

Marline

# Destined Love

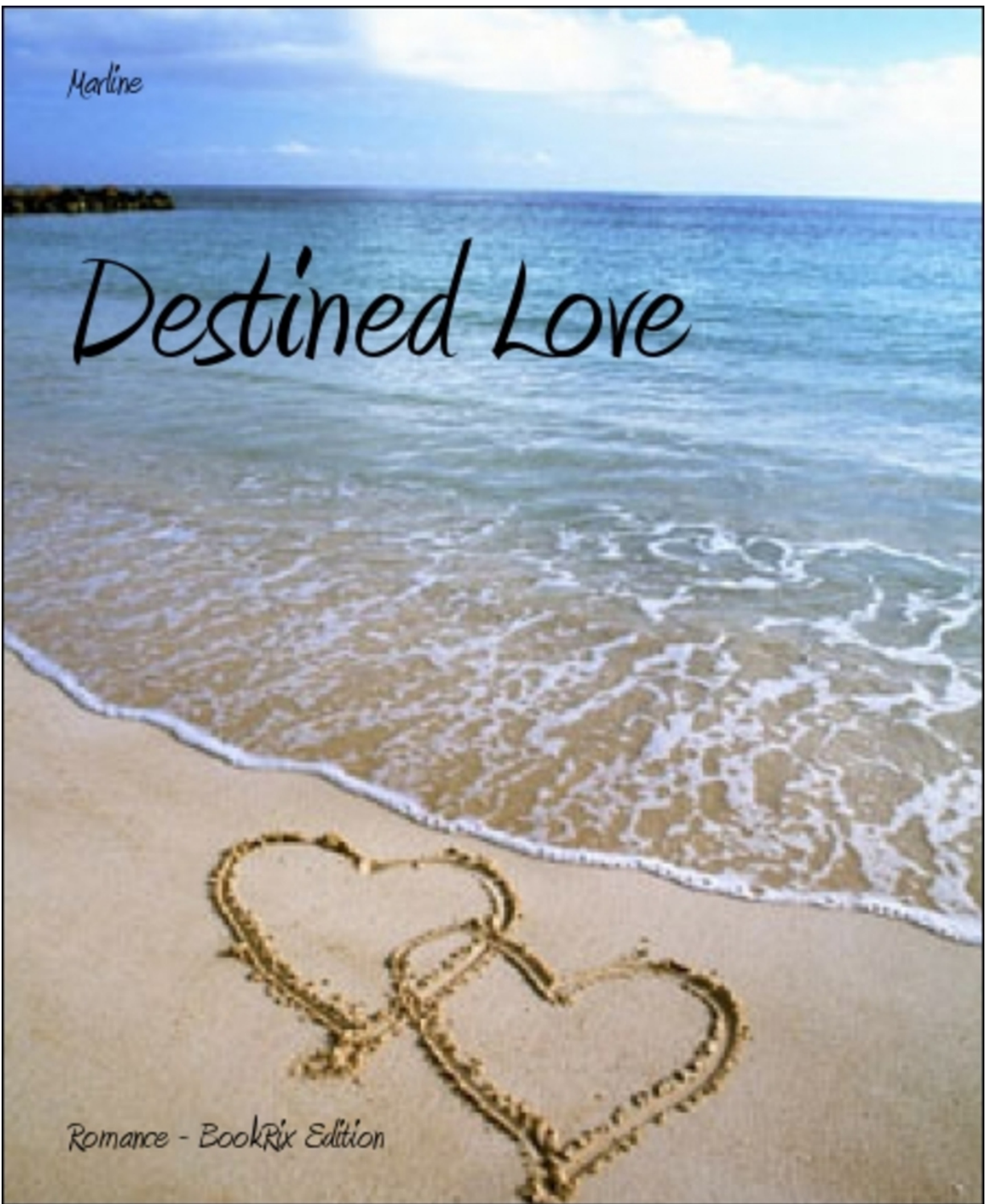
Romance - BookRix Edition



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“Apparently we cannot communicate with each other so I suggest we let our children do the peace talks instead.”

“Our *children*

? Are you out of your mind? What do *they* know about politics?”

“I have taught my daughter enough about politics to be able to have a peace talk. I trust you have done the same with your son.”

“Of course I have taught my son about politics. Fine, we will meet each other next week, next to the River Lianna around midday.”

“All right, we will be there.”

Messengers had been riding back and forth the whole day carrying letters from one king to the other. But at last the two kings had reached an agreement. I was to do the peace talks.

I had heard of King Luperd’s son. He was arrogant, selfish, unmannered but extremely good-looking. I did not look forward to meeting him. Without even asking me, my father had proposed to let me do the talking. He was right about the fact that I was able to do it but I wasn’t sure if I could talk to this annoying young man. At that moment my father came in the room.

“Cleo, we need to discuss the art of having a peace talk.” I sighed. We had gone over this already during my lessons in ‘How To Be A Good Queen.’ But I understood why we needed to cover it again so I followed my father into his study and listened to his lecture. I had always found my father’s study a solemn place. It had a big wooden desk in the middle and rows of bookshelves along the sides. There was a large window with boring gray curtains and outside I could see the garden which was nudging me invitingly with every blow of wind I could see going through the trees. The books all looked boring and dull but my father cherished them and cared for them as if they were his children. It was no surprise that my mind was somewhere else when we were going over the peace talks. I was wondering about Durwald, King Luperd’s son. Was he really as good looking as people said he was? Apparently he had seduced many girls, and he was said to be a born player. But I wasn’t worried, however hard he tried, he would *not*

be able to seduce me. I hoped.

"Cleopatra, are you listening to anything I'm saying?" I suddenly heard my father's booming voice.

"Sorry father, I was thinking about the peace talks."

"Hmm. Well, to have a good peace talk you should.." And my father was off again, teaching me everything he knew about peace talks.

The week flew past, I had lessons in 'how to have a good peace talk' everyday and by the end of the week, I was even dreaming about it. I knew my father's study inside out and, out of boredom I had counted the number of books on the bookshelves more than once. I had also memorized the pattern of the carpet and knew exactly when the guards outside changed shifts. I had been seriously bored. The day before the dreaded peace talk I decided to go riding. I had had enough of the stuffy study and the palace where everybody seemed nervous and jittery. I needed some freedom. My father warned me not to go too far because the enemy wasn't very far away. I obediently said yes, and walked towards the stables. The hallway was long and one side of it was completely made out of glass. My shoes clicked on the marbled floors and I knew that if I started running, people would hear me and scold me, because I wasn't allowed to run inside. But I did it anyways, I was too tempted to go outside. When I arrived, surprisingly without being caught, my horse, Starflight, was there waiting for me. He looked up and whined. I walked over to him and he nuzzled his head against my pocket, as if he knew I had a treat for him. I laughed.

"You smart horse. Yes, yes, I have a treat for you." I got out an apple and gave it to him. He ate it delighted and I pet his dark black coat. Afterwards I started saddling him. When I was done, I got on my horse and was off. After sitting in the palace the whole week, it was great to feel the wind rush through my hair. I was happy that there was a forest attached to the palace and I hoped I didn't meet anyone I knew because the clothes I was wearing weren't exactly presentable. I walked slowly through the open forest. The soggy leaves under my horse's legs muffled the sound of it walking and I felt completely at peace. I came to a big open field and noticed that the grass looked green and healthy. It had rained a lot the past few days and I had not had the possibility to go outside. I kicked

Starflight softly and he immediately responded. I raced over the field, enjoying every moment of it. I did not hear the horse hooves which were right behind me until I slowed down. I held in the reigns and looked around. My breath stopped in my throat and my head started spinning because behind me I saw the most handsome boy I had ever seen. He was sitting on a shiny black mare and looked like he was born on horseback. He was wearing a shirt without sleeves and dirty shorts. He had dark blond hair, was tanned and had beautiful brown eyes. Because his shirt had no sleeves, I saw that he had strong, muscular arms. He was perfect.

"You ride well." He complemented me. I could barely speak and if I didn't have as much experience in horse riding as I did, I would have surely fallen off. But I managed to say "Thanks" and at the same time I sure didn't have to worry about being seduced by Durwald anymore because I was already completely, head over heels in love with this perfect being.

"You want to race?" He asked me playfully.

"Sure." I answered.

"Ok, until that tree over there." He pointed in the distance to a big oak tree with huge branches. I nodded, spurred my horse on and off we went. I think we arrived around the same time, I wasn't sure, I had been observing him throughout the whole race and actually, I just didn't care. Because I would allow this person to beat me anytime.

Suddenly I reminded myself of the fact that I was a princess. I was immediately sure that I did not want him to know this. If he asked for my name I would say it was Cleo. Only my parents and my friends called me that.

I looked over at the boy next to me and he was grinning naughtily.

"I won!"

"That's unfair, my horse was already tired!" I defended myself and the horse.

He laughed. "Yeah, right."

I smiled admittedly. "All right, you won."

"I'm Nathan." The boy suddenly introduced himself.

"I'm Cleo." I answered, happy that I had been smart enough to be prepared and not say my full name. I hoped he wasn't suspicious.

"Do you live here?" He asked.

"Yes. Do you?"

"No, I'm here to visit my grandfather."

By now we had both told our horses to walk and we were going back towards the forest.

"So, where did you learn to ride so well?" He asked me.

"I don't actually know. I've been riding since I can remember. How about you?"

"Same." He said, grinning.

"So where do you live if you don't live here?" I asked.

"I live in Tokito. I understand that there will be peace talks between Tokito and Dardoland tomorrow."

"Yes. I hope they will not declare war on each other." I pretended not to know anything about the peace talks. But actually it was up to me if they declared war on each other or not.

"I trust our prince will do a very good job in keeping the peace. As long as Princess Cleopatra doesn't cause any trouble, everything will go fine."

"Why do you think Cleopatra will cause any trouble?" I shot at him.

"She seems like such a stuck up person."

"Well, I haven't heard too many good things about Durwald either." I defended Cleopatra, myself.

"Like?" He pulled up an eyebrow.

"I've heard he's seduced practically every girl in his school and that he has cheated on half of them as well."

"That's a rumor." Nathan said, sounding extremely sure of himself.

"You shouldn't judge Cleopatra before you've even met her."

"Have you met her?" He asked me. Up till now I had not lied to him. I decided that this was not a good time to start.

"Yes, actually, I have." I answered him in a tone as if I wanted to say: "hah, in your face!" I noticed that I was getting worked up and decided that this was a good time to go home.

"I have to go now." I said. I had to admit, I desperately wanted to see him again. I didn't want to sound too desperate though, and therefore did not ask if we could meet a second time.

"Goodbye." He said.

I turned my horse around and trotted through the forest towards my

house. I had to force myself not to look back at him.

When I arrived at the palace, the servant was waiting to take my horse. "Your father is waiting for you." He said to me. I could guess that my father wasn't too happy. I rushed up to my father's study and knocked on the door. Anxious I waited for his reply. When he replied I opened the door and found that my feeling had been right.

"Cleopatra, where have you been? Do you know what time it is?"

"I met somebody in the forest. We just talked a little." I defended myself.

"You talked to a stranger?" My father roared. I knew I wasn't supposed to and looked down. I wasn't going to say I was sorry because that would be a lie.

"Eat your supper and go to bed." My father was furious. "It's a day before the peace talks! What goes on in your mind?" I didn't say anything.

"Dismissed." I walked towards the kitchen where my food stood, ate and went up to my room. There, I took out my diary and wrote about what had happened. I didn't even know a person like Nathan existed! He was so absolutely perfect. Well, except for the fact that he thought I was a stuck up snob. I decided to go to sleep because the next day I would need all the patience I could get.

I woke up and looked out the window. It was a beautiful day. Too beautiful for the big task that stood before me. I went downstairs, ate breakfast and was then told to go to my father's study. He then went through the whole process about having a peace talk once more. I wanted to tell him that I already knew the whole process by heart but decided that I better let him speak, especially after last night. My father concluded with: "Go get dressed."

I went upstairs and fell down on the bed.

Suddenly a servant knocked on the door.

"Yes." I told her to come in. She walked towards my cupboard and got out one of my nicest dresses. It was made from light pink silk and it had lace around the sleeves. The collar was a bit too low cut for my liking but it made me look more sophisticated, which was exactly what I needed to be. The body of the dress fit around me tightly and the skirts flowed out. The servant helped me dress. Another servant



came in and did my hair. After they were finished, I could barely recognize myself but I had to admit I looked beautiful. I wondered why I had to get this dressed up, if I didn't know any better, I would think that my parents wanted me to seduce Durwald. A couple minutes later I was sitting in the carriage, which was being pulled by two horses, on my way to the Lianna River. I was extremely nervous. My mother was in the carriage with me.

"Honey, you look beautiful and the peace talk is going to be great." I smiled at my mother thankfully. She always knew how I felt and always had the right thing to say.

We arrived at the field next to the Lianna River by midday. The field looked like the Sahara desert, there was sand for miles and it was very dusty. I looked down at my gown and was disappointed that it would get dirty. But there was nothing I could do about it. The golden door of my carriage was opened by the driver and he held out a hand to help me down. I took it and elegantly stepped out of the carriage. I looked up and saw that the King of Tokito and his family had already arrived. They turned around and looked at me the moment I stepped out of the carriage. I recognized him immediately. The only difference about him was that he was wearing a suite and his hair was neatly combed. I could not believe this. How could I have been so stupid? Our eyes met and I could see that he recognized me as well. I was too embarrassed to look at him for long. He looked shocked and surprised, the same way I felt. My father came from out of nowhere and stood next to me. "Remember everything I taught you." He whispered in my ear. I nodded at him reassuringly.

My father led me towards the Tokitian King and with eyes twinkling of pride he said:

"King Luperd, may I introduce you to my daughter Cleopatra?" King Luperd took my hand and kissed it. I smiled at him, said "how do you do?" like I was supposed to but my thoughts weren't with him. I was declaring myself an idiot over and over again. Then prince Durwald took my hand. A shiver went through me as his gloved hand touched mine. He looked up at me when he bent down and I felt my heart beat faster when his lips touched my hand. I could understand now

how seductive he could be and was determined not to show him the effect he had on me. I took my hand back and looked at him in a way that showed him he should not try anything with me.

"Why don't we all go to our palace?" My mother suggested.

"No, I think we should stay right here." King Luperd said. "The peace talks could be held under the trees over there." He gestured towards some forest that was miles and miles away and hardly visible. I knew I had to be polite and therefore didn't look up at him as if he was a complete idiot but just smiled and stood there. But King Luperd's wife, Queen Marie tugged softly on his arm.

"I would enjoy a cool glass of water." She said quietly. King Luperd looked grim but gave in.

"Our children can get to know each other on the way to the palace." He said, meaning that we would have to ride in the same carriage.

I stepped in the carriage and he followed me. There was no one else in the carriage and I knew this was going to be an awkward ride.

I was furious and knew every word I said would sound that way.

"So, how are you *Nathan*

?" I asked him sarcastically.

"You didn't tell me who you were either." He defended himself.

"No, but at least I didn't lie about my name!"

"Neither did I. My middle name is Nathan, my friends call me that too."

"Is it true that you have dated nearly all the girls in your school?" I asked him, still trying to find a way to hurt him.

"Is that what they say about me here?" He asked in return.

"What, are you going to deny it?" I couldn't believe this. If he was that way he could at least tell the truth about it.

"Yes, I am. Actually, I've never been on a date."

"Yeah right, and you expect me to believe that?" What did he think I was, stupid?

"Believe it or not, I don't care, but it's true."

I wasn't even bothered to comment on that. If he wanted to lie to me, so be it.

We didn't say a word to each other for the rest of the trip. I was happy when we arrived at the palace because any longer of that piercing silence would have caused me to jump out of the carriage

screaming. I was helped out of the carriage and then walked towards my mother who was talking to Durwald's mother.

"We will have a ball in your honor the night you leave." My mother was saying.

"Yes, and so that our children can get to know each other better, they can dance with each other!" Queen Marie was getting excited. Oh no, this was not happening. I was not dancing with that arrogant annoying, self centered, perfect boy. But what could I say? It would be rude to refuse a dance. I could only hope that he would have the guts to tell his father that he wasn't dancing with me.

