truth in the back of her mind reminding her that Arayalynn was direct cousins with the Winter Prince and his brothers.

“That’s nice...that you look out for each other.”

Arayalynn looked sharply at her.

“You’re family too Mollie. I know it took a while, but we did come back for you. We never would have stopped trying to.”

Mollie just looked down. She didn’t know what else to say.

“Caleb was pissed after Isaac couldn’t get you out. We thought at least one of you would have been able to smuggle out of Questershire...”

Mollie laughed humourlessly.

“Right.”

Arayalynn grimaced.

“Is he...Is he okay?”

Mollie glanced at Arayalynn. She knew the girl was referring to her younger brother.

“I...I really don’t know,” she said shakily. “It has been months since I last saw him. Micah told me that he’d spare him.”

Arayalynn went quiet as Mollie spoke.

“You don’t know where do you?”

Mollie shook her head. She wished she could be of more help.

“What’s he like?” she whispered. Her tone was flat with unsuppressed rage and Mollie jumped at the dramatic shift in her tone.

“Who?” Mollie asked feigning ignorance.

Arayalynn scoffed.

“Micah fucking Lyon that’s who. What’s he like? Is he as cold hearted as they say? After all you know him better than anyone else it appears.”

Mollie turned to look at her sharply.

“What makes you say that?”

She couldn’t help the animosity in her tone and she saw Arayalynn raise her hands quickly.

“I’m just going off the rumours. Everyone is talking about you Mollie,” she whispered. “And I mean everyone. You’re kind of... famous.”

Mollie felt her face heat up.

“Wha-What?”

“Come on,” Arayalynn pushed. “Don’t tell me you didn’t know? You think walking side by side with the Winter Prince wasn’t going to garner attention?”

Mollie turned away. She didn’t want to think about Micah right now.

“The others think you’ve been around him too long to see reason. They don’t trust you enough. But I know you’re on our side Mollie. It’ll take some time for the others to see that. Especially my idiot brother –“

“Araya.”

The sharp voice came from behind them and Mollie tensed. Zephyr Lyon was slowly becoming her least favourite person on this claustrophobic vessel.

She turned around swiftly.

His blonde hair lay messily against his forehead as he crossed his arms stiffly and stared unsmiling at the two of them.

“You’re wanted below deck Araya,” he said stonily.

Arayalynn sighed dramatically.

“Can’t you see we’re having some girl time? You’re interrupting.”

He ignored her and motioned with his head for her to leave.

“I’ll catch up with you later Moll,” she said with a half smile. “Avoid looking down,” she added as she stood up and sauntered towards the staircase that led below deck. “It’ll make you less nauseous.”

With that she disappeared below deck.

Mollie swallowed thickly when she realized who her only company was.

He didn’t say anything for a long time as he stared at her and Mollie felt horribly vulnerable under his gaze.

Mollie guessed he was around her age from his somewhat youthful features but his weathered skin and large frame definitely made him appear older. Even if Mollie hadn’t known who he was she could have guessed he was a Lyon from those sharp features. Except for the eyes and the hair. That was different.

“Refuge on this ship isn’t free.”

His deep voice pierced the air and Mollie cringed at its harshness.

“You want food, you work. You want to rest, you work, you want protection? You work.”

He continued staring coldly at her.

“There aren’t servants here and nothing comes for free. Even the clothes on your back will cost you. The sooner you start, the better.”

Mollie frowned back at him. She didn’t like his tone.

“You can work the kitchens starting tomorrow.”

With that he turned and walked away, heading towards the staircase leading below deck.

Mollie sighed and looked out at the view for another moment.

She wondered if Micah knew what had happened. Did he know his brother betrayed him? She wondered if he cared.

She was free of him wasn’t she? Then why wasn’t she happy? Why did she feel a gaping hole in her chest?

She blinked away tears as she pushed herself to her feet.

She was back with the Insurgency – the very people who had put her in the position she was in now. Would her freedom come to her? Would they uphold their end of the bargain after everything?

With a huff Mollie shuffled towards the staircase, the last of the smog overtaking the now black sky as the crescent moon reflected itself on the deep blue surface of the choppy sea.

“Like this dear.”

Mollie struggled to keep her eyes open as she aided Pauline in peeling the potatoes.

There seemed to be an unusually high amount on the ship and Mollie eyed the many bags that lined the back wall of the cramped kitchen.

“Prevents scurvy,” muttered the plump woman beside her catching her gaze.

Mollie nodded as she threw the skin into a small bin near the sink.

She had woken up so miserable this morning. As if a weight had been resting on her shoulders, holding her down throughout the night. Her back ached, her chest ached, and she couldn’t seem to control her bladder. She had already run to the washroom several times in the past hour and already she felt drained after barely getting through the first round of her chores.

Zephyr hadn’t been exaggerating. Work was a requirement and Mollie was already feeling it on her first day in.

“Maybe a nap will do you some good dear.”

Pauline placed a comforting hand on her back in spite of Mollie’s protests.

“I can do it. It’s just the ship...it’s still making me nauseous.”

Mollie didn’t want to appear weak, it was her first day at up and about on the vessel since she had arrived and she didn’t need anyone to pity her more than she felt. Especially considering how she had broken down in front of Caius himself.

Caleb didn’t say much to her and she knew he was harbouring his own guilt. But Mollie wasn’t ready to speak to him yet. Not for a long time.

Pauline went quiet.

“Yes, it...takes some getting used to. Give it a couple of days Miss Mollie. You won’t even notice it after that.”

Mollie grimaced. She hoped that would happen sooner rather than later.

With a grateful smile she placed the peeler down and dragged her feet towards her bed on the bottom deck.

It was more of a sleeping quarter to be precise. Mollie shared the room with the other two females on board and the mens quarters were in the adjacent room, with only a wall to separate. It was...tight. They all had curtains surrounding the perimeter of the cramped bed but it still felt awfully communal.

Mollie had quickly learned the layout of the ship and made sure to ingrain the directions in her head. It was larger than Mollie had first thought and she realized there were four levels including the open top deck. The female quarters were on the third floor right beside the kitchen on the port side and the mens on the opposite site near the starboard. The dining hall was on the second and the meeting rooms on the fourth. The bow also had a small office usually reserved for the captain but Araya had told her that was where Caius spent most of his time. The meeting rooms on the fourth floor were used mostly by Araya, Zephyr, and Caden for "training" as they had put it.

Araya seemed reluctant to let Mollie down there but Mollie hadn’t minded that much. She wasn’t a physical person to begin with. She had no interest in those kind of endeavours.

She groaned as she passed through the cramped corridor of the boat using the railings to guide her way back to her room. The fatigue was consuming her mind like a hazy smog and she felt as if she may collapse right there.

Mollie froze when something caught her eye.

She turned halfway, the flickering lights in the corridor shedding a pale illumination on another figure around the corner.

It was a woman, an older woman and if Mollie hadn't been frozen, awake, and startled she would have believed it were a hallucination. She was under the impression herself, Araya, and Pauline were the only women on board the vessel. Mollie hesitated. She hoped no other surprises were awaiting her for the next few weeks.

The woman was staring hatefully at Mollie, her lips moving as she muttered something under her breath. She was in a gown, a long white one that stopped just above her ankles. Her long wiry hair was slightly matted and her cheekbones were overly pronounced due to the woman's frail slim body.

Mollie felt her throat swell up. The woman was staring her dead on with cloudy blue eyes. Her expression was nothing short of pure lividity.

Mollie didn't feel like sleeping anymore and she backed away slowly, opting to catch her breath on the top level of the ship. The fresh air would offer her some relief.

She pushed her feet upward, the spiralling metal staircase offering little support for her lean lanky frame.

Mollie yelped when she ran into someone—or something utterly solid and hard. She gripped the railings as an irritated huff was heard from above her.

“Are you fucking blind or just fucking stupid?”

Mollie recoiled quickly as Zephyr glared above her, his frame taking up most of the tight cramped space.

He narrowed his eyes when he looked at Mollie and she saw his lips tighten.

“What are you doing? Why aren't you working?”

Mollie locked her jaw and glared at him back.

She respected his position of authority, but she wasn't going to let the son of the another Lyon boss her around, even if Caius was the Jekyll to Hartley's Hyde. God knows she had already let that go on for long enough.

“What are you, the work police?” she retorted pushing past him.

The blonde man blocked her way, his face looming over her as he caged her in.

“No. I'm worse,” he responded.

His voice went lower, almost threateningly and Mollie scoffed.

“I'm *terrified*,” she whispered letting her tone bask in sarcasm.

His face flushed and Mollie could tell he wasn't used to being challenged.

“You should be,” he muttered through gritted teeth as he descended a step further down the staircase so he stood directly above Mollie. “Because if Micah Lyon didn’t finish you off, I sure as hell will.”

Mollie fumed silently as he slid past her making sure to shove his shoulder against hers as he past so she stumbled down a stair or two.

Mollie exhaled sharply and let him go. The last thing she needed was to make enemies within the Insurgency.

Mollie finished her trek up the rickety staircase and stomped her way to the top deck where an icy breeze enveloped her frame. She had on extra coat on top of her cloak today and she was happy to inhale the fresh cool air after being below deck for so long.

She let her negative feelings dissipate as she closed her eyes and let the wind run through her thick curls. She stiffened when a sharp heat began to emanate from her neck. Startled, Mollie looked down to see the metal *M* on her necklace glimmer blue as it lay neatly against her neck. It was giving off heat from some reason and before Mollie could touch it she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder.

She whipped around nearly tumbling backwards as she swung hard into the railings.

“Easy there.”

She released a breath in shock as Caius stood in front of her his arms outstretched as if to catch her.

He chuckled as she regained her composure and she quickly brushed her curls out of her face.

“You’re rather agitated,” he said with a smile. “Relax Mollie. No one here is out to hurt you.”

Mollie frowned. She was tempted to tattle tale to Caius about his bratty son but she held her tongue.

He pursed his lips as he observed her and she watched as he offered an arm out to her.

"You were actually just the person I was looking for," he said with a smile. "Would you be willing to accompany me to my office?"

Mollie was surprised by the gesture. She knew Caius was no longer directly associated with the monarchy, but it seemed as if certain habits were ingrained.

The gesture was all too familiar to Mollie but she trusted Caius. There was a warmth that radiated from him, a fatherly affectionate aura that made Mollie want to open up and tell him her lifestory. She almost forgot in that moment that he was a Lyon himself, and that the same blood that ran through the Kings' veins ran through his.

“It’s cold up here, you’ll get sick if you linger here for too long.”

He was murmuring to her as he lead her gently back below deck so the dusty warmth of the air below deck simmered around them.

He guided her down to the second landing of the ship where they passed the dining room and entered into another smaller room. It was cosy and warm with a little fire below a dusty mahogany mantelpiece. A desk was in front of a large round window overlooking the icy waters around them.

“Have a seat Mollie.”

Mollie swallowed nervously and seated herself in front of the large desk that Caius had slowly walked behind so he could sit across from her.

Mollie still somewhat struggled to separate Caius from the King and she kept averting her gaze as he made them both a warm cup of tea. The resemblance was undeniably uncanny and she thanked him quietly as he pushed the drink toward her.

She met his gaze and waited as he held the cup in his hand.

He seemed to know what she waiting for and he gave her a half smile before he took a long sip first. It was an invitation – a signal that he came in peace with no ill intentions.

Mollie followed suit, taking a sip as Caius sat back in the leather chair pulling out a gold pocketwatch from his pocket.

Mollie’s eyes snapped towards it and Caius seemed to sense her curiosity.

“My father gave this to each one of us,” he murmured showing Mollie the thick gold covering around the outside. An elegant *C* was engraved on the surface and Mollie admired the expert craftsmanship. Relics like that were priceless.

“Said he got it forged in the volcanoes of the Obsidian Desert.”

Caius twirled the object in his hand. When Mollie looked closer, she realized with surprise that it wasn’t just a pocketwatch. It was a navigational tool, equipped with nautical and cardinal elements. The thin pick of the needle on the corner was pointing East and Mollie met Caius’ placid gaze. He really did have a beautiful eye colour. Strikingly similar to his sons.

Mollie shifted uncomfortably as Caius snapped it shut and slid it back into his left pocket.

“Micah has one,” she murmured. “Just like that.”

Caius nodded.

“I’m sure he does. One of many invaluable heirlooms”

He sipped his tea again as he inched closer to the table.

“But even priceless brass turns black Mollie. Remember that.”

Caius clasped his hands together as he leaned forward on the table and Mollie noticed that he too wore a ring on his pinky finger.

“I don’t want to pressure you this early,” Caius started, looking earnestly into her brown eyes. “But it’s important you understand the gravity of our situation. The purpose of our mission.”

His soft blonde hair caught the light and Mollie wondered how he could possibly be related to people as sickening as the Lyons. He seemed too truthful...too honest...too *good* to be associated with them. What went so wrong?

“It wasn’t fair what happened to you. And I’ll spend everyday trying to show you how sorry I am. Truly.”

“It isn’t your fault,” Mollie murmured.

Caius paused.

“Thank you for your assurances Mollie. That’s kind of you, but I’ll address an injustice when I see it. And quite frankly I believe it *was* our fault. We pride ourselves on our trust-- on our dependence—on our support of each other. I built this rebellion with the hopes of bringing down the very thing that broke the monarchy apart in the first place. Greed and selfishness.”

He paused again, taking a sip of his tea. He spoke softly but urgently and in his voice lay an adequate balance of fierceness and honesty.

“A monarchy exists to maintain order, as a way to prevent people from lapsing into the selfish persona we all harbour inside of us. That is the reason we have governments, police, peacekeepers, enforcers of the region.”

Caius sighed.

“But the minute a person lets that power corrupt them, they become the very thing they swore they sought to destroy.”

His voice had taken on a rather dismal tone and Mollie bit her lip.

“I stood by family through a lot of turbulent times Mollie,” he explained. “I protected them, I fought for them, I would have *died* for them. That’s what family does.”

His fists balled up as he looked away from her for a moment.

“I don’t understand,” Mollie murmured.

Caius' eyes flickered to hers.

“I thought the Insurgency killed Logan Lyon?”

Caius frowned and Mollie saw fleeting remnants of pain creep around the edges of his face. It surprised her.

“Logan... was his own demise.”

His voice was flat and with a shock Mollie realized that Caius still seemed to be grieving the loss.

“Logan was deluded. Completely brainwashed by Hartley by the time we reached him. He dropped the anthrax before any of us could make the first move on him. Killed everyone in that city and the next city over.”

He exhaled sharply.

“Everything changed the minute Hartley put that bounty on my head and on my family’s.”

Caius turned to Mollie abruptly and she could see the pain in Caius’s eyes mirrored in her own and in so many people the Lyons had trampled on.

“It’s one thing to murder others for your own gain, but it’s a whole other kind of evil to do it to your own family.”

Mollie stiffened at the sharpness in Caius’ tone.

“But before I justify my actions, I think it’s only fair that you understand what it means to be a part of this family. What it means to grow up in this world of royalty and betrayal. I think it’s only fair you understand what justifies my actions to want to kill the only brother I have left.”

Chapter End Notes

Couldn't delay this. That was a mean cliffhanger I dropped that last chapter. Won't be too much smut coming up due to the heavy focus on plot and mystery. As always, thank you for reading xx

Chapter 34: Sélénium

Chapter Summary

Further truths about the Lyons begin to unravel and Mollie comes to a life changing realization.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Caius had hesitated when Mollie removed her coat so she remained in only the vibrant yellow cloak atop her shoulders.

It was a similar shade to Caius' hair and she wondered...

"Another relic," he murmured with a small smile, his eyes on the cloak around her. "Take good care of that Mollie," he added. "It belonged to a courageous soul."

"Please," Mollie said softly. "What happened to her?"

Before Caius could speak she saw his eyes zero in on the necklace glimmering around her neck.

He had stiffened and Mollie noticed his blue eyes had suddenly darkened.

"Where...where did you get that?"

It was the first time since she had met him that she heard his voice come out cold and harsh. It was such a stark transition from his normally congenial tone and Mollie tensed.

Before she could respond he had stepped right up to her, seemingly gliding around the table to grasp her shoulder hard and observe the jewellery more closely.

He seemed shocked and Mollie was suddenly nervous.

"Caius?" she questioned gripping the hard wood in front of her with her nails.

"This was hers."

Caius's whisper was so soft – so fleeting Mollie may have imagined he had never spoken at all.

"This was my sisters."

Mollie felt her throat constrict when she heard this and she looked at Caius sharply.

“That’s impossible,” she whispered clutching the necklace to her throat. “You’re confusing this with Izabel Lyon’s locket. It’s different. Micah-”

The look Caius gave her reminded her so sharply of Hartley she scrambled backwards in involuntary fear.

"Micah gave this to you?"

Mollie had gone silent. Caius' voice had come out blunt and incredulous and she felt her palms begin to sweat.

“This isn't her locket,” he said harshly. “This is different. *This* necklace is what Izabel was wearing the day she returned from the Ophian Empire. This...this is the necklace she was wearing the day she *died*. ”

Questershire, 23 years earlier

Caius glanced upwards the sound only registering in his ears minutes later. The courts were empty, the decision hanging heavy in the balance as the King took his last breaths from the room above them.

Logan pouted at the opposite end of the table not wanting to be a part of the meeting. Caius shook his head in annoyance. The boy was young and spoiled. He had told his father this many times but the king didn't want to hear it. It would be foolish to leave the West in the hands of a whimsical 17 year old spoiled prince. Surely Atem would see this and make the appropriate call. It would be best for the monarchy – for the people.

Atem was stressed, his knuckles clenching and unclenching as the footsteps echoed throughout the enormous fortress above them – backwards—forwards—backwards— forwards. It was as if God himself was taunting them – toying with their minds as he grappled with his decision to let the King live for another day or two.

Hartley was silent as usual, seemingly bored as he twirled a goblet of whiskey in his hand. The gears in his mind were in motion -- Caius could tell – and he narrowed his eyes as the sound of children fighting suddenly filled the room.

Caius could only assume what had happened this time and he rubbed his eyes slowly as the sound of Arayalynn's sharp sobs could be heard echoing throughout the manor followed by boyish laughter.

Atem shot Hartley a menacing look as servants could be heard from outside trying to placate the screaming girl. Hartley didn't even seem to notice.

*“Pouvez-vous controller vos fils?”**

Atem's voice came out hard and gritty but Hartley only smirked at the frigid response.

*“Les garçons seront toujours des garçons mon frère.”**

Caius sighed. Hartley's two young sons were little monsters and it was common knowledge. Especially that older one. His insolence irked Caius in more ways than one.

*"Si tu avais un fils, je peux vous assurer tu comprendrais mieux."**

Atem's lip curled at the hidden insult but he didn't engage. Not today.

"Mes frères."

Caius interjected swiftly. He was always the mediator between the two of them – always maintaining the peace. It was tiresome but it was his unofficial job at this point. He had been doing it for years.

*"Nous devrions canaliser nos efforts ver le problème actuel n'est-ce pas?"**

*"J'ai faim," Logan said suddenly. "Je ne veux pas être ici."**

Caius glared at the boy his blue eyes widening before dropping back to the table in fear. The others ignored their youngest brother, their own thoughts too heavy to ignore.

Caius had a soft spot for his youngest brother. Their mother had died when Logan was only four and she had babied him too much. He also had their mothers eyes, much like Caius. A deep sea blue that reflected the sky.

Caius turned his gaze towards the exit, longing to be anywhere but in this cramped cold room. His eyes lingered over the tall beautiful princess – his eldest brother's wife.

She had always been a looker but today she was simply breathtaking. Her eyes met Caius' from beyond the glass windows of the parlour. She wore white, her long flowy gown draping over her figure so elegantly – pronouncing the curves of her breasts and the shapely figure of her hips.

When Caius met her gaze again she looked stressed, her blue eyes wide and her lips parted in fear.

Caius didn't even think twice. He got up from his chair and swiftly left the room, ignoring the angry calls from his eldest brother as the door shut behind him.

*"Isla," he said sharply marching towards her. "Qu'est-ce que c'est le problème? Êtes-vous blessé?"**

She was shaking, her lips quivering – her hands quivering.

Caius looked sharply upwards when he saw that someone else had entered the hall.

Her yellow cloak was draped around her shoulders, highlighting her tall slender figure. Her thick blonde hair fell in loose curls around her shoulders and on her face was an expression of absolute lividity. Caius watched in silence as she marched up to Isla, her bright green eyes narrowed accusingly. Without a pause in her step, she proceeded to slap the woman harshly across the cheek.

Caius doubled back in shock.

*“Je sais ce que vous avez fait.”**

Her voice was so uncharacteristically blunt. It shook Caius to the core.

“Izabel!”

Caius gaped at his sister as she turned her stormy gaze towards him.

He watched silently as Isla glared daggers at his sister, her lip curled in anger as she stormed off, her gown billowing out behind her.

Izabel made a move to step around Caius and follow the princess but he stopped her, his grip on her slender wrist tightening.

*“Parle-moi Izabel, je t’en supplie.”**

She looked up at him with wide eyes, those green irises burning into his soul. He hadn’t seen her in a year since she had voyaged to the Ophian empire. And God how he had missed her. Her stunning smile, her fierceness, her determination.

He caught sight of a shimmering necklace against her sunkissed neck, glowing bright against her smooth collarbone. It was new...a product of excellent Ophian craftsmanship he suspected. Their abundance of precious metals and jewels was unsurpassed by any other regime.

“En Anglais Caius,” she whispered looking around her in fear.

Caius furrowed his brow.

*“Pourquoi? Dois-je m’inquiéter de quelque chose ?”**

“Caius please,” she whispered clutching his arm tightly. “Someone might hear.”

He sighed pulling her off to the corner of the atrium, away from the doors leading into the parlour.

“They’re coming after me Caius,” she whispered her eyes wide.

“Who?” Caius said immediately his grip on her tightening. “Who is? The Ophians?”

She shook her head quickly. She was so frazzled – so fearful. It made Caius’ heart sore to see in her such a state.

The Ophians had broken their temporary treaty settlement for the fifth time in less than a decade with the Lyons and Caius feared they may never be able to maintain a stable relationship with the Ophian empire. The King -- his father-- had been considering the monarchical transition to constitutionality, but the usurpation of sole power did not sit well with him. Caius was aware that the Ophians disliked the power disparity between the people

and the government and this had been a driving force in their reluctance to maintain civil economic and political ties with their regime. Caius had hoped Izabel and Hartley's trip to the Empire as congenial diplomats could have potentially smoothed things out between them but Caius had a feeling things did not go as well as they had originally hoped. Izabel had been prepared to arrange a marriage with an Ophian prince anyway, that was the primary reason for her accompanying Hartley. Caius and Hartley did not get along well, but even Caius couldn't deny the man knew how to negotiate -- exceedingly well in fact. It was shocking to him as well as his father when they both returned -- Izabel without a prince and Hartley without a deal.

"What happened in Anatarin? Does this have anything to do with Isla?"

He hesitated as he asked the question.

Izabel narrowed her eyes.

"Trouble always seems to follow Isla. I told Atem I never liked her from day one."

Caius smiled affectionately at her.

"You're too used to getting all the attention. That's all it is."

Izabel shook her head rapidly. She was still so on edge. Caius cupped her cheeks in his palms.

"Please Izabel, talk to me. Who is coming after you?"

Izabel stared fearfully into her brothers blue eyes. She was shaking.

"I don't know. I don't know what or who they are but...they came after me-us- Caius. They want something that I have-"

"What do you have?"

Izabel hesitated. She tucked a soft tendril of blonde hair behind her ear.

"I...I can't tell you."

Her whisper was so fleeting Caius had to do a double take as he stared deep into his sisters eyes.

Her words hurt him more than he cared to admit. He always treasured the relationship he shared with Izabel. They had always been transparent with each other, since they were children.

"You always told me everything. What changed?"

"Everything," she whispered.

The sound of arguing woman could be heard on the landing above them and Caius cursed.

“They won’t even let Father die in peace. Everything is...spiralling out of control.”

He knew their voices. Isla and Porphyria were fighting again. The two women couldn’t stand each other...not so different from their spouses. Caius was well aware that Isla was bitter that Porphyria had been granted with the title of Queen despite being the wife of the second born prince. Rightfully, it should be Isla, but her unpopularity with his father had rendered her simply a princess in spite of her marriage to his firstborn. It ate at her, Caius could tell and Porphyria flaunted her title at any opportunity she got which only intensified their toxic relationship.

“It should be you Caius,” Izabel whispered clutching her brothers fingers in her own.

“Father should have insisted you succeed him as sole business proprietor; he has the power to do so.”

Caius stared at his younger sister in shock.

“Nonsense,” Caius said with an air of surprise. “Atem will be a fine King of the North and Hartley of the South. I have no problem giving my position as CEO of trade to Atem. You know how much I despise sitting in that throne all day.”

He laughed but Izabel stayed silent.

“Plus Atem is the oldest. It makes sense.”

Izabel frowned. Her thoughts seemed to be faraway.

“It’s always those that seek the kingdom the most that drive it to the ground the hardest.”

Caius sighed.

“Izabel...”

“Izabel!”

Hartley’s deep tone echoed down the hall and Caius hesitated as his sister ran from him to her other brother.

He seemed shocked to see her and Caius frowned at the tense situation between them. Ever since their voyage to the East, Hartley had been strangely disconnected from the family. Caius sensed something off about the entire expedition and he planned on drilling Izabel about it later.

“Hartley,” Caius said sharply.

Hartley had his arm looped around Izabel, the two on their way out towards the massive grounds of the manor.

“Yes?”

Hartley had that soft languid tone in his voice that made Caius want to knee him in the gut. It was the tone he used to use everytime he threw Caius or Atem under the bus to avoid a punishment from their father.

"I'm taking Izabel out with me to the ball in Elysia tonight. She needs to get ready-"

"I'll take her," Hartley said cutting Caius off before he could finish. Izabel looked blankly at Caius, the emotion wiped clean from her face as Hartley ushered her outside into the foggy ambiance.

Caius frowned.

At this point, he knew something was off and he had every intention of getting to the bottom of it. He wouldn't let anyone hurt his sister. And if Hartley had led her into some kind of danger in the East, Caius would make sure his older brother felt his wrath. It was about time he let people know that his kindness was not to be mistaken for a weakness.

"I still don't understand."

Mollie had her arms crossed across the table as Caius paced behind his desk.

"It could have been anyone," Caius said softly his fingers rubbing his temples. "Everything happened so...quickly."

He sighed.

"We all had a weapon on us and we all had it facing at each other. She wasn't there...she wasn't even in the room...then suddenly she was *there* -- bleeding and curled on the floor..."

Mollie hesitated as Caius closed his eyes, the vision obviously re-surfacing some unpleasant memories.

"She was wearing the necklace earlier that morning when I saw her. *Before* she left with Hartley somewhere. But her neck was bare after her body was examined..."

"Why *M*?" Mollie questioned. "Why was Izabel wearing a necklace that had the letter *M* on it."

Caius suddenly paled and before Mollie could probe further he had turned away from her.

The door opened loudly startling Mollie, and she turned towards the figure in the doorway and felt her stomach roil with rage.

Zephyr entered with a lazy look on his face. He all but ignored Mollie as he addressed his father directly.

"La formation commence dans une heure."

Caius nodded absent-mindedly. Mollie could tell he was pre-occupied with his thoughts -- with the news he had just learned. He looked as if he were going to be sick.

“Papa, j’ai besoin que tu sois là pour me former.”

Caius brought his fingers to his temples again and Mollie could see the stress evident on his features.

He suddenly lifted his head and turned to Mollie. He had a strange apprehensive look on his face as he observed her closely.

“Where is Araya?” Caius asked.

Zephyr frowned.

“Training as usual. That’s what she spends all day doing. She neglects the rest of her duties.”

His voice was harsh and rough, much like his exterior.

Mollie noticed that Zephyr seemed to have just finished some sort of workout session. The ends of his blond hair were damp with sweat from hardcore exertion and his thin shirt clung to his muscular figure. His muscles rippled as he crossed his arms and Mollie did her best not to stare.

Caius turned to Mollie suddenly.

“Take Mollie with you.”

Zephyr looked as if he had just been severely insulted and Mollie felt her face flush.

“Quoi?”

Caius shrugged.

“I think basic combat would be a good skill for Mollie to learn. And seeing as she has lots of free time to spare, I’m sure she’ll have no problem fitting it into her schedule.”

Zephyr was pissed. Mollie could see it on his face. He did nothing to hide his feelings towards her.

“The basics will suffice,” Caius said with a warning tone. “What do you say Mollie?”

Mollie frowned and looked at Zephyr who was unabashedly fuming.

“Carry on Zen. I’m sure Araya would be more than happy to assist. I have some urgent things to see to.”

There was an edge to Caius' voice that Mollie noticed Zephyr had heard as well and he didn't push his father any more, even though his annoyance radiated off of him.

Caius returned to his desk and Mollie slowly stood up as Zephyr glared at her from the entrance.

“Oh and Mollie,” Caius added before she could leave. “Thank you for your help...”

She nodded and meekly left the room, the feeling of Caius’ son’s cold glare burning a hole into her back.

Araya squealed when she saw Mollie sitting on the bench across from the wide clearing in the middle of the room.

Mollie guessed that this was room that must have at one point been used for storage of material. However it had now been transformed into a combat room filled with weapons along the wall and several wooden mannequins that were decorated with holes and missing limbs.

Zephyr was scowling in a corner as he listened to another member – Mollie believed Caden was his name – speak to him.

“Don’t mind Zen,” Araya said with a frown. “He just doesn’t like new members. He has trust issues.”

Mollie felt as if Zen’s hatred toward her went deeper than mere distrust but she kept that thought to herself.

“But Zen is a formidable teacher. He trains all new members of the group. He’s the one to get you in tip top position for any sort of threat or danger.”

“Did he train you?” Mollie asked hesitantly as Araya flipped her short bob to the side so the ends curled around her ears.

“Please,” she said an eyeroll. “He wishes. I may not look it but I’m in my mid thirties Mollie. I’ve been around a lot longer than little Zen has.”

Zen picked up his head when he heard his name in conversation and he scowled when he noticed Mollie beside his sister.

“He hates me,” Mollie muttered as Arayalynn scampered around Mollie.

“Nah,” she said absent-mindedly as she bunched Mollie’s long thick hair through her fingers. “He’s just...careful. A little too careful sometimes.”

Arayalynn released Mollie’s hair with a sharp exhale and crossed her arms.

“You have too much hair Mollie. You’re going to have to cut some of this off. It will weigh you down in battle.”

“Battle?” Mollie repeated. “What the hell do you mean? I don’t fight,” she argued stepping away from the girl.

“I know,” Araya said brushing her off. “That’s why we’re going to teach you.”

Mollie swallowed. Maybe she would have been better off just heading back to her room.

“What do you think?”

Mollie was in front of the mirror in one of the back rooms of the training ground as Arayalynn circled around her.

It was a big change from what Mollie had quickly realized she had become accustomed to.

Instead of long silky gowns and hand stitched girly dresses she was clothed in a skin tight black suit that covered her entire body. Along the edges were silvery material with thick mesh covering around the ridges. It was full of pockets and crevices and Mollie felt stifled. She felt as if she were wearing a wet suit that was already wet.

Araya had chopped her hair quite short, so it just brushed the edge of her shoulders instead of resting at her waist.

She pinned it back and away from Mollie’s face into a slick ponytail that fell behind her.

She looked so different. Mollie didn’t even recognize herself.

Mollie had to admit the suit was a bit tight around the midriff but Araya waved her off.

“Whose suit was this?” Mollie asked as Arayalynn helped clip her belt in place.

Araya fell silent for a moment and Mollie watched as the girl carefully tucked her straight choppy hair behind her ears.

“It’s Isaac’s,” she said softly crossing her arms. “He won’t mind if you borrow it, trust me.”

Mollie bit her lip and took a step back from the mirror. Her lean frame fit into the suit quite well but Mollie only *looked* the part. She still had no idea how she was going to *fit* the part.

“This is handcrafted Ophian clothing Mollie,” Araya said, suddenly serious as she turned her wide blue eyes towards Mollie. “The mesh covering is activated during any activity involving water and the layer underneath is insulating during cold climates.”

As she twirled Mollie around and showed her the different parts of the suit Mollie realized they had company joining them as three members of the group entered the room promptly.

“Great,” Araya said suddenly turning to the others. “She’s ready to get started.”

Zen was in the corner watching and Mollie tensed when she saw his mate beside him. The third person Mollie had never seen before and she didn't know there was one extra member on the ship.

"I don't think we've met," he said swiftly taking a step toward Mollie. "I'm J  l," he said with a charming smile. Mollie blushed. He was very handsome with rich dark skin and a clean side part through rich black curls. He had dark eyes framed by a thick array of equally dark lashes with a smile that made Mollie instantly feel warm.

"Mollie," she replied shaking his hand.

Araya gave J  l a tender smile when she saw him and Mollie noticed how she touched his arm ever so slightly as she walked past him.

Araya turned towards the other two and clapped her hands together.

"Caden. Zen. Let's get started."

Mollie really hadn't done all that much so far but already her legs ached and her muscles were sore.

"Lift your arms higher Mollie."

Araya had intervened straightening Mollie's posture and adjusting her arms.

"I can't keep them up," she muttered, the burning in her joints traveling straight to her brain. "It's painful!"

Araya nodded.

"That will happen till it doesn't. I'd be more concerned if you didn't feel anything at all."

Mollie sighed heavily.

"Timing?" Araya asked turning towards J  l who was working away at some machine in the corner.

"A little delayed," he said fluidly. "But that's expected. Speed will improve with time."

"Time isn't exactly on our side."

Zen had intervened and Mollie scowled as he strolled in shirtless tossing his shirt onto a nearby bench in the corner.

His sweat soaked muscles flexed as he walked towards the aged black wardrobe in the back.

"What's in the wardrobe?" Mollie whispered to J  l who had sauntered over to adjust Mollie's collar.

Jöel smirked.

“That’s an armoury not a wardrobe.”

Mollie stiffened as Zen re-appeared with a long sword in his right hand. Mollie looked confusedly at Araya who grinned as her brother began to actively spar with her. She had but a simple wooden stick in her hand.

“Zen is rather fond of the desertblade.”

Mollie had heard only rumours about such weapons and she stared at Jöel in surprise.

“Is he out of his mind?” Mollie whispered back harshly. “Those things are exceedingly dangerous. No one uses elemental blades anymore, it was said to be way too dangerous even for the person wielding it.”

Jöel seemed amused by Mollie’s reaction.

“I know.”

Mollie cringed as the two of them sparred at a speed that surpassed what Mollie had believed was possible.

“I can’t do this,” she groaned sliding her hands down her face.

Jöel placed a gentle hand on Mollie’s shoulder.

“We all start from somewhere Mollie,” he reminded her. “It only seems impossible now since you’re starting out.”

Jöel hesitated as Araya began to shout orders at Zen.

“You ever see the prince spar?”

Mollie looked down. She wanted to wipe any thoughts she had about Micah away but she knew it was impossible.

“Not really,” she admitted with a frown. “I did try to disarm him once though.”

Jöel’s eyes seemed to bug out of his head and Mollie gave him a half hearted smile.

“It didn’t go over too well.”

“You’re kidding?” Jöel whispered, his dark eyes bright. “How did you...how are you still alive? Mollie that’s crazy.”

Mollie frowned.

“Like I said...it didn’t go over so well.”

Jöel’s face fell and he seemed to realize his question was a little too intrusive.

"I'm sorry," he admitted with a sigh. "I shouldn't have pressed you like that. I've just heard a lot about Micah Lyon. They say he learned how to wield a sword before he knew how to write."

Mollie snorted.

"I wouldn't believe everything you hear about the prince," she said a little harsher than she intended. "And I don't believe that to be true."

Jöel shrugged.

"I suppose you're right. But the way he comes across, you can't blame people for believing it."

Jöel suddenly leaned in and Mollie watched as he removed something from his pocket.

"You know why I asked why you were still alive earlier? After you tried to disarm the prince?"

Mollie looked at him and shook her head. She wasn't sure where Jöel was going with his musings.

"In nobility, it is custom that every person carry with them a dagger that they themselves designed and created after successfully completing their five pillars of training."

Mollie blinked at him.

"What? Like a diploma after graduation?"

Jöel smiled.

"Yeah. Exactly like that."

"What are the five pillars?" Mollie asked curiously.

Jöel laughed lightly.

"It's quite simple, really." He paused after this, as if reconsidering his words. "Well, in conversation it is but in practice not so much."

He watched Zen and Araya spar with each other for a couple minutes before he began his explanation.

"The first pillar is the G stone. It stands for *Guidance*. Without proper instruction from your coach you can't expect to proceed further in your training. Only once your coach deems you proficient do you move forward to the S stone. *Semblance*. Engaging in battle is all about expecting the unexpected. It is no different from a dance between two people or a duet on stage. The final performance will always be different from the practice session, no matter how much you train. But regardless of what happens, you maintain composure, even in the midst of chaos."

Mollie swallowed uneasily as she took in his information. She didn't feel prepared for any of this. She was a simple baker from the country, not a warrior with years of training below her belt.

Jöel continued.

"The third pillar is the D stone for *Deliverance*. It is one of the most crucial stages of your training.

Mollie turned to him confusedly.

Jöel smiled at her again.

"People always react that way when they find out the D stone is the most important pillar of them all. It never gets old."

"I don't get it," Mollie interjected, her brows furrowing. "How can liberation be the most important pillar? Isn't being in battle the opposite of liberation? Aren't you trapped with the person you're fighting? Aren't you *attempting* to achieve liberation?"

Jöel chuckled at her questions as he played with the dagger in his hand.

"All valid questions," he said with a grin. "But you're missing the bigger picture Mollie. You're focusing on the physical aspects of battle when in reality it's so much more to it than that. Being in battle is not only a game of arms. It's a game of the mind. *Deliverance* is a direct reference to your mental liberation. Without the proper psyche, you'll crumble before you even reach for a weapon."

Mollie paused. She hadn't considered this.

"But how can you possibly know if someone is mentally prepared for battle?"

Jöel shrugged. "It's different for everybody. It's something you figure out when you reach that stage."

He hesitated after this.

"Of course not everybody reaches that stage..."

Mollie frowned. She could feel her anxiety blossoming up inside of her. Jöel continued.

"The fourth pillar is the E stone for *Endurance*. That one pretty much speaks for itself I'd say."

Mollie weakly returned his smile. This dump of information was a lot for her to absorb.

"The fifth and final pillar is the R stone for *Remembrance*. Your training means nothing if you are unable to remember all that you have learned from the first pillar to the last. It is also a testament to your ability to remember all that your coach has taught you. It is no less important than the other four.

Mollie exhaled slowly as her stomach did somersaults within her.

Jöel gave her an easy going smile. "You'll get there eventually Mollie, believe me. And before you know it you'll have completed your training and in your hands will be your *own* dagger.

"Why a dagger?" she questioned as Jöel unsheathed his own from its black casing.

"A dagger is probably the most simplistic weapon. You ask anyone to name a weapon and nine times out of ten someone will name a knife or a dagger of some sort. It's that ubiquitous."

Mollie watched as he balanced the fine shining weapon in his palm.

It was quite beautiful in its own way with its slick thin handle and sharp grooved edges along the side. Engraved along the side were symbols and words Mollie couldn't quite discern and the blade had a deeper greyer colour than Mollie would have thought.

"This dagger was designed by me and created to fit my hands only. Only I know how to wield it in such a way."

The dagger seemed to balance perfectly in Jöel's palm and as Mollie went to reach for it he gave her a playful shake of his head.

"Not so fast," he said with a wry smile. "No one touches my dagger but me."

Mollie remembered Micah's quite clearly. The icy blue metal that seemed to glow cobalt in the night. It was freezing to the touch and adorned with jewels along the hilt. It was so... *him*. Had she known about the importance of such a weapon, she may have played her cards a little more wisely in the past.

"When you've completed your training, albeit successfully, you'll get your own Mollie."

Mollie flinched.

She doubted she'd ever reach that point. Not with her long legs, lack of coordination, and inability to properly hold the damn thing.

"*DAMN* it Zen," Araya called out as he gave a particularly hard whip of the weapon at her unprotected torso.

Zen simply laughed as she scowled at him returning to the opposite side of the training clearing.

"Gotta keep that arm down," he reminded her playfully as she attempted to return the hit.

"They call that shot the gastro fiasco," Jöel said with a laugh. "Super painful and incredibly effective. Your torso is one of the most vulnerable areas during battle due to the lack of bone coverage there. As well as an unprotected thigh."

Mollie continued to watch Zen and Araya spar for a bit. Although it made her nervous, she much preferred this than sitting in the cramped kitchen above deck peeling potatoes with old Pauline.

“Why an unprotected thigh?” Mollie questioned as Zen increased the pace of his thrusts.

“Because of the femoral artery,” J  l explained. “It’s one of the largest arteries in the body due to the requirement of supplying blood to the muscles in the legs. It also has the highest blood pressure due to its proximity and spatial arrangement from the heart. It has the highest blood pressure because it is the largest artery below the heart and thus it is not necessary for blood pressure to fight against the force of gravity.”

He spoke gravely and quickly and Mollie listened as J  l continued to teach her the basics.

“It’s important to know these things before you even pick up a weapon, let alone practice with another person. That femoral artery in particular is troublesome. It lies quite close to the surface of the skin and makes us vulnerable in that position. One slice there and you can bleed to death in minutes.”

“But how do you account for that?” Mollie questioned. “How hyperaware do you have to be in order to cover your, chest, torso, and your thighs while at the same time trying to find those weaknesses in your opponent?”

J  l grinned at her.

“That’s the beauty of sparring Mollie, you live and you learn.” He paused at her expression of shock and laughed.

“I’m joking,” he said with chuckle. “You simulate. Simulation is powerful. You practice with the fake stuff before you use the really dangerous stuff. Like Zen. That’s just a safety sword, not an actual desertblade. Though even a skilled sparrer would second guess using that weapon in battle.” He hesitated as he continued, dropping his voice even lower. “But Zen likes living on the edge. Always has.”

Mollie made a move to stand, the muscles in her legs cramping. Her aches had only seemed to worsen with each passing day and she felt a strong pulse of nausea begin to hit her again.

“You alright?” J  l asked, the concern in his voice evident.

“Fine,” Mollie brushed off. “I think the tilting of the ship is kind of getting to me now,” she admitted. “I just need to get out of this suit and rest a bit.”

“Let me call Araya,” J  l replied turning towards the siblings who were still sparring with each other.

“No!” Mollie said rather sharply. “It’s fine. I can do it myself.” She gave him a small smile as she turned to head towards one of the back rooms.

“I’ll see you at dinner.”

Mollie had slept straight through dinner and only when she heard the sharp sound of shuffling above her did she wake from her slumber. She was surprised to see that it was pitch black around her. It must have been late, well past midnight, but the room was surprisingly empty. Her curtain was closed and the blankets wrapped snugly around her body.

Mollie groaned as she pushed herself to her feet and made a move towards the small sink and mirror around the corner. As she splashed cold water on her face she saw a familiar face staring at her from the mirror – right behind her shoulder.

She gasped in shock and whirled around to see the old woman in white that had intercepted her way to her room early yesterday morning, standing in front of her.

The woman had not aged well and Mollie swallowed nervously as she stared at Mollie with those pale milky blue eyes. If Mollie hadn't seen her before, she would have thought she were a ghost.

Quite suddenly she reached forward and gripped Mollie's wrists in her hands and Mollie yelped at the abrupt contact.

"You stupid girl," she hissed. "Bad luck will befall this ship now that you're on board."

Mollie recoiled quickly, attempting to unsuccessfully yank her wrists from the old woman's strong grip.

"What the hell are you talking about?" she cried out twisting in the woman's shockingly steely grasp.

"You carry the seed of the enemy in your womb, I felt it the minute you boarded this ship. You've doomed us all."

Mollie began to scream as the woman began to claw at Mollie -- her nails sinking into her shoulders and dragging downwards to claw away at her abdomen.

Mollie hadn't even realized that she was wearing very little -- nothing except for a short top and her panties as the crazy woman scratched at the flesh of her stomach.

It didn't take long for the other members of the ship to come scampering down to the bedroom quarters.

Mollie was terrified as Caius and Zen acted quickly, immediately seizing the old woman as she hurled threats at Mollie. The woman thrashed and screamed as Caius and Zen dragged her as far away from Mollie as they could.

Araya clutched Mollie and quickly led her out of the room as the old woman continued to scream from above deck.

By the time Mollie made it to Caius's office she was trembling. Not even the soft reassurances from Araya were enough to settle her spasming nerves.

“Mollie I’m so sorry,” Araya blubbered as she clutched Mollie’s quivering wrists. “She’s supposed to be passed out by this time of the night. I’m so sorry.”

Mollie didn’t even bother to ask who or what the woman was doing on their ship, she was too numb by what the woman had told her.

“Why would she say that?” Mollie whispered brokenly between numb lips. “Why would she...”

Mollie trailed off as those womans words filtered through her head.

You carry the seed of the enemy in your womb.

No. God No.

Mollie was suddenly gasping for air as she fell to her knees, desperate sobs escaping from her throat.

“What the hell is going on in here?”

Mollie recognized Caleb’s deep voice but Mollie couldn’t hear anything – she had blocked her mind out from everything around her.

But he had given it to her. Micah had injected her. He had told her it would prevent her from getting pregnant.

Mollie sobbed as she remembered that moment.

“Oh Mollie, you foolish girl,” said that taunting voice in the back of her mind. *“That was months ago. How many more times had he fucked you after that?”*

Mollie had lost count. How had she lost track of time so horribly after being in the North. It was as if being there, in that isolated setting surrounded by ice and glacial mountains had warped Mollie’s reality -- transformed her perception of time and space and everything in between.

The last time she had her period was sometime in Questershire. Days before she had been transported North. She knew...and...

She suddenly felt as if she were going to vomit again.

Micah had known too. He easily could have tracked her cycle after knowing her first day of menstruation.

The memories began to hit her full force after that. The nausea, the appetite fluctuations, the sleeping, the fatigue.

Oh my god.

She could see Micah's smirk now as he glanced at her, all dolled up in her yellow gown as he showed her off to the rest of his guests. He had been so protective of her, so watchful. So smug.

"You won't like the champagne. It's fermented differently here than it is in the South."

Mollie felt her fists clench.

She recalled another more recent memory of him, as she lay sprawled across from him on the massive bed within *Chalet de Lyon*.

"You can't use me to further your own agenda Micah. I..I won't allow it."

He had smiled in her face.

"Well it's a little late for that isn't it?"

Mollie was on her hands and knees at this point, ignoring the strong arms of the person who had lifted her up into his arms.

"It must be so boring for you. Being one step ahead of everybody else in the room."

He had looked at her, almost apprehensively then.

"I suppose it can make day to day activities rather monotonous. It's mostly just a matter of waiting for everybody else to catch-up."

Mollie had frowned at him as he smirked at her.

"How dreadfully infuriating," she had told him.

"You have no idea."

He knew. He fucking knew.

Chapter End Notes

Translations in Order:

*Can you control your sons?

*Boys will be boys dear brother

*If you had a son, I can assure you, you would understand better

*We should be focusing our efforts on the current problem, yes?

*I'm hungry. I don't want to be here

*What's wrong? Are you hurt?

*I know what you did

*Talk to me Izabel, I'm begging you

*Why? Should I be worried?

Chapter 35: Brome

Chapter Summary

Mollie copes with her newfound situation. A shocking truth about the winter prince is revealed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“The good thing is,” Caius said softly. “Is that we are the only ones that know as of now.”

Mollie felt the blood drain from her face as the words left his mouth. She had draped her cloak over herself as she sat in front of the rest of the members aboard the small ship.

“So we can use it against him?” Araya said swiftly. “Strike a deal maybe.”

They were gathered around the dining table, the candlelight illuminating the dark room below deck. It must have been well past two in the morning at this point.

Mollie shook her head wordlessly as the others turned to look at her.

“He knows.” She whispered.

The others had gone quiet and Mollie felt her heart sink.

“How do you know?” Arayalynn asked. “Him playing word games with you doesn’t confirm anything Mollie. Maybe he suspected it but he can’t be sure. Not unless he did a proper examination.”

“He might have!” Mollie argued running a hand through her thick curls. She was a deep sleeper and Micah knew this. “For all I know he could have done one while I was asleep.”

Arayalynn looked dubiously at Caius who seemed unsure.

He turned towards Mollie.

“Did he ever mention it to you? Make it seem as if he knew?”

Mollie swallowed uneasily.

“You don’t know Micah,” she said warily. “He’s not like that. He doesn’t *seem* like anything. It’s impossible to tell what he knows and doesn’t know. It took six months before he even told me that the queen wasn’t his real mother!”

Mollie didn't mean to shout it but her voice echoed across the table regardless.

There was a laugh from the opposite end of the table and Mollie frowned when she turned her head to the source.

Zen had a cruel smile on his face as he looked at her.

"Wow I'm surprised," he said dully, heavy sarcasm in his tone. "I thought you would have fucked some more information out of him. You must be bad at your job."

Mollie felt her face flame and she felt her fists curl under the table.

"Shut the fuck up Zephyr."

Arayalynn's voice pierced the air shrilly and Caius frowned at his son.

"If you have nothing positive to introduce to the discussion, then refrain from participation."

His tone was biting and Zen sighed in exasperation.

"At this point, assuming the prince is ignorant is too risky." Caius brushed a hand over his face as he weighed his options. "I know my brother. He raised those boys with the purpose of making them stone cold killers and each of them serve a purpose that benefits himself the most."

"Micah's different."

The silence that radiated around the table shook Mollie more than any insult that had been hurled at her and she suddenly wished she had kept her mouth shut.

Caius had turned his placid gaze on her but there was a flicker of interest there.

"What makes you say that?" His tone was not unkind, just straightforward and curious and Mollie bit her lip.

She didn't know what to say to these people. She knew Micah on a level no else did...on a level no one else would. How could she possibly make them see things from her perspective?

Caius spoke again and Mollie felt it was his way of making her open up more as he gave her his undivided attention.

"I remember Rowan and James when they were young... before Micah was born."

Mollie looked at him sharply as he spoke directly to her as if it was just the two of them seated at this table.

Arayalynn frowned, a memory from her past resurfacing as well.

"I cannot speak for Micah as I've never met my youngest nephew, but I can for the other two and let me say, it is not favourable Mollie. I find it hard to believe there would be one good

egg amongst a batch of rotten ones reared by the same owner.”

She sighed suddenly feeling drained.

She wanted to fucking kill Micah. She was positive that he knew about her pregnancy and that he went out of his way to keep her in the dark about it. She had been too preoccupied on figuring him out that she had neglected her own problems in the process -- and he had seen this long before she had.

She could kick herself.

“All I can say,” Mollie said softly meeting Caius’ eyes, “is that he didn’t plan this from the start. He...used me along the way.”

She felt her throat go thick and she suddenly felt ill.

“I think I need some fresh air,” she barely managed to say as she scrambled out of the room.

She could hear the hush fall over the table behind her as she scrambled up to the top deck.

She cut off here, the reality of what she knew suddenly hitting her full force. Maybe it was all lies, all the sweet things he had told her about while she lay beside him in bed, or when he rubbed her cheek affectionately or insisted he run his fingers through her curls. Maybe he did it all because he had to make her submissive, make her believe that he had some morsel of kindness so she obeyed him and wasn’t a problem. He had to make her believe he somewhat cared for her during her pregnancy to keep her beside him. To keep her subdued.

Her mind was urging her to reason with the events that had occurred. But her heart. Her heart was aching-- contemplating a situation where Micah was not the cold hearted monster everyone made him out to be.

She was so confused. So utterly exhausted.

She gripped the railings, feeling the cool air ruffle through her hair as her curls swiped her cheeks.

Mollie felt the tears well up as she pressed her palm against the small but definitely noticeable bulge of her belly. Mollie wondered how she possibly could have missed it. Now that she was aware of it, she couldn’t comprehend how she had overlooked it.

She heard shuffling behind her and she swallowed the sobs in her throat as the shadow loomed closer behind her.

“Just leave me alone,” she snapped bringing her palms towards her cheeks.

“It’s me.”

The tone made Mollie straighten up and she glanced over to see Zephyr Lyon standing beside her, his hands in his thick black coat as his dark blue eyes scanned over Mollie.

“Just who I was looking for,” she said bitingly turning away from him.

“Hey...look I’m sorry.”

He hesitated as Mollie turned her back to him. They had gotten off to a terrible start and Mollie didn’t think the future looked too promising either.

“Save it. I don’t need an apology that’s coming from your Dad to go through you.”

She heard his breath inhale sharply.

“It isn’t,” he retorted.

Mollie ignored him. There wasn’t that much to see this late but Mollie could definitely feel that the air was becoming less chilly.

“What are you sorry for then?” Mollie challenged. She kept her eyes glued ahead.

She could hear Zephyr mutter under his breath from behind her.

“I’m sorry for snapping at you at dinner,” he muttered. She could hear the simmering irritation beneath his tone.

“Is that all?”

She knew this ticked him over the edge and he all but sneered at her as he came closer so his shoulder brushed hers.

“I’m not apologizing for anything else because I’m *not* sorry. Anyone who allies with the King and his sons is an enemy to me.”

Mollie stiffened.

“I wouldn’t have been in that position if *your* people hadn’t put me there in the first place.”

Zen rolled his eyes.

“Look I already know how that went down-,”

“Like hell you do,” Mollie hissed turning toward him. “You don’t know shit. I’m tired of people telling me what I do and don’t know.”

She took a step toward Zen and tilted her head up to reach his incredibly tall height so that her nose was inches apart from his.

“And whatever you think of me, I don’t care. I can see your hatred towards Micah Lyon is blinding you to the real enemy here. He’s *not* the problem. He’s as much a prisoner in this war as you and I. The enemy here is Hartley. Hartley Lyon is the fucking mastermind behind this whole disaster. He wants a war and he’s going to get it the minute Micah steps foot on

Ophian territory. It's time to start focusing on killing the real enemy here. Maybe then you can put those ridiculous threats to use.”

With that Mollie left him behind her as she stomped her way back below deck.

To hell with him she thought as she slammed the door behind her. As Mollie approached the large room that had been turned into their sleep quarters she caught sight of the crazy old woman that had almost mauled her the other night. Mollie kept her distance and thankfully the woman kept hers -- but Mollie couldn't help but shoot her a look of utter disgust. The woman was singing a soft lullaby to herself as she brushed her fingers against the vessel walls.

Rock-a-bye baby

On the treetop

When the wind blows

The cradle will rock

When the bough breaks

The cradle will fall

And down will come baby

Cradle and all

Two weeks had gone by already and Mollie still felt grossly behind everyone else.

She had been livid after finding out everyone on the ship had been well aware of her condition before she had been. It seemed the whole world had known of it except for her. She couldn't *stand* it.

However now that she was aware that she was carrying a new life inside of her she felt different --more careful and protective.

She had created something beautiful in the midst of a time of unimaginable hardship and despair.

Caius sighed as he walked around the training ground, his thumb at his chin as he observed the papers in front of him. He was working closely with J  l on a novel prototype. Some sort of machinery Mollie wasn't quite familiar with.

She couldn't stop brushing a hand against her stomach now that she knew of her condition. She was absent-mindedly pressing at her little bump as Araya plopped herself down beside her.

Mollie had learned that the woman who had very nearly assaulted her two weeks earlier and who seemed to enjoy wandering around the lower levels of the ship was Arayalynn's mother and oddly enough the mother of Zephyr and Isaac as well. She was even more shocked to find out that the woman was none other than Isla Lyon-- former queen of the Lyon empire and wife of the deceased Atem Lyon.

It was clear that the woman had obviously lost her mind at some point in time and Mollie felt something painfully familiar with knowing that. She grew up in that kind of environment for most of her life. She realized now why Zephyr and Araya distanced themselves the way they did. It wasn't because they didn't care about her, it was just...easier to cope that way. She knew that.

"For how much longer are you going to give me the silent treatment?"

Mollie frowned and turned away. She hadn't spoken to the girl in the two weeks since she had been informed of her condition.

"Come on Mollie," she said with exasperation. "You were spiralling into a depressive episode when we brought you on board. We couldn't tell you right away --it wasn't safe! I wanted to...but Caius was against it. Not until you were mentally strong enough to grasp the situation and make a rational decision."

Mollie was getting rather put out with not having a female friend to talk to anymore. But she had been so upset with Araya for not telling her. Of all the people on the boat, she had expected the most out of her.

"Do you forgive me?"

Mollie sighed brushing her hair back. Araya was staring at her with those wide brown eyes, it was almost comical how hurt she appeared.

Had Mollie not been so put out, she would have easily made the girl beg a little bit more for her forgiveness. But she was just so exhausted she didn't see the point.

"I'll consider it," Mollie said flatly. The smile that appeared on Araya's face was as if Mollie had just told her she won the lottery. "But only because there is a disproportionate amount of females to male on this ship. And we should stick together."

Mollie ignored her as she draped her arms around Mollie and squeezed lightly.

"Caius!"

Mollie and Araya turned around in time to see Caden sprint down the narrow steps and run up to Caius his hands clasped around some sort of object.

Caius turned swiftly and Mollie watched as he removed a thick scroll attached to the thin skinny legs of what appeared to be a... bird?

"Homing pigeon," Araya whispered to her as Caius removed the scroll and opened the letter that had been rolled and attached to the bird. "We use it to send messages during long

distance voyages.”

Caius seemed frustrated after reading the message and crossed his arms. He began to pace up and down the training clearing, agitation clear on his features.

He turned to Caleb abruptly and whispered something to him. With a sharp nod Caleb proceeded to leave somewhere above deck, his pace swift.

Caius suddenly turned to Mollie and she swallowed nervously.

“Mollie,” he said addressing her directly. “Did any of the Lyons ever talk business with you? Did they ever discuss any trade with Ophians?”

Mollie bit her lip.

She had told them everything she knew so far, but she had remained tight-lipped about much of her interaction with the prince. Those were her memories for now. No matter how hard they grilled her she couldn’t open about that part of her life just yet.

In fact she did know about the interaction the Lyons had planned with the Ophians. She knew that Micah would be the one negotiating with them directly. She also knew he would be making the trip directly from *Icedalar* to the Obsidian Desert.

She felt her cheeks burn as Araya stared her down with that apprehensive look on her face. She ignored her facing Caius.

“I’ve already told you what I know about that,” Mollie said somewhat flatly. “The Lyons plan on docking there sometime super soon. Hartley wanted Micah in charge of the operation.”

Caius pursed his lips.

“I just got a message telling me that Rowan would be the one negotiating that deal.”

His arms were crossed and he seemed doubtful.

Mollie felt rather than saw all the others turn to look at her out of the corner of her eye. Her face heated up even more.

“What you think I’m lying?” she pressed.

“No,” Caius said pleasantly. “I believe you. I just wonder how outdated your information is. You said this meeting took place in Questershire? That was months ago. Perhaps the arrangement has been modified somewhat?”

Mollie shook her head.

“Hartley was dead set on Micah doing it. He is CEO. As a political leader, the Ophians being a constitutional monarchy have no ground to harm him. Not immediately anyways.”

Mollie hesitated.

Caius didn't answer but she could see his thoughts were in motion again.

She could see Zen frowning at her from across the room but she studiously ignored him. She wasn't falling for his intimidation tactics today.

"As you know, the Ophians have been a good friend to us when we needed it. They are in full support of taking down the Lyon monarchy and they will help us in any way they can. Our only problem is *Devonis* and... the winter prince."

Caius turned to address the others in the room and Mollie could tell he was ready to lapse into another speech.

"So far, we have an idea of how James and Rowan operate," he paused his pacing to turn to look at each and every one of them. "But we draw a blank when it comes to Micah Lyon. However I have heard he is more like his father than the other two."

His eyes glossed over Mollie and she looked down.

"But we have Mollie with us now. And that gives us an advantage over him."

"And we don't just have Mollie," Caden added with a sly grin. "We have his heir too."

Mollie didn't know why she felt so insulted by his comment but she bit her lip and kept her eyes glued to the floor.

She could hear the disgust coming from Zen after the comment.

"So what?" he interjected turning to his father. "We threaten him with Mollie and the foetus? I doubt he cares enough for that."

"Of course he cares," Arayalynn hissed back. "It's Micah Lyon. He wouldn't have risked getting her pregnant if he didn't want it to happen!"

"She'd be better off getting rid of it," Zen said hotly. "And as soon as possible too."

Caius frowned and Mollie felt a headache begin to start as Araya leaped out of her chair to challenge her brother.

"What the hell Zephyr," she screeched. "That is out of line."

Zen protested and before long Mollie could hear the beginning of a heated argument on the brink of escalation.

They spoke about her as if she weren't in the room and she distanced herself from the surrounding shouts around her.

She suddenly caught Caius' eye and she noticed the way he was looking at her. As if he were sending her a silent message.

“Mollie can lure him in,” Zen explained. “Get the prince close enough to her then we can take him *out*. ”

“Why are you so keen on taking him out?”

Mollie raised her voice when she addressed Zen directly, in front of his father and all of the members around him.

She could see Zen grit his teeth as he slowly turned his unimpressed gaze towards her.

“Perhaps the real question is...why are *you* so keen on protecting him. Not once this entire trip have you said a single fault against the Winter Prince.”

He suddenly stood up to his full height and Mollie braced herself as she felt the others around the room begin to circle around him.

“Maybe it’s because you’re fucking loyal to him now. That’s why.”

“That’s enough.”

Zen was biting his lip so hard Mollie thought he would draw blood right then and there.

“Tell her,” Zen said suddenly turning towards his father. “Tell her what you confirmed.”

Caius huffed and Mollie sensed his discomfort.

“Tell me what,” Mollie said through gritted teeth.

“Tell her the reason we need to take out Micah Lyon. There’s no point in hiding it anymore.”

Caius frowned, his brows knitting together as Zen’s face began to flush bright red.

“*TELL HER.*”

Mollie was immobilized to her chair at this point. She watched as the dynamic between Caius and Zen gradually descended into chaos.

“Get him out of here.”

Caius didn’t need to repeat himself and Mollie watched as Araya and Caden flanked Caius' eldest son. Zen brushed them off immediately and stomped his way above deck. Araya shot her a pleading glance before she scampered above deck- probably to further condemn her brother. Joël was next to leave, quietly heading above deck to give Mollie and Caius some privacy.

The silence that ensued made an awful prickly feeling erupt along Mollie’s spine.

Caius remained calm and poised walking slowly around the table till he stood in front of Mollie. She trembled as he lowered himself down to one knee so he was eye level with her.

“Micah gave you that necklace didn’t he?”

Mollie nodded stiffly as Caius's eyes flickered down to her neck for a second.

His fingers brushed her collarbone as he lifted the delicate silver from her neck. His fingers were warm and Mollie watched as he stared down at the precious metal.

"Look, Mollie. Being in such close proximity to someone can create emotions, strong emotions that make you feel as if you have nobody else but that person to depend on. I know."

Mollie furrowed her brows, staring Caius dead on.

"What...what are you suggesting?" she whispered. "If you think I love-"

Caius sighed.

"I'm not suggesting that. All I'm saying is... the way you feel about Micah Lyon is not abnormal. He was all you ever had during those moments alone. It is inevitable that you would develop feelings towards him. Almost unavoidable in this case."

Mollie felt her eyes begin tear up as Caius looked knowingly at her.

She hated how easily he was able to make her reveal how she really felt. She didn't know whether it was just his aura, or the way he looked at her in a way that made her feel as if he understood. Perhaps it was because he had been through so much -- not so different from herself.

"I...didn't want to," she admitted as the tears fell down her cheeks. "But I know he's not all bad." She began to sob as Caius nodded at her. "I know he isn't. I...I believe he isn't. I have to believe that he *can* be saved."

Caius seemed wary as he waited patiently for Mollie to gather herself.

"I'm so sorry Mollie," he whispered brining a warm hand to her cheek.

She cried harder as he comforted her in the chilly basement of the swaying vessel.

"You're carrying his child. Things are different now and no one-- no one will understand your predicament Mollie. Not unless they've gone through it themselves."

"What do you have to tell me Caius?" she whispered wiping the tears from her cheeks. "Just tell me."

Caius took a deep breath.

"Look. There's a reason Hartley favoured that boy over his other two sons," Caius said softly his blue eyes glistening. "Within the Lyon monarchy, there has always been a subtle push to keep the blood line as pure as possible. Our father used to tell us that all the time."

Caius paused for a moment, a lock of his light hair falling over his brow.

Mollie felt her heart climb to her throat as she began to piece things together.

"I had my suspicions about Micah's birth mother. I *always* have. But I could only speculate, there was never enough truth to the matter to validate my conclusions." Caius' eyes had zeroed in on the necklace around Mollie's neck. "Not until now."

A dark sinister expression crossed Caius's face and Mollie tensed at the sudden shift in the atmosphere.

Mollie's voice trembled as she spoke.

"Micah's mother wasn't a commoner was she? She wasn't even a mistress."

Caius shook his head slowly.

His voice had gone grim and so quiet she had to strain closer to listen.

"The evidence had always been there. From the angry cries of an affair from Porphyria --the animosity from Isla -- the hate spewing from the lips of Atem."

Caius trailed off and turned his deep blue eyes onto hers.

"Micah's mother was no common woman, nor was she a mistress. Micah's mother was Izabel Lyon, Mollie. Hartley Lyon conceived the boy with his own sister."

Mollie felt sick to her stomach just hearing it and she stumbled to a corner for a moment feeling her dinner rise up in her throat.

She dry heaved as Caius stood behind her, placing a gentle hand on her back.

"Jesus," she whispered.

"Atem had suspected it the day Izabel was murdered. It would explain his behaviour that day, why he was so set upon killing Hartley -- he was inconsolable - completely deranged for someone who was usually so lucid."

"That's her," Mollie whispered -- the portrait of the beautiful blond girl in his chambers crossing her mind. "That woman wasn't a mistress at all...it was Izabel."

She had been thrown off by the colourless sculpture of Izabel Lyon in the garden. She hadn't even considered the possibility that they could have been the same person.

"How...how did Atem find out?"

Mollie knew the Lyons were a fucked up family, but never in a million years would she have thought they would stoop to the level of incest.

Caius frowned.

“The same way we all did...Porphyria,” he said softly. “She had suspected Hartley had been having an affair. At the time we didn't know who with and we didn't care. She had been going off about it for some time. Now this isn't particularly uncommon for royalty. Many take concubines to satisfy their needs. But an affair is something else altogether. Hartley didn't love Porphyria the way he loved this...other woman.”

He sighed, his fingers pressing into his temples.

“Of course we didn't find Porphyria's complaints to be of that much significance at the time. What Hartley didn't know when he left to the Ophian Empire with Izabel was that Porphyria was also pregnant.”

He curled his lip as the memory resurfaced in his mind.

“She was a particularly spiteful woman and quite frankly my Isla couldn't stand her. Porphyria had threatened to expose Hartley and Izabel first chance she got after finding out about their relationship. As to *how* she found this out...I do not know. She had confronted Atem about it some days before father died, and of course Atem informed me and we both found it rather incredulous. She had no proof.”

He swiped a hand against his forehead as he looked at Mollie who had slowly made her way back to the chair.

“Of course, we didn't believe her...not until we saw both children. The son with blond hair and the daughter with dark hair.”

Caius trailed off for a moment and Mollie saw him grimace slightly before he continued speaking.

Micah had been fair haired at one point. Like his mother.

“Unfortunately for Porphyria, she should have known better than to make threats against Hartley. Especially when it involved the well being of Izabel. Izabel had the child soon enough -- in Courchevel I suspect -- on her way back to Questershire and Hartley came up with a plan. It would explain why she hadn't returned with Hartley for the morning assembly the day our father passed. But Hartley--being the quick witted snake he is-- knew Porphyria was also pregnant when he had returned and that her due date matched quite well with Izabel's. Rather than leave the child in the North and risk having to conclude his child was a bastard to the people --he was set on bringing his pure blood child back with him to Questershire and set on raising it as a royal. And why wouldn't he? The child was a pure Lyon after all and should not have been treated as anything otherwise. To preserve his dignity and the life of his son he staged the birth to make it seem as if Porphyria had given birth to twins.”

Mollie felt her stomach twist again and she placed a hand against her belly.

“What Porphyria didn't know...was that Isla had overheard a particular nasty outburst between Porphyria and Hartley. She relayed this information back to Atem and...well Izabel's

absence that morning certainly matched up with what Isla had said. This proved to be quite fatal for Porphyria.”

“That’s what Esperanza had known,” Mollie muttered. “She told me Porphyria had twins.”

Caius looked at her.

“The maid?”

He seemed less than fond of her and Mollie wasn’t the least bit surprised.

“That woman spent more time snooping than she did doing her job. I’m surprised she’s still alive.”

Mollie shifted uncomfortably.

“She told me...that Porphyria had two babies. Twins.”

Caius frowned, his blond brows furrowing.

“That’s what the maids were coerced into believing. Hartley planned this incredibly well Mollie. He thought about every possibility and every loophole well in advance.”

“And what about the babies?” Mollie asked tentatively. “Were they...healthy?”

Caius cocked his head to the side...as if trying to remember.

“I suppose,” he said rather languidly. “Though the boy had trouble breathing. Was on ventilation for a bit. The other was healthy. I remember.”

Mollie felt sick hearing this. Maybe that's why Hartley had Atem killed and a bounty put on Caius' and Isla's head. Since they knew too much--*suspected* too much. They were the only ones who knew the truth...

Mollie felt her insides clench.

“And Porphyria?” she questioned.

Caius frowned.

“Childbirth complications,” Caius said flatly.

Mollie grimaced. She knew it would have been fairly easy for Hartley to get rid of her while she was going into labour.

"What happened to the girl?" Mollie wondered out loud. "Hartley wouldn't kill his own child right?" Mollie asked tentatively. "Would he?"

Caius pursed his lips.

"I know my brother. He values Lyon blood too much to do something like that, especially to his own child. No. He didn't kill the poor thing. I'm sure of it."

Mollie sighed. It was yet another unanswered question in the Lyon family history --the fate of Porphyria's only daughter.

Caius continued musing on but Mollie just felt numb.

"Izabel had been so...different that day -- so out of character. I should never have let her go..." he muttered. "I'll regret it for the rest of my life." He had taken a couple deep breaths after this and Mollie wondered how someone like Caius -- with such a bloody history and corrupt family could still manage to continue living week after week, trying to do the right thing despite wallowing in a never ending spiral of pain and guilt. It couldn't be easy.

"But that necklace she had been wearing," Caius said softly his blue eyes glinting in the soft light, "it was a gift...a gift Izabel had made for her son. It is no coincidence that it bears the letter *M* and that it had come to fall into Micah's possession. For years I had wondered -- grappled with this repugnant possibility. I didn't want to believe it. But this necklace...this confirms it all."

She remembered vividly in that moment how Micah had opened up to her about his fears, his beliefs.

He was convinced something was wrong with him from the start – and his hunch was not unwarranted. He didn't want to believe he was a full Lyon. He was set on a reality -- his own reality that involved his father and a common woman conceiving him. His humanity predicated on this reality, the one where the non-Lyon side of him was capable of existing -- maybe even overcoming the other part of him – his fathers part.

Mollie suddenly knew in that moment why Hartley had kept this secret all these years. Apart from the ethical aspect of it, Hartley knew Micah well. He was aware of Micah's weaknesses and his strengths and how to manipulate the boy into doing exactly what he wanted. He encouraged this reality, to keep Micah chained like a dog to the fence -- fed him false nothings about a woman Micah knew nothing about. Allowed him to believe that his mother was out there somewhere, alive and possibly free.

She felt a gut wrenching emotion consume her just thinking about Hartley. She knew why Hartley would – *could* never tell Micah this truth. It would most certainly destroy him to the point of no return.

Hartley favoured that boy because he was the only son with pure Lyon blood in his veins. That's why he wanted Micah as King and that's why he put that boy on a pedestal, above his older brothers. It all made sense now.

Mollie looked at Caius with a panic.

"Hartley never intended to give up the throne to either Rowan or James did he?"

Caius looked away.

“I don’t believe so. Hartley was always obsessed with keeping the blood line pure.”

Mollie felt a sadness grip her heart.

“He would have never let Micah free...no matter what he did.”

This realization dawned upon Mollie and she felt a cold biting numbness clench around her heavy heart.

Caius sighed.

“Hartley’s most powerful weapon is Micah Lyon. We take him out, Hartley buckles Mollie. And that is our goal at the end of the day.”

Mollie felt numb. Her throat felt thick and heavy and her skin far too heated to be normal.

“There must be another way. Caius please. This isn’t Micah’s fault-”

Memories of Micah kneeling on the cold floor of the prison beneath the winter fortress swept through Mollie's mind and she couldn't attribute whether these feelings were a result of her unfounded connection to the prince or her hormones. Irregardless, she felt a deep gut wrenching pain for him that she could no longer ignore.

Caius closed his eyes as Mollie’s protests fell on deaf ears.

“Micah’s circumstances are deeply unfortunate,” Caius said softly straightening up. “But I can’t spare him Mollie. Not after knowing what he is. He isn’t like us. No child of his nascency is.”

“Stop,” she cried out. “Just *stop*.”

She had lurched to her feet as her sobs began to erupt from her chest.

She could see from the look on Caius’s face that he wouldn’t budge on his stance. He had arranged his mission and he planned on carrying it out to the fullest, with or without Mollie’s help.

With a tender hand on her stomach Mollie fled the room-- the necklace around her neck suddenly ten pounds heavier than the life she carried in her belly. For the first time in her life, Mollie could definitively say that she agreed with Micah. She wished she hadn’t been so set on finding out the truth. In some situations ignorance could be the most blissful outcome of all.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Micah. Everyone is out to get him.

Side note: Phew. This chapter was so. freaking. exhausting and incredibly difficult. Emotionally and physically. Remind me next time to ditch the mystery because this is hard work lol.

Family Tree:

<https://thelyonchronicles.tumblr.com/post/630882995345276928/updated-lyon-family-tree>

Chapter 36: Krypton

Chapter Summary

Mollie's formal training begins. Mollie comes to terms with her pregnancy and what it may entail for her future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mollie was drowning.

The water was all around her-- threatening to pull her down into a place deeper than the trenches that lined the bottom of the open sea. There was someone there – someone above her. She could see it through the blurry interface of the water. She swam closer, and closer – kicking her legs as far out as she could – desperately keeping the last remnants of oxygen in her already deflating lungs. The person was getting clearer and clearer the closer to the surface she swam. She knew that face...those familiar dark curls contrasted against that pale skin. The hand grasped hers tightly, the coldness emanating from the skin sending shockwaves through her body. She broke the surface in a frantic rush knowing she would meet familiar green eyes staring back at her. But as she blinked away the blurriness from her hazy vision she saw not him – but a child – so strikingly familiar but also so startlingly different. Instead there stood a little boy clutching her arm, dark chestnut curls plastered against his forehead, his pink lips curved in a smile, deep dimples set in a beautiful charming face. But those eyes...those eyes were hers staring back at her. Before she could react he had loosened his hand from her grip letting her drop backwards as Mollie screamed, the water threatening to usurp her in its impenetrable grasp once again.

Mollie woke up drenched in sweat and gasping for air. Her hair stuck fast to her neck and she coughed, the water from her dream feeling so terrifyingly real. The heat hit her next and she hurriedly threw the heavy quilt from her body as she sopped the sweat from her brow.

It was always that same recurring dream she had been having for the last week. That little boy who would be her ultimate demise. The boy with a beautiful face and eyes like hers. The way he smiled as she drowned...

Her cheeks felt stiff and dry from the tears she had shed from the dream and she groaned at the pain in her neck from the poor mattress she was sleeping on.

It was just a dream.

It was absolutely sweltering below deck and Mollie felt as if a cloth had been placed over her face and pressed forcefully against her nose and mouth. The heat was a smothering fog in the atmosphere, weighing down on her like an impenetrable net.

Quietly, she shuffled past her curtain towards the top deck in search of cool less stifling air.

Mollie cringed as she ascended the narrow staircase and stepped onto the top platform. A humid stifling heat took over as she draped her cloak around her arm. Mollie could already feel the sweat trickling down her back and she sighed as she walked towards the bow of the vessel.

Arayalynn had not been wrong. The heat hit hard and fast.

There was a soft lulling whoosh as water splashed against the vessel.

Mollie ran her fingers through her shorter hair and was happy Araya had decided to cut it. Her long thick hair would have been too difficult to manage in a climate as overbearing as the one she was in now.

“You’re up early.”

That deep growling voice was all too familiar to Mollie and she paused when she heard it.

She turned to see Caleb making his way towards the very front of the ship. He had on a plain black tunic with black pants and Mollie followed his movements carefully as he tucked his large hands into his pocket.

“How are you feeling?” he grunted through his thick black beard.

Mollie tightened her lip but she saw no way around evading him. Not when they were the only two people on the top deck.

“I’m fine,” she said stiffly crossing her arms. “What about you?”

He half smiled at Mollie’s question.

“Spectacular.”

Mollie went silent after this, the two of them just standing there as they watched the sun perch above the distant mountains.

“I can see land,” Mollie said softly, her eyes fixed on the mountains in the distance. “I reckon we’ll be there soon.”

Caleb nodded.

“We’ll have more resources by the time we meet with the Ophians. Our training will increase and we’ll be able to get you to a proper doctor.”

Mollie swallowed uneasily.

“They’re incredibly advanced,” he murmured resting his elbows against the metal railing.

“All these machines, devices I’ve never seen. You’ll be in good hands.”

She watched as Caleb mopped a hand against his brow.

“Though I fucking *hate* the sand.”

Everything was a blur to Mollie.

It felt odd to reach land after being on water for so long.

Mollie’s balance felt off and she struggled to maintain her sense of direction especially in her new outfit that stuck to her like gum on a sidewalk.

She had pulled her hair back into high ponytail and followed the others who all wore similar attire out onto the makeshift boardwalk.

Jöel was beside her, offering an arm as Caius and Zephyr led the way.

There were two people waiting for them at the end of the boardwalk and Mollie saw that they were dressed head to toe in white.

They were both elegant in the way they presented themselves and as Mollie ventured closer she could tell that one was male and the other female.

They bowed as Caius and Zephyr greeted them and began to speak quietly.

Mollie could feel the sweat already dripping down her back but she ignored the feverish heat and followed the others.

They seemed to know each other well and Mollie watched in silence as the two members greeted each person warmly before they touched foot on the sandy terrain.

Mollie was the only one left to exit the plank and she felt her cheeks heat up as she approached the two Ophians hesitantly.

“Welcome to *Anubis*,” said the male in a foreign accent Mollie hadn’t heard before. His skin was a rich brown and the womans beside him a beautiful deep olive. They both had vibrant violet eyes the colour of rich amethyst and Mollie was stunned. She had never known such a colour existed.

The woman didn’t speak but watched Mollie closely, her vivid eyes following her all the way till she joined the others.

Mollie hurried up her pace until she was side by side with Araya who seemed oddly on edge.

“What’s going on?” she whispered as they continued down a steep pathway towards a large domed shaped building. It was a splash of white among the brown russet ambiance.

“We’re discussing our terms,” Araya whispered back. “We can’t just come and go as we please, as much as they are our allies.”

Mollie was surprised as they filed in to a thankfully cooler and less exposed environment within the grand piece of architecture.

“Caius,” the woman said warmly bringing him into a snug embrace.

Zephyr’s arms were crossed in the corner of the massive hall – his tight black tunic straining against his muscles as he spoke with the man who had invited them onto their land. Mollie’s own shirt was pulled taut against her belly and she kept tugging it down – praying no one noticed the protrusion as much as she did.

Isla had remained outside of the hall. She seemed fixated on the sand beneath her feet and Mollie turned her gaze away abruptly. She didn’t like the old woman – not one bit.

“That’s Luna,” Araya whispered quietly gesturing to the woman who was speaking with Caius. “That there is her husband Kaveh.”

Mollie didn’t like the way the woman – Luna – how her eyes kept flickering over to her – as if the woman knew something about Mollie.

“This is their empire?” Mollie questioned.

“Kind of.” Araya responded. “The monarchy here has no official influence on political and international affairs. It all must go through *government*,” Araya muttered. “They call it democracy. Where the people choose who they want to lead them.”

“That doesn’t seem like a terrible idea,” Mollie murmured with a shrug.

Luna had come towards them her bright eyes glowing against her tanned skin.

“May I show you to your complex?”

Mollie exchanged another glance with Araya before they followed the woman outside the cool hall and back into the stifling heat.

The architecture here was truly something. Mollie had never seen so many domes and pillars in her life. It had its own style to it – almost rustic and traditional but intricately designed. Mollie never imagined that such a place could exist in the middle of a desert landscape.

A small wooden boat lay floating on the edge of a shallow pool that forked to join a long wide stream that flowed downwards.

“The main city is across the river,” Luna explained quietly. “That’s where we are headed.”

Mollie noticed a pathway further down that led towards a dense green underbrush not too far from the rivers edge.

“What about that path?” Mollie questioned pointing towards the cluster of trees that lay a good few metres past them.

Luna shook her head quickly.

“No,” she said sharply. “It is much too dangerous through the forest. *Aconitum napellus*. We go by boat *only*.”

Mollie flinched at her tone and quickly followed the others into the boat. She’d have to remember not to bring up the topic again.

The first few days in Ophian territory were an adjustment for Mollie.

Mollie noticed immediately that the temperature cooled down significantly in the evening and when that time set in she invited the chilliness. She would take advantage of these moments when they came. The heat drove her absolutely delirious.

The buildings here were whitewashed – another tactic to drastically cool the interiors. Their customs were different and Mollie noted how different it was from living within the Lyon regime. There was a kind of freedom here that Mollie cherished. Although the climate was harsh and the sand like a whip against her tender skin -- there was a unity here among the people. A happiness that was lacking in her hometown of Chartery. Their group had their own quarters somewhat isolated from the rest of the locals. Mollie could feel the tension radiating off of the local people who watched them descend from the boat and make their way towards the main road. She knew that look. The grim stares followed them all the way to their building but the other Insurgency members appeared unaffected. Perhaps they were used to it.

Mollie watched the bustling locals in silence and imagined that this must have been what Riverton and all the countryside villages were like before the Lyons invaded their land. They were not so different after all. The only difference was that the Ophians had the resources, technology and the population to fight back. They weren’t weak and outnumbered like Mollie’s people had been. They could stand their ground.

In contrast to the black tunic and black pants Mollie had sported on the vessel for all those weeks – the Ophians preferred white. It reflected the heat of the sun and it was the colour of purity as they called it.

Mollie wondered how Luna and Kaveh always kept their tunics white and pristine despite trekking through the same sand that she and the others did each day. That was a skill she had yet to accomplish.

She had spent the first couple of days settling in but she knew it was just a matter of time before she would have to throw herself back into training. She wanted to be ready when the time came to face the Lyons once again. It was this- this goal in the back of her mind that urged Mollie to swallow the pain in her abdomen and ignore the aches of her knees and back. She let the possibility of retaliation fuel her and only when she saw Hartley’s head on a pike would her anger be dissipated.

Mollie had her own spacious room (thankfully) and as she stepped out into the common area she spotted Araya in her white training uniform on her way to the clearing. The clearing was

next to the massive waterfall where the Ophians had created a rather brilliant water reserve system that recycled rainwater and all other forms of waste. It was rather ingenious.

“Wait,” Mollie called out before the girl could disappear down the steps.

Araya grinned when she spotted Mollie. The buildings within Ophian territory were all circular and equipped with circular balconies that piled on top of each other level upon level. It was astonishingly symmetrical and Mollie suddenly knew why Ophian craftsmanship appeared to be such a luxury. The architecture in these lands was truly unsurmounted. No fancy castle could compare. Hastily she darted down the spiralling staircase to meet up with the older girl.

“Did you visit the doctor yet?” Araya asked tentatively as Mollie sprinted up to her.

Mollie sighed.

“Tomorrow,” she muttered.

Araya frowned at her.

“You shouldn’t put it off Mollie. The sooner the better.”

Mollie waved her off not wanting to talk about it. She was still coming to terms with the entire ordeal. She needed a distraction – something – *anything*—to get her mind off the little being that was growing in her stomach.

“That goes for my training as well,” she murmured grabbing the sparring sword from Araya’s shoulder and swinging it around her own.

Before Araya could respond Mollie was already making a bee-line for the clearing ignoring the way the ends of her white pants submerged in the sandy terrain.

“Mollie!” Joël said excitedly when he spotted her. “Good to see you down here.”

“Hey,” Mollie said with a smile.

“Mollie wait,” Araya huffed. “There’s something I forgot to tell you.”

“Is she ready?”

That bored lazy drawl sent Mollie’s blood boiling and she turned to spot Zephyr Lyon leaning casually against the armoury behind Joël, as he bit into an apple.

He was still wearing black in spite of the heat – the tunic sticking to his body like a second skin. He was incredibly fit – Mollie could tell and his muscles bulged from beneath his black shirt. It added to his already intimidating aura. His honey blond hair was ruffled from the breeze and seemed more gold in the light of the sun that shone down upon them all like a spotlight on a stage.

Mollie didn’t respond to him. She turned to Araya swiftly.

“What’s he talking about?” she hissed.

Araya grimaced and this seemed to amuse the blond Lyon even more.

“Well...we were talking about your training before,” she mumbled sensing the obvious tension. “And...well – Caius saw it more fitting that you train with Zephyr rather than me. My expertise is needed for other plans...it would be too difficult for me to manage both -”

Mollie felt her face flame.

“And why would he think that?”

“Are you questioning my fathers judgment?”

Zephyr’s deep drawl intercepted between the two of them and Mollie gave him an irritated look.

“Trust me, I’m not jumping for joy either,” Zephyr muttered turning on his heel to sling a bag of materials over his arm. “But we have a mission to complete whether you like it or not.”

With that he turned and began to walk towards another clearing adjacent to the one they were currently standing on. It was smaller and dotted with markings across the expansive floor. It must have been a training ground of some sort.

Mollie felt her heart sink. She wanted to complain – throw a tantrum – stomp her foot down at the unfairness, but she knew it wouldn’t do much use. If anything – it would probably further destroy her credibility. She had to suck it up and be mature about it – as much as she loathed the idea.

“Zephyr is a formidable teacher Mollie,” Araya said quietly. He trains a lot of the young from the villages. All of them are on our top line now,” she murmured. “Zen is the best teacher by far. If anyone can get you into top shape its *him*. ”

“Who taught him?” she muttered crossing her arms.

Araya smirked.

“You’ll have to ask him that.”

Mollie rolled her eyes.

“Just remember,” Araya added before Mollie could follow Zen to the clearing. “Zephyr is your mentor now. With that designation comes a lot of duties and lessons to uphold. Completion of the five pillars is no easy feat Mollie.”

Mollie said nothing.

She turned around stiffly and headed towards the clearing, letting her legs propel her forward. She had nothing else to say.

“Stand still and straight.”

Mollie exhaled with a huff but did what was asked.

Zen had a way of ordering her around that seemed bossy and condescending and it irritated her.

His blue eyes had zeroed in on her lithe frame, taking extra time to linger on her slightly curved torso before landing on her chest.

Mollie saw his lip twitch and she quickly crossed her arms over her chest.

“You have no manners,” she snapped as she glared at him

She felt the anger surge when he began to laugh.

“I’m your mentor. You’re going to have to get used to me observing you. And closely too.”

He had circled around her, taking his time to squeeze her skinny forearms, measure her height and weight, as well as her ability to jump and the time it took for her to sprint once around the massive lake.

She was panting by the time she was finished. He continued to observe her stoically, his arms crossed and his expression strict.

“You’ve got long legs,” he commented as Mollie struggled to catch her breath. “That’s an asset. And your reflexes aren’t bad for an amateur. You can learn and quickly, if you’re willing to put in the sweat and tears.”

Mollie frowned as Zen flipped his own dagger in his hand absent-mindedly. She was drawn to his unique colours, the bright green stones shimmering off the harsh, spiky blade. It had aspects that reflected that of its owner.

Mollie’s eyes had wandered to the armoury that took up the majority of the back wall in the training ground and she noticed that Zen had followed her gaze.

“It’s hand to hand combat before you even *touch* any of those.”

The warning tone of his voice shook Mollie from her thought and she rolled her eyes.

“I was just looking,” she said flatly. “Plus how am I supposed to know what weapon to choose if I don’t think about it first?”

Zen laughed mockingly at her.

“You can’t consider a weapon when you don’t even know what skills you possess,” he said sharply.

He turned to look at her suddenly.

“Do you think I *chose* the desertblade as my weapon?”

Mollie tensed at his sudden shift in tone.

Fluidly, he pulled the blade from the hilt in his waist and Mollie watched him expertly manoeuvre the blade so it glinted in the hot sun and caught the brown waves of the russet hills.

“Feel it.”

Mollie hesitated as he gestured with his chin for her to proceed.

Tentatively, she stroked her fingers against the heated metal. She recoiled at the intense heat at first but slowly her fingers adjusted to the warm blade till the sensation mimicked a spark rather than a flame.

“Imagine holding onto this during battle.”

Zen’s voice was a soft murmur and Mollie had to lean in closer to listen to him.

“I grew up in a nomadic desert Mollie. I’ve had years to acclimatize to my surroundings including the elements that make it so unbearable.”

Mollie frowned.

“I grew up in the southern countryside,” she argued ignoring the burning sensation of the blade against her palm as she pushed herself to hold the blade longer. “I know how to handle the heat.”

Zen took a step back and laughed.

It was the first time Mollie had seen him genuinely laugh, not out of scorn or sarcasm and she scowled.

“What?” she questioned.

“That was a joke right? Tell me that was a joke.”

Mollie sunk her teeth into her bottom lip as she grabbed the makeshift blade Zen had given her before and pointed it at him.

“Stop laughing at me,” she screeched.

Zen was shaking his head at this point, the remnants of tears in the corner of his eyes.

“Now I see why the prince thought it best you stick to finger painting.”

In a state of anger Mollie had attempted to swipe the makeshift blade at Zen in an attempt to engage him in battle but she stumbled bumping into his bicep instead and yelped when the

blade twisted in her hand.

Mollie only registered her twisting legs after she had lost her balance and felt the air leave her lungs as she fell forward, the sandy ground filling her vision at an alarmingly fast rate.

Before forehead could touch stone Mollie felt a strong grip catch her as Zen threaded his arms through her own to wrap strongly around her waist.

At an even faster speed Mollie was upright again and angry blue eyes were boring into her own from above.

“Are you out of your *mind*?”

Mollie recoiled at the anger in his tone and she looked fearfully at Zephyr who was visibly fuming.

“You’re pregnant for fucks sake Mollie. You can’t go around lunging knives at people. Don’t be so foolish.”

Mollie was taken aback by the comment and for a moment she did feel a sense of shame.

Before she could react Zephyr was reaching for her wrist, his rough warm fingers prying open her own.

“Now look what you did.”

His voice was swift and irritated.

It had seemed her attempt to hurt him had done nothing but hinder further training and cause more unnecessary harm to herself.

Without waiting for a response Zen pulled her firmly across the training clearing towards the medic centre near the back.

He had a no nonsense aura to him that teetered on the realm of indifference but Mollie figured it was just his way of getting his tasks done efficiently and diligently.

Mollie winced as he hurriedly pulled a vial of alcohol from the cupboard and thrust her palm forward to meet the pungent clear liquid.

He seemed to notice Mollie’s discomfort and gradually he slowed his movements.

He was muttering to himself – something along the lines of never before having to take a student to the medic centre on their first day.

Mollie could tell he wasn’t used to being gentle, and his dealings with her were completely new territory for him.

He was quiet for a moment as the alcohol burned at the sides of her torn flesh where the blade had sliced a small but relatively deep incision in her palm.

“What the hell happened to your fingers here?”

Mollie looked up in surprise when Zen thumbed the almost faded but still slightly bluish skin that lined the pads of her middle three fingers.

Micah had been so gentle with her when she had been injured. He was almost fluid in his movements, so elegant. Mollie hadn't realized quite how pleasant those gestures were till she had received the opposite treatment.

“I burned them in *Icedalar*,” she said bluntly.

Zen looked at her.

“You burned your fingers in the fucking arctic?”

Mollie scowled at his crass response as he tightened his grip on her wrist as she attempted to pry away from his grasp.

“Let me go,” she complained as Zen finally let her free. He brought his fingers to his temples and Mollie realized it was a trait he must have gotten from his father.

“This is going to be *so* much more difficult than I thought.”

Mollie ignored his grumblings as she reached for the gauze herself and clumsily wrapped the bleeding wound in the soft material.

As he held her wrist in his Mollie caught site of a bracelet wrapped loosely around his wrist.

Mollie could make out a single name embedded in the leather in delicate silver scrawl.

Viv

From the distance, Mollie could hear the sound of the chimes indicating that it was already well past 8.

She could feel Zen's gaze on her and she childishly kept her gaze averted as he brushed past her.

“Don't think you're off the hook because of a little scratch. We continue training until you get it right.”

Mollie stiffened as he turned to give her one last menacing glare.

“And that includes all night if you don't catch on fast enough.”

Mollie sighed and ignored the throbbing of her hand.

At this moment, she would have gladly taken three hours of French lessons with Cécily over what lay before her now.

It was the beginning of sunrise when Mollie found her way back to her room.

She couldn't feel her legs nor her arms and her back ached with every push forward she took.

As she collapsed on her bed she heard a sharp knock at her door.

"Go away," Mollie moaned as the door cracked open.

She sighed when J  l appeared around the corner.

"Zen is waiting at the dock for you," he said with a half smile.

"What?" Mollie said jerking up. "But we just finished a lesson less than ten minutes ago!"

J  l gave her an apologetic smile.

"Welcome to the club."

Mollie was squinting against the sweltering sun that was beating down upon her as she held her position.

Her tunic was wet against her back and she felt dizzy from the desert sun beating down upon her.

Zen appeared unaffected. He always did. He seemed immune to the elements, as if this heat was to be expected. He was watching her, his sharp eyes taking in every slight movement of her body.

"What is this?" he whispered close to her ear from behind giving her a sharp pinch on the underside of her arm. "I don't want chicken wing formations on my training ground."

She winced tightening her posture and feeling the burning sensation of her muscles protesting against the subtle action.

Zen took his time observing her closely pacing forwards and backwards in a circuit before he gave her a hard tap on her shoulder eliciting a painful groan from the girl.

"Relax."

Mollie felt as if those words couldn't come soon enough and she exhaled sharply feeling her joints ache as the tension in her bones released.

"We're going to do what we did yesterday alright?"

Mollie was always struck but how quickly Zen could transition from the menacing Lyon she knew so well to the strict teacher that he was to her now.

"This time we're not focusing on your precision. We're focusing on your strength."

Mollie gulped. Her skinny arms seemed even more pathetic now that he mentioned it.

“I want you to lunge for my chest and hit me as hard as you can.”

Mollie felt close to exhaustion after the last arduous task he had put her through. But this new challenge filled her with a reservoir of fresh energy that put a smile on her face. He didn't have to ask her twice.

“Gladly.”

Mollie took a few quick steps backwards then proceeded to shove her fisted hand as hard as she could towards Zephyr's chest and cried out when she hit what felt like solid rock.

Zephyr snorted as she recoiled in pain.

“Really?” he said with a frown.

Mollie went again, using her other fist and was met with the same pain that vibrated downwards from her knuckles to her forearm.

He didn't even flinch.

Both punches left her empty of air in her lungs and she was breathing rapidly as he stared at her.

He seemed almost....insulted.

Mollie grit her teeth at his expression. It was bored. Mocking. Unimpressed.

She took one step back again and flexed her fingers before she fisted them. She felt the tension in her shoulders let up a bit and she swung with more speed this time aiming for the centre of his chest.

Mollie huffed when Zen caught her fist in his palm before she could make contact with his chest.

“That was better,” he commented. “You had momentum that time that would have relayed more energy than the first two times you swung.”

Mollie frowned. She wanted to hit him and hard. She had the feeling he knew this but he just smirked. He liked that she was in a submissive position she could tell. She didn't know what it was about Lyon men but they seemed to get a hell of a kick out of seeing their female counterparts in vulnerable positions.

He moved to stand behind her, his incredibly large frame blocking out the sun that had been roasting her back for the past couple of hours.

“Feel this,” he murmured squeezing her skinny forearms. “This needs to be locked when you punch. Keep your entire arm flexed for the duration of the punch. You want to deliver the maximum energy you possibly can when in combat.”

“But I’ll be with a weapon won’t I?” she muttered as he squeezed her arm continually until he felt the resistance he wanted.

“You should be equally as dangerous *without* a weapon as you are with one.”

Mollie fell silent.

“Your weapon should not be the deciding factor in what makes you a threat Mollie. It’s supposed to add to you, *complement* you. You cannot rely on it wholeheartedly. You must rely on yourself first.”

She huffed and practiced her punch with both arms as Zephyr talked her through the process. Mollie would have never imagined that so much thought would have gone into something as simple as a punch. How wrong she was.

“Again,” Zephyr muttered as Mollie punched through the air time and time again. Each time it seemed, her mentor had something more to add or some other correction to see to.

It seemed like hours had gone by before he finally decided to step in front of her once again.

Mollie could feel her baby hairs stuck fast against her forehead from sweat and she scowled at how unaffected Zen looked in front of her.

“Now look down.”

Mollie looked down and spotted the painted circles that lined the training ground.

The circle was medium sized, giving Mollie enough room to step forward once in any direction she saw fit – forward, backward, or to either side. It wasn’t large enough to allow any further movement though and she followed Zephyr’s movement closely as he stepped into the circle directly across from hers.

“This time when you punch, I want you to propel yourself with maximal energy the way we’ve been practicing *without* you stepping out of your circle.”

Mollie tensed.

“Look at me Mollie,” he murmured. She looked up to meet dark blue eyes piercing into her own brown ones. “Everything is in that bubble alright? Your entire life, your existence is in that bubble. The minute you step outside of it, it’s over. This applies to any kind of combat be it hand to hand, sword, or spear.”

Mollie nodded.

“From here on out, I never want to see you leave that circle when you attempt to engage in combat. Are we clear? You must learn to move your body accordingly and in sync with your own centre of gravity.”

Mollie nodded again.

“I said are we clear?”

Mollie shot him a dirty look. The question was uncannily familiar to her and she scowled.

“Yes *Sir*.”

She didn’t mean to add the title when she replied but she saw Zephyr’s lip tighten at her smartness.

“It’s just Zen,” he said between clenched teeth. “None of that title shit.”

He turned around then and stalked over to the armoury and returned quite quickly unrolling a thick fabric in his hands.

“Wrap your hands in this,” he muttered.

Mollie mirrored his movements wrapping the fabric around her fists and tying it in a similar fashion.

“We keep going,” he murmured taking a step back and brushing his blond fringe from his forehead.

Mollie frowned. Her knuckles were already bruised from the first couple of hits that she had attempted and she could see the first dots of blood spurting at the creases of her fingers.

Zephyr gave her a humourless smile as she observed her fingers.

“If I had it my way, I would teach you properly. Step by step and slowly. But that takes years Mollie. We don’t have that time so I’ve decided to give you the somewhat condensed version.”

Mollie was still frowning as she looked down at her fingers -- numb and bruised as she tried unsuccessfully to flex them.

She heard Zephyr’s exasperated sigh from in front of her.

“*Again*.”

Mollie swallowed the pain and brought her arms back. As much as she disliked Zephyr Lyon she had more pressing enemies on her mind. Instead she pictured James and Hartley Lyon in front of her, the way their brown emotionless eyes scanned over their prey like a lion does his first kill. She found her pain easier to ignore when she pictured them in front of her.

Biting her lip hard she threw herself into her punches, imagining that with each swing – she was bringing her fist closer and closer to Hartley Lyon’s throat.

The days passed by in a similar manner and each day Mollie felt her bones begin to ache more and more.

She realized quickly that stepping out of her circle was met with a harsh punishment from Zen and she slowly began to find ways around the restricted space by becoming flexible in certain tactful ways. Combat really was a game of reflexes and clever anticipation and with swift realization Mollie soon began to see how to acquire the skill. She was no where close to Zen's level – she never would be-- but at least she'd have experience under her belt.

“Do you think you can run the circle before we start with the fists?”

Mollie rolled her eyes.

“Why wouldn't you think so?”

Zen's eyes flickered to her abdomen and Mollie stilled.

She wasn't huge...but still the extra weight was another burden on Mollie's already troubled shoulders – or in the more physical aspect to her legs and her back.

“I'm fine.”

She had continually put off going to see the doctor. Her avoidance was her way of making her entire ordeal seem less real. Mollie knew she couldn't put it off forever – but for now ignoring it was her escape and she would take refuge in whatever time it offered for her.

When she returned back to her little circle in front of Zen she noticed the pleased expression on his face.

“That's impressive. You were faster today than on your first run and that was weeks ago.”

Weeks. She had almost forgotten how much time had passed by. Mollie was pleased herself too. Maybe this wouldn't be as impossible as she once thought...

This morning was no different from any other and Mollie knew the routine. As she dressed in her simple white tunic and pants she made her way towards the training ground -- the crack of dawn bathing the lower clearing in a warm orange glow. She found it easier to train at these times of the days -- whether it was sunrise or sunset. Anytime between that allowed the full strength of the sun to glare down upon her in a way that threatened her stamina.

She yelped as an arm swung around her as she reached the bottom of the spiral staircase, directly intercepting her path towards the training clearing.

“You're not putting this off any longer Mollie.”

Mollie protested as Araya gripped her tightly by the arm – dragging her towards the medic centre she had visited only once before.

“You need to take this seriously.”

Mollie huffed at her tone feeling a sharp spike of anxiety surge through her as they approached the plain white door.

“I *am* taking this seriously.”

Arayalynn ignored her, knocking raptly on the door once before a kind older gentleman opened the door.

“Ah Araya,” he said giving her a warm embrace. “Hopefully not another blood wound? I am low on suturing material.”

“Not today Darien,” she said with a light laugh. “I’m here with another more urgent issue...”

Mollie ignored their silent exchange and reddened as the doctor peered closely at her. Mollie guessed he must have been in his fifties by his greying hair and thick beard. He had a skin tone similar to Kaveh’s -- a rich brown that had seen many days spent in the sun.

“Ah. A new recruit—how wonderful,” he said with a hidden smile. “This way my dear.”

“Do you want me here?” Araya asked quietly as Mollie followed the doctors orders and lay down on the thin parchment covered bed.

“Like I have a choice,” Mollie muttered. Araya rolled her eyes as she helped Mollie perch on the elevated bed.

“I was just being polite,” she grumbled as the doctor turned back around.

He seemed to pause for a moment as if he were looking at Mollie for the first time in his life.

He looked questioningly at Araya who gave him an equally stiff expression and Mollie watched the exchange in silent fury. She was seething.

“I see,” he said all of a sudden walking towards the end of the bed his eyes flickering to the small but noticeable bulge stretching from Mollie’s abdomen.

“Who’s the lucky fellow?” he asked with a grin. Mollie grimaced at the comment as he placed his hands gingerly on her small protrusion of a belly and prodded slowly.

Mollie swallowed trying to ignore the discomfort of his hands on her stomach. Araya was standing beside her – her expression almost faraway.

Whatever the doctor was thinking – he did not voice it-- but Mollie could tell there was a burning curiosity behind his words. She figured he didn’t get many pregnant Insurgency members. The whole concept seemed completely ludicrous to Mollie and she ignored the awkward silence hanging in the air as the doctor examined her thoroughly.

“May I ask when you think conception occurred?”

Mollie looked up startled.

Araya turned to the doctor quite quickly. It was almost as if she had rehearsed this before.

“We are not sure of the exact date of conception but we have reason to believe she’s around 10 weeks.”

Mollie glared at Araya who gave her a warning look.

“Hm,” he commented inching down so that he rested between Mollie’s legs. “May I?” he asked.

Mollie knew he was also being formal and she swallowed her embarrassment and nodded. It was now or never.

As he gingerly peeled down her layers to “examine” her Mollie glued her eyes to Araya who looked just as nervous as she did.

Mollie ignored the discomfort and found her mind going through memories of the last time she had been lying down on a bed with her legs spread. The memory was still so vivid. She felt herself squirming as she remembered the feeling of the prince ghosting his cold lips against her thighs, his mess of dark curls brushing her abdomen as he brought his lips further and further *downwards* -

Micah. He was the reason she was in the position she was now. She swallowed those memories away. She couldn't let herself dwell on them. Not now.

The doctor re-appeared from between her legs-- his expression one of perplexity.

“Hm,” he repeated turning around towards his desk.

“What is it?” Araya snapped.

Mollie turned to the side. She should care shouldn't she? Her concern should mirror that of the others in the room.

But why couldn't she bring herself to? Images of the little boy from her dreams flashed through her mind and Mollie felt a horrible clenching in her abdomen. She didn't want to think about it. She didn't want to think-

The doctor turned around to face the both of them – his voice tense.

“I'd say she's around 15 weeks pregnant. And abnormally large for someone at this stage.”

Araya stepped closer to Mollie, her fingers inching over the railings on either side of the bed. Mollie said nothing.

The doctor peeled off his gloves with a sigh, his gaze glued to Mollie's stomach.

“At four months, the foetus is usually around four inches and the size of a pear...unless...” the doctor trailed off for a moment his expression teetering between confusion and trepidation.

“Unless what?” Araya demanded.

The doctor had turned around and reached for a long thin wooden device that sent Mollie closing her legs in fear as he inched closer to her.

“Relax dear,” he murmured absentmindedly placing the wooden tube against her belly and leaning in close so his ear brushed the material.

Mollie stilled as Araya stared in silence.

He looked up at them in amusement as they both stared at him stony faced.

“I always preferred mediate auscultation over immediate auscultation.”

None of them said a word as the doctor perched on the edge of his seat listening intently through the small contraption he had assembled beside them.

Carefully he pulled back placing the device gently on the table behind them and turned towards Mollie.

“That there is a stethoscope,” he explained. “It is what allowed me to listen to the heartbeat of your baby.”

“And?” Araya whispered.

“It is good. Strong.” The doctor said with amusement. “There are *two* very strong heartbeats.”

Mollie froze as Araya’s face paled.

“Congratulations,” he said with a smile. “God has blessed you with two miracles.”

Mollie felt a cold numbing feeling take over as the doctors words circulated in her head.

“How would we like to proceed?” the doctor asked.

Mollie had zoned out for some time as Araya quietly conversed with the doctor. Here she was -- miles away from the Lyon empire with not one...but *two* heirs of the throne in her womb. Her children -- who would be half Lyon blood. What life would there be for them in this world? In a world where their own flesh and blood could beat them with a chain to their back without a single regret? A world where they were slaves to the empire they were born into?

Mollie had picked up on snippets on the conversation – something about further down the line and she stood up shakily.

“Mollie?” Araya asked concernedly.

“There won’t be a next time,” Mollie choked looking between the doctor and Araya who looked at her confusedly.

“What are you talking about?” Araya asked her brows furrowing.

“There’s no need to worry about further down the line because I’m not doing this. I..I *can’t*.”

Mollie felt the tears begin to drop from her lids and she ignored Araya as she protested trying to reach for her.

“You don’t know what you’re saying Mollie,” Araya called out as Mollie slid to her feet.

“I can speak for myself,” Mollie said shrilly.

Araya sighed.

“Please if I may,” the doctor interjected sensing Mollie’s obvious distress.

“No you may not,” she snapped pulling her tunic down.

Mollie didn’t linger to gauge his reaction. She pushed past the door ignoring the stuffy heat that engulfed her as she walked through the sandy terrain. She ignored the calls from Araya behind her.

Mollie wasn’t quite sure what to call it but at the back of her mind it was almost as if she *knew* of her predicament long before the doctor told her. Perhaps that is why she had put off seeing him for so long. It was a tugging lingering possibility at the back of her mind that she didn’t want to consider. That she had refused to.

She spotted Zephyr and Caden sparring in the main training clearing and she picked up her pace.

He had turned to her before she could call him, his eyes squinting against the relentless sun as it shone down proud and strong above them. His blond hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat and the gold streaks reflected the light like raindrops on a window.

In that moment she knew who she wanted to speak to as she blinked the tears in her vision away. She knew whose perspective she craved most. She needed clarity now before she made a decision with repercussions that would torment her for years to come, and she had every anticipation of finding it in the person she least expected.

Chapter End Notes

René Theophile Hyacinthe Laënnec created the first stethoscope in 1816. His model is what the stethoscope in canon is based off of.

Chapter 37: Rubidium

Chapter Summary

Mollie makes a decision. Things begin to heat up in the North.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was late one evening, before they took a break for dinner that Zen grabbed Mollie's hand before she could leave. It caught her by surprise but even so, she didn't show it. She barely showed any emotion these days – not since her dreaded appointment with the doctor weeks ago.

Zephyr usually turned around and left himself, letting Mollie decide when she knew she was proficient enough in a certain skill to acknowledge completion of the lesson. It didn't take her long to realize that the *intention* was that she remain there for a longer period of time despite Zen's departure. She cringed at an earlier memory of him pulling her right back to the training clearing after she had misjudged what it meant to truly complete a lesson.

As he grabbed her sleeve now Mollie noticed a somewhat softer expression on his usually stoic features.

“You....you're improving.”

His tone was stern as he addressed her but Mollie knew he was somewhat relieved that she was in fact teachable. He was usually a robot during her training and if not, then he was yelling at her. But he had been quieter tonight. Mollie had noticed that much. Mollie failed to crack a smile. Rather, she failed to show much emotion at all these days. Mollie felt his eyes on her as he released her wrist and let her walk away towards the sleeping quarters.

Araya had refused to talk to her after Mollie had voiced her thoughts over whether she would keep the babies or not. It was as if a switch had gone off in Araya's head and Mollie attributed this to her Lyon upbringing. Abortion was a crime in the Lyon regime for as long as Mollie could remember. To her surprise however, the Ophians were more than willing to indulge her interest. They respected the choice Mollie faced and laid out the options she had. Now that the option was available... she was grappling with it.

Mollie was on limited time. She couldn't wait too long. The longer she waited the more dangerous the procedure became. She had to choose. And soon.

To keep her mind off of these pressing matters she distracted herself as much as she could.

She worked and she trained. That's what she threw herself into these days. She didn't converse with the group anymore. Instead she spent what little free time she had by the waterfall in the courtyard. The sound of rushing water was comforting to her. It resurfaced memories of the countryside – of her home. When it came to her training she knew she was doing well. She could feel it. Her blocks came more naturally and her steps mirrored her thoughts rather than the other way around. She also *felt* better. She was usually dead exhausted after a training session with Zen but today she felt re-energized, almost as if she could go another round.

The only hinderance to Mollie's ability to train was the swell in her belly that seemed to grow almost as quickly as she acquired each subsequent new skill.

It was a race against time now and she knew Zen knew this too. There would come a point where it really did become too dangerous for her to actively spar with another person while pregnant. This was yet another reason Mollie was tempted to free of herself of this burden.

It was late in the evening, well after dinner, where Mollie seated herself next to the waterfall, letting the sound of the water lull her into a light relaxing slumber. It reminded her of home. Her real home in Riverton. She relished in the soft droplets of water that sprayed against her cheek as she rested it against the cool white stone railings on the balcony of her sleeping quarters.

She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply.

“Hey you.”

Mollie jerked awake. She'd know that harsh tone anywhere.

She didn't turn her head as she felt a presence lingering behind her. She didn't have the energy to fight with anyone. Not even Zephyr Lyon.

The sound of a soft grunt beside her peaked her curiosity somewhat and she watched as Zephyr brought his incredibly tall frame to the ground as he perched on the edge of the circular balcony beside her.

“You shouldn't be here,” she muttered. “This is the womans quarters.”

He just shrugged unperturbed by Mollie's comment. She didn't even bother asking how he had snuck in unnoticed – she didn't care enough to.

“You didn't strike me as the type to snitch.”

Mollie ignored him choosing to close her eyes instead.

There was a long silence between them – the only other sound being the splashing of the water against the crystal clear bottom of the tributary that lay below them. Mollie was a little surprised but she was by no means baffled by the blond Lyon's presence. Zephyr and her had learned to treat each other civilly while in the company of others. It didn't start out like that--not at all. But as their time together became a constant --so did their ability to tolerate each

other. Oftentimes they'd silently eat their lunch together before returning to training or complete their post workout routines across from each other.

As they sat in comfortable silence Mollie turned to look at him. His hair was long, golden, and wavy. Unkept but thick and lustrous all the same. Mollie wondered how different Zephyr would have been had he acknowledged his royalty -- had grown up surrounded by the riches bestowed upon a prince of royal blood. He was handsome... there was no doubt about it and Mollie figured he would have been a pretty popular prince both with the commoners and elite members of the monarchy had he grown up in Questershire with the rest of his family. Mollie wondered if it ate at him that his cousins -- the people he called his sworn enemies -- maintained so much power and privilege. Did he envy them or pity them? She did not know.

The press of her belly against the railing lurched Mollie back into a more ominous reality and she swallowed uneasily as she remembered her somewhat abysmal circumstances.

“What made you change your mind?”

Mollie’s blunt question was abrupt and demanding but she knew Zephyr wouldn’t care. He was rather like that himself to begin with.

Zen sighed.

She turned to look at him. His skin was bronzed, his blue eyes like two sparkling gems against his tanned skin. He had on a thick sweater, the chilly evening threatening an even colder temperature drop as the night wore on.

He took his time before he responded.

“Priorities.”

Mollie frowned at the vague response.

He rolled his eyes at her stiff expression and shook his head as if in frustration.

“Regardless of what I or anyone says. It will always be your decision. Not mine, not Araya’s and certainly not the fucking winter prince’s. You do what you think is right.”

Mollie felt tears begin to blur her vision as she stared down at her belly.

“But what if I don’t know what’s right?” she whispered. Her hand lingered just above the bulge of her belly. A part of her wanted to love the beings she had created and another part of her wanted to free them. Liberate the lives she would give to her children whose destiny would only be rife with hardship and misery. No child deserved that.

Zen was quiet as Mollie cried softly beside him. She didn’t cry in front of others – she hated feeling weak. She struggled to breathe as the tears racked her body vibrating her chest and swelling her throat.

“I...I can’t bring two children into a world like this,” she sobbed.

“Mollie,” Zen said softly.

“I can’t give the winter prince what he wants.”

“Mollie relax.”

“What if they’re like him?”

Her voice trembled as she asked the last question and for a moment Mollie felt twelve again. She felt as if she had asked the very same question to her own mother once a long time ago.

What if she was like her own father?

Maybe she was. After all, she had never met him. Maybe there was something wrong with him that he had passed on to her too.

“Hush.”

The softness of the voice startled Mollie and she stilled as Zen crushed her against his chest. She wasn’t expecting it but the close contact enveloped Mollie in a bubble of comfort she hadn’t felt in ages. He was so massive and warm and protective and Mollie cried hard as he held her against him until her sobs turned into quiet whimpers. He had a rough woodsy scent to him. Like charcoal and fire and musk that reminded Mollie of the outdoors. It was so different from the sensual frosty cologne of the winter prince.

“You’ll do the right thing Mollie,” he said gently, his grip on her not loosening even the slightest. “I know you will.”

She shook her head against his chest letting the soft fabric of his jersey soak in her tears. She stayed like that for a while, until her sobs turned into soft breaths.

“I think you overestimate my decision making abilities,” she mumbled against his chest.

She felt rather than heard the soft chuckle from him.

“As your mentor I think I have a pretty good grasp on you and your ability to make decisions.”

She sniffled quietly against his shirt. She had almost forgotten that this was the same person who had nearly thrown her down a rickety flight of stairs aboard the vessel only weeks ago.

Or was it months?

“Araya will never forgive me if I go through with it,” she mumbled.

She heard Zen sigh as he brushed her hair over her shoulder. It was a fleeting gesture – but still it made Mollie’s skin tingle.

“Araya...has her own reasons for that.” He seemed somewhat despondent after admitting so and Mollie looked up at him questioningly. “My sister can’t have kids Mollie,” he said

bluntly. “She found out years ago.” Mollie froze in his arms after hearing this but Zen remained rather serene. “That’s why she reacted the way she did. It has nothing to do with you.”

Mollie knew of the horrible stigma that followed woman who struggled to bear children – especially within the Lyon regime. She suddenly felt selfish for not inquiring about Araya more. The girl had been nothing but nice to Mollie since she first arrived and Mollie had failed on more than one occasion to be a friend to her. She felt terrible.

“You hear me?”

Zen nudged her softly breaking Mollie from her thoughts.

“I...was against you keeping the child at first,” he admitted bringing a hand back to brush his own hair backwards. The gesture reminded her starkly of Micah and she bit her lip avoiding his gaze. Instead Mollie focused on the fabric of his jersey as way to distract herself from the similarities between Zephyr and Micah Lyon. “But that stemmed more from my own prejudices against the winter prince.”

Mollie looked up at him but this time Zen purposely avoided her gaze. His jaw was locked and Mollie saw remnants of the Zephyr she was familiar with begin to creep back into his features. He had large blue eyes framed by an array of light lashes. However typical of the Lyon clan, he had those sinister dark brows adding an air of intimidation to his otherwise elegant features. The masculinity that radiated off of Zen was overwhelming and Mollie wondered if it was a conscious thing. He was not delicate, sculpted and primped like Micah was. He exposed himself to the elements and revelled in every scar, cut and bruise that lined his sun kissed skin. Maybe he was compensating for those delicate features -- trying to hide who he was behind another rougher exterior. Just thinking about Micah brought up something in Mollie's mind -- the hatred Zen Lyon harboured towards him. There was something more - - something unresolved between the two of them that Mollie was intrigued to find out. Zephyr's feelings towards Micah Lyon went deeper than the other members of the Insurgency -- Mollie could tell that much. Whatever unresolved issues Zephyr had with Micah was personal.

“He hurt you,” she whispered. “Micah hurt you.”

Zen stiffened against her. His lips pursed and his expression darkened and Mollie swore she saw his nostrils flare slightly. It was all the indication she needed to confirm her suspicions.

“He hurt a lot of fucking people,” he growled his body jerking against her own.

Mollie hesitated against him as his breathing gradually began to return to normal.

“But even though he doesn’t deserve a fucking child, my father is right. You and his spawn are the only leverage we have to properly negotiate with Micah Lyon.” Now Zen was the one to hesitate. “You keeping the child increases our chances of getting Isaac back,” he murmured. “Micah doesn’t trade things Mollie. He trades with peoples lives. That’s how Lyons negotiate.”

Mollie went still in his arms after Zephyr spoke.

“Hold on,” Mollie murmured pushing herself away from Zephyr who dropped his arms immediately. “Is...is that why you changed your mind about the abortion? Because you saw an opportunity? An opportunity to gain leverage over the Lyons?”

Zen’s face hardened and Mollie glared at him from her tear stained face.

“I’ve told you this multiple times Mollie. We do what we have to. If this brings us one step closer to taking down the Lyons. So be it.”

Mollie’s stomach clenched and she blinked away the fresh surge of wetness that flooded her eyes.

“Are you manipulating me?” she screeched her eyes narrowing as her brown irises bore into Zephyr’s sea blue ones. “Are you manipulating me into keeping them?”

Zen scoffed, his austere persona replacing the soft gentle soul he had morphed into only moments before.

“Not at all,” he said harshly. “I don’t have the time or patience for that shit. Do what you want Mollie. Keep it or don’t keep it. At the end of the day I don’t care. As long as I get my revenge on the Lyons I’ll be content-- be it through you or through some other means.”

Mollie frowned wiping the last remnants of her tears from her cheeks. Zephyr’s unabashed honesty was cruel and blunt but also telling. He wouldn’t hide anything from her – that much she was certain of. He laid things out on the table and set down his rules. He didn’t play to deceive or to manipulate. It wasn’t his style.

“Whatever you decide to do -- you stick by that choice. Don’t let anyone sway you from it and for fucks sake think about the future before you come to a decision. Because once it’s done...there’s no going back. That’s my advice to you Mollie. As a mentor.”

Mollie watched him rise up from his perch on the balcony – his six foot five frame completely blocking the misty spray of water from the waterfall in front of them.

His blond hair gleamed in the dark lighting like strings of gold in a wheatfield.

“Get some sleep and quit with the moping around. I want you well rested and energized on my training ground tomorrow.”

She watched the massive blond Lyon walk away from her before dropping her gaze back down at the protruding belly in front of her.

Wiping her stray tears away Mollie gasped when she felt a sudden strong nudge from her abdomen. The sensation was swift and caught her by surprise. She placed her hand on the soft swell of her belly. She was visibly showing now and she bit her lip hard as she felt the sensation from within her stir again. It was as if the little life forms inside the girl had heard her conversation and were reminding her of their presence. Taunting her. Making her choice *that* much more difficult.

Mollie spent her evenings much the same way, watching the sun set above the “sacred” waterfall that flowed across from the training clearing. She had a direct view of it from her balcony quarters and she liked feeling the soft sprays hit her as the water descended past the slippery cliff edge.

“They’re moving.”

Mollie jerked when she caught sight of Luna staring at her from the entrance to her chambers. Her eyes gave off a sultry violet glow and she moved gracefully and fluidly. She was petite in comparison to Mollie but her fierceness made her no less intimidating.

“She reacted the same way you know. Surprise. Always surprise. Never joy...just awe.”

Mollie felt her brows furrow as the woman came to stand next to her.

She had a lingering-- almost melancholic presence. Though Mollie figured that was not too far off from her own ambiance these days.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mollie said flatly tucking her curly hair behind her ears. She was still on edge after her tense conversation with Zen. Instead of the closure she expected after speaking with him she felt as if she had returned immediately back to square one.

Luna laughed, the chiming sound echoing across the balcony.

“Of course you do.” She pointed at Mollie’s throat. “The woman who wore that necklace before you. Though I must say you handled it better than she did. She was a wreck.”

This caught Mollie’s attention and she whipped her head towards the woman.

“Izabel Lyon?”

Luna smiled.

“Ah Izabel. You’re kind of like her, in a rather...peculiar way. Your energy is similar. Vibrant, but composed, intelligent but wary. In love but in denial.”

Mollie frowned.

“I’m nothing like Izabel.”

The way she said it was glum and she sighed heavily. The woman shot her a calculated look. Her hair was dark, long and sleek, parted in the centre and straighter than the sharp edge of a sword.

“How did you come by her cloak?”

Mollie shivered under the woman’s fierce gaze.

“Some maid at the manor gave it to me, I didn’t go looking for it,” she said softly.

“Precisely,” Luna said coolly. “And I’m sure that necklace found its way to you without you searching for it as well.”

Mollie swallowed uneasily and looked away.

“That’s....a coincidence.”

“Right,” said Luna with a poorly concealed smile. “Us Ophians may be notoriously religious...but we don’t believe in coincidences.”

Her violet eyes almost glowed in the dim lighting. Mollie found her stare intense, almost equivalently to that of Micah’s. They both had an unnatural glow to them...it made Mollie’s skin prickle.

“What happened to her Luna? What happened to Izabel?”

Luna blinked at her, the shadow of a smile still painted on her soft features.

“You sailed from the Lyon regime did you not? I would have thought you’d be able to tell me.”

“She’s dead.” Mollie said bluntly turning her gaze back to the waterfall.

Luna was unruffled by the comment in a sweepingly fluid gesture she looped her arm through Mollie’s.

“Perhaps we can take a walk?”

The waterfall was louder where they were on the main level, the balconies of the sleeping quarters circling high above them.

It was quiet at this late hour – everyone else had already long since retired back to their rooms and only the soft glow of the candlelight surrounding the twisting walkway illuminated the path ahead.

Mollie paused as Luna ventured closer to the gushing water. She was unaffected by the misty sprays that hit them at this close proximity. Gently, she cupped her hands in the moving stream and drank contentedly from the source.

She turned to Mollie as she sipped the water from her cupped palms.

“Try some Miss. There is no purer water you will find anywhere else on this Earth.”

“It’s just Mollie,” the girl said hesitantly as Luna urged her forward. “And I don’t think that’s safe. Remnants of parasites can still exist, even in moving water.”

Luna laughed.

“You are on sacred land in *Anubis*. This land has not been corrupted by those who invade and industrialize. There is no need to worry about such things. This waterfall is a vestige of nature in its most unadulterated form.”

Mollie was reluctant, but at the same time she did not want to offend the woman. Carefully she bent down to her level, resting lightly on her knees, and cupped her hands in a similar way letting them catch the clear liquid in her palms. The water was cool – a pleasant temperature for a drink and Mollie brought the liquid slowly to her lips.

She could feel Luna’s eyes on her as she drank deeply, the sweet water quenching her insides with its cooling sensation. Luna was right. This water was different – Mollie would daresay even coveted. She had never consumed water so sweet, purifying, and satisfying in her life.

Almost drunkenly Mollie cupped her hands for another deep drink before Luna gently laid her hands on her wrists.

“Careful Miss. Do not over indulge.”

Mollie halted almost immediately – what the woman had told her before resurfacing in her mind.

“My apologies,” she murmured, quickly straightening up. Mollie felt refreshed – so much better and fulfilled. Almost as if one drink had re-nourished and re-vitalized her after so many weeks of misery.

They continued down the pathway that curled underneath the waterfall before circling back around the main pathway that would lead them back to the training ground and ultimately the sleeping quarters.

“This waterfall here is the end of the stream that glides deep into the forest we passed on the outskirts of *Anubis* – a little further down from the port.” Luna was incredibly elegant as she glided beside Mollie. Her soft murmurs were a pleasant addition to the sound of rushing water and the alluring scent of melted wax from burning candlelight.

“This is not the same river we crossed on our way to the main city?” Mollie asked.

Luna shook her head.

“No. That is the *Morte* River that we crossed.” She seemed sad as she mentioned it to Mollie. “That river once united *Devonis* and the Ophian Empire. It flows directly upstream towards the *Devonis* city. Their greed for oil has caused massive spills in the river – for this reason it is no longer safe to drink.”

The evening chill was more of a pleasant coolness tonight and Mollie’s interest in the politics between the different cities was fruitfully rekindled.

“The river was so beautiful once,” Luna murmured as they passed underneath the gushing waterfall above them. “It was known for its abundance of yellow leaved waterlilies and green

sheathed daffodils. It was cold too. Always so cold in spite of the blistering heat of our lands. It was a source of immediate gratification for anyone who walked these lands.” She frowned as she continued speaking. “That was until its exploitation. It was quickly penned the River of *Morte* after several foreigners docked their boats here centuries ago and drank from the river upon arrival. Killed every single one of them.” Her violet eyes glossed over to Mollie.

“Morte,” Mollie whispered. “Death. These invaders spoke French.”

Luna nodded. “Of course. The Lyons are an old ancient family Miss. They’re satiation for invasion and power has been a staple of their generation for years.”

“They blame your people for those deaths didn’t they?”

Luna smiled humourlessly.

“A regime like the Lyons – with a hunger for power will blame everybody but themselves when things go horribly wrong. Yet it was their greed – their lust for money and total disregard for mother nature that caused the death of their own people. Had they respected the land they reached, had learned gentler ways to extract resources in the past, had understood the benefits of resisting temptation...no one would have died upon touching the rivers water to their lips.”

“You still do business with them though?” Mollie asked as they emerged from the shielded cover of the waterfall.

“Of course. The Lyon Regime is powerful. It would be foolish not to. However, engaging in business with one nation does not make them allies. Not even close. We do what we need to ensure the survival of our own nation.”

“What’s on the other side of the Ophian Empire?” Mollie asked curiously.

Luna shrugged.

“Well there’s the city of *Peréal* in the Marchesseault regime and further north is the city of Beacon Cape.”

“Are they allies?”

“No,” Luna said sharply. “The Marchesseaults are sharks, they are constantly on the hunt for new land. Beacon Cape is neutral. No one wants to travel that far North anyways. We have our boundaries with both of them and there is mutual respect for the rules.”

Mollie nodded.

“Are the Marchesseault’s like the Lyons?” Mollie asked hesitantly. She was not sure of the political ties between these monarchies but she had heard the Marchesseault regime was quite well off. They had outstanding fisheries and mining there. They attributed the majority of their wealth in that facet. They, like other regimes such as the Rineau Regime, were also royally ruled. Mollie was sure the Ophian Empire was the only exception.

“Yes and no,” Luna said with a shrug as she bent down to re-illuminate some of the candles that had gone out since they had last passed by. “Alexandre Marchesseault is a smart but diplomatic man. He is negotiable and loyal to his word. He also has a good sturdy population behind him and he is well received. However he too has a tendency to encroach on land that does not belong to him. But unlike the Lyons he pays more heed to treaty rights and land boundaries. However these days he has been rather quiet. His health is not good...”

Luna’s voice had gone stiffer as she finished.

“King Alexandre understands the importance of preservation. He benefits from the spoils of these lands as much as we do. But he lacks certain more... *coveted* resources.”

Mollie matched Luna’s knowing gaze, those violet irises halting Mollie in her steps.

“Iridium,” she said softly. “You know how to extract it don’t you?”

Luna chuckled at her comment.

“Our people have benefited off the spoils of iridium for years – long before the rebellion that freed us from the tyranny of dictatorship.”

“Is it true?” Mollie asked in a hushed tone. “All the things people say it can do?”

“Rumours don’t just start from nothing Miss,” Luna said with a smile. “Izabel asked me the very same thing many years ago.”

Mollie stopped in her tracks.

“You know what was funny about it?” Luna murmured unperturbed by Mollie’s sudden movements. “She too was pregnant and took a walk with me on this same path...23 years ago now I’d say. It was such a struggle to get her to stop drinking from the waterfall. She was easily tempted you see. She was used to getting what she wanted...”

“You told her. You told her where you could find it didn’t you?” Mollie whipped out.

Luna exhaled sharply. “The foreigners who used to scour our land in the past in search of it referred to it as *Souffle de Vie* -- something they could sense in the air around them. Iridium is no one material Miss. It takes many forms...”

“I don’t understand,” Mollie murmured.

“It is both tangible and intangible depending on its element of source,” Luna explained inching closer until she stood directly in front of Mollie. “In water it takes on a liquid form, in fire it takes on a gaseous vapour and untouched it is a hard solid material -- silvery in colour.” Her violet eyes quivered as she addressed Mollie. “There is an old myth – an ancient ballad that supposedly leads one to the primary source of pure crystallized iridium. It was a story created generations ago by former kings of the Marchesseault Regime. It’s source – the location of this pure iridium is said to be at that location.”

“Yes,” Mollie murmured. “I know that ballad.”

Luna blinked at her.

Mollie felt her heart clench as several things hit her at once.

“It’s...it’s too coincidental not to be true.” Mollie had begun to talk to herself as she ignored the woman standing in front of her.

“There are no such thing as coincidences,” Luna murmured.

She had remembered the story of what Gibbs had told her. Mollie had no doubt he was from the Marchesseault Regime himself. After all, he was a man born into nobility. He must have been a young boy when the Ophians overthrew their monarchical leader. The riots swept through many regions of the east, the Marchesseault regime included. Many sought refuge in the country towns where Mollie grew up -- *Riverton, Yvoire, Saignon, Ménéham*. They were safe and happy for many good years -- until the Lyons invaded. Some must have fled and brought with them what they believed to be iridium. And the river...the river of *Morte*. Maybe it was true. Maybe that was the forest that it flowed into?

“What forms can it take on?” Mollie asked suddenly turning towards Luna who still remained rather motionless on the pathway.

Luna pursed her lips.

“Many. The water from that waterfall comes from the forest. It too is laced with trace concentrations of iridium. Those who have ventured on the search for its source have never returned Miss. Perhaps that is nature’s way of showing us that it is not meant to be sought. We must respect that.” Luna had a faraway look in her eyes for a moment. “However there was... one man. One man who claims to have ventured deep into the Forest of *Tennyson* and survived bringing with him a pure source of iridium.

"Really?" Mollie asked. "Who?"

Luna hesitated. "I do not know. He was not one of our own but my son knew him well. It was many many years ago. He claims to have found a way to perfect its use for weaponry. However with what little he had *allegedly* taken with him all those years ago... I highly doubt he accomplished what he claims to have done. Iridium's purpose is not for such things. We must take advantage of the things it gives us -- not of the things we can forcefully take from it."

“So what do you use then?” Mollie interjected. “What makes the iridium you use so different from the traces the Lyons have acquired from your transactions? Why is their iridium sub par to yours?”

Luna smiled humourlessly.

“You still don’t understand,” she said softly.

Mollie remained still as Luna glided over to her pressing a soft hand against her belly.

“Iridium sequesters whatever it takes in. Who’s to say the reverse is not true?” Luna brushed a hand gently over Mollie’s bump as she continued speaking. “The iridium that we have shared with others is the only form of it we are willing to trade. It’s an alloyed form from the surface of the bedrock deep in the river on the edge of the Forest of Tennyson. It is mixed with traces of osmium, carbon, zinc, iron, and antimony. It is dangerous and incredibly difficult to separate these elements and purify the compound. People have tried for years and the results have been lethal. The concept of pure iridium is a fickle one. A figment of a simple-- a *corrupt* mind.” Luna’s violet eyes bore into her own. “It is not *worth* the effort to purify an alloyed form nor go searching for its pure form deep in the Forest of Tennyson. Us Ophians will not risk the lives of our people doing such a thing. And even so, why would we hand over something so dangerous to a regime like the Lyons? It would be foolhardy to do so.”

“Wait,” Mollie whispered suddenly putting it together. “The iridium... is inside you? All of you?”

Luna grinned.

“That water we use for our crops, for our food, to quench our thirsts, the metal from the bedrock of the river is used for the foundations of our buildings. That is where its *true* strength lies. Not in weaponry – not in pure form. Its purpose is better served in more fruitful avenues. But perhaps that is the simplistic mind of an Ophian speaking.”

“They want to use it as a weapon,” Mollie finished brushing her damp curls away from her forehead. “The Lyons.”

“They’re not the only ones,” Luna said gravely.

“What do you mean?” Mollie asked tentatively.

“Have you heard of the Outbacks?”

Mollie blinked. “The outbacks? The people who live out in the Wilderness?”

Luna nodded.

“Of course,” Mollie shrugged. “It’s uninhabitable. Just arid land with no use.” Mollie was pretty sure it was just an expanse of wasteland. It was under no one’s rule. Venturing into the outbacks was a death sentence, that is why the Lyons never pursued prisoners who fled past the outskirts of their land. They wouldn’t last a week out there.

“No,” Luna said sharply. “Arid land indeed but uninhabitable it is not. The Outbacks have been steadily rising in numbers for years.”

“But they keep to themselves right?” Mollie asked nervously. “I mean there can’t possibly be enough of them to be a threat. They probably don’t even have enough resources to do anything.”

“That’s speculation Miss. No one knows what occurs in the Outbacks. And even if they did, you must never underestimate the capability of your enemies. Surely your mentor taught you that much.”

Mollie flinched. She dryly remembered Zen had told her that before.

“Do the Lyons know?”

“I’m sure of it,” Luna said solemnly. “But the Lyons are in a bit of a situation themselves these days.”

Mollie swallowed uncomfortably. That was an understatement. The internal family conflicts were eating away at the Lyons like a parasite to the body. Between the Insurgency threatening to overthrow the government and the Lyons insatiable desire for expansion – not to mention the hatred between the brothers... it really wasn’t looking good.

“How do you know that?” Mollie asked curiously. “How are you so up to date on what the Lyons are up to?”

Luna laughed.

“Give us a little more credit than that. My son resides within the Lyon regime. He told me all about you too Mollie Mayeson. I knew you’d be coming.”

Mollie froze.

“Who...what?”

It hit Mollie like a train. The dark hair...the pointed nose...the olive skin. How had she *not* seen it before.

“Solanio,” she whispered.

She hadn’t paid nearly as much attention to him as she should have. But with a jolt she realized he had been there. Almost as much as she had been back in Questershire. He had always been lurking-- be it behind a pillar-- in a chair further down the dinner table ... across the hall from her.

Luna smiled.

“He’s a spy?” Mollie couldn’t help but shriek.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Luna sniffed. “All the regimes do it.”

“But Rowan,” she trailed off. “Is...is he working with your people?”

Luna frowned.

“Please,” she said with an air of disdain. “That middle Lyon is as unscrupulous as it gets. He figured out Solanio was a spy. But rather than killing him like the Lyons do to all their

prisoners he took advantage of the situation.”

She seemed angry at the entire ordeal and it was the first time Mollie had seen the woman show any emotion even remotely resembling anger.

“I had told him it was too risky, ” she muttered to herself. "He had gotten bold you see. Making trips to the Lyon regime and back. It was only a matter of time before they caught him,” she sneered.

Mollie hesitated as she listened. She didn't know whether or not Luna was aware that the relationship between Solanio and Rowan was far from the relationship one had between a prisoner and his captor. Though to be fair -- maybe he had been in the exact same position as Mollie had been. She just hadn't cared to look hard enough.

“Rowan is not my favourite person either,” Mollie muttered. She had a newfound hatred for Rowan Lyon after he dragged her from the fortress and exchanged her like fresh cargo all those months ago in the North. “He exchanged something with the Insurgency when he kidnapped me. Do you know what it was?”

“That’s something you should discuss with Caius.”

Mollie hesitated before she asked her next question.

“What about your son?” Mollie challenged.

“I thought you’d have figured it out by now my dear.” Her tone had gone soft – almost defeated. “There is no escaping once the Lyons sink their claws into you. You must know that by now.” Mollie stiffened at her dismal tone. “I have come to terms with that.”

"So that's it then?" Mollie asked angrily. "You won't fight back?"

Luna laughed humourlessly.

"To retaliate against the Lyons over a spy would set a bad precedent as well as a poor taste in the mouths of other regimes. We can't afford that."

She suddenly came close to Mollie and the girl shivered as Luna took her hand and curled it around her own before placing it gingerly on her curved stomach.

“Just as iridium comes in many forms so do the weapons we have to fight against our enemies.”

Abruptly, she dropped her hands from Mollie’s stomach and sauntered away into the night. Mollie watched her go, the long dark hair of the beautiful Ophian woman blowing softly behind her in the night breeze that carried with it a promise of a better tomorrow.

It was the first time in months that Jelena had a smile on her face.

She was 8 weeks pregnant and her midwives had informed her that she was progressing exceedingly well, much farther than she had the last couple times she had attempted to conceive.

She had been the first to arrive to court that morning after Hartley had called upon a prisoner to be interrogated. Dinner was in the grand hall tonight but Jelena knew she'd be able to stomach it today. She knew the King would be thrilled once she told him the news.

Jelena had dolled herself up today, more so than usual and she idly twirled a lock of red hair as the large doors to the hall opened.

Jelena stopped in her tracks when she saw the chair beside Micah's empty. She was wondering if his little pet would be joining them.

Jelena had forgotten the girls name.

Rowan and Micah walked in not long after -- their cloaks brushing the icy floor behind them as they took their place at the table, both of them striding right past Jelena as if she were a lone candelabra in the large room.

Rowan had a rather disinterested look on his face, and Micah looked as stony and as frigid as the snowstorm that howled outside the castle walls.

Rowan was speaking quietly with a guard as he took his seat and Jelena hesitated when she made her way towards her own seat. Micah didn't even blink.

It was an unusually late dinner and Jelena had already put Nina to bed hours ago. She hoped this was quick. She had more pressing matters to attend to.

Jelena looked up startled when the King entered, his tall figure casting a shadow in the room as he elegantly walked to his seat.

They each stood as he lowered himself into his seat and with the slightest flick of his wrist, the guards were in motion, bringing plates and goblets to the table.

Jelena stiffened as she eyed the empty seat beside her.

Where was her husband?

It was highly unusual for her to dine with her in-laws in the absence of her husband and it made Jelena feel extremely vulnerable.

Not a word was exchanged as the food was served and Jelena couldn't help but let her eyes wander towards Micah who sat still and frozen beside Rowan, his face blank. He didn't touch his plate, nor his goblet.

If Hartley suspected anything different, he didn't show it. There were no guests tonight and Jelena found it hard to swallow as she managed to eat a couple forkfuls of the rich food in front of her.

When the plates were finally taken away, Micah's untouched, and hers somewhat picked at, she noticed Hartley's cold gaze was flickering between the two members of the table who sat directly across from one another.

"You did not touch your wine."

Hartley's deep voice echoed across the room in spite of its softness and Jelena stiffened when all eyes turned towards her.

Hartley had turned his brown irises onto her own and she hesitated, staring at the full glass accusingly.

God where was James when she needed him. She wanted him here when she finally broke the news. She quickly realized that wasn't going to happen. The King was far too observant.

His eyes flickered to Micah.

"You did not touch your food."

Micah's jaw was locked and Jelena eyed him nervously as the leather of his gloves stretched tautly against his fingers as he flexed them.

Rowan frowned as he turned his gaze from Micah to his father.

"Father may I--"

"Hush Rowan."

Hartley's swift response was sharp and Jelena felt her blood run cold.

"Micah, dear boy, the floor is yours."

Before the prince could speak Hartley turned his gaze towards Jelena and she froze as he addressed her directly.

"It would be best if you run along," he murmured. "I'm sure James will be more than eager to hear the good news."

Jelena gulped as Hartley's eyes flickered to the wine and back to hers.

She bowed weakly as she left the table, hating the way Hartley brushed his fingers over the long sceptre he carried around with him.

