



# 1

TODAY, PRINCE CYRUS RETURNS TO THE CAPITAL with a bride, or else.

From the Seer's Tower, the tallest point in the Sun Capital, I can see a train of purple banners fluttering amid the fields outside the city—the royal caravan making the steep approach to the south gates. Cordoned-off crowds pack the streets, waiting to welcome their prince home. Six months have passed since Cyrus departed to tour the continent, since he set out to “seek from the land and its generous people all the wisdom” that he could not learn in a palace.

Or something like that. I stopped listening to his going-away speech midway through.

Mostly, his tour was to find a bride—a solution to his curse. Cyrus didn't mention that in his speech. I know this because his father, King Emilius, berated him afterward for the omission; then I had to mention it in *my* speech, a few days later, when I announced that I dreamed a new prophecy.

The best part about being Seer isn't the tower or the amenities or the access to the king. It's how easily everyone believes what you say.

“The capital was less lively without His Highness. I do miss those girls running amok, trying to save him,” says the peach-faced woman sitting at my divining table. “I suppose that will change for good. He’s chosen our next queen by now, hasn’t he?”

If Cyrus listened to me, he would have. “He better,” I mutter, turning from the window.

“Pardon?”

“I said, he *met her*.” I flash an enigmatic smile at my lone patron. With the caravan’s return, I didn’t expect anyone to visit my tower today. This woman has the weathering of someone too practical to line up for a peek at a royal face: a brimmed-hat tan and calloused hands, turned upward on the divining table’s marble surface. “If you speak of the prophecy I received before His Highness left, my dreams told me, ‘Prince Cyrus will meet his bride before his journey’s end.’ No more than that, no less.”

She nods. “I didn’t recall the exact words you used—”

“The exact words are important.” I paced this room for four nights to decide on those words, and I won’t have them misremembered now when they finally matter. Picking up my robes, I take a seat across from her and push my heavy braid over my shoulder. The sooner this reading is over, the sooner this small talk can end, and I can leave for the palace and greet the prince myself. “What is it that you want me to see?”

The woman’s brow twitches. My curtness offends her, though she won’t say so. “My only concern is the harvest season, Sighted Mistress Violet. Anything regarding my farm’s future. I pray the Fates be kind.”

I don't like doing these fortune readings, but the king insists I interact with the populace regularly so they trust the girl behind their kingdom's prophecies. It was either this or matchmaking, and seeing buffoons in love makes me want to empty my stomach.

I lay my hands over hers, and the brush of my fingers against her skin sparks something sun-bright in my mind. I shut my eyes and focus on the grooves of her palm, the folds and scars, the blood that pumps underneath—any physical mark of her history that I can use to anchor my magic. In my mind's Sight, I find the threads that bind her soul to the turning of this world:

*A hillside farm, golden with fayflowers.*

*Rides to the Sun Capital, part of her monthly routine.*

*A different farm in the borderlands. Family? A lover's home? The Fairywood looms on the horizon.*

*Long days of fieldwork stretching into nights . . .*

And so they go.

The clearest threads are ones that have already happened—her memories. Future threads, on the other hand, look hazy and can even be contradictory. The Fates are fickle gods, and fortunes are always changing. If I can't see the future directly, I might feel the Fates' intentions instead: foreboding feels like the wet gust before a storm; opportunity, like a dip into warm honey. But much of the time, the Fates don't like showing their hands.

Not unless they mean to, anyway.

My patrons have to deal with what little I see. I'm the only Seer in the Kingdom of Aueny, the only choice they have. This is not a coincidence. There are nine known

Sighted in the world, every one of us in the employ of various courts—we're too useful to be left alone. I hear that one Seer in Yue, in addition to her prophecies, can predict storms from the ripple of a pond, and another in Verdant knows the date of every birth.

I'm the youngest Seer at eighteen, plucked from the Sun Capital's very own streets seven years ago. All I know how to do is dream, read threads, and lie.

"I don't think you need to worry," I murmur as my Sight peers into the fog of the woman's future. I embellish my vague visions with details from her memories. "Your fay-flowers should grow fine this year. But stay diligent. Don't wander so much, maybe, and keep to your farm."

When I open my eyes, the woman withdraws her hands. "Kind Fates—that's very good to learn," she says. "Anything else?"

