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THE WOUNDED KINGDOM
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The Wounded Kingdom

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Качиньска С.

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After an accident, I lost my memory and woke up in the palace of a foreign kingdom.In Eyrholm, a single mistake can cost you your life, especially if you find yourself caught up in the struggle for the throne.Callum, the fourth prince, is my undoing. He hides his face behind a mask, and even his own servants fear him.And yet he may be my only chance to survive the court intrigues and uncover the truth about my past.A note from the author:The Wounded Kingdom is the first book in a trilogy. The continuation of the story is already in the works, and the second book is expected to be released in the coming months.I would also like to mention that some of the characters archetypes were inspired by the Korean drama Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo. However, The Wounded Kingdom is an independent, entirely reimagined story with its own original world, events, and character development. It is neither a retelling nor a direct adaptation of the drama.Happy reading!

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The Wounded Kingdom

The playlist:
Bad Omens — *Dying to Love*
From Ashes to New — Forever
From Ashes to New — *Die for You*
Mos Elian — *Find Me*
Imaginex Music World — *Kamin (Male — English Version)*

Prologue

I woke beneath the water.

I tried to open my eyes, but I could barely see anything. A murky greenish-gray haze shifted in front of me, broken by faint, flickering glimmers of light. I had no idea how far away the surface was, or whether there was one at all. My body moved on instinct. My fingers swept blindly through the water, my legs kicked helplessly in search of something to push against, but there was nothing beneath me. Panic surged through me, drowning out every thought. My lungs were already screaming for air.

I lunged upward, heading toward the only source of light. With every movement, my body grew heavier. A burning sensation spread through my chest, and my fingers began to go numb. I kicked and clawed my way through the water with what little strength I had left, barely aware of where I was going. Even when it felt as though I wouldn't have enough air for another stroke, I kept moving. The light grew brighter. Just a little farther. And then the surface broke above my head.

I burst out of the water with a desperate gasp that sounded more like a scream. The air burned my throat, pain shot through my chest, and I doubled over, coughing violently. Water spilled from my mouth and nose, streaming down my chin and neck. I kept dragging in breath after breath, unable to manage a single proper inhale, while my body slowly recovered from the ordeal.

My head was pounding. Blood throbbed heavily in my temples, blurry spots drifted across my vision, and every sound seemed to come from somewhere far away. I could hear my own breathing, the gentle lapping of water, and a strange, indistinct noise around me, though I couldn't make out where it was coming from. I took several slow breaths, trying to steady myself, and only then noticed that the water was hot.

At first, I thought I was imagining it. After nearly drowning, my body could hardly be trusted to interpret anything correctly. But the moment I shifted, warm water brushed against my skin again. Steam rose from the surface in thin white ribbons, drifting across the water and obscuring everything more than a few yards away.

I blinked, trying to clear the lingering haze from my vision, then slowly turned my head.

There was no shoreline. A jagged stone wall rose straight out of the water, climbing almost vertically above me. Its dark surface glistened with moisture, and thin streams trickled between the uneven stones, slipping silently back into the pool. Beyond the curtain of steam, I could make out other walls, columns, and towering structures. My vision was still unreliable, and their outlines kept blurring whenever I tried to focus on them. The air smelled of minerals and something metallic. Neither scent stirred the slightest sense of recognition.

A figure emerged through the haze ahead of me. At first, it looked like a dark blur floating in my vision, but gradually it began to take shape. I wiped my face with a wet hand and tried to focus.

Someone was standing in the water, watching me without moving. His eyes were so pale they almost looked transparent. A narrow embroidered band circled his forehead, and his wet hair clung to his skin. Water trickled down his bare shoulders.

For several long seconds, we simply stared at each other. Then the young man jerked backward, startled, as though I'd appeared out of thin air and shattered every law of nature. He let out a startled cry, stumbled away, and threw up his hands in a defensive gesture. Apparently, I'd frightened him just as much as he'd frightened me.

Where am I?

The young man glanced sharply over his shoulder and shouted something to people I couldn't see. Most of his words were swallowed by the pounding in my head, but one sentence came through with startling clarity.

"There's a girl! There's a girl in here!"

His voice carried through the clouds of steam. I tried to turn my head in the direction he was looking, but the world began to blur again. The white haze thickened, the light above the water stung my eyes, and my body grew so heavy that keeping my head above the surface became an effort. Just before my vision clouded over completely, I caught sight of two more men standing at opposite edges of the strange pool.

Their silhouettes appeared almost ghostly through the steam. Gradually, my eyes began to pick out details: long garments made of heavy fabric, intricate patterns embroidered along their collars and sleeves, rich, deep colors that seemed entirely out of place here. Both men stared at me with the same stunned expression as the young man in the water.

My legs gave way. The world tilted, and I slowly sank, no longer trying to fight it. My knees touched the bottom. Beneath them was surprisingly smooth, warm stone. For some reason, that simple sensation was the only thing I could trust amid everything happening around me. I wrapped my arms around myself and sank until the water reached almost to my chin, trying to shield myself from the strangers' eyes as much as the depth allowed.

All I wanted was to close my eyes, let the warmth ease the last of the tension from my body, and stop trying to figure out where I was. My head was still spinning, and the world around me was slowly losing its shape. It felt as though I were still falling, even though I'd been sitting motionless at the bottom of the pool for some time. If not for the voices around me and the strangers' stares, which I could almost feel against my skin, I might already have fallen asleep right there in the water.

Meanwhile, the young man climbed out of the pool. He grabbed a robe lying on the stones and hurriedly pulled it on, fumbling with the sleeves more than once. His hands were visibly trembling, and his gaze kept darting back to me, lingering for barely a second before he turned away again.

One of the men standing at the edge of the pool finally stepped forward. His dark blond hair was neatly gathered into a low bun, not a single strand out of place. His clothing looked simpler than the others', though when I looked closer, I noticed delicate patterns woven into the dark fabric.

"Guards!"

One word was all it took. Rapid footsteps echoed beyond the stone arches, soon joined by the thunder of many boots and the clatter of metal. The noise grew louder until armed men began pouring into the courtyard, one after another.

I froze.

They wore dark, heavy clothing secured with leather straps. Their tall boots reached almost to the knees, and I could make out swords, spears, and other weapons strapped to their backs and belts, though I didn't have time to identify them all. My heart began racing again. My mind felt strangely blank, yet crowded with questions, and every passing second brought more of them.

Who are these people? What is this place?

The guards reacted quickly. I barely registered which of them reached me first before I felt a firm hand beneath my elbow and a careful tug urging me to stand. I didn't have the strength to resist. My body felt heavy and unfamiliar, my muscles barely responding, so I let them pull me to my feet. I swayed, then looked down at myself for the first time since surfacing.

At least I wasn't naked.

The relief was so intense and unexpected that, for a moment, I almost wanted to laugh. I was wearing a thick gray dress that fell to my ankles. The fabric had grown heavy with water and clung to my legs, while the cold air seeped through it, raising goose bumps across my skin.

They led me out of the pool. My legs could barely support me, and I had to rely almost entirely on the guards as they guided me along a stone pathway. I kept my eyes on the ground, trying not to lose my balance, when the young man with the band around his forehead spoke behind me.

"Who is she? What is she doing here?"

I raised my head. He stood a little way off, still clutching his robe closed, staring at me in bewilderment. Then he turned toward the dark-blond man, who hadn't taken his eyes off me either.

His gaze traveled over my soaked clothes, lingered on the fabric clinging to my body, then rose to my face.

I had no idea what to do or what was expected of me, so I kept walking, trying to take in my surroundings. Stone pathways wound between dozens of pools. Thick clouds of steam rose from each one, gathering beneath the vaulted ceilings like white clouds before slowly spreading across the enormous courtyard.

I'm so cold...

The trembling grew worse. My teeth began to chatter, my fingers went numb, and my arms felt impossibly heavy. I tried to concentrate on the path ahead and the guards beside me, but everything kept shifting in and out of focus. The stone beneath my feet seemed to tilt. Or perhaps the entire world was tilting.

By then, I barely cared where they were taking me, who these people were, or what would happen next. I wanted only one thing: to close my eyes and let the darkness take me again. To escape the cold, the noise, the unfamiliar voices, and the endless questions I had no answers to. Even for a little while.

That was when a young woman appeared in front of us.

She approached with such confidence that the guards stopped without a word. She wore a dark, high-necked dress that fell almost to the floor, with a clean white apron over it. Her hair was hidden beneath a neatly tied lace cap. She came straight up to me and, without saying a word, took my chin between her warm fingers, forcing me to lift my face.

She gave me a quick once-over, her gaze lingering on my soaked clothes. Then she released my chin and turned to the guards.

"She's to be taken to Her Ladyship."

Her Ladyship?

There were too many questions. My mind could no longer hold on to all of them at once, and I stopped trying. The guards led me forward again. I could feel their hands, the cold stone beneath my bare feet, and the weight of my own breathing, but everything else was gradually slipping away. The voices grew muffled, the figures around me blurred, and the light dissolved into a hazy patch.

I had just enough time to think that, this time, I wasn't afraid of the darkness.

Then it swallowed me again, and I lost consciousness.

Chapter 1

The Kingdom of Eirholm

Callum

I hate these winds.

They always arrive before the real cold, carrying the scent of wet stone, dry grass, and the long winter still lingering somewhere beyond the horizon, yet already present in every breath. Autumn never stays long in Eirholm. A few weeks of gray skies, faded hills, and a thin layer of frost each morning, and then snow blankets the land until spring. Winter hasn't quite claimed the kingdom yet, but its approach is impossible to ignore. The air has grown sharper, the cold scratches at my throat, and even the distant cliffs seem closer than they should.

I drove my stallion across the hills without slowing. His powerful muscles shifted beneath the saddle, and his hooves struck the frozen ground with heavy blows, scattering the silvery crust of frost.

The gray hills stretched as far as the horizon. In the south, people would probably call a place like this harsh, then invent some pretty tale about it for a song. Eirholm has always reminded me of an old warrior who has survived too many battles: scarred, silent, and far from welcoming, but brutally honest. This land has never promised more than it could give. Perhaps that's why I've always trusted it.

My men rode behind me. I hadn't looked back once during the journey, but I knew exactly where every rider was. I could hear the clink of metal, the creak of leather straps, the heavy breathing of horses, and the steady rhythm of hooves. These men had followed me long enough to understand an order before I even gave it. Good soldiers and decent killers. In Eirholm, there was hardly any difference.

The higher we climbed, the stronger the wind became. It battered my face, slipped beneath my collar, and found its way through my clothes, making the cloak behind me snap with every gust. The heavy black fabric streamed out behind me, and my loose hair kept blowing across my face, but I paid it little attention. I usually braided it before a long ride, but today I hadn't felt like wasting the time.

The iron mask pressed cold against my skin. Its metal edges rested tightly against my cheekbone and jaw, and I'd grown so accustomed to its weight that I barely noticed it anymore. Sometimes I even caught myself feeling uncomfortable without it.

The castle appeared in the distance. Dark walls rose above the hills, while tall towers pierced the faded sky. The banners hanging from them barely stirred, despite the wind tearing at my cloak with such force that I had to tighten my grip on the reins.

I guided my stallion down the slope. A thin layer of frost covered the road, glinting dangerously beneath the occasional rays of sunlight, but the horse never faltered. He knew this terrain as well as I did and moved with the confidence of an animal that could sense he was nearing home.

We left the town to one side. I turned off the main road before reaching the first houses and led my men along an old back route. It was quicker, and I had no desire to deal with the locals. From a distance, I could see smoke rising above the rooftops and the silhouettes of people near the wells and stables, but I had no intention of getting any closer. They would recognize me anyway. They always did, even if they quickly looked away afterward.

Over the years, I'd learned to recognize fear and contempt as easily as the scent of rain or smoke. Eirholm had plenty of both. People respected me enough to obey my orders, but that had never been enough to make them love me.

The inner courtyard gates opened before we even reached them. The heavy doors slowly swung apart to let the riders through, and the sound of hooves changed at once. The soft thud against frozen earth gave way to the hollow rumble of stone. The noise echoed off the walls and came rushing back. I rode into the courtyard first, only then bringing my stallion down to a walk.

The castle greeted me with its familiar chill. It always smelled the same: damp stone, iron, smoke, and power. Some scents never change, even after centuries.

I dismounted and handed the reins to the nearest soldier. He took them without a word, already turning the horse toward the stables, and I managed only a brief instruction.

"Water and feed him. He's had a long journey."

My men immediately dispersed across the courtyard.

I pulled off my gloves, tucked them into my belt, and noticed the man waiting by the wall. He stood perfectly still, his hands hidden inside the sleeves of his dark cloak. The wind stirred his gray hair, his thin face remained composed, and his watchful eyes seemed to take in every little detail. I'd known this man since childhood.

Oldrig, the king's adviser.

The silver-haired man approached me by a few steps.

"Welcome to Eirholm, Your Highness."

His voice was soft and even. He'd spent decades navigating court intrigues and had long since mastered the art of concealing his true thoughts behind carefully chosen words.

I walked straight past him without stopping.

"I want to see the queen," I said as I went. "My mother."

A brief silence fell between us. Behind me, the adviser let out a displeased sigh.

Oldrig remained where he was.

"Her Majesty is resting," he replied. "It's been a long day."

I gave a humorless smile.

"Tell your masters I've been grown for a long time, and I no longer believe in fairy tales."

Nothing changed in the old man's expression. Impressive discipline. Decades of service had taught him to remain composed under almost any circumstances.

"The queen is not expecting visitors today," he said after a brief pause.

This time, I finally looked him in the eye.

"She never expected me."

The words came out far too calmly. I wasn't even sure whether the old resentment was still there or whether the years had worn it away entirely.

Somewhere behind me, a horse whinnied. Voices drifted across the courtyard, mingling with the clatter of harnesses and the footsteps of men going about their business. The castle carried on as usual. My arrival had changed nothing.

I turned away before Oldrig could answer and headed for the castle.

A broad staircase led up to the open doors, beyond which darkness waited. From below, the entrance looked like a black chasm carved into the stone, and with every step, the walls seemed to grow taller and more imposing. Cold stone, narrow arrow slits, towering walls that had outlived generations of rulers and wars, their only reminders the scars left in the masonry. For centuries, these walls had witnessed decisions, forged alliances, broken oaths, and spilled blood. Eirholm held more secrets than its towers had windows.

My brothers called this castle home. But home was a place you wanted to return to, a place where someone waited for you because they wanted you there, not because your title or your duty demanded it.

I hadn't missed the castle, nor had I forgotten the past. I'd returned to Eirholm because it was my kingdom by birthright. By blood.

And now it was time to claim my place in it.

***

When I opened my eyes again, the first sensation was almost deceptive. For several seconds, I lay perfectly still, trying to work out where I was. Consciousness returned slowly, leaving behind a thick, hazy emptiness in which I couldn't find a single thought that might explain what was happening.

I looked up.

A heavy canopy stretched above me, decorated with intricate patterns of leaves, flowers, and unfamiliar symbols. Thick fabric fell in soft folds from a tall wooden frame, partially concealing the ceiling, though I could still make out massive carved beams. Sunlight streamed through the tall windows, passing through stained glass and scattering golden, amber, and copper-colored patches across the walls.