The door shut behind her with a clang and Jelena stood there for a moment. The sound of metal against wood echoed behind her and quickly she shuffled as fast as she could towards her quarters.

Jelena hesitated as she awaited for her husband. She hadn't seen him return and she was nervous, her delicate arms breaking out in goosebumps. She had searched everywhere for him and her efforts went without reward.

It was highly unusual for him to be this absent. It struck a new chord within the woman and she felt an itching rebellious streak to find out what he was really up to.

She knew she shouldn't ask, nor approach the princes without a good reason but Jelena was worried sick. She had made her way back to the dining room after a thorough search of the winter fortress.

When the door finally opened Jelena recoiled at the swiftness with which Rowan exited. Without wasting a second Jelena managed to make it to the entrance before his younger brother could make a dash for it as well.

"Prince Micah," she called out before he could turn the corner.

He always strode in and out of court these days, exchanging few words and even fewer greetings. It was as if he was a shadow, only appearing when sought and cast upon.

Jelena had seen the least of him she ever had and she wondered if it had anything to do with his concubine being gone. She had heard the girl had run off but Jelena doubted that was the case.

Micah froze when she spoke. He looked vaguely irritated, almost angry and Jelena stuttered, her words congealing in her throat.

He turned his green eyes on her and Jelena recoiled at the absolute iciness that radiated from them. She felt as if he were stabbing her with his stormy gaze and she parted her lips in surprise.

He continued to glare at her, his lips unmoving.

"I...I was looking for James," she said barely above a whisper.

Jelena swore she saw a trickle of blood ooze down the side of his pale neck and quickly she snapped her eyes back to his.

Her youngest brother in law had never, never looked at her like that. Not ever. And Jelena didn't quite know what to make of it. She knew he had a lot on his plate these days, it must have been catching up with him.

He didn't respond and Jelena felt the blood drain from her face.

He didn't blink, and it put Jelena very much on edge.

"But I guess you haven't seen him since dinner...." she squeaked.

Micah had always had the most vibrant irises. It was almost unnatural – the luminescence they gave off and Jelena noted the uniqueness of it the rare time his gaze did match her own.

And his body language. Always so rigid and stiff. Jelena doubted he knew the meaning of what it meant to relax.

She trailed off and it was as if Micah had remembered where he was. Jelena saw a flicker of life re-appear in his eyes and she let out a silent breath as that familiar blankness took over his features.

“What?” he murmured. “I’m sorry if you’ll excuse me...”

With that he walked around her and down the hall, his thick navy cloak brushing past her as he turned the corner.

Jelena shivered at the strange interaction and continued forward.

She was seeing less and less of James these days and she had slowly been counting down the days till she set foot on Southern soil again.

There was no way she was giving birth to a child in these lands. It wasn’t up for discussion and Jelena had managed to put her foot down on that one.

The walls of the winter fortress gleamed proudly as the sun shone through the sparse clouds that littered the grey sky. It hit the glassy walls of the fortress illuminating the vast corridors and expensive mosaics that lined the ceiling tiles from which large glass chandeliers hung casting crystal sparkles along the icy floor. It was a rare thing to see the sun in these lands and one could only appreciate the beauty of the north on days where it decided to reveal its hidden lustre.

Jelena rubbed her little belly lovingly and smiled down at her little bump.

“One day this will all be yours little one.”

Chapter End Notes

This was a word dump mixed with a ton of plot this chapter. It’s been a while since the smut (yes I’m aware). But it’s coming ;)

Chapter 38: Strontium

Chapter Summary

Mollie delves further into the past of her mentor. The Lyons have new plans on the horizon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mollie slowly made her way back to her sleeping quarters. The dusty glow of the late evening sky provided little illumination for her but Mollie didn't mind. She had opted to take the long route around the waterfall which was separated several metres away from the training grounds. The soft torchlights brightened the pathway but Mollie knew it was a relatively safe compound. Not many people were up at this late hour.

Mollie tucked her dark curls behind her ears as the sound of gruff exhales suddenly filled her ears. It would be odd to find someone training at this late hour. Confused but also rather curious, Mollie felt compelled to investigate and made her way towards the training ground. Moving silently like she was taught to do, she shuffled forward leaning against the back wall.

She paused when she saw the familiar overbearing frame of Zephyr Lyon chopping wood in the distance. There was always a large fire that was lit every night before dinner and Mollie knew the wood had to come from *somewhere*...she just hadn't really considered the process. She trembled as she watched him, the way his muscles flexed as he brought the sharp object down, the way his sweat trickled down his rippling biceps. The way his tanned skin stretched tautly against muscle accumulated over years of training.

After another few minutes of chopping wood and throwing the pieces into the small pile beside him, Mollie watched him drag an arm across his forehead. In spite of the coolness of the evening, his exertion had raised his body temperature enough to leave him sweaty.

"To your left."

Mollie tensed.

Who was he talking to?

He was facing away from her, the fire from the torches around them painting his entire figure golden as he swung the axe over his shoulder dragging the wooden plank behind him.

"That basket to your left."

When Mollie looked up again she felt her stomach fall to the floor. He was looking at her over his shoulder – clearly unimpressed and his lips were turned downward – almost irritably.

She turned to see a large wooden basket beside her and meekly – her face as red as a tomato she carried the thing toward him.

He was a good distance away and Mollie wondered how the hell he could have heard her from that far away. Was she *that* loud?

He took the container from her swiftly and Mollie hesitated as she stood in front of him.

Zen was in nothing but his training pants and she shifted on her feet as he studiously put his materials away. His pectorals were defined and firm and glistening with sweat. Mollie swallowed uneasily as she tried to avert her gaze elsewhere.

“Well don’t just stand there,” he muttered.

Mollie frowned. His manners really were something else.

“If you were more polite maybe I would be more willing to listen,” she retorted.

Zephyr whirled around to eye her with a particularly cruel sneer.

“Save the table side manners for the prince,” he snapped making Mollie cower at his absolute size as he loomed over her.

With an irritated sigh he stalked past her towards his quarters on the opposite side of the training ground.

Mollie paused, her cheeks burning from his rudeness but she decided to ignore it. Zephyr had been moody since the first day she met him. Even after all these weeks she expected nothing less.

“You’re still up!”

Another chirpier voice piped up from behind Mollie and she turned around in time to see Joël bounding up to her.

“Ah look at you. You’ve got a belly now!”

Mollie stiffened. Joël seemed to have immediately picked up on the cold reception and his smile faltered.

“Oh...should I not have said anything?”

His brows creased and Mollie sighed as he looked sheepishly at her.

“What did the doctor say?” he asked quietly motioning for Mollie to take a seat next to him on the training bench.

Mollie sauntered over and plopped herself down beside him. Her legs ached at the action but she knew she had to get used to that happening.

“I’m having twins.”

Mollie’s voice was blunt and hard and for a second Joël just gaped at her.

Mollie felt a surge of moisture fill her eyelids and she quickly blinked them away. Not fast enough apparently.

“Oh Mollie,” Joël whispered putting a protective hand on her back.

The girl was grateful for his friendship but internally Mollie was distraught. In the back of her mind something told Mollie it was wrong for her to be crying about this considering Araya’s position...

“This...this is good Mollie,” he murmured giving her a soft pat on her back. “This is a miracle. As much as it is a... um...curse.”

Mollie inhaled and exhaled slowly. God knows she cried enough tears to fill a river at this point.

“I’m s-so-sorry,” she managed in between breaths. “It just felt real...saying it...out loud.”

Joël nodded. Mollie could tell he was taken aback by the sudden onset of her emotions but he was being as supportive as he could.

She liked Joël. He had been the most non-judgmental person since she had arrived here and she also found him the most unbiased. He didn’t see her as anybody else but Mollie Mayeson. It was refreshing.

“You know you don’t have to keep it,” Joël said kindly. “It is not a crime in these lands. It never should be one.”

Mollie sniffed wiping the few tears that escaped with her sleeve.

“I know,” she whispered. “But I want to. I.... need them as much as they need me.”

She swallowed thickly placing a hand gently on her belly.

“Did you tell Araya?”

Mollie frowned. The girl had avoided her like the plague and Mollie had done the same. She missed her terribly but at the same time she was angry with her too. She thought Araya of all people would understand her predicament.

“We’re not exactly on speaking terms,” Mollie muttered.

Joël grimaced.

“Yeah. I heard.”

They sat there for some time listening to the fire Zen had started earlier crinkle and crackle before them. It reminded Mollie of the little fireplace in the Questershire cottage across from the manor. The place where she had first gotten intimate with the winter prince.

“You’ve been training pretty hard. Zen said so.”

Mollie perked at the comment.

“Zen said so?” she clarified, unsure if she had heard correctly.

Joël chuckled.

“Yes. I don’t know if you know this but Zen has a pretty good track record as a mentor. I don’t think he has any intention of training anyone sub par.” He trailed off for a moment. “He’s a good guy you know? He just wants to do the right thing.”

Mollie sighed.

She *had* heard that before.

“Talk to Araya Mollie,” Joël suggested softly. “I know she misses talking to you. I worry about her. She’s always going off about others controlling their emotions but she is the worst one. She’s a loose cannon.”

Mollie half smiled as he helped lift her up from the log where they had been seated. If she had suspected anything between Joël and Araya she could certainly confirm it now. They cared deeply for each other.

“I’ll talk to her.”

“Thanks Mollie,” he said with a smile.

Mollie bid him goodbye as he followed the pathway Zen took earlier towards the male living quarters.

Zen didn’t bring up their little evening talk that had happened the other night and neither did she.

They continued their training with a lot more silence these days than Mollie was used to.

Due to her growing belly Zen had realized that it was necessary to cutback on the gruelling workouts she usually did before and after her lessons. It was just too risky.

As she finished her blockings late that afternoon she felt a sense of pride as she saw the thin layer of perspiration lining Zephyr’s forehead. She had never been able to make him break out in a sweat till now. Clearly she was doing something right.

“Almost ready for a weapon,” she muttered half-heartedly as she released her hair from the high ponytail she sported after a particularly tough session.

Zen scoffed.

“Maybe. Good job today. You...you’re getting there.”

Mollie felt her cheeks burn as they stood there in silence for some time. There was not much sound apart from the clashing of sword against sword coming from another room.

Zen suddenly straightened up and Mollie bit her lip as he sheathed the switchblade he had been practicing with earlier and slung it over his huge frame. He really was massive and Mollie sometimes liked to use his shadow as her personal shade from the glaring sun when it was particularly hot out.

“Don’t take my praise for proficiency,” he muttered.

The tall blond Lyon had tanned again after spending hours training in the sun and Mollie had noticed the rays had turned his golden hair into a nice honey coloured tone.

“The winter prince will reach Ophian land in a little under three months I’m told,” he said severely. “That’s 90 days to get you somewhat ready to defend yourself against an attack.”

Putting the time into days hit Mollie hard and she sighed. It really wasn’t much time at all.

“Should I go again?” Mollie asked tentatively reaching for the fabric she usually laced around her fingers.

“No,” Zen said curtly his eyes flickering towards the armoury. “You’re done for today. Rest. On Friday we get you started with a weapon.”

Mollie paused as Zen began the walk towards the main building.

She quickly caught up with him easily matching his long strides with her long legs.

“Why Friday?” she questioned. It was only Tuesday after all.

Zen looked at her.

“Because, I have to go pick up materials with Caden and the others,” he muttered. “It’s in the main city – not far from the port where we arrived. Our compound is isolated from the main city. We’re responsible for bringing resources from there to here. The food and water doesn’t just appear you know.”

Mollie ignored his sarcasm.

“It takes that long to get resources?”

Mollie could tell Zen was getting irritated with her questions as well as how easily she was able to match his pace.

“Not normally. But my father and Caleb haven’t returned from *Peréal* yet. It’s been three weeks. They *should* be back by now. They bring lots of resources back with them but whatever is holding them up there is significant enough for them to be gone for so long without touching base. So...we have to take matters into our own hands.”

“What if they arrive while you’re gone?”

“Someone has to stay with Isla anyway,” he muttered eyeing Mollie as if that resolved the problem.

Mollie grimaced.

“I’m not staying with her,” Mollie muttered.

Zephyr rolled his eyes.

They had made it back to the main building and Mollie hadn’t let down even as Zephyr dropped off his materials in the storage room and busied himself by pouring a glass of water from the canteen.

“I’d rather sleep *outside*,” Mollie continued, flinching at the hard stare Zen had shot at her. “I won’t do it.”

“She’s a little crazy but she’s not dangerous,” Zen sighed. “If it makes you feel any better we’ll keep her in the main area only. That way you won’t have to worry about her venturing out and walking the training grounds.”

“I stayed with a woman like her all my life,” Mollie muttered. “I didn’t travel all the way here to do the exact same thing.”

Zen’s expression faltered and Mollie felt embarrassment creep into her features.

“I’m coming,” she growled. “Whether you like it or not.”

Without waiting for a response Mollie left the main building. She probably shouldn’t have shouted at him in that way but Mollie knew he didn’t care. She just hoped Zen would allow her this one shred of freedom.

Before Mollie could turn up towards her quarters to pack for the trip she caught site of another figure walking down the staircase towards the main floor.

Mollie could hold a grudge. For a long time too, but she cared about Joël and she wanted to make things right between herself and Araya. Muttering under breath she swallowed her pride and greeted the girl.

“Hey.”

Araya’s lips twitched but Mollie could feel the air around her was significantly less hostile today.

“Hey,” she said somewhat less enthusiastically.

Mollie wouldn’t push it. That was as far she went and with a nod she made a beeline for her room.

“Whoa that’s it?” Araya said with surprise blocking her way with a fluid step in front of Mollie.

“Not even an apology? That’s cold Mollie.”

Mollie looked at her angrily.

“I should be asking you for an apology,” she muttered trying unsuccessfully to step around the girl.

“Dramatics dramatics,” Araya mused pulling Mollie’s arm forward, although gently on the stairs, so Mollie could re-orient herself. “I was on my way to spar before I saw you. Maybe you’d care to join me and Caden?”

Mollie looked conflicted.

“More of an observer,” Araya added with a half smile. “Joël told me you two talked last night.”

Mollie sighed.

“You’re doing the right thing Mollie.”

“Let’s just move past it,” Mollie mumbled brushing a hand against her forehead. She really didn’t want to talk about it. Not now.

“Fine with me. See you in a few.”

Caden swore as he fumbled backwards, his sword usurped from his grip as Araya managed to disarm him with her quick movements.

Julien and Joël were lingering a distance away. They were speaking quietly to each other.

“See Mollie?” Araya said with a grin as Caden cursed and pushed himself to his feet. “That’s what happens when you step out of your circle. You accept vulnerability and fall flat on your ass.”

“That was a lucky shot,” Caden shot back.

“What did I tell you about lucky shots?” Araya barked giving Caden a sharp kick to the shin. Mollie jumped at the sudden action as Caden stumbled back for the second time. “Just because you have a dagger now doesn’t make you a professional. Lucky shots don’t exist in battle you dunce.”

Mollie half smiled as she continued barking orders at her student. Perhaps with Zen as her mentor she didn't have it quite as bad as she first thought.

"Four laps around the falls," Araya muttered. Caden threw his sword to the side and was panting heavily at this point. He had a couple welts around his knuckles from where Araya had tapped him hard with edge of her blade. She looked over at him now with a glare. "If you don't take off now I'll make it eight."

With a groan the brown haired boy pushed himself to his feet and took off for the pathway towards the falls.

Araya looked over at her as Mollie absentmindedly pressed at her belly.

"How has your training been going?"

Mollie looked up.

"Fine. I'm not able to do as much anymore as I was a couple weeks ago."

Araya nodded.

"Good. I was worried Zen would be pushing a little too hard. Your situation is unique – I'm glad to see he understands it."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say he understands it," Mollie whipped out turning her angry gaze away from Araya. "He's just being careful because he has to be. I don't think he cares all that much."

Mollie crossed her arms angrily as her expression soured. It had suddenly gone quiet and Mollie looked up in surprise.

Joël's face had gone stiff and Julien seemed to purposefully be avoiding eye contact with everybody. Araya hesitated as she pushed back her short bob.

Had her comment been that bad?

"Did...did I say something?"

Mollie was genuinely confused and she didn't like the awkward glances she was getting from Joël either. It was putting her on edge.

"I wouldn't be so quick to judge Mollie," Araya said with a frown.

Quick as a wink Araya had her arm in hers and was dragging her outside of the training ground and away from the prying eyes of the other group members.

They made their way to the canteen across from the infirmary and carefully Mollie slid onto the stone bench as Araya mirrored her movements across from her.

Araya hesitated before she spoke and Mollie noticed she seemed awfully reluctant to get her words across.

“Zen...wasn’t always like that Mollie. He’s been through shit that will never go away. He copes with it in his own way.”

Mollie was stunned. She hadn’t known. How would she have known?

“What...what happened?”

Araya frowned.

“He was in love. That’s what happened.”

Mollie struggled to picture Zen and love in the same sentence but she supposed it could explain his bitterness and caustic demeanour.

“What happened to her?” she questioned. “She left him?”

“No,” Araya said darkly. “She...she died Moll. A couple years ago now.”

Mollie suddenly felt sick and she dropped her gaze.

“Geneviève,” Araya said softly. “That was her name. She was an incredible fighter Mollie,” Araya said with a sad grin. “Could give Zen a run for his money and that’s saying a lot.”

Araya had gotten up briefly to bring them some water and when she returned, she pushed a glass across the table for Mollie.

“She and Zen were around the same age when we found her. The Lyons had acquired her village at the time and were forcing people into industrial cities. She refused to go --had managed to run away before the forced migration was put into place.”

Mollie swallowed uneasily. She knew first-hand how horrible that had been for herself – the move from Riverton to Charterly. She could imagine just how terrible that must have been for the girl. She must have been pretty street smart to have escaped. Araya also seemed pretty fond of her.

“Caius had found her – said he’d never seen a more well to do nine year old. She and Zen got along well from the start...they trained together, fought together...hell they did everything together.”

Mollie had gone silent as she listened to Araya speak.

“She was deadly with a bow and arrow,” Araya said with a sly smile. “Was her weapon.”

“How did she...”

Mollie trailed off but she knew Araya understood her question.

“A mission,” she said softly. “Viv and Zen were sent out to retrieve some prisoners from that Ice Castle of Death in *Icedalar*. Some of our own members.”

Her tone had darkened and Mollie realized even speaking about it was hard for her.

“Viv was experienced and the mission wasn’t supposed to be dangerous – but of course you have to be prepared for anything...” Araya had begun to fiddle with the edge of her glass – her pinky finger doing nervous circles around the rim. “It’s like they were on to us from the start.”

“You were there?” Mollie asked quietly.

She nodded mutely.

“It was the wolf I think,” she murmured. “That’s the only thing I can think of that would have left such a... mess. She was mangled -- almost beyond recognition...but it was her.”

Mollie felt her stomach lurch forward. She could remember several occasions in the not so distant past where that easily could have been her.

“Zen witnessed the whole thing,” she said struggling to hold her emotions. “He was only seventeen at the time. It was his screams that alerted us. By the time we got there it was... too late. It was the first time that I had seen Micah Lyon in the flesh. He was nineteen at the time...around four years ago.”

Mollie shivered under her stony gaze.

“He did nothing. He just stood there --like a statue-- as his brothers laughed.” Mollie felt sick to her stomach as Araya told her the story. “Zen was there...holding what was left of her in his arms.” Araya’s gaze had gone glassy and Mollie could feel her stomach tighten. She didn’t want to know – she didn’t want to hear any more. “I don’t know what was worse,” Araya continued. “Knowing she was still alive or hearing Zen’s ear splitting screams-- crying -- *begging* for someone to help her. There was so much blood – around the walls, the pillars, the floor. So many pieces of *her* scattered everywhere-”

“Stop,” Mollie whispered. “Please stop.”

“We dragged him away of course,” Araya murmured. “It was a narrow escape...for all of us.” Her eyes suddenly met Mollie’s and Mollie could see for the first time the trauma that Araya so expertly concealed on display before her.

“You know what was weird about it?” Araya asked her eyes still holding that glassy faraway look. “The way the winter prince watched us as we struggled to gather all her limbs together – like he was watching a film or analysing some piece of ancient artwork. He didn’t say or do anything...not while Geneviève’s screams split the air as she lay a mangled limbless mess in the middle of the courtyard.”

“It was only when she was gasping for air as we struggled to drag Zen away...after the prince’s brothers had left did Micah look at us before he unsheathed his dagger and slit her

throat.”

“*Stop.*”

Araya seemed to blink and she suddenly came back to the present as Mollie dry heaved across from her.

“Are you alright?” she asked warily as Mollie blinked the blurriness away from her vision and ran a hand across her feverish forehead.

Mollie didn’t answer immediately and she heard Araya sigh.

“You asked.”

“I know,” Mollie said forcefully wishing Araya could have at least spared her some of the details.

She breathed in and out slowly as Araya looked across the clearing where in the distance she could see Zen and Caden arguing over something. She saw Zen differently now. Araya was right. Seeing your lover ripped apart to pieces before your eyes is not something anyone would get over...ever. And yet she had to admit – he was coping fairly well. She sure as hell would never have been able to cope with something that gruesome. She had misjudged him.

“Why?” she asked suddenly her eyes still on the blond Lyon in the distance. “Why does he blame Micah?”

Araya was wary as she looked at Mollie.

“Because he took her away from him.”

Mollie bit her lip.

“Maybe he was putting her out of her misery,” she murmured. She remembered in that moment what Micah had told her that day in Questershire. The day he slaughtered those prisoners in the earthy basement of the manor.

“Whatever his motives were. He finished her off Mollie. And he made a hell of a show of it.”

Araya’s voice was curt and biting as Mollie looked away. She didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

She quickly recovered when she noticed Joël, Caden, Julien and Zephyr striding towards them – packs on their back and swords slung loosely on their waists. They were wearing all black this time – not the preferred white attire of the Ophians.

Zen looked at Mollie briefly before addressing his sister.

“Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” Araya said promptly. She turned to Mollie as if to tell her something but Zen cut her off promptly.

“Mollie’s coming with us. She made it clear she has no desire to stay behind.” His blue eyes flickered over to hers. There was something alive within them – something primal and bright. It made her skin tingle.

Mollie suddenly felt a wave of guilt fill her as she looked at Zephyr. His blond hair was swept across his forehead in light honey toned waves as he blinked them out of his blue eyes. They were trained on her now and she quickly averted her gaze. She didn’t want to give anything away by standing awkward and ashamed in front of him. As far as he knew – Mollie had no idea of his past.

“Great,” Araya chirped shooting Mollie an irritated glare. Maybe she wasn’t doing the best job at hiding her emotions. “The sooner we leave the better. Who’s staying behind with Isla?”

“Pauline has already volunteered to stay,” Joël chimed in. “She prepared a pack for you too Mollie,” he added slinging a pack towards her.

Mollie took the pack gratefully and slung it around her back.

The sun was beginning to set and Mollie realized they were going to be traveling on foot through the night. She supposed it made more sense. It was too hot during the day for any sort of long distance hiking in this place. It just wasn’t feasible.

“Good,” Zen said checking his watch. “Let’s leave now. I want us across that river before midnight.” He paused as the others began to make their way down the path that would lead them away from the compound towards the main river.

“You’ll want to change before we go,” he murmured. “Something black in colour and comfortable. White stands out too much in the forest at night.”

Mollie nodded wordlessly.

She couldn’t help but notice the bracelet he wore on his wrist just below his watch.

Viv.

It stood out like a sore thumb to her now and she quickly flitted through her pack as a distraction.

Mollie could feel his gaze on her for an unusually long time before he went to follow the others and she finally exhaled. She just hoped he didn’t suspect anything.

Jelena laughed as her daughter collapsed in the snow her mousy brown hair sprinkled with dots of white from the light layer of flurries that fell from the sky.

“Viens ici Nina,” she called out as her daughter scampered up and down the vast landscape of *Château de Glace*.

Jelena watched her sadly as she jumped from one indent in the snow to the other. She was lonely, Jelena could tell. She needed a companion to get her through these tough times.

“Maman, viens jouer avec moi!”

Jelena sighed tiredly. She had to be careful. Even running for short distances in her condition could be dangerous.

“Non Nina. Tu sais que je ne ferai pas ça.”

The girl pouted, her heavy brown coat dusted in a light layer of snow.

Jelena was content today. It had been the first time in months that James and her had been able to have a brief escape together. He was thrilled she was pregnant and Jelena had a good feeling she would bear him a son. This pregnancy felt different. Finally, she would give Hartley the grandson- the heir-- he always wanted and she and James would inherit the Lyon estate. Jelena did not care too much for the wealth herself – she wanted it for her children. She feared for Nina as she grew up in a world that would treat her cruelly due to her gender. She wanted Nina to be different, more independent than Jelena herself had been. She didn't want her daughter to end up in the same position that she had...

“Princess Jelena,” the soft murmur from behind pulled Jelena from her thoughts and she turned to see one of her ladies in waiting standing behind her. The woman seemed flustered.

“Il est temps pour Nina de prendre des cours d’anglais.”

Jelena had to double the English lessons for her daughter after her grandfather had voiced his concerns over her aptitude in English. Nina detested it, but it was important.

“Non!” Nina cried out turning to run away from her mother farther into the snow covered courtyard.

Jelena sighed. She felt like a single mother more often now with how often her husband travelled.

“Master James est ici princesse,” her lady in waiting murmured as Jelena looked up sharply.

“He's here?”

This came as a shock to Jelena who hadn't expected his return for another week.

“Où est-il?” she asked sharply while keeping an eye on her daughter who had started jumping from snow pile to snow pile once again.

“Salle de réunion.”

Jelena nodded already adjusting her coat as she stepped into the atrium.

“Regardez Nina pour moi.”

The young maid nodded as Jelena swept past her towards the main hall.

The trail of her ember coloured gown swept behind her as she glided down the corridors of the winter fortress. the chill still sending a trickle down her spine in spite of the many layers she wore.

In her haste she opened the door to the meeting room abruptly to a sight that was all too familiar to her.

“James!” she cried out rushing towards her husband who’s left cheek was awash with fresh blood.

She barely registered the blade Micah Lyon was holding against his throat as James chuckled at his youngest brother.

It was just the two of them in the room and Jelena began to tremble as she attempted to see to James who pushed her away immediately. Jelena knew of the dislike between Micah and James. It wasn’t new for them to brandish a dagger every now and then... but she never thought any of them would physically act upon those urges – and in such a violent manner at that.

“You’re a traitor to the monarchy,” Micah whipped out ignoring Jelena’s presence completely. “The penalty for that is death.”

Jelena felt her heart jump to her throat and she scrambled closer in an effort to protect her husband.

What was he talking about?

Micah had an unsettlingly high number of kills below his belt and his proficiency was not unknown to the people. His title as the winter prince alluded more to his personality than it did to his birth town. He was cold, pale, and threatening in the most sinister of ways.

“Stop – don’t.” Jelena was choking as she watched Micah’s ice blue blade dig deeper into her husbands neck. *“Please – I’m sure this can be discussed.”*

Jelena was beside herself – her breathing erratic and her vision blurring with tears. Micah didn’t even flinch-- his cold blank stare boring into James as if it were only the two of them in the room. Even though he was slightly shorter than her husband, he still radiated a danger that was equally as threatening as the one posed by her husbands gargantuan frame. She shouldn’t be this stressed – especially in her condition.

“What is going on here?”

Rowan’s voice echoed through the room and Jelena registered the sharp click of the door closing behind her as he took in the scene before him.

“He’s going to kill him!” Jelena sobbed as Rowan walked coolly past her.

Rowan looked at her.

“Stop your dramatics woman,” he sneered looking distastefully at Jelena. “No one is killing anyone here.”

Jelena struggled to regain her breathing as Rowan looked between the two of them with a frown.

“Lower your sword Micah,” he said sharply before turning his gaze to James. “We both know you’re not going to inflict further harm onto him.”

Micah’s fingers flexed around the blade but Jelena could see it was taking every fibre of his being not to plunge his blade deep into James’ throat. The look on his face was one of pure hatred and she could see the smirk on James’ lips as the blood seeped further down his face to accumulate in the indent at the corner of his lips. Apparently – her husband knew it too.

“*Micah.*” Rowan said more sharply. He didn’t intervene, he only spoke from a distance his stance cool and authoritarian.

Micah stepped back sheathing his sword as Rowan turned his glower towards James.

“Clean this mess up,” he muttered at James who still had that cynical smile on his face.

“Before father gives us a real reason to pull out our swords.”

“I’ll take the risk.”

Micah’s frigid tone sent a chill down Jelena’s spine and she looked fearfully at Rowan who frowned at the comment.

“Of course you would you selfish brat,” Rowan said curtly. “But we will be the ones to suffer the consequences and I will *not* have that happen.”

“Oh you’re no fun Rowan,” James muttered dusting himself off as if what had just occurred was nothing but a harmless squabble. “Micah wants to prod the beast. Let him.”

Jelena froze as Rowan stepped up to James so his nose brushed his elder brothers.

“This is not your domain James. Don’t be so foolish.”

Micah was staring at his brothers, still and unmoving-- his expression lapsing back into something unreadable. Jelena didn’t miss how his fingers never left his sword despite being sheathed and covered on his hip.

“For now,” James said in a tone as equally gritty as Rowan’s. Smoothing his tousled hair down with a quick brush of his hand James left the room. Jelena dried her tears quickly in a hasty attempt to follow her husband. The blood from his cheek had left several splatters against the stony floor and before Jelena could leave Rowan had walked slowly towards her so she was alone and cornered under his intimidating expression.

“You will not mention this to anyone,” he said menacingly his dark eyes glinting. Jelena recoiled even further nodding meekly. He stepped out of her away promptly and she scuttled away as the sharp sound of her name from the corridor made her hasten even further. She could hear her husband curse in irritation as gave up waiting for her and stalked down the corridor away from the meeting room.

However Jelena had another idea...one the concubine had given her several months ago.

Rowan had not closed the door fully after he had chased her out and Jelena decided on doing something she never would have done before. Something that could get her into heaps of trouble.

Gingerly she pressed herself against the door and listened to Rowan’s quiet musings from within the room.

“Leave it be Micah,” Rowan muttered. “You’ve waited this long.”

Micah cursed and Jelena recoiled at the sound of blade digging into wood echoing across the room.

“I can’t wait any longer Rowan. He’s pushing it.”

The deadness in Micah’s tone made a chill go down Jelena’s spine.

There was a snort from Rowan and Jelena listened as footsteps echoed across the room.

“This would never have happened had you stuck to the plan in the first place.”

Rowan’s tone suddenly spat malice and Jelena pressed herself even closer.

“Are you threatened Rowan?” Micah asked rather shrewdly. “Did you think you’re the only one capable of twisting the rules to your liking?”

“Father won’t allow it,” Rowan spat hatefully.

There was a humourless chuckle from Micah.

“Now I think we both know that’s not true.”

There was a long silence that followed and Jelena tensed.

Jelena felt sick. She felt as if the two brothers were plotting something terrible. Something that would put her husband at risk.

Should she tell James?

“How could you be so bold Micah? Do you know who she is? Did you know?”

“Of course not,” Micah responded. The malice dripped from his voice and Jelena shivered just hearing his tone.

“Father must be alerted.”

“Not yet.”

Micah’s curt tone was clipped and unyielding. *“Not until I’m absolutely certain do we tell him.”*

“How much more certainty do you want? She knew about the riddle Micah. You told me yourself.”

Jelena recoiled at Rowans sharpness. She breathed in and out slowly as Micah’s soft husky murmur permeated the silence once again.

“I depart in a couple weeks. Peréal is not far from the borders of Obsidian Land. I am due to pay Monsieur Marchesseault a visit. That is where I will confirm what I already suspect.”

“Fix this Micah. Or God forbid I’ll be dragging you by shackles to court and you can take Alexandre Marchesseault’s place.”

Jelena scuttled to the opposite corridor as she heard footsteps approach the door.

Micah laughed and she watched from her perched position as he brushed his dark locks back and turned to look at his brother who now lingered in the doorway Jelena had been pressed against only seconds before.

“Keep dreaming Rowan.”

With a smirk he left down the corridor leading towards the east wing – away from Jelena. The red headed woman shivered as a white wolf brushed past her its blue eyes cold and unforgiving as it quickened its pace to bound proudly beside its master.

Jelena bit her lip as she hid behind the pillar until a second set of footsteps left the room and echoed briefly before lapsing back into silence. The ache in her back from bending in that position for so long reminded her of her condition and she struggled with her options.

She knew then she had heard information she certainly should not have known. But should she wait? Waiting would entail telling James that she eavesdropped and she worried about the repercussions of admitting such an act to him.

Perhaps she should wait. Yes. That would be best. Wait until she came up with something better to relay this information back to her husband.

Whatever the other Lyons had planned did not strike Jelena as something they would be able to accomplish soon. Plus, she figured it would be another whole situation trying to explain her findings to James who would certainly not be pleased to find out she had been snooping.

Swallowing the thick bile in her throat she shuffled away quietly before anybody else could witness what she had done.

Chapter End Notes

I don't even know what to call this chapter lol. Stuff happens. There's a lot to dissect here but I think it gives a good idea of personality and seeps into the psyche of some rather secondary characters.

Chapter 39: Yttrium

Chapter Summary

Mollie makes the trip to Anubis for the first time. The meeting reveals new truths about the state of unrest across several regimes. Zephyr unravels.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

So this was difficult. More difficult than Mollie had originally thought.

The walk was more of a tread through the underbrush and it was taking a toll on Mollie and her fragile body.

She blinked as the first drops of rainfall hit her forehead. Stumbling on the thick underbrush for what seemed like the tenth time in less than an hour, she struggled to match her pace with the others who had ventured far ahead of her.

The brush ridden landscape didn't last long with the route they were taking and before Mollie knew it, the group were back on familiar desert ground. The sound of quick running water filled her ears and Mollie immediately knew they were back to the place they had arrived at several months ago. She squinted, seeing a familiar thick forest across from the river in the distance and heard the soft sound of moving carriages and chatter filtering through the air. It must have been close to midnight at this hour and Mollie was struggling to stay upright on her feet. She could barely keep her eyes open but she knew she had to persevere.

"Araya," Zen said sharply turning towards his sister. "You and Joël need to pick up the food parcels at the main gate. They won't grant all of us access into the city at once. Not altogether and certainly not at this hour."

Araya nodded at her brother as they dropped their packs on the banks of the sandy riverbank and discussed their plan of action.

Mollie jumped in surprise when she heard her name barked loudly – over the sound of the rushing water in front of them.

"Mollie. Listen to me," Zen repeated his lips turned into a scowl. "Caden and Julien are picking up the weapons shipment at the main port. You and I on the other hand have some business to attend to in the city."

Mollie struggled to blink away her tiredness as Araya carefully handed Mollie her pack that the girl had carried for Mollie for most of the trip.

“But I was supposed to be on weapon pickup with Araya,” she replied as Zen began to pull the rope attached to the boat that would lead them across the river towards the main city. She hoped he hadn’t picked up on the slight slurring of her words. She was utterly exhausted.

He didn’t look at her as he responded.

“Change of plans,” he muttered. “You’re coming with me.”

She didn’t fight it. Not at this late hour and she fell silent as Zen gingerly lifted her into the boat before Caden and Julien shuffled in quickly after. The four of them fit snug and Mollie blinked blearily in the darkness as Joël swiftly untied the rope letting them bob in the water for a moment before the current began to take them across. It didn’t take long for Joël and Araya to become two small figures in the distance as the current carried them along. It was unnervingly still as they crossed the river water – the only disturbance being the gliding motions of chestnut wood against inky black liquid. The midnight air was crisp and cool and Mollie shivered as she felt sharp movements from within her belly. It always happened at night – rousing her from sleep at the most inconvenient at times and she squeezed her muscles tightly hoping to alleviate the discomfort somehow.

No one spoke the entire journey across and Mollie was proud that she had managed to keep herself alert and awake throughout the short traverse across the river. It took a tremendous amount of effort but Mollie had done it. She had remembered what Luna had told her about this place. The tainted waters beneath them. She didn’t want to think about how many bodies lay at the bottom of the river...

Zephyr’s blond head was the only glimpse of colour Mollie could spot in the eerie darkness and in record time he was propelling the boat forward till it reached the sandy banks of the shore.

He helped her out of the boat carefully and Mollie looked back in confusion as Julien and Caden stayed put in the boat, waiting for the two of them to exit.

As Zephyr easily manoeuvred himself out of the boat she saw him nod once to Caden who let the rope drop and allowed the boat to catch the current back to the opposite shore where the other two members were waiting.

“Why are they both going back?” she whispered as Zen gripped her arm tightly in his fingers.

“The boat needs to be evenly balanced,” he explained lowly taking Mollie’s pack from her and slinging it on top of his. “Either in twos or fours. Any irregularity in the transport will create instability in the system. That’s why they’re going back.”

Mollie fell silent as he pulled her gently along with him towards the main city.

“Here,” he muttered handing over her yellow cloak as he swiped a black one of his own from his pack. “It’ll only get colder as the night goes on.”

It was not a far walk to the main gate and when Mollie arrived beside the tall Lyon she noticed the men at the gate look at each other once before allowing passage to herself and

Zephyr. There was light rain as they walked through the iron gates into the city and Mollie gratefully pulled her hood up. The guards looked twice at Mollie's belly as she passed by them and she didn't miss how Zephyr's grip tightened on her the second they crossed the threshold into the heart of *Anubis*.

It was surprisingly busy for a city at midnight and Mollie was surprised to see locals sitting in bars through the window, play-fighting with swords in public training grounds, and some just walking side by side down the cobbled streets. Mollie and Zephyr stood out – Zen in his black cloak and Mollie in her yellow as the locals wore their traditional white and stared at them as they passed them on the street. She was no longer tired at this point. She was simply on edge as Zen walked coolly beside her, seemingly unruffled by the stares and attention they were receiving.

"Why is everyone..." Mollie trailed off as she saw a couple holding a baby in their arms as they exited a restaurant towards the end of the street. They looked...normal. As if it was not out of the ordinary to be leaving a building at midnight without a care in the world.

"Out and about?" Zen finished for her as he pressed his hand to the small of her back leading the way. "There's no curfew here," he explained. "It's not like back home where everyone is scheduled to be home by 10 pm. People are free to travel around the city whenever and wherever they please. Just as long as they don't break any rules or do anything to disturb the peace."

The concept baffled Mollie and she realized the freedoms these people had here where tenfold what they were permitted to do back home in Lyon territory.

"There's no status cards?" she asked eyeing how easily people were able to enter and leave buildings. There were no government patrols, no presence of any sort of elite guard. It was shocking to her.

"Nope," Zen said. "They did away with all of that stuff after their official monarchy fell."

Mollie was so lost in thought, she almost lost her footing when a chirpy voice called out from a small little pub around the corner. Mollie squinted to see a lanky local in a short white dress waving them over, her glossy hair pulled back into a tight bun to display her pixie like features.

Mollie hesitated as Zen urged her forward towards the girl who was jumping on her toes at this point.

"Zen!" she cried out throwing her arms around him. Mollie watched the exchange coldly as the girl retracted giving him a dazzling smile.

"Evening Leyla," he said with a lazy smile.

Her eyes flickered to Mollie and the girl reddened as the local turned her eyes back to Zen – a wicked glint to her eye.

“You did *not* you naughty boy,” she chastised giving him a playful smack on the shoulder. He was so tall she ended up swiping his chest. “You were always such a *tease* but you gave in eventually didn’t you?”

To Mollie’s embarrassment Zen forced a laugh. It was uncharacteristic and Mollie figured he was just going along with it.

“Guilty as charged,” he said with a smirk. “That being said it would be a sin to leave me and my... baby mother out in this foul weather now wouldn’t it?”

She faltered after this and Mollie could tell she had gotten herself into a bit of a trap with his quick response.

“You know I can’t Zenny,” she said with a nervous glance behind her. “It may not seem like it but the city is on high alert.”

Zephyr sighed pulling his hood down so his damp blond hair hung loosely across his forehead.

“Actually it *does* seem like it. Your city guards aren’t very subtle.”

She rolled her eyes and Mollie wondered what kind of past relationship they had. Obviously they knew each other somehow.

“The spare rooms are full Zen,” she said lowly stealing another glance behind her again. “There are spies crawling all over our lands. We aren’t taking any chances. Not even with you and your people.”

Zen pursed his lips for a second and Mollie watched the exchange in silence. She didn’t know how they were going to get out of this one.

“That’s a shame,” he murmured. He seemed to purposefully be rattling his pockets and Mollie heard the unmistakeable sound of thick metal coins bouncing against one another.

The girl straightened up immediately and Mollie could sense her interest had been piqued.

“However...” she sniffed swiping her hands against her apron. “I do believe the attic is empty. It’s also hidden away from the other rooms so no will come knocking or searching during the night.”

“The others are coming too Leyla,” he said softly. Mollie couldn’t quite tell if he was warning her or reminding her, but regardless Mollie saw a sliver of apprehension cross her features.

“They’re here too you know,” she murmured leaning in close as Zen tilted his head down to hear her. From far away it almost looked like they were exchanging a kiss but Mollie could hear their soft whispered from her position beside them. “The Marchesseaults. They left at dawn this morning.”

“I know,” Zen said softly. “That’s why I came.”

Leyla's brows furrowed and Mollie could see the first sign of irritation creep into her features.

"My pub isn't a bed and breakfast or a meeting room Lyon," she hissed.

"It is tonight," Zen whispered back harshly. The familiar Zephyr she knew was back on display and even she shivered at his harshness.

The girl recoiled at his fierceness but she seemed unable to come up with another excuse.

"How many rooms do you need?" she muttered.

"Just... two more. I'll take the attic."

She grumbled something under her breath but Mollie relaxed when she saw that the girl didn't look nearly as upset or apprehensive anymore. She just looked mildly ticked off – almost inconvenienced.

She squinted at Mollie again and Mollie looked down averting her gaze. She was sizing her up again.

"So this is new..." the girl said eyeing Mollie and Zephyr with curiosity.

"The rooms Leyla," Zephyr said sharply.

She rolled her eyes dramatically and opened the door to let them both in.

The warm ambiance was inviting as Mollie walked in beside Zephyr. Soft pub music filtered through the air and it was full enough in the small restaurant filled with booths that Zephyr and herself didn't stand out too much.

"What was that?" she asked him seconds before he pulled her quickly into a booth near the far corner of the pub.

"What?" Zen asked unperturbed. "I was getting us a place to stay...unless you wanted to spend the night outside?"

She ignored the comment and flipped her hood down letting her damp curls fall around her shoulders.

"Hungry?"

Mollie looked up to see his blue eyes trained on hers. She blushed and looked away.

"It's going for 1 am," she responded eyeing the clock at the front of the pub near the bar.

"So?" he scoffed. "Might as well enjoy something that isn't potatoes and duck meat-- even if it is only for one night."

She sighed and picked up a menu. The food was foreign and unfamiliar to her and she looked up bewildered as Zen lazily took the menu from her fingers and scanned it. He rolled his eyes at her as he called a waitress over.

The waitress smiled at Zen, a sultry expression on her face as she looked between the two of them.

Mollie found it unbelievably strange that they were getting served in a restaurant at 1 am but she knew the customs were different in this regime. She would have to start getting used to these differences.

“What can I get you handsome?”

The waitress frowned and looked at Mollie as if she were a threat in her path. Mollie pursed her lips and kept her eyes trained on the menu.

“We’ll get two stews,” he said tonelessly handing her the menus. “Thanks.”

“You want the taters with that?”

“No,” they both shouted at the same time making the waitress stumble backwards.

Mollie couldn’t look at potatoes again. It was all they had eaten while on the vessel from Icedalar to Ophian territory. She’d rather starve.

The waitress finished writing in her notepad before giving Zephyr another sensual stare. “Alrighty. I’ll be right back with your orders.”

Zephyr ignored her reaching for a wine bottle on the empty table next to them and drinking straight out of it.

Mollie frowned at him.

“I’d offer,” he said rather lazily. “But you’re pregnant.”

“Please don’t,” Mollie retorted sliding her hands backwards against the cheap wooden table. It looked like red wine from here and she shuddered just thinking about it. It reminded her of Micah. The way his pink lips stained red after taking a sip from his goblet. The way it felt when he swished it from his mouth to her...the sharp bitter taste...

But Micah would never do such a thing. She could just imagine the expression that would cross his face had he witnessed someone drinking wine straight from the bottle. The thought made her smile internally.

“What are you smirking about?”

Zephyr was watching her, his eyes narrowed as he took another swig from the bottle.

“Aren’t we supposed to be having a meeting?” she said ignoring his question. “How are you supposed to negotiate while drunk?”

“I’m six fucking foot five Mollie,” Zephyr said with a frown. “It would be physically impossible for me to get drunk from a half bottle of red wine.”

She ignored him as a local couple in the booth behind Zen turned to look at them.

Mollie felt heat flood her face as they shook their heads in annoyance and turned back around.

The bell from the pub door tinkled as two men walked in and Mollie perched on the edge of her seat as they handed the woman in the front a small piece of parchment. They wore tunics similar to what the Insurgency had in black but the colour they sported was a dark red.

“Zen,” she whispered straightening up in her seat. “They’re here. I think that’s them.”

“Probably,” Zen said not bothering to turn around. “Don’t worry. They’ll come to us.”

He seemed so unruffled...so apathetic to the entire situation and Mollie just sighed through it. She didn’t have much say in this anyway. Zen had made that pretty clear from day one.

On cue the two men’s eyes scanned the pub and within seconds their eyes locked with Mollie and they began to walk towards their table.

Mollie stiffened as they came to a slow halt beside their cramped booth.

“*Monsieur Lyon,*” the one said turning his gaze towards Zen. The men stood in front of them briefly and Mollie took a good look at them. They were wealthy. She could tell by their fancy tunics and the ostentatious badges that gleamed against their chests. But instead of a Lyon insignia, there was a different symbol. A circle? A planet? Mollie’s wasn’t quite sure.

“Sit,” Zen muttered sliding out of the opposite booth to squeeze in beside Mollie.

The guards looked at each other briefly before pursing their lips and sitting down. They didn’t seem fond of the man in front of them and Mollie didn’t blame them. Zen was not the most likeable.

“Bold of you to make the trip out here prince.”

Zephyr grimaced at the term as the second guard regarded the two of them coldly.

“Perhaps we should speak in French. Someone might overhear.”

Zen scoffed at the comment.

“Won’t make much of a difference. The Ophians know the language too well at this point.”

The two guards looked at each other again before falling silent. They watched Zephyr quietly, judgment written all over their faces as he finished off the wine bottle cleanly before tossing it back to the table across from them.

Before another word could be spoken the waitress re-appeared with two steaming bowls of stew in her hands.

“Anything else –“

“We’re good,” Zen said waving her off.

The hot stew wafted in Mollie’s face and she shivered as the guard directly across from her matched her gaze.

His eyebrows furrowed as he regarded her – as if trying to match a name to a face or a face to a name. But he said nothing more.

“They found him,” the one guard said quietly inching forward on the table. Mollie hadn’t yet touched her stew but Zephyr had dug in already bringing a spoonful to his lips. “Quinn Marchesseault.” Zephyr said nothing. Instead he dipped his spoon back into his stew and continued to eat. “We’ve been tipped off that the Lyons have it prince. That middle one got his hands on it somehow and the Lyons are going to use it to invade us all. We have to act *now*. ”

Zephyr cursed flinging his spoon into the stew so the hot liquid seeped over the bowl and splattered onto the counter.

“Are you fucking with me?” Zen barked. His fists had curled on the table and the guards before him tensed.

“They’ve had him prisoner for months now,” the guard said. “It was only a matter of time before he buckled and told them how to weaponize it.”

Mollie felt her blood run cold.

“Fuck,” Zen repeated.

“Our King has requested that our forces merge for the time being. A safety precaution in case the Lyons *do* decide to initiate. Now that they have it, nothing is stopping them from invading.”

“When we wanted to ally with you in the past you all retreated to your castles and ignored the plights of others,” Zen growled. He was absolutely fuming. “Why don’t you ask your Ophian friends for help?” Zen spat pushing his still full bowl away with a clatter. “Oh wait. They fucked you over too didn’t they?”

The second guard – the one across from Mollie – sighed heavily.

“We have good reason to believe it was the... Ophians who handed the iridium to the Lyons.” The guards exchanged a look with each other after this.

“Something doesn’t make sense,” Zephyr growled. “Why would the Lyons agree to a negotiation with the Ophians if the Ophians have *already* given them what they need? Why would they still be offering *us* refuge on their lands?”

“Think about it prince,” the guard sneered. “The Ophians are trading with every fucking regime at this point – the Rineauxs, the Lyons, the rebels. I’d bet my gold coins they’re conducting deals with the fucking Outbacks too. They help out because they have something to gain. It has nothing to do with loyalty.”

Mollie felt her stomach roll when she heard this. Zen was right. Something didn’t make sense.

“What did you exchange with Rowan for me that day in *Icedalar*?” she interjected. She wondered if it played some role in the Lyons acquisition of iridium.

The guards looked taken aback that Mollie was participating in the discussion but Zen just twitched his lip at her.

“He wanted an Ophian map,” Zephyr said lightly. “It was an odd request, but at the time you were our top priority and that was his demand.”

Mollie stilled when she heard this.

An Ophian map?

“But he could get that anywhere. There’s maps all over the place.”

“No Mollie,” Zephyr said biting. “They’re not. They’re actually incredibly hard to come by. But I would have thought at this point in time the Lyons would have *already* had access to one.”

“Maybe they were checking?”

“For what?” Zephyr muttered.

“Look,” the guard interjected from across the table. “It doesn’t matter what has happened in the past. What matters is the fate of our futures. The youngest Lyon is set to make a stop at *Peréal* following his negotiation with the Ophians.”

“What?” Zen snarled.

“Whatever he is coming for, we are obligated to welcome him as a diplomat regardless. That is customary.”

“I want to be there.”

Zen’s voice was rough and blunt after this and the guards regarded him stonily.

“No. There will be no bloodshed on our grounds. We already told your father this. Though I must say he was a hell of a lot more persuasive than *you*.”

Zen laughed mockingly.

“I’m sure he was.”

“We’re done here,” the guard said in a clipped tone.

Mollie had gone silent, watching the tense interaction. She didn’t like how often the second guard’s eyes kept flickering over to her. She had *not* been imagining it. It was almost like he was trying to place her.

“We’ll take our leave prince,” the guard said rather derisively as he stood up.

“Fuck off,” Zen grumbled.

“*Mademoiselle*,” the second guard said with a bow directed more at Mollie. She looked over at Zen who was already calling the waitress over for another bottle of wine. That was enough of an indication for Mollie that they needed to leave. He had already embarrassed her enough that night and Mollie could only suck it up for so long.

“We’re leaving,” she muttered.

He grumbled at her and she shoved him hard to the side. She probably hurt herself more than she did him but he followed through shuffling out of the booth.

Mollie could tell this meeting had really soured Zen’s mood and she hesitated as he angrily tossed a bag of coins on to the table and stalked towards the back of the pub.

She curled her lip as he grabbed the bottle of wine he had ordered from the bar before stomping his way upstairs towards the attic.

An old rickety attic with a leaking roof was certainly not what Mollie was expecting.

The walls were peeling, the floorboards were chipped and scratched, and the bed was small and lumpy.

Mollie wasn’t one to complain but she cringed as she felt the splatter of rainfall from the poorly patched roof trickle down the back of her neck as she rested against the small corduroy armchair in the far corner of the room.

She was grateful for the shower and food they were given as well as the hospitality provided by the somewhat reluctant pub owner. She seemed nice enough. But still. This place was rough.

Mollie groaned as she rubbed her swollen belly. The pain was not subsiding this time around and she was trying her best to swallow the soreness that was erupting within her lower abdomen.

She hoped a cold shower and some time alone would serve Zen some good before he returned to the claustrophobic room they were sharing. She didn’t think she’d be able to take any more of his moodiness. He was worse than her and her hormones were raging through her.

Mollie tensed as the door opened and Zen appeared, his hair damp from the shower and a loose black tunic and slacks on his toned frame.

He said nothing as he rummaged through his pack before sauntering to perch on the edge of the bed.

He had something in his fingers a fabric of some sort. Something silky and feminine. She had an inkling of who it belonged to.

It must have been close to two or three in the morning at that point but not one of them made any sort of move to suggest they were ready for bed.

Mollie cleared her throat quietly as Zen reclined lightly on the bed stretching out so his body was splayed out on the left side of the bed.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

It was probably best that Mollie just kept her mouth shut. But the guilt was gnawing at her from the inside. Picking away at her soft interior.

“For what?”

His tone was still hard – but softened by the huskiness of exhaustion. He had no intention of picking a fight tonight. She wasn't sure if it was the meeting that was the cause for his bleakness...or the weight of other memories that were bringing him down. Rather than play it safe, Mollie went with her gut.

“For what happened to her.”

Zephyr’s eyes flickered to hers and she felt her face heat at his abruptness.

There was nothing but the soft patter of rain on the roof and the drip of water leaking onto the floorboards from the ceiling. It was no place for a prince. No place for royalty. But in some strange sense, Zen seemed to embrace it. She saw how his face twisted in anger when those guards bestowed the title onto him. Mollie never really thought much of it. But as she considered it she realized he was entitled to so much – as much as his cousins-- yet – he would rather stay here, in this rickety shack. She heard the money that lined his pockets. He easily could have gotten them to stay at one of those fancy hotels at the heart of the city. He could afford it. But he decided *not* to. It fascinated Mollie as much as it confused her.

“Are you in pain?”

Mollie sighed and looked away. She had thought she had been doing a good job of hiding it.

“I’ll...I’ll manage,” she stuttered as another pull from her belly sent her gripping the armrests tightly.

“Lie down,” he said sharply rising from the bed and walking towards her.

“I’ll be okay Zen,” she murmured placing a hand on her stomach. “They tend to move a lot at this hour. It’s not unusual, trust me.”

He seemed concerned but Mollie decided she might as well lie on the bed anyway to pacify him.

She eased her way onto the bed, lying gently on her back. She spotted the fabric he had been toying with in his hands and ever so gently Mollie lifted it up.

He watched her from beside the bed as she handed it to him pressing the purple fabric into his hands.

“Araya told me what happened,” she murmured looking up at him from beneath her lashes.

“Yeah,” Zen grunted taking the fabric from her and slipping it into his pocket. “She can’t keep her fucking mouth shut about anything.”

Mollie recoiled but his harshness wasn’t directed at her. She knew this.

Slowly, he lowered himself onto the bed beside her, his weight bringing her slightly closer to him as the iron rods squealed under their combined weights.

“She sounded lovely,” Mollie said softly.

Zephyr was quiet for some time after this and Mollie assumed that he simply wouldn’t answer. She wouldn’t blame him if he didn’t.

“Yeah,” he said after a long moment brushing his golden locks back. “Yeah she was. She was something...”

Mollie chewed her lip as she pressed softly at her belly.

“It’s okay to miss her you know,” she said quietly. She didn’t look at him as she spoke. She was worried his expression would flounder her into silence.

“What makes you think I don’t?” he murmured.

“You bottle things up,” Mollie said slowly turning to look at him. “And most people who bottle things up end up breaking apart later. It helps to talk about things before that happens.”

Zen was staring at her silently.

“I’m just quoting your sister,” Mollie admitted after some time.

“I was going to say,” Zen said rather dryly. “That sounded like the usual heap of bullshit she would say.”

Mollie couldn’t help the giggle that escaped her lips as he closed his eyes briefly and brought his arms behind his head. His lip had curled slightly up to the side and Mollie hesitated as she

saw his muscles straining against the tight tunic. She got a smile from him. It was certainly a start.

Mollie cringed as a particularly hard kick from her stomach sent her lurching upwards on the bed.

Zen was up in an instant, the concern etched across his features.

"I knew it. You're *not* alright. You're such a terrible liar Mollie," he said tiredly as she bit her lip.

"It's not painful as much as it is...uncomfortable," she admitted brushing her thick curls backwards. "I'm lucky to get even a couple of hours of sleep on most nights," she said.

Zen was silent for a long while, his eyes glued to the thick quilt covering the lumpy mattress.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Zen asked quietly.

She shrugged. She didn't really know why she didn't tell him. Perhaps she wanted him to know that she could handle it. Everything he threw at her on top of her pregnancy, the training, the meetings...

"It doesn't matter," she muttered shifting a little more on the bed as the skin of her stomach stretched taut against the movement inside.

Zen hesitated as he noticed the movement from within her stomach.

"You should have said something," he repeated monotonously.

"So you could take it easy on me?" she challenged lightly in an attempt to brighten the mood.

In a surprisingly gentle gesture he leaned over and touched the bottom of her chin lightly and half smiled at her.

"Never."

She found herself smiling timidly back and in that moment she felt something warm in her belly. It was a feeling that pinkened her cheeks and made a certain heat build in the soft tender space between her thighs. Her nipples felt tender as they rubbed against the tight fabric of her shirt and her core throbbed. It was suddenly sweltering in the room and Mollie tried her best to calm her erratic breathing.

With the way Zephyr was looking at her Mollie couldn't quite tell what was going through his mind. Most of the time he was rather easy to read, but tonight, he was indecipherable.

"It's hard to forget," he whispered. He was thumbing the bracelet he wore on his wrist and Mollie knew what he was alluding to. "Everytime I'm having a good time. Everytime I laugh, I smile, I do something to make me feel warm and good and whole.... I'm reminded of her - her bleeding body in my arms." His voice was so soft and languid Mollie had to inch even closer just to hear what he was saying. "In those moments I think to myself, how can I

possibly be smiling, laughing, enjoying myself when she isn't *here*? What gives me the right to feel all of those emotions running through me while she lies cold and emotionless – never to smile, never to laugh... never to *live* again.”

Mollie listened quietly as he spoke. For the first time she didn't interrupt him.

“It doesn't feel right,” he mumbled brushing his hair back.

Mollie watched as he pitifully reached for the wine bottle he had grabbed before they came upstairs. It had fallen somewhere on the bedside table where he had tossed his cloak earlier.

His fingers were trembling as he tried to open the bottle and gingerly Mollie reached her fingers over his so they stilled.

“Talk. Don't drink,” she said softly. She attempted to peel his fingers from the top of the glass bottle but he all but pulled her fingers off.

“Don't tell me what to do,” he grumbled.

“Zen stop,” she muttered pulling it free from his nimble grasp.

His body was so close to hers – Mollie could feel the heat radiating off of it and it made her breathing pick up. It seemed he had felt it too because seconds later he released the bottle from his grip, letting it fall with a *crash* onto the floor before crushing his lips to hers. The shock of it registered only after and Mollie shuddered as his hands tightened around her waist and began to pull her closer to him.

His hot mouth sealed over hers and she groaned into it as he kissed her deeply.

No. No this is wrong. This is so wrong.

His arms snaked up her torso as he dipped his hot tongue along her bottom lip before sliding it wetly against her own. Mollie pulled back trying to ignore the warmth of his body against hers and the feel of his heated skin on her feverish one.

“Zen,” she said warningly, her husky tone trembling with unsuppressed passion.

It would be so easy for her to lose herself. To succumb to the gnawing aching feeling of emptiness that had consumed her.

But she *shouldn't*.

Mollie was repulsed by the warmth that spread between her legs as the tall blond Lyon began trailing kisses down her neck. He didn't seem to hear the hesitation in her voice. There was something animalistic about him. Something rough and feral that excited and terrified Mollie all at once.

“Zen,” she said again as he inched his palms across her bulging stomach to wrap around her waist.

“Just give in to it,” he whispered tugging her earlobe softly with his teeth.

Mollie exhaled sharply as he gently pushed her down onto the bed. The bed springs creaked beneath them as he shifted on top of her freeing himself of the tight tunic he was usually sporting. His golden skin glowed under the flickering candlelight – so different from the pale icy luminescence of the winter prince and much more untamed. His muscles rippled in the warm room, years and years of training leaving his body toned and muscular in places Mollie never thought possible. She swallowed uneasily as her eyes lingered over his body.

Mollie realized quickly that Zen was not a patient lover and she moaned sharply as he ripped her pants and shirt in record speed. She writhed as he held her firmly, greedily drinking in her bare body.

“Wait,” she gasped as he slid his hands down her body till it wrapped around her waist.

Carefully he turned her around so she was kneeling on the bed and facing the headboard -- her stomach bulging in front of her.

Mollie barely managed another word before Zen’s hands shot out to grab her hips making her legs buckle beneath her hypersensitive body.

Mollie felt something hot and blunt press against her from behind and she moaned in yearning as he pushed forward -- further and further and *further*.

Mollie cried out as he slammed full force into her from behind. The bed creaked at their combined weight as he sheathed himself to the hilt through her slick warmth. Mollie clawed her fingers against his as he held her hips steady. She was desperate for any sort of balance and eager to brace herself against something - *anything*- as he slowly began to move behind her.

His head dropped to her shoulder as he groaned against her neck his golden hair brushing her cheek as he planted slow breathless kisses against her neck. He was so *thick*, so incredibly thick and Mollie whimpered as he forced her to yield to his hardness – tightening his grip on her hips as he locked her into position.

With a force she hadn’t anticipated he pulled out and then slammed back in – pounding into her from behind. Mollie couldn’t register anything – not the water dripping down on her from the ceiling, nor the rattling iron rods of the creaking bed, nor the cries from her lips. Only the sensations of pleasure simmering through her body were enough to alert Mollie that she was in fact *present*.

“Just... like... that,” he groaned from behind. Had it not been for his hot heavy breaths on the back of her neck Mollie would have felt as if she were suffocating. His cock pummelled through her like a wildfire through a blazing forest – burning her lungs and dousing her body in a slick coat of gasoline. Her grip on the iron headboard stretched the skin of her knuckles taut along her fist and each tingle that racked her body felt like a flame ignited against her skin and she whined loudly as he inched deeper into her.

He leaned over her, his warm palms squeezing the full flesh of her breasts from behind her as Mollie cried out. She writhed as he adjusted his angle just the slightest bit pounding down into her – hitting that sweet spot that sent Mollie reeling into the sheets.

Mollie gasped, a ragged desperate breath, as if she had been underwater instead of beneath the blond rebel prince pounding into her from behind. Mollie released her grip on the headboard onto the sheets and clawed at the thin material, her fingers pulling the ragged sheet out from its tucked formation beneath the mattress as Zephyr grinded his body against hers.

He had her facedown on the sheets, her swollen belly swiping against the bare sheetless mattress as she dragged her nails down the mattress.

“I bet you’ve never been fucked like this,” he muttered. “Been...wanting...to...do this... since I saw you that day on...that fucking ship.”

“Stop...talking,” Mollie moaned as his hand slithered up her back to curl around her neck. Quickly he yanked her thick curls to the side so he could sink his teeth gently into her neck.

“Ohh. *Ohh*,” Mollie moaned as he continued his hot thrusts from behind. He got a good few thrusts in before Mollie went completely rigid beneath him. Like a vice against her waist, she tightened before exploding hot and wet against his cock with a hoarse throaty groan, squeezing and shuddering through each rough steady thrust from behind.

“Fuck,” he snarled before pulling all the way out and sinking all the way in with a guttural moan. Mollie felt rather than heard him cum as she felt a familiar thick wetness trickle down her thighs.

“Fuck Mollie,” he muttered planting wet kisses against the back of her neck. “That was...that was *hot*. That was so fucking hot.”

Mollie couldn’t respond. Hell, she couldn’t even move. But the pain...the pain in her belly was gone – replaced instead with a warm simmering feeling that flowed from her belly to her toes.

Her hair was a tangled curly mess atop of her head, the tendrils sticking to her sweaty forehead. Groggily she pushed them away from her forehead as Zephyr pulled himself free from her quivering cunt before slowly lifting her up so she lay backwards with her head on the pillow.

Mollie was spent. Panting and exhausted as she lay on her back staring at the old peeling ceiling with a single painting above the bed. It was of a red barn in a field of wheat. Even the painting looked aged with its yellow browning tint. Mollie lay there sprawled on her back, her belly heaving with each breath she took as she waited patiently for some feeling to return to her limbs.

Zephyr pressed his forehead against her shoulder as he collapsed down next to her. He was careful not to put any weight on her front and she sighed as he exhaled with a groan beside her. His breath tickled her ear and she brought a hand upwards to rest on his tanned glistening back. His skin was so bronzed and sun kissed and healthy. She hesitated at first before gently

laying her palm against the warm heated flesh. She had to be. When she made love to the winter prince that was a spot she was forbidden to touch -- his back that bore the scars of his childhood.

His blond hair brushed her cheek as he lay on his stomach beside her, his fingers inching up to thumb the underside of her breast.

“That’s impressive,” Mollie murmured breathlessly as she brushed her fingers down his shoulder to his bulging bicep.

She squeezed the heated flesh lightly as he blinked an eye open beside her.

“What’s impressive?”

“Your muscles,” she said tracing the pronounced ridges on his forearms.

He laughed lightly his smile half hidden by the pillow.

“It definitely helps with your intimidation tactic. You must scare your enemies off before they even try to engage with you.”

He went quiet after this and Mollie hesitated.

She resumed her breaths as he continued sliding the pads of his fingers beneath her breasts.

“Do I intimidate you?”

Mollie stilled for a moment, stopping her own circular motions against his skin.

“What?”

“If we had never met and you saw me for the first time,” he said slowly. “Would I have intimidated you?”

Mollie didn’t know why his question sent her heart racing so quickly but she managed to scramble together an answer before the silence went on for too long.

“I...No,” Mollie said quietly. “No you wouldn’t have.”

He scoffed and Mollie turned to look at him.

“That’s too bad,” he murmured. “Maybe you should have run away when you first saw me.”

Mollie paused as he closed his eyes beside her once again.

She shifted her weight slightly, feeling the wetness smear messily against her inner thighs. She couldn’t bother to clean herself up at this point though, she was far too exhausted.

“There’s not many places to run when you’re on a ship in the middle of the ocean.”

“That’s not the first time you saw me,” he hummed against the pillow.

Mollie paused to stare at him, her expression one of utter bewilderment.

“You don’t remember?” he said quietly. “Back in *Icedalar*...on the main floor powder room.”

Mollie stilled.

Of course. Of course she remembered...the footprints...the knuckles on the glass window....the shadow...

“That was... you?” she muttered.

Before Zephyr could respond she took the pillow he had been lying on and slapped it harshly against his cheek.

“The *fuck*,” he muttered sitting up immediately. “The hell is wrong with you woman?”

“I was in the bathtub,” she growled at him. “I was *naked*, what the hell were you thinking?”

“For Gods sake,” he hissed grabbing the pillow from her hands. “I needed to get a look at you and that was the only way possible. We didn’t know if you were really there...we barely saw you. What the fuck did the prince do anyway? Keep you in a metal cage with a blanket?”

“You scared the *hell* out of me,” she muttered crossing her arms over her chest. She ignored his comment.

Zephyr scoffed wiping a hand across his sweaty forehead.

“I wasn’t paying much attention at the time...” his voice had become a low throaty growl and in an instant he was peeling Mollie’s arms away from her chest. His eyes zeroed in on her chest his gaze darkening. “But fuck... I wish had been.”

Mollie blushed and looked away. His unabashedness was overwhelming and Mollie found it rare. Micah spoke little, preferring to relay his feelings with his hands...his tongue...his actions. But Zephyr...he was not afraid to voice his feelings. If anything, he was almost too frank about it.

“Shut up,” she mumbled dragging the sheets up over her naked body.

“I’m being serious,” he said halting her movements for a second time. “You’re beautiful when you’re angry – not angry – smiling – unsmiling – pregnant...not pregnant.”

Mollie laughed humourlessly.

“Maybe I *should* have let you drink that bottle of wine,” she grumbled. “I’d love to see you when you’re not intentionally spilling your secrets.”

He half smiled at her before he leaned in and kissed her lightly on the cheek. Mollie looked down tracing the defined ridges of his hip bone, following the triangular bone further past his hips over the bulge concealed by the sheets strewn across their lower bodies.

"You have soft hands," he mumbled after a brief silence.

Mollie frowned.

"Not anymore," she murmured sliding her palms together. The still healing blisters on her hands from all the training had not yet formed into hard callous. It would take some time before that happened. Araya had told her that.

"Nah. You do. Bread and butter hands. That's what my mother would call it."

Mollie sighed softly and picked at a thread on the sheet as Zen shuffled closer to her.

"It's different," he continued musing. His voice was slightly muffled by the pillow he was strewn across but Mollie could hear him clear enough. "Most of the females I train have tough skin. They're familiar with combat. They've learned how to deal with it from a young age."

Mollie couldn't tell where Zen was going with his musings but she stayed silent regardless.

"You're a primary citizen with soft hands, a mysterious history, and the only girl to have ever caught the eye of the fearsome winter prince.

"I'm a baker," Mollie said flatly as if that explained everything. "That's why my hands are soft. It has nothing to do with my upbringing. I worked hard just like all of the other primary citizens."

Zen laughed lightly and Mollie could feel a scowl form on her lips. How could he just change from being so sultry and gentle to being a complete asshole in a span of less than two minutes?

"You were running a bakery business that was established way before you took it over. That doesn't really sound like primary citizen upbringing to me."

Mollie opened her mouth to respond and closed it quickly. With the way he phrased it... it really *didn't* sound all that bad. But still. How dare he?

"It was my *grandparents* bakery," she said between clenched teeth. "The only thing they left me after they died.

"Primary citizens aren't afforded luxuries like family heirlooms Mollie Mayeson," Zen said casually. "Your grandparents were lying to you. You're no primary citizen."

The proof was on her status card...the card that Micah Lyon had tossed into the fire the first time he saw her.

Zen turned over fully so his face was inches from her own. His breath fanned her lips and Mollie resisted the urge to press her lips against his for a second time. The effect he had on her was foreign. She didn't like it.

"A lot of citizens from the Ophian Empire, Rineaux Regime and the Marchesseault Regime fled after the fall of the Ophian Empire," Zephyr explained, voice soft and lulling. "Much of them were nobles who were forced to hide their lineage from the Lyon regime after arrival. They settled in those country villages on the southern tip of the Lyon empire."

Mollie went quiet when she heard this.

"But what does that matter?" she asked forcing her gaze away from his lips and into his sea-blue eyes. "We were given a new status when we were forced out of Riverton into Chartery anyway."

Zen shrugged.

"Maybe it doesn't. But it certainly explains a lot. Caius believes that stuff is important. Blood means a lot to monarchial empires Mollie."

He was right. Mollie knew this. This had been ingrained in her head since she was a small child.

"It means a lot...even for me..."

Zen trailed off after this and Mollie knew what he was alluding to. The mood had taken on a somewhat dismal turn. She was beginning to understand Zen better after all these months of training, and rather than return to their previous state of gloominess Mollie attempted to lighten it --even just a little bit.

"*Prince Zephyr*," she murmured bringing her eyes back to his lips and tilting her head in a mockery of respect.

She smiled when she saw him roll his eyes and collapse back down into the pillows.

"I think we're a little past the formalities at this point," he said with a half smile.

Mollie blushed. He had a point. They were both as naked as could be.

She could feel the tiredness setting into her bones now and she relaxed as Zen gently pushed her back down so her head fit snugly into the crook of his neck.

"Sleep," he murmured, his fair locks brushing her cheek as his warmth enveloped her beneath the sheets. He didn't have to tell her twice.

"Pleasant dreams *votre majesté*," she murmured blindly reaching out to grab his knuckles the way the royals did in court.

"Stop." Mollie could hear the smile in his voice from above her as he caught her wrist and tucked it beneath the covers.

For the first time in several months, Mollie slept deeply without a single nightmare.

Chapter End Notes

Whewwww. That was a long time coming ;)

Chapter 40: Zirconium

Chapter Summary

A plan is set in motion. Mollie learns about the mysterious Alexandre Marchesseault. Secrets unfold.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“God *damn* it.”

Caden pounded his fist onto the cold hard table in anger.

The single piece of cloth fabric lay in front of them on the table. A single word written in elegant calligraphy in the centre, the ink sinking deep into the fibrous material.

Wait.

The handkerchief had embedded in the bottom right hand corner a familiar signet Mollie had seen. A crimson coloured planet delicately embroidered into the material. The official emblem of the *Marchesseault Regime*.

It was Caius’ writing, Mollie had deduced that the minute the pub girl had delivered the message to them that morning.

Jöel had gone quiet – his expression lapsing into something of concern.

After the first night here, Zen and Araya had left to attend to other matters -- including picking up their mother who was still stationed at the main compound outside *Anubis*. They’d been gone for close to ten days now and the lack of activity was taking a toll on the other three members who were forced to spend much of their time inside the dingy dark pub.

Jöel had deemed it too dangerous to venture outside – not since Zen had informed him of their meeting with the *Peréal* guards over a week ago. To maintain her skills Mollie had continued her training with Jöel during Zen’s absence. It hadn’t been all that long, but still Jöel’s style was different. He was a reticent fighter who took a more defensive approach than Mollie was used to. She was familiar with Zen’s aggressive approach.

It was another dreary rainy day as Caden, Mollie and Jöel sat inside the booth of the dingy pub, the handkerchief sitting between the three of them like a silent accusatory elephant in the room.

There was no way to send a message to Araya and Zen – to inform them that Caius wanted them to wait. Whatever it was – he wanted them far away from the negotiation – the exact opposite of what Zen wanted.

The message was short and clear.

They were to wait for as long as they were ordered to.

Mollie regarded the other members of the Insurgency closely as they sat across from her... their expressions forlorn.

“Can I get you anything else?”

They all shook their heads as the girl looked at them with a frown before sauntering away.

“So this is it then?” Caden muttered looking angrily at the shuddering windowpanes. “We sit here doing nothing indefinitely.”

“An order is an order Caden,” J  l said calmly taking a sip from his mug. “Caius must know we left the compound. That’s the only reason he would have risked sending this message.”

“How do we know Araya and Zen haven’t decided to take the route from here to *Per  al* after picking up Isla?”

J  l shook his head before Caden could finish his question.

They bantered on for a while and Mollie found herself zoning out. She was still navigating through her twisted feelings as she idly picked at the scrambled eggs on her plate. She couldn’t keep her mind off of what had happened over a week ago. To Mollie, she could still feel the sensations in her belly as if it had occurred mere hours ago.

She shouldn’t have done it. She shouldn’t have gave in. Hell she was pregnant with the child —*children*-- of the enemy of the man she fucked. Even so...she couldn’t help but feel *guilty*. She couldn’t understand how it could feel so right...yet so terribly wrong at the same time.

The owner of the pub suddenly began stalking towards them and Mollie could see the relief that was spread across her features.

“They’re back,” she said quietly bending over to address J  l directly. “They’re here.”

“*Finally*,” J  l huffed just as two familiar figures entered the pub.

Araya was the first to run towards them her arms outstretched as they wrapped around J  l tightly.

Zephyr followed her slowly. Mollie noticed that he seemed to be moving a bit slower than normal and before she could approach him she felt Araya’s tight embrace around her.

“Good to see *you*,” she muttered flickering her damp auburn bob behind her ears.

Mollie smiled returning the hug. She noticed that the sword resting casually against the petite girl's waist was stained red. She had seen that before many times but it still had the same effect on Mollie each time she saw it.

It must have been an eventful couple of days for the siblings.

Zen said nothing as the others greeted him formally. Mollie hesitated before slowly returning to her seat.

He seemed pale and fatigued. Mollie wanted to ask him if he was alright but she had a feeling this would be something Zephyr would respond negatively to. If there was anything he hated more than his cousins – it was the illusion of a weak appearance.

So she followed the lead of the others and remained silent as he stalked over – his blue eyes flickering straight for the handkerchief in the middle of the table.

“Took you long enough,” Caden grumbled as he gave Zephyr a rough pat on the back.

“We had some... unexpected company,” Zen responded wanly looking at his sister.

“Marchesseault spies,” Araya said with frown. “They set up a unit around us.”

“Not just them,” Zen grumbled picking up the handkerchief in his fingers and squeezing it in his fist.

Araya sighed heavily and Mollie could see the fierce tension between the two of them.

“I know what I saw,” Zen snapped as his sister shot him a familiar look of disdain.

“What did you see?” J  l said immediately ignoring the nudge from Araya who had squeezed into the booth beside him.

“Zephyr thinks he saw an Outback,” Araya said as if it were the most ludicrous thing in the world.

Caden laughed while J  l tensed.

“I didn’t *think* I saw it Araya,” he said bitingly. “I *saw* one. He was watching us the moment we left the gates of the city.”

“That’s not possible Zen,” Caden said an air of humour still in his tone. “They’re out eating raw meat and circling a wood fire out in the wilderness.”

“There’s nothing humorous about this situation,” Zephyr snapped making the table silent once again. “The Lyons have iridium, the Ophian Empire is infiltrated. Caius isn’t letting us in on *shit* and you’re all here making fucking jokes?”

“Zephyr calm down,” J  l said – his deep comforting tone challenging the husky growl from the man in front of them. “People are looking.”

Mollie could see Zen was in a mood and whatever the others were saying to calm him down was having little effect on him.

“To hell with Caius,” he spat flinging the cloth to the table with a huff after reading the single four letter word on the cloth. “We leave for *Peréal*... *today*.”

“Zephyr,” Araya whispered harshly. He flung her arm off before he stalked upstairs, his footsteps making the ceiling shake with his angry steps.

“Let him go,” J  l sighed placing a hand gingerly on Araya’s shoulder. Mollie could see the pain flit across her features as she slowly sunk back in her seat. Zen had barely looked at Mollie when he walked in. Mollie figured he was just upset...but had he forgotten what had happened between the two of them so quickly?

“I know,” she murmured giving a J  l a faint smile. “I’m exhausted too. As dramatic as my brother can be...he is right about something,” she said lifting her fiery brown eyes to meet Mollie’s across the table. “We can’t stay here. Not with what we encountered on our way back to the compound. The Marchesseault’s are mobilizing. Those two guards the first night here were just observers. They’ve sent in the rest of their guard for us. I’m sure of it.”

“I knew it. Those fucking backstabbers,” Caden muttered.

“Wait,” Jo  l said sharply. “Did the *Per  l* guards say anything about Caius and Caleb?”

“No,” Araya muttered reaching for J  l’s mug of black coffee and taking a long swig from it. “But Caius and Caleb won’t budge until they come to an agreement in *Per  l*.”

“By the sounds of it negotiation isn’t going over too well.”

Araya nodded mutely.

“Great,” Mollie muttered tucking her thick hair behind her ears. “When do we leave?”

“Today,” J  l said. “We should take the route up the river.”

“That’s too conspicuous,” Araya murmured. “There’ll be way too many spies crawling around the river.”

“Then what do you suggest Araya?” J  l asked.

“We could always take the mountain passage,” Caden shrugged. He was clutching his dagger in his hand and flipping the material up and down between his fingers.

Araya rolled her eyes at him.

“And how exactly do you expect Mollie to hike up a mountain range?”

Caden grimaced at the comment.

Before anyone else could respond the woman working the pub the night before came to their table to take away their plates. Mollie had barely touched hers.

“Leyla,” Araya said suddenly turning to the young waitress.

She gave the girl a sharp look as Araya gestured for her to come over.

“Do you still use that old carriage to transport food to the rural villages?”

Leyla sighed.

“Not recently. It’s been dangerous to travel these days, what with the rumours and all...”

She trailed off as she eyed the other members at the table uncomfortably.

“We’re going to need to...borrow it.”

Jöel seemed to be choosing his words wisely and Mollie watched the girls reaction closely.

“Are you asking me or informing me?” she muttered her dark eyebrows furrowing.

“Is there still passage through the Obsidian desert?” Araya interjected. She had been chewing her lip nervously ever since Leyla had sauntered past their table.

Leyla grimaced.

“The volcanoes have been active. Our people believe it is a sign of unrest,” she trailed off for a second, her dark eyes flickering between Mollie and the others. “And they are not wrong. Look at what has unfolded. The last time it erupted our monarchy fell.”

“I’m going to need the transport Leyla. Please.”

Araya was looking at Leyla severely, her grave expression not going unnoticed.

“What will I get in return?” she challenged raising a single slim brow.

Mollie could see the flush set in to Araya’s cheeks. With all of the differences Mollie had been able to spot between the Ophian empire and Lyon regime – one thing appeared to stay the same: every deed had a price.

“You *will* be compensated.”

That familiar gruff husky voice permeated the pub once again and Mollie jerked as Zen re-appeared from around the corner stairwell, cloak in place and cheeks flushed as he slung two packs around his shoulder – one his and the other Mollie’s.

Zephyr all but spat it out but it was enough for the girl who retracted the minute she saw him.

Mollie had seen the carriage Zephyr was referring to. It was an old ancient thing that seemed to have taken its fair share of travel across many lands. It didn’t look strong enough to carry

two let alone four people. It stood awkwardly outside the small pub, the wood peeling, the door slightly ajar. Mollie cringed just thinking about it.

“We’re not all going to fit in that carriage,” Caden muttered as if reading Mollie’s mind.

“Of course not,” Araya snapped as Mollie and Joël rose from the small booth. “Some of us think about these things before hand,” Araya muttered.

Caden frowned at Araya who quickly flicked her dark green hood over her head.

“Our ride is outside,” she said coolly.

Through the rain Mollie could make out two large figures in the distance. It looked massive and as the others prepared for the travel Mollie noticed Zen slip outside – his own dark hood flicked up to conceal his face.

Quickly she followed her, yellow cloak doing its job to protect her from the harsh elements of Ophian land.

When Mollie stepped outside she saw two of the most regal horses she had ever seen. They weren’t like the generic horses used to pull carriages from one location to the next...these ones were ethereal. The first was pitch black, its glossy coat wet and glistening from the rain. The other was a pearly white, its coat still managing to maintain its luminescence in spite of the rainy weather.

Mollie was *almost* envious that this would be their mode of transport. Her grandparents had owned stables back in Riverton. The horses used to ride freely amongst the greenery at some point. It was a memory that had been buried deep in her mind, something that re-surfaced only now.

Ahead of the horses was the old rundown carriage. She assumed that would be her mode of transport. Mollie was in no condition to ride a horse.

“How long is the travel?” Mollie asked hesitantly as she stepped to stand beside Zen who was glancing at a rather detailed map. The rain was light in spite of the foggy atmosphere but Mollie didn’t mind. For a land as arid as the one they found themselves in...the rain was far and few. She’d enjoy it when it came.

“It’s a twenty hour travel via carriage,” Zephyr muttered. “A lot quicker than the three days it takes by foot.”

Mollie nodded and adjusted her now tight shirt that was pressing tight against her torso.

“Where did you find these creatures?” she asked curiously brushing her fingers against the slick coat of the black horse beside her.

“Luna,” Zen said softly his eyes flickering to hers. “She figured we may not be returning...told us to take them with us. This one here is *Jetta* and the other is *Blanche*.”

At their names both let out a soft chortle of acknowledgment and bowed slightly.

“Wow,” she laughed as the sleek horse brushed its head against her palm.

“This one is young and playful,” Zephyr said with a smile giving the horse a firm pat on its flank.

Mollie eyed the heavy saddle that rested on the horses.

“Is this really necessary?” she muttered tugging on the heavy fabric as the horses walked forward to drink from a heavy wooden bucket.

Zen eyed her curiously.

“If you want to get from point A to point B then yes.”

She frowned at his tone as he walked over to the wooden carriage to pack their bags into the back.

“I don’t think they like it,” she murmured as the white horse shook out her fur, rattling the saddle on her back.

“Yeah well, I don’t particularly like teaching new recruits,” Zen responded gruffly. “But I don’t get the luxury of choosing whether I do or don’t.”

“They’re not meant to be tethered,” Mollie murmured brushing her fingers through its delicate mane.

She could feel Zen’s eyes on her from afar.

She stilled when she felt him venture closer. Her breaths quickened as she felt his own brush the back of her neck.

“They’ll get their freedom Mollie,” he said softly, his voice husky and deep. She shivered as she felt his hands encircle her waist from behind. “Sometimes it just... takes a little time before that happens.”

The sound of footsteps on the steps of the pub echoed and Mollie felt Zen’s arms disappear from around her.

“Zephyr.”

Araya’s sharp voice echoed through the crisp foggy air and Mollie jumped as Jöel and Isla Lyon appeared beside her. The woman seemed more frail now than before and Mollie cringed as she glared at Mollie with her pale blue eyes. She obviously hadn’t lost her spark for evil.

“Sweet is this our ride?”

Caden’s boyish drawl echoed across the landing as he strode towards the jet black horse beside Mollie.

“Not today,” Zen’s strict tone sent the smile washing off the boy’s face as the tall blonde gestured with his chin toward the carriage where two sad brown horses sat mulling in front of the wooden box. “You’re coming with me and Mollie.”

Mollie didn’t miss the subtle wordless exchange between Araya and Zephyr and she looked questioningly at Zen who deftly avoided her gaze.

Jöel had carefully loaded Isla onto the horses back and Mollie caught site of a long sword strapped to her thigh. Hell, even she had a weapon. Mollie wondered why Zen had been so adamant to allow her to take one of her own. She had asked him several times during training but he brushed her off each time. Maybe he didn’t think she was ready? Or maybe she wasn’t strong enough? These questions plagued her even as he silently loaded her into the carriage – their previous exchange of affection as fleeting as the rain in the deserts of Ophian land. Mollie felt as if the others were purposely hiding something from her. She could see it even when Araya gave her another tight hug. It felt almost...parting. Tighter than usual. As if she wouldn’t be seeing her again. Mollie wanted to corner her and get it out of her...she knew she could but circumstances were not on her side.

“Stay safe Mollie. We will see each other again soon.”

Jöel’s warm parting allowed Mollie a small smile as she watched the other three members leave down the path ahead of them.

Mollie felt a strong sense of déjà vu hit her as she sat near the carriage window. However instead of a white backdrop it was a grey dusty atmosphere that awaited her.

There was something off. Something the others weren’t telling her. She could *sense* it.

“Why are we stopping?”

Mollie blinked awake as Caden’s whiney drawl echoed through the small space.

In fact he was correct. The soft sway of the carriage was slowing down and as Mollie blinked her tiredness away she could see they were on a narrow but paved pathway leading towards what appeared to be thick wrought iron gates.

“We’re taking a small detour,” Zen said monotonously, his eyes never straying from the window.

The carriage rolled off the pavement onto a dusty landscape away from the paved road sending Mollie jolting forward as she clutched protectively at her belly. It was a reflexive action and she steadied herself as the carriage came to a slow halt.

“Caden,” Zen said sharply. “Stay with the carriage. This won’t take long.”

Caden’s eyes widened and as Mollie exited the carriage stepping into thankfully cooler and less stifling air than Ophian land she could see the excitement on the boys face.

“Really?”

Zen shot him a half smile.

“Yep. You’re ready. Guard our belongings with your life. You don’t know who else is scouring these lands.”

Caden nodded eagerly exiting the carriage and placing a hand protectively over his sword.

“Let’s go,” Zen muttered gripping Mollie’s upper arm.

Mollie felt a tingle go down her spine at leaving Caden alone on the side of this abandoned road but Zen seemed at ease.

“Will he be okay alone?” Mollie asked as Zen all but lifted her over the heavy boulders scattered along the pathway.

Zen laughed swinging the heavy pack on his shoulder onto his other arm.

“He’s small for a twenty year old, but he’s quick and agile. Caden can handle it if anything happens.”

Mollie had seen him spar with Araya many times. The boy was incredibly quick, but still his size bothered her. He was so small and lanky. If anyone Zen’s size or bigger fought him Mollie couldn’t fathom whether he’d make it or not.

“I also don’t have much of a choice,” Zen admitted after a moment as they looped around a set of stacked rocks down a dusty slope scattered with quartz, limestone, and other coal like materials Mollie had never seen before. “He’s the only one here besides you and I.”

Mollie half smiled. He did have a point. Everything else around them seemed devoid of anything – nothing but roan red rocks and the simple cobbled pathway leading them deeper towards the Marchesseault regime. Mollie didn’t see water – animals – not even the slightest inkling of plant life. It made her nervous.

"What's *Peréal* like?" Mollie asked as they walked further into the dusty landscape.

Zen chuckled at her question. He seemed to have slowed down his pace to match hers and Mollie was secretly grateful. It was getting harder and harder for to keep up with each passing day.

"It's not like *Anubis*," he said. "It's large and modern and...comforting. It feels like a city.

Mollie felt her spirits rise hearing this. The desolate harsh conditions of the desert Ophian land was a struggle to adapt to and Mollie didn't think she'd be able to go through that experience for a second time.

Mollie hesitated as she asked her next question.

"What about the King?"

Zephyr shrugged as he squinted against the afternoon sunrays. He seemed to be looking for something or *someone*. Mollie followed his gaze but was met with nothing but the blinding light of the unforgiving desert sun.

"What about him?" Zen muttered.

Mollie frowned but Zen seemed to have connected the dots rather quickly.

"I suppose every monarchy has its own internal adversities."

Mollie waited for him to elaborate. He shot her a knowing look as they continued their walk across the uneven land.

"Alexandre Marchesseault was the youngest of three siblings. There was his older sister Cosette and his elder brother Olivier. They were close when they were young, a good sturdy familial unit."

Mollie listened carefully as Zen told her the story.

"Things began to escalate when they got older and responsibilities began to get in the way of their fun. Reality came charging at them like a brick wall. Alexandre was a rather promiscuous prince. His reputation was not unknown amongst the elite."

Mollie winced. She knew that stuff was important to monarchies. Micah was always going off about it whenever he got cross with her.

"Anyways, Olivier being the oldest, would be next in line for the throne. However, the idiot fell in love with a commoner. Ended up choosing her over everything else and was forced to renounce his title."

"You can do that?" Mollie asked. "You can give up your title?"

"Kind of," Zen explained. "The current King of the monarchy must approve it in order for the renouncement to be legitimate."

Mollie's face fell. She could see how difficult that could end up being.

"Did he?"

"It took a long time," Zen admitted as he grabbed Mollie's hand to help her over a particularly jagged set of rocks. "But eventually he got it."

"That's good...I guess."

Zen shrugged.

"His renouncement meant that Alexandre would become King...but being the youngest he was spoiled and immature. He was a boy in big mans shoes." Zen paused after this, letting the words sweep from his lips in short bursts of information. "Before their father -- the former King- died, he had arranged marriages for all three of his children. But Olivier took his own

path and before Cosette could even walk down the aisle, she was struck by a horrible bout of plague. She died the day her youngest brother became King."

"And Alexandre?"

Zen frowned. "He was the only legitimate Marchesseault. Olivier's twin boys he shared with his wife were no longer regarded as royals within the monarchy despite the half royal blood in their veins. This meant Alexandre had to marry quickly and produce an heir and a spare as soon as possible."

Mollie grimaced.

That poor woman.

"He was set to wed Ophélie Rineaux of the Rineaux Regime. The older of two sisters -- princesses of the realm."

Mollie perked up when she heard this.

She had seen that woman before...at the Lyon dinner table in Questershire. She had appeared to be in good relations with the Lyons. But it was impossible...there was no way she was married to Alexandre Marchesseault. She ruled her own land - Mollie had heard her say so.

Zen continued speaking and Mollie listened with rapt attention.

"However, Alexandre Marchesseault was not one to be forced into acquiescing to the demands of others. Not even his late father. He had his sights set on her sister. The young maiden of fourteen.

Mollie felt her throat thicken when she heard this.

"During a visit to the Rineaux Regime he took the maiden for himself and claimed her as his own. Unfortunately for him, that backfired and he was banished from ever setting foot on Rineaux soil for life."

"And the maiden?" Mollie asked stiffly.

"I'm not sure what happened to her. But even so, she had been defiled. No prince would claim her now. Not when she had been taken and used and before marriage too."

"But it wasn't her fault," Mollie protested.

"Rules are rules Mollie," he said bluntly. "And the monarchy is stringent when it comes to abiding to them."

"What happened to Alexandre after that?" Mollie pressed.

"He married another princess, from some other empire. He had two sons with her. One died last year -- freak accident during a voyage. I believe the other is still alive."

Mollie listened silently. She had mixed feelings about Alexandre Marchesseault since the moment she heard about him and she was glad to know her trepidation did not go unfounded. The man sounded despicable.

"Despite all his flaws," Zen continued. "He... is a good leader. The Marchesseault regime has continued to thrive and prosper under his rule ever since he took the throne at the age of sixteen."

Sixteen? Mollie gulped. That was no king -- that was a child.

"What about the queen?" Mollie asked as Zen ushered her around a sharp corner of rock.

"She died last year," Zen said softly. "She caught something bad --died like Alexandre's sister did. I suppose it was somewhat karmatic -- considering what the boy had done in his youth."

Mollie shivered. It was a horrible series of events.

Mollie hadn't even realized how far they had walked from the carriage and when she looked up at her surroundings she was shocked to see a large winding staircase of rock above them. The thing was crumbling and looked as if it hadn't been used in centuries.

"Zen," she said hesitantly as he guided her around a rather large boulder towards the first step. It looked terribly precarious – even if Mollie wasn't in the condition she was in.

"*Zephyr,*" she said with more force as he huffed and turned to look at her.

"What? Don't you trust me?"

Mollie stopped dead in her tracks. For a moment she felt Micah's presence as if he were there right beside her. *His* voice questioning her. It made her stomach drop to the floor and turned her bones to jelly.

She remembered a vivid memory in that moment. Something Micah had told her, his cold lips brushing her ear.

You see how it feels Mollie? To have your trust for someone probed and queried before your eyes after so willingly handing it over to them?"

Mollie began to breathe heavily.

What was she doing? What the hell was she thinking?

Mollie could feel the air sliding past her lips in breathless sweeps as she dug her fingers into her palms and began to hyperventilate.

The man beside her was a Lyon too. All of them were the same. She had said so herself. What's to stop him from harming her too?

Zephyr seemed to have noticed her moment of recollection and he too stopped to stare at her.

“Mollie?” he asked stepping closer.

“Get *away* from me!”

Mollie backed up, stumbling on the uneven terrain as she clutched at her belly in terror and choked on the dusty air around them.

“Mollie be careful!”

Zephyr’s eyes widened as he noticed Mollie’s unsteady balance.

“No...no...no no no.”

Was he leading her away from the carriage? Away from any witnesses so he could get rid of her? Had she been *too* trusting?

These rabid thoughts went through her head as she stood beside the blonde rebel prince – her mind spiralling into a vortex of gruesome manifestations of the signs she had missed – of what may become of her and her children.

“Mollie calm down.”

Was she screaming? She wasn’t sure. Her mind was fogging up and her belly was clenching.

“Fuck,” she heard Zen yell as she stumbled backwards – her extra weight disturbing her centre of gravity as she felt Zen grab a hold of her before she could fall forward.

Before she knew it she was being crushed against his chest, his warm palms on her head as he held her steady. He had caught her and brought her slowly towards the ground so she lay sprawled across his lap.

Her breathing was still ragged and choppy and her vision was blurring.

What was happening to her?

Zen was talking to her but she couldn’t hear him properly. The blood rushing through her ears was too much for her to overcome

He was covering her mouth? His calloused palm was firm against her face -- pushing hard to curb her rapid breathing.

Her head was woozy and her belly was killing her but luckily whatever Zephyr was doing was working. She felt the feeling return to her limbs and she flailed again, her body jerking against his as he held her tight.

“It’s okay it’s okay. Fuck. Just relax – *relax*. Breathe. C’mon Moll, *breathe*.”

Was that a tremor she heard in his voice? She blinked up at him, her brown eyes meeting frantic blue ones.

His eyebrows were knitted together and his features were twisted into something resembling fear.

“Are you alright? Mollie?”

She blinked in confusion. Her mind clearing and sweet oxygen suddenly filling her lungs at a speed she found acceptable.

“What?” she whispered as he finally dropped his hand from her face. He still kept the tight grip he had on her torso even as she moved forward to support herself. “Can you..let go?” she asked suddenly, his grip digging into her bones.

“What the *fuck* was that?” he asked his expression transitioning from of fear into one of anger. “Was that some kind of joke? Are you *fucking* with me?”

“No,” she said hotly pushing away from him. “I...” she trailed off for a moment not knowing what to tell him. Mollie herself wasn’t quite sure what happened. Her fear that he would harm her and the child sent her into a fit that had her gasping for air. Now that she thought about it...the entire thing seemed incredibly irrational.

“I’m...I’m sorry. I couldn’t breathe for a second,” she admitted brushing her hair back. The cold sweat at the back of her neck made her curls stick fast and she ran her fingers through her hair once more.

Zen seemed shaken and Mollie realized he must have been more spooked than she was.

“You...you were scared of me.”

His voice came out as more of a statement than a question and Mollie tensed.

“Of course not,” she said immediately steadying herself and rising up to her full height. She averted her gaze as Zen rose to his feet taking the time to dust the red sand that had stained her black tunic and pants.

“I saw the look on your face,” he continued ignoring Mollie’s attempts to drop the subject. “I know fear when I see it.”

“It was nothing,” she muttered suddenly embarrassed at the entire ordeal.

“That wasn’t nothing Mollie,” Zen pressed his eyes flickering to her belly. “When was the last time you went for a check up?”

“Can you just drop it?” she hissed shooting him a glare. “I’m alright. It was just...the heat.”

She had already turned around to stare at the pathway Zen had prompted her to take before she had collapsed. She didn’t need to look at him to know the expression that was on his face. He knew as well as she did that whatever happened had *nothing* whatsoever to do with the heat.

He didn't say anything but Mollie could feel his eyes burning a whole through her back. Whatever he wanted to show her – she hoped he made it quick. The entire ordeal scared her too – more than she cared to admit. But she didn't want to think about it anymore. Not for a long time.

The trek wasn't as hard as she had first thought and Zephyr was there to guide her whenever the trail got too tricky. They didn't speak about what happened again and Mollie was only too glad to direct the conversation elsewhere – or what little words they *did* exchange.

She could feel the air become hotter with each step she took but Zen didn't comment on anything. Her mind was sound. She knew he wouldn't harm her. Not when he had already had ample opportunity to do so. And certainly not when they were so close to the nearest city.

“Are you...sure you're up to this?” his deep rumble startled her from her thoughts. Hastily she swiped her hand across her forehead and nodded. “Because we can head back. I don't want you to over-exert yourself.”

“I already said I'm fine Zen.”

She didn't actually mean to snap at him but her tone came out harsher than she intended. He went quiet and she bit her lip. She knew he was concerned for her – but her emotions were all over the place. She just needed to get this over with. Whatever he wanted with her.

As they reached the top of mountain Mollie was surprised to see an old wrinkled man at the top, his clothes sticking to his body with sweat and his beard thick and coated with the red sandy dust that seemed to settle all over this place.

She paused in surprise but Zen was quick to tug her forward – a sign that this was to be expected.

“Marozzo,” Zen said swiftly dropping to his knees.

Mollie looked between them in surprise as the men's milky eyes turned to flicker between the two of them.

“So this is her?”

His voice was a whisper, a thick accent marring his syllables in a manner that made it difficult for Mollie to understand.

“Yes.”

Zen's voice cut through the silence that followed the man's question and Mollie stood frozen as she watched him scrutinize her.

“I apologize for the delay,” Zen said slowly standing up to his full height.

The old man held up a hand for Zephyr to remain quiet as he stepped closer to Mollie.

Mollie had a billion questions running through her head at this point. Who was this man? Why was he here? Why had Zen asked him to be here? How did he know to come to this exact spot in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere?

But she kept her lips closed and stood still.

“Hm,” the man muttered stepping even closer to Mollie so he stood directly in front of her.

She was taller than him, his face only reaching to around her neck, but something about his presence screamed danger.

As he began to circle around her Mollie heard him begin to mutter under his breath.

Mollie watched him out of the corner of her eyes, her sharp gaze going straight for the heavy weapons that the old man had strapped to his back. She stiffened, her frightened gaze meeting Zen’s who re-assured her with his strong gaze.

She was safe. She would not be harmed.

“dritto fendente...dritto sguaembrato...dritto tondo....falso dritto....montante...sotto mano.”

She remained still as he came around her left side, his mutterings only increasing in tone.

“fendente rouerso...rouerso sguaembrato...rouerso tondo...falso mancho...molinello.”

He stopped in front of her once again. Mollie was suddenly struck by how strong the man was in spite of his seemingly frail frame. In his back were swords, heavy metals of steel and iron that he had been carrying with him for the duration of his scrutiny.

“You have been trained.”

Mollie hesitated. The mans’ challenging stare was intimidating.

She nodded slowly.

“Speak.”

She jolted and quickly muttered a yes.

“Let me see your palms.”

Mollie acquiesced...her heart slamming in her chest.

The man gripped her hands tightly and brought them outstretched before her, his eyes scanning over the lines that criss crossed across her palms.

His tanned wrinkled skin gave the illusion of frailty even without the deep indents and gashes that marred his skin. But his grip suggested otherwise and Mollie had no doubt this man was a warrior – a fighter. Only those who fought in battle had scars like that on their body.

“Steel,” he muttered. “Rose water, pearl skin, fish scale, and gold.”

Mollie looked questioningly at Zen who had an unreadable expression on his face as he watched the man mutter and reach deep into the rucksack strapped to his back.

Mollie felt a shiver go down her spine as he straightened up and turned around to face her once again. Laying across both palms was an elegant dagger, the metal tinted rose-gold, the handle curved inward – shiny and moulded in vine like motions – the appearance not so different from the scales on a school of fish. The metal was not silver like Jöels, not blue like Micah's – not green like Zen's. It was a pearly white – beautifully complimented by the rose gold handle.

“Hold it.”

It was beautiful – a work of art Mollie couldn't help but marvel at and she slowly reached for the dagger her fingers curling around the cool polished handle.

Mollie stared at the dagger, the top of the hilt adorned with tiny shimmering stones, but with enough space below the handle to leave space for a myriad of other slots to be filled. She remembered Micah's dagger in that moment. Its weight. The full ornate display of precious, gems, stones and diamonds that decorated his. She knew now. She knew what they were meant for. It was a display of your accomplishments. Of how many gems you had gotten from someone else's dagger. It was a display of your kills. Of your strength. Of your *competence*.

And now. Mollie's was bare. Her dagger never having seen a kill.

“So it is,” the old man said softly curling his fingers around Mollie's once before letting go.

She looked up at Zen who's expression softened immediately. If Mollie didn't know any better she would have thought she saw a flicker of pride in his eyes. Whatever happened, Zen looked pleased.

“Proceed,” the old man said sharply. “Stain your blade and press it to the Earth.”

Mollie looked up at Zen worriedly who had crossed the distance he had been standing at to stand beside Mollie.

“It is a custom,” he murmured. “Every trainee who has completed the five pillars must stain their blade with their own blood before they stain it with another's.” She looked up at him confusedly as he brushed his hand against her own. She hadn't even realized how hard she had been holding the dagger in her hands, and carefully she eased her grip. “They used to believe in ancient times that the dagger would remember its owners blood after its first splash of blood and that if an enemy ever attempted to use the blade on its owner, the blade would turn to ash – unable to pierce that whose blood gave it its first sweet nectar.”

Mollie listened carefully.

“If you'd rather not...”

“No,” Mollie said softly gripping the cool blade in her hand. Slowly she opened the palm of her left hand and slid the sharp edge of the weapon gently across her soft skin.

The man began to murmur again and Mollie gently closed her hand on the shimmery pearly material of the weapon and watched as her blood stained the steel red.

“It is complete.”

The old mans breathy tone pierced the air and carefully he handed her a delicate casing that strapped against her waist. It was an elegant addition to the dagger she had been given.

The man bowed once again with Mollie mirroring his movements before he turned back around in the direction of the blazing sun.

“May I?” she heard Zen murmur against her ear.

“Not a chance,” she replied with a smirk.

Carefully she sheathed her blade into its casing and snapped it onto her hip as Zen smiled at her.

“Good girl,” he muttered teasingly as she tucked her hair behind her ears.

She looked up at him, her cheeks reddening as he stared down at her.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked tentatively as the tall blonde squinted into the distance. His blue eyes flickered back to hers in seconds.

He shrugged.

“I had to make sure the time was right.”

Mollie didn’t quite understand the answer but she didn’t press it. Her heart was fluttering too quickly for her to care.

“You really think I’m ready?” she whispered looking up at him.

Zephyr shot her a half smile. The lazy one that made him seem so much like the twenty one year old he really was and not the old boring adult persona he usually adopted.

“You are.”

“But how do you *know*?” she interjected.

“Marozzo would have never completed the ritual had you not been ready.”

She looked up in surprise before turning around to look behind her.

The only thing in her sight was the pathway leading them back down towards the parked carriage. The man that had been standing there before was gone. Not a footprint, not even a scent was left to suggest he had even been there at all.”

“That was him?” Mollie asked. She couldn’t help but look around them – hoping to catch even a glimpse of the man that had secured her as a master of the five pillars.

“Yes. Marozzo is his name. He is the most renowned swordsmith of this generation. It’s nearly impossible to find him these days...” Zen hesitated for a moment. “I apologize about the journey here, but I didn’t want you to have anything but the best. You...you deserve the best.”

Mollie felt her heart swell at his words and she was suddenly overcome with emotion. She had been reading him wrong ever since he had returned.

“Thank you Zephyr,” she mumbled, trying to keep her voice steady.

“You don’t have to thank me for anything,” he said strictly. “You trained hard. As your mentor I’m proud to see that you persevered and that you succeeded.”

“I’m not thanking you as a student,” she said softly. “I’m thanking you...as an ally...as a friend.”

She didn’t need to say it for Zephyr to understand. Their relationship had long since left the realm of mentor and student long ago. Even before that intimate night they had shared.

He smiled at her. For the briefest second Mollie could swear he wanted to say something more. His lips parted, his eyes quivering the slightest bit his palms flexing.

This time, Mollie didn't wait for him. She stepped forward and kissed him deeply burying her fingers into the damp golden locks that curled at the nape of his neck. Mollie gasped against his lips, his tongue inching into her mouth to twirl around hers. She moaned as he sucked hard on her lower lip. The kiss was dizzying and passionate and sloppy but Mollie didn’t mind. She didn’t care.

The sun had began to settle, the darkness of nightfall creeping up from the edges of the clear desert sky.

By the time Zephyr released her from his lips Mollie was breathless and sweating. He said nothing more as she breathed out slowly and followed him down the pathway. Her heart was pounding in her chest. She remembered in that moment how much hate she used to harbour for the boy beside her. How that hate had turned into something warm and soft and comforting. How it had turned into the antithesis of its very being.

She swallowed and tightened her grip on him. She knew with this distinction came a load of responsibility – a new beginning. But she also knew that with it came an end. An end to her training. An end to him as her mentor. And the very thought made her throat swell with a heavy sadness. A sadness that terrified her more than anything else she had endured.

“We’re being followed.”

Caden's head snapped up as the carriage continued down the cobbled winding road. Mollie could see the remnants of homes beginning to scatter the surrounding area and she felt a sense of comfort as plains of grass and plant and wildlife began to blossom along the roadside. The stark transition from Ophian territory to Marchesseault land was overwhelming and Mollie couldn't begin to explain how relieved she was to see everything other than sand and russet brown stone around her.

"How do you know?"

Mollie turned to the others as Zen's concerned tone disrupted the small quiet silence of the carriage interior.

"Behind us," he muttered.

"Not just behind us."

Caden said this through gritted teeth and in a flash Mollie looked ahead to see several men on horses closing in around them.

Mollie felt the blood drain from her face as she realized these men – men of the Marchesseault regime – were closing in on them.

"Why?" she asked somewhat hysterically. "Why would they attack us? Surely they know we're with Caius and Caleb."

"They're not in a defensive position," Caden muttered despite reaching for his sword.

"That doesn't mean they won't engage," Zen growled unsheathing his own sword. Mollie noticed he reached for his desertblade..not his dagger and she tensed.

"What about Araya and Jöel?" she choked. Mollie suddenly felt a fear in the pit of her stomach for the other members of the Insurgency. She prayed this was nothing – just a routine stop to monitor who was entering and leaving their borders.

Perhaps it was her lack of experience or naivety that was the cause of these thoughts. But Mollie didn't want to think about a different scenario. Not one where bloodshed was involved.

The carriage came to a halt and Mollie could hear the screech of the horses as they slowed to a stop.

From her spot in the carriage Mollie could see there were around seven to twelve men around them. They all wore the crisp crimson red colours of the Marchesseault regime.

"Stay in the carriage," Zen growled as he locked eyes with her. Before Mollie could reply both him and Caden were hopping out of the carriage and onto the cobbled streets on the outskirts of *Peréal*. They had not yet reached the city. Mollie could now easily spot the wrought iron gates ahead of them. They were not out of danger yet. They were still in uncharted territory.

“Zen wait,” Mollie choked, but he was gone before he could respond.

She sat in terror as she heard the formation close in around them. Her babies writhed inside her – probably feeling the sudden onset of stress that was wracking her body. She clutched at her belly, rubbing soft circles around her protrusion to calm them as she squeezed her eyes shut.

They can handle this. They can handle this. They’ve been training for years.

“Where is the girl?”

Mollie’s eyes snapped open when she heard the question.

“I’ve already told you. She’s *off limits*.”

Zen’s hateful tone reverberated through the air and Mollie heard the sounds of several swords unsheathing.

Her heart began to thump wildly in her chest.

“There is no need for initiation,” said a man with a heavy French accent. “We simply want the girl. We mean her no harm. Our conditions were clear – we told you this during our last meeting. Hand her over and you are free to go. We told your father the very same thing.”

Mollie’s heart was hammering through her now and she inched closer to the window. *Last meeting?* Had Zephyr known that these men had been after her? Is that why they had to leave the pub so abruptly? Is that why Araya had been acting so strangely?

The voices picked up again outside and Mollie could feel her palms beginning to sweat.

It was twelve to two. Even with all the training in the world Mollie knew it would be a very slim victory. Not even all of their training combined could overtake these men. It just wasn’t feasible.

“Then you have forced our hand prince.”

The sound of metal against metal sent Mollie into a frenzy and she couldn’t sit back any longer. She wouldn’t let him die for her. She wouldn’t let Araya lose a brother...she wouldn’t let Caius lose another son because of her.

“*Stop*,” she cried out fumbling the carriage door open and stumbling onto the jagged cobbled steps.

She knew she had disobeyed an order and the look on Zen’s face as he whirled around to glare at her sent her cowering against the carriage door.

“Get back in the *fucking carriage*.”

Zephyr’s voice was pure venom but Mollie swallowed and moved her gaze towards the men around them.

They stiffened when they saw her and Mollie could see the surprise that flitted across their features.

“Mon Dieu c’est vrai.”

Mollie ignored the comment and flattened herself against the carriage door. They were all staring at her as if she were a foreign gem or treasured commodity.

“Mollie.”

“Mollie.”

This voice was different – deeper and Mollie whirled around in surprise.

“Caius?” she whispered.

She hadn’t seen him in weeks and his presence suddenly filled her with a sense of comfort. Beside him was Caleb, his axe resting lightly on his shoulder. Behind them on a snow white horse was Araya, her choppy bob fluttering in the wind as Jöel sat stony faced beside her, his jet black horse inches away from his comrades.

They were here. They had made it.

“You know the terms Master Caius.”

The same guard that had spoken before looked darkly at Caius whose eyes never left Mollie’s.

“I am aware of the terms. Mollie will be accompanying us to *Peréal*. There is no need for you to separate her from the rest of us. She will be granted the same rights to enter and leave the land as a diplomat -- not as a commoner.”

“I have strict orders from the King himself,” the guard said stiffly.

Caius looked at the guard pleasantly.

“At ease boys,” he said motioning for Caden and Zen to lower their swords.

Zephyr was glaring daggers at Mollie and she swallowed uneasily keeping her gaze glued to Caius.

“I came here immediately following my meeting with his majesty *Alexandre Marchesseault*. It appears your King has overridden those orders.”

The guard seemed taken aback and Mollie watched as he gripped his sword tighter his face quickly switching into something antagonistic.

“You really want to take that chance?” Caius’ voice had taken on that soft dangerous lilt that sent a tingle down her spine. “I have agreed to the King’s demands on the exception that Mollie stays with *us*. We are to accompany her there for the duration of our stay in *Peréal*.”

Mollie tensed.

What? Why were they so interested in her?

The guards seemed reluctant but Mollie could tell they could do little. Disobeying the Kings orders was a crime and if Caius was telling the truth, the repercussions could be lethal. Either way they would end up in *Peréal*...whether these guards dragged her there as a prisoner or if they granted her access to the city along with the Insurgency.

“*Bien*,” the guard said all of a sudden. “Come then. But wait outside the castle gates until we verify these dealings with his majesty himself.”

“Of course,” Caius said pleasantly. “That wasn’t so difficult was it?”

The guard turned to Caius his expression unreadable.

Mollie felt her heart clench when she saw the wicked smile cross the mans features.

“I suppose not. But unfortunately for you. His majesty has no intentions of seeing *you* return. Not when your presence is so sought after by others. After all, those terms only apply if you are alive to see them through.”

A soft chuckle from behind turned Mollie’s body to stone as another more menacing presence washed over the ambiance.

The pathway curved upwards behind them, blocking out the setting sun in the distance as several figures emerged from the elevated land. Mollie felt her heart thump unevenly as figure upon figure appeared on the hill, a mini army washing them in a sea of gold and blue.

She knew that laugh, she knew those colours...she knew that chilly presence and she felt her legs begin to give way.

“Uncle,” said that soft icy purr. “Long time no see. Father will be simply *ecstatic* to see you.”

Mollie turned around, her belly clenching, her heart pounding. Her hands were shaking, the sweat dripping off of them as she turned to the source of that voice – so soft – so languid – so *chilling*.

Mollie screamed as a thick arrow, whizzed past her from above a sickening crunch echoing through the air as something large and heavy fell from the horse beside her. The aim was perfect. They had been set up.

Everything was a blur to Mollie as hands grabbed her from behind and Zephyr’s shouts echoed through the air.

But amidst all of the chaos that was happening around her Mollie could only make sense of one thing...

He was here. The winter prince had arrived.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of plot here. We crossed the halfway point to the story. Things are going to get messy from here on out.

Chapter 41: Niobium

Chapter Summary

The Lyon reunion takes a dark turn. Mollie deals with a new heavy truth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mollie felt the air leave her lungs in ragged breaths as she stumbled backwards.

Caius was on the ground, his body twisting as the arrow sunk deep into his torso, the blood seeping between his fingers.

No. Please no.

Araya was next to her uncle in an instant as the Marchesseault guard of twelve retreated ever so slightly.

“Caius? Caius? Are you alright?”

Mollie could tell Araya was trying her best to keep the hysteria out of her voice but was failing miserably.

“You never informed me that you invited some extra company to the negotiation.”

Micah’s voice held a shred of amusement and Mollie watched in fear as he looked down at them from his position on the higher ground above them. The setting sun behind him bathed the winter prince and his army in shadow and Mollie struggled to see his face.

“That is a violation of royal protocol. You should know better than that Caius.” Micah’s soft voice somehow carried over the distance between himself and the people below him and in spite of its softness there was a cold icy layer of danger that made Mollie shudder in her boots. “What happened?” Micah purred. “Did all those years in the shadows make you forget the rules?”

His icy tone sent a chill down Mollie’s spine and she flattened herself against the side wall of the carriage in fear. In an instant she was being surrounded and Mollie knew the reason immediately. Caden, Zephyr and Jöel had circled her – any further arrow or sword having to go through them before it reached her. Not that he would shoot her – not in her condition anyway.

Caius slowly rose to his feet again and Mollie watched as both the Lyon army ahead of them and the Marchesseault’s behind them began to inch forward.

“In spite of what you may think *Prince Micah*, I did not invite the Marchesseaults to our little meeting.”

Caius’s voice was ragged but loud and strong enough to carry through. He spat the prince’s name as he spoke.

As the winter prince stepped out of the shadows Mollie felt the rest of her breath escape her lips.

He had that expression on his face – that one he held when he was about to do something gravely unpredictable – the same look he had on his face when he nearly dropped her over the balcony in his quarters all those months ago. His eyes were like two blank emeralds shining with a lustre that seemed to be frozen solid. His face was carefully impassive, his eyes never straying once from the blond man who managed to push himself to his feet.

Seeing him brought back a flood of memories and Mollie felt her legs knock together with unease. He looked as cold and as menacing as ever -- his dark chestnut hair tousled in waves, his dark brows knitted together. She was struggling to see past his exterior – past his carefully moulded persona of the winter prince. But she knew Micah was somewhere inside of him, somewhere buried deep. She just couldn’t find him at this moment in time.

He hadn’t looked at her – not once and Mollie knew he was all business in these moments. Nothing would distract him – not even her.

“Looks can be...deceiving.”

Caius’s voice had a tremor when he said the last word and Mollie saw Micah shift his eyes ever so slightly. He was sizing up his crowd and Mollie wondered what was going through his mind.

“Lyon Prince.”

The Marchesseault guard from behind ventured forward and Mollie watched in utter fear as he bowed at the young prince above him.

“We brought what you wanted. Now let us take what we want.”

Micah’s expression never faltered. Not even when Zen roared in fury prompting several guards from behind to close in on him.

Mollie trembled as they pushed him into the ground – five of them struggling to keep the large boy restrained.

Mollie could see Zen’s face and she felt her stomach drop to the ground. His face was twisted into a look of utter hatred and it was boring straight for the man above them. He was surrounded by a sea of red and Mollie sat still as J  l held her arm strictly in his. It was a subtle warning.

Micah said nothing his eyes flickering between the two groups before him.

“What was your business here?”

The guard bowed again as Micah addressed him directly.

“We are here to collect something on behalf of King Marchesseault. We were well on our way towards doing so before Caius and his...*army* intervened. We proposed several peaceful transactions in the past -- but he refused us each time.”

The guard curled his lips when he mentioned Caius’s army and Mollie didn’t miss the judgment in his tone.

Caius had gone rather pale and Mollie noticed that it was taking every ounce of strength for him to keep himself steady.

“I have not broken protocol Micah Lyon,” Caius said with a curt edge to his tone. “I was simply informed of an additional matter that prompted a rather abrupt change of plans.”

Micah continued to stare down at them. He was so still and blank he could have been a statue.

“You have something of mine,” the dark haired prince said softly his eyes flickering between the two groups in an unsettling manner. “I’m here to collect it. Caius, if you would?”

Caius stiffened and Mollie could practically feel the tension in the air ascend sharply.

“You’re a little early prince.”

Micah chuckled at Caius’s chilly response and Mollie had a terrible feeling she knew what he was referring to.

“And you’re on borrowed time.”

Mollie was afraid even the slightest movement would be lethal and before she could register her own actions she was reaching into her hip to slip her fingers around her dagger.

“Gentleman.”

This tone came from behind and Mollie jumped as the Marchesseault guard came forward, his horse only metres away from where Mollie and her group stood.

“Your business is your own. We are here for the girl and the girl only. It is not our intention to spill a drop of blood.” His eyes flickered to Caius. “Though with that bounty still on your head you’d make a pauper rich.” He looked back at the winter prince. “That bounty was dead or alive if I’m not mistaken?”

Mollie felt her heart pound as Micah’s expression turned stony.

“Oh dear,” he murmured his gaze gluing back to Caius. “It appears we are in the midst of a little... quandary.”

Mollie heard rather than saw the guards behind her unsheathe their swords the moment the prince finished his sentence.

Zen managed to scramble to his feet shoving the grip of the guards off of him.

Zephyr turned to his father but before the boy could speak Caius had already turned to him – his expression angry.

“I told you not to come.”

“You needed us.”

“You disobeyed me.”

Caius’ tone was blunt and harsh and Mollie froze as Zephyr flexed his fists.

“You disobeyed me,” Caius repeated turning his head to the other side. “And now we’ll have to face the consequences.”

The blood continued to seep from Caius’ torso, the arrow bearing the infamous Lyon insignia shining shamelessly on the edge of the bow buried deep into pale flesh. He turned away from his son to face the winter prince.

“The terms remain the same winter prince,” Caius said tonelessly. His knees buckled slightly as he rose to his feet.

Micah was quiet for a long time and Mollie could hear the unease spread through the Marchesseault guards behind them. They were growing impatient.

“Hartley wants me alive.”

Caius’ voice was like a whip through the air and Mollie cringed as Micah stared down at his uncle.

“He may – but I don’t.” Micah’s voice had a playful lilt to it and Mollie felt sick. “And rest assured I’ll bring you or your corpse back to Questershire.”

Caius grinned humourlessly.

“He’ll know...” Caius trailed off. “Your sadism is not unknown boy.”

“There is a fine line between sadism and pragmatism Caius,” Micah murmured, his tone icy. “Father is aware of this.”

“And what about mother dearest? ”

There was a silence that followed and Mollie watched in fear as Micah’s expression stiffened ever so slightly.

“It’s a shame she won’t be there to greet me with open arms. I know she would’ve. She adored me. More than your father I dare say.”

Mollie knew what Caius was doing. He was trying to crack Micah’s exterior but she knew Micah didn’t operate that way. If anything, it reinforced his barrier and only served to irritate him further. And irritated Micah was danger on a whole other level.

“You look like her,” Caius said softly as Micah’s eyes bore into his uncles. “Spitting image.... soft lips, slender nose, those high cheekbones.” He stopped for a moment. “Those green eyes.”

Micah was all but a statue and Mollie saw a flicker of unease spread through the guards behind him.

“I’m sure you miss her,” Caius continued.

Mollie shifted uneasily at how much like Hartley Caius had suddenly become. She knew how much Micah hated his father. She suddenly felt a fear in her gut for Caius. He was unknowingly playing a very dangerous game.

“In fact, I know you do.” Caius didn’t mention Mollie but she felt as if her name had been shouted across the grassy landscape as Micah’s eyes flickered to hers for the first time that evening. The coldness that radiated from them made Mollie want to dig her own grave.

“Micah.”

The prince turned his gaze to Caius and Mollie saw the first remnants of hatred begin to creep into his expression.

She was beginning to panic. She could feel the adrenaline spiking in her gut. Caius was too close to the prince, in close enough distance for him to throw that despicable blade into the Leader of the Insurgency.

Before Mollie could step forward and intervene a warm calloused hand wrapped tightly around her waist jerking her against a tall strong body. She protested as Zephyr shook his head at her slowly and turned his gaze to the show in front of them.

“Don’t say a word,” he whispered leaning down so his lips brushed her ear. She didn’t know if it was deliberate or not but she squirmed in Zen’s grasp nonetheless.

“Micah will kill him,” she protested whispering harshly. It was impossible to move with the grip Zephyr had around her waist.

“A word of advice,” Zen hissed. “Never run in between a fight between family. That’s how accidents happen Mollie.” His grip only tightened the more she struggled. “This is a formal negotiation,” he whispered harshly. “They *won’t* engage in battle. It is against royal protocol.”

She slowed and dropped her protest with a huff.

This seemed to catch Micah's attention and she saw a certain iciness take over his expression as they flickered between herself and Zephyr. Zen only crushed Mollie closer to himself as she squirmed against his unyielding grip.

Micah simply turned his head elegantly back to Caius.

"You seem to be missing a member of your entourage," Micah said pleasantly, his arms returning to clasp behind his back.

Caius frowned, his blue eyes appraising Micah slowly.

"What was his name again? I seem to have forgotten."

Micah turned his head to a guard who was standing slightly behind him and looked at him as if in question.

The guard murmured something softly and Micah smiled as if in soft remembrance.

"Ah oui," he said with a chuckle. *"Isaac c'est ça?"*

Caius went ram rod straight and Mollie gulped as Zephyr's tight grip began to tighten further.

"That's quite bold, even for you Caius to send one of your own and dearest straight into the lions den."

There was a chuckle and murmur that ensued behind the prince and Mollie cringed. She had unintentionally shouted his name that day in the dungeons with Micah. This was her fault. Micah didn't keep Isaac alive because she had begged him to. He had kept the boy alive the moment he figured out who he was. It was an opportunity the prince had seized and used to his advantage.

Much like he always did.

"Every drop of Lyon blood that is spilled is a waste," Micah continued his voice taking on a sharper tone. "I will gladly return him to you if you uphold your side of the transaction."

"Slow down boy," Caius sneered when he spoke.

Micah was stoic, unperturbed by Caius' chilly response.

"I want proof of life before I agree to anything further with you."

Micah laughed.

"Of course," he said with a plastered smile.

He stepped to the side as two guards, one of whom Mollie recognized immediately as one from the Questershire dungeons pushed a light haired boy to the ground as he groaned in pain.

Mollie could feel Zephyr's grip on her waist tighten painfully. The boy looked awful, his hair plastered to his forehead, his skin pale and waxy, and his *fingers*...

Mollie turned away, her lunch threatening to make a re-appearance.

Zen was shaking. She could feel his anger radiating off of him in waves.

Isaac. Poor poor Isaac.

"Release him."

Caius tone has gone stiff and dangerous and Mollie watched as Micah stared him down. His gloved fingers were clasped elegantly in front of him as if they were simple discussing pleasantries at the dinner table.

"You heard the man," Micah said softly turning to the guard beside him.

In a rather violent manner the guard shoved the boy down from the high elevated ground – his limp body hitting the ground in sickening crunches before he reached the bottom in a crumpled heap.

Mollie recognized those light curly blond locks. She remembered the last time she had seen him – sometime in Questershire Manor.

He was okay. He was breathing – barely so – but he was alive.

Mollie looked on in horror as Julien and Caden rushed forward to drag the boy towards them, across the expanse of no-man's land till he lay sprawled on the grassy floor beside Araya and Joël.

Micah watched emotionlessly, several others guards standing behind him as they watched alongside their prince the proceedings take place.

Micah turned to Caius swiftly.

"A deal is a deal."

Micah's voice was icy as he tilted his head to the side, his eyes on Caius.

Caius said nothing as his eyes flickered from Micah to Isaac to Mollie.

Mollie felt her throat constrict as Caius began to weigh his options carefully.

Mollie already knew what he wanted. It was no secret and Caius' hesitation pierced Mollie to the core. He could easily hand her over and keep his son happily without a care in the world.

"Prince Micah," Caius said crisply making sure to hold all formalities. "Perhaps we can further discuss this. The child-"

“There is nothing further to discuss,” Micah said in a sharp tone. “It will be born on Lyon land. That was the deal.”

Caius’s lips twitched.

“And Mollie-“

“We’ll discuss her predicament following the birth.”

Micah’s cold bottomless gaze bore into Caius.

“It is unbecoming to re-negotiate terms that have already been set isn’t it...Caius.”

Caius frowned – his frustration evident.

Micah’s no-nonsense attitude was clear and Mollie could see Caius immediately back off. They were outnumbered anyway. Micah had brought a humungous Lyon army behind him. They stood no chance.

“She’s...*pregnant*?”

The voice from behind them was from the Marchesseault guard and Mollie could see the astonishment flash across his features.

He turned to Caius in an instant and Mollie could see his sword unsheathe immediately.

He pushed his way past Zen and Mollie sending her careening forward on her aching knees before a sharp hiss punctured the still air.

Before Mollie could scream a harsh grunt from behind sent her jolting forward as something warm and wet splashed against the back of her neck.

Mollie knew what it was before she turned to see the leader of the small Marchesseault guard panting on the ground as he clutched his shoulder in pain.

Zen had his grip on her as she regained her balance – the warm splash of blood creating a thin uncomfortable sensation on the back of her neck.

“You *treacherous scum*,” the guard yelled as he muttered a slur of other phrases in French as he writhed on the ground.

Zephyr had curled his fingers around Mollie’s wrist and she turned to the winter prince frightfully. His expression was one of absolute abhorrence.

“You touch her again, the next arrow to hit you will be in the space between your eyes.”

Micah’s voice had gone quiet and severe and Mollie shuddered at the blank expression on his face.

“Caius,” he said turning to the blond man beside them. “Proceed.”

The guards in red retracted slightly as they watched their leader writhe in pain on the ground – the arrow from the Lyons embedded snugly in the space between where shoulder and arm met.

Caius was shaking almost imperceptibly. Mollie could see from her position and she felt a fear clutch at her heart.

The groan emitting from the curly blond boy crumpled on the ground snapped Mollie out of her position of fear and she watched as Zephyr scrambled forward towards his brother.

She caught Caius' eyes suddenly-- blue meeting brown for the briefest of seconds. In that small moment of confusion – the smallest little distraction provided an opportunity – an opportunity the Insurgency had created for *her*. To anybody else it could have been a glance but Mollie knew better than that. Her training had prepared her for this – her ability to sense something awry on and off the battle field.

Her eyes were welling with tears but she knew what she had to do. Even if it meant leaving behind the only family she had ever truly known.

As Zen lurched over towards his brother – his massive frame blocking Mollie's figure for a second, she seized her opportunity. Her frame was blocked for seconds and in those precious seconds she spun around and acted.

The empty saddled horse from where the leader of the Marchesseault army had fallen had a sturdy leg holder which proved useful for Mollie's now larger than normal frame. She attributed much of her strength to the adrenaline spiking her system as she propelled herself forward jumping up onto the horse. Swinging her dagger free from her back-pocket she cut loose the attachment of the horse to its owners uniform and lashed the reigns as the horse took off.

She gasped as her belly pressed painfully against the saddle but didn't stop. Not even when an arrow whizzed past her ear – missing only by inches.

She heard the yell of the winter prince as he shouted for his guards to cease fire.

Mollie didn't look back – she couldn't -- but she could hear the sound of two other horses beside her. She was scared at first but the formation behind her was one reflective of a protective -- not an offensive stance. To her relief, she realized they were protecting her from any further threat from behind. She could hear sword against sword clashing behind her and she prayed to every God she knew that no blood would be spilled. Not tonight. Not again. Not because of her.

The sounds grew softer and softer as she urged the horse faster – her belly clenching with a pain that radiated from her abdomen to her head.

Her vision was blurring but she had to persevere. The wrought iron gates that marked the entrance to the city of *Peréal* couldn't have come sooner and soon as they opened and Mollie crossed the threshold – she released her breath.

She made it. She was safe here.

The winter prince could not touch her – not within the Marchesseault's regime.

As Mollie urged the horse farther Mollie caught sight of something that made the blood drain from her face.

In front of her was a sea of red – an army of guards.

They had opened the gates for her and in a moment of utter astonishment Mollie realized they had been waiting for her.

Whatever Alexandre Marchesseault wanted with her was imperative. He had sent out his own fucking army. Just for *her*.

The sounds of steel against steel and arrows whizzing through the air was just a whisper in the wind now and Mollie felt the tears roll down her cheeks.

Micah.

Wherever he was – it was impossible to see him now. His presence had brought back so many emotions and Mollie no longer knew how to differentiate one from the other.

As the horse came to a slow Mollie noticed the soft breeze and gentle ambiance around her. This was not like the harsh conditions of either *Anubis* or *Icedalar*. This place *seemed* warm – inviting – hospitable. The threats were not immediately apparent – not that Mollie would have been able to defend her self now. Her knuckles were numb from clutching the reigns so tightly and as the horse came to an immediate stop in front of a sea of red Mollie felt her vision darken.

Her thoughts couldn't stray away from the others – the ones she had left behind.

Caius.

Isaac.

Zephyr.

They had done this for her. So she could escape.

Mollie did not know what their intentions for her were? Was she supposed to make it to *Peréal*? Was she meant to escape somewhere else?

She did not know. But for now she could do nothing but let the darkness blocking her vision slowly take over as she slid off the horse and fell to her knees.

She was being surrounded by people from a city she had never been to – from a city she did not know.

And whatever they wanted with her could potentially be threatening. She knew this somewhere at the back of her mind. Why else would they want her so badly? But Caius wouldn't send her to her death would he?

She had yet to find out.

Mollie's eyes blinked open in shock.

The first thing she felt was a tingly feeling in her arm. In horror she could hear the steady drip of water beside her as she blinked rapidly to clear her hazy vision.

A series of tubes were attached to her arms and the soft drip of liquid hitting liquid was coming from a clear packet beside her.

She was moving – soft grey blankets wrapped around her tightly as she looked around her in fear.

The bed had wheels and she appeared to be mobile – two people beside her pushed her down a corridor.

Was she on a stretcher?

The walls around her were foreign – the language foreign – the people foreign. It was almost too much for Mollie to take in and she could feel the air begin to escape her lips in a series of rapid breaths. The walls were made of grey stone and the floors an expensive dark wood.

*“Mademoiselle, vous avez besoin de respirer.”**

The voice beside her was sharp and Mollie moaned in pain as her head swam.

“Where are you taking me?” she gasped – her belly heaving with her breaths as she struggled to breathe air into her lungs.

Her babies.

She clutched her belly tightly. She hadn't felt movement in quite some time and she felt her throat constrict. It had been unusually long and Mollie felt a fear creep up her spine. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt them.

“Mademoiselle,” the woman said again – her voice stricter. *“Respirer. S'il vous plait.”**

Mollie screamed as the woman pushed her down – her questions going unanswered as she writhed against the restraints around her wrists and ankles.

“They're not moving. They're not moving.”

She kept crying and screaming as the people beside her pushed her forward – past dark corridor after dark corridor as she cried helplessly.

*“Elle est là?”**

This voice was male and Mollie felt her voice break as she screamed her voice hoarse.

They ignored her – as if her distress was nothing but a mere inconvenience.

*“Il veut la voir. Maintenant.”**

*“Maintenant?”** said the woman beside her with surprise.

Mollie looked between them in shock.

“Oui.” The man said simply. “Immédiatement.”

She was in a different outfit from the one she had worn earlier. It was a pretty red dress – long sleeved and warm. But her dagger – her weapon was gone from its place at her hip. They had stripped her of everything – including the necklace the winter prince had given her around her neck.

*“Par ici, dans la salle du Trône.”**

As they wheeled Mollie around fancy corridors decorated with paintings and rich ornaments that were foreign to her she was wheeled to a slow stop in front of a fancy wooden door.

The woman and the men unclipped her restraints swiftly and Mollie stared at the two people before her as they stood her up carefully and ushered her towards the door.

*“Le Roi attend depuis longtemps de vous voir...comme nous.”**

Mollie just stared at them – her face tear stained and her cheeks flushed dark from her exertion.

The doors swung open as Mollie stared numbly at what awaited her.

Not so different from the courts in *Questershire* and *Icedalar* the room was grand. There was something rustic about the style and Mollie stared wide eyed as several eyes turned to stare at her.

But Mollie’s eyes were drawn to a more commanding presence. At the end of the hall was a man in a chair – a man whose eyes locked with hers the minute the doors of the grand throne room opened.

Mollie could do nothing but stare as their eyes locked.

She could hear a series of gasps surround her from the few other members in the room but Mollie didn't pay it too much attention. She was too enthralled by a different more domineering presence.

She knew he was. She could tell from his position – his clothing – his stance.

His Majesty Alexandre Marchesseault.

She hadn't moved from her spot at the entrance to the grand hall. She could no longer feel the dried blood caked on the back of her neck – but the pain radiating from the cuts on her knuckles – the pain in her belly. That hurt more than anything she could remember.

“Please.”

It was the only word she was able to conjure as images of her friends – her family – the people she had been forced to leave behind in a mess of sword against sword all but consumed her thoughts.

The shift in her belly caused her to curl inwards and though it hurt – it brought a surge of relief over her.

They were alive.

The man continued to stare down at her from his throne. His features were chiselled and elegant and touched by the first remnants of age. He was still rather young for a King – his dark locks still lush with colour and his features locked into an expression of perpetual scrutiny. And his eyes. Pale brown eyes that mirrored her own.

He was staring and Mollie was struck by the familiarity in those pale brown eyes that stared back at her.

“*Giselle*,” he whispered rising from his seat.

The guards all turned towards her and Mollie felt a strange feeling form in her stomach.

Mollie's lips parted. The man seemed frustrated – almost apprehensive and before Mollie could retreat she felt a strong grasp grip her forearm from behind and guide her forward.

“*C'est vraiment vous?*” the King whispered.

Mollie's attempts to break free were futile and she froze as the King stepped down from his throne to stand before her. He waved the guards off of her the minute she began fussing.

He was incredibly tall. Mollie wanted to guess maybe even around James' height and she recoiled at his closeness as he approached her.

He was calm with his movements and when he looked down at her with a shimmer in his eyes Mollie found herself becoming more and more stunned.

“Please,” she repeated.

He seemed enthralled to hear her speak and as Mollie shut her eyes in fear she felt a warm caress against her tear stained cheek.

“You've returned,” he said softly a smile breaking across his features that brought back a surge of youth to his features. “You have come home.”

Everything was a blurry haze of grey walls and unfamiliar faces.

It was as if Mollie was a zombie brought back to life somehow as she was bathed (again), fed, and seen to by a doctor.

Those around her seemed to quickly pick up on her limited French and she felt a surge of relief knowing that they were also competent with English.

Before long she was being surrounded by guards and guided towards a quaint but warm room with a fire and a table of *petits hoer d'oeuvres*.

Mollie was still as she was seated gently into a chair across from the King of *Peréal*.

He nodded at his guards as he whisked them away with a soft wave of his fingers.

Suddenly those pale brown eyes turned to hers and Mollie felt her stomach clench.

“There must be some mistake.”

Her voice was hoarse and raspy from her screams but the man did not seem to care. He had a soft almost longing expression on his face that made Mollie squirm in her chair.

Mollie tensed as his eyes glued to hers – an exact replica of her own.

“No. The winds do not lie. I felt your presence for some time. I always knew you’d find your way back. A Marchessault always does.”

Mollie frowned.

He hesitated for a moment, his rich red velvety cloak brushing the steps as he perched elegantly on the chaise across from Mollie. He was drinking in her features with each wash of his eyes on her. It made Mollie tingle with unease. She didn't know him.

“It pleases me that you are so well – so strong.”

Mollie said nothing as his eyes shone with an emotion Mollie hadn't seen in a man for quite some time.

“Where is Caius?” she spat. “Where are the others who were with me.”

“*Patience ma fille*,” he said softly. “We’ll address that later.”

Mollie shook her head and glared at the man in front of her.

“How is she? Bianca?”

The question threw her and Mollie felt her lips part in surprise.

Bianca.

It was a name she hadn't heard in what felt like a lifetime.

Bianca Mayeson. Her mother.

The shock must have registered on her face and she saw the tall man smile knowingly.

"I miss her oh so much," he murmured. "Seeing you is like...seeing her in a way."

Her lips were parted in shock and she stared at him for a second longer.

"I...I...I don't understand...."

"Does she still dance?" he murmured. "She was a wonderful dancer. She had the most lovely shaped legs. She danced for me the first time I ever laid my eyes on her."

Mollie said nothing. She couldn't find the words in her quite yet.

As the minutes ticked by Mollie was piecing everything together.

She didn't want to believe it. Not like this. But those eyes – were indisputably hers staring back at her. The nose, the soft forehead, the lips – that dark brown hair.

She remembered her mothers words as if Bianca Mayeson were right beside her then. Her mothers' slender fingers digging into her skin as she leaned her chin against Mollie's shoulder.

"He was tall like you. And with those same eyes. Those pale brown orbs."

"How is she?"

The Kings' voice was a soft pleasant inviting sound. It sounded like liquid honey but softer. Like a caress of soft fingers against fleece. But Mollie was not in the mood to be enticed nor persuaded.

Mollie felt her shock disappear and its place grew another emotion. An emotion that sent her fists flexing and her breathing ragged. How *dare* he ask her. He had all the time in the world to search for her. All the money, everything. Yet he didn't raise a single finger.

"You don't deserve to know," she whipped out.

Her dark brown eyes rippled with anger as they faced off against those across from her. These ones looked back at her with nothing but congeniality. It almost angered her more.

Quite surprisingly Alexandre smiled.

"My my you are just like her," he said with a grin. "You are Bianca's daughter no doubting that."

His voice was full of warmth and amiability.

“Why didn’t you come?” she whispered – her anger dissipating as quickly as it arrived.
“Nineteen years...you never came.”

Alexandre frowned.

For the first time Mollie saw sadness creep into his features. She still had her reservations about the man -- the man she had convinced herself a day ago that she hated. But now that she knew who he was – she struggled to find it within her to do so.

“It is not the way of our peoples,” he said quietly.

Mollie’s vision blurred with tears.

“Not even for your own child?” she whipped out her fists curling.

Alexandre breathed deeply.

“No. It would be hypocritical of me to do so as King. And as I told you before *Giselle*, a Marchesseault will find its way back to its kingdom. Regardless of whatever circumstances they find themselves in.”

Mollie scoffed.

“You put a lot of faith all right,” she hissed straightening up in the chair and blinking the tears away. If he was angry he didn’t show it. He just stared placidly at her. His calmness irked her even more.

“And my name is *Mollie*. Mollie Mayeson.”

The name seemed to trigger something within him and Mollie saw his face flush.

“That’s what she named you?” he said an air of disgust in his voice. “*Cette putain*,” he muttered under his breath.

Mollie ignored him and turned towards the door.

“Wait. Just for a moment...daughter.”

Mollie felt her throat swell up at the term.

“Our discussion is not yet complete.”

He had eyed her belly several times already but he didn’t yet comment on it and Mollie was relieved. It was a discussion she did not want to have to explain just yet.

“I have waited so long for you to return. I had imagined this moment day after day. When I caught wind that you were alive – and out of the Lyon Regime I knew immediately I had to bring you home. You have been the only thing on my mind since the day I lost you. I’ve waited almost two decades for you my dear.”