I ramble until she's finally satisfied. Thanking me, she throws silvers into the dry fountain basin that's become a vessel for offerings and departs my tower.

I peek over the fountain's scalloped rim and sigh. I don't rely on the coin, since the palace provides everything I need, but under the previous Seer, the fountain overflowed with offerings. Under my tenure, it's gotten . . . dusty.

And now that Cyrus has returned, my reputation will only get worse.

The din outside rises and falls with cheers. I barely need to glance at the window to know the royal caravan is inside the city. The court has been scheming over Cyrus's homecoming practically since he left. King Emilius has grown more sickly, and Cyrus is expected to ascend to the throne

before the end of the year. The time to make an attempt for his favor is now.

My teeth grind. That goes for me, too.



Seven years ago, Sighted Mistress Felicita—stars guide her soul—uttered her final prophecy:

*“The land will bloom red with blood and roses and war. The prince—his heart will be damnation or salvation. His choice may save us all. His bride—it is up to her! A curse, a curse, accursed curse—gods, be wary—”*

And that was all before she died. A maidservant who attended her sickbed claims the Seer’s mouth was frozen wide, her fist clenched by her neck, as if she had been fighting against someone in order to speak. Even in death, they couldn’t uncurl her body.

The kingdom plunged into paranoia. Was Felicita heralding the end of Auvény? The end of the world? Why was Prince Cyrus the catalyst? I became the new Seer after her death, but I was just a child then, a waif play-acting in silk, confused as everyone else. I never dreamed of what Felicita described.

My lack of answers didn’t endear me to anyone.

We sought aid from Seers serving in neighboring lands and warned them in turn, but even they couldn’t sense any coming omens. The grandmotherly Seer of Balica had us consider that perhaps—if Felicita wasn’t simply fever-mad—it meant that whatever she saw was far in the future. We had time to prepare.

And so, with every new season, every gala, every visiting dignitary, the kingdom has held its breath, hoping for Cyrus to fall in love. Felicita's prophecy was clear enough here: the future rests in the prince's heart, his choice, his bride.

In seven years, Cyrus hasn't chosen anyone. A sinister prophecy on his shoulders and he's decided to be *picky*.

But he can only stall for so long.

I head to the palace to witness the results of his tour myself. It's a short walk, thanks to the bridge connecting my tower's entrance to the north end of the palace grounds. Without it, I'd have to trek down two hundred stairs to the tower's base, sitting far below on the banks of the river Julep. The Seer's Tower is a gnarled relic of the Fairywood that once covered the continent—grown, not built, so it was never crafted for practicality.

Tales say that one of the first Seers drew the walls out of the ground and raised them high so that she could live among the stars. Feats like that used to be common, supposedly, when the Fairywood was wide, nations were few, and the land seeped magic. I might not have believed it if I didn't sometimes dream of long-past threads—of times when trees were taller than mountains and canopies were lit with fairies and we humans weren't the cleverest creatures wandering the forests.

Today, the Seer's Tower is simply out of place. It juts into the sky like a fang, a trunk of petrified vines rising from the riverbanks, stark green against the developed city. A breeze tangles through my robes as I cross the bridge away from it. The views of the Sun Capital disappear behind the marble berth of the palace and its gold-tipped spires. I pass through

a set of gates, and the gardens unfold before me: a patchwork of neat flowerbeds, carved fountains, and ornamental trees.

On the way, I receive a few greetings: a quick bow or curtsy, along with a murmur of “Sighted Mistress”—others know that I don’t care for formalities. Stealing down a narrow caretaker’s trail on tiptoes, between the hedge maze and a row of newly trimmed begonias, I arrive at one of the palace’s back entrances with only a bit of dirt on my slippers.

Inside, every room and hallway is filled with chatter. A frown stitches itself across my face; I’m troubled by what I overhear. What I *don’t* overhear.

I ascend the staircase to the royal living quarters and the conversations fade away. The guards outside Cyrus’s rooms look uneasy as I approach, but they don’t stop me.

I throw open the double doors to his bedroom.

*“Do not let her in—Violet, leave.”*

My eyes land on Cyrus by his wardrobe. The prince is dressed, mostly. And—ugh—handsomer than before.

