



ONE



A TORN SLIP OF PAPER skates under my door as the last stub of my candle gutters.

I close my book and scurry to the door, my bare feet chilled by the cold stone. Only one word is scribbled and ink-smudged on the paper—*stables*. I've just read it when the last flicker of the candle dies.

With a little grin, I swap my long woolen nightgown for my gray maid's uniform, the routine so ingrained I can easily tie my apron strings in the dark. By feel, I shove under my pillow the book I . . . let's call it *borrowed* from the royal library. Then I pull on my work boots and hurry to the stables as the last stars burn in the slowly lightening sky, grateful that the wind streaming in from the river has kept its late summer warmth.

When I reach the giant, white-washed stable doors, a hand reaches out and yanks me around the corner into a deeper pocket of darkness.

I yelp, my fingers going to my apron pocket, but when I hear the low, familiar chuckle behind me, I leave my knife where it is. "Rowan!"

"Sorry," he says, sounding the opposite. "You were about to give us away."

I twist to face him just as he adds, “Come on!” and pulls me down the side of the stables to a smaller door at the back.

An empty stall glows with the light of one small candle, set carefully on the newly swept floor. Next to it rests a polished wooden chessboard.

My eyes light up. I scramble to the far side of the stall and sit down beside the black-painted set of figures. “I’ve only got an hour before morning rounds.”

It won’t be the first night I’ve missed sleep entirely, between reading and meeting Rowan.

“Plenty of time for me to beat you,” he replies, dropping to the floor behind the ivory set.

There’s enough light to see him now—his untidy blond hair, the dark shadow of stubble along his jaw, his full lips curled into a challenging smile. And, of course, his sparkling blue eyes, full of what Mellie calls “the devil’s mischief” but which have always seemed harmless to me. Any royal who’s willing to be friends with a maid can’t be that bad.

His clothes are rumpled, his shirt falling open at his throat, which should make him look more mess than prince, but instead gives him a disheveled charm. It’s obvious he’s been up—or at least busy—all night.

“So,” I say, arching a brow, “who—I mean, what—were *you* doing? You’ve obviously not been to bed.”

Rowan turns his attention to the board, agonizing over his first move, and doesn’t answer. But his ears turn pink.

“Shameless.”

He shrugs. “What else am I supposed to do? Cedric’s off in

his own world, Belle barely talks to me, Asher's busy being commander of the guard or whatever bullshit Father set him to, and Sorren—"

He cuts himself off abruptly. But I know what comes next.

And Sorren is dead.

It's been six months since Prince Sorren fell—or, if the rumors are true, jumped—from the Old Tower. My heart aches for Rowan. He wasn't close to his eldest brother—as heir, Sorren was busy learning the business of the kingdom—but he looked up to him.

Everyone did.

Prince Sorren was the golden son of the kingdom of Lumaria: handsome, confident, kind. His death rocked the entire kingdom, and that made it even harder for Rowan. It wasn't just his grief he had to deal with—it was everyone's. It also doesn't help that they look—*looked*—so similar. For a while, Rowan said he could barely stand his own reflection.

As I play my first turn, I ask, "How's the king feeling?"

King Octavius has been seen little since Sorren died. No one knows exactly what his ailment is, but it's clear Sorren's death has taken a toll on his health.

"I haven't talked to him in a couple days. He hasn't wanted visitors." Rowan plays a pawn. "But I hope he's building his strength, because there was another protest yesterday. He has to respond."

"I thought Prince Asher sent troops . . ."

Rowan rakes a hand through his light hair. "He did, but that's all he can do without Father's approval. And who says troops are the answer anyway? It's not as if we want actual violence. The

protests have been peaceful so far . . . if the soldiers attacked, it would be a disaster. I think—well, it doesn't matter what I think." He looks suddenly weary. "It's not as if anyone will ask me. Asher, of course, wants the show of force."