Mollie turned her gaze back to him – her tears temporarily blinding her.

“Well I guess you’re going to have wait just a little bit longer.”

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas to everyone who celebrates and happy holidays. What a year it has been lol. But I hope we all come out of it much stronger. Cheers xx

Translations in Order:

*Miss, you have to breathe

Breathe. Please.

*Is she here?

He wants to see her. Now

*Now?

Here. In the Throne Room

*The King has waited a long time to see you...much like ourselves.

Chapter 42: Molybdène

Chapter Summary

Mollie learns a life changing secret about her past. A guest at dinner throws the Marchesseaults in disarray.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was a coldness here that wasn't apparent in the other realms of royalty Mollie had visited. It wasn't a physical coldness – but a foreign disingenuous apathy that seemed to radiate through every royal staff member Mollie had the privilege of crossing paths with.

It didn't take her long to figure it out.

Her pregnancy. Her belly.

It was an enormous unspoken truth that the king – her father-- had yet to address. Mollie had been avoiding him for as long as she could ever since her first meeting with him. Her emotions were in a spiral of confusion and distress. Her heart ached for Caius and Zephyr. Not knowing whether they were alright *consumed* her and Mollie did nothing but pace her grand quarters for two straight days – screaming – raging – crying. It was all a cycle – a cycle she didn't see herself breaking out of anytime soon.

Micah's cold merciless gaze was etched into her mind. She knew what he was capable of.

Mollie didn't want to think of a scenario without them – her family – Araya – Jöel – even Caden. Those months of training had been hard on her but they solidified a soft spot in her heart as well.

The staff in this place were not warm to her like the others has been. They weren't skilled and meticulous like Esperanza, or warm, kind and pure like Cécily. They were stony and reluctant. They were seeing to Mollie because they *had* to – not because they cared for her. They didn't see her as their own. That much was obvious. She wondered what Alexandre had done to force them to obey.

She did not have to wonder for too long though.

Her arms had been marred by scratch marks during the many fits of rage she experienced over the past forty eight hours. They were raw and tender to the touch and her nose hurt from where the Marchesseault staff had stuffed a tube down her throat just to get her to eat and drink. It had been traumatic and Mollie was still reeling from the treatment.

The rich opulence around her did nothing for Mollie. She cared for none of it – preferring even to lie on the cold stony floor and sleep rather than in the large four poster bed that took up a significant portion of the room. She would have preferred a cot – or even her little bed back in her apartment in *Chartery*. The one near the window that carried the noisiness of the city bustle into her room and made it impossible for her to sleep.

She didn't want anyone to touch her. She just wanted to be protected – shielded and hidden from all that had happened in the last seventy-two hours or so.

She wanted her mother.

Mollie squeezed her eyes shut as she curled her arms around her body, the constant swell of her abdomen had become a chronic everlasting pain to her lithe frame. She focused on the memories of her mother – the good memories. The ones where her mother was of sound mind. When she'd come up behind Mollie and place her chin on her shoulder – brush her warm fingers through Mollie's thick curls – wrap her up in a soft embrace when their apartment got too cold in the winter so they could feed off each others warmth. Those moments were few but they were there and Mollie clung to them like fire in a snow desert. As motherhood crept up on her achingly quickly – she found herself wanting to be close to her *own* mother. It was a strange feeling.

The more Mollie contemplated these thoughts the less she felt she knew her mother. She had never asked her mother about her past – except to ask about her father. She had never taken the time to ask her mother about her childhood – *why* she was the way that she was.

The more Mollie thought about these things – the harder her tears fell. She never knew if she'd ever get that opportunity again. Why hadn't she worried about her mother more than she had? Putting food on the table and ensuring a roof over their heads was not enough. She should have done something. She should have spoken. She should have done *so* much more than she had.

The guilt that filled her was overpowering.

The soft knock on the door interrupted her thoughts and Mollie blinked her eyes open blearily. It was not so different from the one she had heard the day before and the day before that.

She was lying on the stony ground, her curls splayed out around her. Her belly heaved from her abdomen – the weight becoming a burden for Mollie to carry around. She was checked everyday by a doctor – the pills forced down her throat much like her food.

Her throat hurt from all the tears she had shed and her fingers and wrists were sore to the touch.

She sat up slowly as the door opened. She wasn't surprised when the door unlocked and the person she wanted to see least walked in, his expensive garments sweeping the floor.

Her father's brown eyes flickered to the bed and back to her on the ground. He kept his emotions carefully hidden but Mollie sensed something else there. Frustration? Anger?

Concern? She couldn't quite tell.

His tall sturdy frame was complimented beautifully by a long red velvet cloak – the colour capturing the splendour of such an effulgent garment. His light brown locks curled lightly around his ears as he slowly took in the subfuscous ambiance around the room.

“My late wife used to lie on the ground while she was pregnant,” he said softly as if Mollie's position splayed out on the cold stone was the most normal thing he had seen. “She claimed the shift in gravity calmed her babe.” He paused for a second. “She used to decorate the castle with white flowers in anticipation for the birth. It's an old royal tradition that used to be done in the past,” he said waving his hand away as if it were a paltry custom.

Mollie didn't respond. Her silence did not deter the King and he simply continued walking around the room slowly. His cloak caught the sun filtering in through the fancy carved windows. It caught the gems embedded in his cloak and Mollie watched as they shimmered with each step he took around the room.

“I was sixteen when I married her,” he murmured. “She was thirty six.” He didn't wear gloves like Micah and the rest of the Lyons and he didn't carry around a sword with him. But he had lots of jewellery. It was almost overwhelming how many gems decorated the mans slim fingers. She remembered suddenly what Luna had told her. The Marchesseault regime was a mining empire – of course.

Mollie had only been half listening before but as he continued to muse on she lifted her head up.

“My father – your grandfather,” he continued. “He arranged it all before he passed. He had everything planned out. His present, his future... I swear if he could, the man would have even attempted to re-write his past.”

Mollie couldn't quite decipher his tone. It wasn't fond but it wasn't bitter either. He was placid.

“People think we are free to do what we want in this position. But if anything, we are slaves to the people. At the end of the day they are the ones who truly decide our fate.”

He had walked close enough for Mollie to reach out and touch him had she wanted to. His accent was strong. Much stronger than the Lyons and Mollie realized he must not have spoken English in quite some time.

“As much as it pains me to tell you this – it is my duty as a King and as a father to do so.”

Mollie was quiet as the man bent down towards her.

Carefully he placed his palm to cup her cheek in a gesture all too familiar to Mollie.

“Don't do this daughter,” he murmured squeezing her cheek lightly. “Work with me—not against me. This kingdom needs you as much as I do.”

Mollie sighed.

“They don’t even know me,” she protested wiping the trails of tears down her face. “They don’t *want* to know me.”

Her father sighed perching elegantly against the edge of the massive bed.

“They can’t if you won’t let them.”

Mollie sniffled, her tears drying to become a sticky sheen against her cheeks.

“I’m an outsider to them.”

To her surprise Mollie watched as her father proceeded to lean forward and sit down on the cold floor beside her.

“You are as of now.” His candour baffled her. But Mollie preferred it regardless of how much it hurt her. “You’ll have to work hard for them to see you as fit to be a part of this monarchy. And as of now, the odds are highly stacked against you.”

Mollie had a feeling he was referring to not only her unconventional royal upbringing – but her pregnancy as well.

He let out a tired sigh as his long legs splayed out beside Mollie’s.

“Give me your hand.”

Mollie looked at him in confusion. She would have preferred to have continued her silent treatment but the look of fatigue on Alexandre’s face prompted her to obey.

Carefully she placed her hand in his. He squeezed it comfortingly --almost aching-- before sliding a small gem off of his own finger. Without waiting for a response he slid the gem onto the pinky finger of Mollie’s left hand.

“*Giselle.*” Mollie looked up at him – his soft voice soothing and filling the spacious room. “This belonged to *Giselle Valentino – ma mère – ton grandmère.*”

Mollie reddened as she realized the gravity of the name he yearned to pass on to her. He continued to play with her fingers as he admired the gem on Mollie’s bare hand.

“*Malheuresement,*” he mused suddenly breaking the brief silence. “I had no daughters to pass this on to during my early reign as King.” He looked at her warmly as Mollie admired the simple but elegant rose gold band that surrounded her pinky. “But God reminded me of a gift I thought I had lost.”

There was a long silence between the two of them. This silence was heavy – heavy with the years they had lost together. Years that were spent with Mollie struggling to survive in a world that favoured the rich and punished the impecunious.

“She’s not well.”

Mollie murmured as her father continued to toy with her fingers. It was as if he were memorizing them – sealing the texture – the shape –the complexion into his mind.

He paused, his breath catching as well.

“I’m...I’m sorry to hear that.”

His voice was still so soft – so languid.

“I always wondered why she hated the monarchy,” Mollie continued. “I always thought she was bitter because she wasn’t like them.”

“Like who sweet girl?” her father murmured.

“Like the quaternary citizens,” Mollie hissed. She flexed her fists and she felt her father’s touch pause.

“How much did Bianca tell you?”

Mollie looked at him but his eyes were focused on her fingers.

Nothing. She told me nothing because half the time she was fucking some stranger in the apartment.

Mollie hesitated. She didn’t want to speak ill of her mother. And by the sounds of it – Alexandre and herself were talking about completely different people.

Her father reached for something in his cloak pocket and Mollie watched as an old crumpled photograph was removed.

Mollie gasped as her father smoothed the photo down to reveal the faces of two smiling individuals.

Mollie blinked away the fresh surge of tears that brimmed her eyes as she touched the photograph.

“*Mémère and Pépère,*” Mollie whispered. The smiling faces of her grandparents staring back at her.

Mollie stiffened when she saw the photograph.

Hold on. This was from the bakery. It was one of the only photographs she had of her grandparents. How did he...

“Where...How did you get this?”

Her father smiled softly.

“*C’est ton grandmère et grandpère oui?*”

Mollie just stared at him.

“You really think I just up and left the only heir I had to my throne nineteen years ago?”

Mollie didn't know what to say. She was burning with questions now. She tried to remember the last time she had seen this photograph.

It had been the day she received the letter – exactly two weeks before she boarded that train that changed her life forever.

Had it been a coincidence that the Insurgency found her? Had they known ever since?

Mollie felt her chest constrict as she replayed those moments over and over again. She hadn't thought about it. She hadn't considered it.

She stilled.

There had been a man. A man who had entered the bakery. A man in a long tan trench coat. He had stared at the photo before he asked for the owner.

“You sent him,” Mollie said through unmoving lips. “It had been you...not the Lyons.”

Her father's expression remained grim but Mollie knew he had much more to tell.

“Olivier and Ruelle Marchesseault.”

Mollie's head snapped up.

“Olivier?” she whispered.

Her father nodded.

“My elder brother,” her father explained quietly. “He married a commoner. My father banished him from the realm after he did so and left him and his wife to raise his twin sons in the middle of the desert. The Ophians were overthrowing their monarchy at the time. It was a miracle they were able to escape.”

Her father's voice had gone more quiet as he spoke and the more Mollie listened to it – the more soothing it sounded to her.

“I asked my brother only one favour,” the King murmured, “And that was for him to find Bianca and bring her to me. She had been banished from her realm you see, and the country side was the only place for outcasts like them. It was free land at the time. A place to start fresh.”

Mollie felt sick as she thought about it.

Free land before the Lyons came and took it over for themselves.

Mollie took a deep breath as she followed the words of her father.

“My mother,” Mollie whispered. She swallowed thickly before she continued. “She...she was royalty too?”

Her father looked at her, his brown eyes warm.

“She was. Bianca Rineaux of the Rineaux Empire. Youngest daughter of Onald and Gertrude Rineaux.”

Mollie brought her hands to her forehead as she sunk her fingers into her thick curls. She could herself moaning as she took in this new information.

“No..No...that’s impossible. No. This...this *can’t* be right.”

Her mother was Bianca. Bianca the whore. Everyone knew it. He was *wrong*.

“She was.”

Her father’s voice was blunt when he spoke.

“I don’t understand,” Mollie moaned yanking her curls so hard her scalp burned. “Mum hated the monarchy. She *hated* it. She couldn’t stand even mentioning it.”

“I suppose she was bitter,” Alexandre said quietly. “I don’t blame for her that.” His voice had a lilt to it that caught Mollie’s ear. “But I do blame her for hiding you from me.”

Mollie was pressing her fingers to her temples in circular motions. This was too much. Her entire life had been a lie from the start. Her existence seemed to predicate on the secrecies of one monarchy to another. It made her sick to her stomach as much as it fuelled her lividity. She never had a say -- from the moment she was conceived.

“You’re warm,” her father said suddenly brushing his fingers against her forehead. “It might be best to continue this conversation when you are better --”

Before he could get up Mollie had lurched forward holding her belly as she stared down her father.

“Why was she banished?” Mollie hissed. “What did you *do* to her to make her into the person she became?”

Her father turned away from her – his gaze instead resting on the window.

Mollie knew. She knew what he had done. It was written all over his face. She knew those expressions too well at this point in time.

Guilt.

Regret.

Bitterness.

His silence angered her. It was the first time he had looked away from her when she confronted him and Mollie knew that guilt would never fully go away. He had carried it with him for nineteen years.

“You had no right.”

Her voice was just a whisper at this point. She couldn’t even stop the tremor that rocked her tone as she spoke.

“I...tried to fix it,” her father said softly. “I tried to right my wrongs. Each and every one of them.” His voice was stiff as he spoke. “I’m not proud of what I did. I’m not proud of the person I was. But I like to think I have become a better man. Fault me as you will daughter. But rest assured I won’t stop trying.”

Mollie sniffed as she wiped her tears away.

“I had lost contact with my brother a year or two after your birth. Olivier and Ruelle thought it best to raise you...especially during those first few years. They told me Bianca was not well. It was a difficult delivery and she had always been rather...impetuous.”

Her father’s voice had regained its soft tone again. It was so lulling and calming.

“But after the invasion I..I didn’t know what had happened. Whether you were alive or not. You and Bianca went completely off the map.”

The strain in his voice hurt Mollie deeply. She knew he was telling the truth.

“The Lyon regime is gargantuan. You could have been anywhere. For years I tried to pick up on something -- *some* kind of lead that could tell me something about your whereabouts. But I supposed Bianca was bitter. She kept you hidden away from me as a punishment. I’m *sure* of it.”

His tone had turned caustic and Mollie flinched as he continued.

“But I always knew you were alive. I could feel it.”

He stood up after this, his frame blocking out the late afternoon sun filtering in through the window. It was molten red – as if it kissed the volcanoes before reaching out into the sea blue blanket of the sky.

The fierceness in his voice was intransigent and Mollie bit her lip as her father approached her.. He placed his hands softly on her shoulders as he looked down at her.

“You are a Marchesseault. The blood of this empire runs through your veins. The fight within us is *strong*.”

Mollie looked up at him – brown eyes mirroring brown eyes.

Mollie wanted to say something – anything to keep him speaking. For so long she had wanted answers. And now that she was getting them she couldn’t stop. Not now.

“About the baby,” Mollie whispered, feeling her cheeks redden. “It’s not what you think-”

“We won’t discuss it now,” the King said with a frown. “What’s most important is that it doesn’t become public which is why you will stay here in the castle till your delivery – which by the looks of it is not far off.”

Before Mollie could protest, there was a sharp knock on the door that couldn’t have come at a worse time. Mollie frowned as an older woman – one Mollie recognized as the same one that had ushered her in the first day, came around the corner. Her uniform was the same as all the others – crimson coloured with a touch of gold along the trim.

“Mon roi,” she murmured. *“Le dîner est prêt.”*

Her father nodded as if he were expecting her.

Quietly she closed the door and Mollie watched as her father elegantly dusted his cloak as he regarded Mollie firmly.

“I hope that now that you have gotten some answers, you will be a little more inclined to cooperate with me.”

Mollie exhaled.

“I do not wish for you to remain isolated in your chambers for every meal of the day.” He paused after this, his eyes flickering to land squarely on Mollie’s. “It would also be much easier if you agreed to nourish yourself willingly. It displeases me to see you rebelling against something that is integral to your health.”

He had a deep longing in his voice.

“I’m expecting a rather important guest for dinner this evening,” he murmured, the rings on his fingers glistening as he crossed them gracefully in front of his body. “It would be a good opportunity for you to join me. The sooner you learn about the political affairs of the monarchy the better.”

Mollie couldn’t help but scoff.

“I thought it wasn’t a woman’s place to know about political affairs.”

“You are not on Lyon soil anymore,” he said sharply. Mollie jumped at the shift in his tone. It sounded angry – almost repugnant. “We do things differently here. And you *will* learn how things are run here. One way or the other.”

Mollie looked down when he said this. The people in this regime didn’t even regard her as one of their own. Place of birth was a fundamental aspect of status across *all* regimes. Mollie would daresay it was *equally* as important as blood and status. Mollie wasn’t born on Marchesseault soil – and even though the King was her father – it didn’t matter much to the people. Birthplace was essential to them.

“If...that’s what you want,” Mollie murmured. She ran a hand through her hair, wincing as she caught several tangled strands through her fingers.

Her father nodded.

“I’ll send in one of the ladies to make you presentable,” he said softly. “There are certain dress codes, etiquette, and formalities that must be maintained during any formal meeting with another envoy, diplomat, or visitor from another regime.”

Mollie hesitated when he said this. The dress she had on was tight due to Mollie’s straining belly and she dreaded to think about what she’d be forced into this time.

“There is a lot I have planned for you my dear,” he said softly giving Mollie a warm glance. “Some of it will not be to your liking and some of it you will enjoy. But you must take the good with the bad if you are to stay here.”

Mollie stiffened.

Who’s to say she would stay here? Was it up to her at this point?

“If I am to introduce you as my daughter publicly, you will have to follow the rules I lay out for you. Do you understand what I’m saying *ma fille*?”

Mollie swallowed but managed a nod.

“Say it verbally,” said the King with a slow nod. “Always assert yourself orally. Nodding is a sign of ambivalence that is not customary of a royal.”

He seemed to already be throwing himself into teaching mode and Mollie cleared her throat quickly.

“Yes...I understand.”

“Very good,” her father said coolly. “You will wear what Margot picks out for you and you are to join me in the grand hall not a minute later than 8 sharp.” Her father tilted his chin down in a severe manner. “You must *not* be late.”

Mollie was halfway through nodding before she caught herself.

“Yes Sir.”

Her father paused for a second – giving Mollie a once over with his eyes before he nodded strictly and closed the door behind him.

Within seconds the woman Mollie saw before re-appeared. Her iron grey hair was pulled back into a tight bun and her no-nonsense persona put Mollie’s hair on end. She barely spoke to her – preferring to gesture with her head or her chin or sometimes just pulling Mollie along wordlessly. Mollie already decided she despised her.

Quite expectedly, she jutted her chin forward towards the bathing quarters and glued her hazy dark eyes to Mollie.

With a sigh Mollie followed her.

Mollie sipped her water politely and looked at the other four members of the table. There were three empty seats across from her, two people on either side of her - and then her father at the head of the table with his advisor beside him.

The tight dress she had on was stifling and uncomfortable – several sizes too small for someone who was nine months pregnant. It stretched tight against her belly as she shifted in her seat at the table.

She tucked a delicate curl behind her ear and scowled. She had tried unsuccessfully to get her father to release Caius and the others who were being held at a compound not too far from the castle. Knowing they were alive sent a pulse of relief through Mollie. But she hated that they were being held as prisoners. Without them, Mollie would have never made it here alive.

Despite her tantrum her father didn't let up. If anything he was equally as severe.

When food arrived Mollie looked up at King Alexandre in confusion.

Were they to eat without their guests?

Her father leaned towards her. He spoke softly.

"Rarely do royal visitors eat at another's residence," he explained quietly.

"Then why cook the dinner?" Mollie asked confusedly staring at the lavish food. "Seems a bit of a waste."

"It's a gesture of invitation," he murmured. "You always offer to feed a visitor. Even if you know they won't accept."

Mollie remembered the Lyon dinner table in that moment. The dark wood. The red. The food. How no one really touched all it had to offer. It made sense to her now. Perhaps she really hasn't understood the extent of royal appearances. How seriously they took these rules and traditions. It made her nervous.

They ate in silence except for the occasional soft murmur from Alexandre and his advisor. The other two members at the table beside Mollie paid her little attention and she spent the time trying to swallow her meal. It was almost too rich for Mollie. She wasn't used to the food after spending so much time eating basic essential foods for months in the desert. She could barely manage to get through a quarter.

"You are to remain seated until I deem the dinner has ended," her father explained. "And please," he added rather stiffly. "Refrain from exposing your situation."

Mollie looked up sharply.

“My situation?” She said with a hint of defensiveness.

“Indeed,” her father sniffed. “Apart from my council and the maids, the general public is unaware that you are pregnant. I would very much like to keep it that way up to the delivery which according to the doctor is quite soon.”

Mollie didn’t know whether to feel insulted or not but she just stayed quiet.

She hoped the night would go by quickly and uneventfully. She just wanted to sleep. She had gone through so many emotions today. She was utterly exhausted.

As she managed to stuff another last morsel of lavish food into her mouth she heard the door open as chairs squeaked and the two members of the table beside her stood to welcome the guest.

As Mollie looked up she felt the food turn to dry mush in her mouth as she dropped her fork to the plate with a clatter in utter shock.

“*Ah bienvenue,*” drawled the king as he motioned for his guests to sit. He barely glanced at Mollie. “I pray your journey was a pleasant one.”

Mollie was all but frozen. She was shaking imperceptibly. She was so unprepared -- so astonished. She hadn’t even *contemplated-*

“*Bon soir mesdames et monsieurs.* I’m honoured to be here.”

“Micah Lyon. It is an honour to have your attendance. Please sit. Let us begin.”

Mollie choked a little as she struggled to swallow.

Micah ignored her at first, the two guards behind him taking their seat on either side before he himself was seated. He looked handsome and confident as he always did at these meetings - with an air of aplomb and unparalleled elegance and charm.

Mollie’s face was all hot as she glued her eyes to the table as Micah seated himself across from her.

“I hope your health is well,” Micah said coolly looking directly at the King.

“As good as it can be I suppose,” said her father gesturing for his advisor to pour glasses for his guests.

The Lyons accepted it and Mollie watched from beneath her thick lashes as Micah twirled the drink in his hand. The sharp scent of the whiskey hit her nose and Mollie felt a twist of nausea hit her.

She was flabbergasted.

How could he be so calm and collected after what had just happened days ago? It was as if he and Mollie shared no history as he sat before her father as a guest of the Marchesseault regime.

“What have you brought for me this evening Lyon prince?” Alexandre asked with a sly grin as Micah toyed with the goblet in his left hand.

“Only the best for a regime as rich as yours”

The King smiled.

“I would expect nothing less.”

Micah smirked.

“I enjoy an expectant crowd.”

Mollie looked between them quietly, their conversation seeming to hold something more beneath the layers of congeniality.

“There have been whispers on the wind,” Alexandre said softly. “Of certain instability in what I so know as the prosperous Lyon empire.”

Micah chuckled.

“There are many whispers on the wind – much of it hot air I’m afraid. I’m sure you relate your highness.”

“To a degree” Alexandre said curtly. “I do hope you are aware, the Prince of the West paid me a visit. Mere weeks before your prospective arrival.”

James.

Mollie gulped.

Why would James pay the Marchesseaults a visit? Did his brothers know? Something was up.

Micah’s face went blank for a moment before his plastered smile returned.

“How lovely,” Micah murmured without an ounce of warmth in his tone.

“He is quite the talker,” Alexandre chuckled. “I was *almost* tempted. I must say...his propositions are rather...unusual.”

“You are far too modest with your choice of words,” Micah said smoothly. “I would have gone with something more... fitting. Something along the lines of unconventional? Heretical? Farcical?”

The King laughed loudly at this along with the other members of the table and Mollie cringed as the conversation continued.

“His passion is stronger than his rationale I’m afraid,” Micah murmured after the laughter had died down.

“I do hope that is not a family trait,” Alexandre said coyly.

“Not all bristles of the brush paint the same,” Micah said curtly. His tone had a hard edge to it.

Alexandre laughed again as he drank heartily from his goblet.

“Speaking of family,” Micah started. “You are the talk of the table these days.”

Alexandre stiffened ever so slightly and Mollie felt her face warm again.

“Yes. This is my daughter,” Alexandre said smoothly. “Isn’t she a pretty thing?”

Mollie could feel her father’s eyes burning into hers. She had no choice. With unsuppressed anger she lifted her eyes to Micah’s and let her full fury unleash with a single glance.

It was the first time their eyes met since he watched her from the elevated hills outside the Marchesseault borders. His expression was soft and calculating – his lips curved slightly upwards – his dark locks brushing his cheekbones.

He was enjoying this.

“Not a single gem or diamond on Earth could ever challenge such exquisiteness,” Micah murmured reaching across the table.

He held his gloved hand out formally – as if he were meeting her for the first time. Little did the others know how well Mollie knew those palms – those long pale fingers that lay concealed beneath that rich fabric. Fingers that had felt and pressed and glided over every single part of her trembling flesh. Fingers that had reached down between her legs to press at her bundle of nerves and bring her to a pleasure that was unrivaled in its euphoria. Those pale digits that had brushed her cheeks numerous times- - had untangled the knots of her thick dark hair when the moon shone its light through the black sky well till the sun regained its radiance in the early orange light.

Mollie knew what she was supposed to do – what she was *expected* to do... but her anger was a feral untameable blaze of fire.

With her jaw locked tight she placed her hand forcefully in his as he curled his gloves fingers around her own.

She glowered at him as he smiled at her – a smile that radiated smugness and confidence. She wanted to kick him beneath the table. She was tempted to.

Before she could make up her mind Micah released her hand abruptly and turned back to the King.

“I have brought something of yours along with the generous gift on behalf of my father.”

The King sighed audibly.

“A shame he couldn’t make it. My special whiskey ages with each subsequent year he does not come to visit me.”

Micah smiled stiffly.

“I’ll let him know,” he said rather dryly.

“You know I am not fond of surprises, or games, nor am I fond of riddles young prince,” Alexandre said ominously – his tone shifting into something more curt. “Be frank.”

Mollie watched them closely. It was rare to see Micah in a form that was not streaked with some stroke of elusivity or equivocality. It had become a sort of enigma and as the winter prince brought the goblet to his lips for the first time that night Mollie saw something more glint within those cold blank eyes. Something wild.

“How unfortunate,” Micah murmured. “I *do* fancy a game of *I spy* every so now and again.”

Alexandre went silent and Mollie felt a heaviness in the air around them.

Micah’s eyes had flickered to Mollie’s and she felt her throat go drier than the Ophian desert.

“There’s nothing more important than family they say,” Micah murmured as his eyes dropped to the amber liquid in his gem encrusted goblet. “Do you agree your highness?”

Alexandre’s smile had gone rather stale and Mollie felt the gaze of her father’s advisor stuck to the side of her profile.

“It depends,” her father said – his voice uncomfortably strained. “Blood may be thicker than water, but the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb.”

Micah smiled humourlessly.

“Perhaps.”

Alexandre’s lip curled and Mollie saw the first signs of scorn cloud his features.

“Dinner is done,” he said bluntly. “Let us discuss this further in the throne room.”

The walls of the castle were chilly and dark as Mollie struggled to keep pace with her father. The sharp twists and turns were making Mollie woozy as her tight dress pressed down against her belly.

“Please,” Mollie interjected as her father swept past her into the grand throne room to carry on his negotiation. “There’s something I *have* to tell you,” she murmured as she struggled to keep up with the long strides of her father. “It has to do with the baby –“

“Not now daughter,” he sighed cutting her off as he glided up the stairs leading to the elevated platform. “We will discuss this matter later – *in private*. ”

The way he said the last bit made Mollie wince as she stood next to her father’s advisor on the stage. Alexandre sunk into his gold encrusted throne as he turned to address Mollie standing several metres away from him on the stage.

“This is your first negotiation and your first official outing in the company of two royal regimes. You are to observe only.”

Mollie closed her mouth promptly as her father shot her a warning glare as the members of his cabinet began to file into the room.

“Sit at the table – don’t stand,” her father instructed quietly.

Mollie bit her lip and obliged – hating the fact that she had to hide her current state.

Not long after – a sea of blue and gold dressed men entered the room on the opposite side of the room – much more than the few that joined them at the dinner table.

“I want that signature *Marchesseault*, ” snapped a familiar husky voice that echoed around the ornate chamber.

Mollie watched in shock as Micah strode into the opulent throne room – his cloak billowing behind him as he stood before the King and his cabinet on the elevated stage of his throne room.

She spotted the giggling chambermaids standing along the entrance as they eyed the winter prince with obvious lust in their eyes.

With an anger Mollie hadn’t anticipated she saw Micah’s expression transition unto something stony and dangerous. It was so different from the charming playful persona he had opted for at the dinner table.

But Mollie knew how the rules worked.

The dinner table was not the place for business. That came after.

“Ah *there* he is,” Alexandre drawled as he regarded the boy distastefully. “If you weren’t such a thorn in the side of my enemies I would have gladly eviscerated you and the rest of your spoiled blood myself long ago.”

“A missed opportunity on your part,” Micah said smugly. “That seems to be a common... family trait amongst you Marchesseaults.”

Mollie wasn't sure if the insult was directed at her or not but whatever he had said made her father sit ram rod straight in his chair.

In a practiced manner, the Lyon advisor that had joined them at the dinner table rose and Mollie watched as he walked past his winter prince and gingerly placed a scroll on the long table in front of Alexandre Marchesseault.

"Take your bloody contract off my table," Alexandre hissed as he stared down the winter prince menacingly. "You Lyons and your insatiable greed make me sick. I've already told you I will not end my alliance with the Cape over a baseless rumour!"

It was as if a switch had gone off and all the formalities that had been so meticulously upheld at the start of the dinner was immediately ceased.

"I don't think so," Micah sneered.

The guards on either side of Micah had reached for their swords and Mollie heard the guards in front of her repeat the gesture almost synchronously.

Mollie was surprisingly calm considering the animosity that had taken over the table and as she turned to her father she saw his face contort into something less hostile.

"You kept him shackled like a rabid dog for the past two decades. Now you want to return him to us— all in exchange for this bloody contract?" her father all but seethed. "*Au diable avec toi!*"

Micah laughed suddenly and Mollie felt her heart clench.

"Oh no your majesty," Micah said slowly – the exertion from his laugh bringing some colour back to his cheeks. "As much as it's a treat to return your nephew to you, he is not the surprise. Not today."

Alexandre had gone quiet and Mollie didn't like the sinister turn that this meeting had taken on.

In a flash Micah reached for something beside him and to Mollie's surprise she saw that it was a bouquet of flowers. Slowly he began to make his way towards the platform of the King. Mollie hesitated as she heard the Marchesseault guards unsheathe their swords.

Why flowers? It seemed odd...

To Mollie's utter chagrin she realized that Micah wasn't heading towards the King...he was going diagonally...he was coming towards her.

He stopped right in front of her just as the guards beside her unsheathed their swords fully in a manner that purely defensive.

Micah all but ignored it. His gaze was fixed solely on Mollie.

Mollie swallowed, ignoring the blush of her cheeks as her gaze dropped to the bouquet in his hands. There was everything Mollie could think of in there. Peonies, roses, petunias, daffodils...

How in the hell?

They didn't even *grow* in these lands.

"Pour vous mon amour," he murmured reaching for her hand and brushing his cold lips against her knuckles.

Mollie looked confusedly up at him as he forced the bouquet into her nimble fingers. She could hear the whispers of the crowd around her as Micah flashed her a devastatingly handsome crooked smile before heading back towards the centre of the throne room.

"I do hope you consider that contract," Micah said softly his eyes now flickering back to the King.

"Madames et Monsieurs," he murmured before striding out the same doors he arrived in. His guards were quick to follow him -- their uniforms glinting in the candlelit ambiance as they shadowed their prince out of the throne room.

Charming. Doting. Elegant.

Micah knew how to take charge and win a crowd over when he wanted to. He was damn good at it.

Mollie just stared after him for a couple seconds.

What was he up to? What had he done?

She could feel the burning eyes of her father as his gaze bore into her along with dozens of others.

"Adjourné," her father snapped. In a flash his cabinet members, fellow aides and confidants filed out of the room.

The room emptied alarmingly quickly and before long it was just Mollie, her father, her father's advisor and her strict lady in waiting.

Alexandre's lip tightened and his eyes narrowed as Mollie couldn't help but cower at the absolute fury that had lined her fathers normally placid features.

Her hands were shaking as she gripped the lavish bouquet in her fingers --each flower – each soft petal a brilliant blinding shade of white.

"You could have picked anyone," her father murmured, his fists clenching. *"Anyone...but it had to be a fucking Lyon."*

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year Everyone!

Just an addition: White flowers are thought to have been a gesture of rebirth and purity back in the day and even now. In canon, it is the same. According to Alexandre, it was an old royal tradition that one decorate the castle with white flowers when a royal heir was set to be born. That may provide more context for those who may have missed the subtle explanation earlier in the chapter.

Chapter 43: Technétium

Chapter Summary

Mollie gets on shaky ground with her father. Mollie finds herself in a spot of terrible vulnerability as she has her first formal meeting with the winter prince since the events of Icedalar.

Chapter Notes

Plenty of smut this chapter. I also wanted to add, I read ALL of your comments. I'm sorry I'm so slow at responding. I promise I'll be better. I love that you take the time to write them out and value each and every one of you. Y'all are the best xx

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Tell me again how this little *mistake* happened.”

Elio Courtois sighed and bowed down in respect to the man speaking to him.

“It was off of a single picture your highness. I hadn’t *known* it was the other girl. Both of them were at the bakery that day.”

“No,” said Alexandre Marchesseault bitinglly. “You *assumed*. There’s a difference.”

Elio went silent, his fists flexing in his tan trench coat. He looked down in shame.

“My daughter is pregnant. Fucking *pregnant* with a Lyon because of you and your... *incompetence*.” Elio’s face paled. In all the years he had known his King – never had he seen him so livid. “You were supposed to send the other girl with the Rebels and deliver my daughter to *me*.”

“Your highness,” Elio choked as Alexandre’s stormy gaze bore into him like a knife through soft butter. “My...my utmost apologies. On my family’s name I am so humbly sorry.”

Alexandre’s expression was frozen in a fit of rage. His hand was on his sword – that long ruby encrusted sheen of steel that had fought and conquered so many wars of the past. Maybe Elio’s blood would be another addition to its sequestered sea of crimson.

Alexandre trembled for a second and Elio watched in fear when the King took several steps back, his wrists shaking as he struggled to clutch his sword.

“Your highness,” Elio called out wrenching quickly to his feet.

The King waved him off, struggling to maintain his balance.

“It’s happening again isn’t?” Elio whispered.

Alexandre ignored him – instead – he shuffled closer to his seat and placed himself down as gingerly as possible.

“Each day that goes by is a critical one Elio,” Alexandre murmured. “I am on borrowed time. I do not have much longer.”

His voice sounded so soft and shaky. So unlike the King he knew so well.

“Don’t say that,” Elio whipped out. “You are young. That is not true.”

“It is foolish to deny it,” Alexandre hissed. “We must come to terms with it and accept it and prepare for it. Channel our energies into more constructive avenues than on something fruitless like denial.” Alexandre paused. “Perhaps it is my punishment. A curse placed on me for the sins of my past.”

Elio sighed.

“You’ve done so much good my King. You’ve brought peace to so many – built up this city into something prosperous. You have saved *lives*-”

“A good deed does not cancel out a bad one Elio.”

Elio went quiet.

“You have to help me fix this,” Alexandre murmured as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “You have to fix this fuck up. I don’t have the strength or the *time*-”

“I will your highness.”

Alexandre went silent as he stared down at one of his most trusted confidants. Elio hesitated. It seemed it was his curse to be the bearer of bad news for the second time today.

“What did you do with the girl? The red-headed one.”

Elio kept his head down.

“She had seen too much. I had Prince Caine deliver her back to Charterly.”

Alexandre’s head snapped up.

“You sent Caine? *Merde*. ”

Now Elio was the one to pinch the bridge of his nose with regret.

“I know.”

“*Merde*, ” the King repeated with a frown.

Elio paused.

“He is trying his best *mon roi*, ” Elio murmured. “He misses his brother.”

Alexandre flexed his fists.

The pain was still there. Elio could see it in the Kings eyes every day. The loss of his golden child. His eldest son.

“He’s not coming back. The sooner Caine accepts that the better.”

Elio sighed.

“He did well on his last mission. Drove out the Outbacks and reclaimed the surrounding mountain range. He named the city *Saint Laurent*. ”

Alexandre frowned.

“He seeks your approval your majesty. He just wants –”

“He is *not* Laurent. He *never* will be.”

Elio went silent immediately. Now was not the time. Elio could tell.

The scowl on Alexandre’s face was back on display and Elio could tell he would hear no more on the subject.

Wiping the sweat on his brow – Elio slowly changed the subject.

“It displeases me to tell you this – especially at such a tempestuous time. But the winter prince is keeping the Insurgency out in the abandoned Cathedral just a mile away from the main gates.”

Alexandre narrowed his eyes.

“He is more cunning than I gave him credit for. *Cette salopard*. ”

Elio breathed heavily.

“The Lyon prince is being housed in the royal chambers as of now. I assume by now the news has spread throughout the kingdom like wildfire. Perhaps the girl need not be locked down here anymore?”

Alexandre turned his fiery brown eyes back to the member of his guard.

“*That girl* is my daughter,” he said in a dangerous voice. “Regard her with more respect.”

Elio went beet red.

“Of course of course *je m’excuse*,” he said bowing low. “*La princesse*,” he corrected.

Alexandre ignored him, instead choosing to admire the jewels that adorned his wrists and fingers.

“She stays locked down here. Until she has the child.”

“Is she aware of the custodial ramifications of the situation?”

“Somewhat. She is tired now,” Alexandre murmured. “I will address it further with her when the time is right. Right now I need you to...make sure the winter prince’s needs are seen to immediately.”

Alexandre was struggling to get the last sentence out and Elio could see it was taking everything in him not to march to the guest quarters and slice the head off his smug pale body.

Elio nodded mutely. He understood. They had to play nicely. For now.

“It seems God is not quite done punishing me for my sins,” Alexandre sighed. “Not all of us get the luxury of a painless descent the closer we get to death.”

Elio swallowed the lump in his throat. This was his fault. All of it.

“I swear. I will fix this your majesty. In every way I know how.”

Elio was proud of the way his voice came out much stronger than how he was truly feeling on the inside.

With a heavy heart he left his King to his thoughts – the weight of his burdens feeling so much more vexatious.

Mollie was still recovering.

She had been sick to her stomach the night before – the white petals of the bouquet Micah had given her scattered around the stony ground of her room as she vomited up her dinner in the toilet. She was emotionally distressed and it was affecting her adversely. How could it not when the winter prince was just on the other side of the massive castle?

“*I’m such a fucking coward*,” she thought miserably as she locked herself in her room and cried. She cried a lot that night. Longer than she could remember.

Micah hadn’t come to see her and neither had she gone to see him. But for how long could they keep avoiding each other?

Her father hadn’t come to visit her– he was probably still taking in what Mollie quickly realized was something of a nightmare for him to process.

She didn't understand the importance of what her father called Royal Protocol. It all seemed like a bunch of fictitious artificiality to Mollie. Why couldn't they just battle it out? Raise the swords they all carried with them and end it right then and there? What was the point of being civil to each other when so many aspects of this entire situation was so far outside the realm of civility?

Mollie remembered how quickly the King had chased the rest of his cabinet out of the room the minute Micah Lyon retired to his rooms in the guest quarters the night before. Something in the King changed. She saw it.

The smugness on Micah's face seemed to reiterate with Mollie and she realized he already knew. He was well aware of her status before he walked into that dinner hall. He was *always* one step ahead of her. From the first day they met.

Mollie didn't want to face him. But she couldn't keep herself here. Her father couldn't always be the one to drag her out of another long episode of depression. She found herself missing Araya terribly. She knew how to get Mollie out of a bad spell in just a few words.

Mollie knew the next interaction she would have with her father would be unpleasant. She could already taste the bitterness on her tongue as she thought about their last heated argument following Micah's departure from the throne room.

"Do you realize what you've done?"

Her father's stiff voice punctured Mollie's gut and she froze at his tone. She felt like a prisoner in front of him now as he sat in his throne and observed her. Two other men stood beside him. Neither looked at her but their expressions were as stony as the floor beneath their feet.

He brought his fingers to his eyes and rubbed them tiredly.

"You don't understand –" Mollie interjected. "I tried to tell you before–"

"Silence."

Her father snapped at her and she went silent immediately.

"You've sealed your future. You have no clue what this means for you."

Mollie felt her heart sink.

"The public will know by now. That we cannot help..."

Her father was murmuring to himself now and Mollie watched as he drummed his fingers against the long oak table in front of him.

"But he's here," Mollie responded – a slight desperation to her tone. "Micah is in your...our territory. Surely we can do something. We must have more flexibility than he does."

“It doesn’t work like that daughter,” her father muttered. He was clearly exasperated with her lack of knowledge of monarchical politics and she frowned. He turned his pale brown irises towards her and Mollie saw a hint of sadness within them. “He is the father and you two are unmarried. That makes him more than capable of taking not only your child away from you but bringing it to his territory and raising it there.”

Mollie felt her heart jump to her throat.

What? No. No.

Her father’s expression was entirely grim now and Mollie clutched her belly as he continued speaking.

“He can even go so far as to raise it alone – without you ever being present in the child’s life. The Lyon monarchy is known for being obtusely patriarchal. You have no chance.”

No wonder Micah had been so smug. He held all the fucking cards in his palm. No wonder Caius was reluctant to come to a final deal with him. There was no way around it. She was going to have to give up her babies to him.

“No- no- there must be some way. There must be something.”

Mollie was tearing up as her father stared grimly at her.

“You better start getting on his good side. If he’s feeling generous he may permit yearly visits.”

With that her father rose from his seat and left the room.

Mollie sunk to her knees and sobbed.

She had come so close.

Her father had made it clear to her that there was no way out of this and it seemed he had no further inclination to help her. But Mollie couldn’t accept this. She *couldn’t*. She didn’t suffer through her desert trainings under the scorching sun – vomit herself into fatigue – nor put up with the chronic pain for Micah Lyon to take what he wanted so easily. She wouldn’t let him. Not without a fight. She dragged herself back her bed and let her tears soak into her pillow as she sobbed herself to sleep.

It was past midnight when Mollie woke up with a start – a horrible dream having roused her from the sleep she had been so desperately craving for days on end. Now that she had *finally* found it—she found the pain and pressure from her belly not letting her enjoy it.

She gasped in pain as her child shifted in her womb – its weight resting directly on her bladder. After relieving herself and taking a short walk around her spacious quarters Mollie still found herself restless and hurting.

Her mind began to wander while she paced and flashes of Micah and his smile – that *fucking* smug smile crossed her mind and made Mollie's blood boil.

She was irritated, hormonal, and fuming at the audacity of the winter prince. She couldn't wait to get her hands on him – to wrap them tightly around his throat and just *squeeze*. Her depression had wallowed inside of her – turning from a small ball of bleak grey into an anger that was red, liquid and searing hot.

He had *humiliated* her and her father with his mockery. Mollie could feel it. The reception from the servants had felt so cold and menacing, so much so, that Mollie was hesitant to leave her quarters ever since the wretched dinner. And once again, Mollie had no one to blame but herself. She should have come clean with her father the minute she laid her eyes on Micah Lyon.

She eyed her dagger and the thin silvery necklace that her lady in waiting Margot had laid out for her on her vanity. Mollie shuffled towards it, wincing as her belly hit the edge. She lifted the necklace admiring the thin silvery blue material that felt like cool droplets between her fingers. With a fury she clutched the delicate necklace where the elegant *M* hung gently from the silver thread and with as much force that she could muster she threw it against the mirror till it clattered on the vanity and landed with a shrill *clang*.

It was *unfair*. All of it.

She had made up her mind already. She would not be giving up her babies. Not to Micah – not to Hartley – not to anyone. Not voluntarily. She'd fight till every bone in her body was broken before they could pry them away from her.

Her eyes lingered over the pearly dagger that had been returned to her and lay neatly on the table of her vanity.

She picked up the dagger and unsheathed it, feeling the light glossy material in her fingers. She twirled it in her fingers the way Zephyr had taught her – extending her arm out and slicing horizontal before snapping her arm back and shifting her feet.

She staggered when the movement sent a sharp pain down her abdomen.

"*God damn it,*" Mollie heaved between breaths as the pain radiated from her waist to her skull.

She bit her lip hard as her fists shook in anger. Everything that had happened to her – everything that had gone wrong had been because of Micah. The reason she was in this position was because of him. The unbearable pain that had been plaguing her since her pregnancy was because of *him*.

Biting her lip down hard with fury Mollie grabbed her dagger and reached for her silk robe. It had gone short in its struggle to cover her belly and as she slid it on she freed a piece of fabric from the garment and used it to tie her dagger around her thigh. Breathing heavily, she smoothed her silk robe down so it came to rest just above her knees to conceal the object.

With a final glance at the clock she marched to the doors of her quarters and opened them quietly.

She felt the dagger dig against the flesh of her thigh and closing her eyes she lay her head against the wooden door and tried unsuccessfully to soothe her trembling limbs.

“This is what you fucking trained me for,” she hissed.

Pushing open the doors, Mollie slipped into the shadowed corridors of the Marchesseault castle.

It took much longer than Mollie expected before she finally found the guest corridors. She had heard the guards discussing the royal guest quarters and she knew that was where royal visitors of the castle were permitted to stay. It was quite a good distance from Mollie’s room and she figured there were some very good reasons for that.

Her knees and ankles ached as she slid along the walls, her thick curls having come loose as she navigated from corridor to corridor.

By the time she made it to the large mahogany doors that separated her from the guest chambers Mollie caught her breath.

She looked around her once before sliding herself along the door and checking to see if it was locked. She grabbed a torch from the corridor and jiggled the handle.

Surprisingly it clicked open and Mollie was immediately on guard.

Was the prince expecting someone?

Instantly Mollie was curious and she laid a hand against her thigh as she inched the door open slowly.

Expectedly, the room was lavish – it was a royal chamber after all – but it seemed oddly untouched.

It was pitch black but Mollie could see the bed was pristine, the sheets pulled taut against the luxurious mattress and the pillows lining the bed full and fluffy without a single crease.

Mollie could barely see anything else in the room and she cringed when she knocked her hip against a chair on her way closer into the room.

She lifted the torch higher and looked around.

Nothing seemed too out of place. She caught sight of several files on the table near the window and the curtains had been drawn. Apart from that it looked... uninhabited. Mollie suddenly stiffened.

What if he wasn’t in the royal chambers at all?

It seemed unlikely – but it wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

Before she could leave she heard the sharp sound of footsteps growing closer and closer.

Mollie panicked as she snuffed out the flame shoving the extinguished torch under the bed and dashed across the room to hide behind the large wardrobe on the opposite end of the room.

She barely made it as the sound of the door opening hit her ears.

Mollie slapped a hand against her mouth to control her breathing as the door slowly closed.

Mollie squeezed her eyes tight as the sound of matches being lit could be heard, followed by a soft yellow light filtering from beyond the room.

Mollie opened her eyes slowly – her heart pounding in her chest. She pressed herself even tighter against the dark wardrobe.

Carefully she bent over to steal a glance. She felt her throat go dry.

He was there. Standing in the middle of the room in simple black slacks and a coal black dress shirt. His dark chestnut hair was tousled now – different from the stylish part he had teased it into the last time she saw him. His gloves were off and Mollie watched him slowly make his way around the room, lighting each candelabra until the room was bathed in a warm inviting glow.

He was facing away from her and Mollie wondered why he had stopped moving.

He seemed to be glancing at something in his hand – his pocketwatch maybe?

Mollie wasn't entirely sure what it was but she knew she would never get such an opportunity again.

Slowly, she placed a hand on her right thigh and she inched closer and closer to the winter prince – his back to her.

Before she could reach for her dagger a hand shot from behind and she was pulled forward.

The movement put her off balance immediately and Mollie cried out in surprise. Her arms were grabbed and entwined behind her with Micah effortlessly spinning her around so she was facing him – his tight grip around both her wrists as her knees hit the back of the bed. Her belly pressed up against his flat abdomen as he stared down at her his green eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Nice try,” he whispered mockingly.

Mollie growled as she attempted unsuccessfully to kick him. He only pushed her harder into the bed, his weight pressing down on her knees only.

“I wish I could say I was surprised,” he purred his one hand holding both her wrists tightly as the other came to stroke her cheek. “But I knew you’d come to me. It was just too hard to resist wasn’t it,” he breathed. He brushed his lips against her forehead after and Mollie squirmed beneath him.

“Did you like the flowers *mon amour*?” Micah asked adoringly as he entangled his fingers in her thick dark curls.

“Let me go Micah,” she hissed twisting her wrists in his grasp and groping fruitlessly for her dagger.

She could do it this time. She could sink her blade into his chest and succeed. This time she wouldn't break down.

“Why should I?” he challenged raising a dark eyebrow. “You came to me did you not?”

Mollie did the only thing she could think of.

Feigning pain she gasped bringing her hands to her belly as if to convey the origin of her pain.

Micah let go immediately, his expression transitioning into something of concern for fleeting seconds.

In those mere seconds, Mollie reached for the dagger on her thigh and lunged.

Micah’s blade clashed against hers in a flash of blue on white and instantly she saw the fierceness of his gaze collide with her own.

She didn’t even see him reach for it but quite suddenly it was clashing against hers with a force that sent Mollie’s blade clattering out of her fingers. With a speed she hadn’t imagined possible Micah’s pale hand flashed and caught the blade before it could hit the floor.

Mollie stumbled backwards in shock as Micah turned to look at her. He was *not* impressed.

“Secrets secrets,” he murmured grabbing her wrist for the second time and jerking her forward. His cool breath fanned her ear as he pulled her in until she was inches away from him. “What else is Mollie Mae keeping from me?”

She was speechless. He had been so swift and agile. She realized now how foolish she had been. She stood no chance. All that training could not have prepared her for the aptitude of swordplay that was Micah Lyon.

There was a smile playing at the corner of Micah’s lips and as he pressed against her. She could feel just how aroused he was by the entire situation.

“I know it’s been a while since we last saw each other,” Micah murmured. “But there’s really no need for theatrics,” he chuckled.

He regarded her closely – his blank green eyes resurfacing so many emotions in side of her. She was trembling in front of him, her anger still pulsing through her veins like a shock of adrenaline.

Micah flipped her blade in his fingers and pushed his own ice blue one back into his belt. He was scrutinizing it like one did a painting or a sculpture. His sharp eyes traced the elegant pearly handle and the rose tinted steel before they flickered back to hers. His gaze was ice cold.

“This is a Marozzo blade,” Micah said slowly, continuing to twirl her dagger through his pale fingers. “How exactly did you get your little hands on this?”

The way he looked at her – with that unreadable cold expression. It made Mollie’s stomach fill with dread. She tried again, unsuccessfully, to snatch the blade back. His tone had lost all amusement.

Mollie scowled pinning him with a stare equally as frigid as the one he had given her.

“I *know* what it is,” she snapped, avoiding the question. Micah raised an eyebrow at her.

He ignored her, opting instead to run the sharp edge of her dagger from one side of her collarbone to the other. Mollie stilled immediately. The look on his face screamed danger and Mollie knew not to push it.

“Look at you,” he murmured. “So fervent and passionate and full with child. You are glowing Mollie Mae.”

Instead of sheathing the blade like he had done to his own, he dragged the steel across her flesh taking his time to rip through the shoulder of her silk robe, gliding her blade across the material. He enjoyed ripping her clothes off of her. It was a control thing Mollie realized, that excited him.

Mollie swallowed uneasily. The cool air assaulted her, sending a shiver down her spine. The blade had gone through both her robe and the pajamas she had on underneath leaving her in nothing but her panties as the material of her nightwear fluttered to the floor.

Micah seemed pleased as he admired her body. She realized that the last time he had seen her bare – made love to her -- had been long before the swell of her belly was noticeable. He was taking in the changes slowly – admiring it.

He groaned, brushing his cold fingers against the massive swell of her stomach.

“So beautiful,” he murmured.

Mollie could still feel the anger coursing through her. She wanted to make Micah pay for what he had put her through during these past six or so months of her pregnancy. She wanted him to feel the pain she had felt each and every day since the moment she found out she was carrying his heirs.

But before she could decide on what pain she wanted to inflict on the winter prince, Micah had pressed his forehead against her neck and breathed in her scent slowly. His fingers had glided up her bare arms to rest on her shoulders. He inhaled and exhaled softly.

“How I missed you,” he murmured into her skin. “Each and every day. I didn’t stop thinking about you Mollie. You and our *child*.”

She froze when he sunk lower and lower – all the way until his knees touched the floor and his head was level with her swollen belly. Mollie looked down, her breath hitching as he closed his eyes, his dark lashes and his slender nose brushing against it. Gently as if she were made of glass, he wrapped his arms around her waist. His lips caressed her belly, a touch of winter on her heated skin.

He stopped suddenly, his eyes lingering over her stretched skin and Mollie shuddered before him. His face had turned into something unreadable and Mollie tensed immediately. She knew that look. It meant the gears were turning in his mind – Micah was *too* astute. Much too perceptive for his own good.

“You’re awfully large,” he murmured absent-mindedly as his cold fingers brushed her belly.

Mollie panicked. She didn’t know why – but she didn’t *want* him to know she was carrying more than one of his heirs. The less he knew – the better it was for her.

Before she could process her actions she grabbed his fingers and pressed them up against her clit – moaning when the pressure sent a sudden sensation spreading along her limbs. It was a weak attempt to distract him but Mollie had nothing better up her sleeve.

Mollie gripped his forearms tightly as he froze for the several seconds – probably surprised by her boldness. She sighed in relief when his fingers slowly came back to life, swiping the cleft between her thighs again, the searing heat making a dizzying delirium ring through her head.

“You know,” Micah whispered, taking his time to press the pad of every one of his fingers against her pulsating rosebud. “If you want something from me...all you have to do is ask.”

Mollie shivered when Micah stood up slowly. His one hand had curled around the curve of her belly while the other had lifted her chin up gingerly so he could attach his lips to hers.

Mollie didn't want to do this. This isn't what she came here for. But *God* Mollie couldn't resist him - not when he looked at her like that. Their faces were inches away from each other, his fine features on full display before her trembling irises. Her fingers dug into his expensive black shirt and her heart raced in her chest. He looked so devastatingly beautiful. His dark chestnut coloured curls -- the same colour as his dark brows against that smooth pale skin like a splash of colour against white marble. Pink lips set in a soft smirk below those vibrant emerald eyes.

What was she thinking? Sneaking into his quarters like a blushing teenager -- weeks away from her birth with a sword in hand to stab the prince. How could she do such a thing

especially to the father of her own children? It seemed absolutely ludicrous now that she considered it.

She melted into the kiss when his lips met hers -- those soft cold lips like an ice pack to her inflamed wounds. Mollie brushed her palms downwards underneath his shirt flattening over the smooth skin of his chest, feeling his strong heartbeat beneath her trembling fingers. The strong steady rhythm beneath her palms calmed Mollie's frantic nerves and she sighed as his tongue toyed with hers. The kiss was deep, heady and dizzying – passionate in a way that surprised Mollie and she barely registered the frigid hands that had ventured further up her chest.

“Poor Mollie Mae,” he whispered against her lips as his fingers wrapped around the back of her scalp spidering through her thick curls. “No one to take care of you after all those months alone. No one to see to your *needs*. ”

He crushed his lips against hers again – the coldness so soothing and electrifying as their tongues fought for dominance. Mollie broke away with a gasp, the kiss leaving her breathless as she curled her legs around Micah's lean sculpted body. Tenderly, he laid her on the bed and kissed her deeply once again. She leached off his coolness as he shed himself of his dress shirt and loosened the buckle of his pants. His cool palms cupped her mounds as Mollie tugged his head closer to her own – sealing her lips to his once again. The feeling of his fingers against her dark swollen nipples made her moan helplessly as he drowned them out with his talented mouth.

Micah broke away from her sloppily, barely letting Mollie catch her breath as he licked, kissed and sucked across every surface of skin his lips could find– down her neck, across her chest, over her hypersensitive peaks. Mollie shuddered, the wet kisses against her sore breasts eliciting a surge of warmth from between her legs to make a mess of her thin underwear.

Mollie tugged hard on the chestnut coloured locks that swiped her chin as he squeezed and massaged her breasts. She whined – the pull of *wanting* and *needing* a body moulded against hers so desperate. Mollie grinded her hips to meet his, sparks of relief and tingling pleasure shooting down her spine when she felt his bulge hard and forceful against her heat.

Micah's lips broke away and she heard him murmur under his breath as he hovered above her.

“Do that again,” he purred against her ear. “Slower this time.”

Mollie moaned. Her pussy was *throbbing*. She couldn't tell if it was due to the life forms in her belly pressing down against her cervix or the seeping heat that coated the crevice between her thighs in high anticipation for some sort of alleviation.

She rubbed against the winter prince hovering above her, the thin material of her panties offering little separation from the searing heat of what lay between his thighs. Mollie rocked her hips up to meet his, her belly hindering her ability somewhat but managing to slide her covered folds along his concealed length.

“Wait,” he murmured gently laying her wrists backwards so her arms lay above her.

“I can’t,” she gasped. “I’m *ready*.”

“Mollie,” Micah said softly tucking her curls behind her ear. “Just let me take care of you first *d’accord*?”

Mollie looked at him confusedly.

He seemed amused by her expression and she just froze in confusion as he pressed a light kiss against her nose.

“We have to take it *slow*. You’re pregnant and I don’t want to hurt you.”

She went limp when he pressed her hands back against the pillow and nipped her lightly on the neck. “We have time Mollie. There’s no reason to rush.”

Mollie blushed at the comment and averted her gaze.

Mollie tensed as he began to trail kisses down from her neck, through the valley of her breasts, down across her swollen belly and to her surprise down her leg until he reached her ankle.

Mollie held her breath, his cheek brushing her ankle. His eyes were closed as if he were re-living a memory and she tried her best to quiet her heavy breathing.

She whimpered when he lurched forward once again skimming his fingers up her quivering thighs in feather light strokes. The sensation sent tingles down her spine and she felt her face warm at the soft smile he shot her.

She gasped as he sunk his head lower so his dark locks brushed the side of her inner thighs.

“Are you okay?”

Mollie didn’t answer – the surge of happy hormones flowing through her veins was too rich and overwhelming of an experience.

He pressed his lips softly against her fabric covered mound, nipping, *teasing* gently until she was a squirming mess, before he took pity on her and slipped his fingers beneath the material and pulled down.

Mollie’s entire body tightened. She felt his cool breath caress her core. His sharp green eyes were on her as he pressed his thumb lightly against her outer folds.

Mollie moaned as his frigid hands pushed her thighs open keeping her anchored in place as he continued to tease her with his lips. In a flash his lips were on her as he tasted her. The sensation tensed Mollie’s muscles and she threw her head back. Her face reddened with the blood pumping through her veins.

God how she had *missed* what he could do to her. That cold tongue tantalized her and teased her as if it were trained to do so. The way he made her *feel*. Zephyr may have given her the

hardest fuck she had ever received – but Micah gave her a pleasure that was downright unsurpassable.

His tongue traced the line of her slit as she balled her hands up and whimpered. The heat from her core all but flooded through her trembling limbs.

Open mouthed kisses from the prince sent Mollie quaking and writhing beneath him as he sucked her clit, taking his time to swirl his tongue over the swollen bud.

Mollie gasped. She slapped her hands to his shoulders – digging into his muscles as he worked her between his lips – his fingers joining his mouth not long after to take her higher and higher.

Mollie was not a particularly loud person, but when his middle finger inserted between her wet lips and curled within her – she couldn't help the helpless moans that slipped past her lips.

“Je peux dire que je t'ai manqué,” Micah murmured against her clit as he pressed his lips against it.

Mollie bit her lip as he continued flicking the bud with his tongue and curling yet another finger past her swollen lips. The sounds leaving her lips were foreign to her as Mollie cried out in pleasure. Her back bowed against the bed, her fingers tangled in the sheets, and her legs shook beneath her when Micah flattened his tongue against her core. Mollie squeezed her eyes tight, the small ball of pleasure in her belly expanding. He flicked his tongue over that spot – *that spot* that had her seeing stars long before she could blink them open again.

Mollie panted as Micah had settled on toying with her clit between his fingers – massaging the sensitive bud as he swiped his tongue in and out of her dripping slit.

Mollie whined as she swiped several pillows off the bed – her moans coming out high pitched and uncontrolled.

Why had she come here in the first place? She had completely forgotten at this point in time.

The only thing going through her head was a white hot earth shattering pleasure. This was different – much different from the other times he had tasted and pleased her with his mouth. His cool tongue – now warmed by her flesh and her juices *probed* inside of her – lapping up all it could find as she writhed on the sheets.

Mollie clutched the pillows behind her – dragging her body upwards in an effort to ease the intensity of her orgasm. Whatever she did – Micah felt it as his grip on her waist only tightened and his arms locked her in, his tongue continuing to trace her in the most blissful of ways.

Mollie's walls clenched tightly around Micah's tongue as her hips lifted from the bed and her hands ventured downwards to entangle in Micah's dark chestnut locks. She pressed him deeper into her as she came hard and fast – his tongue easing her through it as she trembled and wheezed on the massive bed. Mollie's head was fuzzy and her ears were ringing, her

moans slowly transitioning into soft whimpers. He retracted his tongue after this, his lips caressing her clit for another single moment before he kissed his ways back up to her lips.

Mollie gasped when she tasted herself on his lips.

The nerves in her abdomen tingled as her wet walls shuddered with each breath she took.

She wanted it hard and fast – something quick to satisfy the primal urge pulsating through her hypersensitive body. She needed him inside of her. *Now.*

She shifted herself upwards, on top of him, the way he had settled her in the past. Almost immediately, she felt his arms lock.

“Absolutely not.”

His harsh tone made her freeze and she trembled when he pushed her back down against the sheets so she lay beneath him – her hair splayed out around her on the pillows.

He was not amused by her attempt to satisfy herself and Mollie winced when he caught her chin between his fingers.

“It’s too dangerous,” he explained quietly. His tone had gone softer after this and Mollie pouted.

Why couldn’t he just satisfy her already?

“Not if we’re careful.”

Mollie was so desperate she was practically begging for him to fuck her.

“I’m so fucking pathetic,” she thought bitterly as her thighs slid against each other -- the skin damp with her slick. It was as if the winter prince had turned into her own personal drug at the peak of Mollie’s worst withdrawal.

Micah frowned and Mollie could tell she was pushing him.

“I...it’s not safe.”

His tone did not hold the same sense of finality as it usually did and Mollie could sense the uncertainty in his tone. He wanted this as much as she did. The insistent nudge at the bottom of her belly was proof.

“Micah,” Mollie groaned as she fisted her hands in the sheets.

He seemed to be fighting some internal battle but Mollie could tell he was losing his resolve quickly. It had been too long. And now that he had her – he couldn’t leave her – not without fucking her.

“Slowly,” he muttered as he smoothed her curls away from her forehead. His eyes were hesitant – careful – full of concern as Mollie slid her hands down his pale chest sliding his

pants off the rest of the way with her legs so his cock brushed against her folds. Mollie groaned in pleasure as she enjoyed the sensation of his member against her heat. She all but coated him in slick as she swiped against him. He hovered over her, his dark hair dangling over his forehead as he brushed it back and supported his weight above her with his forearms.

Mollie rocked against him, the top of her belly brushing his as she felt a familiar fire building up in her stomach.

“I don’t want to ask again,” Micah muttered inching his fingers downwards to replace his stiffness with the familiar feel of his cold fingers against her heat. “But are you sure you’re feeling up to this?”

Mollie trembled as he probed her, making sure she was wet enough for what he was about to do.

“Yes,” she sighed pulling his forehead down so it brushed against her own.

Without wasting another moment he was positioned back at her entrance. The prince began to push in then, the glide of his member smooth as satin as he inserted himself within her.

Mollie felt the stretch immediately and she whined, her body quickly accommodating his size. She felt woozy as she locked her arms around his neck.

“*Lentement*,” he murmured as Mollie bit her lip in pleasure. “Slowly,” he repeated in English. His muscles tightened above her.

Micah was thicker than Mollie remembered and it seemed like an eternity had passed before he was fully inserted within her heat. Mollie could hear his jaw lock as the winter prince struggled to take it slow for her sake.

“Is there...any...pain?” he whispered as they slowly found a rhythm.

“No,” Mollie breathed as he groaned into her ear.

Mollie hummed, her breath releasing in ragged pants – the pleasurable feeling of being so full and engulfed like fresh snowfall in a desert land. It was enough. Enough to quake her limbs and create a warm blazing circle of bliss in her stomach.

Mollie climaxed hard while crying out in pleasure. Warmth flooded her insides managing to fill her up while leaking from her entrance simultaneously. She gasped for breath as Micah jerked above her, his swollen shaft emptying inside of her completely before he rested his now feverish forehead against her neck.

Mollie wasn’t sure how he managed to support his body above her – but he did – his weight not coming down upon her swollen belly for the entire duration of their exertions.

Mollie gasped when he pulled out of her, her whimpers stuttering as her muscles clenched around empty air.

Mollie shivered as Micah lifted her spent body ever so slightly. With surprising agility, he lifted the sheet and slid himself behind her so Mollie lay flush against him – her back to his chest.

She felt Micah's somehow still cool hands slide up and down her bare body. The heaviness of sleep and exhaustion was crashing steadily upon her.

He was rubbing slow circles around her belly – the feeling inching Mollie closer and closer towards oblivion.

She felt him pause as his fingers brushed the silk fabric around her thigh – the place where she had kept her dagger.

Whatever was going through his mind was too much for Mollie to process now.

For the first time in *months* she was falling asleep to the sound of a heartbeat against her ear and a painlessness below her chest.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Mollie. Her situation just gets more dire. In her state of vulnerability all she really wants is to be protected. She's ready to give birth very soon and her emotions are all over the place. Hopefully she can pull it together before her children arrive....

Chapter 44: Ruthénium

Chapter Summary

Mollie questions Micah's sincerity and decides to take matters into her own hands.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Laying naked on the bed, Mollie woke up with a start, her blood turning to ice. Dread bubbled in her stomach when she caught sight of the bright sun that filtered in through the stained glass windows.

The black sheets around her were not her own – neither were the gold trimmed walls surrounding the room, nor the heavy navy cloak that was draped over the chair near the wardrobe.

“Bonjour mon amour.”

The voice chilled her to the bone and she felt the blush spread from her face to her chest as Micah appeared from around the corner.

He was adjusting his ascot in the mirror. It was a navy blue satin material that added a splash of colour against his white throat.

He had a smug smile on his face – his lips pulled up into a perpetual smirk that made Mollie simmer.

I’m such a whore.

She had begged and moaned his name last night. Spread her legs for him. Let him do the filthiest of deeds to her desperate body as she cried out shamelessly.

She was *weak*.

His eyes caught hers in the mirror and Mollie quickly pulled the black sheet up to hide her bare breasts. She winced as she brushed them. They were heavy and oh so *painful*...

She heard Micah chuckle as he sauntered up and down the room.

“Why so shy today hm?” he said teasingly.

Mollie looked away, her back stiffening.

He was combing his hair taking his time to tousle his dark glossy locks in place.

Mollie was sore. She always was after sex with Micah.

Her eyes caught the dagger that lay innocently on the bedside table. She had plans last night – plans that went horribly wrong. How had she gone from wanting to kill the winter prince to having him pound into her till she screamed his name?

She blushed feeling soft movement in her belly.

He had been gentle though. So much gentler than he had ever been. His whispers of love, his tender strokes across her swollen belly.

She looked at him from beneath her lashes as he slid his gloves on and adjusted his waistcoat. He looked...good. It made Mollie swallow thickly. Her dark brown curly locks were thick and unruly around her shoulders and her head was pounding. She could feel the bitemarks on her neck where Micah had nipped her during the night.

She looked up to meet his gaze in the large mirror.

“How long?”

Mollie’s voice was ragged and dry. Raspy from her cries the night before and the thirst that scratched at her parched throat.

Micah’s expression didn’t falter in spite of the obscurity of her question. He knew exactly what she was referring to.

She had wrapped her hands around her belly. The skin was pulled taut -- her body struggling to hold the weight of what lay inside. Thin stretch marks were forming on her thighs and Mollie didn’t want to look at them. She had an inkling they would never really go away. They’d be there forever. A reminder of what had happened to her. What the winter prince had done to her. She dug her nails into the stretched skin of her stomach and grit her teeth.

"How long Micah?"

“*Always* so late to catch on aren’t you Mollie Mae?”

His voice had a mocking tone to it. It made the anger in Mollie’s stomach flare.

“When did you plan this hm? Was it before or was it after you found out who I was?”

Micah laughed at her sudden shift in tone.

They stared at each other for a few moments – anger meeting amusement.

“Oh Mollie. Sweet sweet Mollie.”

Mollie didn’t know why, but his term of endearment for her made her blood boil even more. He always had the upper hand with her. He was *always* one step ahead of her. She could never catch him off guard. Maybe Caius was right. Maybe there was no hope for her or anyone else while Micah still had air in his lungs.

“Who would have ever thought?” he breathed as he walked over to her. She dry sobbed as he cupped her head with his gloved palm and leaned it against his muscled abdomen. “Who would have ever thought the little fawn I found on the rooftop of Questershire was the spawn of a Marchesseault?”

He chuckled again – his tone so mocking – so *pleased*.

“Royal blood is in your veins,” he whispered rubbing soft circles against her scalp as the tears spilled over onto her cheeks. “To see you blush and hide from me on that dinner table,” he murmured. “So coy. So secretive. You can’t run from me Mollie. I’ve told you that.”

“My f-father will kill you – “ she seethed as Micah brushed his cold leather concealed thumb down to press against her lips.

“Shh,” he said softly as he wiped her tears away. “No my love. No he won’t. Alexandre is indebted to me. He will yield to whatever I demand from him because he has no choice.”

“You couldn’t have known he was my father. You *couldn’t* have,” Mollie shook as she cried. “There was *no way*–“

Micah continued to thumb her tears away as she cried. The sheets darkened with each teardrop that met the dark satin.

“Oh yes there was.”

Mollie shivered as his soft strokes against her cheek stopped.

“You told me yourself. That little ballad you sung for me that day in *Courchevel* confirmed it all. Remember?”

Mollie struggled to catch her breath as Micah gloated proudly in front of her.

“I had *always* questioned your blood. The moment you handed me that good for nothing status card.” Mollie had forgotten about that. How he had tossed it into the fire. “Riverton,” he muttered as he settled on tangling his fingers in between her thick curls. “No one is born in Riverton – not unless they were fugitives of another empire.”

Mollie shivered. *Had he suspected since their first meeting? Is that why he had just tossed it into the fire without a second thought?*

“Then why didn’t you say anything?” she questioned pushing away from his body.

Micah looked down at her, his green eyes blank and unfeeling.

“What fun would there be in that?”

Mollie exhaled sharply and winced the minute she slid off the bed.

Micah gripped her carefully, his lips pursed tightly as he helped steady her. He ignored her attempts to brush him off.

She caught sight of herself in the mirror as she shrugged into her clothes from the night before. Her nightgown was in shreds – Micah having torn it to pieces when he undressed her. She had to settle on her little shorts and thin strapped shirt that did little to cover her swollen belly.

Mollie cringed. The walk back to her chambers would be humiliating.

She really was huge. Her belly had enlarged so much it was now sinking downwards. She already felt so heavy – but seeing it now made it all too real.

Would she ever be attractive anymore?

Neither Micah nor Zen had commented on her appearance. Zen had seemed to ignore it entirely but Micah...Micah had worshiped her body – choosing to relay his feelings through his actions. And why wouldn't he? Mollie was sure it wasn't because he particularly *cared* for Mollie. It was for his heirs -- the future Lyons that would run his empire. Mollie had seen the look on his face the night before as he pressed kisses into her swollen belly – stretch marks and all. He was enraptured with them. Inside of her were Micah's personal golden tickets.

Mollie watched out of the corner of her eye as Micah draped his infamous cloak over his body and adjusted the cuffs on his sleeves.

Nothing had changed for him. Not since he impregnated her. His appearance was as unblemished as it ever was. If anything Mollie swore he had *gained* some muscle since the last time she had seen him. It angered her immensely. What gave him the right to continue on normally while she suffered day after day with the burden of carrying a child?

“I brought something for you. Something from home.”

He brushed past her caressing her cheek affectionately – totally unbothered by the scowl that had become a permanent part of Mollie's expression since the morning.

“How thoughtful of you.”

The sarcasm in her tone was unmistakable.

Mollie saw his lip twitch. She wondered if he would have reacted differently had she not been pregnant. She had a feeling he would have.

“I'll have it sent straight to your quarters later today.”

Mollie hesitated as Micah adjusted the sword on his hip and strode quickly to the doors.

“Where are you going?”

Micah paused and raised an eyebrow.

“Out. I have a meeting to attend to in *Péreal*. Outside the castle walls.”

Mollie's eyes dropped to his sword.

"Are you...expecting any danger?"

Micah looked at her.

"I can't answer that question Mollie."

"You don't usually take your sword with you for meetings," Mollie couldn't help but add. She knew this was true. Micah carried only his dagger with him for meetings. She had seen him prepare for them so many goddamn times. But today... he had decided to take the thin massive sword and clasp it tightly to his hip beneath his cloak.

He reached for the door opting to ignore her comment completely and Mollie felt her belly flip flop. She wanted to know about Caius, and Zephyr and the others. Micah was keeping them prisoner somewhere. For all she knew it could very well be right here in the castle under her nose. She had to get it out of him. *Somehow*.

"Where outside the castle are you going?"

Her voice had dropped lower – almost to a whisper. She couldn't look at him when she asked. She was afraid her deviance would be written all over her face. Micah knew her oh so well. He enjoyed reading her like his own personal stack of literature.

"You want to know?" he snapped. He had turned around to give her that infamous glare he saved for when he was *really* on the verge of losing his patience. Mollie quickly closed her mouth. "A place where in your current condition, holds no real pertinence. Even if I did tell you *chérie*...it's not like you could follow."

Cruel. He could be so cruel even in her current situation.

His words stung and Mollie dropped her gaze.

"Channel that hormonal energy elsewhere, not at me. Worry about yourself and the child."

His tone held no more of the same warmth as it did earlier and without another word he closed the door with a snap.

It was close to midday by the time Mollie was fresh and presentable. It took her long to get herself ready these days. If her ankles didn't swell, her breasts didn't leak, and her joints weren't sore she'd have been ready a lot quicker. But this was not the case.

"I want to see the King."

Mollie had ignored the hateful stares from the Marchesseault guards. She had to see her father. She had to reason with him. Make him understand where she was coming from. There had to be something that she could do.

The guards outside her fathers chambers looked at each other once before resting their gaze on Mollie.

The look in their eyes was nothing short of disgust.

“I’m afraid the King is not seeing any visitors today,” the guards said slowly. Their expressions were stoic.

“But I’m not a visitor. I’m his daughter,” Mollie said equally as frigidly.

Their expressions never wavered.

“Shouldn’t you be on bed rest or something?” the other guard said lazily staring at Mollie’s swollen belly.

Before Mollie could respond another deeper voice echoed down the hallway of the King’s large corridor.

“*Princesse*. There you are.”

Mollie whirled around. She had seen this man before. Once. Beside her father in court.

“Gentleman. *Je prends la relève*.”

He was around Mollie’s height. Dark brown hair. Brown eyes. Older gentleman. His stiff shoulders and neatly pressed uniform signalled to Mollie that he was a high standing guard or member of the monarchy.

He turned to Mollie bowing slightly before offering an arm out to her.

“Elio Courtois,” he said crisply. “Advisor to King Marchesseault and his *Cura regis*.”

“I don’t care,” Mollie snapped. She dismissed him immediately turning back to the guards. “I *demand* to see the King. *Now*.”

Elio seemed surprised by her stubbornness but showed no signs of annoyance or anger. If anything he seemed amused by the entire display.

“Ah but I can assure you that you *will* care. With time.”

Mollie glared at him as he took it upon himself to fit his arm through hers. He nodded stiffly at the guards and led Mollie away from the King’s quarters.

“Are you familiar with that term princess?” he asked quietly letting Mollie walk at her own pace.

“Yes,” she muttered. She had heard Micah use it a couple times during a meeting she had eavesdropped on when she was in Questershire. “It means the King’s Court.”

“*Ouias*, ” Courtois said with a grin. “Then you’ll know every leader of the monarchy has their own personal advisor team or cabinet followed by a larger group known as the members of the *Curia regis*. ”

Mollie tightened her lip but nodded.

“Sometimes when a King or Queen is unable to attend to something right away he or she consults certain members of his or her cabinet or *Curia regis* to deal with the matter. He or she then informs them on what his or her decisions will be and they relay it to the rest of the public. At least...until he or she is in a position to do so.”

“He or she?” Mollie questioned dryly. She couldn’t help but shake her head in false amusement.

“*Quoi?*” the man said suddenly looking at Mollie with a raised eyebrow.

“You said he or she.” Mollie repeated. “Like there was a possibility for both.”

Courtois chuckled.

“Ah I forgot where you grew up for *un moment*. ” He chuckled lightly again. “Don’t look so surprised *princesse*. It is a minuscule mistake to underestimate the power of a woman. I always despised the Lyon mentality for their backward ideologies about them. I think women are far more capable than men in many aspects -- including leadership. It's a pity only men are allowed to inherit...”

“Minisucle?” Mollie asked. She couldn’t help but allow the disgust filter into her tone. "A *minuscule* mistake?" she repeated as if she had heard him wrong.

“*Bien sûr*. ”

“I doubt they underestimate women,” Mollie retorted. “They forget we’re even a threat in the *first* place.”

Courtois smiled.

“I sure hope they don’t,” the man said quietly. “Underestimation is one thing but forgetting them entirely? Now *that* is a gargantuan mistake.”

He raised an eyebrow at Mollie.

“You know why *princesse?* ”

Now Mollie was the one to raise an eyebrow.

“Why?”

“Because those that forget the power that women hold within them are the ones that are the most susceptible to complete and utter cessation.”

Mollie scoffed. Maybe...just maybe her and this Courtois fellow could get along.

“And what about the King?” she interrupted. “Why is he not available right now? Is he busy with something else more... important?”

Elio sighed.

“You *are* his priority *princesse*. Don’t think for a second that you aren’t. But you have to understand that his stresses are plentiful and persistent. Not even the most rational and capable mind can deal with so much at one time.”

Mollie chewed on her lip as the man guided her back to her quarters.

“Ah *vous êtes arrivées*. ”

Mollie looked up to see a familiar face smiling timidly at her. It brought back a surge of memories – ones that reminded Mollie of white blizzards, snowy footprints, and icy backdrops.

“Cécily?”

The girl bowed deeply and gave Mollie a sombre smile.

“*Mademoiselle Mollie*. It pleases me so much to see you once again. I accompanied Master Lyon here. Myself and...

“Hello dear.”

Mollie looked behind her to see another older woman. Someone Mollie hadn’t seen since her days in Questershire.

“Esperanza.”

Mollie’s voice was just a whisper. She had forgotten about the old woman.

Esperanza smiled wanly.

“Long time no see.”

It was late into the evening by the time Mollie was left alone in her sleeping quarters. It had been a relief to see Cécily but Mollie had her reservations about Esperanza. The old woman had been there when Micah was born and played a large role in the prince's life. Mollie had no doubt Micah had her accompany him here just so she could bear witness to the birth of his children. It didn’t sit well with Mollie and these thoughts weighed her down terribly.

Although Cécily’s kindness and mild manner was comforting to Mollie – it did little to appease her fears. She had spotted not long after they arrived and the sight of the blood

dripping from between her legs terrified her. The doctor had assured her that she had nothing to worry about. But Mollie's uneasiness persisted.

She patted her belly gingerly waiting for some kind of tiredness to set into her bones. But her hopes went unfulfilled. The call for her father went unanswered later in the evening with not much changing since the morning. She had heard nothing from Micah after their encounter this morning and even less from the guards around her. She had only Cécily, Esperanza and her less than enthusiastic lady in waiting, Margot. All three of them Mollie had dismissed for the night.

She missed talking to someone. Someone who truly understood her.

She missed Zephyr.

It was on nights like these where she wished she could run to his quarters like she did in the harsh Ophian lands after an exhausting day of training and spill her thoughts until she was a quivering tearful mess. He was not the kindest with words or lessons... but he was so honest and sincere...

She needed to see him. She had to.

At her size and at this rather critical point in her pregnancy it was a foolish endeavour to want to pursue. But Mollie had been through a hell of a lot in a rather short amount of time. Although she carried the spawn of Micah Lyon in her belly, she still loved the little beings that pressed and kicked at her belly from within. Her resentment towards them at the beginning of her pregnancy had gradually become something softer and more understanding - especially when she felt them move within her. They were as much a part of herself as they were an extension of him. With the way Micah caressed and worshipped her body the night before Mollie figured he had forgotten that they were hers as much as they were his. And she'd be damned if he considered even for a second that he could take her babies away from her.

She was due to give birth in exactly two weeks. Her personal staff had told her so. She chewed on her lip as she smoothed her hand over her stomach. How could she feel so much for something she'd never even seen yet? Mollie wondered if her mother had felt the same way about her when she'd been in the same position. Mollie felt tears well in her eyes. She wiped her tears away angrily. Mollie was different. She wasn't like her mother. She loved her babies. She always would. She would love them and care for them and protect them with her last dying breath.

And what of her after she gave birth?

She remembered what her father had told her. There was no hope for her once Micah had the children in his grasp. What was stopping him from getting rid of her afterwards?

Mollie began to hyperventilate as she thought about these possibilities – each subsequent thought becoming much more sinister than the last.

How quickly he could change. She had seen it herself.

Mollie had to do something. Soon.

She knew there was someone who could help her. Someone who was clever enough to outsmart the prince. She just hoped time was on her side.

Not wasting another moment she dashed out of her her quarters – as quickly as her nine month belly would allow her to -- and rapped on the door of her lady in waiting. She didn't care that it was going for midnight and she didn't care that it was past their working hours.

It took several minutes before the door cracked open. Mollie was met with an angry scowl and an even angrier glare from those cold grey eyes.

"Take me to the prison," Mollie said immediately after her lady in waiting opened the door. Her voice was still thick with emotion but she put as much ferocity behind it as she could.

She narrowed her eyes at Mollie.

"Hm. I knew it was a matter of time before that insolence inside of you would make itself known," she sniffed. You think I care about the bastard daughter of our King--

"Do it or I'll have you out of a job and out of this kingdom before you can finish that sentence."

The woman seemed shocked by Mollie's frosty response. She reddened but Mollie knew that her threat was not entirely weightless – and clearly the woman did as well.

"What prison are you referring to?" Margot asked slyly. "We have many that line the outskirts of *Peréal*."

Mollie knew what Margot was doing but she was not in the mood for mind games. Not tonight.

"I want to see where the winter prince is keeping his prisoners."

Margot raised an eyebrow.

"Did you ask his permission?"

"Yes," Mollie said without hesitation – hoping the lie was not written all over her face.

The woman simply raised an eyebrow.

Mollie reddened. "Was the empty bed you observed this morning not enough proof for you?"

Margot was one of the few members of her personal staff that checked on her routinely. Mollie had no doubt she knew Mollie had spent the night in Micah's quarters. The empty bed in her chambers was more than enough proof of that.

"You can ask the winter prince himself if you don't believe me," Mollie added with a sly grin. "That is if you're brave enough to go over to his chambers. I heard his meeting didn't go over

so well today. He's in quite a... mood."

Micah's ruthlessness was terrifying and it was notorious. For the first and probably only time in Mollie's life she used it to her advantage. She had been at the receiving end of it once and Mollie would forever be regretful of that night.

Margot's nostrils flared as she observed Mollie distastefully.

"I will have to alert the King that you are leaving the premises."

"You will *not*."

Mollie towered over her small frame inflicting as much menace into her expression as she could muster.

"Do this for me Margot and I promise...I promise your deed will not be forgotten."

The woman hesitated for some time but Mollie let her weigh her options. She was beginning to realize how things worked in this monarchy. Nothing came for free. It was not so different from when Mollie was struggling to make ends meet in Chartery as a teenager. It was a dog eat dog world. But instead of rabid dogs lunging for each others throats like the poor primary citizens in the alleyways outside her apartment -- it was a dance between two swans in a lonesome pond, one more extravagant than the next as they found a way to clip eachother's wings one at a time -- slowly and purposefully-- in such a way until the other was left featherless and without the support of their wings to keep them afloat any longer... till they drowned in their own exorbitant nest of downy white feathers. This was the way the quaternaries did it.

It took a good couple of minutes before Margot reluctantly nodded and Mollie released her exhale softly.

"Smart choice," Mollie muttered as the woman tied her robe tightly and led her down the corridors of the Marchesseault Castle.

It was a little past late evening and Mollie was not fit to ride a horse. Thankfully Margot was smart enough to arrange a carriage for her and hastily Mollie slipped inside grabbing her yellow cloak on the way out. She had stuffed the garment with food and water just in case. She would not be surprised in the slightest if Micah was starving his prisoners.

"You are to wait for me here till I return. I'll be back before sunrise."

The woman scowled but nodded. Mollie watched her open the gates that would lead towards the prison.

"Oh and Margot," she added. "This stays between us."

Mollie did a double take when the carriage rolled to a slow stop not thirty minutes away from the castle gates. It wasn't a prison at all – but some old crumbly cathedral. It was dark by the

time she arrived and the wind whistled menacingly. Mollie felt foolish for feeling afraid. She wasn't six years old anymore.

The building was big and from the first glance it looked dilapidated. The cross on top was a crumbling mess of white paint and what used to be smooth marble was now chipped and worn stone -- but Mollie knew better than to assume it was abandoned.

"You are to wait here." Mollie ordered the guard on the carriage who nodded stiffly.

Without wasting any more time she slipped inside the building.

Her legs were aching already by climbing the few steps into the building. She looked around her -- searching for some kind of presence of another person, but she was met with nothing but an eerie silence.

Mollie felt her throat go dry when she spotted a crumbling sign with an arrow pointing downwards.

Catacombs.

She didn't know why she did it but she placed a hand on her belly as she descended downwards. She was careful -- not wanting to slip and fall and she gripped the rough stone walls tightly. Knowing she was not really alone -- her babies shifting in her belly -- was a small comfort but still Mollie was trembling. There was nothing but skulls and a heaviness to the dusty air that sent Mollie coughing and using her cloak to shield her face from the dust.

As Mollie brushed her hands against the wall she let out an ear piercing scream. There were skulls. Skulls upon skulls packed tightly along the walls that Mollie had been using to guide her descent downwards.

She clutched her hands to her mouth in horror. There were bones *everywhere*. Bodies of people all around her.

"Mollie?"

Had Mollie *not* known the voice she probably would have turned right back around and bolted for the exit. But she *knew* that voice and she dropped her hands from her face, swallowed her fear and shuffled closer to the source.

"Caius!" she called out excitedly.

"Mollie? Mollie! Over here. Follow my voice."

It was a much easier said than done task and it took Mollie some time before her hands began to swipe metal bars rather than rough human skulls.

"Did she bring candles? We're almost out."

The other softer voice also sounded familiar and Mollie guided herself even closer.

She was so stupid. How could she bring food and water and forget something as necessary as candles or even a torch?

“It's alright Isaac. We'll use what we have left.”

The soft sound of a match being lit and the warm scent of fresh sparks alerted Mollie to the source.

She perked up and sighed in relief when she saw a familiar blond face just inches away from her.

Caius lit the small torches that lined the cell and suddenly the cold dusty space was encased in a yellow glow.

As quickly as she could she shuffled towards him clutching his fingers through the bars of the cell.

“Smart girl,” he said with a proud smile. “I'm glad to see you made it out unscathed. I trust your welcome was warm?”

The knowing tone of his voice told Mollie he already knew of her heritage.

Mollie didn't want to explain the political details to him so she avoided the question entirely her eyes fixed on his bandaged stomach.

“Are you in pain?” she whispered. “Did they fix you up?”

Caius chuckled.

He had bags under his eyes and his skin looked waxy. His hair was more limp and he looked pale – much paler than Mollie remembered him to be. He had lost his bronze glow.

“They had to,” Caius admitted. “But they didn't use anaesthetic. It's been a while since I remember a pain that sharp.”

His tone was light – attempting to be playful but it still made Mollie sick to her stomach.

“I'm so sorry,” she mumbled. “This is all my fault.”

“No it isn't,” Caius murmured. “This is not the first time I've been locked away in a cell Mollie,” he said with a chuckle. “And it certainly won't be the last. Even if you hadn't come and found us, we would have figured a way out. Us Lyons are good at escaping.”

Mollie knew he was trying to cheer her up.

“Mollie?”

Another softer male voice came from behind and Mollie felt her stomach flop when she saw a flash of gold.

Zephyr.

Before she could reach for him another more youthful face appeared beside Caius.

Mollie inhaled sharply. Not Zephyr.

“Isaac,” she whispered.

“Hey Mollie,” he said with a half smile.

Mollie felt tears well up when she saw him and before she could say another word she began to sob.

“I’m so sorry Isaac,” she blubbered as he shushed her. She eyed his missing pinky and ring finger on his left hand and she began to sob even harder. “It...you...it was my fault,” she cried as her entire body was wracked by sobs.

“Mollie,” Isaac said sharply. “Stop. You saved my life.”

She stifled her sobs after she heard this.

Using his other hand he held on to her hand tightly through the bars and smiled at her. He had always had a kind smile – even that day on the train all those months ago. Or had it been a year since? Mollie had lost track.

“If you hadn’t intervened... I doubt Micah would have spared me.”

Mollie was shaking her head before Isaac could finish.

“He already planned on keeping you alive Isaac,” Mollie murmured through her tears. “Even if I hadn’t begged him not to in that basement. He needed you – he needed you as leverage against Caius.”

“No he didn’t,” Caius said gently. “You give Micah Lyon far too much credit.”

Mollie turned her gaze to him.

“Micah had all the leverage he needed even without Isaac. His demands were simple. You and the child.”

Mollie felt her heart skip a beat when she heard this. Did he really just give Isaac back to Caius because he could? That didn’t seem right.

“I tried to reason with him farther. Convince him that he didn’t *need* you. That it would be more beneficial for him to hand me over to his father. You wouldn’t be going anywhere – not when you reached *Peréal*...but me on the other hand. I can vanish anytime. I’m quite good at it.”

Mollie barely managed to return the smirk Caius directed at her.

“I had told Zephyr to keep you back in *Anubis*. Until you had the child. You’re almost ready to give birth. Had you waited, the child would have been born on lands that were neither native to you or Micah. On top of that, it would have been much easier to negotiate that way. At least you and the child wouldn’t come as a single package.”

Mollie remembered the note Caius had sent back. The single word.

Wait.

She should have listened to Caius. She should have convinced Zephyr to see reason. She knew he was impulsive and she fed into it – just because she was sick and bored of spending day after day in a rickety old pub. But there she would have been safe. Neither the Lyons nor the Marchesseaults could have taken her against her will there – not in territory that wasn’t theirs. That all changed the minute she, Zen, and Caden ventured out into uncharted territory.

Mollie felt her head drop.

“I’m sorry we took so long,” Caius continued. “Caleb and I planned to return after a week like we always do after leaving our compound in the desert....but my problems only continued when Alexandre’s men confronted us outside the gates to *Peréal*. He threatened to turn us over to Micah and his men if we didn’t surrender you to him immediately.”

Mollie looked up in shock.

“But I know Alexandre,” he murmured. “He hadn’t known of your situation. And he isn’t really the type to ask questions. His guards returned to him the day before we arrived. Alerted him that you were supposedly pregnant. Seeing as you were in *our* custody at the time. He came to his own conclusions.”

Mollie felt her face flame when she remembered.

“He thought...it was you,” Mollie whispered.

Caius shrugged.

“Not me. But you were in *our* care when he tracked you down. That doesn’t make it much better.”

Mollie remembered.

“He sent those fucking guards and they reported back to him,” Mollie hissed. “Zen had a meeting with the Marchesseaults after you left and one of them kept staring at me. I thought I had been imagining it but I *know* he knew.”

“Everything happened so quickly,” Caius continued. “And when you arrived the day of the negotiation in front of Micah like that – with everything he wanted– it was really the tipping point. I had managed to get him to agree to have the child... as well as myself if he allowed you safe passage to your kingdom. The kingdom that is rightfully yours.”

Mollie didn’t know why but hearing Micah settle for that deal made her stomach clench.

He had gazed at her on the hilltop with so much passion – as if he wanted to take her right then and there – but perhaps that fervour hadn't been directed at her. Maybe he cared only about the child. Not about her.

Mollie blinked away her emotions. She was being so irrational. So childish. How he feels about her should be on the very bottom of her list.

She focused on what Caius was telling her instead – hoping her emotions were not written across her face.

“I'm proud you noticed my little signal,” Caius said with a grin. “Zephyr did a fine job with your training.”

Mollie didn't return the smile this time. They had still lost. She had to tell Caius.

“He's here Caius,” she whispered, not having the guts to make eye contact. “Micah's already at the castle. He's staying there. He has what he wants. It's over.” She didn't mean to blubber the last bit but she was emotional. “He's going to take my babies Caius. He's going to win, just like he always does.”

“What do I do?” Mollie whispered as the tall man came toward her and placed a hand gently on her shoulder. It was a warm fatherly gesture that made Mollie's heart feel whole again.

It had taken some time before Mollie was able to get a grip on her emotions and think though the situation rationally.

She had managed to help Caius pry the lock of his cell open and before long Caius and Isaac were out and pacing the dark gloomy basement of the crumbling Catacombs beneath the Cathedral.

Isaac had told her that the others were in another passage somewhere further down the corridor and Mollie watched him scuttle away quickly – probably off to set them free.

She had heard Caius warn the boy to be careful. It was easy to get lost here – and what may seem like something close by could be a trap. What Mollie hadn't known was that the Catacombs were not so different from the interior of a pyramid. The layout was set to deceive any person brave enough to venture through it. It was a maze – a labyrinth of sorts. One could easily find themselves lost within its depths and without a way out.

“You have two options Mollie,” Caius said seriously as he paced in a circle.

He had managed to drag an old plank of wood and the bones of some poor soul and create a makeshift table.

Mollie was suddenly glad she had managed to sneak some food and water out of the castle and wasted no time laying all she had brought with her on the table.

He had lit the rest of the torches around the basement so a warm inviting ambiance had been established inside the underground tomb – or as comforting as a cold tomb many layers below ground could get.

His blue eyes bore into hers and Mollie ached at how familiar they were to Zen's.

“Option one, you take your chances and relinquish the children to the winter prince. This I would strongly advise *against*. If there's one thing you don't want to do – it's to be entirely at Micah Lyon's mercy. However he seems fond of you and I believe the boy would want you to be a part of the children's lives... irregardless of these dire circumstances.”

Mollie grimaced at this. She wasn't so sure. Micah was unpredictable. One wrong move that pissed him off and Mollie reckoned he could play dirty.

“Option two.” Caius paused after this and Mollie watched his expression shift into something more cunning. “We beat Micah at his own game.”

Mollie stiffened when she heard this.

“How?” she breathed.

“You're not going to like it,” Caius sighed brushing his fair hair back. “Which is why I didn't suggest it immediately.”

Mollie wasn't interested in emotions right now. She just needed to know.

“Just say it,” she whipped out.

Caius sighed.

“Alright then.”

His pale hands clasped in front of him.

“As of now, Micah has no idea that you are carrying two children. The Lyon constitution lists that a mother must relinquish her child to the father of a man born within that regime. It does not explicitly say that she must hand over *both*.”

Mollie tensed when she heard this.

Caius smiled half-heartedly.

“Seems like a small loophole – but the repercussions can be rather cataclysmal.”

“That's too simple,” Mollie murmured. “There must be a catch.”

Caius dropped his gaze when she said this and Mollie knew there was more to it than just that. She could already feel her hands begin to sweat as Caius dragged his palms down the table.

“Indeed. There is something...more.”

Mollie held her belly as Caius spoke.

“Even if you went through with this option – you would have to relinquish the first child out of your womb to him. Regardless of whether it is male or female.”

Mollie hadn’t even thought about that. She had been too focused on them being lifeforms -- she hadn’t even considered that they would be little humans soon – with a gender and their own identity.

“I never imagined I would ever say this,” Caius muttered running a hand through his hair. “But for your sake, I hope they are both female.”

Mollie winced.

“As females, the children would not be entirely useful to Micah – that is if his agenda involves anything other than the mere joys of fatherhood. Males are powerful within the Lyon empire and as far as I know...Hartley desperately wants one and he does not yet have one.”

Mollie could see where this was going and she felt her fists flex.

“I can’t give up a son to him Caius,” Mollie said between clenched teeth. “I won’t let my son go near a man like Hartley-“

“You don’t have the luxury of deciding that Mollie,” Caius replied. “That is something that is beyond all of us at this point – including Micah Lyon.”

Mollie felt her hope wane within her and she dragged her palms back against her cheeks as her babies shifted in her womb. It was as if they sensed their mothers distress and Mollie breathed in deeply.

“There is a way.”

Mollie shot up when she saw two other people appear from behind Caius.

“Araya,” she said with a grin as the girl sauntered towards her pulling her into a tight embrace. It was awkward with Mollie’s belly but they somehow managed. Mollie had never been so happy to see another familiar face again.

“God Mollie you’re huge,” Araya giggled brushing a hand against her cheek.

"Are you okay?" she whispered. The girl scoffed at her as if she had been insulted.

"This is like a fucking chalet compared to the many places where I've been imprisoned before Mollie," Araya muttered. "I mean don't get me wrong...it's Micah so I wasn't expecting a four poster bed and a private chef, but still. This is not too bad. It's better than what happened to them," she admitted jutting her chin out towards the skeleton that lay dangling from a coffin in the corner.

Mollie frowned. She didn't appreciate the dark humour. Not now.

Another more dominating presence behind her made Mollie's knees wobble and she disentangled herself shakily from the petite girl as a tall muscular blond came out of the shadows.

She met his gaze and felt her skin warm when that half smile appeared on his face.

"Hey you."

Mollie felt as if she were going to sob again. Zephyr however sensed the waterworks beginning and quickly he walked towards her placing his hands on her shoulder the way he did in training all those months ago.

"Hey. What did I say about the crying?" he said in that irritated tone that used to send her cowering.

"S-Sorry," she managed in between sniffles. "It's hard to keep my emotions intact these days...what what with being pregnant and all--"

Before she could finish her sentence she was being pushed against his strong chest – his strong smell of outdoors, and musk, and warmth surrounding her.

Mollie breathed in his scent greedily. She had missed him *so* much.

"Alright alright," Araya chirped from beside them. "Enough of that. We need to help Mollie."

Caius had gone oddly silent and Mollie reddened when she saw the stiffness in his expression. Something was bothering him – Mollie could tell. She just hoped it had nothing to do with her.

"What is it?" Mollie asked ignoring the stain on her cheeks as Araya reached into her pocket. To her surprise the girl began smoking a pipe. Mollie had been told that was something only men did during their free time but Araya didn't seem to care all that much.... and neither did the others.

She felt a smile tug at her lips as she watched Araya swipe the matches from Isaac's clumsy fingers. He eyed his sister obnoxiously.

"You take the pledge."

Mollie looked at her confusedly as she took a long drag from her pipe. She heard Zen growl from beside her.

"Fuck no. Araya be practical."

Araya turned her gaze towards her brother and Mollie felt a great tension between the two of them. Something was up..

"That is the only way. Caius and I talked about this."

Zen snapped his head up to look at his father. Caius still had that look on his face and Mollie watched as it coolly landed on his son. Zen still had his hand wrapped around her hip and Mollie shivered under Caius' gaze.

“Is there a problem Zephyr?”

“Of course there’s a fucking problem,” Zen hissed shooting his sister a particularly nasty glare. “That is asking too much of Mollie. She has done enough –“

“And since when did you care about that?” Araya challenged crossing her arms and blowing out a smoke ring from between her lips.

“Enough you two,” Caius murmured turning back to Mollie. “We must let Mollie decide what she wants to do.”

Mollie looked confusedly between them.

“Take the pledge? The pledge for what?” she whispered.

“The pledge,” Araya said stiffly her eyes not leaving her brothers. Zen's grip had become uncomfortably tight around her waist. Something he did when was trying his best to curb his anger. Mollie stayed motionless beside him watching the expressions of the Lyons around her transition into something stoic and foreboding.

“The pledge to marry the winter prince.”

Chapter End Notes

I think I re-wrote this chapter close to 20 to 30 times. The most edits I ever had to do so far on this story. Thank you all for being so patient. It's been a while since the last update. Sidenote, I personally think pregnant women are so so beautiful. Mollie's views don't represent my own lol.

Chapter 45: Rhodium

Chapter Summary

The Lyons and the Insurgency set their own plans in action. Mollie's stress leads to unexpected complications.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“We’ve been over this.”

Zen’s cutting tone was something Mollie had long acclimatized to.

“Mollie isn’t going to do it. We need to look at other avenues.”

“There are no other avenues Zephyr,” Araya hissed. “You knew this was a possibility the minute Mollie decided to keep them. You had no problem with it then.”

Zen continued to shout at his sister, the two of them disagreeing on their latest plan of action.

Isaac was quiet. He sat beside his father, his wide blue eyes flickering between his siblings as they continued to hurl insults at each other.

“He asked me to marry him already,” Mollie whispered. Her gaze was drawn to the table they were seated at.

“Listen Mollie...” Caius started.

“We can’t get married,” Mollie said shrilly. “Love doesn’t even come *close*—”

“This is not about love Mollie.”

Caius’ sharp tone split the air and Mollie shrank back against his outburst. Caius had never raised his voice at her.

“Please understand,” the blond man said fiercely. “In the frankest of terms – marriage is not an overt declaration of love. It is an agreement – a deal-- a *pledge* you make to someone that is purely political. It is a contract. You do not have to love to be in a marriage.”

She was trembling when he spoke to her. Even Zephyr and Araya had fallen silent.

“Your marriage to him will be for the sole purpose of doing what is best for your kingdom and if not for that... then for your children. Marriage is splitting half of what you own with the other person. That would include his empire. That is a very *very* powerful thing Mollie.”

“I don’t *care* about that,” Mollie whispered dragging her nails through her thick curls in anger. “I don’t care about having half of what he has. He can have it.”

“*Really now Mollie?*” Araya interjected.

Caius silenced her with a single glare.

“Do you really believe all marriages run on love Mollie?” he asked quietly as she dropped her gaze. Hearing him say that made her think of her father. What he had gone through. She grimaced. “Marriage is an unfair deal at its core,” Caius continued with a frown. “You get some superficial sense of respect and security for yourself and from those around you. But that’s all it has to offer in a comforting sense. The rest is all about what the two of you can reap from it the most.”

Mollie stayed silent as Caius explained quietly to her.

“If you agree to this pledge between the two of you, you have a chance at seeing your children grow up. You have the chance of earning the respect of your kingdom.”

“But that makes him entitled to half of what I have too,” she whispered locking gazes with Caius. “He’ll take over this empire like he did with *Riverton* and *Yvoire* and the rest of the country side villages.”

Caius grinned.

“No he won’t.”

Mollie blinked up at him.

“Alexandre Marchesseault abolished patriarchal laws when he became King almost twenty years ago. That means that any marriage between a Marchesseault and a royal of another empire prevents that monarchy from taking it over. Be it a woman or a man who holds the throne they will always maintain their power and have no grounds to give it up to their spouse.”

Mollie was at a loss for words. Her father hadn’t told her that.

Zephyr was scowling at the others who had shuffled around the table to pick at the food Mollie had managed to bring them. Mollie could tell he wasn’t overly fond of his fathers new plan.

“Where are the others?” she murmured turning to Zen. “Where is Jöel and Caden and Pauline?”

“They’re fine,” Zen said softly. “They escaped the confrontation outside the *Peréal* grounds the same day you arrived at the castle. They’re heading… West.”

Mollie could hear something more in Zen’s voice. A weighted answer. He was hiding something from her – just like how he hid knowing about her royal status for all those months.

“You’re hiding something from me,” she seethed shooting him a glare. “I can tell.”

Zen stumbled for a moment.

“You’re not getting away with that for a second time. So just spill it.” Mollie brushed her curls over her shoulder and glared.

Zephyr was staring at her, his expression a mix of surprise and something more...something Mollie couldn’t place.

“It wasn’t... my place to tell you about that,” he managed between stiff lips. “But if you really want to know. Then fine. I’ll fucking tell you.”

His attitude towards her changed so dramatically she felt herself go rigid beside him. He had been so warm and inviting before when they embraced. Now he was back to being cold and stony. Back to the Zen she first knew on that God forsaken ship. It made her heart sore.

“James Lyon has gone rogue. He’s been traveling from realm to realm performing hostile takeovers on land that doesn’t belong to him.”

Mollie’s blood turned to ice.

“That’s what the King said,” she whispered. The blood had drained from her face completely. Micah had downplayed the severity of the situation at that dinner table – but by Zephyr’s strained tone and the heaviness that seemed to circulate around the kingdom Mollie was beginning to believe it was true. Perhaps the hostility didn’t have to do with her entirely. This was something bigger than her. Much bigger.

“What did Alexandre say about it?” Zephyr inquired immediately.

“Nothing!” Mollie said startled. “I haven’t been able to speak with him one-on one since...” Mollie trailed off.

“Since what?”

Her cheeks blazed. For starters, Zen did not need to know what went on between her and Micah. Secondly, Mollie knew it wouldn’t end well if the blond Lyon found out that she’d foolishly slept with the father of her children the night before. It was a silly, completely irrational thing to hide but Mollie didn’t want him to know. She carefully changed the subject.

“I just remembered something,” she said quietly. She pried Zen’s large fingers from her shoulders and turned to Caius.

“James was here in *Péreal*. ”

Caius’ head snapped up.

“When?”

His voice had gone flat. He exchanged a glance with Araya who had begun to chew on her thumbnail.

“I...I don’t know,” Mollie muttered. “Sometime before Micah arrived. The King said so. James proposed something to Alexandre – something he found rather absurd. It was almost as if Micah was trying to...curtail what James had proposed. He suggested it was something completely infeasible.”

“I fucking told you didn’t I?”

Zephyr’s voice cut through the tension like a knife through soft butter and Mollie winced as he kicked at the sandy wall sending a downpour of bones and other unfathomable objects crashing down onto the floor.

“He’s got it. Pieces of it.”

“Pieces of what?” Mollie questioned.

“Is it possible?”

Caius had turned to Isaac whose face had gone rather pale. He swallowed uneasily, his thin body quaking with nerves.

“I...I suppose,” he mumbled looking at his father. “While I was imprisoned at the manor in Questershire I overheard that James had assembled his army. I...I didn’t think much of it at the time but he was talking about his voyage as if it were a...a crusade.”

“His...army?” Mollie choked. “Since when did he have an army?”

“I saw it myself,” Isaac muttered brushing his light blond curly locks off his forehead. “He has an army and they’ve got...”

Isaac trailed off after this looking up at his father in terror.

“What do they have?” Zephyr muttered.

“I...I don’t really know for sure,” Isaac muttered. “But they kept talking about something. I...I had never heard of it. *Souffle de vie*.”

Now Mollie’s head was the one to snap up.

Caius had gone rather rigid and Mollie could sense that something was gnawing at him. He was too stiff.

He knew.

She had heard whispers of this power – this entity - whatever it was since she had been thrown into this world of battling monarchies and hidden secrets. Gibbs had first mentioned it to her when he had fled his own regime as a child. Something about a man bringing it over

with him to Lyon land. Luna had mentioned it once before too when she had taken Mollie out to the river in Anubis.

Mollie shuffled over and dropped into the chair beside Caius. She reached across the table and dug her fingers into his pale flexing fists.

“Please,” she whispered. “No more secrets Caius. I have to know. Is this thing real? Why is everyone after it? What does this have to do with iridium?”

Caius sighed. The ring on his finger shone bright even in the darkness of this decrepit tomb. It was as if he aged years overnight when his eyes flickered back to Mollie.

Araya had mumbled something about dressing Isaac’s wound and quickly stood up. Mollie figured that was more of an excuse to give herself and Caius some privacy. Zen’s expression was eerily unreadable -- burdened with his thoughts. It wasn’t long before he too excused himself and followed silently behind his cousin and brother.

When their footsteps disappeared and the thin veil of silence fell over the two of them Caius began to speak.

“It was said that pure iridium was impossible to synthesise. It flowed in the river of Morte bestowing its properties onto whatever surface, landform, or lifeform that it encountered. Once extracted, it was believed that it could no longer function in the way it was supposed to. This river begins up in the icy regime of Devonis and flows down into the scorching desert of the Ophian Empire.”

Caius paused for a moment, his blue eyes meeting her wide brown ones.

“But twenty years ago, this was proven to be wrong.”

“Someone figured out a way to extract pure iridium and use it?” Mollie asked. Her voice had dropped into a hushed tone.

So it was never just a rumour.

“Supposedly. A man by the name of Quinn Marchesseault.”

Mollie cleared her throat uncomfortably. It was a familial tie she wasn’t overly fond of.

“Unknowingly, the man had discovered a way to extract pure iridium from its source within the Ophian territory something so powerful it had the potential to destroy cities – people – regimes.” Caius shook his head sadly. “In its pure form it can take in whatever it touches and amplify it -- sequester its strength.”

Mollie nodded. She knew this.

“Quinn never believed he was capable of accomplishing such a feat. But even his own mind surprised him.”

“They imprisoned him didn’t they?” Mollie said hotly. “The Lyons.”

“Yes, but not before Quinn had realized the mistake he had committed. Things as powerful as pure solid iridium are not meant to fall into the wrong hands. Quinn knew this. But it was far too late.”

“What did he do?”

“He asked the leaders of the Ophian Empire to disperse the pure iridium he had extracted -- hide it from anyone who attempted to find what he had created -- what he had accomplished. The Ophians agreed -- their fear of too much power falling into the wrong hands urging them to take action. They created their own synthetic version of iridium. Something weaker and restricted in its form. Impure iridium – still quite high in monetary value. But nowhere close to what its pure form can accomplish. It was a way of lessening the danger so to speak.”

Mollie wondered if Luna sending her son to the Lyon Empire had anything to do with his involvement in the concealment of the iridium. It must have been. Solanio had been present at almost every meeting Mollie had the privilege of attending in Questershire.

“What about the pure iridium. Where is it?”

Caius frowned.

“It was said that the Ophians tried to destroy it. That much power cannot fall into the hands of one person. But in that attempt it almost killed the entire team who tried to do so. The closest they came to destroying it was splitting it into 5 pieces of iridium. From there they hid it.”

“5 pieces? 5 solid pieces of iridium?” Mollie breathed. She could only imagine the power it could bestow upon the person who owned it.

“Not quite,” Caius murmured. “When it was split...it was crushed under immense heat and pressure. In order to reap the benefits all 5 pieces must be put back together.”

Mollie exhaled.

“But that’s a good thing right?” she whispered. “I mean the odds of someone finding all five pieces in this lifetime is unheard of.”

“He’s been finding them.”

Mollie nearly jumped out of her chair when Zephyr re-appeared at the door – Isaac and Araya hot on his heels.

“That’s what he’s been fucking doing since before he became King. He’s been hunting for them. They didn’t need Quinn to manufacture anything for them – they had been mentally torturing him for years – forcing him to reveal the location of each individual piece of iridium.”

“Holy shit,” Mollie murmured. “Is that why Rowan wanted the map?”

Isaac winced. She had her answer.

“Then why the hell did you give it to him?” Mollie all but yelled.

“And leave you in *Icedalar* for all of eternity?” Zephyr retorted.

Mollie flushed in anger.

“How many pieces has he found?” Mollie choked turning to Caius. Just knowing James and Rowan were so close to finding something so powerful it had the potential to wipe out regimes made her want to vomit right then and there.

“They say he has three of five,” Isaac muttered. “How true this is...I...I don’t know for sure.”

Mollie stood up. She stared down at all of them – her expression stiff.

“You should have told me.”

“Mollie,” Araya hesitated.

“You should have *told* me.”

She rose from the table as gracefully as she could manage and gathered her cloak together.

“Mollie,” Zen protested reaching for her.

“Don’t,” she hissed.

“Mollie,” Araya interjected blocking her path. Mollie closed her eyes tightly when Araya squeezed her arm comfortingly. “Everything’s going to be okay alright?”

The softness in Araya’s tone wasn’t enough to soothe the ache in her belly or the pounding in her head nor the fear in her heart. It was like a raging fire in a dry forest inside of Mollie’s head and the smoke was making it difficult to breathe.

“James isn’t as powerful as he thinks. Not yet.”

Mollie looked up into the glacial blue eyes of Caius Lyon.

“James is still searching and his army is no where close to *Peréal* as of now. The rest of our group has gone West back to the outskirts of *Anubis* for reinforcements and the rebel army in Questershire is being mobilized by Caleb as we speak. We’re going to win this war.”

The vindication in his tone reminded her of Hartley. It was almost uncannily familiar.

“The other piece of iridium is being housed in *Anubis* isn’t it?” Mollie whispered aloud looking at Araya.

“Yes,” Araya murmured. “That’s why Julien and Caden and....Joël have gone back...” she trailed off after this. “James has merged his army with the Outbacks. Their numbers are big and they plan on taking the iridium being protected in Anubis by force. Luna and the others

had tried to deceive James Lyon -- making him believe that he had acquired the piece he had sought on their land. But he's no fool. He realized he was being deceived and he's retaliating hard. He's going to take it by force. He's already wiped out several towns on the outskirts of the Obsidian desert and has destroyed many villages leading into the heart of Anubis."

"What about the last piece?" Mollie muttered turning her gaze back to Caius. "Where did Quinn Marchesseault hide it?"

Caius's gaze hardened when he looked back at her.

"What better place to hide something so precious than in a place you know as well as the back of your hand."

The castle. It was in the castle. That meant that James could come searching here next...

Mollie felt sick to her stomach.

"Once he gets what he needs in Anubis that means he's going to come *here*," Mollie shrieked.

"That's if he wins against the Ophians," Araya muttered. "It'll be some time before that happens. Their army is one of the strongest I've ever seen."

Araya's words did little to comfort Mollie. She had seen the bloodthirstiness in James Lyon's eyes. The man was completely unhinged.

"Araya and Zephyr are going to stay here, grounded in *Peréal*. It should be easy for them to gain access into and out of the castle – especially now that one of our own is free to roam inside as they please."

Mollie shivered. *One of their own*. Was this Caius' way of solidifying her as a member of the Insurgency?

"And what about yourself?" she mumbled looking up at Caius.

"Isaac and I are heading to *Anubis*. The sooner we slow James Lyon down the more time we have to prevent him from gathering all five pieces of iridium and becoming the holder of the *Souffle de Vie*."

"I don't mean to interrupt," Zen muttered. "But Mollie needs to get back to the castle before dawn," Zephyr muttered. "It will be morning soon."

"How will I know where to find you both?" Mollie wondered as she secured her cloak around her shoulders and followed Araya towards the staircase that would lead her back to the cathedral.

"There's a bell tower in the Marchesseault castle," Araya said hastily tucking her short auburn bob behind her ears. "It's at the end of the corridor near the west wing. The bell rings twelve times at midnight. If you are ever in trouble or you need to make contact with us, that's where we'll meet."

Mollie felt her stomach roll with nervousness.

“Okay,” she managed wiping the sweat from her brow.

“You won’t be alone,” Zen muttered.

God she was scared. She was so scared. Maybe it was written all over her face.

Mollie wanted to say more – she did but she didn’t think she’d be able to manage anything tangible. Instead Zen pulled her close and threaded his calloused fingers through her hair. “We’ll get through this. Remember what I taught you.”

Reluctantly, Mollie released him. This was it. The fifth and final pillar for Mollie. Remembrance. She was one of them now and she had to be strong.

"Don't stray too far," she muttered eyeing the siblings.

"We won't," Araya said fiercely. "Zen and I are going to scour the city. We need to figure out where this thing is hidden. You don't have any ideas do you?"

Mollie chewed on her lip.

"No," Mollie muttered shifting her gaze from Araya to Zephyr. "But I think I might know someone who does."

Caius watched them from the shadows, his blue eyes glistening.

“It's a start. Focus in these desperate times. We'll get through this.”

The beginnings of the morning began to rise on the land of the Marchesseault empire casting a dusky glow over the ancient city. Mollie managed to guide herself back to her room undetected letting the soft morning glow cast over her heavy body.

She knew the tiredness would set in soon. She had spent the whole night with the Insurgency but it was vital she sought the information she needed. She learned a lot and this information was critical for Mollie. She had to be smart. She had to think like they did – like these monarchies did. And most importantly she had to put her children first.

The chambermaids outside Mollie’s quarters were giggling as they eyed Mollie walking out of her bedroom chambers.

“*Princesse!*” they chirped dropping into a curtsy.

“Mollie is fine,” she said curtly. “What are you laughing about?”

“Prince Micah sent this for you,” they both giggled as they handed her a note. It looked like a royal invitation with its blue and silver seal. The rich emblem of the Lyon monarchy.

They were blushing and laughing as they looked at Mollie almost enviously. It irritated her.

“Well run along now,” she muttered. They were watching her – waiting for her to open it.

“Well what’s it say?” said one of them. The bolder of the two.

“It’s not your business,” Mollie snapped.

The girl sunk backwards. Mollie suddenly felt guilt fill her stomach.

The other girl looked at Mollie stricken before they both took off down the corridors – the tunics of their uniforms brushing against the wall in their haste.

Mollie swallowed the lump in her throat and steadied herself with the help of the door frame. She slowly opened the letter.

Join me for breakfast in my quarters. Do try to be on time.

Regards,

Micah

It was written beautifully. Micah’s handwriting had always been nothing short of calligraphy. She gnawed on her lip as she thought about the invitation. She suddenly had an idea.

“Cécily?” she called out.

The brunette haired girl arrived immediately sinking into a curtsy the minute she spotted Mollie.

“Oui Mademoiselle.”

“Would you be so kind as to send a message back to the winter prince?”

Cécily hesitated. This clearly didn’t happen often.

“If...you want. I suppose...what do you want me to tell him?”

Mollie smiled to herself.

“Tell him to meet me in *my* quarters for breakfast.”

It was petty and childish. But Mollie didn’t like that he was ordering her around in her own territory. On her land. The audacity of him irked her. He had bossed her around to his hearts desire when she was in Questershire. Why couldn't she do the same?

Cécily seemed nervous and surprised by Mollie’s boldness but she bowed in agreement nonetheless.

“Oh and Cécily,” Mollie called out before Cécily could turn the corner and make the long journey to the guest quarters.

“Do tell him to be on time.”

Mollie kneaded the dough in the kitchen. It was a relief to feel her fingers sink into fresh flour and butter. The smell of spice and sugar was comforting and Mollie was at home here. She had consulted Esperanza before she took it upon herself to enter the kitchen. Esperanza had told her what Micah liked and Mollie figured she'd get on his good side by surprising him with a meal. She had to – she already knew he'd be irritated after sending back his invitation. However Mollie had another motive as well. She knew James was acting on his own accord -- but she had yet to figure out what Micah's role was in all of this. She wondered if he was planning on retaliating against his brother or joining him on his crusade. Mollie was suspicious. For all she knew -- he could be here for the exact same reason the Insurgency was -- for the iridium.

She placed the poached eggs delicately on the plate and flitted around the kitchen. It was eerily domestic. Especially with how the nine month swell of her belly pressed against every counter she worked on.

Mollie kept her face carefully stoic when she heard the door to the kitchen open and close softly. His presence was profound. She could practically feel his aura from way across the kitchen where she stood.

He raised an eyebrow when he saw her. He was dressed airily today, although still formal. He did not wear his cloak - only a loose tailored dress shirt and slim fitting slacks.

She didn't know why but she blushed when he took in her form in the kitchen. Mollie wouldn't have been surprised if it turned him on seeing her performing such a domestic duty. Fucker.

“Good morning,” Mollie said pleasantly. She hated when he stayed silent like that with his cold blank stare boring into her. It was as if he weren't human.

He acknowledged her with a brief nod before gracefully seating himself into the chair in front of her.

He wouldn't bring up the invitation this morning. He was too prideful for that.

“How is our child?”

Mollie opened her mouth and closed it once. All this for him and he inquires about her babies first? Mollie didn't know whether to feel grateful or bitter. Her fingers were aching due to the pregnancy and her ankles and knees quaked each time she moved one foot in front of the other. He should be asking her how the fuck *she* feels.

“Spectacular,” she responded dully taking extra time to place the food on the plate gracefully. He watched her movements stoically.

“Glad to hear it.”

His voice was clipped. Tired – as emotionless as hers. Mollie wondered if it had anything to do with her. No. It couldn't. He looked distracted. Mollie could tell. She knew him well enough to know when he was in a bad mood due to her and when he wasn't.

The door opened making Mollie jump. One of Micah's advisors -- the one he had arrived with in *Péreal* -- came forward to speak to him. They spoke in French while Mollie silently cooked in front of them. Her French was quite strong now and she kept her ears wide open, spending an absurdly long amount of time on Micah's meal. She had never really seen him eat; but Mollie could already guess he was a food snob. She had a feeling he wouldn't touch the food if it wasn't perfect.

"Et après?" *

Micah's tone was dull. Callous. Whatever he was hearing wasn't pleasing him.

"Il viendra ici mon prince," * the man said nervously.

Micah muttered under his breath.

Mollie leaned closer brushing her thick curls to one side of her shoulder. She listened to the musings of the men in front of her. Mollie was convinced they were talking about James.

When Mollie finished with the meal she walked around the large island to slide the plate in front of him. It was perfect and Mollie swelled with pride. The eggs were steaming, the garnish a vibrant shade of green contrasted against the porcelain white plate. A fine meal for a royal.

Micah was turned towards his advisor his expression irritated.

She reddened when she noticed he didn't even acknowledge her nor the dish directly in front of him that she had spent so much time making — too deep in conversation to notice. Mollie wanted to yell at him - to make him eat the damn thing she had worked so hard on. But she kept her mouth shut and scowled instead.

"Ouais c'est ça," Micah sighed. He threaded his fingers through his chestnut brown locks before addressing his advisor once more. "I'll be there in 30 minutes."

Mollie gaped as he stood up, his advisor nodding quickly with him before he bowed down in respect to the winter prince.

"But aren't you going to try-," she started before getting shut down immediately by the palm Micah offhandedly waved at her - a gesture to keep silent.

"I'll handle it," Micah said lowly. His advisor nodded gravely.

As if she weren't even there Micah followed his advisor out of the room, the door closing behind him with a soft click.

Mollie had spent the rest of the day hidden in the kitchen. She was seething and rather than do something foolish she channelled her anger into her baking. She was messy today – ingredients spread across the marble countertops like sprinkles of confetti – white flour dusted across her arms and cheeks. But she didn't care. She needed to clear her head from everything she had learned – from everything that would only get harder for Mollie.

Would Micah even propose to her again? Could she do what Caius asked of her? Would James find what he was looking for? Was Micah with or against his brother?

She muttered under her breath as her turbulent thoughts consumed her. She focused instead on stacking her pastries on the serving platter in front of her. She was supposed to spend the morning extracting information from Micah. She had meticulously planned out what she was going to ask him. She gritted her teeth in annoyance. Mollie was also irritated that he invited her for breakfast first and then decided to just leave before he could even touch her plate. Was he being petty because she countered his original invitation earlier?

“Like I fucking care,” she mumbled under her breath.

Mollie was so taken up with her thoughts she hadn't heard the door quietly open and close. Only when she felt arms snake around her from behind did she yelp and drop the dough in her hands with a shock.

“What-“

“Shh.”

His soft whisper at her ear made Mollie's spine tingle with nervousness and a hint of arousal. His smell was all around her – challenging the aromatic smell of the baked goods enveloping the kitchen with its rich scent.

He hummed against her neck – his cold lips making her skin erupt in a myriad of goosebumps.

His palms slid down her body to rest on her swollen belly. Mollie shivered. He was so cold to her earlier in the day and had written her off as if she were just another maid in the castle. Now he was worshiping her as if she were his queen.

He had quite a nerve.

Mollie swallowed uneasily. Every question she had planned on asking him suddenly evaporated in her mind like flurries on wet concrete.

“Micah,” she gasped as he rubbed his palms against her stomach slowly.

“*Mon amour*,” he responded planting soft kisses against her throat.

The motions were soothing and Mollie found herself closing her eyes, revelling in the calming sensation of Micah's soft breaths against her jaw. She writhed when his lips reached her pulse point and he slowly began to suck.

Mollie blinked her eyes open and turned her head slightly. Her pale brown eyes met his vibrant green irises and she winced. They were always so *clear*.

“You look...tired. You should be resting, not hiding yourself away somewhere in the castle. Who knows what could have happened had you escaped somewhere no one could find you.”

Mollie froze.

Did he know?

Mollie’s heart was pounding in her chest. She didn’t want to fathom how pissed Micah would be if he knew where she had taken off to the night before. Maybe she was being paranoid. Maybe he just noticed the tiredness in her eyes. Yes that was it. She hadn’t slept a wink last night.

“I guess that comes with one of the many joys of pregnancy,” she murmured turning to glance down at her belly.

Micah was quiet for some time – his body pressed against hers from behind. Their breathing matched as she felt each inhale and exhale of his chest behind her.

Micah’s arm tightened around her and she stilled feeling him press gentle kisses down her collarbone from behind.

“You’re going to be such a good mother.”

His whisper against her skin made her knees weak and Mollie clutched the edge of the table tightly. The fierceness in his tone made Mollie’s throat swell with its sincerity. God. Why did he have to do this to her.

“Things will be different.” He hesitated thumbing the swell of Mollie’s belly. “Our child will have everything this world has to offer. I promise you that.”

“You can’t promise me that,” Mollie whispered. Her nails scraped the marble counter top as she shook against the winter prince. Micah turned her chin towards him. Her nose brushed his as he moved one of his palms from her belly to hold her cheek. “You can’t promise me nothing will happen to her.”

“Her?”

Mollie hadn’t even realized it had slipped past her lips. Her dreams had always been of a little girl and her nightmares of a boy. She *wanted* a girl. At least for her own peace of mind. She hadn’t realized she had said it aloud in front of Micah.

He smirked as she blushed.

Micah dragged Mollie away from the counter and sunk to one knee in front of her. He didn’t care that she was covered in flour nor that the kitchen was a complete mess. His thoughts were on something else entirely. “Is that what you are?” he murmured brushing his nose against the tip of her abdomen. “*Une petite princesse?*”

As if it knew its father's voice her babies shifted in her womb. Mollie would never get used to that feeling – no matter how many times it had occurred throughout her pregnancy.

Mollie bit her lip and closed her eyes tightly when Micah left a soft kiss on her belly. It was a gesture that made her warm and gooey and completely distraught all at once. She wanted to hate him so badly. Especially after how he had treated her this morning. Mollie was still bitter about it.

He stood up swiftly and pocketed his gloves in a single fluid motion.

“What's on the menu tonight?”

Mollie raised an eyebrow at him. She subdued the urge to scoff in his face.

“Oh so *now* you're hungry? Didn't seem like it this morning.”

Micah furrowed his brow for a moment in confusion. She simmered with irritation when he laughed off-handedly as if he had forgotten about their encounter earlier in the day.

“Oh Mollie Mae,” he chuckled amusedly.

Mollie frowned at the way his pink lips curved up in a smirk. It was a smile that sent many hearts racing and many cheeks burning. Mollie was not entirely immune to Micah's advances and she had a feeling he knew how it made her squirm.

She clutched the table even tighter feeling her nails dig into the stony countertop.

Mollie had made several dishes – some just to remind her of her bakery in Chartery and something else altogether. Something she had specifically asked Margot how to create.

She watched Micah's movements as he lifted a delicate bowl of custard cream Mollie had whipped earlier.

“It's not finished yet...”

Mollie blurted this out before Micah could properly observe the stacked pastries Mollie had been assembling before he walked in.

Croquembouche.

He had told her once long ago that it was something he enjoyed. Something his mother had adored as a child.

Mollie blushed when he raised an eyebrow at her. He seemed surprised she had made the dish. In all honesty, she was surprised she had made it too.

“I still have to glue it together...with the caramel,” Mollie muttered swiping her palms against her apron.

She chewed her lip watching Micah reach for a choux pastry near the top of the golden tower. Carefully he pulled apart the dough letting the cream custard filling spread across his pale fingers.

He said nothing but walked closer to her – so close that she could feel his cool breath fan her forehead.

Mollie looked up at him questioningly. He looked down at her with that familiar cold stare.

“Undress.”

Mollie’s lips parted in surprise when he slid his custard coated fingers across her collarbone feeling the warm sugary sweet liquid smear against her skin.

“What the...” she protested. He said little – taking the liberty of pulling her simple dress downward to expose her shoulder. “What are you doing?” she gasped.

He lifted her up onto the counter as if she and the babies in her belly were little addition to her weight.

She panted when he pulled the beautiful lace collar of her dress to the side exposing her shoulder. The smell of custard and cream filling permeated Mollie’s senses as his sugar coated fingers continued to glide across her skin.

“Aren’t you going to offer me a taste?” he purred against her ear.

Mollie’s long legs wrapped around his torso for balance as his fingers continued to pull down the front of her dress till it pooled around her hips, leaving her nude from the waist up.

She paid little attention to the various jars and bowls that fell over when Micah sat her on the counter and inserted himself snugly between her thighs.

“If I recall correctly,” she hissed feeling a fresh coat of custard smear across her chest – “I already did that this morning.”

She felt him smile against her neck.

“Well then do it again.”

Mollie shivered watching him reach for another choux pastry before squeezing the soft dough in his hands and letting the filling drip down her chest and in between her breasts.

She frowned and reached for the pastry letting the filling spread across his fingers seep onto her own. She decided to humour him.

“Do you want a taste?” She brought the pastry forward to his lips expectantly – eager to actually see him try something she had made. He smirked at her.

“Yes,” he murmured. “But from *here*.”

Mollie gasped at the sensation of his cool tongue following the line of creamy sweetness from one part of her shoulder to the other. He lapped up the decadent sweetness with his tongue – cleaning up the custard that dripped down her chest.

Her throat tightened and her centre throbbed with arousal the more she watched him suck the creamy filling from the top of her chest -- across each mound and even in the space between her breasts. It made Mollie tingly and breathless but she refused to let him know.

Mollie tensed when he kissed his way from her breast to her neck, taking his dear sweet time to line her bottom lip with his tongue gently, before enveloping her mouth with a slow and sensual kiss.

The kiss was deep and dizzying and Mollie could taste the sweetness of the filling on his tongue as it twirled against her own.

“Fuck,” Mollie thought hazily. What was she even doing? She should be fucking interrogating him, not making out with him in the middle of the kitchen.

Mollie broke away sloppily and groped around for the fabric of her dress that had pooled around her knees. She pulled it up and adjusted it making sure to shoot a frigid glare at Micah who had a smug smile on his face.

They were supposed to be discussing important matters. Mollie wasn't here for pleasure, she was here for information and Micah was doing a beautiful job of distracting her. Typical.

“Put me down,” she snapped.

Micah was unperturbed by her change in attitude and with a crooked smile lifted her gently back onto the ground. She couldn't get down herself and it hurt her pride to have to ask him. She threw her apron to the side with a huff and pushed past him to stand on the opposite side of the massive island that stood in the centre of the kitchen. The same island littered with sugar and custard where they had just made out.

Micah laughed at the scowl she directed at him. He rolled his sleeves upwards, so the sleeves of his dark shirt rested lightly at the crease of his elbows and leaned forward on the island expectantly. His green eyes gleamed with mirth.

“What's this about *chérie*? Is this about this morning? Or is this about something else entirely...”

Mollie ground her teeth. She had a lot of fucking things she could grudge him about.

Whatever happened between them this morning was rudimentary – Micah knew this. He just wanted to toy with her a little. Classic Micah.

“Look Micah,” she muttered. “We need to talk about the...child.”

Mollie had to be careful how she approached the subject. Micah sighed.

“I suppose you're correct. The sooner we have this conversation – the better.”

Mollie felt her knees wobble when he clasped his hands together on the countertop. So poised – so expectant – as if they were having a pleasant negotiation.

Their eyes met and she swallowed uneasily.

“She’s going to be born here,” Mollie said firmly. “I can’t travel anywhere else in my condition and... my father forbids me from leaving the castle anyway.”

Micah shrugged.

“A pity,” he murmured. “But we must adapt to circumstances.”

He didn’t *seem* pissed but Mollie knew better than to assume. She still had to be vigilant.

“I want her to be raised here Micah,” she said tentatively. “The family ties are strong and this place is... forgiving. There will be so much opportunity for her here.” Micah said nothing and Mollie felt her throat go dry. His expression was vacant. His eyes flickered back to hers and Mollie felt the frigidness from her position. “There’s so much instability in the Lyon regime,” she continued. “Chartery is an industrial wasteland and with the rebellions happening in the South and the armies in the West...please understand Micah. It’s no place to raise a child...”

Mollie was phrasing her words carefully. But what she really wanted was her daughters as far away from Hartley and the rest of his Lyon clan as humanly possible.

“How can she be expected to earn the respect of her people if she isn’t present?” Micah asked calmly.

“Her people are *here*.” Mollie hissed.

“The child is a Lyon. She is expected to rule the kingdom given to her by the last name she bears Mollie Mae. It is not my choice. That is just the way it works. It has been that way for generations.”

He was so diplomatic and conversational as if none of this was his fault or doing whatsoever. As if Micah were the one forced into following the rules.

Mollie just stared at him.

“You are a Marchesseault, thus you are entitled to stay here and rule this kingdom as you so please. It is quite simple Mollie. The rules are in place and we must follow them.”

“The rules can be changed,” Mollie muttered. Her heart rate was quickening. She didn’t like what Micah was implying.

“The rules *won’t* be changed.”

His tone had become curt and Mollie could hear the veiled warning beneath his cool demeanour.

“Don’t make this difficult Mollie. The child will accompany me back to Questershire once she is well enough to travel. Whether you come with is *entirely* up to you.”

Mollie’s back stiffened.

He was throwing the ball in her court for the first time since she’d met. It was something Micah never allowed back in Questershire.

“She’s not going *anywhere*.”

Micah chuckled.

“We’ll see.”

The door to the kitchens opened widely and Mollie froze in place – not so different from a deer in headlights.

Mollie’s eyes snapped up and met the strict gaze of her father.

“You’re late.”

Mollie cursed silently. She had forgotten about the scheduled meeting with her father. Micah had distracted her.

Her fathers gaze flickered to the winter prince and Mollie saw his smile go stale.

“And you are?”

“Leaving,” Micah said with a smile.

He grabbed Mollie’s hand before he left pressing a soft kiss to her fingers. It was chaste as it could get – as if they hadn’t just made out on the kitchen countertop.

Mollie’s legs felt wobbly as her fathers gaze followed Micah out of the airy room. His brown eyes flickered back to hers and Mollie squeezed her legs together tightly. Her neck was riddled with bitemarks reddening her cheeks and making her more flustered than she was. She was sure her father noticed.

“What did you tell him?”

Her fathers tone was crisp.

“Nothing,” she said bluntly. “I told him nothing he didn’t already know.”

Alexandre didn’t seem satisfied with her answer but Mollie could tell something more pressing was on his mind.

“I have to leave for some time. I received an urgent message from fellow members of the *Curia regis* in a neighbouring empire. An ally.”

Mollie tensed.

"What's wrong?" she pressed. "What's happening?"

Alexandre raised an eyebrow.

"Why not ask your winter prince that question," her father sneered. "I'm surprised he hasn't filled you in on what is going on outside these walls. Perhaps you were too busy with other...pursuits."

Mollie flushed.

"We were discussing the child," she said hotly. "That's more important than anything political right now."

"And?"

"I won't let him raise the child without me," Mollie said firmly. "She belongs to me as much as she belongs to him."

She could practically feel the frustration rolling off her father. "I do hope you know what that entails," Alexandre said stiffly.

Mollie was aware. She knew the price was a heavy one but she would do anything to keep her children safe.

"I'm going to marry him," she murmured softly.

Alexandre huffed in frustration. Mollie could see the slightest flicker of pain flit across his features.

"You don't have to do this," Alexandre muttered. "A cover up can easily be orchestrated. No one apart from my cabinet and the few loyal members of this monarchy are aware of your pregnancy let alone who the father is. You can live your life *free* of this servitude."

"Is that what you did?"

Mollie hadn't intentionally meant to confront him in such a manner but his choice of words punctured her heart. "Is that what I was to you? Something to be covered up to free *you* from a life of servitude?"

Alexandre's face reddened.

"*Ne fais pas ça*," he murmured. "That's not fair."

It was as if all the memories of Mollie's childhood resurfaced as she stared into the eyes she inherited from her father. From the death of her grandparents to the feeling of every tear that soaked her pillow when she lay in her cot night after night, wishing for her father to magically come and take her away from her little apartment in Chartery. From the nights she went hungry when the bakery had a slow day to nights spent hiding underneath the stairwell of the decrepit apartment while Lyon guards raided the building searching for rebel spies.

"I'm not going to do what you did to me," Mollie said thickly. "I'm not like you. No child deserves that."

Alexandre was quiet his gaze faraway.

"It's going to be different for her," Mollie whispered. "I'll do whatever it takes to make sure of that."

The silence was long and heavy but Mollie was prepared for anything. Even if her father decided to kick her out of his kingdom himself for refusing to adhere to his conditions.

"I...I understand," he said slowly. "I only want what's best for you, Mollie. I always have. Every parent wants that for their child." He hesitated. "I don't want you to live a shackled life -- you still have your whole life ahead of you."

Mollie hastily wiped the few tears that had dripped from the corner of her eyes.

"Micah won't shackle me," she said immediately. The conviction in her tone surprised her as much as it did her father. "After all, the fight within us is strong. Isn't that what Marchesseaults are known for?"

Mollie didn't think it was possible for a man as strict and imperious as Alexandre Marchesseault to smile -- she really didn't. But she liked him a lot better when she saw it spread across his features. It really took a whole decade off the the man.

"I trust your judgment," he said softly.

Mollie smiled back. She hadn't realized how much of a weight it had been on her shoulders thinking her father saw her as someone incapable of making decisions. She felt pride knowing she proved him wrong and that he respected her for it.

"For how long will you be gone?" she murmured eyeing the guards who stood several feet away outside in the corridor.

"Hopefully only a couple weeks. I don't like to be absent from my monarchy for longer than I need to be."

Mollie felt a wash of worry run through her. Alexandre was one of the few people in this castle Mollie knew wouldn't harm her. She had yet to warm up to his advisor – Courtois was it? Either way she couldn't help but feel a sense of vulnerability creep up her spine with the absence of the King.

As if reading her thoughts Alexandre spoke quietly.

"You will be safe here daughter. Within these walls you are untouchable."

Mollie looked away and brushed a hand over her belly. It wasn't *her* safety she was worried for.

"Who will be ruling in your absence?" Mollie asked.

“Caine,” he said tonelessly. Mollie could sense a hint of disdain there. “It’s temporary – and whatever he decides to carry out must be approved by Elio and the rest of the cabinet. As far as I am concerned, little should change.”

“Caine?” Mollie asked questioningly.

“Your brother,” he said simply. “Elio will introduce you later today. Till then, keep healthy and look after yourself.... Mollie.”

Mollie watched him turn with a swish of his red cloak – his guards flanking either side of their King. He disappeared into the dark corridors of the castle.

It was the first time he had addressed her formally. The first time he had said her name -- had *called* her Mollie. It made a warm fuzzy feeling spread through her body and Mollie was pleased to know their relationship had made progress since their first encounter. There was still so much time left for them to get to know each other. Mollie looked forward to it. However something else her father said crept into her thoughts.

Brother?

Mollie swallowed nervously. She had forgotten that Alexandre had fathered two more children after her. Mollie had always thought she was an only child and she lived her entire life till now believing so.

“*Half*-brother,” she muttered to herself brushing her fingers through her wild curls. She wasn’t looking forward to the reunion.

After Mollie had dragged herself to her quarters that night she was surprised to see the empty room awaiting her. Usually Margot, Esperanza or Cécily would be present, waiting for her to arrive and prep her for bed. Mollie needed assistance nowadays, the weight of the twins in her belly was too much for her skinny body to carry around.

The silence was deafening in her spacious room and her mind began to wonder. With her father gone. Micah at his usual nightly meetings and her ladies in waiting not present to breathe down her back, Mollie sensed an opportunity.

The possibility of reuniting with Zen and Araya was tempting – especially now that she was truly alone. She knew where the bell tower was. She could get there herself. She wasn’t *completely* incapable.

Mollie grabbed her yellow cloak and made the lengthy journey down the long narrow corridor in her quarters and down the spiralling staircase towards the back doors to the courtyard separating the west wing from the east. It was cold and quiet in the hallway and the vacancy made Mollie’s skin prickle. She grabbed a torch on her way and held her belly carefully ignoring the fiery pain in her ankles and her back.