Cyrus Lidine of Aueny is cut from the cloth of story-book dreams: dashing, well-read, witty if he deigns to speak to you, and beautiful even without fairy glammers. He could make a sack look fashionable, and his smile is responsible for more fainting spells than the summer heat.

Now at the wane of his nineteenth year, he’s filled out his height, muscle smoothing out the angles of his adolescence, his clothes no longer pinching at junctures, since he’s done growing. Color has returned to his cheeks, once porcelain-pale after a bout of childhood illness. He’s shed his boyishness with a fresh cut of his copper hair.

But some things never change, including the disdainful

gaze he levels at me as I do not leave. These months apart haven't tempered the loathing between us.

A lifetime apart wouldn't.

"You can't come barging in here—" Cyrus starts.

"And yet I just did," I murmur, glancing around the room. I'm the only other person here, which is a problem. The bed is unrumpled. His bath seems empty. I saw no retinue downstairs, no court ladies huddled around some latest addition to Sun Capital society. So it begs the question: "Where is she?"

Cyrus turns to the mirror and resumes buttoning his vest. "Who?"

"Her future Majesty. *The girl you're marrying.*"

"None of your business."

I march over, braid swinging. "Entirely"—I wedge myself between Cyrus and the mirror as he heaves a heavy sigh—"my business." If I wasn't underfed during my early childhood, I might have grown enough to be eye level with him. As it is, he's a hand taller, and I have to jut out my chin to glare at him. "I foretold that you would find a bride, and here you are, with no one in your arms. Do *not* make me a liar."

"Then you shouldn't have lied."

My eyes narrow. Cyrus ignores me, shrugging on a bird-patterned jacket.

It was just a small lie, something to smother talk. Last autumn, there were reports of Fairywood turning black near the borderlands, of bloodred rose petals blowing through villages at night. People were getting anxious, so King Emilius asked me to search the future for any clues or elaborations about Felicita's prophecy.



But my nights were fruitless, my dreams frustratingly empty.

So as Cyrus left on his tour, I made something up to calm the court:

*Prince Cyrus will meet his bride before his journey's end.*

A small lie goes down like overwatered wine. You hardly notice it, and if you do, it isn't a big enough problem to complain about. Cyrus needed to find a bride eventually. All I did was give him a timeline.

"Fine," I say, arms crossed. "I didn't really dream that you'd find your bride. I shouldn't have had to. You should have chosen someone by now." You could pave a footpath with the admirers swooning in the streets for him. How difficult can it be? "As long as Felicita's prophecy hangs over your neck, people will be afraid of it, and they'll fear for your reign, too. They call you *cursed*. Not to your face, clearly. I bought you time, Princey—time and optimism."

Checking his cuffs, Cyrus tweaks the lion's head-shaped buttons, continuing in his bored drone, "More concerned with appearances than the prophecy itself, I see."

I flash teeth. "I can be worried about two things at once."

"Of course: your precarious reputation, and my father's opinion of you."

"The latest patrol reports came back last week. They found rotting trees in the Fairywood."

"I'm aware. I saw it." He finally stops fussing with his clothes and lowers his gaze to mine; disquiet frames the green of his eyes, but I don't behold it for long before he glances away. "My father should have already sent troops to burn it."

“But the *root of the problem*—”

“—might be Felicita’s last prophecy, yes, but I can’t do anything. I don’t get to decide when or with whom I fall in love.”

Felicita’s prophecy only mentioned a bride—love doesn’t have to play a part in it—but Cyrus is a romantic; he thinks it matters. Otherwise, he’d be celebrating his third anniversary with an arranged Verdantese princess by now. “You’re not even trying,” I scoff.

Cyrus only shakes his head. “I’m not giving false hope the prophecy will be broken. That’s all there is to it.” He pivots toward the bedroom doors.

I follow on his heels, out of his quarters and into the hallway, where courtiers are milling about. They turn to the prince with lighted eyes and ready questions. Cyrus flaunts a dazzling smile before dropping it sharply as soon as he jogs down the stairs, avoiding them all. Two guards fence him off, but I slip through.

I lower my voice. “Do you at least have a plan for when you spark a panic amongst your people?”

“I’m not discussing this with *you*,” he mutters.

“*Me?*” I mock in the same tone, fingers pressed to my chest.

“You, who took every chance to undermine me for years.”

“Years you wouldn’t have if I hadn’t saved your life.”