The bed was enormous. Several people could have slept in it comfortably. The warm blankets smelled of herbs, the sheets were impossibly soft, and the air held a faintly sweet fragrance whose source I couldn't identify. Tapestries depicting mountains, rivers, and strange creatures covered the stone walls. Some of the animals were unlike anything I'd ever seen. The furniture was heavy, made of dark wood polished to a deep shine. Beside the window stood a small table holding ceramic bottles filled with oils and bundles of dried plants.

I forced myself into a sitting position. A dull ache immediately spread through my head, my vision darkened, and I had to remain still until the dizziness passed. Once the walls stopped swaying, I carefully lowered my feet to the floor and only then noticed that I was wearing different clothes.

The gray dress was gone. In its place was a long, pale nightgown made of soft fabric, covering almost my entire body. Thick white stockings had been pulled over my feet.

Someone had changed my clothes.

I ran a hand through my hair. It was dry and neatly brushed. There was no trace of the water I'd woken up in: no damp strands against my neck, no heavy, soaked fabric clinging to my skin.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a mirror in the far corner of the room. I got up too quickly, and my muscles immediately protested, but I ignored the pain. I needed to see myself. If I couldn't remember anything else, surely my own face would at least look familiar.

I crossed the room and stopped in front of the mirror, gripping its wooden frame.

My reflection stared back at me. Nothing had changed. Hazel eyes, long eyelashes, a small nose, familiar lips. A tiny abrasion marked my lower lip, already covered by a thin layer of healing skin. I touched it with my fingertips, and my reflection did the same.

I wondered where the scratch had come from.

I studied my face for a long time, trying to feel something, to recognize the girl in the mirror through something deeper than sight. I searched for even the smallest familiar sensation, anything that might tell me who she was.

But nothing came.

This was my face. I knew that as surely as I knew I had two hands and two eyes. Beyond that, I remembered nothing. I couldn't even say how old I was, where I'd lived, who might be waiting for me, or whether I had friends or family. I had no idea how I'd ended up in the water, where I'd come from, or why I was now lying in this room.

The door opened almost silently.

I flinched and stepped backward until the backs of my knees hit the edge of the bed. I sank onto it, clutching the fabric of my nightgown.

A familiar servant entered first. I recognized her immediately. She was the girl who had taken me from the guards. Another woman followed, and I instinctively straightened.

She looked no older than twenty-five. Her fair hair was arranged in an elaborate updo, woven from dozens of delicate braids. A few loose curls brushed her temples and neck, softening the otherwise refined lines of her face. Her bright blue eyes immediately drew my attention, while a small beauty mark on her left cheek made her features seem less perfect and all the more alive.

But her dress made me forget everything else.

I'd never seen anything like it. The deep ruby color seemed almost alive, and the heavy fabric shimmered with every movement. The fitted bodice followed her figure perfectly, its long skirt

flowing softly across the floor. A sheer wrap rested over her shoulders, completing the ensemble. Her entire appearance was so unusual that I simply stared at her in silence for several seconds.

How beautiful.

The girl was the first to break the awkward silence.

"You have nothing to be afraid of."

Her voice was soft and warm, nothing like the sharp voices of the men who had surrounded me earlier. Her words were almost soothing, but my fear remained. I wanted to answer, or at least nod, but a dry, burning pain caught in my throat. Every breath still hurt after what had happened in the water, so instead of replying, I sank deeper into the pillows.

The servant remained by the door. The girl in the ruby dress approached and carefully sat on the edge of the bed, making sure not to startle me with any sudden movements. Now that she was closer, I could see her more clearly. She smelled of fresh roses, their petals still damp and cool. For some reason, the fragrance had an unexpectedly calming effect on me, though I couldn't understand why.

"Are you from one of the villages?" she asked.

A village?

I looked at her, trying to understand what she wanted to know.

"I..."

My voice broke into a rasp. I swallowed, but my throat tightened painfully.

"I don't know."

Her fair eyebrows lifted slightly.

"You don't know?"

I gave a weak shake of my head. She studied me for several seconds, and her gaze only made me feel more helpless.

"Then where are you from?"

I opened my mouth but couldn't bring myself to say a word. I tried searching through the emptiness inside my head, hoping to remember the name of a settlement or even the smallest detail that might help me solve the mystery.

My memory remained blank.

"I don't remember," I finally said, lowering my eyes.

This time, the girl didn't immediately ask another question.

"You were found in the baths," she said after a brief pause. "And not just any public baths. These belong to the princes. No one could get in there by accident."

Something tightened beneath my ribs. Once again, I pictured the hot water, the white steam, the man with his hair tied back, and the armed guards who had surrounded me the moment I surfaced.

"I woke up in the water," I reminded her quietly. "But I don't remember how I fell in."

She listened without interrupting. A hint of wariness entered her expression.

"Do you understand why that raises questions? No girl from Eirholm would end up there without a reason."

Eirholm.

The word sounded perfectly clear, yet it meant nothing to me. I repeated it silently, searching for some association, but my memory offered nothing.

"Who are you?" I asked, looking up.

The stranger studied me.

"You don't know?"

"I... don't remember."

She exchanged a brief glance with the servant.

"Fetch the healer."

"No!"

I hadn't expected to react so strongly myself.

"Please, don't. I'm not ill."

The girl looked at me, and I became painfully aware of the difference between us. She sat beside me in a magnificent ruby dress, composed and graceful, carrying the scent of flowers in her hair and clothes. I was barefoot, wearing someone else's nightgown, with a parched throat and an emptiness in my head that grew more frightening with every passing minute.

"Calm down," she said gently. "If you've truly lost your memory, the healer may be able to determine what happened to you. No one is going to hurt you."

I looked into her blue eyes for several seconds, trying to decide whether I could trust her.

"Where am I?" I finally asked. My mouth had gone dry again. "Please... tell me."

Her answer came almost immediately, without the slightest hesitation. Apparently, this was the simplest question I'd asked so far.

"You're in Almaren, the capital of the Kingdom of Eirholm."

Two unfamiliar names that were somehow supposed to explain everything.

The girl continued.

"You're in the palace of His Highness, Prince Lucian. The third prince."

So Eirholm was a kingdom. Every new word seemed to carry me even farther from understanding anything.

"And you...?"

The blue-eyed blonde gave a slight smile. This time, it was simple and unexpectedly warm.

"His wife."

She paused briefly before introducing herself.

"My name is Celia."

At that moment, the door opened again, and a short, elderly woman appeared in the doorway. She wore a dark green dress without jewelry, embroidery, or any other decorative details that might draw attention. Yet, somehow, she looked more at home here than anyone else I'd seen. There was nothing overly formal about her movements, and her gaze was calm and attentive.

"Lie down, child," the healer said gently.

For some reason, I obeyed. I genuinely had very little strength left to argue or resist. I settled back against the pillows and stared up at the ceiling again. The canopy, the stained-glass light, the heavy beams, Celia in her ruby dress, and the elderly woman beside my bed formed a picture far too detailed to be a dream.

I still didn't want to believe any of it. Without drawing attention, I pinched my side, harder than I'd intended. The pain flared immediately, convincing me beyond doubt. I went still, staring at the colored patches of sunlight on the ceiling, and finally allowed myself to accept the obvious.

I wasn't dreaming.

The healer was already leaning over me. She placed her palms against my temples, and a pleasant warmth spread from her hands, gradually easing the tension. She worked calmly and confidently, following a familiar routine she'd probably performed hundreds of times. She checked my pulse, gently lifted my eyelids, and examined my neck, collarbones, and wrists, watching my reactions closely.

"Headache?" she asked without looking up.

I nodded.

"Nausea?"

Another nod.

"Any tightness in your chest?"

"Yes," I whispered.

My own voice sounded strangely weak.

The woman straightened and looked at Celia. They exchanged a glance that seemed to convey an understanding I was not part of. Apparently, they'd already reached a conclusion about what had happened to me while I lay there, unable to remember even my own name.

"Something is wrong with the girl," the healer said. "But her condition is understandable."

I tensed.

"She's most likely from Loenvik. There's a fast-flowing river there, with dangerous banks. People fall into the water all the time. She probably struck her head against the rocks. The current may have carried her downstream and brought her to His Highness's baths."

The healer spoke with such confidence that, for a moment, I was frightened by how easily these strangers were putting together an entire story about me. They didn't know who I was, yet they already had an explanation for my appearance: a place I'd supposedly come from, a reason I'd ended up in the water, and even the circumstances that might have caused my memory loss.

And I couldn't confirm a single word of it.

"Judging by her condition, she was without air for some time," the woman continued. "There's a little water in her lungs, but her body was clearly deprived of oxygen. Such an ordeal can sometimes affect memory. At times, the mind shuts away what it cannot bear to process."

Celia regarded me thoughtfully.

"Will her memory return?"

For the first time, something personal entered her voice. It wasn't merely curiosity or a desire to understand a strange incident. She genuinely wanted to know the answer.

The healer gave a slight shrug.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not."

She fell silent for a moment, continuing to study me.

"But that isn't always a bad thing. Sometimes forgetting is how we survive."

Her words settled heavily inside me. I wanted to remember something, anything: a name, a place, a face, a voice, some small detail that might restore my sense of who I was. But my memories remained beyond my reach, and the thought made my anxiety grow.

Celia rose from the bed and gave the servant a slight nod.

"Bring her some water and something to eat. Something light and warm."

The servant bowed her head and slipped silently out of the room. I could hear my own breathing and the faint crackle of a fire somewhere beyond the bedroom. Celia turned back to me.

"Do you remember your name?"

I froze. A name should have been something obvious, the first thing a person could tell someone about herself. It shouldn't require any thought or depend on someone else's explanation. I searched through everything I could, but I couldn't find even that.

I didn't know my own name.

"No."

I shook my head, still staring at the stained-glass patterns and the patches of sunlight scattered across the stone floor.

"I don't remember anything at all," I added, swallowing the lump in my throat.

Celia gave a brief nod. Perhaps, after everything the healer had told her, my answer no longer came as a surprise.

"Then you shouldn't force yourself to remember anything just yet. Rest will do you more good than a hundred questions."

She stepped closer and straightened the edge of the blanket near my feet. The gesture was almost maternal, unexpectedly gentle, though I still didn't know whether I could trust her. I couldn't tell where genuine kindness ended and the business of deciding someone else's fate began.

"We'll talk later," Celia continued. "Once you've recovered, we'll decide what to do next."

I watched her in silence. She headed toward the door but paused at the threshold and glanced back at me. Her gaze lingered for a moment before the door closed.

I was alone.

Alone in an enormous, unfamiliar room, surrounded by stone walls, heavy fabrics, and sunlight slowly shifting across the floor. Until I understood who I was, the only sensible thing to do was speak as little as possible and listen as much as I could.

The enormous four-poster bed remained the only thing in the room that made me feel even remotely connected to reality.

I spent several hours lying almost motionless, listening to the silence of the unfamiliar palace. Gradually, staying in one place became unbearable. The walls seemed to press in around me, the air felt heavy, and the silence only made my anxiety worse. I forced myself to get up. My legs still felt weak and unsteady, but they held my weight, so I slowly crossed the room and approached the window.

It was tall, almost the entire height of the wall, with a heavy wooden frame and slightly cloudy glass that distorted the world beyond it. I rested my palms on the cold windowsill and looked outside.

Nothing was familiar.

Stone pathways crisscrossed the inner courtyard, winding between bare trees and low shrubs dusted with frost. Their dark branches stood out against the gradually fading sky, reaching upward in thin, tangled patterns. There were hardly any people around. Occasionally, a solitary figure in long clothing appeared in the distance, only to disappear behind an archway or gallery a moment later.

Dusk crept in almost unnoticed. The sky lost its daytime colors, turning a cold grayish blue, while the frost on the grass began to glimmer with a dull silver sheen. Shadows settled over the courtyard, making the stone walls seem even taller.

I stepped away from the window and stood in the middle of the room for a while, unsure what to do with myself. Then, almost absentmindedly, I approached the door and slid the bolt into place.

It was a childish gesture, completely useless. If someone really wanted to come in, a thin wooden latch wouldn't stop them. But after everything that had happened, even the illusion of having some control over my surroundings felt valuable. The soft click was unexpectedly reassuring.

No one else came to see me that day. Perhaps they'd forgotten about me, or perhaps they'd deliberately left me alone, deciding I needed time to recover. I wasn't sure which possibility was worse.

Only once did a servant appear. She slipped into the room almost silently, placed a tray of food and water on the table, and left just as quietly. The girl barely looked at me, as though she were afraid to let her gaze linger for longer than necessary.

I had no appetite, but I forced myself to eat a few pieces of soft flatbread, similar to plain bread, drank a little clear broth with finely chopped herbs, and took several sips of warm water. It had a faint metallic aftertaste that made me wrinkle my nose.

The nausea still came in waves. Whenever I turned my head too quickly or tried to stand up, the room began to sway. A dull throbbing persisted in my temples, accompanied by a heavy ache deep inside my skull.

Every now and then, unhurried footsteps sounded beyond the door. After a while, I almost learned to recognize them. It was always the same servant. She would approach the door, knock softly, wait a few seconds, and leave without receiving an answer. Each time, I hid beneath the covers, held my breath, and closed my eyes, pretending to be asleep.

It was ridiculous, but so far, it worked.

I listened as the footsteps faded down the corridor, and only then allowed myself to breathe again. I couldn't hide forever. Sooner or later, someone would come inside and start asking questions all over again.

And what could I possibly tell them?

Outside, darkness had completely settled, but no one came to light the candles. At first, I didn't pay much attention to it, but eventually I realized the room had grown far too dark. In the fading twilight, I could still make out the shapes of the furniture. Now, even those were gradually disappearing into the shadows.

I was just about to lie down again when I heard voices.

At first, they seemed like part of the palace's general background noise: distant sounds beyond the wall, scattered words too faint to make out. I froze and listened. The voices grew closer, becoming clearer with every passing moment.

After several hours of barely moving, getting up proved more difficult than I'd expected. Still, I forced myself across the room and approached the door. The floor seemed suspiciously loud beneath my feet. Every step echoed in my ears so sharply that I imagined the entire palace could hear me sneaking toward the exit. Stopping beside the door, I carefully rested my shoulder against the wood and pressed my ear to its cool surface.

Almost immediately, I recognized Celia's soft, even voice.

"I've arranged for the girl to stay in the east wing, in one of the guest chambers. She can remain there until we understand what's happened."

Someone answered her quietly. Probably a servant. I couldn't make out the words and was just about to step away when I heard a third voice.

A man's voice. Low, with a slight rasp.

It sounded so unexpectedly close that a chill ran down my spine.

"Has no one found out who she is yet?"

His voice was pleasant, but there was a note of cold irritation beneath it.

"Do you really think it's normal for an unknown girl to turn up in the princes' baths, and for everyone to pretend it was an accident?"

There it was. Finally, someone was asking the right questions.

"She's lost her memory," Celia replied quietly. "The healer confirmed it. Most likely, it was an accident."

"Or a very convenient lie."

A brief, tense silence settled over the corridor.

"She could have been spying on one of the princes. Or all of them. You've trusted her far too easily."

I pressed myself more firmly against the door. He was voicing exactly what I'd feared from the beginning. Sooner or later, someone would question my story and decide to investigate.

"I want to speak with her."

His voice sounded closer now. I could almost hear his footsteps.

"She hasn't opened the door," Celia explained after a short pause. "It's quiet inside. She may already be asleep."