Mollie pushed open the large red doors of the main entrance which opened to a large and spacious courtyard. The white pillars surrounding the space were enveloped in thick lush green vines and the beginnings of sprouting white climbing roses and blush pink mandevillas decorated the vined structure. The sweet scent of honeysuckle filled the air and Mollie found herself closing her eyes briefly letting the soft autumn breeze ruffle her curls.

She could picture it. Her little girls running through the underbrush, the warm temperate climate of *Peréal* providing a safe and comforting ambiance. She could make that dream a reality. This war wouldn't last forever -- nothing did.

They would have everything she never did.

When Mollie opened her eyes again she eyed the large full moon above her that bathed the mosaiced courtyard in a pale creamy glow. In the distance she could spot the green hilltops beyond the gates of the city and the spotted lights of the town that lay beyond the massive castle. Her eyes caught something else on the hilltop in that moment. Mollie blinked once -- her brown eyes quivering when she locked gazes with a creature that turned her blood to ice.

She gasped and dropped her torch ignoring the darkness that it left her submerged in.

No. It couldn't be.

Outlined on the hilltop was a large jet black wolf with deep-set yellow eyes that glowed in the dark ambiance.

Mollie knew who it belonged to. She'd recognize those ravenous yellow eyes anywhere. The last time she had seen it, it had chased her down the hallways of the ice fortress in Icedalar.

She could hear her breaths whooshing past her lips as she came to the horrid realization of what was before her. Its owner may be closer than she thought.

Before Mollie could dash back into the castle she felt a horrible gut wrenching pain erupt in her abdomen that sent her careening onto her knees in pain. The thought of seeing James Lyon again made Mollie retch and she groped at the tiled ground -- the pain in her abdomen radiating throughout her entire body.

She screamed in pain -- a horrible wetness gushing out from between her legs. She clawed at her abdomen -- the pain erupting like a fire within her womb.

"No," she whispered.

Mollie felt as if she had submerged her lower body into a pot of heated molasses. Slowly, she brought her palms from between her legs to stare at the offending crimson liquid that had bathed her knees and lower body in its looming grasp.

The unmistakable scent of copper assaulted her senses and Mollie choked on her sobs staring at her blood soaked palms.

She screamed into the night. The pain was a knife through her uterus cutting through everything in its path and leaving Mollie broken on the steps of a courtyard beneath a blanket

of stars.

Her thoughts were on her babies.

“Please,” she choked between her screams. “Please not now. Not them.”

Only the sound of her own sobs echoed in her ears as the excruciating pain continued to rip through her trembling body.

Mollie wondered if this was what hell felt like. The world went dark.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for being so patient. I had so many applications to complete this entire month and it was so incredibly draining. Ugh. It was a relief to come back and continue the story.

"But I think I might know someone who does." Any ideas who Mollie was referring to in this chapter? As always thank you for your feedback and comments. Love you all xx

Translations in order

*And after?

*He will come here my prince.

Chapter 46: Palladium

Chapter Summary

King Alexandre responds to an urgent message from a neighbouring ally. Jelena struggles to balance love and duty. Rowan gives a glimpse into the tumultuous relationship he shares with his his brothers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Heferménage

“Do you think he caught on *votre majesté*?”

Elio Courtois’ tone held a hint of doubt when he addressed his King. Courtois was not one to accompany Alexandre on an excursion such as this one – but any dealings with foreign leaders always included cavalry and a formal escort. Courtois was not about to make any changes to those rules, especially now that foreign leaders seemed to have infiltrated their monarchy since his King reclaimed his first born daughter.

“Those Lyons don’t miss a beat Elio,” Alexandre sighed. “He noticed my signal immediately.”

“Do you think he will come?”

“His curiosity is peaked,” Alexandre replied. “He will come.”

Before Elio could respond the words in his throat dissipated.

The air had become smoky and thick and Elio tensed when the carriage came to a slow halt. *Heferménage* was an ancient, wealthy, independent nation that the Marchesseault empire traded with daily. It was close to the main city of *Peréal* – only several small cities away. It was too close to home for Elio to witness such desecration.

The city was obliterated. The last of a fire extinguishing itself on what was once a sturdy home, slowly caved in on itself – taking whatever may have been inside with it. Elio never got used to seeing dead bodies left to spoil and the scent hit him hard making his stomach churn with nausea.

“My King,” Elio murmured. “What is the meaning of this?”

Alexandre had gone quiet. They had received a message from Canes Venatici, the leader of *Heferménage* only days ago. Nothing in his message suggested that the extent of his urgency

was *this* bad. The sight that lay before them now chilled Elio to the bone.

“They were attacked,” The King muttered. He turned behind to his men and barked orders. The cavalry had already noticed the insidious atmosphere, and the entire front line were already in a defensive position.

Elio felt his heart clench painfully. Canes and his wife Leda were wonderful leaders – allies to the Marchesseault empire. To see the city in ruins was devastating on another level of pain.

Alexandre stiffened.

“We have company.”

The rich red coloured uniforms of House Marchesseault sparkled amidst the dank ambiance but Courtois paid little attention to the loyal men behind them. His eyes were on the grotesque man on his knees ahead of them and the two figures beside him.

The two men flanking the prisoner were nothing less than giants and Elio froze mid-step when he spotted them. He had always believed King Alexandre’s six foot four height was a sight to behold before his own rather short stature. But seeing the men who stood beside the prisoner made even his regal King seem like a lone shrub next to a great oak tree.

They wore furs – thick pelts of brown and black and the stench radiating off of them suggested they spent most of their time outdoors. It was an unpleasant scent that carried with it the odour of raw meat and aged formaldehyde. Their thick beards covered most of their face leaving only slits for their eyes which bore down at Courtois and his King with a fury that made Elio even more nauseous than the scent of rotting corpses.

They had shackled the man Elio had once recognized as Canes Venatici. The left side of his face had been badly burned – almost to the point of unrecognizability. A thick rope had been tied around his neck forcing the man to his knees as if preparing an animal for slaughter. If it weren’t for that familiar shock of white hair on his head Elio wouldn’t have been able to place him.

The sound of heavy galloping filled the air but Courtois, the King, and the men that stood by their side didn’t move a muscle. The thick tension in the air was palpable. Alexandre’s fury was fuming and Courtois didn’t need to look at his face to know the glare that was being directed at the two giants holding Venatici hostage.

A glimmer of silver and blue glinted in the smoky light. Courtois knew who had arrived.

“Don’t move.” Courtois recoiled at the thick gravelly voice of the giant. “Any of you.”

Alexandre turned his head slightly to the side his fury laced eyes landing on another victim.

*“Êtes-vous impliqué dans se qui s’est passé ici?”**

His tone was dead and layered with simmering anger.

The winter prince's expression was the same as it always was. Blank. Expressionless. Vacant. The more time Courtois spent with him the more convinced he was that the boy was incapable of feeling any emotion at all.

“SILENCE.”

The bark that came from the giants in front of them made Courtois' skin prickle with unease. The giant had grit his stained yellow teeth – what few he had left-- and picked up his spiked wooden club off the ground.

“You won't speak that vile tongue in my presence.”

He shook the prisoner hard when he addressed the royals standing before him.

Venatici was too beat up to put up a fight and Courtois clenched his fists tightly letting his knuckles crack. Anger flowed through his veins at the disrespect these savages were directing at members of royalty.

He knew who these men were now. The rumours *must* be true.

The Outbacks had infiltrated.

Only they spoke English in that vile accented tongue. Their hatred towards the monarchy went back centuries. But more so were they known for their gruesome attacks and lust for blood. They enjoyed killing. Got off on it. They were lower than the scum that lined the bottom of Courtois' boot.

“What is your purpose here?”

The husky emotionless voice of the young Lyon prince carried over surprisingly sturdy. His glowing emotionless eyes were glued to the grotesque men before them.

“That's the other one,” huffed the second giant who glanced at his partner bored.

They exchanged a look before they both laughed again. Terrible chuckles that reverberated through the air disrupting the eerie silence of death that surrounded them.

“He ain't as threatening as I've heard Ti,” said the other. “He's just a little pretty boy.”

They choked with laughter again making Courtois recoil with disgust.

The sound of the cavalry mobilizing behind Alexandre made the two men cut short their laughter.

Their expressions transitioned back into something that resembled curiosity. Not fear. These Outbacks were too inhumane to feel something as mundane as fear.

The one that had spoken first, Ti, seemed intrigued by them.

“Why?” The King shouted. Even Elio was taken aback by the sound. “What was the meaning for all this death? This act of barbarism?”

The giants smiled clearly enthralled by the question.

“We’re looking for something. Something expensive... and shiny. We’re told you have it in your little kingdom. And we ain’t talking about diamonds and rubies and shit. Our leader said you’d know what we’re talking about. Pure stuff.”

“This is outrageous,” Alexandre seethed. “This is not how we negotiate in my kingdom.”

“I don’t give a fuck how you run your little empire,” the man named Tì roared. “The monarchy has always been a vile system. You call it government we call it control. You call it death we call it even. You call it iridium we call it God.”

Alexandre narrowed his eyes.

“Well you better give a fuck. Because this is my land you have your filthy boots on. And I will punish you the way I please. And I think you’ll find that we’ll both call it satisfying.”

The other giant seemed triggered and made a move towards him. Tì stopped him with a gentle squeeze to the shoulder.

“You’re a fool for trusting him.”

Tì turned in surprise towards Micah Lyon whose expression remained the same. His navy cloak rippled behind him in the breeze.

Courtois watched with bated breath. Tì stepped towards the prince slowly, threateningly. It was a scary sight but the prince stood his ground – his own cavalry close behind him.

“Am I?” Tì questioned with that same grotesque smile. “Master Trius Sian has proven his loyalty to our people. Your thoughts on the matter mean nothing to me.”

The prince chuckled humourlessly.

“Once James gets his hands on what he wants he will have no further use for you.”

Tì chuckled at the winter prince.

“Or maybe we’ll have no further use for *him*.”

“There’s been enough death today,” Alexandre said between clenched teeth. “Let your hostage go. He has nothing to do with this.”

Tì looked at his partner once before reaching for his club and smashing it repeatedly over the head of Canes Venatici. His blood sprayed the ground – dousing what little vegetation remained in a puddle of warm liquid crimson. The crunch of bat against skull echoed several times before nothing remained but the squelch of ruined flesh against wood.

“Let this be a message for you royal scum,” the man shouted into the air. “We will take your lands and we will take each and every one of them by force! A new age is upon us! One where monarchies fall and anarchies prevail!”

Courtois didn’t need a signal to know what was coming. He was a political advisor – not a fighter. He negotiated with people not savages and he certainly wasn’t prepared for what he had to witness at that moment.

Alexandre and the winter prince were upon the Outbacks in no time – the King’s silver and ruby encrusted blade glinting in sync with the icy blue blade of Micah Lyons.

In seconds two heads hit the ground with a thud, the blades of the two men sliding across the flesh like a shear against sheepskin. Courtois knew this was just the start. The Outbacks had numbers that surpassed many. These two were a small sacrifice sent by a much a larger army. They had numbers to spare.

The minute the bodies of the two Outbacks hit the ground the clash of Alexandre’s blade against the Lyon prince’s screeched loudly, both men lunging for each other.

“If you have anything to do with this –”

“Lower your blade,” the prince hissed with equal ferocity.

“I should just kill you now,” Alexandre spat between clenched teeth. “Would get rid of a lot of problems off my back. And not just for me.”

The prince smiled. It was purely predatory.

“Are you really going to kill the father of your grandchild?”

Courtois watched the two of them in fear. This isn’t how things were supposed to ensue.

Alexandre roared in fury, his arm lunging forward to initiate a fight of blade against blade.

The sound of clashing swords filled the air and Elio froze in fear.

The armies of both men stood alert behind them – their own weapons up and ready for a signal to engage.

Elio’s heart was beating rapidly in his chest. The King was not in any state to be fighting.

“Oh *Alexandre*,” Micah purred leaning in close. His blade came tauntingly close to the King’s throat. “You wouldn’t want your only grandchild raised without a father would you? Could you imagine how difficult that would be? The effect it could have on the child? The indignation they would carry with them for the rest of their life?”

“*Va te faire foutre*,” the King snapped.

“She resents you for it. I can see it in her eyes everytime she looks at you.”

Elio's eyes widened. The girl. The princess.

"You think you're so clever don't you?" Alexandre hissed. He brought his sword down savagely, the prince dodging the blow elegantly. He had youth and speed on his side. It was something the King lacked. "I bet you took her for yourself the moment you figured out whose blood ran through her veins." He lunged again, the sound of steel against steel reverberating through the air. "You Lyons have always been bloodthirsty for land – *my* land. But you won't *touch* this kingdom Lyon," Alexandre all but spat. "You may have taken her from me, infused your corrupt seed in her womb -- but you won't take this kingdom with you. I *forbid* it."

"Are you sure about that?" The prince taunted. He flipped his blade in his fingers, the two men dancing in a circle around the bodies of the Outbacks they had slaughtered only moments before.

Elio felt the primal urge to intervene. The animosity between the Lyons and the Marchesseaults was deep and dangerously visceral. It wouldn't be the first time the Lyons and the Marchesseaults clashed. It was like this once long ago that Cosette Marchesseault had her own little rendezvous with a Lyon. The blonde one Elio thought bitterly. The one that had been killed earlier that year. Logan Lyon. He drove the late princess mad. Elio was convinced his abandonment of her was the nail in the coffin that sent Cosette to the grave.

Micah Lyon was undoubtedly lethal with a sword. Elio could tell by the way he engaged in battle. He had been trained and well. By the elegant curve at the hilt of his sword and the balance with which it carried during battle, Elio could tell it was crafted by Marozzo himself. The prince's youth and confidence was a major asset as well as the intimidation that radiated off his impassive features. Elio had seen a Lyon in battle before – once during a rare meeting with an empire overseas. The eldest son of Hartleys. The hothead as he was notoriously known to be. However nowadays, as Elio had chillingly discovered, he now went by a new name...

Elio remembered seeing the winter prince as a little boy. King Hartley had always been strangely *possessive* over him. Hiding him from the public – refraining from speaking about him openly. He had been an unusual boy from all of the Lyon boys from the start with those green eyes and that dark hair. It had been light at some point. Gold – like a lion. It must have darkened over time – much like his heart Elio thought bitterly. If he even had one at all. Micah had been a good looking kid – always. And seeing him now – Elio could tell he had grown tall and domineering like his father. He had grown handsome too – looked nothing like the late queen in Elio's opinion. However even with all the boy had accomplished at his young age Elio always found something *off* about him. He couldn't place it but he could just *feel* it. It made the hair on his skin prickle.

As the boy lunged and whipped his blade in sync with the King, Elio admired his undeniable dexterity and competence with a sword. But even with all his strengths, he indeed continued to lack something Alexandre possessed.

Experience.

The prince was young. Twenty three. Not a full man yet in Elio's opinion. And Elio knew what happened to boys who tried to fill a mans boots before it was time. They stumbled and fell. *Hard*.

Alexandre twirled his blade expertly – the speed with which it spun sending an array of red glittering shadows flashing from the gems that encircled the hilt. Micah huffed twisting his wintry blade within his grip and sending shockwaves of frosty air blasting around the two men.

Elio could feel the chill from where he stood. A blade such as that was incredibly unstable. Infused with trace amounts of iridium to lock in an element of choice, Elio figured the boy must have soaked the iridium laced blade within the glaciers of *Icedalar* – allowing the material to sequester the element and lock it in its grip transforming it into an elegant but deadly weapon. Bits of frost and snow emitted from the blade with each clash of the sword against the Kings. The blade glowed blue giving off a wintry luminescence of its own. It look chilled and icy even to the eye. Elio would not under any circumstance want to experience death to a blade of that kind of craftsmanship. Not ever.

Elio watched the two men continue to flit around each other in a dance of swordplay. It was almost as if each were trying to outdo the other in some kind of way. It was too close to call who was gaining the upper hand. Both were quick. Both were proficient and both had a lust for retribution.

Alexandre's crimson red cloak rippled behind him much like the silvery navy cloak that blew around the back of Micah Lyon.

In a surprising but duplicitous action Alexandre closed the gap between the prince and himself managing to land a hard blow with his knee at the prince's abdomen.

The prince gasped in pain – the blow winding him, but not enough to prevent retaliation. Quickly the prince managed a blow of his own to the King catching a nice cut with his blade towards the King's unconcealed wrist.

Alexandre roared.

Elio wasn't sure if it was with pain or anger but both had taken a step back to glare viciously at one another. Alexandre clenched his fist letting the drops of blood ooze down his wrist to curl and wind around his clenched fists while the prince gazed back coldly, his right hand resting against his abdomen.

The winter prince was a tricky opponent. His left handedness gave him an advantage in this right dominated world, and it was especially useful in battles of this calibre.

The King and the prince looked ready to tear eachothers throats out but Elio knew he could not intervene. Even the men behind him were watching their leaders fight with bated breaths. It was a miracle they had been able to stay under the same roof this entire week. Perhaps all that pent up energy had built up and was being released now. It would certainly explain the thick tension that saturated the air.

Before either royal could raise their sword to continue their battle the sound of galloping hooves behind them filtered across the desolate landscape.

“Votre majesté!” called a voice.

Elio squinted. The figure grew gradually larger till he recognized the face of one of his own guards of the castle.

Elio looked at him in shock.

What was he doing all the way out here?

“Votre majesté,” he said again sliding off his horse in a panic. *“Il y a une urgence!”**

“What?” Alexandre roared – clearly irritated at the interruption.

“The princess!” he gasped. “She – she’s in labour.”

The winter prince snapped his head up and Elio noticed with surprise that something resembling concern flitted across his features. It was the first real emotion he had seen cross the boys face.

Alexandre froze. *“Maintenant?”** he hissed. *“Merde!”*

In a gesture that shocked Elio, the winter prince sheathed his sword, turned to address his army and began to bark orders.

It was improper to end a battle without a surrender from the opponent. It was against the rules of battle. Surely he would not abandon this engagement?

Alexandre seemed flabbergasted by the gesture and shot the prince a wintry glare.

“What are you doing?” he hissed. “This isn’t finished.”

Micah turned around to glare at the King.

“Are you deaf?” he hissed, his green eyes glinting with malice. “The princess is in labour.”

Alexandre laughed scornfully.

“Don’t act like you care winter prince,” he snapped. “You don’t feel. Not a single emotion can penetrate that icy wall that surrounds you. You may have convinced my daughter that you care – that you *feel* – but you haven’t fooled me. A ravenous predator has more sympathy for its prey than you do for your own bloody people!”

“We’re finished here,” Micah said darkly – his tone was biting. Elio felt his heart stop. The look on Micah’s face was something Elio hadn’t anticipated. His eyes were colder than the frozen arctic seas.

Without wasting another minute the prince whistled once and strode towards his horse. In seconds a blinding white wolf was padding towards the winter prince who bent down to stroke the beast of the animal that rubbed itself against him.

He murmured something in French to the creature that howled once before taking off at a speed in the direction of *Peréal*.

In seconds the prince was mounting his horse and directing his men, ordering them back towards the castle.

Elio watched in silence. If the prince abandoned their battle it was regarded as a defeat. The humiliation that came with that was a terrible thing to have plastered against a reputation – particularly for a royal.

“You’re really going to concede to me?” Alexandre murmured. “You’re going to concede to a battle between a Lyon and a Marchesseault?”

“If it means being present for the birth of my child. Then *yes*, ” the prince snapped. “Take the win if you want Marchesseault,” he muttered. “Bask in your anomalous triumph.”

With disgust Elio watched the winter prince remove a precious diamond from the hilt of his dagger that he kept loosely in his pocket and toss it to the King. It was a similar colour to his sword but with a sharper glassier cut. The gem sparkled on the bloody damp soil. With unease Elio noticed it would be the first and probably the last diamond to ever be removed from the prince’s decorated hilt.

Without another word the prince and his entourage galloped away from the scene on their horses towards *Peréal*. The prince’s cloak fluttered behind him blending with the inky darkness of the night before it disappeared completely into the foggy mist.

Elio stood straighter – his gaze on the King who had frozen in position completely. He seemed stunned.

“*Votre majesté*, ” he said after some time – his tone hesitant. “Orders?”

Alexandre blinked up at him – as if returning to himself.

“He conceded,” the King murmured picking up the gem the prince had tossed at him. He stared at the diamond accusingly in his palm ignoring the blood that soaked his fingers from the cut he had received.

“It does not matter,” Elio countered. “According to the rules, you still won this battle even under these...unusual circumstances. Celebrate it. The rest of the monarchies will soon know you beat the Lyon prince in battle. It will go down in history.”

“I did not *beat* him,” Alexandre hissed – his stormy gaze silencing Elio. “It was not a fair win. It was not an *honourable* win.”

Elio hesitated once again.

“I would rather the world know I beat a Lyon sincerely than by mere...*circumstance*.”

Elio understood and nodded.

“This will not be recorded,” Alexandre hissed loud enough for his men to hear. “Consider this battle incomplete – for now.”

Quickly he marched over to the carriage and made haste with sheathing his sword. He began to yell his own orders to his men.

“*Votre main* –“ * Elio muttered when the King turned back around.

“Leave it.” He pursed his lips and exhaled in anger.

His pale brown eyes opened to meet Elio’s dark ones.

“I...was wrong about him.”

Elio said nothing. The King was speaking loud enough for only Elio to hear. The men behind them had already begun to reorient themselves.

“What do you mean?” Elio asked dumbfounded.

“He should have maimed me,” Alexandre muttered inching his sleeve upward to show the jagged mark left behind by the prince’s blade. The King’s fair skin had been tinged purple – almost as if frostbitten but along the edges was a superficial cut – something that could have easily been caused by a common kitchen knife.

Elio looked at him confused.

“*Non mon roi*,” he murmured. “He just grazed you. Sometimes these things happened.”

Alexandre glared at his advisor.

“Lyons don’t graze Elio. They hunt for the kill otherwise they don’t engage in a battle at all.”

“The boy knows. He knows I’m dying.”

Elio froze.

“He couldn’t have.”

“He’s more perceptive than I gave him credit for.”

Elio sighed.

“I don’t know how he knows – or why you think he would – but either way he has returned back to the castle. Perhaps we should follow.”

“No,” the King muttered. “I don’t have that time Elio. You know this.”

Elio's eyes widened when the King pulled his sleeve up farther to reveal the dark purple blood that lay beneath the fair skin. It has spread."

"He saw it didn't he?" Elio breathed. "During your battle."

"I have no doubt," Alexandre sighed.

"What about the princess?" Elio questioned. He watched Alexandre direct his men South – away from *Peréal*.

"My kingdom is in danger Elio. I must be a King before I am a father. That is how this monarchy works."

Elio could hear the pain in Alexandre's voice.

Elio never questioned his King. Not unless he was asked to. But for the first time in his life – he felt as if he needed to say something. Something that in any other circumstance may have jeopardized his entire livelihood.

"You've been a King your entire life Alexandre," Elio murmured. "You were the King to your people before you were a father to your boys. Be a father to your only daughter now."

Alexandre closed his eyes tightly.

Elio could see the conflict in him so clearly – it was almost painful for him to see his King in such a position.

"She'll understand," Alexandre managed between breaths. "I know she will."

Elio swallowed thickly.

"Tell me she'll understand Elio."

Elio looked into the eyes of his King. He told him what he wanted to hear.

"She will understand *votre majesté*."

The King nodded.

"Yes. Yes she will."

Elio looked away.

"Where to *mon roi*?"

"*Anubis*," Alexandre hissed. "It's time to put an end to this crusade. Trius Sian has seen the last of his days burning my territory to the ground."

Elio nodded weakly.

“Call upon the aid of every ally to the Marchesseault empire. Inform them of the events that occurred tonight. Tell them to rally every capable man or woman ready for battle. We are declaring war.”

Elio nodded.

“And what of the Lyon prince?” Elio muttered.

“He’ll be there for the birth of his child. The way a father is supposed to be,” Alexandre said tonelessly.

The King reached into his cloak swiftly before pressing a tight scroll into Elio’s hands.

“Return to the castle and make sure this gets to Micah Lyon.”

Elio looked up in surprise gripping the rolled parchment in his hands.

“I need you to return Elio. Watch over my daughter. I need you to be my eyes and ears while I’m away.”

“And leave you alone on your journey to *Anubis*?” Elio protested.

“I’ve got my army behind me. That’s all a King needs in battle. That’s an *order*.”

Elio nodded. He watched his King seat himself into the carriage, the guards behind them getting into formation.

“She’s going to be okay Alexandre,” Elio managed to say before the King could take off. “She is strong.”

The King looked up at the stars and back at Elio with a sparkle in his eye before turning his head out the window.

“Of course she is Elio. She’s a Marchesseault.”

Anubis

Jelena glided her comb through her thick red locks humming the same tune she had sung to lull her daughter to sleep only hours ago.

“*Maman?*”

Jelena looked up startled.

“*Nina! Rendors-toi. Il est tard.*”*

Her daughter rubbed her eyes tiredly, her messy caramel coloured hair falling into her eyes.

*“Où est Papa?”**

Jelena sighed. Before she could respond she heard the unmistakeable sound of footsteps outside their grand private quarters. Jelena stilled.

“Papa!” Nina called out jumping down from the bed and scuttling down the staircase.

“Nina!” Jelena shrieked. Her daughter was too quick for Jelena’s slow movements and was down the staircase and outside the doors before Jelena could even attempt to stop her.

“Renée!” she shouted. “Watch her please!”

Jelena heard nothing below her and cursing inwardly she realized the woman had the evening off tonight. She was heavily pregnant and she rubbed her belly slowly pushing open the doors to her quarters. She'd have to go herself.

The dry desert air of *Anubis* hit her full force and Jelena felt a twinge of nausea wash over her.

She was sick of this place. This horrid musty desertland that caused the sweat to soak through the fabric of every outfit she wore. She missed her gowns and fancy dresses. When she told James she wanted a change of scenery from *Icedalar* this was *not* what she had in mind. It was one extreme to the other. Jelena would give anything to be back there.

Jelena blinked in surprise when she spotted a man who stood still and austere on the doorstep of her quarters. He had turned around to address the little girl who stood bouncing on her toes beside him.

*“Faites attention,”** said the man curtly. “Unless you want to lose those little fingers.”

Nina pouted brushing her mousy hair away from her face. The russet brown wolf in front of her curled its lip ever so slightly making Nina hesitate where she stood.

“What are you doing here?” Jelena stammered. The last time she had spoken to her brother in law was in Questershire over two months ago. It had been less than pleasant. “You made the trip here?”

Those familiar dark brown eyes turned towards her – so painfully similar to her husbands but with a more cynical flair to them.

“I’m not passing through the neighbourhood for leisure if that’s what you’re insinuating.”

His harsh drawl was something Jelena probably should be used to at this point – but it still made her wince, especially when he walked to her slowly, his gloved hands clasped tightly in front of him.

“Can I pet her *please*. *Please* Uncle Rowan!”

Jelena looked over to see Rowan had brought his beast along with him. She preferred it over Napoléon -- but still the animal scared the living daylights out of her.

Rowan turned his head slightly to acknowledge his niece. She was jumping up and down excitedly.

"*Him chérie*," Rowan drawled. "You may pet *him* if you want. But gently. You know he bites."

"Why are you here?" Jelena hissed. "If James sees you —"

"On the contrary I'm hoping he *does* see me. Like most, he isn't at the top of my list when it comes to people I go out of my way to find. But no one else wants to speak with him directly so I suppose I must take the initiative."

"I've already tried to speaking with him. He refuses to open up."

"Well that explains that outcome," Rowan retorted with a frown. "Please, where is he? I do hope he's taken a break from his little... scavenger hunt."

Jelena's face flushed.

"You dare mock him!" Jelena muttered. "You're just bitter he had the guts to do what you couldn't."

Rowan's face froze and Jelena took an immediate step backward. She stared at him in horror.

Rowan's eyes narrowed.

"It's the pregnancy," she stammered. "It's throwing my emotions all over the place."

He sneered at her when he spoke.

"For your sake I hope it was."

Jelena shrank back. Rowan scared her even at the best of times. His anger was not impulsive like James nor did it simmer like Micahs. It was remarkably insidious. Not to mention it took a lot for him to reach that point. He was the most level headed from Hartley's three boys. Jelena had yet to see him reach a fury that paralleled his brothers. She hoped she never did.

"Fetch! I said fetch!"

Jelena's eyes snapped up to see her daughter stomping her foot down in anger.

"He's not going," she whined ignoring the way the wolf growled menacingly in her direction.

"Nina come inside," she muttered grabbing the girl's wrist and closing the door tightly behind her. No way Jelena was letting that beast walk into the house.

"This is no place for a child. You should have left her back in Questershire."

Rowan's quiet murmur rose over the whining of her daughter and Jelena grimaced.

“I know. But I couldn’t be away from her. Especially now that I know our time here is indeterminate.”

“That was foolish.” Jelena looked away. She didn’t want to have this conversation with Rowan. “This is the middle of a warzone. There is absolutely nothing stopping the Ophians from storming this compound and slaughtering you. The only reason they haven’t is because of their superstitions. One hundred years in purgatory for the death of a pregnant woman.”

“They wouldn’t,” Jelena hissed. “James would *never* allow that.”

Rowan’s frown deepened.

“James is aware of this too. That’s why he brought you along. It’s buying him time.”

“James is doing what he must to become the most powerful King the Lyon Regime has ever seen. He will find what he’s looking for. And when he does you’re going to wish you believed in him to begin with.”

“I believe in logic Jelena,” Rowan snapped. “I’ve uncovered knowledge about this *Souffle de Vie* that no one else ever has. Even if James acquires all the pieces, the amount of energy flowing through iridium of that size and that purity will be catastrophic – not just for James but for anybody within a mere metre of him. It will obliterate an entire empire. That is the kind of magnitude this thing entails.”

“Now you’re sounding just like these superstitious Ophians,” she snapped. “That’s what they’ve been saying for years yet they drink from the source of its purity as if it were nothing!”

“That is different and you know it,” Rowan hissed. “I’m not here to convince you nor am I here to persuade you. But if my brother succeeds in this little endeavour which he will not, I don’t want to be another name on his long list of casualties.”

Jelena huffed in irritation.

“You don’t understand James. You never did.” Jelena rubbed her belly tenderly. “Once James acquires *Souffle de Vie*, he will be King of the Lyon, Marchesseault and Ophian Empire. He will complete what the Lyons were destined to do. He will rule the North, South, West, and the East. He will be *unstoppable*.”

Rowan’s eyes narrowed.

“With those savages at your side? I doubt that.”

Jelena frowned. The Outbacks were a...temporary alliance. Even James had told her so.

Rowan circled around her curiously – his lips turned up in a predatory smirk.

“You don’t care about the iridium,” he murmured his eyes flickering down to her abdomen and back to her face. “What exactly did James promise you?”

Jelena flushed.

“Is this about the child?”

“That doesn’t concern you Rowan,” Jelena snapped.

“Ah so it is,” Rowan chuckled.

“He will be heir to the Lyon empire!” Jelena yelled.

Rowan laughed mockingly at her. He reached in the cabinet above the sink for a bottle of wine and flitted around the kitchen making himself at home.

“*Your* heir?” he said scornfully. “James is playing you for a fool. He always has.”

“What do you mean?” Jelena screamed.

Nina had cowered behind the counter of the living quarters where they stood. She looked stricken.

“Oh so he *didn’t* tell you?”

Jelena was shaking. She could feel her heart thundering in her chest.

The footsteps at the door couldn’t have come at a better time and in seconds a large cloaked figure was entering the small living space.

Jelena’s anger could have put the depths of hell to shame with the fury that was pummelling through her veins.

James’ eyes widened when he spotted Rowan standing casually in his kitchen, a glass of wine in his hand.

“The fuck are you doing here?” James growled.

Rowan sipped his drink gracefully with a smirk.

“Would you believe it if I told you it's because I missed you?” he retorted.

James was ready to go off on his brother but Jelena couldn’t wait. She was livid.

“Do you have something to tell me James?” Jelena snapped. She glared at her husband.

James narrowed his eyes instantly.

“Are you talking to *me*?” he hissed.

Rowan watched the two of them with a glimmer in his eye. Oh he was enjoying this – Jelena could tell.

“Rowan tells me you haven’t been... honest with me.”

James' lip curled with disgust.

"Oh *darling*. Don't tell me you're naïve enough to believe him?"

"Stop doing that James," she shouted. "*He* will be heir to the throne right?" she yelled clasping her hands around her round belly.

James shot Rowan a murderous look.

"Of *course*. Now Jelena...don't be difficult. There's no need to raise your voice." Nina was shaking in the corner – watching the events unfold in terror. "You're scaring our daughter."

"The girl is dead right? Micah's whore."

Rowan looked amusedly at James.

"She will be. In due time."

"She's still *alive*?" Jelena screamed. "You told me she was dead James. You *told* me. You lied you -"

Before she could mutter another word James silenced her with a vicious slap to the face. Jelena was used to these slaps but still – for him to do it in front of company – it made humiliation bubble inside of her.

Rowan straightened immediately.

"James," he said coldly. "Control yourself."

Jelena was sobbing -- strings of vile curse words left her lips. She had felt sorry for the girl at first – but all that remorse – that empathy evaporated the minute Hartley himself had told her Micah's whore was carrying the heir to the Lyon empire. From the day Jelena had joined the Lyon family she had been nothing to them. A vessel to carry a male heir she struggled to conceive. And now that she was so close to securing a future for her son – some whore threatened to take it away from her? A mixed blood girl with no real tie to the Lyon family? For Gods sake she wasn't even *married* to the winter prince!

The girl had fooled Jelena –

She had played the part of a servant girl when in reality royal blood had flowed through her veins. Jelena had figured this out after a good bout of snooping around *Icedalar*. The fact that Hartley was willing to accept her and Micah's heir made Jelena's blood boil even more. How dare he. How dare *she*.

"I didn't lie to you *putain*," James spat. "I was ready to dispose of her that day in *Icedalar*. But Micah intervened as fucking usual," he cursed.

His eyes flickered back to Jelena's "But rest assured when our paths cross again – and it will - I'm going to kill her first," James hissed. "Then Micah will follow. It's about time that little *fil de pute* gets what he deserves."

Rowan frowned opting to take a slow drink from his glass.

“He took the North away from me and now he wants to take away what father plans to leave behind for *my* heir? For his fucking brat? I won’t fucking allow it.”

“Dramatics dramatics,” Rowan murmured.

Jelena continued to sob quietly clutching her cheek where a stinging radiated throughout her skull. The look in James’ eyes frightened her. Each day that went by took with it a small piece of her husband and left him with only a shell of who he used to be. It was as if each step closer to iridium -- to this power her husband lusted over for years-- took him one step further away from himself and closer to his moniker, Trius Sian.

“No one will take this empire from me,” James growled. “With iridium so close in my grasp I will become King of the most powerful empire. Long gone are the days of playing second best to Hartley. I’ll do what mother always wanted for me,” James looked directly at Rowan when he spoke. “She believed in me. She knew *I* would be the one to make her proud...”

“Mother was power hungry like you James....and look where it got her – buried six feet under with the rest of her ancestors.”

The anger in Rowan’s tone was apparent.

“She didn’t have what I did...what I do now,” James muttered. “I have the largest army of any empire with a battalion that remains unmatched. I have the tools to satisfy every insatiable desire to get what I want Rowan. And you know I *always* get what I want.” His dark brown eyes flickered with need – the same colour as his brother who stood across from him.

“Remember what father used to say?” James murmured.

Rowan remained silent, his eyes vacant.

“War is like a game of chess. Every piece on the board has the potential to move, every piece an opportunity to win – but some pieces *must* make greater sacrifices than others for the King to succeed.”

“You’re forgetting something James,” Rowan said softly placing his empty glass down on the table with a soft clink. “Father saw every piece on that chess board as a pawn – including his queen.”

“Don’t preach to me Rowan,” James snapped. “I’m well aware of what father believed. I gave you the choice to stand with me before I left Questershire and you *made* your choice.”

The glare James had fixed on Rowan made Jelena turn as stiff as an icicle.

Rowan frowned.

“You forced me James,” Rowan growled. “I once stood beside a brother who shared the same beliefs as I did, not a power hungry warlord with an alias issuing bounties and burning cities

to ash on a whim.”

Rowan closed the distance between himself and his brother – their noses inches apart.

“Go on then,” James said between gritted teeth. “Do what you do best Rowan. Run from your responsibilities. Just know, if our paths cross again I will be the one forced to take action.”

Rowan stepped back his face carefully melting back into something unreadable.

“Father always said you were his favourite opponent in chess,” James muttered. More so than our baby brother.” He paused for several seconds. “But there will be no stalemates this time Rowan,” James continued. “So keep your knights close and your queen closer.”

Rowan's eyes flickered to Jelena and the woman saw the smallest glimmer of something in his eyes. “Of course I was,” Rowan muttered. Father and I were on equal footing from the start. Always were and always will be. Nothing has changed James. You're all pawns to me – just like we were all pawns to him.”

Jelena watched for several more seconds as the two stared at each other long and hard. It looked like James wanted to say something more but ultimately decided against it. What they shared was something unspoken. It sent a shiver down Jelena's spine.

She was unsurprised when she heard the door slam shut moments later leaving her in the kitchen alone with her husband once again.

Jelena had been crying softly till then – trying her best to mute her whimpers.

“Quiet,” James hissed. “Or I'll give you a real reason to cry.”

Nina's soft whimpers from behind the counter seemed to soften the mood and Jelena trembled when James strode over to her.

“Viens ici.”

James scooped up their daughter into his arms and walked past Jelena as if she weren't even present.

However Jelena had gone very still. It was something James had said in passing that jogged her memory. Something relating to the Marchesseault halfbreed.

Micah intervened as usual.

Jelena felt her face heat up.

Not letting another second go by Jelena waited until James disappeared into their bedroom before she dashed outside once again – slipping past the doors as quietly as possible.

“Wait,” she called out holding her belly and her light airy floor length dress in the other.

“Rowan!”

The stifling heat surrounded her but Jelena couldn't be bothered by it now. Not when her mind had come to a sudden startling conclusion.

Rowan was almost at the end of the pathway before he turned around at the sound of his name.

He waited at the end of the pathway. Under no circumstances would Rowan come running to anyone's beck and call – not even for his pregnant sister in law.

It took her a while before she got to him – her cheeks flushed from the effort required from her.

“You did this,” she hissed. “You're the reason that Marchesseault girl is still alive. I know it.”

Rowan laughed in her face.

“All that effort and *that's* what you came here to tell me.” He shook his head as in disbelief. “If you think I care that much about a mixed blood girl with a whore mother then you're mistaken.”

Jelena wasn't sure where her surge of confidence came from. She wasn't sure if it was a result of the tight slap James had given her or the hormones raging in her blood. But either way – she wasn't cowering any longer. And certainly not to Rowan.

“I didn't say you care about *her*,” Jelena muttered. “But if Micah instructed you to – I have no doubt in my mind that you would do it.”

Rowan's features twisted in a way that irked Jelena but she stood her ground. If there was anyone that knew the dynamic and the personalities of Hartley's three boys – it was Jelena. She knew them so well in fact that she had missed what was lying right in front of her face. Gone were the days of underestimating herself and cowering in fear. Jelena was happy she met Micah's whore. The girl had been right. Jelena had inside access that no one else had. She could play just as dirty as her husband and his family.

“I don't work for *anyone*, let alone Micah,” he sneered. “Whatever gave you that absurd idea?”

“You think I'm stupid?” she barked.

Rowan raised an eyebrow.

“Is that supposed to be a trick question?”

“I see you two,” Jelena seethed. “You and Micah whisper around corners, plot your own little plans and execute them quietly. You leave James out of it each time. But it stops now. I'll tell James everything I know. I *heard* you two in *Icedalar*.”

Rowan went quiet. Quickly his look of mild surprise turned into something ominous. His smile curved upwards slowly.

“Oh Jelena,” he said with a wicked grin. “You don’t want to play those games with me.”

He leaned forward to brush his gloved fingers against her stinging cheek.

“I know you helped that mixed blood whore escape. You’re the only person who would have had anything to gain from it,” Jelena muttered.

Rowan’s smile grew wider.

“Tell me dear Jelena,” he continued. “What would *I* have gained from that?”

Jelena hesitated. She knew her hunch was right – she could feel it.

“Micah’s trust,” she finished. “You had to gain his trust somehow after that fiasco with Quinn Marchesseault.”

Jelena ignored the low rumble coming from the wolf beside Rowan. It added a layer of intimidation to the whole confrontation that quite frankly Rowan didn’t particularly *need*. He was intimidating enough on his own.

“Quinn wouldn’t cooperate,” Rowan said slowly. “And believe me, Micah knows how impatient I can be when my subjects work against me rather than with me.” He leaned in closer. “But trust me Jelena, my baby brother wouldn’t hold that against me.”

“You forget Rowan,” she continued “that I was *there* that day in *Icedalar*. I spoke with the girl even. And you know what... I *saw* her. *Both* of you that night,” she laughed bitterly. “I hadn’t thought too much about it after. I had believed she had run off maybe – got shipped off to some other remote place. But then James told me that you had made plans to get *rid* of her-” She laughed again – almost hysterically.

Rowan had gone silent – but Jelena was on too much of a high to notice the way Rowan’s expression darkened.

“And then... when I hear now that she’s suddenly alive and carrying a *child*. Well now...” she giggled. “Now I know something is up. Oh yes. I know you had something to do with this. James thinks it was Micah...” she said menacingly. “But it was *you*.”

“Oh here it is,” Rowan whispered with a dark gleam in his eye. The poison in his smile was unmistakable. “One person’s word against the other.”

Jelena was openly glaring.

“Your story is a good one,” he mused with a grin. “I applaud you for it –truly. The problem with your little... anecdote is in its immense disregard for credibility.” Rowan brushed a stray chestnut curl that had fallen loose on his forehead and tucked it daintily behind his ear. “You see the problem with our little situation is that it is a dyadic conflict. My word against yours,” he clarified. “It takes two to form a group – but only one to end it.”

Jelena narrowed her eyes. Rowan was doing what he did best. She had seen him do it too many times to prisoners. He confused them –distorted their version of reality to the point that

they forgot what the truth was to begin with. It was effective – when the subject was not aware of what was being done to them. But Jelena knew what he was doing.

“Why did you do it?” Jelena muttered. “Why was her life worth saving? Why was her child worth protecting?”

Rowan pursed his lips for a moment. He turned as if in thought. The few stray curls that had fallen loose from his gelled hair fluttered in the warm humid breeze.

Jelena could catch the scent of his cologne where she stood.

“Did James ever tell you about our childhood chess competitions growing up?”

Jelena opened her mouth in surprise. She hoped this wasn’t another one of Rowan’s tactics to throw her off guard.

“Yes,” she sniffed. “He did. He told me it was His Grace’s way of introducing you to the basics of ruling a kingdom. He made all of you play as children...”

Rowan hummed in amusement.

“Introduced us,” Rowan commented dryly. “An interesting choice of words to use in conjunction with my father.”

Jelena shivered. She knew her father in law. She knew she wasn’t going to like what she heard next.

“Where is this going?” she muttered.

“Father let us play,” Rowan continued as if uninterrupted. “He used to tell us that the chess board was our kingdom and that each time we challenged each other – we played for our lives. That each little piece on the board was our soul cut into sixteen pieces.”

He smiled after this.

“For every loss one of us suffered – we would be subjected to a punishment of sixteen blows – a punishment for every bit of our soul we conceded to the opponent.”

Jelena closed her eyes tightly. She didn’t want to hear it-

“James and I would drag it out when we were boys” Rowan continued lowly. “We would try to alternate on days we would win so as not to get punished two days in a row. Sometimes that wasn’t always possible.”

He sighed as if recalling a fond memory.

“But father caught on to what we were doing quickly. It took a while before James and I figured out a way to continually stalemate each other.”

Rowan smiled.

“But not Micah,” he said softly. “No. Micah figured out a way to win each and every time. Almost effortlessly if I might add.”

Jelena tensed.

“When he was born – it was as if everything James and I had grown up with – all those punishments – those torturous years of learning how to evade it all just... restarted. As if all that effort all those tears, all that *bloodshed* was for nothing.”

Jelena looked away disgusted.

"I resented Micah at first," Rowan hummed in amusement. "James and I often used to think of scenarios on how we'd get rid of him together. But those were childish fantasies," he chuckled. "With time I came to realize he held more power within his little body than James and I ever did...ever would. He had Hartley behind him. We had no one."

Since Jelena had joined the Lyon family she had seen the favouritism exhibited over Micah from Hartley. He had sent James on weak useless missions – preferring to send Micah to briefings overseas and taking the time to involve him on Hartley’s latest monarchical developments. Jelena could always feel James’ simmering rage for his youngest brother – but she slowly began to realize with time that it was something that ran deeper than mere envy. Even with James living his whole life in the public eye and Micah behind closed doors till recently – they still embraced the winter prince over her husband. The public's preference to see Micah as the official King of the Lyon Monarchy was evident even amongst the staff. It was the last straw when Hartley handed the useless leadership duties of the West to her husband and bestowed the prestigious Northern Land to Micah including the coveted position as CEO as trade.

“Brain ticks faster than a clock that boy.”

It was Hartley’s favourite line to recite about his youngest son. Jelena almost missed Logan. He was one of the few members of the Lyon monarchy who was bold enough to put Micah in his place. Speaking to Rowan now reminded Jelena of past memories – remembrances that she wished she could forget.

“Oh look at him Hartley,” Logan growled, his deep blue eyes darkening under the candlelit ambiance of the outdoor courtyard in Questershire. “The boy has gone soft now that he’s left your care. I bet it’s all his dick knows too.”

Hartley looked over coldly.

“I am,” he said in a voice as chilly as his expression. “Micah has no indulgences for those kind of pursuits. He is far too focused on his work.”

“Ah yes,” Logan said dryly. “Your little money maker. He’s been a busy boy - almost as good as I am at closing deals.” He took a long swig of his drink his blue eyes crinkling with delight.

“What did you school him on this time brother?” Logan cackled. “Gross domestic product?”

The sound of metal against metal echoed through the night air accompanied by the soft sound of a sharp inhale or breathy exhale.

Jelena hated when Hartley's boys sparred outside after dinner. She didn't want to be the one to clean James' wounds following a battle with his brothers. He always took things too far.

There was a new girl sitting across from Jelena today.

The girl was pretty – loose brown hair framing a soft oval shaped face with full lips and large blue eyes. She kept shooting shy smiles at the winter prince who all but ignored her since the dinner began. He didn't even look her way. Not once. Jelena smiled to herself. She lost count of how many maidens of royal blood Hartley brought to the table to introduce to his youngest son – only for them to leave in tears when the moon rose high in the sky when night fell.

Rowan shared that smug look on his face too. Jelena always wondered how he weaselled his way out of an orchestrated betrothal by his father. Perhaps some perk by being middle child.

Micah had sheathed his long ice blue sword back into its casing following a spar with Rowan -- Micah's blade like a flash of blue lightening against Rowan's slim silver one.

Micah smirked at Rowan who gave his brother a firm pat on the back as he too sheathed his blade back into its casing. Micah and Rowan's Wolamutes sat regally in the evening glow, the white one with its blue eyes watching the proceedings quietly – the other licking its paws. Napoléon went hunting around this time – that black wolf always had an insatiable appetite for meat. It rarely interacted with its siblings. Not so different from her husband.

James watched the two of them quietly – his fingers tapping the table impatiently.

Micah and Rowan had put on a spectacular display. The guards were behind them immediately to see to the superficial cuts or bruises that may have ensued following their match. Both declined politely before seating themselves at the table.

"Gibbs," Hartley said softly. He had turned his smouldering brown eyes on Micah's closest advisor. "Thoughts?"

Gibbs cleared his throat quietly.

"A fine display by the princes," he mused in his rough voice. "Both would be a force to be reckoned with if unfortunate enough to cross their paths in battle."

Logan scoffed at the comment.

"That looked to me like two spoiled brats fighting over the last piece of the pie," he chuckled to himself. "Not two men in the throes of battle."

He turned his eyes to Hartley.

"Remember what father used to say," he said quietly. "It's not a real battle until a little blood is spilled."

Hartley smiled at this.

“I do enjoy seeing my sons bolster their sword skills but I fear there is some truth to Logans words. Would it be imprudent of me to assume that you both.... coincidentally missed one another?”

“I think the correct term is “mutually” missed one another,” Logan snickered.

Rowan laughed tucking his damp brown hair behind his ears. Micah said nothing.

“That would be quite the feat to achieve during swordplay wouldn’t it Uncle?” Rowan chuckled. “And as you know when Micah lunges – he doesn’t miss. I have simply mastered the art of evasion.”

Logan frowned.

“Oh you have indeed,” the blond haired man said dryly. “A shame he couldn’t give you a good knock to the balls, maybe then you’d know where the proper place to stick it is.”

Jelena reddened.

Rowan smiled pleasantly unperturbed by the few laughs at the table it earned him.

“The proper place?” Rowan questioned. “Enlighten me Uncle, I’d love to hear it. You know how much I adore soaking up your ever sought after knowledge.”

Logan bristled at his nephew. Jelena stifled rubbing her fingers against her temple. If there was anyone who could forge a war of words to last for an entire dinner – it would be Rowan and Logan.

“Stick to your little chemistry set boy,” Logan replied tersely. “Maybe there’s a potion down there that makes it go up when you see a cunt.”

“Forgive my brother,” Hartley purred to the girl whose mouth had dropped open in shock at the obscene comment. “He gets a little... excited when guests come over.”

She shrank back in her seat. Jelena didn’t blame her – Hartley’s lack of facial expressions made it difficult to tell if he was being kind or menacing.

Rowan reached over to pour himself a glass of wine. “Come visit me in the laboratory sometime. I love showing off my potions – especially to guests as eager as you.”

“I hope your expertise there exceeds your swordplay.” Logan retorted.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

There was a dangerous lilt to Rowans voice and Jelena saw the way Logan backed down immediately. He was no fool. Rowan was not to be prodded.

“Wine?” Rowan asked with a tilt of his head as he offered the bottle to his uncle. Logan frowned turning his gaze elsewhere.

“Easy there Uncle,” James drawled. “Rowan knows what he’s doing. You mustn’t judge him based on his preferences.”

Logan scoffed.

“At least he has a preference,” Logan muttered. “With this one here I don’t know which way he swings.”

Logan’s eerie troublesome smile returned but this time it was directed at Micah and Jelena felt another headache come on once again. Logan was really making his rounds tonight.

“Such a pretty thing,” Logan mocked turning to Hartley. “That’s what they used to call him as a boy,” Logan breathed leaning over the table closer to Micah. “You know who else was bestowed that comment?” Logan continued. “My little sister.”

“Logan that’s quite enough,” Hartley said coldly.

*“Un petit agneau,” Logan muttered. “C’est ainsi qu’ils l’ont appelée.”**

“Little lambs and little girls are pretty things,” Logan continued. “Not men.”

Jelena could see the half smile on James face.

“Es-tu un petit agneau Micah?” Logan breathed leaning over to caress his face in a mocking gesture.*

The table had gone silent including the guards who had come twice already to replace the waxy candle columns that had leaked down the slim pillars to form a puddle of hardened wax on the stone table.

Logan’s face twisted in disgust.

“I wonder what your mother would have had to say about you. Had you not killed her she probably would have been sitting at this table with us right now.”

The entire table tensed and Jelena could feel her heart pounding in her ears. If there was one topic that was not to be brought up, it was that of the late Queen around Micah’s presence.

Micah turned his head to rest his eyes on Logan. It was the first real reaction from him all night and Jelena could feel the tension between them like flint against steel.

“You always looked nothing like her,” Logan murmured quietly. “No. In fact you always looked like-“

“Logan, mon frère chéri,” Hartley murmured in a voice as frozen as his expression, “I think it’s time we wrap up our little evening meal. We must return our guest home before nightfall.”

"We?" Logan sniffed. "Get your boys to do that Hartley." The blond Lyon sighed dramatically taking his time to rise from his seat.

"What were you going to say?"

Micah's soft husky voice carried over the table and Jelena noticed Logan's immediate discomfort.

His eyes flashed to Hartley's once before resting on his nephew once again. Was that fear Jelena sensed in his expression?

Logan recovered quickly – taking a little too much time to fix his collar in place.

"I...nothing. I have nothing more to say on that matter."

"How unusual," Micah murmured. "You always have something to say – regardless of the matter at hand."

This earned him a chuckle from around the table.

"Well said brother," Rowan chuckled.

"You watch out Hartley," Logan growled turning to Hartley. "Your precious boy will be your undoing one day. Mark my words."

It had been one of the last times they had been altogether. It would only be weeks later that Logan Lyon met his end in the Western cape of the Lyon regime. Jelena wished she had paid more attention – she wished she could have seen the way Rowan and Micah interacted – how much the two of them really shared in comparison to their eldest brother.

"You always defended Micah. Protected him." Jelena's voice had softened somewhat. "How could your loyalties lie with him when James went through so much to do the same for you as children?"

"You can't let sentiments get in the way of survival Jelena," Rowan said quietly.

Jelena felt her face pale.

"James never had a chance did he?" she choked quietly. "Hartley would have never made him King."

Rowan said nothing. She knew she had her answer right there.

"Go back to Questershire," Rowan murmured. "Take Nina with you."

"Where will you go?" Jelena whispered. She had a feeling she already knew.

"Peréal. Micah and I have unfinished business to resolve." He paused, his dark brown eyes appearing black in the dim ambiance. "I wished it never had to come down to this but I always knew it would. And I've chosen my side."

Without another word Rowan turned around and disappeared into the night. His wolf was a shadow to his master - no different from a knight to his horse.

Peréal

The corridors of the Marchesseault castle were eerily quiet. Esperanza found herself wandering the halls alongside Cécily – the two in deep conversation regarding the political state of affairs.

It was all one big shit show.

“What was Master James thinking?” Cécily choked looking at Esperanza with her wide blue eyes. “He’s basing all of his actions on a myth. *A myth.*”

Esperanza sighed.

They had gotten closer ever since Micah ordered them to accompany him to *Peréal*. Micah’s little pet had seemed so shocked when she saw Esperanza again – and the old woman had to admit – she was not expecting to see the girl with pinkened cheeks and a massive swollen belly. It shocked Esperanza more than anything.

Micah had said nothing of her state to Esperanza and with bitterness the old woman realized that Cécily had known before her.

Esperanza found it even more comical when she arrived and discovered the girl was a Marchesseault. Esperanza didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. The girl was truly full of surprises.

She was as beautiful as Esperanza remembered with her thick dark curls and her freckled cheeks – and those wide brown eyes. It reminded Esperanza of her own daughter she left behind all those years ago. Mollie looked barely seventeen with her small frame and youthful face. Esperanza worried for her. She had seen what happened to young mothers who were unprepared for motherhood. They self destructed. She hoped Mollie wouldn’t be one of them.

“I think Master Lyon is smitten with her,” Cécily muttered to herself tucking a strand of mousy brown hair behind her ear.

“What makes you think that?” Esperanza snapped.

“*Please,*” Cécily said rolling her eyes. “Have you seen the way he looks at her? You should have heard the demands he asked of me in *Icedalar*. It was as if Master Lyon had been replaced by someone else! Cécily run her bath, Cécily fluff her pillows, Cécily make her tea, Cécily make sure she is warm. My jaw nearly dropped.”

This was news to Esperanza who had experienced a different dynamic between the two in Questershire a year ago.

“Master Lyon doesn’t love,” Esperanza said wanly. “Don’t be foolish.”

Cécily huffed in irritation. “I didn’t say it was *love* Esperanza. It’s something... else. I don’t think there’s a word that exists for it yet.”

Esperanza smiled at the girls thoughts. She hadn’t realized how much she missed a womans proximity.

“Oh really?” Esperanza said with a smile. “And what would that be?”

They continued down the hallway towards the kitchens.

“They feel each others aura you know?” Cécily murmured. Esperanza raised an eyebrow. “They don’t love each other...they...*sense* each other. They perceive each others emotions. And it isn’t always warm and fuzzy. But it's strong. They challenge each other. They feed off each other. They *know* each other.”

Esperanza frowned. Cécily turned her wide blue eyes onto Esperanza’s.

“Sometimes to know is to love.”

Esperanza looked away. The girl had begun to chatter about something else as they finished their duties in the kitchen and did their final rounds near the front of the castle.

Her husband had told her that once long ago – the night of their wedding.

I know you.

It hadn’t seemed like much then, but as Esperanza thought about it – it certainly carried a lot more weight than she had first considered.

Cécily had stopped chattering and Esperanza picked up on the silence instantly.

“Cécily? What’s wrong?”

Cécily’s face had twisted in horror halting the old woman in her tracks. Esperanza turned her gaze forward and followed the girls gaze.

In front of them was a glistening trail of blood that had smeared across the floor and down the staircase leading to the courtyard. The castle was nearly vacant with the King, Prince Micah and the cavalry guards gone. That could only mean one thing.

“Get the medic Cécily,” she snapped. “Send a guard out to the prince. *Immédiatement*. There’s no time to waste.”

First off, Happy International Womens Day! This was a very plot driven chapter that was necessary for the story. There is a lot to unpack here and a lot of hidden meaning behind a lot of words. It also offers a rare glimpse into Rowans relationship with his brothers which up till now has been very ambiguous. As always, thank you for the kind words and messages. You all keep me motivated to keep these chapters rolling xx

Translations in Order:

"Are you involved in what happened here?"*

"There is an emergency!"*

"That's what they called her.*

"Are you a little lamb Micah?*

"Now?"*

"Your hand"*

"Go back to sleep. It's late."*

"Where is Papa?"*

"Be careful."*

Chapter 47: Argent

Chapter Summary

Mollie gives birth.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: the birth is a little disturbing. Be aware

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Esperanza had never run so fast in her life.

“Where is she?” the old woman hissed. She had witnessed and aided in many births over the course of her lifetime. Hell, she was there when Micah Lyon himself was a newborn – just hours old. She would be there to witness his firstborn when it made its own appearance into the world.

The Marchesseault midwives glared at Esperanza and Cécily who had sobbed after seeing Mollie in the state she was.

“She’ll want us to be with her,” Cécily begged. *“S’il vous plaît. Un visage familier.”*

Mollie’s whimpers could be heard from beyond the massive chamber the guards of the castle had turned into a birthing room only weeks ago.

The guards exchanged a look.

“Un moment. Nous allons le confirmer avec la matron.”

Esperanza growled in irritation. She despised being in foreign land for this particular reason. But she had little choice.

It would be over an hour later that the doors once again creaked opened.

“La matron a approuvé. Entrer.”

Esperanza and Cécily rushed inside.

Mollie was on the bed – several matrons around her and the head midwife in between her legs which were spread wide on the bed.

“How are you child?” Esperanza murmured placing a gentle weathered hand on Mollie’s flushed cheek.

“They gave me something to numb the pain,” she managed between heavy breaths. “It---it’s helped me a lot.”

Esperanza leaned over the girl. On the medical table was indeed several familiar plants Esperanza recognized. They had been ground and mixed with a saline for administration. The old woman was familiar with the numbing agents. It was easily applied to the patient via syringe.

Cécily was stroking her thick dark brown curls away from her face. Several tendrils were slick with sweat and plastered to the girl’s cheek and neck. Her chest was heaving and the pain in her eyes was evident. Her strength was waning. Esperanza could tell.

“You have to push,” said the strict midwife in a tone that was far from maternal.

“I *am*, ” Mollie wailed throwing her head back.

Esperanza sighed. The girl was still so headstrong – even in the pain that she was in.

Mollie’s whimpers began to increase in pitch as the midwife between her legs began to bark orders at her.

“Almost there princess.”

Mollie had squeezed her eyes shut and in a gesture that pulled at Esperanza’s heartstrings, she clutched onto her hand like a frightened child to their mother.

She pulled with what little strength she had on Esperanza’s hand forcing her to bend over. With widened eyes the woman leaned down.

“There’s something I have to tell you,” Mollie whispered. Her fingernails dug painfully into Esperanza’s weathered ones.

“What is it my dear?” Esperanza whispered replacing the cooling cloth on Mollie’s head with a fresh one.

“There...there’s...two...”

She winced and gasped as the matron beside her snapped at Mollie to keep her legs apart.

“Two what Mollie?” Esperanza murmured. The girl’s grip was surprisingly strong and Esperanza winced at the death grip she had on her fingers.

“She’s having two babies,” the midwife snapped. “Twins. And *encore princesse*. Push!”

Mollie cried out her entire body shaking.

Esperanza had frozen still. Cécily looked up at her at the same time. Their eyes mirrored their fear.

The sound of a crying infant filled the air.

“Cécily....” Mollie whimpered.

“I know *Mademoiselle*,” the girl said gently. She turned to the midwife who had swaddled the baby efficiently and moved to cut the cord. “Let me hold her.”

Esperanza swallowed the lump in her throat and turned to Mollie who’s tear streaked face was focused on Cécily.

Cécily was smiling down at the child whose vitals were being assessed.

“You didn’t tell the prince.”

It was a statement, not a question and Esperanza could see the stubbornness within Mollie's wide brown eyes.

She turned her head sharply towards Esperanza.

“No. He doesn’t get to find out. Not until-“

“He’s on his way,” Esperanza whispered fearfully. “He’ll be here any minute...when you went into labour I sent a message. I thought...I thought –“

Mollie’s eyes turned as wide as saucers.

“You *what?*” Mollie cried out. “You *told* him?”

Esperanza knew Micah and she knew the girl had done a very foolish thing keeping something like this from him.

“He *can*’t know. Not yet!” Mollie wailed.

“Hush,” Esperanza said urgently. “I’ll try to stall him. Just...calm yourself. Everything is going to be okay.”

The girl looked far from placated.

Esperanza didn’t know who she was trying to convince. She just hoped this mistake didn’t come back to bite the girl – or worse-- the both of them.

Esperanza heard him the minute the doors of the castle swung open. Within seconds of his arrival she flitted to his side.

“Master Lyon –“

“Where is she?” he whipped out. He was striding down the hallway his eyes wandering the empty castle in the direction of Mollie’s quarters. He didn’t even bother looking at her.

“She’s in her quarters...”

Esperanza was shaking in terror. She worried for the girl – the prince already looked irritated.

The shouts of the strict matrons alerted their position and Esperanza saw Micah turn in the direction of the noise.

Micah’s eyes were cold and stormy. His thick hair was windblown and tousled and his cheeks were stained with a blush from his haste. His lips were pulled tightly into a frown – his dark brows knitted together in fear? Irritation? Annoyance?

Esperanza was panicking. She knew that expression. She gulped. This wasn’t going to end well.

She sprinted after him as he darted down the corridor in the direction of Mollie's room.

“Master Lyon! There’s something I must tell you-“

She stepped in front of him.

Esperanza trembled when she saw him freeze in place - his expression stony.

“What is it Esperanza?” he said sharply. “Can it wait?” His eyes flickered towards the door – his expression preoccupied. “Is she still in labour?”

Esperanza hesitated. She eyed the spattered blood that decorated his usually pristine clothing.

“She’s...well...”

Esperanza bit her tongue at the expression he had fixed on her. She felt a shiver go down her spine.

“Go on. Spit it out.”

Esperanza blinked up in fear. The way he said those words – so biting – knowingly. He knew her too well. She was silly to think she could ever get a fast one past Micah Lyon.

Esperanza saw no other option. He’d find out soon enough -- and rather from her than a stranger.

“She’s... having twins. She was... pregnant with twins.”

She didn’t have to look at Micah to sense the drastic change in his aura.

Mollie’s soft whimpers filtered through the doors and Esperanza looked up through half lidded eyes to see a rather frightening expression cross the prince’s face. If there was one

thing the winter prince couldn't stand – it was deception. And oh had he a temper when he reached it.

"I... didn't know Master Lyon I swear it," she said bowing immediately. "She kept it from us – told only her royal staff. I found out not long before your arrival."

He said nothing. On his face was a smirk – something forced and plastered. It made Esperanza's skin tingle.

Oh you poor poor girl.

"Thank you Esperanza. That will do."

Without another word he was through the door and closing it behind him.

Where was she? Where was her baby? Where did they take her?

Mollie was panting -- the dull throbbing pain in her gut was returning. She needed more of that numbing stuff they had given her earlier.

"Cécily..." she called out weakly.

The brunette was standing in the far corner of the room rocking the bundle gently in her arms. She was surrounded by a swarm of midwives as they gushed over the new arrival.

Mollie's vision was hazy and the pain in her gut was enough to make her want to succumb to the darkness. But her baby. Her baby was here – *finally*.

Cécily looked up at Mollie briefly. Why wouldn't they let Mollie see her? Mollie knitted her brows in frustration.

"I...let me...see...her."

"Attendez princesse, you still have a long way to go."

Before Cécily could take another step closer – the doors to the chamber flew open with a force that sent a cold gust through the stuffy room.

Mollie's expression turned from confusion into pure horror when she saw who was standing before her with eyes glassy and vacant and an expression that was royally pissed off.

The midwife who had been coaxing Mollie through her contractions looked briefly at the prince before returning to nestle herself in between Mollie's legs. Mollie was shaking. She had seen that expression on his face once before -- on the balcony of Questershire. Her heart was pounding in her chest.

"You won't want to be in here *votre majesté*," the midwife said crisply. "Most men fail to stomach it."

“I’m not most men,” he said flatly. He strode confidently into the room and straight to Mollie’s side. He looked windblown and slightly out of breath.

Mollie looked in surprise. Was that blood splattered against his clothes?

The fear of his anger and the pain from her abdomen left little room for Mollie to think about other things. She felt a sudden shift inside her belly that made her cry out in pain.

Her two other midwives – Margot and Iris-- exchanged an uncomfortable glance. Mollie knew why. It was highly unusual for men to be in the room when woman gave birth.

Mollie cowered backwards when a cold pale palm cupped her sweaty cheek and tilted her head to the side till her eyes met chilly green ones. The pain in her body was unbearable.

“What did I tell you about keeping secrets from me Mollie?”

Mollie stared at him in horror.

He was doing this now? While she was in fucking labour?

His eyes were oh so cold and Mollie could tell by the way his lips curved upwards that any attempt at damage control was completely out the window.

“I’m going to administer you another dose,” the midwife informed her bringing the soft syringe towards Mollie’s curved belly. “It will numb you from the waist down once again and allow me to deliver your second baby.”

Micah turned to the woman before Mollie could respond.

“Leave it,” he said firmly. “She’s delivering. Without the pain reliever.”

Mollie jerked as the midwife looked up at the prince in utter shock – her fingers probing Mollie from somewhere far below.

“Your majesty,” she stammered. “I...that is...the child is not in the correct position. I must perform a breech extraction for the second child. It is much larger than the first. It will be very painful.”

The effects of the last dose of medication were waning quickly and Mollie could already feel the tearing pain between her legs spreading quickly. Her blood went ice cold.

Micah looked down at her callously.

“Good.”

Mollie simply stared at the prince. Dread filled her as she processed his words. The midwife in front of her seemed equally appalled and before Mollie could say a word Cécily was at her side.

“Master Lyon you mustn’t,” she begged. She had flitted to Mollie’s side instantly. Mollie had begun to tremble, the pain intensifying with each breath she inhaled. “Think about your child.”

“*Enough*,” Micah snapped. “You dare question my orders?” he had turned his infuriated gaze on Cécily who backed up and cowered into the corner.

Mollie was fully trembling as the midwife worked hard between her legs to coax her second baby from her womb.

“The child isn’t in the right position and you’re dilating quickly,” she muttered, the unmistakable tinge of fear in her voice. “I...I have to proceed.”

“Wait-“ Mollie choked. “Please. Micah *please. Don’t do this.*” Her breaths were ragged and her body was quaking with fear. “I’m sorry- I’m *sorry.*”

“Shh,” he whispered threading his fingers through her sweat soaked curls. Mollie openly sobbed. The midwife had locked her ankles in place so she was spread apart completely. Oh she could feel it. Every stretch -- every movement -- every tear. She felt as if she were being ripped apart from the inside. Warmth was blossoming around her thighs. The smell of blood was overpowering her senses. “I’ve given you liberties. Too many, and I’ve let it go. But for you to hide *this* from me...”

The pain was excruciating. Mollie began to scream.

“Hold her down,” the midwife snapped. “On both sides.”

It was as if the numbing that had spread throughout the lower half of her body for the delivery of her first infant had all but evaporated. The pain setting on her was like a knife through her uterus – inching off bit by bit of her internal flesh as the child inside of her writhed.

What was supposed to be something beautiful had in a matter of minutes slowly descended into a graphic blood churning nightmare.

Micah was holding her down on her right with Cécily on her left. Whatever the midwife was doing between her legs was like a scalpel against the space between her thighs.

Mollie's vision began to dot with blackness -- her hearing going in and out of focus. The blood curling screams around the room felt like background noise to her she thrashed and screamed her throat raw.

She would never recover from this. She was sure of it.

“Please. Please, please, *please.*”

She was begging as she sobbed, clutching Micah’s hands and crying her forgiveness. His cologne surrounded her – providing a brief relief from the scent of blood that lay heavy in the room.

She could have been rousing a statue for all the response she was getting from him.

“Hold her still,” the midwife yelled above Mollie’s blood curling screams.

“Why is there so much blood?” she heard the prince snap as she continued to thrash in his vice-like grip. Her senses were waning -- she could feel only a jagged ripping pain from below.

Micah’s hold on her shaking broken body did little to settle her trembling muscles.

"No...no no no no no."

Mollie moaned and writhed and screamed. She could no longer distinguish her own words from the buzzing of voices around her.

Mollie spared a glance down through her blurred vision seeing only blood stained sheets and red soaked surgical gloves moving somewhere deep within her womb.

Her vision went black.

Esperanza had stepped outside to breathe in fresh air. Her eyes caught that of the wolf that had been running laps around the courtyard. Its snowy white coat glistened in the crisp night air. It must have been close to dawn by now. Mollie had been in labour for some time now.

It bounded up to Esperanza happily - its tail wagging. She smiled down at the animal as it brushed against her legs. Theo's blue eyes blinked up at the woman knowingly -- her fluffy head tilted to the side. Theo was not a vicious creature -- she was not trained to be. It was all an illusion. Esperanza was one of the few who knew this. To everyone else she was a beast that was to be feared, but Micah did not raise her like James did Napoléon. *That* beast was a killing machine and Esperanza had seen it rip prisoners apart limb after limb. Micah's words rang clear in her head as she brushed a hand lovingly over her snow white fur.

I did not teach her to kill. The line between instinct and learned behaviour is blurred. What's stopping them from doing what they've been taught to do to the very person who reared them?

Thinking about the winter prince made another surge of emotions rear up inside of Esperanza. She had seen the fire in his eyes earlier.

“Oh Micah,” she sighed sliding her palms down her cheeks. “What have you done?”

“Esperanza!”

The old woman turned around to see a wide eyed Cécily in front of her. Blood soaked her sleeves and Esperanza paled instantly.

“We need you.”

She didn't waste another second.

When Esperanza burst into Mollie's room – what she saw would haunt her for years to come.

Esperanza heard her screams the minute she returned inside the walls of the castle – but to see Mollie shaking and jerking against the restraints they had attached to her. It made Esperanza want to slit someones throat.

She turned to see the midwife -- her one hand firmly depressed on the girls abdomen and the other deep within her uterus.

Micah was holding her down as Mollie screamed and sobbed helplessly. Blood soaked the white sheets beneath her.

The girl had gripped the edges of the bed, her knuckles strained tight against her skin. She had leaned over the bed to retch as she moaned in pain.

Esperanza had reached her last straw.

“That’s enough.”

Her eyes met Micah’s.

Thankfully he didn't stop her when Esperanza took it upon herself to pick up the syringe and administer it to the girl who had gone alarmingly limp.

She continued to whimper and cry as the midwife reached in skillfully between her legs and pulled.

Esperanza's throat swelled when she watched the child enter the world feet first and covered in thick viscous blood.

The midwife turned to Esperanza.

“It's a boy.”

It was the whispering that triggered her.

The whispers of past memories and sweet lullabies that rose above the rushing sounds of waterfall ridden forests amongst a lush greenery. It was the feeling of soft earth beneath her toes, a sensation that compelled even the most materialistic person to appreciate the simplistic normalcies of the common woman. She had caught sight of her reflection in the glistening water. Her cheeks flushed with pink, her skin a healthy deep complexion from the bright sun. Her freckles spattered across her lean nose as wild as the thick hair that surrounded her youthful features. Her large brown doe eyes stared back at her in the water, a sparkle to them as her grandparents called her from behind, the smell of fresh pastries filling her senses. She had turned quickly to return to them. They had called her name twice already. But she was stuck. Why couldn't she move her legs? She was desperate to go to them, to see

them, to embrace them. They were steps away from her but the river had her locked in its slippery grasp-- the water level rising to dangerous heights. Mollie looked down at the water watching it transition from clear and transparent into something dark and opaque. Red seeped into the liquid like black tea into scalding water. The thick crimson liquid dragged her down – staining everything red with its unrelenting speed. The water plummeted up Mollie's nose choking her and sending her spluttering for air.

Mémere? Mémere?

She was calling her grandmother – trying her best to avoid the liquid that was creeping down her throat. She always came to Mollie when she called her. Why wasn't she here? *Why wasn't she coming?*

She had to get to her. She had to fight her way up to the surface...

Mollie opened her eyes with a start.

Instead of fresh earth and the scent of sweet flowers she was met with the harsh odour of generously applied bleach and a tangy sharp smell that Mollie believed to be vinegar. The walls were stone, grey stone with hints of black and white. She was alone in this vast cold room. Where was she?

She meant to push herself up for a better glance around the room and felt a sharp excruciating pain from her abdomen. The onset of pain was so abrupt and so sudden Mollie cried out in shock. With quivering fingers she lifted the white sheet that was expertly wrapped around her body to see a small noticeable bulge in her belly. She began to pant in shock -- the memories resurfacing in her mind. Her stomach was empty -- the bulge simply a reminder of the life it had carried only hours ago. Thick cloth bandages were wrapped around Mollie's pelvic bone and between her thighs where most of her pain appeared to be originating from.

She ghosted her fingers over her belly. The lack of pressure from within made her tremble.

She looked around the room in panic. Where were her babies?? Her breathing had begun to increase and her lack of mobility was causing her to hyperventilate.

The door opened and Margot appeared with a tray in her hands. Her eyes widened when she saw Mollie up and alert in the bed.

"Where are they?" Mollie whipped out, her voice laced with panic and raw fury.

Margot hesitated – turning to place the tray on the table beside her.

"Where are my babies?" Mollie snarled.

"They're fine," Margot said flatly. "They are being tended to as we speak."

Instead of placating the girl, Margot had pushed her off the edge.

"I should be tending to them!" Mollie screamed. her voice sent Margot several steps backwards. "I am their mother how *dare* you," she screamed clutching at the sheets around

her in anger.

The loss of their presence was a suffocating pain. She had been robbed of the right to see the lives of the beings she had created, to experience holding her child in its first waking moments on Earth. It was a moment she would never get back.

“I’ll kill you!” she cried as tears streamed down her red face. “I’ll have you fucking hanged. I don’t care how high up you are I’ll kill you myself.”

The door opened once again and Mollie felt the sobs drown in her throat.

Micah had entered the room quietly and authoritatively. He looked as well put together as any other day. Mollie couldn’t remember much of the previous night but she knew he hadn’t looked that regal hours ago. He didn’t look at her when he entered. Instead his eyes went straight to Margot who sunk into a deep bow immediately upon seeing Micah enter the room.

“Where are they?” Mollie snapped letting as much venom sink into her tone. Micah pleasantly ignored her and kept his gaze on Margot.

“I’ll take it from here thank you.”

Margot nodded, only too happy to be free from Mollie and left the room as swiftly as possible.

Mollie had to stop herself from uttering threats to the prince when he finally acknowledged her. The fact that he approached her empty handed was enough to send Mollie spiralling into a whirlwind of uncontrolled sobbing. Her emotions were all over the place and she fought against the prince when he made his way towards her bed to calm her down.

“Settle down,” Micah murmured holding her flailing arms down in his iron grip. As if she were a child he crossed her arms around herself and mopped the tears from her cheeks with his thumb.

He had turned around to fill her cup of water on the tray beside her bed.

“Is this not enough?” she whispered. Her voice was ragged and harsh from her screams the night before. “Was yesterday not *enough* for you?”

As if Mollie had insulted his whole damn bloodline he froze, his expression deeply displeased.

“Do you think I *wanted* to hurt you Mollie? Do you think I enjoyed seeing you in pain?”

She clenched her fists. She knew there was a right answer and a wrong one, regardless of what she really believed to be true.

“No...” she whispered. Her nails dug into her palms. “I’m...I’m sorry Micah. I’m sorry I hid this from you.”

Her face burned with humiliation – with weakness.

“What did I tell you about breaking my trust?”

Mollie blinked at the resurgence of tears that brimmed her swollen eyes.

“You break the rules you get punished.”

Her voice was barely audible but she could tell from the soft sigh beside her that he had heard it.

“Micah...where are my babies?” She asked again. Her voice quivered with emotion.

“They’re in the next room,” he murmured. His thumb swirled delicately around her limp arm.

Mollie froze when she heard this.

“I...I want to see them.”

“Are you going to behave?”

Mollie clutched the blankets around her tightly in her fists. She had forgotten what fear Micah could instill in her. How effortlessly he could change from seemingly gentle– to so heartless and cruel. How could she forget? He had reminded her last night and she had paid for it dearly.

His question spurned a series of painful throbs from between her legs. The tears wet her lashes and she looked away from him. The emptiness in her body – the aching of her heart – the painful swell of her breasts – all of it was a reminder of what was ripped away from her.

She would fucking do as he wanted. If that meant she could hold her babies.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I’ll behave.”

Micah looked at her hard – his expression darkening when their eyes met– hers utterly exhausted. She had no more fight left now. Not after what she had endured.

He seemed satisfied and without another word he quietly left the room.

Several minutes never seemed so long – especially when mobility was not possible. Mollie felt her heart beat accelerate when the doors swung open slowly and Micah appeared followed closely by Cécily.

They each held a bundle in their arms and Mollie felt wetness flow down her cheeks once again.

Cécily perched delicately beside Mollie – a soft tender smile on her face as she passed the tiny gurgling infant into Mollie’s arms.

“*Votre fille,*” she murmured. “Your daughter.”

Mollie cried. She didn't care that Micah and Cécily were watching her like a hawk. She was just so happy to finally meet her. A night had never felt so long.

The child squirmed slightly – as if saddened by the loss of Cécily's arms. It made Mollie's skin prickle with anger.

"Like this," Cécily murmured. She moved Mollie's arm slightly so it cupped the child more snugly around her head.

Mollie knew Cécily meant well. But Mollie was her mother. Not Cécily. And how dare she tell Mollie how to tend to her infant.

"Leave," Mollie snapped.

Cécily stiffened. Mollie caught the faintest flicker of hurt cross her features before she quietly bowed and left the room.

Something in the back of Mollie's mind wanted to reach out and apologize. Cécily had always been kind to her – even when Mollie was no more than a servant girl like herself in the icy pits of *Icedalar* all those months ago.

Micah said nothing. He watched the exchange in silence – his expression unreadable.

Mollie looked down at her little baby and felt her heart explode into a million pieces. Oh she was perfect. So so perfect.

"Look at you," Mollie whispered touching noses with her little girl. The child stopped fussing for a moment – staring up at Mollie with wide brown eyes framed by an array of thick lashes. She had the smallest ring of hazel around her iris. Her little face was framed by several wispy chestnut brown curls – the same colour as the man beside her.

The child looked like Micah but Mollie didn't mind. The spirit of the child was her – she could feel it. Already she was squirming in Mollie's grip – her delicate fists raised upwards and her head turning from side to side.

"Mollie," said another voice from beside her. "She's hungry."

Mollie looked up in surprise. She hadn't realized Margot had entered the room and was standing beside her. She looked... protective. Mollie could tell there was a tenseness between Micah and the guards of the castle. It was obvious.

Mollie blushed. Margot and her had not gotten off on the right foot – but she had been helpful during Mollie's weeks leading up to the birth. There was so much to learn – so much that went into caring for a child that Mollie didn't feel ready for. She still wasn't – but she was willing to try.

The way Margot had taught her – Mollie shrugged off one side of her gown freeing a breast and guided it towards the squirming infant. Her lips were puckered in the cutest way and in seconds she latched onto the nipple and began to nurse. The sensation sent shivers through

Mollie. She was strong and determined as she sucked happily. Mollie winced, the feeling was foreign to her.

Mollie looked over at Micah who had lowered his gaze to the other infant who appeared to be sleeping contentedly.

As if to answer her unspoken question Micah spoke first.

“He’s already been fed.”

He.

Mollie stiffened.

She looked at Margot who looked at Mollie guiltily. Her expression said way more than any words could have ever.

I’m sorry.

Mollie felt sick. Did the universe hate her that much? Was Mollie as cursed as always believed herself to be?

The child began to gurgle suddenly and Mollie watched in simmering silence as Micah whispered gently to it. His voice was so languid and calm – the same voice that whispered into Mollie’s ear when he put that child into her in the first place.

He was smiling down at the newborn-- filled with pride. He got what he wanted. An heir. *A son.*

“Regardez moi Maël. Savez-vous qui je suis?”

The heat that had flooded through Mollie’s veins suddenly felt cold as ice. She could feel her heart rate quicken in her chest. Fear gripped her like a foot in a bear trap. It sunk its ragged knives into her skin till the blood bubbled thick and red down her ravaged flesh.

The fear for her childrens future had been a burden that Mollie had fostered since the moment she found out she was pregnant. And it came back full force in this moment.

“What did you call him?” Mollie whispered.

“Maël,” he said softly. Mollie looked up at him. “It means prince *en anglais.*”

Mollie swallowed thickly.

“It is the father that names the heir of his empire,” he murmured silently. “For all of his children.”

Her daughter had fallen asleep in her arms – her breathing deep and satisfied allowing Mollie to pull her nipple free. She avoided eye contact with Micah.

“But my father changed that when I was born. It was my mother who named me.”

A smile tugged at the edges of his lips.

“I figured I would – give the same privilege to you.”

Had Mollie not been so exhausted she would have rolled her eyes. However she also knew the privilege *was* a large one – and she wasn’t about to let the opportunity slip away.

Mollie looked down at her daughter – her strong willed baby girl.

“Rue,” she whispered. She would be strong and carefree like her grandmother *Ruelle*. “Her name is Rue.”

Mollie was taken by surprise when Micah leaned in to brush his lips against her cheek.

“Here,” he murmured.

Carefully he positioned Mollie’s right arm and gently placed their son into her arm.

Maël's eyes were closed -- but like his sister Mollie could see the wispy curls that brushed his forehead. Only his were fair - the colour of golden hay in warm sunlight. His fists were bunched tightly against his chest.

“*Rue et Maël*,” Micah whispered his forehead resting against her cheek.

Mollie looked down at the two little bundles in her arms and cried letting the emotions inside of her well up and spill over the brim.

Elio arrived at the gates of the *Peréal* castle frantically. His encounter with the Outbacks had left him shaken and it wasn’t till the early hours of Friday morning did he finally reach.

The castle was buzzing and Elio knew the reason why.

The heirs are born! The heirs are born!

It was a whisper on every corner of the guards lips as he shuffled through corridor after corridor.

A Lyon! The heirs are Lyons!

The outrage simmered on the tastebuds of the people and Elio knew it was only a matter of time before-

“Elio.”

The man turned around his eyes meeting familiar hazel ones.

“What the bloody hell are you doing here?” Elio hissed staring the young man down with a glare.

“I don’t need a reason to return home to my castle.”

He was a mini version of his father from the hair to the nose to the pursed lips. But he had the late queen’s hazel eyes and unfortunately for Elio – her personality.

“And thank goodness I did,” he muttered. “The King has forgotten how to rule. He’s too busy digging up old skeletons in his closet. Like I give a shit about that.”

Elio knitted his brows severely.

“You would have been better off staying put in *Devonis*.”

Caine shrugged.

“It’s not really my scene.”

The sound of hooves rustling through the courtyard echoed through the corridor. The flash of silver and blue as it passed them by made Caine Marchesseault freeze.

“What the hell?” he muttered under his breath marching up to the window. He turned to Elio – his face pale. “Why the fuck is there Lyon cavalry on our land?”

Elio smiled.

“Skeletons in the closet,” he murmured. “Shit you don’t care about.”

The boy sent him a withering glare.

“That’s Micah Lyon’s cavalry,” Caine muttered to himself. “Why is he here?”

Elio recalled a rather recent memory – the Elysia ball that took place every December. Elio found it silly but it was a tradition -- a celebration of the monarchy. Caine had accompanied his father once along with Laurent before his passing. Laurent was pleasant – always had been -- but Caine had some words to exchange with Rowan.

Elio wasn’t sure what words were exchanged but whatever happened -- the boy spent the rest of the night running for his life from Micah’s little pet...

“What are you laughing about?” Caine hissed.

Elio looked up.

“Oh just thinking about the re-decorating that will have to take place – now that there are some new....additions to the family.”

Caine growled in annoyance.

“The mixed blood girl?” he muttered. “I heard about that.”

Elio straightened his cuffs and made it an effort to walk around the boy who was blocking his path to the door.

“Oh no Caine. I was referring to the *heirs* of this empire.”

He left a stunned Caine behind him, feeling a deep satisfaction fill him as the door closed in his face.

The scroll felt heavy in Elio’s pocket when he reached Mollie’s grand chambers and knocked twice on the door.

Immediately it opened and Elio was transfixed by pale green eyes and a cold frown.

“I’m here for the princess,” he said sternly. “I must speak with her urgently.”

Micah smiled – that playful smirk spreading across his fine features.

“I’m sure you do. But that’s not possible. She’s sleeping right now. She had a...rough night.”

He said it fondly, his dark lashes sweeping his cheekbones as he gave the man an intimidating once over.

“So I heard. *Félicitations* on the new arrivals.”

Elio’s voice was colder than snowfall in the arctic.

“Thank you.”

The prince’s sharp eyes caught the scroll in Elio’s pocket.

“Where are the children?” Elio asked casually.

“Also sleeping.”

Micah kept a pleasant smile on his face but Elio could see something more burning through his placid features.

Curiosity.

Elio hesitated. He wanted to speak to the girl first – but circumstances were simply not on his side. He had many things to get in order in Alexandre’s absence and he could not afford any more mistakes.

“The King wanted me to give this to you,” Elio said reaching for the scroll. Micah raised an eyebrow but took it nonetheless. “After all, you kept your side of the deal.”

“You sound surprised,” Micah added dryly unravelling the parchment from between gloved fingers.

“Not at all,” Elio drawled. “I wouldn’t want my children to be known as bastards either.”

Micah's expression froze for the briefest of seconds. His eyes narrowed – sinking into something deep and foreboding. It made Elio's skin prickle.

"I don't suppose you had anything to do with...what happened in *Heferménage*."

Micah directed his attention to the parchment in his hands -- his impassive eyes scanning the document.

"I had thought my pledge to fight alongside your army would have been more than enough proof of where my allegiances lie."

Elio sighed.

"The combination of our armies still won't be enough to stop Sian's army. If he manages to take down the Ophian defence in *Anubis* – we stand no chance."

"My brother Rowan has rallied the West Lyon empire alongside my own in the North. Alexandre will assemble the army in Beacon Cape and that will give us more numbers."

"What about the rebels?"

Micah frowned.

"What about them?"

"Their numbers will add further men and women to our army – it will give us a chance--"

"I wouldn't hold my breath for them," Micah seethed. "I'd rather try my luck with *Devonis*."

Elio chuckled humourlessly.

"I said we had possibilities in building up the strength of our armies – I didn't necessarily say you'd *like* them."

"The rebels are scattered throughout the Lyon and Ophian empires. Their numbers are unpredictable and at this rate – we don't have the *time* to consider rallying them up."

"No need for that," Elio said lowly.

Micah raised an eyebrow.

"So it was *you* who set my prisoner free?"

Elio chuckled.

"Nope. That would be the princess – oh pardon me. Your future... wife." Elio gestured to the parchment in the prince's hand. "And it's a good thing she did. Caius left for Questershire – with plans to bring the rebel army here."

Micah narrowed his eyes.

“Caius is not stupid enough to set foot on Lyon land.”

“He disappeared for twenty three years and built up his own army *Lyon*,” Elio said flatly. “I think he’ll be fine.”

Micah ignored him.

“He won’t make it in time. It takes three weeks to cross the ocean separating Questershire and the *Peréal* port.”

“I know,” Elio muttered. “Alexandre and the armies of our neighbouring cities have sent as many men as we could spare to aid the Ophians in preventing further trajectory of Sian’s army North. It will buy us the time we need before his army arrives on Marchesseault soil.”

The winter prince looked sceptical but Elio knew there wasn’t much to criticize. The circumstances were dire.

“Funny isn’t it,” Elio murmured. “It took a war for us to finally figure out how to work together didn’t it?”

The winter prince pocketed the parchment in his cloak before turning to Elio with a humourless smile.

“Don’t get too used to it.”

The door closed behind him with a soft click leaving Elio alone in the duskiness of the west wing. Never would Elio have believed in his lifetime, that a Marchesseault and a Lyon would fight an enemy side by side.

Perhaps luck was on his side today. His chance at redemption was not to be wasted.

Maybe they could make things work. Maybe.

Chapter End Notes

And she lives! You'd think our poor girl would have known better than to slip a fast one past ML.

Chapter 48: Cadmium

Chapter Summary

Mollie recovers. A familiar face returns and Mollie sets her sights on a new target.

Chapter Notes

Something significantly more light hearted than the previous chapter.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Mollie moaned, the dull pain in her abdomen rousing her from sleep.

It felt strange to press her fingers against her stomach and feel the flatness of it. The emptiness in her was foreign.

She blinked her eyes open slowly.

A chair scraped loudly beside the bed. Mollie frowned. It was probably Micah reminding her to feed again. It had been a little over two weeks since the birth and already he was micromanaging everything. It was getting on her nerves.

“Just leave me alone...” she grumbled into the fabric of the pillow.

“You’re alright.”

Mollie blinked her eyes open in shock. That deep growl was all too familiar to her. She hoisted herself up as quickly as she could.

She brushed her curls out of her face, her wide brown eyes meeting soft blue ones.

“Zen?” she gasped.

She blushed tucking a curl behind her ear. Her night shirt stuck wetly to her chest, the sweet smell of her milk heavy in the air. Her hair felt thick and matted from tossing and turning all night. She must have looked rough. But *oh* was she happy to see him.

As quickly as it arrived, her happiness turned to fear.

He wasn’t supposed to be here. Mollie didn’t want to think of the consequences if he was caught.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she whispered her eyes widening.

“I came to check on you. It’s been damn near impossible to come within even a couple metres of your room without some guard patrolling. The fuck is going on Mollie? Have they been keeping you hostage in here or something?”

Mollie opened her mouth and quickly closed it. She didn’t even know where to start.

“I...I got hurt pretty badly during the delivery,” she murmured. “It’s taken some time for me to heal. I’m sorry I haven’t tried to meet up sooner.”

Zen’s eyes flickered to the crib near the window for the briefest of seconds.

Mollie swallowed. That was putting it lightly. It was traumatizing. The only good thing to come out of all her trauma were the two little infants gurgling in the crib.

Mollie hesitated. Even talking about what happened triggered her.

“I don’t remember too much,” she mumbled.

Zen nodded.

Mollie felt so self-conscious around him. She felt so silly. Like a schoolgirl walking past the jock of the clique.

He looked a little sweaty – as if he had run from somewhere far away before he made it to the castle. The ends of his blond hair were dark with sweat and his hair had grown out. It brushed the back of his neck now.

“How’s Araya?” Mollie asked.

“The usual,” Zen said irritably. “A pain in my ass.”

“Did you two make any progress?” Mollie frowned. “I haven’t had a chance to search the castle but I *will* when I-“

“It’s not here.”

Mollie stopped short.

“What do you mean?” Anxiety began to bubble in her stomach. “How do you know?”

“Araya and I traced every possible footstep that Quinn Marchesseault could have taken before he left for Questershire. We suspected he may have even hidden it in the house he grew up in, just outside *Saint Laurent*.”

"And?"

“Nothing,” Zen muttered. “It was almost as if it had already been searched. Everything was *too* pristine.”

“Someone searched it before you.”

Mollie’s voice had gone soft.

Zen’s gaze darkened.

“Definitely. I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s the Outbacks. James has them doing his dirty work while he continues to burn cities to the ground that he no longer has use for...”

“Maybe Alexandre knows what happened.”

Zen was shaking his head before Mollie could finish her question.

“Quinn never would have trusted Alexandre enough with that information. I have a feeling he may have taken it outside *Peréal*. Someplace he could *ensure* it would be safe.”

“Where?” Mollie asked miserably. It felt like they reached a dead end no matter which alternative they turned to.

“No clue. The good thing about this is that we know James is as close to finding it as we are.”

Mollie ran her fingers absent-mindedly through her curls. Her recovery had thrown her plans to help Zephyr and the others big time. She had felt so helpless these last fourteen days – but she had needed that time to bond with her babies anyway. But now it was time to see to her other responsibilities.

“I want to get back into training,” Mollie murmured pushing the duvet off of her. She noticed Zen redden at the short silk nightdress she had on before looking away discreetly.

She grabbed her robe and tied it around her body.

“You’re still recovering,” Zen protested lightly. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“It’s not like I have the time to wait Zephyr,” she replied tersely. “I want to be ready. I’ve wasted enough time already. James and his army will close in on us before we know it...”

“He won’t get within a foot of you,” Zen growled.

Mollie snorted walking around the corner of her quarters to wash her face and brush her teeth.

“You don’t know James,” she muttered turning on the faucet. “He had it in for me the moment he saw me.” Mollie would never forget the feel of his knife between her thighs.

“Is that a challenge I hear?” Zephyr muttered a half smile on his face. He had perched on the small sofa near the window. His large frame was almost too large for the small dainty furniture and it made Mollie giggle seeing him so carefree.

She combed her fingers through her hair, trying her best to free the knots. It had grown long again, past her shoulders.

“You know I can never back down from a challenge Mollie.” His blond hair glistened in the sunny morning light streaming through the windows. The more Mollie stared at him the more he reminded her of Caius. He must have looked like that at one point too... years ago. Mollie watched Zen lean over the sofa towards the cabinet that was lined with a variety of whiskies, and champagnes and other extravagant wines.

“Zen what are you doing?” Mollie sighed from around the corner. She had changed into a comfortable tunic and slim form fitting pants. She had every intention of easing into training today. She would be rusty – but the sooner she got back into shape the better.

She heard the familiar sound of liquid hitting glass and as she stepped around the corner she saw Zephyr sipping a familiar amber liquid in his glass.

“It’s nine in the morning,” she snapped. Zephyr chuckled downing the drink in seconds before pouring another glass.

“I forgot how good the whiskey is here,” he chuckled tilting his head in enjoyment. “*Peréal* is known for its fine *Pinot noir* and whiskey. You should try it some time.”

Mollie frowned.

“Get that bottle off the change table,” Mollie snapped again shooting Zephyr a glare.

He rolled his eyes dragging the heavy bottle of alcohol with him before placing it down on the centre table near the window.

“Relax,” he muttered. “It’s not harming anybody.”

Mollie walked towards the window and leaned over the crib to watch the chests of her infants rise and fall rapidly. It was what she did every morning since her delivery. It had become routine to Mollie at this point. They were still sound asleep. Mollie breathed a sigh of relief. She had woken up to feed them at dawn. She knew they’d be up again in no time.

“How did you even get in here?” Mollie muttered glancing out the window. She didn’t know what she expected to see? A ladder? Her quarters were way too high from the ground for anyone to climb it.

“I didn’t come in through the window,” Zephyr snorted. “I came in through your door just like everybody else.”

Mollie felt worry go through her.

“Someone might have seen you,” she muttered. By someone she was referring to a certain individual.

Zen’s expression darkened ever so slightly. Even Zephyr had caught on to who she was referring to.

“So what if he did?” Zephyr muttered. “He doesn’t scare me.”

He waltzed over to her with his drink in hand and loomed over her with his huge frame.

“You think I can’t take him on?”

Mollie narrowed her eyes at him.

“I never said that,” she said flatly. “He’s just... going to be in a bad mood tonight if his meeting doesn’t go well. I can already feel it.”

Mollie hadn’t meant to voice her thoughts out loud but as they escaped her lips she realized how...domestic it sounded. She felt heat fill her cheeks.

Micah had left early that morning after helping her feed the twins. He had left to train and address political tactics with his army.

Strategy.

It was something he was always mulling over whether it was the crack of dawn or the cusp of dusk. The army had settled directly in the heart of *Peréal*. In anticipation for war – the citizens had cleared out much of the main city to temporarily take refuge along the city that lined the oceans edge. This gave the armies of both the Marchesseaults and Micah Lyon’s plenty of space for training and regrouping within the main city. It was also a safety precaution – in case a war were to occur – even unexpectedly – the ocean pass would be the pathway the citizens would be able to escape through first.

Mollie knew it was a matter of time before she pledged herself to the winter prince. It was not only for the sake of her children – to ensure their rightful birthright as royal blood – but to allow Micah full access to the Lyon army.

A coronation would take place following this union and with it would come many more responsibilities that would bestow the winter prince. One of these being his official title as King of the Northern Lyon Empire and unrestricted access to land deals, negotiations, the navy, and most importantly an accumulation of soldiers. James may have seized the bulk of the Lyon army for his own pursuits – but Micah had his share of loyal soldiers. A long time ago – this kind of access to power would have angered Mollie to the core. But now...she needed Micah in charge of them as soon as possible...especially know that she knew Micah had agreed to fight against Trius Sian’s massive army that loomed in the distance.

On top of all these responsibilities (and Mollie hated to admit it) - Micah was handling the infants a lot better than she was. Especially with the long nights. He was good at it -- fatherhood. Although Mollie didn’t expect it – in fact she expected the *opposite* considering his own father – Micah succeeded in every thing she anticipated he would fail at. And he did it with *ease*.

“Wow. And here I was thinking you two weren’t married *quite* yet.”

The shift in Zephyr’s tone jerked Mollie out of her thoughts.

“Stop it,” she mumbled.

He swept past her placing the bottle and glass onto the table.

“When’s the big day?” Zephyr continued coldly. “Did he get down on one knee? Or is that not the prince’s style?”

“It’s not like that Zen,” she growled. “You know it.”

“I’m not sure I do Mollie,” he murmured. “As far as I know Micah has agreed to a conditional agreement to keep *them* here...until the war is over. Safety reasons.”

Mollie hesitated. By “them” Mollie knew he was referring to the twins. Zen barely glanced at the crib. He acted as if it wasn’t even there. It made Mollie’s heart clench painfully.

“That negates the need for a marriage Mollie. That is...unless you *want* to marry him which is an *entirely* different story.”

“I don't think I have much of a choice Zephyr,” she hissed. “Micah needs full access to his army which will help with our numbers and that can only happen if he marries. Plus if I refuse... our children will be bastards. You know how society will treat them. Look at what happened to my grandparents.”

Mollie sighed.

"I just need more *time* to think it through. That's all."

His jaw clenched.

Mollie closed the distance between them. She didn’t want to fight with him. Not when she hadn’t seen him in so long.

“Please. I missed you,” she mumbled wrapping her arms around him from behind. And she *had*. In spite of all his flaws and his arrogance, she had missed him and his company – his smell – his presence.

He still had that woodsy outdoorsy scent to him. She pressed her head against the top of his back barely managing to close her skinny arms around his muscular torso.

She heard him exhale sharply before he placed his hands on top of hers.

They stayed like that for some time, Mollie just taking in his scent.

“I almost forgot.”

Mollie watched Zephyr reach into his back pocket and retrieve a small piece of fabric.

“It’s not much. But I found this at the house we were searching.”

The soft white material had long since faded and the stitched in roses along the trim had paled from what once must have been a rich vibrant colour. In the corner of the fabric was a name – barely legible due to age but just readable.

Ruelle.

“I thought...maybe you would have wanted it.”

Mollie carefully took the handkerchief from him. Heat blazed in her cheeks at the gracious gesture. That must have been home for her grandparents before they were forced to flee to Riverton. It warmed Mollie’s heart to have a piece of them with her. A physical piece instead of just a ratty old photograph.

“Thank you,” she whispered. She ran her fingers over the stitched in name over and over again. “That was...really thoughtful Zen.”

“It was nothing,” he shrugged off.

Mollie wished she could tell him to stay. She wished they could leave and spend more time together elsewhere – trekking through some unknown territory with their swords in hand the way they did in *Anubis*. But she couldn’t. A new more ominous threat hovered above them all forcing them to prioritize the difficulties in life over the pleasures.

“I should go,” he muttered after some time. “Caius should be reaching *Peréal* any day now. The moment he does I have to be ready to receive them at the *Peréal* port.”

He detangled himself from Mollie’s arms and walked towards the door.

“Zephyr...,” she whispered.

Before he could respond the sharp cry of a baby pierced the silence. The high pitched wail made her wince.

“I’ll see you around.”

With that he was gone, the door closing softly behind him.

Mollie chewed her lip and sauntered over to the crib to pick up her son. Rue was still sound asleep both fists raised beside her head, but Maël was wide awake– his eyes alert. Mollie felt her heart flutter when their eyes met. They were a beautiful amber brown – like Alexandre’s. Like hers. Seeing her babies faces always lifted Mollie’s spirits. She could tell he was hungry by the way he whined and chewed on his fists.

Gently Mollie lifted him from the crib and shifted her shirt so Maël could latch onto her nipple. His breathing was rapid with excitement for his next meal.

Mollie walked over to the window. The pain between her legs was dulling with each day that went by, but her fear only increased. Alexandre had been gone for two weeks now and not a word had been reported back. Hearing about Araya and Zen’s lack of progress was another constant worry at the back of her mind that only fuelled her stress.

Her nightmares had been terrible the last couple nights. Mollie was nothing short of paranoid. Every time she saw even a flash of black or the howl of an animal in the distance she worried

it was James coming to finish what he had started with her. When she closed her eyes hard enough she could still feel his blade against her inner thighs...

She had tried speaking with Elio about her fears but he remained tight-lipped especially when it came to the King. Mollie had found herself pestering Margot about every message be it a homing pigeon or written letter that came to the castle but none was from her father.

She had heard Caine had arrived not long after her fathers departure and had been overseeing much of the housekeeping that was required during the Kings absence. Mollie didn't know why but it bothered her being so isolated from the politics of it all. She wanted to be present. Not stuck in her room with her chambermaids nursing infants all day.

"Ow," she protested as Maël suckled hard on her teat. He was not gentle like Rue when he fed. He always drank from her as if it would be the last meal he ever received.

The door to her quarters opened and Mollie turned to see the familiar swish of a navy cloak brush past.

Mollie stared at Micah stonily but he was too pre-occupied. Instead he went straight for the crib and picked up their daughter into his arms. Mollie had given him the silent treatment since she delivered the twins. Even so – it was almost as if Micah thrived off of it. Each glare she sent him from the bed had him smiling right back at her. Just seeing him jogged Mollie's memories.

*"Tu guériras bientôt. Je promets mon amour."** He had told her gently.

Those first couple nights following the delivery had been brutal for Mollie. But she had to rely on him in addition to her chambermaids for her recovery and that itself had her blood boiling.

Had it been her way – she wouldn't have had him step *foot* inside of her room but her recovery was imperative.

"You aren't dressed?"

Mollie looked up startled. He had said little back to her since she refused to speak with him. His sudden breach of their little game of silence surprised her.

Mollie knew it was childish to continue in this way. Micah had been blunt with her from the start. Break the rules – receive a punishment. She had just never expected the punishment she received to be so brutal. She would never make that mistake again.

Swallowing her pride Mollie turned to him.

"Dressed for what?"

He had barely glanced her way.

"We're taking a short trip to Beacon Cape. We leave tonight. I thought Margot told you."

Maël snapped her from her state of surprise as he fussed in her arms. Sticky milk dribbled from his little lips to stain onto the pristine tunic she had just changed into.

“We?” she emphasized with a raised eyebrow. “And why? Alexandre is going to stop there on his way back from *Anubis*.”

“Alexandre’s been non-responsive since he departed for *Anubis*,” Micah said dryly. “We’ve already wasted too much time in anticipation for his return. We must take matters into our own hands.”

Mollie frowned.

“Maybe he’s in trouble,” she murmured. “What if James is holding him hostage there?” Worry began to cloud her mind as awful scenarios played out in her head.

“He’s not,” Micah said firmly. “I would know...James doesn’t believe in hostages.”

Mollie reddened. *Of course. She knew that.*

“Then where could he be?”

She hadn’t realized she had asked the question out loud.

Micah had gone silent and Mollie realized he had walked over to the little table by the window. A glistening bottle of half empty whisky glowed in the sunlight. Mollie froze.

She was going to fucking kill Zephyr the next time she saw him.

Micah raised an eyebrow at her. It was a silent question from him that she knew expected a verbal answer.

“What?” she sniffed. “Maybe I missed it after nine months of...sobriety.”

Her tone came out flat and angry and Mollie was sure heat flooded her cheeks.

Micah bristled immediately.

“*Please*,” he said with poorly concealed amusement. “This is cask strength whiskey Mollie Mae. You wouldn’t make it through one sip.”

She hadn’t expected his tone to be laced in amusement and she quietly sighed in relief. She waited for him to push the topic but he never did. He had returned his attention back to their daughter who lay snuggled in his arms.

Mollie’s thoughts were interrupted once again when Maël clutched a lock of her hair pulling it *hard*. He followed through by spewing a fresh wave of milky spit up on her shirt.

She gritted her teeth in annoyance. He always left those early morning presents for her – never for his father.

She didn't know why but his cries were like a constant ringing in her ears that made anger boil up inside of her gut.

Irregardless Micah never laughed at her – not once during the several times she had been the victim of one of Maël's messy moments.

"Here," he murmured placing Rue back in her crib before relieving her of the milk covered child in her arms. "It helps to feed him while sitting down – that way the shift in gravity won't make him so nauseous."

Mollie nodded miserably. His words were kind – not chastising in any way.

"As for Alexandre...he's not imprisoned nor is he being held hostage by anyone." Micah's deep murmur prompted Mollie to match his gaze. "I'm sure of it. He's too strong for that. Something else is keeping him busy – keeping him so pre-occupied that he can't spare even a second to send a message back to his own kingdom."

The concern was evident in the winter prince's tone and Mollie felt a chill run down her spine.

With his free hand he brushed a thumb tenderly against her jaw.

"How are you feeling?"

Mollie narrowed her eyes at him. She wanted to tell him to fuck off but she knew better.

"Oh so *now* you want to ask me that question?" she replied hotly. The pain between her legs had not fully dissipated. It throbbed dully and it was all his fault.

Micah blinked at her.

He seemed confused by her response which made Mollie even more angry.

"I wish you had more time to recover," he said carefully while reaching for a handkerchief to clean the sticky milk that dribbled down Maël's chin. "But time isn't on our side. We'll have to try to convince Beacon Cape to merge their armies with ours in an effort to retaliate against James' army. They won't be happy that Alexandre isn't the one to do it – but we don't have a choice."

Mollie had set to work on cleaning the sticky mess off of her tunic.

"Why do I have to be there?" she muttered.

Micah placed a cleaned and now sleeping Maël back into the crib beside his sister. Mollie caught a glimpse of his fair curls before they disappeared behind the blanketed edge of the bassinet.

"They want to see a united front," Micah admitted. "As far as the rest of cities that lie beyond the Marchesseault regime knows...we are already married."

Mollie paused.

“So you lied to them?” she clarified brushing her curls over her shoulder.

“No,” Micah said with amusement. “I said as far as they *know*. But I’d be happy to clear the confusion.”

He had retrieved a slim piece of parchment from his cloak and twirled it between his fingers. A smile played at the corners of his lips.

Mollie stiffened.

“What is that?”

“It’s an official document,” he explained. He beckoned her closer with a finger and Mollie grudgingly obliged.

He unravelled the parchment revealing a document engraved with a Marchesseault seal. Mollie scanned the parchment slowly.

J’autorise cette alliance sous les terms suivants...

Beneath the letters was the elegant signature that Mollie recognized as Alexandre’s.

“Authorize an alliance of what?” Mollie muttered.

“Marriage,” Micah said simply.

Mollie felt her skin prickle with unease. She had told her father that she would marry Micah. She just hadn’t thought he would have followed through so *soon*.

Was this it? Was her life signed over to him already? Was that why he was so fucking smug? She glanced at the crib and felt her heart clench painfully.

Before Micah could close the scroll Mollie found something at the edge of the paper that made her heart race.

“Wait,” she muttered.

The date was in the top left corner as it was always officially done – but Mollie hadn’t realized how much time had gone by. And certainly what date had passed her by.

La 24 Novembre.

“This was signed by Alexandre on the 24th,” she murmured.

“*Oui*,” he murmured. “And?”

Her eyes locked onto his. Suddenly a smile spread across her features.

“My birthday was on the 20th,” she explained triumphantly. As quick as snowfall hitting water Micah’s smile vanished from his face.

She knew she got him and she felt deep satisfaction fill her. Mollie continued to smile as she spoke.

“That means this document is no longer binding. Twenty is the age of consent in *Peréal*. If we *are* to be officially married you would need *my* signature next to yours. My fathers consent is no longer applicable.”

Mollie realized in that moment why Caius had decided to stall Micah for so long when she first reached *Peréal*. It had not been for the sake of her pregnancy (though that would have been ideal also), it had been to ensure she would be of age by the time any sort of binding contracts could be established.

Caius was a genius.

Mollie’s smile went stale when she saw the frigid expression on Micah’s face. But as quickly as it came he carefully softened his expression into something neutral.

“I guess that means we aren’t quite married yet Master Lyon,” she murmured. She looked at him from beneath her lashes. She knew she was pushing it but she had beat him at something for *once*.

Micah chuckled lowly.

Mollie knew Micah didn’t take well to being outsmarted. It didn’t happen often. If anything, Micah knowing her birthdate was something that was beyond his control. He couldn’t have known. But still – she could see the anger simmering beneath his calm façade. It ate at him that he had missed something so crucial.

“Well played Mollie Mae,” he said with a smirk. “I’m impressed.”

Mollie thumbed a stray curl of hers nervously between her fingers as Micah slowly closed the parchment and tucked it back into his cloak pocket.

“But stalling isn’t going to accomplish much.”

Mollie frowned.

She knew he was right. The victory was a weak one. If anything – it brought them one step backwards. But Zephyr’s words from earlier played through her mind like a cassette tape on replay. Micah had agreed to keep the twins in *Peréal* till things settle down and the rest of the world *already* believed they were married. What *was* the point in officiating it?

“You don’t want our children to be bastards do you Mollie Mae?”

Micah’s low voice infiltrated her mind and she blinked away her stray thoughts. She knew it was only a matter of time before people found out the truth and Mollie cringed to think about what a scandal that would be.

“Think carefully about your choices. Marriage or not, our children are Lyons and will be entitled to what they are owed. But here...here they will not be given the same treatment.

That is...unless you decide otherwise.”

Mollie swallowed the lump in her throat. She didn't think she'd be able to endure separation from her twins especially across the ocean that separated the Lyon empire from the Marchesseault one. And Micah would surely take them to *Icedalar* which itself was an isolated fortress from the rest of society.

“This isn't about me and you,” Micah said coldly. “It's about *them*. Don't let your emotions get in the way of logic Mollie. You're smarter than that.”

Mollie's anger flared.

“Maybe I don't want to be smart,” Mollie mumbled. She didn't want to look at Micah when she spoke. She feared he'd manipulate her into something she didn't want to do. He did it all the time at his business meetings. There was nothing stopping him from doing it to her.

She didn't need to look at him to feel the irritation radiating off of him in waves.

“Then don't,” he snapped.

Mollie bit her lip. She watched him for a while walk up and down the room. Silence settled over once again. He was tossing things into bags and rummaging through the dresser. He was probably distracting himself from his anger. He was throwing things around with a little too much force.

Mollie could tell he was annoyed.

When he spoke again Mollie could hear the dismissal in his tone. He was done with their argument and it was time to move on.

“Remember Mollie,” he muttered while sliding his sword into his belt pocket. “We need to convince Beacon Cape to merge their armies with the Marchesseaults...as well as with my own. Others will try to convince them otherwise. They will try their best to inveigle the leader of Beacon Cape into choosing a more appealing offer over another, but I'm going to need you to work with me to seal this deal.”

He closed the dresser with a sharp snap and walked towards her.

His deep green eyes swept over her. Mollie felt goosebumps break out against her skin. His tone was still caustic.

His pale fingers reached out to twirl gently around the loose curl that their son had yanked free only moments before.

“Do you think you can do that?”

Mollie frowned at him.

“What is that supposed to mean?” she sniffed. She could read past his feigned sincerity as well as he could read past her lies.

He smirked. He seemed to have regained his edge.

“It means I’m going to need you to do exactly as I say.”

Mollie resisted the temptation to roll her eyes in front of him. She did what he asked most of the time anyway. As if he sensed her sarcasm he stepped even closer. She could feel his cool breath fan her lips.

“No games this time Mollie. I’m serious.”

Mollie blinked up at him.

“I don’t want you breaking my trust. I can’t...I *won’t* tolerate it. Not again.”

His voice had gone eerily dead and Mollie could see that soft glow in his green eyes solidify into something icy and hard.

Mollie would never forget that pain -- the pain she had endured twice already by breaking Micah’s trust. The first time in Questershire and then here...she wouldn’t handle it again. This she was sure of.

“I won’t break your trust again.”

She whispered the words quietly.

“If I say sit down,” Micah murmured. “You sit.” He had begun to circle around her – as if testing to see whether she was genuine. “If I say exit the room, you exit the room.”

Mollie could feel his hands snake around her waist from behind. His voice had gone softer.

“If I say close your eyes and don’t look. You close your eyes and you *don’t look*.”

“I get it,” Mollie whispered back fiercely. “You want me to *obey* you.”

“Look at me.”

Mollie winced but acquiesced. She wouldn’t be surprised if he said that just to test her.

“Every word. You follow every word. You hear me?”

Mollie could see the severity in his gaze. She could see it in those emerald irises. This wasn’t something trivial. This was dangerous. This wasn’t just a rouse to satisfy Micah and his urges.

“Yes,” Mollie finished. “I hear you.”

He finally seemed satisfied and Mollie sighed heavily.

“Start packing. The sooner we leave the better.”

“How long are we going for?”

“I don’t want to stay there longer than 48 hours,” Micah muttered under his breath. “I’ll try to make it as quick as possible.”

Mollie sauntered over to her wardrobe.

It was filled with gowns and dresses and beautiful garments she hadn’t really taken the time to go through. It was different from the time she spent dressing up in Questershire. Back then she felt as if she were impersonating someone else. She was wearing gowns that were used by others before her. But this...all of this belonged to *her*. Each tailored and custom sewn to suit her figure – and hers only.

“What’s the occasion?” she asked.

Micah paused. His lip twitched when he responded.

“Wear something...*nice*.”

Mollie frowned. She knew *exactly* what that meant.

Chapter End Notes

Translations in Order:

*You will heal soon. I promise my love

Chapter 49: Indium

Chapter Summary

Part 1 of the Beacon Cape arc. Mollie and Micah attempt to establish alliances with the King of Beacon Cape.

Chapter Notes

All plot this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Micah schooled her on a lot of the customs and protocol endemic to their final destination while on their way towards the Eastern most city of Beacon Cape that lay just outside the Marchesseault Empire. It was a lot to take in and a lot to remember but Mollie tried her best to absorb all he was giving her.

Much of it was familiar to her, particularly when it came to dress codes, etiquette, and formalities. But some of it was completely new.

“They can be a little...eccentric at times,” Micah admitted as they boarded a long train that would take them outside *Peréal* and out towards the island city. "At least, that's what I've heard." Theodora bounded behind them. Her white fur glistened amongst the greenery. Her tongue lolled out of her mouth, eyes wide and wandering to take in her new surroundings.

The last time Mollie had been on a train still remained starkly in her memory. She winced, being careful to lift her pretty pale pink dress up when stepping over the threshold leading to the private compartment. The soft velvet floors brushed her ankles.

It was in a compartment just like this one – over a year and a half ago that she had boarded a train as a commoner – marvelling at the rich, scoffing at the women in gowns and tightly curled hair who had lifted their own skirts to perch on the edge of their seats.

And here she was now. Above those woman – not even as a quaternary status citizen – but above that title. She was a *royal*.

Mollie eyed the titles engraved carefully above each compartment.

Private – Quaternary

Public – Tertiary and Secondary

Bottom – Primary

It was something that her world had orbited around as a child. Her status. But the more Mollie stared at those gold trimmed words etched into the wood of the compartments, the less prevalent it seemed. She had truly done the impossible.

She had risen from a primary to a royal. She had done what Hartley feared would happen had he not been King. *His* world revolved around status, money, and *greed*, and he had brought his vision to life. He was there every step of the way to bring his ideal world to fruition and impose it on those that lacked the fortitude to retaliate.

Yet somehow – here was Mollie. A primary citizen who ascended the ranks of the caste. Not only did she beat him at his own game at keeping the poor *poor* and keeping the rich *rich*, she had brought his nightmare to life. His precious Lyon blood was mixed with commoner blood – *Marchesseault blood*-- and he had his son to thank for that.

Mollie was no fool. She knew her marriage to Micah solidified Maël and Rue as royal heirs – she doubted it had any real sentimental value beyond that. But it also granted Mollie true ownership over her Marchesseault heritage. Without it, she was still Mollie Mayeson – the commoner. And without it, Hartley's grandchildren were still mixed blood.

Knowing this resurged a hope within her that she had lost a long time ago when she was just a prisoner in the hallways of Questershire. The King of the Lyon Empire had always been somewhat of an enigma to Mollie. She saw him as a public figure all her life – an omnipresent seemingly benevolent entity with an inexplicable presence that sparked fear and awe amongst his subjects. Even in Questershire, she only saw him at the head of the dinner table – never looking at him for long periods of time and *never* exchanging a single word.

And yet, they now shared a bloodline. Something that would tie their families together forever in the form of two little infants.

The train roared to life around them. The soft patter of rain did little to lift Mollie's spirits. She thumbed the sleeve of her dress. She let the soft sound of the ticking clock above her soothe her rampant mind. She looked down at her sleeve. A lace this expensive would have never been accessible to her two years ago.

A woman in a thick wool coat dragged herself to the back of the train towards the stairs that led below the common compartments. She caught Mollie's eye before she descended downwards. Mollie knew where she was heading -- to sit with the cargo.

She shot Mollie a disdainful glare before she disappeared down a rickety staircase.

Mollie wished she could look back into those dark hateful eyes and tell the woman that she knew what it felt like. That she *hadn't* lived this life of luxury all her life – that she had sat with cargo and freight beneath a bustling train station as a child – starving and destitute-- while wealthy citizens feasted on *foie gras* and *escargot* above her. She wished she could tell her that she was Mollie Mayeson the primary citizen commoner from Riverton long before she was Mollie Marchesseault the princess of *Peréal*.

“*Votre majesté,*” a crew member murmured before closing the compartment door behind them.

Quickly, she settled into the seat across from Micah. Mollie’s necklace lay cold against her skin. He had put it on for her that morning. It was the same necklace he had given her in Questershire a year ago.

Her belly disappeared a little bit each day – flattening her torso the way it had been before her pregnancy. It had only been a couple hours since she had left the *Peréal* castle but already she missed Rue and Maël.

Mollie cried when she had to leave her twins behind. She had never known what that ache felt like. But now she did. She knew between Margot, Esperanza and Cécily that they would be in good care. But it wasn’t the same.

“We won’t be long.”

As if Micah could sense her ache he gave her hand a firm squeeze.

Not a second later, Mollie felt a soft nudge at her knee. Frosty blue eyes met hers as Theo nestled her muzzle against Mollie. She must have sneaked her way into their compartment. Pets weren’t allowed on trains but Mollie figured no one was brave enough to inform Micah of that.

Theo pushed her wet nose into her hand prompting Mollie to absent-mindedly run her fingers through her fur. She purred happily, resting her head on Mollie’s knee. It was so cute and Mollie found herself smiling down at her. She was probably following her master but still – it made Mollie feel a little better.

She sighed and looked out the window. The rain fell harder.

Beacon Cape wasn’t like anything Mollie had pictured it to be.

The island city rested along the outskirts of the ocean and a salty sea breeze saturated the heavy air.

The smell of fish and ocean assaulted Mollie’s senses and the humidity was quick to sink its grasp into her loose curls.

The town was quaint and simple, but not far in the distance, on a hill situated precariously close to a cliff, Mollie could see a rustic inspired cottage themed villa. The style was different from what Mollie had encountered so far.

“*This* is it?” Mollie whispered to Micah as they made the short trek up a simple bridge towards the gated lodge-like monstrosity. Theo bounded up ahead of them – her heavy paws leaving a trail of pawprints in her wake. Mollie couldn’t picture anything *less* threatening than what lay before her eyes.

“Don’t be fooled by simplicity,” Micah murmured back. “Looks can be deceiving.”

Mollie had insisted they take *her* entourage with her instead of Micah’s and surprisingly, he had agreed. Mollie was beginning to understand that the Lyons had quite the reputation across different regimes. Suddenly -- it didn’t seem all *that* surprising to her. The rich red uniforms of the *Peréal* guards shimmered behind them. Micah wore all black, but Mollie opted for something...girly. Innocent.

Micah had suggested she play the part of the meek innocent newlywed. Something to cater to the “*ethos of their clientele*” as he had put it. Phillip Aurelio was known for hosting incredibly lavish events that always garnered a large audience. It was safer for Mollie to be as modest as possible. Mollie gritted her teeth but went along, no matter how much she hated it.

“Welcome,” said the guards in a thick foreign accent. Their expressions were stoic but professional.

Mollie swallowed uneasily. Micah had his long sword casually on his hip beneath his cloak and Mollie too had strapped her dagger to her thigh beneath the blush pink gown that surrounded her. She felt safer with it on her.

“Slide your arm through mine,” Micah murmured at the same time the guard dressed in green and white led them through the large doors of the villa.

Mollie followed through clasping his arm in hers and staying alert and ready, the way she had been taught. The villa was a lot larger on the inside than it appeared from the outside. The walls were each painted a vibrant colour. Each room they passed tended to have its own theme. The one near the entrance had red painted walls, another one they passed with green and even one with purple.

They both came to an abrupt halt outside two grand wooden doors.

“Ahhh *Alexandre* is that you?”

A deep booming voice came from around the corner. Mollie tensed immediately.

A larger man with rich dark skin and an expensive suit walked around the corner. But that was not what Mollie was immediately drawn to. It was the massive sceptre he held in his hand. Mollie had seen one like that before – her fathers -- and of course Hartley’s. But this one was *enormous*. The jewels that decorated the object were larger and heavier than anything Mollie had seen yet.

He paused a good few steps away from Mollie and the prince. His lips parted in surprise.

Before Mollie could open her mouth – Micah intervened.

“Good evening your highness,” Micah said with a respectful bow. “On behalf of the *Peréal* kingdom and the *Icedalar* regime it is an honour to meet with you. My wife and I hope our gift was well received.”

The man raised a single eyebrow. Mollie didn't have to look around her to know that they were surrounded by a sea of green uniforms. A lot more than the mere handful of *Peréal* guards that had followed her and the winter prince into the villa.

"Well I'll be damned," the man said with a laugh. "Look at you all grown up and married," the man chuckled. "You were a tiny little thing the last time we crossed paths isn't that right?"

"Indeed," Micah murmured. "Twelve years ago to be exact."

"Ah and you brought your dog!"

Mollie stifled a smile. She knew how much it irritated Micah when people referred to Theo as such.

Theo growled menacingly at the man but he seemed unaffected by it.

The man snapped his fingers and in seconds one of his guards was behind him.

"Get a nice hearty meal for Prince Micah's pet. A fine *fine* animal she is."

The man's eyes glistened with something else but before he could speak Micah spoke first.

"Don't even think about it Phillip."

Micah's voice came out wary. The man bellowed with laughter.

"I'm just looking prince. I promise. Nothing wrong with admiring something pretty."

Mollie eyed the fur that lined his thick collar. She grimaced.

The man's eyes flickered to Mollie. The remnants of a smile were still on his features.

"Speaking of pretty," the man said with another hearty laugh. "You must be Alexandre's little one. I've heard *all* about you."

Mollie stiffened. Her grip on Micah's arm was vice like.

"I'm not sure what you're more famous for...being a Marchesseault or marrying a *Lyon*."

He chortled after this and quickly waved them in to follow.

"I joke I joke," he chuckled. "You came just in time. I had some other guests who joined my table only hours before I was alerted that guests of the *Peréal* kingdom would be coming."

"How lovely."

Micah's voice was clipped and Mollie could hear the simmering deadness beneath it.

When the doors to what Mollie assumed to be the dining room opened, she froze.

There were ten seats at the table and seven of them were occupied.

Before her were two empty seats side by side. They were across from a duo Mollie had seen before. Mollie's heart went racing in her chest when familiar violet coloured eyes locked with her own from across the table.

"Please!" The man beckoned to his other guests. "Let us welcome Prince Micah of the Northern Lyon Empire and his new bride to our dinner table."

Every single person at the table rose to their feet when they entered and Mollie felt her cheeks redden at all the familiar faces around her. She knew every single person at this table. And for some reason this made her uneasiness peak even more.

"Look how beautiful she is," the man named Phillip continued to chuckle. "You Lyons know how to pick them don't you? Please give us a twirl won't you?"

Mollie felt her stomach turn to ice.

Was he being serious?

The man blinked at her from behind his chair at the head of the table and she felt Micah's firm squeeze on her forearm.

Carefully she gritted her teeth and slid her arm free from his.

Mollie thought she'd die from second hand embarrassment when every eye in that room trained onto her as she spun once for the guests. Her dress was innocent and playful. Something she would have dressed a twelve year old in for her birthday party. She figured there was a reason he had suggested she wear something...chaste.

"Ah how do you say it in your language prince?" the man had turned to Micah who had seated himself beside Mollie as soon as she had finished with her little display.

"Magnificent?"

Micah had a plastered smile on his face when the man addressed him. Quickly, glasses were filled and plates were loaded. Mollie struggled to keep the innocent smile on her face – especially now that she had a good look at who she would be dining with for the rest of the evening.

"How rude I am," the man said in a tone that reeked of feigned astonishment. He placed his sceptre carefully beside his chair. To Mollie it looked like more of a throne. This man was flamboyant in every way possible. "I am under no false illusion that you are all first time acquaintances... but I figured introductions are in order regardless. He gestured to the couple across from Mollie and Micah.

"Luna and Kaveh Shrader of *Anubis*. It is a *pleasure* to have you join us tonight."

Luna eyed Mollie knowingly and for some reason it made her blood boil. She could have something to do with her father's absence. Why the *fuck* was she here – dining with another

empire while her people died under the hand of James Lyon? Was her empire not under siege? It didn't make any *sense*.

He gestured to the end of the table, to the couple beside Luna and her husband.

“Ophélie Rineau and Henrie Boulet and across from them is my good friend Grigoire LaFlamme and his stunning wife Natalia.”

Grigoire didn't react to the introduction at all. If anything he seemed a little worse for wear. He kept his eyes glued to the table. Phillip paused for a moment – a smile playing on the edges of his lips.

“And last but not least, my beautiful wife Sofia.”

Mollie knew Grigoire. He had graced the Lyon's own dining table many times. He had his own city somewhere not far from the Lyon empire. As far as Mollie knew their relationship had always been solid. Unless that changed...

“Oh stop Phillip,” the woman named Sofia murmured. “Let us dine. Our guests have travelled far and wide to grace our dinner table.”

The urge to lean over and whisper to Micah was suffocating but Mollie couldn't. She had to play her part.

They ate for the most part in silence. Mollie's legs began to pain from the hard seat supporting her. Her uterus was still sore and she could feel the pain spreading from between her legs up her spine. She usually took this time to take it easy and stretch in her room. But she didn't have that luxury now.

Phillip began to chuckle. The hearty laugh that filled the previously silent room with an echoing vibration.

“It is so quiet in here. They say there's two reasons for a dinner of silence. Either there's a traitor among us or the food must be downright *scrumptious*.”

The reception to Phillips attempt to lighten the mood was poor – as expected. The only people who seemed to be enjoying themselves was Phillip himself and his wife who had a sweet sickly smile on her face.

“Tell me Ophélie, how are things in *Étretat*? I do love those little rock formations you have there. The one you brought for me will be a fine addition to my art collection.”

Mollie's eyes flashed to the womans. Dark brown eyes met hers and Mollie swore she saw her lip twitch.

Mollie's heart clenched painfully in her chest. She looked...like Mollie's mother. A beautiful elegant – *lucid* version of her. Mollie had always thought so – even back in Questershire when she had no idea who Ophélie Rineau was. But now... there was no mistaking the connection.

“Things are good but could be better,” Ophélie murmured taking a sip from her goblet. She had returned her gaze to Phillip.

Mollie realized the woman had said many words without saying anything at all. Cunning. That’s what she was.

“It’s a shame Alexandre couldn’t be here to join us isn’t it?”

Phillip’s voice held an underlying layer of amusement but by the look on Ophélie’s face he might as well have insulted her.

Ophélie said nothing but Mollie could swear she saw the man sitting beside her shift uncomfortably.

“Refrain from saying that name in my wife’s presence,” the man named Henrie said darkly – he had trained his eyes on Phillip.

Mollie watched the interaction carefully. Curiosity burned within her. She wondered if Ophélie’s bitterness had anything to do with her mother. It must have.

Mollie stilled. It had gone over her head at first but when she thought about it bile rose at the back of her throat. Alexandre had chosen Bianca over Ophélie...surely it wasn’t *that* alone that caused such bitterness?

“God knows he’s caused enough mess in all of our lives,” Henrie said bitterly. “They should have banished him from *Peréal*. Stripped him of his status just like the whore he ran off with.”

Had Mollie heard those words a year and a half ago she probably would have started crying. But hearing them now sent a new emotion bubbling up in her gut. Something primal and livid. Her fists clenched under the table and from the corner of her eye she could feel Micah’s stern gaze burning a hole through her cheek.

Don’t you dare.

It was written all over his face.

She swallowed her emotions down and reached for her glass. She needed to distract herself with something. The cherry champagne was sickly sweet. The sugary diluted alcohol spread across her tastebuds unpleasantly.

Ophélie said nothing. She just twirled her long red fingernails around the rim of her glass. She didn’t look at Mollie again.

“Enough with the small talk.”

Grigoire’s scratchy voice interrupted the frigidness that had taken over the table.

“Calm yourself Grigoire,” Phillip said with an exaggerated sigh. “No family is perfect. My haven as I like to call it is a perfectly safe space to discuss anything that comes to mind. After

all we live up to our name. We are a beacon for many things after all – not just a signal for war but for peace too." He reached his arm out over the table for an elegant porcelain dish. "Here, try the truffle my friend. It is outstanding."

"Il faut laver son linge sale en famille."

Grigoire grumbled. He sniffed when he spoke, giving him an extra layer of haughtiness that really wasn't necessary.

"I beg to differ," Phillip chuckled. He took his time dishing out a spoonful of caviar onto his plate. His teeth sparkled white against his swarthy skin. "What better place to air your dirty laundry than *at* a dinner table?"

The way Phillip leaned across the table made it seem as if he were directing the comment at Micah. However Micah's expression remained deadpan. It was as if Phillip had never addressed him at all.

Luna suddenly smiled at her from across the table before turning to Phillip.

"You're making her uncomfortable Phillip," Luna said in her honey sweet voice. "Take it easy on the newlyweds. They just started a family."

Mollie felt what seemed like a dozen eyes land on her and she could've sworn her face was as red as the cherry champagne in front of her.

"Darling Mollie and I spent much time together when she came to visit me in *Anubis*. I really took a liking to her."

Phillip looked at her shrewdly.

Mollie could feel Micah tense beside her. Whatever Luna said had given something away. Mollie could sense it by the way he shifted in his seat.

It was all a game at these dinners. Every shift – every gesture – every word carried with it a weight or an equivocation with a domino effect. Mollie hadn't realized it before – but Micah had always been playing the game – since the first dinner he took her to in Questershire. Even back then when she understood little about the intricacies of royal protocols.

Micah hadn't told her those rules back in their bedroom of *Peréal* to keep her tamed or docile as she once foolishly thought. He had been protecting her from becoming the meal at the very dinner table these sharks feasted at day in and day out. They entertained themselves with this game of words – throwing them at each other – baiting each other to reveal something and use it against them later.

But Mollie knew better now. She could play that game too. And this time – she would be the entertainer not the entertainment.

"Visit?" Phillip repeated. "*Anubis* is no place for a new bride."

She gave Phillip her best smile – taking the time to tuck her dark curls behind her ear.

“Luna was wonderful,” Mollie murmured. She appeared shy and quiet when she spoke. “She taught me things every soon to be mother should know. We had a great time walking the rivers edge as the men worked...”

Mollie hoped she wasn't selling the whole obedient wife thing too hard but Phillip's scepticism seemed to ease slowly from his features as she spoke.

Mollie had a feeling him and his other guests wouldn't take too well knowing Mollie was training with a bunch of rebels in a warzone while pregnant.

“Was that before or after your honeymoon?” Phillip asked. He suddenly turned to Micah. “You know I don't recall receiving an invite to the wedding.”

Micah laughed. He placed a gloved hand gently atop of Mollie's.

“Oh you know how Alexandre can be. I wanted something grand and lavish. But he was against it. He struggled to see past the politics of it all I suppose.”

“I find it hard to believe Alexandre *allowed* such a marriage to begin with.”

Phillips wife had chimed in from the opposite end of the table. Her dark brows were furrowed in confusion.

“Remind me Phillip, wasn't it Alexandre himself who told us he would die before he ever allowed a Lyon to cross his path?”

“I hope he stayed true to his word.”

Ophélie's tone was dry when she contributed to the conversation.

Phillip looked at her with a frown.

“Ophélie,” he murmured. “We don't wish ill on any of our guests – even those who were invited and could not attend...”

“I've had enough of this.”

Mollie stiffened in her chair when Grigoire leapt to his feet and proceeded to slam a pudgy fist down onto the table.

“You cannot stay neutral Phillip. War is imminent and you have invited us all here so you can pick and choose what deal will save you and your bloody civilians once its over. Don't drag this nonsense out any longer.”

Phillip raised an eyebrow at Grigoire's outburst – but he didn't in any sense appear angry nor irritated.

“Oh Grigoire. You have always been so-“

“Forward?” Sofia suggested smiling across the table at her husband.

Phillip chuckled.

“I was going to say passionate. But my darling I like that word a lot more.”

“You sit here and laugh while people die on the streets,” Grigoire yelled. The table had gone eerily silent and Mollie found herself curling a hand around Micah’s thigh. She was so nervous. The emotions rocking this dining table was like nothing she had experienced before.

Grigoire suddenly turned his bloodshot eyes towards Micah and waved a finger at him from across the table.

“Your bloody brother gallops through cities destroying everything in his path. He took everything from *Fioriene*. There is nothing left. *Nothing*.”

“So he is strong is what you are saying?” Phillip interjected.

He chuckled when Grigoire’s entire frame began to shake in anger.

“You can’t stay neutral Philip. He will come for you – and when he does he will bring his army with him... and his iridium.”

Phillips eyes flashed when he heard the words leave Grigoire’s mouth.

“So he’s found them all?”

The mans voice had dropped an octave lower and Mollie didn’t miss how the knuckles of his gem encrusted fingers tightened against his sceptre.

Phillip turned his gaze to Luna.

“Something to share Luna?”

Luna’s lips stretched taut. Her smile had gone stale a while ago.

“Nothing Phillip,” she said crisply. She took a long sip of from her goblet.

Mollie’s curiosity was peaked. As far as she knew, one of the pieces of iridium was located in Ophian territory. She wondered what her expression meant. Was it safe? Was it protected? Mollie was itching to know.

Unfortunately the table went quiet after that and Mollie and the rest of the guests were left to finish their meal in silence.

There were too many secrets around this table. Mollie wanted to get to the bottom of all them. She just hoped she found the opportunity to do so.

Following the dinner, the guests slowly made their exit with Henrie and Ophélie being the first to retire to their rooms. Luna and Kaveh joined Sofia elsewhere and Micah and Mollie

were beckoned by Phillip out of the dining hall and into a vast hallway just past the dining room.

“Prince.” Phillip’s voice was cool and curt when he addressed Micah. “Sofia and I are in dire need of your input. With an elemental blade yourself, I’m sure you encounter....similar novelties.”

Mollie knew it was just a ploy for Phillip to get him alone.

“Certainly,” Micah said smoothly. He snaked his fingers around Mollie’s waist. His fingers pressed into the curve of her hip. “*Viens avec moi.*”

His lips brushed her ear as he spoke.

Phillip seemed unsurprised when Mollie walked alongside Micah. The room they entered was decorated with antique sculptures and beautiful paintings that left Mollie breathless with its beauty.

Unlike the grand hall in Questershire with paintings of past royalty amongst its walls – the art that adorned Phillip Aurelio’s private room was abstract art. Mollie spotted a painting of an open corn field beneath an orange horizon. Another was of a distant beach with scattered pebbles around the bottom edge of the canvas.

The door closed behind them with a heavy echo.

“Before we begin, what can I get you prince?” Phillip murmured. He had walked over to a beautiful gold trimmed table top complete with a stocked bar. “I’d offer cognac but something tells me your preferences are...different from the typical Lyon.”

Micah smiled humourlessly.

“I’m not Hartley Phillip.” His tone was light but Mollie could hear the curtness simmering many layers beneath.

Phillip laughed heartily.

“Of course you’re not,” he muttered settling on a classic whiskey. Phillip suddenly turned to Mollie, a mischievous smile on his face. “Did he say he wanted it on the rocks? I can’t quite remember.”

Mollie blushed. Phillip settled on a laughing loudly before pushing the glass across the table towards the winter prince.

Micah’s face was blank, eyes glued on Phillip’s dark brown ones.

He turned to Mollie again, ignoring the piercing stare the winter prince had fixed on him.

“And what can I get you princess?” he asked.

Mollie smiled politely.

“Nothing for me.”

“Nonsense!” Phillip insisted shuffling through his many bottles. He paused for a moment. “Unless you got another one in there?”

Mollie’s jaw dropped at the question. He had jutted his chin at her stomach. She hadn’t expected it.

“I...no... of course not...” she stumbled. Her face flamed.

“Then it's settled. I'll have you try this,” Phillip said reaching for a fancy bottle with a jewel encrusted stopper. “My wife adores it. A hint of sweetness but with a spicy punch to the palate.”

Mollie swallowed uneasily but didn’t fight it. Phillip struck her as the kind to not take no for an answer.

He smiled widely when Mollie took the drink from him.

He waited in front of her. She nodded weakly and took a sip.

The drink was bitter...but as it spread across her tongue Mollie could taste the smoky sweetness.

He raised an eyebrow.

“Well?”

“It’s nice,” Mollie managed. The drink made her head whirl. She quickly placed it down.

“You’re good you know...”

Mollie blinked up at him in surprise.

"Pardon me?"

He had circled back around the counter. He toyed with the goblet in his hand. Dark brown eyes met Mollie’s.

“You almost had me with the whole timid wife act.” He paused, his eyes scanning her dress. “And the outfit.”

Mollie looked over at Micah. Fear gripped her heart.

“But your eyes...” Phillip continued. “Your eyes were fiery. Not the eyes of a scared docile newlywed.” Phillip chuckled.

“Where is it Phillip?”

Micah’s voice was hard and cold. All pleasantries that had been there before disappeared.

Phillip grinned.

“It’s not here prince,” Phillip said dryly. He lazily played with the rings on his finger. His eyes flickered over to Micah’s.

Mollie could see the irritable flush seep into Micah’s cheeks.

“Though I have to say…” Phillip continued in that same drawl. “I am surprised to see you here without your little entourage.”

“I thought you preferred it that way,” Micah said coldly. The small bit of warmth he had carried with him earlier had completely snuffed out at this point.

“Oh I do prince,” Phillip said equally as coldly. “I like company. I do. But your old man is not welcome in my territory. Not now. Not ever. And neither is that rogue brother of yours. And you know how I am prince. I give the seed a chance to grow even if the apple does not fall far from the tree.”

“When did he come here?” Micah sighed.

Mollie watched their exchange closely. It was almost like they were speaking a language of codes. Her brain hurt trying to keep up with it all.

But by the way Micah’s jaw clenched Mollie guessed he was referring to James.

“He didn’t get far,” Phillip mused. “My walls are high and my people strong. We are all trained. Each family knows how to fend for themselves. But I have no intention of handing any land over, let alone what James Lyon seeks from my kingdom.”

“Something you don’t have,” Micah sighed.

“The iridium.”

It was the first time Mollie had spoken in quite some time and both turned to look at her. She felt her cheeks flush.

Phillips eyes flickered over to hers.

Mollie felt her heart sink. If the iridium wasn't in Beacon Cape, then their voyage here would be nothing short of useless.

“Micah,” Phillip said suddenly turning to the prince. “I *do* want that blade looked at if you don’t mind.”