"Good morning Princess Cleopatra." I was woken up by one of the servants who opened the curtains. It was a rainy, gray morning, the exact way I felt. Usually I enjoyed this weather and I loved listening to the raindrops on the roof. But today I knew it would be a gloomy day, a dark day in my history. I knew I was exaggerating but I didn't care, I wasn't bothered to be perfectly mannered today. Unwillingly I stepped out of bed. The servant went through my cupboard and pulled out a perfectly folded suit. It was a short skirt and a tight blouse. She also put some high heels ready. I didn't understand why I had to dress up like a businesswoman if they had all seen me in other clothes already anyways. But I did what everyone expected of me, got dressed and went downstairs to eat breakfast. I wasn't hungry but had to eat something under the watchful eye of my mother. I then walked into the room that was in front of the meeting room. Durwald and his parents were there. So were the prime minister and my father.

"Good, the meeting can begin." My father said delighted. I tried to smile but it didn't really work out. This first day we would only discuss basic things, not the actual peace talks. We would be polite, ask each other how our trade was going and how infant mortality rates were. We would give each other advice and then eat lunch together. Afterwards we would relax and then later come together again for dinner. It wasn't until tomorrow that the actual peace talks started. I was dreading them because I would have to go into the meeting room alone with Durwald. I was sure it would end up in a fight

"Let the meeting begin." The prime minister announced. I followed Durwald into the room and the doors were closed behind us. There was a table, two chairs, a writing block and a pen. I sat down, picked up my pen and started biting it. I was more nervous than I wanted him to see and I realized that biting my pen didn't exactly help to convince him of my courage and independence. But I always bit my pen when I was bored or nervous and today it was definitely the latter. Finally I looked up at him. He was observing me. I felt like his brown eyes could see right through me and it was making me uncomfortable. I had to bite my tongue so that I wouldn't say something nasty.

"What are your demands?" He asked me.

"We want the city Kipter back. Furthermore we also want you to pull back your troops from our land and 5 million dollars for the damage they have done. What are your demands?"

"We want to keep Kipter and we want you to stop exporting rubber."

"What? That's ridiculous! Rubber is one of our main export goods." What was he thinking? Or what was his father thinking? Or Whoever! Stop exporting rubber? That was just too far.

"Fine, you export rubber, we keep Kipter and do not pay you 5 Million dollars." He tried to compromise.

I thought about this for a moment and then said: "We export rubber, you take your troops out of our land and you don't have to pay us 5 Million. Deal?" I was not going to let him off that easily.

"If we do not have troops in your land, you will declare war on us." He announced. "Therefore, we will not take our troops out."

"That's why we're having these peace talks!" I exclaimed exasperated. Was he really that dumb?

"No, we're having these peace talks to compromise so that we will have a better chance at getting peace." He tried to explain.

"Wait; is *that*

what you think these peace talks are for?" I could not believe this. Durwald and his parents had not come here to discuss peace; they had just come here to discuss a better chance at having peace. Which meant that actually they just came here for their own benefit,

so that they, for example, didn't have to pay the 5 Million. I desperately needed to discuss this with my father but knew that I couldn't. I was trapped.

"Do you agree?" He asked me.

"Let me think." I ordered. I looked away from him but could still feel his stare on me. It made me so nervous that I couldn't think.

I looked at him annoyed. "Could you just.. not?" I motioned towards him.

"Not what?" He asked innocently.

"Stare like that, it's making me nervous." I didn't feel like explaining. I stood up and walked around. What was I supposed to do? Whatever I said, my father would say it was wrong. Suddenly, I had a perfect idea.

"Ok. We will not declare war on each other. We both export rubber, we keep Kipter, you do not pay 5 million dollars and neither of us will expand our armies. Furthermore we can both have our armies in each other's countries." I gave him time to think it over.

"Agreed, on one condition." He said.

"And that is?" I asked him.

"We split Kipter in half."

"What? You want to *split Kipter in half*

?" He didn't answer me. Actually, it wasn't such a bad idea except for the fact that we would need to discuss where the borders were. I walked over to the intercom, which was a tube in the wall that led to the servants' quarter and which could be used if anything was needed, and asked for a map of Kipter. It arrived a few seconds later. I spread it out on the table and observed it. There was a river flowing practically straight through the middle. I decided that that was a good separation.

"Fine. This is the middle." I pointed at the map. He observed it and nodded.

"What about the island right in the middle of the river?" He asked. We couldn't split that in half too. I reasoned. And we couldn't say it belonged to neither of us because that would cause trouble in the future.

"I suggest it belongs to us both." Durwald suddenly said. "Our families can spend the holiday there; I have heard it's beautiful."



"I am not spending my holiday on an island with you." I said. The moment I said it I was sorry I did. His facial expression changed immediately, he now looked a mixture between annoyed and angry. I did not like it. What was I supposed to do now, say sorry? Actually, I was supposed to say sorry but I couldn't bring up the courage. I declared myself a coward.

"Why are you so mean to me?" He asked.

"I don't know. You just have this weird effect on me. Whenever I'm around you I want to say something that will hurt you." I stood up and turned around, away from him. I was annoyed, at myself, at him. Why did he have so much power over me? It wasn't positive power, that was for sure, but power nevertheless. I suddenly felt him stand very close to me. I turned around and faced him. He didn't say anything, just ran a finger over my cheek.

"You know Cleo; you're the first girl who hasn't tried anything with me. And I like that." I couldn't breathe, just stood there. He leaned forwards to kiss me. Suddenly I realized what I was doing. I immediately took a few steps away from him.

"Don't you *dare*

do that again!" I screamed at him. He had seduced so many girls already and now he was going to add me to the list. But I was not going to let that happen. And I was also not going to change my mind about our deal. I forced myself to calm down, my breath to become even. Then I walked to the table and started writing. When I was finished I handed the paper to him.

"Here, the contract. Sign it and let's get this peace talk over with." He read it through carefully while pacing around the room. He then laid the paper on the table, signed it and gave it back to me. We walked out of the room. Our fathers were waiting. They looked expectantly at the piece of paper I was holding. I gave it to my father. He read it, from his facial expression I could read exactly what he approved of and what he disapproved of. My father then handed it to Durwald's father. He read it too. A servant came in with a tray of glasses, filled with wine. I had never like wine but knew I would have to learn to drink it someday. "To peace." My father toasted. "To peace." King Luperd agreed. I finished my glass of wine with a sour face. My father shook hands with King Luperd and I knew what I had to do

now but did not feel like it. I did it anyways. I shook Durwald's hand. I had a sarcastic expression on my face but did not care. He absolutely deserved it.

His Royal Highness Prince Durwald Nathan Rowter and Her Royal Highness Princess Cleopatra Anne Muntington. I was to walk in the door at one side of the room and Durwald would come in through the opposite door. This was too embarrassing. The doors opened and I walked through. Everyone was looking at me and Durwald. I was used to that and didn't mind it. But I did mind that I would now have to walk up to Durwald and dance with him! I thought our countries were enemies! I pasted a fake smile on my face, walked towards him and curtsied. He bowed. He then put his arms around my waist and I put mine on his shoulder. With my other hand I had to hold his hand. Suddenly I was furious at myself. I actually enjoyed that he was holding me. I felt his strength in every step we took together. He was a fantastic dancer. I wondered if he had something which he wasn't good at. I looked at him and was again amazed by the brightness of his brown eyes. I was surprised to find that I was disappointed when the dance ended. I curtsied, he bowed and we walked off the dance floor. I nearly tripped on my dark blue dress because I was not thinking about where I was going. Other couples were dancing now but I had no interest in dancing again whatsoever. A few boys asked me if I wanted to dance but I said I was tired. I decided to get a breath of fresh air outside. In the forest I felt free, away from annoying people who were busy stealing my heart.

"Cleo, don't move." I suddenly heard Durwald behind me. Due to the authority and alarm in his voice, I stopped dead in my tracks.

I tried listening if I could hear anything suspicious but it was absolutely quiet. Too quiet. Suddenly Durwald pushed me out of the way and I landed on the floor. I heard a muffled gunshot and from what I had been taught, I knew I had to lie still even though I desperately wanted to know what had just happened. Was Durwald wounded? Was I wounded? Even if I had wanted to move, I couldn't have because I was frozen with terror. My eyes were closed as I lay there on the floor. Then I heard quick footsteps running away from us. I relaxed a bit and mentally examined myself if anything hurt.

Who had that person been? Why had he wanted to shoot me? I was still too afraid to move, what if he came back or there was another person in the forest waiting for a sign of life so he could shoot at me again? I suddenly realized that Durwald was lying next to me on the ground. I slowly opened my eyes but could see nothing more than his back turned towards me. The smell of rotten leaves suddenly penetrated deeply into my nose and I thought I could hear an insect next to me. After lying still for another 10 seconds, which seemed more like forever, I slowly got up. I looked around me quickly and then observed Nathan. I gasped when I saw him. His shirt was ripped at his arm and there was a big red stain on it. His face was transformed with agony and he had to try extremely hard to keep from squirming in pain.

“Durwald!” I gasped. “You’re shot!” I didn’t know what to do, I knew I couldn’t leave him here but at the same time he desperately needed help. I panicked and started saying a whole bunch of things at the same time. I knew I sounded incoherent but I didn’t care. “Ok, I think the best idea is if I leave you here and go get somebody. But I can’t leave you lying on the floor so you better sit up. But what if the murderer comes back? You might get shot again. And then it will be my fault. But I have to take that chance-“ I looked at Durwald and saw an agonized smile playing on his lips.

“What, do you have a better idea?” I snapped at him, before realizing what I was doing. “I’m sorry!” I added immediately. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to be mean!” I decided that before I hurt him even more, I had better get some help.

“You saved my life.” I whispered softly, still not able to believe it. Durwald was lying in the palace hospital. The sheets he was lying under were snow white and so was the rest of the room. I had always found it a boring room and had begged my parents more than once to paint it some nice color but they had refused. Durwald’s arm was bandaged and was draped loosely over his body. Even the bandage was completely white and I longed to write something on it. I knew this would hurt him too much so instead I looked up into his perfect brown eyes.

“Why?”

"If that shooter had shot without me interfering, you would have been dead. I reckoned that I would rather have my arm hurting than you dead." He answered airily.

"Thanks." I didn't know what to say to him but secretly wished it had been someone else because now I was more or less in debt. And I hated the thought that I had been dependent on him. This completely took away my license to be mean to him and I knew I would have to try really hard not to.

"Why weren't you at the dance?" He suddenly asked.

"I needed some fresh air." I answered unwillingly. I didn't feel like talking to him but it was the least I could do after he saved my life. At the same time I felt attracted to him which annoyed me more than anything.

"So, are you content with the peace talks?"

"Yes. They were.." I searched for the word. "Interesting." I finally said. Why did he ask me this, what did he want? To test how much I knew? To see if I felt like I had made the right decisions so that he could make fun of me later if I hadn't? Well, I wasn't going to give him any information whatsoever. I was sitting awkwardly on the chair.

"Where did you get the idea that I was stuck up?" I suddenly asked him, pretending not to sound annoyed.

"Apparently they spread rumors about me here. They do the same in Tokito about you." He said grinning.

"And you just blindly believed them?" I asked.

"You blindly believed the rumors about me too!" I knew he was right and this irritated me even further.

"Well, what was said about you is probably right." I couldn't think of anything better to say but somehow I desperately wanted to hurt him. I could not believe what I was doing. What was my problem? Ever since he had come I had been in a bad mood and the only thing I wanted to do was hurt him. And now even after he had saved my life, I still couldn't hold my tongue.

"I'm starting to believe that what they say about you is right too. You are stuck up!" With that Durwald looked angrily out the window. "I'm sorry. I did not mean to say that." I said softly.

"You're just saying that because you feel like you owe me. I already know your true nature so don't even bother pretending." I stared at

him, shocked. Who did he think I was? But I couldn't help him for blaming me, my behavior had been despicable the last few days, since he had been here. I slowly stood up and then walked to the door. All I wanted right now was to curl up and cry. But I couldn't, I had to sit up straight, be polite, talk to everyone and act like nothing was wrong. I had had enough. I had a headache and thought that was a good enough excuse to go to sleep. In my room I lay down on my bed and cried myself to sleep.

I had to stand in front of the palace and wave goodbye to the most annoying, arrogant, irritating boy I had ever met. I decided to see it as a big accomplishment if I managed to do this with a smile on my face. It had been bad enough for me to have to curtsy towards him. His facial expression told me that he was still furious and we did not say more to each other than was strictly needed. When they were out of sight I walked to my room. I took out a writing block and a pen and decided to write to my best friend, Lila who had been out of town for the past two months, visiting her cousins. It was school holidays anyways so it did not matter that she was out of town. But right now I desperately needed a friend to write to.

*Dearest Lila,*

*I told you that Prince Durwald was coming to discuss peace, didn't I? Well, he came, we talked and he went. My conclusion: He's unbearable. I think people are right, what they say about Durwald having dated all the girls in the school and cheating on half of them. I would not be surprised. And I'm also not surprised that all the girls fell for him. He is the most handsome, good looking boy I have ever seen! That's probably why he's so arrogant as well. How have your days been? You better come back soon, I'm missing you!*

*Lot's of Love,*

*Cleopatra*

I put the letter in an envelope, sealed it and gave it to one of the maids. I then decided to go out riding. I hadn't ridden for the past few days and had really missed it; usually I went out riding every day.



When I came back from my ride I was surprised to find my father, waiting for me. He stood up as soon as I entered the palace.

"Cleopatra, Tokitian troops are marching into Dardoland. How is this possible? I thought there would be peace between us!" My father boomed.

"According to the peace treaty, Tokitian troops have the right to be in the country. As long as Tokito is not expanding their army."

"Why did you agree to that?" My father was furious. "Now Tokito can attack any time and we will not be able to fight back."

"We can send troops to Tokito, father." I said softly.

"We need our troops to protect our other borders! The Tokitian army was bigger than ours even before the peace treaty!" I had been trapped. I had agreed that the Tokitian troops would be allowed to be here and that neither of us would expand our armies. But I had not known that the Tokitian army would be bigger than ours in the first place.

"Oh no." I whispered softly. "He trapped me."

"Yes, he did! And you were stupid enough to let yourself be trapped!" My father marched out of the room. I was stunned. How had I not seen this coming? I was right about Durwald after all. I had doubted my decision about him the past few days but now I was sure that I had been right. All he had wanted was to make me agree to the Peace Treaty and he had succeeded. Luckily I could say that he had not used his charms to make me agree. No, I suddenly realized, I was stupid enough by myself to agree to it. He hadn't even needed to seduce me.

I was extremely frustrated, with Durwald, his father, my father, but most of all with me. I spent the rest of the day pacing around the room wondering what I could do. I hated the thought that he had outsmarted me. Suddenly I heard a knock on the door. I went to open it myself. It was the prime-minister.

"Cleopatra," He said with a serious expression on his face. "I think it is better if you go away for a while. Your father does not wish to see you."

"What?" I asked shocked. "I do not believe you." I wanted to walk around him towards my father.

"No Cleopatra, you will not go to see your father. You will pack your things and go to Torntown for a month." I looked at him, saw in his eyes that he was amused at my reaction. I was furious. Who did he think he was? My mother would tell me this if my father really did not want to see me.

"I don't believe you." I repeated.

"I don't care. Your things are already packed and your carriage is ready. Go now."

"I will not go without saying goodbye to my parents."

"We'll see about that." He said and pushed me out of the room. Two guards grabbed me. I wanted to scream but could not because they had my mouth covered. Was I being kidnapped by the prime-minister? I wondered. I was pushed into the carriage and the driver rode off. The prime minister went inside with an evil smile on his face. At that moment I was sure I was being kidnapped.

We rode the whole day and the whole day I was begging the driver to let me out. We stopped at a restaurant so that I could use the restroom and get something to drink. I decided that this was my perfect escape plan. If the bathroom had a window. I walked towards the bathroom, hoping, praying that it did have a window. When I entered the bathroom I was flooded by a wave of disappointment. The only window there was too small to exit. Suddenly I realized that I had been smart enough to take my make-up case from the carriage. I had told the driver that a princess always needed to look her best. I took the lipstick out of the case and climbed on the toilet seat.