For a moment, I thought I might get away with it. They would leave, and I'd have a little more time. At least one more night.

But the next sound destroyed that hope instantly.

A heavy blow made the door shudder beneath my hand. I stumbled backward, my heart leaping into my throat. Wood cracked, the latch gave a pitiful snap, and the door burst inward with such force that it slammed against the wall.

I cried out and jumped back.

The man standing in the doorway was the same one I'd seen at the baths.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in a dark, richly embroidered doublet. His dark blond hair was tied back in a low bun. His sharp, watchful gaze immediately found me in the dim room. He seemed momentarily taken aback by just how badly his sudden appearance had frightened me.

Surprise, almost bewilderment, flickered across his eyes before his expression settled into something hard and controlled.

Lucian, the third prince of Eirholm. Celia's husband. The man who was now looking at me as though I were a criminal awaiting judgment.

I had no idea what to do with my hands or how I was supposed to stand under that gaze. My body instinctively retreated toward the bed, the last thing in the room that offered any sense of stability. I gripped the edge of the mattress but didn't sit down. I didn't dare.

"Leave us," Lucian said quietly, without raising his voice.

Celia didn't argue. The servant didn't even lift her eyes. A few seconds later, I was alone with the prince.

He took several steps toward me. I kept my gaze lowered, but I could hear his approaching footsteps and feel his attention fixed on me. It was as though he were trying to figure out exactly what kind of person stood before him.

"I was told you've lost your memory."

Up close, his voice was lower than I'd expected, carrying the same slight rasp I'd heard earlier.

I nodded.

Silence settled between us. Neither of us spoke for several seconds, until I finally forced myself to look up.

Lucian stood close enough for me to make out his features: sharp angles, a composed expression, and faint traces of exhaustion beneath his eyes.

And his eyes...

A deep, vivid green. Cold and watchful.

"You need to tell the truth," he said, his voice growing harder. "While you still have the chance to speak freely."

The prince paused briefly.

"Who are you? And why were you spying on the princes?"

It took me a moment to understand the question. Then something inside me tightened.

"I wasn't spying on anyone!"

My voice came out louder than I'd intended. Lucian's expression shifted ever so slightly, and his gaze sharpened.

"You have an unusual accent," he said slowly.

I froze. He was listening closely now, paying attention to every word, every inflection, searching for something in my speech that might explain how I'd ended up here.

"Which lands are you from?" he continued. "Are you even from Eirholm?"

I shook my head.

"I don't know."

Exhaustion washed over me again, heavy and overwhelming. I had to grip the blanket more tightly to keep my eyes open.

"I don't remember anything," I repeated. "But I wasn't spying on anyone. I woke up in the water. I must have ended up there after an accident."

Even I could hear how unconvincing it sounded, but it was all I had.

Lucian remained silent, his gaze fixed on me. I could see him weighing my words against what he already knew, trying to find an explanation that made sense to him. I couldn't tell whether he believed me.

I was sitting on a bed in unfamiliar clothes, in a room I didn't recognize, facing a man everyone called a prince. For the first time, I became acutely aware of just how helpless I was. Everyone around me had a name, a position, a past, and a place in this world.

I had none of those things.

Lucian watched me for a few more seconds before slowly straightening. Some of the tension in his expression eased. He had made a decision.

"I'll look into this."

His voice carried a hint of weariness, as though the situation was already becoming a burden.

"My wife has asked that you remain at court. For the time being."

I nodded. The word *wife* stood out to me. Celia was his spouse. Which meant everything that had happened really was connected to the royal court, not some strange game whose rules I hadn't yet figured out.

"If all goes well," Lucian continued after a brief pause, "we'll decide what to do with you next."

I'd expected something entirely different: an interrogation, guards, a locked room, more questions I couldn't answer. Instead, I was simply being allowed to stay.

It wasn't a rescue. More like a temporary reprieve.

Lucian headed for the door but stopped at the threshold.

"Let's hope your memory returns," he said without turning around. "It would make things easier for all of us."

The door closed almost silently, leaving me alone once again.

The room immediately seemed larger, and breathing in its vast space became strangely difficult. I sank onto the edge of the bed and wrapped my arms around myself. Only when the prince's footsteps faded beyond the door did I finally allow myself to exhale. The breath carried away some of the trembling I'd been holding back. It spread through my shoulders and arms, making my fingers shake before leaving me with nothing but a dull, overwhelming exhaustion.

Lucian didn't believe me. I didn't know why I was so certain of it.

A few minutes later, the door opened again. A servant entered carrying a candleholder. She moved quickly and efficiently, lighting the candles one by one. Small flames flickered to life, reflecting off the polished furniture and gradually pushing the darkness out of the corners. The stone walls no longer seemed quite so cold and oppressive. They were still unfamiliar, but at least I could see them now.

I caught another cautious glance from the girl and finally couldn't help myself.

"I get the feeling you're afraid of me."

The servant startled so badly that she nearly dropped the candleholder. She froze for several seconds before managing an awkward smile and looking away.

"Can't say I blame anyone, my lady," she said, setting a candle on the table. "You came straight out of the water. Like a ghost. You scared everyone half to death."

She hesitated before adding:

"Especially the fifth prince."

A familiar face immediately came to mind: the young man with the band around his forehead, his startled shout, wide eyes, and frightened expression. Strangely enough, that was the first memory that hadn't made me feel afraid.

"You said *the fifth*..."

I hesitated, still unsure which questions I was allowed to ask here.

"How many princes are there?"

The girl considered it for only a moment.

"There are four at court, my lady."

I nodded slowly, going over the faces I'd already seen. Lucian was the third prince. The fifth was the young man who'd been so frightened by my appearance. I'd also seen another man at the baths, though I hadn't gotten a proper look at his face. Clearly, I knew very little about the royal family.

"Why do you call me *my lady*?" I asked. "I'm not from the palace."

The servant looked at me more closely, her earlier fear seemingly fading. She approached the bed and absently straightened the edge of my blanket.

"Who can say, my lady? No one knows where you come from. Perhaps you're from a noble family and something terrible happened to you. Anything is possible in Eirholm."

I considered that. After everything I'd seen in this world so far, I'd begun to doubt that anything was truly impossible.

"Perhaps," I murmured.

We fell silent for a moment. Beyond the walls, the palace gradually grew quieter. Somewhere in the distance, a door closed, followed by a few muffled voices. Then silence settled over the room again.

I looked at the girl.

"What's your name?"

She seemed slightly surprised. Apparently, she hadn't expected me to ask about her.

"Chessa."

"That's a lovely name," I remarked.

The servant smiled, this time genuinely. A faint blush of embarrassment touched her cheeks.

"Thank you, my lady. It's a shame I don't know yours."

There was no point answering that question. I simply didn't have an answer.

I lowered my eyes.

"Neither do I."

Chessa's smile faded. She didn't ask me to explain. She only looked at me with sympathy before speaking again after a brief pause.

"My lady... if you don't mind, perhaps we could go outside for a little while. Take a walk around the house. I could show you the garden and courtyard."

After spending so many hours in that room, the suggestion caught me by surprise. I immediately pictured the cold courtyard, the guards, the unfamiliar people, and the countless rules I knew nothing about.

"Am I... allowed?" I asked cautiously.

Chessa raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"No one has ordered that you be kept locked away," she replied calmly. "The healer actually recommended some fresh air. After a fall like yours, your head may feel heavy for a while, and a little movement should do you good."

I glanced toward the window. The courtyard had almost disappeared beneath the cold blue of evening, and yet the thought of leaving the room suddenly appealed to me. I'd been alone for far too long.

"All right," I agreed, quicker than I'd intended. "I'd like to see it."

Chessa looked visibly relieved.

"Then I'll bring you something to wear."

She left and soon returned with a light cloak in a pale pink shade. The fabric was soft and warm. When Chessa draped it over my shoulders, I felt a little more secure than I had all evening. She brought me a pair of neat leather boots with small heels as well. I carefully slipped them on and took a few steps, getting used to the unfamiliar footwear.

"Ready?"

I nodded.

The moment the door opened, cold air brushed against my face. It was damp and fresh, carrying the scents of stone, earth, and late autumn. I drew in a deeper breath, held it for a few seconds, and slowly let it out.

For the first few moments, I simply didn't know where to look. Dark stone pathways glistened beneath a thin layer of frost, the grass along their edges shimmered silver in the cold, and bare trees stretched their branches toward the sky, intertwining above the paths. Lanterns burned along the

stone walls. Their steady light didn't quite chase away the darkness, leaving small illuminated patches scattered among the deeper shadows.

The third prince's residence stood nearby, a massive structure of stone and timber. Warm light flickered in its windows, and behind each one I could imagine lives I knew nothing about.

Chessa and I walked slowly. Frost crunched softly beneath our feet. The sound seemed far too loud in the near silence, and I tried to tread carefully while memorizing everything around me: the layout of the paths, the windows, the archways, the towers, and the occasional figures appearing in the distance. I wanted to find something familiar in this place, but not a single detail stirred a sense of recognition.

I looked up at the dark palace walls. If there were princes, then there had to be a king. Surely there was a queen, too, along with courtiers, servants, guards, rules, and an entire way of life I knew absolutely nothing about.

"Chessa..." I called softly without stopping. "What are the king and queen like?"

The girl slowed slightly, considering her answer.

"The king is strict," she finally said. "But he's rarely seen."

An image of a man I already had no desire to meet immediately formed in my mind.

"And the queen?"

Chessa's expression softened a little.

"Beautiful. Cold, but not cruel. She simply keeps her distance. Especially from those she isn't close to."

"Are there many people like that?"

I wasn't even sure why I'd asked. The girl gave a faint smile.

"Every family has its share, my lady."

I said nothing.

We walked a little farther, and the garden gradually changed. The path curved away, the trees grew denser, and the lantern light became weaker. Long shadows stretched between the trunks, and for a few seconds, I had the impression that we were completely alone.

Then I noticed movement.

Two figures appeared between the trees. They were walking toward us side by side. The woman had her arm linked through the man's. I recognized them almost immediately.

Celia wore a light, flowing gown, its hem sweeping over the frost-covered path. Beside her walked Lucian in a dark cloak. His stride was as confident and measured as ever, but there was something different about him now. He leaned slightly toward Celia, saying something in a low voice meant only for her. She smiled and lowered her eyes.

I slowed down. For some reason, I suddenly felt awkward. I was an outsider who had accidentally stumbled upon a private moment, something never meant for anyone else to see, so I looked away. A few seconds later, however, I found myself glancing back at them.

"What kind of man is the prince?" I asked almost absently.

"The finest man in Eirholm," Chessa replied with such conviction that I turned to her in surprise. "He's fair and intelligent. His Highness remembers people, treats the servants kindly, and never punishes anyone without cause. Many believe he should be king."

I looked at Lucian again. Chessa's words were difficult to reconcile with the man who had stood in my bedroom only a short while ago, searching for a threat to the royal court. The cold stare, the hard voice, the questions about who I was and why I'd been spying on the princes. Perhaps I was simply seeing two different sides of the same man.

Lucian said something to Celia, and she laughed softly.

For some reason, I kept watching them. Probably for a little too long.

Because in the next moment, the prince lifted his head, and his gaze immediately found me. Before I could work out whether he'd noticed me by chance or had been keeping an eye on his surroundings, our eyes met.

I immediately looked away, pretending to study the trees ahead. Chessa continued telling me something about the garden, but I barely heard another word.

"How dare you!"

The sharp voice cut through the evening air so unexpectedly that I flinched and turned around.

A young woman was approaching along the path, accompanied by several servants. They followed in a neat formation, keeping an equal distance from one another. This wasn't simply a noblewoman. Her entourage, the way she walked, and the way everyone around her stepped aside spoke of authority far more convincingly than any title could.

She was tall and carried herself with almost perfect poise. Her dark blond hair was styled half-up, the upper section arranged in an elaborate hairstyle that left her forehead and temples exposed, while the remaining strands fell freely down her back. A delicate tiara glimmered on her head. Her emerald gown fitted her perfectly, catching the lantern light with a cool shimmer, and a matching cloak rested across her shoulders.

The girl stopped a few steps away and looked first at Chessa, then at me. Her blue eyes were sharp and cold. They were remarkably similar to those of the frightened prince I'd seen at the baths.

Chessa reacted first, dropping into a deep curtsy. It took me several seconds to realize I was expected to do the same. I awkwardly followed her lead, nearly losing my balance in my unfamiliar boots.

"Your Highness..." Chessa's voice trembled. "Please forgive us. We meant no disrespect."

The princess didn't even look at her.

"You've violated more than just the rules. You've forgotten your manners," she said coldly.

Her disdainful gaze shifted to me.

"Watching a prince and his wife in private is unacceptable. Have you forgotten where you are?"

I lowered my eyes. Not because I felt guilty, but because I wanted to disappear from her sight, even if only for a few seconds. I hadn't been trying to spy on Lucian and Celia. I hadn't even known such rules existed here.

Chessa began trying to explain, stumbling over her words, but I barely heard her. The princess was already looking only at me.

"And as for you..."

She took a step closer.

"I came here personally to see the insolent girl who dared to show up in my brothers' baths."

A thin smile appeared on her lips. She'd already decided what kind of person I was.

I clenched my fingers beneath my cloak.

"Quite an extraordinary coincidence," she continued. "Or did you expect us to believe your little story about an accident?"

Irritation flared before fear could take hold. I raised my head.

"If I'd known where I was going to end up," I said before I could stop myself, "I would've chosen somewhere a little more pleasant. Somewhere without people who mistake arrogance for the right to judge everyone else."

Silence fell instantly. Chessa let out a quiet gasp, and the servants behind the princess froze. The girl herself didn't move, but her expression changed. Beneath the coldness, I could clearly see that I'd wounded her pride.

"Watch your tongue," she said more quietly.

A shiver ran down my spine at the sound of her voice.

"You're here only because my brother is far too kind."

I kept looking at her, although my heart was already beating much too fast.

"I've allowed you to speak more than you deserve. Don't mistake that for permission to address me as an equal."

I opened my mouth. A reply had already formed in my mind, and I probably wouldn't have been able to stop myself from saying it.

"What is going on, Aurelia?"

Lucian's voice was quiet, but those few words were enough to change the tension in the garden.

He approached with Celia and stopped beside his sister. His gaze immediately settled on Aurelia.

The princess turned sharply toward him. Her emerald cloak slipped across her shoulder, catching the lantern light.

"This girl is behaving disgracefully," she said coldly. "She's insolent and has forgotten her place. I was merely reminding her of the rules."

Lucian's gaze shifted to me. I barely resisted the urge to look away.

"She's lost her memory," Celia said gently, stepping forward. "She didn't mean to offend you."

The princess looked at her with obvious irritation.

"You're far too indulgent, Celia. It's no wonder these sorts of problems keep appearing at court."

Aurelia looked at me once more. This time, her glance was brief, final, and icy.

"I have no intention of staying any longer. Good evening, brother."

She turned away. Her entourage followed immediately, without a single unnecessary movement. The figures in emerald and silver disappeared between the trees, their footsteps gradually fading until the oppressive feeling they'd brought with them vanished as well.

Only then did I realize I'd barely been breathing. I slowly exhaled.

"Don't pay any attention to her," Celia said quietly.

I gave a brief nod and lowered my eyes. Lucian was still watching me, and now he knew one more thing about me.