"Lately he's been really good at those," I say, not bothering to hide my distaste. Ever since Sorren's death, Asher has become so angry, short-tempered, and exacting. He's fired at least three of his valets and two of his betrothed's maids. He's always sending troops out for extra training or to intimidate protesters. But he wasn't always like this. I hate how much it bothers me that he's changed. Like it makes any difference to *me* at all.

Rowan rolls his eyes. He, on the other hand, hasn't seemed to change at all. He's always been warm, engaging, and mischievous. He was the prince who played pranks on his nanny and snuck out to learn card games from the stablehands.

"Ruby," he says reprovingly, "I did not sneak you out of the castle to talk politics. Don't you be boring too."

"Excuse me, *I* snuck myself out of the castle."

His hand hovers over his knight. "True. Your craftiness is one of my favorite qualities. But it does have its limits."

"That was the bird's fault, not mine, and you know it."

He laughs.

Five or six years ago, an owl flew into a tree at the edge of the castle gardens—the tree I happened to be hiding in. When I shrieked and lost my grip, I fell to the ground at Rowan's feet, giving away that I'd been spying on him. He chose not to punish me for my transgression. Instead, he asked me to sneak him an extra batch of Mellie's famous peach tarts from the kitchen.



My life of crime was short-lived, but our friendship has lasted.

“So which book had you up all night this time?” he asks. “One of Mother’s romances?”

I shake my head, wishing my hair was loose so I could hide my blush. I should never have told him about the book I found nestled in a dusty corner of the library near some of the queen’s old journals. Calling it a romance is kind. I’ve never read anything, before or since, that was so . . . explicit. He, of course, demanded I hand it over to him instead of returning it to the library. I have no doubt that he made use of whatever he learned in its pages.

Before he can tease me further, I tell him about the book I was reading before I met up with him, about a lost princess and her quest to stop the evil queen who stole her kingdom. Our game passes with the story, until the sun tilts a small, friendly beam into our stall, and I tip his king on its side.

“All right, that’s it,” Rowan says. “I refuse to play with you anymore. You’re too brilliant.”

I grin. “Actually admitting defeat this time? No claim of ‘letting’ me win or insisting it was the spirit of the Great Betrayer moving your hand?”

He flops back onto the packed dirt floor and stretches out, hands behind his head. “The night’s wearing off. Why’s the sun so bright?” he groans.

I climb to my feet. “Go pour yourself into bed. Some of us have to work.”

He grabs my ankle as I pass. “Don’t let any evil queens steal you away.”

“Let’s hope your mother doesn’t find us, then,” I return.



He guffaws. “Did you just call my mother evil?” Before I can backtrack, he adds with a snicker, “Actually, fair. Do you know she had me kissing babies yesterday? Actual babies, Ruby. Some foreign dignitary’s progeny. Disgusting little things, covered in drool.”

There are few limits placed on the royal family of Lumaria, but Queen Narissa does, on occasion, give Rowan what he considers punishment: royal duties.

The horror.

He releases me with a theatrical shudder, his knee scattering the pieces of our game.

“Hush,” I admonish. “It’s not just the queen we have to worry about. If the master of the horse catches me again, he said he’d make me clean stalls after my usual duties.”

Not something I want to do after a night of no sleep. Or at all.

Rowan sobers. He knows as well as I do that I’m the one taking the risks here. Queen Narissa might give him a slap on the wrist or make him kiss a baby, but his livelihood isn’t on the line.

Rowan and I murmur our goodbyes, and then I hurry to the stable door and slip out into the first cheerful rays of morning. It’s much brighter—and later—than I thought. Shit.

The kitchen yard’s the fastest route back to the servants’ entrance and hopefully, if there’s time, my breakfast, before I begin my duties.

As I approach, my stomach sinks. The gate’s ajar. That means—I rush into the yard, but it’s too late.

There’s blood everywhere.