"HELP ME! I'M BEING KIDNAPPED BY THE PRIME MINISTER. PRINCESS CLEOPATRA." I wondered if anybody would believe me but at least it was a cry for help. I opened the bathroom expectantly; maybe the driver was too far away to see me. But he was standing right outside the door. He gave me an icy cold glare and then pushed me back towards the carriage. It felt horrible to be back in the carriage, bumping up and down, only being able to stare at the unknown. There was no landmark that I recognized and the driver didn't say a word. I sat there for another three hours, looking out the window, wondering where we were going. And for the first time that

day I felt hopeless. Tears spilled down my cheeks. I did not want to cry, I wanted to be brave so that I would be able to face being somewhere without anybody I knew and with no idea what would happen in my future. I sighed.

It was already dark when the carriage finally stopped. I wondered if I could escape if I opened the door now and ran for it but a man was already walking towards the door to open it. He helped me out and pushed me towards a boat. What were they going to do, bring me to some deserted island? I had not expected that they were actually going to do that. The boat ride was not long and without anything other than my suitcases I was left on the island. From what I could see in the dark, the island had some palm trees and some dense bush. It looked terrifying. I wondered if there were any other people on the island but after a quick walk around, I came to the conclusion that there weren't. I was completely alone. I opened my suitcases to see what was inside. To my surprise they were filled with canned goods. There were also matches so I could start a fire. There was even a pan! This wouldn't be so bad, I concluded, it would be just like on a camping trip. Except for the fact that I always knew how long a camping trip took and I had no idea how long this would take. I looked around for some dry branches and leaves, found some and started a fire. I was surprised how good it went. I placed some stones around the fire and rested the pan on top. With a can opener (which was also in the bag) I opened one of the cans and emptied the contents into the pan. Before long it was warm and I took a bite. At that point I realized that I had no water. The sea around me was undrinkable, even though it looked inviting. I finished my food and decided to look around. I took a few steps but then thought of all the dangerous animals there could possibly be. I changed my mind and lay down on the sand. I did not know if I should keep the fire going or not. If I did leave it on, animals might be scared to go near. But what if animals actually enjoyed the warmth? I had no idea what to do but didn't have very long to think about it because I fell into a troubled sleep.

I woke up with a crow next to my head. I had no idea where I was,

was completely disoriented but had an uneasy feeling. I sat up and looked around. I saw a sea stretch out for miles ahead of me. The sun was coming up and its rays were reflecting on the water. It was an absolutely beautiful sight. I would have enjoyed it if I had felt safer. I turned my head and looked at the dense bush behind me. My mouth was dry and my lips were cracked. I wondered if there was any fresh water there. I decided I would need to find out someday and stood up. A waterfall of sand fell from my hair and my dress. Slowly I walked towards the edge of the jungle. I was scared of seeing wild animals. I suddenly realized that there was a possibility that I might get killed in the next few weeks. I decided not to think about it and pushed it to the back of my mind. I took a few steps, pushing branches and leaves out of the way, looking at the muddy floor if there was any signs of snakes, spiders or any other creatures. I blindly pushed a way deeper and deeper into the jungle. Then I touched something that did not feel like a branch. I screamed when I looked up and saw what it was. A big, fat snake was lying on a branch, looking down at me as if he enjoyed seeing my reaction. Then it got up lazily and looked like it was going to bite me. I don't remember having ever run so fast in my life. I ran until I could run no more but still did not want to slow down. Was it behind me? Where there more animals like that here? The only good thing about the encounter with the snake was that I could now hear running water. I did not know the way back, did not know how deep I was in the rainforest. I decided to walk towards the water. It was a small stream that, as far as I could see from here, led to a small lake. I put the tip of my finger in the water and tasted it. Good, it was sweet. But was it drinkable? Would I die of water poisoning or something? I did not care that I was making up words, no one would care about my grammar here anyways. I took a scoop of water and drank it. I had not realized how thirsty I was before I took that first sip of water. The water tasted magnificent, it was cool and delicious and I felt like putting my whole head in it. I drank until I could drink no more, washed my face and my hands and stood up. I slowly peeled my dress from my body, there was no one around anyways. I laid the dress down on a stone, scooped water and cooled off my skin with it. My shoes had gotten muddy, my dress was ruined. I had scratches

on my arms from the branches and my whole body was aching from the mosquito's which were everywhere. It would get worse at night. But right now I only thought about the water. It cleaned the blood from my arms and the itching from the mosquito bites nearly stopped. I did not care about my dress or my shoes, they would get dirty and muddy on the way back anyways. All of a sudden it hit me. I was on an island, all alone, did not know how to survive in the wild, didn't know how to get back to the beach and to my food, didn't know what my family was thinking. I started to wonder what I did know. All the things I had been taught, were they useful? What was I supposed to do with formula's and how to find the area of a triangle if I could not even survive in the wild? I sat on a stone next to the stream and realized this whole thing was getting me depressed. I had never been depressed before and did not like the feeling. So I decided to do something; find my way back to the beach. Whatever I did, I would not go past that snake again. I was sure I would be traumatized for life by that animal. Slowly I decided to walk in a direction where I felt I could best find the beach back. This time I looked out where I put my hands and my feet, with every step I grew even more cautious and scared. All I wanted right now was someone I knew, I did not care who it was, who's shoulder I could cry on.

Finally, after having roamed around for what seemed like hours, I set foot on the beach. I was too tired to be happy. Besides, I did not recognize the beach and realized that I would now have to walk around the island until I found the spot where my things were. I decided to turn right and hoped it was the shortest way back to my belongings. I ploughed myself through the sand, becoming more miserable with every step I took. I hadn't known how long I had spent in the jungle until I saw that the sun was already lowering itself. Had the whole day just gone past? Well, I had spent a few hours searching for the water, then spent a few hours at the stream and then finding my way back wasn't easy either. I suddenly became conscious of my hunger. I had not had an afternoon meal, and hadn't even realized it! At last I could see my things. I saw a can being reflected by the sun and it had caught my eye. It still felt like ages before I arrived there and when I did the sun had gone down. I had



missed the sunset, I had been too obsessed with my unhappy situation. The air was getting cooler and I felt the mosquito's coming. I needed to light a fire immediately. I searched for my matches which I could not find, how many other things could go wrong today? But I did not want to give up my search. I had had them this morning, they couldn't be far. I finally found them, buried under the sand. It wasn't easy to light the fire, it took me five matches. I still needed to search for more leaves and twigs but I did not have any energy left. After I had sat down I was sure that I would not be able to get up again. I took a can, emptied in the pan and it slowly became warm. I would have to go back for water tomorrow but I did not want to think of that now. Now I just wanted to eat and sleep.

Every day on the island became easier. I learned how to get to the stream, how to carry water from the stream to the beach and even managed to make a little shelter from branches and leaves. I preferred to sleep under the stars. It calmed me and gave me courage for the next day. Everything was going fine until I got sick. I think I might have been bitten by a mosquito or a spider or some other freaky bug carrying a sickness. I was lying on the beach, getting up every few minutes to drag myself to the water to throw up. I felt miserable, couldn't get any water to drink and was sure that I would die of dehydration if this sickness wasn't over soon. I was getting weaker every hour and I realized that. I needed water desperately and decided to open a can of soup. I used my last strength to open the can, wasn't even strong enough to empty it into the pan. I took a sip and lay back down. I knew I would throw up everything I ate or drank but forced down some more soup. Then I lay on the sand. I could not remember my head having ever hurt this bad. I fell into a feverish sleep.

He was sitting in his boat, rowing towards his island. He had not been on the island for a couple of weeks now, it had been too busy in the palace and he had been needed there every day. He had missed going to the island because the island had always brought him at peace. His parents disapproved of the fact that he went out on the sea alone but after he had proven to them that he wasn't going to

take no for an answer, they let him go to the island whenever he liked. He loved looking at the sunset and, if he was early enough, the sun rise. Sometimes he even spent the night under the stars. He arrived on the island and pulled his boat on the shore. He did what he always did when he got to the island; he walked around it. In the distance he suddenly saw something reflecting the sun's rays. He wondered what it was and increased his pace. A few meters away he saw a girl lying on the sand. He stared at her. Who was she? Her dress and shoes were dirty, her blond, wavy hair looked like it hadn't been combed and properly washed in days and she had scratches all over her arms and face. But he could still see that she was beautiful. Drops of sweat had formed on her forehead and it made him think that she was sick. He placed a hand on her forehead and discovered he was right. He walked over to her bag and looked inside. There were cans of food in one bag and in the other there were some dresses. They were still perfectly clean and neatly folded. Looking at them made him think that she was wealthy. Suddenly his eye caught a corner of dark blue fabric. He pulled the dress out further and held it up to the light. He recognized it and astonished he looked at the girl lying on the sand. Behind the dirt and the scratches he recognized her. It was Cleopatra. She had gotten skinnier; she had bags under her eyes and looked very dirty. There was something else, but he could not put his finger on it, maybe it was that she had gotten tougher as well. For a second he thought of the last time he had seen her, the way they had parted. But seeing her this way made him forgive her immediately.

"Mother." She suddenly moaned. "Mother. Don't let him take me. Please say you love me. Father!" She sat up and screamed. He walked over to her and tried calming her down. She wasn't completely awake yet and the fever had taken over her body. "Sshhh." The boy said softly and laid her down on the sand. He put his hand on her forehead and touched her cheek. He noticed it had a calming effect on her.

"What are you.." She whispered before she dozed off again. He realized he should get some water for her, took the pan which was still filled with soup and emptied it a few meters further. He then walked the well-known path to the stream. How long had she been

here? How did she get here? His mind was flooding with questions but he knew he would not be able to get them answered unless she got better. He cleaned the pan and filled it with fresh clear water. When he walked back she was awake, attempting to crawl towards the sea. She didn't get there on time and threw up on the sand. Apparently she had not eaten for days because she did not throw much up. He ran over to her.

I did not know if I had dreamed it but I thought I had heard somebody. I forced my body to move back to the spot where I had been lying and fell down like a sack of flour. I suddenly felt something cool touch my lips. At first I thought it was my imagination. I slowly opened my eyes and could not believe who I saw there. I was sure I was imagining now. But the water tasted real and I drank it, even though I knew that I would throw it up anyways. I wanted to ask Durwald if he was real. But it seemed like such a stupid question if he wasn't real, it wasn't like he was going to answer. It seemed like an even more stupid question if he was real. It would prove to him that I was absolutely weird. I couldn't believe that I was actually thinking about this when I was on the verge of being saved from this island. He put something on my forehead and I decided the only way to find out if he was real or not was to touch the object on my forehead and see if it was really there. With great effort I managed to lift my hand and when I touched the wet cloth a wave of relief swept over me. I looked at him and saw that he had taken off his shirt. That was probably the thing on my forehead. Right before I dozed off I registered how muscular he was, how strong he looked.

"Durwald?" I managed to ask him with my last bit of strength.

"Yes?" He said while leaning over me.

"Please don't leave me." I begged. I did not hear his answer but hoped that he would stay.

He knew he had to get her to a doctor quickly so he picked her up and carried her to the boat. She did not weigh much, she had been thin when he'd seen her for the first time and now she'd lost even more weight. He gently placed her on the floor of the boat and made her more comfortable with a blanket which he always had on board.

He went back to get her bags. He rowed towards the shore but then realized that it was better if nobody knew who she was. Word would spread around town and Dardoland would be ridiculed for all time to come. He looked at her and decided that they would have to observe her very carefully to find out she was royal. He got to the shore and tied his boat to the dock. He then lifted her up and walked towards the first carriage he could see and told the driver to ride to the palace as soon as possible. He still had Cleopatra in his arms. At the palace one of the guards opened the carriage door. He looked extremely surprised when he saw the girl in Durwald's arms.

"Could you please pay for the carriage?" Durwald asked the guard. The guard nodded and let Durwald in first before he paid the driver. Durwald practically ran up the steps to his house and one of the butlers opened the door.

"Call the doctor, quickly!" He ordered the butler. The butler nodded. Durwald's mother came running from one of the rooms.

"Durwald, what's this?" She asked shocked.

"It's Cleopatra, mother. I found her on my island." Queen Marie leaned over Cleopatra and finally recognized her. She was shocked.

"Oh, the poor dear!" She said. "How long has she been on that island?"

"I don't know mother." Durwald answered. The doctor came in the room and ordered Durwald to follow him into a bedroom and place Cleopatra on the bed. He took her temperature, looked at her eyes and then tried to determine if something had bitten her. He looked at her hands and her feet. On her ankle he saw a tiny little bite. The doctor observed it and frowned.

"What is it?" Queen Marie asked.

"I think she is bitten by a spider. As far as I can see it is a very poisonous one." The doctor unbuttoned the top buttons of Cleopatra's dress and saw the rash.

"She does not have much chance of surviving." The doctor said softly. Queen Marie gasped and Durwald just stared at Cleopatra. The only girl that had been able to steal his heart was about to die.

I realized I was lying on something soft. I had no idea what it could be. My father and the prime minister suddenly entered the room.

“We don’t want her here, she ruins everything. Send her to the island so we will never have to see her again.” They were leaning over me, with sly glares on their faces.

“Father?” I asked unbelievable.

“Don’t call me that ever again.” He boomed.

“No! Father please!” I begged. “I’m sorry! I did not mean to...”

Durwald was sitting next to her bed. He heard what she was saying but had no idea what it was about. Cleopatra’s family had already been contacted and they were on their way here. But if he listened to what Cleopatra was saying, she didn’t want to see them or at least they didn’t want to see her.

I heard people talking around me. Wherever I was, if it was in a dream world or not, I had to let somebody know that I never wanted to see the prime minister again. But for that I had to wake up. I struggled to open my eyes. My lids felt like there was lead tied to them. So did the rest of my body. When I managed to get my eyes open I saw Durwald talking to the doctor. I had no idea where I was but by now I was fairly sure that Durwald existed. I tried to make a sound but it didn’t really work. I needed to tell them. I had to! If the prime minister saw me he would just kidnap me again. And this time he might not be so nice as to put me on an island.

“Don’t...” I croaked. The doctor and Durwald looked at me. Durwald was next to my bed instantly. He took my hand and waited for me to continue.

“Don’t let...” I took a deep breath and whispered the rest of the words.

“The prime-minister come. Please. Not the prime-minister.” My eyelids were getting too heavy and I did not have enough energy to talk anymore anyways so I let my eyes close. I was still awake.

He looked at the doctor. He had no idea what she had meant but she had made the message clear. She did not want to see the prime minister. It was most likely the prime minister from Dardoland that she did not want to see but he was not taking any chances. Even if he had to take care of it himself, neither prime ministers would come near her.



Cleopatra's parents arrived late in the afternoon. The prime minister was with them. Cleopatra's mother walked straight to the room where Cleopatra was and when she saw her she started crying. She sat next to her and took her hand.

"Cleopatra, darling, it's me." Cleopatra did not respond. Then her father walked into the room. He sat next to his wife and looked at Cleopatra.

"Cleo, I'm so sorry." He whispered. The prime minister wanted to enter the room but Durwald stopped him.

"You are *not*

getting in here." He was furious. This was the man that had caused Cleopatra's misery although Durwald did not know exactly how yet. Cleopatra's father looked up.

"It's fine Durwald, he can come in." He said.

"No, I'm sorry. I promised Cleo I would not let him in." Cleopatra's father stood up and walked over to Durwald.

"What do you mean?" He asked.

"A couple hours ago Cleopatra begged me not to let the prime minister come in. I don't know why and she fell asleep again before I could ask but the look in her eyes made me agree instantly." Durwald looked at the prime minister disgustedly. Cleopatra's father stared at the prime minister.

"What have you done to my Cleopatra?" He asked demanding. His tone was deadly.

"Nothing Sire. I think she was just talking feverishly." But one glance at Durwald made the King dispose of that idea. He looked at the two guards at the door.

"Arrest him." He ordered, motioning towards the prime minister. The guards followed his orders.

"You're going to regret this!" The prime minister shouted.