On cue, the door to the room opened and Sofia stepped inside. Her chocolate brown curls glistened. It complimented the burnt orange colour of her lacey gown. She was a beautiful woman.

“Prince Micah,” she said softly. “The blade is just outside. I trust no one else with such a task.”

Micah looked directly at Mollie. It was a gaze that conveyed unspoken words.

Follow me.

Before Mollie could step forward to follow his lead a warm hand wrapped around her waist.

“While we wait for those two I’ll show you around the sculpture gardens,” Phillip said cheerfully. It was as if he was completely immune to Micah’s wintry gaze on him. Or maybe he just didn’t care. “Unfortunately it is not cherry blossom season, but it is quite a view to see. You may come meet us there when you are finished Prince Micah.”

Mollie winced at Micah who watched the interaction with a frigid expression. Mollie could feel his eyes follow Phillip and herself out of the room, even when Sofia began to converse with him quietly. She didn’t know whether his anger was directed at her for following Phillips lead or if it was directed at the King of Beacon Cape himself. She swallowed uneasily. She would find out later.

By the time Mollie and Phillip made it to the gardens the sun had already begun its descent. It casted a pink orange glow on the beautiful carvings, murals, and flowers that surrounded a lily pond decorated with blossoming pink lotus flowers. The sound of boisterous insects and the constant croak of a frog echoed through the air as Mollie walked beside the tall man. She breathed in deeply – letting the fresh mint tinged air settle crisply into her lungs. The saltiness of the ocean wasn’t as intense here, rather, it was fresh and airy.

“We don’t have much time,” Phillip murmured. “He’ll be back as soon as he can.”

Mollie wasn’t stupid. She knew Phillip had called Sofia in as a distraction to separate Micah from Mollie. And clearly, Micah knew it too. Phillip had used royal protocol to his advantage. His land, his rules. Micah wouldn’t start a fight over something that appeared innocent – he didn’t have enough reason to.

“Luna has told me a great deal about you princess Mollie,” he began. He crossed his arms neatly in front of him. The two of them stood near the edge of the pond, their reflections gazing up at them from the crystal clear waters.

“Mollie is fine,” she said tonelessly. “And what did she say? What is she doing here?”

“All good things. Don’t worry. And Luna is here for the same reason as everyone else at that dinner table. They are here to offer their alliances. All for different reasons. It is mine and Sofia’s job to make sure we make the correct one for us and our people.” He paused. “Prince Micah has sent in an offer on behalf of you both. I also received offers from Luna, Grigoire and....Henrie and his wife.”

Mollie looked at him questioningly.

“I don’t normally do this, but Luna’s praise of your....ability has changed my mind. I am quite fond of her. And seeing as Alexandre could not be here, it would be dishonourable of

me not to lend an ear to his closest of kin.”

“You want an offer from... me?” Mollie asked. She couldn’t help the awe that seeped into her voice.

“Indeed,” Phillip said with a frown. “Unfortunately for you, I don’t trust Lyons. Never have, never will. Even if the winter prince had quite the persuasive offer.”

Mollie could already guess what his price must have been.

“Did he offer you oil and protection?” Mollie asked bluntly. She knew it was Micah’s greatest asset, with him being the leader of *Icedalar* and all. Not to mention his army...

“Potentially,” Phillip said with a grin. “But you see, as much as I like oil and the success that ensues from a strong navy, I could get that oil from the lower grade iridium that sits at the base of *Devonis*. And I could get protection from James Lyon’s army if I agree to a truce that was recently established between the Rineau’s and the Ophians.”

Mollie felt her belly flip. Why was he telling her this?

“What would you do if you were...say in my position?”

Mollie felt her mouth go dry. Was he testing her?

She swallowed. She decided to be honest. She didn’t have much choice. He was staring her down and watching every emotion that flipped past her face. She wasn’t cunning like Ophélie, nor had she mastered the perfect poker face like Micah. She was her own person and she accepted that.

Mollie processed each word he had sent her way.

“What did Grigoire offer you?”

Phillip smiled. He seemed pleased she had asked.

“Seeing as James Lyon destroyed his city, he offered me everything he has left...in exchange for one thing.”

Mollie met his gaze.

“What?”

Phillip grinned.

“Micah Lyons head on a platter.”

Mollie felt her palms begin to sweat. Her throat had gone dry.

Phillip stared back at her placidly, as if he had just commented on something trivial like the warm weather.

“So?” he pressed. “What would you do?”

Mollie swallowed and tucked her dark curly hair behind her ear. She smoothed her palms down her blush pink dress and twisted the expensive fabric between her fingers. She knew he was asking her about the previous question she had tactfully disregarded with a question of her own. Something she had learned from the winter prince.

“If I were you...” she started. “I would go with the offer that benefits your kingdom the most. Something that puts your people first.”

Phillip raised a single dark eyebrow. She watched him fish in his pocket for a large thick cigar. He lit it and slowly puffed on it, awaiting Mollie’s response.

“I’m not referring to goods,” Mollie clarified. “Not oil, not iridium, not even military protection. I would choose something better. Something that not only benefits your people in the long run, but guarantees their protection... *without* having them fight.”

Phillip’s interest was certainly peaked.

“After all, don’t you and your people pride themselves on your neutrality? You are a beacon after all. Why ruin that legacy?”

“I don’t see an offer currently standing that incorporates those elements.”

“Not yet,” Mollie said lightly. “I can offer you that. I can offer you a piece of the Marchesseault land mine – something that would greatly increase the networth of your goods here, way more than oil, certainly more than down graded iridium. And I could offer you a navy. One step better than military protection.”

Mollie eyed the jewels that decorated Phillips hands.

She stepped closer to the man. She could see the interest in his eyes, but it was too fleeting for Mollie to let him digest what she had just offered him. She needed to drill it home.

“I have seen James Lyons army,” she said lowly. “Anything militant on land is not going to cut it. He is too strong. His alliance with the Outbacks has proved such. The Outbacks know this land better than any of us will. But at sea...at sea we are the strongest. We have a chance.”

“If it does come to war, you are telling me you have enough ships to ensure the safety of not only your people, but mine as well?”

Phillips voice sounded a little incredulous and Mollie could feel the heat pooling in her gut.

“Yes,” she said firmly.

Phillip puffed on his cigar slowly. The thick scent of smoke and something spicy made Mollie’s chest tighten.

He stood there observing her for some time and she stared back unabashedly.

“Now I want something in return,” Mollie said forcefully.

Phillip laughed at her.

“It doesn’t quite work like that Miss Mollie,” Phillip chuckled. “I’ll give you my offer, *then* you decide whether you like it.”

Mollie blushed. She was such an amateur.

“In return for your generous offer, I will tell you the whereabouts of what you seek.” He paused gauging her reaction. She kept her face carefully placid. “And...I will honour a new alliance with *Peréal*.”

Mollie chewed her lip. It didn’t seem like enough to her quite yet.

“And what about...” Mollie winced as she said it. “My husband. Grigoire has broken his alliance to Micah by asking you to initiate his death. He agreed to side with Micah in a previous deal with the Ophians. That goes against royal protocol- ”

Phillip held up a hand before she could finish.

“That’s not my problem,” he murmured shifting the cigar to the corner of his mouth. “You should know Mollie, I would have never accepted an offer like that. My kingdom does not carry out assassinations. It is against our principles here. But that doesn’t mean I can’t ask another person to do it.”

Mollie felt her anger flare.

“That doesn’t exactly sound like something a neutral kingdom would do.”

Phillip raised an eyebrow.

“You heard the others. Neutrality is not a concept in the midst of war.”

Mollie laughed dryly. Of course. How convenient. Phillip was quick to do away with his morals when it suited him.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about the winter prince,” Phillip said lowly. “Killing him is too messy from a political standpoint. Grigoire is certainly not the first to demand such a request and trust me, he won’t be the last. In case you haven’t realized princess, bearing the crown is much like wearing an expensive bounty on your head. People either want your alliance – others your death. There is no in between.”

Mollie sighed. She had heard that before – from Micah himself.

“I...” Mollie trailed off. She had to choose her words carefully. “I will agree to this deal, but I want you to answer one more question from me.”

Phillip smiled and clasped his hands neatly in front of him.

“Ask away.”

Mollie swallowed thickly.

“Did you know Bianca Rineau?”

Phillip looked at her.

“Yes,” he said softly. “The former princess of *Étretat*. She was a dancer. A lovely one.”

Mollie looked away from him. Instead she focused her gaze on the softly rippling water before them. Her reflection stared back at her, wide pale brown eyes meeting her own. Long thick curls tangling around her neck as if begging to be taken away with the soft breeze. Mollie wished she knew Bianca the way others did. It was as if her mother existed only in a memory – within the memories of others. The woman Mollie knew – the woman she was raised by was a different person. That woman was broken. Mollie wanted to know who Bianca Rineau was before she shattered into a million pieces.

Mollie’s voice had dropped to a whisper.

“What happened to her?”

She heard Phillips soft exhale.

“I think you’ll find a lot more answers to your questions in there than out here with an old lad like myself.”

Mollie blinked up at him.

He had a soft smile on his face. It was the first time Mollie had seen through his tough exterior. When he addressed her this way Mollie could see glimpses of a man, a father, a leader. Not a king with his hands spread open upon the negotiation table.

“Of course,” she murmured.

Her voice had gone somewhat bleak. She didn't want to have to make any kind of conversation with Henrie and Ophélie, but Mollie was burning to know the truth. From the way they looked at her at dinner, Mollie had a feeling they knew exactly who she was.

"As for what you seek..." Phillip puffed loudly on his cigar. "The iridium was here. Twenty three years ago."

Mollie frowned.

"Twenty three years ago?" Mollie said bleakly.

"Yes," Phillip said gravely. He had diverted his gaze to the sky. "Quinn Marchesseault came here. He wanted to make a deal with me. Hide the iridium. Permanently. On *my* land. He had tried to destroy it several times before but he was unsuccessful. I told him I would not have

such a thing on my soil, no matter how much money he offered me. It could not stay here. Something of that value would only bring trouble."

Phillip puffed on his cigar.

"I told him he'd be better off moulding it into something less conspicuous. I offered to do it for him. He was set on hiding it somewhere in the Lyon regime."

"Why?" Mollie asked.

"Distribution," Phillip explained quietly. "The farther out he spread the pieces, the harder it would be to collect them...had someone decided to go looking for them. The problem was that he couldn't step foot on Lyon land." Phillips expression grew darker. "At the time, Atem Lyon was preparing to take the throne. Quinn didn't trust any of those Lyon princes so he had to think of another way to get the iridium there undetected and hide it. Forever."

Mollie felt her heart rate quicken.

"Oh my god," she murmured. "He sent it with Izabel didn't he?"

Izabel had recently returned from the Ophian Empire days before she died. Beacon Cape was not far. It was more than possible she stopped here before her return to Questershire.

"Yes," Phillip murmured. "It was a good idea. Quinn took it upon himself to melt the iridium into something indiscernible. Spending years in Ophian land taught him a thing or two about how to work with the pure element."

"She made it back," Mollie whispered. Mollie remembered what Caius had told her. "Izabel made it back to Questershire with the iridium. But someone knew what had happened. And she was killed for it. Someone betrayed her."

Mollie's head began to spin at all she was hearing. She needed to speak with Caius immediately. He was the only one who could verify these facts. He was one of the last to see her alive.

A thin icy feeling went down Mollie's spine. Could it be?

"You said Quinn turned the iridium into something indiscernible. What was it?" Mollie asked quietly.

Phillip sighed.

"Mollie, I've given you everything -"

"Your majesty *please*" Mollie begged. She didn't care that desperation seeped into her tone. She had to know. She *had* to. "Please. This is so important. This could be a matter of life or death. What was it?"

Phillip stared her down.

"Jewellery," he said quietly. "The iridium was moulded into a ring...no... it was a necklace I believe. Yes that's right. A necklace. Something no one would question."

Mollie felt the blood drain from her face.

Hidden in plain sight. No one would suspect it. Something so precious to be put on display in such a manner. It was an idea only Quinn Marchesseault would have been able to pull off.

"Quinn wasn't lying when he told Hartley it was in Questershire," she whispered out loud. The man had died. Only weeks after Mollie had arrived in *Peréal*. Twenty three years later. Twenty three years of telling the truth and being tortured mercilessly for it.

Mollie's fingers trembled when she brushed them against the silvery blue *M* necklace on her neck. Ice cold. As it always was.

"It belonged to my mother," Micah had told her back in Questershire when he had first put it around her neck. "She had it made for me before I was born."

A family heirloom to be passed on from generation to generation. What better way to preserve something so powerful? Hartley had inadvertently been housing one of the most powerful elements in his kingdom for twenty three years. His eldest son had decimated villages, corrupted his power, destroyed lives all for a piece of something that had been right under his nose for all this time.

It physically pained Mollie the more she thought about it. And she had been wearing this for so long -- thinking it was just some family heirloom Micah had given her. He must not know what it truly was. Mollie suddenly felt panic course through her. She had been wearing this for so long, not knowing what was around her neck was the very thing at the crux of this war between empires.

Phillip clapped his hands together loudly – as if to signal the end of their discussion and took it upon himself to reach for her own hand.

Mollie obliged. She was still in shock at what she had just pieced together.

“On that note, let us wrap this up. It was a pleasure doing business with you Mollie.”

He was back to tiptop professionalism once again. Phillip snapped his fingers twice in the air and Mollie nearly jumped out of her skin when two people, a man and a woman and whom Mollie assumed to be Phillips advisors joined them by the edge of the pond.

“Your dagger please.”

Mollie quickly unsheathed it from her thigh and watched Phillip silently remove his own from his belt and hand it to the man. She had to keep it together. What she now knew was information that could be lethal if shared with the wrong person.

Quickly, as if this had been done a million times, Mollie watched them extract a pretty pearl from the hilt of Mollie's dagger and attach it to Phillips' heavily jewelled one.

“You will get this back,” Phillip said firmly referring to pearl that now glistened amongst the many stones on Phillips own dagger. The woman returned Mollie’s dagger to her promptly. She had only five little pearls on the hilt of her dagger – no other jewels on hers – a reflection of her inexperience. She began to understand that this was more than just a weapon that she had earned. She realized why the process she had gone through to receive her blade had been so arduous. The empty space at her hilt bothered her already. She knew what it meant.

You don’t honour the agreement, you don’t get your stone back.

Mollie realized that every dagger began with five stones – a tribute to the five pillars. The four that remained on her dagger were a reminder of the agreement she was now held accountable to.

Mollie strapped her dagger back to her thigh and adjusted her dress.

“I’ll arrange the proper paperwork to be sent straight to *Peréal*.”

Mollie nodded.

“Thank you. You have a beautiful home by the way,” she added. She gestured to the beautiful gardens in front of them as well as the homes scattered outside the gates of the villa.

“Thank you,” Phillip said with a slight bow.

“I do hope you enjoy the gift Micah and I sent you.”

Mollie wasn’t even sure what it was, but judging by Phillips wide smile she guessed it was something of grand monetary significance.

Phillip chuckled.

“I won’t complain, but it appears the more money I get, the more gifts I seem to receive.”

Mollie smiled wryly.

“What are you going to do with it?”

Phillip glanced at her. Mollie figured it wasn’t her place to ask, but Phillip seemed happy to indulge her.

“Melt it. Gold of that quality will be used to back up our currency here in Beacon Cape.”

Mollie nodded. “That’s...nice. It’s nice that you...give back to your people.”

Phillip nodded silently.

“I get free gifts, they get my handouts.” Phillip met her gaze. “There’s nothing more expensive than poverty, remember that...princess.”

Mollie paused.

“I know,” she replied turning towards the door.

She heard the smile in Phillips voice as she sauntered back into the grandiose hallway.

“Of course you do.”

A soft tinkering giggle filtered through the air.

Mollie lifted her skirt and turned towards the sound. Carefully turning the corner, she found herself in a familiar room of abstract paintings with the sculpture centre piece in the middle of the hall. The necklace around her neck suddenly felt like a twenty pound weight and she almost wanted to snatch it off and hide it beneath her skirts. But she couldn't do that. Swallowing her fear she walked forward.

“How long will it take to craft?”

Mollie heard the sound of sheathing blades before Micah's husky voice replied.

“Around six months.”

Mollie stepped around the corner at the same time Sofia turned around. Her chocolate brown curls twirled elegantly around her neck. It complimented her warm toned dress perfectly.

“Ah princess,” Sofia said in a bubbly tone. “I hope Phillip didn't bore you too much out there. He can go on and on about the historical significance of his garden.”

Mollie smiled tightly.

“Not at all.”

In a practiced manner she joined Micah's side. His hand wrapped around her waist immediately – as if it had been wired to do so from the start.

“I think Phillip is on his way,” Mollie murmured. Sofia eyed the two of them curiously. It made Mollie hyper self conscious.

“Oh yes,” Sofia nodded. “He always enjoys a cigar in the garden after dinner.”

Sofia's eyes suddenly lit up as if she had forgotten something terribly important.

“You will be joining us for the midnight festival I hope!”

Mollie winced.

“It happens at the start of every December, to welcome a prosperous new year. It's such a beautiful sight to see,” Sofia rambled on clutching her hands to her chest. “Gowns, and dancing, and celebrating, and oh the fireworks!”

“Fireworks?”

Mollie had never heard of such a thing.

Sofia clutched her wrist in excitement.

“Oh you’ll absolutely love it. It’s a clear sky tonight!”

“I’m not sure...” Mollie started.

“Nonsense!”

Phillip’s bellowing voice echoed through the hall. Mollie tensed when she saw him take several long strides before wrapping a comforting arm around his giddy wife.

“You must stay for it. I insist.”

Phillip snapped his fingers once again and Mollie heard swift shuffling from behind them.

“Please show the Lyons to their rooms. Let them freshen up before they join us later this evening.”

Phillip gave Mollie an extra wide grin.

“We will see you both tonight.”

Mollie could feel the irritation radiating off of Micah before he could even utter a word.

His grip on her waist was too tight and he had said far too little. In fact he had said not a word to her since she had joined him later after her talk with King Phillip.

When the door to their beautiful private wood themed quarters closed, Micah immediately turned to face her.

“What did he offer you?”

Mollie shouldn’t have been surprised by his snappy tone. But still it made her wince.

“How...how do you know he offered me something...”

Micah bristled before she could even finish.

“Phillip never discusses contracts at dinner. He always does it one on one.”

Mollie felt anger flare up inside of her.

“Well how the *hell* was I supposed to know that?” she shouted back at him.

“Keep your voice down,” Micah snapped between gritted teeth.

Mollie wanted to stomp her foot in anger. Why was he mad at her? He had a lifetime of experience doing this. She was still at her prime when it came to this royal protocol nonsense.

“What did he offer you?” Micah asked again.

Mollie knew she was better off just telling him now. He would find out soon enough anyway.

When she finished explaining she watched the few expressions cross Micah’s face and waited with baited breaths. She had told him everything relevant, but she left out the part about the necklace. She wasn’t ready to divulge it to him just yet.

Micah didn’t seem angry that she had taken the responsibility of negotiating directly with Phillip...but then again Mollie never knew for sure.

Micah suddenly met her gaze.

"And where exactly are you going to find a navy big enough to ensure the protection of *Icedalar, Pereal, and Beacon Cape*?"

Mollie flushed.

"I'm... still working that out," she mumbled. She had panicked. She had to close the deal with Phillip somehow.

She heard Micah sigh.

“Let me see your dagger,” he muttered.

It seemed Mollie was a little too slow with her actions.

With an irritated huff Micah took it upon himself and closed the distance between them. He snatched her dress upwards and unclasped the dagger from her upper thigh. Mollie yelped but Micah barely paid attention to her. She hadn’t even told him she put it there.

Too quickly he was sliding his fingers over the missing pearl on the hilt of her dagger.

“He took your deliverance,” Micah muttered.

Mollie froze.

“What does that mean?”

She suddenly felt her mouth go dry.

Micah tightened his lip. Slowly he bent down and retied the weapon back onto her upper thigh. His fingers lingered on her skin for longer than usual. Then he stood up once again and walked over to their belongings which were neatly stacked in the corner of the room.

“It was...generous of him.”

Before Mollie could question him Micah was already reaching for his own dagger that was snugly fit into his belt.

She gasped when her eyes locked on the gem encrusted hilt and the glowing blue blade that gave off an icy luminescence in the warm room.

“We all start with five stones when we receive our daggers,” Micah explained lowly. His pale fingers grazed over the five smaller blue gems that sparkled along the handle of his blade. “There’s a reason for that. They are made that way to evenly balance out the blade so when we lunge the force exerted from the blade onto the enemy is perfectly loaded.”

His slid his fingers towards the small centre gem that looked like a small sapphire to Mollie. It was the middle one along the handle.

“Phillip took your deliverance gem,” Micah explained. “Taking out the gem directly in the middle leaves your top two, guidance and semblance untouched, and your bottom two, endurance and remembrance also untouched.”

Mollie quickly realized what he was getting at.

“So it’s still balanced,” she finished.

“Precisely,” Micah murmured. “It matters less and less the more battles you win of course. Once your blade is heavily decorated, it doesn’t become much of a weapon anymore. It becomes a symbol of your aptitude, your strength, and of course your integrity.”

Mollie eyed Micah’s blade. The thing was so heavy Mollie wondered how the hell he carried it around all the time. She remembered grabbing it from him during one of their early meetings. She recalled being surprised by how heavy it had been. It was so heavily decorated with gems it was no wonder he used a separate sword for battle.

“Phillip will return your stone once you honour the agreement,” Micah finished. He carefully placed his icy blue blade back into his belt.

“So my blade won’t be affected too much right?” Mollie asked. She felt the cold steel against her thigh.

“It won’t,” Micah assured her. “Though you shouldn’t have any excuse to use it anytime soon,” he added. He had a slight edge to his tone when he said this. “There shouldn’t be any violence here.”

Mollie’s eyes widened when she remembered what Phillip had told her earlier.

“What about Grigoire?”

She couldn’t help but spit his name out when she asked. She couldn’t stand double crossers – even if the action wasn’t directly to her.

Micah chuckled. He seemed completely unperturbed that Grigoire had requested his death be carried out.

“What about him? He’s as good as dead. He has no kingdom to go back to and no one else willing to take him in.”

Mollie stiffened.

Apart from James. She had a feeling she knew how that kind of alliance would end.

“Why does he want you dead?” Mollie asked quietly.

“It’s not him,” Micah muttered.

Mollie suddenly felt silly for asking. Grigoire was just a puppet. He was doing James’ dirty work.

“What if he tries something?” Mollie asked worriedly.

Micah had started pulling out several gowns from their belongings and laying them out on the massive bed before them.

“He won’t” Micah said in a clipped tone. “It is forbidden to carry out a murder, even if it is a contracted murder, on a Kings grounds if he has royally invited you there. It deconsecrates the royal code.”

Mollie perked up at this.

“Really?”

Micah nodded.

“Of course there are loopholes...if you are underground per say, or directly outside the gates.”

Mollie had heard of James once killing a prisoner on the steps of Questershire Manor quite a few years ago. The news had even reached Charterly. Mollie had never bothered to understand why it was branded such an impious act or why it had circulated the media for weeks following the incident. But she understood now. By killing someone on the steps of his manor, he had come ever so close to deconsecrating the royal code. It also explained why these “negotiations” as her father called it, were always a war of words and not swords. A fight always had to be taken outside the castle walls...

“Nothing is going to happen,” Micah repeated. “Now get dressed. You can’t wear the same thing you wore to dinner to tonight’s event.”

“But why do we have to go?” Mollie repeated. “I mean, I did what we came here to do. I got Phillip to forge a new alliance with *Péreal*. With his army we may have a chance at pushing back against James-”

“Yes Mollie,” Micah sighed. “But we still don't know where the iridium is and we *still* don't know if we can gather a navy large enough to offer adequate protection to *three* different kingdoms.”

She fell quiet. She watched him silently as he threaded his fingers through his chestnut locks. He did that when he was annoyed.

“Anyways, I have some...other things to see to before we leave. Nothing to be concerned about.”

Mollie hated when he did that. Kept her in the dark about things he presumed she was too inexperienced to fully understand. She told him everything he needed to know. Why wouldn't he do the same with her?

“Micah...” she sighed. “Can you just –“

“No Mollie,” Micah said sharply cutting her off.

“I'm not a *child* Micah,” she snapped. “How am I supposed to help when you don't *tell me anything?*”

He whirled around to face her and this time Mollie could see the anger fully expressed across his fine features.

“You've done enough and I've already *told* you all you needed to know.”

His tone went eerily flat and the sharpness in it made Mollie take a step back. She chewed her lip angrily and looked away. She suddenly wished Zephyr was here. He would have told her everything she needed to know when she challenged him. He would have seen how capable she was. He would have seen her as his equal.

Angry tears glistened in her eyes and she hastily blinked them away.

Micah took a step towards her. He had carefully melted his expression into something softer. He reached an arm out to her, but almost as soon as he did he flexed his fist and dropped it to his side. Mollie looked away. She expected nothing from him. Micah would never apologize for anything.

“I need you to stay close to Luna Shrader tonight,” Micah instructed from across the room. His tone was softer, but it did little to soothe Mollie's wounds.

Mollie gave him the dirtiest look she could muster but Micah seemed to purposefully be ignoring her. He didn't even glance at her when they brushed shoulders.

“That shouldn't be difficult seeing as you two have...history. Find out what she knows about James.”

She ignored his little jab and followed his lead in sifting through the clothes that scattered along the bed. She wished she had Cécily there to help her choose something. She always knew what looked best on Mollie.

"I don't know why Luna is here," Mollie muttered. "She *helped* us. She housed us while we stayed in *Anubis*. Helped us train, traded with us..." Mollie trailed off. She had trusted Luna. Even considered her a friend.

Micah scoffed.

"You can't trust the Ophians. Ever. They hate monarchies Mollie. They only helped you in *Anubis* because of your association. A rebel group with the sole purpose of taking out a monarchy is *right* up their alley. Any better deal comes their way and they go with it. They are the epitome of disloyalty."

Mollie bit her lip. She couldn't help the betrayal she still felt in her heart.

She reached for a gorgeous slim fitting navy dress that glittered with silver sequins. It was demure but elegant and undoubtedly more mature than the dress she had worn here. It had thin straps and a beautiful long train. It also complimented Micah's cloak perfectly, as if it were the missing puzzle piece in a kaleidoscope of fabrics.

With a sigh she reached for the dress and carried it with her to the massive stone themed ensuite.

Mollie figured she should be used to it by now but Micah's beauty never failed to amaze her.

She opened the door to the ensuite and carefully stepped outside making sure her heels didn't catch on the long train of her gown. It felt all wrong for her to be getting ready and dolled up in the midst of a looming war – but she figured it was just one of the many mores that dictated the lunacy of the royal world.

Her eyes met Micah's who stood waiting at the entrance to their quarters. She saw his lips curve upward when his gaze landed on the necklace she wore – that *M* that designated who she belonged to. Izabel's necklace. The iridium that James Lyon was lusting after.

Micah looked beautiful—as always but he channelled a different more masculine energy when he wore his fancy royal uniform. Especially the rich dark blue and silver along his immaculately tailored outfit. His black gloves were snug on his arms and his cloak swept the floor behind him. He had combed his hair down – flattening the tousled curls he usually sported. His cheekbones were more pronounced and the slight blush on his pale skin added a layer of youthfulness to his aristocratic features. He looked too exquisite to be real.

"Vous êtes éblouissante mon amour."

Micah's soft husky tone made Mollie blush.

She still had a faint bulge to her stomach and she hesitantly smoothed her hands over the imperceptible curve of her belly. It was barely noticeable...even in the mirror and the dark colour of the dress did an expert job at concealing it. But Mollie still felt somewhat self conscious.

God she missed her babies so much. It would be around this time – before the darkness of the night fully set in that she would hold them and feed them before rocking them to sleep in her arms.

Mollie shivered when Micah walked up to her. Black gloved fingers snaked around her white long sleeved ones. Even in her heels he was still taller than her.

She looked up at him. Goosebumps erupted on her arms and she was thankful she had gloves on. The dress was slightly tight around her chest. Mollie was naturally flat chested but her pregnancy had certainly changed her body in more ways than one and she now found her breasts to be slightly heavier than usual.

It seemed to catch the winter prince's eyes as well and Mollie saw him smirk down at her. If anyone knew her body as well as she did, it was Micah.

He was so close Mollie could press her lips against his if she wanted to. But she didn't. She was still bitter at him for being short with her earlier.

His cool breath fanned her lips and Mollie tensed when his gloved hands inched their way from around her slightly rounded belly towards her hips.

"The fireworks display in this city is famous across all the regimes. You'll enjoy it. Everyone should get to witness at least one in their lifetime."

Mollie looked down. His green eyes were so piercing and vibrant – Mollie didn't trust herself to stare back into them – not when she was this close to him. She would tell him about the necklace later. The last thing she wanted to deal with for the rest of the night was a brooding Micah.

"Shall we?"

Tucking her dark brown curls behind her ear Mollie looped her arm through his and tried to swallow down the aching feeling in her gut. It had been bothering her since she and Micah had left Sofia and Phillip in the main hall earlier in the evening.

She hoped it was just a result of her nervousness. It must have been. There would be no violence, Micah seemed sure of it. But then why couldn't Mollie swallow the chill that kept going down her spine? The necklace felt like solid ice against her neck.

She gripped Micah's arm tighter and took a deep breath.

She had nothing to fear.

Chapter End Notes

The calm before the storm guys. But a huge big fat chapter for y'all after quite a while since the last update. I had to really flush out plot and other details which took excruciatingly longer than I thought so I apologize for that delay. We are getting close to the end now! Love you all so much. xx

Chapter 50: Étain

Chapter Summary

Part 2 of the Beacon Cape arc: The night show looms closer and so does Mollie's need for answers. An unexpected guest makes an appearance.

Chapter Notes

More plot.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The delicate sound of a live orchestra filled the Aurelio ballroom. Champagne towers lined the main entrance and warm yellow tones from the candle lined room bathed the shiny floor in a warm burnt orange glow. The chandelier sparkled above the glossy floor casting a shimmering iridescence over the glistening tiles.

Mollie entered the ballroom alongside the winter prince smiling when bowed to and gliding through throngs of guests who parted in waves before them. The reception to her was... different. Mollie was usually the one in the past who was supposed to avoid eye contact, shuffle through the crowd, and curtsy when addressed to. Now people did it to *her*.

These people saw her as Mollie Marchesseault, Princess of *Peréal* and wife of the fearsome winter prince of the Northern Lyon Empire.

Mollie was on edge. She didn't like the attention. Micah was an expert of course, guiding her through the motions like the professional he was. Mollie followed as best she could, laughing when he smiled at her – blushing when he kissed her on the cheek and most importantly playing the part of the supportive wife.

Her cheeks hurt from the practiced smile she had plastered for the guests since she left her quarters earlier that evening.

She sighed in relief when she passed the champagne tower near the entrance. It offered some privacy from the spacious ballroom and Mollie jumped at the opportunity to take a long overdue breather.

Releasing Micah's arm she brushed her long hair over her shoulder and took a deep breath.

“Are they always that...nosy?” she asked.

Micah handed her a glass of water which she gratefully accepted.

“I told you,” Micah said dryly. “The people here are a little intrusive. They aren’t like the people back home. There are large cultural differences.”

Mollie scoffed. That was putting it lightly. They were nothing short of *swarmed* the minute they made their entrance side by side.

Mollie’s attempts to break away from the inquisitive guests had been largely unproductive and Mollie was itching to follow her own agenda. The first involved getting answers from Henrie and his wife. The man made her skin tingle.

“I don’t think I can do this for much longer,” Mollie muttered. She finished her glass of water and placed it on the food lined table.

“You’re doing well,” Micah murmured. “We’ll be on our way back home soon enough. Just a couple more hours *mon amour*.”

Mollie sighed.

“*Regardez-moi.*”*

Mollie looked up. Her brow furrowed.

Micah extended a gloved hand out to her. A charming smile played at the corners of his lips.

“Dance with me?”

Mollie couldn’t help the surprise that flitted across her face.

She could hear the whispers around her, the eyes of many digging into her back.

Micah had that smile on his face. The one he wore after closing a deal. It was the smile he wore when he was in the middle of a grand performance. And isn’t that what they were? The handsome prince and his vibrant bride. How could Mollie leave him standing there with his gloved arm outstretched to her?

She was expected to do what every princess must: dance with her prince. Be the perfect partner. Play the perfect wife to her perfect husband.

She swallowed down her nerves and smiled weakly at Micah. The only thing she didn’t have to fake was the blush that tinged her cheeks.

The soft sound of the orchestra behind her guided her movements.

Micah’s hand attached firmly around her waist, the other clasped tightly around her own as he guided her around the Aurelio ballroom.

His touch was firm and confident and his movements so fluid. His actions were practiced – as if he had danced around a ballroom many times before. With a start Mollie realized he

probably *had*.

He twirled her around, letting the glistening sparkles on her navy dress catch the light in a dazzling manner. She placed her right hand delicately on his shoulder – the way Rowan had taught her back in *Icedalar*. Never did she think his crash course on ballroom dancing would ever come in handy once again.

“People are staring,” Mollie muttered. She tightened her grip on Micah’s shoulder.

“You better start getting used to it,” Micah chuckled. “And besides, how can you blame them? You are simply resplendent.”

Mollie tensed when she felt his gloved hand graze her thigh, giving her flesh a tight squeeze before sliding back up to curl around her waist.

She narrowed her eyes at him prompting a smirk from Micah. He *loved* seeing her squirm in public.

“Privacy is a privilege for people like us,” Micah murmured bringing her in close. His sharp cologne filled her senses. Mollie frowned. She didn’t want to get into the topic of privilege with Micah. Not when they were surrounded by noblemen and women.

“Lean in closer for a second,” Micah instructed.

The underlying assertiveness in his tone made Mollie step closer quickly. They remained like that for some time – his hands pressed into her waist and hers tight around his neck -- before Micah’s grip on her waist relaxed and she took a step back once again.

“I need to get Natalia alone,” Micah muttered. His green eyes scanned the full room with irritation.

“Grigoire’s wife?” Mollie questioned.

Micah nodded mutely.

“She’s purposefully avoiding a confrontation,” Micah told her quietly. “She’s been pacing the back wall near the bar since the moment we stepped into the ballroom.”

Mollie stole a quick glance behind her.

“Maybe she doesn’t like the attention either,” she muttered.

“Or maybe she has something to hide,” Micah said tersely.

Mollie felt Micah’s grip on her tighten. Mollie could tell the gears in his mind were working. Micah had been analysing the crowd since the moment they walked in.

“Where is Grigoire?” Mollie asked hesitantly.

“Left corner,” Micah murmured brushing his lips against her ear when he brought her in close for a spin. “He’s been watching us since we stepped out from behind the champagne tower.”

Mollie felt her heart skip a beat. She had felt many eyes on her, but now that Micah mentioned it she *did* feel something more sinister burning into the skin of her back.

“What are you going to do?” Mollie whispered.

Micah smiled.

“I’m going to have a little chat with his wife.”

Mollie felt ice course through her veins.

“You don’t mean...” Mollie trailed off with widened eyes.

Micah raised an eyebrow.

“Mean what?”

Mollie knew that look. She didn’t know what Micah had planned but she had a feeling it wasn’t going to be pretty.

“I doubt Grigoire would allow you to step even a foot near her.”

Micah laughed.

“I’m not worried about *him*.” Micah seemed amused by her comment. “Natalia will come to me. I can be quite...persuasive.”

Mollie frowned.

Before she could respond another person on the dancefloor caught her eye.

Ophélie Rineau displayed her long towering legs beneath a blood red gown. Her skin glowed in the orangey ambiance. Her arm was wrapped snugly around her husband who radiated an aura equally as fierce as hers.

She must have been a foot taller than Mollie. The woman was truly all legs.

She was alone with her husband near the dessert table. Mollie felt her heart race. This could be her chance. She *had* to speak with her.

Micah’s sudden squeeze on her waist made her gasp with the pressure he exerted. She quickly flashed her eyes back to his. His eyes had darkened somewhat. He knew exactly what she wanted to do.

“I have to talk to her,” Mollie whispered.

Unsuccessfully she tried to twist away from his grasp.

“I’d advise against that.”

His words were sharp when he purred them into her ear.

“Micah...” she began to protest.

“Micah!”

Mollie jumped when a familiar sultry female voice echoed from behind her.

Mollie stumbled backwards, her eyes meeting hazel ones.

The woman’s eyes widened when she spotted Mollie.

“Oh...princess...” she murmured. Her voice had a tinge of shrewdness to it.

Mollie didn’t recognize her at all and failed to return the smile the woman directed at her. She just stared at her questioningly.

The woman giggled.

“Vivienne Coeur,” she murmured. “We met in *Courchevel* earlier this year.”

Mollie could see the annoyance on Micah’s face. She cringed. It wasn’t her fault she couldn’t remember all these rich people.

“Right...” she managed. She did vaguely remember her.

“It’s quite alright.” Her eyes turned to Micah and Mollie could see the evident lust in her eyes.

“How nice to see you two,” she added in that same sultry tone. “It seems these days even the common woman can call herself a princess. What ever happened to tradition?”

Mollie decided to ignore the insult.

“Vivienne,” Micah addressed her coolly.

“You never came to visit me in *Chambéry* for the *pivoine** festival. You know how short the season is.”

“A shame,” Micah said smoothly. “It seems my time has to be better allocated to more primordial needs these days.”

“*Ah oui,*” Vivienne said. “*Félicitations.* * I heard about the two new arrivals. Aren’t you a lucky one?”

Mollie didn’t miss how she directed the last statement at her.

“Indeed,” Micah said lightly. “I couldn’t be more fortunate.”

Mollie smiled politely leaning in and allowing Micah to brush his lips against her cheek for the millionth time that night.

“Always a pleasure,” Vivienne replied. Her tone had a chilly air to it now. “Until we meet again Micah.”

When she sauntered away, Mollie swore she saw the remnants of a blush leave Micah’s cheeks.

She remembered what he had told her about the woman back in *Courchevel*.

We do business together.

Mollie knew that was a vague term for a variety of things.

“She looks pretty tonight.” Mollie commented bluntly. “Old. But pretty.”

Micah ignored her. Mollie didn’t expect much else but she decided to push the subject a bit more. “Do you let her call you that? Isn’t she supposed to address you... formally?”

Micah flashed his eyes to hers.

“How so?”

His tone was clipped.

Mollie frowned. “She’s supposed to address you as *prince*. She’s a countess. Not a royal.”

“If I recall correctly, you never addressed me as such either.”

Mollie fell silent after that comment. She didn’t miss the past tense of his context.

In a rather quick gesture, Micah snapped his fingers sharply prompting a member of her guard to walk toward them immediately. The guard bowed when he finally approached them.

“Escort my wife back to our quarters,” he ordered the crimson dressed *Peréal* member. “I’ll be there shortly to accompany her before we observe the night show.”

The guard nodded.

“*Tout de suite votre majesté,*” the guard said promptly. He placed a gentle hand on Mollie’s arm.

With a last warning stare in her direction Micah slipped past her into the crowd of guests.

His eyes said it all.

Behave.

Mollie chewed her lip. With Micah distracted, this was an opportunity she just couldn’t miss.

Before the guard could fully lead Mollie away from the party she spoke.

“I just need to freshen up for a moment,” Mollie told him crisply.

The guard frowned.

“Prince Micah gave me strict orders. Straight to your room princess.”

Mollie rolled her eyes.

“And I will follow them. Please. I’ll just be a moment.” The guard seemed conflicted and Mollie jumped on his indecisiveness. “I knew you’d, understand” she said sweetly. “Men never know how difficult it can be to spend the entire night in heels.”

The guard sighed and waved her off.

“I’ll wait for you here.”

Mollie nodded eagerly.

When he turned his back to step towards the exit door. Mollie made as if she were heading towards the powder room but quickly slipped back into the crowded ballroom.

Her eyes scanned the crowd haphazardly – searching for a vibrant red dress amongst the silky extravagant gowns that decorated the ballroom. There were all kinds of colours on the dance floor tonight – pinks, and blues, and creams and blacks. It was different from the function in *Icedalar* where everyone had seemed to be adhering to a certain dress code. It was more colourful here – more *alive*.

Mollie spotted a flash of red near the back – heading outside in the direction of the arched doors leading to Phillip’s ever so highly regarded gardens.

Lifting her navy dress Mollie slid past guest after guest – trying her best to maintain balance in her towering heels.

She pushed the delicate glass doors open. The chilly air immediately spread past her bare shoulders and Mollie was suddenly thankful she had worn gloves tonight.

Ophélie and Henrie walked slowly across the platform overlooking the gardens. It was the same platform Mollie had stood alongside Phillip Aurelio only earlier that night.

Slowly the two of them descended down the stairs and around the gigantic lotus filled lily pond. They were the only two out there and Mollie hesitated at the doors.

It wasn’t entirely safe for her to be alone without her guards in a foreign place. But Mollie was competent with a sword – and these people would not hurt her. At least not when she was on the grounds of a member of royalty. It was part of the royal code.

Taking a deep breath Mollie pushed open the doors and slipped outside.

Her curls blew wildly around her face and the wind sent goosebumps erupting along her bare shoulders and the skin of her back. The click of her heels echoed across the stony landscape and Mollie felt her blood turn to ice when the two of them turned around to face her. She stood on the platform while they stood at the bottom of the short staircase that lead deep into the gardens.

Ophélie's face was blank when she regarded Mollie but Henrie's was flushed purple in disgust. The silence between Mollie and the royal couple was heavy with tension and unspoken resentment.

Mollie didn't know what to say now that she was in front of them.

"I..." she trailed off. The wind picked up sending her curls tangling around her face. She shivered in the cold night air.

"We know why you're here," Henrie spat. "We want nothing more to do with you."

"Please," Mollie whispered. "I just...I just want to know about...my mother."

Mollie could see something flash in Ophélie's dark brown eyes but Henrie was quick to shut her down.

"Partir d'ici," * he snarled. His grip on his wife tightened.

"We still share the same blood," Mollie said quietly. She hated how her voice trembled. "Surely that still means something."

Henrie's lip curled and Mollie could see the softness touch Ophélie's features.

"I had thought seeing you in that Lyon dining room all that time ago, you would surely be dead. But it seems you have a way of cheating even death himself," She smiled humourlessly to herself. "Like mother like daughter."

Ophélie's voice was elegant and deep when she spoke. Smooth, like the bow against the string of a cello. Although her tone was delicate, her words were harsh.

Mollie felt her throat thicken. Her eyes widened and her chest heaved.

She knew. She knew from all that time ago who Mollie was.

Knowing this made tears form in Mollie eyes. How easily she could have freed her had the woman wanted to. But no. She had left Mollie there like a cow in a slaughterhouse.

"You... knew...who I was?" Mollie whispered.

"Of course I knew," Ophélie snapped. "Had I known you would have survived I would have finished the job there myself."

"I don't understand," Mollie choked. The tears began to spill. Her beautiful makeup would be ruined now. But that was truly the last thing on Mollie's mind at the moment. "Why? What

do you have against my mother!”

“Come closer and I’ll tell you,” Henrie sneered.

Mollie wasn’t thinking clearly. Emotion was clouding her common sense. Stepping closer she left the elevated platform and walked down the staircase till her heels sunk onto the earthy pathway that marked the entrance to the gardens.

Henrie narrowed his eyes at her.

“Bianca was a whore and an embarrassment to the Rineau empire,” Henrie barked. His dark brown brows knitted together and his black eyes went small. “She sold herself to Alexandre Marchesseault when she was barely of age and conceived a bastard child. That gives us every reason to admonish her entire existence and strip her of her title.”

Henrie stepped closer and Mollie felt her breath catch in her throat.

“Can you even *imagine* the humiliation? What it did to the King and Queen of *Étretat*? People scorned at us left, right and centre all because of that selfish *salope*. I never thought we’d ever recover. I believed high society would ostracize us for the rest of our lives – generation after generation.”

*“Henrie mon amour, cela suffit.”**

“She had to be eliminated. That was the rules of our monarchy and she broke them. Especially since she was carrying a bastard child in her tainted womb.” Henrie clenched his teeth when he spoke. “I don’t know how but she managed to escape into Riverton and have the baby. When alerted of the news we sent out a bounty to eliminate you both. Permanently. But it seems even a tumble down a rock cliff wasn’t enough to kill Bianca Rineau.”

Mollie felt the sobs wrack her body as word after word poured out of Henrie’s mouth.

It made sense now. All of it. It was no longer unclear to Mollie why her mother treated her the way she did all her life. Bianca was left to nourish the very child that constantly reminded her of the very thing that snatched her entire life away from her.

The Rineau's had wanted Mollie dead too. An innocent child. Their goal was to permanently erase any remnant of what Bianca and Alexandre had done. Knowing this pierced Mollie in no way a blade ever could.

She felt as if her heart had been ripped apart. So many people had put their lives on the line for her. Olivier. Ruelle. Her father... She wished it hadn’t been that way. God she wished it hadn’t.

“But perhaps...it isn’t too late.”

Mollie wiped her tears from her cheeks and looked up from beneath her wet lashes.

Out of the corner of her eye, stepping out of the shadows was the pudgy figure of Grigoire LaFlamme. Sandy brown hair the colour of burnt wheat bristled in the light breeze.

A long steel sword with an emerald decorated hilt was clutched tightly in his hand. Mollie felt her body freeze when she saw it.

“On that note,” Henrie murmured. “We’ll take our leave. Come Ophélie. Everyone will gather at the front to observe the show. We wouldn’t want to miss it.”

Not sparing another glance her way, the Rineau's crossed the gardens and made their way back into the crowded ballroom. The platform blocked the window from seeing what lay below the stairs and Mollie knew she had no chance of being seen. Not here.

Had they knowingly led her out here?

“Don’t even think about it.”

Mollie tensed. She had her answer. Slowly she inched her hand toward her thigh but Grigoire’s small steely eyes were quick to catch on.

Either way Mollie was fucked. Her dagger would be close to useless even if she had it in her hand. Grigoire’s blade was huge. She’d barely manage a solid block.

“You can’t do anything,” Mollie whispered. “You’ll deconsecrate the royal code.”

Grigoire laughed scornfully.

“You stupid girl. The royal grounds end the minute you step off that platform. Right now, you are up for grabs by anyone.”

Mollie felt sick.

How could she make such a mistake.

She looked down at her heels in the sunken soil. She stole a glance behind her at the stairs leading up to the the platform. It shimmered from all the lights flickering above it from the window. She wouldn’t make it. Grigoire was too close to the staircase. He could block her off easily.

The air began to rush out of her lungs when she realized the gravity of her situation.

“You don’t want to do this,” Mollie said carefully. She was downright terrified. Hysterical. She couldn’t die. Not now. Not when she had newborn twins who needed their mother. A father who needed her help. Not when she had *pure iridium around her neck*.

“Oh I do,” Grigoire said disdainfully. “You see Miss Mollie, James wants Micah dead. He ordered me to do it in any way I saw fit. But look at me.” He gestured downwards at his small stature. “I am no match for the winter prince. And I don’t plan on giving up my life for the sake of attempting to eliminate a Lyon. No. I plan on surviving. I need my kingdom back. *Desperately*. And I will do *anything* to see that happen.”

Caius’ voice rang through in her mind hearing Grigoire’s words before her.

Desperate people do desperate things Mollie.

He was right. The crazed look in Grigoire's eyes confirmed it.

The man took a step closer and Mollie immediately backed up. Only thick gardens were behind her. If she took off running in that direction, *away* from the villa in her heels and dress – she risked tripping and having a horrible fall that would surely end in Grigoire easily catching up to her. He had her blocked at the staircase. Her only chance was to stall or make a noise...something loud enough to alert *someone* that she was in danger.

“Don't,” Grigoire chuckled. “You are surrounded.” He waved his hand upwards and behind him – thick in the underbrushes were four burly Outbacks. Mollie could tell from their thick beards and their enormous stature.

“Don't worry,” Grigoire purred. “You may survive. That is... *if* Micah decides his life is worth giving up for yours.”

Mollie's ears perked up at that statement.

“Don't be foolish Grigoire,” she replied. “You know better than anyone that Micah would never do such a thing.”

Grigoire raised an eyebrow.

“I once believed Micah Lyon would never get married. After such a feat, I'm tempted to believe just about *anything* princess,” he chuckled. “You are the mother of his children. I have faith he will pull through for you.”

Mollie shook her head slowly.

“You're wrong,” she choked. “He won't. You'll have to kill me and when you do.... I swear to God Alexandre will rain hell on you and your family for the rest of fucking eternity.”

Grigoire glowered at her. He knew she was stalling.

“Bind her,” he ordered at the large black clad Outback beside him. The giant grunted a response and in seconds he was beside Mollie. Mollie was ready for it and in seconds she reached for her dagger beneath her dress and aimed it straight for the thigh of the giant man beside her. He had barely managed to grab her arm before he yelped sharply. The blade was ever so sharp and Mollie watched the warm blood soak down his leg when she glided it against his flesh. The motion took him by surprise and Mollie knew he wouldn't fall over like most people would. His body size was too large for that. It would take much longer before that happened. With a roar he shoved Mollie to the ground twisting her arms painfully behind her as she screamed.

Her dagger clattered to the ground beside her and she fell hard on her side. Her hands scraped against the rough ground. Reaching for her own dagger the Outback grabbed her leg and brought her dagger upwards in a motion to plunge it deep into her side. Mollie tried her best to turn sideways. Her training kicked in and she remembered what Zephyr had told her.

Lateral lower quadrant is the safest bet.

The smell of earth and rain filled her nose as she lay facedown on the ground. She shut her eyes tight in anticipation for the pain she knew would hit hard. But before she could feel anything something heavy and quick pushed her backwards.

The sound of an animalistic growl filled Mollie's ears as well as the sound of an ear splitting yell from the man beside her.

A russet brown wolf soared over her head and sunk its massive canines into the arm of the Outback that had cornered her and pushed her to the ground.

Mollie flipped over and gasped in horror at the scene before her. The gigantic wolf was relentless, tearing limb after limb off the giant man. His face had contorted into a look of pure terror. He didn't even have the chance to scream.

Blood soaked the soil – spraying across the grass. The wolf continued to enjoy its kill shaking its head ferociously from side to side before eliciting a sharp bark from its blood stained lips.

Sharp yellow eyes met hers but Mollie was too frozen in shock to move. The creature was *right next to her*.

She continued to stare at it and it stared back with the same knowing eyes.

"Paris?" she whispered.

The wolf snapped and bared its teeth but when Mollie looked closer she noticed its eyes were fixed on something behind her.

Grigoire's shout from across the garden alerted Mollie and she immediately turned around.

Standing a couple feet away was Grigoire who had backed himself up against the side of the stony structure of the pond.

He was backing away slowly, sword trembling in his hand, his eyes on the tall cloaked figure in front of him.

Where had the man come from?

The man was surrounded by three giant Outbacks swords in hand and all pointed at the single figure in front of them. The man in the black cloak had his own sword in hand, a thin slate grey blade with several rubies at the hilt and decorated by a circle of jadeite gems.

"Gentleman," purred the man. His tone had an underlying layer of amusement to it.

"This is the other one," one of the Outbacks spat to his partner. "*The other Lyon.*"

The third Outback had a furious expression on his face. They barely even glanced at their friend who lay mangled and limbless, his blood forming a small puddle beneath a lonesome

dahlia bush.

“Now now.” Grigoire stumbled over his words when he spoke. Mollie could tell he was terrified. “Let’s just...take it easy prince. We can talk this through, like civilized people.”

The black cloaked man raised an eyebrow –turning his head to the side to shoot a vicious smile at Grigoire LaFlamme. Mollie recognized those defined cheekbones and that sharp jawline. Combed chestnut brown hair glistened beneath the lantern hanging above the pond.

“Civilized?” The middle Lyon clicked his tongue in mock disappointment. “Poor choice of words Grigoire.”

“I’m just following orders,” Grigoire cried out. “Your *brothers* orders.”

Grigoire looked over to Mollie who lay frozen on her side in the damp soil. She could see the desperation in his eyes. He was still wanting to get his hands on her, she could tell.

“Get up the stairs Mollie.”

Rowan’s commanding tone was sharper than fresh cut steel. Wincing, Mollie pushed herself up as quickly as she could and made a beeline for the stairs.

The wolf shadowed her the moment she stood to her feet and followed her up the stairs. Its thick fur brushed her legs. She was still shaking from the trauma of what she witnessed but her heart suddenly clenched in fear.

It was three against one. Rowan had three swords directed at him from all sides. Even at his tall height the Outbacks were still much much larger than him, both in width and length.

“Well come on,” Rowan taunted. “Give me a decent challenge this time.”

The Outback growled menacingly at him but Mollie could tell neither of the three had any intention of engaging Rowan Lyon in a fight.

“You aren’t the one Sian wants dead,” the other Outback growled. “We would hate to have to kill you.”

Rowan smiled.

“You can try.”

The clash of sword against sword filled the air and Mollie jumped into action.

Grigoire had turned around in an attempt to make a run for it but Mollie was onto him. She snatched her dagger from the ground beside her. Zeroing in on her aim she threw the blade and smiled when it plunged deep into the back right leg of Grigoire. He yelped and stumbled, managing only a few steps forward before collapsing into the pond with a tumultuous splash.

Mollie didn’t need to turn around to hear the sound of the door opening behind her.

“Gentleman at ease.”

Phillips deep reverberating voice echoed across the gardens and Mollie watched Rowan expertly engage in battle. His sword glided against the three other blades around him and in a motion that shocked Mollie he flipped his blade between his fingers slicing the ear clean off the Outback that was closest to him.

The man howled and took several steps back. A thin river of blood flowed down the side of his head to pool in his thick curly beard.

“Lyon prince,” Phillip bellowed sharply. “I will not have another body taint the sacred earth of my garden. *At ease*. That is an order!”

Rowan’s cloak flew behind him as he turned on his heels to distance himself between the three Outbacks in front of him. He had perched on the first step leading up to the platform where Phillip currently stood. Mollie looked over to see that Sofia was also beside him. She was frowning, her glare directed at the men standing on their land amidst the palatial garden.

Wiping the blood off his blade discreetly, the middle Lyon sheathed his sword and knelt down slowly before Phillip and his wife.

“Your highness,” Rowan said with a smirk. “I apologize for my tardiness. I hope I didn’t miss the show.”

Paris had perched beside Sofia who had settled on stroking the head of the giant beast. It purred as she ran her fingers through its fur.

“You haven’t,” she said crisply. “Though I would highly suggest you use the front door next time Lyon, even if you *are* tardy.”

“Of course your majesty,” Rowan purred. He glided up the platform to plant a kiss onto her gloved hand. “I’ll remember to keep it conventional next time.”

Grigoire moaned in pain. Mollie forgot he was still rolling in the bushes from the wound in his thigh. He had managed to pull himself out of the water.

“As for you three,” Phillip said darkly. “I expect you to leave my grounds at once. My men will see to it that you are escorted out of Beacon Cape immediately. I don’t want my guests knowing three of Sian’s slaves were prancing in my gardens on the eve of welcoming the new year. It will incite fear and panic.”

Mollie jumped when a sea of green and white uniformed men began to swarm around the three giants in the middle of the garden.

“As for you...”

Phillips voice went deeper when he looked down at Grigoire.

Slowly Phillip walked down the steps until his feet touched the soiled ground of the gardens.

“You dare carry out your personal matters on my land?”

Phillips voice transitioned into something disturbingly violent and Mollie felt a shudder wrack her body.

In a single motion Phillip pulled free the dagger that had lodged itself tightly into the back of Grigoire’s thigh. The man cried out in pain but Phillip barely paid attention.

“I believe this is yours princess,” he said calmly handing her the bloody dagger.

Mollie swallowed uneasily and stepped forward to retrieve it from him.

“What to do with you,” Phillip murmured lightly.

Grigoire snarled when he pushed himself up.

“You’re a fool Phillip,” Grigoire shouted. “I gave you a chance. I gave you a deal that could not be *refused*. And instead you choose this. You choose to betray me – your friend of 37 years for some *whore*- ”

“Watch yourself Grigoire,” Phillip said calmly. “The only reason you’re still alive is *because* I have known you for 37 years.”

One of the Phillips guards walked in front of him before bowing deeply.

“Your majesty?”

“Lock him up in the dungeons,” Phillip said tonelessly.

“And the punishment?” the guard asked.

Grigoire continued to utter threats in French as he was forced to his feet and shackled.

“His tongue,” Phillip said lightly. “I’ll take his tongue. That ought to teach him some manners next time.”

The guard nodded and proceeded to pull the fighting man away.

Sofia brushed her arm and Mollie looked over to see her smiling kindly at her.

“You might want to get that bandaged up, before you return inside,” she said softly.

Mollie looked at her forearm where a noticeable cut had slashed through her skin just above where her formal glove ended.

Phillip returned to the platform and smiled at his little audience.

“Let us return to the party. I need a drink after that,” he added with a chuckle. “It is certainly never a dull moment with you Lyons.”

Mollie cringed. She needed to fix herself up before she returned to the party. She didn't want to run into Micah accidentally. She didn't know what he'd do if he saw her now.

Flashes of her blade hitting dead into Grigoire's leg flashed in her mind and she smiled to herself. Zephyr would have been so damn proud of her. In seconds, her eyes met stormy smouldering brown ones and Mollie felt the smile wipe clean off her face.

It was just the two of them outside now, and Paris who had settled on licking his paws.

"I'm beginning to think you *enjoy* the dangerous life Miss Mayeson."

"What are you doing here Rowan?" she hissed. The ferocity in her tone was evident. The last time she had seen Rowan still remained vividly in her mind. The way he had handed her over to the rebels like a piece of meat.

"You're not the only one who makes deals around here," he purred.

She narrowed her eyes.

"Come with me."

Rowan curled his hand around Mollie's waist and navigated them through the crowd effortlessly. He was so quick on his feet, Mollie found herself struggling to keep up in her heels. He had her burrowed into his side – his dark cloak doing a good job of concealing her from the prying eyes of the guests.

They probably had no idea what had happened outside. Phillip would have made sure of that.

"Sit."

With a sharp push, Rowan sat her down in the parlour room and got straight to work. The chatter of the guests was muted the second he closed the door.

"This is oddly familiar," the middle Lyon chuckled. He reached for her arm.

Mollie remembered. He had cleaned her wounds before back in Questershire when she had fallen in the manor gardens.

"Here."

Mollie took the handkerchief he dropped in her hands and used it to wipe the tears that had smeared across her cheeks.

Rowan was gentle when he worked. How such large hands had the ability to be so soothing was a mystery to her.

"May I ask what compelled you to leave the safety of the party and venture out into the dark gloomy night all alone?"

Mollie sighed. She wasn't really in the mood for Rowan. But she was so mentally exhausted she decided to just humour him.

"I wanted to speak to Henrie and Ophélie Rineau. They owed me an explanation."

Rowan raised an eyebrow. His dark brown eyes glimmered in the soft yellow light.

"Quite bold of you. Though I can't say I'm surprised."

"She arranged to have my mother killed," Mollie cried out. "All because of some stupid rule _"

*"Attendez. " **

Rowan interrupted her with a frown.

"It doesn't matter what monarchy we are a part of. The rules are our scripture. There are consequences for breaking them."

Mollie fixed her fiery tearful gaze on Rowan.

"So you condoned what they did? Sending someone to kill a mother while she was pregnant with child? A woman on the run for her and her child's life?"

Rowan frowned.

"I'm not condoning anything. I'm advocating for the rules of law." Rowan said bluntly. "Bianca and Alexandre *broke the rules* Mollie. Several in fact. There's no denying that."

"She should have *told* me from the first day she saw me who I was," Mollie snapped. "She had no right keeping that from me."

"That woman owed you *nothing*," Rowan snapped. "You're an impulsive selfish little brat. I would have thought you learned from your past mistakes."

Rowan's harsh words made Mollie cringe with its abrasiveness.

He leaned in closer, taking his time to roll her gloved sleeve over her arm to conceal her wound.

"You are a part of this monarchy whether you like it or not," Rowan told her in a low tone. "You aren't the same girl with the privilege to run through corridors leisurely, go on little adventures, and speak to whoever you want *whenever* you want. You are a princess. You have *responsibilities* Miss Mayeson. You have an obligation to be there for your kingdom. To be there for your children."

His words made Mollie tremble. Not out of fear, but out of blatant transparency. She was selfish. Every word out of his mouth was true. And for some reason that made Mollie hurt more than anything. Her need for that *closure* had blocked her common sense. She couldn't

let it happen again. The single thought of leaving Maël and Rue to the care of someone else was almost too much to bear.

“Now that your arm is sorted out,” Rowan huffed. “I need to speak with my brother immediately.”

Mollie looked down guiltily. She was so ashamed after what Rowan had told her.

“James has no intention of backing down,” Rowan muttered to himself. It was the first time Mollie had seen even a sliver of distress cross his features. He was always so smug and confident. Seeing him like this sent true fear bubbling in Mollie’s gut. “James always hunts down the prey that crosses his path. It’s not that he doesn’t want to let it go. It’s that he can’t stop himself from letting it go.”

Mollie hesitated. Her cheeks were still streaked with dry tears.

“He’s been that way since we were children,” Rowan continued monotonously. “When he wants someone dead, he goes through great lengths to see it through.”

“You mean...M...Micah?” she whispered through trembling lips. She knew the answer was wrong – even when she said it.

Rowan bristled.

“That’s different. Micah and James have always been at each others throats. But now...its personal. There’s a line that is crossed now that wasn’t there before.”

Rowan looked at her gravely.

She knew now.

Rue and Maël. Her children. The Lyon heirs.

Mollie felt her heart beat quicken. She hoped Rowan wasn’t telling her that all of the nightmares she had been facing for the past couple months were *true*. James really was going to finish her this time. He was going to kill her. He was *coming for her*.

Mollie couldn’t even swallow. Her throat had gone dry. Jelena’s voice filtered in Mollie’s mind. How she had sat with her that day in *Icedalar*. Jelena had opened up to her about her fears – about the single most thing she had wanted. She had told Mollie why she had put up with the Lyons for all those years. She had done what any good mother would do. She wanted to secure a successful future for her child. And Mollie had taken that away from her. It was not so different from what Micah had done to James. Ironically, they both never did it intentionally.

But she had something James didn’t. She had something to offer.

But would it be enough?

“I know where the iridium is,” Mollie whispered.

Rowan blinked at her. His expression went blank and had Mollie not been so miserable she would have found it amusing. Telling Rowan where the iridium is was a risky move. But Mollie knew Micah trusted him. She wouldn't go so far as to say she herself trusted Rowan Lyon -- she never would. Not fully. But he was the only one who would know what to do. He knew iridium better than anybody else. She needed guidance desperately. Her options on who she could trust were running low. She had to take this chance.

"Pardon?"

Rowan furrowed his brow.

Mollie pulled at the necklace around her neck.

Rowan's eyes narrowed before widening. This happened several more times before he managed to form words.

*"Comment savez-vous?"**

Rowan reached out gingerly – his gloves brushed her bare collarbone for a fleeting second. Almost immediately his hand retracted as if he had been burned.

"Wait here."

It only took a moment. Rowan quickly left the room leaving Mollie breathless and agitated in the small parlour room next to the party. When he returned he had a small bowl in his hands filled with clear rippling water.

Mollie's eyes widened. She understood what he wanted from her. Carefully she reached around and unclasped the material. It shimmered between her fingers. Delicately, she dropped it into the crystal clear water. She gasped when she stared at the bowl in front of her.

Words couldn't even describe what Mollie was seeing. The metal was glowing. No. It was *more* than that. It was radiating a deep ruby red glow that seemed to accomplish the impossible. It was as if the metal itself was blazing beneath the water. The glow from the necklace surrounded the small bowl of water with tiny licking flames. It was as if she were witnessing three states of matter co-existing at once -- all in a little glass bowl. It was beautiful. Mollie had never seen a red so vibrant in colour. She gasped when the bowl shattered in front of her. Her jaw dropped when the necklace fell to the ground. No water remained. Just shards of broken glass.

"The water..." she gasped. Rowan was fairly calm -- rather unsurprised by the impossible display that took place before them.

It sequesters whatever it takes in.

"Rowan..." she whispered. She picked up the necklace in between her fingers – feeling the watery delicate metal against the pads of her fingers.

However Rowan seemed agitated about something. Mollie could tell by the deep frown on his features.

"So it was in Questershire." His face paled when he said this. Mollie watched his nostrils flare as he untied his ascot and threw it onto the chair. He brushed his hair backwards. Mollie didn't miss how hard he dug his fingers against his scalp. "Keep it around your neck," Rowan murmured from between non-moving lips. "At all times."

"No," Mollie whispered. She threw her hand out towards him. She didn't want this thing anywhere *near* her. That much power scared her to the core. "I don't want this around me. You have to keep it. I...I can't..."

"You *must*," Rowan muttered. He pushed her arm backwards. "It's safest with you. I can't carry it around with me. Not when I'm traveling between lands." He stepped closer to her. "That much power in the open is too risky." She squeezed her eyes tightly when he took it upon himself to re-clasp the necklace around her neck. "It's safest in *Peréal*. With you."

Mollie shuddered. The necklace felt so cold all of a sudden. Like a block of solid ice against her heated collarbone.

"You know what this means," Rowan said lowly. His voice was gravelly from his previous exertion. He said it as more of a statement really. An unspoken understanding.

Mollie swallowed thickly. She knew. Of course she knew. But that also meant....that Rowan knew as well.

"Not a word of this to Micah."

Mollie blinked up at Rowan in shock. His eyes were fixed on her necklace.

"What do you mean?" she whispered. "He has to know. James is looking for it...if we don't--"

He cut her off.

"Not. A. *Word*."

Mollie stilled. He was full on glowering at her. Mollie understood why. If she told Micah about the necklace, she was obligated to tell him about...Izabel.

"He doesn't have to know," Rowan repeated. "Not ever." Rowan stepped closer to her. His eyes had narrowed into thin slits. "Don't you *ever* tell him."

Mollie was paralyzed in fear. She nodded mutely. She didn't know why but angry Rowan scared her more than anything else she had witnessed that night.

"Swear it."

"I...won't...tell him," she managed between thin lips. "I...swear."

He sighed heavily and carefully adjusted his cloak.

"*Bien*. Go get yourself cleaned up. It would be best to keep this little.... incident between the two of us."

Rowan smiled wryly.

“As you know. My little brother doesn’t take kindly to those who touch his things...no matter whose fault it is.”

With a sneer he left her alone in the room.

Mollie held her head in her hands and took in several gulps of air before she sunk back into the same chair Rowan had placed her in. She was such a fucking mess. She stared down at her hands for some time. Blank. Empty. Cold.

The unfairness of her situation angered Mollie. The necklace. Ophélie. Her father. James. All of these *secrets*...

How could they have punished her? *Her*. An innocent child. And her mother....the woman Mollie hadn't seen in over a year and a half now. She would be fully off the deep end by now. Mollie knew it in her heart. There was no way Bianca could survive on her own. She was probably dead on some side of the road somewhere now. The former princess of *Étretat*. Exiled at fourteen. Abandoned at sixteen. Dead at thirty five.

Mollie's reflection stared back at her wanly in the fancy mirror across from her. Her curls had tumbled down around her shoulders -- the frizziness setting in. Her cheeks were blushed with exertion and her pale brown eyes were wide and quivering. Hectic spots of red were sprouting around her neck and dirt had smeared her collarbone. Her snow white gloves were splattered with mud. She looked down and peeled them off, dropping them onto the ground. The strike of the clock hitting midnight echoed loudly in the interior of the villa. Paired with the giggling chatty guests outside, it muffled the sounds of the room letting Mollie drop her head into her hands and scream. The necklace around her neck glittered against her bronzed skin -- shining proudly in the reflection across from her.

She picked up her fist and slammed it against the mirror, uncaring that the action sent thousands of glass shards shattering onto the floor. She screamed until her voice was raw and ragged and her throat could no longer keep up with her pain. With screams turning to sobs she held her hands and cried till she had no more tears left to fall.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for the lack of smut. There's been so much plot to flush out. But I promise its coming ;) Thank you all for reading. Chapter 50?!? Whewwwwww.

Translations in Order:

*Look at me

*Peony

*Congratulations

*Get out of here

*Henrie my love that's enough

*Wait

*How can you be sure?

Chapter 51: Antimoine

Chapter Summary

Part 3 and final part of the Beacon Cape arc.

Beacon Cape

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?”

Mollie looked over at Sofia who had her head resting lightly on Phillips shoulder.

She said nothing. The warmth of Micah’s cloak around her shoulders protected her from the harshness of the wind – but it didn’t quite reach the cold iciness that gripped her insides. The fabric didn’t reach that far.

The fireworks were spectacular. Mollie wanted to enjoy it, but she couldn’t help the sorrow that filled her gut. Somewhere in the crowd were two people who would rather have her dead. She couldn’t get past it.

Grigoire's absence was quickly smoothed over by Phillip who briefly mentioned that him and his wife had to leave immediately following a message from their kingdom. The guests never questioned it – not when Phillip was quick to capture their attention with his dazzling display of lights in the sky.

“What happened to Natalia?” Mollie whispered to Micah after the chatter had grown dimmer and the last of the lights faded into the inky black sky. She looked up to meet his gaze.

“She left.”

It was a vague answer that Mollie didn’t quite know how to take.

“*Allons-y*. We should leave first thing tomorrow morning. I don’t want to stay here longer than necessary.”

Mollie said little when Micah snaked his arm through hers and smoothly talked their way out of leaving early. Even Sofia’s puppy dog eyes couldn’t penetrate the icy exterior of the winter prince and all too soon they were on their way back to their chambers.

It was a quiet walk to their guest rooms. The only sound apart from their light footsteps were the creeping sound of their guards behind them. They were always there at a distance – observing.

As they turned the corner a familiar drawling voice broke through the thin layer of silence.

“Well well well.”

He barely glanced at Mollie, not that she expected him to, but still...his ability to act so effortlessly in front of his brother surprised Mollie. He was *too* good a liar.

“If it isn’t the Mr. and Mrs.” Micah frowned but Rowan was not to be swayed. “Am I still obligated to curtsy-“

“Did you speak with him?”

Micah cut him off. Mollie could hear the hard edge in his tone. Micah wasn’t surprised in the slightest that Rowan was here. They clearly had been communicating for a while.

“You’re going to have to be more specific,” Rowan drawled. His eyes scanned Mollie’s briefly. She kept her face carefully blank.

“You know who I’m talking about,” Micah sneered. The hatred in his tone sent a shiver down Mollie’s spine.

“Ah *now* I know who you’re referring to,” Rowan chuckled. “Yes I did. It was as productive as negotiating with a brick wall I’m afraid.” Rowan paused. “But by the sounds of it, you seem to be faring quite well. That was a nice little deal you sweetened with Phillip.” Rowan frowned. “Though whatever gave you the idea that you could tap into my little reserve.”

Micah smirked.

“It wasn’t my idea.” His green eyes flickered to Mollie. “The princess made that call.”

Rowan raised an eyebrow.

“So now I have another leech to suck me out of my inheritance. How *swell*.”

Mollie winced at the narrow gaze he sent her. She suddenly realized what the brothers were referring to. The navy she promised Phillip....

There wasn’t enough manpower between the Rebels, *Peréal*, and Micah’s army to ensure the protection of Phillips people. At least...not without some help. But now, it appeared they had a solution. Rowan was probably annoyed she hadn’t informed him of this deal sooner.

“We would have needed an additional number of men regardless,” Micah murmured. “I told you that army father dumped on you would come in useful one day.”

Rowan bristled.

“Converse with me directly next time,” Rowan muttered. “I’m not your benefactor.”

“It’s all for a worthy cause brother,” Micah said dryly.

Rowan paused. His expression darkened.

“On verra ça.”

With a simmering glare he brushed past the two of them.

Mollie should have felt some relief. Expansion of their combined forces was integral to their fight against Sian and the Outbacks. But all she felt was a stony grasp around her chest.

With a sigh she pushed open the doors to her chamber welcoming the soft candlelight and warm ambiance of her private quarters – the winter prince close on her heels.

Saint-Berelet

“This better be good.”

The doors of the long narrow chamber leading to the court of former leader Lucas Bartholomew’s home in *Saint-Berelet* glowed red amongst the dark wooden interior of the Victorian themed mansion.

The man had put up a pretty good fight in defence of such a small town. It was a loss Jelena’s husband didn’t bother to care too much about. After all, he had an Outback army at his disposal. The savages were high enough in number to counter the casualties.

James lounged in the seat of the former leader. It wasn’t as grand or lavish as what they were used to – but Jelena knew that would come with time. His wolf was sprawled on the platform below him, its yellow eyes glued to the man in the middle of the empty courtroom. The man bowed deeply before he spoke.

“They’ve sent more scouts looking for the King.”

James’ lip twitched.

“Scouts from where?”

“Peréal.”

He smiled.

“Good. Keep them coming. The more they deploy, the less men they have in their army. There are only so many they can spare.”

The advisor to James continued to stand there. A thin line of perspiration pricked at the corner of his hairline and Jelena could see his trembling stare darting from Napoléon back to the Prince of the West.

James smile widened.

“Please. Continue.”

The man seemed frightened and Jelena had a feeling whatever information he had to give was not as promising as what he had just delivered.

“Natalia is dead.”

Jelena snapped her head up.

James shot her a look to be silent but Jelena couldn't help the sadness that engulfed her.

“And Grigoire?” James asked, rather bored.

“Imprisoned.”

He pursed his lip in annoyance.

“How did she die?”

Napoléon lifted his large head up and Jelena saw the mans face go several shades paler.

Jelena knew the answer already and she felt her throat go dry.

“I believe it was... prince Micah... your majesty.” The man mumbled it as incoherently as he could. “But she did obtain some valuable information that I think you might want to hear.”

“What may that be?” James growled.

The advisor relaxed and Jelena could see a spark flash through the mans eyes. He had been waiting for this.

“The girl. The Marchesseault girl. She has it. My spies confirmed it.”

James face went blank.

Jelena tensed.

And then quite suddenly a terrible smile formed across the prince's lips.

“*C'est vrai?*” he chuckled. “Well what a turn of events *this* is.”

The advisor smiled.

“One of the guards of the LaFlamme's saw her and prince Rowan test for its purity while Natalia kept the prince occupied.”

James smile went stale when he heard his brothers name.

Jelena winced. Bringing up Rowans name in front of James was still a little early. But her husband seemed to have let it pass this time.

“I knew sending the LaFlamme's there as spies was a good idea.”

The advisor blinked.

“Is there a reason you didn’t send them sooner *votre majesté*?”

James’s eyes flashed dangerously.

“*Micah*, ” he all but growled between clenched teeth. “The brat suspected they would double cross him at some point. He didn’t trust Grigoire and issued sanctions against *Fioriène*. Prevented them from bringing solid contracts and negotiations to the table.”

“He sanctioned them?” the man asked in surprise.

James ignored the comment.

“The only reason Grigoire was able to even get an invitation to the Aurelio event is because of his friendship with Phillip. It goes back a long time.”

“Hold on a second,” the man interrupted. “I thought you sent Grigoire there to eliminate the winter prince.”

James chuckled loudly at that.

“Like he would ever be able to accomplish *that*. ”

There was a pause and Jelena watched the man’s features carefully iron out.

“You wanted to get rid of him didn’t you?” the advisor said shrewdly.

James laughed.

“Grigoire is a fool. His land is rich. The idiot just doesn’t know how to run it properly. I promised him he’d have his land back if him and his wife did what I asked. He was desperate. You don’t think clearly when you’re desperate.”

“I’m assuming the Shraders will take full ownership of their city?”

James raised an eyebrow. He didn’t miss the grudging tone in his advisors voice.

“You assume correctly.”

The man hesitated.

“It’s just...the Outbacks are getting impatient. I can only do so much to ease their uncertainty...I hope you understand.”

James reached over for a crystal goblet – taking his time to pour himself a glass of the aged cognac.

“Fucking savages,” he sniffed. “Give them Heferménage, then. Let them drink away their problems.”

Heferménage was a known distillery for some of the best whiskey apart from *Peréal*. In fact Jelena was pretty sure it was the official manufacturer of the stuff. It had been hugely profitable for the town at some point.

The advisor seemed a bit stunned for a moment.

“They want what they were promised my prince. They want a piece of that iridium.”

Jelena shifted nervously in her seat. She placed a protective hand over the swell of her stomach.

“Well then tell them they’ll get it as soon as they finish the job completely. That’s how a fucking contract works.”

James voice was dripping in irritation and the advisor nodded miserably.

“*Oui votre majesté.*”

“Good. We set foot for *Saint Laurent* tomorrow. Prepare the men.”

“What about the King of *Peréal*?”

James smiled.

“Well, now that we know where the iridium is, we can finally use him for something useful.”

“Shall I assemble the court?”

James smirked.

“We have no time to waste. Assemble it now.”

“Now?” the advisor repeated hesitantly.

“Isn't that what I just said?” James barked.

“Right away *votre majesté*,” the man said immediately – his face paled. He was out of there faster than a bolt of lightening.

James’ wolf yawned tiredly as it stretched its humungous paw along the platform directly beneath its owner.

It’s lips were still stained from its last meal and Jelena felt her stomach roll nervously. It had been a while since James had called upon the court. She breathed heavily. She could handle this.

Mollie woke up with a shock – the scream was tangled in her throat. A pain pressed down on her chest as she struggled to sit upright.

“Détendez-vous.”

Micah’s voice filtered through the dark humid room. She blinked away the nightmare to see Micah slowly taking his cloak off in front of her.

She took in a couple deep breaths before she spoke.

“Where were you? When did you come in?”

Micah looked over his shoulder at her.

“I was speaking with Rowan,” he said softly. “Adjustments had to be made to certain contracts. I’m sure you understand.”

Mollie blinked.

“You’ll need to sign these.”

“Oh.”

Mollie blinked the tiredness away and took the parchment from Micah. The calligraphy was so elegant – but the context was not unusual to her. Thankfully it was all in English and Mollie was able to read through the papers carefully.

There was no surprises and with a sigh of relief she began to scrawl her signature down on the line beside Micah’s. Phillip had been thorough and true to his word. She winced when she saw the surname that was written above the line intended for her and Micah.

Maison de Lyon.

The quill stiffened between her fingers. She was *not* yet a Lyon.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” Micah said softly taking the parchment from her nimble fingers. He rolled the document elegantly into a scroll before tying it with a tight seal. “Did you have another nightmare?”

His murmur almost lulled her back to sleep but the fear of what awaited her kept her from giving in.

“Yeah,” she muttered. She hadn’t realized a few stray tears had made their way down her cheek following her horrid nightmare. She wiped them away hastily. She had been having a lot of nightmares lately – more so after she had given birth. Some nights she couldn’t even will herself to fall back to asleep. She would wait till the sun came up and the darkness no longer teased her with its presence.

Mollie tensed when Micah walked slowly toward her.

He had rolled the sleeves of his white dress shirt up to his elbows and left the top few buttons undone revealing a glimpse of that pale marble chest. He sat down gently on the bed beside her.

Mollie shivered under his intense gaze.

“He won’t get to you.”

Micah’s voice was soft and husky when he spoke. Mollie looked up at him in surprise.

“You should not fear him,” Micah clarified. “He thrives off of it.”

Mollie figured Micah was trying to make her feel better but his words only pushed her tears over the edge. She knew then that he had understood the nature of her dreams. She must have called his name out in her sleep. Unsurprising.

“No,” she whispered. “You don’t know...” she blubbered. “You don’t know what he did....what he *will* do when he finds me...”

Micah had gone still and Mollie realized his facial expression had frozen into something cold and blank. He remained like that for several minutes even while Mollie struggled to control her tears.

“What did he do?”

Micah’s voice was colder than an arctic storm. She hesitated when he trained his eyes on hers.

“In Questershire,” she confessed wiping her tears and snot away with her sleeve. “He...he took me below ground...and he took his knife...and he...”

Mollie couldn’t continue. She began to cry again.

“Was that it? Did he do anything...else?”

Mollie knew what Micah was insinuating when he asked his second question.

“He tried to...I think... in *Icedalar*. But I was able to get to Rowan in time,” she told him quietly.

Mollie could see that Micah was imperceptibly shaking. He was furious.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

His tone wasn’t angry and harsh despite his body language suggesting the opposite. In fact it was alarmingly calm.

Mollie looked down at her hands.

“I...I guess if I didn’t talk about it... I thought I’d forget...”

Mollie jumped when Micah suddenly placed his palms on her cheeks and brought her forehead flush against his.

Her cheeks were wet from all her tears but Micah didn’t seem to care.

“I’ll make him pay.” Mollie heard him mutter this between gritted teeth. “I swear on my mother I’ll make him pay for what he did.”

Mollie could do nothing but stare back into his lush green irises as they quivered with the sincerity of his words. His lips were inches from hers. She felt heat singe her cheeks when his cold fingers slid past her cheek to tangle in her dark brown curls. They caressed her scalp gently. It was soothing.

“Don’t cry,” he purred. He leaned in to kiss away the fresh tears that had managed to escape the edges of her lids. “He’s not worth a single one of your tears.”

Mollie closed her eyes with a soft exhale when she felt Micah gently lay her down on the sheets. He was so *tender*.

She didn’t fight him when he climbed over her and slowly began to unbutton his shirt.

She moaned when he hovered over her. Swiftly, he shrugged out of his shirt and attached his lips to hers.

He always had the most alluring taste – a mix of whiskey and something cold and frosty. She sighed when his tongue curled against her own, tangling in a frenzy of passion and fervour.

The kiss was dizzying and heady and filled Mollie with a surge of warmth and arousal. She needed this. Something to distract her from her nightmares. To cleanse James Lyon of her mind.

She snaked her hands up Micah’s chest till it curled around the nape of his neck and in those soft chestnut curls she knew so well. It was something he had passed on to their daughter and Mollie could spend hours running her fingers through them. She brought him even closer so his nose brushed hers and his tongue flattened against her own.

Ever so carefully she moved her fingers downwards – leaving papery thin caresses against his ravaged back. The scars were rough against the pads of her fingers – the polar opposite of his smooth porcelain chest. She felt him groan into her mouth as she moved her fingers up and down his scars.

She was beginning to forget about her nightmare. She allowed the sensation of Micah’s always so cool body against hers and his soft kisses against her lips to drown away the nightmare and provide a relief that she so desperately craved.

Mollie gasped when he leaned down to press his chest against hers. The sharp pain that hit her made her recoil slightly.

Micah broke away immediately and Mollie felt her face flush when she realized her night shirt was soaked. Her time spent away from her twins had kept her breasts full and with no one to empty them – they were slowly releasing themselves and putting Mollie through prickly pain in the process.

Mollie was so embarrassed. Before she could roll over and wallow in shame Micah had gripped her wrists and placed them above her head. She gasped at his sharp movements. He said nothing but slowly peeled the garment away from her skin letting her hard sore nipples chill in the night air.

“There is nothing to be ashamed of,” he whispered. He brought his icy fingers towards her full breasts and began to relieve the pressure slowly. “You’re engorged. Let me help.”

Mollie blushed ten times deeper.

“No...wait,” she whispered.

“Shh.”

He silenced her with a sharp squeeze to her breast that sent a jolt through her body.

Mollie felt breathless...but as he worked hard at squeezing her flesh in his cold hands the pain began to subside ever so slightly. It wasn’t supposed to feel good was it? The fact that something so natural, instinctual, and maternal could feel so erotic made Mollie wince with disgust. She *shouldn’t* be enjoying this.

“*Comme ça?*” He purred letting her milk run through his fingers and down her chest.

Mollie whined in relief and pleasure. Her fingers twisted in the sheets. She struggled to catch her breath.

She should stop. She should push him away and berate him for making her feel such sinful sentiments.

But no words formed past her lips.

She felt his movements pause for a moment and all over again Mollie felt that sharp prickly pain once again.

She winced. The pressure he applied wasn’t nearly enough for her to feel satisfied.

Before she could push his fingers away, soft cool lips wrapped around her breast sending her gasping and whimpering into the pillows.

“M...Micah,” she gasped. “Wait...no....*stop*. It’s...it’s not yours...”

Mollie couldn’t help but throw her head back with a cry. His soft lips against her ultra sensitive skin paired with his soft thumb sweeping over her other wet nipple had her sobbing into the pillow.

The feeling of how *wrong* this was interfered with Mollie’s distractions and her arousal. Something so innocent and pure should never be paired with something so sexual. But then why couldn’t she push him away?

Mollie didn't know whether she was shaking in repulsion or arousal but either way Micah was relentless. She could do nothing but pant loudly when Micah's soft lips suctioned around her – teeth scraping against her tender skin as milk flowed into his mouth.

Fuck.

Mollie was able to jerk a hand free from his grip but instead of pushing him away she tangled her fingers in his tousled chestnut curls and pushed him closer against her breast.

"P...please," she panted breathlessly. She arched her chest into his mouth and gripped his hair like an anchor to a seabed.

This was wrong. Mollie shouldn't be feeling pleasure from his ministrations. This was for her *children* – not for him.

The feelings started all over again when he switched to her other nipple. Mollie felt her toes curl and her body tense as he feasted on her and swirled his tongue around her breast as if she were his own personal pacifier.

When the emptiness began to set in and the pain no longer assaulted her chest Mollie felt him release her breast with a soft pull.

Mollie knew her face was all blushed and heated from shame and embarrassment.

"Better?"

Mollie shut her eyes tight. She could hear the amusement in his tone. He found it *hilarious* how fucking turned on she was by what he just did.

"It's irresponsible of you not to pump," he murmured.

Mollie wanted to die when she saw him bring his milk soaked fingers to his lips.

Mollie reached over for her top and hastily slipped it back on over her chest. She didn't care that it was still damp and sticky. She scowled at him.

Although Micah's tone was hard his features were passive.

Mollie sighed and collapsed back onto the bed. She brushed a palm against her sweaty forehead. Micah shifted above her and had settled on rubbing soft circles around her belly. His thick curls brushed her chin. His nose brushed the crook of her neck.

A calming silence settled over them. Only the glossy moonlight that peeked through the curtained windows across from them offered some comfort in the spacious room. Some time went by and Mollie squirmed prompting Micah to lift his head from under her chin and lock eyes with her.

"You're still awake? Are you uncomfortable?"

Mollie squeezed her eyes for a moment before opening them once again.

“No...I’m just...” She sighed. “I’m just...afraid I’ll dream if I fall back asleep.”

Mollie felt childish admitting so but Micah looked at her thoughtfully.

“Ah,” he said quietly.

The silence continued on but Mollie didn’t want it to. She wanted to keep Micah talking. Anything to keep her from sinking back into a bottomless pit of nightmarish visions.

“How come you never tried to run?”

Mollie blurted the question out into the open. It was vague but she knew Micah would understand it. He had told her once long ago that he wanted to.

She knew he was still awake even if she couldn’t see his face.

“What makes you think I didn’t try?”

His voice was muffled against her neck but she could still make out his words clearly.

He sighed and Mollie felt her skin prickle with chills when Micah moved off of her to lie down on the bed beside her instead. His gaze was directed up at the ceiling. Even in the dark his irises shimmered with a beautiful green hue.

He didn’t look at her when he began to speak but Mollie was soaking in every word from beside him. She didn’t dare move – afraid it would break his train of thought and he would fall silent once again.

“I realized... running was useless pretty early on,” he said softly. “Running from training, running from my tasks, running from my father...” He paused. “It didn’t take long to figure out that the harder I rebelled... the harder he would beat me...the harder he would beat *us*.”

Mollie took in a shaky breath.

“I got this the first time I ran from home.” Mollie watched Micah carefully turn his torso to the side to reveal the jagged scar that ran diagonally from his right shoulder all the way down to his left hip. It had healed over time into a silvery thin line but Mollie could see the indentation was deep. “I was 9.”

Mollie closed her eyes tightly.

“My brothers and I would train for ten to twelve hours everyday perfecting our swordplay. If we weren’t busy doing that... then we were spending hours memorizing war tactics and learning the art of diplomacy and arbitration.”

Micah’s soft murmur was a comfort in this stony open chamber, but it kept Mollie alert and intrigued. He had never told her these things before. Not in Questershire...not even when he took her to Courchevel.

“My father had told me that once I married a woman of his choosing, completed my training up north and deemed me acceptable to take full ownership of *Icedalar* – I would be free of any further monarchical duties bestowed upon a prince...”

He stopped abruptly and Mollie could hear his breathing cut short.

“You believed him?” Mollie asked quietly.

“Of course *not*,” Micah replied angrily. He sounded insulted. “Hartley is a treacherous scoundrel. I never expected him to stick to his word. But I miscalculated just how underhanded he could be.”

Mollie shivered at the animosity that laced his tone.

“The day of the White Ball in Questershire was the day that Hartley was supposed to secure my marriage to the Menestratten girl and secure James as ruler of the West and true CEO of the business sector of our monarchy.”

Mollie remembered that day very clearly. She suddenly put the pieces together.

“You brought me there as collateral didn’t you?” she sniffed. “You knew Hartley wouldn’t stick to his word... so if I was there he couldn’t publicly announce your proposal.”

Mollie didn’t know why she felt so insulted by it. She hadn’t meant much to Micah back then. In fact, she really didn’t know if she meant a whole lot more to him now... but *still* – to know he had his own agenda going the entire time shouldn’t have surprised her or bothered her...but it did.

She didn’t look up to see his reaction but she could hear the smirk in his tone.

“Worked like a charm didn’t it?”

He laughed quietly beside her and Mollie resisted the urge to knee him beneath the duvet.

“Hartley prioritizes many things above family and on that list is his immaculate public image. When we spent our lovely evening in Izabel’s cottage beside the manor I paid one of the guards to spread the word that you and I spent the night there.”

Mollie knitted her brows together. She vaguely recalled that memory.

“But what good would that have done? Kings and princes take concubines all the time.” She said the statement with a frown. She found the whole concept of concubines repulsive.

“Not publicly they don’t,” Micah corrected her. “And not the night before their engagement.”

Mollie reddened. No wonder the *Devonis* girl had been so cold to her.

“Well then. I’m *thrilled* things worked out for you,” Mollie added rather sarcastically.

Micah ignored her and continued speaking.

“When news of my uncles passing spread through the city, there was much debate over who was going to be Ruler of the South. As you know, it is the largest part of the Lyon Empire and Hartley can’t be King forever-“

“Didn’t people want *you* as their King?”

Mollie blurted this out like a statement. She heard Micah pause and she inwardly kicked herself at her frankness. Rowan was out of the question and James was vastly unpopular. Micah was certainly the top choice.

“Where did you hear that?”

Micah’s voice was piqued with curiosity. Mollie dug herself into this one...now she couldn’t get herself out of it unscathed.

“Gibbs told me,” she admitted quietly. “Back in *Icedalar*.”

Surprisingly the winter prince chuckled. Mollie breathed a sigh of relief.

“It’s not that they necessarily *want* me as their King,” Micah said with amusement. “It’s more of the fact that any alternative is better than James.”

His honesty made Mollie crack a smile. It was something that hadn’t happened for a while.

“And I don’t believe Hartley had any inclination to just surrender his reign of the South to any of us – no matter how entitled we are to it.”

Mollie considered this. Knowing the man he was... Mollie figured Hartley would have a plan in place to leave his kingdom behind. Leaving it to a grandson made sense – but still. He would have to forfeit some morsel of his power to one of his sons in the process.

“You think he has something else planned?” Mollie asked quietly.

“He always does,” Micah said lowly. “James is too hot headed to rule a kingdom. The writing has always been on the wall.” Micah sighed running a hand through his dark curls. “By himself he would be his own self-demise....but with iridium – he will bring demise to us all.”

“Then why wait?” Mollie sat up suddenly. “Why not kill him sooner?”

“I couldn’t just *kill* the eldest heir to the Lyon monarchy Mollie,” Micah said with a frown. “I didn’t have enough reason to in the past. Though believe me there are many times I wish I *should* have and just endured the consequences...”

“You should have,” Mollie said lowly. Her fingers dug into the luxurious sheets beneath her. Mollie had never been one to wish for bloodshed. Not even when it surrounded her on the streets growing up. But she had a special exception when it came to James Lyon.

Micah sat up beside her. His back rested against the large bedframe behind them. His face was blank.

“No Mollie. I shouldn’t have.” His voice was low and curt. “You think irrationally when you’re fuelled by emotions.”

Mollie blinked at him. His soft gaze met hers. And suddenly Mollie *understood*. Her breathing stopped short. How had she not picked up on this before? How had she not fucking *seen* it?

“You needed him alive didn’t you,” she whispered between unmoving lips. “If James died... the entire Lyon monarchy would have fallen... to you.”

Micah looked away. Mollie hadn’t known how...trapped he really was till now. He had tried to tell her before but she had refused to believe it.

“And if that happened...” she trailed off. She knew the answer as well as he did. He had told her the answer a fucking year ago. Back in Questershire, days after the White Ball.

I always wanted to live away from the spotlight, away from the heart of the city...in the country side maybe. Live a simple life and enjoy the riches of what the natural elements of the earth have to offer.

“That was before...” Micah said lowly. “Before James betrayed the monarchy and threatened the integrity of our empire. Before he murdered Quinn Marchesseault *on my land*.”

Mollie looked at him questioningly. She could tell Micah was still pretty pissed about it.

“*Commandment 53*,” he muttered. “A royal prisoner under contract is protected from any kind of execution while in the care of any monarchical member so long as the prisoner surrenders peacefully and willingly.”

Mollie frowned. I guess that explained her father’s reaction to Micah in his courtroom all that time ago.

“James killed him on your land...while he was technically under *your* care,” Mollie said slowly. “Couldn’t you somehow prove it was him?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Micah sighed running his fingers through his dark locks. “The courts won’t care whose fault it is. It happened under my care. It’s a problem I had to deal with.”

Mollie narrowed her eyes.

“It sounds like this isn’t the first time James has done something like this to you.”

In fact, it seemed James would have done *anything* to make Micah’s life a living hell – besides being physically cruel.

Micah smirked.

“No. But this one will certainly be the last.”

Mollie looked down. It had gone quiet between them again and Mollie found her eyes lingering for a little too long on Micah's sculpted abdomen. He was lean and tall – his skin pale and smooth. It's what allowed him to be so stealth and quiet. To be so quick and graceful when he walked, when he moved...

“What are you thinking about?”

Mollie's eyes flickered back to Micah's in surprise. He tugged lightly on a stray curl that had fallen over her shoulder. His eyes were soft when they met hers. Curious. She could see the interest within them. He always managed to make her feel guilty – even when she had done nothing wrong.

But her thoughts had begun to wander. She had begun to question things. And there was a question at the back of her mind that she could no longer sequester.

“Rue and Maël...” she said flatly. She kept her eyes glued to her hands when she spoke. “What about... them? Were they just another box on your checklist?”

Micah's face went blank and Mollie could tell she was venturing into dangerous territory.

He exhaled sharply. “Why ask a question you already know the answer to?”

His tone was languid when he spoke but Mollie knew there was a curtness to it that wasn't there before.

“Because,” she said stonily. “My children aren't exchanges Micah. You can't treat them like your... pawns on a chessboard.”

Micah got up slowly and Mollie could see his muscles stretch taught on his arms as he supported himself on the bed beside her. Even shirtless and beautiful – he was still equally as intimidating as he was standing up.

“I'd hardly call the future heirs to the Lyon monarchy *pawns*,” Micah said coldly.

And just like that, Mollie cut the sanguinity.

“Wait a minute,” she muttered. “You fucked them into me just to get back at your brother, didn't you,” she shouted at him.

“Oh Mollie Mae,” Micah said with a chuckle. “I'm *way* past getting back at my brother.” He smiled darkly. “That boat sailed a long time ago. I fucked you because I *could mon chérie*.”

He leaned in when he said the last phrase and Mollie felt her skin prickle.

“And what a good job I did too. You gave me not one...but *two* heirs.” He tucked a curl behind her ear. “*Always* full of surprises.”

He pinched her breast playfully through her thin top, as if reminding her of what he had done to her and she pushed away from him.

“Don’t touch me,” she whipped out pushing his hand away from her. “I know why you needed a child,” she hissed. “It was a way for you to protect yourself against my father. With Quinn’s death on your hands he would have never spared you.” She laughed humourlessly. Micah’s ability to evade the rules of the monarchy were begrudgingly admirable. Mollie knew sharing a bloodline between two separate monarchies abrogated many rules and provided great flexibility when it came to agreements and contracts. She scowled. “Getting back at James was just a fucking bonus for you wasn’t it?”

Micah laughed – almost *endearingly*. Mollie always knew it got him aroused when she fought back. Micah *loved* a challenge – outside the bedroom and clearly even inside of it.

“I like it when you read between the lines,” Micah murmured. His voice was dripping in sensuality when he spoke.

Mollie stiffened when she felt his icy fingers creep further and further down her body.

She felt her breath hitch when they brushed past her panties and Mollie clenched her legs closed.

“Don’t,” she whispered.

Micah’s eyes lifted to hers and Mollie felt his fingers pause.

“Why?”

Mollie hesitated.

She didn’t want to tell him that she was still scarred – physically and emotionally from the birth. Mollie did her daily stretches, she soaked in hot baths, and she wore the soft cotton underwear as instructed by her midwives. But still...she was so terrified. Her pregnancy was by no means a pleasurable experience.

“You’re frightened.”

Micah was way too perceptive for his own good and Mollie dropped her gaze. Thankfully his voice was no longer taunting. Maybe she wasn’t so good at hiding her fear as she thought she was...

“Mollie Mae you’re shaking. Please. Relax. *Je ne ferai rien.*”

Mollie couldn’t help but squirm. His fingers were probing her. It felt more like a medical exam than it did pleasurable and it made her panic.

Distract him. She had to distract him. She wasn’t ready for any kind of action down there. No matter how tempting Micah made it seem.

Quickly she caught his hand in her own and pressed her lips to his. Mollie wanted to cry when she tasted the sweetness of her milk on his lips. Exaggeratedly she moaned into the kiss pressing her chest against his – licking deep into the cavern of his mouth until his hand

retreated to rest tightly on her hip. Mollie let out a sigh of relief when she felt him break the kiss first.

His cool breath fanned her lips and his grip on her hip tightened. He brushed his nose against hers.

He laughed softly against her lips and she jerked backwards.

“You’re going to have to try a little better than *that*.”

Mollie stilled. Ice suddenly coursed through her veins.

“Micah... *please*,” Mollie stammered. She squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m not ready. It’s only been a couple weeks. The pain is still there...”

“I’m *really* starting to lose my patience with you Mollie.” His grip on her suddenly became hard and Mollie froze. She could feel her fear starting to kick in full speed. Micah had patience...up to a certain point. But Mollie knew there was only so much of it he could muster before he cracked. He leaned in close once more. His cool breath fanned her cheek. “*Mon amour*...if *that* pain is enough to break you... then you haven’t fucking *seen* pain.”

Mollie felt anger course through her suddenly. The audacity. The fucking audacity.

“I thought you were tougher than that,” he mused. His eyes were bored when they trained on hers. “Perhaps I was wrong...”

Mollie swallowed and eyed him hatefully.

Her expression made his green eyes sparkle. He liked her like this. Not shy and submissive. But the bastard couldn’t have his cake and eat it too. Not anymore.

His comment made Mollie’s skin flush and she clenched her legs together on the bed uncomfortably.

He palmed her cheek affectionately.

“You know I always put your pleasure before mine don’t you?” he whispered.

“Just get on with it,” Mollie muttered.

He pushed her back gently -- pure amusement in his smirk and Mollie tried her best to calm her erratic nerves. God it was going to hurt so much...

Mollie heard the rustle of the rest of his clothes from somewhere beneath her and she squeezed her eyes shut in anticipation.

After several seconds of silence she opened them to see Micah staring impassively at her. He had arranged her on the bed with her back flush against the sheets and her legs splayed open. The stretch from between them was already enough to make Mollie wince. She was convinced she still had some stitches down there that had yet to be removed.

Mollie's shirt was damp and sticky against her chest -- a result of her leaky breasts. Her thin shirt had rolled upwards to rest just over her mounds. Her almost flat belly was on full display... as well as everything that lay below it.

She flushed. He was just *staring*.

"Well...I've certainly seen more... flattering," he chuckled. "But I suppose that's what happens."

Mollie didn't think it was possible but she felt her face redden further. He had humiliated her...twice.... in one night. What did he even expect? A flat stomach, a pert pussy, and sexy lingerie? She had *just* given birth.

She simmered silently beneath him.

She hoped he finished quickly.

Chapter 52: Tellure

Chapter Summary

Mollie struggles with her new position and the choices she must make. Jelena reaches her breaking point.

Chapter Notes

Plot filled chapter.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Saint-Berelet

“Keeping me here indefinitely is not going to help you much longer Lyon.”

Jelena looked down at the man in the middle of the *Saint- Berelet* courtroom. The grey stone walls blocked out much of the daylight leaving a damp dingy setting around the cold interior. The putrid smell of raw meat and animal filled her nostrils and she tried her best to ignore the whiff that got sent her way with each breeze that filtered past the courtroom.

It had been two and half weeks already that James’ forces had the King of *Peréal* in their grasp and James was getting impatient. But he had a different glint in his eye today. Something had changed for the better.

“Who said anything about keeping you here *indefinitely*?”

James smiled at the King who stared back coldly.

“I’ve already told you Lyon. What you seek is not in my possession, nor is it on my grounds. My nephew did not lie to you.”

“Quinn Marchesseault didn’t lie,” James mused. “But he didn’t tell the truth either.”

Jelena watched James carefully. Alexandre Marchesseault was not to be killed. Not yet. They needed him as leverage against the forces Jelena knew were forging only several cities away. Their agreement with the Ophians had been straightforward. All they wanted was land and James promised them lots of it. With every leader of the city James killed and whatever city he burned to the ground the Ophian Empire grew. Already they had Héferménage, Stanstead, Champlain, Crieuse, and Télico. Of course, that was limited to every city *outside* of House Marchesseault and House Aurelio....till now.

“So that warranted his death did it not?” Alexandre hissed.

James shrugged.

“I wish I could tell you,” James said mockingly. “But that’s beyond my control. You know how obscure those rules can be? Your nephew died on Northern soil. You should direct those questions to Micah. I’m sure you had tons of time to *bond* over these last few weeks.”

James had combed his hair flat against his scalp, his lustrous curls glowing in the evening light. His all black attire was a cloud of black amongst the dank scenery. It fit the ambiance. The smell of burning wood still lingered in the air, filtering in through the single open window in the dingy courtroom.

Alexandre smiled.

“Quick witted fellow he is,” Alexandre chuckled. “What a brilliant idea. I certainly wouldn’t have thought of it. Now that we share a bloodline, I cannot try him for Quinn Marchesseaults death.”

James straightened and Jelena noticed his smile had strained somewhat.

“It almost worked for you didn’t it?” Alexandre murmured. “But he played your own game better than you.”

Jelena felt anger boil inside of her.

Twins.

The Marchesseault whore had delivered fucking twins. Effortlessly. And here was Jelena who had been trying for years and could barely conceive one and struggled to bear a second....

“Two heirs for two different empires....” Alexandre was smiling from cheek to cheek. “You really didn’t think this through did you? Now what’s left for you... *James*.”

The way he said his name was almost nostalgic. It was in a fashion similar to the way Hartley addressed him. An air of cynicism attached to his voice no matter how stringent it sounded.

“Everything was always so effortless for him wasn’t it?”

Alexandre’s voice had gone lower. It was almost taunting. It had been quiet in the courtroom before...but now it was *uncomfortably* silent. A heavy foreboding tone has infiltrated the atmosphere.

“Micah... was a mistake,” James said between gritted teeth. “And father gave him leeway because of it. He was *father’s* mistake.”

“Oh James,” Alexandre said with a chuckle. “*I* make mistakes. And I am unashamed to say that I have made many over my lifetime. But *your* father...your father doesn’t make *mistakes*. Hartley is a man of strict formulation.” He leaned in closer – as far as the chains

bound around him allowed. “Funny how willing he was to honour the heir of his *mistake* rather than the heir of his firstborn.”

James reached for his dagger and dug it into Alexandre’s throat. His breathing quickened when his blade broke the skin allowing a trickle of scarlet liquid to flow down the mans throat.

“I’m going to kill you,” James breathed. James’ advisors that had been on either side of Alexandre quickly shuffled backwards. Perhaps they sensed the danger in their leaders aura.

James smiled as he dug the blade deeper into deeper.

“Then I’m going to kill Micah and his little brats.” His blade went deeper. “And last but not least I’ll kill your mixed blood daughter. Rest assured *Alexandre*. I’ll make sure the Marchesseault bloodline comes to an end.”

Jelena could see that James had dug his blade so deep into the mans neck. It would certainly scar.

“You may try,” Alexandre managed between white lips.

“James!” Jelena gasped. ”You’re killing him.”

The blade pressed deeper.

“*James.*”

He turned around to sneer at her and Jelena recoiled at the wildness in his dark brown eyes. But he wouldn’t hurt her...right? Not when she was carrying his heir. Not in front of all these people.

Jelena glided closer to him. She had to be his voice of reason. She always was. She kept her husband in check. After all, she had been doing it for years.

“Do not forget *Commandment 77*. Any foreigner who murders the current leader of a monarchy on their soil faces an exile of ten years. We won’t be able to step foot in *Peréal* if you murder him now.”

James leered at her.

Saint-Berelet was still considered Marchesseault land. He had to be careful.

Jelena stepped closer.

“Don’t do this James,” she whispered. She could feel the gaze of the courtroom boring into her back.

James turned around hastily.

“Take him away,” he muttered.

Jelena breathed a sigh of relief. James' loyal servants began to file out of the courtroom dragging Alexandre with them and Jelena seized the opportunity to confront her husband.

"James," she whispered.

"What?" he barked at her. She felt her throat pulse.

"Alexandre looks ill," Jelena stammered. "Don't you find it...strange that he hasn't called for backup?"

"Of course he hasn't," James hissed. "His numbers are too low. They'll need their army for when we burn *Peréal* to the ground."

"No," Jelena interjected. "Didn't you see his dagger?"

James stopped and looked at Jelena with irritation.

She knew how much it annoyed him when she picked up on details he would miss.

"What about it?" James asked curtly.

Jelena frowned at him. She glided down the dark wooded stage and picked up the dagger that belonged to the King of *Peréal*.

"That's Micah's," she murmured.

Hearing his brothers name made his lip curl and Jelena could tell his interest was peaked.

He marched over and snatched the thing from her gloved hands. The blue sapphire glinted amongst the other myriad of jewels that adorned Alexandre's dagger.

"You don't think...he set this up do you?" Jelena murmured.

James had stilled.

Jelena felt the blood drain from her face. If Alexandre were to die at the hands of James Lyon, that would make him eligible for death by execution by any monarchy allied with the Marchesseaults. Jelena swallowed. There were *many* people allied with the Marchesseaults – Jelena did not see this ending well.

Micah's jewel on Alexandre's sword signified that he had lost a battle against the king – making any sort of possibility of him playing a part in his death null. It was on the most recent part of the hilt too. Jelena stiffened. Was it possible that Alexandre was walking into this knowingly? Knowing he would die. What better way to set James up than to feign a capture and die at the hands of your captor.

Two weeks. Had had bought the Marchesseault Empire time. Time to gather allies – time to mobilize – all while the King kept James busy with his mind games and fruitless tactics.

It seemed James had clicked the pieces together.

“Putain de merde!”

Jelena gasped at the same moment James sent every candle, paper, and document flying off the courtroom table.

Jelena backed up immediately.

“James,” she gasped. “James please. Calm down. Think this through.”

He had thrown the knife in a rage and it now lay deep and stiff in the rich wood of the courtroom table. Jelena breathed a sigh of relief that no one else was in the room with them. The last time James had gotten this upset he had murdered two of his men.

“Think this *through*,” she repeated calmly.

“There’s no point in keeping him alive any longer,” James spat. “It doesn’t matter if we return him to *Peréal*. His death will be due to my hand regardless.”

Jelena looked him straight into his eyes. The weight of what he told her crashed down on her like a pile of bricks.

“Then what do we do?”

James took in several deep breaths.

She ignored the blood that dripped down his fist from where he slammed it down against the table.

“We burn *Peréal* to the fucking ground.”

Jelena paused. James had that look in his eye...that look that made her skin crawl. Now that James knew the location of the iridium -- there was little need in housing the King of *Peréal* for much longer. They were damned either way. He was as good as dead. It appears her husband had settled on the same conclusion.

“But first,” he said between clenched teeth. “I’ve got to meet with the King... one last time.”

A sick twisted smile spread across his features and Jelena watched with nausea as James whistled for his wolf. Napoléon came bounding in through the door in a craze – his eyes wild and his teeth bared.

“It’s been a while since we’ve had some fun hasn’t it *mon chou*?”

The beast snapped and shook its head ferociously. As they stood beside one another Jelena found it hard to discern the difference as they both melted into the shadows.

She heard James laughing as he descended down into the dungeons.

“Long live the fucking King.”

Beacon Cape

Micah had stilled on top of her– their bodies tightly tangled together.

Mollie brushed her dark curls out of her face and breathed heavily. Micah’s chest had warmed beneath her palms – the normally cool skin of the winter prince matched her own body’s temperature for once.

She had braced herself – wincing at the sensation of his eager member brushing against her wounded slit.

She squirmed beneath him but he had become as still as a marble statue.

“Micah-“

“Shh,” he snapped.

He silenced her immediately. Mollie was now the one to freeze in surprise.

“*Couvre-toi,*” he said quietly.

In seconds he was off of her and tossing her the robe she usually wore onto the bed.

Mollie didn’t ask any questions. She knew when Micah ordered her around in French he was all business. Maybe he had heard something outside the door?

Shakily Mollie fished for her underwear from somewhere beneath the sheets and threw on the robe Micah had given her. She slid off the bed and padded barefoot behind the winter prince who had flattened himself against the door.

Even in the darkness – Mollie could make out the luminescence of his eyes as they matched her own.

“*Faites vos valises,*” he murmured. “*Maintenant!*”

Mollie jumped at his tone and as quietly and as quickly as she could muster, began to throw what little clothes she had unpacked back into her bags. In record speed Micah had already re-dressed and was finishing closing the buttons on his collared shirt.

Mollie grabbed her yellow cloak and threw it over her robe. She brushed her curls out of her face. She was still breathless when she returned to Micah’s side. She jumped when the doors to their chamber opened with a sharp bang.

Mollie was shocked to see Phillip standing outside their door.

“Evening prince...princess.”

He had crossed his hands in front of his body. Calm and collected. His rings glinted on his long dark fingers. Mollie's face was all blushed and she reddened at the knowing smile Phillip had on his face.

"King Phillip," Micah said coolly.

"Sorry for this late... interruption. I came to let you know that something came up not long after you left..."

Mollie stiffened.

Phillip smiled pleasantly.

"Let's just say dinner was not as smooth as I was hoping for. In an ideal world we would all get along and return back to our respected abodes after a night of entertainment and downright scrumptious delicacies." He sighed dramatically. "But that's only in the story books isn't it prince?"

"What happened?" Micah muttered.

Phillip straightened his posture.

"*Saint Laurent* has been compromised. I just received word a little over fifteen minutes ago."

He looked between the two of them darkly. She heard Micah curse beside her.

"Whatever has led to this new abrupt development tells me two things," Phillip said shrewdly. "One, Sian is here for some scenic views in the Marchesseault Empire..."

Mollie cut him off.

"Or he's found out something worth returning for," Mollie murmured between thin lips.

The blood drained from her face and she had a horrible feeling in her gut that James had somehow figured out where the iridium could be. She felt anger course through her veins. She had discussed the iridium with only one other person. And that had been a little over an hour ago. And how convenient it was that James now knew where it was. Had she just made the biggest mistake of her life?

Phillip looked at her hard.

"That certainly seems like the more sensible option from the two."

She could feel Micah's vivid gaze on her.

"We need to leave now," she whispered.

"I've arranged a private carriage to take you both back to *Peréal* as soon as possible."

“No,” Mollie interjected. “That’s exactly what he’ll want us to do.” She gritted her teeth. “It’s what he’ll *expect* us to do. We should take a detour – take the route that passes through the city across from *Saint Laurent*. There’s a bridge separating them isn’t there? It’s a longer route back to *Peréal* but we minimize the risks of getting swarmed by James and the Outbacks.”

Mollie had spent a lot of time moping around in her room when she first made it to *Peréal*. But not all of her free time had been spent in vain. She had scoped through her fathers library over many nights, soaking up information and more importantly, studying the hand drawn maps of various cities scattered around the Marchesseault Regime.

“*Côte de Granit Rose*,” Micah murmured. He seemed surprised she knew.

“*Étretat* is just a little further south...that is...if you take the southern route back to *Peréal*. They may offer you temporary refuge,” Phillip muttered. Mollie tensed.

“They aren’t allied with us,” Mollie said flatly.

“They aren’t allied with *him* either,” Phillip said with a raised eyebrow. He shrugged. “It’s worth a shot.”

Mollie frowned. Based on how her meeting with their current ruler went... she wasn’t holding her breath. The Rineaux’s hated her guts.

“Although I wish you two would have stayed with Sofia and I little bit longer – I understand that these times are rather...uncertain.”

Mollie looked up at him. He seemed genuinely saddened to see them on their way.

“Thank you... for everything your majesty,” Mollie said softly. “You have been more than hospitable to us.”

Mollie knew that Phillip was under no obligation to disclose any of this information to her. Had he not – there was a very high possibility that the regular route Micah and her would have taken to *Peréal* may very well have been intercepted.

“Beacon Cape and the Marchesseault monarchy have always shared positive exchanges, for many generations. It pleases me greatly to continue that legacy with you *Madame Marchesseault*.”

Mollie smiled internally. She liked the sound of that a lot more than she liked *Madame Lyon*.

He shook her hand warmly.

“Prince Micah,” Phillip said with a bow. “Always a pleasure.”

Micah nodded at Phillips departure. The minute the man left he turned to Mollie.

“We need to return to *Peréal* immediately,” Micah said harshly. Mollie knew the root of his urgency and it sickened her to the core as well.

“Rue and Maël are there alone,” Mollie murmured. “What if...what if he gets there before us?”

Mollie felt as if she were on the verge of another panic attack. Her voice broke asking the question. She couldn't even *think*-

“He *won't*. ”

The conviction in Micah's tone was sharp enough to cut glass.

He whistled sharply and Mollie heard the sound of heavy paws echoing down the corridor. In seconds the regal snowy white Wolamute Mollie had slowly grown accustomed to entered the room to perch beside its equally graceful owner.

“I'm going to take the main route back to *Peréal*. In the meantime you should send a message to *Monsieur Courtois* ordering a full closure of the city's main gates. I'll send a message out to my own army to mobilize before I get there.”

Mollie nodded. She was struggling to keep it together. The worry for her twins was debilitating.

“Maybe we should just risk it,” Mollie whispered. “Maybe I should come with-“

“*No*, ” Micah said immediately. “If Phillip is right and *Saint Laurent* has been compromised...the main routes will be crawling with Outbacks. It's too dangerous. I'll go myself. I need to get there before James does.”

Mollie swallowed the lump in her throat. She watched in gut wrenching silence as Micah quickly flitted around the room to pack the few things he had brought with him. Before she knew it, he had slipped on his gloves and tied his navy cloak around his neck. His sword glinted on his waist and his glossy curls sparkled in the dim lighting of the room.

He seemed to sense her fear. With surprise she felt his cool glove against her cheek as he brought her forehead against his for the briefest moment.

“Nothing is going to happen to them. *Je le jure*. ”*

Mollie trembled.

The wolf whined at his side and Mollie realized Theo was waiting for him. His eyes flickered down to her once before returning to rest on Mollie's.

“*Sois gentile Theo*, ”* he murmured before brushing a hand against her furry head.

Mollie looked at him in surprise.

“Take her with you. Her sense of danger is impeccably accurate.” The wolf seemed reluctant but Mollie knew she would never disobey her masters orders. “I'll send a message when I reach *Peréal*. I'll let you know whether a clear path to the main castle is feasible from your location.”

Mollie nodded.

“Take care of yourself.”

Mollie heard the chilliness in his voice. It was an order. She looked up at him from beneath her lashes.

“I’ll try my best,” she muttered.

He turned around and strode to the door.

“Micah...” she trailed off before he could leave her. She hesitated. The fact that he was putting himself in danger for the sake of her twins allowed Mollie to swallow the simmering resentment she had built towards him in the last couple days. “Be...careful.”

He paused at the door. His face was half turned away from her. His expression was unreadable in the shadowy lighting. She managed to catch him nod curtly before he disappeared completely with a single flash of his navy cloak.

Mollie didn’t waste another second. The wolf watched her with icy blue eyes from its stance at the door while she finished packing her belongings. She quickly changed into a jet black tunic with slim pants the same colour and laced up her boots before slipping her dagger into a pocket on the side. It was a far cry from the usual dresses she wore but Mollie was heading into potential danger and she had to dress accordingly.

“You ready?” she muttered.

Theo looked at her with sad eyes. Mollie sighed.

“It’s just a day or two,” she muttered at the beast who stared at her with tears in her large doe eyes. “You will be back with your master before you know it.”

Theo just blinked at her.

Mollie sighed.

“He may speak French, but I speak English. So I hope you’re a fast learner.”

Slipping her yellow cloak around her shoulders once again, Mollie left the room and headed straight for the main hall. The wolf shadowed her every move -- a white figure beside her own. She seemed loyal enough.

What she didn’t expect to see at the main entrance was a tall figure in black, waiting for her. Along with a familiar face at his side.

Mollie’s jaw dropped when she saw her.

“Araya?” Mollie nearly yelled.

Araya grinned at her. She seemed stiff and Mollie realized it was probably due to the person standing right next to her who looked less than pleased to be standing there.

“We need to leave.”

Rowan's voice was icy and Mollie looked between them awkwardly.

“I thought *he* was heading back to *Peréal* with Micah,” she stammered looking at Araya.

“You thought wrong,” Rowan retorted.

Mollie turned to him angrily. In fact, she was so angry she couldn't even register her actions before she closed the distance between the two of them and shoved her hands against the tall solid block of bricks that was Rowan Lyon.

“Did you tell him?” she shouted. She threw in a punch when she could. “*Did you fucking tell him?*”

Rowan had her shoved up against the stony wall of the villa faster than the jaws of a lion on its prey.

Her back hit the wall hard and Mollie gasped at the feeling of the air leaving her lungs on impact.

“*Mollie!*” Araya cried out. In seconds she was prying the gloved hands of Rowan off of Mollie's throat as the middle Lyon stared her down with a look that could have sent a corpse turning in its grave. “Rowan stop!”

Theo snapped from somewhere beside them but neither of them paid any attention to her. Rowan didn't even flinch. Mollie was more focused on Paris who stood watching from a distance.

“*Stop,*” Araya panted. She inserted herself between them quickly. “Rowan!”

Mollie swore she had a bruise on her upper back from where Rowan slammed her against the stone.

With a sneer Rowan released her roughly. Mollie coughed and sucked in sweet oxygen as Rowan adjusted the cuffs on his sleeves. He acted as if her touch had tainted his flesh. With cold lifeless eyes boring into hers he turned around abruptly. Mollie followed his movements, chest heaving, until he walked out into the cool early morning air and disappeared around the corner. It must have been close to dawn at this point.

“Jesus Mollie,” Araya huffed. “You're *worse* than my brother-“

“And where is *he*?” Mollie questioned irritably. She still had her daggers out for Rowan.

Araya rolled her eyes.

“Good to see you too,” she muttered sarcastically.

“I’m sorry,” Mollie muttered digging her fingers into her curls. “I’m just...under a lot of stress right now.”

Araya frowned.

“I...I get it. But slamming Rowan into walls isn’t the way to deal with it.”

“James knows the iridium is here. He *knows*.”

Mollie’s voice was hysterical at this point.

“Mollie *calm down*,” Araya repeated raising her voice. “Rowan told us everything. He stopped by *Peréal* before he came here. When Zen and I told him you and Micah left for Beacon Cape he took off here. It seemed urgent. I told him I’d follow for back up in case anything here went sour. But Micah took care of that. He brought his army in earlier tonight after Natalia LaFlamme surrendered.”

Mollie frowned. Micah hadn’t told her that.

“Surrendered? What do you mean?”

Araya sighed.

“James has most of the cities outside the Marchesseault Regime under his thumb. They’re *terrified* of him. He sent Grigoire here to kill you Mollie. That was for certain. Natalia told us everything.”

“Us?” Mollie questioned with a raise eyebrow. “Since when have you started working with the *Lyons*.”

Araya scowled.

“This isn’t petty family drama anymore Mollie,” Araya murmured. “This is something much bigger than that. The minute James killed Quinn Marchesseault – things have gone to shit.”

“Is this some kind of temporary alliance?” Mollie asked. She felt a headache coming on and she brushed a hand tiredly against her temple.

“That’s exactly what it is,” Araya said lowly. “Don’t get me wrong. I hate what the Lyons have done to us – but right now all of our lives are in danger. And we can’t fight amongst ourselves when a much bigger enemy wants us all dead.”

Mollie sighed.

“Is he on our side?” she asked warily.

It could have been coincidence that James managed to piece together the whereabouts of the iridium. Mollie had *assumed* Rowan had told him. Now that she thought about it...she could have been wrong.

“For now,” Araya said sharply. “Rowan has an army that is willing to fight alongside us.”

“Yeah,” Mollie muttered. “I kind of volunteered that option without his permission.”

Araya chuckled.

“That’s hilarious.”

Mollie met her soft gaze.

“And what about Micah?”

Araya sighed.

“Well, he *did* let us go...back in *Peréal*,” Araya admitted slowly.

“Wait what do you mean?” Mollie questioned. She had dropped her hand back to her side. Had she really missed out on that much while recovering?

“When you found us imprisoned that night under that crumbling cathedral, Micah had ordered his army to remain at ease. They would have never allowed us to walk out like that had he not allowed it.”

Mollie felt her throat close up.

“So he let you go.”

“He must have,” Araya muttered. “Caius wouldn’t have been able to gather the rebel army back in Questershire in time had he not.”

Mollie sighed. All this time she was thinking she had outsmarted Micah for once. Yet always...she was proven wrong.

“Maybe...he didn’t want to burden you with all this stuff while you were recovering,” Araya shrugged. “That’s why he didn’t tell you.”

Mollie snorted. She could just *imagine* what Micah would have told her had she questioned him about it.

Figure it out yourself.

“Where is Caius now?” Mollie asked.

“He should be docking in *Peréal* tomorrow,” Araya said quietly. “It’ll take some time for all the ships to arrive but I know we can count on him.”

“And the others?” Mollie questioned.

“Zephyr and Caden are on their way to *Côte de Granit Rose*,” Araya responded. “He’s been clearing out a safe passage for us to get there. As you know, nothing pleases my brother more than sticking the pointy edge of his blade into others.”

Mollie smiled weakly. She knew exactly what she meant.

“Jöel, Isaac and Caleb will join us there in a couple of days too. They’ve been scouring cities searching for survivors and killing Outbacks whenever they come across any.” Araya frowned at her. “*Côte de Granit Rose* and *Sacré-Coeur* are the only smaller cities outside of the Marchesseault Empire that James hasn’t burnt down to a crisp yet. We have to protect them.”

Mollie gritted her teeth. Her father could have been in any one of those cities.

“Your hair is growing long again,” Araya sighed suddenly, tugging on one of Mollie’s thick curls.

Mollie looked down. She hadn’t even noticed.

“I need to get back into practice. I’m so behind with my training.”

“We’ll work on it,” Araya promised. “For now, we need to get you out of here and back to *Peréal* as soon as possible. You’re safest there.”

She eyed the wolf beside her cautiously. The two of them made their way out of the main hall towards the front steps where two large carriages were waiting. Mollie assumed Rowan was in the one in front of hers. It was much fancier than the other.

“I...didn’t know you were bringing company,” Araya said with a chuckle. Mollie looked over to where Theo trotted beside her, alert and menacing. She growled a warning at Araya.

“I’ve never *seen* her hurt anybody,” Mollie admitted slowly. “But I know she’s capable of it.”

“As long as it isn’t the black one I won’t stick a blade through it,” Araya said sharply.

Mollie stopped dead in her tracks.

“What did you say?”

Araya slipped into the carriage that was waiting for them outside the massive villa and Mollie followed slowly.

Theo had bounded ahead of her to join Paris who perched beside a larger carriage just ahead of them. Both wolves seemed ready to take off.

“I said I wouldn’t stick my blade through it,” Araya repeated from inside the carriage as the guards of Beacon Cape loaded what little luggage Mollie had onto the top of the slim carriage.

“No...you said as long as it wasn’t the *black* one you wouldn’t stick your blade through it.”

Araya blinked at her.

“Napoléon,” Mollie muttered sliding into the seat across from her. “That must have been the wolf you saw....the wolf that killed Viv.”

Araya winced.

“That wasn’t Micah’s,” Mollie told her slowly. “That wolf belonged to *James*.”

Mollie shuddered at the memory of those yellow eyes and sharp teeth. She had very nearly met a similar fate.

She noticed Araya’s lip twitch at the corner of her mouth.

“Good to know,” Araya said monotonously. “Zen can have James. But that fucking beast is mine.”

Mollie didn’t miss how her fingers instantly went to her blade. But Mollie had other thoughts on her mind. Thoughts of her children waking up to another morning without their mother. It gutted her. She missed them so much.

She looked out the window when the carriage started moving. Her gaze skimmed the rolling hills, the villa behind them growing smaller and smaller.

She stared into the distance – barely catching the top of the sun making its ascent into the navy sky.

Just a little longer. Just a little longer and she’d be able to hold them in her arms again.

Saint-Laurent

“How the *fuck* could she have it,” James hissed angrily. “How did she get it..”

He was murmuring to himself as he idly twirled a gem encrusted ring on his finger. Jelena swallowed nervously before speaking. Jelena knew he had the Marchesseault girl on his mind. She had bombarded his thoughts ever since James discovered she had what he wanted most. But apart from her, the last couple hours had been turbulent and to put it frankly... Jelena was falling apart. This was it. If James couldn’t get to his precious iridium in time – the allies of the Marchesseault Empire would come down hard on all of them. She needed someone to talk to. She needed her best friend – Natalia LaFlamme. James had ignored her after she asked about the woman. Something was terribly wrong and Jelena had a feeling her hunch was correct.

“Natalia...” Jelena whispered. She said little during court. James preferred it that way and she obeyed. “Is...is she.”

“She’s dead,” James snapped back. He hadn’t even turned to look at her.

Jelena felt her heart break. Natalia had been like a sister to her. She adored that woman so much.

“James...” she choked. “You knew...you *knew* she could die...and you *still*...”

This caught James’ attention and he looked at his wife coldly.

Jelena sobbed.

She was done. She couldn’t do it anymore. She had stuck by James side through it all. The murder, the brutality, the *death*. But to willingly send her friend – the woman he knew Jelena cared so much about -- to her death *knowingly* was too much for her to bear.

“I’m leaving,” she said between thin lips.

“Go then woman,” James snarled. Irritation was creeping into his voice. He rose from the seat walked past her as if she were barely even there.

“I’m going back...back home. With Nina. I’m...I’m taking her to my parents.”

James stopped.

She knew what that entailed. As much as James treated her like shit, she knew deep down he needed her not just for the posh political front – but to negotiate deals. As misogynistic as these monarchies were, the women played important roles. They needed to sign certain documents alongside their husbands. Oftentimes as witnesses. He would not be able to accomplish this without her and he knew this.

“You think I need you as badly as you think?”

Jelena froze.

His expression scared her.

Of course he did. What was he even...what?

She just stared at him, mouth agape.

He walked closer to her and she took several steps back. He ignored it – continuing his steps until her back hit the wall of the enclosure. He was so close his muscled torso pressed against her swollen belly.

“And where is a lonesome pregnant woman like you going to go? On foot you would die before you made it to the nearest town after crossing that bridge into Ophian territory. And if you go North towards the Marchesseault regime they’ll have you imprisoned for your affiliations with me. You can’t go fucking *anywhere*.”

“I don’t care,” Jelena sobbed. “I just have to get away from you. From *this*. Look at this! *Look at what we have become.*”

James watched her emotionlessly for several minutes as she sobbed openly. God he *hated* when she cried. Had Jelena not been pregnant he probably would have punished her.

Only after her sobs subsided and her breaths returned to normal did James take a step closer to her.

Jelena was waiting for it. She was waiting for the slap he would give her...

"Darling. Ma femme. Ma trésor...."

Jelena froze and trembled mutely when he crushed her against his chest.

"I would never want to restrict your freedom. You know I always gave you what you wanted when you asked."

Jelena continued to cry...but she was quiet now.

"Did I not give you everything? The best gowns, the best jewellery, the best vacations, the best... *everything*. You never wanted for anything by my side."

Jelena cried harder. Hearing him say it made her hurt even more.

She whimpered as she spoke.

"Those are just *things* James. I never wanted things. I wanted *you*. I wanted you to succeed and I wanted us to be together...and with our children. That's what I wanted...that's what I've *always* wanted."

James rolled his eyes.

Attention. That's all Jelena ever wanted from James. She would have done *anything* for it. Jelena felt like a fool for openly admitting to it. But by the way his eyes glistened she could tell that he knew. Rarely did he give her the attention she so desperately craved. How hard she tried...and how little he responded.

"You can go wherever you want to," James breathed. He brushed her cheek affectionately. Even though it was soaked in blood she didn't mind. He had *touched* her. After so long. He had looked at her -- glanced her way. He had *noticed* her.

She closed her eyes. It had been years since he had done that, or so it felt.

"You can travel anywhere you want to," he continued to murmur. "But... *after* you deliver my son."

Her eyes blinked open at his comment.

She looked up expecting to see those beautiful brown eyes she fell in love with melt into her own. But instead they were fixed on her stomach. He couldn't even *pretend* to care about her.

Jelena shouldn't have been jealous – but she knew if there was anything James cared more about in this world – apart from power – was his children. The little love he had in him went to them, and though it pleased Jelena, it also filled her with deep harrowing guilt and anger.

How could he care about them more than he cared about her? It wasn't fucking fair. Perhaps he was only keeping her around for so long for the child...

She suddenly paled. How easily he got rid of Natalia and Grigoire ... allies to them for what felt like a lifetime. He could do the same to her.

"My love?"

Jelena blinked. Slowly, she smiled at him weakly. She wiped her tears away quickly.

"Yes James," she said softly.

He smiled at her. That smile that made her fall so fucking hard for him. Oh how she wanted to stay by his side so badly. She would have given him everything -- even though he would never have done the same for her.

"Now go fetch Nina and return to our room. We leave early tomorrow."

His fingers brushed her tummy.

"How much longer?"

"One month," Jelena murmured.

"Good," James muttered. "The nearest port is not far from here. I'll arrange a ship to take you back to Questershire for the birth *dès que possible*. It'll all work out. I promise."

Jelena tried to keep the smile on her lips even when he turned away from her to get back to his duties. Only when she was sure he had gone did she lift her dress and hastily make her way back to her room.

She scooped up her daughter when she saw her, ignoring the girl's protest as she wrapped a coat around her small frame.

"*Quoi Maman?*" she complained.

Jelena turned to her daughter ignoring her protests and shuffling around the room like a mad woman.

"Get dressed," Jelena said sharply.

Nina frowned.

Jelena never spoke to her so brashly – but she had no time to waste.

"*Non,*" Nina said with a pout.

The look on her face reminded her of James and Jelena narrowed her eyes.

"Get dressed now!"

Jelena never raised her voice at Nina and by the way her daughters eyes welled with tears Jelena knew she was scared.

“Don’t cry,” Jelena said from between pale lips. How hypocritical of her to instruct her daughter not to cry, when her own tears were smeared wetly on her cheeks. But she couldn’t process her daughters weeping at the moment. Right now she had to leave. She had to get away and take Nina with her. She had one last chance and she was *not* going to waste it.

“We’re going on a little adventure. Just you and I.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations in Order:

*I swear it

*Be good Theo

Chapter 53: Iode

Chapter Summary

Mollie takes the reins and diverts down a different path. Esperanza faces a truth she would have rather kept hidden.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sacré-Coeur

“Stop the carriage.”

Mollie blinked her eyes open groggily.

The carriage was coming to a gradual stop and Mollie felt her head hit the interior wall from the impact.

Beautiful rain soaked sunflowers grew in the fields beside them and Mollie swore she could hear the sound of a rushing river close-by. This place was simply breathtaking.

It was early afternoon and the air was crisp with a warm breeze ruffling Mollie’s curls as she blinked her eyes open.

“Something is wrong,” Araya murmured.

Mollie heard her voice tremor.

“What do you mean?” Mollie asked. Her voice was husky from fatigue.

“Stay in the carriage,” Araya instructed. She slid out of the door in seconds leaving Mollie inside. Mollie could hear the quiet musings from outside but she couldn’t make out what was being said. She yawned and brushed her hair out of her face. She winced feeling her fingers catch several tangled strands. It had felt like months since Mollie had slept without a single nightmare -- and oh was it relishing. She wasn't sure how long she stayed waiting inside the hot interior of the carriage. Only when the sun began to rise further into the sky and the first drops of sweat began to trickle down her neck did she decide to investigate further.

The sound of hooves on soil filtered through the air and Mollie heard more commotion outside. It sounded like some sort of rendez-vous. When a deep growling murmur eventually joined the conversation Mollie felt her back stiffen.

Zephyr. He was here.

Mollie jumped out of the carriage excitedly. It had seemed like a lifetime ago since she had seen him.

Mollie looked around catching the back of Araya's choppy auburn hair in the distance. She squinted against the brightness, her eyes taking several seconds to adjust. Araya was beside Zephyr who stood a good distance from the cloaked figure of Rowan. Mollie squinted. She caught sight of the familiar mousy brown hair of Caden amongst the small assembly of people. He had matured as much as she had in the short period of time they had spent training in the compounds of *Anubis*. They were surrounding something in the fields but Mollie couldn't quite make it out from here.

She ran toward them. She smiled when Zephyr turned around to meet her gaze.

When she saw the look in his eyes she stopped dead.

She had seen that expression only once from her mentor. And that was when he spoke about his past love -- when the hurt became so much that his tough exterior crackled and the brokenness that he swallowed deep inside of him re-surfaced. It was a look that whispered of a thousand apologies and a million more regrets.

Mollie dropped her gaze to the ground where a scarlet covered fabric lay amongst the sunflowers. Mollie felt her breath catch. She knew what it was immediately.

Like peeling paint from a century old building – the excitement that had erupted within her was snuffed out like a candle in the wind. The smile on her face was replaced with something dead and blank. Mollie just felt *numb*.

Araya turned around and Mollie could see the pain on her features.

Mollie wasn't sure how long she stood there. Just staring. Hollowness swallowed her insides up like a ravenous black hole with an insatiable appetite.

Not even when Zephyr closed the distance and crushed her against his chest did she respond. He was whispering something to her. But her mind couldn't quite process it. She was too distracted by the bloody mess of limbs that lay scattered around the beautiful sunflower fields. It didn't *belong* there.

"Pack it up," she heard Rowan shout to the small entourage he had with him.

"Mollie. Mollie *listen to me*."

Mollie looked up into those beautiful sea blue eyes that bore into her own pale brown ones.

"Get back in the carriage."

Zephyr's voice was harsh but pulsating with emotion when he spoke.

The blood was fresh. Mollie could smell it from where she was.

“I want to see him,” Mollie whispered. She fought against Zen’s restraints but he challenged her.

“You *don’t*. You don’t want to see him this way,” Zephyr argued. “Take it from me.”

Mollie protested against him.

Only when a fresh set of hooves on soil from behind broke the tense silence did Mollie turn around.

“Release the princess at once.”

The sharp voice of Elio Courtois pierced the air and Mollie saw the man arrive on his snow white horse with several men in line behind him. There may have been close to twelve.

“You,” Zephyr sneered unpleasantly.

“Boy.” Elio responded coolly.

“What’s going on?” Mollie whispered. “What’s happening?”

She turned to Zen – desperation in her eyes.

“The King is dead.”

Elio’s voice was low and full of repressed fury. Even saying it seemed difficult for him.

Mollie’s gaze re-directed back to the fields where Elio’s men ordered the others to take a step back as they gathered what pieces of Alexandre Marchesseault was left.

Mollie blinked away the dampness in her eyes. Everything was happening so *quickly*

She felt Zephyr’s grip on her arm tighten.

“This was left on the body,” Elio said coldly.

Mollie felt a chill rack her body.

In Elio’s glove encased fingers was a single yellow rose. It had been carefully selected – they didn’t grow in these lands. The soft petals were a vibrant shade of sunshine yellow. Mollie had seen them before. They grew naturally in Riverton. The countryside was known for their wide array of vibrant coloured flowers.

“Do you know what this means princess?”

Mollie swallowed uneasily. She knew exactly what it meant. She could practically hear the words James had purred into her ear the last time she had found herself in his grasp.

A country rose such as yourself are hard to come by these days. Especially one in full bloom.

Mollie took the delicate flower from his grasp.

“James,” she whispered.

The rose dropped to the ground from between her nimble fingers. She was shaking. It was almost as if he were sending her a private message. Something only she would understand. It chilled her to the bone.

“That motherfucker,” she heard Zen growl from beside her. His grip on her tightened.

“Boy,” Elio repeated. “I’ll have to ask you again to take your hands off the future queen.”

Zephyr whirled around and Mollie could see the annoyance on his features.

“Or what?” he challenged.

Elio frowned.

“Or I’ll be forced to cut that arm off.”

Zephyr smiled.

“Swing at me old man.”

“It’s fine,” Mollie interjected quickly. She could feel the tension rising by the second. There was just so much to process. Mollie didn’t think she’d be able to handle it all at once.

Elio raised an eyebrow. His sword rose ever so slightly.

“Don’t do anything you’ll regret,” Mollie hissed. She spoke to Elio but glared at Zen as she spoke. “He’s a prince.”

Elio’s eyes widened.

“*Another* Lyon prince,” he questioned. He looked between the two of them in horror. “*Mon Dieu.*”

He’s not Hartley’s son,” Mollie added quickly. Elio looked as if he were about to have a stroke. “He’s Caius’ eldest.”

Elio still seemed shaken but he lowered his sword in respect when he addressed Zen.

“My apologies... prince,” he said with a bow.

“Cut that shit out,” Zen growled. “I’m not a fucking prince.”

“Mollie!”

Araya came up behind her. Mollie turned around to see her usually hard features moulded into something soft and gentle.

“I’m so so sorry,” she mumbled throwing her arms around her.

Elio frowned deeply. Mollie knew this kind of etiquette was frowned upon but she didn't care for all that royal protocol nonsense right now.

"And you are?" Elio muttered.

Araya released Mollie and looked up at him.

"Arayalynn. We met back in *Peréal*."

Elio's face reddened.

"Ah *ouais*," he muttered. "I mistakened your brother here for the other Lyon I met back in *Peréal*. But this one here is...much more uncouth."

Araya half smiled at the comment.

"Caius always used to say Isaac is the sail to his ship and Zephyr is the anchor. Always tethered, always resistant."

"I can see it now," Elio murmured.

Mollie had slowly left the group of them behind her and made her way towards the fields. She didn't want to see her father that way. She was glad Zephyr had stopped her. The last memory of him was still profound in her memory. She wanted to remember him *that* way. Strong. Proud. Resolute.

Mollie inched closer – the stain of blood amongst the sunflowers as stark as blood against snow. She reached for the ruby encrusted sword that lay on the ground beside the scarlet covered cloak.

Rowan had ordered the body be sent back immediately to *Peréal*. It was protocol. So much Marchesseault blood had been wasted here. It stained the flowers around her. It hurt Mollie deeply.

She watched the small *Peréal* assembly that had accompanied Elio treat the spot with the utmost care. They would probably rename this place after him at some point.

"Wait-" Mollie called out suddenly.

Members of the Marchesseault guard eased immediately and Mollie was quite taken aback by their response. It was as if they awaited instruction from her now. But that couldn't be? Caine was in charge for the time being...he would lead them...right?

She spotted a glimpse of weathered parchment beneath the cloak of her father. Carefully Mollie reached for the cloak one of the guards had draped over his arm and pulled it free.

Rowan had been watching her from a distance. She broke eye contact to unroll the parchment and read the letter. It was addressed to her. Mollie swallowed thickly.

Mollie,

If you are reading this, then you will know that I have passed and that the fate of this kingdom now lies in great jeopardy. From the moment I first saw you, I knew you had it in you to carve your own way in life – whatever that path may be. Our time together was far too short – and our time apart far too long. But I am forever grateful for the short time we did share together – not just as a King and his heir – but as a father and a daughter. Following my death, Elio will be anointed as temporary leader of the Marchesseault Empire during the short transition period that exists during a change of leadership. I have already made the necessary arrangements for Elio to secure that you, my daughter, are my true successor – be it that you accept such a position...as well as the expenses that come with such an obligation. I have and will always be proud of you daughter. Use the time I have given you wisely.

- Ton père

She looked up to meet the solemn gaze of a member of her army.

“May I?” she asked hesitantly.