Cyrus glares. He hates when I bring up how we met. I love bringing up how we met.

As soon as he lands on the ground floor, he makes a sharp turn to avoid the crowds drifting toward us in the atrium. Carpet muffles the quickness of his steps as he tries

to lose me and everyone else, but I keep pace, the blue silk of my robes fluttering behind me.

“This isn’t just a matter of prophecy,” I call after him. Many dukes are less than enthused about his ascension. They find Cyrus too *honest*. “The Council will use fear against you. Call you unsuitable for the throne. What part of ‘*You’re cursed*’ don’t you understand?”

His mouth thins to a line. Cyrus knows I’m right. “The Council should focus on their own dominions, rather than a fevered prophet’s last words that gave no details, no timeline. Tomorrow, we could be felled by a quake or flood or falling star, and no one’s paranoid about that.”

“That’s very logical, but people are as allergic to logic as I am to fairy dust. Princey—”

He spins around without warning, and I nearly run into him. The edge of his cloak sweeps around my feet. “You don’t even want me as your king. Why should I listen to your advice?”

I swallow a bitter lump in my throat. Because he *will* be king. No matter the panic. No matter what the Council thinks. Cyrus always gets what he wants in the end. “We either spend our energy fighting or learning to work together. We don’t have to like each other in order to be smart about this.”

“What if I don’t want to work with you?”

“You’ll have to, one day. I’m your Seer.”

“I could change that.”

I laugh out of habit, but the dip of his gaze has a cold edge. We’ve always argued like this, yet—no, Cyrus couldn’t really let me go. He doesn’t have the nerve to do something

so unprecedented as removing a sitting Seer, not when there are so few in the world.

I lick my lips. “You need me more than you hate me.” Arrogant, maybe, but that’s the only way to call a bluff.

The edge of Cyrus’s mouth curls upward, the only hint that he might have enjoyed any part of this conversation. “Is that so?”

He turns back around. I watch as he leaves down the hall toward the gilded doors of the Council Chamber. A footman opens them for him with a bow, and Cyrus disappears inside.



Most of the Council’s fourteen dukes or their stewards arrived a week ago for their twice-annual session. There’s plenty of pomp and very little progress as they squabble over taxes and Dragonsguard allocations for their respective dominions. Auvény is the largest and wealthiest of the three Sun Continent nations—outpacing the Republic of Balica to our south and the Kingdom of Verdant beyond the Fairywood and eastern mountains—a status that encourages a mix of ambition and complacency in our leadership. We also pride ourselves on being a model kingdom, with fair laws and opportunities for even the lowest subjects.

So there’s a great deal of self-importance, too.

It’s too much hot air to make eavesdropping worth it for me, but anything interesting will find its way around soon enough; secrets jump like fleas in the Sun Capital.

And if there's a matter that requires a Seer's attention, King Emilius will call me in himself.

After Cyrus enters the Council Chamber, I await the fallout in the upstairs library. I spend many afternoons among the curated tomes; dry as they might be, they're one way I put names to the unfamiliar things I've seen in my dreams. I've never been far outside the river-veined hills of the capital myself. My duties keep me here, and I try to be reliable in presence; I get enough criticism lobbed at me without *lazy* being added to that list.

I'm flipping through a travelogue of a famous Yuenen explorer from the Moon Continent when I hear doors slamming open, followed by a spill of shouts. It hasn't even been an hour. Setting the book down, I follow the racket along with a growing crowd to the main courtyard, where Lord Rasmuth of the Seventh and Lord Ignacio of the Thirteenth are quarreling.

The latter stamps his foot loudly enough to startle birds into the sky. "Efficiency be damned!" Ignacio bellows. "The prince is still cursed! I will not support him as king until he finds a queen—and, dare I say, even then!"

Even with my shorter height, I stand out among the crowd with my black rope of hair and shimmering, shifting robes. Nearby eyes begin turning toward me for answers—exactly the situation I wanted to avoid.

I sigh heavily as the shawled lady at my elbow does a triple take in my direction, as if drumming up the initiative to ask. She finally speaks up on the fourth gawk, after a short bow. "Sighted Mistress, will we not have a wedding soon? But you said—"

“That his Highness would find his true love before his *journey’s* end,” I finish with emphasis. “Not his *tour’s* end. Clearly, his journey isn’t over yet.” This is why the exact words are important.