TWO



IN THE CENTER OF THE mess of blood and torn flesh, a coyote snarls, its muzzle dripping red. My shout does nothing to distract it from its feast. I scramble for the small knife I keep in my apron pocket and throw it as hard as I can. I manage to nick the animal, which finally scares it off, but the damage it did remains.

Prince Asher's favorite dog knows how to unlatch the gate, and once open, the kitchen yard is prey to all manner of vermin—snakes, rats, badgers. Last week it was a family of foxes. We lost half the royal chickens that day.

Today it's our best mouser and her babies, tiny kittens only a few weeks old. My hands shake with rage as I clean up the carnage.

There's a small squeak, a shift in the pile of bloody fur. One kitten is still alive. It's impossible to see the extent of its injuries—there's too much blood—but I pick it up and carry it to the well to clean it off. *Keep breathing, little one. Keep breathing.*

"Come off it, Ruby," Hessa calls. "There's nothing you can do but put her out of her misery."

I stare down at the small body, streaked with its mother's blood, and imagine another baby, left alone in the wreckage of a war-torn home. If the stranger who found me crying in the arms of my dead mother had done me the same mercy—

Yeah, well. Hessa's new. Mellie would have known that the kitten would be coming with me, "mercy" be damned.

Death is never a mercy.

"I guess we'll see," I say, elbowing past her. I've got about three minutes to change my apron, find some goat's milk for the kitten, and get up to the royal family's library to start my work, or I'll be behind all day.

No time for breakfast. Damn.

The kitten mews hungrily in my arms.

"Don't you be feeding that yard cat my porridge," Hessa grouches from behind me.

"I'll keep her out of the porridge, don't worry." I grab a clean washcloth and dip it into the pitcher of milk on the table. Hessa huffs angrily as I give the kitten the wet cloth to suck on.

"She's going to break your heart, girl. Kittens that young die without their mamas. You know that." Hessa heads toward the massive cooking hearth, her arms full of herbs from the garden.

"What kitten?" Sara asks, swooping in to grab a tray of food for the main hall. Her thick brown hair has already pulled free of her braid to curl around her face. As one of Hessa's minions, her day begins even earlier than mine.

I hold up the calico fluff in my hands. "Prince Asher's dog let in a coyote this time. I could only save one kitten."

"You better hide her. Bryson's on a tear this morning." Sara raises a brow. "The king had a bad night."

Bryson, the king's steward, is *always* on a tear. His hair perpetually sticks up because his nervous hands pull it every which way,

and his eyes are always bloodshot from the wine he sneaks to keep his anger in check.

Gareth, the royal food taster, nods to Hessa from the long table. “Delicious. Nothing amiss here.”

Hessa grabs the tray of food. “Sara, take this to the king’s chambers,” she calls, but Sara’s already left the kitchen.

“I can do it.” I tuck the kitten into my apron pocket and take the tray from her.

I make my way up the servant stairs to the first floor, hurry along the Great Hall and down the hallway that runs the length of the castle, between its two tall, round towers. The North Tower holds bedchambers for the nobility, while the Old Tower is largely empty, with storage and several little-used rooms for those the king wishes to punish. This central section, near the Great Hall, houses the royal family. King Octavius’s bedchamber sits at the center, overlooking the road leading to Ryvin, Lumaria’s busiest port, and beyond it, the sparkle of the Talas River.

When I reach the main hallway, a chill wind sweeps along the back of my neck. I pause for a moment as the faint sound of a giggle echoes in the distance.

With a shiver, I glance around, but no windows are open and the giant door to the king’s chambers is, as always, closed tight. Today, Drake is on duty, standing at attention in his leather armor.

I shake off my nerves and approach him.

“Morning,” I say, handing him the tray. “Bad night?”

Drake shrugs. He’s not much of a talker. The younger guards are bigger gossips.

With a knock, he slips inside the king's chambers, and I head back down the narrow corridor to where the royal library waits, dim in the faint glow of predawn.