“Of course *votre majesté*,” the man murmured handing Mollie the cloak along with the sword. “It belongs to you now.”

Mollie felt the weight of the blade in her hand. Balanced, lean, and intricate. It was different from holding her dagger. The sword in her grasp felt a lot more threatening.

“The pointy end goes into the enemy Miss Mayeson.”

Mollie looked up to see Rowan's cold gaze on her. He was a short distance away. His low rumble sounded so much like Micah's at this proximity.

“Thanks for the reminder,” Mollie said dryly.

Before she could encase it Rowan held a gloved hand out toward her. She stiffened at the gesture. She wondered if he was still angry at her for shoving him into a wall earlier this morning.

“May I?” he hummed.

Mollie hesitated and slowly handed the sword over. It's not like he would steal it or run with it.

Gently he unsheathed the blade and took a step backward. His dark cloak fluttered behind him as he expertly twirled the blade in motions that Mollie could only hope to achieve one day.

She recalled what Micah had told her. Hartley had raised these boys with a purpose and one of them was to be experts in the art of swordplay. She could see just how much twelve hours of training each day could turn you into.

“It's a fine blade,” Rowan murmured. He balanced the slim weapon on his finger and tilted his head to the side. His wavy brown hair glistened like the colour of fresh oak wood in the sunlight. “It could...use a little something extra though. Don't you think?”

Mollie matched his gaze. His dark brown eyes smouldered before her and for a second – it was as if it were just the two of them in the middle of this massive sunflower field.

“Micah’s is made of frosted ultra chilled metal. James settled on an alloy of tungsten, arsenic, and wolfs blood.” He turned her father's blade over. “This one appears to be steel, ruby, and platinum.”

“What about yours?” Mollie asked softly. She eyed the thing on his waist.

Rowan smirked.

“Oh Mollie. You never directly ask a prince what his blade is made of,” Rowan chuckled. “You find out for yourself when you defeat him in battle.”

He handed her fathers blade back. She took it and shivered under his gaze.

“My blade works for me,” Rowan said lowly. She watched him adjust his collar and wave to his entourage with a single gloved finger. “Make something that works for you Miss Mayeson...if you have the means to do so.”

She furrowed her brows at the cryptic comment. With a smirk that mirrored his brothers she watched him elegantly mount his jet black horse.

“Where will you go?” Mollie questioned before he could take off.

“Where I am needed,” Rowan drawled. He looked at her suddenly, his expression turning into something calculated. “*Étretat* is just a mile away from *Côte de Granit Rose*. Over the bridge,” Rowan paused. “Wouldn’t hurt to pay them a visit...that is....if you’re feeling up to it.”

With a quick turn Mollie watched him gallop away through the fields, his men at his side until he disappeared completely amongst the tall rows of flowers.

“*Votre majesté.*”

Mollie blinked turning to a member of her personal guard with unease.

“Yes,” she replied hesitantly.

“We will return to *Peréal* to begin the burial ceremony for the King. You are not queen yet, thus we are not obligated to accompany you... should you choose to continue further on your journey.”

“*Princesse!*” Mollie watched Elio urge his horse faster so it circled in front of her. “We should leave now. *Côte de Granit Rose* is just a couple hours away.”

Rowan’s comment threw her off completely and Mollie bit her lip hard.

Why would he suggest she go to *Etrétat*? Phillip had suggested she do so as well. Perhaps there was something to find there?

“Not yet,” Mollie muttered. She ignored the frigid glances of both her entourage and the glower from Elio above her.

“There’s somewhere else I want to go first,” she muttered.

“Mollie!” Elio called out. He jumped from his horse at the same moment Araya, Zephyr and Caden made their way towards her.

“Don’t be foolish,” Elio hissed. “The King is dead. I swore to him that I would protect you and I cannot do that if you keep fighting the rules of this monarchy!”

Mollie narrowed her eyes.

“I don’t need the protection of your monarchy. I survived just fine without it for twenty years,” she hissed.

Elio’s face reddened.

“That’s different. You were unrecognizable then. But now...everybody across every regime that exists knows who the hell you are!”

“As of now,” Mollie said coldly. “*You* are in charge Elio. Micah will reach *Peréal* any day and when that happens – the city can begin to prepare itself for battle.” Her eyes flickered to her entourage who all circled around the body of the former King. “Take the king back to *Peréal* and carry on with the funeral proceedings,” she paused. “I’m confident the prince of *Peréal* will have no problem overseeing those orders.”

Elio stiffened.

Mollie had never met the prince of *Peréal*. She had only heard bits and pieces about her half brother. But as of now...she had more pressing things to see to.

“I can’t let that happen,” Elio whispered.

Mollie’s eyes widened when she noticed the position of her entourage. The people who were supposed to protect her. They were gaining in on her now – their formation turning from something protective into something offensive.

Flashbacks of being pinned and locked down in her monstrosity of a room back in *Peréal* flashed in her mind and Mollie took a step back. She couldn’t go through that again.

“Mollie, what’s going on?” Araya interjected. She took a step closer to Mollie -- a protective stance and Mollie could feel Zephyr and Caden on her left in a similar formation.

“The princess must be protected,” Elio repeated. He was now fully glaring at the four of them. “If that means taking her by force back to *Peréal*. Then so be it.”

“Mollie *will* be protected,” Zephyr said flatly. “She’s with us.”

Elio smiled scornfully.

“Your track record is poor Lyon prince,” Elio spat. “Don’t think I don’t know what happened to your last little girlfriend.”

Mollie could hear the breath cut short from Zephyr and before she could stop him – the prince was lunging for Elio.

“Zephyr don’t!” Mollie screamed.

Thankfully Mollie didn’t have to move even a single muscle before her entire entourage had Zephyr kicked and pressed into the ground – eight of her men surrounding the blond before he could make a single scratch mark on Elio Courtois.

Araya was fully glaring at the man and Mollie was shaking as she watched Zephyr twist and turn like an animal being held down by the men around him.

“I can do this all day princess,” Elio growled. “Don’t make this difficult. I can’t afford to lose you again. I promised him,” he muttered. “*I promised him.*”

Araya matched her gaze.

Mollie’s eyes glanced down at the men who were holding Zen down with all of their might. They had left their horses – saddled and attentive just metres away from where they stood. Araya seemed to get the idea and she smirked from beside Mollie.

Before Araya could speak Mollie took the lead.

“Theo,” she called out.

In a flash the beast soared from behind her to crash into the chest of her closest advisor in a flash of white on red. She heard him scream in shock and she seized the opportunity to bolt for the nearest horse.

“Zen!” she cried tossing him her fathers sword.

He rolled over on the ground catching the hilt with ease and engaged in battle with the men around him.

“Let’s go!” she cried out.

She smiled to herself realizing Caden had freed the horses of the Marchesseault entourage during their scuffle ensuring her army would be unable to catch up should they intend to follow.

Araya had indeed trained him well.

“Keep going. The boys will catch up!” Araya shouted from beside her.

Mollie clutched the reigns of her horse – trying her best to maintain her balance at the speed they were going.

“The others,” she gasped as they left the sunflower fields behind them and took off towards the bridge glistening in the distance.

“They’ll catch up,” Araya repeated. “Not sure about the wolf though.”

“Theo knows the way,” Mollie assured her with a smirk. “She won’t hurt him....at least...I don’t think so.”

She could hear Araya’s bubbly laughter from beside her and Mollie felt a sweet invigorating sensation course through her veins.

She had fought and rebelled against her own army. The absurdity of it all was painfully comical.

As if to remind her of the circumstances that still faced her Mollie felt her fathers letter brush against her thigh. Almost immediately the smile faded from her face and she felt the heat coursing through her veins slowly grow colder.

Her horse slowed down as did Araya’s, the sound of hooves against sand growing fainter and fainter. Mollie slid off her horse and waited with baited breaths at the entrance to a large and decorative bridge across an expanse of vast blue waters.

It didn’t take long for the others to arrive and when Mollie saw the familiar blond and his brown haired mentee at his side. She felt her chest relax immediately.

By their side was a beast with white fur, her tongue lolling out of her mouth as she bounded immediately to Mollie’s side her expression nothing short of pleased.

Mollie smiled at her.

“Good girl Theo,” she murmured caressing the beasts head. She purred happily.

“They’ll follow us here,” Zephyr muttered, sliding off of his own brown horse. “There’s not much time left.”

“What should we do?” Caden asked. He stayed on his horse – turning around in the distance to scour the area.

“Mollie?” Araya asked. She trained her eyes on the young girl.

Everyone’s eyes were on her and Mollie felt heat stain her cheeks. She was in charge now. She took a deep breath.

“I say we go to *Etrétat*. Convince them to rebel against James and his army.” Mollie said lowly.

“Aren’t they your family?” Caden interjected. He scratched his head. “You share the same bloodline. Technically they should welcome you with open arms.”

Mollie laughed bleakly.

“Like *that* matters to them,” Mollie muttered.

“He’s not wrong,” Zephyr mumbled.

Mollie looked up at him in confusion.

He shrugged.

“Blood matters more than anything to a monarchy. Technically they couldn’t lay a hand on you if you went there,” Zephyr said lowly. “But the minute you’re outside the walls of *Etrétat*...well that’s an entirely different story.”

“They turned a blind eye when Grigoire tried to have me killed,” Mollie hissed.

Zephyr frowned.

Caden shrugged.

“Like Zen said. On their soil you’re safe...but outside of it...you have no immunity.”

Mollie chewed her lip hard.

“So... they can’t hurt me?” Mollie asked quietly.

“Correct,” Araya said sternly. “They can’t hurt you while you’re on their land. It would be a violation of royal code. The code of sanguinity to be exact.”

“But that same courtesy won’t be applied to you three,” Mollie said quietly. “What is stopping the Rineaux’s from keeping me alive and murdering all of you? To them you are all anti-monarchy extremists.”

Araya laughed.

“I like that term,” she said amusedly.

Caden shrugged.

“We could just tell them we are your Marchesseault entourage.”

Mollie felt a headache coming on.

“That’s a horrible idea,” she groaned. “The Marchesseaults are the *reason* the Rineaux’s want me dead.”

“You want to get in there or not?” Araya challenged with a raised eyebrow. “The objective is to get you within their walls. Once inside, they cannot hurt you. They are *forbidden* to. I hate to break it to you Mollie but liking you was *not* on the list of things they are obligated to do.”

Mollie sighed irritably.

“It’s not like I can just walk in there with you three around me,” Mollie huffed.

“I don’t see why not.”

Mollie’s jaw dropped when Caden jumped off his horse and began distributing three scarlet cloaks.

“Where did you get those?” Mollie demanded.

Caden chuckled.

“I took them off the horses when your army jumped Zephyr earlier. I set the horses free and took these while I was at it.”

Mollie blinked.

She could hear Araya laughing.

“I trained you *so* well,” she said proudly tying the rich heavy material around her throat.

Mollie swallowed uneasily as the three of them tightened the scarlet coloured cloaks around their necks and stood before her.

She eyed her father’s resting lightly on her horse but decided to keep her yellow one on. She felt more comfortable in it.

“How do I look?” Araya questioned turning to her brother. She tucked her choppy auburn locks behind her ears. “Red is my colour isn’t it? Makes my eyes pop.”

Zephyr scoffed.

Mollie watched with great uncertainty when he mounted his horse and tucked the scarlet coloured cloak behind him. He looked regal. Not like the rough rebel soldier persona he had adopted over the years. He looked...like a prince.

It made his blond hair gleam brightly against the rich material. He matched her gaze, his jaw locking. It snapped Mollie out of her thoughts.

“We’re not sending you in there alone,” Zephyr said challengingly. “No matter how much you protest.”

“This could be beneficial Mollie,” Araya said. She mounted on top of her own horse and turned towards the bridge. “Who knows, maybe you can get them to ally with you. More numbers are never a bad thing.”

“They’re neutral,” Mollie said stiffly. She stepped up onto her horse and brushed her curls over her shoulder. “They won’t want anything to do with me – especially if it involves siding with the Marchesseaults.”

“Phillip was neutral too you know,” Zen said quietly. “You’d be surprised at what you can accomplish.”

Mollie glanced at him.

He had a soft smile on his face – the one that made him look youthful and boyish. It made heat tinge her cheeks.

“We go in and out,” Mollie said lowly. She guided her horse in front of them, making sure to look each of them squarely in the eyes as she spoke. “If we can get the Rineaux’s to cooperate with us, then its mission accomplished.” The wind buzzed past her—sending her curls splaying wildly behind her and brushing several shrubs and greens past her cloak. “If things go well, we can be out of there by tomorrow,” she hesitated. Thinking about her twins was killing her. She detested having to leave them for even longer than she anticipated – but she had to do this. She took a deep breath. “If things do go sour, we’re going to need a backup plan.”

“Jöel, Caleb, and Isaac are in *Peréal*,” Araya said firmly. I can tell them to wait for us at *Côte de Granit Rose*. It’s just on the opposite side of *Etrétat*. If we don’t arrive there by Sunday, we can give them the okay to initiate a forced entry.”

“What about the Marchesseaults?” Zen muttered. “They’ll probably send their army out after Mollie if she’s not back there by tomorrow.”

Mollie swallowed thickly. It wasn’t the Marchesseaults who worried her. It was someone else who would be awaiting her arrival tomorrow. If the Marchesseaults didn’t send their army after her – she had a feeling Micah sure as hell would.

“Keep Caius in *Peréal*,” Mollie said coldly. Araya looked at her. She seemed to understand Mollie’s grievance. “Someone needs to keep the winter prince busy,” she muttered.

“And if we all get fucked over then what?” Caden complained. She watched him cross his arms in front of his body. He had an eyebrow raised at her.

Mollie half smiled.

“Take it from me Caden,” she said softly. “When you’ve gotten fucked over as many times as I have -- you learn a thing or two about survival. We’ll make it out. We always do.”

She took a deep breath and urged her horse forward. She lowered her voice so only she could hear it.

“I always do.”

Peréal

Esperanza smiled down at the small child in her arms. She was a beautiful baby with her wide brown eyes, her full lips, and her thick curls. She had cried all night for her mother but Esperanza knew how to handle a crying infant. She was an expert with children. After all – she did the very same thing to the little girl’s father when he was just an infant. Though back then – her muscles were a lot less sore than they were now.

Speaking of him – the sound of heavy doors slamming beneath her sent Esperanza snapping her head up. The child squirmed in her arms and Esperanza quickly held her closer to her chest.

She began to whimper and Esperanza rocked her gently.

“Hush my little princess,” she whispered. “Everything is going to be alright.”

Prince Micah and Mollie were not to arrive until noon and it was a little over 5 am. Something was wrong...

As if to confirm her fears, the doors to the room opened and Esperanza braced herself against the wall.

Instead of the winter prince – she saw a different Lyon in front of her. Someone she hadn’t seen in many *many* years.

Esperanza stood there in stunned silence. Even as the child fussed in her arms – she could do nothing but stare.

“Long time no see Esperanza.”

Esperanza brought the little princess closer to her – almost in a protective gesture.

That voice. That *voice*.

She walked backwards slowly. Her eyes must have been wider than saucers.

He stood there – looking so much like his brother – but with softer less hardened features. Younger – but equally as handsome, with a casual more colloquial aura that made Esperanza want to mirror the soft smirk on his lips.

“Caius,” she breathed. God he had been so young when she had last seen him. He looked like that blond boy Esperanza spotted sneaking around the castle. The blond one that visited the princess in the early hours of the morning. He was a carbon copy of Caius at that age – the age Esperanza last saw him all those years ago in Questershire.

“You have answers....answers that I deserve to hear.”

He approached her slowly and Esperanza immediately took a step back. The fear of being around Hartley for so long never left her. She would carry that with her for the rest of her life.

Caius stopped and lifted a hand up gently.

“Relax,” he muttered. “Nothing will happen to you.”

She stilled but never relaxed her posture, even when Caius walked closer to the table to make tea.

He was always the gentleman of the four brothers – since he was young – but his reputation had changed drastically in the twenty three years since he had left Questershire. For all Esperanza knew – he could be a different man from the boy she once knew.

“Black? Green?” He paused. “Oh,” he chuckled to himself. “Perhaps you only drink jasmine...that was quite the commodity back home wasn’t it?”

“So it’s true?” she whispered. “You’ve made a temporary alliance with them?”

Esperanza had heard many whispers amidst the castle to the dismay of the people. Most of it revolved around the Marchesseaults and the Lyons working in conjunction with the Rebel Army to take down Sian and his army of Outbacks. The sourness of the Lyon-Marchesseault relationship was still fresh in the hearts of the people of *Peréal* and Esperanza worried about the fate of the princess. Too much change at one time could prove to be fatal.

Caius smiled.

He continued pouring the tea and with an elegance that never really left him, offered a cup to her.

Esperanza took it carefully. She didn’t take a sip. Living under Hartley’s reign for over two decades had changed her. She could trust no one anymore.

“How nice of the prince to bring you along for the show...” Caius murmured taking a sip from the delicate china. “I suppose you were the one he turned to during those dark days in Questershire.”

“That boy is not the problem,” Esperanza said stiffly. “It’s his father. It’s *always* been his father.”

“I see your loyalty never wavered,” Caius smiled. “I admire that. It’s a rare quality you don’t find often these days.”

Caius’ gaze flickered down to the child in her arms and Esperanza tightened her grip on her.

“What do you want from me Caius?” Esperanza whispered.

Caius carefully placed his tea cup back into the saucer. His blue eyes darkened when they landed on her own.

“I’m no fool,” Caius said stonily. “Hartley put James up to this. All of this. You and I are both aware.”

Esperanza swallowed slowly.

“You know,” he mused. “I almost didn’t believe it when the princess was brought to me on that ship just shy of 6 months ago... with *Quinn Marchesseault’s chain around her neck.*”

Esperanza paled.

“What...what are you talking about,” she whispered between unmoving lips.

“That was supposed to be *destroyed*,” Caius growled. His fingers had flexed into fists and Esperanza could tell he was struggling to curb his fury. “If not destroyed then *hidden for the rest of eternity*.”

Esperanza’s eyes widened.

“Izabel never told me the locket was a decoy!” Esperanza cried out. “I had hidden it for her in Questershire all those years ago like she had *asked* me to. Had I known the real thing had been passed down to Micah I would have *never* let him go!”

Esperanza felt her head pound. Mollie had found the key to the locket back in Questershire – Esperanza didn’t even bother to ask how she did it – but she had been quick to bring that search to a close. She couldn’t believe her ears.

“Izabel couldn’t risk it,” Caius mumbled to himself.” Caius brushed a hand through his dark blond hair when he spoke. Esperanza felt her heart clench painfully. “It was...it was too dangerous. With Hartley breathing down her neck and Izabel’s promise to Quinn Marchesseault...it was too risky.”

Esperanza ignored the whining child in her arms for a moment.

“Quinn Marchesseault,” she breathed. “Oh god,” she muttered. “This would never have happened had he chosen to destroy it in the *first* place.”

Caius exhaled.

“I know – but we don’t know what troubles Quinn faced back in Beacon Cape. He must have been truly desperate to ask Izabel for help.”

“Does she know?” Esperanza gasped. “The girl –“

“She knows,” Caius said darkly.

Esperanza breathed out slowly. Rue had gone quiet in her arms. She had tired herself out with her whimpering and had settled on sucking her pacifier slowly. She was staring at Esperanza with wide eyes – as if she knew her mother was now the topic of discussion.

“She’s impulsive,” Esperanza said slowly. “Are you sure that was a wise decision?”

Caius shrugged.

“It wasn’t my decision to make.” He paused. “As far as I can tell – Mollie understands the gravity of the situation. She wouldn’t be where she is now if she didn’t.”

“So it was for nothing then?” Esperanza whispered wistfully. “What happened to Izabel....what she had to do to protect the iridium –“

“No,” Caius muttered. He turned to Esperanza fiercely. “Izabel wanted it that way. The location of the iridium had to die with her. That was *imperative*. I... understand that now. The locket was simply a diversion for Hartley to follow.”

Esperanza could tell how much it pained Caius to speak about the past – especially when it came to Izabel.

“You couldn’t have helped her Caius,” Esperanza said slowly. “None of us could have. The sacrifice she made –“

“She was *always* making sacrifices,” Caius spat. “She put others first and look where it got her.” He sighed. “Izabel knew she was going to die Esperanza. She tried telling me in Questershire...the last day I saw her.”

Esperanza bit her lip. She remembered that day too well.

“I can’t save anybody Esperanza... can’t you see?”

Caius turned around to lock eyes with her and Esperanza could see the crumble in his eyes. The always cool and collected Lyon prince she had known as a young man was showing his first shreds of disintegration and it terrified her. It terrified her to the core.

“I couldn’t save Izabel – I couldn’t save Logan. I couldn’t even fucking save my wife-“

“Enough of that,” Esperanza murmured.

Before Esperanza could speak she noticed Caius’ eyes flash to the door.

Rue shifted in her arms – her chestnut brown curls brushing against Esperanza’s bare arms. She seemed excited.

Caius froze.

His body language tensed and quite stoically he straightened. Esperanza had noticed his face pale ever so slightly. Esperanza realized her mistake too and she froze.

He was silent. He always was. The winter prince had a habit of appearing – even in the most unexpected of times.

“Please,” he purred, feigned amusement lacing his tone. “Don’t let me interrupt your little... façade.”

Esperanza was now the one to pale when Micah stepped into the room slowly. Blood stained his clothing and Esperanza even caught sight of some splashed along the sharp sculpted edges of his face.

“Prince Micah,” Esperanza gasped.

He regarded her coldly – blankly. Esperanza felt her heart sink. That was a look he directed at his cabinet – at his enemies – at his father. Never for her.

Caius frowned.

“Façade? I don’t quite know what you’re referring to Micah.”

Micah scoffed.

“How much did you hear?” Caius asked curiously. He sipped his tea casually.

“Enough to know you two are... familiar with each other.”

He took Rue from her arms immediately and Esperanza felt her fear heighten. He didn’t look at her again but his body language was obvious. Esperanza had fucked up. Badly.

Despite the prince’s blood soaked attire he held his daughter against him.

“Why wouldn’t we be?” Caius continued. “We’ve known each other a long time. Well before you were born...”

Micah looked up at Caius. His expression was chillingly vacant.

“Don’t be *smart* Caius. Duplicity doesn’t suit you.”

Caius laughed dryly at that.

“You’re right,” he chuckled. “I’ll leave that to your father.”

Esperanza watched their interaction in stony silence. She said nothing even when Micah knocked once against the door for Cécily to slide in and take little Rue from his arms.

She shivered when he brandished his sword and began cleaning the blood that had stained his ice blue blade dark red. It was not an overtly threatening gesture – but it certainly screamed abrasiveness.

“When do you want to do this Caius?” Micah murmured softly. His green eyes were on his sword but he was addressing his uncle directly. “I’ve got time to spare.”

Esperanza felt like a fly on the wall, watching their interaction with rapt attention.

Caius smirked.

“You sure you don’t want some time to nurse those wounds? Contrary to what you believe about me, I do like to play fair...when possible.”

Micah stilled. He was staring dead on into Caius’ eyes and Esperanza felt a chill go down her spine.

“Before we start,” Caius murmured. “There are some things we need to address first.”

“There is nothing else to address.” Micah hissed. In seconds his sword was in his hand and his position changed into something purely offensive.

Esperanza wanted to faint. She didn't want to see this go down. Not when she was still in the room.

Caius chuckled. He seemed completely unperturbed by Micah's chilly demeanour.

"Put it down Micah," Caius mused. "Now is not the time for this." Caius gave him a cool once over. "I like to start my battles out with the odds in both our favours."

Esperanza looked over to where Micah stood glaring daggers at his uncle. He certainly wasn't at his best – but Esperanza knew he was still capable of putting up a tremendously difficult fight. The boy was practically raised for this.

Caius clicked his tongue disapprovingly as if he were regarding an insolent child. It seemed to tick Micah off even further.

"Your brother Rowan said you would be difficult to get through to," Caius mused. "He said I'd be better off dealing with any internal affairs with him alone – I hear that's what most people do when they have any...grievances with Lyon proceedings." Caius paused. He gauged Micah's reaction carefully. "But as you know, I like to get right to the crux of an issue. I don't like to beat around the bush."

"What are you getting at?" Micah murmured.

He was still in a predatory stance. His gloved fingers were still taut against the hilt of his sword – flexing and unflexing studiously. His eyes were fixed on Caius like a hawk on its next meal.

Caius smiled.

"Why did you let us go Micah?"

Esperanza's eyes flickered back to the prince.

He paused his motions for a brief second. His face was carefully impassive.

Caius began to walk slowly across the room. Micah followed his every movement and Esperanza swore she could feel the tension in the room grow even stiffer.

"You can't blame me for being curious..." Caius filled his tea cup again and began to walk slowly back to his little spot near the bookcase. "If Hartley knows," Caius clicked his tongue in false disappointment. "That will be quite a hefty punishment to endure."

Micah said nothing. He hadn't moved a muscle – not since Caius had walked from one part of the room to the other.

Esperanza furrowed her brow.

Let them go?

Micah laughed humourlessly.

“You’re empty threats don’t scare me Caius.” He stepped closer. “My actions were not for your benefit – not even the thinnest sliver of it was done thinking about you. The only reason you were permitted to leave that tomb was for the purpose of building our army numbers against James.”

Caius raised an eyebrow.

“You could have married the princess already and gotten your own army numbers.” Caius smiled. He paced slowly, his voice turning curt. “What *do* you have planned Micah Lyon?”

Micah straightened. Not once did he relax his frigid body posture. Caius stared at him appraisingly. It was hard to tell what was going through the blond haired mans head. His expression was one of concern and admiration – with a hint of curiosity.

“Hartley must be so proud,” Caius breathed. “You’re everything he could have wanted in a son. But you’re not all him. I see that now.” Caius smiled to himself. “There are some things even he has no control over.”

Micah said nothing.

Esperanza watched the winter prince carefully. His eyes seemed to glaze for the briefest of moments – those normally striking green eyes suddenly clouded by a mist.

“As much as it would excite me to complete this stand off,” Caius said softly – gesturing to the sword on his own hip. “It’ll have to wait. Our agenda as of now is the same. James Lyon *must* be eliminated.”

Micah seemed to snap back to himself the minute his brothers name slipped past Caius’ lips.

Caius stepped closer and Esperanza watched Micah regain his offensive stance.

“Till that happens. I expect no bloodshed between our armies – our people.” Micah raised his sword an inch but Caius didn’t flinch. Not even slightly. “You’re a clever boy Micah.” Caius was just inches away from Micah and Esperanza was shaking.

If Caius moved too quickly – maybe said even the *slightest* off comment to irk the winter prince in some way – that icy blade would hit him clean and dead on.

He leaned even closer. “You’re this close to the end of this – to the end of James Lyon. Don’t fuck it up – or you’ll end up just like my youngest brother.”

Esperanza knew now that Caius was well aware of the relationship between Micah and James. But Caius was as shrewd as his nephew. It was fascinating to see the two of them attempt to out-wit each other. It was almost more tense than the potential battle that seemed to be on the verge of fruition.

Esperanza cringed. If there was anyone Micah hated more than James – it could very well be Logan Lyon.

Caius suddenly straightened and walked slowly back to the little side table. He picked up his teacup and lifted it to his lips before draining the cup dry. He then sighed and adjusted his collar.

Micah just stared coldly. That infamous blank expression on his regal features.

Caius walked past Micah and paused at the door before he left.

“Oh and Micah, one last thing...” Caius seemed to be fighting a smile when he spoke. “I don’t expect we’ll be seeing Mollie till later tomorrow evening. Royal duties can be so... laborious as I’m sure you know. But rest assured. She’s well protected – you can take my word for it.”

Esperanza winced.

Micah’s eyes flashed. Esperanza could sense a hidden meaning behind those words that made the winter prince simmer with anger.

“Don’t think I won’t hand you over to him,” Micah whispered. Caius gazed back – his expression cool. “This alliance is over the minute James is dead.” Now Micah was the one to step closer. It was almost comical when his nose brushed Caius. If his expression weren’t so frozen and menacing it may have looked even slightly endearing. “The minute that contract is fulfilled, all bets are off.” Micah’s voice had dropped lower and huskier. “And oh has he been waiting a *long* time to see you Caius.”

Caius smiled.

“Good to know we are on the same page Lyon,” Caius smirked. “And don’t you worry about my dear brother.” His smile turned icy quickly. “He won’t be waiting for much longer.”

The minute Caius left the room Micah’s cold empty gaze landed on Esperanza.

Esperanza didn’t have to say a word to know she should leave the room and quickly.

Not wasting another second she bowed deeply and exited as swiftly as possible. She could feel Micah’s gaze burning into her back even when the heavy doors of the room closed behind her.

She caught sight of Cécily in the corridor – closing the doors to the nursery behind her. For once her arms were empty. The infants must have fallen back asleep.

“Shall I?” Cécily asked quietly. Her eyes darted to the closed doors behind the older woman.

Esperanza glanced at the closed doors.

“No,” Esperanza sighed. “I wouldn’t go in there.”

The sound of blade digging into wood echoed through the doors leaving behind an eerie sound that turned Cécily’s face as white as a sheet.

Micah's temper was not to be tested and Esperanza sighed heavily.

“The sooner the princess gets back, the better it will be....for *all* of us.”

Chapter End Notes

I had a power outage in my area in the middle of writing this chapter and I had to re-write the whole thing *sniff*. But it's out now and ready for you all. Thanks for being patient. x

Chapter 54: Xénon

Chapter Summary

Mollie puts her skills to the test. Mollie and Zen face their fears.

Chapter Notes

Things get a bit explosive between our characters. Enjoy x

“It’s too quiet.”

Mollie led her little group further down the cool iron grey walls of the Rineaux Manor. The tiles were as grey as the walls and the ceilings so high Mollie couldn’t discern the difference between what was ceiling and what was sky. Their voices echoed in the fortress. This place made *Icedalar* seem like paradise.

Mollie couldn’t help but wince knowing that her mother grew up here -- had been born on this land. Everything here seemed fragile and unfriendly. Everything here just felt...*wrong*.

“Don’t touch that!” Mollie cried out. Caden froze. Her voice echoed loudly down the wide chambers and she winced. His arm was outstretched towards an ornate looking sculpture that Mollie assumed was supposed to resemble some sort of ancestral figure. “There could be traps here,” she said quietly.

“*Traps?*” Caden repeated with a raised eyebrow.

Mollie ignored his sarcasm. She sized up Henrie and Ophélie Rineaux the minute their eyes locked. Ophélie was the negotiator – the smooth talking one who sugar coated the deals and maintained seemingly friendly alliances with their neighbouring empires. But Henrie – he was sneaky and elusive and seemed *exactly* the type to hide gruesome traps on the grounds of his home.

“Yes,” Mollie murmured. “Traps.” She sighed. “My mother....she used to be paranoid of traps in our little apartment growing up. She’d even hide her money under the seats and in the cupboards because she was convinced people were watching our every move.”

“I thought she was crazy,” Caden mumbled.

“I thought so once too,” Mollie murmured. “But maybe....maybe she wasn’t.”

“Hey Mollie, look at this.”

Mollie turned towards Zephyr who was staring hard at a portrait further down the hall that had been viciously scratched through. The canvas fluttered from having been peeled in what appeared to be an act of arbitrary vandalism.

Mollie stiffened when she followed his gaze.

Although the portrait had been thoroughly ripped through – the image was still decipherable. A beautiful woman next to her husband. They weren’t smiling – their faces were cold and their features sharp. In front of them were two young girls – one unsmiling like her parents and the other with a shy smile that looked so much like Mollie’s.

Mollie brushed her fingers over the face of the timidly smiling child. She was dressed like a princess – in a fancy white dress with a matching bow in her thick jet black curls. They framed her face beautifully as she clutched a white rose in her chubby fist.

“Is that...” Zephyr muttered.

Mollie hesitated.

“I...I think that’s my mom,” she whispered.

Zen had gone silent beside her and Mollie took advantage of the brief moment. What a different life Bianca lived in Chartery despite growing up a princess...a royal.

It made Mollie’s heart ache.

“What did they do to you?” Mollie whispered. She didn’t have to look at the faces of the other family members in the photo to know they were evil. Their blank empty expressions proved it.

“There’s no one here,” Araya muttered. She appeared around the corner – her short bob tousled and windblown. Her hand rested lightly on the blade strapped to her waist.

Zephyr scoffed.

“Did you search the first room you found and come to that conclusion?”

Araya frowned.

“Hilarious,” she sneered.

“Wait,” Mollie whispered. “Do...do you hear that?”

She pressed her ear against the wall and held her breath. From the other side was the unmistakable sound of...*gushing water?*

“I hear it,” Caden muttered from further down the corridor. “Maybe we should go back out and try to find an entrance to the other side of this wall.”

“We have to be careful,” Zephyr said slowly. “The minute Mollie steps away from the grounds of this place – even a single step off this soil...they could kill her.”

“We will be careful Zen,” Araya muttered. “Mollie’s going to be just fine. Nothing will happen to her.”

“Oh yeah?” Zen hissed.

Mollie sighed heavily. The siblings continued to bicker at each other and Mollie slowly shuffled down the wall – the cold steely metal making her cheek cool. It was in times like these where she wished for Isaac’s composure and warm re-assurances.

The windowless corridor sent chills down Mollie’s spine and she eyed the single candle-filled chandelier above them and the few paintings of black, grey and beige with unease.

Her eyes darted to the other end of the corridor. To her dismay, it was another dead end.

“We should head back,” Mollie said quietly.

The silence behind her made her blood run cold.

When she turned around she felt her body freeze. What was previously a long corridor that formed the passageway back to the entrance, there was now a massive wall of steel and black tile. She could no longer hear Zephyr or Araya. In fact, she couldn’t see them either.

“Mollie?”

Mollie whirled around to meet the wide brown eyes of Caden. He seemed as bewildered as she was.

“Thank God,” she muttered. She ran towards him. “What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know,” he hesitated. “But this place is giving me the creeps. I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

“We need to find the others,” Mollie breathed. She pressed both her hand against the wall and pushed but her efforts were futile.

“There’s only one way to go,” Caden muttered.

Mollie eyed the corridor that ran deeper into the monstrosity of the atrium that was the Rineaux Manor.

“We’re not alone,” Mollie whispered quietly.

Caden had his hand tight around the sword on his hip.

Mollie took her father’s sword and unsheathed it from her hip. It was heavier than she expected. It didn’t help that she was so rusty from lack of practice...

“Put it away,” Caden interjected. “They can’t hurt you here.”

Mollie winced.

Caden was a little shorter than her. He was incredibly talented with a sword but he was still a mentee like herself. Araya had yet to officially graduate the boy.

“I know,” Mollie said wanly. “But they can hurt *you*.”

Caden straightened up. His expression turned into something of realization.

“Be prepared for anything,” Mollie said between gritted teeth. “They separated us for a reason.”

“Which way should we go?”

Mollie had already begun moving forward, closer to the sounds she had heard on the other side of the wall. Caden ran to keep up with her.

“Forward,” she told him. “That’s the only way we can go.”

“They won’t hurt Araya and Zen right?” Caden questioned. His voice was laced with concern.

Mollie bit her lip. As of now, she was the only one safe. It was a strange situation – then again – nothing in Mollie’s life had ever been conventional.

Mollie looked over into the chocolate brown eyes of her fellow mentee. Their friendship had grown so much in the last couple months. She daresay she even cared about the boy. His loyalty never ceased to amaze her.

“They wouldn’t dream of it,” Mollie told him with as much conviction in her tone as she could muster.

She looked up at the cold grey ceiling and the single chandelier above them. She knew they could hear every word.

After what felt like hours of walking down corridor after corridor, Mollie once again picked up on the sound of rushing water around her.

“Do you hear that?” Caden asked, his eyes bright.

“I hear it,” Mollie said slowly.

Mollie’s mind was working and she suddenly had an idea. Something she would have thought was previously unfathomable. But with the way Mollie was raised...it suddenly didn’t seem so strange.

“Caden,” she said calmly. “I need you to lift the cushions off all of the chairs we have encountered so far.”

Caden furrowed his brow.

“What the hell?” he muttered. “Why?”

Mollie eyed him with irritation.

“Just do it,” she snapped.

With a grumble she watched him shuffle down the corridor. Mollie observed him carefully. She didn’t want to let him out of her sight -- but at the same time Mollie was desperate. They couldn’t circle around this monstrosity of a castle forever. Mollie had an awful feeling that if they couldn’t find a way out of here – they wouldn’t ever get out.

“There’s a button!”

Mollie breathed slowly.

“How many?”

There was a brief silence before Caden responded.

“Just one...but I think its surrounded by some kind of mesh or marble contraption.”

Mollie chewed the inside of her cheek nervously.

“Should I press it anyway?”

Mollie hesitated. It was in moments like these that she wished she wasn’t alone. Had she been with anyone else she had a feeling her thoughts would have been a lot clearer. Rowan would know what to do. Caius and Zephyr too.

She closed her eyes tightly. Micah certainly would.

“Describe it for me.”

She heard the boy grumble under his breath.

“It looks like ice or something. I could just risk it and press it Mollie. It’s not a big deal.”

Mollie’s eyes flash opened.

“Does it look like crystals?” she called out to him. “Like little ice spheres?”

“...actually...yeah.” She heard Caden mutter. “It does.”

“Then don’t touch it,” she said coolly. “It’s ultrachilled metal. Use the hilt of your sword to press down instead. One touch of that stuff to your skin and it will burn your flesh.”

Mollie knew exactly what that felt like...and she had the bruise to show for it.

A couple minutes later, she heard the wall slowly sinking down behind her and instantly she turned, sword in hand. In front of her was something she never expected to see.

“Holy shit.”

Caden had appeared beside her within seconds, slightly flushed from the previous exertion she had sent him on and his expression frozen in shock.

Before them was a glass room with floor to ceiling windows. The humidity in the air was thick and misty and immediately the windows began to dampen with the gradual accumulation of condensation. Besides the glass interior and the expansive room, Mollie’s eyes were glued to the massive pool of purple that took up much of the space.

“Don’t touch anything,” Mollie told the boy severely. The wall behind them closed and Mollie wiped her sweaty hands on her pants before clutching her sword tightly. The rushing water was deafening at this proximity and Mollie could tell this entire operation seemed to be some sort of chemical plant. The water was being diverted from the river and undergoing several rounds of flocculation before being laced with some sort of plant that turned the once clear liquid into a deep vivid purple.

“Hey Mollie look at this.”

Mollie crept closer to the voice around the corner. Caden was standing next to an enormous field of purple flowers that lined every surface of the ground.

“I think they’re lacing the water with whatever is inside this flower,” he murmured. He crouched down to admire the beautiful earthy plant.

“Wait a minute,” Mollie murmured. “I’ve seen this before.”

She crouched down beside the boy.

It was almost as if Luna was here beside her as she stared at the deep purple hue of the petals before her. Her heart stopped when she remembered.

Aconitum napellus.

“*Shit*,” Mollie gasped. She grabbed Caden and pulled him backwards harshly. “We need to get out of here now.”

“Huh?” Caden huffed. The boy had been so taken aback by Mollie’s action he nearly dropped his sword.

“This is poison,” she hissed. She prayed none of the plants had touched her flesh as she grabbed Caden’s hand and tugged him away from the plants. The river water descended down on them and in her haste both of them were submerged beneath the torrent in their efforts to escape.

“What the hell is this?” Caden yelled as they pressed against the glass doors in vain. They needed to get out of here *now*.

“*Aconitum napellus*, ” she said quietly. She was completely soaked from the river water that they had run under to get back to the wall they had come through.

Caden’s eyes widened.

“No way,” he whispered. “Wolfsbane was banned from extraction over one hundred years ago. It’s also near impossible to find. It only grows...” he trailed off.

“In the desert,” she hissed. She glared angrily. “The Rineauxs are trading with the fucking Ophians.”

Mollie felt as if her head was about to explode.

“This is illegal,” Caden growled. His brown eyes had narrowed into slits. “We have to report this to Caius and the other monarchies immediately.”

Before Mollie could stop him Caden had reached for his sword and shattered one of the windows near the back of the green-house like room.

Mollie realized it led back to the outside.

“Caden wait,” she called out before he could leave. “We need evidence.” She ran up to him – her damp curls sticking uncomfortably to the back of her neck. “No one will believe us based only on our word.”

Caden’s eyes flickered to the flowers.

“I’m not touching *that*, ” he said quickly.

“I’m not *asking* you to,” Mollie snapped. “I’ll do it. I just need your knife pouch.”

Mollie was well informed about the potency of something as toxic as wolfsbane. But she also knew her capability. After all, she had carried pure anthrax on her at some point too – and that was *before* she was aware of how critical her role in the monarchy would be someday.

Caden winced at her sharp tone. A guilty expression crossed his features.

“Wait...” he interjected.

“What is it?” she sighed.

“Well...”he started. “I’m...well...I’m not really supposed to make you do anything dangerous...” he admitted. “If Zephyr knows...he’ll kill me.”

Mollie rolled her eyes.

“Just hand me the pouch please.”

In a flash he handed it over and Mollie proceeded to gingerly navigate her way through the array of purple petals. She was hyperaware of her surroundings and being extra careful to ensure none of the petals came into contact with any exposed flesh.

She knelt down and carefully plucked a plant from the root, using the pouch as protection. Even though she had a soft elegant pair of gloves on – Mollie wasn't taking any chances.

Shakily she stood up, ignoring the way her wet clothes plastered to her body.

The iciness on her neck suddenly increased tenfold and Mollie inhaled sharply.

She slipped the knife pouch containing the wolfsbane into her belt pocket and carefully concealed it beneath her yellow cloak. Already, the material was drying fast. With cold fingers she brushed the necklace that lay against her throat.

"Mollie?" Caden was staring her down from the shattered glass doorway, his expression fixed into a state of worry. "What the hell are you doing?"

She glanced up at him.

"I have an idea," she breathed.

"Mollie what the *fuck!*"

Quickly, Mollie jumped the short distance from the field of purple wolfsbane towards the waterfall that had soaked her and Caden only moments before. She ignored Caden's angry snarls for a moment and reached for her father's sword.

Rowan's words swirled in her mind as she approached the edge of the liquid lake that glowed purple beneath the bright light.

Make something that works for you Miss Mayeson...if you have the means to do so.

"I must be out of my mind," Mollie muttered under her breath.

The heat from the liquid sent a tremor down Mollie's spine but she swallowed her fear and reached for the iridium around her neck. The metal glowed bright in her palm, the *M* glistening like a million crystals beneath a blazing sun. In her left hand she held her father's sword, the rubies giving off their own luminescence amidst the whitewashed ambiance.

Carefully Mollie lowered the silver blade into the liquid, holding only the hilt tightly in her grasp. Mollie held her breath – the fumes from the liquid were making her hazy and she could feel her heart beat increasing.

This was dangerous.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Mollie brushed her thumb over the iridium once before tightening it around the sword before releasing it into the ocean of purple before her.

Mollie screamed, the impact nearly pulled her right in had it not been for the force of the person who pulled her backwards.

The entire room began to shake from the energy pulsating through such a small piece of metal, sending glass shattering around Mollie. The ground began to shake, the purple ocean of liquid slowly disappearing as the iridium attached to her fathers blade began to sequester the liquid around it.

“Are you mad?” Caden cried pulling her back further. “I almost saw you die before my eyes!”

The shattering glass began to pick up in both momentum and speed, the once beautiful room slowly descending into chaos.

“I need to go back for the sword,” Mollie gasped. She tried to wrench her arm free from Caden’s grasp but the boy was not about to repeat his mistake.

“It’s not worth it Mollie!” Caden screamed.

With another ear splitting tremor Mollie was brought to her knees from the force of the blade absorbing the liquid around it. Glass rained down on her from above and both of them were quick to use their cloaks as protection against the sharp downpour.

“This way,” Caden yelled. Mollie followed him blindly, her eardrums ringing from the proximity of the blast.

Water splashed around her legs in an effort to follow the brown haired boy down the glassy corridor.

“There!”

Mollie turned in the direction of Caden’s voice and scrambled towards the single door beneath a canopy of leafy green.

Before Mollie could reach for the handle she was yanked backwards with a force that sent her head snapping backwards and her teeth chattering against each other.

She fell deep into the water, the ice cold temperature freezing her insides into a solid block of ice.

She could barely move her limbs, let alone kick her legs. The surface was above her but Mollie was chilled to the bone. The weight of her cloak and the gems encrusted along them were weighing her down, dragging her deeper into this depthless abyss.

Mollie was tumbling in the dark murky liquid with nothing but her useless dagger in her hand. She felt herself tumble with the force of the current leading her somewhere and clipping her against the rocky edges of its path. Water filled her throat and Mollie flailed blindly. The current knocked her into several sharp edges and she felt the edge of her forehead come into contact with a particularly sharp object. Eventually the current died and Mollie was left floating in a pool of liquid filled with debris. With what little strength Mollie

could muster, she pulled her dagger free and stuck it as close to the surface as she could reach. It sunk into soft earthy ground, the grip far from steady. Mollie dragged herself up, and with what last energy she had, she broke the surface.

She gasped and coughed, her lungs filled with the water as she choked on the sweet air around her.

“Caden,” she screamed looking around for him.

When Mollie looked around her, she found herself on the shore of a massive lake on the brink of the Rineaux Manor courtyard.

The beautiful high tech greenhouse that had once been housing illegal biohazard operations had caved in on itself, leaving only shattered glass in its wake. Mollie realized the Rineaux’s had been diverting lake water – the same lake water they used to quench their citizens – and using it to run their wolfsbane operation. Looks like she had fallen through the tube like system leading the water from the lake into the facility.

Mollie was suddenly glad she had brought the entire building down. It had not been her intention but it was for the best.

“Caden,” she gasped again looking for the brown haired boy. She pulled herself up and shook out her cloak and clutched her dagger tightly in her hand. She swiped her hand against her forehead and saw her fingers come away with spots of blood.

When she swiped her hair to the side, she felt the emptiness around her neck.

“Shit,” she gasped. The iridium was tied around her sword which was still....

Mollie looked up to the now ruined building that was now debris and fallen ruin. She had to go back for it. She *had* to.

Someone finally broke through the surface of the lake behind her and Mollie breathed a sigh of relief when Caden dragged himself to shore, spewing lake water from his lips as he struggled to regain his breath.

“We need to find the others,” Mollie said lowly. She helped Caden to his feet. He seemed shaken by the entire ordeal.

“They must still be on the other side of that wall,” Caden panted. He brushed his damp fringe backwards. His throat was raspy from his coughs.

“We have to go back,” she said quietly.

“For what?” Caden questioned.

“For this?”

Mollie stopped dead in her tracks.

Only metres away from her was a man with dark hair and dark eyes in a gold trimmed cloak with an abnormally long train.

“*You*,” she hissed.

“I’ve been watching you all since *Sacré-Coeur*.” Henrie stroked his well trimmed beard as he observed Mollie and Caden closely. Amusement flickered in his dark eyes when they met Mollie’s. “You just won’t stop will you?”

Mollie wanted to stick her dagger through him but the sword in his gloved hands stopped her from making another move. She blinked in shock. The blade in his hand -- *her* blade had deepened into a vibrant purple, the silver shining through along the outer edges of the steel. The hilt had went from porcelain to lavender and the rubies and stones had darkened from blood red to magenta.

The necklace was still tightly wound around the hilt and Mollie couldn’t help but dart her gaze towards it. It hung innocently, the *M* appearing no different than the way it always had.

“I’ve been wanting to get my hands on this for a while,” Henrie murmured to himself. “To have the blade of Alexandre Marchesseault in my possession... *C’est incroyable*.”

“It belongs to me now,” Mollie snapped.

Henrie frowned.

“You’re on my land you stupid girl,” he snapped back with equal ferocity. “What you bring here is as much mine as it is yours.” He smiled a horrible smile that made Mollie’s blood simmer. “And after all, *you* were the one so eager to claim what little Rineaux blood runs through your veins. You must take everything that comes with that honour.” He tapped the blade lightly. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep it safe for you.”

Mollie’s heart was racing. She couldn’t let that sword out of her sight. Not with the iridium still attached to it.

Speedily Mollie reached for Caden and unsheathed his sword from his hip. He yelped in surprise but Mollie was too focused on her prey. Never had she felt this burning desire inside of her...this desire to *kill*.

“Then I challenge you to a fight,” she hissed. She tightened her grip on Caden’s sword and locked her eyes onto the blade in Henrie’s hands. “For the sword.”

Henrie laughed at her, his belly shaking as he slowed his laughter and finally met her gaze.

“I don’t think you’re fully aware of how things operate around here,” he said slowly. He began to walk slowly towards the two of them and Mollie braced herself. “You see *Mollie*, I am only obligated to keep people whom I do business with alive while on my land.” He played with the sword in his hands and Mollie chewed her lip. She winced when the metallic taste of blood spread across her palate. “And I don’t do business with the Marchesseaults nor with the Rebel Army you’ve allied with.”

“You can’t kill me,” Mollie hissed. “No matter how much you fucking want to.”

She stepped forward slowly enjoying the irritated expression that crossed Henrie’s face.

“You’re stalling isn’t working Henrie.” She smiled humourlessly. “What’s the matter?” she breathed. “Are you scared you’ll be beaten by a mixed-blood *commoner*?”

“*Salope*,” he hissed. “Like mother like daughter.” He spat saliva on the ground between them, his expression twisted into one of disgust. “Your whore mother died at the hands of my sword.” He smiled. “It would *only* be fitting that you followed in her footsteps.”

Mollie froze. She had assumed Bianca had passed by her own means – she was mentally unstable. But this. *This*. This changed everything.

Henrie seemed to notice the transition of emotions flitting across Mollie’s features and his smile widened.

“*Aww je m’excuse*. Did you not know? *Ahh zut*. I had thought the winter prince would have told you. We sent a message back when you were his whore in *Icedalar*.” He looked her up and down distastefully.

Mollie was fuming. Why hadn’t Micah *told* her?

“Though I must applaud you,” he said quietly. “In all my years as King, I have seen ascension of the ranks, but never one quite as large a leap as the one you have taken.”

“Mollie....,” Caden breathed. “Don’t.”

But Mollie was deaf to the words of everyone around her. Only Henrie’s voice pulsed through her mind – and only when he could be silenced could her ears open up to the rest of the world.

“Rot in hell,” Mollie whispered before she charged.

Caden yelled behind her but Mollie was far too engrossed in the battle of blades before her. Her dagger clashed against Henrie’s and his eyes sparkled with delight with each lunge she directed at him.

“Now that you’ve challenged me,” he breathed, his breath hot against her cheek. “You no longer have safe refuge in these lands. It is within my rights to kill you here and now.”

Mollie pushed off of him and continued her motions, lunging under and over and swiping her blade the way she had been taught.

She smiled when her blade grazed his chin and she heard the man hiss.

Blood dotted the cut below his lip to trickle into his beard and Mollie saw violent anger erupt in his eyes.

“I have every intention of killing you now,” Mollie spat. She stepped closer. “And unlike you, it’s a promise I won’t leave unfulfilled.”

She continued to lunge – ignoring the aching pull of her muscles. They protested at her sharp movements, still exhausted from nearly drowning earlier.

Mollie gasped in shock when Henrie’s knife swiped her wrist immediately dropping the sword from her hand.

She cried out in shock. With a sharp kick to the gut Mollie hit the ground, her cheek meeting damp grass. Pain erupted across her vision and her belly ached from the force of Henrie’s kick. She groaned in pain, but the man was far from finished.

He lifted her head up by her hair and Mollie cried at the pain. Her scalp burned when he brought her forward. He looked manic with dried blood on his neck and his eyes clouded with revenge.

Mollie watched him grin before reaching behind him for her sword. The purple blade shone brightly and Mollie squirmed in terror.

She could hear Caden screaming from behind but she couldn’t move. She was pinned down by the man above her.

Mollie screamed and thrashed but it was useless. She dug her nails into the earth – searching for something – *anything* that she could use against him.

Henrie clicked his tongue in disappointment.

“Such an amateur,” he chuckled. “To think there’s a Marchesseault that exists who doesn’t know how to fight.” He guffawed at the statement.

Mollie watched him reach forward to admire the sword.

“There is nothing more ironic than yielding to the blade of your own sword is there?”

Mollie couldn’t speak. She was pinned to the ground and when she looked up, she saw that Henrie had several men holding down Caden. No wonder he couldn’t come and help her.

“It’s almost like a captain having to go down with his ship wouldn’t you agree? There’s an... elegance to it.”

Mollie flexed her right hand, feeling warm wetness spread across her palm. Her breath stopped. She was losing feeling in it. In fact, it was becoming so numb Mollie was scared to look at it. She could only feel the warmth on her skin and the heavy fog that was beginning to cloud her vision.

Blood loss. She was bleeding out.

Henrie was mumbling something else, his mouth open as he chuckled above her but Mollie couldn’t care to listen any longer. With her slowly draining strength she grabbed the leather

pouch on her hip and bunched the plant in her hand. With all the force she had left she shoved the wolfsbane into the mouth of her aggressor before flipping over onto her stomach and gasping in pain.

She heard him scream and scramble backwards, choked garbled sounds emitting from the mans mouth.

She nearly cried with happiness when Caden used the distraction to lunge for his sword and finish them off.

He looked over at her a smile on his face. Proud. As he should have been.

What happened next, was something Mollie never could have anticipated.

Henrie growled with anger – taking Mollie’s sword and plunging it straight through the stomach of Caden.

“NO!” Mollie screamed. For the smallest of seconds, shock crossed Cadens features – as if he too couldn’t believe what had just happened. Mollie was sobbing but she could nothing but watch as her fellow mentee sunk to his knees, blood drenching the fabric of his abdomen to spread across his entire torso.

“No!” she sobbed pulling herself closer to where the boy collapsed on the ground. He was so young, Mollie could see it now as his brown eyes widened and he choked on the blood in his throat. So youthful – no more than sixteen. His breath was getting shorter and shorter but Mollie could barely keep her own eyes open.

Her sight began to darken, spots of black erupting across her tunneling vision. Henrie was standing there, the skin on his face a horrid shade of blue, and Mollie’s blade still tight in his grip.

The last thing Mollie saw before her vision went black was the little piece of iridium sparkle against the hilt of the purple blade.

The first thing Mollie felt when she opened her eyes was a stinging pain on her forehead.

“Careful.”

Mollie blinked her eyes open in a panic. When her brown eyes met soft blue ones she felt her heart beat quicken.

“Zephyr,” she whispered.

“Hey,” he said softly.

She blinked a couple more times before scanning the room. She was in a bed and she was comfortable. But everything in here was white. The walls, the floor, the bed...everything.

“Is she awake?”

Mollie froze.

At the entrance to her room was a lady in white. She wore a flowing gown that accentuated her slim curves and her statuesque height. Her rich dark skin glowed in the candlelight and her smouldering gaze met Mollie’s. Her jet black curls framed her angled jaw and complimented her strict but sophisticated features.

“She just woke up,” Zephyr said quietly.

Mollie looked between the two of them in confusion.

“Good,” the woman said crisply. “I don’t want the winter prince knocking down my door anytime soon.”

Mollie noticed Zephyr’s jaw lock.

“Zen...” she whispered. “I...where...”

Mollie couldn’t even form words. She was shaking.

“Shh,” he told her quietly.

“What’s going on?” she whispered. Everything in her mind was a blur. The last 24 hours in particular. Her limbs ached and her head was pounding. The tinnitus in her ear was still faint and her muscles were sore. “Why is *she* here?”

Zen sighed.

“If I tell you do you promise not to interrupt?”

Mollie frowned.

“I’ll try my best.”

Zephyr rolled his eyes. Mollie had a feeling had she not been so ill he probably would have sassed her right back.

“After we got separated in the corridors, Araya and I managed to find our way to the courts,” Zephyr explained quietly. “While we were there we managed to strike a deal with Ophélie.”

“Terminate it,” Mollie interjected immediately. “The Rineaux’s can’t be trusted.”

“I thought you said you wouldn’t interrupt me,” Zephyr replied with a frown.

“I said I would *try*,” Mollie huffed. She crossed her arms and looked away.

“Her relationship with Henrie is not what you think,” Zen said quietly. “They have different agendas.”

Mollie met his gaze once more and when she did she felt her stomach clench.

“I don’t care. He...tried to kill me.... *twice* Zephyr,” Mollie whispered. “I...I had to..I..”

Mollie couldn’t finish. She remembered the look on his face before she passed out. The way his face had turned an awful shade of violet before he began to foam at the mouth...

“I’m proud of you,” Zephyr whispered. Mollie was shocked when Zephyr leaned forward to rest his forehead lightly against hers. “You did what you had to. You fought him and you won. That’s exactly what I trained you to do Mollie.”

Mollie breathed in deeply.

“Caden...” she whispered.

She noticed Zen break eye contact immediately.

“He saved my life twice while were trapped,” Mollie told him quietly. “I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for him.”

Zen sighed.

“That was always the objective Mollie. To keep you alive...at any cost.”

Mollie shook her head.

“My life isn’t worth more than anybody else’s,” she told him quietly. “He was so young Zephyr,” she whispered, her voice breaking. “God he was so *young*-“

Silent tears fell down her cheeks as she rested her head against Zephyr’s shoulder.

She inhaled his scent, pressing her forehead into the crook of his neck. He threaded his fingers into her hair – just holding her as she cried.

“He knew the price Mollie,” Zephyr told her quietly. “We all do.”

The pain in his voice was apparent. Mollie remembered what Araya had told her all that time ago when she was just a lonesome prisoner alone on their ship.

We are family. All of us.

They had lost a family member yesterday. The pain was raw. For all of them.

They had been close – Caden and Zepyr. And....Araya. Mollie could only imagine. Araya was his mentor. She must be devastated.

Mollie wiped her tears and looked at Zephyr earnestly.

“Zen....what Caden and I saw yesterday. This changes everything.”

“What did you see?”

Mollie tucked her wild curls behind her ear. She ignored the sting of her muscles.

“The Rineaux were running a bioterrorism operation Zephyr! It was a whole facility. They were harvesting the poison from wolfsbane.”

“Wolfsbane?” Zephyr repeated with furrowed brows. “No way. That stuff only grows in *Anubis*.” He paused as if putting the pieces together in his mind. “Wait a second-“ he muttered.

“I tried to take a sample for evidence,” Mollie explained quietly. “But...I ended up stuffing the plant down Henrie’s throat when he tried to kill me.”

Zephyr glowered.

“Fucker deserved it.” He sighed and Mollie could see he was a little...put out. “Is that the reason you blew up the place? Without evidence there isn’t much we can do Mollie.” Zephyr seemed as angry as her about it. “Without evidence the courts can do nothing. The Rineaux will get off scot free.” Zephyr paused. “What *did* cause that explosion?”

Mollie hesitated. This was going to be a tough one to explain.

Zephyr twisted his body beside her and she could feel his unamused gaze burning a whole through her cheek. “What did you do?” He brushed a hand through his blond hair. “Do I even *want* to fucking know?” he muttered to himself.

Mollie suddenly sat up. Her brown eyes widened and she felt a surge of hope reignite inside of her.

“Wait....I *do* have evidence,” she said suddenly snapping her gaze back to Zephyr’s. She made an attempt to swing her legs from beneath the warm covers but Zephyr stopped her quick.

“Slow down there,” he muttered. “You didn’t answer my question.” He frowned at her.

Mollie blushed when his warm hand wrapped around her thigh in a motion to slow her movements.

“I...my sword,” she said quietly. She scanned the room. “Where is it?”

“Ophélie has it,” Zephyr said slowly. His expression seemed to freeze and immediately Mollie could tell something was wrong. “That was what the deal was,” he explained quietly. “Our freedom and their neutrality in exchange for Alexandre Marchesseaults sword.”

“No,” Mollie groaned tugging her curls till her scalp burned. Ophélie was far more shrewd than Mollie had ever given her credit for.

“The *iridium* is on the sword Zephyr,” she explained quietly. “We *have* to get it back.”

“Fucking *hell*,” she heard Zephyr groan.

Mollie cringed. This entire mission was turning into a nightmare.

“Listen to me,” Mollie said softly. She shifted so she was now kneeling on the bed beside the blond Lyon. “I used the iridium to sequester the extracted wolfsbane into my sword –“

“You *WHAT?*” Zephyr shouted.

“Just *listen to me*,” Mollie snapped. “It was the only way I could think of at the time to shut down the operation. The iridium would sequester it all. I just...hadn’t expected the energy to be of such a large magnitude.”

“What were you thinking?” Zephyr growled. “Playing around with iridium is dangerous stuff Mollie,” he snapped. “Your job was to keep it safe – not go around using it as you *please*.”

Mollie realized suddenly that Zephyr was furious. No...he was *livid*. She had only seen him this angry a handful of times. She leaned backwards.

“You could have gotten everyone in that vicinity killed doing that,” he said between gritted teeth. “What the hell compelled you to do such a foolish thing.”

Mollie bit her lip. She had a feeling Zephyr would never forgive her if she told her the real person behind the idea.

Rowan.

“Everyone has a sword that makes it theirs,” Mollie explained quietly. She ignored Zephyr’s furious gaze. “Micah’s is ice and yours is fire...” she looked away.

He stared at her for a long time and Mollie felt her cheeks redden. Micah did the same and it always made her squirm. What was with these Lyons and their intense gazes?

“You’re a crazy lady,” Zephyr said finally sighing in defeat.

Had he not been so furious earlier Mollie may have laughed at the comment.

“Says the boy with the *desert* blade,” she grumbled.

“I think you mean *man* with the desertblade,” he retorted giving her a look.

Mollie smiled.

“That’s debatable.”

Before she could gather her thoughts Zephyr had nudged her down onto the bed and climbed over her. His musky scent engulfed her and she felt her heart quicken as he hovered above her, his muscles bulging on either side of her body.

“Oh yeah?” he breathed. “You want proof of my virility?” He pressed his body against hers and Mollie gasped when he licked a hot trail from her collarbone all the way up to the edge of her lips. “I’ll give you proof.”

She trembled when he brushed her curls out of her face and smiled down at her. Carefully he brushed the small cut on her forehead that was carefully bandaged.

“This seems oddly nostalgic,” Mollie murmured.

His blue eyes softened. Mollie knew that he too remembered the first time they had ever met. It was in a situation much like the one they were in now – only much more hostile.

That earned her a smirk from the blond in front of her. He was gentle when he removed the gauze from her forehead.

She brought her hand forward to brush his blond hair away from his eyes and noticed the tight bandage around her wrist. She inhaled sharply.

“Are you hurting?” he whispered urgently.

Mollie shook her head.

“No,” she breathed. It didn’t hurt much. Mollie was thankful to see the wound had not been as severe as she had thought.

“It was deep,” Zephyr told her quietly. “But it won’t affect your swordplay. Just take it easy with your practice for the next couple weeks.”

“It won’t stop me,” Mollie told him with a smirk.

“I know,” Zephyr muttered. “Crazy people can’t be stopped.”

“I’m not crazy,” she grumbled playfully kneeing him in the gut. He elegantly dodged it.

“That’s debatable,” he whispered in her ear – turning her own words against her.

He laughed when she glared at him and she felt a warmth blossom in her gut.

Before she knew what she was doing she was crushing her lips against his and holding his cheeks within her palms.

He leaned into the kiss dragging his own calloused palms down her back and squeezing.

Mollie sighed their tongues tangling in a frenzy and their breaths turning heavier by the minute.

Mollie broke away for breath and rested her forehead against his – leeching off the warmth of his skin.

“Zephyr,” she breathed as he encircled her waist with his massive hands.

“Hmm,” he hummed. She felt his nose brush the top of her head.

Mollie gasped when his hand ventured upwards to palm a breast.

Mollie inhaled sharply. The pain made her wince.

“C..careful,” she stuttered. He only hummed a response and began to nibble at her neck. His fingers ventured downward and Mollie felt the fear overtake her once again.

As if she were electrocuted she clenched her legs closed.

Zephyr pulled back immediately.

“What’s wrong?” he breathed. His full lips pressed softly against hers. Mollie trembled. “Relax,” he murmured. “I’m not going to do anything.”

Mollie blinked her eyes open in shock.

Je ne ferai rien.

It’s what Micah had told her too.

“That’s what he said too,” she whispered against his lips. Zen stopped kissing her and pulled back. Mollie was full on shaking. God she was so scared.

“Who?” Zephyr muttered.

“M..Micah,” she whispered.

Even saying his name made Zen’s lip curl.

“Could you *not* say his name when we’re in bed together.”

Mollie frowned.

“He’s the last thing I want on my mind right now.”

“Zephyr...” Mollie trailed off. She trembled when his huge warm hands curled around her slim thighs, slowly inching further and further up.

She tensed and Zen paused.

“Why are you hiding from me?” Zen asked her softly.

God she didn’t want anyone to see her. She didn’t want anyone to see her ravaged body. She was hideous now. She was forever tainted. Forever scarred.

Mollie felt embarrassed for admitting so. But she was terrified of getting intimate. Especially post pregnancy. The last time they were together had been different.

“I’ve still got stitches,” she told him quietly.

“So?” he shrugged.

“I’m hideous down there,” she admitted. “I feel...hideous. It’s like I don’t recognize my body anymore. Like its changing faster than I can keep up.”

Mollie felt vulnerable admitting these things to Zen but he was surprisingly mature about it.

Zen nodded. He had tangled his fingers in her curls and was slowly brushing her scalp. It was a soothing gesture.

“It’ll be better once you’re fully healed,” he re-assured her.

Mollie winced.

“Hey, listen to me Mollie,” Zephyr muttered. He brought her chin forward and tilted her face upwards so his own hovered inches above hers. “I’m no expert,” he mumbled reddening slightly. “But giving birth isn’t all that pretty. I’ve seen it happen far too many times. Most of the time it’s a fucking mess.”

Mollie grimaced.

“But-“ he continued. “No matter what anyone says– don’t you ever think any part of you isn’t beautiful. Your scars tell your story. There’s no shame in having them.”

Mollie leaned her head against his shoulder.

“It’s still disgusting,” she muttered.

She yelped when he lifted her leg up catching a quick glance Mollie hadn’t expected it and she went beet red.

“I’ve seen worse,” Zen shrugged. Dropping her leg back down to the bed. Mollie lifted her head and glared at him.

“What?” he retorted. “I’m just being honest.”

Mollie frowned.

He brushed his blond hair back and rested his head against the back wall.

“So...about that,” he muttered. His fingers began to inch near her thighs again. Mollie squirmed but this time it wasn’t out of fear or embarrassment. She felt a familiar wetness at the apex of her thighs and she realized her arousal was rising. She inwardly sighed in relief. She had thought it would never be possible again.

“Will you grant me access this time?” he muttered swiping her cleft with his thumb.

Mollie rolled her eyes.

“Now is *not* the time,” Mollie huffed. She swung her legs down and fixed herself before heading straight for the wardrobe.

She could hear him groan from the bed but Mollie had too many objectives on her mind.

She spotted her freshly laundered tunic and pants as well as her yellow cloak neatly folded inside the wardrobe.

She changed quickly and tried to tame her unruly curls. She stopped when she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror. It had felt like ages since she'd taken the time to stop and gaze at her reflection and she felt her heart thump unevenly. She looked more mature now, her body toned in places it had never been before and her hair long and thick around her shoulders. She had lost the fullness of her cheeks and the childlike features she was always known for as a teenager. Although the splash of freckles still dotted her nose and the apples of her cheeks she looked like a young woman now. Her pale wide brown eyes shone brightly in the mirror and she let her hair fall loose from her hands. She ran her hands down the yellow cloak she always wore and touched the pocket where Henrie's dagger lay. It was hers now – proof of the battle she had won.

When she returned to the main room Zen was waiting for her by the door.

“Ready?” she asked him.

He looked up at her and Mollie was thrown off by the intensity in his gaze.

She paused.

“*Perséides* is just across the lake,” Zen said quietly. He had changed back into his classic black on black outfit and Mollie couldn't help but admire the contrast of the dark clothes against his fair hair and tanned skin. His cloak fluttered lightly behind him from the breeze through the open window. He was leaning against the door, his eyes shrouded by his hair. He didn't wait for her to respond. He just continued to muse quietly. “It's a small village upstream of the River of *Morte*. It leads right back to Ophian land. To *free* land.”

Mollie knew what he was referring to. It was a land where monarchies didn't exist. A place where it didn't matter your blood, your gender, your race, or your sexuality. It was a place where everyone started on equal footing from the start.

Mollie froze when Zen took several strides forward and gripped her hands in his.

“Come with me Mollie,” he said quietly. “We...we don't have to do this anymore. We can free ourselves from these burdens. We can be *anyone* we want to be. None of this royalty bullshit. None of these obligations.”

Mollie felt her throat swell.

“Zen...” she whispered.

“They'll *never* find us,” he whispered.

Mollie felt her vision blur from the tears clouding her vision.

“Please,” he whispered to her. “Don’t... make the same mistakes. Don’t make the same mistakes as she did.”

“Zen...” Mollie choked.

“I... can’t lose you like I lost her.”

Mollie gripped his hands tightly.

“We’re two different people Zen,” she explained quietly. “The decisions I make won’t lead to the same outcomes as her. I need you to understand that.”

“Everything is so... similar,” Zephyr said slowly. “Viv and I were supposed to make it out of that ice wasteland and live our lives.” He brushed a hand through his hair. “But she insisted we do that mission. That *fucking* mission-”

“You told me to never run away from my problems Zephyr,” Mollie told him quietly. “We shouldn’t run from our fears either.”

“My fears are fucking valid,” he hissed.

“I... can’t leave Rue and Maël,” Mollie said quietly. “I...I could *never*.”

Zephyr scoffed.

“*Please*,” he muttered. “Is it them you’re afraid of leaving, or is it *him*?”

Mollie stopped short. Her gaze turned stormy.

“This isn’t about Micah,” she snapped. She paced the room in annoyance. “This is about... *responsibility*.” Mollie reached into her cloak and pulled out the letter from her father. She tossed it to Zephyr who easily caught it. “Alexandre expects me, *me* to succeed him,” Mollie said with a hint of hysteria in her voice. “I barely knew him...he barely knew *me*, yet he’s leaving his kingdom for me to rule.”

Zephyr read the letter slowly before rolling the parchment back up. He looked at her.

“You aren’t obligated to accept it Mollie,” he said slowly.

“That’s not what bothers me,” Mollie admitted. “It’s the fact that he didn’t want to leave the kingdom to Caine.”

“Yeah,” Zephyr mumbled. “Because Alexandre has some common sense.”

“The people of *Peréal* are relying on me. Rue and Maël are relying on me,” Mollie said quietly. “Your father is too.” She looked away sadly. “I can’t abandon all of them.” She looked out into the fog ridden hillside that lay before the Rineaux Manor. “I’ve always wanted my freedom—ever since the Lyon guard dragged my mother and I away from Riverton and dumped us in Chartery. I’ve been fighting for it all my life. The only reason I

agreed to work with Caius' army was because he promised me what I could never achieve." She smiled almost humourlessly. "I guess I always knew deep down it would never happen."

Zephyr had gone quiet. His expression had turned stoic and Mollie could tell it wasn't quite what he wanted to hear.

"You didn't train me for all those nights, all those mornings in the hot desert for nothing," she murmured. Her eyes were still on the hillsides that lay outside the window. "We'll make it," she said softly. "Trust me." She closed her eyes tightly. "I *need* you to trust me Zephyr."

Before he could protest Mollie closed the distance and pressed her lips to his. It was warm and soft and gentle. Chaste even. It was a kiss of re-assurance and raw desperation.

When she pulled back that look of concern still remained on Zen's face.

"There's no turning back once we leave this room," he told her. "It's now or never."

Mollie tightened her yellow cloak and headed to the door. She *hated* ultimatums - especially when it came from those she cared about deeply. But Mollie had seen the look in his eyes. She already knew. He *didn't* think she could do it. He *didn't* believe in her—he didn't think she was capable. Mollie couldn't pin down if it was due to her lack of ability or his own past trauma. Irregardless, it broke her deeply. It made Mollie's heart shatter into a million pieces. She blinked the dampness away in her eyes.

"You don't think I'll make it do you?" she whispered. Her voice cracked with emotion when she spoke. "You....you underestimate me." It didn't feel right saying it. Mollie couldn't make sense of it. Her own damn mentor didn't believe in her.

"It's not that Mollie," Zen argued. He brushed his hair backwards and Mollie could tell he was already irritated with the turn the conversation had taken.

Mollie hadn't told Zephyr that she knew -- but Araya had let her in on the vital role Viv had been in their group. She had been the leader -- even above Zephyr when it came to the rules and the training. Mollie should never have said what she said next but her emotions bubbled to the surface and clouded her otherwise better judgment.

"I'm sure if Viv had been the one asking you, your response would have been completely different."

Zephyr's head snapped up and Mollie could see the anger darken in his stormy eyes.

"Don't you fucking dare Mollie."

His tone had dropped several octaves into a growl but Mollie was undeterred by his sudden hostility.

"Don't think I haven't figured it out," Mollie blurted. Tears dotted the edges of her vision. "You see me as some kind of fucked up replacement for her. I *know* it."

Zephyr straightened and Mollie could see his face flush deep red.

"That's why you trained me so fucking hard," Mollie continued. Her words were pouring out of her like water from a faulty pipe. She couldn't stop. "And you can't deal with it. I've seen you. You can't deal with it every time I digress from your version of what *you* want me to be."

Zephyr took several steps forward and Mollie could tell his hands were shaking.

"Shut the *fuck* up Mollie. You don't know what the hell you're talking about."

His voice was eerily empty and it chilled Mollie to the bone. Zephyr was usually fiery and impulsive when he argued. Him suppressing it was almost more unnerving.

He smiled knowingly for a moment and Mollie flexed her fists.

"Did Micah put you up to this?" He was almost too calm now. It was unnatural for Zephyr. "Because that's what he does best Mollie. He gets deep into your psyche and fucks everything up in there until you're eating out of the palm of his fucking hand."

Now Mollie was the one to laugh humourlessly.

"Even now you still give him much more credit than he deserves."

"If it weren't for him I'd still have Viv right now and I wouldn't be in this fucking mess!"

Mollie recoiled as if he'd slapped her. She wished he had honestly. At least that physical pain would overtake the internal one that was building up inside of her.

Zephyr breathed heavily after he screamed at her and she just stood there for a moment taking it all in. She couldn't form words quite yet.

Mollie was hurt. God she was so fucking hurt. Out of everything he'd said to her tonight. That hurt the most.

"Well there's no point wishing for something that will never happen," Mollie spat. "She'd dead and she's not coming back."

Mollie said those next words from a place of immense emotional distress. The minute they left her lips she wanted to take it back.

Zephyr's lips parted in shock and Mollie could tell the weight of her words hit him hard.

She almost felt satisfaction knowing he felt the pain she felt only moments ago. But almost as soon as the high came it was gone and in its place was regret, guilt and horror. That's usually how it was. Gratification was always so short lived.

Zephyr stiffened slowly and Mollie could see a dozen emotions flit across his face.

She bit her lip and closed her eyes tightly. She was such a bitch. He was grieving one of his best friends and Mollie had to go in and remind him of his dead lover. She was awful. So so awful.

He walked slowly to the door facing away from Mollie the entire time.

"It was never about replacing you," Zephyr said quietly. Mollie looked up when he spoke but he was purposefully looking away from her. "It was about protecting myself...from a loss I wouldn't be able to go through twice."

When he finally did turn to look at her, Mollie could see the dampness in his own eyes.

"But you wouldn't see it that way would you Mollie?" He half smiled. "I guess that's what makes you so different from her."

With that he closed the door behind him leaving Mollie to grapple with the repercussions of her words.

Selfish. She was so selfish.

Mollie swallowed the massive lump in her throat and wiped the dampness from beneath her eyes. She needed her friends now more than ever. She just hoped she didn't just throw away the only true one she had left.

Chapter 55: Césium

Chapter Summary

Mollie returns to Peréal. The Lyon princes have their first face off after four years.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The courtroom in the heart of the Rineaux castle within the *Étretat* region was bare, chilly, and whiter than a sheet of fresh snowfall. It was not so different from the rest of the rooms Mollie had encountered so far in the castle.

Mollie had seated herself at the end of a long limestone table filled with members of the Rineaux courtroom. Araya and Zephyr sat on either side of her and across from her with a sharp glint in her eye was the queen herself.

Ophélie was calm -- she always was -- but she seemed slightly more perplexed today. Mollie's gaze was drawn to the sword that lay just inches away from the long wandering fingers of the queen. The blade had lost its purple lustre and had since faded back into a steely grey. But Mollie knew its potency was still just as fierce. Her eyes locked onto the silvery necklace that was tightly wound around the hilt.

"You have killed a King."

Mollie said nothing. She stared the woman down, her gaze matching the frostiness that the woman directed back at her. Ophélie didn't seem particularly sombre about it. In fact, she seemed rather unaffected by it. She was simply stating the facts.

"And he killed one of my own," Mollie said. "That warrants retaliation does it not?"

Mollie had slowly become familiar with the many commandments of the monarchy. She knew what her rights were and she knew how monarchical members used and abused them. She was learning to do the same.

Ophélie raised one slender eyebrow.

"It certainly does. But retaliation in the form of death is condoned only under the most exceptional of circumstances. Taking prisoners is the far more...*common* way of dealing with such an issue. You should know that."

Mollie frowned.

"I guess I'm a little rusty."

“My my,” Ophélie chuckled. “Whatever happened to that docile little girl in the red dress?”

Mollie looked down. Her fingers dug into the smooth stone of the table. Her pride melted away ever so slightly. She knew Ophélie was referring to their first meeting – back in Questershire Manor. It felt like a lifetime ago. Mollie *had* been docile then -- inexperienced, oblivious, and naïve. She had been a little lamb in the heart of a lion pride.

“I think I liked her better,” Ophélie murmured. “She was much more...*pliant*.”

“I want to re-negotiate the terms set forth by my council.”

Mollie changed the subject immediately.

“*Impossible*,” Ophélie said immediately with a wave of her hand. She turned to her two advisors who chuckled at the suggestion. “It is a done deal.”

“I was not present,” Mollie challenged.

“Oh you were,” Ophélie drawled. “You were just... unconscious.”

“A deal is not a deal until it has been *signed* by the highest member of a monarchy, which in this case would be *me*,” Mollie all but growled from across the table.

Ophélie’s eyes snapped up to meet hers.

“You are not,” she hissed. “Alexandre would have *never*.”

“*I am*,” Mollie snarled back. She reached into her yellow cloak and pulled out the letter written for her by Alexandre. He had signed his name at the bottom ensuring the document maintained validity in a monarchical courtroom.

Ophélie took it from her and read it slowly. Several emotions flickered across her face when she read the letter.

“Hm. Interesting,” the woman drawled handing the parchment back to her advisor who handed it back to Mollie. “But still. You would need the permission of the temporary leader before you are permitted to re-negotiate a deal.”

Mollie cursed under her breath. She knew Ophélie was just being purposefully difficult at this point. Elio Courtois was probably back in the *Peréal* castle cursing Mollie a thousand times over. And now that she really needed him, he was nowhere in sight.

“*Look*,” Mollie hissed. “I don’t have *time* for this. If you don’t want to re-negotiate a previous deal then... how about I propose a new one?”

The Rineaux advisors looked stricken by Mollie’s bluntness but she didn’t hold back.

Ophélie had already stood up with the intention of closing the meeting. She paused when she heard Mollie's proposal. Her white pleated dress that circled around her slender waist spread

around her like an assembly of cirrus clouds. A cruel smile played at the corner of her blood red lips.

“Oh dear Mollie,” she murmured. “I hadn’t imagined your desperation would reach such lengths for you to *willingly* be indebted to me.”

Mollie closed her eyes. She was desperate. As much as she despised it, she could do nothing.

Ophélie suddenly gestured for certain members of the table to rise and exit the room. Mollie felt a tingle spread through her limbs.

“All of you, leave us. I have some matters to deal with the princess... *en privé.*”

“They stay with me,” Mollie argued looking straight at Araya and Zephyr.

Ophélie frowned.

“Very well. But the rest of you...out.”

The room cleared rather quickly, many giving Mollie lingering stares until only Araya, Mollie, Zephyr, Ophélie and her personal advisor were present.

When the door closed, the woman began to speak.

“You destroy a part of my home, you murder the King of *Étretat*, and now you demand diplomacy from me?” the queen demanded in a deadly tone.

“It’s not murder if he agreed to the fight,” Araya muttered between clenched teeth.

Ophélie ignored her as if she hadn’t spoken at all. Her dark eyes rested solely on Mollie’s.

“You can’t part with that sword because it’s evidence,” Mollie said lowly. “The courts of every monarchy that exists will have the opportunity to sentence you if they know what operation you were running here.”

“You even *try* bringing this to the courts, and I will have you sentenced for the murder of Henrie Boulet. Mark my words.” Her eyes went dark. “Between the two of us, I have a feeling the courts would be more willing to take my word over yours.”

“Blackmail?” Zephyr huffed. “Really? Is that the best you can do?”

Mollie smiled at the woman.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

Quickly Mollie reached into her yellow cloak and grasped Henrie’s dagger in her hand tightly. Embedded in the hilt a single vibrant purple stone with jagged edges and a smooth interior. A stone from *Anubis*.

"Looks like your husband was a busy man," Mollie said conversationally. "This here shows that your precious Henrie was involved in some dealings with the Ophians." Mollie paused for several seconds, feigning surprise. "How shocking considering the Rineaux Empire prides themselves on their neutrality." Mollie stood up slowly. Her height matched Ophélie's. "You even signed a contract to prove so -- the very same contract that Phillip Aurelio signed." Mollie sighed dramatically. "He will be *so* very disappointed if he knows his only other neutral ally renegaded on the contract. And Phillip can be quite *creative* with his punishments, especially when his allies deceive him. Just ask Grigoire..." Mollie chuckled. "He definitely got a taste of it."

Ophélie's face stiffened and Mollie could tell the woman was silently fuming.

Mollie smirked.

"You almost had all your bases covered. *Almost.*"

Ophélie's eyes turned stormy and for the first time Mollie could see anger cross her features.

"*Cet crétin,*"* she hissed under her breath.

Mollie tensed. She noticed Zephyr and Araya take one step closer to her.

"If only he had died sooner."

Mollie froze at the comment and she couldn't help the surprise that flitted across her face.

Ophélie eyed the dagger in Mollie's hand with disdain.

"If you're referring to your husband," Araya interjected. "I don't blame you."

"*Husband,*" Ophélie scoffed. "We were more like business partners. Nothing more, nothing less."

"An arranged marriage..." Mollie said slowly. They had seemed very in sync when Mollie had last seen them in the Aurelio ballroom. Had it all been...an act?

"*Oui,*" she snapped. "I did because I had to. We both had to." She sighed. "Henrie was a poor businessman. He couldn't close a deal if his life depended on it. But he came from a royal blood -- *sang royale*. That was enough for my parents."

Mollie shifted uncomfortably.

"Henrie was my partner -- the man I married -- the man I pledged myself to," she said sternly. "But he was not a husband to me -- just as I was not a wife to him." She looked at Mollie directly. "To the world we were a husband and wife. But within these walls we were just a man and a woman trapped in a lifelong arrangement neither of us really wanted."

Mollie felt her mouth go dry. Had she really been that blind? The more she thought about it the more it made sense. Ophélie seemed to enjoy closing deals on her own. There was little

contribution from Henrie. Mollie had only known the man existed when she met him at Phillip's dinner table.

"But now that he is dead, that is one less thing for me to worry about."

"What was Henrie doing making deals with the Ophians?" Mollie inquired. She looked at the stone on his dagger. "Especially a *contracted* deal. It must have been something of great importance."

Ophélie frowned.

"Henrie owed the Lyon King a debt. And that debt had to be repaid."

Mollie's ears perked up.

"Hartley?" she questioned exchanging a glance with Araya.

"Indeed," Ophélie murmured. "Hartley is keeping the son of the Shraders hostage. Has been for years."

"Solanio," Mollie whispered.

"To ensure their sons life remains unharmed, the Shraders agreed to the conditional deal that the harvestation of wolfsbane be permitted under the pretense that it is not directly done on Ophian land – as that would be a violation of their code."

"So they manufactured it here?" Zephyr muttered. "How ignominious of you to agree to such a demand."

"I had no choice," Ophélie seethed. "Henrie had his own debts with Hartley that I was no part of. I tried my best to smooth things over with him in Questershire, but the man is *ruthless*."

Mollie clenched her fists. It seemed no one was immune to the actions of the Lyons. They really sunk their claws deep into the soil of every monarchy they interacted with. She wondered what the Lyons were using wolfsbane for. Mollie felt ill. She could already theorize what gruesome purposes Hartley was using it for. Her skin suddenly prickled. She hoped it wasn't another source of ammunition for James to use on his bloody crusade from monarchy to monarchy.

"I need that sword," Mollie said lowly. Your majesty please--"

Zephyr cut her off prompting Mollie to glare at him.

"If you don't hand over that sword," he said between clenched teeth. "You may end up joining your husband sooner than you think."

Mollie pushed past the massive blond. Now she knew why Caius never sent the boy to close deals. He had no patience.

“What he *meant*, ” Mollie muttered. “Is that the importance of that sword is critical. It belonged to my father and... I need it if I’m going to cross paths with James Lyon.”

Ophélie’s eyes flashed at the name.

“He doesn’t go by that name anymore,” she murmured.

Mollie bristled.

“He can call himself whatever the hell he wants – it doesn’t change a thing about the man to me. But everyday he inches closer to *my* land.” Mollie stepped closer to her. “I have to defend my people. I have to protect *Peréal*. And I have to do it because I am a Marchesseault.” Mollie hadn’t realized she had inched so close that she was now standing almost face to face with Ophélie. “That’s a part of me I can’t change,” she told her quietly. “I’ve been through the denial, the anger and the pain. I’m past it. And no matter what grudges you hold against me, it would give me no pleasure to see your kingdom fall at the hands of James Lyon. Because rest assured he will burn every monarchy to the ground the minute he gets what he wants.” Her voice trembled slightly when she spoke. “And if you keep that sword your majesty -- you jeopardize not only your own kingdom, but every city, town and village spread out across these lands.”

Ophélie just looked at her – her expression indiscernible.

"It's here isn't it?" Ophélie murmured. Her voice had dropped low. "The iridium. The very thing he wants."

The silence that lingered was almost heavy – like fog in the midst of a humid summer.

Mollie hesitated. She had her dagger strapped to her thigh if needed and she could already see in her peripheral vision that Zephyr and Araya were ready for an offensive attack. She shook her head slowly. She could handle this -- *without* anymore bloodshed.

"It's not what you think," Mollie said quietly. "It'll bring nothing but despair. That's all it ever does. Its legacy is as tainted as the river where it was found. Anyone unfortunate enough to carry this burden around with them has faced only hardship and heartache." Mollie thought about all the people before her who had stumbled upon this revered element. She understood what Luna had tried to tell her all that time ago by the river. Some things were simply not meant to be touched - others were not meant to be found.

Gently, Ophélie walked over to the corner of the room where her advisor stood and whispered something to the woman.

She bowed immediately and left the room.

When she returned, the woman brought with her the entire assembly that previously gathered before the court. The men and woman looked between Mollie and Ophélie several times before the queen of the Rineaux Empire spoke.

“The Princess of the Marchesseault Empire has offered a new proposal. One that will override the previous arrangement if it is seen to completion.”

There was a collective mutter that Mollie didn't miss. The Marchesseault hate ran deep in these lands. She could sense it. She wondered if this was how Micah felt whenever he traveled to every realm that wasn't his own.

The advisor beside Ophélie began to draft the proposal, her quill scraping vigorously against the thick parchment. Mollie took a deep breath and ignored the sweat that soaked her palms.

“The sword of Alexandre Marchesseault will be relinquished from the hold of the Rineaux Empire and returned to its previous owner,” Ophélie said tersely. “In return, the dagger of the late King, his majesty Henrie Boulet, will be relinquished from the hold of the Marchesseault monarchy and returned to its rightful owner – the Rineaux Empire.” She took a deep breath. “It will reside where it is meant to, alongside our King.”

“If I may my queen,” said a man from the table. “May I ask how the Marchesseault girl acquired the King's dagger in the first place?”

“She defeated him in battle,” Araya hissed. “The princess challenged him and he accepted.”

There was a collective gasp and murmur that circulated the table and Mollie felt their gazes rest on her.

“It was an honourable win,” Ophélie said between thin lips.

The assembly seemed flabbergasted.

Mollie caught bits and pieces of the rapid French they spoke to one another. She certainly heard a couple insults inserted in there as well but she held her tongue. She found it almost humorous. They struggled to believe Mollie, a mixed blood commoner, managed to defeat a King of Henrie's calibre.

She glanced down at her first stone on the hilt of her dagger. A silvery orb dotted with specks of gold. She had removed it from Henrie's dagger and placed it on her own. It was a symbol of her strength and her abilities. *Her first win*. She had a feeling it would not be the only one to grace her dagger. She would have it as decorated as Zen and Micah's one day.

The rest of the proceedings were rather dry and Mollie knew it was just a matter of filling out documents and adhering to protocol. The difficult part was over.

Mollie only relaxed her stance once her father's sword was returned to her, with the iridium wrapped around the handle. By the time Mollie had gathered her things and was on her way out of the manor she felt her skin prickle. Two body bags lay just beyond the steps leading to the courtyard. Although it had been a successful mission - it hadn't gone without some major casualties.

Four horses stood outside the courtyard where Mollie and the others had left them before entering the manor only twenty four hours earlier. However only three would return.

"I'll take the body," Araya said between stiff lips.

Mollie locked gazes with Ophélie who stood beneath a canopy of leafy green that stretched its vinery across the stony walls of the castle. Their eyes met.

She walked towards her slowly, her dark curls ruffling behind her in the cool breeze. It was December and the chill in the air was unmistakable.

She had been rather quiet following Mollie's new proposal. Mollie figured she was just taking things in slowly.

"So much fearlessness is within you," she whispered. "My sister was the same."

Mollie looked at Ophélie for a long time before she answered.

"She knew you would come for her. She always knew," Mollie said softly. "It was never the monarchical guards that scared her. Not the Lyons, not the enforcers. It was you."

"Henrie didn't kill her Mollie," Ophélie said quietly. "He wished he did, just as he wished he could rule a successful kingdom."

"I figured," Mollie said softly. "Mum was no easy target. She knew how to fight. She would have finished him."

"She killed *herself* Mollie."

The truth tore at Mollie's heartstrings like a knife to the chest. She felt a sore heaviness form in her throat.

"I...guess that was a long time coming," Mollie managed between stiff lips. She watched Zephyr and Araya mount their horses in the distance. "She couldn't have survived for that much longer on her own."

The loss was a heavy one and Mollie would be lying to herself if she said she didn't feel the burden it set on her. To lose both her parents in such a short period of time was difficult. What was worse, was the feeling inside of Mollie that tugged at her insides. The feeling that she really didn't know them at all and would now, never get the chance to.

"I wish she would have waited," Mollie said quietly. "I wish she would have waited just a little longer so she'd remember that I always come home. Even if I get delayed sometimes."

"Bianca doesn't wait for anyone," Ophélie said with a secret smile. "It was never in her nature to do so."

Mollie half-smiled.

"It's not really in mine either."

With a graceful bow Mollie left the queen beneath the canopy of green and made her way towards her horse. Theo launched upwards immediately from where Mollie had left her the

night before. Mollie nearly toppled at her heavy weight when she jumped on her, covering her cheeks with wet licks.

“Lentement Theo,” she told the wolf scratching behind her ears lovingly. “Let’s go home.”

Peréal was in chaos. There was no other way to describe it.

Esperanza felt sweat drip down her neck on her way back from the courtroom to the nursery. Between the crying infants, the state of the castle and the underlying fear amongst the residents, it was a far from pleasant atmosphere.

The members of Alexandre's council wasted no time burying their King, and even though it had been a little over twenty four hours since they laid him to rest, citizens still congregated around the outskirts of the castle. Word would spread throughout the monarchy and Esperanza hated to think about the vulnerability of the Marchesseault empire at that moment. Not only were they ruler-less, but their future queen was alone and without her royal guard in some foreign land. If she failed to return, Courtois may be forced into a decision that could be detrimental to the future of a once prosperous regime.

If anything happened to Mollie, then most certainly the monarchy would fall to Caine Marchesseault and Esperanza had her reservations about the boy.

The early December chill seeped in through the open window of the atrium and Esperanza found herself enjoying the cool breeze that carried with it the scent of frost and honeysuckle scented air. Unlike Questershire, it got rather cold in *Peréal*. It was nowhere near the temperatures it dropped in *Icedalar*, but it was still cold enough to need a thick sweater or coat to venture outside. There was a light layer of snow that fell the night before, but as quickly as it came, the delicate white powder turned to slush and melted away into the greenery.

Esperanza draped her apron across her arm and closed her eyes. The green fields reminded her of the rolling hills that lay behind the Questershire manor and resurfaced memories of her time there. For years she had seen the building animosity between James and Micah. She had watched those boys grow and she had buried the truth instead of addressing it. What had appeared to be brotherly rivalry was something far sinister and Esperanza knew deep down this rivalry would ascend into a full fledged war.

She looked down at her weathered hands.

Their father knew it too. And it was that knowledge that bothered Esperanza the most.

“Madame. Elle est ici! La princesse est arrivée!”

Esperanza looked up.

“She’s here? She’s back?”

The young chambermaid nodded quickly before turning on her heels down the atrium.

Esperanza felt a weight lift off her chest.

“Thank heavens,” she muttered. Ignoring the pain in her legs, she hurried down the corridors in anticipation for the arrival.

The princess had spent little time greeting the civilians upon arrival.

Apart from the swarm of guards that surrounded her the minute she stepped foot inside the gates, she barely had time to greet her people.

Mollie's dark brown hair was wild around her shoulders when she arrived on her chocolate brown horse, her coal coloured mesh full body suit snugly hugging every curve and edge on her body like a second skin. It was an admirable creation that could only be a product of Ophian craftsmanship .

She carried a massive sword on her back and strapped to her thigh was a glimmering pearly dagger. Esperanza saw more than just a princess when she looked at the girl. She saw a warrior with a maturity she hadn't seen there before.

Behind Mollie were the other two Insurgency members Esperanza had come across briefly in the past.

The blond boy and his sister -- the son of Caius and the daughter of Atem.

The boy appeared brooding and menacing, but the girl beside him with the choppy auburn hair seemed gloomy.

Leading the way was Theodora, her white fur shimmering beneath the afternoon sun like the surface of a glacial pond.

When they disappeared into the castle Esperanza was quick to fight her way through the swarms of people.

By the time the gates closed and the princess was safely within the walls of the *Peréal* castle Esperanza made a beeline straight for her quarters. As expected, Esperanza found out the girl had gone straight to the nursery. She smiled quietly to herself.

Before Esperanza could make it halfway down the corridor and back to the main hall, there was a sharp knock on the door to Mollie's quarters.

Esperanza paused midway. A deep growling voice echoed down the hallway.

“Mollie? Can we talk?” He huffed. Esperanza heard pacing and quietly she inched her way backwards.

Was that...Caius' son?

She rounded the corner and froze.

The boy seemed agitated as he paced outside Mollie's quarters and Esperanza heard him muttering to himself under his breath. He was much taller at this proximity than Esperanza had originally thought.

"You know it was never about doubting you right?" he said softly. He was facing the closed door and Esperanza watched him rest his closed fist against the wood in frustration. "And it was never about replacing you either. I would....I would never want that." He sighed. "It wasn't fair to force you to choose," he mumbled. "And it wasn't fair to bring the fucking prince into it either – even if he is the one you have to-"

Before the boy could finish, the door opened slowly and Esperanza felt her stomach drop to the floor. She stepped behind a corner of the wall and watched from a distance.

Standing there with ice cold eyes was the winter prince himself, his stance calm and his expression nothing short of amused.

There was an uncomfortably long silence as the two stared at one another. It had been several years since the infamous *incident*, the *Bloody Siege* as it was called. Esperanza believed over one hundred Insurgency members were killed in that particular attempt to bring down the Lyon monarchy. It had gained Hartley's three boys *quite* the reputation.

"For *fucks* sake," she heard the blond spit. He took a step backwards.

"What a pathetic apology," Micah murmured. "I've heard better from limbless prisoners."

"I was wondering when you'd climb out of your little ice cave," the boy sneered. "Did you finally get tired of being Hartley's little bitch?"

Esperanza felt her limbs turn to ice. This was *not* good.

"So the rumours about you are true," Micah chuckled. "You *are* poor with words."

"Yeah," the blond breathed. "I let my sword do the talking. Gets my point across a little bit better."

His large hands were flexing and Esperanza felt the primal urge to intervene. This kingdom was in enough disarray as it was. These two didn't need to add fuel to the fire.

"You're even more of a commoner *now* than you were back then," Micah said with amusement. "What falsities did Caius preach to you out in the desert? Clearly discourse and decorum were at the bottom of his list of priorities."

The boy laughed dryly.

"Don't get into parental politics with me *Micah*. It's an argument you won't win."

"Is that so?" He chuckled. The prince seemed to be enjoying the feistiness of the blond Lyon before him. "I *love* challenges."

“This isn’t going to be like last time,” Zephyr growled. He took a step forward. “This time you won’t walk away unscathed.”

“Is that a threat?” Micah asked, his smile gentle.

Esperanza knew about the temporary contract between the Rebel Army and the Lyons – specifically Rowan and Micah’s. There was to be no bloodshed between the two Lyon brothers and the Insurgency -- at least until James Lyon was defeated. The consequences of breaking such a binding contract – no matter how temporary-- was significant.

“You think I care about a fucking contract?” the blond breathed. “You and James are no different in my eyes.”

Micah’s smile remained on his face but Esperanza saw the edges of his lips tighten. The amusement was fading away and in its place was something frigid and lethal.

Esperanza knew that expression well.

“Don’t run away from me this time,” Micah taunted. “I doubt you’ll make that jump twice.”

Esperanza had a feeling Micah was referring to some past encounter with the boy. Perhaps it had something to do with the Bloody Siege that took place a little over four years ago in *Icedalar*?

“I’ve jumped from higher places,” the boy hissed.

Micah smirked. “What a shame your woman couldn’t do the same.”

Zephyr slammed his fist so hard into the wood of the door, it splintered and Esperanza jumped at the grinding sound it made.

She watched in fear as the two princes spat venom into each others’ eyes. The dark haired one was calm and collected but with an insidious danger, like a looming glacier on the edge of a cliff. The fair haired one was a fiery spark, a combustion that could occur at any moment. He was like viscous gasoline inching its way towards an open flame.

Esperanza waited with bated breaths. If the two of them had any morsel of common sense they would both let this go. But the torrent of hate and vengeance that tainted the air was almost too thick to ignore. She questioned whether either had enough self control.

Esperanza sighed in relief moments later when the blond stalked past her quickly – his long legs providing ample speed. She pressed herself into the wall until she heard his footsteps fade.

Good. The boy had *some* sense.

Only when silence once again befell the corridor did the old woman step out of her hiding place.

She felt nauseous already. The rest of the monarchy may believe that only one war needed to be fought, but little did they know how much closer another one loomed.

Mollie had gone directly to her babies after arriving in *Peréal*. She had been surprised by the boisterous crowd that swarmed her upon her entrance into the city. She had familiarized herself with the normally abrasive reception she received from the *Peréal* people. But it had seemed in her brief absence, Elio had been working hard to get the people on her side.

There is nothing worse than having a kingdom that despises their King.

He had told her that during one of their painfully long lessons several months ago.

Much of the crowd held portraits of Mollie's face and even more carried signs with her name written on it.

With many cities outside *Peréal* falling to their knees before James Lyon, the people were desperate. They needed hope and for some reason – they saw it in Mollie.

Margot had been unusually tolerant of her when they crossed paths once again inside the castle and Mollie felt strange with all these new changes happening so quickly.

Would the people accept her as their queen? Would she be able to meet their expectations?

It was a question she couldn't yet answer.

Mollie ran her fingers through her thick curls – fresh from the shower -- and sauntered over to the window in her massive quarters. She had a beautiful view of the gardens from here as well as the horizon that painted the sky blue, orange, and purple in the mornings and evenings. Before Mollie could turn away she spotted a figure in a cloak in the heart of the *Peréal* gardens. Mollie paused from her position by the window. She clasped her towel tightly around her body and edged closer. Her fingers grazed along the stony frame.

Micah was standing there, his arms full with Rue and Maël. He was murmuring quietly to them, his expression calm. It was a picture of serenity and Mollie felt her chest warm. She ignored the uncomfortable feeling of water trickling down her neck. She was too drawn to the view that lay before her.

Theo stood beside them, almost protectively, her tail swiping against the back of her master. She perched elegantly beside the winter prince, her fur glistening amongst the greenery.

Mollie wasn't sure if it was due to the residual hormones in her blood or the fact that she had just really missed her little family, but she felt tears fill her vision.

Mollie rarely saw Micah Lyon genuinely smile. But on his face was a smile of such unparalleled splendour, she wished it could be there to stay. Mollie felt warmth blossom in her gut while she watched him...*admired* him. This man. *This man* who the world knew as her husband, but to Mollie was still a beautiful adversary, tempting her like milkweed tempts a monarch butterfly. Mollie knew there was something within Micah that made him different

from his brothers. She wasn't sure if it could be attributed to the fragment of Izabel that existed within him, or if it was something else entirely. But there was no denying that she cared for him. A small part of her always had and Mollie had tried numerous times to snuff those feelings away to no avail. Micah had proven it when Mollie was unable to sink his blade through his chest. He had known since then that her feelings towards him were imminent.

He held their son and their daughter close and Mollie realized that Micah was not like his father. It was a fear she had harboured when she found out she was pregnant but the more she observed Micah the more she realized it was an ungrounded fear.

"Princesse?"

And just like that the utopic vision before her was interrupted.

"We must prepare you for tonight. Come with me."

With a heavy sigh Mollie was forced to turn away from the view in front of her and follow her lady in waiting back to the throne room.

There was much to address and Mollie was informed by a not so pleased Elio that some important guests had arrived at the castle. It was Mollie's job to see to their needs and ensure that all of their demands and grievances were resolved promptly.

She took a deep breath and smoothed her dress down before opening the doors that led to the ornate throne room. The iridium lay safely around her neck, the *M* sparkling against her bronze skin.

Mollie felt Micah's presence through the door even before she saw him. She always had a second sense of when he was around, even when she was a prisoner in the manor. Thinking about him with her twins earlier stained her cheeks pink.

Mollie reminded herself to avoid looking at the empty scarlet coloured throne that stood collecting dust at the front of the throne room. Everything felt incomplete without the powerful aura that Alexandre brought with him to court. Swallowing her discomfort, Mollie pushed open the door ready to greet her assembly. To her dismay, Mollie locked eyes with pale blue irises staring at her from a soft mousy face.

Tamzin Menestratten.

Beside the girl was Micah, the two of them hovering over several documents that were spread out across the table.

The first thing Mollie felt course through her was a stab of jealousy. It was silly. What did she care who Micah saw during his free time? She suddenly felt ridiculous for fawning over him earlier. It must have been the goddamn hormones.

They both looked up when she walked in and Mollie felt her face flame. The surprise must have flickered across her face because Tamzin smiled sweetly while Micah's expression was carefully blank.

"Hi Mollie."

Her voice was high and smooth and dripping in smugness.

Mollie had second thoughts to ignore her entirely but she knew it would only come off as jealous and bitter. It also bothered Mollie that she referred to her in such a casual manner. Mollie was convinced she did it on purpose.

"I hope I wasn't...interrupting," Mollie said tersely.

Micah watched the two of them in silence. His expression was carefully passive – but Mollie knew he was processing everything – including Mollie's reaction.

"I was just telling Micah about the cavalry we have in the southern region of *Devonis*. It has never been stronger."

Mollie tensed. She had a feeling she knew what was coming.

"As you know, we have had very strong relations with the Lyons for years – particularly due to the fact that my cousin is the future queen of the empire..."

Mollie paused.

Jelena?

Mollie had never realized that Jelena was a distant relative of the Menestrattens. It made perfect sense now why Hartley arranged the marriage all that time ago.

"Unfortunately, the marriage is binding so our kingdom is dedicated to ally with James and his army." Tamzin said softly.

Mollie felt the blood drain from her face. She had learned a lot about Devonis and she knew they were a force to be reckoned with. Their second grade iridium provided ample opportunity for manufacturing and their culmination of natural resources was sought after by many regions and monarchies. Mollie already dreaded the fight against James...but to fight the Devonis army on top of that was unfathomable.

She glanced at Micah whose features remained blank.

Mollie felt her hands begin to sweat. Was it over? Had Mollie travelled across monarchy to monarchy forming contracts, taking hits, and putting her friends in danger all... for nothing?

"But I am willing to change that."

Mollie met her gaze. She didn't miss how close she stood to Micah.

Tamzin wore a rose coloured dress with ruffles on the side and seemed to glide as she walked across the room. Her icy blonde locks caught the afternoon sun that streamed through the stained glass windows like carefully cut crystals.

“What do you want?” Mollie asked, trying her best to keep her voice calm.

Tamzin smiled at her.

Mollie's eyes flickered to Micah but he had already look away.

“This. All of this.” Tamzin's smile widened. “That’s not a lot to ask for is it?”

Mollie felt her blood boil. This was the *last* thing she ever could have contemplated returning home to.

Chapter End Notes

The hate runs deep between these two princes. And whoa wasn't that a long time coming??

Again. Thank you so much for being so patient and for those who are still reading thus far. I appreciate you all xx

Translations in Order:

*that idiot

Chapter 56: Baryum

Mollie smiled and lifted Maël into her arms. She giggled when he laughed and reached for her chin. His hair was light – a soft hay coloured tone so unlike hers or Micah's. Mollie wondered if maybe it was a trait he had gotten from his grandparents. Whether it was from Micah's side or her side was impossible to tell.

The scent of milk and powder filled her senses as she nuzzled the baby soft skin of her son. A long time ago, Mollie would have dropped everything to free herself from the shackles of a monarchical world. Never did she anticipate that two little infants would change her mind in an instant.

Whenever the stresses of her kingdom rained down on her, she was always able to find relief in the company of her twins. Cécily giggled beside her, watching a busy Rue chew on her pacifier while she reached for her mother.

Mollie peppered Maël's cheek with kisses at the same moment the door to the nursery swung open.

The smile dropped from her face and Mollie knew the minute that door opened, her safe haven had been breached.

Micah stood still and solemn at the door, his expression hard. He eyed Cécily and the girl didn't need a verbal cue to know what he wanted. Mollie sighed when Cécily took Maël from her arms with Margot quick on her heels to take Rue. They both whined, not wanting to part from Mollie and she felt her heart ache.

The door closed behind the women leaving the normally bubbly ambiance of the room in heavy silence.

"Hiding in here isn't going to solve your problems."

Mollie gritted her teeth at the comment. Micah walked slowly toward her. He was dressed as formal as ever – so different from Mollie who wore an airy simple dress. Here, she didn't need anything fancy or exorbitant. This was her space – away from the prying eyes of the rest of the monarchy.

"I wasn't...hiding," she finished. She dropped the blanket she had in her hands and watched it unfold on the floor. "What do you care? You and Tamzin seem to have everything figured out anyway."

Mollie bit her lip at the silence that followed.

"Watch your tone Mollie."

His voice was harsh when he responded and Mollie just glared at the ground. He still had that effect on her – as if he were still her master and she was still his prisoner.

“Someone needs to get things done around here. We all can’t abscond and expect things to fall into place.”

“I didn’t *abscond*,” Mollie cried. “The Rineaux’s had to be dealt with. They were doing awful things.” Mollie’s anger intensified. “Things for *your* father.”

“I warned you to leave those people alone,” Micah hissed. “But you don’t listen.” He sunk down into the chair beside the crib and Mollie watched him thread his fingers through his dark curls. “Now I have to fix this. As usual.”

Mollie stood up angrily. It wasn’t graceful by any means but she didn’t care. Micah was pissing her off with his negativity and insufferable smugness.

“Then *fix* it,” she snapped. “I’m sure that won’t be hard for you considering the history you and *Lady* Tamzin share.”

Mollie didn’t mean to snap it at him but she instantly regretted it the minute he leapt to his feet.

In seconds he had her against the wall, her back hitting the stone hard and her heart race quickening at his speedy movement.

“I already told you,” he purred into her ear. “Watch. That. *Tone*.”

Mollie couldn’t even squirm with the iron grasp he had on her. Her scalp burned from where it made contact with the rough wall.

He suddenly chuckled and Mollie felt his cool breath fan her cheek.

“*Es-tu jalouse ma chérie?*”*

He seemed so amused by it all of a sudden, as if he were only just noticing how annoyed Mollie was by it all.

He looked at her endearingly, enjoying the look of pure lividity on Mollie’s face.

He tilted his head to the side, a soft smirk playing at the corners of his pink lips. His dimples deepened when she met his eyes.

“Are you angry that I was seeing another woman...another woman that wasn’t... *you?*”

“Stop it Micah,” she hissed.

Unsuccessfully she tried to free herself from his grasp.

He placed a gentle kiss on her throat and Mollie shivered when his nose brushed her jaw.

“Oh Mollie,” he whispered. “Mollie Mae.” Mollie pushed against him but it did little to help her cause. If anything, it pressed her closer to him. “You know what I like about Tamzin?” he

purred. “She never talks back to me. She is always so pleasant, so graceful, and *ladylike*. She is the embodiment of royalty.”

Mollie’s sight blackened. The same angry streak in her that had previously been submerged, re-ignited within her and she felt a throaty snarl erupt from her throat.

How fucking dare he.

“Then why the fuck didn’t you get her to birth you two children,” she spat. The weight of everything Mollie had gone through seemed to release in this moment and she couldn’t stop. “Why don’t you marry *her*?”

Micah knotted his fingers in her hair and brought her face into the crook of his neck. Mollie felt awful when she felt his kisses edge down her throat and his hands begin to wander around her midriff. Her cheek brushed against the fabric of his cloak but Micah seemed more pre-occupied with initiating sex with her than anything else.

“Maybe I will,” he taunted playfully. He pushed her onto the settee, her long legs splaying out haphazardly beneath her. Mollie gritted her teeth when his fingers dipped beneath her panties to caress her slit, stroking the soft skin of her outer lips. She was unprepared and the sensation was uncomfortable more than it was pleasurable. Mollie squeezed her eyes tightly, expecting Micah to plunge his fingers into her heat the way he usually did. But instead, he removed his fingers entirely and tugged her panties clean off of her thighs with a single pull.

He chuckled to himself and took a step back, twisting the fabric between his fingers before tossing it carelessly to the floor. Mollie just stared at him, her legs curled up on the settee. She closed her legs, her cheeks reddening and gave him a frightened glare.

“Hm.”

Mollie realized what he was doing and pushed herself to her feet.

“Are you *serious* Micah?” she yelled.

He looked at her coldly, his green eyes blank and emotionless.

She wobbled on her legs, unsuccessfully attempting to pull her short and now wrinkled black dress down over her thighs.

“Whatever you may think, I didn’t go over there for *pleasure*,” Mollie hissed. “I went through the trouble to ensure Ophélie didn’t indirectly provide ammunition for James’ attack on *Peréal*.”

“Oh I don’t need your assurances Mollie,” Micah said amusedly looking down at the undergarment on the floor. “I’ve already got my proof.”

“We didn’t do anything,” Mollie hissed. “And even if we did, it’s not your *goddamn* business.”

Mollie wasn't stupid and she sure as hell knew Micah wasn't either. She saw the look on his face the first time she mentioned Zephyr in front of him.

Micah whirled around and Mollie saw the anger flicker in his eyes. It was no longer playful.

"It is my goddamn business," Micah said in a dead frigid tone. "That *boy* is a liability more than he is an ally."

Mollie's lips parted. Zephyr was...impulsive. But Mollie really didn't know how much the two knew each other.

Micah smirked at her reaction.

"So naïve," he whispered. He stepped closer to her and tucked a loose curl behind her ear.

"He didn't tell you about his upbringing did he? How *untamed* he used to be as a child."

Micah shook his head slowly as if concerned. "There's a difference between ill-discipline and impulsivity Mollie Mae. One can be fixed, the other cannot."

"What are you trying to say?" Mollie asked him quietly. Zephyr hadn't spoken much to her about his childhood. But Mollie had assumed that he was just raised in Anubis like the other children Caius and the Insurgency had managed to recruit.

"A man who can't protect his woman is as good as useless Mollie Mae. They are not the kind of person you want to put your trust in."

Mollie narrowed her eyes.

"And whose fault was that?" Mollie challenged.

"Irrelevant," the winter prince replied with a wave of his hand.

"He told me the same about you," Mollie said stiffly. "He said you can't be trusted."

"Did he now?" Micah said dryly.

He had walked away towards the table where a delicate tea set glinted on the table. His tone had turned indifferent and Mollie knew he was only half listening now – his attention diverted.

She hadn't told Micah about the sword yet and she knew she couldn't. She had slid it under the mattress of her bed back in her quarters and carefully placed the iridium back around her neck. Everytime Micah looked at it, her heart raced. She prayed he hadn't sensed it. Micah had an unsettling knack for uncovering hidden truths.

"What was your father using wolfsbane for?" Mollie asked suddenly.

Micah looked up briefly.

"I have no idea."

Mollie frowned. Was he really doing this to her now?

“Well, what did you discuss while I was away?”

She watched Micah walk towards her, two delicate teacups in his hands. He handed one to her.

“Have a seat and I’ll tell you,” he said calmly.

Mollie walked towards the settee he had pushed her on earlier and sat down. She ignored the discomfort of being bare beneath her dress. She eyed the heaps of toys that covered one end of the nursery to the other. There seemed to be more now than Mollie remembered.

Micah sat gracefully beside her and took her bandaged hand in his. With surprise Mollie saw that the cup he kept for himself was filled with tea leaves.

Mollie watched him silently while he unwrapped the dirty bandage on her wrist and inspected her wound.

His eye caught hers.

“Drink,” he instructed.

Mollie frowned but took a sip of the tea he had handed her earlier. She wrinkled her nose at the taste.

“It’s bitter,” she admitted.

“It’s medicinal,” he mused. “It’s not meant to be palatable.”

She winced when he dipped his pale fingers into the sticky tea leaves beside him and swiped it across the cut on her wrist.

“Tender?” he questioned with a smirk.

“No,” Mollie said stubbornly. It stung but she didn’t want Micah to know that.

He just smiled and continued to rub the sticky mixture onto her cut.

“Elio informed me of where you ran off to after *Sacré-Coeur*,” Micah said softly. Mollie tensed. She was waiting for Micah’s anger but it didn’t come. “In the future, it would be wise to return to your own city, regroup and prepare before you head off on your next expedition.”

“Like *you* would have let me do that,” Mollie mumbled.

Micah paused.

“As a princess I can stop you. As a queen I cannot.”

Mollie was surprised by the comment. She hadn’t really thought about it. As a queen, she had privileges that surpassed those that belonged to a princess. And Micah was still a prince. He

wouldn't be a King until Hartley permitted so, or unless he died. Mollie froze. Would she really outrank him if she decided to follow through with her fathers wishes?

"The Menestrattens arrived not long after I reached *Peréal*. Seeing as you were absent," Micah said lightly, "I took it upon myself to hear what settlement could be reached between our kingdoms."

"She wants *Peréal*," Mollie muttered. She clenched her fist making Micah pause his movements for a second. "She can't have it."

"We're not exactly in the position to make demands Mollie," Micah told her tersely. "James absolutely cannot join forces with *Devonis*. Even with all of our armies combined, Insurgency included," Micah muttered. "It still won't be enough."

"How can I give her *Peréal* without actually giving her *Peréal*?" Mollie moaned.

"Stay still," Micah murmured. He retied her bandage with a fresh cloth and Mollie watched his movements carefully. "What happened here?" he questioned. Another wound, freshly scabbed over was on her elbow and Mollie quickly brushed it off. It was from her scuffle with Grigoire but she didn't want Micah to know about that one.

"Nothing," she said quickly. He didn't respond and Mollie quickly went back to the subject at hand. She sipped the bitter tea.

"It would be unwise to assume she just wants a subset of land wouldn't it?" Mollie muttered under her breath.

She didn't need to look at Micah to know the answer.

"Semantics," she heard him mutter under his breath. "The very foundations of a monarchical negotiation."

He stood up and went back over to the table to place the now empty cups back in place.

The sound of angry voices from the courtyard could be heard and Mollie recognized that whiney voice immediately.

She stood up and went to the window. Just as Mollie assumed, she saw an angry Caine fighting with one of the *Peréal* guards. He looked very much like a younger Alexandre. She hadn't formally met her step brother but Mollie could already tell by his abrasive personality that it wouldn't be a smooth reunion.

"Semantics you say?" She smiled to herself. "I think I have a solution."

The sound of breathless sobs circulated around Mollie's ears.

"Hush," Mollie practically begged while her son screamed himself hoarse from another tantrum. Mollie had already fed him and burped him but the child continued to cry and

Mollie couldn't understand why.

"I never thought you'd be the type for children."

Mollie gasped and tucked her son against her chest protectively.

Gibbs stepped around the corner. He wore the colours of the Lyon Empire but his usual hardened features were carefully soft.

"Oh its *you*," she said with an air of annoyance.

Gibbs chuckled at the chilly reception.

"Your majesty." He bowed in a gesture that seemed more mocking than it did respectful.

Mollie frowned.

"Why are you here?" she muttered.

Gibbs sighed.

"Do you always question the obvious Mollie?"

"I have enough protection thanks," Mollie sneered.

"That's not really for you to decide," Gibbs finished.

"Did Micah send you?" she muttered.

"You know contrary to what you may believe I *do* have a life besides following the orders of the winter prince."

"Shocker," Mollie mumbled under her breath.

"It seems my priorities have... shifted in the last couple of months. Besides Micah, I now have an obligation to protect the future heirs to the Lyon empire," he paused briefly. "And of course the person who brought them into this world."

Mollie stopped dead in her tracks.

His tone had gone hard and serious and Mollie's eyes widened. Maël had finally cried himself to sleep and she gently rocked him in his arms.

"So now you want to be patriotic and loyal hm?" Mollie murmured.

"Things are different now," Gibbs told her sternly. "Not only did you bear the only heirs to the Lyon Empire, but you are a Marchesseault. You are the heir to the *Peréal* Empire."

Mollie gave him a withering glare. She was still angry at the way he had treated her in the past. As if she were a nobody.

“Oh *really*?”

“And by the looks of it princess, you need all the help you can get.”

“I don’t need *yours*, ” Mollie barked. She had buried somewhere at the back of her mind that the blood they shared was the same. Gibbs was as much a Marchesseault as she was, but his past actions were ingrained in Mollie’s memory.

Maël whimpered in his sleep and Mollie quickly lowered her tone.

“I don’t know why you bothered coming here,” Mollie muttered. “You should have stayed in Questershire and continued to serve your King.”

“Don’t go insulting what little family you have left on your side Mollie,” Gibbs sighed.

“I don’t know whose side you’re on,” Mollie retorted.

“Don’t let personal grudges blind your common sense,” Gibbs hissed. His eyes had darkened. “Since I pledged my loyalty to the Lyons I never once renegaded on that contract. I protected each of Hartley’s heirs from the day they were born till now, even putting my life on the line when needed.” Mollie went silent as Gibbs continued to grunt out his grievances in that same growling manner. “But they killed my brother. They fucking killed him.”

Quinn.

“All of it, every single year of slogging away in that fucking house of horrors in Questershire – all for fucking nothing. *Nothing.*”

“It was James,” Mollie told him quietly. “He killed Quinn in *Icedalar* to frame the courts into thinking it was Micah’s fault.”

Gibbs lips twitched but Mollie could tell by his reaction that he already knew. He walked to the window in the parlour and curled his gloved fingers around the stone edge. Beside him were a stack of *canelé* Mollie had made earlier that morning. She saw Gibbs reach over and pick up one of the delicate pastries between his gloved fingers.

“My mother used to make these all the time when I was young,” he whispered.

It was indeed Ruelle’s recipe and Mollie sighed and looked away.

“Gibbs,” Mollie asked quietly. “Did...Quinn ever tell you *why* he entrusted Izabel with the iridium?” Gibbs’ eyes snapped to hers. “I know you know.” The strength in her tone made pride simmer inside of her gut. If anyone knew the ins and outs of these monarchical secrets it would be Gibbs Marchesseault.

Gibbs smiled but not an ounce of warmth was there.

“You know....I told Quinn from the start that getting involved with a Lyon never ended well.” He placed the pastry carefully back on the plate before turning to look at Mollie. “But what I thought was a friendship between the two had turned into something much much more.”

Mollie's eyes widened.

"Were...were they...did...they?"

"They cared deeply for each other. That much was obvious. I told Quinn to end it immediately once I found out. He couldn't hide a thing from me even if he tried."

Mollie hadn't expected this. She never would have predicted it and she felt her skin crawl. Izabel Lyon and Quinn Marchesseault? The relationship seemed damned from the start.

"Did Quinn ever discuss with you what he discussed with Izabel?"

Gibbs' eyes flashed dangerously. "Why do you ask?" He stepped closer. "How much do you know about Izabel?"

"Enough," Mollie spat.

Gibbs raised his eyebrows.

"Impressive. Then you're aware of Micah's...well let's call it *predicament*."

Mollie scowled. She didn't think she'd ever really get used to it.

Gibbs had placed his hands in the pockets of his cloak and began to pace while he spoke. "Izabel confessed to Quinn about the pregnancy when they met briefly in Beacon Cape – even though Hartley had sworn her to secrecy about it. Poor thing was distraught...and understandably so."

Mollie could imagine. A relationship of that kind would be disastrous if the public found out.

Gibbs chuckled silently to himself.

"Quinn told her to get rid of it but... Izabel could never. Her whole life was dedicated to his little being but she was trapped in this situation that seemed inescapable at the time."

"Did Hartley find out...about the two of them?" Mollie asked quietly. She clutched Maël a little tighter while Gibbs continued the story.

"He suspected it," Gibbs seethed. "There's no other reason to justify him torturing my brother for twenty three straight years. The fucking iridium was just the perfect illusion to carry out his actions."

Gibbs met her gaze and Mollie shivered at that deep awful scar that split his face into two parts.

"Hartley was obsessed with Izabel. He could never have her be with anyone else but him. The extent of it was unparalleled. So much so that Queen Porphyria had taken notice."

"Caius told me that Porphyria found out about Hartley and Izabel. Who told her?" Mollie asked.

Gibbs sighed.

“I don’t believe the boy had any ill intention when he did what he did. But his actions caused a domino effect that costed many many lives.”

Mollie stepped closer. Gibbs light brown hair hung limply across his forehead as he spoke and Mollie noticed the colour was quite similar to her fathers.

“He was only a child at the time but he saw Izabel and Hartley together...in Questershire. Whether he understood what was going on or not is beyond my knowledge. But he told his mother what he saw and that was the end of that.”

Mollie met his gaze. Esperanza’s words rang through her mind as she stared at the tall burly man in front of her.

That Rowan always had a soft spot for his mother. I think her passing was the hardest on him.

Mollie swallowed. Rowan had chosen to side with Micah – despite the awful circumstances that had befallen them in childhood. Was it driven by guilt more than it was a brotherly bond? She wondered whether she would ever find out.

“Izabel had the child in Courchevel with plans to return to Questershire at the same moment Porphyria delivered her child. That way, it would appear as if she had given birth to twins. Unfortunately Porphyria would not have it and Hartley resolved that issue promptly.”

“And the iridium?” Mollie whispered.

“I told Quinn to destroy it,” Gibbs hissed. “This cursed thing that people worshipped. This *bloody* element that grants power unimaginable to those with each of the five fragments. Together, each piece of iridium makes *Souffle de Vie*. His discovery put a large bounty on his head. Every monarchy wanted it and Quinn only realized how dangerous this could be if it fell into the wrong hands when it was much too late...”

“You need all the pieces to harness the power don’t you?” Mollie questioned. “That’s why no one has ever been able to fully access its power.”

“Yes,” Gibbs sighed. “Iridium by itself is powerful, but to have it in pure solid form – with all the fragments put together. You are damn near invincible.”

“James has four of them,” Mollie whispered. “I know he does.”

Gibbs frowned.

“He will never find the last piece. Izabel hid it somewhere no one would ever find it. She disguised it. She told me herself. That way Hartley would never be able to follow its path.”

Mollie cleared her throat uncomfortably.

“Actually,” she hesitated. “She...um... left it to Micah as an heirloom.”

Gibbs' head snapped up.

"*Pardon?*" His face flushed and Mollie noticed his back straighten. "Since when?" He began to fidget and Mollie could sense the unease radiating off of him in waves. "I...I must see Micah immediately," he murmured between thin lips.

"No!" Mollie nearly shouted. She cringed when Maël whimpered in his sleep then quickly fell silent once again. "You can't!" she whispered harshly. "Micah doesn't know about the necklace...he...he *can't* know."

"Have you lost your *damn* mind," Gibbs growled. His eyes widened and Mollie could tell he was putting the pieces together in his mind. "*Mon dieu*. James already knows it's here doesn't he? That's why he's launching an attack on *Peréal* as we speak. *Merde!*"

Gibbs began to pace again and Mollie noticed his skin had gone pale once again.

"Hold on a minute. Did you say *necklace*?" Understanding seemed to cloud his eyes and Mollie saw his lip curl ever so slightly. "Phillip fucking Aurelio. That *salopard* knew all this time? *Lèche-cul*."

"Wait!" Mollie murmured. "You've been in Questershire longer than any other monarchical member..." She trailed off. "You must have seen what happened to her. What happened to Izabel."

Gibbs frowned. His posture had stiffened further and his hands had bunched into fists.

"I...don't believe there was any way— no matter what path she could have taken, where Izabel Lyon could have come out of Questershire alive. Atem knew about the child and Quinn was being pursued by the Ophians for his discoveries. Whether she ran into that fight between her brothers deliberately or not no longer matters."

Mollie's breath faltered.

"I...don't think she ever anticipated that Atem would have taken the blame for what occurred. But I suppose it was a sacrifice that had to be made to keep the secret hidden." Gibbs sighed. "Atem was a good man. He didn't...he didn't deserve what happened to him. A lot of people didn't deserve what happened to them that night."

"Do you really think Izabel planned it?" Mollie said between unmoving lips. Something was gnawing at the back of her mind like a bloodthirsty parasite. It just didn't *sit* right with her. "Would Izabel really have left her *only* son with the last fragment of iridium...and only hours later walk to her death?"

Gibbs sighed and Mollie could tell the entire story was difficult for him to speak about.

"I promised Izabel I would look out for her just as I looked out for my brother," Gibbs sighed. "And I swore to her I would do the same for her son." Gibbs' lip tightened. "I will not fail her."

"And the child?" Mollie whispered. "What happened to Porphyria's daughter?"

Gibbs turned to look at her.

"As far as I know – only royal members of the castle had access to the quarters were Porphyria delivered the child. I only remember...a song...a song being sung by a woman in the nursery. It echoed down the halls. It was rather...eerie. I suppose it may have been Porphyria...her last moments with the child."

Mollie brought Maël closer to her breast – hugging her son tight.

Gibbs hesitated. His eyes lingered over the infant in her arms. When Mollie looked down she saw Maël's pale brown eyes blinking up at her. His fair lashes swept his cheeks with each blink of his eyes.

"He is a beautiful child," Gibbs said quietly. "He'll be a fine ruler one day, just like his sister." Gibbs smiled. "Twins run in the family."

Mollie's lip tightened.

"He's just a child," Mollie mumbled. "Let him be that before he is anything else."

"Of course," Gibbs said with a small bow.

"I'll inform Micah of the iridium when the time is right," Mollie told Gibbs sternly. "For now I need to address the court and prepare *Peréal* for any potential attack." She paused. "If there is anything I've learned these past couple of months, it's how a Lyon operates."

"It doesn't take too long does it?" Gibbs grunted with a smirk.

"I also know James isn't responsible for this. Not in its entirety."

Gibbs blinked.

"It's Hartley. It's always been him. He doesn't care about James. He never has." Mollie hissed.

Gibbs dropped his gaze.

"Are you suggesting Hartley orchestrated this war between all three of his sons?"

"Not between the three of them," Mollie said between clenched teeth. "Between James and Micah." Mollie turned to Gibbs. "You told me yourself. Hartley always wanted Micah to rule. It wasn't that James wasn't good enough. It was that James could *never* be his heir -- despite being his firstborn. Hartley won't settle for anyone else other than Micah to rule," Mollie finished. "And that is his weakness."

"Then what do you suggest?" Gibbs huffed.

"We need to get Hartley out of Questershire," Mollie hissed. "He's untouchable when he's there."

"He won't leave Questershire," Gibbs said heatedly. "Believe me Mollie."

"Maybe we can," Mollie murmured. "Micah can't be free as long as Harley is alive and Hartley will not relinquish his power without Micah."

Gibbs' eyes widened.

"Hartley has faith that Micah will defeat James. I am sure of it. We need to give him a reason to believe he... isn't. Something to lure him here."

"Are you sure of that? Hartley raised those boys like the Spartans raised their army Mollie. It isn't like him to be concerned about which one falls during battle. Only about the one that prevails."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Mollie murmured. "Izabel lives on only through Micah. Hartley won't let that go. No matter what the cost is."

Gibbs had gone silent.

"I hope you're correct. If not....this will end badly. Very badly."

Mollie snapped her eyes to Gibbs.

"We don't have a choice. Hartley wins either way Gibbs. He gains the iridium through James and he gains his successor through Micah. We need to stop both from happening if we are to defeat Hartley."

"I promised Izabel I'd look after that boy," Gibbs said quietly.

Mollie winced.

"I wouldn't worry about Micah," she muttered. "He's not exactly an easy kill."

"You speak from experience?" Gibbs snorted.

"Something like that," Mollie muttered under her breath.

She adjusted her cloak and tucked her wild curls behind her ears. She heard footsteps from outside and she felt the hair on her arms prick.

"Everything we discuss here stays between us Gibbs. I *mean* it."

Gibbs raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"If I am to trust you," Mollie said slowly. "You'll have to prove your loyalty. The blood we share may be strong, but your time spent with the Lyons may be stronger."

Gibbs nodded slowly.

"I understand the hesitance Mollie."

"Not hesitance," Mollie said between gritted teeth. "Precaution." She knocked on the closed door lightly. Within seconds Cécily was standing outside and was there to take a fussing Maël

from her arms.

“Whatever you may think,” Gibbs started. “My loyalty with the Lyons started and ended with Izabel,” Gibbs said firmly. “I only stuck around there for so long because of her son and for the sake of my brother. I always stick by my word Mollie. That is the Marchesseault way.”

Mollie looked at him over her shoulder.

“We shall see.” She tucked her curls behind her ear. “Oh and one last thing Gibbs,” she added. *Votre majesté* will suffice...for now.”

Mollie caught one last glimpse of his flushed face before she left the parlour allowing the heavy door to swing shut behind her.

Mollie took a deep breath.

She seated herself in the cold throne room of the Marchesseault castle. Micah sat beside her – as a husband did to his queen and Elio on her other side. Her father’s sword was like an iceblock between her fingers and she suddenly wished she had her comfortable yellow cloak on instead of this heavy red one that swamped her figure.

She was waiting for her guest to arrive. When the doors suddenly slammed open and a young fawn haired coloured boy marched into the room – Mollie felt the sudden shift in energy that filtered through the room.

Caine was full on glowering and Mollie matched his gaze coolly. Pale brown eyes meeting pale brown eyes.

“I’m not fucking going anywhere.”

Caine’s tone was low, dark and full of hate when he spoke. “You can’t order me around like you’ve been here all your life. I know these streets, these walls, these people more than you. *I won’t do it.*”

“You dare disobey your queen?”

Elio rose immediately. His tone was laced with danger but Caine had his gaze fixed on Mollie.

She raised an eyebrow.

“Your contract is right here. How lovely you came to collect it yourself. Otherwise I would have had it sent straight to *Devonis*.”

“You can’t do this,” Caine muttered. “You’re still just a mixed blood commoner,” he yelled. “You’re not queen *yet*. Not till Elio hands over the throne to you.”

Mollie reached out to place a gentle hand on Elio's shoulder before he marched down there to discipline the boy himself.

"Sit Elio," Mollie ordered.

Her frigid gaze met her half brothers.

She took the delicate rolled parchment in her hand and dropped it from her platform so it rolled to rest at the boys feet.

"You're under no obligation to take orders from a mixed blood commoner," Mollie said slowly. "You can leave anytime you want to. But rest assured if you do, you lose sovereignty over that lovely city I've grown so fond of..." She tucked a loose curl behind her ear. "The one named after your brother right? *Saint... Laurent?*"

She saw Caine's face pale.

"Maël adores the water. I think he'd quite like it. When he's a little older I think I'll gift it to him –"

"Fine," Caine growled. He looked absolutely defeated. Mollie felt her heart clench. She knew that pain. But she had to be strict and firm and callous. Her title permitted it.

"Fine what?" she repeated.

She watched Caine pick up the parchment and hastily grab a quill to sign it.

"I'll marry Tamzin Menestratten. If... that ensures the protection of our kingdom."

Mollie felt her chest relax. This was a huge victory. She knew the price was high – but it was needed.

"I'll take that."

Micah opened his gloved hand patiently. His expression was placid but smug. She noticed Caine grimace when he eyed the prince. He was terrified of him and this seemed to amuse Micah greatly.

Caine quickly slid the parchment into his hand – approaching the stage cautiously. He shot Mollie an angry glower before he stormed from the room.

Mollie kept her face passive... but inside she felt terrible. Before the doors closed Araya came racing in, her hair windblown and her cheeks pink from exertion.

"There's an army of Outbacks on the horizon," Araya panted between heavy breaths.

"They're on their way towards *Peréal*."

Mollie stood up quickly. There was no way James had already breached the outskirts. No one moved an army that fast.

“Who told you?” Mollie asked immediately. The others had stood up beside her.

“Rowan sent a message this morning.”

“We need to keep them there,” Mollie snarled. “Where is our cavalry?”

Elio was beside her in an instant. He smoothed a map out in front of her.

“The *Icedalar* army has been positioned at the East entrance to the city and the Insurgency at the West. Our own army sits patrolling the South and North entrance.”

“We need more people at the South entrance,” Araya huffed. “That’s where James’ army is approaching towards.”

“Where is Rowan’s army?” Mollie questioned turning to Micah.

Micah’s face was blank when he spoke.

“You promised them to Phillip remember?”

Mollie cursed her under breath. There wasn’t enough protection all around the kingdom. They needed to take soldiers from other entrances and build up their numbers at the Southern one.

“Might I suggest taking numbers from the Northern entrance and bringing our unit to the South? It would be impractical for the enemy to send a unit in from there. Especially considering the mountains... it would take time.”

Mollie chewed her lip. It was a tough decision. She hated leaving an entrance vulnerable – especially against a war criminal like James Lyon. You could never be too careful.

When Zephyr walked in Mollie felt the entire room tense. His blue eyes flickered between all of them and Mollie saw his eyes seemed more icy than they did warm.

“Caius and Caleb have taken watch outside the gates,” Zephyr said flatly. “We should be ready for anything.”

Mollie tensed.

“In the meantime Caius suggested we send a small group forward to delay the oncoming unit James has sent towards *Peréal*.”

“That’s a waste of time,” Micah said icily. He turned to the others. “I know James. He’s not one for sending out a small army even if they are just scouts. You would be sending out a group for slaughter.”

Zephyr’s lip tightened. He was glaring daggers at the winter prince.

“We need to know which route they are taking though,” Araya said nervously. “If they do decide to split up, there’s the possibility of a distraction – disarm.”

“A distraction – disarm?” Mollie repeated. She wasn’t familiar with all these war terms just yet.

“I’m aware of that,” Elio said coolly. “I have a special unit specifically for that purpose. Alexandre was always sending scouts out. He made sure to always keep that unit proficient and readily available.” He turned to Mollie. “Sometimes, the enemy employs a method meant to catch their prey by surprise. They divert a big unit towards their target but keep highly specialized individuals on the main route so they can infiltrate their target base and stay dormant until they get close enough to take out the highest member of their monarchy.” He paused. “You take out the highest member of your monarchy, its game over.”

Mollie swallowed. *Like a game of chess.*

“I have a better idea,” Araya interrupted. “Send *our* group out to scout. Zephyr, Jöel, Isaac and I know these roads. We’ll be able to loop back quickly and figure out where they’re going and what they’re planning”

Zephyr nodded.

“We can be back in a couple of days.”

Mollie froze.

“Let’s go,” Zephyr muttered. “The sooner we head out the better.”

Mollie felt her heart clench when he said this.

“Wait,” Mollie interjected. She reached for Araya’s arm. “I want to come with.”

“Absolutely not,” Elio finished for her. She gave him an annoyed glare.

“I don't think that's a good idea Mollie,” Araya said sadly. “One of the perks of being a royal.”

Mollie looked down glumly. She wasn’t yet officially queen and already she wasn’t liking the restrictions one bit.

“Oh and Micah,” Araya added dryly. “Seeing as you’ll be here on daddy duty, I suggest you start teaching Mollie how to lunge with a sword. She needs to keep her skills up and supposedly you have a... reputation for that technique.”

Micah looked away from her in disgust and Mollie couldn’t help but stifle a smile.

“We've got this Mollie. Oh, and when I get back, I want to see a proper lunge.”

Mollie watched the group leave, their swords in hand and their coal black outfits glinting off the candlelight that submerged the room in a warm earthy glow. She tried to catch Zen’s eye before he left but he seemed to purposefully be avoiding her.

“Shall I arrange a carriage for Lady Tamzin?” Elio asked. “The marriage must happen immediately for the *Devonis* army to acquiesce to our demands. The sooner we send the two of them off the better.”

Mollie suddenly had an idea.

“No...” Mollie said softly. “Change of plans. The marriage will happen *here*. In the *Peréal* ballroom.”

Elio seemed floored by the suggestion.

“*Ma reine*, ” he hesitated. “We are in no position to be hosting such a grand event. Not when war is looming upon us like rain on a tropical island.”

“The closest ally of the *Devonis* Empire are the Lyons,” Mollie told him quietly. Micah had left soon after Araya’s comment, but still she looked behind her in caution. She made sure only the two of them were left in the room.

“*Ouais*, ” Elio said warily. “And?”

“It’s the perfect event to invite Hartley to the *Peréal* kingdom. He is still King of the Lyon empire and he cannot refuse the invitation.” She smiled bitterly to herself. “One of the perks of being a royal.”

Elio paled.

“Mollie,” Elio stuttered. “I don’t think you understand the magnitude of that request. King Hartley does not come to anyone’s beck or call. Not even for something this grand. It is beneath him.” His jaw locked. “I applaud you for your quick thinking with how to deal with the Menestratten issue but I simply cannot *stand* more Lyons on my soil-”

“He will come,” Mollie said stiffly. “I know he will.”

“Why?”

Mollie thumbed the necklace around her neck.

“Because I have *exactly* what he most desires.”

Chapter 57: Lanthanides

Chapter Summary

Mollie learns to turn the tables in her favour. Something unexpected is approaching in the distance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was the simple things in life Jelena had forgotten mattered most.

Running water, crackling fires, the sound of heavy footsteps on cobbled stones. They were sounds she had forgotten existed while living within the insulated barriers of Questershire Manor.

But now, they re-surfaced inside of her like a torrential downpour. The sharp scent of cigar smoke, tumbleweed, fresh bread, and damp alleyways hit her full force making her stumble into an old woman filling a bucket of water from a stone well.

*“Regarde où tu vas!”** the woman snarled.

*“Je suis désolée,”** Jelena gasped. She clutched her stomach – the pain making dots of black spread across her vision. She must have looked much worse for wear than she had originally thought. The travel had been more difficult than Jelena had contemplated. The Ophian lands were harsh and unforgiving. Only when Jelena crossed into Marchesseault territory and the greenery began to grow once again did she manage to find some relief.

“S’il vous plaît,” she managed to gasp between breaths. “I...I need to speak to the princess immediately. I ..need to get to the castle.”

The woman laughed in her face.

“Vous?” she chuckled. *“Pour la princesse?”*

“PLEASE,” Jelena choked. “She....she knows who I am. My daughter and I are seeking refuge here. We have no where else to go...”

The woman shot her a look of utter disdain before walking away – leaving Jelena panting and hurting in the middle of the bustling epicentre of *Peréal*. How exactly she managed to slip past the gates and into the city was nothing short of a miracle. She had her daughter to thank for that.

“They aren’t listening to us,” Nina whispered to her mother. She tugged on Jelena’s ripped, mud stained dress that had once been expensive fabric, the rich green now faded into a dirty olive coloured rag. What little food and water they had left -- Jelena had given to her daughter without a second thought. Jelena knew her status meant little here. She couldn’t use it even she had wanted to. Her association with James was a death sentence here – especially if the guards recognized her. For once – her unkept primary status-like appearance was a blessing. But Mollie could pardon her. The girl had been understanding once. Jelena hoped she would understand her situation – forgive her for Jelena’s past mistakes. All that mattered now was getting her daughter and her unborn child safe and out of harms way. Even if it meant Jelena would have to beg for scraps.