"We'll see." Cleopatra's father said.

I heard a soothing voice. I thought it was my mother's but when I heard a horribly familiar voice on the background I knew it was a nightmare again. I wanted to scream, kick and scratch, anything to get me out of this nightmare. Without knowing I was crying. I forced

my mouth open, needed to scream, knew I wouldn't survive if I didn't. I don't know where the energy came from but I suddenly managed to sit up, scream, cry and throw up all at the same time.

"He's going to kill me!" I screamed. I heard my mother's voice and was sure I was dead.

"Cleopatra, shh. It's ok, we're here, nothing will happen to you." I felt arms around me and I froze. I looked around the room, saw my parents, Durwald, his parents and the doctor. My eyes went to my mother's.

"Where am I?" I asked softly. My throat was dry and it was extremely difficult to talk.

"You are in King Luperd's palace." My mother said. "It's ok, we're here."

"Is he gone?" I asked terrified.

"Is who gone?" My mother asked.

"Him." I didn't have enough strength to explain.

"Yes, he's gone." My mother calmed me down. I did not know if she had any idea who I was talking about but hearing my mother deny his presence helped me. She gently pushed me back on the pillows. The blanket which was covering me was taken away and a new one was brought. I did not know what happened because I dozed off into the first peaceful sleep I had had in days.

I woke up and felt much better. I still didn't have enough strength to sit up but at least I wasn't dozing off in the middle of my sentences. My mother was still sitting next to me.

"Mother?" I asked her pleadingly. "Please don't let him come in here. This time he will kill me."

"Honey, who are you talking about?"

"The prime-minister." I managed to say.

"Don't worry, I am not letting anybody in here." My mother reassured me. The door opened and I looked at it frighteningly. I could breathe again when I saw it was my father. Durwald and Queen Marie were with him. My eyes met Durwald's and I suddenly remembered what had happened before I was kidnapped. My father had been furious with me. The nightmare came back and I wondered if my father really did hate me. I decided to ask him. He sat down next to my

bed.

"Cleopatra, how are you?"

"Father?" I asked him. I couldn't look him in the eye. "Do you hate me?" I was scared of hearing his answer.

"Of course I don't hate you darling! What gave you that idea?"

"Richard." I said softly.

"The prime-minister?" My father asked unbelievable. I nodded.

"Tell us what happened." My father was curious and so were the rest of the people in the room.

"Richard came into my room, tried convincing me that you and mother hated me and never wanted to see me again. He then kidnapped me and I was brought to the island. That's where I've been spending the last few days."

"You were there without any food?" My mother asked shocked.

"No, Richard had been nice enough to pack me some canned food." I was too tired to make my voice sound sarcastic. My parents looked relieved.

"Come on, let's go eat some breakfast. Durwald, could you stay here with Cleopatra?" Queen Marie asked her son.

"Sure." He answered. I wasn't sure if I liked the prospect of being alone in a room with him. When everyone had left the room he leaned against the table and observed me. I felt uncomfortable with him looking at me that way and therefore decided to talk.

"Thanks for saving me again." I couldn't believe that I started off by saying that but I did need to thank him sometime.

"No problem." He grinned.

"Why did you cheat me in the peace treaty?" I suddenly asked annoyed. Durwald laughed and walked over to me.

"You really don't like me, do you?" He asked with a teasing expression on his face.

"I don't know, you just have a strange effect on me." I was trying to avoid the question.

"Is that a good or bad thing?" His smile was the sweetest smile I had ever seen. I had to force myself to stop staring at him.

"It depends how you see it." I answered nervously.

"Hmmm.." He said, amused. "Anyways, I did not cheat you on the peace treaty. We just knew some things you did not know. One of the

things was that Dardoland would be attacked by Lindendurgh. Tokito would also be affected so therefore we transported our troops into your country. We were not planning to take over Dardoland.”

“Really?” I asked him, still not sure if I could trust him.

“I promise.” He said.

“Sorry I didn’t believe you.” I couldn’t believe that I had said both ‘sorry’ and ‘thank you’ to him in the last ten minutes. I think he could read my mind because he laughed.

“That’s ok. I didn’t trust you either in the beginning.”

“Why not?” I asked him curiously.

“Let’s not start this conversation again. I can guess how it’s going to end.” He said. This time it was my turn to smile.

“I think you should go to sleep now. You look tired.” Durwald got the blanket and put it over me. “Oh, and please call me Nathan.” He added. It didn’t take long for me to fall asleep.

I woke up and noticed that I felt completely fine. I was relieved; I had gotten sick and tired of being sick. I sat up, noticed there was no one in the room and walked over to the door. I opened it and looked outside. I had no idea where to find anyone but I really did not feel like staying in the room any longer. I needed some fresh air. Aimlessly I walked through the beautifully decorated corridors. Unwillingly I wondered where Nathan’s room was. At the end of the corridor I turned right and found that ahead of me there was another long corridor. But at the end of this one I could see a door that led to the garden. I walked quickly because I was looking forwards to some fresh air and some nature. Although I had probably seen enough nature for a year on that island.

I got to the end of the corridor and walked through the door. Ahead of me was a beautiful garden. But strangely I saw nobody there. I realized I had not seen anybody at all today, no maids cleaning the rooms, no people in the garden. It had been too quiet. I started feeling uncomfortable. I walked through the garden but could not enjoy the walk anymore; I was worrying about where everybody was. I decided that I needed to find somebody before I started panicking so I went back inside the palace and started searching around. I knocked on every room I passed and then looked inside but there

was nobody. Frantically I continued my search, my despair growing with every door I knocked on. I finally arrived at the front of the palace and walked through the main doors. There was no one there either. I did not understand this; if the family had left they would have left a note. And the staff would still be there. Something strange was going on. I actually started questioning my sanity. Which wasn't such a good idea at a crucial time like this. I walked around the palace and hoped I could find some stables or a gardener or something along those lines. I was walking, or rather running, on a gravel path, there were flowerbeds next to me. The flowerbeds were stuffed with flowers in all kinds of different colors. Suddenly I saw one of the flowerbeds move. I stopped dead in my tracks and turned around, not sure if what I had seen had actually happened. The plants moved again. I stared at it, ready to run away if some kind of monster came out of it. I saw a forehead appear, then eyes, a nose and a mouth. It was an old man, the few hairs he had were already gray and his face was completely wrinkled. He looked around nervously and then motioned me to come. I didn't know what to do, who this man was, if I could trust him or not.

"Princess. Come here!" He ordered me in a whisper. I decided to trust him, what could such an old man do to me? I walked over to him and when I was at the edge of the flowerbed he grabbed me and pulled me inside. He stifled my scream with his hand. He pushed me down so that I was sitting on the floor next to him. I realized I was out of sight for other people now.

"Princess, you're in danger. The King, Queen, Prince and your parents all had to flee. The palace is being guarded now, all the staff had to leave. The men who took over the palace are ruthless and your parents did not have enough time to go back to your room to get you. On their way out of the palace they told me to take care of you." I listened to all these things without saying a word.

"What am I supposed to do? How do I find them? How do I get out of the palace?" I finally asked.

"Don't try getting out of the palace, especially not if you look like this. The guards do not let anybody out who does not have permission from James, the head of the men who took over the palace. I don't know where your parents are, they might be outside the country or

they might be in a prison somewhere. I think that your best chance of survival is if you work here as a maid, you might get some inside information.” The old man answered.

“Wouldn’t they recognize me?” This was never going to work out.

“If you cut your hair a bit shorter, wear something different, they might actually believe it.”

I had to cut my hair? That was my only pride! My blond locks flowed until my waist and I wasn’t going to give them up that easily.

“Fine, I’ll wear something different and pin my hair up.”

“Color your hair.” He ordered. I felt like I was having the peace talk all over again, with compromises and arguments.

“All right.” It wasn’t such a bad idea, if I colored my hair and pinned it up no one would notice. “But how do we get out of the palace? And how do I become a staff member here?” I was lost. I had no idea what to do.

“First you could ask James for permission to leave the palace but I’m pretty sure that he will never let a pretty girl like you go. I suppose you could go up to the guards and seduce them.” The old man said, out of the blue.

“Seduce the guards? What if that doesn’t work? I will be taken prisoner! And I have never been very good at seducing people.”

“Don’t worry, it’ll work, you’re pretty enough. And the guards stand there all day, they are tired and like a change in the evening.” This was completely against everything I had learned and I wasn’t sure if I was happy doing this.

“We first have to color my hair though.” I said, hoping that he would change his mind about the seducing thing and come up with a better idea.

I was standing in the stables, ready to dip my hair in a bucket of charcoal mixed with water. I had never done anything so disgusting in my life and I had hoped never to have to do anything like it. But the man had warned me that I would have to do this routine everyday if I wanted my hair to stay black and remain unrecognizable. I closed my eyes and leaned backwards until all of my hair was in the bucket. I had to sit there for a few minutes to let the charcoal sink in and then afterwards I had to keep a towel

around my hair until it dried, which would take forever. I felt the cool water run over my forehead and I desperately felt like crying. I had no idea how to get out of here, a stranger was my only friend, or rather, he was my only acquaintance, and I had absolutely no idea what I was supposed to do to get out of here.

After sitting with my hair in the bucket for a few minutes, I stood up and took a towel from the table. I was used to everything being handed to me before I could even ask and now I had to take everything myself. I didn't mind this though; it would toughen me and help me in my future life as a queen. If I ever became a queen. I wished I could just get out of the palace and go to Dardoland to live in peace and harmony. But for that I first needed to get out of the palace and find my family.

I was lying on the straw in the barn, planning out my technique how I would become a maid in the palace when I heard footsteps coming towards me. I could hear they were soldiers because they were wearing boots and were marching as if they owned the place. I sat up quickly, looking around for a place to hide when I remembered that I was supposed to be noticed so that they could use me as a maid or something of the sort. My heart was pounding in my chest when I saw the first soldier march into the barn. He was tall with black hair and a very pointy nose. He looked into every stable and examined the horses. Suddenly he kicked one of them hard, so that it whinnied and became nervous. I had to pinch myself to keep from standing up and shouting at him. How could he be so mean? The horse hadn't even done anything! At the same time I realized that if he was that mean to the horses, he would probably act the same to me. I wanted desperately to whimper in distress at the thought of what he might do to me. With every step he took my heart started beating faster and I tried to make myself as small as possible. He was observing the second to last horse now and he opened its mouth harshly to look at its teeth. I prayed for a miracle to happen at that moment. The man stepped out of the stable and then walked to the last one. I knew he would see me even before he got to the horse. I was too afraid to look up at him and I just sat there, covering my head with my arms so that if he would kick or hit me at least my

head would be spared.

“What on earth are you doing here?” The voice suddenly boomed. I made myself as small as possible but forced myself to look up at him. He was hovering over me; the way he stood he looked around 3 meters tall. His nose looked even pointier from up close and I could see that his mustache was perfectly combed, something I knew only mean and harsh people did.

“What are you, some little spy who can’t talk?” He kicked me with his boot and I lost my balance.

“Don’t be so mean to her, she might actually be useful.” I heard another voice. Could this possibly be my savior? I wondered. Or was it the other type of useful they were referring to?

I was standing in one of the rooms, making up the bed. I had done it; I was an actual maid in the palace. Never in my life had I thought it possible that I would become a maid and I nearly smiled at the irony. It had taken me a while to learn how to make up the beds this perfectly but now I was good at it. The blanket had to be spread out over the bed and then folded at the top. There were not supposed to be any folds in the blanket at all. I had never expected being a maid would be this hard, there was so much work to do and everything needed to be perfect. The door opened and I stopped what I was doing immediately, turned around towards the door and stood up straight with my hands behind my back. It was James who came in the room.

“Hello Patty.” He said. I curtsied. “Your Highness.”

“I would like you to become one of my personal chamber maids.” He said. I knew this was an honor and I was looking forwards to it. James was interesting, and very good-looking for that matter. And I might get some information from him.

“Yes sir.” I said, with my head down. He walked over to me, put a finger under my chin and lifted my head up so that I had to look him in the eyes. For a second I thought he had recognized me and my heart started beating like a royal drum roll.

“Hmmm.” Was the only thing James said, let me go and left the room. I had no idea why he had done that but his touch had left a tingling feeling. Was I busy getting a crush on one of the people who



had sent Durwald and his parents out of the palace? That wasn't possible. How could I even consider it? Why did he even care that he was good-looking, he had sent Durwald's family out of their palace and was busy taking over the country. I had to be very, very careful with this young man.

I was sitting on the back porch of the palace when James emerged from inside.

"Hello Patty," he said.

I smiled at him and nodded, as a way of acknowledgement. James sat next to me on the step and looked out over the garden without saying anything.

"You know," he suddenly commented, "It is strange how a person can feel lonely amidst a whole group of people." I knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Yes, it is indeed strange."

"But what's worse," James continued, "is when people who you thought were your friends, turn out not to be." I was curious as to what he was referring to.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Nathan, Durwald, I mean, used to be one of my good friends. We went to the same school and at one point I got a girlfriend. Nathan was jealous of me and I suspect that he liked the girl too because he ordered me to dump her. I refused and Nathan grew so angry that he put me in jail for a week and in the meantime he got together with my girlfriend. I promised that day that I would never forgive him and that he would pay for it." James was staring off into the distance. I sat there, completely astonished at this revelation. Was it true? Had Nathan really done something that horrible? Was that the reason why James had attacked the palace? Suddenly James looked in my direction.

"I'm sorry to be bothering you with all my troubles." He smiled sadly.

"That's all right, your highness." I said softly. It was still strange that I was calling him 'your highness,' it was usually I who was addressed with that title.

The next few days James and I spent more and more time together. I

grew to like him; he was nice, calm and very interesting. He was also charming and charismatic, and, best of all, he told me where my parents were. I had asked him this in one of our conversations, he had laughed and said that 'those stupid people' were on the island Yirido. What was it with me and that island? It was like it kept coming back to haunt me. I had smiled when I heard this because Nathan was an expert at living on small islands, he had proven this when he had found me the day I was sick. I had also asked James if I could go out of the palace to visit my family but he had refused this. It had annoyed me greatly but there was nothing I could do about it. That night, in the stuffy dark room which I shared with multiple other maids, a few of them came over to me and started talking.

"You do know that all he wants is to get you into bed." One of the maids told me. Apparently she could see that I did not know this and she gently explained it to me.

"He does this to lots of girls, and many of them have actually gone to bed with him. That's the only reason why he's interested in you." I did not know what to say, I had trusted James!

"I don't believe you." I said. "James is nice and well mannered and a gentleman." The rest of the maids started laughing.

"I think we best just let her find it out for herself." One of the women said to another.

"But by then it might be too late." The other answered. I had turned around on my bed and stared out the window. I couldn't keep back tears, James had been my only friend here in the palace apart from the old man. It was at times like these, when I felt like my whole world was collapsing, that I missed my parents most. And somebody else, I suddenly realized; Nathan. Maybe this was the reason why I had gotten crush on James; because I missed Nathan so much and desperately needed somebody to take his place.

I was cleaning up his table when he came in.

"Ah, Patty." He said smiling.

"Hello." I said, and again I could not believe what the girls had told me. James had told me not to curtsy anymore when he came in the room and to treat him like a normal person. But something seemed different about him today. He took a few steps towards me. The look

in his eyes frightened me and I took a step backwards.

"It's ok Patty, I'm not going to hurt you." He said softly. I stood still and let him approach me. "I just want to have some fun."

When he was close enough, he leaned forwards. I knew he was going to kiss me but at the same time I felt his hand touch my chest. In a sudden impulse I slapped him hard in the face. I saw my handprint appear on his cheek.

"Don't you *dare*

." My eyes were blazing with anger and I was furious. He was stunned and this gave me a moment to run past him, out of the room. But before I reached the door he grabbed my hand. I tried pulling it loose but he had a tight grip on it. He forced me to turn around and I noticed that he was smiling wickedly at me.