The large room, designed as a private gathering place for the royal family, is quiet and empty, save for the faint memory of pipe smoke. King Octavius has always insisted this room be cleaned first each day. I settle the kitten into one of the tall-backed chairs by the hearth. She protests the separation from my warm body, but soon enough she's back to nursing the milk-soaked cloth.

Quickly, I build a fire, dust the bookshelves, and swish a broom across the cold stone floor and thin carpets, imported from some far-off country, their colors vibrant even after all these years.

I wait to dust the table by the fire until last, my heart beating a quickening tattoo in my chest.

Finally, I pause and stare at the game sitting on its polished surface.

Someone has moved the obsidian rook and taken the marble knight.

My knight.

What are you playing at? You've exposed your queen.

I stare at the board, imagining all the possible moves, teasing out every potential outcome.

And then, finally, I see it.

Ah. Clever.

But not clever enough.

I avoid the trap easily.

Check.

Rowan swears he's not my mysterious chess partner in the royal

library, and I'm inclined to believe him. Seeing as we play together all the time, there's no reason for the secrecy, and he's also not as good as the person who's been playing with me, on this specific board, since I was a child. But Rowan's also always told me he doesn't know who it is, and that I'm less sure about. Whenever this particular game comes up, his eyes flick away and he usually changes the subject.

Suddenly, a thud echoes through the room. Before I have time to move, Prince Asher staggers through the doorway. He shudders to a stop when he sees me standing by the fire. I pause a moment too long, shocked myself.

Lord, he looks terrible.

His hair is a messy, chestnut whorl, much darker and longer than Rowan's, his velvet jacket singed and unbuttoned, the white shirt beneath hanging open at the collar, exposing his velvety tan skin. Okay, actually, he doesn't look *bad*. Just terrifying. His half-open eyes stare at me, dark through the firelight.

For a moment I'm caught in his gaze, surprise curling through me. He never looks at me. Why would he? I'm the broom that invisibly sweeps the floor, the magical spark that starts the fire in the hearth, the rag that disappears the dust.

I'm invisible.

I'd be lying if I said it didn't bother me. If I didn't spend nights imagining his eyes on me like a physical touch. Now, for the first time, I have his attention . . . and I don't have the first clue what to do with myself. Is this a dream?

A feminine voice sounds behind him.

"I don't think you need a book at this hour, Your Highness." A thin, pale arm shoots out to hook his elbow, followed by an ethereal

face with the perfect frame of heavy, red-blond hair. “Maybe just some sleep?”

Lady Rosaline, his betrothed, doesn’t notice me.

But it’s obvious now that I’ve interrupted a private moment between them, and my frozen body thaws immediately. No wonder he’s staring at me. I need to get out of here now, before he does more than stare.

I drop into a hurried curtsy, stuff the broom into the small closet behind the fallen-knight tapestry, and scoop up the kitten.

“Pardon me,” I murmur, my head down. “The room is ready for your use.”

“Oh! A kitten!” Rosaline’s lilting voice is far too loud in the quiet. And the arms reaching toward me far too demanding. “How *precious*.”

I jerk away from her grabbing hands. The kitten squeaks in protest.

“Oh, please let me see her,” Rosaline says, smiling prettily. Her cheeks carry a smattering of freckles—since Sorren’s death, some of the other noblewomen have taken to dotting on fake freckles with makeup now that Lady Rosaline is marrying the new heir to the throne. “I’ve always wanted a pet. Asher, wouldn’t you like me with a little fur kitten around my neck? Like a stole that purrs! I can just—”

“No.” My voice bursts out of me, shocking Rosaline into silence. I’ve always thought she was superficial, changing into multiple different gowns every day, making her lady’s maid redo her hair over and over, but a kitten as a *fashion statement*?



“What?” Prince Asher’s voice snaps across the room, sharp as a whip.

Shit. Now I’ve really got his attention.