“Which way to the *Peréal* castle?” Jelena managed between trembling lips. She had stopped in front of an older gentleman lugging chopped wood on the back of his tired horse. He pursed his lips when he looked at her. However when he looked down at Nina she saw his old weathered face break into a small smile.

“Are you the help?” the man inquired. “I heard you speaking *français* earlier. It is irresponsible to take the quaternary children into town – even if it is for educational purposes.”

Jelena tucked her fiery red hair behind her ears and carefully concealed it beneath the scarf she had lifted onto her head to hide her face.

“Erm....*oui*...yes,” she managed. “I need to take her back to the castle immediately. If you’ll show me the way...I will be ever so grateful.”

He seemed reluctant at first. Only when Jelena placed a gentle palm on her full term belly did he sigh heavily and gesture for her to follow.

“You don’t look so good *Madame*,” he added hesitantly. “Do you not have a husband to take care of you? It is not customary for a pregnant woman to be wandering around town by herself.”

Jelena couldn’t even answer. The pain erupting within her abdomen was growing increasingly stronger. Each step was a gut wrenching effort that brought tears to her eyes. But she had to stay strong.

“We should get you to a doctor. Surely the royal guards will understand your predicament.”

“We don’t stop,” Jelena gasped. “We keep going. *I won’t stop* until I reach the castle.”

He went silent after this – casting a worried glance between Nina and Jelena before continuing to lead them over the green hills towards the enormous stony monstrosity in the distance.

Jelena wouldn’t stop. Not even for a brief moment. Not even when she felt a gushing warmth drip down her legs – thicker than water and darker than a stream. Not even when the pain threatened to buckle her legs beneath her. She would keep going till she had no strength left to breathe.

“Try again.”

Mollie sighed. It had only been fifteen minutes and already she was annoyed. Micah was a very silent teacher – so different from Zephyr who was constantly yelling at Mollie about every little detail.

It must have been close to dawn and Mollie blinked the tiredness from her eyes. The lush scent of freshly watered greenery and the sweet smell of flowers filled her senses. The open clearing in the *Peréal* gardens offered plenty of privacy and shelter from the prying eyes of the castle. It also provided the perfect space for sparring practice.

She lunged forward in the way Micah had showed her three times before. Quite shockingly, he was patient. He didn't laugh at her nor did he vocalize her bad posture. He just stared blankly at her and stood at a distance observing her closely.

He wore a loose navy tunic and slim dark slacks tucked into stylish fur lined boots. He had forgone a cloak today and let his collar ruffle freely in the breeze. His chestnut curls had grown long and unruly to curl around the nape of his neck. It was the most casual Mollie had ever seen him.

Quite suddenly he flipped his blade in between his fingers and tapped Mollie's knuckles hard with the blunt edge of the blade.

“Ow!” she yelped dropping her sword to the ground. It was the second time he had done that to her. The first had been when she had foolishly tried to disarm him in the guest quarters of the castle.

“That's what happens when you break concentration,” Micah murmured. “You get hurt.”

Mollie felt heat flood her cheeks. Her pride was wounded, especially when she bent down to reclaim her dagger.

“This isn't a hobby,” Micah continued in that same musing tone. “This is life or death.”

“Again,” Mollie hissed.

Micah smirked and took a step back. He slid his own dagger back into his belt. Mollie could still feel the icy tingling feeling radiating through her knuckles. The cold temperature of his blade made her fingers slightly numb.

She took a deep breath and lunged. She would master this and she would master this by the end of the day. She promised herself.

It was midday when Mollie was finally able to get a break. She had surprised herself with her skills and although Micah wasn't one to praise too much – she could see that he was impressed with her progress.

She had laid out a blanket on the grass where both Rue and Maël lay dozing beneath the afternoon sun. It was an unusually warm day for December and Mollie wanted to take full advantage of it.

“How are you feeling?” Micah asked. He stood beside her beneath the thin veiled greenery that offered slight protection from the sun. God knows he needed the sunlight more than she did.

“I’m great,” Mollie said thinly. “Never been better.”

In reality, her limbs were aching and her knuckles were bruised beyond what she imagined was possible. Micah may not have said much with his words but he delivered some mean hits with his sword.

He didn’t respond and Mollie had settled on resting her gaze on her infants who were beginning to wake from their nap.

She stiffened when cold pale fingers grazed her hand. Mollie watched Micah lift her hand slowly and pressed his lips against the welts that decorated her knuckles. Mollie hesitated, feeling heat rush to her cheeks.

“The real thing would be much much worse,” he murmured.

Mollie shifted.

“That’s not what’s bothering me.”

She walked forward and carefully lowered herself down beside her slumbering infants.

Micah joined her silently. It reminded her of the time in Questershire when it was just the two of them near the clifftops. Of course, now they had some company.

“It’s their future,” she said quietly. “I...I don’t want this for them.”

“What?” Micah questioned quietly. “Royalty? Heirship?”

Mollie sighed.

“I don’t want them in Questershire. I don’t want them anywhere near your father.”

Micah’s face was still impassive but his features were soft.

“Mollie,” Micah said slowly. “*Icedalar* is a separate entity from the Lyon Empire. I chose to secede not long after James launched his attacks. It’s what took me so long to come get you after you left...”

Mollie looked up in surprise.

“You were going to come after me?” Mollie couldn’t help but whisper.

“You were pregnant,” Micah muttered. He looked away when he said this and Mollie felt her skin flush. “Secession is only permissible under the grounds that the subject has an heir. I need proof of an heir before the secession is complete.”

Mollie frowned.

“So you didn’t come back for me,” Mollie finished bluntly. Mollie didn’t mean to sound as insulted as she did but still, it filtered through her voice.

Micah smirked.

“I never said that.”

Mollie looked away from Micah’s intense gaze. There was a glimmer of smugness there that irritated her.

“You never told me that secession through an heir frees you from the constraints of your kingdom,” she muttered.

“You never asked,” Micah said slowly. “It isn’t... recommended, nor is it common. You lose certain privileges any time you secede from a larger monarchical entity.”

“Right,” Mollie muttered under her breath. She watched the breeze ruffle his glossy chestnut curls – the faint sunlight casting a natural shimmer across his lustrous locks. Even after a tiring workout, he still managed to look polished and irritatingly handsome. “Micah look!”

Mollie hadn’t meant to shout it but during their conversation Rue had rolled herself completely over till she rested on her belly. She smiled at Mollie – proud of her accomplishment and Mollie felt her heart warm. Her little fingers gripped the blanket beneath them and Mollie nearly melted at the little cry of joy she let out.

“She rolled herself over,” Mollie murmured.

Micah smiled and Mollie couldn’t help the pride that swelled inside of her. Mollie lifted her up immediately and pressed her nose against her daughters. Micah must have been pleased. Rue had all his looks from the dark hair to the high cheekbones to her soft pink lips.

In a flash her chubby fingers pulled hard on the thin silver element around Mollie’s neck. Mollie froze. She began to bring it towards her lips and Mollie pulled her away gently.

“No Rue,” she murmured placing her down between the two of them. Maël slumbered on to Mollie’s relief. Rue was the quiet one, but Maël was persistent and once the tears started they flowed heavily.

Micah’s green eyes rested on the necklace and Mollie suddenly felt her skin prickle. He had no idea – not a clue of the true meaning of what he had given her. She felt almost guilty keeping it from him.

“*Ma petite princesse,*” Micah murmured brushing his fingers through their daughters wispy curls. “*Je te gâterai mon amour. Je te donnerai le monde...*”

Mollie closed her eyes letting the cool breeze brush through her curls. She latched onto moments like this – when things were serene and quiet and peaceful. Even if it was just for a moment --- Mollie would take it and cherish it.

She blinked her eyes open when Theo brushed her back from behind – her thick fluffy tail caressing Mollie’s skin. They too had come a long way and Mollie smiled giving the beast a gentle scratch behind her ears. The beast was particularly protective of the infants and Mollie would often see the wolf resting under the massive bassinet in the nursery. She purred gently against Mollie's palm.

“Have you decided what you’re going to do?”

Mollie looked up in surprise.

Micah was gently holding Rue – his eyes fixed on her but Mollie knew he was directing the question at her.

“I already discussed operative measures with Elio-“ Mollie started.

“Not that,” Micah said dismissing her comment. “I meant about the succession of *Peréal*. ”

Mollie chewed her lip. Theo had begun nudging her wet nose into Mollie's hand insistently and she carried on with her motions.

“Well....my father wanted me to take over and rule after his passing....”

“You are under no obligation to,” Micah told her curtly. “It was a request, not an order.”

“It would be irresponsible not to,” Mollie argued. “He obviously didn’t trust Caine enough with the kingdom.”

“So you must take the burden?” Micah questioned.

“Are you threatened?” Mollie asked raising an eyebrow. She dropped her hand from the beast who had now wondered over to rest beside her master. “Is this some kind of mind trick to throw me off my decision?”

Micah laughed dryly.

“Oh no Mollie Mae, I save that tactic for prisoners only.”

Mollie winced. She didn’t want to remind him that she had been one of his prisoners at one point.

“I’m only asking because I’m... concerned,” Micah said quietly. He lay Rue gently beside her brother on the expansive blanket beneath them. “You can decide to rule and take everything that comes with it, or you can choose not to –”

“And what?” Mollie scoffed. “Go and spend the rest of my days rotting away in a snowy wasteland with you?”

Micah's lip twitched.

"You have a *choice*," Micah said forcefully. "That is more than what I was ever given."

Mollie went quiet after this. Had Mollie not known better she would have assumed Micah was almost...envious. He had told her many times how much he hated the monarchy.

"That was clever thinking by the way," Micah added with a smirk. "Yesterday...with your brother."

Mollie grimaced.

"It was the only thing I could think of," Mollie mumbled. "Your fiancée is an utter nuisance."

Micah laughed.

"Caine owed many kingdoms many debts. At least he can pay them off now."

Mollie sighed.

"She's not exactly someone I'm overly thrilled to have part of the family."

"It's distant," Micah told her. "The laws of *Devonis* and the laws of *Peréal* are similar. Spouses negotiate where their primary residence will be. What leisure time is left over is dedicated to visiting other locations."

"Caine isn't good at negotiating," Mollie said flatly.

"I suppose you won't be seeing both of them for a little while then."

Mollie glanced at her twins briefly before setting her gaze on the winter prince once again. The gears in her mind were turning.

"We haven't discussed... *our* primary residence," she said bluntly. "Not officially."

Micah smiled.

"I'm ready whenever you are." He opened his arms up as if it were an open invitation and Mollie frowned. He looked at her from beneath his dark impossibly long lashes – a smile playing at the corners of his lips. "Make me an offer I cannot refuse Mollie Mae."

"An offer?" she breathed. She bit her lip in frustration. She had a feeling she knew what the offer would be and she felt ice course through her veins. She exhaled sharply. In fact, she knew *exactly* what he was alluding to. It was that damn document. The document she had to sign to finalize her marriage to the winter prince. She had been delaying the inevitable and Mollie knew it would catch up with her at some point. "Fine. I'll sign the contract.... on one condition."

He seemed pleased she had figured out what he was referring to so quickly. With a flash she watched him call a guard over where that familiar slim scroll of parchment was handed to

him.

“And what is that condition *mon amour?*”

Mollie had put off signing that contract for a number of reasons. The first being the obvious one – the promise of marriage. But the second had been a problem at the back of her mind. She didn’t want to move with Micah to *Icedalar*. As a Lyon – his laws held as strongly as her own in the Marchessault Empire – something Caius had warned her about. It would be foolish to sign the contract willingly and inattentively – not without maintaining some of her own autonomy. On top of that – she had her babies to worry about and she certainly did not want to give Micah the power to have complete control over them. Not when she was in the position to challenge his power. And best of all – she had something over Micah – the twins were born *here*. Not in *Icedalar*.

“We split fifty-fifty,” she muttered. “Six months in *Icedalar* and six months in *Peréal*.”

Micah’s expression remained placid but Mollie could see the hint of something darker behind those pale irises. His pink lips remained in that crooked smile he had worn since she first mentioned the contract. But there was something behind that mask of placidness that had frozen solid. It sent a shiver down Mollie’s spine. Minutes ticked by and Mollie felt her heartbeat hammering within her ears. Negotiating with Micah made the negotiations Mollie had with Phillip and Ophélie seem like a walk in the park...

“Hmm,” he murmured leisurely flipping the scroll effortlessly between his fingers. He barely blinked and it made Mollie nervous. “I’m not sure I’m entirely enticed by that offer... *princesse*. Give me something *more* and I will...be more inclined to accept your condition.”

Mollie stopped short of exhaling in annoyance. Micah couldn’t be so stubborn as to bar her children from completely spending time in their birthplace? It was a given Mollie would not let them out of her sight so she would go with them wherever they went – even if that included six months of the year in *Icedalar*. It was only fair! Micah couldn’t be that cruel....

“What else do you want Micah?” she said between gritted teeth. He had enough money, enough land, enough *everything*. What more could he....

Micah’s smile widened.

Mollie felt heat spread through her cheeks.

Oh. *Oh*.

Mollie hesitated. She looked over at her slumbering infants. He couldn’t be serious. Not now? Not out in the open in full visibility of the guards in the distance...

With a locked jaw and a fiery gaze in her eyes she swiped her sweaty palms against her pants and tucked her stray curls behind her ear.

She leaned forward, being mindful of the infants beside her. She matched Micah’s gaze, her own pale brown irises resting on his vibrant green. Her lips were inches away from his – cool

breath fanning her lips. Goosebumps rose along her arm when she raised it towards him, taking the time to cup her hand around his pale icy throat beneath the fabric of his navy blue collar. Her hand inched higher, her breath growing heavier till she gripped those soft chestnut curls within her fingers. Her nose brushed his as she pushed him towards her, chest heaving and blood rushing through her faster than a stream through a dam. His wintry scent surrounded her, and she leaned forward pressing her lips against his and finally closing the distance between them.

The kiss was sensual and soft – his lips caressing hers in a way it hadn't in a long time. Her fingers tightened within his threaded locks and she felt him deepen the kiss, his tongue moving against hers slowly, wandering, seeking – *tasting* everything in its path. Mollie's breath stuttered, her tongue moving in sync with his. His hand had curled around her thigh and Mollie couldn't help but moan when he tightened his grip on her. His fingers dug into her flesh and inched higher while the kiss grew increasingly more passionate. She gasped when he tugged her hair free with his other hand – letting her thick curls cascade around her shoulders, not allowing her to breathe even for a second longer before his mouth was back on hers. She groaned when he tugged her lip with his teeth softly before connecting their lips once more. When his fingers wandered toward the apex of her thighs she shivered.

"Micah," she panted breathlessly. "Not....not here.." He continued to kiss down her throat and along her collarbone. "Not...in front of them."

She blushed thinking about doing something so heated in front of her children – even if they were too young to understand. Micah didn't seem to mind one bit.

"Already changing the terms of your offer Mollie," he whispered against her throat. "That's not very diplomatic."

She eyed the scroll fitted snugly in Micah's waist pocket and felt her spine stiffen.

"Tonight," she whispered against his lips as they connected once more. "Tonight I'll close this deal with you."

She felt him smile.

"Good," he breathed. "Because I don't plan on making love to just anyone tonight," he whispered. His grip tightened and Mollie felt her throat constrict. She felt the low rumble of his chest against hers as he chuckled lightly. "Tonight I plan on making love to my wife."

A rustle from the bushes behind her made Mollie break away quickly – her arms dropping to her side. Only when soft footsteps grew louder and the twinkling eyes of Elio Courtois met hers did she relax. Her face was all flushed and her hair was disheveled and she knew her tunic was creased.

Elio didn't look the slightest bit impressed and Mollie's blush deepened. She cleared her throat quietly and threaded her fingers through her curls in a weak attempt to tame them. It was so embarrassing. She felt as if she were caught doing something she wasn't supposed to. Micah was smirking – his expression nothing short of amused.

“Your highness,” Elio said sharply. He addressed Mollie directly, making an effort to shoot Micah a particularly cold glare. “I’d hate to interrupt,” he muttered, “but your attendance at the Cillian Estate this evening is important. It is the christening of the heirs and following that we have another briefing with members of your *Curia regis*. ”

Mollie stifled a groan.

“Arrange a carriage then,” Mollie muttered.

“Arrange it for two.”

Mollie’s head snapped up. Elio frowned. Micah had stood up and Mollie watched him neatly unroll his cuffs till they concealed the pale skin of his arms beneath layers of fabric once again. A faint blush touched his cheeks but apart from that – he didn’t look even the faintest bit as scandalous as Mollie did.

“You don’t have to come,” Mollie hesitated. “I can handle it myself.”

Micah just smiled.

“I’m sure you can,” he said dryly. “I have some things to discuss with Rowan. As you know, he’s obligated to be there now that his army is deployed in Beacon Cape.”

Mollie dropped her gaze from him for the second time in less than a minute.

Elio looked at her sharply. His gaze softened when it fell on the little heirs beside her.

“Let’s get you ready.”

Mollie mingled with the noblewoman in the main hall of the Cillian Estate. Mollie remembered when she used to cater for events as lavish as this one back when she ran her bakery in Chartery. The women gravitated towards her – each more desperate for attention than the last. Mollie knew it had more to do with her status than it did her personality. She stomachached the false smiles and flowery compliments but kept her distance. They only treated her nicely as she was future heir to the Marchesseault empire.

The whispers swarmed her like bees on a hive and the weight of the jewellery on her neck and the new addition to her finger only furthered the load on her shoulders. She looked down at her left hand – the memory fresh in her mind.

“Give me your hand Mollie Mae.”

Mollie looked at him in confusion. “What are you doing?”

Micah ignored her. Instead he reached in his cloak pocket – a slim velvety blue box in his hand. Mollie’s eyes widened when he opened the box to reveal a glittering tear drop shaped diamond complete with sparkling blue stones around the band.

Mollie was at a loss for words. Her eyes were fixed on the jewel in front of her. How Micah managed to find something that large and priceless was beyond her. Gems cut to that degree were not easy to come by.

"I'm not getting down on one knee if that's what you're waiting for."

"I didn't ask you to," Mollie retorted. She already assumed Micah wouldn't – he didn't bend for anyone.

"The guests will talk," he mused quietly. A dark curl fell loosely from his carefully combed curls – a touch of contrast against his alabaster skin. "We shouldn't give them a reason to."

Mollie snapped her eyes back to his. His green irises quivered with irritation.

"I gave you two heirs," she muttered. "Last time I checked that consummated a marriage.."

Micah stepped closer and Mollie quickly trailed off. Now was not the time to anger the winter prince any further.

"Two heirs out of wedlock," Micah snapped. Mollie heard the thin layer of disgust that lingered beneath his tone. "Don't be smart with me Mollie. You did more harm than good with that stunt you played."

Mollie felt her cheeks blaze. She looked down at the dagger that rested lightly on his hip. He had pulled that dagger flush against his own chest that day outside the borders of Courchevel. Mollie had very nearly fell for him then. How desperate he made it seem – as if he had needed Mollie to be his queen. But Mollie knew the truth now – she knew it had little to do with her and more about the two little beings she had been carrying in her belly at the time...

She stood still even when Micah lifted her hand to slide the ring onto her finger. It was as cold and as icy as the prince himself – and equally as sublime. It sparkled against her bronzed skin – the blue stones casting icy crystals when touched by the light.

Micah frowned.

"This is for them. Everything we do from now is for them."

Mollie looked up at him from beneath her dark lashes. Rarely did Micah express his thoughts and the odd time he did it always managed to catch Mollie off guard.

She swallowed thickly and nodded.

It was probably the few things the two of them could agree on. But Mollie wouldn't complain. She would never complain of the sacrifices she would make for her twins.

*Micah had brushed his lips softly against her forehead before he had left for the office several floors above the main hall. He had given her a wink – almost *flirtatious* in his actions and Mollie felt heat surge through her. She knew it was a reminder of the promise she had made*

to him. He was teasing her already and the night had only just begun. Whatever meeting he was in right now was Mollie's chance to be free of Micah's relentless gaze.

Mollie could feel the tight security all around her. If it wasn't him watching her, it was Gibbs, Elio, her guards, or Araya. The girl had turned from Mollie's best friend into her around the clock security and it was beginning to get on her nerves.

"Bonsoir votre majesté."

Mollie noticed a couple familiar faces in the crowd and she smiled sweetly and curtsied when addressed. Her thoughts were in complete turmoil.

Her eyes met pale browns that were narrowed into slits when they met hers. He stood straight and severe – his expression hard and stony.

"Je m'excuse pour un moment," Mollie murmured before slipping away from the throng of women. She carefully navigated herself in her long slinky black dress and approached the large burly man standing against the doors leading to the grand hall.

"You need a better spot to hide that dagger," Gibbs growled when Mollie eventually made her way to his side. "It's uncouth."

Mollie rolled her eyes. She liked the spot she had chosen. Easy access.

"You know what's uncouth?" she muttered tossing her curls behind her shoulder. "Spying on royals."

Gibbs snorted.

"It's my *job* to spy on you princess," he chided. "In fact I don't get paid enough for the crap I do."

"You want a raise?" Mollie muttered. "Then bring me Hartley's head on a pike."

She heard Gibbs chuckle from beneath his thick beard and she felt her lips twist into a smile.

"Alexandre said the very same thing," he managed between his laughter. "Though he was a bit more subtle when in the company of his advisors."

Mollie's smile faded and she felt what little warmth inside of her slowly evaporate into nothing.

She heard Gibbs hesitate before his eyes wandered the room – always in search for anything even slightly out of place. He seemed to have picked up on Mollie's silence. Mollie swore she even saw his face soften – only by a fraction.

"You getting better with your skills I hope?" he growled from beneath his beard. His eyes never left the crowd behind her.

Mollie shrugged.

“My teacher isn’t exactly the most vocal these days.”

Gibbs chuckled.

“Prince Micah is a very skilled swordsman *princesse*. He was so skilled he used to serve as the knight to his own army you know – even before he was eighteen. You are in good hands.”

Mollie grimaced. It had been where his reputation preceded him. Rumours had always swirled around the youngest Lyon prince and many of them had been about the boys lust for blood. Micah knew how to kill and he did it well, so well he was almost immune to the horrors of war they said. It was where his infamous title had first been drawn from. A prince as cold as his birth town and as numb as the feelings that penetrated through his icy exterior. Cold. Unfeeling. The essence of winter.

“Though of course Hartley put an end to that rather quickly. He couldn’t risk his youngest sons life in the throngs of battle,” Gibbs mused quietly. “He had too much in store for him.”

“He won’t teach me everything,” Mollie muttered beneath her breath. “I’d be too much of a threat to him if he did.”

Gibbs looked at her.

“If that were true he would never have bothered in the first place,” the guard said bluntly. “Micah wouldn’t waste his time teaching anybody anything,” Gibbs growled as if Mollie were a complete idiot for making such a remark. “The only reason he’s teaching you is because you are the mother of his children and he can’t have you unable to properly defend yourself.”

Mollie chewed her lip. She hadn’t considered this but Micah’s words ran clear in her mind.

This is for them.

Mollie breathed out slowly. She could feel Gibb’s unwavering stare on her and she carefully tucked her curls behind her ear. She spotted Araya by the window, her short choppy bob blowing in the breeze filtering in through the open window as the woman smoked freely.

Mollie tensed. *She returned? Had the others returned as well?*

Araya only smoked when she was stressed and Mollie quickly bid Gibbs goodbye and made her way towards her, gingerly placing a hand on the girls shoulder when she crossed enough distance to reach her. For once Araya had opted to wear a dress.

The sky blue dress was long and ruffled with an elegant string of buttons along the back. It made her appear soft at first but Mollie knew the girl was the farthest thing from that. It was purely an illusion – something all Lyons seemed to have a natural knack for.

“What’s going on?” Mollie murmured giving her shoulder a squeeze. “Let me guess...the others changed the plan on you?”

Araya looked away, her brows furrowing. She seemed particularly annoyed at the comment. Araya was the one to change the plan on others – not the other way around.

“It’s been fourteen hours Mollie,” Araya said quietly. Her gaze was stormy but Mollie could tell she was trying her best to keep her voice down in the room full of people. “And they’re not back yet.”

Mollie tensed. It was unlike Araya to be unsure. She had always been the most solid and composed amongst the group.

“Everything will be fine,” Mollie murmured giving her arm a squeeze.

She barely managed a smile and Mollie knew what little comfort she had to give her was less than adequate.

“I’m not so sure,” Araya mumbled. “Joël and Isaac joined Zephyr and Caius. Now that Caden isn’t... here...someone had to take his position. But they didn’t want me there. They said we needed to split the protection in case something happened *here* while they were gone....and I suppose they are correct. You aren’t safe here without at least one of us to watch over you.”

Mollie hesitated. She always felt gut wrenching guilt when she thought about Caden – no matter how many times Zephyr reminded her that it wasn’t her fault.

“Joël isn’t a natural fighter,” Araya continued. “He never has been. But he insisted he accompany Caius and the group.” Araya took another deep inhale from the pipe before dropping it down on the table beside her. The bitter scent of the smoke swarmed around the two of them. “I have a bad feeling about it.”

“When do you think will they be back?” Mollie asked.

Araya sighed. “I don’t know....early hours of the morning maybe? If they’re not back by this time tomorrow I’m going after them myself.”

“You care for him deeply,” Mollie said slowly. “Joël.” Araya met her gaze. Her lip tightened ever so slightly. She tossed her cigar into the closest crystal ashtray and tucked her hair behind her ears. “I’ve seen the way you look at him....and...the way he looks at you.”

“Oh please Mollie,” Araya interjected. She reached behind her for a slim glass chute filled with champagne before bringing the glass to her lips. “What a load of nonsense.”

“Do you love him?”

“Love is for children,” Araya replied reaching for her cigar once again. “And for the weak. The minute you start caring for others – your circle becomes too big for you to balance your own centre of gravity.”

Mollie stiffened. She remembered her “sacred circle” – she even had the bruises to show for it every time she had stepped outside of it during her training in *Anubis*.

“But-“

“No,” Araya snapped. “We’re not talking about *my* love life right now.” She raised an eyebrow suddenly and the expression on her face made Mollie tense. “But perhaps we should talk about yours.”

“Excuse me?” Mollie gasped.

“*Excuse me?*” Araya repeated in a mocking tone. “Don’t think you’re fooling anyone. I saw you outside with his royal iciness earlier this afternoon.”

Mollie felt her face turn a deep shade of scarlet.

“I was negotiating with him,” Mollie retorted.

“For Gods sake Mollie,” Araya whipped. “You were tonguing him down like a desperate housewife. I saw you.”

“You saw what you wanted to see,” Mollie scoffed. “I don’t know what you think but Micah’s idea of negotiating isn’t your regular pen and paper kind of deal.”

“I’m *sure*, ” Araya sniffed.

Mollie gritted her teeth in annoyance. Araya’s attitude was getting on her nerves. Before Mollie could storm off Araya reached out and gripped her arm tightly.

“Hey....wait....I’m...sorry.”

Mollie exhaled sharply. She had a half mind to ignore her but Mollie knew she was coming from the right place.

“I’m just missing Joël....and its making me irritable that he hasn't returned yet.”

Araya’s voice had turned glum and Mollie hesitantly watched her prepare to light another cigar.

“I tried everything to convince him to stay....but you know how men can be? They set their minds to something and then they can think of nothing else outside of that thought – no matter how many times you go down on them.”

Mollie grimaced. She had a feeling she knew what Araya was talking about and she wished she would desperately change the subject.

Araya was quite perceptive and she quickly took in Mollie’s puzzled look.

“Oh Mollie....please tell me you know what I’m talking about.”

“I know,” Mollie argued – her cheeks staining pink again. “But that stuff doesn’t work on all men.”

Araya rolled her eyes dramatically.

“It does. If you do it right.”

Mollie cringed.

“You want something from a man – suck him off then take what you need. Men have a long refractory period Mollie – much longer than ours. The minute you do what you need to do, take what you want and leave. He’ll be too satisfied to worry about anything else.”

Araya eyed her sharply.

“A cute little make out session isn’t going to cut it for a man and it certainly won’t for the winter prince.”

Mollie winced. With a lingering glare Araya walked back into the throng of guests – probably in search for more cigars while Mollie lingered near the window – her thoughts in disarray. She knew what she needed to do – she always had. She just hoped she found the courage within herself to do it and fast. She swallowed the lump in her throat and smoothed her gown down – the fabric suddenly feeling too constrictive around her lithe figure.

She caught sight of her reflection in the large glass windows of the castle – her large brown eyes staring emptily back at her. She had always been considered cute and innocent and youthful. She had never been bossy and edgy like Araya – or graceful and seductive like Ophélie. She wasn’t even bubbly like Sofia.

But each one had something in common. They knew how to get what they wanted from the man beside them.

Mollie pursed her lips in defiance. Her reflection mirroring her movements as she locked her jaw in anger.

“I’ll fulfil that stupid contract,” she muttered under her breath. “On my terms. Just you wait.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for going an entire month without an update! I had a really big move from one city to another and I had to flush out everything left to close the end of this story at the same time...

I hope the next update won't be so long but thank you all for bearing with me and still sticking around. We are almost there! Love you all xx

Chapter 58: Hafnium

Chapter Summary

Mollie tries her hand at another kind of negotiation. A fear turns into a reality.

Chapter Notes

Smut alert.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Mollie paced outside her grand chambers. Her slinky black dress hugged her tightly, the train trailing far behind her as she flexed and unflexed her fingers in apprehension.

“Pacing is a sign of nervousness.”

Mollie looked up.

Elio walked casually, his gloved hands clasped tightly and professionally before him. “You are aware of this.”

“I’m not nervous. I’m psyching myself up,” Mollie replied.

The return to the castle had thankfully been an uneventful one but Mollie hated having to be sandwiched between Gibbs and Araya like they were her personal body guards. The good thing was that the ceremony had tired out Rue and Maël and Mollie found comfort in knowing they would sleep through the night.

“Mollie?”

Mollie looked up to meet Elio’s concerned gaze. His eyebrows furrowed and he frowned. In his arm was a folded piece of glittering crimson fabric.

“I’m fine,” she murmured. “I just...have a lot on my mind.”

“I understand,” he said slowly. “But please don’t forget what is most important....this empire, the King's legacy...”

Mollie grimaced.

“Do you know why we wear red Mollie?”

Mollie resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“Courage?” she muttered – reciting something she had read in Alexandre’s library ages ago.

Elio shrugged.

“I suppose that is the figurative interpretation.” He stepped closer and Mollie stilled when he unfolded her father’s cloak and draped it around her shoulders. “Our ancestors wore red so in the throes of battle – our enemies would be unable to see the blood that seeped from our wounds.”

He tied it sharply with a tug before bowing in respect and walking down the very same corridor he came down.

Mollie watched him leave until he turned the corner. The lump in her throat seemed to expand and she swallowed thickly and ran her fingers through her thick curls.

She placed a palm on the rough heavy wood of her door and took a deep breath. “Here goes nothing,” she whispered. Slowly, she pushed open the doors to her room and walked in, letting the lock click shut behind her.

Mollie felt her breath catch when she noticed the candlelit table adorned with various scrolls and two gem encrusted goblets in the centre next to a fancy bottle of aged whiskey. Night had seeped into the crevices of the castle casting its dark inky cloud amongst the stony walls. The candlelight played off of it – mocking its embrace with its shuddering shadows. He was here as Mollie suspected he would be.

Micah’s skin glowed against the candlelight – that pale luminescence almost ghostly amongst the ambiance. His emerald eyes glowed when they met hers and Mollie could see the excitement within them. He was still dressed in that beautiful deep blue collared shirt he had been wearing earlier and Mollie noticed how he eyed the cloak that surrounded her. His own lay neatly draped over the chair.

“I’ve always loved how you look in black,” he murmured.

Mollie shivered. It reminded her of a year ago – when he had dressed her and forced her to dinner with him in the manor. Little did she know a year later she would have bore two children to that very same man.

Micah had set everything up as if it truly were a meeting between the two of them – as if they were now business partners considering a formal arrangement than two individuals on the verge of marriage.

He wore his gloves while he gestured to the table. Mollie noticed he had added several wines to the table as well. A formality. Royals always insisted on sharing a drink when they discussed business dealings. Phillip had done the same thing in Beacon Cape.

Mollie shook her head prompting a smirk from Micah. She watched him reach over and pour himself a glass of whiskey. His fluid elegance irked her and Mollie felt her palms begin to

sweat. She had a feeling he was just dragging this out – waiting for Mollie to make the first move. His chestnut curls glowed with lustre in the candlelight and Mollie didn't miss the feel of his wandering eyes on her. They were hungry and passionate – raw with fervour and anticipation.

She noticed the scroll on the table her eyes flickering towards it before returning to the winter prince.

“Viens ici.”

Mollie flinched but acquiesced. She shifted her gown around her long legs and walked towards him fitting herself into his cool arms. His cologne engulfed her the minute she inserted herself into his arms – his wintry scent going straight to her head.

He was impatient today and Mollie struggled to control her breaths while Micah's wandering hands threaded through her hair and explored the rest of her body – fitting into every curve and edge it could find and squeezing. Mollie gasped when he pulled her closer, adjusting her onto his lap. Mollie shivered when he slipped his cold leather clad fingers against the top of her gown – pulling the expensive fabric to the side to suck at the pounding pulse in her neck.

Mollie knew he would notice. She hadn't done this for no reason and she waited with bated breaths to see his reaction.

The flash of red beneath her coal black gown made him freeze and Mollie knew it was something he certainly hadn't expected. She dropped the red cloak from around her shoulders and looked at Micah who's expression had gone rather blank.

His normally glowing eyes darkened and Mollie bit her lip hard when she noticed his lips twist while he thumbed the lacy fabric beneath her gown – so expertly concealed by the dark coloured material.

"My my Mollie Mae," he murmured under his breath. His cold fingers grazed the fabric making Mollie's cheeks burn. He was making a ridicule of her boldness. Sizing her down when she should have been sizing him up. " *This* is new..."

Suddenly, in a motion that left a shiver ripping down her spine Micah leaned away from her, his tousled curls falling to curl around his forehead. "Show it to me."

Mollie looked him in the eyes, her own as vacant as his and untied the gown from her body – letting the fabric drop to pool around her legs. She felt small before his unsettlingly intent gaze – loaded with heat-- and Mollie could practically read on his expression the things he planned to do to her. He was drinking her in and burning the view before him into his memory.

The look of him illuminated by the candlelight-- so utterly still and sublime sent goosebumps erupting on her exposed skin. In spite of her best efforts Mollie found herself squirming before him. He continued to lean back and stare. His posture was irritatingly dominant – arrogant, *-overconfident*.

He said nothing – did nothing. Mollie was almost embarrassed just standing there in the red lacy fabric – not knowing who would come and knock on the door next. Not knowing how the man before her would react. He was waiting. He was waiting for Mollie to make the first move. And that she did.

Mollie approached him slowly – settling herself on his lap in an effort to continue where he had so abruptly left off. She trailed her bronzed hands down the smooth hard planes of his marble body, unbuttoning as she went down. She felt the ridge of his abs, surprisingly cold and so hard and defined. He kept his arms slung gently – almost lazily over the armrests of the chair beside the table he had so meticulously arranged for the two of them. He refrained from touching her but Mollie could feel the steady pulse of his eyes on her – watching her every move.

Those clear green eyes – always full of calculation and always so cold. It had always made Mollie nervous – since the first day in that chamber beneath the floor of Questershire Manor.

He let her tangle her fingers into his soft lustrous curls. Mollie found it alarmingly comforting to do so and she had a feeling Micah knew she found pleasure in doing so. She blinked hard – feeling more whoreish than she had ever felt in her lifetime and let her other hand slide down to the waistband of his pants. But not before he caught her wrist in his steely grasp.

“Get on the bed.”

His voice had turned husky and Mollie knew that tone only too well.

Hesitantly she disentangled herself from his lap and made her way towards the expansive bed. It was the same bed that she had birthed the twins on – only with a fresh mattress and equally pristine sheets. But Mollie couldn’t help but shudder in horror at the memory. Not even the cleanest sheets could eliminate the stains that would remain there. Her womb throbbed at the memory.

She lowered herself onto the plush mattress and crossed her long leg over her knee and looked at him. Although he was blanketed by the shadows – Mollie could still make out those glowing irises. Mollie’s face heated up in flames. Something about the way he ordered her around and watched her from a distance made things feel even more intimate than normal.

Mollie hesitated. She knew he was waiting so she quickly did as he asked – feeling her heart hammer in her chest. Mollie felt naked beneath his ravenous gaze – like a fawn prancing before a carnivorous lion. His beauty was mesmerizing from this angle – the way the soft flames of the candle flickered off the sharp line of his jaw and the sculpted edges of his cheekbones. This dark beautiful damaged angel was teasing Mollie – testing her with unparalleled grace and fluidity. He had cocked his head to the side – perhaps catching the way Mollie’s eyes had wandered to take in his own form

“Keep those eyes on me,” he breathed softly – cruelly. The deep reverberating tone of his voice left little room for debate.

Mollie’s stomach churned.

The contract. Think about the contract-

Micah took in her form, eyes taunting and expression full of amusement.

The fireplace crackled behind his form, as if trying futilely to melt the icy atmosphere that enveloped the winter prince. His shadow loomed over her. Mollie dug her fingers into the duvet beneath her.

She was prepared for anything this time. Whether it would be a compliment, a teasing remark or even a fucking insult. She was waiting for it -

“All this for me?” he taunted. His voice was low and husky and his green eyes dug into hers – that blankness always present.

Mollie hesitated. Her body had always betrayed her when it came to Micah. But her mind never had.

“I...” she whispered.

“Come again?”

He walked toward her slowly. Mollie’s eyes flickered down to the dagger in his belt that swayed with each of Micah’s graceful movements.

“I...” she repeated, her cheeks blazing. Had she not been so in need of something she would have told him off. But she was in no position to do that. “I...I do,” she breathed. Mollie swallowed her humiliation and looked back up to meet his gaze.

Micah smiled, satisfied that she had given him answer he had wanted to hear.

He reached for her thigh – pale fingers inching towards her exposed pussy but Mollie had a plan.

Before he could get to her Mollie clutched at his dress shirt feeling the fabric slide against her trembling fingers. She wasted no time bringing them down the hard planes of his chest before stopping at his pants. Micah froze.

In all of the time Mollie had spent with the winter prince – she had never initiated – not once.

This seemed to resonate with the prince and he stood still – on guard once again. Curious perhaps.

Mollie was tempted to play it safe – she knew Micah expected her to. His soft pink lips held the faintest whisper of a smile but the rest of his sharp elegant features were moulded into something indiscernible. Had Mollie been as naïve as she was in the past she would have kissed him and ended it there – but she wanted – needed something more from the prince, and her expectation was to deliver something that matched the price he had offered.

Her fingers trembled when they met the clasp of his expensive buckle. She was clumsy and shaking and Mollie could tell he sensed her struggle. When it finally loosened between her

fingers Mollie swallowed back the nausea in her gut. Mollie had never done this before just as she had never fucked another before Micah. It seemed he would be the first and last to take all of her firsts.

It was dark and quiet in the room besides the crackling fire and shadowy candlelight but Mollie was close enough to see it all. It was hard and throbbing and Mollie felt the first shiver of fear go through her.

What if she wasn't good enough? What if this wasn't what he wanted?

Mollie didn't care how it looked or how unpleasant the experience was going to be. She only thought about the contract – about getting even. She slowly took a lick of the underside- the taste of salt and frost stinging her tongue at the same moment Micah shifted in front of her.

He was silent as Mollie got to work, brushing her curls carelessly to the side while she struggled to fit him down her throat. She set a punishing pace, her jaw slack and aching as she grasped his thigh for stability. Apart from the grip he took on her hair – Mollie could have been sucking off a fucking statue. She picked up the pace trying to control the urge to gag while he thrust into her mouth. Mollie could feel her saliva dripping down her chin. It was sloppy and felt as if it were lasting an eternity. In frustration Mollie looked up and what she saw next sent a wave of fury through her.

He had one tight grip on her curly hair, his fingers threaded through them and in his other hand was a document – a document that he was reading casually while she choked around his cock.

Mollie released him breathlessly, her face a mess, her skin red with exertion and her jaw aching. He was hard in her mouth so she must have been doing something right. Raw humiliation bubbled up in her stomach once again.

“Why did you stop?” Micah didn't even glance down at her – his eyes were on the words scrawled across the page in front of him.

Mollie was speechless. She opened her mouth and closed it several times – the taste of him still fresh on her palate.

“Is this....am I...are you not...” she stuttered.

Micah looked down at her.

“You're doing fine.” He shifted his gaze and loosened the grip on her scalp – instead bringing his gloved hand down to brush the saliva that had smeared below her bottom lip to dribble down her chin. His expression was eerily empty and Mollie felt goosebumps spread across her flesh. He turned back to his work. “Now finish what you started.” He smirked afterwards. “If you can.”

Mollie wanted to cry. He had done this to her before – played on her insecurities – but he always seemed to enjoy it the most when it came to Mollie's lack of experience and *especially* when it came to anything remotely sexual in nature.

For the first time since she had run into Micah Lyon – Mollie wanted a reaction. She wanted him to bend to her in some way and at the moment he wasn't budging. Was it out of pride? Out of experience? Or was it purely to prove a point?

For the second time that night Mollie wrapped her lips around his tip and sucked extra hard, tongue probing the soft smooth skin there and swirling in a circle over and over. She heard him inhale sharply and she continued her pace – her anger turning into determination. Mollie knew she was close – she could feel it. He throbbed in her throat and the smooth skin began to increase in temperature. She was mentally preparing herself for the finale but before it could happen she felt cold fingers push her back.

She registered his dark chuckle and she panted while he slowly tucked himself back within his pants and tilted her chin up to him. She blinked up at him in confusion.

"Stand up Mollie," he said quietly, his eyes sparkled with something sinister.

"I wasn't finished," she said between clenched teeth. She must have looked feral but she knew Micah found her equally as entertaining when she had reached that point.

"Oh," he said with amusement raising a single dark brow. "So there *is* more. How exciting."

Mollie stood up – uncaring of formalities and dragged him down onto the bed. The parchment in his hands fluttered around them in a flurry. Breath heavy and skin flushed, Mollie straddled the winter prince her long legs wrapping around his narrow hips and her fingers clawing down his expensive shirt to reveal his marble chest to her.

"Ah *there* she is," he murmured against her forehead as she dragged the material of the shirt off his muscled arms.

Micah twisted the red lacy fabric off of her the moment his leather gloves made contact with her blazing skin. She shivered from the icy feeling and felt her cheeks burn the minute her small chest was exposed to him. The silence was dreadful but Mollie didn't think she could take any more mental mind games. In a movement she wasn't expecting the prince leaned forward and took a long lick of her nipple prompting a sharp gasp from Mollie. He ripped his gloves off next. His fingers were even colder than the leather. The sensation of his tongue on her nipple and his fingers on the other made Mollie uneasy. Her mind was twisting in a wonderfully sensationally disturbing mess.

"Give me a taste Mollie Mae..." he breathed against her breast. Mollie pulled him back up so her lips met his in that familiar mesh of fire against ice. Her breaths increased when she felt him poking into her this time against her torso. Mollie felt that prickly feeling of nervousness touch her once again when Micah pressed his chest flat against hers – his mouth meeting hers in a clash of teeth against teeth and skin against skin. "This is mine, isn't it...wife?" he breathed against her lips. They had never done this position before – so close – so intimate. Mollie was scared it was going to hurt.

"M-Micah," Mollie moaned against his shoulder.

"Say it louder," Micah whispered breathlessly against her ear. His fingers had found their way to her clit where they circled and probed at her wet centre. He didn't seem to care about his own pleasure anymore and with a small sense of despair Mollie realized her own was overtaking her. Her vision was blurring and her body trembled in anticipation for the blissful orgasm that was approaching. Her legs rattled around his body and Mollie moaned shameless in his ear, the heat of his member searing against her stomach.

Somewhere at the throes of her high – between her trembling body and her shameless cries Micah bit her neck hard, his breath stuttering against the flushed skin of her jaw. Mollie shuddered at the same time something warm and liquid suddenly covered her hands, stomach and all the way up to her breasts.

"You're mine. You're *mine*."

Mollie froze, her breathing hitched and her eyes widening in shock. She relinquished her iron hold on him and leaned back, not needing to see – but feeling his spend all across her body – like white paint on a canvas.

He took several breaths against her shoulder. His fingers dug into her hips and Mollie gingerly ran her fingers up the scars on his back. Unlike before where he would shy away from her he remained still. His grip on her was tight but Mollie barely registered it. She was too busy counting the number of inhales and exhales Micah was taking against her shoulder. He murmured something into the skin of her shoulder and she found herself squeezing her eyes tight while his thumbs swirled deep gentle circles against the sharp bones of her hip.

"I always knew I'd make you mine," he whispered against her skin. "We were destined to be together Mollie Mae." She hesitated while Micah continued to plant the sweetest and most gentle kisses against her throat, slowly dragging his soft lips across her skin till it once again reached her swollen lips. He entwined his hand in hers and Mollie felt a surge of emotions filter through her when Micah brought her left hand towards his lips and kissed her ring finger gently. "*Mon amour...ma femme...ma reine*." Mollie couldn't look him in the eyes when he brought his thumb towards her neck to caress the necklace around her throat. He was looking at her so earnestly, so softly and genuinely. Mollie felt almost guilty. He truly had no idea of the significance of the heirloom left behind from his mother to her only son. Every time Mollie looked at him she could only see traces of Izabel and it frightened her in a way she had never acknowledged before. She could only begin to imagine the things Hartley must have done to him and it angered her. It angered her that Micah could have been different - *should* have been different.

"I...don't....think" she managed between heavy breaths. "I don't think...that your father would approve... of your choice in wife," she told him quietly. She felt his grip on her hand tighten.

"I think I could make a pretty compelling argument," he murmured. He didn't seem triggered by the mention of his father and Mollie held her breath in caution. "After all, he did the same with my mother." He brushed his nose against hers. "And I did the same with you."

Mollie's lips parted. A part of her was tempted to just tell him the truth now. Maybe it would be easier this way?

He twisted a lock of her hair around a single pale digit as he drank in her features. "Rue and Maël...they are so lucky to have...you as their mother." Mollie felt tears well up in her eyes as she stared into the eyes of the beautiful man who had given her something more to live for after taking away everything she *had* lived for. Micah pressed his forehead against hers and Mollie found herself fighting an internal battle. "I think Rue will like the snow," he mused twisting Mollie's fingers between his gently. "We'll take them both to *Courchevel* after this war ends," he said quietly. "The tranquility there is simply unparalleled." He smiled. "Do you remember our night there?"

"Micah, we can't take our son or daughter anywhere while Hartley still sits on the throne," Mollie informed him quietly.

"I don't see why not?" Micah said curtly. He brought his hand up to tangle in her curls and to tilt her head towards his. "I know how to handle my father. Trust me Mollie," he added in a tone barely above a whisper. "His interest in them is not as invested as you think. They are half Marchesseault."

"He'll punish you," Mollie said barely above a whisper. "...for breaking the rules."

Micah was quiet for some time. Only the smooth movements of his fingers against her scalp notified her that he was not a statue.

"I think he could punish me for a lot more than that," Micah said lightly. Mollie grimaced against him. "But that is neither here nor there. Hartley will want nothing more to do with me now that I've secured the secession of *Icedalar* from the Empire." He paused. "I came to *Peréal* with no intention of ever returning to Questershire. Why else do you think I brought Cécily and Esperanza with me?"

Mollie hadn't considered this. But hearing these words from his lips...it suddenly made so much sense to her.

"Micah..." she whispered. The secrets inside of her were shredding her apart and Mollie fought every urge within her that was itching to reveal the truth. Thankfully she didn't have to worry about her self control for too much longer.

A sharp knock on the door sent Mollie snapping out her reverie. She looked up blankly. Micah had released her the moment the sound of a knock echoed through the room and had already begun reaching for his shirt. Mollie noticed the ends of his curls were damp with sweat and that his cheeks were stained with a blush that complimented his beautiful features. His eyes shone with pride and dominance. He had marked her in a way he never had before.

He caressed her cheek gently. Mollie ignored the feeling of the sticky cooling liquid that had begun to stick to her body.

The knock on the door was harder this time and Micah quickly dropped his hand.

"Get dressed."

His command was sharp yet still breathless from their exertion and Mollie was forced to use what little strings of fabric she had around her to clean the mess that covered her.

Mollie said nothing. She only stared at him with parted lips. She had almost forgotten about the contract in the midst of the heavy string of emotions they had exchanged.

“Master Lyon? Êtes-vous prêts?” The voice belonged to Gibbs.

“I’m not usually one to leave without a proper goodbye,” Micah chuckled breathlessly tucking Mollie’s curls behind her ear. He gave her another once over – the hunger still evident in his gaze. “But my responsibilities demand my presence elsewhere.” He was looking at her almost longingly – not wanting to leave but also knowing he couldn’t delay any longer. “Don’t pout *mon amour*,” Micah added tenderly. “We’ll work on your...skills. As you know, I’m a phenomenal teacher.”

“The contract,” Mollie whispered between unmoving lips. She had barely moved from her position on the bed. She had managed to tug her dress back on but the stickiness on her chest clung to the fabric in a way that made her uncomfortable. “You promised.”

Micah was quiet while he adjusted his hair in the mirror- taking the time to smooth his tousled curls down.

“Ouiias,” Micah said offhandedly. “I have not forgotten. We’ll have it signed the minute my meeting is over. You have my word.”

He brushed his lips against her cheek and fitted his gloves onto his hands before adjusting his midnight blue cloak back around his tall lean frame. *“À bientôt.”*

With that, the door closed behind him leaving Mollie alone, lips swollen from desperate kisses and dress damp from his spend. Sniffing quietly and gathering herself up she left the room soon after the winter prince, the feeling of cold semen sticking to her dress suddenly making her nauseous. She felt nothing but numbness and confusion. She kept walking forward – even when the cries of her infants from the nursery reached her ears.

Micah's words from a year ago played through her mind as she made the long lonely journey back to her rooms. She hadn't understood him then. Her mind has been juvenile then - immature and misguided. This life they lived was not one that could have ever culminated from love. The sooner she accepted it the easier it would be.

“I’ll tell you this. My mind tells me, that I should not love, but my heart...my heart tell me I’m not destined to. That I’m not meant to.”

Mollie looked down at the blue diamond ring that glimmered on her finger. Everything about it reminding her of winter, of ice of *him*.

It wasn't that he should not love or that he could not love. It was that he would not allow himself to for the same reason Mollie would not allow herself to.

“This is why we do not love Mollie. Love is a detritus that infiltrates and sequesters our strength. Love is a disease that feeds off of us like a parasite at our flesh. It sequesters every morsel of our energy, dampens every inkling of our willpower and blinds every facet of our sharp intellect so it can make weaklings of us all.”

And oh how weak she was.

“*Ma reine*,” Margot said with a curtsy. “They have returned.”

Mollie dropped the towel she had in her hand letting her damp curls fresh from the shower stick to her back.

“Finally,” she breathed.

Mollie didn’t waste a minute longer. She grabbed her yellow cloak and threw it over her shoulders brushing right past her lady in waiting and for the staircase that would lead her straight to the grand foyer.

Mollie’s chest was heavy with worry. She hoped the mission had gone smoothly. They were all in desperate need of an update on the safety measured around *Peréal*.

“And where are you off to in such a hurry Miss Mayeson?”

Mollie’s back stiffened. She turned slowly on her heel, her teeth gritted.

Rowan had that smirk that so resembled his younger brother on his face. It made Mollie’s fingers tingle with annoyance. She fought the urge to punch something.

“Responsibilities,” she said grudgingly.

She eyed Paris beside him. The wolf paid her little attention.

“I had a good long conversation with Gibbs earlier,” Rowan said curtly. “I didn’t think the man said more than a few words at a time...” he trailed off. Rowan was looking extra formal today and Mollie noticed he had his sword with him. He must have returned from somewhere?

His dark brown locks curled below his ears and his dark brown eyes glimmered with malice.

“What do you want from me?” Mollie asked brazenly. Her tone was clipped.

“What I *want* and what you can give me are well beyond your capabilities Miss Mayeson,” Rowan mused. He walked closer to her, his steps caging her on the dark staircase. “I’m just... curious. I know you’re familiar with that trait aren’t you.”

His tone was mocking and Mollie felt the hair on her neck stand up. It was a subtle reference to her past actions but a reference none the less.

Mollie caught the faintest flash of blood on his collar but in seconds it was concealed. Her sharp eyes noticed the silver Lyon insignia that hung below his collar. The metal glistened against his expensive fabric. The Lyon Empire had been tainted ever since James had begun his crusade. Why would Rowan be wearing it? Unless...

"Did you go to visit James?" Mollie whispered. Mistrust prickled through her and she took a step back.

Rowan smiled dangerously. "I always told Micah you were more of a mouse than you were a fawn."

"How long were you there for?" she gulped. "What...what did you do?"

"I sent my brother a fond message," Rowan said with false gentleness. "If you really want to know I was there for around thirty hours." He paused taking in Mollie's reaction. "What? Is that too long for *you* to keep your mouth shut Miss Mayeson?"

"For me?" Mollie said between gritted teeth. "Not at all. But for you... I don't know. Maybe you saw your brother's face and felt...*nostalgic*. Maybe you let something slip."

"The only slips you need to worry about Miss Mayeson are the ones between your thighs."

Mollie decided to ignore the crude remark this time.

"Mollie!"

Turning away from Rowan, Mollie spotted a bulky blond come running up the staircase, hair windblown, clothes muddied and dried blood around the edges of his jaw.

Mollie was almost grateful for the interruption -- especially when Zephyr frowned and narrowed his eyes at the sight of Rowan before him. His lip curled in disgust.

He turned to Mollie. He seemed winded. The Outback army is closing in. We couldn't hold them back. We were forced to retreat."

Mollie felt her blood turn to ice.

"Is everybody okay?" Mollie asked immediately. She had forgotten Rowan at this point.

Zephyr hesitated. "The Outbacks are like fighting three per one. Fucking savages."

The stiffness in Zen's voice was unmistakable. Mollie didn't like how he had evaded her question.

"Mollie, I don't think hosting the wedding here is going to work. It's just not practical -"

"Wedding? What wedding?"

They both turned towards Rowan whose voice had gone shrill.

"Caine and Tamzin," Mollie told him stiffly. "The sooner they get married, the sooner we can use the *Devonis* army and set up more defence numbers around *Peréal* and drive the Outbacks out.

Rowan laughed scornfully. "A war is looming over your empire and you spend more time allocating resources to a wedding? *Mon Dieu* Miss Mayeson. You certainly never cease to astound me."

"It was a brilliant idea" Zen sniffed. "Considering your army has little to contribute."

"Are you speaking to *me*?" Rowan challenged.

"You bet I am cocksucker," Zephyr hissed.

Mollie clutched Zephyr's wrist. She knew they couldn't fight due to the contract Caius had forced the two of them to sign, but that didn't mean they couldn't hurl abuse at each other in other ways.

"Stop it," Mollie hissed giving his arm a hard tug backwards. "Save it for Hartley."

Rowan's eyes snapped to her the minute his fathers name left her lips.

Pardon?

Mollie hesitated while Zephyr gritted his teeth.

"Your old man got an invitation," Zephyr said - a mocking edge to his tone. "I heard he's been looking for a good excuse to get his claws into *Peréal* now that Alexandre is no longer with us. Funny how circumstances can change a mans mind so *drastically*."

Rowan had frozen still in front of them and Mollie noticed a dozen emotions flit across his face before his expression finally settled into one of pure blankness.

"You...invited him...here?"

Rowans tone had gone oddly strained and Mollie noticed his face had turned rather pale. He seemed to snap out of it and before she knew it he was barking orders at her.

"Take it back," he snarled. "Revoke the offer."

Mollie stiffened.

Rowan openly glared at her and had Mollie not been the subject of such a ferocious glare in the past she probably would have lost her bearings. But she was different now. Her fears were no longer as assailable as they used to be.

"It's too late," Zen growled. "He would have received it by now."

Rowan had gone silent and Mollie swore she saw a flicker of pain flit across his features. It was something she never thought she'd witness

"If indeed he has," the prince said quietly between thin lips. "Then you, Mollie Mayeson have damned us *all*."

Chapter End Notes

This is going to be...one of the last...warm.... scenes before things really get climactic and wrap up. Just a heads up.

Chapter 59: Tantale

Chapter Summary

Mollie confronts her feelings towards the winter prince. Caius reveals another side to him. Micah grows increasingly suspicious of the whereabouts of iridium.

Chapter Notes

Extra long chapter for you all. Thank you for being so patient with me. It's been a while. Lots of politics and emotions this chapter. Graphic - so please take care. x

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The room was cold. Frigid. Hollow -- like an icy storm had swept and lingered for too long in the crevices of stone that surrounded the Marchesseault court room.

Mollie looked tentatively at the people seated in front of her. Her skin prickled with unease and the growing threat of war loomed closer than ever over the once prosperous regime of *Peréal*. It was thicker than smoke from a fire and heavier than smog from an erupted volcano. It was suffocating.

Rowan's words rang loud and clear in her head and Mollie found herself going over the day she would come face to face with the man who was the beginning of all of her fears and the continuation of all her sleepless nights. She could picture his black bottomless gaze boring into her own. The way his handsome features twisted into something manical and cynical when something didn't quite go his way...

Caius was speaking at the head of the courtroom, his rich permeating voice echoing through the ornate walls of what was formerly the *Cura Regis* chamber of Alexandre Marchesseault. But Mollie struggled to focus. Her eyes wandered over to Micah and Zephyr who sat stiffly and as far apart from one another as the table allowed. Micah barely looked over at her and Mollie felt her unease quicken.

Had Rowan told him? Was he upset with her?

Rowan on the other hand had been glaring daggers at Mollie since she had been seated and she had done her best to avoid eye contact.

She felt her breath release heavily when Caius adjourned the meeting. Before she could slip away back to her chambers she felt a soft but firm grip tighten around her wrist. Mollie

turned around and met piercing green eyes – a hint of amusement within those vibrant irises.

“If I didn’t know any better Mollie Mae. I would say you were going out of your way to avoid me.”

Mollie reddened. She ignored the lingering stares from the others as they walked past her. Only Joël’s kind gaze managed to send a wave calmness over her trembling figure.

She had to pull it together.

“What?” Mollie squeaked. “Avoid you? Why would I?”

Micah raised an eyebrow.

Mollie sighed.

Micah’s gaze turned thoughtful and Mollie thought for a moment he was going to let it go. But of course, it was a hopeless thing to rely on.

“Though I am curious,” he murmured stepping closer. “Whatever did you do to Rowan? The last time I had seen him that angry someone had tried to sabotage his date night.”

Mollie looked up in surprise.

“Did you....talk to him?”

Micah frowned – the amusement flickering away as fleetingly as it arrived.

“No I haven’t...should I?” He raised his hand to brush it gingerly down her exposed shoulder.

Mollie met his soft gaze. “Sounds like you’re answering a question with a question...*prince* Micah.”

His lip twitched.

Mollie could feel his lingering touch slide from her shoulder down to her waist. Even through the gloves she could feel the chill in her bones. His fingers caressed down her arm to linger by her wrist. In a gesture that made her squirm he brought her hand forward and brushed his lips against her fingers.

“I detect a hint of elusivity in that tone Mollie Mae.”

Mollie could feel the stares of her guard behind her as the winter prince gave her a particularly charming smile. Shrouded within it was something dark – something concealed.

“Perhaps you’re losing your touch,” Mollie said crisply.

His grip on her tightened painfully and Mollie inhaled sharply. He pulled her in close in a motion that chattered her teeth and made fear blossom in her gut. To everyone else in the

room – the gesture appeared intimate but Mollie knew it was far from that.

He had that expression on his face. That strained smile he directed at her to hide the threat of a future punishment. His green eyes shimmered with an iridescence that sent a chill down Mollie's spine. Something blank and primal.

Faites attention Mollie. We're in public."

"Give me that contract you promised me and I'll be more inclined to," Mollie hissed. She ignored the painful way his fingers dug into her arm. She had a feeling she'd pay for that comment later but she knew deep down Micah would not – could not hurt her the way he used to. She had power now and she would use it to her advantage in any way she saw fit. "You don't have as much power here as you think."

"Don't educate me on hierarchies Mollie," Micah said flatly. "You only do that when you're..." Micah's eyes glinted. "Hiding something."

Mollie felt ice go down her spine. She was wearing the necklace. It was right in front of him. She stiffened when his eyes lowered down and up to examine her closely. She cursed herself internally. She gave too much away and Micah immediately picked up on it.

"It's... the wedding," she mumbled. Her attempt to diffuse the sudden attention sparked curiosity within those emerald eyes staring back at her. "I'm not sure it's such a good idea to have so many guests congregated in one place..."

Micah was silent. For too long he just stared prompting Mollie's hands to sweat and her fingers to tremble. It was a weak lie - it was Mollie's idea to host a wedding in the first place.

Eventually he looked away and Mollie exhaled slowly.

"Strategy was never really your strong suit was it?"

Mollie frowned. She'd take the insult as long as it distracted the winter prince for however a short of period of time she could get.

"Prince Micah!"

Micah didn't react at all when his name was called from the doorway where his guards stood waiting – neither did he turn to acknowledge them.

His grip on her eased and with a lingering stare he turned and left leaving Mollie in a heightened state of agitation.

It had been a long tiring day for Esperanza and the last thing she was looking forward to was attending the summoning sent to her from Elio on behalf of the Lyons.

With deep shaky breaths, the maid made her way to the guest wing, knees weak and head pounding.

“You may enter.”

The guest chambers of every monarchy was exorbitant- but the rich vibrant reds and golds of *Peréal* introduced a whole new layer of regality to the place. This room was not far from Micah’s chambers but by how untouched everything around her seemed Esperanza figured the prince spent most of his time somewhere... else.

Esperanza pushed open the heavy wooden doors and stepped in to see a severe looking Rowan staring down in deep dissatisfaction at his younger brother. Micah on the other hand was fuming and Esperanza took an involuntarily step back.

“You...called for me?” the old woman squeaked.

Her eyes flickered between the two princes but her heart hammered hard in her chest. Rarely did Micah call on her for anything – unless it had something to do with Mollie and even then Esperanza was willing and ready. But this...this was different.

“I did.”

Esperanza froze. From behind the princes stepped a familiar face – shrouded by wispy blond hair and a youthful tired gaze settled on hers. His arm was in a sling and a number of cuts and bruises decorated his delicate features. He looked less like his brother now – less like Hartley and more like a man who had seen and experienced the throngs of war.

“Oh for God’s sake,” Esperanza hissed. She glared at the brother of her former King and gritted her teeth. “How many more times are you going to interrogate me about the King? I have left that life behind me.”

“This isn’t an interrogation,” Caius sighed. “This is quite the opposite actually...”

“You owe me Caius.”

Micah’s tone was low and deadly. Esperanza looked between the two of them, eyes as wide as saucers.

Caius turned his chin slightly – as if to acknowledge the prince but his eyes remained on Esperanza’s. His jaw clenched.

Esperanza watched Micah side step Rowan who with a huff was unable to keep his brother at bay.

“Hartley cannot step foot on the grounds of *Peréal*. That was the arrangement.”

Caius whirled to face the boy – his tone strained.

“That was *your* arrangement.”

“Our arrangement,” Micah snapped. “*N’oubliez pas pourquoi vous êtes toujours en vie.*”*

“You told me this wouldn’t be an issue Caius,” Rowan drawled. He carefully tucked his ascot back into his collar and brushed his fingers against his immaculate gelled hair. He seemed unperturbed by Micah’s anger. “That isn’t very... honourable. Isn’t that what you preach to your little loyal followers?”

“What is this about?” Esperanza interjected. She turned to the two princes. “You’ve been working with him the entire time?”

Caius rolled up his sleeves and began to pace slowly. He poured himself tea as he spoke – his voice clear and strong.

“Hartley was going to come here even if Mollie hadn’t invited him over herself.”

“She still had no right,” Rowan hissed.

“She had every right as future queen,” Caius quipped with an equally challenging tone. “Hartley believes James has the capacity to capture *Peréal*. It’s something Hartley has always wanted.”

Rowan scoffed. “Hartley wants everyone’s land. *Peréal* was just another city to add to his list.”

“No,” Caius snapped. “No it wasn’t. Alexandre and Hartley had their fair share of disputes over the years and it was...*personal*.”

The way he said the last word was ambivalent and Esperanza picked up on the sudden flicker of surprise that flitted across Rowan’s face.

“I don’t care about that,” Micah hissed. “I care about what he’ll do when he steps foot here. What you promised me wouldn’t happen if I gave you my army – what we decided when we agreed upon this goddamn alliance!”

Esperanza paled. She suddenly understood the basis for Micah’s fear.

The Lyon kingdom must always have an heir. It was a rule that had been there for generations and the Lyons had always bore sons. It seemed that tradition still stood true and at the moment only one son was truly eligible and he was barely one years old.

“James can no longer be King,” Micah muttered. “Not after what he’s done. The other realms will rally, riot and sanction till we are economically crippled. We’ve seen what that outcome has led to in the past.”

Esperanza felt her breath quicken. “Perhaps Rowan can take the throne –“

“Rowan *cannot*,” Caius interjected. “Hartley deprived him of that privilege the second his affair went public.” His lip tightened.

Rowan chuckled. “Contrary to popular belief that was not *entirely* intentional. The man had such a way with words-...”

Caius frowned.

“Micah,” Esperanza said softly. She approached the winter prince carefully. His chestnut hair was tousled and his usually blushed cheeks were pale and waxy. Deep purple shadows lay beneath his vibrant green eyes. He looked exhausted. He must not have slept in days. The predicament was a dire one and the more alternatives Esperanza thought about the less plausible they seemed. “Hartley can still make you King. He will not renounce your title – even though your secession from the Empire occurred. You can make this work.”

“He will not,” Micah said coldly. “Hartley is a spiteful man.” He turned slowly to match his gaze to hers. “He’ll hit where it hurts most.”

Caius sighed.

“If Hartley sets foot in *Peréal*,” Rowan said slowly. “He will take Maël.” He looked over to where his brother sat perched on the first step leading up to the grand table in the parlour. His fingers in his hair and his expression empty. Emotionless. Rowan stepped forward and looked down at where his brother perched, his long cape surrounding him in a blanket of glistening navy and silver stars. Rowan’s silvery grey one sat stiff and long behind his shoulders. “I warned you Micah. You only have one son. You should have bred at least three others. A safety measure to ensure-“

“My children won’t have *salopes** as mothers,” Micah snapped.

“Who knew you were such a loyal man,” Caius hummed. He stirred his tea lazily while he spoke. He eyed the two brothers curiously. “Your father had at *least* four women at your age. Settled down only after our father fell ill...I suppose it was his way of preparing for the duties of the throne.”

Micah accepted the glass of whiskey from his brother. His expression remained vacant even when he took his first sip. “I’ve had my share. *Ça suffit maintenant.*”*

“Indeed you have...but why her?” Caius asked suddenly. His tone had dropped to a murmur but even so, that burning curiosity still stretched through his words. Rowan’s gaze at his brother sharpened. Esperanza didn’t miss it.

Micah gracefully rose and finished the last of his whiskey with a single touch of his lips to the goblet. He smiled to himself not meeting Caius’ eyes while he spoke. “I suppose it was... *personal.*”

Caius chuckled. “Oh I bet it was. Did you impregnate her before or after you discovered she was a Marchesseault?”

“You know the answer to that,” Micah murmured with a smile. “I would have been able to deal with Alexandre sooner and in a much cleaner manner... had *you* some self control.”

Caius laughed.

“I couldn’t help myself. Then again you didn’t have to shoot me in the stomach.”

“You’re right. I could have gone for the heart – had there been one there to start with.” Micah replied.

Caius continued to chuckle. “We are Lyons. We have no hearts.”

“Finally,” Rowan grumbled. “Something we all agree on.”

Esperanza watched the three of them in silence. It was almost as if she were a fly on the wall – observing a very similar scenario she had lived through in her young days when she was just a new timid servant in the grand walls of Questershire Manor. It was as if she had gone back in time and was viewing the same video on repeat only generations later. It made her most uneasy.

“Tell us again Micah,” Rowan drawled taking another long swig of his whiskey. “What else made you keep her besides her name...and her cunt?”

“Show some respect Rowan,” Micah snapped with disgust. He eyed his brother coldly as he walked towards the table. Long rolls of parchment covered most of it but in the centre was an old half melted wick. With ease the winter prince re-lit it and brought luminescence back to the room. Rowan only snickered.

“You two,” said a gruff voice from behind. Esperanza jumped out of her skin when a ragged man with dark skin and a bushy beard slammed open the doors to the room. He walked with heavy footsteps and his frame was large enough to block out the light shining in from the open doorway. “You laugh like boys while the Outbacks close in around the perimeter of the castle. If Caius hadn’t brought his army back with him from Questershire, *Peréal* would have fallen weeks ago.”

“Easy there Caleb,” Caius murmured. “James will be here in exactly eleven days. His wife and his child are missing and Hartley is on his way here. Everything is going according to plan.”

The man grumbled a response but Esperanza didn’t miss the frigid glares being directed towards him from the two brothers across the room.

Caius walked towards the window drink in hand as he swirled his tea with a spoon with more symmetry and soundness than a ticking metronome. His blue eyes observed the serene landscape that lay before them. Esperanza wondered if it would be that way for much longer. She doubted it. Nothing went unscathed in war.

Micah walked toward the blond man slowly – his cloak like an inky blanket of darkness behind him.

“In exactly eleven days this alliance ends.” Micah’s eyes bore into Caius’ with an edge Esperanza had never quite seen before. “And I have my own promises to keep.”

Caius smiled pleasantly.

“What else do you want from me Micah? I protected your little heirs like you asked me to and made sure Mollie inherited Alexandre’s empire over his spoiled brat of a son. I went over and above what you asked of me.” The smile on Caius’ face vanished. “Now you need to uphold your end of this deal.”

“Bringing Hartley to *Peréal* was *not* a part of the deal.” Rowan spoke softly but even so his voice carried over towards the two men by the window.

“Neither was keeping Mollie alive,” Caius snapped. “But I did that out of special request by your little brother – even *after* the heirs were born.”

Rowan’s eyes snapped to Micah’s and Esperanza saw pure venom in those dark brown irises. “Oh Micah,” he purred, a dangerous lilt to his tone. “Perhaps James was right. You *have* gone soft.”

“*You* needed her alive Caius.” Micah spoke pleasantly but his expression was blank and serene. It was almost more frightening than when Rowan lashed out. “Alexandre would have never spared you had Mollie not pleaded for your release. You had plenty of time to hand her over and get her to safety before the birth. But you dragged it out.” He stepped closer. “And that *pissed.Me.Off.*”

Rowan placed a hand on his brothers shoulder prompting the winter prince to shrug it off and stalk back around the table – his fists clenching and unclenching.

“What Micah is trying to say,” Rowan said smoothly, “is that certain decisions were in both of our best interests...even if not formally discussed with every member of this alliance.” He shot his brother a withering glare. “Clearly.”

“Well I can assure you,” Caius said stiffly, “that Hartley’s arrival on *Peréal* soil will be in both of our best interests.”

“Hartley wants the iridium. I need all of it. Every last scrap of it in exchange for my sons freedom from any ties to Hartley’s empire.” Micah slammed his hands against the table. “Hartley needs to stay alive in *Peréal* in order for that to happen. He cannot die unless it is *within* the boundaries of Questershire. Anywhere else and the rules of the monarchy demand an immediate replacement – with no grace period.”

“Hartley is untouchable in Questershire,” Caius sneered. “And if he gets his hands on every piece of the iridium... there is nothing stopping him from bringing us all to our knees. You may be safe with that little secession deal *you* struck with him. But I can’t let my people down and I won’t let the other kingdoms fall either.”

“That isn’t my problem,” Micah murmured. “He must be killed on Lyon soil Caius. You know the consequences of killing a royal upon invitation on foreign land.”

Caius narrowed his eyes at Micah.

“Oh I apologize,” Caius retorted. “It’s been a while since I adhered to royal protocol *prince*.”

“Gentleman please,” Rowan interjected. “Let us worry about technicalities when the time comes. For now we must focus on working together to eliminate the war lord that stands right outside our front doors *oui?*”

“Warlord as in your brother?” Caleb grumbled.

“Yes,” Rowan said with a smile turning to the tall burly man. “That very same one.”

Micah looked away from the others in the room and in several long strides made his way to the exit.

“Micah,” Caius said severely. “I will do what I can for the little prince. But if an opportunity comes along to bring Hartley Lyon to his knees. I will take it. I have to...for reasons I wish I had the time to explain to you.”

“I don’t need your charity,” Micah said curtly.

“Would have been better off having a backup plan,” Caleb muttered under his breath. “A shame it takes nine months to generate another offspring.”

In seconds the winter prince was gone – his beast waiting outside the doors for her master.

“Let him go,” Rowan muttered. The door closed shut behind leaving the room in another bout of brief silence.

“I hope you know what this entails,” Caleb grumbled to Caius who stood still, his arms crossed tightly in front of him.

“We carry on with the plan,” Caius murmured. “This changes nothing.”

Esperanza watched the two men exchange a severe look before Caleb stalked off. His heavy footsteps echoed though the room.

Caius turned his gaze to Esperanza. Rowan watched the old woman, an unfathomable expression on his face.

“Does he know?”

Esperanza smiled humourlessly.

“He is questioning it. He will very soon.”

Mollie adjusted the straps on her short ruffled white dress and fiddled with the belt on her waist where she had previously tucked her iridium laced blade. The purple colour had long since faded making the sword appear like a regular steel blade but Mollie knew of its power.

She carefully placed it on the stand beside her wardrobe and pressed the tips of her fingers against the necklace around her throat.

It was cold. Icy against her thumping pulse.

She picked up the brush and began to comb through her hair letting the soft bristles brush through her deep brown curls. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

Eleven days. In eleven days this will be over. She'll find her peace.

There was a knock at her door which interrupted Mollie's thoughts. With an irritated sigh she put her brush on the table. It must have been Cécily with her dinner. She had taken to having her meals in private – within the confines of her quarters and with her twins for company. Sometimes Araya would join her and other times she would find Zephyr and just talk about mindless things with him before they would spar. Her time was special to her now and with so much unknown about what lay before her in the coming weeks – Mollie wanted to value every minute – every *second* of it she had left.

"I'm not hungry," she called out turning back to brush her long hair.

"Wrong answer I'm afraid."

Mollie tensed when that soft languid tone filled the chamber.

The door opened letting in a soft breeze that sent an icy shiver down Mollie's spine. Micah walked in slowly, his one hand carrying a tray of food and his other arm occupied by a slumbering Rue. Only her mess of soft dark curls were visible, the rest of her face burrowed deep into the fabric of her father's cloak.

Mollie said nothing. Not even when he placed the tray of food beside her nor when he walked gracefully across the room to place their sleeping daughter in the circular crib next to her massive bed.

"You should eat," he murmured easing his cloak off his shoulders. "You've lost a lot of weight and with the wedding events in full swing tomorrow...I don't know if there will be enough time to."

Mollie blinked.

The Wedding. Was the first event really in less than forty eight hours?

What Mollie had come to realize rather quickly was that Royal Weddings were extravagant and lasted days. It was not a one day affair like the commoners made it out to be. But with the main event the following evening – that would mean much of the guests would begin to filter in over the next couple of days with gifts and warm greetings. But Mollie only really cared about one.

The smell of warm crispy *toutière* filled her senses and Mollie gingerly brought a piece of the warm meaty pie towards her mouth. As she ate she felt Micah's presence grow stronger around her.

She nearly choked when she felt his wintry fingers sweep across her collar bone from behind. Involuntarily she clutched the necklace - almost in fear that he would take it away from her. She felt Micah freeze behind her.

There was an awkward silence that followed and Mollie felt her palms begin to sweat.

Fuck. She hoped she hadn't given anything away. Micah's lack of reaction scared her more than when he was actually *doing* something. It meant he was processing.

"I... have something for you," the winter prince said quietly. She sighed in relief when he leaned over the back of her chair and brought something towards her. Mollie hadn't seen it at first but when he brought the thin scroll of parchment towards her she felt her excitement quicken.

She dropped her fork to the table and turned around to face him.

"Really?" she whispered. She reached out to take it only to pause – sudden swirling thoughts of mistrust surrounded her mind. Almost immediately her adrenaline spiked and the warm buttery feeling she had in her stomach turned to solid ice. "Wait," she hesitated. She hadn't actually slept with Micah since she had made that ridiculous deal with him. He couldn't possibly be giving it to her without some sort of ulterior motive. It would be too easy. She hadn't fulfilled her end of the deal.

"It's yours," Micah said softly placing it in her hand. "Consider your end fulfilled and your obligations to me complete."

Mollie blinked. She half expected him to pull her up and throw her on the bed – or maybe even taunt her into agreeing to something else. But he just seemed...empty. Vacant.

"I..." she trailed off. The scroll felt rough between her fingers. "Thank you."

Micah nodded slowly before walking slowly towards the window. Mollie was still on edge. He was almost too calm and it was making her anxious. Their previous encounter only earlier that morning seemed like ages ago but it still lingered in the back of her mind.

Oh.

Mollie carefully unrolled the parchment and felt her throat swell when she saw the date at the corner of the contract.

Le premier Janvier

"Give that to Elio first thing tomorrow morning." Micah's soft murmur was a low husky sound in the otherwise silent room and Mollie found herself staring blankly up at him. "It will go into effect immediately starting tomorrow. That's...partly why I waited before I decided to give it to you. Had I done so right away – it would have been void by the time the first of January came around and we would have had to formulate another." He flashed her a crooked smile. "We would have had to start from scratch."

Mollie swallowed thickly. She should thank him – but Mollie knew even this act of decency was not something to be grovelled. Not after what he had put her through.

“Six months here and six months with you.... in *Icedalar*?” she inquired.

Micah kept his gaze on the window. He responded without looking at her.

“That is what we agreed isn’t it? His voice sounded wary but Mollie knew there was something much larger than a simple contract that was biting away at the minute fragility within the winter prince. Within his pale slender fingers Micah twirled his pocketwatch and Mollie caught the glint of the metal in the light. The insignia of the Lyon empire on the circular cover glittered casting sharded shadows across the expansive floor.

“I care.” His voice was a whisper that had the room not been so silent – Mollie surely would have missed it. Mollie looked at him questioningly from her seat in front of her mirror, her dinner long forgotten. Her lips parted in surprise. “Pretending not to numbs the pain...keeps it at bay.” He looked down at the watch again his dark lashes brushing against the stark contrast of his marble skin. “But you were right. I don’t have to pretend anymore.”

Mollie exhaled shakily. His words resurfaced their conversation from a year ago, back when she was locked away in his chambers in the Questershire Manor. The 31st of December – the night of his birthday. He had been so cold and unfeeling with her then. And she had been so naïve.

Mollie hesitated. She chose her words carefully.

“I know how it feels Micah,” she said softly. She stood up, smoothing the tulles of her white dress down. She walked over towards him feeling the evening sun touch her skin. “I... understand now. I do.”

He looked over at her - his green eyes so translucent in the light they almost appeared grey.

“How unfortunate we are,” he mused. “Blessed yet cursed. Free but shackled. Loved yet hated.” He turned back to the window. “Killing...yet saving.”

“When you put it like that,” Mollie murmured. “It doesn’t make much sense at all does it?”

Micah smirked. “It rarely does.”

Mollie turned back to the window where seas of blue and red circled the perimeter of the *Peréal* castle. The picture before her was so different from the one she had first seen when she arrived. It had only taken a mere matter of months to change the ethereal setting of *Peréal* into a warzone.

“I shouldn’t have come here,” she whispered. “I brought the war here –“

“No,” Micah said firmly. “It has nothing to do with you.”

“It does.” Mollie insisted. “I invited Hartley to *Peréal*.” She took a step back almost in fear of what Micah might do. “I don’t get you,” she said biting. “How can you let him continue

to live – after what he did to his people? After what he did to me? After what he did to *you*?” Micah looked ahead, his expression stern but Mollie could see the way his brows furrowed in anger. “He is untouchable in Questershire. And everyday that goes by is a day that he inches his claws closer to *Peréal*. Closer to our son.” She shook her head in disbelief. “And you just...*let it happen*.”

Mollie expected the winter prince to lash out at her for hiding this from him but if anything his expression seemed to go even softer. His eyes closed and he breathed in and out slowly – almost as if relishing the moment. It made Mollie’s stomach flop with uncertainty.

“You are such a good mother.” Mollie’s eyes snapped up when he said this. His eyes were still closed but Mollie could see his pink lips move quickly as he spoke. “Such a good mother.”

Mollie stayed unmoving for several minutes. Her lips were parted in surprise and she stood still even when Micah eventually bent down to press his lips against hers in a lingering but sensual kiss. It almost sounded like he was re-assuring her. It made anxiety blossom in her gut. Something wasn't right...

The kiss grew more heated and Mollie found herself panting as the winter prince brought his cold fingers against her cheeks and pulled her in close. His tongue tangled with hers and Mollie felt his hand drop to her waist before trailing down her dress to her bare thigh. Mollie pulled back.

“No,” she whispered against his lips. “No Micah.”

“You want it,” he breathed, his ice cold lips against hers like a drop of snow against a flickering flame. “I know you do.”

Mollie stiffened but Micah was not to be denied.

“I need you,” he breathed against her lips. “I need you so much it hurts.” Mollie trembled as he ghosted his lips down her throat and back to her lips. “*Tu ne sais pas à quel point j’ai besoin de toi.*”*

“Don’t,” Mollie whispered as he lifted her into his arms. Mollie felt him position her so that her legs wrapped around his slim torso. She buried her head into his shoulder – her tears cascading down her cheeks to soak into the fabric of his shirt. “Don’t... say things that aren’t true.”

“I have never lied to you *mon amour*,” he murmured. “And I never will.” His words held a tone of finality to it and Mollie shivered in his arms. He was always so cold – regardless of how many layers draped his body yet his words to her had never been warmer. “You were always so beautiful,” he whispered against her throat. His fingers tangled in her curls, slow circles working into the smooth skin of her scalp. “Too beautiful for the ugliness of this world.” He continued to murmur in a blend of English and French against her skin – even after he gently laid her on the bed and kissed her until her lips swelled and her breathing was laboured and uneven.

“But you don’t love me,” Mollie whispered as Micah trailed his kisses down her skin. She said it like a statement. Mollie didn’t know why she said this out loud nor why when she said it her voice cracked in two. “You don’t love me. You don’t love me. You *don’t love me.*” She wailed and cried while he caged her in, his forehead flush against hers. She didn’t know who she was screaming this to anymore or who she was trying to convince.

“Don’t cry,” Micah purred. “Please,” he whispered, touching his lips to her tear stained cheeks.

But Mollie couldn’t stop. She couldn’t help but wail as she wept. He had told her so many times – *so many damn times.*

“It could never be love,” she sobbed to no one as Micah tore her clothes off of her. “Love could never hurt like this.” She looked at him through her teary eyes. “Right?”

His chestnut curls dangled over her, his green eyes boring into her own like a green rainforest in the peak of spring. His pink lips parted above her.

He nodded curtly above her.

The last thing she heard before before the sounds of her own cries filled her senses was his soft husky voice at her ear.

“No more pretending Mollie Mae.”

Esperanza knocked once on the grand doors of the Queen’s quarters before she opened the door slowly. The sun had only just rose and the orange light of dawn casted a burnt glow along the grey walls of the castle.

“Heavens,” she whispered taking a step back. The smell of sex and cologne saturated the air. Esperanza watched unimpressed, as the winter prince emerged from around the corner where the massive en suite was. His hair was still damp from the shower, his cheeks were blushed and his green eyes were glassy with lust.

“*Bon matin,*” he said with a smile.

Esperanza watched the winter prince stiffly as he bent over his sleeping wife who lay oblivious and nude atop the tangled bedsheets. Her hair was a mess of dark wild curls and her skin glowed amongst the early morning sun filtering across the white sheets. Her skin was littered with bite marks but what Esperanza couldn’t draw her eyes away from was the space between her thighs that glistened with each ray of light that caught her bronze skin.

Unperturbed by her presence Esperanza watched the prince brush Mollie’s curls backwards and drag his long pale digits down across her body till it stopped at the junction between her thighs. With a slight twist of his fingers he pushed that glistening wetness that coated her thighs back inside of her. Nothing more than a sleepy moan escaped her parted lips before

she continued to snooze, sleep still keeping her in the throngs of its grasp. She had always been a heavy sleeper - to her detriment.

“She’ll resent you for the rest of eternity.” Esperanza said coldly.

Micah looked down – almost knowingly.

“That was bound to happen.” He paused. “Eventually.”

Esperanza stared glumly at the scene before her. She had grown fond of the girl – no matter how much she denied it. So much so that her feelings for Mollie incited a protectiveness inside of her that matched the one it had for the winter prince.

“You don’t give up a kingdom for those you don’t love Micah,” Esperanza told him stiffly. She eyed him severely.

“You don’t resent the ones you love either.”

Esperanza gave him a weak smile. “I think we both know that’s not true *mon petit prince*.”

Esperanza was living proof of it – but she knew deep down Micah would never see it that way. She hadn’t called him that since he was child and Esperanza watched his handsome features twist into something blank and unfeeling.

He said nothing more as he slipped on his gloves and gestured for Theo to follow him out of the doors. The wolf had been curled up beside the bed near the bassinet where the twins slept – her blue eyes locked on her master.

“Make sure she eats something,” Micah told her frigidly. With that he left her alone, the doors to the chamber closing quietly behind him.

Esperanza sighed and pulled herself back into the throngs of work.

“Don’t I always?” she grumbled.

What had started out as a beautiful crisp January morning had slowly turned into a dark stormy blizzard. Snow pelted against the glass windows of the *Peréal* castle almost reminiscent of the Northern treacherous mountains of *Icedalar*. Much of the briefings and sparring practices had been transferred to the West wing of the castle. Closer to the living quarters so the main part of the castle could be dedicated to lavish decorating in preparation for the wedding. Esperanza had watched in amusement as Caine Marchesseault and Tamzin Menestratten spat venom at each other. Both had personalities of a Komodo Dragon.

“*They’ll make it work eventually. They always do.*”

Esperanza shivered. It was something Hartley used to say over and over. However it was more truthful – more brutally honest to say they had to make it work and that they always would for the sake of the kingdom. Prince Caine understood his duty as did the *Devonis* girl.

Esperanza watched the three royals at the table – the tension taut and the surge of emotions high.

“Mollie?”

Esperanza turned to see Mollie rubbing her eyes lightly. She looked dead on her feet. Poor thing. She didn’t look like she slept a wink last night.

“Yeah...I’m listening,” she muttered tucking her frazzled curls behind her ear.

“No...you’re not,” Zephyr retorted. “What did I just say?”

Mollie sighed irritably.

“Something about...a frontal attack?”

Zen frowned.

“I said they *won’t* do a frontal attack. The pigs head formation was what James launched against his enemies in the west but that was because of equally large numbers. The balance of numbers is going to be *uneven* when they touch down here. He will go for a square formation and when that happens we won’t be able to break through nor will we be able to counter attack...”

Esperanza watched the girls eyes close shut for a second time before blinking open once again.

“Mollie,” he snapped.

“What?” she snapped back equally as annoyed.

Esperanza eyed the winter prince on the other side of the girl. He was watching the interaction in quiet amusement.

“I didn’t sleep at all last night,” she mumbled. “I’m just a little tired.”

Esperanza sighed.

“Yeah well snap out of it,” Zephyr barked. “I need you to focus.”

“Shh,” Mollie hissed. “Keep your voice down.”

The fear in her eyes was evident. Esperanza understood it. There was nothing more upsetting than spending all night putting a child to sleep only for it to awake minutes later. The infants were sleeping just a couple rooms down from them.

Zephyr crossed his arms. His gaze was directed at Mollie.

“You can distract long enough for us to push back that front line. Lead them down the cliffs edge towards the perimeter.”

“No.”

Micah’s tone came out hard and cold. Zen’s lip twitched. He ignored Micah completely focusing his eyes on Mollie’s. It was the first word the winter prince had muttered all morning. Otherwise he was like a statue at the table. Stony and silent.

“What do you think Mollie?” Zephyr said between gritted teeth. His blue eyes narrowed.

“No.”

Micah’s voice whipped out before Mollie could respond and before she could move a muscle, Zen was curling his fingers around his goblet in a death grip.

“I’m asking Mollie,” he growled. “Not you.”

“How much time would I have?” Mollie muttered.

Micah glared at her from across the table. Esperanza knew he was annoyed that Mollie was even entertaining the idea in the first place.

“Two hours at *least*,” Zen said stiffly. “It’ll give James’ army enough time to regroup and separate them from the Outbacks clan.”

The tension in the room made every person sitting at that table break out in a sweat. The tenseness could cut glass.

“Mollie can handle it,” Zephyr said between gritted teeth. “She’s tougher than you think.”

“I don’t need *you* to school me on my wife’s capabilities,” Micah hissed. Disgust laced his tone. “And I don’t care how prepared you believe she is. This is war. No amount of preparation can ever make you ready. You have to adapt – you have to think on your feet. That is not something that can be learned from a few months of mere sword fighting. That skill takes years.” Micah narrowed his eyes. “And even then – some *still* never master it.”

“I can speak for myself thank you,” Mollie hissed from her place in the middle of the table. Esperanza watched the girl grimace between the two of them. Her cheeks were pink and she seemed almost...embarrassed.

“Go get some air child,” Esperanza murmured from across the table. The boys continued to stare daggers at each other. “You’ve been at this since the morning.”

Mollie sighed and shoved her chair out of the way as she stood. She didn’t look at either of the boys when she left the room. Esperanza felt bad for her. It couldn’t be easy juggling everything she had thrown her way.

“Don’t fucking preach to me about war,” Zephyr spat. The blond’s fists trembled, sending the cutlery that lined the table shaking.

Micah laughed at that. It made Zen’s face go even redder.

“I always wondered...” Micah sighed. “Why it was that Caius never sent you to regroup the West hm?”

Zen’s lip curled at the question.

Micah smiled.

“Perhaps he knew you weren’t capable of leading. Emotions can cloud even the most sound of minds.”

“You’d know wouldn’t you?” Zephyr snarled. “You don’t know what it’s like to feel emotions. You’re an empty vessel Micah Lyon. You always have been and you always will be. Emptiness is all you’ll ever know.”

Micah raised an eyebrow.

“Last time I checked, my bed wasn’t the one that was empty.”

It only took a second.

Esperanza cringed as Zephyr recoiled and brought his fist straight for the winter prince. The crack of knuckle against skin echoed as Micah hit the back wall hard from the force of Zephyr’s fist. Both chairs slammed down against the polished floor with a deafening clang. Blood gushed from Micah’s nose as his back collided with the wall from the force. The prince chuckled knowingly. The blood trickled down his face.

“Always a hothead weren’t you? I see that didn’t change.”

Zephyr closed his hand around Micah’s throat as he continued to smirk at the looming blond caging him in. “You cocksucking bastard,” he hissed. “I’ve thought of every single way – *every* scenario – every possible outcome of how I could kill you – and each one doesn’t even come *close* to satisfying me.”

“Couldn’t get me off your mind I see,” the winter prince grinned. The blood that trickled down his skin sparkled like glistening rubies against his pale complexion.

Zephyr tightened his grip on Micah’s throat and leaned in close.

“I could say the same about your wife,” Zephyr snarled. “But it wasn’t my *mind* I couldn’t get her off of.”

The silence between them was so potent. Micah’s face went blank. Now Zephyr was the one to smile. Esperanza swore her heart skipped a beat. “I didn’t know she was a screamer,” Zen breathed. His throat pulsed as he spoke. “It’s hot. Especially when I took her from behind. You ever tried that? Or is that not posh enough for you? Did Hartley only teach you the classical way to fuck a woman?”

Esperanza felt the blood drain from her face completely. She had to intervene otherwise she feared bodies would be piling well before James and his army arrived.

“Boy,” she huffed standing up from her seat and striding forward to grab the blond Lyon by his shirt. She yanked backwards with as much force as she could gather.

He seemed surprised by her strength but he let her pull him back – but not before giving the winter prince an extra shove against the window. It shattered on impact – sending shards of glass everywhere.

“Leave,” she hissed. “Get out of here. If you know what’s good for you you’ll let this go.”

The boys blue eyes narrowed and Esperanza saw a flash of something dark within them. Something that reminded her of her King. He absolutely towered over her – the woman barely reached his chest but she didn’t back down.

Micah’s face had contorted into a smile that was the farthest thing one could call warm. The blond had no idea who he was messing with. The winter prince had his fair share of practice taking blows as well as dodging them since he was a child. His brothers made sure of that. Before Esperanza could sort the problem out Mollie re-appeared swinging the doors open. Shock splayed across her face at the shattered glass, the fallen cutlery and the overturned chair littered the glossy floors. She eyed the prince’s bloody nose and Zephyr’s bloody fists as he slammed his hand against the table.

“What the hell is going on here?” Mollie cried out. Before anyone could answer a loud shrill cry of an infant carried down the corridor.

Mollie stilled. Esperanza watched as her expression transitioned from shock to anger to pure despair. She looked between the two of them slowly. Her expression turned into something indiscernible.

“Micah...” she whispered.

Esperanza placed an arm gently around Mollie’s. Slowly the winter prince rose to his feet. Glass shards rained around him as he dusted his clothing free of the material. The cries down the corridor increased in pitch. He walked past all of them in silence – leaving a trail of dotted blood in his wake. Esperanza didn’t miss the frigid glare he directed at his wife moments before he exited the room.

It wasn’t long before the cries of the babies subsided and an eerie silence overtook the previously rambunctious hall.

“What did you say?” Mollie’s voice came out dead.

Zen had ripped a piece of the tablecloth and wiped his bloodied fist against the tattered fabric.

“Nothing,” he said tonelessly.

“What the fuck did you say Zephyr?” she yelled.

She shrugged off Esperanza’s grip from her arm and stomped up to the boy. Her fists were shaking. Esperanza had never seen Mollie so upset. It must have been a mix of irritation and

utter exhaustion. She would never try it with Micah – but it was refreshing to see she still had that fire in her.

The boy rolled his eyes.

“He’s just jealous he didn’t fuck you from behind first.”

Esperanza winced at the sound of the sharp slap that echoed through the room.

“Are you trying to torture me?” Mollie demanded. Her voice rose a couple octaves. “The more angry he gets the less he cooperates with us! With me!”

“Cut that shit out,” Zephyr hissed. A sharp blush spread across his left cheek from the impact. Mollie winced. “You’ll hurt yourself more than you’ll hurt me.”

“You are hurting me,” she cried out. “Everytime you make this harder for me you hurt me.” Her voice lost force as she said the last few words.

Esperanza shot the boy a withering glare from behind Mollie who stood in front of the blond – her lithe figure shaking from repressed anger.

“I’m...sorry.”

His voice had lost its previous edge but his expression was still contorted in anger – anger directed at the winter prince.

“No you’re not,” Mollie muttered. She brushed her fingers through her tangled curls and let her arm flop to her side defeatedly. “If we can’t learn to work together...we’re never going to defeat James.” She looked him dead in the eye. “We’ll never win this war.”

“I can’t work with him Mollie,” Zephyr interjected. “I’ll kill him before I kill his brother... and the faggot one too.”

“If you can’t work with him then you can’t work with me,” Mollie finished.

The blond Lyon appeared frustrated. Esperanza observed him closely – especially when he threw his goblet down onto the ground in frustration – adding another downfall of glass shards to the already decorated floor.

The girl stood her ground.

“Please Zephyr.”

She ignored his tantrum entirely. Esperanza watched her clutch him gently by the wrists – tugging on them until his blue eyes fixed onto hers. It was a curious thing – how much influence the girl had over him. It almost seemed the other way around at first – but as Esperanza watched closely she realized that wasn’t quite the case.

“We’ll win this war. With or without Micah Lyon.” The boy’s words were final and with a huff he stalked out of the room – the doors swinging violently behind him before he

disappeared down the hall. Mollie just stood there for some time – her arms extended towards the now empty space before her – as if it were still feeling the boys wrist in her grasp.

“Where are the guests currently residing?” Mollie asked Esperanza.

“In *Sacré-Coeur*,” the woman said immediately. “Why do you ask *princesse*?”

Mollie bit her lip and leaned over the table – the map of the city splayed out in front of her. Her dark brown curls fell over her shoulder as she stared at the parchments in front of her.

“Inform Caine of a change of events,” Mollie said brusquely. “The wedding happens in two days. Only one event - like the way the commoners do it.”

Esperanza looked up startled.

“Something is up,” Mollie hissed. She began to pace. “It’s been too quiet and the wedding will provide some insulation from a possible attack. We can’t keep the guests from other kingdoms here for more than days at a time. It’s eating up resources and it’s putting them in danger. The wedding will be cut down to one main event. In two days we will host it.”

“Mollie. I’m not sure Caine or Tamzin-“

Her brown eyes narrowed. “I don’t care what Caine thinks and I care even less what his fiancée thinks of it. We’re all pulling our weight around her,” she said seethingly. “I want to see a fucking marriage certificate by the end of the week or I swear *Devonis* will be the next kingdom I set on fire.”

Esperanza was rendered speechless as the girl left the room hastily, the doors slamming for a third time in less than an hour.

“Yes...” Esperanza managed to murmur. “Yes your majesty.”

“Wait!”

Mollie ran down the halls of the Marchesseault castle – her yellow cloak billowing behind her like a wash of liquid gold.

“Zen!” she called out hoarsely.

She turned a sharp corner and continued running, her curls whipping behind her and her legs burning with the speed at which she ran. He always walked so *fast*-

“Mollie!”

The voice that called out to her made Mollie come to a sudden halt and she jerked to a standstill. It was familiar and tinged with desperation.

“Mollie. PLEASE. I *have* to talk to her!”

Mollie watched her guards attempt to wrestle a ragged struggling woman at the entrance to the castle. She was putting up a fight but Mollie recognized that fiery red hair. She was screaming so loud her voice was raw.

“At ease gentleman.”

Mollie slowly walked towards the commotion – tightening her cloak as the chill of winter seeped into her skin. Her guards came to a halt as Mollie approached the whimpering woman.

“It’s a commoner seeking refuge your majesty. This one keeps escaping the safe house. We’ll deal with it.”

Mollie looked sharply at her guard.

“This isn’t a commoner,” she hissed. She bent forward to shift the shoulder of the woman over and met watery crazed blue eyes within a gaunt waxy face.

“Jelena?” Mollie whispered. The shock was all over her face as she stared in horror at the woman lying on the grass in front of her.

Mollie’s eyes dropped to her swollen stomach where a growing trail of red was beginning to flow out of her.

“Take her into the castle,” Mollie yelled. “She’s bleeding – for Gods sake!”

Her guards sprung into action but not before Jelena pulled her close. She looked awful – completely unrecognizable from when Mollie had last seen her. Her swollen belly heaved as she began to scream in pain.

Mollie ran with them into the castle – even when they carried the former princess of the Lyon Empire into the guest chambers of her castle.

“Get Cécily and Esperanza,” Mollie snapped to her guards. “No one else is to know of this.”

“*Oui votre majesté,*” the guard nodded before darting out of the room.

“Mollie-“ Jelena gasped clutching at the empty space beside her as she lay panting and heaving on the bed.

“You need water and medicine,” Mollie said shakily. “You-“

“*NO,*” Jelena hissed. “*Listen* to me.” She heaved and coughed before vomiting a thin trail of bile onto the floor beside her. The bile was mixed with blood and it made Mollie’s stomach lurch.

She was dying.

“*Please Mollie,*” Jelena sobbed grabbing at Mollie’s arms weakly.

“I’m..I’m here,” Mollie gulped, clutching her tightly.

“Please...please save them,” Jelena managed between shaky breaths. “My....my little ones....they are...innocent. They are....they are just children.”

Mollie felt hot tears prick the edges of her eyes as Jelena clutched her arms even tighter with what little strength she had left. Cécily and Esperanza had entered behind her and Mollie could see them begin to work in between Jelena’s legs to extract the child from her womb.

“It’s too early,” Esperanza told her severely. “Her illness will kill her before the child is out.”

“Take it out,” Jelena choked. “Take him out...please.”

Esperanza looked at Mollie in a panic.

The scalpel lay on the table along with an array of other medical equipment that made Mollie want to heave.

“Do it,” Mollie whispered. “Do it Esperanza.”

“Mollie...”

Mollie could see the life leaving Jelena’s eyes as Esperanza reached for the scalpel.

“James...he’s...he’s...”

“I know,” Mollie whispered. She smoothed her damp red hair backwards and brought her hand to Jelena’s cheek. A thin layer of spittle dripped down her cheek as the woman shook beneath her. “He’s coming.”

“No...” Jelena managed between her wispy breaths. “*He’s...he’s already here. Tried....to warn...*”

Mollie froze still. It felt as if her ears had popped and her lungs had ceased to stop expanding. Her hands shook and she felt an awful surge of vertigo hit her.

No. That was impossible. He couldn’t have gotten here. Not this quickly and not undetected. The entire place was surrounded.

The smell of blood assaulted Mollie’s senses but she didn’t dare look at what lay further below the woman’s chest. She didn’t trust she’d manage to without vomiting herself.

“Where?” Mollie demanded. “Where is he?”

Mollie shook the arm of the woman. When her eyes snapped up Mollie felt her blood run cold. Empty glassy orbs of blue stared lifelessly back at her and Mollie felt the strands of her sanity began to unfurl.

She was gone.

She barely registered the sounds of the screaming infant. She was too busy trying to get a grip on her emotions. Only the sharp shake of Esperanza beside her snapped her out of her state of shock.

“He’s hungry Mollie,” Esperanza barked. “He needs milk.”

Mollie hesitated. The cries of the child had caused her breasts to leak. She could feel the wetness seeping through to dot her tunic.

Her breasts were so sore from feeding her own children. Mollie couldn’t.

She looked over to where Jelena lay – her red hair splayed out around her. Eyes dead, and body nothing more than a corpse.

“I...I can’t,” Mollie blubbered taking a step away from the old woman and the dead body. She couldn’t look after this child. Not when she knew what a monster its father was. “I can’t.”

The child cried in Esperanza’s arms – its hoarse little voice crackling. It was so *small*.

“Mollie.”

Cécily looked at her desperately.

Mollie looked at the red shrunken thing covered in blood as its screams began to gurgle and fade into a whisper of chokes. Mollie felt a surge of tears flow down her cheeks.

A boy. This poor child.

An orphan. That’s all it would be soon. It didn’t matter what titles it would have – prince – royal blood – heir. He was still an orphan. No amount of royalty would change that. An orphan like her.

When she looked down at the corpse of the former princess of the Lyon Empire – she knew deep down what she had to – not out of pity – not out of kindness – but as a duty from one mother to another.

Wordlessly she took the child from Esperanza and carefully untucked her tunic, bringing her left breast towards the child. It struggled to latch and Mollie guided it as best she could.

The child cried weakly in Mollie’s arms. Mollie doubted it would even last the next couple hours but still she tried to get it to feed. Eventually it latched and began to nurse – the familiar sensation of letdown simmering down Mollie’s chest.

The child gulped, draining what little milk she still had left in her breasts. The tears flowed silently – her shock not yet fully leaving her.

The doors opened behind her and Mollie could hear the sound of footsteps growing louder behind her.

Not now. *Please* not now.

“*Votre majesté*,” Cecily gasped standing up.

“Where is she?”

Micah’s voice was clipped and frigid. He was in no mood for any challenge. Mollie watched him flit past her only to pause and stare at the corpse of the woman on the bed. Only the dripping sound of her blood hitting the floor could be heard.

The winter prince cursed under his breath as he stared at the corpse before ordering the guards to take the body away. When he turned around to face Mollie she saw his feature twist into something that teetered on anger and pure revulsion. He froze for a second – as if the sight before him was something he never fathomed he’d ever witness. Before Mollie could even open her mouth Micah was already speaking.

“Get rid of it,” he sneered eyeing the thing in Mollie’s arms as if it were vermin.

Mollie cringed. The child was starving. She doubted it would survive even the next couple of hours. The least she could do was feed it.

“It’s not well Micah.” Mollie tried to reason with him but she could see the anger fuelling him from behind that impassive expression. “He’s hungry,” she explained hurriedly. This seemed to infuriate him even more and Mollie found herself falling silent rather quickly.

“Do you think...even for a second...if the roles were reversed...that the same courtesy would have been extended to *our son*?” He had walked over slowly, threateningly. Mollie felt her words die in her throat. Oh he was livid. She knew the answer was obvious. But she still knew he wanted to hear it coming from her lips. “Do you think...had you been lying here...that this woman would have fed the sustenance from her body for the child that you bore from *your* womb?”

The child sucked greedily from her—draining her breast which was already low on milk from having to feed her own babies...

“It didn’t ask to be born...” Mollie whispered.

His fists clenched.

“Get it out of my sight Mollie. Or I swear to *God*...”

Mollie didn’t wait for him to finish that statement. She clasped the child to her and scuttled out of the room. The baby whined at her breast – but Mollie knew she needed to act fast. There was absolutely no way the child could stay here. Mollie knew that. Micah was not one to forgive and she feared his anger would get the best of him. He saw no reason when it came to James. The child wasn’t safe around him. At least – not one with James’ blood running through its veins.

Mollie ran. She ran towards the bell tower outside the castle. She reached into her cloak for the soft blanket she often wrapped Maël in when she took him for walks. It was biting cold

outside and she wrapped the child thickly in the blanket and continued her trek up to the treacherous tower. She pushed her back against the stone – making sure to clutch the child safely in her arms. The bells chimed above her and Mollie sunk down to the ground and clutched her eyes closed.

The baby was quiet now and Mollie quickly smoothed her tunic over her sore chest. The infant stared up at Mollie – bright blue eyes burning into her own. It was the same shade as his older sisters. It looked at her almost knowingly and it made Mollie cry harder.

“It isn’t fair,” Mollie whispered down to it. Tears trailed down her cheeks. She knew it didn’t understand her. It had settled on placing its fingers near her chin and swiping. “Life didn’t start fair for you. But I’m going to give you a chance.” Her voice trembled as the sound of running footsteps could be heard in the distance. “I’m going to give you the same chance that I got.”

A flash of auburn hair was all Mollie caught sight of when she appeared on the crumbling steps of the ruined bell tower.

“It can’t stay here,” Mollie whispered monotonously. She wanted it out of her arms quickly. She didn’t even want to look at it too long.

“Mollie..” Araya’s voice came out choked. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t want to know what you do with it or where you take it,” Mollie mumbled. She didn’t let Araya interrupt her. “But just take it away from here and never bring it back.”

Araya lifted the child into her arms and Mollie used that opportunity to turn back and sprint back to the *Peréal* castle.

She didn’t look back.

Chapter End Notes

Translations in Order:

*Don't forget why you're still alive

*Whores

*It's enough now

*You don't know much I need you

Chapter 60: Tungstène

Chapter Summary

A wedding takes place and secrets slowly begin to unravel. Mollie confronts her enemies and *Peréal* prepares for war.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mollie was running. Her thighs burned and her throat ached from the ragged breaths she was gulping but she didn't stop. The fear gripping her chest was all but crushing her.

“Mollie!”

“Move. *Move!*”

Mollie pushed past the guards decorating the castle in preparation for the wedding and made a beeline for the West Wing.

She screamed when a firm grip tugged her arm from behind sending her careening backwards into a massive manly body.

“Christ, Mollie can you relax!” She trembled in fear when she turned – her wide amber eyes meeting exasperated blue ones. “Where have you been? What’s going on?”

“I have to check on the twins,” she whispered between unmoving lips.

Zephyr looked at her blankly.

“Why?”

Ignoring his question, she twisted herself out of his grip and continued to sprint even as he called after her. She could vaguely hear him following close behind but she couldn't care less.

When she burst through the halls of the nursery she was nearly faint from fear and her knees were quaking.

“Thank God,” she cried spotting Cécily sitting in a rocking chair next to the bassinet where both her babies lay on their stomachs gurgling to each other.

“*Princesse!*” Cécily said immediately, standing up. “Are you alright? You look ill.”

“We need to lock down the castle,” she whispered looking wildly around her. “He’s here. He could be anywhere...” She began to talk to herself in a frenzy as she paced the room, letting her anxiety consume her.

“Snap the fuck out of it Mollie.” She stiffened when Zephyr wrapped his large calloused fingers around her skinny shoulders. “The castle has been searched inside and out. The enemy hasn’t penetrated yet.”

“But Jelena-“

“She was half mad by the time she made it here Mollie,” Zephyr explained quietly. His grip softened and she allowed him to pull her closer. “She was probably seeing that fucker everywhere she looked.” Zephyr frowned. “The Outbacks have halted their advances just beyond the gates. They are *waiting* for the go ahead from James.”

Mollie tensed.

“And the guests?”

“Arrived early this morning,” Zephyr murmured quietly. “They won’t stay here longer than needed. They know we’re buying time.” His last words came out bitter and Mollie brushed her curls away from her face in defeat.

He brushed her cheek affectionately. “You should get ready,” the blond Lyon murmured. “The moment the vows are done – the guests are permitted to go and our temporary hold off on war is lifted.”

Mollie nodded slowly. Zephyr was correct...now wasn't the time to panic, but Mollie also knew how cunning James could be. And she wouldn't let the possibility that he hadn't yet crossed the boundaries of the castle leave her thoughts. She needed a plan of action.

“There is... one more thing I need to do,” she said softly. “I need you to cover for me.”

Zephyr raised an eyebrow. “Cover for you? Should I be concerned?”

“Even if I told you not to be you still would.”

Zephyr chuckled. “All true words.” He gave her a crooked smile before dropping his hand from her shoulder. “Don’t worry about his royal iciness. I’ll keep him occupied.”

Mollie grinned and whistled sharply.

“*Theo viens ici,*” she whispered harshly.

The wolf growled at her disapprovingly, as if knowing what Mollie was doing would be frowned upon by her master.

“Well you came this far didn’t you?” she muttered at the animal. With a deep throaty growl the snow white Wolamute padded softly behind her – the sharp senses of the predator on high alert.

"Mollie..."

She turned around watching Zephyr shift uncomfortably before her. "Try not to be late...for the wedding I mean. God knows this has been a shitshow since the start...but the last thing you want is the future queen to show up late for her brothers wedding."

"I'll try my best," she said with a half smile. "Come on wolf," she muttered under her breath. "Lead the way."

The chill in the air was sharp enough to cut through steel.

Esperanza observed through glassy eyes as the Marchesseault guards barricaded the grand entrance of their castle. The bolts of the various locks echoed loudly through the corridors and the sound of weapons and sharpening blades replaced the usual rush of the flowing creek and chirps of the animals that would graze along the forests edge. Esperanza hadn't seen animals other than the vultures since she had arrived. They feasted on what other detritus was left behind from the last massacre of the Outbacks.

Esperanza closed her eyes tightly. If *Peréal* didn't fall to James tonight, then it surely would when Hartley arrived. He would take it like he did all the southern villages that were formerly independent nations.

"Foolish girl," she whispered.

Esperanza understood Mollie's stubborn stance as well as the pressure that fell on her to preserve the integrity of the kingdom and maintain the Marchesseault Empire. But her refusal to negotiate with the Outbacks could cost them. There were simply too many and the *Peréal* guard had taken a bad hit ever since Alexandre and his army were slaughtered by James Lyon. Even with Micah's army from the North, it would take a miracle.

Esperanza had lived a long time and had seen many wars. But this...this was something she never could have foreseen.

"It's too late," she said quietly to herself as she paced the ballroom turned wedding venue. Elio was already escorting guests into the room and Esperanza recognized many faces sitting stony faced in the crowd. Esperanza found the entire thing quite comical. Alexandre had completed several favours for many kingdoms over the course of his reign and many were indebted to him. His final request before his death was for the attendance of these guests in a time when he needed them most. This was that moment and it could not be refused by those kingdoms in spite of the gloomy war that hung above the empire. These guests were not pleased, but Esperanza knew deep down they had no choice. They had to abide by the code.

Rowan stood against the back wall, gloved hands clasped tightly in front of him. He was dressed as many had decided to – in all black. Although he wore his infamous dark cloak around him Esperanza could see the irritation in his eyes. The ballroom was a strict no weapons zone and everyone was required to leave all of their swords, blades and weapons in

a separate room upon entry. Esperanza however wondered if Rowan had a couple tricks up his sleeve to evade that rule.

Esperanza struggled to appreciate the beauty of the venue, considering what lay just beyond its walls was the exact opposite. It was all an illusion and Esperanza was exhausted with it all. The chandelier sparkled and the rosy champagne tower in the middle of the enormous room glittered beneath the candlelight. The guests began to wander in and Esperanza could practically feel their discomfort. It was suffocating and heavy, like osmosis in an overfilled salty pond.

She breathed in deeply and smoothed her black dress. One more army would serve them well after Caine married the Menestratten girl. But Esperanza doubted the army would make it to *Pereal* in time. What may be left may only be ruins.

She spotted Elio ushering guests in and smoothing his rich red vest down as he sighed.

“Did you do another sweep of the castle?” she whispered quietly taking several steps toward the man. Elio regarded her with a frown.

“I have guards on every floor and they scour the halls outside of this ballroom as we speak.” His eyes darkened. “He is not here.” Esperanza knew he was referring to James but his assurances did little to placate her. It seemed the princess felt the same way. She spotted Caius enter the room next followed by Araya, Zephyr, Isaac and Joël. With surprise Esperanza noticed that Caius held onto his wife’s arm tightly. Esperanza frowned. She couldn’t stand Isla Lyon since her days in Questershire and Esperanza was quite surprised to see the bitch was still alive.

Esperanza was surprised to see Zephyr Lyon standing tall next to his father in a smart tuxedo that hugged his figure in a flattering way. It was the first time Esperanza had seen him in anything other than his usual war attire. He looked almost regal. *Almost*.

Everyone had taken their places and Esperanza shuffled towards her place near the guests and checked the time. Cécily would be long gone at this point - having taken the twins far away to the secret safehouse. It was far too dangerous to keep them within the walls of the castle.

When the doors opened next Esperanza felt the room fall silent.

Micah Lyon stood at the entrance, his arm wrapped tightly around his wife - the Princess of *Peréal*. If they lived long enough to see the evening of tomorrow Mollie’s new title would officially be Queen of *Peréal*.

Micah’s expression was utterly blank as he walked arm in arm with Mollie, who in spite of her divine beauty appeared stoic and cold. She wore a blood red gown that complemented her bronzed skin. Her hair had been pinned up into a slick updo with several loose curls that framed her delicate features. She looked mature as she walked alongside the prince. Everyone in the room rose and bowed deeply when the two entered including Rowan and the Insurgency members. Esperanza bowed deeply and rose slowly.

Esperanza saw Mollie lock eyes with Phillip Aurelio and she saw him shoot her a sly wink. Mollie kept her gaze down before opting to gently murmur something to Micah. The orchestra began to play and the wedding was in motion. Everyone rose as Elio opened the doors once again.

Caine Marchesseault walked in slowly. He wore his formal royal attire that consisted of red and gold colours and a long red cloak that shimmered against his sunkissed skin. His fawn coloured hair had been gelled and neatly parted to accentuate his features. He looked so young and Esperanza could see the hesitation in every step he took towards the platform.

He was a child. No more than seventeen.

By the time Caine stood on the platform, the doors had opened once again to where Tamzin Menestratten stood alongside a guard of her kingdom. Her gown was exceedingly extravagant with a train that extended down the hall and a veil threaded with various designs of lace and glittering sparkles. Her ice blond locks had been delicately curled and rested against the blinding white of her dress.

Caine blinked several times before he straightened his posture and stood staring in awe at his future bride.

Esperanza smiled to herself. The boy didn't look quite so disappointed anymore.

Mollie shifted in her seat. She could feel a droplet of sweat trickle down the back of her neck and she squirmed in her seat trying to calm her nerves. Quickly a pale hand curled around her knee through the slit of her dress.

*“Es-tu prête?”**

Mollie looked up into Micah's clear green eyes. His expression remained placid but Mollie knew he was ready for anything.

“Yes,” she said coolly. “I am.”

The vows were quick and by the time the couple had stepped down from the platform for their first dance many guests joined them at the centre of the ballroom beneath the ornate chandelier. Micah said little to her after that and Mollie was grateful. She didn't think she'd be able to lie to him anymore than she had, especially regarding the necklace. He knew she was hiding something but for the first time since the two had met, Mollie hadn't given in to his pressure.

As the music played on in the background, Mollie blinked and trembled with the sudden realization that she would never get something like this. The ring that glistened on her finger was nothing to be celebrated.

She looked at the crowd before her, an array of bustling fabrics, delicate silks, and a kaleidoscope of rich colours and patterns that exuded wealth and extravagance. She had

always believed that having access to these things would have made her the happiest girl in the world one day. Days spent coddling beneath tattered tartan rugs and catching rainfall in buckets flashed through her mind. Those memories were fading quickly and Mollie dug deep through the recesses of her memories to preserve them. She didn't want to forget – she didn't want to lose who she was. She hoped she hadn't already...

“Mollie Mae?”

Mollie blinked. The coldness of Micah's skin against hers thrust her back into the world around her.

Micah watched her carefully, silently- meticulously.

She watched Phillip Aurelio kiss his wife tenderly against the cheek before glancing back at Mollie from across the room, before slipping outside into the atrium of the castle.

“I have to go,” she whispered quietly, breaking free from her husbands grasp.

“Wait for me for one moment... please?”

Mollie froze.

She felt Micah lean toward her, his scent, his presence surrounding her like a shadow on the cusp of dawn. Princes didn't make requests. Micah didn't ask permission from anybody.

He reached down and lifted something heavy, ornate, and jeweled. It made Mollie's stomach flip and she stilled as Micah draped her yellow cloak around her, taking his time to tighten it over her skinny shoulders. He adjusted the curls around her face and smiled at her.

“Izabel would have been honoured,” he murmured. “To have you carry a part of her around with you as you reign as queen of an empire.”

Mollie blinked, her fingers and toes tingling as Micah leaned forward to press a tender kiss against her jaw. The cool leather of his gloves sent shivers down her spine and she stilled when he pressed his fingers against her necklace.

“You...more than me.”

Micah's brow furrowed and Mollie dropped her gaze. She felt Micah's grip on her tighten ever so slightly.

"What do you mean by that?" His voice had gone hollow.

"Micah, you are the smartest person I know," Mollie murmured. "I think you've known for a while. You just haven't come to terms with it yet."

His grip loosened and she used that moment to make a headline for the exit, ignoring the lingering stares from the guests. Mollie covered ground fast in spite of her heels and when she slipped into the parlour she met the dark eyes of Phillip Aurelio.

“You’re running out of time.” His deep baritone voice sent vibrations through Mollie’s body.

“Caine is married,” she managed between breaths. “We have the *Devonis* army.”

“It won’t be enough Mollie,” Phillip said more forcefully. “The Outbacks are on your back and front door. They are breaking down the gates as we speak. They’ll be into the castle within the hour.”

Mollie felt the blood rush through her ears.

“The guests,” she gasped.

“Prince Micah is on it,” Phillip said quietly. “The minute you were to follow me out of the ballroom doors him and Rowan are to shuffle the guests through the smuggler’s tunnel and out to the nearest safe house. The same one that Cécily used to get the little heirs out earlier today.”

“He could have told me that,” Mollie muttered with annoyance.

“No,” Phillip responded. “You had other things of greater importance to see to. This is *your* kingdom. Not the Lyon prince’s. It is up to you to protect it as he would do if it were the North.” Phillip sighed as he reached for something deep within his elaborate silk robes. “This belongs to you.”

Mollie watched as Phillip handed her back the gem that he had taken from her during their first encounter.

“You held your end of the deal. But you need that navy now more than ever.” Mollie looked up at him in surprise.

“You brought the navy here?” Phillip’s gaze darkened.

“This war isn’t just about *Peréal*. It involves us all. James wouldn’t have stopped here and every empire knows it.” He leaned closer. “I haven’t just brought the navy Rowan gave to you, but the navy of the Rineaux’s as well as my very own.”

“The Rineaux’s?” Mollie whispered.

“You underestimate your skills princess,” Phillip said with a smile. “She believes in you. As do I and much of the guests who came to your aid today.”

Mollie felt a course of emotions run through her, but she still knew at the back of her mind that the threat was still a very real and prevalent issue.

“But I fear it still won’t be enough Phillip. James may have already breached our premises and Hartley...”

Phillip’s expression softened. “This is *your* turf now Mollie. You hold the advantage, regardless of what any of these Lyons tell you. That is your greatest advantage. Not all is lost.” He stepped closer and gently ran his finger over the icy necklace around her throat.

Mollie's heart race quickened.

"I can't give this up Phillip," she murmured clutching the iridium in her fingers. "But I also can't let *Peréal* fall to Hartley's reign."

"If I may princess, what is the weakness of every Lyon?" He raised an eyebrow. "You know them better than anyone else I daresay."

Mollie looked up into his deep brown eyes. "Pride."

"Indeed. Hartley won't refuse your invitation. I guarantee you. He thinks you are weak. Let him believe it. Let him believe he has the upper hand. Nothing hurts a prideful man more than humiliation." He stepped closer to her. "Remember what I told you Mollie. Know *what* to leverage and *when* to leverage it."

With a stiff nod, the King of Beacon Cape bowed and left the room swiftly.

Mollie began to pace. These moments were critical but Mollie couldn't help but think about a single thing that didn't make sense. If James *had* broken down the gates and had already infiltrated the North and South gates...why hadn't he launched an attack yet? Mollie paused. Unless...

Could it be?

Mollie felt her blood run cold. Of course. She stopped her pacing and began to run – straight for her father's grand chambers – to the very same place she entered upon her arrival to the *Peréal* castle.

Of course he wouldn't come with the rest of the guests. And of course his entrance wouldn't be predictable. Hartley was an eccentric and treacherous man and would plan his arrival on his own terms. Mollie anticipated an entrance – but she didn't *quite* anticipate the magnitude... nor the intrepidity of it.

When she burst through the doors of the throne room she felt her knees tremble and her throat go dry.

He was there. Lounging in the rich red velvet of her father's throne, his legs elegantly crossed and a shimmering crystal goblet of cognac held within pale fingers. Black eyes the colour of coal landed on her the minute she entered and Mollie felt as if she had the eyes of Medusa on her – her body as stiff and unmoving as stone.

She shouldn't be shocked. She invited him after all. But still – his presence frightened her – it always had.

His sharp features glistened among the candlelit throne giving him a shadowy menacing aura. His dark hair was rich and glossy in spite of the specks of gray that peppered the luscious strands. He was a handsome man – but as Mollie stared at him now she couldn't have imagined how she had ever confused him with Caius. The coldness in this man was incomparable. It was inhumane.

“For a moment there, I truly believed you wouldn’t come,” Hartley Lyon chuckled. “But you figured it out, clever girl.” He clapped for her and Mollie felt her insides churn. She couldn’t tell if he was mocking her or praising her.

She had always had Micah there around in Hartley's presence. But now that she was alone with him she felt naked and vulnerable. And her sword. Mollie swallowed. It was resting there beside Hartley and she watched him watch her glance over it. It made his smile widen.

“You have brought several gifts for me,” Hartley drawled, bringing the goblet to his lips. “A sword of wolfsbane and that beautiful thing around your neck. These are much better gifts than Alexandre has ever offered me,” he continued with a chuckle. “Besides the cognac of course.”

“What are you waiting for?” Mollie asked between gritted teeth. “There is a reason you haven’t launched your attack yet.”

“Straight to the point?” Hartley chuckled. “I like that. I myself never fancied the prelude but I am a strict adherer to protocol.” His cold dark eyes gave her a once over. “But seeing as you deviate from protocol in more ways than I can count I am not surprised in the slightest.”

Mollie knew a great insult was buried behind his words but she didn’t care.

“I like the colour by the way,” he mused turning his eyes back to his goblet and giving the glass a cool twirl. “The same colour my son dressed you in the first day you joined us for dinner.” His eyes met her once again. “The colour of a true Marchesseault.”

Mollie’s throat tightened. So he *had* looked her way that night.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Hartley chuckled. “I caught you peeking that night.”

“You don’t scare me,” Mollie growled. “Not then and not now.”

Hartley smiled. “That happens later,” he said with a brush of his hand. “I don’t intend to scare anyone upon first meeting them. That would take the fun out of it all wouldn’t it?” He sighed and rested his elegant gloved fingers on his knee. He suddenly looked at her beneath those long lashes. “How is married life treating you by the way? I do hope Micah is being a gentleman. You let me know if he isn’t and I’ll sort him out.”

Mollie eyed him hatefully, the emotions buried deep within her bubbling up to the surface like magma at the tip of eruption.

“I know what it is you want,” Mollie spat. “I won't give it to you.”

“Hush child,” Hartley waved her off like a mere pest. “You will and quite easily. You will do so voluntarily and of your own vocation. You love your dear kingdom too much.” He gave her a wicked smile. “I know how much you have sacrificed for it... which is why I have asked James to spare it...at least for the time being.” He stood up suddenly prompting Mollie to take on a defensive pose. Hartley ignored it and continued to speak and walk towards the massive wine cabinet on the same elevated platform where the throne stood. “Everything that

happens from here on out depends on *your* choices my dear. You can choose to maintain the integrity of *Peréal*...or you can choose...*not* to.” He laughed. “It is all up to you-”

“I invited you here,” Mollie hissed. “I get to set the rules. Not you.”

It happened so quickly Mollie didn’t even see it coming. In seconds a crystal glass hit her shoulder – the impact like a knife through her skin. She screamed – the glass cutting into her exposed flesh like a knife through a sponge cake. She crumpled – pulling the shards out of her shoulder as she whimpered in pain. His aim was spot on.

“Please don’t interrupt me again.”

The sudden shift from the colloquial nature of the conversation to what just happened made Mollie stare up in horror. The blood trickled down her shoulder – warm and fresh to seep into the fabric of her dress of the same colour. It *hurt*.

“It brings me no pleasure to see this rich empire crumble to the ground which is why I have told James to hold off on his attack. It would be a shame – too much waste. The riches of this land are simply too precious to desecrate. Rather – I intend to make this Lyon land and extend my empire overseas.” He looked at her crumpled on the ground again. “Which is what I am offering you. I will allow *Peréal* to remain untarnished if you agree to make it Lyon land. Seeing as you already married my son that won’t be hard for you to do of your own will. No contract would be needed.”

Mollie rose to her feet slowly, her shoulder throbbing as she picked out the last pieces of glass from her arm. His aim was deliberate and she winced as she moved it. This would greatly hinder her battle abilities and she cursed the man in front of her. Her father would turn in his grave if Mollie agreed to his demands. She felt despair begin to blossom in her gut.

“If that is all I’m sure we can come to some kind of....agreement.” Her tone was blunt in spite of the pain she was in.

Hartley adjusted his cloak and admired the jewels on his fingers.

“I’ll need that necklace also.” His tone wasn’t so colloquial anymore and Mollie felt her blood run cold. It no longer sounded like a negotiation.

“And what do I get in return for that?” she said softly.

“I think you know,” Hartley said, matching the softness of her tone.

Mollie shifted her weight ignoring the throbbing pain in her shoulder.

“I so desired a grandson...as you are aware.” His blank lifeless eyes made her blood grow cold. “It can be so cruel to keep family members apart isn’t it my dear? You know exactly what that can be like... don’t you?” Hartley turned around and Mollie braced herself. Nausea bubbled in her stomach and Mollie felt light headed. “You are wise beyond your years. Don’t be foolish. Think about your children. If you refuse me...I will have no choice but to let

James have his way with you.” He sighed almost fondly making Mollie tremble. “And my eldest is a bit...passionate when it comes to killing. Not sure where he got that from.”

“He’s in the castle,” Mollie said between unmoving lips.

“Oh yes,” Hartley murmured. “Has been for some time now.” His cold eyes held not a hint of emotion as he spoke. “Normally I don’t make a trip overseas for... anyone. But considering the invitation it was quite a surprise. But that’s not the only reason why.” He smiled at her and Mollie watched as he walked over to one of his men who reached behind him – a bundle in his arms.

Mollie froze. The bundle....could it be?

Her stomach rolled in dread and sweat began to drip down her back like a cold icy trail.

No. It was impossible. It was *impossible*.

Hartley’s smile widened and Mollie realized with a horrible lurch that her worst nightmare had come to fruition.

Mollie’s eyes snapped back to the hallway behind the throne where the unmistakable body of her lady in waiting lay mangled. The corpse disfigured past the point of recognition.

“You gave me a grandson...an heir,” Hartley said with a wide smile. He rocked the bundle in his arms and Mollie felt faint. This monster – this killer had her son in his grasp. Mollie couldn’t bear it. “I didn’t think you’d come in particularly useful,” Hartley continued to muse as her son lay wide eyed and quiet in his grandfather’s arms. “But you came through. I told Micah you would.” He glanced briefly up at her. “He refused at first – my stubborn youngest. He insisted you weren’t a Marchesseault – that you were not of royal blood.” He smiled. “But all was confirmed when Ophélie came to pay me a visit. That shut him up real fast.”

“Maël was born here,” Mollie said softly. She chose her words carefully. “He is not a true Lyon.”

Hartley’s smile tightened but his façade remain uninterrupted.

“A true Lyon,” he murmured staring down at her son with nothing but blankness in his eyes. “You’ll see how true to the throne he will be. I will make sure of it.”

The maternal instinct in Mollie wanted her to break down and weep for her son. It wanted her to scream and thrash and pry the pale fingers of the monster in front of her from the delicate softness of her baby son.

But she had to put her emotions aside. It was almost as if she could feel Micah’s lips against her ear now -- his cologne in the air—his soft curls brushing the back of her neck.

Emotions cloud even the most sound mind Mollie Mae. Compartmentalize it and let logic lead the way.

She blinked, letting any thoughts of fear and anguish settle in the pit of her stomach. She had to play it smart. She had to think like a Lyon.

“Micah and I are married,” she said softly meeting Hartley’s dead cold gaze. “If that entitles him to my throne then I am just as much entitled to his.” She dropped her hand from her shoulder where she had slowly been holding her wound. “And that entitles Maël to choose where he will decide to domicile when he comes of age.”

Hartley smirked but Mollie could sense an irritation within it. Even now, he gave Mollie brief cold glances – almost as if he believed staring at her too long would lower his status.

“When he comes of age,” Hartley chuckled. “That’s a long time to wait my dear. He is too young to make that choice now.”

“Exactly,” Mollie challenged. “And according to the Royal Code it is the parents who decide for him.”

“Ah yes,” Hartley grinned. “The father.” Mollie swallowed the lump in her throat. “And what do you think my dear son will decide?” Hartley’s smile widened as his pacing on the platform came to slow stop. “It is a moment of truth is it not?”

“You under estimate him.”

“Oh no,” Hartley countered shifting her son in his arms. “You *over* estimate him.”

“Your Grace,” said his guard with a deep bow. “They are halfway through the tunnels. Should we attack?”

Hartley turned towards Mollie, a smile on his face.

“You wanted to hold all the cards didn’t you Princess?” He lifted the arm that wasn’t holding her son open -- almost as if it was invitation. “Welcome to the life of a royal.” He chuckled darkly. “It isn’t as fun as it looks is it. Especially when lives are at stake.” He looked at her coldly. Brazenly. “Perhaps you shouldn’t be so quick to judge hm?”

Sweat trickled down Mollie’s neck and her nausea blossomed in full force. Everything was going wrong. All those months of planning and training flashed before her mind. She had to do something. She had to act now.

“*Peréal* will... merge with Lyon land,” she said through trembling unmoving lips. “Just let them pass. Let them all pass.”

Hartley smiled. “Very good. See that wasn’t so hard was it?”

He handed Maël to the guard on his right and approached Mollie slowly.

“And the necklace?”

Mollie met his eye brazenly. She locked in the look of those dark cold irises on her own and felt a thousand years of hatred and anger surge through her. Anger for what he did to the

people of Questershire, Chartery, Riverton and every other place he took for his own. Anger for what he did to her grandparents – her father – Micah.

“It’s yours on a single condition.”

Hartley raised an eyebrow

“I beat your eldest son in a challenge.”

Hartley was quiet for a long moment, his expression never wavered. A smile played at the corners of his lips.

“I accept.” The tone was deep and familiar and Mollie felt her skin prickle as a figure entered from far behind Hartley Lyon. He was the same as he always was. The same fear that elicited in Mollie the first time she laid her eyes on him began to creep down her spine once again. That handsome jaw line was locked and in his eyes was a murderous glare.

“I accept your challenge.”

“I’ll need my sword,” Mollie managed between gritted teeth, her eyes locked on the eldest Lyon.

“*Bien sûr,*” Hartley said with a glint in his eye.

Mollie watched him approach the platform of her late father and remove his sword – now hers— from its casing.

Mollie’s gaze never left James’s not even when Hartley took a jewel from each of their daggers and stepped back to lounge in the throne. Mollie’s shoulder was carefully wrapped by her guards who stared at her with a mix of fear and longing. Mollie knew that look. They didn’t think she’d make it.

“We’ll take a recourse before we proceed?” Hartley said with a grin. “I’m sure what few guests we have left are dying for some entertainment. I know I am.”

Mollie knew it was a matter of time before her door would be broken down but she never expected it to fully come breaking down.

“I have two minds to kill you my fucking self.”

Mollie took a deep breath as her private quarters flooded with a familiar sea of faces. Many of which made Mollie want to break down right then and there.

“Did the guests make it to the safe house?”

Mollie questioned immediately. She ignored the heaving chest of Zephyr who stood by the door he had broken down with his fists clenched by his side.

Araya threw her arms around Mollie making her wince as she squeezed her wounded shoulder.

“Jesus Mollie I’m sorry,” Araya mumbled opting to place her palms on Mollie’s cheeks instead. “The guests made it there and the passage has been closed off. Good work holding Hartley and his army off.”

“It wasn’t me,” Mollie mumbled back. “Hartley knew about the passage. If I hadn’t challenged James, I fear he would have launched an attack on all of those innocent people.”

“You give him too much credit as usual,” Araya quipped. “He was bluffing Mollie. That passage was guarded by Rowan, Micah, and Phillip. There was no way Hartley was touching those guests. He would have forced a challenge between you and James regardless. You bringing it up before he could was a brilliant move. Not to mention you stalled him long enough for us to regroup.”

“You don’t have to fight him,” Zephyr interjected. “We’ll do that for you. You just focus on getting Maël back to safety.”

“No,” Mollie said lowly. “I am going to fight him.” Her fists clenched. “I want to fight him.”

“No you aren’t.”

“I am,” she insisted with a frown. “I challenged him and a Marchesseault never backs away from a challenge.”

“I’m not going to watch you get torn to pieces by that fucking psychopath Mollie!” Zephyr shouted.

“Don’t you trust me?” Mollie screamed back. “You’re supposed to trust in your pupil as much as they are supposed to trust in their mentor!” Zephyr recoiled immediately. His expression faltered. “You trained me. I can do this.” She closed her eyes as she whispered her next words. “I need you to trust me.”

The room had gone silent, the faces of Isaac, Joël and Araya -- her family looking to her.

“I trust you Mollie.” She opened her eyes, holding back the trail of tears that threatened to burst through her lids. “I trust you...so much. Words can’t even begin to describe the faith that I have in you.”

It was all she needed to hear before she ran to him and embraced him till her shoulders ached and her chest heaved against his.

“I have always trusted you,” Mollie whispered as she hugged him tighter.

“I know.”

When she let go she felt him wipe a stray tear from her cheek with his calloused thumb.

"But I also made a promise that I can't let go. And that was that I will be the one to avenge Viv."

Mollie stepped back, dropping her arms from around the blond Lyon.

"One of James' most powerful weapons is that wolf," she muttered. "We'll need to keep it as far away from James as possible."

"Leave that to us," Zephyr muttered.

"Mollie."

Mollie looked up to see a slightly dishevelled Caius appearing before her. In seconds she was squeezed into his embrace.

"Caius," she whispered returning the embrace.

"I've been waiting a long time for this day," said the blond haired man with a grim look. "I'm done hiding in the shadows. It's time to reclaim what should have rightfully gone to me." He squeezed her hand comfortingly as Araya finished the elaborate braid she had done for Mollie. The familiar feel of Ophian clothing on her skin was no longer stretchy and uncomfortable. It was flexible and molded to Mollie's frame perfectly.

"Remember everything we taught you and you will prevail." He smiled at her warmly. "I promise you."

"I'm not afraid Caius."

"You wouldn't have gotten this far if you were your majesty." He gave her a quick wink and carefully clutched the long steel sword in his hand. "Mollie deals with James. Hartley is mine. He isn't to leave that throne room under *any* circumstances. Are we clear?"

"What about Maël?" Mollie quickly asked, clutching her own sword in her hand. "Maybe Micah--"

"Micah cannot be trusted," Caius said sharply. "Not when his father is in such close proximity to him. My brother's influence is too strong."

Mollie remembered what Hartley told her. She felt her stomach lurch.

And what do you think my dear son will decide?

"I'll be there to take Maël when the time is right," Isaac volunteered stepping forward. "I don't fear Hartley."

"No," Mollie said sharply. She turned to the one person she knew she could trust. Someone with an integrity so pure and genuine that it made her trust him from the moment she saw him.

"Joël will do it."

“Of course your majesty,” he said with a bow stepping forward. “No harm will come to the little prince.”

She nodded before clutching the iridium tightly around her neck. The ice cold feeling against her nimble fingers gave her comfort. She turned to Araya.

“Tell Elio to launch the attack,” she said fiercely. “Tonight. We go to war.”

The sound of rain beating on the walls of the Marchesseault castle reverberated through the walls like fists against a drum. It echoed and cried as if the castle itself was aware of the predicament that loomed above it.

The walk towards the throne room had never felt longer to Mollie whose long strides seemed indeterminable as she approached the familiar heavy wooden doors before her.

Mollie closed her eyes and thought of her children. Little Maël with his blond curls and Rue with her chestnut curls and dimpled cheeks. She thought of her father with his safe commandeering presence and her mother with a courage she could only wish to have.

The moment the doors opened Mollie felt the faintest brush of something soft sweep past her legs. She looked down and smiled.

“I knew you’d warm up to me eventually,” she whispered to the white beast that purred as it looked up at her with eyes so blue it could challenge the glacial sea.

The room was filled with a crowd as expected -- but Mollie walked in alone. Her company was that of Hartley Lyon and his eldest son on the elevated platform, surrounded on the ground floor by a crowd of Outbacks. The Outbacks snarled and taunted her as she walked through them but her eyes never left the coal black eyes of James who smiled at her from the moment she entered.

“Come,” she snarled under her breath. She reached for one of the stones in her dagger and tossed it onto the platform before her. She lifted her sword up defensively and steadied her balance. “I have something to show you.”

As James drew his own decorated dagger from beneath his jet black cloak Mollie couldn’t help but notice its heaviness and ornate details. She was so entranced with it that she missed the sound of the doors to the grand chamber opening.

“I bet you do,” James said with a sick smile. His clenched teeth stiffened his words and Mollie braced herself. “I never took you for the sadistic type Mollie,” he said mockingly. “But you sure showed it when you gutted my wife like a pig for slaughter.”

“She had it coming.”

Mollie froze as that deep husky voice permeated over the shouts of the Outbacks and the growls of the one – no – two Wolamutes that now stood in a defensive position beside their respective owners.

Mollie's head snapped up. Before her were Micah and Rowan, their cloaks billowing behind them as they stared stone faced in front of the doors to the grand chamber. Behind them stood the Insurgency, their faces stoic and their expressions vengeful. Mollie never thought she'd live long enough to see Micah and Zephyr stand on the same side- then again Mollie realized she may have *just* lived long enough to see it happen.

"Now isn't this a sight," James said mockingly. He curled his lip in disgust.

Mollie eyed Joël who stood closest to the door. She locked eyes with him. He nodded to her slowly as if to reassure her that he knew of the plan. Mollie realized that the timing of the Lyon princes and the Insurgency was strategic. She looked down realizing that Theo had left her side at the precise moment her master entered. It wasn't to be by her side – it was to keep her a certain distance from the platform.

She turned her gaze to Zephyr who purposefully avoided eye contact and with annoyance she realized the obvious. That they had no intention of letting her fight to begin with.

"So that's what you chose."

Mollie looked up to the platform where James had turned to regard his brothers. His expression was still one of disgust but his voice betrayed him. Mollie could hear the loss in it – the most minute slice of astonishment that lay within its layers.

"It was never about sides," Rowan said calmly. He turned to his father at the same moment the Outbacks began to shout and thrash their axes to the ground.

"Ah," Hartley said with a smile from the throne. "All of my sons together again. What a special moment." He barely glanced over at Rowan and Micah but instead sipped on a blood red liquid within his goblet. He didn't acknowledge the Insurgency that stood behind them. "Rowan. Micah. Come forward."

Mollie watched as the two princes walked forward and bowed before their father. She felt sick to her stomach.

"Clever of you two to use my own army against me," he chuckled as the two princes straightened their stances before the King. "Audacious. Admirable. But still foolish." He narrowed his eyes. His voice dropped an octave lower and Mollie felt a chill go down her spine as Hartley spoke his next words. "*Tu as vraiment cru que tu pouvais me tromper?*"

His eyes were boring into Micah whose face had paled.