"I dare." He said and pulled me towards him. I didn't know what to do, all I knew was that I did not want him to touch me and that I longed to wipe that smile off his face. And with this knowledge I kicked him in a very inappropriate place. But it had the desired effect, he doubled over, spitting out swear words at me. I stood a few seconds, enjoying his agony, before I ran out of the room. I ran blindly and didn't know where I was going. I dove into the room which I knew led to the cellar and sat there, breathing fast, extremely scared. I heard footsteps pass the door and a cursing voice. I hoped and prayed that he would not open the cellar door because if he did I knew I would not survive long.

I sat there for a few minutes calming myself, finding weapons I could use if he decided to look in the cellar. I prayed silently, asking God if he would give me a way out. Suddenly I saw a window. I observed it for a few seconds and realized I would be able to fit through it. I sent a quick thank you to God. But then I thought that even if I did fit through the window, I would never be able to get past the guards. Unless.. No, that was impossible, I couldn't do that. My flirting skills weren't that great and I wasn't that pretty either. Pondering over what I was going to do next, I decided that seducing the guards would be the only way out. And I was pretty, I told myself. All the guys had not fought over me for no reason. I took a deep breath, opened the little window and poked my head out. I quickly pulled it back in when I

saw a guard marching past. A few seconds later I looked out again. The guard was gone and I knew I had to be quick, I had to get out of the room before the guard came back. I pushed myself up, using my hands and bumped my head in the process. Even though it hurt, I told myself that I had bigger things to worry about and did not stop to rub my sore head. I put one leg over the edge and then the other. Finally I was out of the palace. But I was not out of the gates yet and I knew this would be harder than getting out of the palace. Suddenly I remembered the guard who had walked past a few seconds ago and ran to the shadows. I calmed myself down and observed my surroundings. There the guard was again, coming around the corner. I pulled deeper into the corner and prayed that the guard would not see me. I was almost too scared to look. The footsteps suddenly slowed down and I held my breath so that I would not make a noise. I saw the guard peer in my direction. Noooooo! I screamed silently. "Hey, Brad, over here!" I heard unexpectedly. The guard looked up and marched toward his friend who was invisible for me because he was around the corner. I let out my breath slowly and thanked God for saving me once again.

When I had gathered enough courage, I took a step out of the shadows and walked towards the gate. On my way I wondered how far I would go. Would I let him kiss me? Was my freedom worth my first kiss? I decided it was, but I would not let the guard go further than a kiss. When I arrived at the guard I reminded myself of all the times I had seen girls try to get a guys' attention and I had rolled my eyes at them.

"Hey." I said to the guard, in my most feminine and charming tone of voice. I stood very close to him and could smell the newness of his costume. It was covered in gold and silver medals. Personally I just thought he was showing off and did not like it but I decided to comment on it anyways: "I really love your costume! Have you really won that many medals? You must be very strong and brave." I knew I sounded stupid but the other girls I had seen doing this always blabbered a bunch of nonsense as well so I guess it didn't really matter.

"Yes, I have, I won them in the war. My friend and I were crossing

over into enemy territory and everyone around me was being shot down but I did not stop, I just kept on going until I got there. And boy, did I teach them a lesson! I was the most important person in the July explosion.” He said proudly.

“Wow. You’re brave! I like brave men.” I said softly as I walked my fingers up and down his arm. “You know what I also like?” I asked, as I leaned even closer to him. “I like to go out riding.” I could see that he was getting persuaded and I was surprised at how easy it was to wrap him around my finger. “Will you come with me?” I whispered in his ear.

It didn’t take long for the guard to agree to go out riding with me. At first he was a little nervous when he found out that I did not have a signed note from James but apparently my charms caused him to break the rule. He told one of the other guards to take over his post and walked with me to the stables. I took his arm while remembering what the old man had said about one horse; it was faster and fitter than all the others. Meanwhile I continued flirting with the guard. “So how long have you been a guard here?”

“Since the palace was taken over.”

“Do you agree with everything James says?”

“Of course. He is brilliant. He managed to take over the whole palace and will soon rule over the whole country.” Pride was etched in the guard’s voice.

“He is so intelligent!” I crowed. “But is he going to take over the whole country?” I looked at him wide-eyed.

“That’s the plan.” The soldier answered. “James is going to take command of the army and get rid of anyone who stands in his way. Then, when the whole country is under his command, we will kill the Royal family and go to war with Dardoland.”

I gasped and he looked at me weirdly.

“What a coincidence!” I pretended that the gasp had been a positive one while in fact I was horrified. “I was talking to my family yesterday and telling them that the Royal family is extremely unsuitable for ruling Tokito. They have made so many stupid decisions already. I am so glad that James is finally taking action.” The guard smiled and walked over to one of the horses and I walked over to another.

“This horse is beautiful, can I ride it?” I asked him.

“That horse is extremely strong. I’m saddling this one for you, she’s calm and doesn’t run so fast.” I attempted to smile sweetly but was boiling inside. Why was this guard trying to ruin my plan?

“I have been riding since I was a little girl. I can handle a strong horse.” I said it firmly and to my delight the guard immediately gave in.

“Whatever you wish,” he said. I smiled again, walked over to him and kissed him on the cheek.

“You’re sweet.” I told him and I saw that he had turned a deep shade of red. He saddled the black stallion and then saddled a light brown one as well. When he was done I let him help me into the saddle and he opened the large wooden doors of the stable. I rode out slowly and the horse pulled on the reins, whinnied and was about to gallop off but I had a strong hold on the reins. I was happy that I could already notice the strength of this horse. The guard had taken his own horse out as well and then closed the wooden doors and jumped onto his horse’s back in one quick motion.

“Are you all right?” He asked me, as we walked over to the palace gates.

“Oh yes, I am absolutely fine.” I said sweetly. We rode through the busy town and I noticed that everybody seemed more jittery than usual, especially when they saw a palace guard ride past. When we had neared the forest I grew excited. I was going to make my escape here but nervously bit my lip when I saw the guard’s rifle hanging by his side. I would have to ride criss cross through the forest so he wouldn’t shoot me. Then I nearly started laughing. Cleo, I told myself, this guard next to you would never shoot a lady. Besides, he doesn’t even know you did anything wrong and that James is going to be furious when he finds out that he let me go. You’re going to be fine. We rode for a few more minutes in silence when I saw a little yellow flower at the side of the path and immediately got a brilliant idea.

“That’s a beautiful flower.” I said to the guard. “Do you mind getting it for me?”

“No, of course not,” he said, and immediately jumped off his horse. Just as he was bending down to pick the flower, I nudged my horse into a gallop.

“Hey!” The guard shouted after me but I knew that I had a few seconds head start and that the guard had little chance of catching up with me. I heard his horse’s hooves follow me for some time but then slowly die away. I had done it, I was free. Now all I needed to do was find Yirido.

I rode until it had become dark and my horse was growing tired. Could I sleep in the forest? I sat on my horse for a few moments, wondering what I should do, listening to the forest noises. Even the slightest noise made me jump and I knew that I wasn’t going to get much sleep tonight.

You’ve slept under these circumstances before, I reminded myself. Yes, I argued, but I wasn’t being chased by an insane guy that time. I smiled at my own stupidity, why was I having an argument with myself in the middle of a forest when I was dreadfully lonely and hopelessly lost?

I woke every few hours and slept restlessly. When dawn finally appeared I sighed in relief and climbed onto my horse. Apparently my horse was anxious to get away from this forest as well because he immediately started galloping the moment I nudged him. After having ridden for around two hours, and wondering if I was going in circles, I saw a tiny cottage appear. I slowed my horse down to a walk and slowly approached the cottage. What if the people in there wanted to hurt me? What if I couldn’t trust them? What was I to do? I circled the house slowly and then took a deep breath. I was going to have to take a chance and hope that there was somebody in the cottage who was nice and was willing to give me directions towards Yirido. I dismounted and walked over to the front door. Even before I knocked the door opened and an old, fat, lady stood there, slightly hunched. The smile on my face immediately calmed my nerves and I knew that she was jolly and would surely help me.

“Good morning.” I said.

“Good morning!” She smiled. “Are you here all alone?” She poked her head out of the door and looked left, then right, and then back at me.

“Yes.” I said. “I got lost.”

“Oh dear. Come in, come in, you must be hungry! Have you been out

all night?" I was ushered into a cozy sitting room told to sit down.

"I have been out all night. I don't mean to bother you, I was just coming to ask for directions." I said.

She waved my concern away. "You're no bother! I'm extremely happy that somebody is coming by. It gets quite lonely out here in the forest."

"Yes, I can imagine."

"Would you like some warm milk and breakfast? I'm sure you haven't eaten yet."

"That sounds wonderful."

The rest of my visit I could not stop smiling. How was it possible that I was so lucky? After having stayed at the woman's cottage for around an hour, I stood up. She had given me directions and new hope to get to Yirido.

"I really must go now. I don't know how I can thank you for all you've done for me."

"Just promise you'll come visit again." The lady said. I couldn't help myself; I walked over to her and hugged her. Then, I walked out the door and mounted my horse again.

I rode the rest of the day and nearly screamed with excitement when I saw the river in which Yirido lay. I did not understand why James had shipped the Royal family off to Yirido, it was so close to Tokito. But then I suddenly realized why he had done it: Yirido was an easy place to keep someone prisoner because it was impossible to escape and impossible to go there without anyone seeing. I felt like crying, I was exhausted, hungry and hopeless and even my horse was no longer as motivated to continue our journey.

I had not eaten in two days and I felt my body weaken. My horse was dieting on grass and he wasn't too happy about it but, I told him sternly, at least he had something to eat. I had ridden for most of the day and all my limbs were sore, riding for three days straight was not good for one's muscles, I concluded. I could hardly walk when I stepped off my horse at night and had no trouble falling asleep. I was so tired that I didn't even notice that I could see Yirido until I was only a few hundred meters away. My energy slowly started returning



when I realized that my parents were so extremely close. And my heart started beating faster because Nathan was on that island too.

I stood on the banks of the river and stared at the island. One patrol guard had already walked past and asked for my name and what I was doing here. I told him that I felt warm and needed to freshen up. He bought it without any further questions. But what was I going to do? I had not thought up a plan and I could hardly rent a boat and peddle to the island. Multiple guards would stop me and news would travel fast that a young lady had attempted to reach the island. And then James might find me. I shuddered at that idea. I walked over towards the water of the river and splashed my face with cool water. My hands were halfway to my face when a brilliant idea came to mind. Dardoland was just across the river, if I could cross it then I could inform the army and they could get my parents off the island. I got on my horse and rode along the riverbank until I came to a small ferry. I frowned when I realized that I had no money and could therefore not take the ferry to the other side. I wasn't wearing any jewellery which I could use to give the man either. The only option I had left was to cross the river by swimming across it. I knew that at one point the river became very narrow and therefore rode for another half our to get to that place. I stared at the cold, murky waters and dreaded the thought of having to swim across this river. The water did not look very calm and I could see that there was a relatively strong undercurrent. And then, worst of all, there was the possibility of wild animals who would love to have a young woman for lunch. But I had to set it all aside and forget about my worries because it was a necessity to get to the other side. I got off my horse and walked towards the water. I sat down and took off my shoes and placed them against a tree, knowing that I would probably never see them again. I placed one toe in the water and I flinched when I felt how cold it was. Then I slipped my simple dress over my head and wondered what the head of the army would think if I approached him in my underwear. I needed to keep my dress. I looked over my shoulder at the horse and knew that he had to come with me to the other side because I would be helpless without him. I made my dress as small as possible and then put it through one of the stirrups, then

over the saddle and through the other stirrup. I hoped it would stay. Then, I took him by the reins and together we descended into the freezing water. My horse disliked it just as much as I did because he whinnied in protest.

“Shhhh.” I said to him, with chattering teeth. When the river was too deep for me to walk, I started swimming and only the thought of big fish and piranhas in the water forced me to continue. I kept reminding myself that if I moved enough I would get warmer but I wasn’t really helping. I had let go of my horse’s reins but to my surprise he did not turn around and swim back to the shore, but instead he followed me to the other end of the river. Even though I was freezing cold and extremely scared, I couldn’t help but smile at the loyalty of this animal.

I arrived at the other side of the river, got out and then just lay on the bank, too exhausted to move. My horse, I felt like by now I was able to call it mine, stepped out beside me and shook the water from his skin. He then stood there and observed me. The only good thing about crossing that river by swimming was that I was indeed warm now but I knew this warmth would not last long and soon I was shivering again. The best thing to do was probably to continue onwards and to find the army. Then realization struck me that this was Dardoland. This was home! I smiled broadly and walked over to my horse to get the dress off it’s back. I wrung it out, pulled it over my head and swung myself onto the saddle. I rode slowly because both my horse and I were tired and I needed time to think about how I was going to find the army.

It was dark and I was about to get off my horse when I heard a horse galloping in the distance. It was coming in my direction. I sat very quietly, wondering who it was and if I was in any possible danger when I saw a shadowy figure, on horseback, appear in the distance. I held my breath, and waited for him to approach. When he was close enough he slowed down to a walk and then stopped in front of me.

“You are in a restricted area. What are you doing here?” He asked.

“I just crossed the river.” I answered.

"A woman?" He sounded surprised. Apparently he had thought I was a man and I didn't blame him because the moon did not shine very brightly tonight. "I'm sorry ma'am, but I will have to bring you to my commander."

"You're in the army?" I asked and I couldn't help the fact that excitement was in my voice.

"Yes ma'am." He answered. I smiled from ear to ear but then forced myself to remain formal.

"I would like to speak to your commander please." I said.

"Follow me." The man said, and I gladly did so. I surely hoped that this man was indeed in the army and that this was not some trick to get me to follow him.

We rode for a good fifteen minutes before I saw a light appear between the trees.

"That is our camp." The soldier said over his shoulder. When I came closer I realized that it was a campfire and I heard the chatter of men. The soldier rode into the clearing and I followed him. The men who were sitting around the campfire looked up and immediately noticed that there was a woman in their camp. Many of them were already quite drunk and that was why some of the remarks they made were not exactly very gentlemanly. If only they knew who I was. The soldier who had accompanied me to the camp dismounted and wanted to walk over to my horse to help me but I had dismounted even before he neared my horse. I followed him quietly, trying to avoid eye-contact with the men around the campfire and I sincerely hoped that the commander had not had alcohol tonight. I wasn't sure what I would do if he had.

"Commander, there is a woman here who was riding in the forest." The soldier said. We were standing outside a tent and I saw the shadow of a man walk over to the entrance of the tent. He then pulled the tent flap aside and observed me.

"Let her in." He said and held the tent flap open. I walked past him and entered the tent in which there was a corner where a few blankets had been laid on the ground as an improvised bed and an oil lamp stood in the middle of the tent with a large map lying next to

it. It wasn't until I was in the tent and the light from the oil lamp shone on the commander's face when I noticed that I had seen this man before. He had attended a ball once, at the palace, and he had flirted outrageously with me. The only reason I still remembered him was because he had threatened to fight another man over a dance with me. I smiled slightly and wondered if he would recognize me. Probably not. My hair was loose and I absentmindedly took a strand of it between my fingers and started playing with it. When I looked at it I saw that it was a mixture of blond and black, the river water hadn't completely washed the black away. The back of my dress was probably streaked with black as well.

"Sir." I addressed the commander. "I am Princess Cleopatra and I need your help." The commander looked at me and narrowed his eyes.

"Do you really expect me to believe that you are the Princess?" He asked. "No, the Princess has been taken prisoner by the new ruler of Tokito."

"You are wrong." I said. "My family has been taken prisoner but I have managed to escape. I know where they are and I need the Dardoland army to free them. The Tokitian Royal Family is with them and they need to be freed restored to the crown.

The commander started laughing and I got extremely annoyed.

"Wipe that grin off your face and do as I say or you will regret it." I hissed. He stopped laughing and looked at me with an amused expression on his face. He was around thirty years old and I didn't understand how such a young man could have such a short-term memory that he had forgotten what I looked like already.

"Look at me." I snapped. "Observe me closely and you will see that I truly am Princess Cleopatra." The man walked over to me and turned my face towards the light. He looked at the left side of my face, then the right and I knew exactly when he recognized me.

"Your highness!" He stuttered.

"Finally." I rolled my eyes. "My parents are on Yirdo and are being guarded by several men who are under the new ruler's command. They need to be freed as soon as possible."