“She’s mine,” I blurt, and then curse myself. I’m a maid. *Nothing* is mine. “I mean, I’m sorry, Your Highness. She’s a mouser in training. Her mother was killed. By your dog.” *No. Don’t say that, don’t accuse. You’ll make it worse.* “I—I mean—the kitchen needs her.”

I back away, toward the door. I’m in so much trouble. He’s going to snatch the kitten right out of my hands. He’s going to have me whipped for my impertinence. He’s going to fire me—

Oh hell.

I don’t wait to find out what Prince Asher will do. I turn and flee down the hall, the kitten clinging to my chest with her tiny claws.

I’ve just made it to the Great Hall when the lilting, haunting sound of the fife fills the room.

I stop short, dread unfurling through my body. The music is odd this early. I haven’t heard it since . . .

Since Prince Sorren’s death.

Across the room, Bryson bows his head as servants drape black fabric across the long windows at the far end of the hall.

Sara slips up next to me and whispers, “Did you hear?”

I shake my head, the dread now sitting like a boulder in my stomach. “What happened?”

Her hands clench into fists. “King Octavius is dead.”



THREE



IT TAKES A FEW MOMENTS for the words to sink in. The king is . . . dead? I was at his door less than an hour ago. Rowan was just saying he hoped his father was getting his strength back.

“Drake found him dead in bed when he brought him his breakfast,” Sara whispers while Lissa comes up on my other side. She’s holding an armful of linens, as if she was interrupted mid-task.

“So it’ll be King Asher then,” she says quietly, tension tightening the corners of her mouth. “Like that’s any better.”

“I quite liked Sorren,” Sara murmurs. “He always left out sweets for us on winter solstice. He might have been different as king.”

Lissa shakes her head. “They’re all the same. Until they’re all gone, nothing will change.”

I nudge her with my elbow and hiss under my breath, “You can’t say that. Not here, Lissa.”

My gaze sweeps the quiet room. Like us, there are other clumps of servants standing around, with several of the older maids huddled in the corner openly weeping. I don’t see any guards or anyone else paying attention to us. But that doesn’t make me feel safer. If anyone overheard and reported back to Bryson . . .

Lissa hates the royal family, and she’s got good reason to. Her parents died in the brutal, short-lived war with Castella, after their brazen attack on her border village. It was brutal in that many



Lumarians died, and short-lived because King Octavius paid Castella off with a chunk of our southern countryside, including the village they destroyed. A reward for their slaughter, Lissa calls it.

Lissa feels safe saying things like this around me because she assumes I hate the monarchy too. My parents were also killed in the war, after all. But she doesn't know about my friendship with Rowan. Or the books I've read on the history of our kingdom. I've never quite been able to blame King Octavius. It's not as if *he* started the war. It was his closest advisor, Lord Garrick Donahue, who sold Lumaria's secrets to Castella. Garrick, the "Great Betrayer" who gave them the troop movements and numbers they needed to successfully attack our southern border. King Octavius acted quickly to imprison his friend and end the bloodshed.

And it's true that Garrick is the most hated man in all of Lumaria. But there are those who also feel the king was too lenient . . . and too weak. Lumaria has struggled since—so much of our farmland was burned or annexed by Castella—there is real suffering. I can't deny that.

I didn't know the king personally, of course, but he always struck me as even-handed and kind. As someone who carried the weight of his country on his shoulders. Rowan has stories of his father being gentle and attentive with his children when they were young, actually spending time with them despite Queen Narissa's insistence that the king's presence wasn't necessary. And the few times I came upon him in the library, he always asked after my health. A king who notices a maid, let alone speaks to her . . . Well, it's hardly the norm.

Plus, the royal family allowed me to be raised within the castle.



I could have been sent to an orphanage. I could have been left to die as a baby.

So while I know why Lissa hates the royal family, I just . . . can't.

Across the room, Bryson clears his throat.