I excuse myself, feigning a headache. Pushing a path into the palace, I can see the fresh implications of my reply rippling through the throngs in shocked expressions and whispers. The news will bleed through the entire city before dark.

Cyrus’s footsteps echo near, louder than everyone else’s, sending the message that His Highness will *not* be answering questions right now. The tail of his jacket flaps past me as he heads toward the wing containing his father’s offices.

I can’t resist calling after him, “Hate to say I told you so, Princey—oh, wait, no I don’t. *I told you so!*”

He doesn’t even stop to glower.

Cyrus’s attempt at rebellion inconveniences both of us, but more him than me. King Emilius knows his son’s moods. Despite the diplomatic smiles they wear in public, Cyrus might argue with his father more than he argues with me—and Cyrus never wins. I know this because I’ve never in my life heard the king change his mind about anything.

I, on the other hand, have always been in the king’s good graces, and Cyrus resents me for it. His father’s respect is hard-earned, rare as a treasure plundered from the depths of a dragon’s lair. That respect will protect me even when Cyrus ascends. King Emilius will likely keep one hand on Aueny’s puppet strings even after passing on his crown; the Council of Dukes—all appointed by him—are loyal to Emilius, and that is where the true power lies.

Evening curtains the sky soon after I return to my tower.

I relish these hours, when it's too late for anyone to call for my services. Up in my bedroom, I light the hearth and draw a cold bath. I slip my robe from my shoulders, unbutton my skirt, pull my blouse and shift over my head.

Bracing myself, I plunge into the tub, then scrub down by firelight. Old scars have mostly faded from my soap-softened skin. My hair pools around me, dark as ink and heavy with perfumed water.

Seeing me today, you wouldn't guess that I was born a scraggly weed of the Moon District slums. Now I have my own tower with its own porcelain bath and a bed of silks. I can read and write, I eat as heartily as the royal family, and people bow to me.

Still, a title and a tower don't erase a fear of things people don't understand. When something as strange as magic lives in someone as strange to them as a foreign-faced girl, I will never stand a chance. I should remember that when I get arrogant with the prince, even if I am right.

After drying off, I yank on my nightgown and tumble into bed, exhausted.

When I shut my eyes, something clinks downstairs.

Then again, in repetition: *kak-kak-kak*.

Cabinets settling? I frown.

*Kak-kak-kak-kak*.

Snickering.

My heartbeat fills my ears. No reason I wouldn't be alone. Slipping out of bed, I grab the closest blunt object I can find in the dark—a long-handled brush by the tub. I hold my breath and pad downstairs, careful to not make the stairs creak.

In the pitch-black, I circle the room, feeling along the ridges of the walls, but the only sound is the scrape of my own feet against the floor.

There's no one here. But I ask the dark anyway, just to settle my skin: "Who's there?"

I hear a hiss like a tongue meeting hot steel. Swinging the brush in a wide arc, I strike something solid that clatters and skids across the floor.

A wooden tray and bowl. I exhale.

Laughter bubbles forth. *Hah-hah-hah.*

*Vi-o-let.*

I swing around again, stumbling. The echo of my name sticks to the back of my skull, here and nowhere all at once.

*What a fitting*

*name*

*you have,*

*Vi-o-let.*

Words layer upon each other—many voices, merging into one. My heart hammers; this is no earthly sound.

*Vile.*

*Vi-o-let.*

*Violet of the Moon.*

I've never heard these voices before, yet they're familiar as instinct, innate as a layer of my soul. "Who are you?" I ask, even though I know the answer.

Two dim lights flicker in the distant dark. My breath catches in my throat. Nothing makes that kind of glow in this room.

*We grant you your power, wretch.*



Brush held in front of me, I approach the lights with stuttered steps, toeing around the tray I knocked over. I recognize what I'm walking toward: the offering fountain, where my patrons toss in gifts and coins. And carved at the top of it is the faceless statuette they sometimes pray to.

*Formerly faceless.*

The blue-copper statuette has been worn smooth for as long as I've seen it, barely recognizable as a figure at all, let alone one of a Fate. It's only remarkable for an antique, said to be nearly as old as the first Seer.