I wasn't very good at keeping quiet when someone accused me unfairly.

Chapter 2

Callum

I walked across the stone slabs, polished over centuries to a cold, mirrorlike sheen. With every step, I recognized the palace, though almost everything about it felt foreign. The high vaulted ceilings, the massive columns, the narrow windows through which daylight fell in long, pale strips across the floor. Even the shadows between the torches remained unchanged. It was a strange feeling, returning to a place where you had once known every turn, only to discover that your memory had preserved it better than your heart had.

The palace of the King of Eyrholm greeted me with solemn silence. Somewhere beyond the walls, expensive fabrics rustled, metal clinked, and servants moved through the corridors with quiet steps, doing their best to remain unnoticed. Power didn't need constant reminders of its presence here. It was woven into every crest above every doorway, every bow before a title, and the instinctive way people straightened whenever someone from the royal family passed by.

I hadn't been here in nearly twenty years. It had been long enough to become a different man, to learn how to make decisions without anyone else's permission, take responsibility for my own mistakes, and stop looking to others for approval. Apparently, though, twenty years hadn't been enough to stop me from being my father's son.

The audience chamber came into view ahead. The king was waiting behind its doors.

I had no idea why he'd summoned me to the capital, especially with such urgency. I recognized the handwriting in his letter at once: neat lines, no unnecessary flourishes, and not a single word more than required.

Come at once.

His signature and the heavy royal seal. Now all that remained was to find out why I'd really been called here.

I passed the old tapestries, depicting the kings of the past towering over their kneeling enemies and subjects. Their faces looked stern, almost indistinguishable from one another.

I stopped before the doors. The enormous dark wooden panels were carved with the crest of the royal house. The metal handle felt cold beneath my fingers. Behind those doors was a man I hadn't seen in nearly twenty years, yet whose face I could picture with my eyes closed.

I exhaled and pushed the door open.

The guards straightened almost imperceptibly. Their spears shifted a few inches, the leather of their armor creaked softly, but no one tried to stop me. I didn't spare them a glance.

The throne room greeted me with its vastness and half-light. The vaulted ceiling disappeared into the heights above, old frescoes darkened between the massive beams, and flames burned in metal braziers along the walls. Their light slid across the dark stone floor, picking out faded tapestries from the gloom. As a child, I'd thought the room enormous. Now I'd simply grown up.

At the far end, on a raised platform of black stone, sat the king.

My father. A man who had long ago stopped distinguishing himself from the power he wielded.

He wore a heavy royal cloak embroidered in gold along the edges, over a doublet of deep burgundy. His dark hair, touched with gray, was swept back as always. A short beard sharpened the line of his jaw. Rings glinted on his fingers, each one once representing land, a treaty, an alliance, or someone's fate transformed into a claim of ownership. My father was reading a parchment.

I stopped at the foot of the dais, but he didn't look up. For several seconds, I stood silently before him, feeling a familiar tension rise inside me. The king finished the line, slowly rolled up the parchment, and set it aside on the armrest. Only then did he look at me, his gaze heavy, direct, and appraising. When I was a child, I'd thought my father could see right through me. Later, I realized he was simply very good at spotting other people's weaknesses.

"You've grown," he said.

I smirked.

"So have you. Growing old on a throne must be especially convenient."

My father's expression didn't change, but I noticed his jaw tighten.

"You summoned me," I reminded him. "Care to explain why?"

He clasped his hands in front of him.

"Rumors have reached me."

"I'm sure there are plenty of those in the capital."

"These don't please me."

My father studied me for several seconds, as though deciding how far he could push things in our first conversation after twenty years of silence.

"Discontent is growing in the kingdom," he finally said. "But it isn't directed at me."

I drew a slow breath.

"Adrian."

He gave the slightest nod.

"The heir is too proper. He believes in people and fails to see what's happening beyond the palace walls."

I said nothing.

"People are saying the throne should belong to someone else," the king continued. "There has been talk of a conspiracy. Of an assassination attempt."

I folded my arms across my chest.

"And you believe the threat is coming from outside?"

His gaze hardened.

"I believe it could be anywhere."

"Then why are you looking beyond the palace walls? Every other person here smiles at someone they're planning to betray, and every third one knows where to hide a knife so no one will find it."

My father didn't smile.

"That's precisely why you're here."

I remained silent.

"You know how to go unnoticed," he continued. "How to hear things other people aren't meant to hear. How to see what everyone else overlooks. They don't consider you a threat."

"How amusing."

"What is?"

"Hearing that from you."

This time, my father frowned.

"Don't start."

"I'm not starting anything. It's just strange to hear that my greatest asset is my ability to be a shadow from the man who once did everything in his power to teach me how to become one."

The king rose abruptly. His heavy chair scraped against the stone with a dull groan, but I didn't move.

"That isn't what we're discussing," he snapped. For the first time that morning, genuine anger entered his voice. "I'm asking you as your king."

My father descended one step from the dais.

"Will you help your brother?"

I studied him for a long moment. Perhaps too long for someone standing before a king, but I no longer cared how many rules I broke before leaving that room. Two instincts warred inside me: turn around and walk away, erasing Eyrholm from my life once more, or stay and find out who had decided to undermine the palace from within. Both choices came at a price. The only difference was who would get to decide what that price was.

"You're asking a rather strange question, Your Majesty," I said at last. "I didn't come back for my family. And certainly not for the throne."

"Then why did you come back?"

I inclined my head slightly.

"If someone really is planning to assassinate Adrian, I'll find them. But not because you've ordered me to, and not because I've suddenly developed a desire to save the royal family. This palace has spent far too long pretending everything is under control. And I know exactly what happens to a house when rot is hidden beneath expensive fabrics and family crests."

My father's expression remained unchanged, but his fingers tightened around the armrest.

"And what is it you see?"

"Advisers who know more than they let on. And an heir who has already become the subject of whispers."

The king watched me without moving.

"Be careful, Callum."

"I'm always careful."

He knew I wasn't boasting. I really did know how to disappear, how to hear what was said behind closed doors, and how to notice the things others preferred to ignore. If my father had decided to bring me back now, the situation was more serious than he wanted me to believe.

"Then you agree?" the king asked.

I didn't answer immediately.

"I'll help," I said after a pause. "But I'll do it my way."

"That isn't up for discussion."

I raised my eyes.

"Then you've summoned the wrong son."

For several seconds, the room fell completely silent. Familiar irritation flickered in my father's eyes, but something else appeared alongside it—the same expression I'd remembered from childhood. He was already calculating his next move.

"The heir's investiture is coming soon. You must remain at the palace."

I allowed myself a brief smile.

"Of course I'll stay. I've missed my family terribly."

His fingers clenched again.

There. That had struck a nerve.

"Your mother…" the king began.

"I know."

The word came before he could finish. I took a step closer to the dais.

"She was one of the people who decided to send me north."

My father's gaze grew heavier.

"It was a political alliance. Necessary to secure the borders and preserve peace," he attempted to explain.

"Of course," I said with a nod.

Sometimes a single word was enough to make someone understand everything you had no intention of saying aloud.

"Peace bought with another person's child," I continued. "A convenient way to put it. Especially when that child happens to be your own son."

The king's jaw tightened. I saw him preparing to answer, but I no longer wanted to listen.

"Don't trouble yourself, Your Majesty," I said. "I've long since learned to tell the difference between necessity and self-interest."

My father was the first to look away, and I made a note of it. We remained silent for several seconds before the king finally spoke again.

"There's something else."

I went still.

"You must speak with Lucian."

My brother's name hung between us, heavier than anything we'd said before.

"I'm not particularly eager to."

"This isn't a request, Callum. Lucian needs to know what's happening. And you need to be there for him."

"How amusing. No one remembered I existed for twenty years, and now the entire family suddenly needs me."

"Don't overestimate your importance."

I met the king's gaze.

"Don't worry. I remember very well how little importance I have here."

I turned away.

"I'll visit Lucian," I tossed over my shoulder. "But don't expect any family embraces."

"Lucian isn't to blame for any of this."

I stopped in the doorway and reluctantly turned my head. The king was watching me, waiting for another argument, but I said nothing. I opened the door and walked out.

The doors of the throne room closed behind me, shutting away the king's voice, the cold stone, and everything I'd left behind all those years ago. Yet I felt no relief. Now I knew the most important thing: I hadn't been brought home. No one was planning a family reunion or hoping to rekindle old bonds.

I'd been summoned like a mercenary, someone capable of sorting out the mess and preventing a possible assassination attempt on the heir to the throne. And if my father truly believed I was a shadow, able to pass through walls without being noticed, he'd made one mistake.

The king had forgotten that shadows could choose whose side they were on, too.

In my sticky, restless nightmares, I found myself in unfamiliar places over and over again. Sometimes I stood in the middle of a square surrounded by tall stone buildings. Sometimes I walked down narrow streets where the cobblestones gleamed after the rain. Other times, I simply stared at someone's face, a face that seemed important, though I couldn't remember the person's name. Every dream ended in the same place—an instant before I was supposed to understand who I was.

I opened my eyes.

The carved beams beneath the ceiling were still there. The woven pattern above me remained motionless, and the canopy swayed faintly in the draft, letting in the pale morning light. A delicate pattern of frost silvered the tall windows.

I closed my eyes, trying to hold on to at least one name from the dream, but the memories crumbled before I could reach them. Somewhere, there was a home that belonged to me. People who knew me. A place where I'd been born. Perhaps a family. If the healer was right and I'd really been in an accident, a blow to the head or a lack of oxygen might have taken far more from me than a few hours of memory.

The corridor outside my door was quiet. I wasn't being kept prisoner, but no one had explained what would happen to me next, either. I was still in a stranger's house, surrounded by unfamiliar people, and I couldn't even tell them my own name.

I got up carefully, waiting for the dizziness to pass. A wardrobe stood against the wall, its door slightly ajar. Inside hung several dresses, arranged in neat rows. I began examining them with genuine curiosity. Heavy fabrics, long sleeves, high necklines, embroidery, fastenings, delicate belts. Everything looked perfectly suited to this place, but I couldn't understand who the clothes belonged to or why they were in my room.

I chose a pale pink dress with a small, faded pattern. It was long, with soft sleeves and a heavy hem. The fabric was thick and warm, and smelled of herbs and clean linen.

Once I was dressed, I went over to the mirror. A pale face with tired shadows beneath the eyes stared back at me. A thin abrasion was still visible on my lower lip, and my hair fell loosely over my shoulders, slightly tangled from sleep. I touched my reflection with my fingertips and studied my own eyes.

Who was I?

I knew how to move, how to hold myself, how to speak and defend myself. Countless habits and skills had survived without the help of my memories. But whenever I tried to find the most important things—my name, my home, my parents, the place where I'd been born—I found nothing but an empty space.

There were too many questions. I didn't know where to go. Was it too early to visit Celia, or was it time already? No one had come to check on me, no one had invited me to breakfast, and the silence in the room was gradually becoming harder to bear than the ache in my head.

So I simply went out.

The corridors of the third prince's residence were quieter than I'd expected. Somewhere in the distance, I could hear footsteps, low voices, and the clinking of dishes. I wandered without any particular destination until one of the corridors led me to a pair of tall double doors.

Beyond them was a library.

I stopped in the doorway. The smell of paper, leather bindings, dry wood, and dust reached me before I had a chance to take in the room. The shelves rose almost to the ceiling, disappearing into the dimness of the upper levels. Rolling ladders stood between them, and books filled the shelves in tightly packed rows. Gold symbols, titles, and crests gleamed on the dark covers.

I stepped inside. It was so quiet that even my breathing seemed like an unnecessary intrusion. Slowly running my fingers along the spines, I began reading the titles. Some meant nothing to me. Others stirred a strange sense of recognition that vanished before I could work out where it came from.

At least I understood the language of Eyrholm. Did that mean I'd been born in this kingdom? Or had I lived here long enough to learn how to speak it?

I had stopped at one of the shelves, trying to make sense of the titles, when I heard footsteps behind me. I didn't have time to turn around. The collision came out of nowhere. I walked straight into someone's chest and stumbled backward, nearly losing my balance. The thick book in the stranger's hands tilted, but he caught it with a single movement.

I looked up.

Prince Lucian stood before me.

He wore a dark emerald doublet. His hair looked a little less severe than it had the day before, with a few strands loose at his temples. For a moment, I completely forgot what I'd been about to say.

"I'm sorry," I blurted out. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

One of his eyebrows lifted slightly.

"Do you often make your way around the palace like that? Without looking where you're going and picking arguments with members of the royal family?"

I immediately remembered my encounter with Aurelia the previous day.

"If Your Highness is referring to the misunderstanding with the princess, she was the one who insulted me first."

"A misunderstanding," he repeated, a hint of amusement in his voice. "You behaved rather differently yesterday. You barely spoke and refused to leave your room."

I felt my cheeks grow warm.

"I was frightened."

"And now?"

"Now I simply don't want to spend the entire day cooped up within four walls."

Lucian held my gaze.

"Do you always speak like that?"

"Like what?"

"Directly."

I didn't know what to say at first. The prince seemed to be trying to understand where I'd acquired such a habit of speaking to people most would prefer to avoid.

"You don't speak like the others at court," he observed.

"Perhaps I've never been to court before. I don't know all the rules of etiquette."

It was true, though I couldn't be certain it had always been that way. I lowered my eyes.

"I'm sorry if I've offended you."

Lucian didn't argue.

"Have you remembered anything?"

I shook my head.

"No. Just fragments of feelings. Sometimes I think I know something, but the moment I try to remember, it disappears."

"Your name, too?"

"Yes."

I lowered my gaze and noticed the book in his hands.

"Are you reading?"

The question slipped out before I could stop it. This time, Lucian looked genuinely surprised.

"Do you often ask princes questions?"

"Only when I accidentally walk into them."

Something resembling a smile appeared on his face. It was barely there, but it was real.

"Fair enough."

I hadn't expected him to agree.

Lucian lifted the book slightly.

"Books are part of a prince's education. They teach you to recognize the consequences of your actions before you have to face them."

I glanced along the shelves.

"I wish I could remember what I liked to read."

"What makes you think you liked reading?"

"I don't know. It just feels as though I should have."

Lucian didn't answer. His gaze grew thoughtful again, his eyes narrowing slightly in a way I'd already begun to recognize. He seemed to consider my words for a moment before speaking.

"You should take a walk through the market outside the palace walls."

I looked up in surprise.

"Am I allowed?"

"There's no reason to forbid it. Not yet."

He paused briefly.

"People, scents, streets, conversations. Sometimes memories return not because you try to summon them, but because something unexpectedly feels familiar."

His words made more sense than I wanted to admit.

"You're being very kind today," I said uncertainly, alluding to the suspicion and sternness he'd shown me the day before.

"My wife trusts you," he replied. "That's reason enough to give you a little time."

His voice was calm, but his words still carried a reminder: I'd been allowed to spend that time here. It hadn't been given to me freely.

Lucian stepped aside, clearing the way.

"Go to the market. Perhaps you'll find something familiar there."

I was about to walk past him when I stopped.

"And if I don't?"

"Then we'll keep looking."

I didn't have time to understand why those words sounded so unexpectedly reassuring. Lucian turned and disappeared between the shelves, leaving me alone in the middle of the library.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped back into the corridor and almost immediately ran into Chessa. She froze in the middle of the passage, a laundry basket pressed against her, and stared at me for a few moments, clearly not expecting to find me outside my room.