The boat came closer and closer and I grew more excited every

minute. When they had neared the shore I couldn't control myself anymore and ran down the steep slope towards the river.

"Father! Mother!" I exclaimed, before they were even close enough to hear me. I felt like jumping in the water and swimming towards them but the memory of the freezing cold water withheld me from doing that. Why were the men pedaling so slowly? Finally, after what seemed like forever, the boat neared the shore. My mother jumped off the boat into the mud and she didn't care that the whole bottom of her dress and her shoes were now completely dirty. She ran towards me, hugged me and refused to let me go for the next few minutes.

"Oh darling, I'm so happy you're not hurt. I was so scared! I didn't want to leave you in that palace but I couldn't warn you in time. I'm so sorry!"

"It's fine, mother." I assured her. "It's not your fault and I learned quite in the past few months." My father then walked up to me and hugged me as well.

"I am so proud of you." He said. "I knew you would get us off that island." Nathan's mother hugged me and his father shook my hand. And then I stood face to face with Nathan. I had to remind myself to breathe and the mere sight of him caused my heart to beat faster. He held out his hand towards me and waited for me to shake it. I didn't.

"A handshake?" I asked him. "I save you from an island and this is what I get?" Nathan smiled and hugged me too.

"Better." I said, as I hugged him back. When he pulled away and our eyes met I realized that I had never wanted to kiss somebody as bad as I wanted to kiss Nathan now. But this was impossible, my parents and his parents were both standing only a few meters away and it would be much too humiliating if I kissed him. Besides, it was possible that he wasn't interested in me at all and then kissing him would be a huge mistake.

"Cleo, tell us what happened while we were stuck on that dreadful island." My mother said.

"Let's go to the carriage first and I'll tell you all about it on the way to the palace." Everybody thought this was a very good idea and so we walked over to the large carriage and climbed in.

On the way to the palace I told my parents, Nathan's parents and Nathan everything that had happened while they were away. I told

them that I had been a maid in the palace, that I ran away and managed to get out of the palace.

"Wait," Nathan suddenly said, "what did you say the man's name was? James?"

"Yes." I answered and wondered how this was important.

"Oh no," Nathan groaned.

"What's wrong?" His father asked him.

"James was the person who's father you sentenced to a lifetime in jail. James came over to me and told me to get his father out of jail but I refused. He then threatened that one day he would take over the palace. And he did." We were all staring at Nathan in disbelief.

"Well, there's one positive thing you can say about this man, he is certainly determined." Nathan's mother commented and I laughed at her down-to-earthness.

"He certainly is." My mother agreed. "But Cleo, how did you get out of the palace? I thought you said James did not allow you to leave."

"He didn't," I said, and wondered if I should tell them how I really got out of the palace. It was going to be quite embarrassing. "I flirted with a guard." I admitted. I saw Nathan's eyes narrow and this caused immediate butterflies in my stomach. Was Nathan jealous, or just protective? The rest of the ride we spent exchanging experiences and it wasn't long before we arrived at the palace. We rode through the large metal gates and I stared out the window like in a trance. Everything was so incredibly beautiful, the bushes that had been cut into various shapes, the flowerbeds and the beautiful palace. I smiled as I saw it and realized that I would soon be able to take a warm bath. But first I had to do something else, I had to bring my new horse, who I had named Liberty, freedom, to the stables, and make sure that he had enough to eat and a warm place to stay. If it wasn't for that beautiful horse, I would never have made it home.

I stepped out of the carriage and told my parents that I would be right back. Liberty was tied to the back of the carriage and I untied him and then pet his nose. He whinnied softly.

"This is your new home, Liberty." I told him. "I hope you'll be happy here."

"I'm sure he will be." I heard a voice behind me. "Especially since

you're his owner." I turned around and smiled at Nathan.

"Thank you." I said to him. "Do you want to come to the stables with me? I'm going to assure that Liberty is treated with the utmost care."

"Liberty," Nathan pondered. "Freedom. I like it."

"If it wasn't for this horse, I wouldn't have made it to the army." I told Nathan as we were walking towards the stables. When we arrived one of the servants took the horse from me and I told him to give Liberty an extra treat and to take good care of her. He promised and I kissed Liberty on his nose before leaving.

The path back to the palace was a quiet one, with neatly lined up trees on both sides. Nathan and I walked in silence until Nathan suddenly stopped me.

"Cleopatra," he said, "I still feel like I haven't thanked you properly for saving me from that island." I turned towards him.

"It's fine." I said, "I'm just happy that everybody is all right. Besides, you saved my life so now I saved yours." Nathan grinned and took a step towards me. He ran a finger over my cheek and I swallowed. He then leaned forwards and gently placed his lips on mine. I kept my eyes open for a few seconds, to make sure that this was really happening and then I closed them and surrendered to his kiss. I slipped my arms around his neck and he had one hand on my cheek and the other around my waist and pulled me closer and closer. I was slowly running out of breath but at that moment I would rather suffocate than make him stop kissing me. When we pulled away we were both gasping for air.

"That was a better thank you." Nathan said, when he had gotten his breath back. I couldn't answer, too stunned and happy to be able to speak.

"I've fallen in love with you, Cleo," Nathan said gently. "And I was wondering if you feel something for me as well?"

I smiled and looked up into his dark brown eyes.

"You were all I could think about when I was sleeping on the forest floor or making beds or doing whatever other chore I did as a maid. I got annoyed at myself more than once because I just couldn't keep my mind off you." I bit my bottom lip and then said: "I think I've fallen in love with you too." Before I knew it his lips had captured mine

again and I knew that my skin would never stop responding to his touch.

With his arm around me we walked towards the palace. I lay my head on his shoulder and he kissed the top of my head and then smelt my hair. I looked up at him.

"I'm sorry," I said, a little embarrassed, "but my hair probably does not smell very good at the moment.

"On the contrary," he said, smiling, "I was wondering how it could still smell so good after all you've been through." I smiled as well, and put my arm around his waist.

"Will you have dinner with me tomorrow evening?" Nathan suddenly asked me.

"I would love to."

## 2 Months Later

My parents were having a ball that evening and I spent more time standing in front of the mirror than usual because I knew that Nathan was coming too. When I was finally satisfied with my appearance, I descended the stairs and slipped into the already crowded room. I had asked my parents not to give me a formal entrance because I didn't feel like getting all that attention tonight.

I walked into the room and within a few seconds I felt his arm around my waist. He observed me sideways.

"Now that you're wearing lip gloss I can still kiss you right?" He asked, grinning.

"Of course, I would never take lip gloss over a kiss from you." I smiled. He laughed and kissed me. I loved the fact that we couldn't care less what others thought about us.

"You know, we really shouldn't do this, what if we declare war on each other when we break up?" I asked out of the blue.

"Well, let's just not break up." He suggested. I actually thought that was a perfect idea. And achievable. For the time being.

"You know what I really feel like doing right now? I feel like going out riding. We haven't ridden together since that first day." Nathan looked at me anxiously. I looked down at my dress and then decided



I could ride sidesaddle for today.

"Sure," I said, "but don't be surprised if I fall off riding sidesaddle. And I certainly won't win in a race." He laughed. I loved his laugh, I could listen to it all day. Every time I looked at him I could not believe that I had disliked him at first, that I hadn't trusted him. He was absolutely perfect, physically and mentally. I should really stop misjudging people before I've even met them, I thought to myself.

"What are you thinking?" Nathan asked, as we slipped out of the ballroom and walked towards the stables.

"I'm was just wondering how it was possible that I didn't like you at first and I reminded myself that I shouldn't misjudge people." I said, a little embarrassed.

"Well, turns out I taught you a very important lesson in life." He teased me.

I punched him playfully. "That's not the only thing you taught me," I mused.

"What else have I taught you?" He asked, curious.

"Hmm.. You taught me that Prince Durwald isn't the arrogant player that he is rumored to be and you taught me what having a boyfriend is like." I answered.

"I still can't believe that you've never had a boyfriend." He said unbelievably.

"What about you! There are thousands of girls who would be your girlfriend instantly. The last thing I expected from you was to have never had a girlfriend." He turned me towards him and looked me deeply in the eyes. We were standing in the middle of the courtyard, in a little house built right in the middle. It smelled like roses all around and added to the romantic atmosphere. "I was waiting for the right one." He said softly. His hand ran over my cheek. "I love you." He plucked one of the roses and handed it to me. It was red and had little water drops from the rain which had fallen a few moments ago. It was perfect. I couldn't believe he had just said that to me and I was so overwhelmed that I couldn't say anything. He looked at me expectantly, waiting for me to reply.

"I love you too." I finally managed to whisper. We leaned towards each other and shared a long, passionate kiss. But I felt like something was wrong, something was bothering him. I pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

“I don’t know. You seem nervous.” I said.

“I just told a girl I loved her, guys get nervous when they have to do stuff like that.” He laughed it off. But I could see there was something wrong.

“Nathan..” He sensed that I would not let it go and he noticed that I knew him too well to see there was nothing wrong.

“Wait until we get to the tower.” He said as he took me by the hand and we continued walking towards the stables. I was extremely curious but knew he would not tell me anymore and therefore decided to wait patiently.

The horses were saddled quickly and I got on, sidesaddle. I had needed to learn this for official ceremonies but I rarely did it when I went out riding for fun and I did not enjoy it. But it was a bit difficult to ride normally in the dress I was wearing. We went slowly at first but then gradually went faster.

“You want to race?” He asked, with a twinkle in his eye. It reminded me so much of the first day I had met him and I laughed when I realized how much had changed since then.

“It’s your fault if I fall off!” I shouted at him but our horses were already galloping at full speed. Breathless we arrived at the tower.

“You’re still a pro, even in sidesaddle!” He laughed as he got off and then walked over to my horse to help me down. His hands were around my waist and when I was on the floor he did not let go. Instead, he leaned forwards and kissed me once again. I put my arms around his neck, he put his around my waist and then lifted me up. I giggled as he spun me around.

With his arm around me we stood on top of the tower, gazing at the beauty before us. There were mountains and behind the mountains was the sea. Above us were thousands of twinkling stars and it was nearly full moon. There was no light but we didn’t need it. I leaned my head against Nathan’s shoulder. Suddenly I remembered that he was going to tell me something on the tower and I lifted my head to look at him. He sensed what I was going to ask him and let me go. He got something out of his pocket and then bent down on one knee. I was stunned as I realized what he was about to do.

“Cleopatra, I love you and I will always love you. Will you marry me?” He asked as he held out a ring towards me. I couldn’t speak for the second time today. Had Nathan gone crazy? He was proposing to me but I was only 16! He got up, slid the ring back in his pocket and took my hands.

“You probably think I’ve gone mad but I can explain. It’s a long and complicated story but in the end I had to choose between an instant marriage and losing Tokito. And since there’s no other girl I’d rather spend the rest of my life with, I chose to ask you to marry me.” I gasped and stared at him for a few seconds before I forced the words out of my mouth.

“Could I have some time to think about it?”

“Of course, take all the time you need as long as it is no longer than 5 days. I need to know before that.” He answered.

“Who knows about this?” I asked.

“Your parents know about it but said that it was up to you to decide. After all, it is you who will have to put up with me for the rest of your life.” He grinned, trying to make the atmosphere less tense. I just stared at him. He wrapped his arms around me and suddenly laughed.

“You’re speechless, that doesn’t happen very often.”

“What do you expect? I thought I would have a few more years to decide whom to marry.” I said sardonically and still a little shocked.

“Cleo, something else is bothering you. Tell me.” He said gently.

“Nathan, I love you more than anything in the world right now. But I’m only 15, what if I don’t love you anymore in a few years, what if I fall in love with someone else?” I whispered.

“I’ll take that risk.” He kissed me long and if it was only my heart here tonight I would have agreed to marry him instantly. I took a deep breath.

“I’m going to Yirido for a few days, to think things over.” I announced.

“When I come back, I will let you know my decision.”

“Not only beautiful, but wise.” Nathan said.

“Are you sure you want to go all alone?” My mother was looking at me disapprovingly as I told the maids what to pack.

“Yes mother, I’m sure. I need time to think. This decision will affect

the rest of my life.” I answered as I gave a shawl to the maids to pack.

“But it could be dangerous, what if you get sick again?”

“I’ve learnt a lot from the last time I was stuck on an island. Besides, I’ll only be gone for a few days, it’s not enough time to get sick.

“But-“ My mother couldn’t think of any more arguments.

I laughed, walked over to her and put my arm around her. “I will be fine mother, I promise. And if something goes wrong, I’ll row to shore. It’s not very far. I just need to do this.” My mother nodded, even though I could see she was still not too happy with my decision.

*Can’t we just fight Jeremy?*

I wondered. *Just because he is Nathan’s cousin doesn’t mean he has a right to be King. But he does*

*, I reminded myself. It’s the law. If the Crown Prince has been out of his country for longer than 3 months, he will have to marry before his eighteenth birthday or otherwise lose the crown. And since Nathan’s birthday is in two months, he needs to get married now. It’s the most stupid law I have ever heard of! But it hasn’t been changed and therefore Nathan will have to agree with it.*

*But can I marry him? I’m fifteen! What if it turns out I don’t love him anymore in a few years? Why would I not love him anymore? What’s not to love about him? He’s practically perfect. Maybe he’s too perfect. A guy can’t be too perfect! And why am I thinking of reasons not to like Nathan? And would I really want him to lose the crown? Cleo, this isn’t about him, this is about you! Don’t marry him just because you don’t want him to lose the crown! Marry him because you actually want to. But do I actually want to?*

I pondered over that question for the next 5 minutes but all that time I had known the answer; I did actually want to marry him. It was probably a good idea to ask God if he agreed with my idea because He was the one who knew the future and He was probably the best person to decide whether I should marry Nathan or not. I spent the next few minutes in prayer and a positive feeling came over me, something that I knew I could trust. I thanked God for this opportunity to be able to marry the man I loved and then thought to myself: *Well,*

*now that I know that answer, what shall I do on this island for the next three days?*

Nathan came to pick me up alone. I could hardly wait to let him know my decision but didn't want to seem too excited. I met him with a solemn expression on my face. The moment he saw me he could guess my decision and I saw a whole range of emotions go through him, from misery, to annoyance, to questioning. But even though he thought he knew what I was going to say, he asked me anyways.

"Have you made your decision Cleo, will you marry me?" He looked at me and I almost felt sorry for him, because of what I was doing. I waited a few moments and then a sly grin spread over my face.

"Yes!" I squealed. I would always remember the expression on his face at that moment, it was a mixture between surprise, happiness and love. I ran into his arms and he lifted me up. We both laughed and I kissed him.

"On one condition though." I suddenly said. He put me down.

"Anything."

"Our honeymoon is spent here, on Yirdo." I wondered what he thought of the idea.

"All right." He said, with a mysterious twinkle in his eye.

"Nathan." I said, in a threatening tone of voice. "Tell me!"

"Nope." To change the subject he got the ring out of his pocket. This was the first time I saw it by daylight and I gasped at its beauty. He laughed softly and slipped it on my finger. I could not stop staring at it.

"It's beautiful." I whispered.

"You've seen it before." He reminded me.

"Yes, but not in the light." I looked up at him and wrapped my arms around him.

"You know, I have a feeling I'm not going to regret this decision."

"All because of the ring? I never thought you were that easy to buy." He teased. I laughed.

"When's the wedding?" I asked, all of a sudden.

"As soon as possible." He whispered as his lips ran over my cheek.

"Well, let's go tell the world." I pulled him with me towards the boat.

"Cleo, do we have to go this soon?" He definitely did not want to go.

"Do you know how much there is to do before a wedding?" I asked, pretending to be serious. "Especially a royal wedding." I winked at him.

"Ok, fine." He gave in and we walked, well, I was so hyper I couldn't walk normally, so I skipped, towards the boat. I sat opposite him and could not believe how happy I was.

"You know, for a moment there, I really thought you were going to say no." Nathan said, referring to when he first arrived on the island.

"I know," I smiled naughtily, "that was my intention."