But as I near, the grooves of the statuette form a woman, coldly serene, draped in a cloth that flows from her like a waterfall. Her eyes blaze blue fire. From her mouth spills a chorus:

*Seven years gained,*

*one life owed.*

*You saved the crowned boy*

*who was ours to claim.*

*Diverted his death*

*so you could live in your tower.*

*It is time to pay it back.*

Memories rise: the prince running through the Moon District marketplace. Me, pulling him away from the crush of a horse-cart. We were barely more than children then. Felicita was still alive. It was long ago. "I don't understand." Every vein in my body pulses, aware of a danger I can't place. "Is this a threat?"

*There is always a price for defying destiny.*

*One life owed.*

*The boy must die  
before summer's end,  
or you will burn.*

“Why? But I didn’t—” My grip on the brush’s wooden handle shakes, the only tether I have to anything solid. My feet have gone numb.

*The boy must die  
for all tales must END.*

Wind rushes through the room—or did I imagine it? Is this how Felicita went mad? I can’t really be talking to the gods. This is impossible.

The voices surge, deafening, solid enough to fill the dark:  
*IT IS TIME,  
AT LAST, AT LAST,  
BLOOD AND ROSES AND WAR.*

I slam the end of the brush into the statuette. The top half of its body smashes to the ground. Black tendrils erupt from the marble stump, spiderwebbing down the fountain. A cackle bounces off the walls. I clutch my head, keening.

I’m going mad. This is mad. I scabble around on the floor for anything to make the laughter stop, and I slice my hand on broken marble. I cry out at the bright pain. Lightning flashes. The room shudders, as if divinely struck.

*YOU ARE NOT WORTHY OF ANY LOVE THAT  
WILL SAVE YOU.*

I breathe in smoke.

The tower bursts into flames.



I wake gasping from a memory of ash, hands curled around my throat, legs twisted in the sheets. Fire sears my skin for a white-hot second. Another blink, and the night is dark and cold. Above me, the gems studded into the tower's ceiling wink, unburnt, as if they know what I saw.

Slowly, I unclench my hands from my neck.

Was it a prophecy or—? What else could it have been? A hallucination? It was so vivid.

It didn't feel like any prophecy I've had. None have spoken directly to me before.

None have *threatened* me before.

Kicking off my covers, I crawl out of bed and put on my robe with trembling hands. A chilled wind rushes up my knees as I push through the balcony doors and press myself against the railing. Dawn is brightening. The scaly rooftops of the Sun Capital glimmer below. Beyond the city walls, the land dips into shadowed valleys.

"What do you want?" I say to the sky.

Nothing speaks back. Maybe because I don't believe in the Fates' influence, not truly, and what do gods do all day besides find the barest reason to be insulted?

Fog curls from my breath like smoke. The reminder of Felicita's prophecy unsteadies me most: *blood and roses and war*. If the prophecy is true—if it's *here*—

Why would it be because I saved Cyrus seven years ago?

Why would the Fates have wanted him to die?

People think that because I have the Sight, that makes me some messenger of the gods. As if I understand these forces or how my magic works. I've dreamed across time and now I'm hearing voices—

But I never know why.

If the Fates control our future, I don't understand to what end. Here in Auvény, the belief is that the Fates judge us. That if we are generous, honest, not too chatty, placable, forgiving, they might twist our threads so we find love and earn our heart's weight in gold. Everyone has heard of the miller's kind daughter who marries richly, of the maid who coaxes the man out of a beast, of faithful girls in locked towers waiting for their knights.

But I don't believe in anything that supposes it knows me better than I know myself.

I am a better liar than I am a prophet. I don't believe there's reason to our destinies. I don't believe the world is just. I believe in wolves—in con men and crowned men who wear wickedness as if it were a talent. Who don't ask for judgment before devouring what's theirs. They know the future is no better than a roll of rigged dice, so they may as well do the rigging.

Kings and their dukes have been writing futures with nothing but lies and smiles. I understand *this* power more than any of some fleshless voice in the dark.

I shut my eyes and remember what the voice said: *The boy must die before summer's end, or you will burn.*

*Or.* If it isn't a threat, then it's a choice.

It means I can be saved, if he dies.

I brace myself against the railing, knuckles turning white. For now, they're only words. For now, it's only a nightmare.

No one needs to know about this.

With one last glance to the quiet sky, I turn back to the tower, shutting the balcony doors behind me.