"I thought you were still asleep."

"I've been awake for quite a while," I replied. After a brief pause, I added, "Could you take me to the market?"

The maid looked surprised.

"Right now?"

I nodded.

"Maybe it'll help me remember."

That was only part of the truth. I wanted to understand where I was, to see the city, its people, its streets. I wanted to find something—anything—that might stir a familiar feeling and give me a clue about who I'd been before waking up in the baths. And if I was lucky, perhaps I'd discover whether there was a way to get home.

Chessa didn't argue. Perhaps she simply had no reason to talk me out of it.

We left the third prince's residence and followed the road toward the outer fortress walls. The farther we got from the palace, the more the air began to change. It filled with movement, voices, and new scents: fresh bread, smoke, spices, damp stone, and something wonderfully alive.

Chessa talked almost without stopping, telling me about the capital. She explained which streets were considered respectable, where it was best not to go without an escort, which shops were known for their quality goods, and which merchants were so skilled at cheating their customers that the victims didn't realize they'd been swindled until they got home.

"Everyone here knows their place," she said as we turned onto a busier street, "and does their best not to lose it."

I listened, taking in everything she told me while looking around. The market district of Almaren was far larger than the handful of rooms and corridors I'd seen so far. Real life was unfolding here, with its own rules, customs, and people who had lived here long before I'd ever appeared. I wondered whether I'd ever been part of that life.

The market greeted us with a roar of noise.

There were so many people that if you stopped for even a second, the crowd immediately began flowing around you on both sides, paying no attention to your existence. The narrow streets barely had room for carts, merchant wagons, baskets, horses, and travelers. Wheels creaked, metal clinked, vendors shouted over one another, children darted between the stalls, and shoppers argued over prices, trying to make themselves heard above the din.

The carts stood almost side by side, blocking the passage entirely in some places. People squeezed past them sideways, clutching their purchases and gathering up their long skirts to keep the hems from getting dirty. Colorful awnings stretched above the streets, flags fluttered between the buildings, and fabrics in every imaginable shade hung from the stalls.

I kept looking down to avoid tripping over the stones or someone's basket, then lifting my gaze again, trying to take everything in at once. The air smelled of autumn: damp earth, decaying leaves, smoke from the braziers, fresh bread, and sweet fruit laid out on rough wooden tables. Apples, pears, and unfamiliar-looking fruit were stacked in neat little pyramids, glistening with the morning moisture and looking remarkably bright against the gray stone.

I did my best not to lose my companion in the crowd. The hem of my dress kept catching on people's sleeves, cloaks, and baskets. People glanced at me curiously, letting their eyes linger a little longer than usual, but I noticed no open hostility. Apparently, word of the girl who had appeared in the princes' baths had already spread through the capital.

"And do you…" Chessa leaned closer so her voice wouldn't get lost in the noise. "Do you really remember nothing about yourself? Not even your favorite color?"

"Lilac," I answered almost automatically.

Then I fell silent, trying to understand where that certainty had come from.

"At least, I think so," I added more quietly.

Chessa smiled.

"So you do remember something after all."

I nodded, though the realization only made my heart feel heavier. If I remembered my favorite color, then somewhere inside me, the person I'd once been was still there. A girl who had favorite things, habits, people, and a home.

I looked around Almaren's market once more. If I'd really lived somewhere around here before, why didn't a single corner of the city feel familiar?

I was just approaching a fabric stall when someone's scream cut through the air. Another followed, then a third. The market changed in the space of a heartbeat.

People scattered. Someone dropped a basket of apples, sending several rolling across the stones. A woman grabbed a child by the shoulders and practically shoved him into the doorway of the nearest shop. Vendors fell silent mid-sentence. The crowd parted, though I still had no idea why.

Then I heard the thunder of hooves.

The sound came closer at terrifying speed, echoing off the stone walls of the narrow street. Each beat grew louder, reverberating somewhere beneath my ribs.

I turned.

A sweat-darkened black horse was charging straight through the market, moving far too fast for such a narrow street. Its mane streamed in the wind, its hooves striking the stones with tremendous force as people leaped out of its path.

The rider was dressed entirely in black. His cloak whipped behind him, rising in sharp folds, and at full speed it almost looked as though something enormous and predatory were spreading its wings. For one fleeting moment, I thought of the monsters in old legends, creatures capable of blotting out the sky, then immediately dismissed the ridiculous notion.

He didn't slow down. He didn't seem to have any intention of doing so. No one shouted after him, protested, or tried to stop him. They were genuinely afraid.

"My lady!"

Chessa's cry came from somewhere to my side. I caught a glimpse of her backing against a wall, nearly losing her balance. I needed to move, too. I stepped backward to clear the way, but my heel caught between two stones. My foot slipped, my body lost its balance, and I realized I was falling.

The next second, a strong arm wrapped around my waist and jerked me upward. I didn't even have time to scream. The breath was knocked from my lungs, the world lurched, and suddenly the stone street was no longer beneath my feet. I was thrown across the saddle, pressed against the rider, my fingers instinctively clutching the black fabric of his cloak.

The smell of leather, metal, and cold air mingled with the sharp scent of the horse. Everything around me blurred into a jumble of colors, faces, and moving shadows. I had no idea where I was looking or what was happening until I raised my eyes.

A black metal mask covered half the rider's face, leaving only his dark brown eyes exposed.

He glanced at me once—quickly, assessing me as though I'd become an unexpected obstacle that needed to be removed from his path. I opened my mouth, but before I could say a word, the rider gathered the reins in one hand, pushed me away with the other, and a moment later I was falling.

The fall was brief but painful. The air was knocked out of my chest, a flash of white burst across my vision, and my palms burned against the stones and dry earth. I rolled onto my side, struggling to breathe, but instead of air, dust filled my throat. I coughed, dragged in a ragged breath, and only then became aware of the pain. It spread from my bruised side toward my lower back and hip, growing worse with every movement.

For several seconds, I simply lay there, trying to collect myself. Then I planted my palms against the ground and struggled to my feet. My knees trembled, my dress caught around my legs, and my palms stung, but I barely noticed the pain.

Chessa stood a short distance away, her face pale, unable to move.

I slowly turned my head.

The rider was still there.

He sat calmly in the saddle, as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. The horse shifted impatiently beneath him, sending little clouds of white breath into the cold air. The crowd around us had gone still.

Our eyes met.

The rider didn't even bother to say a word. He simply tightened the reins, and the horse lunged forward. I stumbled backward, nearly losing my balance again, as its hooves struck the stones. Dust and dry leaves flew into the air. The rider's black cloak flared behind him, briefly obscuring his figure, and moments later he vanished at the end of the street as quickly as he'd appeared.

No one tried to stop him. Judging by the faces around me, the locals knew him well enough to stay out of his way.

Chessa rushed over almost immediately. Her face had gone white, and her fingers clamped around my elbows so tightly that I suspected her greatest fear now wasn't that I'd fallen, but that I might decide to chase after the rider. She quickly looked me over from head to toe, checking whether I'd suffered anything worse than a coating of dust and a few bruises.

"My lady, are you all right?" she whispered. "Did he hurt you?"

"He nearly killed me, then nearly kidnapped me, and finally threw me onto the ground," I said through clenched teeth, brushing off my palms. "I'm not even sure what to call that."

"Please, don't discuss what happened with the prince if you see him at court."

I froze.

"The prince?"

The maid swallowed nervously.

"That was the fourth prince, my lady."

I closed my eyes for a few seconds, trying to process the information. Then I opened them again.

"I'm already losing track of the heirs."

Chessa lowered her voice even further.

"You can always recognize the fourth prince by his iron mask. He never takes it off. He lived in another kingdom for many years. They took him away when he was still a child, and people said he would never return."

"Apparently, he did."

The black mask and those dark eyes flashed through my mind again. There had been nothing in his gaze but cool appraisal. He'd lifted me from the road with such ease, as though the whole incident hadn't been worth a second thought, then disposed of me without a single word.

"You should be grateful," Chessa added hastily. "Very grateful. If it weren't for him…"

She trailed off.

"If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have ended up beneath his horse's hooves in the first place," I finished for her.

Chessa went even paler.

"You don't understand. He usually spares no one."

She fell silent, clearly deciding whether to explain what should have been obvious to me or let me draw my own conclusions. I looked in the direction the prince had disappeared, but the street was already filling with movement again. People were returning to their stalls, vendors were picking up fallen goods, and someone was gathering the scattered apples. The noisy market was gradually forgetting what had happened.

Chessa hugged her basket more tightly against her chest. When another cart rushed past, she flinched and watched it with a frightened expression until it disappeared around the corner. I said nothing. Words seemed useless just then.

The pain from my fall gradually faded, changing from sharp to dull and aching. My bruised hips hurt with every step, and my lower back throbbed unpleasantly, but the worst pain was the humiliation.

I kept replaying what had happened: the black horse, the sudden jerk, the cold metal of the mask, his hand around my waist. The ease with which he'd lifted me off the road. And how much more easily he'd thrown me back down, without even thinking it necessary to stop.

I clenched my teeth and forced myself to relax. A little longer, and I'd start getting angry all over again. Anger was the one thing I seemed completely unable to control.

When the walls of the third prince's residence came into view, I breathed a sigh of relief.

The house had fully woken up. Servants hurried through the corridors, carrying fabrics and dishes from one wing to another, while muffled voices and the clinking of metal drifted from deeper inside the building. We hadn't taken more than a few steps when a senior maid came striding toward us.

She was a tall, lean woman with perfectly arranged hair and such a stern expression that I felt an immediate urge to confess to every wrongdoing I'd ever committed, including the ones I hadn't.

"Chessa!"

The girl beside me flinched.

"Where have you been? The dining hall still isn't ready. The cooks are waiting to serve, and no one can find you!"

"I'm sorry… I…"

"You can explain yourself later. To the kitchens. Now."

The woman didn't even let her finish. Chessa immediately lowered her head and obeyed, making no attempt to defend herself or explain where she'd been. She only shot me a brief, worried glance before disappearing after the other servants.

I watched her go and realized that the last thing I wanted was to return to my room. I didn't want to lie beneath the canopy again, stare at the ceiling, and try to remember things I couldn't remember.

"I can help," I blurted out before I had a chance to change my mind.

The senior maid stopped and studied me carefully. Her gaze traveled over my dress, hair, and face before settling on the dirty hem. She was clearly deciding whether I'd be an extra pair of hands in the kitchen or one more problem someone would have to deal with.

After a brief pause, the woman nodded.

"As long as you don't get in the way."

"I won't."

My answer came too quickly, but I didn't care. For the first time all day, I felt relieved by the simple thought that I could keep my hands busy and, at least for a little while, stop thinking.

The kitchen greeted us with a wave of heat. After the cool corridors, the warmth struck my face, carrying the smell of fresh bread, smoke, herbs, and spices. Steam rose above the hearths, something bubbled in enormous cauldrons, and piles of vegetables, fruit, and roots covered the stone counters. Dozens of people moved with such speed and precision that, somehow, the entire commotion remained orderly.

Chessa disappeared among the working servants almost immediately. The market, the fall, and the fourth prince were left somewhere beyond the kitchen walls, in another life. Someone handed me

a knife, a bowl, and a whole pile of root vegetables. I began peeling them, awkwardly at first, then with growing confidence. Gradually, the repetitive rhythm soothed me. The knives tapping against wooden boards, the crackle of the fire, the voices, the smell of baking—all of it was simple, familiar, and real.

When the dishes began to be carried into the dining hall, I volunteered to help one of the maids. I wanted to keep moving, to avoid stopping long enough for my thoughts to return to the road, the mask, and that dark gaze.

I carefully lifted a heavy tray and followed the girl carrying the other dishes. We walked along the long corridor in silence, and with every step, the sounds of the kitchen grew quieter. The heat gave way to the coolness of the stone walls, while the smell of smoke faded into the scents of wax and expensive incense. The house seemed to change before my eyes, shifting from the world of servants and labor into a place where every movement mattered.

As I crossed the threshold of the dining hall, I immediately lowered my gaze. Chessa had explained that this was customary here, and I preferred not to test the limits of what was acceptable again. But even with my eyes lowered, I couldn't help noticing the long table, the silver cutlery, the tall candlesticks, and dozens of candles reflected in polished goblets.

I set the tray down at the end of the table and was about to step away when I heard a familiar voice.

"He should be arriving any moment."

Lucian sat at the head of the table, composed and collected in his immaculate doublet. Celia was beside him. A gentle smile played on her face, but the longer I watched her, the more I felt that she was hiding far more behind that smile than she cared to show.

"My brother is never on time," the third prince continued.

He said it calmly, but there was unmistakable irritation in his voice.

I froze.

Brother?

A pang of unease went through me. The black cloak whipping in the wind flashed through my mind, followed by the metal mask and those dark eyes that had looked at me without a trace of hesitation.

I instinctively took a step back, then another. I wanted to disappear, blend in with the servants, and hide behind the nearest column. I shouldn't have volunteered to help with the meal.

That was when I noticed someone lounging in a deep armchair as though the entire dinner were an irritating obligation he had to endure for the sake of appearances.

The fourth prince was already here.

He had stretched out his long legs and folded his arms across his chest. Even from where I stood, I could sense the cold confidence radiating from him. He was still dressed in dark clothes, better suited to a journey or a battle than a palace dinner. No ornaments, nothing unnecessary. Just black fabric, leather straps, metal, and that same mask covering half his face.

His dark brown eyes weren't fixed on Lucian, or Celia, or even the table. They were looking straight at me.

My fingers tightened around the tray. For a moment, I thought he recognized me. His gaze moved slowly over my face, lingering a little longer than ordinary politeness required, before dropping to my dress and the tray in my hands. Then the prince turned back toward the table. There wasn't even the slightest hint that less than an hour ago he'd held me off the ground with one hand before dropping me onto the road.

I forced myself to move forward, keeping my expression as calm as I could manage. After all, if he'd decided to pretend nothing had happened, I could play along, too.

The tray felt heavier than I remembered. Or perhaps my hands were still trembling. I carefully set the dish on the table, doing my best to hide the tension in my fingers.

Celia looked up and smiled at me.

"Thank you."

After the fourth prince's icy stare, those words felt almost like a rescue. I gave her a small smile in return and was about to step away when I felt another gaze settle on me.

Lucian's wariness was entirely different from his brother's cold indifference. Around the fourth prince, I was afraid of ending up in the path of another runaway horse. Around the third, I felt a different kind of unease. It seemed that if I gave him enough time, he'd piece me together and understand things I couldn't yet explain even to myself.

I took a step back, quickly turned away, and headed for the exit, longing to get as far as possible from that table — and especially from the man in the black mask.

Chapter 3

The corridor greeted me with cool air and silence.

Only then did I allow myself to stop. I leaned my shoulder against the stone wall and drew a deep breath, realizing I had barely been breathing properly all this time. Then I forced myself upright and continued down the corridor.

Chessa came rushing around the corner so quickly that she nearly knocked over one of the younger maids. As she walked, she untied her apron, which was stained with a thick, dark mixture that smelled of onions and smoke. She looked exhausted and irritated, muttering something under her breath as she hurried toward the nearest room. I watched her disappear. After everything that had happened today, very little surprised me anymore. Something was constantly being spilled, dropped, or stained in the kitchens. I supposed that was what ordinary palace life looked like.