"You!" Nathan dove towards me and the boat rocked dangerously. He pinned me down on the bottom of the boat. I silently dared him to kiss me. Slowly, as if wanting to show me that he dared and wasn't scared of me, he leaned forwards. Just before his lips touched mine I moved quickly and got out of his grasp. I slowly walked towards the front of the boat and then stood at the very front, with my arms spread out for balance.

"You'll fall." He said, without even a hint of concern.

"My balance is not *that*

bad." I looked back at him and lifted one eyebrow.

"Oh no?" A mischievous grin played on his lips as he started rocking the boat.

"Nathan!" I squealed. Just before I lost my balance he took a dash towards me and with his arms wrapped around me we fell in the water together. Laughing and gasping for air, I came up. It wasn't deep and we could both stand.

"You are absolutely horrible!" I laughed.

"Thank you." He said, as he took my hand and kissed it. I looked at him for a few seconds, realizing how happy I was that I could spend the rest of my life with him.

We were lying next to each other on the bottom of the boat. He had taken off his shirt which was drying on the front of the boat and he had his arms around me. The boat was deep enough so that no outsider could look in and it had exactly enough room for two people, if they were squished really close together, which Nathan and I had no problem with. I observed his body, registering all the abs and

biceps I could find and I could not believe how a person could be this perfect. Suddenly I caught sight of something and ran my finger over the scar on his strong, muscular arm.

"Thanks again." I said softly. He put one finger under my chin and forced me to look up at him.

"Anytime." He smiled. Then he kissed me tenderly. I could feel his lips caress mine softly and I felt completely happy in his arms.

I could not believe how much choice there was in wedding dresses! And it was especially annoying to choose one knowing that the whole country would see it. It had to be suitable, pretty, not too open, not too this and not too that. Well, at least I could exclude at least half of the dresses in the humongous room. My mother suddenly came running in.

"Cleopatra, we have a problem." She looked alarmed. I followed her out of the room and we stepped into the limousine.

"What, mother? What's wrong?"

"Durwald will explain it to you." My mother said.

"Oh no." I moaned, as I put my head back and looked at the ceiling, hoping it was not yet again some annoying problem we had to fix. I ran out of the limousine when we had arrived at the palace and a page showed me towards the room where Nathan was. His parents and my father were there too so I knew it was serious.

"Cleo, we have a problem." Nathan announced as he took my hands. Except for the shortcut of my name, my mother had used the exact same words. I nearly laughed at the similarity but knew it was too serious for that. "Tokitian law states that the girl I have to marry, if I have been away from Tokito for more than three months, has to be Tokitian. So technically, I am not allowed to marry you." He let it sink in for a moment.

"Ugh! What is it with your stupid laws?" I burst out. "Can't they spend their time better than thinking of what if stories that just happen to come true in our lives?"

"What?" Nathan looked puzzled. I wasn't really bothered to explain.

"Never mind. What are we going to do about the situation?"

"We are looking for a loophole in the law and fighting in high court." Nathan's father said. "But I am afraid the law will be very difficult to

change.” I felt like crying, I knew I could not live without Nathan, especially since I had adapted to the idea that I would never be without him. *Be strong.*

I told myself. *For his sake.*

A plan started forming in my mind and I knew I would have to act fast. I took a deep breath.

“Well then. I guess that’s it. Goodbye Nathan.” I turned around and walked out of the room. Just as I was out, Nathan caught up to me.

“What do you mean?” He asked distressed, “I’m not just going to let this happen. I can’t live without you.” It hurt me to have to do this to him but I forced myself to.

“I’m sorry, but I cannot live with anymore of your laws. There is too much uncertainty in marrying you. I need to find someone who can give me some stability in my life.”

“But Cleo-“ He sputtered.

“I’m sorry Nathan.” I turned around and walked off. I knew hurting him like this would be one of the hardest things I had ever done in my life but at the same time I knew I had to.

“I thought you loved me!” He called after me. I pretended to ignore him but it stabbed me harder than any physical pain could have ever achieved. When I was out of his sight I started running. I needed to speak to Lila. She was trustworthy and would possibly understand my plan. I dashed up to my room, put some random clothes in my suitcase and scribbled a quick letter.

*Don’t come looking for me. I need to do this. I will be back soon. Lila is with me. Don’t worry.*

I ran out the back entrance, out the door and stopped the first taxi I could see. I gave them the address to Lila’s home. In the taxi I could finally breathe again. It would be hard on both Nathan and me but it was the only way. The only way to happiness.

We checked in *The Golden Goose Hotel*



a few hours later. I had explained the whole story to Lila and finally convinced her to help me. "That was so unbelievably mean!" She had said. "I know, but he should have no hope left." I had responded. But that comment was nagging on me. Still, his feelings were not important right now. Or actually, they were very important, but in a different way. The whole goal of what I was doing was to get Nathan depressed, sad and angry, to show his country that he could not live without me. I knew it sounded selfish and I was not happy about what I was doing but I knew I had to. I knew I could not live without him and I hoped he felt the same way too.

We checked in under Lila's name and we had a big bag of books with us, which I had managed to get before we left to the hotel. They were Tokitian law books and I hoped to find a loophole in the law. At the same time I would write a speech to convince the people of Tokito to let me marry Nathan. I had never been too good at writing, or reading speeches but I desperately needed this one to be successful.

I sat on the bed and blew the dust off the cover of the first book. It was big, heavy, and it had a dark brown cover. It looked freakishly boring but I would look through books like these for the rest of my life if I could be together with Nathan. I started reading the first page and when my thoughts flew off to some other place, I forced myself to concentrate on the words again.

"I need a dictionary." I complained to Lila, "I don't understand half of these words and the other half I can't read because they are either too vague or smudged."

"Do it for Nathan." Lila answered. That was all she needed to say because I plunged back into the book and started reading vigorously. Page after page of boring laws, half of them didn't make sense to me. I was again surprised at the stupidity of some of them but then again, I had not read the Dardoland law books either. Who knew what was in those books, maybe even more rubbish than in these.

I needed some time alone so decided to go for a walk. It was already quite dark but I didn't care about my safety at the moment. It was cold and misty on the road and I regretted not having brought a

shawl. I wrapped my arms tighter around myself and thought that if I walked a bit faster, it would keep me warm. Since I had met Nathan, this was the longest that I had not contacted him and I missed him terribly. At the same time I was worried about my speech. It wasn't going well and I knew it wasn't persuasive enough. Without realizing it I had been climbing up a hill and when I looked up I saw a tiny building. It looked like a church but I wasn't sure. Curiosity won over fear as I climbed the rest of the hill upwards. It was a church. It was small and looked cozy. Some of the big windows were stained glass while the others were just normal. I walked up to it slowly and when I came close I saw that the door was open. I walked in slowly and saw that it was empty. I sat down on one of the pews and couldn't help but cry. I hadn't cried since I had left him but now my emotions were taking over. Together with my sobs I prayed. I prayed for all the things that could go wrong in the rest of my life but most of all I asked God if I could please marry Nathan. At the same time, I suddenly got an idea. I ran out of the church, down the hill and in the hotel. I rushed up the stairs, not bothered to wait for the man-powered elevator. I took the steps two at a time and burst into the room. Lila looked up surprised.

"Lila, I have a perfect idea!"

I stood in a little room, waiting for the parliament to be seated. I nervously straightened out my skirt and blouse while doubting if writing a poem had been a good decision. What if they did not like modern things? What if some of the things I had said were too open? What if- I couldn't finish that thought because Lila came bursting into the room.

"They're ready." She said excitedly. I smiled nervously, checked if my speech cards were in order and walked out of the room.

When the meeting room door was opened for me, the room quieted down immediately. There were around 100 people in the room and they were seated neatly at rows of tables. The room looked exactly the way a parliament had to, big and boring. All the men were dressed in formal suits and the women wore something similar to what I was wearing. I looked around for Nathan but before I could find him, I reminded myself that I better not. It would break my

concentration. I walked up to the microphone and took a deep breath to steady my heart and my shaking hands before I began.

First of all, I would like to say,  
That this is a very difficult day,  
I have dreaded it and been afraid,  
Been discouraged and dismayed.  
Speeches have always given me a scare.  
But this is because I care,

I could not resist the temptation to find him in the crowd and our eyes met. He was the only one I looked at for the rest of my speech.

And because I just don't dare,  
To live without being able to run my fingers through his hair.  
Yes, this poem is written indeed,  
For him and for me, we don't wish to bleed.  
I will tell you all now, I love him.  
And the whole world seems dim,  
When he is not here, with me.  
So please, I am begging you, please let our marriage be.  
Because the way he is now, depressed and sad,  
Upset, annoyed and maybe even a little mad,  
Is the way I will be without him too.  
And it's up to you to decide what to do.  
I am begging you to change, or even break the law.  
Because if you don't, it might be a great flaw.  
I will be forever grateful and content,  
If for this once, the law is bent.  
I thank you all for your patience and time,  
And for listening to this rhyme.

When I finished the whole room was silent. I nearly panicked but then the room burst out in muffled clapping and everyone was talking at once. I took a deep breath as I stepped off the stage. I hoped it had touched their hearts and they would listen. Maybe some of the people would have found it too modern. But I knew there was

nothing to do about it now. I knew I needed to hurry if I did not want the whole room to see me cry. Just before I left the room I heard a beautifully familiar voice.

"Cleopatra, wait!" I looked up at him and didn't care that the tears were already streaming down my cheeks and that everybody could see this. He took me by the hand and then walked up to the microphone.

"I have decided," he said, pronouncing each word slowly, "that I cannot live without her. And if I have to lose the throne to keep her, I will."

I stared at him shocked. "No, Nathan, you cannot do that! It's your country, your people, you can't give them up for me."

"Cleo, you mean too much to me, I can't just let you go."

"I won't let you." I felt a sob come up and I had to fight to keep it down. "I won't!" I repeated, as I tore my hands from his grasp and ran off the stage. In the room where I had been before the speech, I cried my heart out. I knew the parliament would never break the law for me, I was sure of it now because even Nathan thought they wouldn't. They disliked me and there was nothing I could do about it. There was a short knock on the door. I turned around but Nathan did not wait for an answer, he just barged in.

"Hey," he said softly, as he sat next to me and wrapped his arms around me.

"I won't let you do it." I said again. "I love you too much to let you give all this up."

"I'm not going to give anything up. Not you, and not the crown." I stared at him, dumbfounded. How was that possible?

"The court agreed, as long as we get married within the next two weeks." He laughed at my face and hugged me so tightly that I could barely breathe.

"But, I thought.." I started.

"Apparently they thought differently." He wiped a stray tear off my cheek and then kissed me. I forgot everything at that moment and barely heard the knock on the door. Suddenly I heard someone clear his voice. Nathan let me go to see who it was and it turned out to be the head of parliament. I was a little embarrassed but Nathan seemed to act like there was nothing wrong so I didn't mind that

much either.

"If you would be so nice as to come back to the meeting room for a few minutes, we have something we would like to say to you two."

"Sure." Nathan answered and hand in hand we walked back to the meeting room. I suddenly realized that I must look horrible, my mascara was probably running and maybe my other make up was too.

"Wait, one moment." I tugged on his arm. "I just need to use the bathroom for one moment." He understood what I meant and laughed.

"You look fine, I promise." He gave my hand a squeeze and a few moments later we walked into the meeting room. I hated seeing all these people again but if they really were the ones who had allowed me to marry Nathan then I should be really grateful.

"Nathan and Cleopatra, we hereby allow you to marry each other as long as the ceremony takes place within the next two weeks. Furthermore, we wish you both a lot of luck and extend our deepest apologies for any calamities we have caused."

At that moment, I did not care if there was a room full of people watching, I couldn't help myself. I walked up to the head of parliament and hugged him. He was extremely surprised but after a few moments he hugged me back. The whole court started clapping and they all stood up. I caught Lila's eye and she smiled at me knowingly. Then I looked at my parents and saw that my mother was wiping the tears from her cheeks.

The day of my wedding was a beautiful day. I woke up to birds chirping outside my window and when I was awake I immediately jumped out of bed. I walked over to the window, pulled back the curtains and then threw open the window. A cool breeze entered my room and played with my nightdress and my hair. I laughed, just because I could, and then danced around the room. The rest of the day passed much too quickly for my liking but I enjoyed every minute of it. Nathan looked more handsome than he had ever done before and I'm quite sure that the priest got a little annoyed at us at one point because we could not take our eyes off each other. When he asked me if I was going to cherish and obey Nathan I nearly forgot to

say yes because Nathan winked at me just before I was going to answer. The party lasted till late in the evening and Nathan and I were happy when the last guests finally left. I felt exhaustion take over but suddenly Nathan was by my side and placed a hard kiss on my lips.

"Don't you dare fall asleep." He said. I smiled at him. "I won't." He pulled me close and kissed my neck before whispering in my ear: "Let's go." I nodded and hand in hand we went to find our parents. They were sitting at a table with a glass of wine and looked up when we came walking in.

"I think we better leave now before we fall asleep." Nathan announced. Our parents started laughing and then they stood up and went over to say goodbye to us.

"Have fun, and take care!" My mom told us both and then gave us each a kiss on the cheek. Then Nathan and I made our way towards the stable where Starfright and Liberty were saddled. I rode on Starfright and Nathan mounted Liberty. And then we galloped off into the darkness.

We arrived at the tiny dock where Nathan's boat was tied and he helped me get down from the horse. He kissed me quickly before taking my hand and leading me towards the small rowboat. It wasn't long before we reached the island and Nathan stepped out of the boat and pulled it on the shore. I stood up and was just about to jump down when he caught me and kissed me before he placed me softly on the floor. He wanted to take my hand and walk further onto the shore but I put my hands on his face and pulled him down so I could kiss him again. He gave in to my kiss immediately and I enjoyed the fact that I could feel the hunger in his kiss. But then he pulled away and took my hand.

"Come on," he said, "I need to show you something." We walked over the shore, hand in hand, and then I saw light coming from around the corner. I wondered what it was and glanced up at Nathan who was looking down at me expectantly. Walking was too slow for my liking and so I pulled Nathan and we both laughed as we ran over the beach. I stopped dead in my tracks the moment we rounded the corner and I saw the sight before me. There were dozens of oil

lamps placed in a huge heart around a king-size double bed. On the bed were rose petals, again arranged in the form of a heart. It looked amazing. I looked up at Nathan and saw that instead of looking at the beautiful sight before him, he was looking at me.

"I love you, Nathan." I whispered. He smiled.

"I love you too." Then, unexpectedly, he lifted me up and carried me towards the bed. I noted how nice he smelled and how handsome he looked in the light of the oil lamps. He set me down in front of the bed and then, with his arms around my body, unzipped my dress. When it was completely unzipped he gently pulled at the sleeves and the dress slid off me and fell on the floor. He then pulled out the pins that were holding my hair up and my blond curls cascaded down like a waterfall. I lifted his shirt over his head and then he leaned forewords and kissed me. He gently pushed me on to the bed and I gasped when his hand slid under my bra to forbidden territory.

I woke up in Nathan's arms and felt like crying, crying because I was so incredibly happy. Last night could not have been better and I smiled when memories of my wedding day flooded my mind. I looked up at Nathan and saw that he was awake.

"Good morning," he smiled, while he took a strand of my hair and started playing with it.

"It is indeed." I said. Nathan chuckled and then kissed me. I stretched in the large bed and then lay watching the huge river. I soon got bored of this though, especially since I had discovered a new form of entertainment last night. I turned around in Nathan's arms and half lay on top of him.

"Last night was incredible." I sighed.

"Is that a hint?" Nathan questioned me. I smiled mischievously and then answered:

"Maybe." In one quick motion Nathan moved us so that I was lying on the bottom and he was on top.

"Should I give you an encore of last night?" He asked playfully.

"I would like that very much," I admitted.

"That can be arranged."