"James and I have unfinished business."

"*Mauvais!*"

Hartley threw his glass to the ground with an ear splitting shatter that sent Mollie scrambling several steps backwards. The shards scattered around both princes who maintained their composure. Clearly they both knew this was coming.

"You and *I* have unfinished business Micah." Hartley snarled, flexing his gloved fingers.

“Mollie, stand back.”

Mollie was pulled backwards as Elio appeared from behind her to bring her closer to her guards.

“Wait what’s happening?” Mollie gasped. Anxiety was blossoming in her gut.

She watched frightened, as Hartley walked down the steps of her father’s platform towards his two sons. The expression on his face was enough to make Mollie want to vomit in fear.

“Step aside Rowan,” Hartley murmured.

Rowan hesitated before walking to the other side of the room to stand with Hartley’s men, all of whom regarded the prince with unconcealed disdain. As if Rowan knew what was coming he clutched Theodora from behind. She resisted, attempting to snap and growl but a sharp bark from her brother Paris had her whimpering before hanging her head low. Hartley turned towards Mollie and the Insurgency who had moved to stand by Mollie’s side.

“You will all watch this,” he said lowly before shooting a particularly venomous glare at his youngest son. Mollie watched the smile appear on James’ face as a guard from Hartley’s side came to stand beside the winter prince.

Mollie felt a horrible lurch in her stomach.

“Kneel.”

Micah’s expression was utterly blank as he slowly knelt before his father and the guard.

“Seven. For turning your back on your duty as a Lyon.”

Mollie watched in horror as the guard harshly removed the layers of clothing from the winter prince before revealing his exposed ravaged back to all. Before Mollie could react chain to skin was met with a sickening slap that had Mollie gasping.

“Stop him!” Mollie gasped. She pushed against the restraints of Elio who shushed her.

“It is not our place to interfere,” he told her quietly. “We need as much time to stall as we can. Gibbs is bringing the Devonis army here from the East. The longer we delay the better it will be for *Peréal*.”

When it was over she watched the winter prince rise slowly. The pale skin of his back was raw and decorated with lacerations, the blood seeping down his back like wet paint on a blank canvas. She couldn’t imagine the pain he was enduring as he slowly put on each article of clothing once again, eventually ending with his thick navy cape. He didn’t make a sound – not once through each beating.

“Now may we proceed?”

Mollie could hear the husky voice of Micah. He spoke through gritted teeth – probably to conceal the pain of what he had just endured.

“There is little to discuss,” Hartley said off-handedly. “The princess and I have come to an agreement.”

“It means nothing without my approval.”

Hartley smiled and turned his dark lifeless eyes to Mollie’s. He gestured for her to come forward. She felt Elio release her, albeit reluctantly.

“Micah,” Mollie murmured stepping towards the prince. He shrugged her off immediately, giving her a venomous glare.

“Princess. Are you ready?”

“No,” Micah snarled. “James and I have unfinished affairs. That must be met *before* he engages with anybody else.”

Hartley stared at Micah coldly. “Is that so?”

James laughed. “So this is it baby brother? You’ve finally grown a pair and are prepared to die before me.” He unsheathed his sword – pure venom in his eyes as he rested them on the winter prince. “It’s about time.”

“No,” Mollie whispered. “You can’t Micah. You’re wounded – it’s not a fair fight.”

“*Déplacez* Mollie,” he hissed pushing her aside.

Mollie watched in horror as Micah unsheathed his icy sword, his arm shaky from his wounds and prepared to engage in battle. She couldn’t help but feel as if this was planned. That Hartley purposely wounded his youngest son to give James the upper hand.

Mollie did the only thing she could. Shoving off the prying hands of Elio she ran to the other side of the room and clutched at the arm of the only other person who could help.

“Rowan,” she gasped. “You have to stop this. You have to do something.”

Rowan barely glanced her way. Even when he spoke to her his voice was level and his expression cool. “This was a long time coming Mollie. It’s not for any of us to interfere.”

Mollie just stared in shock. “But he’s hurt. Micah’s hurt,” she insisted.

“I’m sorry do you want me to stitch him up and give his bruises a kiss?” Rowan seethed. “My brother knows what he’s doing. Unfortunately I can’t say the same for you.”

“I have a plan,” Mollie quipped. “I just need some time. Why else do you think this is still around my neck?”

Rowan looked down at her briefly before returning his dark brown eyes back to his brothers who stood before each other spitting venom.

“Sheer dumb luck I would argue,” Rowan drawled.

"How can Hartley give James the upper hand like this?" Mollie questioned, ignoring Rowan's cheeky remark. "How can he favour one son over the other so...blatantly," she trailed off.

She heard Rowan chuckle lowly. "I thought you would have figured out by now why Hartley did what he did."

Mollie looked up at Rowan blankly. Her heart was pumping so fast she could hear its wild beats within her ears.

"My father wasn't giving James the upper hand. He did what he did to make the fight even." He looked down at her with eyes so cold it very nearly matched that of the man who stood before them on the platform. "Wouldn't be much of a fight if baby brother was all shiny and new would it?"

Chapter End Notes

I missed writing this story :'). Three chapters left. We're so close.

Chapter 61: Rhénium Part I

Chapter Summary

The Battle Part I: Secrets unravel between the Marchesseaults and the Lyons as the final battle comes to fruition.

Chapter Notes

See my Tumblr page for further details. Happy Holidays to you all xoxo

His Grace was in full control.

Esperanza couldn't help but cower in fear at the spectacle before her. But she couldn't do anything. Not a damn thing. Mollie had quickly slipped out of the room and Esperanza watched one of the Insurgency members sneak off somewhere behind the platform where His Grace stood. Rowan had gone carefully stoic – as if he were waiting for something more to happen.

The guests had made it out safely but Esperanza had yet to reunite with Cécily who had taken little princess Rue with her out to the safehouse past the belltower and out of the invaded lands of Peréal. It had been too long and Esperanza was beginning to pace. Cécily should have returned by now. Something was *wrong*.

“Oh Micah.” The older prince smiled gleefully as he sauntered down the steps of the elevated throne. His gaze lingered on the younger prince's. “Is this your last desperate attempt to keep the mixed blood whore alive?” He chuckled. “I daresay – I'm almost tired of sending Marchesseault's into the grave at this point.”

“No more chances,” Micah murmured. “Surrender yourself with your army of savages...or I *will* kill you this time.”

James' face changed. In one instant it went from arrogant and gleeful to something utterly alien. He walked toward Micah, his eyes gleaming with a predatory hunger, and slowly drew his sword. It sent a crisp screech echoing across the hall as it came into view, the blade thin and serrated like the teeth of a monstrous beast.

“Oh yes,” James crooned, flourishing his weapon as the brothers began to circle each other. “It was always going to come down to this wasn't it?”

Micah had adopted a battle stance, his sword tight in his grip in spite of the sweat that had soaked the edges of his chestnut curls. James held his blade casually – tip pointing to the floor. Neither seemed to breathe. James then smiled – his lips turning up into an eventual smirk that resembled more of a growl. In a blinding move he swept his blade up with every intention to maim. “I’m going to enjoy this.”

James lunged at Micah – his serrated blade blurring through the air. Micah brought his sword up – frosty sparks emanating from the blade as they screeched against each other. Snarling, James lunged viciously at Micah, his cuts deliberate and savage. He advanced with a series of savage head strikes and Micah blocked. Esperanza could see that this was a fight that held many years worth of accumulated rage.

She had seen these boys fight constantly since they were young. But this was different. Oh this was something *entirely* outside the realm of civility and principle. Every time Micah and James had battled previously, there had always been a tinge of fear – perhaps a fear that extended towards Hartley. They knew they could never injure the other so severely in the past in the case that it enraged their father.

But now that his approval no longer mattered...everything was different.

Micah ducked, blocked, and lunged, stabbing at James’ throat. James had a couple inches on the winter prince but his movements were lightning fast. James spun gracefully aside, their cloaks caressing in a blur of navy against black. Micah whirled at a speed that had Esperanza’s eyes watering. She saw how close the blade missed his neck and shuddered. Had he not turned in time – the older prince would have cut him clean.

Smiling, James raised his weapon and Esperanza cried out. The jagged blade was dripping with blood. “I always get the first cut,” James taunted. Esperanza watched white faced, as blood began to seep through Micah’s layer of clothing and down his left arm – his dominant hand --with which he held his sword. James snarled coming closer and with a savage elbow to the throat had Micah hitting the ground hard. James loomed over him like a vulture over a carcass. “All those years,” he breathed. Esperanza was close enough to hear but knew those around her were clear out of earshot. “All those years of being the favourite ends now.” He kicked him in the gut, sending Micah gasping as he clutched at his sword and flipped over to avoid the blade that James had hurled toward the ground and towards his face.

Esperanza looked up at Hartley whose expression was utterly blank. She looked at him almost desperately, but the man didn’t bat an eyelash.

“Even if you begged for mercy,” James leered. “I wouldn’t spare you.” He slapped the winter prince hard across the cheek. “You were *never* one of us. Your mother was probably a whore... that’s why father never spoke of her.” James curled his lip in disgust. “And now you’ve married one and birthed little bastards. Bastards that father is willing to accept as future heirs. It should have been me. It should have fucking been *me*. I did everything right. I always did.” He kicked again but Micah was ready and acted fast bringing his dagger up to slice at his brother.

James roared taking a step back as two fingers went dropping to the ground not far from the princes along with a splattering of blood. The crowd reacted with a series of roars.

“Your little brats are as good as dead. I’ll wipe out your entire bloodline Micah,” James choked, his lungs becoming more desperate by the minute. “Just.. like you did... to *mine*.”

Micah lunged again. This time, both moved so quickly, twisting, evading, and spinning their blades. It almost looked like a performance – the way they moved in sync – but entirely opposite – mirroring each other in a beautifully timed dance of blades.

Sparks flew, ice ricocheted off the blades, and blood splattered the steel of both swords creating a speckle of crimson dots across the ornate floor. It was too close to see who had the advantage – too close for Esperanza to make the call of who would be the one to finish on top.

Mollie ran through the corridors of the Marchesseault castle at a speed she previously believed was beyond her endurance. Although her lungs burned and her calves seared with pain and her shoulder ached from the wound she had received earlier – she did not slow down.

When Mollie burst through the doors of the grand chamber she felt all air leave her lungs. Her eyes went straight to Micah.

He wasn’t going to make it. He wasn’t going to win this time.

Micah was pinned to the ground and bloody in a manner she had never seen before. The hellish vengeance in James’ eyes was enough to send Mollie quaking but she had to act.

Quick as a wink Mollie ran forward and slid her own dagger to Micah who snatched it from the ground and used his elbow to strike James’ head against the tiled floor. Mollie heard the gasp of air leave James’ body but by the time he flipped over, Micah had Mollie’s blade against James’ throat. James shot Mollie a particularly nasty glare before he directed it at his brother, his features twisted into a mixture of hatred and pain. Both of them were panting, blood seeping through the wounds that now decorated both of their bodies.

James began to chuckle as the room grew silent – the howls from around them dying out. “Do it baby brother,” James challenged. “You have the upper hand now that your little whore stepped in to assist you.”

Before Mollie could step forward a sharp grip on her cloak yanked her backward.

“Not yet,” Rowan whispered.

Before Mollie could protest the doors burst opened and a jet black wolf with eyes as fiery as its master burst through the doors. Mollie felt the air leave her lungs when she saw what was locked within those razor sharp jaws. Along with the scent of fresh blood were the unmistakable pieces of flesh and what appeared to be a limb in its mouth as the animal violently swung its head from side to side – proud of its kill.

No.

Mollie felt nausea hit her suddenly and felt a different set of arms surround her from behind. As Mollie felt the first remnants of vomit surge up her throat she saw the animal drop its kill to the ground where behind it lay the mangled near unrecognizable body of Joël. She looked up at Hartley after she had stumbled several feet and retched into a corner of the throne room. He met her gaze with a smile on his thin lips. She could hear someone screaming in the distance about chasing and killing the animal...but the damage had been done.

She didn't need to hear his voice to know what he was telling her.

Better luck next time.

Mollie retched several times but she couldn't muster even the slightest of bile from her stomach.

"Get off of me," Mollie snapped. Her tone was caustic and sharp prompting Elio to release her immediately. His eyes were wide with surprise but within them were grief as well. Grief for another innocent life lost at the hands of a Lyon. Mollie didn't know if the others were safe fighting outside the walls but she didn't want to think about that now. The only thing on her mind now was revenge.

"Don't."

Before her was Rowan who blocked her path towards where his two brothers lay, one with a dagger to the other's throat.

"Get out of my way."

"You never approach a fight emotionally Ms Mayeson," Rowan hissed. Mollie saw him reach for his own sword but the only thing filling her mind now was pure unprecedented rage.

"I think I'll take my chances," she snapped.

"You made a promise to me," Rowan growled. He released his sword prompting Mollie to unsheathe her own.

"I know what I promised," she hissed. "Now get out of my way before I have Elio add another Lyon finger to the collection."

Rowan went scarlet with rage but he didn't let up. With a quick step forward he grabbed Mollie and forced her against him in a grip that was much too tight for comfort. She looked over towards Micah who still held her dagger at James' throat. His arm was shaking with rage and James' lips had turned into a bloody smirk.

Rowan had his arm around her throat, forcing Mollie to thrash desperately in his grasp.

"No!" Mollie yelped. She whipped her head to the side in panic but Rowan's grip around her throat tightened. He leaned in close to her. His chin brushed her cheek causing her to shudder in fear. His fragrant cologne wafted around her. It stung her nostrils and made her eyes water.

“Threaten me again,” he murmured. “And you’ll be very sorry indeed.”

“Do it Micah,” Hartley said softly. He stepped closer towards the edge of the stage, his eyes glued to the dagger at James’ throat. “Finish what you started.”

Mollie could see the turmoil on Micah’s face. Mollie could see the dilemma within him – the need to kill the brother who had made his life a living hell and the need to rebel against the man who brought him into this hellish plight.

“You’re fucking *weak*,” James spat.

“Micah!” Mollie cried. “Look out!”

It took a second before the black wolf lunged towards them -- knocking the dagger from Micah’s wrist and allowing James to retaliate. The jump from the beast made Rowan stumble and she managed to slip free from the death grip he had around her throat.

Mollie could see it in slow motion, the blade inching towards the abdomen of the winter prince that lay exposed as he was knocked backwards by the force of the gigantic black wolf.

“Your son is alive,” Mollie screamed.

She saw James freeze as the beast circled back – but not before being intercepted by Theodora who sent the beast retreating back towards the doors of the throne room. Their cries echoed down the main corridor, letting silence descend upon the bloody court room once more. It was now James who held his sword towards Micah’s neck as the winter prince struggled to keep the serrated edge from piercing his flesh.

“Your son... is *alive*,” Mollie repeated between her gasps for breath. “And so is Nina.” Mollie chose her words carefully as she slowly approached the two of them, her sword still tight in her grasp.

She could see the blackness deep within the depths of James’ eyes.

“You lying whore,” she heard him breathe as he pushed more of his weight down on Micah who groaned from the pain.

“Bring her out.” Mollie ordered.

Within seconds, the doors of the throne room once again opened and Nina stumbled in – escorted by two *Peréal* guards. Mollie winced at the hard grip they had on her little shoulders.

“I offer you this proposal once and to you directly,” Mollie said, her tone clipped. She could feel Hartley burning a hole with his stare into her. “Your daughter in exchange for my son.”

She saw several emotions cross James’ face. Tears had begun to stream from the eyes of Nina as she stared at her father who had his knife dangerously deep in the neck of her uncle.

Several seconds went by before the eldest Lyon prince responded and Mollie held her breath.

“And what of *my* son?”

Micah squirmed beneath him but James didn’t alleviate any of his pressure. She could hear Micah protesting from below but James had his eyes locked on hers.

“He’s alive.”

Mollie stepped closer to them. “Jelena came here. She told us... of your breach of *Peréal* borders,” Mollie explained. “She betrayed *you* to save *him*...to save your son.”

James face had gone blank – similar to his father’s when he was deep in thought. The grip around his blade was soaked in blood from his missing fingers but Mollie could see the gears turning in his mind.

“She alerted me the moment you breached our borders,” Mollie whispered. She took another step closer to them. “She showed me where her true allegiances lay.” Nina began to cry and Mollie watched James’ expression falter.

Know what to leverage and when to leverage it. Phillip's words echoed in her head now as she faced off against her arch enemy.

She had Gibbs retrieve the girl the moment she found Jelena, bloody and desperate, on the grounds of her castle. She told no one else of this matter. Now that the walls of the castle were breached – no secret was safe. Mollie hoped what little shred of humanity James had left would be revived by his only daughter. As bloodthirsty as the man was, she had watched his interaction with Nina closely and Mollie was sure he would pull through when he needed her to.

The room had gone silent. Many held their breaths, eager to see what the eldest prince would decide. James' grip tightened and she heard Micah's gasp of pain.

“James,” she whispered taking another step closer. “It doesn’t have to end like this. You can walk away from this. From all of this.”

The turmoil in his dark eyes was apparent and Mollie knew it was now or never.

Mollie felt the first trickle of relief spread through her as James removed the blade that had been digging into his brother's throat. Slowly, he rose, his posture stiff and his eyes clouded with the heaviness of grief and relief. She saw Micah roll over and choke down air. He had already reached for his icy blade but James paid him little attention now. His eyes were locked on Nina who gave her father the faintest of smiles from her tear stained face. Gibbs handled Nina roughly, the girl stumbling in his vice-like grip. Hartley didn’t even look her way. His eyes were fixed on his eldest who had gone stiff.

Mollie drew her sword. “Now give me back my son. A child for child.” She stared hard at James. The resolve in the eldest Lyon faltered. His features crumpled and she saw James nod stiffly. Mollie breathed out slowly.

“Stand down Hartley!” From the entrance emerged Caius, a long scarlet cloak draped around him. Flanking him was Araya and Zephyr who both looked ready to kill.

As Caius promised, he had made his entrance at a critical moment. But Mollie had another more insidious fear at the back of her mind. It was the same feeling she felt creeping up her spine when Hartley himself had made his grand entrance onto the platform in Questershire all that time ago. Grandiose, narcissistic, and ravenous for power. She knew Zephyr would have never let her fight James. Yet, Mollie felt the need to want to lunge the weapon, to use it and feel the thrill that came with a successful slash. She shivered at her own gruesome thoughts and turned her attention back to the stage.

“Mollie, the necklace if you would?”

Mollie looked up into the blue eyes of Caius that seemed to pierce straight through her soul. She looked up at him in shock.

Micah had stumbled beside her sometime during the grand entrance of his uncle and she noticed his features go blank when Caius spoke. The rage that surged from behind her was enough for Mollie to know that Rowan was simply itching to end her life.

She narrowed her eyes at Caius. “The necklace?” she questioned. Her attempt to feign ignorance did not fly and she saw Caius’s smile turn ever so stale.

“The iridium in that necklace that my lovely sister kept hidden. You know of what I speak.”

“You must be mistaken.” The cold chilling voice of Rowan pierced the air. He shot Mollie a scathing look as he approached the platform.

“Am I really?” Caius chuckled. “You know exactly what I’m talking about Rowan. When your father fucked my sister and she birthed your precious little brother, she did the only thing she could to keep the iridium away from your father and protect her child.”

Micah had gone stone cold and Mollie could see that blank chilling stare take over his handsome features. It made her gut throb. She could remember in fine detail what had happened in his quarters back in Questershire the last time that expression crossed his fine features.

Betrayal coursed through Mollie and she stared angrily at Caius.

Mollie took the necklace off gingerly and clutched the silvery material tightly between her fingers. The betrayal ran deep and she could feel the moisture of tears forming at the corner of her eyes. She was losing control and the thought was terrifying. She had to gain the upperhand before it was too late.

“I’m not handing anything over... until I see Maël” Mollie hissed. Caius sighed and jerked his head forward. Quickly Araya disappeared and re-appeared from the room with Mollie’s son in her arms. A dead guard lay near the entrance to the ballroom. Mollie shot Araya a chilling glare. “Give him to Esperanza,” she muttered.

Stiffly the older woman whisked him away and Mollie's thoughts once again found clarity. She hesitated, feeling the cold metal between her fingers. Hartley didn't seem upset at the fact that Caius had managed to regain control. And it was that very fact that prevented Mollie from feeling at ease.

"Caius," she yelled. Her voice broke when she spoke. "These pieces cannot be put together. Certainly not here. It's too dangerous. Too volatile."

"I intend to use it for good," Caius growled. "With all these pieces of iridium together I will bring freedom back to these lands. I will restore what was taken from our people!" His voice deepened and his stance became more ridged, his words spilling out faster than Mollie could comprehend. "There can be no liberation without imprisonment just as there can be no retribution without infliction. I will do what I must in order for our people to win."

Mollie blinked. She had heard that speech before. From someone a little too close to home.

Hartley met her eyes knowingly. His smile widened. "Not so different are we my dear?"

Mollie took a step forward and felt her stomach clench – this time with a force that sent her stumbling. Once again that awful feeling of nausea swarmed deep in the pit of her stomach and she heaved and coughed between breaths. Mollie pushed back the sweat slicked strands of hair from her forehead glanced over at Micah's expression. That dark blank stare of the winter prince was frozen on his features. However his eyes weren't trained on her. Rather, they were focused now on his father who looked back at his son with a stare equally and eerily as empty.

"If I may?" Rowan spoke up from behind, making a deliberate effort to step around Mollie. She ignored the exaggeration and glared. He ignored her, choosing instead to turn his full attention onto Caius.

"I have nothing to say to you boy," Caius remarked coldly.

"To *me* perhaps," Rowan said softly. "But there is someone else who has an awful lot to say to *you*...uncle."

Rowan gave Mollie a shrewd once over before he beckoned for someone to come forward. The doors had already been broken open from the fights that had broken out earlier and walking through the debris, graceful and as calm as ever was someone Mollie swore she had seen before.

Whispers of age lined his pale skin and soft shades of grey peppered his otherwise well groomed hair. He was a handsome man and oh was he tall. He must have been James' height or even an inch taller. In spite of his towering figure, his cold features and his dark black cloak, there was something about him that made Mollie's flesh tingle. What was most mesmerizing about this man wasn't his height nor was it his presence. It was his eyes. A deep blue that seemed to carry within them the tidal waves of the seven seas. They were deep and desperate, like the calm before a tumultuous storm. Mollie had most definitely seen those eyes before.

His stormy eyes met Mollie's and she noticed the smallest of smiles form.

"Miss Mollie. We meet again."

It had gone silent and Mollie stared blankly at the man before her. The necklace was still clutched tightly in her fist and she noticed the man glance briefly down at it.

Caius had gone silent and Mollie noticed the soft smile that rested on the lips of Hartley.

"Did you take an excursion on your way down here?" Hartley asked dryly.

The man chuckled. "I was waiting till things got a little interesting." His eyes flickered to the elevated platform where James was kneeling. He was placid and as blank as ever. If he knew who the man standing before them was, he didn't show it. "And interesting it appears to be."

"This day had to come. We both know that." The man said quietly.

"It should have been me brother," Hartley said quietly. "It should have been *me*."

"No," the man said softly. "Someone had to rule and ensure that the Lyon regime prevailed no matter what happened."

"And in spite of even my best efforts I could not do that," Hartley said stiffly. "First Izabel... and now Logan."

The man closed his eyes briefly. "I wish it didn't have to end like this."

"Who the fuck are you?"

It was Zephyr who spoke and for the first time ever Mollie was glad the blond had no filter. He asked a question everyone was dying to know the answer to.

Rowan glowered but the man beside him regarded him with amusement.

"Zephyr is it?" The man smiled. "How much like Logan you are."

Zephyr drew his sword and looked up at his father whose expression was faraway.

The man turned his gaze to the platform. He observed James and Micah quietly and with a look of amusement directed his gaze back to Hartley. "Now isn't this nostalgic?"

Caius was slightly breathless but his face was full of suppressed rage. "I had an inkling you somehow managed to worm your way out of your punishment. You were always good at that. But not on your own. Not on your fucking own." His eyes glittered with malice. "I know exactly what you did to help him," Caius sneered. He spoke now to Hartley. "You two were always plotting. Leaving me out of the details and then making me clean up your fucking mess."

"Caius--" the man began, but Caius overrode him.

“It wasn’t my intention to go to such extreme measures but you all left me no choice. Not even I dreamed that I would have both of you before me to kill at my own will. But my waiting was an investment...all those years. And this pay out I will have.”

“You fool,” the man said softly. “Is a childhood grudge worth sending another of your own kin back to the grave?”

“A lion will do what he must to protect his pride,” Caius murmured. Hartley sneered at him when he spoke.

“I no longer need a reason to keep you alive,” Hartley said slowly, dangerously.

“Oh Hartley,” Caius chuckled. “Your own children were ready to do exactly that. It is all we’ve ever known and even you can’t deny it.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” the mystery man reasoned. He raised his arm up in an effort to lower the biting tension. “We do not have to repeat past mistakes. And we can begin now. I believe Micah and James can work things out just as I did with Hartley.” He looked at his brother sternly. “And I have hope in you too Caius. *I have hope in you.*”

Mollie stood there, paralyzed, not knowing what to do or whom to believe. She glanced around at Rowan who looked stonily and at the brothers. Each of whom still seemed ready to tear out each others throats.

When he walked past her, she caught a familiar scent that brought with it a lurch of memories. *Patchouli*. She knew she had smelled that scent before.

Mollie stepped backwards, the shock written all over her face.

Could it really be? He was alive...all this time?

“Is that...” Mollie whispered. She heard the whispers around her before she could utter the words herself.

Atem Lyon. So he lives.

Rowan smirked. “The true King has returned.”

Caius stared at the man standing before him. However Mollie's gaze was fixed on James. He was inches away from his daughter. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Maël was safe. Nina was safe. They could make this *work*.

But war still loomed around them all.

The tumultuous fight between Micah and James had been halted by the introduction of another Lyon who had yet his own agenda to complete. But Mollie had enough of this. She was tired...no... *exhausted*.

They had ganged up on Caius now, and Mollie saw a conflicted look on Araya's face. Her loyalty was being questioned at the most crucial of moments.

The original three brothers had begun to argue again and Mollie watched as all of them began to speak over each other. Rowan had joined in, finally putting himself between Micah and James in an effort to pledge a peaceful end between all parties. “

You know I would hate to crash the family reunion. But I've got someone who may have the answers to every question the lot of you may have.”

Mollie recognized that gruff voice and turned at the same moment Gibbs walked into the room. He was dragging a frail pale woman who was thrashing and resisting his grip. “Been looking for this bitch for a couple of years now.” Gibbs muttered through his thick beard as Isla thrashed violently in his grip but the man was prepared for it. He held her wrists tightly. “Now speak.” He handled her roughly. “Tell *them* what you told *me*.”

The woman mustered the filthiest glare she could manage and attempted to force herself out of the unyielding grip of her captor.

“Speak woman!” Gibbs barked. In a shockingly violent manner, she convulsed several times in his grip before begrudgingly giving in to his demand.

She eyed Atem, Caius, and Hartley on the stage and smirked. “Well *this* I have seen before. A shame we're missing a couple people though isn't it?”

Before she could finish her statement Hartley was charging at her with every intention to kill. Mollie hadn't even seen him unsheathe his sword from its casing.

“No!” Atem stepped in front of him before he could reach her. “We need her.”

“You're still protecting her?” Hartley said between gritted teeth. “Even after she left you to die and ran off with our good for nothing brother?”

“She needs to offer evidence in front of witnesses,” Atem responded crisply. “Without her, *none* of us will be cleared before the court. The commandments are still our guidelines brother. We must heed them.”

Mollie had noticed that Luna Shrader had accompanied Gibbs when he had brought Isla Lyon before the room. She eyed Mollie intently prompting the girl to look away. Those violet eyes had always sent a tremor down Mollie's spine.

“You know what happened the night Izabel was murdered,” Atem said lowly. “Reveal the truth before the Marchesseault court and face what consequences await your actions.”

She smiled when she eyed Atem. “My my... you aged like fine wine my love,” she mused. “You were always the most handsome brother. Blonds were never really my type.” Gibbs shook her again prompting Isla's teeth to clatter in a manner that set Mollie's teeth on edge. “Easy servant,” she sneered at Gibbs. “I'm still a lady.” She frowned as she locked eyes with her former husband. “Yes...Izabel. How everyone adored her.” Her tone had turned mocking.

“Porphyria and I could barely stomach it. She knew from the start you were fucking someone else Hartley. She just never expected it to be...so close to home.”

There was a collective gasp among the crowd.

“That boy,” she continued pointing at Micah. “is an abomination. A product of incest between Hartley and his precious sister. I saw the both of them the night you covered it up!”

“You have no proof of this,” Hartley snapped.

The woman proceeded to laugh.

“Enough!” Atem bellowed. “You betrayed Izabel. Just like you did to all of us. Like you did to me...”

Her laughter trailed off and for a fleeting moment a flicker of hurt crossed her features. “You weren’t the one that was supposed to suffer.” Her voice went low when she spoke.

Hartley had come closer and the motion had not gone unnoticed by Caius.

“Stand back,” Caius snapped. The room went silent. The two brothers stood beneath the massive chandelier – their swords in hand and their eyes locked on one another – one being a sea blue and the other a deep brown.

“There was always a chance,” Caius said softly stepping closer to his brother who stood still. “There was a chance that Izabel wasn’t yours and yours alone. You knew this.”

“She was mine.” The hiss that came from Hartley sent Mollie’s stomach rolling in fear. “She. Was. *Mine*. Her mind. Her cunt. Her soul. Everything belonged to me.”

“You’re in denial,” Caius continued to muse. “You can’t accept that she fucked the Marchesseault over you. That’s why you kept him in Questershire and tortured him for twenty three fucking years.”

Hartley curled his lip in anger but he still hadn’t reacted. Atem was keeping Hartley in control, but Mollie feared for how much longer he could do so...

“There is still that small chance it was his seed and not yours that implanted in her womb.” Caius looked up from beneath his light blond lashes, a wicked glint in his eye.

In a flash Hartley attacked. Caius reacted swiftly and the sound of sword against sword echoed throughout the room. The two were fighting to kill and the slicing sounds of blade against air was enough to send several chills down Mollie’s spine.

Caius fell as Hartley launched another attack and Mollie screamed when Hartley’s blade sliced a deep cut across Caius’ thigh.

He gasped and faltered giving Hartley more than enough time to prepare for the final blow but before he could, a flash of white appeared in front of him and blocked the blow.

“Ever wonder what happened to your precious daughter?” Isla hissed. “Oh it was *sweet vengeance* when I took that ventilator away from her. You should have seen Porphyria’s face.” She cackled even when Hartley stood up slowly – his eyes burning with rage. Mollie had remembered something Isla had murmured back on that ship months ago. She had looked at Mollie’s pregnant belly at the time and sung a lullaby that Mollie had realized only at that moment...was a confession. The woman was more deranged than Mollie had originally thought. “And then...” Isla whispered with a gleeful glint in her eye. “I got to watch you kill her.”

“Hartley DON’T!” Atem’s voice fell on deaf years as the King, who prided himself on his immaculate composure suddenly lost it all in a single second.

Hartley wasted no time and Mollie screamed as she watched him pick up the woman by the throat and throw her down onto the grand table with a force that sent all the dishes, cutlery, and ornaments shattering onto the ground. With a sick squelch he plunged his blade into her chest and began to carve. The woman wailed. An awful wail that sounded like a strangled animal. The laughter was eerie and inhumane as Hartley continued to carve – his eyes black with rage and his aura darker than the pits of Hades lair. In seconds, he reached into her chest and pulled out her heart before squeezing with all his might.

The act was so violent in nature Mollie found herself shaking, as Hartley continued to squeeze the organ in his palm, rivulets of chunky blood dripping down his wrist.

It pumped weakly in his palm once or twice before it exploded in a heap of guts and blood down his arm. He teeth were bared and his chest was heaving with heavy pants as the woman lay dead beneath him – sprawled out.

In a second Caius was up and throwing his arms around Hartley bringing him to the ground as the two continued to fight. Fist to fist. Zephyr and Araya charged forward then, using this as a catalyst to engage in combat.

It was bloodshed all around her then, and Mollie couldn’t help but feel a sense of deep dread in the pit of her stomach. Isla’s death was gruesome and sickening and Mollie stumbled backwards. Nausea bubbled in her stomach.

Mollie scrambled towards Micah who was still clutching his abdomen in pain. The wounds from his previous battle were deep. “Micah,” she gasped.

“Get... out of here,” he managed between heavy breaths. “Everyone...is distracted. Just..go..to safety.”

Mollie clutched at his sleeves which were also soaked with blood. “I’m not leaving without you.”

She heard Micah laugh humourlessly in between his pain. “Forgive me for not feeling sentimental. After the shit you just pulled.”

She grimaced at his harsh choice of words. “I didn’t have a choice. I promised Rowan I wouldn’t tell you until the time was right. If you killed Hartley in a rage of madness you

wouldn't *ever* be free Micah," Mollie managed as the fighting around them began to escalate once more.

In a flash Micah grabbed her by the throat and pulled her forward so nothing but the emerald green of his eyes was visible. He was still incredibly strong, even while wounded and Mollie cried out in pain. "*Don't* you dare make this about my freedom," he hissed. "You had no fucking right." Malice laced his tone. Mollie swallowed the rest of her words as Micah's fingers pinched into her jaw. His hand was tight on her face and she winced in pain at the ache that began to stir in her bone. Mollie reached up grabbing his wrist, and Micah's eyes appeared so much darker, so much colder as he regarded her. With disgust he released her and pushed himself to his feet and Mollie shivered with fear as he reached for his sword. The handle was still bloody from his previous battle.

"I did it *for* you," she hissed back. Her defiance of him was the last of his patience and she cried out when he pulled her close ready to strike. "I did it... *because I love you.*"

Her lips trembled when she spoke and she saw a flicker of blankness cross Micah's features. His grip slackened but the resolve in his eyes didn't falter. His handsome features, even in the throngs of battle were something to be marvelled and Mollie blinked away the dampness in her eyes as he stared back at her with nothing but emptiness. Mollie expected nothing less when he brandished his sword and strode past her towards the ensuing chaos, leaving her behind. His reaction shouldn't have been surprising nor hurtful at this point. Yet Micah had always given her some sort of attention albeit it negative or positive when it came to her expressing her vulnerability. His utter dismissiveness hurt more than if he had actually struck her.

Mollie barely heard the voice calling out to her from behind as she grappled with the realization that she loved someone who could not love. It hurt more than the pain that radiated through her shoulder, more than the pain she suffered during birth. Nothing could compare. He had told her *so many times*. But still, Mollie held on to a flicker of hope for all that time.

"Are you deaf?" Mollie was snapped out of her reverie as Rowan carefully but firmly tugged on her arm. His brown eyes were fiery with annoyance as he spoke to her. "Mollie, *listen to me*. You need to get this to Phillip right now. Everyone is distracted and we won't get another opportunity like this. He was gesturing to the iridium that she still had clutched in her fist. " She could see out of the corner of her eye that Rowan's beast Paris was tearing apart several Outbacks who were engaging in battle just beyond the entrance to the castle. "He'll be waiting by the water. The civilians will be out of the tunnels by now and aboard the vessels that will take them to Beacon Cape for temporary refuge until we regain *Pereal*."

Mollie blinked at him in surprise. She had always hated the way he spoke to her like he already knew the answers he was looking for, like he was the smartest person in the room. Before she could take off, she felt Rowan press something cold into her hand.

She looked down at her sword in surprise. It was *hers*. The same one Alexandre had passed down to her...but how did he?

She looked up at Rowan in surprise. He must have swiped it from Hartley when the chaos at the platform had begun. For once Mollie was thankful for Rowan's quick wit and stealthy abilities. "How are we going to bargain with Hartley and Caius further without this?" Mollie questioned. "He won't give *Pereal* back unless he has this." She looked around her frantically. "He won't surrender until this place is just a pile of rubble."

"I asked you once that I will collect on a favour you owed me," Rowan hissed. His eyes had turned stormy, the parallel to his younger brother appearing clearer than ever. "And now I am collecting... seeing as you now have something to offer."

Mollie's eyes widened. She suddenly remembered that promise all those months ago back in Questershire.

"Phillip will destroy it Mollie," Rowan explained hastily. He pushed her backwards shielding her from an incoming arrow that had whizzed dangerously close to her ear. If these pieces of iridium are combined together here in Pereal, then rest assured...I can *guarantee* there won't even be rubble left of your precious kingdom. They are our last hope."

"You don't know that?" Mollie pressed. "What if it was just another lie Quinn came up with to keep the iridium for himself?"

"Remember what happened when you dipped that sword into the wolfsbane?" Rowan said harshly. "Imagine that on a *much* higher scale. That is what awaits us all if anyone on that platform gets their hands on that."

His eyes darted around them and quickly, the both of them were able to sprint for the exit as the room erupted in battle. "Go now Mollie," Rowan barked. "We can't hold out for much longer."

With his sword in hand she watched him head for the entrance of the castle where the doors had been broken down and Outback after Outback had begun to file in. It was a menacing sight that made Mollie's throat go dry. She knew Rowan and the others were buying as much time as necessary for her and Mollie couldn't waste it. He appeared unperturbed as he readied himself for battle. There were *so many*...but Mollie couldn't wait around to watch.

As quick as she could, she sprinted towards the back of the castle and down the main hallway that would lead towards the courtyard. From there she could find a clear path to the water where Phillip's ships would be waiting.

Mollie's throat burned with exhaustion and her shoulder was aching with pain from her still bloody wound. However she didn't let up as she turned the sharp corner that lead to the courtyard. As she turned, she felt something hit her chest hard and square on. She cried out in surprise as she tumbled down the courtyard steps and rolled several times before she came to a stop. She had landed on her back and was gasping at the pain that radiated from her chest. Mollie blinked in black and white before her vision cleared and she looked at who had hit her.

Her eyes widened when she saw. "You?" she whispered.

"Hello Mollie," the woman sneered mockingly. Vivienne Coeur smiled humourlessly down on her as Mollie struggled to breathe after getting the wind knocked out of her.

"What the winter prince ever saw in you...I will never know," she continued in her usual sarcastic drawl. "Now hand it over. I know you have it."

Mollie pushed herself to her feet and readied herself for battle. "You don't want to do this," she hissed. Before the woman could land another blow Mollie took off. Her legs burned and her hair had come undone to tangle wildly around her face. She could hear Vivienne cursing loudly behind her and following in hot pursuit of Mollie. The courtyard of the Pereal castle was elevated with the pier far below. Walking down the pathway towards the water was hazardous in of itself. Running down that hill would be life threatening. However Mollie knew the ins and outs of this castle and she used this knowledge to her advantage. Rather than run downwards, Mollie flattened herself on her belly just below the step that led down the rickety pathway towards the pier. At a sprint, Vivienne was unaware of the drop. Letting the woman think Mollie had already run down the pathway was too easy, and as Vivienne stepped down, Mollie flipped herself over the step and gave the woman a single hard push.

With an eerie scream Mollie watched her fall several feet before tumbling down the pathway that was filled with boulders, jagged rocks, and various other hazards. She winced as the woman continued to roll down until her screams fell silent. Pushing herself up, Mollie ignored the grazes that covered her knees and exposed skin and clutched the iridium in her fingers. Carefully, Mollie made her way down the slope, taking extra caution with the sharp twists and turns of the pathway. The last thing she needed was a nasty fall due to her own negligence. When she met solid footing near the pier once again she felt her breath release in relief. Gingerly, Mollie took several steps down the treacherous peak. Her shoulder erupted with pain every time she moved her arm even slightly but she endured.

The edge of the peak here was dangerous and Mollie had remembered her father mentioning, that back in the day the Marchesseaults were known for sending prisoners off the cliff for crimes against the monarchy. The water was rough and unforgiving in these lands with a massive waterfall that eventually joined the main river connecting several of the cities. Mollie could understand why. From afar the cliff appeared manageable but the trek itself was dangerous and riddled with sharp jagged rocks. A fall from the top had the capacity to kill a person. It was no wonder Jelena died by the time she reached the top. As Mollie inched closer to the pier she felt the hairs on her arm straighten. Goosebumps erupted across her skin and she paused only for a moment. It took a second for tight arms to wrap around her throat from behind.

"You...just...won't die," said the caustic voice. Mollie screamed, unprepared for the attack. Mollie was weak and her body couldn't take much more than what she had already been through. She cried out, the necklace falling from her grasp as Vivienne clawed it from her limp fingers. Mollie crawled forward, her body aching as she feebly attempted to protect herself against this woman who looked downward at her in triumph. The woman was bloody and scratched up all along her throat and chest. She had grabbed Mollie's sword and had it tightly in her grip, pointing it at Mollie's heart. For the first time, genuine fear pierced through Mollie. She was truly alone out here with nothing but the sound of the waves and the caress of wildflowers in the tall grass that surrounded her. Mollie closed her eyes, thinking of

her twins, and awaited the blow. Several seconds went by and Mollie chanced opening her eyes. Vivienne still had the tight grip on the necklace but on her face was an expression nothing short of primal fear. Mollie heard it before she saw it. The thick padding of heavy paws as the woman screamed shrilly. A flash of white blurred past Mollie's vision and she watched in terror as Theodora attacked the woman, biting into her flesh with tearing noises as she yelled. Mollie had never seen Theo attack someone else in real time. She looked just like Paris and Napoleon as she bit limb after limb as the woman tried fruitlessly to escape on foot. The animal chased her down, but before Mollie could get back on her feet the woman had unknowingly stumbled straight towards the cliff.

"Stop!" Mollie cried as she watched in horror about what was about to happen. The animal had been going at a speed and as if realizing where it was it began to whimper and attempt unsuccessfully to slow down. "Theodora!" she screamed, crawling towards them both.

The wolf turned to look back at her one last time as if it knew its fate. "NO!" Mollie screamed. Blue eyes blinked back at her, before it too tumbled over the edge of the precarious cliff, taking Vivienne Coeur and Mollie's precious iridium with it.

Chapter 62: Rhénium Part II

Mollie's adrenaline spiked as she pushed herself up from the rocky ground and ran towards the cliffs edge. Before she could get even within a foot of the edge strong tanned arms wrapped around her from behind.

"Mollie no." She recognized that gruff voice as tears streamed down her face.

"Let me go!" she cried, fighting against the restraints around her.

"Hey," he said softly. "Stop moving Mollie."

Mollie shakily held his bicep as she steadied her feet. She was woozy and tired and she could barely blink away the sting in her vision that made her eyes water.

"Where did you go? What were you doing out here?" Zen asked shakily. "You just disappeared the moment the negotiations went sour. You can't do that."

"What are you talking about?" Mollie hissed. She winced as her shoulder ached from the sudden movement.

"Everyone was looking for you. You can't just take off on your own as queen. It's dangerous and it's irresponsible."

"I haven't even been sworn in as queen yet," Mollie mumbled. She paused, not liking the expression on Zen's face. "Wait...what are you trying to say?"

Zephyr looked uncomfortable. "I'm no expert by any means....but it looked suspicious."

Mollie laughed without an ounce of humour in her voice. "Are you serious right now?"

"It's not me!" Zephyr argued quickly. "All I'm saying is it looked suspicious from an outside perspective. I don't question your loyalties for a second. But the council might."

"The council?" Mollie questioned. "*My* council?"

"Yes," Zephyr said icily. "Why else do you think your ice prince and the other members of the monarchy are never given a minute of privacy unless they ask for it in advance? The enemy will use this to their advantage. Remember what happened to Quinn? To Atem? Have you learned nothing?"

"But I didn't do anything wrong!" Mollie yelled. Her voice carried across the cliff, almost mockingly echoing back to her. "I..." she trailed off. "Vivienne Coeur tried to kill me."

"Where is the body?" Zephyr asked slowly looking around. "Did anyone besides you see her?"

Mollie blinked. She felt as if she were going to vomit. "Well no...she....she fell off the cliff."

She heard Zephyr exhale sharply. "This isn't good Mollie. This isn't a good look."

Mollie felt misery well up inside of her when she saw the seriousness in his face. Had she been set up? However Mollie had bigger problems on her hands. "It's gone Zen," she said barely above a whisper. "The iridium is *gone*."

Zephyr's lip tightened. He seemed to be trying his best to keep it together. "What happened?"

"Phillip was going to take it and destroy it," Mollie explained. "I was on my way to meet him."

"Phillip was called back to the *Curia Regis*, for tribunal," Zephyr said solemnly. "We all have. I think it's everyone's way of ending this war once and for all. It'll be first thing tomorrow morning..."

"I've lost my leverage Zen. It's over," Mollie whispered. "The iridium is gone. I've lost...everything."

"It's not over yet," Zen said stiffly tightening his grip on her arm as they walked back up the treacherous incline toward the castle. "Your life is more important than any precious metal. That's something everyone in that chamber can agree on." Zen stopped abruptly, causing Mollie to collide with his enormous frame. She followed his gaze to where a slender and more ominous form stood near the entrance back to the castle.

"Cocksucker." She heard Zen mutter under his breath in disgust.

"I'm going to talk to him," Mollie murmured. "I'll meet you inside?"

Zen seemed unsatisfied. "Keep the true whereabouts of the iridium to yourself," he murmured so only she could hear. "The minute people know you no longer have it..." he trailed off. "As far as anyone is concerned...it's safe okay?" She heard him mutter under his breath. "I'll spread the word that you succeeded in transporting it to Phillip and out of Peréal." With a scowl he stomped off leaving Mollie alone once again.

The waves crashed against the sides of the cliff reminding Mollie that the calmness around her was only just an illusion. Micah's cloak billowed behind him like a canopy of navy. Coldness gripped Mollie's chest as she remembered what had happened only hours prior. She approached him carefully, her own cloak sweeping behind her. She stumbled once before she approached him. Her stomach lurched when he turned and took a few steps forward into the courtyard towards one of vine covered benches that adorned the exterior. It had begun to rain lightly adding a more ominous feeling to the already dark aura.

Micah's face was blank as it always was but this time it was different. Empty. Void. *Callous*.

He spoke first, his voice as hollow as his expression. "Vivienne Coeur is missing." Mollie said nothing, choosing to let the silence between them speak instead.

"She tried to kill me." She heard him sigh. "I could have killed her. I almost had her."

"Where is she?" Micah asked abruptly.

"Dead at the bottom of the cliff," Mollie said. Even her own voice sounded dead and empty.

She heard Micah sigh.

"I didn't...want that for you." His voice was soft when he spoke. The breeze ruffled his dark locks around his face as he continued to murmur beside her. "You shouldn't have killed her Mollie."

"Do you really think I had a choice?" she snapped. "It's not just *her* blood on my hands," she added, her voice raising in hysteria. Her eyes watered as she remembered how Theodora had tumbled over the cliff to save her life. She wondered if he knew. Micah looked at her. His green eyes quivered with an emotion Mollie rarely saw. "Theo...I...she...." Mollie struggled with her words as Micah's stare continued to bore into her. "She saved me...and I couldn't save her." She looked down, shame spreading through her body. "I killed her too."

A cold hand brushed her cheek making Mollie's eyes widen in surprise.

"Theo... was following orders." He said it as more of a statement than a question and Mollie noticed that his demeanour had become less frosty. It was just the two of them out here and Mollie realized it had been a while since they could speak without someone from either one of their guards looming over them. Was that how it would be from now onwards? The two of them constantly having to escape from the monarchical world just to hold onto brief moments of solitude? She hadn't realized that he had asked her a question until his soft murmur broke through her reverie.

He was looking at her with concern and Mollie realized her lashes were wet and her shoulder was bleeding again.

"Here," he murmured. "Sit."

His voice, although soft, was still empty and Mollie had an inkling that Micah was holding something back. She knew the winter prince well at this point. She couldn't pin it but something was wrong. He was too calm. Too collected. Too gathered. With hesitation she let him gently walk her back a couple steps towards the vine covered bench beneath the wet green canopy. He perched elegantly next to her and peeled back the layers of her clothes until her shoulder was exposed. She winced at the pain and she heard him inhale sharply. He seemed angry and Mollie didn't want to remind him that it was his father who had left that mark for her. He reached into his cloak and Mollie closed her eyes. She felt his gloved confident fingers redress her wound and tie it tight with a clean cloth. Before he could turn away Mollie grabbed his arm. She felt him stiffen but she didn't release.

"And... yours?" she murmured.

"I'll see to them later," he sighed. Before he could turn away Mollie gripped him tighter, instead choosing to pull the gloves off his hands herself. He was staring hard at her and he didn't look impressed. However he hadn't pushed her away nor scolded her so Mollie continued, taking his acquiescence as an okay to continue. He watched her warily as she looked at his pale but muscular arm that was soaked with both old and fresh blood. His wounds made hers look superficial and she shuddered. The coppery smell of the blood

saturated her nostrils. He noticed her expression and attempted to turn away but Mollie held her ground. "No. Let me do this." She insisted.

He watched her as she worked to stop the blood. Mollie didn't know why, but her eyes were growing blurry. She tried blinking away the dampness but it was useless. She wrapped the fresh cloths around his wrist and bit her lip to keep silent as the tears streamed down her cheeks. She inched her hands more and began to peel back the layers of bloody garments that had stuck to his wounds. She felt her breathing grow ragged as she watched the dark blood ooze from the wounds that decorated his pale skin. When she was finished he stood up abruptly making her wince.

"Micah..."

He looked at her, his expression inquiring.

"What would happen... without the iridium?" He hadn't yet known that Mollie no longer had it. But she braved asking the question anyway.

His face changed almost immediately, and Mollie almost regretted asking him the question in the first place. She watched him heave a heavy sigh, chest and shoulders rising and falling. He slowly sat down next to her again, staring ahead before finally shaking his head.

"Why would you ask me that?" he said with annoyance. "It's not lost."

"...but what if it was?"

"It's not!"

Mollie jumped as his voice echoed across the cliffs, her eyes wide and focused on Micah as he pinched the bridge of his nose. Zephyr's warning rang clear in her mind and she felt her skin prickle. Mollie could see then how stressful this was for the winter prince, and Mollie wondered if he'd thought the same as her, if he'd been trying to ignore such thoughts only for Mollie to bring them to his attention again.

"Don't say that Mollie Mae," he said slowly."

Mollie trembled. "...but Micah-."

"Mollie."

"If it *wasn't*...what would happen to you? She swallowed thickly. "What would happen to us?" The winter prince gave her his full attention at that, a slight furrow between his brows as he studied her. "I mean Atem would take over the monarchy in Questershire right? And Hartley, Caius, and James would be tried in court?"

Micah thought for a short while before nodding slowly.

"More than likely," he admitted. Mollie blinked back tears, hating the way he was avoiding eye contact with her. He hesitated before he spoke again, his sharp jaw flexed and he ran a

pale hand through his hair. "However Hartley is *still* head of the council for the Lyon empire and the monarchy *still* needs an heir...especially given Atem's age and health."

Mollie knew what that meant and she felt nausea simmer in her belly. Even after everything, they would still plan to take him away. Maël could still be taken away from her.

"What if we run...?" she slowly asked him.

Mollie could feel his vibrant eyes on her, and the silence was loud. She pulled her lip between her teeth and bit down hard.

"I mean, if it starts to look like we *can't* save them...what if we run?" Mollie looked at him now. "What if you and I and our twins just took off? Go into hiding somewhere and they never find us?"

Mollie couldn't describe how Micah was looking at her, and she didn't know if she liked it. Micah stared at her for what felt like too long before exhaling through his nose and gently taking her arms. His dark hair was damp, the rain starting to fall harder as the first few droplets crawled down his handsome face.

"I... won't abandon my brother," he told her firmly. "Do you understand me?" Mollie bit her lip as the tears spilled over.

"...But what about what you told me back in Questershire...?"

"Mollie-."

"What about wanting to escape huh?" Mollie questioned, her voice rising slightly. "What happened to all of that?" Her anger boiled and she pursed her lips in anger. "What about *me*?"

Micah's jaw ticked as he listened to her.

"What about your son?" she cried. "You don't care do you?"

"Don't say that," he argued, moving closer to her.

"They'll take him away from us," Mollie sobbed. "He won't have a future-"

Micah took her face into his hands, as she frantically shook her head.

"I'm the Queen of this Empire now," she whispered. "I'm here...and I'm in this position *because of you*." Mollie frowned angrily at him. "...and you're telling me...that you still won't even choose your children... over them?"

Micah closed his eyes tightly, making a noise of disagreement.

"It's not that simple anymore," he told her angrily. "We... are a family. All of us. We don't abandon one another-."

"Who are they to me?" Mollie screamed. "Why should I care about them?"

“...because they’re your family too now! This affects *all of us*-. ”

“No, this affects Rowan and Hartley,” she sneered, and Micah froze. “Your father was right. Maybe I *did* overestimate you. Rowan is Hartley's son too right? It's not just *your* responsibility, or mine, or James' or God forbid is it Maël's. This is a Rowan problem. He could take over this monarchy if he wanted to regardless of how unpopular he is with the public. It's not like that mattered in the past.” she added disdainfully. “You don’t have to make it yours...or mine. Micah, we can *leave*. ”

Mollie reached for him.

“It’ll just be us. You don’t have to agree with them, with *him*. You don’t, and especially not because Hartley and Caius lost something that didn't even belong to them in the first place. The throne was never theirs, the iridium was never theirs. Who cares if it's gone?” Mollie cried. “They can't use our son to fill their place as future King and rectify their mistakes because the monarchy “needs an heir.”

Micah had gone still. He stared at Mollie, eyes empty and lips pressed together.

“He can't have Maël! What right does the Lyon monarchy have to take him away-?”

Mollie swallowed the rest of her words when Micah's ice cold fingers pinched into her jaw. His hand was tight on the young girl's face, and she winced in pain at the ache in her jawbone. Mollie reached up to grab his wrist as Micah pressed harder, his expression so much colder as he regarded her. Mollie realized that she had said too much, revealed too much of her thought process as of late, and her lips trembled.

Micah blinked at her, green eyes glowing with anger.

“Do not say that ever again.” His other hand gripped her upper arm, and Mollie winced. “Do you understand?” he hissed, shaking her head slightly so her curls bounced against her back. “Don’t you ever repeat that.”

“Micah-,” Mollie whispered tearfully.

“The Lyon monarchy gets to choose a new heir as it wills just as it had the right to appoint me as CEO of the business sector,” he said lowly. “Whether that was against my will or not is irrelevant. And the Marchesseault monarchy has the same ability to do so through *you*. If we ever ran away, they would stop at nothing to have us killed and then take our children away *anyways*.”

A few tears trailed down her cheeks, and Micah took a calming breath. “Do you understand?” he repeated. His grip on her jaw slackened.

Mollie chewed her lip, frantically blinking.

“Yes,” she breathed. She suddenly felt horribly ill. She remembered what Elio had told her, and her father also. But both of them forgot to tell her the most important part. Even if she

refused to be queen there must always be an heir and a spare. They would just go next in line and that was directly to Rue and Maël.

"Do you know what would happen if anybody else heard you say that?" Micah said coldly. "That...that my monarchy has no right to choose the heir next in line? That it was basically right to run away if we wanted?"

Mollie couldn't stop her tears, and when Micah finally let her face go, her head dropped.

"You've been here long enough...you *know* enough to know that simply isn't a welcome thought," he coldly told her. "You're not a commoner anymore Mollie. I thought you were further along than this. That's disappointing."

Mollie jerked her head up at that, her eyes wide as she looked at him. Was she naive to think that there was a way where her children would come out of this scot free? That the disappearance of the iridium wouldn't have repercussions? Perhaps Ophélie was right. Perhaps she wasn't cut out for this.

"Hey." His soft whisper had her tears falling down harder. "Come here Mollie Mae," Micah whispered. Mollie allowed him to slide her closer so she was half in his lap, fitting into his awaiting arms.

He pressed his lips to hers, and reluctantly she kissed him back. One of his cool hands rested on the back of her neck, while the other snaked around her waist as he held her to him. The kiss was gentle at first, and Mollie found herself relaxing, but it wasn't long before his hands tightened and the kiss turned heavy. With a jerk he bit her lip...hard.

Mollie jerked away from him, the taste of blood blossoming on her tongue. Micah's face was cold and blank, and with a gasp Mollie watched him reach up to roughly swipe his thumb along her lip. It hurt a bit, and Micah harshly rested his hand on the side of her face.

"Those words will never come out of your mouth again. Okay?" Mollie blinked at him in surprise. *Was that supposed to be a punishment?*

"But why-," she whispered.

"And for lying to me...about your prior knowledge of the iridium."

She looked down when he said this. Shame filled her features.

"I know why you did it. Rowan told me. I... get it." He didn't look particularly pleased, but he did look satisfied for the time being, and he leaned in to gently kiss the corner of her lips.

"But from now on no more lying -"

"I didn't *lie*," Mollie protested angrily.

"Leaving out bits of the truth isn't that much different," Micah responded curtly.

She went silent after that as they both calmed their breathing.

“You should shower and get some rest,” Micah said eventually. “It's been a taxing couple of days. We'll sort the rest of this out tomorrow morning at the tribunal.”

"Micah..." she said softly as he led her back into the confines of the castle and out of the rain.

"Yes?" His voice was wary.

She turned to him, her expression solemn. "I'm so sorry...about Theo. I'll...i'll miss her."

He said nothing and Mollie realized the pain was still too fresh for him to process. With features as blank as they always were, he simply squeezed her hand and guided her back into the castle.

Mollie knew something was off when she tried to return to the throne room following her near death experience. Her council had immediately called a recess prompting all parties to return to their chambers and continue negotiations the following morning. It would allow a brief time for them all to recollect and address their issues with a fresh mind. There would be a halt of the bloodshed and Mollie hoped that whatever came tomorrow would ensure that it would end permanently. Her guard still had Nina in their custody to ensure James didn't abscond had they handed her over sooner. Hartley, Caius and James would be escorted to the dungeons under the close supervision of Atem on Marchesseault grounds. Mollie didn't feel comfortable having any of them under the same roof even if they were her prisoners. The Outbacks had been driven out of the castle interiors by the army she had acquired from Rowan as well as her own guard. Thankfully Phillip brought with him his own large group of capable men to assist in the temporary peace alliance. Similarly to Mollie, he wanted an end to this as much as she did.

The rhythmic sound of Micah's heartbeat beneath Mollie's ear was the only thing keeping her grounded. It was the middle of the night, and he was sound asleep...and for once Mollie was not. Mollie hadn't slept well in days, not since the weeks before the war and after. The possibility of having to part with her son was a thought that brought her to tears on more than one occasion, and while it was something that really couldn't have been avoided Mollie still cried.

Ever since Alexandre had passed away, Mollie constantly fretted over whether she did the right thing or not. Would Alexandre have still been alive if she had not gone to Beacon Cape? Mollie supposed that it didn't matter because what was done was done, but she couldn't help her mind from wondering about what could've, should've, and would've.

Micah shifted beneath her, and Mollie lifted her head slightly to gaze at him. It was rare when he was asleep and she wasn't, so she appreciated the moments when he was. He was serene and beautiful even in the depths of sleep and she inhaled deeply allowing his arms to circle tightly around her. Mollie stared at him as he slept, tracing his features with her eyes and wondering if she was crazy for allowing herself to care for the man sleeping next to her. She blinked, eyes burning.

It had been less than a day since Mollie had accepted that she loved Micah.

It was a heartbreaking realization for a myriad of reasons. It was one thing to lack the strength to fight back so fiercely or even try to reach for freedom, but it was another entirely to become so attached to the man who had ruined her life. God, if only her mom could see her, now, she'd be so disappointed. Or perhaps heartbroken.

Mollie herself was heartbroken.

This was the man who had a hand in the death of her friends and many others, and yet here she was...staring up at him...

Almost like she loved him.

She got up quietly and walked by the crib where her twins slept peacefully. She found herself near the window, that looked out to the gardens. Mollie's face felt colder all of a sudden, and she reached up, tentatively, realizing that she had started to cry. She gasped, startled, when she felt a light touch on her waist. The suddenness of it made Mollie jump, and she looked over her shoulder just as Micah shifted. He truly was silent even in movement.

"Why aren't you asleep?" Micah murmured. His voice was huskier than usual making Mollie blush.

She shrugged, forgetting that he probably couldn't see the action so well in the dark. It wasn't long before candlelight flickered within the room, and Mollie didn't have time to turn her face away.

The concern on his own was palpable, and she let him reach for her.

"Are you alright?" he whispered, scooting closer. "Did you have another nightmare?"

Mollie shook her head, unable to quite voice her internal dilemmas. Micah would say nothing. Or explain to her his inability to love anyone else but his children. But he wouldn't understand—couldn't understand. His cool hands on her arms were a comfort to her though, and she leaned into him.

"Parlez-moi Mollie." he said quietly. "I'm a good problem solver...a good anticipator... but I'm not a mind reader."

His soft lips grazed Mollie's hair as she leaned her head on his shoulder, just staring out at the gardens bathed in moonlight. Again, Mollie couldn't speak, just shrugging and moving to wrap her arm around his waist. She just wanted to hold him and let him hold her for the time being. At least, that was what she thought, but as she closed her eyes and inhaled the scent of Micah, she realized she just wanted to be as close to him as possible.

Micah said nothing when Mollie lifted her head to meet his gaze, just looking at her in question while she looked back at him. Mollie ran her eyes over his face, her gaze lingering on his pink lips. Micah was still as she moved closer, hesitant and a little unsure. Mollie was thankful for that, positive that if he moved an inch, she would lose her nerve. When her lips met his, it was light, barely a kiss, but she just remained there, just focusing on the feel of his lips touching her. When she kissed him again, it was firmer, and she placed her hands on his

shoulders. She deeply inhaled, gasping when his own hands curled into her hips. Micah softly spoke her name into her mouth, as Mollie fully leaned into him. Micah was content to carry her back to the bed, letting Mollie rest on top of him while he kissed her back deeply.

Once they started, Mollie couldn't stop, tasting him and lying on top of him. Micah's fingers were twisting into her nightgown, some white short piece of fabric he'd brought for her one day after his meeting. Mollie's body felt fuelled by something stronger than what she had ever felt before, a desperation to feel him against her...in her. She truly didn't know why, and let her body do what it wanted, trailing kisses along his icy neck while his hand came up to rest on her head and thread their way through her dark curls.

He whispered her name again, but Mollie didn't want to talk.

Not now, anyway.

When Micah's hands slid up her frame, sliding the white fabric with it, Mollie didn't protest. She shuddered when her bare chest brushed his own, nipples pebbled and taut against his cool skin but Micah didn't do much more. He was happy to keep kissing her, basking in the feel of resting under her weight. Every brush of his fingers made Mollie shudder, and she found herself pulling away to catch her breath.

Mollie slowly rolled off of him, keeping her eyes on his as she did. Her fingers entwined with his own, and Mollie held his gaze while he pulled her closer. His chest was heaving, and his green eyes glowed and shimmered in the low lighting. His pants were pulled away as he settled himself over the girl, and she reached up to touch his face. If Micah was surprised by the gentle reciprocation, he didn't show it, only content to let Mollie touch him. When she kissed him again, her hands grazed over his shoulders and back, fingers gently gliding along his scarred skin. Micah deepened the kiss when she wrapped her long legs around his waist. One of his hands kneaded deep into her side while the other rested on the side of her neck.

When he finally did find his way into her, Mollie moaned.

She had already long accepted that she just wouldn't ever get used to the feel of him pushing into her. She kept her hands on his face as Micah thrust into her, slow and as if he wanted to savour the sensation. Underneath Micah, it was the only time Mollie could just exist free of all the troubling thoughts that plagued her mind. However, tonight was different.

Mollie couldn't stop thinking.

She clung to the winter prince in the hopes that maybe the feel of his body on top of her and his cock in her would distract her from all of her dizzying thoughts. Wipe her mind clean, but they were too overpowering. A shudder traveled through Mollie when he placed kisses along her jaw, and Mollie threaded her fingers through his hair. She just wanted him close, so close, and she couldn't pinpoint why. Perhaps it was the trauma of what she had experienced the past couple of nights. He was extra careful around her shoulder making her melt into him even more.

Mollie's chest was heavy, and her eyes burned, and she realized with a jolt that she was going to cry again. Mollie held Micah's head to her neck, hoping to keep him from looking, but she

quickly reached up to wipe her face at the same moment he lifted his head. He paused, and it was hard to name the look in his eyes.

"Mollie Mae?" he breathed, wiping her face. "What's wrong?"

Mollie licked her lips, and stared past him, attempting unsuccessfully to keep from crying. Mollie felt so overwhelmed, and she just didn't know why. She felt scared and panicked, and she couldn't stop shaking. When Micah started to pull away, Mollie was quick to clutch his arms, keeping him against her body.

"Talk to me Mollie," he quietly repeated.

Mollie realized then as Micah tried to pull away that she didn't want him to.

"Is...there anything else you want to tell me?" he asked the question slowly. His tone had gone abruptly serious and Mollie could sense the sudden speculation swirling in his mind. There was a hint of warning there even in the way his body had stiffened. A serious tone that Micah often used when he addressed his guard or his father directly. "Because if there is...now would be the time-"

"Would you ever stop loving me?"

It was clear he hadn't expected that, and she slowly met his gaze again. Mollie pulled her lip between her teeth as she searched those emerald eyes, Micah blinked. A frown formed between his dark brows, and he stared down at her, his features blank.

"You're asking me that now...?"

A slight smirk ghosted along his lips, and it was clear he thought this was some rouse until more tears fell. His smile fell as Mollie squeezed her eyes shut, and he wiped her face again. He softly called her name, and Mollie tried to stop crying.

"I meant...would you ever stop *caring* for me? Looking out for me? Looking out for them?" She gestured to where their twins lay sleeping. She sniffed, dropping her gaze down.

"Hey...hey, look at me," he whispered, urging her to open her eyes. When Mollie finally did, his expression was soft, light eyes searching hers and drinking her in.

"I'll never stop loving you," he finally answered.

Mollie's face crumbled again, and when she blinked, she looked towards the ceiling before meeting his eyes again.

"Even if I do something bad? You won't...you won't hate me...?" Micah blinked at her, his frown deepening and confusion growing. "Even if I...did something bad?"

Micah was quiet. His expression thoughtful. He was reading her and Mollie knew that he was aware that this was a loaded question.

"I could... never hate you," he assured her slowly. "You are the mother of my children Mollie Mae."

She let him go slowly and pressed her palms to her face.

"Hey, hey, what-what is going on? What's wrong?" His voice wavered in concern and confusion.

Mollie pressed her lips together, blinking at him. "Even if I did something really, really bad?"

Micah smirked before leaning in to kiss her. It sounded like he thought her concerns were trifling matters, and he brushed his nose against hers.

"Look at me," he said gently. "I will not hurt you." Mollie sniffed. "You should know that by now. Considering how many liberties I have given you." He paused. "At least not permanently." He chuckled at that. "You're a little *too* pretty for that."

She blinked, wiping tears from her cheek. He hesitated as he spoke again, realizing Mollie wasn't lightening up after his joke.

"I may get... really mad," he admitted, being truthful. "...but I'll never *not* love you. I'll never *not* love them." He said gesturing to where their twins were sleeping.

Mollie touched his cheek, lips trembling.

"I thought you couldn't love," she mumbled.

He hesitated. "I said I didn't understand love. That I wasn't destined for it. Not that I couldn't." He brushed his nose against her cheek. "The closest thing I ever felt to love was when I got to hold our son and daughter in my arms," he admitted, his soft murmur against her cheek. "I liked it."

"You promise?" Mollie choked out.

Micah sighed at her, green eyes scanning over her face before he pecked her nose lightly.

"Je promets."

It was quiet the next time Mollie entered her grand chambers. She had opted on wearing a white dress today. A symbol of peace and purity that was known widespread. The aura was tense and foreboding following the bloodshed that had occurred over the past day or so. She had decided to go early and pace the room by herself in an effort to collect her thoughts and calm her frenzied mind. The blood had been cleaned and scrubbed from the day before and the room had a pungent smell of vinegar and some other chemical Mollie couldn't put her finger on. It made her head whirl but she continued pacing. She had woken up nauseous in the morning and sipped her herbal tea in an effort to curb her gnawing stomach. Tamzin's army had arrived moments before Mollie had entered the grand chambers and she breathed in and out slowly. This was good for her. It meant more numbers and more numbers meant more

influence. Her guards had managed to cage James' feral wolf but Mollie feared it wouldn't be enough. She had a feeling the thing would have to be put down. It was just too dangerous and too many lives were lost in an effort to get it where it was now.

A long table stretched through the chamber now, a set up for the council that would now decide what fate would come from those who broke the rules and those who sought to make peace. Mollie would be represented by Elio who in turn would represent the Marchesseault monarchy. Micah would represent Icedalar and unfortunately for Mollie, Hartley was still in charge of the council for the Lyon monarchy. Only when the proper documents were arranged to transfer authority to Atem would he be able to become head of the Lyon empire once again. Phillip would be present to represent Beacon Cape along with the Shraders on behalf of the Ophians. And to Mollie's dismay, Ophélie for Étretat. It was a full circle moment that Mollie knew she had to be ready for. The loss of the iridium was a blow to her leverage, but she had to play her cards correctly as Zephyr had warned her. Its loss meant that her kingdom was safe from destruction, as was the others. Somehow she had to convince the council that the iridium was moved to a location where its concealment was of paramount importance. She knew Phillip had her back. However, it was the others she had to manage to convince also.

Mollie looked up as people began to file into the room once more. Her guards still had Nina tight in their grip and Mollie watched wordlessly as James was brought from the dungeons, his wrists chained tightly behind him as he looked around the room for his daughter. When he spotted her on the platform, her hand tightly in Esperanza's she saw him exhale a breath of relief. He looked worse for wear. The bandages that decorated his body were not well reinforced and many needed re-dressing. However his eyes were still as ferocious as ever and with the glare he directed at her, Mollie knew he still had plenty of fight left in him.

Mollie watched as the council members began to file in slowly. Mollie scowled knowing some of them refused to lend numbers and aid to her people when they needed it most over these last couple of days. When she spotted Elio she saw him give her a smile of encouragement.

Hartley didn't even glance her way as he made his way to the head of the table and took his seat. He looked as regal as he always did, as if the events of yesterday did nothing to his appearance in the slightest. Apart from the bruising on his jaw from the punch he received from his brother, he looked well kept. Micah and Rowan took their seats beside each other and noticeably far away from their father.

Gibbs nodded at her as he paced the entrance, his focus on James. The blade in his hand was enough of an intimidation factor and it didn't go unnoticed.

Zephyr, Araya, Atem, Isaac, Caius, and Kaveh Shrader were the last to enter the hall before the heavy doors were closed behind them. Although Kaveh was the only one permitted to sit at the table, the others stood by the stage, alert and ready.

"Good to see you looking better princess," Caius said softly. "Now that you've had a full night to think about your next move how about we discuss ownership of the iridium?"

"The iridium has been transported," Mollie spoke directly to Caius. Her voice rang clear and sharp through the chamber. "It's been handled and taken out of *Peréal* to a place no one will ever be able to reach."

She watched Caius' face turn a deep shade of scarlet. "You lie."

Before she could respond the sound of Hartley's resonating laughs filled the chamber. "Well isn't *this* a turn of events," he chuckled.

Mollie ignored them both.

"This bloodshed ends today," Mollie continued. "There is a reason Izabel handed the iridium over to Quinn, a reason she never wanted it to be found nor discovered by any monarchy. Its properties expand beyond what we ever thought possible. In its purest form, yes, it elongates the typical life span, preserves youthfulness, and allows for the manufacturing of weapons that could wipe out entire civilizations. And these alone were just the fragments. Together, this element would be an abomination of nature. It is not *meant* to be combined to create a weapon. If it were to be assembled on this land, the repercussions would be too gruesome to fathom, with the potential to wipe out all of us. It's a risk I...am not willing to take."

"What have you done with it?" Caius whipped out. "Where is it?"

Before Mollie could respond another deeper voice spoke from behind her. "It has been taken to my kingdom to be safely destroyed. Mollie delivered it to me not long after James Lyon was imprisoned yesterday evening.

She turned in surprise to see Phillip Aurelio staring at her from his seat at the table. He spoke so fluidly and confidently. It made Mollie feel more emboldened. "In fact, I owe this back to her as she honoured her word." Silently, he slid the pearl from her dagger he had taken from her in Beacon Cape to Elio who sat across from him. "Have that recorded Elio," he continued, his dark eyes shifting to the man beside her. "As well as everything that will unfold here today."

The silence that permeated the room was tense but Mollie held her ground. Atem had stood beside her and was the next to speak.

"If that is the case, then I do not see why we cannot negotiate like civilized members of society." He said coolly. "As true King of the Lyon Empire I will see to it that James Lyon is tried for his war crimes against the Marchesseault regime in addition to conspiracy with the Ophians to wipe out an entire group of individuals. My brother will be duly penalized for the murder of a monarchial member," Atem said, shooting a glare at Hartley. "And foremost, Caius, *you* will spend the rest of your days in jail for orchestrating many crimes that led to the murder of so many innocents today. Now is the time where you will surrender peacefully and *honour the code*."

Atem looked at Mollie next. "Does the Queen of the Marchesseault Empire have any objections?"

Mollie blinked, the sudden influx of stares made her grimace. She stood up straighter with a shaky exhale and ignored the pain in her shoulder and chest. She gripped her dagger tightly in her hand. "I want the trial today," she said crisply. "And I want each Lyon tried in this court room. Her eyes flickered over to James. On Marchesseault land." Mollie looked at the members of the table. "I don't object to anything else apart from that request." She met Elio's eyes.

"I concur with the Queen," Elio said quietly."

"I object," Hartley responded grittily. "That is highly unc customary considering the unique circumstances." His eyes narrowed. "An ally of our monarchy was just killed on Marchessault land not even twenty four hours ago. Vivienne Coeur's death must also be taken into account. The circumstances of her death are as *ambiguous* as the circumstances surrounding the late King Alexandre."

Mollie grimaced. She knew that was coming. Hushed whispers erupted from the table. Her eyes met James, a nastiness still present within them. It was well within Mollie's power to sentence him to far worse. They all knew this.

Several murmurs circulated the room and Mollie felt Atem's calming presence beside her. When he spoke next it was just to her. "Having the trial here means keeping the prisoners under your monarchies care till the sentencing. I fear that is too long. Let them return to Questershire and meet their fates there," he murmured placing a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Mollie met his gaze. "He killed my father. Alexandre would have wanted him punished to the full extent. He won't get that in Questershire." Mollie knew how it worked. The leniency would be nothing more than a slap on the wrist and she couldn't have that.

Atem sighed. "I hope this isn't an eye for an eye princess. You can still walk away from this Mollie. Your father gave you a choice."

Mollie inhaled slowly. She looked up at the platform where James Lyon stood then over to Hartley who had his blank chilling stare on her. Atem was still their blood - he was still a Lyon. She looked over to Caius who was angrily arguing with Rowan over something. The sound of their voices was suddenly the loudest thing in the room and Mollie froze. It was too quiet. Too calm. Mollie immediately felt the hairs on her arm tense. Her blood ran cold and she turned around abruptly to face the cage where the feral Wolamute was supposed to be imprisoned.

The empty cage was enough to make Mollie spring to action and she looked upwards where James Lyon stood. To her horror he was unrestrained, the chains around him gone and the look in his eyes absolutely unhinged. However his focus was not on Mollie nor was it on the council meeting. His focus was on Nina who stood on the other end of the platform. They were seconds away from feeling each others warmth, inhaling each other's smell, and uniting their little family that had been torn apart by the throngs of war, greed, and deceit.

Mollie heard it before she saw it. A single sharp shot that buzzed past her ear like bees swarming a honeycomb. Mollie felt herself go limp because she had heard that sound before.

A drowning sense of despair rocketed her body. The feeling was so intense – so visceral – that she felt her knees collapse.

Her garbled scream was muffled by the howl of fury that echoed through the chamber.

“Get down!” Zephyr’s yell snapped her out of her state of immobility as he stumbled towards her and pulled her down. She felt the air leave her lungs as he tugged her downwards in a protective manner. He held her towards his chest as she choked down air – the sound of James’s screams echoing through her ears.

“No,” Mollie gasped. *Please. No.*

The shock of what had just happened sent the entire room in disarray. James had dropped to his knees next to his daughter as he sobbed openly. Esperanza had screamed, her hands soaked with blood as she curled her palm around the child's delicate cheek as blood soaked straight through the clothes on her chest. She was choking on the blood in her throat, the arrow lodged snugly in her little chest.

Mollie was pulled backward by her hair. She cried in pain hearing the sound of a sword unsheathe.

Rowan’s blade was pointed straight at her throat and she gasped in pain, her shoulder throbbing as she was turned around sharply to face him. His nose brushed hers and the anger in his eyes made her knees go weak.

“So this was your plan?” He hissed. To make promises and minimize the casualties? But only to the people who mattered to you wasn’t it Mollie?”

“Get your hands off of her,” she heard Zephyr snap. With a look of utter rage, Rowan pushed her away forcefully prompting Mollie to stumble backwards. Micah was frozen. He hadn’t moved a muscle since the arrow had been shot...in fact he didn’t seem to be present at all. Zephyr stepped in front of her, blocking her from Rowan’s reach. Mollie felt her blood run cold.

“I didn’t...” Mollie whispered. “I would *never*.”

Her words came out small and choked. Mollie's faced crumbled as those around her stilled. The screams of James suddenly seemed muffled as Mollie processed the horror of what had just happened. Mollie's frame shook as her chest tightened, a cry escaping the otherwise quiet throne room.

“Mollie look at me.” Someone was shaking her but Mollie was in shock. The feeling was numbing and suffocating all at once. “I didn’t have anything to do with this. I’m telling you. The desperation in Zephyr’s voice shook Mollie out of her state of immobility and she stared up into those deep blue eyes that were now wide and concerned.

“Of course,” she heard Rowan sneer. “You’re always the innocent one. I’m sure you had no part whatsoever.”

Rowan's sarcasm made her teeth clench but she ignored him, her heart ached for the desperation in Zephyr's voice.

"Can't you see it?" Mollie whispered between unmoving lips. She turned her eyes back to where the two brothers stood facing each other. Caius' eyes were locked on the body but Hartley had turned to watch his eldest son who lay howling next to the crumpled form of his daughter.

Mollie blinked – her vision was blurring. Behind a sobbing James was Araya who looked equally as surprised by the sudden death of the young Lyon.

"They killed her," Mollie whispered. "They...*killed* her."

Hartley stood still at the table, his face blank. Dark eyes meeting blue. James's sobs continued to echo through the hall and Mollie noted the position Rowan took in front of Micah. With a jolt Mollie realized he was putting himself in the way of any potential arrows directed at the table.

Mollie turned to Zen first. "You...knew about this?" Her voice was absolutely broken when she spoke.

Zephyr's face went pale. "What? No. Mollie I *swear* I didn't."

Tears of betrayal filled her lids as the weight of what happened set in. "All this time...I trusted you."

"Mollie you don't understand-," Zephyr said urgently. "I...we didn't do this..." Before he could plead his case further, James' wolf rounded the corner at a speed that made Mollie's stomach drop.

Mollie was scrambling to see who had shot the arrow but between all the guards it was impossible to tell. She screamed when James' wolf burst through the door, jaws snapping and eyes absolutely feral.

With yellow eyes hungry for prey Mollie watched it lunge from the platform. With a shock she saw it clamp its jaws onto Caius who screamed as it tore at his torso with its ragged claws. She could see Araya, Isaac and several others attempting unsuccessfully to save him as the beast tore limb after limb.

"Bring it down! *Bring it down!*" Mollie screamed.

Zephyr was screaming at her to get to safety but Mollie's rage took over.

Vivienne Coeur isolating her on the hilltops....Mollie entering an empty grand chamber that morning...someone letting the beast loose while they were distracted. It was all *planned*.

Mollie clenched her fists. They had been betrayed. Someone in her immediate circle had betrayed them in an effort to set her up so her allies would turn against her. And worse...turn the Lyons and the Insurgency against her also.

There was only one person who would have known not only her gameplan but the Insurgency and the Lyon's as well. Someone with their own personal vendetta to accomplish. Someone who wouldn't have cared whether Mollie lived to be queen or not and someone who would stop at nothing to have Micah Lyon as King. She wished she had seen it sooner and as she took one last look around the room her eyes met familiar brown ones. His lips curled into a smile...or at least the closest thing it could get to considering the massive scar that ran down his face.

Gibbs *fucking* Marchesseault.

Chapter 63: Rhénium Part III

Chapter Summary

Mollie faces the tribunal and must choose between two life-altering choices as punishment for the crimes committed on Marchesseault soil

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It didn't take long for the commotion to begin.

It was the sound of screaming that disoriented Esperanza - something the old woman had thought she had heard enough of when this war had begun. She had gone numb. Totally frozen in confusion—and gut wrenching despair. The scream alone was enough to send the old woman quaking at her knees.

"Let me talk to her!"

It was Micah's husky voice, the very sound of it made Esperanza's hair stand on end. She slowly moved towards Mollie's quarters. She trembled, having never known Micah for the type to raise his voice under any circumstances. There were a lot of voices mingling together from below the staircase on the main level, and they all quickly drowned his out. The old woman slowly blinked as she stared at the heavy gold trimmed door from where the scream had originated from.

An uneasy feeling stirred deep in her gut.

"Poor girl," Esperanza thought sadly. She had been the first to see to Mollie after she had fainted. It was no doubt an accumulation of stress and exhaustion but there was something else too. Something else Esperanza had feared at the back of her mind since the winter prince and the future queen had been on good terms. However it could be this fact alone that could save the queen from the wrath of the council that would face her soon.

It only just occurred to Esperanza that if the winter prince was downstairs, then he wasn't with Mollie in her quarters.

Everything had happened so quickly after the council had come together. She had narrowly escaped her own death, had felt the whoosh of air from the arrow that passed her by. She had felt Nina's warm hand disappear from within her own grasp and then suddenly her body was so cold. She died like her mother did. Staring lifelessly upwards as blood bubbled beneath her.

Esperanza knew who the blame would shift to immediately...

Caius was currently being attended to in the room below them and Zephyr, Araya and Isaac had managed to isolate and kill James' beast. But that hadn't stopped Mollie from nearly passing out in the middle of the room prompting a second recess of the council. Without Caius well enough to be present at the tribunal now...the odds were certainly not in Mollie's favour.

Esperanza heard footsteps coming up the stairs, and she stared at the door in dread. They were nearing Mollie's room, the sound of them echoed in the hallway, and for some reason, she expected Atem's imposing frame to be the first to appear. It wasn't, but Esperanza still felt no relief at the familiar sight of Prince Micah.

She rubbed her sore eyes as her gaze met his, the dark-haired man standing before the doorway entrance. He looked almost as sick as the queen had earlier. His skin paler than usual and the shadows beneath his eyes dark.

"Prince Micah..."

It was hard to pinpoint the look on his face, only that it was strained and severe. She watched the way his jaw ticked, chest heaving slightly, and when her gaze lowered, it landed on his tightening grip on the doorknob. Esperanza said his name again, growing even more nervous the longer he didn't speak.

"Micah."

That wasn't her voice.

Esperanza's lips parted at the sound of Atem's stern voice coming from over Micah's shoulder, and she guessed that he was somewhere in the hallway below the spiralling staircase where she couldn't see him. At the sound of the other man's voice, Micah seemed to visibly tense. He stood there for a few more seconds before finally opening the door. She followed him promptly, guessing her presence would be needed.

"Micah, what...?"

Mollie stood in the centre of the room, chest heaving and hair cascading around her shoulders to her waist in soft ringlets. Her arms were shaking and Esperanza could see the confusion and shock across her pretty features.

It had been a commotion after Nina Lyon had been killed. The blood had caused Mollie to sink to the floor. Little Nina was dead, and with little accountability for her death present and the death of Vivienne Coeur before that, they would have to proceed with much more urgent council matters. She had only just woken up minutes ago and already the council was demanding her presence and waiting for answers and more concerningly..punishment and accountability.

"It's okay," the winter prince immediately whispered, even though to Esperanza it felt like it was absolutely *not* okay. "Everything's going to be okay." He took Mollie's hand immediately, threading his fingers through hers. "I just...I need you to come downstairs." His voice was so low, and despite the confusion the girl must have been feeling, she gazed into

his eyes and slowly allowed him to lead her out of the room. Esperanza surmised that Atem had went back downstairs because he was nowhere to be found when she followed the winter prince and his wife into the hallway.

Every step felt heavy, and Esperanza didn't miss the tight hold the prince had on Mollie's as he gently guided her downstairs. Esperanza had no inkling of where anyone was going, but she was shocked to realize that they were heading to the courtyard. However, the biggest shock of all was the sight that would meet her the moment she stepped outside.

Time seemed to move slower for Mollie as she looked between Micah and the approaching doors that led to the massive courtyard of the castle. Esperanza murmured something to Micah before she slipped outside, leaving as silently as she appeared. It was too low for Mollie to hear but she could feel the tenseness radiating off of Micah like a thick heavy blanket.

"Micah..." Mollie's voice was barely a whisper, but she knew he had heard her by the feel of his pale hand gently squeezing hers. She glanced back at Micah, her face hurting from how much she was frowning. They had made it to the door, the both of them standing behind it, fingers interlocked.

He gave her his undivided attention, and Mollie breathed as smoothly as she could muster. "What are they going to do to me?" Her question came out almost inaudible, just barely above a whisper as she found herself almost too afraid to ask—too fearful to want to know. When Micah's face fell some, Mollie's own frown deepened, and when he sighed, her heart sank.

"I don't... I don't know," he murmured slowly, and Mollie could see that he was telling the truth. Mollie knew that Micah would have no say in this. Mollie was suddenly reminded of her early days in Questershire, when Micah had warned her about her conduct around his family, especially his father. He had stood behind the doors to the dining room then. She almost wished she could go back to that moment. He had warned her...many many times. However faced with this memory only served to make her stomach twist more. Only this time, Mollie wasn't able to stop it, and it was Micah who kept her from falling as she hurried to the nearest chamber. Mollie had only just made it to the toilet in time, and with nothing in her stomach to throw up, all she expelled was bile.

One of Micah's hands held on to Mollie's waist, while the other gently rubbed her back as Mollie vomited again. With every heave of her stomach, she shook more and more.

When Mollie was done, she could only stare at the wall behind the toilet.

"You're sick," he murmured, tone strained with worry. Mollie shook her head.

"No, I'm angry" Mollie hissed. She lifted her gaze to meet his. "...and heartbroken." Micah frowned. His eyes turned stormy.

"My niece was just murdered in a room surrounded by *your* guards and *you're* heartbroken?"

Mollie pushed herself away from the toilet angrily. He didn't let her go even though she could feel her tears beginning to fall again.

"Here," he murmured turning away for moment before returning and handing her a cold glass of water mixed with spearmint and ginger. "It'll help with the nausea."

She sipped it quietly, wanting to say something snarky but something about his demeanour prevented her from doing so.

"I didn't have anything to do with Nina's death," she said quietly. "You can choose to believe me or choose not to, like the rest of your family." Mollie watched him close his eyes tightly. His lack of response made her heave again.

"Hey hey. Stop with the tears." Micah's sharp voice made her open her eyes in surprise. He cupped her face gently, cold leather chilly against her tear stained cheek. "At this point it doesn't matter whether you killed her or not. They were going to find a way to punish you regardless," he spoke quickly, as if they were running out of time. "Remember that you have been through...a lot when I first had you in my care in Questershire and you didn't shed a tear." He was murmuring and Mollie had to lean in closer to hear him. "I need you to be as strong as you were then, now more than ever." There was a sadness, a longing there as if he were cherishing a memory. He clenched his fists and Mollie remembered the scar he had on his palm after she had attempted to unsuccessfully disarm him in the bathroom. "I know it's not fair to ask that of you now...especially after everything that has happened. But you have to. Once they break you down completely... there isn't a way to..return. At least not unscathed in some way."

Mollie nodded miserably.

"But Micah," she whispered. "Why did you minimize your part in all of this? Why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you *do* anything..." Mollie continued before Micah could protest. "Why did you hold me and comfort me last night and tell me you weren't as bad as them when you're much worse?" Micah stepped back. Her question seemed to have surprised him and she could see his jaw clench.

"I am not," he said stiffly.

"But you are," Mollie insisted with a frown. "At least with Hartley and James and Ophélie I *know* who they are. I fear them because they've shown me *why* I should." She touched her shoulder gently, the pain still fresh and she felt Micah pull her close again. His breathing grew ragged whenever he eyed the wound his father had given her. "With them I always knew where I stood...but with you...you made me love you." Mollie's words came out small and choked, and her face crumbled as Micah stilled. Her petite frame shook and her chest tightened, a cry escaping her in the otherwise quiet bathroom. Micah didn't respond right away, just holding the girl as she struggled to get her bearings.

"It may be hard for you to believe....but I'm not like them Mollie..." he whispered, rocking her gently against his chest. "I need you to *understand* that," he hesitated. "I don't know how else to show you that." She squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm not proud of what I did in the past," he confessed. "...but it *is* why I can hold you every night for as long as I want." Mollie sighed

as Micah pulled away. She felt that the numbness that consumed her reflected in her own gaze in the bathroom mirror. He heaved a sigh, twisting the ring she wore on her finger. "I would still do anything for you," he assured her, looking at the girl from beneath his lashes. "That'll never change...and even... even when I have to do whatever it is I have to do today, I'll be doing it with love." Those words didn't exactly comfort Mollie, and she stiffened. In fact, Mollie was sure she was going to throw up again. "Punishment in the monarchy is never trivial Mollie," Micah told her softly. "Whatever happened to Nina yesterday was carried out with the sole intent to punish *you*. Rowan and I feared something like this would happen," he muttered. "I bloody *told* him-

"You know who did it?" Mollie whispered. "Since when did you know?"

Micah's expression darkened. "Since I pulled this from beneath Theo's body." Mollie's jaw dropped when Micah reached into his pocket and pulled out the necklace.

"The iridium," she whispered. She began to panic. "Micah do you know what this means -"

"Hush," Micah said curtly. "What Rowan has been working on for so long in his lab was not the manufacturing of iridium for weapon use as the lies have been spread for those to believe. But how to safely neutralize the element so its energy can be safely harvested as potential energy, stored safely and if needed for use, converted to kinetic energy in a way that isn't highly combustible.

"Isn't that unstable?" Mollie whispered. "You wouldn't have had any time to head back to Questershire for the right equipment..."

Mollie froze. "Wait a minute...the wolfsbane," she whispered. "That helps doesn't it?" Micah nodded.

"Yes. Pure wolfsbane doesn't grow in Questershire or as far as I know in any other empire except..." Mollie stiffened.

"Except in *Etrétat*. Hold on...how did you know the wolfsbane could neutralize it in such a way?"

"Rowan suspected so," Micah explained. "Even with large amounts of wolfsbane, iridium can be stabilized as long as the medium has some kind of metal infused within it, for example wolfsbane in conjunction with platinum like my ring," he mused gesturing to the ring on his pinky. "Or your necklace which is alloyed with titanium." Micah was deep in thought as he spoke. "Rowan believes the high conductivity of the metal is a big factor and something about the wolfsbane allows the energy to move in such a manner that it isn't combustible upon impact...but slower. More gradual."

Mollie frowned. "Like my sword which is steel...which is made out of an alloy of carbon and iron." Mollie gritted her teeth as she spoke.

"Your sword?" Micah's voice was flat as he raised an eyebrow.

“You should ask your brother who he decides to use as his little research project next time he discovers something new,” Mollie said bitterly.

Micah frowned. “He *what?*”

“That’s not important right now,” Mollie mumbled. “The more metal present in close proximity the stronger the impact once it combines with the iridium yes?” Mollie paced as she thought long and hard about how she was going to make her next move.

“Yes...” Micah said warily. “Why do you ask?”

“Just wondering,” Mollie said calmly. “May I have that?” she gestured to the iridium that shimmered against the dark leather of his gloves.

“No,” Micah said sharply. “I know what you’re planning on doing and I won’t let you do anything else that will further punish you and in turn myself.”

“Gibbs needs to die,” Mollie said flatly. “And I need it in my possession for the tribunal regardless. I had Zephyr leak to the council that it is in Phillips possession. If you waltz in with it my credibility is destroyed. As is yours.”

She winced as she took the necklace from Micah avoiding his angry gaze. His fingers flexed when she took it from his grasp. It wasn’t something she explicitly disclosed to him but at this point he had little choice in that decision.

“That boy is hardly a credible source,” Micah said with disdain. “I wouldn’t worry too much about that.” He paused. “As for Gibbs...let me take care of him...” Micah said, his tone eerily calm. “We will extradite him to Questershire where he will spend the rest of his days. He will *wish* he faced the same fate as his brother.”

“Like *your* brother?” Mollie challenged. “Will he face the same fate?” She heard him sigh as he stood up to his full height.

“Mollie,” Micah responded coldly. “You seem to forget that James is the only one who can get even *merely* close enough to my father and stand even a chance of defeating him.” Mollie shivered. Hartley was truly the epitome of nightmares but she didn’t know if that made him worse than the atrocities that her own blood had committed. Whether Mollie wanted to admit it or not, Gibbs was her blood and he was just as much a monster as the King of the Lyon Empire. Perhaps there was an evil in all of them and Mollie squeezed her eyes tightly. She had to focus her attention on other matters before she vomited again. Micah had been murmuring something – it sounded like words of comfort. It felt *wrong* leaving his lips. Micah wasn’t the type to dish out soothing words in times of distress. Not even when Mollie was bleeding open on an operating table while birthing his children did he whisper words of comfort to her. For him to do it now made her even more sick to her stomach. He was trying to calm her against something that was unknown to him too and she felt her breaths shudder. She reached for her yellow cloak and draped it tightly around her shoulders. Once dressed Micah stepped forward. His green eyes were cold like they always were as he looked her over, his gloved fingers grazed over her own but this time it felt...*scared*.

Never had fear gripped Mollie much like it did in that moment. She held her breath and finally let him lead her out of the comfort of her castle and truly out into the wrath that awaited her outside.

“Step away from her Micah.”

The voice that addressed them wasn't one Mollie heard often. She shuddered at the sharpness emanating from Hartley Lyon. He sat cold and still beside his brother Atem who seemed noticeably agitated. Now that Caius was recovering from nearly being mauled to death by James' beast, Atem had to take his place.

Mollie's eyes met Hartley's dark ones and it truly felt like the first time he had ever bothered to look at her and take her in. As his gaze bore into her own she felt Micah's hand leave hers as he was forced to step away from her and join Ophélie, Gibbs, Elio, Phillip, and the other monarchy heads who had arrived for the tribunal. Seeing Gibbs with that horrid smirk made Mollie's fists curl in anger.

She was standing, isolated and in the middle of the courtyard, the staircase leading back to the castle behind her almost adding to the dramatics of it all. Although they were on level ground to Mollie she still felt incredibly small and vulnerable. Hartley's anger and disgust was palpable and Mollie found herself struggling to maintain his intimidating stare.

“You will look at me,” he sneered. He stood as if to challenge her and Mollie trembled. “You think me a fool,” he murmured. “I expected nothing less than this little stunt you pulled to take the attention off the iridium.” Mollie wasn't used to being on the receiving end of Hartley's venomous gaze, dark eyes nearly black with rage, icy and coal-like. “I look forward to it even,” he confessed. “None of you will ever succeed so it helps to realize this. It makes acceptance that much easier and allows you to get any sliver of hope out of your systems.” Mollie swallowed the lump in her throat and she knew Harley could practically feel the fear radiating off of her. He was more colloquial with her earlier in the confines of her castle. But now that his niece was dead, his other brother was fighting for his life, and his eldest son stood as a convicted criminal, he was nothing short of livid.

“You know...I was actually *anticipating* for you to pull something grandiose from the *moment* you birthed those heirs with my son. But you seemed too... docile to fight back properly then. *Too docile* even to fight for yourself when you challenged James to battle.” When Mollie blinked again she felt the tears forming but she bit back hard remembering what Micah had warned her. The silence loomed on and Mollie didn't know whether he was expecting a response. Evidently, he was.

“What is it girl?” he mused. “Nothing to say for yourself?” Mollie's chest heaved and she took a deep breath and started to glance around. She spotted Esperanza with surprise also standing in a corner, with those that were witnesses and not a part of the actual tribunal. She seemed as if she had been crying and Mollie felt her breath cut off completely at the jagged scar across her cheek. She was clutching a handkerchief to her cheek as Margot held her close.

“No,” Hartley snarled. “Don’t look at them. Look at me.” He ordered. “After all it was *my* granddaughter who was murdered in cold blood in front of all of these witnesses. When Mollie’s gaze met his again, she held back her tears and swallowed the nausea in her stomach. Mollie now understood how this man had managed to maintain power for all those years. He was not only as persuasive and charismatic as much as he was cruel, he was also terrifying.

“Your Grace,” she said with as much clarity as she could muster. “Myself and neither did my monarchy give the order-“

“I actually *expect* you to fight back,” he sneered. “What I *don’t* expect however, is the murder of blended family and the cowardice to have another take the blame for it.” He interrupted. He spat the words out making Mollie flinch. “Because anything...*anything* could come from that. You could kill one of us in our sleep and think nothing of it.”

“You’re telling this to the wrong person.” She managed between gritted teeth. Even though the words left her lips Mollie could feel that heavy sense of foreboding that it wasn’t going to change anything. It was the imperceptible shake of Micah’s head from the table where he sat that alerted her to the notion that there was a right and a wrong approach. “Your Grace,” she began again. “With all due respect, I apologize that the murder of your granddaughter occurred on my premises. And I *promise* you...the one responsible will be charged to the fullest extent in proportionality to the offence.” Her gaze met the smug eyes of Gibbs briefly before she turned them back to Hartley. His time would come...

Hartley stared at Mollie for a long time—*too long*—just looking down his nose at her as if he could barely stand to look at her. Mollie was all too aware of the eyes on her, all too aware of the example being made out of her. She was in the dark about what was going to happen, now, and it made her want to be sick. Mollie maintained her gaze however, her blood boiling as she stared into his empty brown eyes. Mollie knew Nina would have never been heir, not when there was a male heir alive. For him to throw that out to everyone as if Nina was always somehow a potential successor to the throne when it was so untrue was almost too much for Mollie to bear.

“Phillip,” Hartley said with chilling emptiness. “Proceed with the interrogation.”

The voice of Phillip Aurelio rang clear as he spoke. "Prince Micah, why did you accompany Rowan to the throne room yesterday evening?"

Atem hesitated as Micah stood up slowly and frowned. "You must answer the question Prince Micah," he said quietly. Micah gritted his teeth, his gaze on Mollie not wavering even slightly.

"Because," the winter prince said icily. "I was looking for my wife."

Hartley nodded, slowly and with a hum. "...And *why* was that dear boy? *Où était-elle?*" Mollie didn’t stare at any of them. Rather, her eyes fell to the ground as she fought to keep her stomach contents down. She felt numb and heavy all at once, and for the first time in a long time, Mollie genuinely wanted to die.

“Where was she, boy?” Hartley asked again, not so nice this time. Micah didn’t respond right away, and Mollie wrapped her arms around herself, head tilting downwards.

“She was...here,” he finally breathed, sounding defeated. “She was in the throne room.” Mollie heard Ophélie mumble something, and although Mollie couldn’t make it out, she knew it wasn’t nice. The rest of the members murmured amongst themselves making Mollie's skin feel hot and feverish. Elio seemed genuinely worried but Mollie couldn’t bring herself to even glance at him. Only another moment passed before Micah was harshly moving forward, but it wasn’t fast enough. A member of the Lyon guard had gripped the sleeve of Mollie's dress from behind, both ripping the fabric and scratching her skin in the process. It seemed to be an attempt to arrest her and Mollie screamed in both shock and pain, hurrying back and clutching her arm as Micah harshly shoved him away.

“She didn’t do it!” Micah yelled.

“Sit back down, Micah,” Rowan hissed. Mollie hadn’t even seen him at the table, he was shrouded in the back – almost as if he were one with the shadows.

“Nina was family,” Gibbs said slowly. “She was innocent.” Mollie felt the urge to kill when she heard who had spoken next.

“I didn’t kill her!” Mollie screamed.

“Shut up,” he snarled, so harsh and violent that Mollie jerked backwards several steps. Mollie pressed her hands to her mouth, trying and failing to hold her cries in. “I don’t want to hear another word out of her mouth unless it’s the truth,” he bit out.

“Stop it,” Micah ordered, taking a step towards him. “Do you hear me?” He continued before Gibbs could say anything else. His voice had gone dangerously dead. “Don't speak to her that way. If you think I’m going to stand here and let you talk to her like that, you’ve taken one too many liberties with me,” Micah sneered. The two faced one another for what felt like too long, just staring each other down, and Mollie felt herself sliding to the floor. The room was blurry from her tears, and it felt so hard to breathe. Mollie brought her hands to her knees, dropped her head, and squeezed her eyes trying with every fibre inside of her to keep her tears at bay.

“Let me talk to her,” Mollie heard Micah say slowly, the same thing she had heard him yell earlier. It was a last desperate attempt at peaceful negotiation. “We can end this now. The dramatics aren’t necessary.”

"Micah," she whispered. "I didn't do this." He was close enough to her that he could hear her voice.

“Look at me. Hey...look at me,” he murmured coming closer. Mollie picked her head up, only to glance behind her when Micah gripped her chin. “Don’t look at them,” his voice was hard. “Look at me.” His voice was husky, and Mollie reached up to grip his wrist as she met his dark gaze. His eyes were soft, but there was something swirling there that put her on edge. An underlying skepticism lay there, and Mollie pressed her lips together. He seemed to inhale slowly, making her gut clench even more before he spoke. She knew he had to do this, no

matter how much he didn't want to. "Did you kill Nina?" His voice carried enough for the tribunal to hear behind them.

"No," Mollie answered without hesitation. "I didn't. I... I could never." And she was telling the truth. She could tell by the coldness of his features, the tautness of his jaw that he wasn't finished. He dropped his gaze for a moment before meeting her eyes once again and it looked like he dreaded the next question.

"...But you were in the throne room first? You were in the throne room before Nina even arrived?" Micah held her gaze, and she held his. Mollie barely moved...she couldn't articulate her words. But with a jolt Mollie realized she didn't need to. Her silence was appearing as confirmation enough, and she flinched when she heard someone at the table shatter their glass.

"Micah..."

"You saw her standing there...and you didn't do anything," he sounded heartbroken, and Mollie soon realized why. "You lied to me."

Mollie's head lowered, and she wiped her face, but more tears just replaced those. Mollie reached for him, gripping his shirt, trying to keep him close.

"Micah," she choked out, trying to pull him closer.

"Is that why..." he trailed off, sighing to himself as his eyes fell closed. He chuckled to himself, but it lacked humour. "*That's* why," he said to himself, his own head lowered so that his forehead touched hers. Mollie felt him wipe her face, a shaky sigh leaving him.

"Je vous l'ai dit Micah," Rowan said calmly. *"Je t'avais dit que ça finirait mal. Je t'ai dit que tu étais trop tendre avec elle."*

"Rowan..." Micah's voice dripped with exasperation as he raised Mollie to her feet. Mollie couldn't stop shaking, and her head was pounding so much from holding back her tears. What would happen now? Would they imprison her? Speaking of the eldest Lyon, he had been eerily quiet since this entire tribunal began.

"Micah," Hartley ordered. *"Laissez-la là et restez avec votre sang."* Mollie felt the winter prince leave her side almost immediately at the sharp tone of his father.

However, of all the things she expected...

Mollie didn't expect Hartley to suddenly order one of his own guards to quickly grab her arm from behind, twisting it—and Mollie herself with his other arm— before violently shoving her to the ground. It happened so fast that when Mollie finally cried out in pain, clutching her wrist, she was already looking up at him from the ground. Hartley wasn't looking at Mollie though, hands behind his back even as he stepped away from his spot in the centre of the tribunal and slowly towards her. He was looking at his youngest son...gauging his reaction with strict scrutiny. From her position Mollie could hear the protests from Phillip, Atem and the loudest coming from Elio, but she knew she would be punished and that it was well

within Hartley's power to do so. Would he whip her like he did to Micah earlier? Something told Mollie...that just wouldn't cut it.

"There are two outcomes for you today," Hartley started as he sauntered over to the long table situated on her property and poured himself a generous amount of whiskey. He walked towards Micah who looked like he was moments away from committing murder – once again. "Personally...I am impartial to either outcome. But myself and these other lovely ladies and gentleman at the table have all agreed that penance must be sought considering two people are dead now within the borders of *your* land. In addition to my niece was Vivienne Coeur, who was loyal to our empire."

Mollie started to push herself to her feet but the guard seemed to hear it and pushed her back down hard.

"No no my dear," Hartley chuckled taking a deep sip of his drink. "You don't get to get up yet." With a heart sinking in her chest, Mollie let her long legs curl up beneath her, cloak surrounding her like a cloud of gold.

"Remind us again, Micah...", Hartley finally spoke up again, his voice eerily calm as he looked between the two of them. His words had Mollie blinking, and she looked to Micah in confusion. He looked conflicted, almost miserable, in fact, and she watched his jaw clench. "How long your...*wife*," he sneered when he spoke. "Remind us how long she knew about the iridium and withheld this from you?"

Mollie looked at Hartley, despising him and his mocking tone. She hated the way he spoke like he already knew the answers he was looking for, as if he were the smartest person in the room.

"Remind us..." he paused, his eyes glinting with something that made Mollie want to tear her insides out. "Remind us how *far along* she is right at this moment." The guard above her looked down at her in shock and Mollie blinked away the tears that had begun to blur her vision.

No. Not again. It couldn't be.

The gash on Esperanza's face must have been punishment for withholding information and Mollie felt her skin grow cold. Her heart dropped to her gut and she heard more than felt the sob escape her lips. She hadn't even known herself...*surely* Micah knew this. The expression on his face had gone alarmingly stony and Mollie trembled. There was no way. It had to be some kind of sick lie in an effort to turn Micah against her. Mollie was sure of it.

"Don't listen to him Micah," she gasped. "I *promise* you-"

"More lies," Hartley sneered, disgust lacing his tone. "But first outcome..." he dragged out, resting a hand on Micah's shoulder. "We finally get to see what Micah has in him..." Mollie felt her head drop into her hands as she struggled to pull herself together. "Oh you can't cry now." Mollie heard Hartley sneer as she processed her newly discovered information.

Surely he wouldn't...

Mollie felt the same Lyon guard who had pushed her down earlier now yank her up to her feet.

“Please your Grace,” she heard the murmur of Elio Courtois. “She may be with child. I urge you to pursue another option. This is too high a punishment.” The quick cut off was explanation enough for Mollie.

When Mollie had first met the Lyons, Micah had told her about 'the punishments' but she hadn't fully grasped the magnitude of his words till now. The circumstances of her offense now however did not lie with Micah...and she knew it would be a harsh one.

“Your other option,” Hartley continued as if uninterrupted, his smile widening. “Is to give up both of your heirs to the monarchy. Considering Nina was the only princess of the Lyon monarchy, your little one can now take her place.” When Mollie's eyes met Hartley's again there was a gleam in his eye and a curve to his lips that screamed that it wouldn't be an easy choice. Mollie didn't even want to say that the choice would be easy if given one because while her worst fear was recreating what Mollie had seen prisoners go through during her first days in Questershire at the hands of the winter prince...Mollie also knew that losing both her children would break her beyond belief. But Mollie also feared that a punishment at the hands of Hartley would change her permanently once complete.

“It all depends on who gets to you first,” Hartley said softly.

Mollie and the rest of the tribunal watched him in silence as he stepped away and gestured towards the beautiful river that ran from the castle down to the city, his free arm pointing in the direction towards the dense trees of the forest that existed adjacent to the city.

“Those long legs that are near and dear to Micah's heart are going to take you as far as you can go...” His soft words made Mollie grimace. “Now, don't think that you're getting away...” he looked at Mollie and she slowly looked at him. “...because you're not. Someone will catch you, it's only a matter of who it will be.” His reminder of one of the possibilities made Mollie lightheaded, and she pressed her hands to her chest as he continued to lay out her punishment before her. “If Micah catches you...then Micah will do what he has been instructed to do...”

With a shock Mollie heard a quiet protest from Rowan, a plea with his father to reconsider, but the older man ignored him. “...and I was going to participate in this little game myself,” Hartley said, jaw ticking as he looked down at Mollie. “...but you deserve to be absolutely terrified after what you did.” Mollie pressed her lips together as she wrapped her arms around herself. “So...” he backed up, a small smile on his pink lips. “If James catches you...” Mollie couldn't stop her knees from buckling, world spinning as she flexed her fists against her knees. Her skin pricked, and she felt almost on the verge of a heart attack. “Then he gets to do what he wants with you.”

The sounds of the world were going in and out, and once again, Mollie felt like she were going to throw up. Both options were the last thing she ever could have wanted, and once she ran into those trees, Mollie didn't know what would relieve her less—the sight of Micah or the sight of James. It was sick, really, because obviously Mollie would rather be caught by Micah, but not if it meant...that he would be the one to punish her...and if James caught her, Mollie just *knew* it wasn't going to be that simple.

“That is punishment enough for what you have done,” Hartley said coldly. “It has already been decided.”

Mollie could see the faces of the tribunal. The conflict on Phillip’s face as he looked away, Elio’s continued but fruitless protests as Atem sighed and shook his head slowly. Mollie couldn’t even focus on Zephyr who was swearing every Lyon guard in his proximity with profanities. Mollie knew that anyone who stepped over the line from the witness pool into the tribunal would be imprisoned on the spot, so there was little he could do but await her punishment and hope she survived it.

“You are a queen,” the Lyon guard whispered to her as he pulled her to her feet. “So you will not be killed. But you may just wish for death.” Mollie blinked slowly as she stood up, tightening the hold on her cloak.

“No weapons are permitted,” Hartley said loudly. “Just you and your endurance.” Mollie’s belongings were placed in Elio’s care until she returned from her punishment. As of now, the iridium and her sword were in a safe place with him and Mollie felt the smallest bit of reprieve with this knowledge. “Whenever you’re ready.” Hartley’s words were mocking, filled with a mixture of disdain and satisfaction, and as Mollie looked up at him, she didn’t know who she hated more—him or James. The dark haired man in question was someone Mollie had avoided looking at since she stepped outside, bitter to see the sick satisfaction that no doubt covered his features at her humiliation.

Pushing herself to her feet was a struggle, and Mollie didn’t look at Micah, too afraid to accept that he might be who she wanted to catch her, after all, even if it did mean public humiliation beyond comprehension. Mollie felt beyond alone as she walked down the small decline, the dewy grass starkly nice against her bare ankles in spite of the gruesome circumstances. It almost felt as if she were back in *Riverton* in some twisted sickening away. As if those circumstances that seemed so dire back then were actually a paradise compared to what the royal treatment had in store for her.

It was only when Mollie got to the tree line, staring deep inside into its depths, did it hit her.

Mollie was going to be hunted and chased down like some wild animal, and depending on who caught her first, that was what her punishment would be. Both options were enough to make her stomach flip, and for the life of the girl, she just couldn’t decide which was better. With a panicked sob, Mollie forced her feet to move. Every tree looked just like all the others to the girl, and there was nothing in these woods to signal some kind of progress as Mollie ran. It was crazy to think that there had once been days when Mollie dreamed about being in these woods, closer to freedom and away from the insanity she had been forced into. Now that Mollie was in the thick of it all, she was consumed with the prospect of who was going to find her first.

Hartley’s words echoed in her mind as she ran for her life.

Man this chapter was a hard one. Thank you all for reading and keeping this story alive.
I know it's been a long time. xx

Chapter 64: Osmium

Chapter Summary

Mollie faces her most challenging punishment yet. The death of a royal raises more questions than it does answers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It wasn't a matter of whether either of them would catch her. Both Mollie and Hartley knew that she wasn't getting away from here, let alone from Micah or James in these woods. One of them was going to find her first, and even as Mollie brushed past harmful branches and stumbling vines, she still didn't know which choice presented to her was better. More than anything in the world, Mollie wanted it to be Micah to find her, but could she be okay with being punished by him for the rest of the tribunal to see? Her father could have gotten her out of this...but it was too late for him to save her now.

Both Hartley and James wanted to make the biggest example out of Mollie and so the entire tribunal would be there to witness her humiliation. However...it was one day. One hour even at the most of Micah inflicting his worst. But Mollie knew Micah could only go so far. If James caught her on the other hand...

Losing both her children to the Lyons made her knees shake, causing Mollie to stumble against a tree. Mollie knew—she knew—that even with every shred and fibre of strength in her body she couldn't handle that, and she knew that Micah knew it too. One option was just one bad day, that was all, but the other option would turn Mollie into even more of a mess than she already was. Mollie had already had to deal with the imminent prospect of potentially losing her only son to the monarchy but to lose her daughter too was hell for her to process.

Mollie heard a tree branch snap, and she felt herself freezing. The tree she was next to was larger, much larger than the girl, and Mollie remained perfectly still as her hand rested against it. She had only stopped for a few moments, and the whole time she been spiraling in her thoughts that she hadn't even heard any footsteps around her. In fact, something in the girl told her that she was supposed to hear the snap of that branch. Her training kicked in and she quickly dared to peek around the trunk. What she saw caused all of her breath to escape her in a single puff.

The sight of James' dark hair and coal black cloak was a stomach churning one, and just as quietly as she peeked around, Mollie hid herself behind the tree once again. With one movement, she could end this torture and not have to be punished for the whole tribunal to see, but no matter how much Mollie didn't want that...she couldn't bring herself to move...

...because she didn't want the alternative either.

James terrified Mollie beyond belief—something Hartley knew, acknowledged and had used to his utmost advantage—and something in the girl just knew that he wasn't going to find Mollie and take her back to the tribunal as easy as that. Outside of punishing his women in the torture chamber back in Questershire Mollie had never actually heard of James doling out any kind of physical abuse to another royal, but she had a sneaking suspicion that James would strike Mollie square across the face if he could get away with it considering his hatred for Micah.

Peeking around the tree again, Mollie watched him walk away slowly, scanning the area before him for any sign of the girl. Her nails pressed deep into the trunk, and with a sinking heart, Mollie both accepted and prayed to every God that existed that Micah would find her, making peace with what that meant for her. With James completely out of her sight, Mollie didn't know which way to go, and so she went forward, completely adjacent to the direction of where James went. Mollie felt like she were getting so turned around the further she walked, and she wondered what would happen if she just decided to go back to the castle. She wondered how the punishment would be decided then—provided she actually made it back without being caught. The thought of being caught by James prevented Mollie from remaining calm and thinking clearly.

Or perhaps it was everything else that did that.

Mollie could feel a familiar burn behind her eyes, and she struggled to swallow, throat feeling incredibly tight. Mollie had believed that she had cried enough in Questershire at the hands of Micah then the Insurgency in Anubis, but that kept proving to be untrue. A few tears had trailed down her face before many more followed behind, and Mollie took in a shaky breath.

How could it be that she hated Micah so so much for what he did...while also wanting nothing more than to just return to her bedroom with him when this was over? Mollie didn't want to go back to the tribunal and fight. She was just exhausted....close to broken as Micah warned her. She wanted to sleep in her bed with Micah and she wanted him to hold her while she cried about the very things he'd done that caused those tears.

How could it be that she hated him, but that she also wanted to be near him? Such a paradox could not exist...could it?

Mollie didn't want to hate him from afar. She wanted to hate him while staring at his beautiful face every night and listening to the sound of his breathing and feeling his hands on her shoulder as he sat behind her and trailed delicate kisses across her exposed flesh. She hated Micah so much for what he did—and for obeying everything that was thrown at her at the tribunal—

But it just wasn't the kind of hate where Mollie couldn't stand the sight of him, and she hated him all the more for that.

Mollie was pulled from her thoughts by the sound of footsteps, and considering she had gone in the opposite direction of James, she was prepared to meet her fate when her gaze would meet that of familiar green ones. Only...

the eyes that met her weren't that of an emerald green...they were brown...and she felt her lips part in shock.

Mollie didn't hesitate to run the other way, a scream ripping out of her throat when she was tackled to the ground. James' hand was pressed to the back of her head as he slammed her face against the leaves and sticks, making Mollie gasp, and when his arm snaked around her neck, a choked sound left her lips. Mollie wasn't surprised when he threw her down to the dirt again.

"I knew..." he started, slowly following the girl as she attempted to crawl away. "From the *moment* Micah gave us that crock of shit about a gentler method back when he first got his hands on you, I fucking *knew*."

Mollie clawed at the dirt when James reached down to pull on one of her legs.

"I knew then back after his promotion in Questershire that he was being too soft with you," he spat, flipping Mollie over. "I knew that it would come back to bite us all." James squatted over Mollie, one hand tightly curling around her throat, and she struggled to breathe as he slowly forced her to her feet. Mollie scraped at his hand, gaze tearful and pleading as James stared her down, nostrils flaring. His chestnut hair was a mess, an unusual sight for Mollie, but those dark eyes were as cold as ever.

James really hated her.

"Hartley is better than me," James hissed at her. "...because if Jelena had done what you did I wouldn't make Micah stop until you were begging for him to put you out of your misery." Mollie pushed at his hands, panicking, and in response he only shook her in response. "You think he's your best fucking friend," James breathed through clenched teeth, sizing her up. "You have forgotten that at one point not so very long ago...he was the same man who owned you." When he threw her down again, her head spun, and Mollie struggled to right her vision. She pressed her hands to her temples as she cried, fighting the urge to curl in on herself. "That ends today..."

"You're still keeping me alive?" Mollie gasped, as her nose brushed the ground. The smell of soil and earth assaulted her senses. "Why? That isn't like you James."

She heard his jaw clench as he forced her chin up. His dark brown eyes glistened with anger. His grip on her was so tight it made her head pound. "Who says I won't kill you once this is over?"

"Because I saved your son," Mollie managed between breaths. "I saved him from Micah." She pushed his hand away as James' nostrils flared before her. "But no will save *you* from him if you kill me."

"Even after all this time," James breathed. "You still have hope that a Lyon can love? That he'll care so much to hunt down the person that killed his whore?" He laughed in her face. "Micah won't be the one to kill me. You have no idea *princess* how many times we have tried. I don't fear him, in fact, fear is not word I keep in my vocabulary."

"Perhaps," Mollie murmured. "But it is in your eyes."

Mollie groaned in pain as James took extra care in throwing her back to the ground. It took some time for Mollie to regain her bearings once again as she heard approaching footsteps. She heard James exhale, and when Mollie dared to look up, her heart skipped a beat at the sight of the winter prince.

"Micah," he acknowledged in a drawl. "*Love* that timing of yours."

Micah didn't hesitate to hurry towards her, placing a cool hand on her head as Mollie released her sobs that she had been holding in since the tribunal. As she had suspected, Mollie knew it wasn't going to be that simple if James caught her instead, and she realized just how complicated it was going to be at the sound of his next words.

"We need to make sure nothing like this happens again, Micah," James told him, and they shared a look, something unspoken between them that had Micah's jaw clenching. "After all, she was one of the last ones around when my wife died on her land."

"So, is this why you forgot who she belongs to? Is that why you treated her like you used to treat Jelena on her really bad days? She's already terrified of you. What more do you want?" Micah sneered at him, briefly looking at Mollie and brushing his thumb over her cheek.

"Oh no *mon petit frère*," James chuckled. "I simply need her to be terrified of *you*," James answered, hands on his hips. "I told you from the beginning that you were too soft with her. I told you what needed to be done for her to *get it*. To understand what it means to be a part of this monarchy. And now look."

"I already understand that James!"

"...but you don't," James barked at Micah, staring at the younger man just like a brother would. "You don't get it because if you did, this would've never happened." James gestured around, cutting Mollie a scathing look that made her wither. "If you understood it my daughter would still be alive. You let her play you time and time again because you are *weak*."

She could hear Micah's breaths cut short as James continued to scold him.

"This *salope* would've never felt more loyal to the Insurgency and her own crown...than to you." Mollie hated the way Micah's hands slowed on her face, and when she gazed up at him, he looked to be deep in thought, those green eyes chillingly vacant.

"We always had our differences...but we always agreed about what was best for the family," James paced. "You are going to make her understand that she's not your friend and certainly not your fucking equal. This punishment goes way beyond me, and you know it. Because even in the past, you never truly punished her. You *spoiled* her."

Mollie watched Micah defeatedly exhale, his eyes falling closed.

"You are going to make her understand that, right now," James snarled.

“James...” Micah murmured.

“I gave up everything for our empire. I lost my family for it and now I will rot in prison in Questershire for the rest of my life because of it. All I did was give give give...but it was never enough. And I realize now,” he said between gritted teeth. “That it was never going to be.”

Mollie watched Micah defeatedly exhale, his eyes falling closed.

“James...”

Micah’s tone was pleading, and that was when Mollie finally sat up, looking between them with a racing heart. She scooted back, but Micah’s hand on her thin arm prevented Mollie from going far. When Mollie’s gaze met his, his eyes had softened, something in them pleading with her.

“I will make you, Micah.” James’ tone was scarily calm, and she glanced at him, lips shaking at the malice in his eyes. “Do you understand me? I will not rest until you give her a proper punishment,” he quietly told him. “So, it’s either now or I will make sure it’s later and much worse...but it is happening regardless and this time you cannot stop it. You decide.”

In truth, Mollie didn’t know why she was crying. She had already accepted that she would rather get this over with than drag it to some other horrific fate. However, that was just it, wasn’t it? James was going to make Micah do this and still turn around and give up her twins to the monarchy. She knew it deep down and Micah knew it too. She could see it on his face. It was still unfair.

“Do this and...maybe...maybe Rowan can convince father to let her keep one,” James proposed, and by the tone of his voice, he knew that he’d triumphed finally against the brother who had always beat him.

Mollie barely had time to send James a scathing look of her own before her back was roughly pressed to the ground. Micah’s mannerisms were rough, and while Mollie knew it was because James wanted them to be, it didn’t mean she had to enjoy it. Mollie didn’t think Micah had ever been rough with her during sex, not even when he punished her that day in his bedroom in Questershire. He had been somewhat still tame then, and she cried out at the harsh pull on her hair, his other hand painfully digging into her waist.

“See, you need to understand, sweetheart,” James’ voice reached her ears as he circled her. “That you belong to the Lyons now. And the only way you will truly understand that...” Micah had flipped her onto her stomach, now. “Is if he treats you like it.” Mollie screamed when her chest was forced to the ground, Micah manhandling her in the way he knew James wanted. “...And what better way to do that than to show you that he can and will take you wherever and whenever regardless of who is around to see it,” he slowly said, making sure he was heard loud and clear.

The humiliation of feeling Micah push himself into her before James’ very eyes had Mollie squeezing her own shut, a harsh sob escaping her as Micah’s skin slapped against hers. His

hand was on her throat, and she clawed at it, gasping when his teeth pressed into your shoulder.

“You don’t have autonomy over your body anymore. You don’t exist independently of Micah, and that extends to this family...”

Micah’s harsh thrusts made Mollie’s toes curl, and what was once a rough entry had become much smoother. With no warning and feeling wholly unprepared for this turn of events, tears escaped her eyes, and her fingers dug into the grass and dirt. The feel of Micah’s cock pushing into her walls was a familiar one Mollie had actually grown to love, but the sound of James’ pacing steps and voice made Mollie want to crawl in a hole.

She now felt torn apart.

“Had Micah previously understood this, all of this could’ve been prevented.” James sounded pleased with himself—and Micah—and the thought made Mollie sick. How could they go from nearly tearing each other apart yesterday evening to siding with each other about her punishment? When Micah pulled her head back, she winced, and Mollie started to move away from him, wanting this earlier and regretting it now—especially since she was going to lose her twins anyway. When Micah’s lips grazed her ear, Mollie shuddered.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered to her, hand painfully pulling at her soft curls, making Mollie cry out again. “I am...so sorry Mollie Mae.”

Mollie recalled Micah’s words from earlier, and Mollie knew why this was happening. She understood the hierarchy in the household, understood that what Hartley said went, and Mollie knew without a shadow of a doubt that Hartley would’ve absolutely made this happen for the entire tribunal to see if Micah had even *attempted* to intervene. Mollie understood that this was the better alternative, but that understanding is exactly what made her cry more.

This wasn’t something to be understood. The man thrusting into her had killed her friends and kidnapped her, and the man standing before her had helped too. Nothing about any of this was right, and in that moment, Mollie shouldn’t have been rationalizing or understanding anything.

...but she had.

Mollie understood why Micah had grabbed her with no hesitation and proceeded to fuck her under the watchful eye of his eldest brother. Mollie now understood why Micah was choosing now rather than all her previous punishments to murmur sweet nothings and apologies into her ear as he roughly held her down and plunged his cock into her.

Mollie understood it all, and she loathed it.

Mollie didn’t want to simultaneously hold Micah closer and push him away as he roughly fucked her against the grass, face to face with her, now. Mollie didn’t want him to obey when James told him to fuck her harder. Mollie didn’t want to understand that Micah didn’t actually want this because if that were true... he simply wouldn’t do it, right? Mollie didn’t

want to accept that these monarchies didn't follow the rules of the outside world and that so long as she were a Marchesseault accused of a crime—neither would she.

“Are you sorry, now?” James wondered, somehow she was able to hear his voice over the sound of her cries. “Hmm?”

Mollie knew this was just as much revenge for her as it was for Micah, his gleeful voice was proof of it. Mollie didn't give him the satisfaction of an answer, but she knew she gave him that anyway the moment she had started crying. When Micah's eyes met her, he shushed her, a poor attempt to make this better somehow, and his next words made her cry harder.

“Do you see how much worse I could be?” he whispered, too low for James to hear. “Do you understand...how much worse they *want* me to be?” Mollie stared at him, nails digging into the skin of his pale arm, and with another harsh sob, she finally nodded. “Do you understand what I've been trying to protect you from...from the day we first met?”

Again, Mollie nodded.

Micah's nose grazed her own. “Do you get it now?” he asked her miserably. “Do you understand that the day I took you to the cabin away from the manor and took you for myself was to prevent someone else from doing it?” When she nodded again, unable to find her voice between cries, Micah quieted her. His fingers pressed into her bronzed skin, and his hips painfully came down against hers. When his lips pressed against hers, they swallowed the noises that escaped her ravaged throat.

“I never wanted this for you.”

...and Mollie knew that Micah was telling the truth.

It was almost poetic how much slower time crawled in the moments of the greatest adversities and how quickly it passed in moments of immense exaltation.

Mollie thought about that as she stood beside Elio and her guard in the chilly throne room of her late father. It was strange how normal things proceeded now that Mollie's punishment had been seen to its end.

All she was knew was that she had emerged from those woods as a different person. She had emerged with a realization that she had underestimated her opponents from the first day, that every action her father had in place for her was to make sure she persevered and survived the horrors of this world. But even all the lessons in the world couldn't have prepared her for what she had endured.

She would not speak of it, and no one would ask, but it was almost a silent acceptance among the counsel that Mollie had survived. She had passed some test and she had come out of it alive, albeit not unscathed.

Hartley had a ghost of a smile on his lips. Almost prideful. Mollie didn't look at him and neither did she glance at James who was the only one who had dragged her back. That part of Mollie's mind had blurred. Micah hadn't followed and he was absent from the counsel, even now.

Although Mollie had been scrubbed and cleaned and moulded back into her pristine condition as queen, she still felt unclean. It was a sick illusion that brought a lump to her throat even now. Her dress was red, nostalgic of her first meeting with the Lyons and her bold move to pair it with a red lip was almost comical.

"Penance has been sought, punishment has been rightfully completed and we can proceed with the deal," Elio muttered as he spoke on behalf of Mollie who sat cold and stony faced at the table. "The next question is who is worthy enough of this armour that you have so generously brought with you."

"That armour was our gift for the new queen," Ophélie said coolly. "It was forged and moulded with the very same iridium extracted from the rivers of Morte that run through Ophian land."

"And we accept it," Mollie responded in a tone that matched Ophélie's. "In fact," Mollie continued. "As a way to thank you for your service to my husbands monarchy for all these years, and your roots to my own, I intend to gift this armour..." her eyes flashed as her gaze shifted. "To you Gibbs."

Mollie took great relish in the flicker of surprise that flashed in Gibbs eyes. He was thrown off and Mollie could see him trying to regain his bearings.

"The queen is far too kind," he murmured as he stood up and bowed before taking a seat once more.

"Not kind," Mollie corrected him. "Grateful." She stood up herself and motioned for Gibbs to come forward. "Don't be bashful," she teased, struggling to mask the disgust that threatened to dispel from her tone. "Come forward and claim your reward."

Her eyes met Rowan's. His eyes were knowing and Mollie felt a warmth in her gut when she saw him smile at her. It wasn't a knowing smirk, nor a lift of his lip in regards to a fulfilled task. It was a raw genuine smile that Mollie daresay, even held a hint of pride.

"Elio," she called. The man was by her side in an instant. "Help him into the armour. I want to see the fruits of the *Etrétat* monarchy on full display for our council."

"Ouais ma reine," he responded.

Gibbs was staring hard at her, the council quiet as each burly piece of fine Ophian quality-grade armour was carefully placed to each individual body part of the loyal Lyon guard before her...the traitor of the Marchesseault family. Mollie smiled. She was enjoying the flicker of hesitation that flitted across Gibbs' face as he allowed the armour to cling to his massive frame. She stepped down from her own seat at the table and walked slowly towards Gibbs.

“You will wear it with you on your return back to Questershire,” Mollie insisted. “Only the best for all your years of service to both our families. It is well deserved.”

He narrowed his eyes at her when she finished. “*Merci*,” he said carefully. “If the queen insists, I shall follow through.” She clutched the iridium necklace in her fingers deftly twisting it, so it touched the glinting armour that adorned the burly guard. She placed it near his heart watching as the soft clink echoed. She held it there slowly watching the beautiful M shaped metal glint several colours in the soft natural light, the speed almost too quick for the natural eye to behold. With a quick exhale she retracted it and clutched it in her fist. With a smile she returned to her seat and continued to play with the necklace between her fingers. Her sword rested behind her, the purple colour sparkling like an amethyst in the soft evening light.

“It appears all our affairs are in order then?” Phillip asked stiffly. There was a murmur amongst the council. “How is Caius doing? I heard the beast nearly tore his leg off.”

“Not well,” Araya responded coldly. “He wishes he could have been present for the tribunal,” her eyes flashed to Mollie’s sadly. “His injuries are too severe and I’m afraid infection will set in soon if we don’t act quickly. If we don’t set sail for Questershire before the evening sets, I do not think he will make it. Unfortunately, the materials needed to treat him are available only there.”

Mollie scanned her eyes in the crowd for Hartley but she could not see him. Had he gone inside?

“A shame,” Phillip said regretfully. “I wish him a full recovery.”

The murmurs continued but Mollie was drowning them out. If they were already leaving that meant...

Quickly, Mollie lifted her dress and sprinted down from the platform past a startled Esperanza, her heart in her throat as the sudden realization of the Lyons departing Marchesseault territory meant they wouldn’t be leaving alone. The woman avoided eye contact with her completely and Mollie dashed towards the docks, ignoring the way Elio called back from her at the council table. Hartley and James’ absence from the table spooked Mollie to the core and she ran as fast as she could towards the ship that would be taking the Lyons back to their territory anchored at the dock.

As Mollie ran, she felt a burly blond stop her dead in her tracks.

“Mollie!”

“Did they leave yet?” she managed to ask between heavy breaths. She winced at the tight grip he had on her skinny arm.

“No...” The expression on Zephyr’s face was uneasy...almost pained. She hadn’t seen that expression on his face in a while...only when he spoke of Viv.

“What happened?” she asked hoarsely. “Is Caius alive? Did they leave?”

“Not yet...” Zephyr repeated again slowly. “Caius is alive. They are still here.” His voice was strange, almost muted.

“Are... you going back with them?” Mollie asked quietly. “Are you leaving me too?”

She didn’t mean for her question to come out as painful as it did.

When those blue eyes met hers again they were full of an emotion that made Mollie’s blood drain from her face. Without a word he hugged her, a little too tightly but Mollie allowed it, almost relishing in the genuine emotion that Zephyr was choosing to embrace rather than reject.

“You’re scaring me,” she said uneasily.

“Do you trust me?” he asked quietly. When he blinked at her Mollie swore she could see the beginning of moisture accumulating around his lids making those blue eyes truly seem like a storm in the ocean.

“I trust you,” she confirmed giving his arm a reassuring squeeze.

“You know I won’t leave you. Not unless I absolutely have to.” He murmured bringing her in for another embrace.

“I know,” Mollie whispered against his neck, feeling his blond locks brush against her cheek, the smell of pine and desert filling her senses.

“I just... wanted you to know that.” She nodded, his lips brushed her neck as he spoke. “If I had it my way. We would have met first, and none of this ever would have happened.” Mollie sighed, her own emotions bubbling in her stomach. As if he could sense her forming words he continued to speak. “Thank you,” he continued. “For teaching me that you can love twice in one lifetime.”

“Zen,” she murmured.

“You may not have been my first love,” he said quietly. “But I would have burned the world down to be your last.” Gently, as if she were made of glass, he leaned down to press a chaste and soft kiss against her lips. “Now go see your kid,” he mumbled stepping away. “*Jusqu’à ce que nous nous rencontrions à nouveau, ma reine.*”

With that he moved past her, towards the castle in the opposite direction. Mollie breathed out and continued the trek down to the docks where she looked desperately around for a glimpse of her guard or her ladies in waiting.

“He’s not here Mollie.” Mollie whirled around, meeting brown eyes that were unusually empty. She hadn’t expected to see the middle Lyon and the surprise across her features caused him to frown. “He is with Micah. He will bring him down so you can see him before we depart.” Mollie felt her gut relax a little. If Maël was with Micah that meant he was safe. She felt as if she could suddenly think clearly again. “You’re not out of the clear yet I’m afraid,” Rowan said quietly.

“You think?” Mollie snapped. “There is no way I’m letting James onto the same boat as my son.”

“That’s why there are two boats Miss Mayseon,” he retorted, heavy sarcasm dripped in his tone. “One for the royals and the other for prisoners. As James is now a prisoner of your realm,” he paused. “Well multiple realms now, he will be stripped of his title and sent straight to prison upon arrival on Lyon soil.” Rowan hesitated as he regarded her, his expression unreadable. Given what Mollie had gone through earlier at the hands of his family she wasn’t surprised. She stepped closer to him so his fragrance surrounded her, so close she could touch noses with him.

“Make sure to take the boat with Gibbs back to Questershire,” she murmured so only Rowan could hear. Rowan stared at her, his eyes sparkling with a delight she hadn’t seen in quite some time. With a slow nod he regarded her coolly.

“As the Queen wishes,” he said with a smirk.

“*Ma reine.*” Mollie turned around to see a very exhausted Elio behind her. His face was red and he appeared frantic.

“Elio?” Mollie asked, startled. “What’s wrong?”

“Where is Caius?”

Mollie was taken aback by the question, blinking at Rowan who narrowed his eyes at her advisor.

“Araya said he was already on the boat...”

Before any of them could react he was scrambling towards the dock as if in a frenzied state. It was only when Elio pulled out his knife that Mollie screamed and Rowan seemed to jump into action.

“*Ce n'est pas lui!*” Elio screamed as he waved his blade around like a madman.

“Wait out here!” Rowan snarled. The authority in his voice froze her in place and she trembled as the middle Lyon ran as fast as he could onto the boat, his cloak billowing out behind him.

With bated breaths Mollie waited, each breath heavier than the last. The only sounds that seemed to register to Mollie was the sound of the ocean slapping against the ship that rocked with the light breeze that sent her curls tangling across her face. It was a tense period of time that felt like an hour to Mollie, but it truly must have been only around fifteen minutes. She couldn’t bring her legs to move, and even if she wanted to she didn’t trust that they would move the way she intended them to. When Rowan finally re-emerged Mollie felt her lips part in shock.

The normally pristine middle Lyon was covered in blood from the chest down. His fists were shaking and the tremor that racked through his body made Mollie’s hair stand on end. He

only said two words to her but it was enough to get her legs moving once more.

“Get Micah.”

"I want to see him," Mollie cried as Rowan brushed past her. "Is he okay? Is he alive?"

"The blood is not from Caius," Rowan said caustically. Mollie felt the blood drain from her face.

"No," she whispered.

"Mollie...Mollie stop!"

With dexterity that surprised even herself, Mollie flitted past Rowan, her shoes slapping against the wooden flooring of the massive ship as she turned the corner near the starboard and ran down the steps that led toward the lower level. Even as Rowan lunged to stop her, she evaded him, still quick on her feet in spite of her frail condition. She took the stairs two at a time, following the hallway that had the oil lamps adorning the corridor already lit. It was the blood pooling from the last room on the left at the end that made her skin grow cold.

"Caius?" she called out. Her voice had a slight tremor that made her grit her teeth. She held her dagger in her hand and approached defensively, the way she was taught, before rounding the corner and bursting through the room.

She swore when she spotted the body of her advisor, laying mangled and bloody on the ground beside another much larger body that made Mollie drop her dagger to the ground in shock. The sound made her jolt as it clattered against the flooring.

"Mollie?"

Mollie whirled behind her where Caius lay, the bottom half of his body concealed by thick heavy blankets and the rest of his body from the chest up soaked in fresh blood.

The smell of the coppery iron substance made Mollie's head whirl but she steadied herself and approached the man slowly.

"You...you're alive?" She whispered. "What happened?"

"James tried to kill me," Caius explained lowly. "And I would have let him, had your advisor not stabbed him from behind first."

"What?" Mollie breathed. "Elio...tried to kill....James?" It didn't make sense. None of Elio's behaviour did, even when Mollie saw him not even an hour earlier. He had been frantic...in an almost crazed state. "He must have been trying to stop James...Elio had no intention of killing him. I know that for a fact. He voted against killing James...he advocated for having him sent back to Questershire to seek justice there."

"He tried to kill me Mollie," Caius said coldly. She froze, his tone making her gut clench. He seemed to soften slightly, when he noticed how tense she had become.

"But..." Mollie whispered. "That doesn't explain the blood on *you*."

"Why don't you look under the bed?"

With her heart in her throat, Mollie flitted her eyes downwards where she noticed the haphazard shape of an arm under the bed, the unmistakeable glint of a gigantic ruby red stone adorning the finger that belonged to its lifeless owner.

Mollie knew who it belonged to and she stumbled backwards, a cry escaping her throat.

"There are two types of evil my dear," he murmured. "Those that blatantly are and those that are but pretend not to be. You tell me which one you think is worse?"

"Mollie!"

She looked up to see Rowan and Micah in the doorway, their expressions full of concern. Rowan's low voice carried in spite of the dingy blood filled room. The only light was the flicker that came from the few oil lights that hung adjacent to each other on the wall.

"Micah get her out of here. I'm going to move Caius to another room."

"Is he...?" Micah trailed off, his eyes flickering towards where the body lay beneath the bed.

The brothers stood side by side. Their expressions mirrored each other. An amalgamation of relief, coldness, and satisfaction.

"Of all the ways for father to die..." Rowan murmured. "I never anticipated that it would play out like this." Micah was quiet as he stared at the three bodies in the room, his expression blank. He paused briefly, before his eyes landed on Mollie's, the brightness of his vibrant irises glistening. "The council will want a full account of what happened," Rowan mused as the brothers cleared the doorway where several Lyon guards filed into the room to take care of the grisly scene.

"Leave the council matters to me," Caius managed between short breaths. "I'll write up the account of what happened here."

"We need to set sail for Questershire immediately," Rowan replied sternly. "Your injuries are too severe. We can take care of that once we reach home soil."

Mollie could still feel Micah's eyes on her as Rowan and Caius discussed their next course of action.

"Master Lyon," the closest guard murmured with a bow of respect. "The body of the King? We must prepare it-"

"We're taking it with us," Micah responded curtly. "I want an autopsy done in Questershire before the body is prepared for burial. Nobody is to touch it without my consent."

The guard sighed. "You still think this is a trap don't you *votre majesté*?"

"I always assume that," Micah said tonelessly. "That's why I'm still alive."

With that he turned on his heel, navy cloak billowing behind him as he left the room. Even with a physical body before him, Micah was still skeptical, Mollie could tell. He wasn't at peace, he wouldn't be, not unless he was the one to have killed Hartley himself.

As Elio's body was covered with a white sheet, Mollie felt her emotions bubble up again. Elio had always stood by her, supported her. And he was the last connection she had to her father. She was truly alone now. She heard the guards arguing about his placement but Mollie spoke up before a decision could be reached. "I'll take care of the burial for Elio myself," she said, her voice eerily empty.

The room was quiet as she left, brushing past the Lyon brothers and carefully making her way out of the confines of the ship. No one suspected that in her pocket was the ruby red ring that had previously adorned Hartley Lyon's finger. The stone was icy cold as she ran her fingers over it. It shimmered in her pocket, a flash of purple caught her eye.

Chapter End Notes

This took me so long. Making sure all loose ends were tied up and just overall the heaviness of these last few chapters were so tolling. Thank you so much for being so incredibly patient with me - I know it isn't easy to have such long breaks between chapters. Love you all for sticking around for this long. xoxo

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