"As many of you have heard," he starts, his voice hovering on the jagged edge between reverent and stricken, "King Octavius succumbed to his illness this morning. There will be much to do in the coming days as we prepare for his funeral and the new king's coronation. The royal family has granted you the next several hours to mourn this incalculable loss. Please return to your rooms. You have until fifth bell to gather yourselves for your evening duties."

At the clap of his hands, we disperse.

I try to stifle a yawn, but Sara notices.

"You better use your time to sleep, Ruby," she says, nudging my arm. "You look tired as a bear in winter. I'm sorry for the king, truly am, but I can't say I'm sorry we have a little time to ourselves."

Lissa sighs heavily. "Doubt I'll get any rest at all. Can't just leave these linens, now, can I?"

She trudges off, making no effort to keep the linens from dragging on the floor. Sara and I head for our rooms.

"So," she murmurs, checking to see that we're alone in the corridor. "Another rendezvous with your prince? Don't think I didn't notice you coming into the kitchen from the yard."

My lip quirks. "You make it sound so tawdry."

Sara's the only one who knows about me and Rowan. She's

my best friend—and it's not as if I haven't covered for her a time or two for her own secret rendezvous.

"He'd make it tawdry if you'd only let him. That man has slept through half the women in this castle, noble and commoner alike." She waggles her eyebrows at me but stops suddenly when a valet turns the corner and strides down the hall toward us.

We're silent until he passes.

"It's not like that," I say when we're alone again. "We're friends. Like you and me."

Sara pauses outside my bedroom door. "Ruby, you and *Prince* Rowan are *not* friends like you and me."

I roll my eyes. "Oh, go on, Sara."

This isn't the first time we've had this conversation. And it's not like I'm entirely immune to Rowan's charms. But he's never made a move—and I've never invited him to.

I remember the way he grabbed my ankle, so casually. And so casually let me go.

I shake my head with a little smile. Sara's seeing something that isn't there.

Once in my room, I let the kitten out of my pocket. She curls up in the blanket on my cot and goes to sleep, her mottled fur sticking up like dandelion fluff. I stare at her for a moment, weighing the impossibility of us both being here, alive within the castle.

My hand slips under my collar to squeeze the small pendant hidden there, the ruby-red stone warm against my skin.

It was Mellie, the old cook, who named me, when the stranger who saved me brought me here for safekeeping. She who ensured no one took my necklace, the one piece of my past life I brought with me to my new one. I don't know what my real first name was or who my parents were. Only that they died in Castella's invasion, that I was saved by a stranger, that I was brought here, and that I was wearing this pendant when I was found.

The kitten squeaks in her sleep. She's a survivor, all right. We both are. And, like me, she needs a name. My gaze drifts to the corner of the book hidden under my pillow.

Princess. It's a frivolous name, but the lost princess in the story defied all the odds, and I'm determined that this kitten will too.

"Princess," I murmur, stroking a finger along her soft fur. Vibrations tickle my fingertip as she starts to purr. "Well. That settles it."

I tuck my necklace back under my collar and snuggle beside her on the cot. I haven't had a day off in five years, and despite the circumstances, it's luxurious to think about having seven whole hours to myself. I consider picking up *The Lost Princess of Lennox* again, but the sleepless night is catching up with me. I've almost drifted off when a loud knock shakes my door.

Groggy and a little confused, I get to my feet, smooth my apron, and straighten my shoulders. Guess our grieving period is over already.

I open the door and let out a strangled gasp.

Bryson is standing before me, a guard flanking him on either side. He has never once come to my door.

His face, drawn with exhaustion, looks especially grim. "Come now, Ruby."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Don't make a fuss," he says wearily. "It won't look good for you."

With a quick, furtive look back at Princess, who's thankfully still asleep, I follow him into the hall.

"What's going on, sir?" I dare to ask, my heart suddenly pounding.

He doesn't reply. The guards fall into formation in front of and behind me, as if I'm a prisoner they're marching off to trial.

Is that what this is? Am I in trouble?