I was just about to move on when something caught my attention at the opposite end of the corridor. The approaching figure moved with too much confidence to be a servant and looked far too relaxed to be a guard.

I recognized the fifth prince almost immediately.

The same young man with the bandage.

He looked younger than me, practically a boy, with narrow shoulders, an animated face, and an open expression.

He approached the door Chessa had just disappeared behind, leaned forward, and peered through the narrow gap between the door and its frame.

I froze.

For several seconds, I watched him, trying to convince myself that I had misunderstood what I was seeing. But the prince was most definitely spying. Chessa was changing, and he was standing outside her door, watching with a satisfied smile.

After my encounter with his brother, my patience was already hanging by a thread.

What on earth was wrong with the men in this family?

I didn't even stop to consider the palace, their ranks, or the consequences. I simply walked toward him.

"Excuse me!"

My voice cut sharply through the silence.

The boy jumped and spun around so quickly that he nearly struck his shoulder against the doorframe. For a brief moment, his face held the unmistakably childish expression of someone caught doing something he shouldn't. But it vanished almost immediately. He straightened and looked at me with an air of complete composure.

I stopped right in front of him.

"Why are you doing that?"

The prince pretended not to understand.

"Doing what?"

"Spying on a maid."

"I was simply standing by the door."

I stared at him.

"And what difference does that make?"

He considered the question for a moment before answering with complete seriousness.

"A considerable one. There are usually several important steps between standing somewhere and spying."

I wanted to throw something at him.

"I saw what you were doing."

"Then perhaps you should have your eyesight examined."

"Being a prince doesn't make this acceptable."

He narrowed his eyes slightly.

"And who said I was a prince?"

I took a deep breath.

"That still doesn't give you the right to behave like an ill-mannered boy, Your Highness."

His expression changed. The amusement gradually faded as he seemed to take a proper look at me for the first time, searching his memory for something familiar.

"Wait a moment... You're that girl!"

He pointed at me with the confidence of someone who had just uncovered a royal conspiracy.

"The one who was spying on the princes."

"No." I stepped closer. "I fainted and woke up in the water."

"Of course." He nodded solemnly. "People accidentally end up in the royal baths all the time."

"An inability to admit when you're wrong is a poor quality in a prince."

"And do you have any good ones?"

For a moment, I was speechless. The boy looked far too pleased with himself.

"Yes. For example, not spying on maids."

"But you eavesdrop on princes, apparently. And during their bath, no less."

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. Impossible boy. Judging by his expression, he knew perfectly well that he'd just won that round.

The door behind him swung open. Chessa stepped out, now dressed in fresh clothes, but froze the moment she saw us. Her gaze darted from me to the prince and back again.

"Your High—"

"Don't," he interrupted lazily.

She fell silent at once. I noticed her shoulders tense.

"Why would I need to spy on a maid?" the prince asked, casting Chessa a brief glance. "If I wanted to see her naked, I'd simply order someone to bring her to me."

The smile vanished from my face.

"What?"

The prince shrugged.

"She's not my type. That's why I haven't ordered it."

"That's disgusting."

He blinked in surprise. For the first time during our conversation, I had managed to leave him genuinely confused.

"She's a person," I said sharply, stepping in front of Chessa. "Not an object or a dog you can summon with a whistle."

"Nobody whistled."

"Stop twisting my words!"

I stepped closer. He didn't move. Less than a step separated us now.

"Do you really believe your title makes you better than everyone else, Your Highness?"

Chessa had gone pale, her fingers clutching the edge of her dress, but I couldn't stop myself anymore. Everything that had been building inside me since the moment I'd awakened in this kingdom was finally spilling out.

"Princes don't become greater by trampling those who have no way to defend themselves."

The boy continued looking at me with that infuriatingly smug expression. I was beginning to seriously consider punching him.

"So, please," I added, feeling a tremor run through me even though my voice remained steady, "keep your noble curiosity to yourself and learn to look away when you pass someone else's door."

The corridor fell silent.

I'd just crossed another line, one far more dangerous than any of the ones before it.

Chessa stood beside me, utterly stunned, trying to say something, but I barely heard her. For the first time in days, I'd allowed myself to stop holding back, and now I felt a strange, almost intoxicating sense of relief.

At the far end of the corridor, Celia and Lucian appeared, apparently drawn by our raised voices.

Celia stopped first. Confusion crossed her face as her gaze moved from me to the fifth prince, then settled on the door behind him, the one Chessa had just emerged from. Lucian stopped a few steps behind his wife. He surveyed the scene carefully, and I suspected he already understood that things were getting out of hand.

"Princes never have to answer for their actions," I continued, unable to stop myself. "Their titles allow them to turn a blind eye to almost anything."

The smile disappeared from the fifth prince's face. He took a step toward me.

"Be careful, girl. If the king heard those words, he'd have your insolent tongue cut short."

"So you're going to complain about me?"

His jaw tightened.

"What did you say?"

"I simply told the truth."

"You've been here for only a few days, and you've already decided you have the right to judge the royal family?"

"I know enough to understand that spying on someone while they're changing is unacceptable."

"You're forgetting yourself!" the prince exclaimed indignantly. "This is outrageous."

Celia gave a barely perceptible shake of her head, silently warning me to stop. Lucian still hadn't intervened, apparently hoping his younger brother would find a way to back down before things turned into an open confrontation.

But the prince took another step closer.

"You're coming with me. You'll explain yourself before the king."

"I'm not going anywhere."

He moved so close that I had almost no room left to retreat. I finally lost what little patience I had remaining. My palm struck his chest, shoving him backward.

Nothing particularly dramatic happened. He only stumbled half a step, more from surprise than from the force of my push. But that was enough to change everything around us.

Celia went pale. Chessa froze, pressing a hand over her mouth. Lucian immediately stepped forward, only to stop when his younger brother's gaze shifted from my hand to my face.

"You dare..."

He didn't finish.

I wasn't even sure what I intended to say in response. Anger, fear, exhaustion, and a desperate determination not to back down before someone who considered his title permission to trample over others all tangled together inside me.

"I'm not going to be afraid of you simply because you wear a crown," I said quietly.

It was a mistake. I realized that from the way Lucian's expression changed. He finally moved forward, but the fifth prince was faster.

He lunged toward me and grabbed my wrist.

"You seem to have forgotten where you are."

His fingers tightened.

I tried to pull free.

"Let go."

"First, learn to speak with respect."

"Let go of me!"

I jerked my arm toward myself. The prince instinctively tightened his grip, and a brief struggle broke out between us. I tried to shove him away with my shoulder. He lost his balance for a moment and finally released my wrist.

I stepped forward, but another hand closed around my wrist almost immediately. I was pulled sharply backward.

"Enough."

A low voice sounded right beside me.

I froze.

The dark cloak still carried the scent of the outdoors: cold wind, leather, and metal. A tall figure stood behind me, almost entirely blocking the space between me and the fifth prince.

The fourth prince glanced at my face, then at the hand gripping me, before turning his attention to his brother. The corridor grew so quiet that I could hear my own pulse.

"I said, enough."

The masked man didn't argue with his brother or bother explaining himself. He shifted his grip to my elbow and led me away.

I could barely keep up. My long dress caught against the stone floor, my breathing still hadn't recovered from the confrontation, and he moved with such calm that one might have thought nothing unusual had happened. We passed several turns before the prince stopped in front of the massive dining hall doors.

The room was empty. The servants had vanished so quickly that I hadn't even noticed when they'd left. The air still carried the lingering scents of hot food, wine, and cold stone.

I stopped at the threshold.

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

The prince turned and studied me for several seconds.

"Then you can stay in the corridor and explain to the king why you decided to strike his son."

I clenched my teeth and stepped inside.

The door closed behind me. The click of the lock sounded unnaturally loud in the empty hall.

The fourth prince released my elbow, and I immediately stepped back. His gaze briefly dropped to my hand before returning to my face.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked unexpectedly.

"No."

The answer came too quickly.

"A lie."

He moved aside, leaving some space between us. Only then did I realize how close he'd been standing.

"You started an argument in the corridor," the prince said. "Insulted a prince, shoved him, and then attempted to continue the confrontation."

"He deserved it."

"Perhaps."

I froze.

"What?"

The man ignored my question and slowly removed one of his gloves. The black leather slipped quietly over his fingers. For some reason, I found myself watching his hands more closely than I wanted to.

"I saw him spying on Chessa with my own eyes," I protested.

"People often see only what they want to see."

"Convenient."

His gaze grew colder.

"What?"

"Making excuses for everything princes do."

We stared at each other in silence for several seconds. My eyes burned with anger and humiliation. The fourth prince returned my gaze with something cold and almost contemptuous, and for a brief moment, I felt uneasy.

"Who are you?" he finally asked.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you my name. I don't remember it."

The masked man raised an eyebrow ever so slightly.

"Your name doesn't interest me," he said with dry indifference. "Something else does."

He took a step closer.

"What is your social standing that you think you can take such liberties with princes?"

A strangled but unmistakable laugh escaped me.

"Ah. So that's what this is about..."

I lifted my eyes to his, no longer bothering to hide my contempt.

"It doesn't matter what happened. It doesn't matter that someone was spying, insulting people, and violating their privacy. All that matters is wealth and titles, isn't that right?"

I straightened despite the ache in my thighs and the throbbing in my shoulder.

"Those at the top are always right. And those beneath them are expected to keep quiet and be grateful they haven't been crushed altogether."

Something shifted in his expression. Only for an instant, but I caught a brief spark before it disappeared.

"You must be a brave girl," the prince said quietly. "But right now, you're standing against those who decide who is allowed to exist in this kingdom and who isn't."

I gave him a crooked smile, though anger still trembled beneath my skin.

"I don't know how to stay silent when I see injustice."

The man studied my face for a while. Then his gaze dropped to my lips, lingering on a small cut near the edge of my lower lip.

"Where did that come from?"

"What?"

He gave a slight nod toward my mouth.

"That cut."

I instinctively touched it with my fingers.

"I don't know. Or rather, I don't remember."

The prince moved a little closer. He smelled of the outdoors, leather, and something metallic, a scent I recognized from our encounter at the market that morning.

"Is it true they found you in the royal baths?"

I didn't have time to answer.

The door suddenly flew open, slamming against the wall and shattering the taut silence between us.

Celia and Lucian appeared in the doorway.

The blonde woman was pale, her fingers nervously clutching a fold of her dress. Her husband remained as composed as ever, but his expression had hardened. He quickly assessed the distance between us, glanced at my wrist, and then looked at his brother.

"Leave us, Your Highness," Celia said to the fourth prince. Her voice was quiet, but firm enough that no one thought to argue.

Lucian nodded.

"Come with me, brother. We need to discuss the ceremony."

The masked man didn't reply. He simply looked at me once more. Our eyes met for a fraction of a second, but I was the first to look away.

The princes left, and the door closed heavily behind them.

"I can explain," I said quickly, before Celia had a chance to speak. "He..."

"I know."

I fell silent.

Celia stood facing me. Her expression held traces of exhaustion and concern, but her voice remained stern.

"You shouldn't have laid a hand on him."

"He was spying on Chessa."

For a moment, the woman lowered her eyes.

"I understand what happened. And believe me, I'm not pleased to hear about such behavior. But you need to understand where you are. You shoved a prince and then got into a physical struggle with him in front of the court."

"I only pushed him away."

"There's no difference as far as everyone else is concerned."

There was a warning in her voice. I clenched my jaw.

"Then I'll explain everything to the king."

Celia looked at me with sympathy.

"You won't get to see him."

"Why?"

"Because you're not someone the king would interrupt matters of state for."

A chill ran through me.

"So what am I supposed to do now?" I asked, bewildered.

Celia stepped closer and lowered her voice.

"Let's hope Lucian can help us sort this out. That's all I can do for now."

I gave a humorless laugh.

"Apparently, I've already managed to ruin my reputation."

"That can be repaired. But please, don't shove anyone else, and don't argue with Callum."

The name caught me off guard, and it took me a moment to understand she was referring to the fourth prince.

Callum?

Until that moment, he hadn't had a name in my mind. He existed there as a collection of separate images: a black horse, a dark cloak, a metal mask, a cold gaze, and a hand that had pulled me out from beneath the horse's hooves with a single movement.

"The fourth prince is called Callum," Celia confirmed. "And he's quite different from the others. He didn't grow up here."

I raised my eyes.

"Not in Ayrholm?"

She shook her head.

"He was raised in Nordvein. It's a kingdom in the north of the continent. Their customs are very different. Children there are taught to fight from an early age."

I thought again of Callum's steady gaze and the unsettling calm that seemed to surround him. He really did seem more like a warrior than a prince.

Celia paused, then looked at me again.

"I asked Lucian to let you stay at court. To make you my lady-in-waiting."

"What?"

She offered a small smile.

"Because you struck me as a good person."

I hadn't expected to hear that. After all the questions, suspicions, and uncertain looks from people who had no idea what to make of me, those simple words affected me more than anything else.

"You're stubborn," Celia continued. "Far too outspoken. And sometimes you say things that any sensible person would know better than to say aloud."

A hint of warmth appeared in her eyes.

"But you're not cruel."

I lowered my gaze.

I wanted to thank her. To tell her she was wrong because she didn't really know anything about me. Or perhaps confess that I had no idea who I used to be or why any of this was happening to me. But the words wouldn't come.

"I wasn't wrong about you. Just try not to make me regret my decision."

I nodded slowly.

"All right. I'll try."

She held my gaze for another moment before turning and leaving.

The door closed, and I was left alone with my thoughts, my aching wrist, and the bruise left behind by the fourth prince's unforgiving fingers.

Chapter 4

Callum

I followed Lucian down the corridor, keeping to my usual distance: close enough for him to know I was following, but far enough not to give the impression that I was in a hurry. My boots struck the stone floor with a dull rhythm, the sound echoing beneath the high vaulted ceilings before fading into the distance. I watched my brother's back, feeling irritation gradually gather inside me until it became almost unbearable.

What in the hell was going on here?

That girl had appeared at the palace only a few days ago, unable to remember her name, her past, or how she'd ended up in the royal baths. And already, she'd managed to do something most people at court wouldn't dare attempt in their entire lives: look princes directly in the eye, argue with them, raise her voice, and behave as though their titles meant absolutely nothing to her.

That was the most troubling part. She genuinely didn't understand why she should be afraid. Or perhaps she did understand, but simply didn't care.

My thoughts returned to the market. To my horse charging down the narrow street, the people scattering in panic, and the look on her face when she realized she wouldn't get out of the way in time. The girl had lost her balance right in front of me, and I'd been forced to pull her out from beneath the hooves. Back then, I'd assumed she was nothing more than a careless country girl who lacked the common sense to move aside when a horse was approaching.

I still remembered her expression as she stood in the middle of the dusty street, dirty, frightened, and so furious that her anger almost concealed her fear. Most people would have made sure never to cross my path again after an encounter like that. She, however, had studied me with those watchful eyes and, judging by the look on her face, had been silently demanding an explanation.

Now that same girl had nearly come to blows with my brother, a prince the entire court considered untouchable.

The first time, her insolence had amused me. Now it didn't. Even stupidity had its limits. So did fear. Yet this girl kept pushing forward, even when she'd been given more than enough reasons to stop.

Lucian stopped in front of a tall door decorated with delicate carvings. Ancient symbols of our house were hidden among the intertwined vines, their meanings now remembered by only a handful of people. He opened the door more sharply than etiquette required, and I followed him inside.