We spent the next few days swimming in the river, cooking food over

an open fire and barely getting any sleep. I loved every moment I spent together with Nathan and was unhappy when the day came that we had to go back to the palace. Nathan didn't feel like leaving either but we had promised our parents that we would be back before sunset. We made it to the palace just in time. It would take a while before our new palace, which was situated on the border of Tokito and Dardoland and where Nathan and I were going to live, would be opened and therefore we would be staying at my parents' palace for the next couple of months. We eventually had to pick up our daily routines again and soon I was in meetings with ministers and travelling through the country to open hospitals and schools. So far Nathan had always travelled with me on these trips but today he had to go to Lindendurgh, a country that neighboured both Tokito and Dardoland, for the renewal of a cease-fire agreement. I had to stay at home because I had to receive some royal guests. The days crawled and even though the guests were nice and very pleasant, I could not fully enjoy their company. And the nights were the most dreadful, I missed Nathan every waking moment and even in my sleep did I dream of his touch. I was beginning to get a little worried about myself; I had no idea that I could become this obsessed about a guy. I discussed it with Lila but she waved it off and said that every woman in love behaved the exact same way. I was happy that I had such a good friend.

Nathan was due to return in the late afternoon and I had left him a note at the palace, saying that I would be on Yirido, waiting for him. I had asked one of the servants to row me to the island and armed with food and a blanket, I arrived there.

I was lying on my stomach, reading a book. I couldn't really concentrate on it though because I knew Nathan could arrive any moment. With every sound of the wind rushing through the trees I looked up, checking if it was him. I could not believe how much I had missed him and how lucky I was to have had the chance to marry him. Suddenly I heard soft footsteps approaching.

"Hey." Nathan said as I looked up at him. I smiled up at him, I was so happy he had returned! I never thought I could miss anyone as much



as I had missed Nathan. I put my book away and sat up. He came to sit next to me on the blanket which was spread out on the beach. I put my arms around him and hugged him tightly.

"I've missed you." He said.

"I've missed you too." I let go of him so that I could look him in the eye. "Please don't leave me often. I hate not having you here. You're like the sunshine in my life or something, you light up my day." Nathan laughed. "I thought you were a rain person and enjoyed rain."

"All right, then you're the rain drops in my life that make everything fresh, healthy and new." I said as I cupped his face in my hands and kissed him. He quickly took over the kiss and slowly pushed me down on the blanket. Before he could go any further, I pushed him away.

"Are you hungry?" I asked, smiling slightly mischievously.

"Yes, hungry for you." His gaze ran over my body approvingly and this made me blush.

"I was talking about food." I said quickly. He sighed, and asked, as if it was some daily routine that he had to do and did not enjoy: "What is there to eat?" I rolled over and reached for a plate of pasta that was standing on a chair.

"Pasta?" I offered him.

"Sure." He took it and put it in between us. He pulled out one string of spaghetti and put one end in my mouth and the other in his. I nearly bit his finger in the process but managed to start chewing it. I giggled as I chewed it slowly. Our lips met when we had both finished our half of the string of spaghetti.

"Ok, I'm full." Nathan announced when he pulled away. He carelessly put the plate beside him somewhere. "It's hot here!" He suddenly stated and to emphasize on that statement, and took off his shirt and threw it away from him. I was observing him amused, it was so obvious what he wanted to do but at the same time I found it amusing to resist him. I knew, though, that my resistance was being torn down with every smile he gave me and him taking off his shirt certainly didn't help. He had probably done some exercise when he was away on the trip because he looked even fitter than usual, which was nearly impossible. Or maybe I was just imagining it because I

had not seen him in a while. The six pack, the strength I could feel every time he touched me, the perfect smile he could give. My thoughts wandered off when I suddenly realized I was staring at his body and looked away, embarrassed. He laughed softly.

"Don't even try to resist me Cleo, you know I'll win in the end." He said, as if he could read my mind.

"Hey, I'll be happy both ways." I said. "But I'll be happier if you get your way." I added, and laughed softly. He got what I meant and kissed me devouringly. Then he impatiently took off my shirt and I was completely lost in his love. All I remember is that at some point he pulled a blanket over us because it was getting rather cold.

I woke up because the wind was nearly blowing me away and I felt Nathan release his grasp on me. I turned around and looked at him.

"I'm just getting another blanket." He smiled. I didn't want him to go but knew he would be back soon. When he was lying next to me again and had put the other blanket over us, I felt his arms slip around my waist and I nestled myself against him. His chin rested on my shoulder as we both watched the waves clash softly on the shore.

"How was Lindenburgh?" I suddenly asked him. Neither of us had mentioned his trip since he had returned and I was curious about it.

"You should come next time. It's a beautiful country. The government is quite annoying though, they went against every suggestion I made."

"Really? What will we do?"

"I don't know. I guess we will just have to try to persuade them or otherwise make them suffer the consequences."

"Nathan, I am not declaring war on Lindenburgh." I told him.

"No, I don't want to either. But I will if I have to."

"You will?" I couldn't believe how Nathan would be able to do that.

"You're willing to sacrifice people's lives?" I was completely against war and I knew for sure that I would never start or take part in one. I thought Nathan felt the same way! He didn't answer my question and I knew I was about to get annoyed.

"Nathan, I thought that..."

"Oh no you're not." Nathan suddenly said as he turned us so that he

was hovering over me and I was lying pinned on the ground, unable to move.

"You are not about to get annoyed at me. Please Cleo." I closed my eyes for a few seconds and then smiled.

"No, I won't get annoyed at you. I don't even think I can."

"Good." Nathan said. "Because otherwise doing this would not have been as much fun." He leaned forwards and briefly brushed his lips against mine. Then he looked at me and smiled teasingly.

"Nathan! You are so mean! Is that the best you can do?" I tried challenging him, as a way to make him kiss me longer.

He started laughing. "I knew you would react to that! And no, that is not the best I can do." He winked at me before he kissed me and drained my whole body of energy because my heart was beating so fast. I could feel the blood rush through my veins and was again surprised at the power he had over me.

Nathan put his arms around me again and I snuggled against his muscular chest. Momentarily I felt like my life had never been better and I had completely forgotten about the mini fight we just had when Nathan suddenly pondered:

"I have decided that I will never declare war. I will never do anything that will put you at risk." I turned around in his arms and looked at him.

"Nathan, you have to do what you have to do. I'll take care of myself."

"Cleo, you don't always have to pretend to be so independent. I cannot live without you so let's just call it selfishness that I want to defend you."

I bit my lip and looked up at him.

"Nathan, you are so romantic! But I know you just said that so I'd be quiet and not comment on that independent comment."

He smiled. "I admit that the selfishness part was indeed to make you stay quiet but I meant the part about me not being able to live without you."

I laughed and punched him softly. Then I became serious again. "I love you."

"Good morning!" He smiled as I stretched out on the blanket and

looked at the clear blue sky. There was nothing left from yesterday's storm.

"Good morning." I lazily snuggled against him when I suddenly remembered that I had a meeting today.

"What time is it?" I asked him.

"Around twelve thirty." He replied.

"Yeah right. Come on, tell me, what's the time."

"It really is around twelve thirty." I gasped and sat up quicker than I had ever sat up before and started looking for my clothes.

"Why, are you in a hurry?"

"Yes, I have a meeting with the minister of education! It starts in half an hour!"

Nathan laughed softly and pulled me down.

"Relax. I cancelled that meeting before I came." He kissed my neck and buried his head in my hair.

"Wow, how can you be so organized? I really don't get it."

"If being organized means I get to spend more time with you then I am organized." He shrugged. I laughed and kissed him.

2 Weeks Later

"Cleo! Tell me. I'm your husband, I have a right to know!" I knew it would make him angry but at the same time I knew that I would never tell him what I was about to do because he would definitely stop me.

"I'm becoming suspicious you know. If there is someone else, just tell me. Please." I looked at him shocked. "You don't trust me?" I asked unbelievably.

"Of course I trust you, that's not what I meant. But if you keep secrets from me then don't you find it natural for me to expect the worst?" He asked. I was getting really worked up but at the same time I knew that starting a fight was not the right way to approach this.

"Nathan, remember when you asked me to marry you and I said that I was scared I would not love you in a few years?"

He nodded and wanted to ask something but I was quicker.

"I have never regretted the decision and I am still head over heels in

love with you. But you have to trust me.”

“All right.” He said as he walked over to me and hugged me. Then, with his arms still around my waist, he looked me in the eye. “Just, whatever you do, please don’t regret it.” I kissed him quickly on the cheek.

“I won’t. I love you.” I walked quickly towards the carriage and got in. I sincerely hoped that Nathan would trust me enough not to send spies to follow me.

I walked through the long, dark, disgusting corridors of the prison. The guard led me towards one of the cells. Expectantly I looked inside it. There, I saw him, barely recognizable, sitting on the floor with his head in his hands. He looked up when we approached and I could see that he recognized me. The guard retreated to give me some space to talk.

“Patty?” James asked. “What are you doing here? Attractive as ever and... alone. For the time being.”

I felt my anger flaring but I had promised myself to stay calm.

“James, even though you have proven the opposite, I think that deep down inside you somewhere there is a good man. Someone who needs to be loved and cared for just like everyone else.” I said.

He scoffed. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“No, indeed I don’t.” I said. “But I want to help you.”

“What, so you can pretend to be a psychiatrist and counsel me out of here? So you can go back to your family and say ‘I told you I could get the good side out of him’ and then be praised for your good work? Just leave me alone.” I stared at him, dumbfounded. I admit, I was going to try to counsel him, but it was not for the reasons he thought. I imagined Nathan’s reaction when he would find out that I had come to see James and decided that I could use this to get James to trust me.

“My husband made me promise never to go anywhere close to you. He would get furious if he found out I had come to see you. Do you really think I’d risk that just to get a pat on the back?” I asked him softly.

“You got married? Poor man, wonder how he lives with you.” James scoffed.

"You know, it isn't so hard to live with me if I get treated right." I was getting annoyed.

"You're nothing but a lazy liar who uses people to get attention. I want nothing to do with you." James poked me roughly through the bars of the prison gate.

"I came here to help you! But you know what, I give up. I think you've just proved the statement wrong that there's a good part to everybody. Because you would need to dig for days and days to find even a single cell of good in you." I was wondering if I made sense but I was furious and did not care. I stomped off angrily and the guard looked after me, confused.

"Cleo, will you please tell me where you've been?" Nathan practically begged.

"I never knew you were so curious." I smiled without humor. He just looked at me, waiting for an answer.

"Fine." I sighed. "Just.. Please don't get too angry." He was not showing any emotion on his face and I could see that it took him some effort to keep his mask in place.

I took a deep breath and then blurted it out. "I went to visit James."

"You did what?" He asked me and his mask had disappeared. Shock was written all over his face.

"I went to visit--"

"I heard you the first time! I told you never to go near him again. You promised Cleo! Did he do anything to you, are you all right?" I bit my lip nervously.

"He was in a cell, Nate. He couldn't do anything."

"What did he say to you?" Nathan demanded.

"I told him that I believed there was a good part inside of him. And he said that I was being selfish and that I used other people to make myself look good." I said, slightly irritated.

Nathan just stared at me for a few seconds and then took a step towards me.

"I forbid you to ever see him again Cleo."

"You *forbid*

me?" I raised one eyebrow. "You have no right to do that!" I was furious and walked out the door. Who did he think he was? When I

opened the door I nearly bumped into my lady-in- waiting.

“Ma’am, you have a meeting with parliament in half an hour.” She said.

“Could we by any chance postpone that? I really can’t have a meeting with them right now.” I think something in my voice made the lady-in-waiting not question anything.

“Yes Ma’am.” Was all she said. I ran through the corridors of the palace towards the stables. I knew that riding was the only way I would be able to forget everything. Without a word to the stable helps I grabbed the headset of Starfright and put it on her. Then, without bothering to saddle her, I galloped out of the stables. I rode at full speed for a few minutes, concentrating fully on not falling off.

It was already getting dark when I decided to ride back to the palace. When I arrived the lights in the palace had already been lighted and I stood for a moment, enjoying the romantic atmosphere. And then I reminded myself of how annoyed I was at Nathan. I frowned and walked up the wide steps towards the entrance of the palace. A doorman opened the door for me and I went directly upstairs, towards my bedroom, our bedroom. When I opened the door Nathan was standing in the bathroom, with the door open, brushing his teeth. We did not acknowledge each other but our eyes met in the mirror. I walked over to the cupboard and got out my nightgown. I then attempted to take off the dress I was wearing but I had problems with the zipper, because it was at the back of my dress. I struggled with it for a few moments, too proud to ask Nathan for help. Then I heard his footsteps coming towards me and he wordlessly pulled down the zipper of my dress. He then walked towards the bed and lay down in it. I changed quickly, brushed my hair and my teeth and then lay down in bed next to him. Nathan blew out the candle that was on his beside table and I blew out the candle on mine. We then lay there in complete silence until Nathan suddenly moved towards me and harshly placed his lips on mine.

“Nathan, stop! I can’t breathe!” I gasped.

“I thought you were good at holding your breath.” He said and he sounded annoyed.

"It's not that." I was still gasping for air.

"Then what is it?" He demanded.

"It's you. You are making my heart beat so fast that I need more oxygen to be able to function. And if you're kissing me at the same time, well... it doesn't work."

He chuckled softly but I heard an etch of sarcasm to his voice. "Well, I'm happy that at least I haven't lost my touch in that area. Because I can see that I can't make you listen to anything else I say." I closed my eyes for a moment and then looked back up at him.

"Nathan..." I started.

"Don't even bother." He cut me off and turned his head towards the ceiling. I felt horrible and desperately tried searching my brain for something to say. I needed to let him know that I still listened to him, that I still cared about what he thought. I pushed the covers away from me and got out of bed. I couldn't lie there next to him as if we were complete strangers and so I opened the balcony doors and walked out. There was a chair there which I sat on with my knees pulled up and my arms wrapped around them. I looked up at the moon for a while before resting my head on my knees. It was impossible for me to stop the tears spilling over and I wasn't bothered to try keeping them back.

"You know what's really annoying?" I suddenly heard Nathan's voice. Without waiting for an answer he continued. "It's the fact that I am too in love with you to stay mad at you for long." I swallowed to keep from bursting out in sobs. I heard Nathan walk towards me and felt his arms around me.

"Will you stand up so that I can give you a proper hug?" Nathan unexpectedly ordered. I could hear that he was attempting to sound annoyed and couldn't help but smile when I stood up. He wrapped his arms around me and I closed my eyes tightly. One tear escaped and ran down my cheek but I officially dubbed this tear as a happy one.

"I love you Nathan." I whispered. He pulled away a bit to be able to look at me and then opened his mouth to speak. I quickly put one finger to his lips.

"Your opinions and feelings mean a lot to me and I'm sorry if I hurt you. But..." I looked down because I did not want to see his reaction.



"I think I will go back to see him again." I winced. He put one finger under my chin and forced me to look up at him.

"Just allow me to send some body guards with you." Was all he said before he kissed me. Suddenly he scooped me up into his arms. I squealed softly. He carried me into the bedroom and gently lay me down on the bed. He unbuttoned my blouse and then quickly pulled his shirt over his head.

"What are you thinking?" He asked, as he absentmindedly traced his finger along my arm.

"I'm amazed at the idea that we made such a crucial decision at such a young age. And how mature we actually are."

"Mature as in?"

"This for example. I think we have much more experience than other people our age."

He laughed. "Don't be so sure."

"And the fact that I've been married to you for half a year now and still don't regret my choice. I mean, aren't teenagers supposed to change their mind every few days?"

"But then again, we're not normal teenagers. You doing peace talks at the age of fifteen. It's kind of ridiculous actually, come to think of it. I guess we are more mature than our parents." Now it was my turn to laugh.

"I can't say I was so mature when I first met you." I pondered. He tightened his grip on me.

"What did you think when you first met me?" He asked curiously.

"I think.." I paused, trying to remember my exact feelings. "I think I was glad that I had met you because then I was no longer at risk of being seduced by Prince Durwald."

"Was it love at first sight?"

"I'm not sure.. I mean, you were extremely attractive." I glanced up at him quickly. "Still are by the way. But does that make it love?"

"I have no idea." Nathan confessed.

"What about you? What were you thinking?"

"I was wondering if you were going to be my first girlfriend and what my parents would say if I got together with you."

I smiled in the darkness.

“You know, I’m going to enjoy being able to spend the rest of my life with you.” I told Nathan. “I love you so much.” Nathan laughed softly. “I feel the exact same way.”

The End

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