It's obvious Bryson won't answer my questions, and I'm certainly not about to ask the guards. They're not among the handful I know, and their faces are drawn into severe frowns.

By the time we re-enter the Great Hall, my pulse is shuddering in my throat and my hands are slicked with sweat. There's only a handful of things I could be in trouble for, but the most recent is my behavior toward Prince Asher and Lady Rosaline this morning.

He's going to fire me. I'll be out on the streets, my meager candle money too little to find shelter for more than a night or two. I might find another job, but I've heard he likes to blacklist those he lets go. I'll have to leave Ryvin altogether.

Tears well in my eyes. *Shit.*

We don't stop in the Great Hall, and I nearly lose it completely when Bryson leads our little entourage straight for the ornate, gilded door to the throne room. We can't be going in there.

We *can't*.

The only maid even *allowed* in that room is Miriam, and that's because she's so ancient she can't hear anymore.

Oh God, I'm in for it. This is going to be worse than a firing. He must be *really* pissed.

The throne room glows with opulence. Low lamps hang from the ceiling, burnished and beautifully bright. Sharp, shining swords hang from the walls, a line of soldiers in front of them. A royal blue carpet leads from the doorway straight down to the dais, where two golden thrones loom, draped in blue velvet.

One, of course, is empty.

Queen Narissa sits on the other, her golden hair pulled in a twisting sweep to the shining crown at her forehead. King Octavius's children stand on either side of the dais. My gaze finds Rowan immediately. His eyes ask a question I can't answer . . . and make it clear he doesn't know why I'm here either. I move my shoulders in a tiny shrug. He looks just as worried and confused as I feel, but more than that, there's an uncharacteristic heaviness to his features. To lose his eldest brother and his father in less than a year . . . my heart breaks for him.

Sometime in the hours since dawn, Rowan has changed into a black jacket and brushed his hair. Prince Asher, on the other hand, is still in his singed velvet coat, looking even worse for wear than when I saw him last. Dark shadows crowd under his eyes, and there's a twist to his mouth that makes the breath freeze in my chest.

Rowan's twin sister, Princess Belle, stands rigidly straight on Rowan's other side, her eyes glassy, her thin body tight as a



bowstring. Their youngest brother, Prince Cedric, stands off on his own, still in his dressing gown. He's my age but has always seemed a lot younger. He stares at the swords on the wall and appears to be ignoring the rest of us.

Aside from the soldiers flanking the thrones, King Octavius's three advisors are the only other people in the room.

"Your Highnesses," Bryson says, bowing to the royal family. "Ruby, housemaid."

I curtsy a little awkwardly under the weight of their stares, and Queen Narissa raises a brow, her mouth twisted suspiciously. "Lord Hayes, why is a maid here? I don't understand."

Oh good. I'm not the only one.

Lord Tareth Hayes, one of the king's three senior advisors, clears his throat. "Upon his death, King Octavius left an edict, written in his own hand, witnessed by his youngest son."

I look up, surprised at the words. Lord Hayes rubs at the craggy line between his brows. His neat beard hides most of his face, but it's clear he's frowning. The other two advisors, Lords Simon Rutherford and Liam Stone, Lady Rosaline's father, stand beside him.

Prince Cedric remains fixated on the swords.

"An edict? Really, Tareth. I'm certain my husband's latest education crusade or pay-the-maids-more scheme can be handled tomorrow." Queen Narissa settles back in her throne, looking exhausted even as her voice shows fangs.

I catch Prince Rowan's eyes again. Did his father discover our friendship? Is this decree something to do with us?

Lord Hayes clears his throat. "Your Highness. I assure you, this

matter must be handled expeditiously.” He pinches his lips, like what he’s about to say is as distasteful as Hessa’s first attempt at liver pie. “King Octavius has . . . ahem . . . named Ruby, a housemaid, his heir. Our queen.”

When he finishes his pronouncement, he stares at me, waiting. I blink.

Wait, *what?*