My brother's study had always seemed too warm to me. There was none of the cold grandeur of the throne rooms or the carefully arranged luxury of the royal chambers. Only old wood, books, papers, and maps covering the walls. The air carried a mixture of parchment, smoke, and the spices Lucian stubbornly burned in his fireplace, despite half the palace considering the habit peculiar.

My gaze lingered on the maps.

Ayrholm. The southern lands. The eastern principalities. Nordvein.

I studied the last one a little longer. Gray mountains, snow-covered passes, and cold cities where children learned to fight before they learned to speak.

I turned my attention to Lucian. He stood by his desk, both hands resting on the surface. From a distance, he might have appeared perfectly calm, but I noticed the tension in his shoulders and the brief movement of his hand through his hair. He drew a deep breath before speaking.

"You went too far."

I smirked.

"I did?"

"Yes, Callum."

"That's amusing coming from you."

Lucian straightened and looked at me.

"She doesn't understand where she is."

"That's her problem."

"And she doesn't know the rules of this palace yet."

"Then that's even worse for her."

"You know perfectly well what I'm talking about."

"No," I replied coldly. "All I know is that your protégée raised her hand against our brother in the middle of a corridor, in front of witnesses, and for some reason, you've decided my behavior is what needs discussing."

Lucian exhaled slowly.

"Because you know perfectly well what I'm accusing you of."

I folded my arms across my chest and stared at him in silence.

"Why are you protecting her?"

"Because she's not an enemy."

I gave a short laugh.

"You can't possibly know that."

Pushing away from the wall, I began pacing around the study. The floorboards creaked softly beneath my boots. The girl had appeared out of nowhere. No family, no name, no past, no one who could vouch for her. She claimed to remember nothing, yet she spoke with far too much confidence and ease, sometimes using expressions I'd never heard from someone of her apparent standing.

I stopped beside the map.

"She's hiding something."

Lucian said nothing. I turned my head, waiting for an answer, but my brother merely looked away. That was enough.

"You've noticed it too, haven't you? Then why do you keep her close? Why is she living in your house?"

Lucian walked over to the window.

"That's not the most important thing right now. The ceremony for the heir's investiture is approaching. Half the nobility is already ready to tear one another apart for the privilege of standing closer to the royal family. The last thing I need is to deal with every girl Celia decides to bring into the palace."

I considered his words. Somehow, in just a few days, this girl had managed to win the favor of both of them, despite having no past to support a single thing she said.

"Celia trusts her," my brother added.

"Trust is the quickest road to a knife in your back."

Lucian looked at me but didn't argue. He returned to his desk and began sorting through the parchments scattered across it. The papers rustled beneath his long fingers, their steady sound distracting me slightly from my thoughts.

"Have you seen Adrian yet?" my brother asked without looking up.

"No."

I paused before adding:

"Nor am I particularly eager to. Too much has changed during the years I was away."

Lucian didn't object. There was enough history between us that neither of us needed to waste words explaining it.

"And Ethan?" he asked.

I gave a crooked smile.

"Ethan worries Father. And, in my opinion, not without reason."

"Do you think he's capable of turning against the king?"

"I think he's always believed himself entitled to the crown."

Lucian raised his eyes.

"Father senses it. That's why he's concerned."

I walked over to the window and stopped beside the heavy curtains. Below us, lights were beginning to appear. Servants crossed the courtyard, and guards changed shifts at their posts. Everything looked peaceful, almost flawless, but I'd known this palace long enough not to trust such appearances.

The ceremony would bring too many people together in one place, and not all of them would have good intentions. Nobles, ambassadors, military commanders, representatives of the old houses. Everyone would come to congratulate the heir. They would watch, assess, and observe. And all it would take was one person who had long since run out of anything to lose.

"I'm afraid Adrian will be attacked during the ceremony," Lucian said.

I turned toward him. My brother had voiced the very thought I'd been having.

"The crowd will give an attacker everything he needs. Noise, movement, dozens of unfamiliar faces, guards forced to watch everyone at once. If someone has been waiting for the right moment, they won't find a better opportunity."

I looked at the prince for several seconds.

"That won't happen."

"Callum..."

"As long as I'm here," I interrupted calmly, "no one will get near Adrian."

Lucian fell silent. I noticed his shoulders relax slightly. Only a little, barely enough to see, but it was sufficient. Some promises between brothers didn't need oaths.

We spent a long time discussing the ceremony: the guards who needed to be discreetly repositioned closer to the inner circle, the people whose names had been coming up far too often lately, and the rumors spreading through the palace faster than any official order.

In Ayrholm, nothing was insignificant. The wrong seat at a banquet could be taken as an insult, a lingering glance as a warning, and an unexpected absence as an admission of disloyalty.

When the conversation finally came to an end, I stood.

"Stay with us," Lucian offered. "There's an empty room."

I agreed. I had no desire to return to the same roof as Father. Over the years I'd been away, I'd learned to manage perfectly well without his company, and I wasn't about to find out whether that rule still held.

I paused at the door.

"I want to visit the baths before bed."

Lucian nodded. We parted without another word.

I made my way through the western wing alone. Gradually, the noise of the palace fell behind me. Voices, the clatter of dishes, the hurried footsteps of servants all faded beyond the stone walls until the corridors settled into their familiar silence. The air grew warmer and more humid, carrying the scent of heated stone and mineral water.

The only place in the palace where I could be alone with myself.

I pushed open the heavy door to the baths and stepped inside, hoping to escape my oppressive thoughts, if only for a little while.

The enormous chamber was bathed in the soft golden glow of torches. Steam rose from the water, slowly drifting between the tall columns, softening the outlines of the stone walls and concealing the distant passages. Hot springs flowed quietly over the stone ledges, their steady murmur filling the space and drowning out every other sound.

I loved this place precisely because of its silence. There were no courtiers, advisers, servants, or people watching me too closely, trying to guess what lay beneath my mask. Here, at least for a little while, I could forget that I was a prince, the king's son, and a man from whom far too much would be expected in the coming days.

I stopped at the edge of the pool and ran a hand over the strap of my mask. The metal had long since stopped feeling foreign. I'd worn it for so many years that sometimes I noticed its weight only when I took it off. My fingers released the fastening, and the mask came away from my face. The warm, damp air touched my skin, leaving a faint chill across the scar.

I closed my eyes for a moment before looking down. My reflection stared back at me, the face I preferred not to examine for too long: dark hair, tired eyes, sharp features, and an uneven mark running down the right side of my face, from my temple to my cheek. The scar reached the edge of my eyelid, a reminder of what had happened many years ago. There had been a time when I couldn't look at it without feeling anger. Now it was simply part of me, a trace of an old pain I'd long since learned to live with.

I turned away and placed the mask on the bench. My doublet went beside my weapons, gloves, and other belongings. Along with my clothes, I tried to leave behind the tension that had kept my shoulders perpetually braced throughout the day.

I stepped into the water and slowly lowered myself, allowing the warmth to ease the fatigue from my muscles. The hot currents enveloped me, and for the first time all evening, my thoughts began to quiet. My conversation with Lucian gradually receded into the background. I didn't want to think about the ceremony or the nobles already dividing future power among themselves, even though the crown hadn't yet touched the heir's head.

I exhaled slowly, closed my eyes, and rested my head against the heated stone.

I don't know how much time passed. Perhaps a few minutes, perhaps longer. I was almost drifting off when a sudden splash broke the silence.

My eyes flew open.

Ripples spread across the surface, moving outward from the far end of the pool. I straightened and listened. At first, I thought one of the servants had entered, but then I heard a cough.

My hand instinctively reached for the weapon I'd left on the bench, but stopped halfway.

A head emerged from the water.

The girl coughed, swept her wet hair away from her face, and drew in a desperate breath, struggling to regain her composure. Her dress weighed her down, the soaked fabric clinging to her body as water streamed from her hair and chin back into the pool.

I froze.

The same nameless girl.

She slowly lifted her head. Relief first crossed her face at finally reaching the surface, then her gaze traveled around the baths and settled on me. For a while, we simply stared at each other. The enormous chamber was filled only with the occasional drip of water falling from her wet hair and her uneven breathing.

And then I realized.

I wasn't wearing my mask.

My hand flew to my face, and I immediately felt the emptiness where the metal usually separated me from other people's eyes. For several seconds, I didn't move, staring at the girl who had just seen something no one was supposed to see.

She was looking directly at me. At the right side of my face, which I'd spent years concealing beneath metal, at the uneven scar beginning at my temple and crossing my skin and the edge of my eyelid. Her expression changed. Surprise flickered in her eyes, followed by wariness. I knew what reactions usually followed such a discovery, and I had already prepared myself for the familiar expression that would appear on another person's face.

But she kept staring, trying to understand what exactly had been revealed to her.

I couldn't bear the attention.

I rose abruptly. Water surged away from my body, crashing against the stone edges of the pool. The mask was in my hand almost instantly. I pulled it over my face and tightened the straps more

than necessary. The familiar metal settled back into place. Only then did I feel as though I could breathe freely again.

"What did you see?"

My voice came out low and hoarse. I didn't repeat the question, even though the girl remained silent and seemed not to understand at first that I expected an answer.

I stepped toward her, closing the distance in a single movement, and grabbed her by the throat. I didn't squeeze hard enough to hurt her, but my grip was firm, leaving her no room to pull away. My palm still held the warmth of the water, and my fingers tensed. I wanted her to understand that she was dealing with someone who had no intention of tolerating mockery or idle curiosity.

Her breathing faltered. The muscles beneath my hand tensed, and for the first time since we'd met, genuine fear appeared in her eyes. It wasn't the kind she had hidden behind her defiance while arguing with the fifth prince. This was the fear of someone who had realized she'd gone too far.

"I asked you," I repeated more quietly, leaning closer. "What did you see?"

She swallowed. Her hazel-green eyes flickered toward my hand for a moment before returning to my face.

"Nothing..." she breathed. "I didn't see anything."

I immediately understood that the girl wasn't as simple as she'd tried to make herself appear earlier that day, when she'd waved her hands in front of Aurik and displayed her reckless defiance. She was frightened, but she'd managed to assess the situation quickly and choose an answer that might spare her trouble. Caution was far more sensible than bravado in a situation like this, but that didn't make me any less angry.

I loosened my grip but didn't release her. I needed time to gather my thoughts and decide what to do next. Before me stood a stranger who had appeared in the royal baths a few days ago and had somehow managed to find her way back here.

And this time, she'd seen my face.

"Then explain," I said coldly, "what are you doing in a prince's bathing pool?"

She flinched. Apparently, only then did she fully realize where she was and whom she was speaking to.

"I..." she began, then stopped. "I was trying to get my memory back."

She hadn't come here by accident. That much was obvious. Perhaps she'd decided the baths might help her remember the circumstances surrounding her arrival at the palace.

The girl looked away.

I released her throat but remained close, making it clear that I wasn't finished questioning her.

"So you came here deliberately?" I asked.

She remained silent and seemed unwilling to reveal anything more than necessary.

"If you think silence will help you avoid answering, you're mistaken."

I leaned a little closer, keeping my voice calm. I didn't need to raise it this time to make sure she heard every word.

"Listen carefully. If you tell anyone — a servant, a guard, a prince — about what you saw here, I'll kill you."

I paused briefly, allowing the threat to hang between us without softening it.

"And don't expect your position or Celia's protection to save you. I won't allow anyone to discover what's beneath this mask. Do you understand me?"

***

It was difficult to hold his gaze. My body still ached from the sudden jerk, my skin burned from the hot water, and my heart was pounding so hard that I could feel every beat somewhere in my throat.

I genuinely thought he might kill me. Right there in the bathhouse, surrounded by steam, stone, and the gentle murmur of water, where any scream would disappear beneath the high vaulted ceilings and my disappearance would become just another secret the palace would prefer not to discuss.

I'd come here late, almost at night, when the corridors had fallen silent and the servants' last footsteps had long since faded somewhere deep within the palace. I needed water. Perhaps it was somehow connected to my arrival here. If the water had brought me to Ayrholm in the first place, perhaps it could take me back. I clung to that thought because I had absolutely nothing else to go on.

I was wrong.

I'd surfaced practically between the fourth prince's legs, choking on air and struggling to sweep the wet hair away from my face. For the first few moments, I couldn't decide what frightened me more: the fact that my attempt had failed or the man who had ended up in the pool with me.

He was frightening. And, much to my own irritation, impossible not to look at.

I studied him surreptitiously, almost against my will. Broad shoulders, sharp features, deep brown eyes, dark hair damp with steam and water, and a scar running down the right side of his face. Without the mask, he looked like an entirely different man.

"Do you enjoy threatening people?" I blurted out before I could stop myself.

My voice was hoarse, but steady enough. I clung to what remained of my dignity because giving in now would mean admitting that he really could silence me with a single look.

I expected anger, another threat, or something considerably worse. Instead, the corner of his mouth twitched almost imperceptibly.

"I enjoy silence," the prince replied calmly. "And you've disturbed it."

Callum climbed out of the water and approached the stone edge of the pool. His movements remained unhurried, and that composure only made me more uncomfortable. He picked up his clothes and gloves, gathering his belongings without a single unnecessary movement, then cast me a brief glance.

"Leave."

Just one word. It took me a moment to realize he was actually letting me go. After the threat he'd made only moments earlier, his sudden calm was almost more frightening. I carefully climbed out of the water, trying not to make any sudden movements. My legs were trembling, but I forced myself to straighten and hide it. I picked up my soaked dress, pressed the fabric against myself, and headed for the door.

Just before leaving, I glanced back. Callum remained by the pool, his face once again hidden behind the mask, the shadows, and the steam. He was looking somewhere toward the water, as though he'd already forgotten I was there. I lingered for only a second before hurrying out, just in case the prince changed his mind.

I wandered through the corridors, leaving a dark trail of water behind me. It dripped from my hem, fell from my hair, and gathered in uneven patches on the stone floor before gradually disappearing into the old slabs.

The palace was erasing the traces of my stupidity.

I'd wrung out my dress just outside the bathhouse, twisting the wet fabric until my fingers hurt, but it had barely helped. The material clung to my legs, dragged at my steps, and chilled my skin, reminding me of what had just happened with every movement.

I'd seen something I wasn't supposed to see. I'd accidentally become a witness to someone else's secret, one its owner seemed prepared to protect at any cost. Now I would have to keep quiet, even if the encounter itself was likely to remain in my thoughts for a long time.

The corridors were still empty. A few candles burned in the wall sconces, casting flickering light across the stone, while thick darkness filled the spaces between them. My footsteps echoed beneath the vaulted ceilings, and I couldn't shake the feeling that if I turned around, I'd find his tall figure following me.

When I finally reached my room and pushed open the door, I immediately spotted Chessa. She was standing beside the bed, clutching her apron in both hands. The moment she saw me, she let out a sharp breath and froze for several seconds.

"My lady..."

There was so much genuine alarm in her voice that I felt a little guilty.

"I was so worried! You simply disappeared. You can't do that. You should at least tell me where you're going."

I wearily ran a hand over my face. I must have looked dreadful: wet hair, a soaked dress, a disheveled appearance, and enough bad decisions to last me several weeks.

"I thought I wasn't a prisoner in this palace," I said quietly.

Chessa immediately shook her head.

"You're not a prisoner. But there's no harm in being careful. Especially after what happened with the fifth prince. There are eyes and ears everywhere here."

I sighed. I had no intention of telling her where I'd been or whom I'd encountered.

"I went for a swim."

Chessa fell silent. At first, she simply stared at me. Then her face visibly paled.

"In the princes' baths?" she asked almost soundlessly.

I didn't answer. That was enough.

"You mustn't!" the maid exclaimed. "There are separate springs for women, beyond the gardens, near the old wall. If anyone had seen you..."

She trailed off, and I looked away.

It was a good thing no one had seen me. At least, no one except one man.

And I'd seen him, too. His scar, the face he went to such lengths to conceal, and, much as I hated to admit it, his bare shoulders and chest. At this point, it hardly mattered which of us had become the first witness to the other's secret.

"I don't know anything about this palace," I admitted. "Nothing about the princes or how things work here."

I looked at Chessa.

"Tell me about all of them. And..." I hesitated briefly before adding, "the princess, too."

The girl hesitated, clearly deciding how much she could afford to tell me. Then she sat down on a chair, folded her hands in her lap, and began. I remained standing opposite her, slowly piecing together a picture of the family I'd unexpectedly found myself entangled with.

"The eldest is Crown Prince Adrian," Chessa began. "The heir. Reserved and proper to the very core. He's respected, but not particularly loved. He's rather... distant. He's always been that way."

I nodded. A man born for the throne. I supposed he'd been taught from childhood that being an heir meant learning to keep his feelings under lock and key.

"The second prince is Ethan. He's clever and dangerous. And, honestly..."

Chessa lowered her voice.

"He's very good at controlling the courtiers. He knows how to put anyone in their place if they dare contradict him."

I frowned, committing the name to memory. Apparently, this family had no shortage of people it was better not to argue with.

"The third is Lucian."

This time, the maid's voice softened noticeably.

"You know him. He's kind and fair. The people love him. They love Lady Celia, too. If the king were chosen by the people's hearts, many would choose Lucian."

I remembered Lucian's calm expression, the way he spoke, and how he treated the servants. Now I understood why he had so many supporters.

"And the fourth?" I asked, although I already knew the answer.

Chessa fell silent, and I waited patiently for her to continue.

"Well, I think you understand that one for yourself," she finally said. "He grew up in another kingdom. They have different laws there, much harsher ones. People are afraid of him."

The girl looked at me intently.

"And rightly so."

My stomach tightened unpleasantly. Callum's unmasked face appeared in my mind, followed by the memory of his hand around my throat and his promise to kill me. I forced myself to concentrate on the conversation.

"The fifth is Aurik," Chessa continued, and a hint of irritation entered her voice. "The youngest. Spoiled and insolent."

I almost smiled. It was difficult to disagree with that description.

"And the princess?"

The question came out more quietly than the others. I already knew the answer, but I still wanted to hear it from Chessa.

The maid pursed her lips.

"Aurelia. The king's only daughter. Very beautiful and very cold. The princess knows exactly who she is and will never let you forget it."

I understood that perfectly well without Chessa's warning.

The conversation, however, took an unexpected turn. The girl smiled, not with the cautious, polite expression a maid was accustomed to giving her mistress, but with something bright and slightly mischievous. For a few seconds, she allowed herself to be nothing more than a young woman.

"To be completely honest..." Chessa drawled, tilting her head slightly, "I think Aurik is rather charming."

I couldn't help letting out a short laugh. The pain, fear, and weight of the past few hours briefly receded, leaving behind a rare feeling of lightness.

"Oh, really?" I said with mock indignation. "So here I was, defending you from his spying, and you actually enjoyed it?"

Chessa laughed softly, covering her mouth with one hand.

"A little," she admitted, a blush spreading across her cheeks. "It's flattering. After all, it's not every day that a prince takes an interest in you."

"Even if that prince behaves like an ill-mannered little boy?"

"He can be... persistent," Chessa replied, lowering her eyes. "But it's still nice when someone notices you."

I shook my head, smiling. It seemed my new friend had her own ideas about what counted as pleasant attention. Still, I didn't try to change her mind. Perhaps she simply wanted to indulge in a little daydreaming, and I had no desire to spoil the moment.

Only then did I realize how much I'd missed an ordinary conversation and a good laugh. The chance to forget, for a few minutes, that I was surrounded by an unfamiliar palace, strange rules, and people who could alter my fate with a single word.

But my smile quickly faded.

"Chessa," I said more seriously. "What's going to happen to me?"

The maid looked at me more closely.

"For what I did..." I stumbled over the words. "For shoving a member of the royal family."

The heavy phrasing hung between us. Chessa immediately stopped smiling.

"Let's hope Lord Lucian can sort everything out," she said cautiously. "He likes you. I think he'll do his best to help."

I raised my head sharply.

"What do you mean, he likes me?"

Chessa immediately began waving her hands.

"No, no! Not like that! Of course not as a woman. He has a wonderful wife, as you know. I meant... as Lady Celia's lady-in-waiting."

I nodded, accepting her explanation, although I couldn't quite convince myself it was the whole story. Sometimes Lucian looked at me a little too intently, allowing his gaze to linger longer than ordinary courtesy required. Perhaps he was simply trying to figure out who I was and where I'd come from. After all, if I were in his position, I wouldn't be quick to trust a stranger with no past either.

I decided not to pursue that thought. In this palace, even an innocent glance could take on a meaning no one had intended.

Later, after Chessa helped me change and finally left me alone, I lay down on the bed and stared up at the dark canopy above me. Fragments of the past few hours kept replaying in my mind: the princes, the voices, the corridors, the anger, the hot water, the black mask, and the face I'd now seen without it. Everything had become so hopelessly tangled that I could no longer separate one event from another.

I still had no idea how I'd ended up in Ayrholm. I didn't know whether there was any way to uncover my past or find out what kind of accident had happened to me. And perhaps the most dangerous thing wasn't even the fact that I'd broken the royal rules and managed to cross several princes in the space of a few days.

I was beginning to see them as people rather than titles.

And that made everything much more complicated.

Chapter 5

It was already the second week of my stay in Ayrholm, and time seemed to move strangely here. The days stretched out, losing their familiar rhythm, while the palace had a way of turning a few hours into an entire eternity.

Nothing truly terrible had happened. No one had burst into my room in the middle of the night, dragged me off for questioning, or demanded an explanation for my fight with the fifth prince. I suspected Lucian had something to do with that. Perhaps he really had spoken to his brother. Or perhaps the palace simply had enough other problems to ensure that my latest disaster quickly lost its importance.

Over the past few days, I had managed to explore almost every corner of the third prince's residence. I knew which gallery smelled most strongly of damp stone in the mornings, where the narrow passageways were crossed by cold drafts, and at what hours the sunlight streamed through the tall windows, bathing the grey walls in soft gold. Lucian's residence was remarkably like its owner. I had expected a prince's home to be far more extravagant, but instead I had found calm, order, and restraint. Dark wood, pale stone, ancient tapestries without unnecessary ornamentation. Even the servants moved more quietly here than in other parts of the palace.

Callum had disappeared.

At first, his absence brought me relief. Then it began to irritate me, and after a few days I caught myself thinking about him far too often. Sometimes I thought I glimpsed a tall figure in a black cloak at the far end of the garden. My gaze would linger instinctively, only for me to realize a moment later that it was nothing more than a guard or a servant. Each time, I grew angry with myself for looking for him in the first place.

Lucian was hardly around either. He left early, returned late, and devoted more and more of his time to palace affairs and preparations for the upcoming ceremony. Occasionally, I caught a fleeting glimpse of him on the stairs, in the library, or at breakfast. We exchanged a few words and polite smiles, but there was always something left unsaid between us.

Most of my time, however, was spent with Celia. We walked through the gardens almost every day.

Almarena, the capital of Ayrholm, was breathtaking in the final weeks of autumn. The paths wound between golden-green shrubs, ancient trees cast delicate shadows across the ground, and the air carried the scent of damp earth and flowers whose names I still didn't know. Brightly feathered birds sometimes swept overhead, while the wind occasionally brought the smell of the sea, though the water itself remained hidden from view.

Celia liked talking about simple things: gardens, books, dresses, the weather, all those little details that somehow seemed especially precious within the palace walls. She rarely touched upon politics and almost never spoke about her family, but even our conversations about ordinary matters were enough to make me grow increasingly attached to her. There was none of the arrogance I had expected from someone in her position. Celia was kind without making a show of her gentleness, and strong without needing to prove it to anyone. Being around her made it easier to breathe.

Sometimes I watched her when she wasn't looking and tried to imagine what she and Lucian had been like when they first met. Had their marriage been a political arrangement, or had feelings truly sparked between them from the beginning? Did they laugh when they were alone together? Did they argue? Did they miss each other when they went too long without seeing one another? Curiosity tempted me to ask those questions more than once, but each time I managed to stop myself.

One day, Aurelia visited the third prince's residence. Her arrival proved unexpectedly unsettling.

The princess was so polite that I immediately felt uneasy. There were no sharp remarks, no mocking smiles, no deliberately cold looks. She smiled at Celia, joined the conversation calmly, and addressed me several times in a perfectly friendly tone. That was precisely what made me most suspicious.

Open hostility was easy to understand. It was honest. At least then you knew what to expect. But Aurelia was different. I could feel her attention even when she was looking elsewhere. She asked nothing directly, yet her silence made me more uncomfortable than any interrogation could have.

After her visit, I found myself thinking seriously about the queen for the first time. If her daughter could make such an impression on me, what was her mother like? My instincts suggested that meeting the queen would hardly be a pleasant experience.

And then the day of the ceremony finally arrived, the one the entire palace had been discussing all week.

It was treated with the kind of reverence usually reserved for ancient customs whose origins had long since been lost to time. I had learned that every year, shamans performed a purification ritual for the heir to the throne, driving away evil spirits. The ceremony had existed for hundreds of years, long before the current dynasty. In ancient times, the crown had been considered not merely a symbol of power, but something of a curse. People believed that wearing it drew the attention of forces that had no place among the living.

It sounded absurd. But not so long ago, I would have considered the very idea of waking up in the middle of an unfamiliar kingdom with no memory equally absurd. So I was trying not to rush to judgment anymore.

Besides, the ceremony offered me a chance to see the other princes for the first time. Until then, I had known only Lucian, Callum, and Aurik. The heir to the throne remained almost a mythical figure to me, someone who existed only in other people's conversations. The closer the day of the ritual came, the more my curiosity grew.

Chessa brought my dress in the late afternoon. I stared at it for a long time before finally reaching out to touch it.

The emerald velvet was heavy and remarkably soft. The fabric shimmered with every movement, shifting from deep green to an almost black shade. Silver embroidery on the sleeves resembled intertwining branches, while the long skirt fell to the floor in heavy folds.

It was clearly not a dress intended for a girl who, until very recently, had been lying in the dust of the road, unable to remember even her own name.

"You're going to outshine half the court tonight, my lady," Chessa breathed as she tied the last ribbons at my back. "Just don't tell Princess Aurelia I said that."

I smiled quietly.

When Chessa was finished, I raised my eyes to the mirror and stopped recognizing my reflection for a few seconds. She had woven my hair into an elaborate braid, threading it with delicate silver strands and tiny white flowers. A few loose locks framed my face. Against the dark velvet, my skin looked paler and my eyes brighter.

I stared at the girl in the mirror and, for the first time, saw someone who might actually belong in this world.

Almost.

Beneath the dress, the silver, and the flowers, I was still a girl who had no idea how she had ended up in Ayrholm or why she had been placed among people for whom this palace had been home since birth. Sooner or later, someone would start asking the real questions. Where was I from? Who were my parents? What was the name of the village where I had grown up? What lands lay beyond the neighboring river, who ruled them, and what cities could be found farther away? And every time, I would have to lie or remain silent, because I knew none of the answers.

Voices were already drifting through the corridors, accompanied by hurried footsteps and the soft chime of jewelry. The air was filled with the scent of wine and incense, along with that particular tension that settled over a palace before a major event. It seemed as though all of Almarena was holding its breath, waiting for the ancient ritual to begin.

Lucian and Celia were waiting for us at the entrance to the main palace.

The third prince was impeccable, as always. His dark doublet, embroidered with silver thread, emphasized his broad shoulders and straight posture. His hair was tied back in a low ponytail, leaving his calm, noble features unobstructed. Beside him, Celia looked almost otherworldly in a dress the color of moonstone. The pale fabric shimmered softly in the rays of the setting sun, while a delicate tiara glinted among her golden hair.

They truly belonged together.

I quickly looked away. After my conversations with Chessa, it had become much harder to pretend I didn't notice anything. Before, I had convinced myself that Lucian's glances were simply a matter of politeness, a host's concern for a girl who had found herself in trouble. But lately, I kept catching his eyes before I had even managed to look up, and each time I noticed something warm and gentle in them, something almost thoughtful.

"Are you ready?" Lucian asked.

His voice was as even as ever, but for some reason I had the impression that the question wasn't meant for everyone.

"Of course," Celia answered for us, smiling at him.

We set off through the garden. The sun was already touching the horizon, bathing the paths and walls in rich amber light. The trees cast long shadows, the wind stirred the leaves, and the main palace gradually appeared beyond the crowns of the ancient elms.

Every time I saw it, it took my breath away all over again. The stone blazed in the last rays of sunlight, the tall towers reached into the darkening sky, and the royal banners moved slowly above the spires. From a distance, the palace looked almost too perfect to be an ordinary building. It had survived so many generations that a human lifetime seemed insignificant beside it.

Music drifted from somewhere deep within the gardens. Its notes floated above the paths, carried by the evening air.

"This is an annual celebration," Celia reminded me softly as we began climbing the broad marble steps. "The Day of Purification. Tonight, the shamans will perform the ritual to drive away evil spirits, so they cannot come near the heir."

We stepped inside.

After the soft golden light of the sunset, the palace was almost blinding. The glow of hundreds of lamps reflected off the polished marble, crystal chandeliers glittered beneath the high ceiling, gold along the walls caught the light with every movement, and the precious stones around the courtiers' necks scattered colorful reflections across the hall.

Everything shone, and amid all that splendor, I felt more acutely than ever that I didn't belong.

Lucian turned around. Our eyes met for barely a second. He offered me the faintest smile, but I was the first to look away, because I understood all too well what I was afraid of.

The ritual itself was far more exclusive than I had expected. Only members of the royal family and representatives of Ayrholm's oldest aristocratic houses were permitted into the main hall. Their bloodlines reached so far into the past that their names appeared in the chronicles alongside those of the first kings.

Everyone else had to wait. Although calling what was happening in the hall prepared for the guests *waiting* would have been almost an insult.

The high vaulted ceiling disappeared into the shadows of painted arches. Ancient frescoes stretched along the walls, depicting old gods, forest spirits, and heroes from long-forgotten ages. Massive columns were entwined with living branches, among which garlands of white flowers added

a sweet fragrance to the air. Scented oil burned in bronze lamps, casting a golden glow across the faces of the guests.

The music never stopped. Strings carried long, lingering melodies, flutes wove delicate notes through them, and somewhere in the distance, drums sounded slowly, giving the celebration a deep, measured rhythm.

People laughed, talked, and raised their goblets. No one seemed concerned with what was happening behind the closed doors. They celebrated, drank, and smiled, while an ancient ritual was being performed inside the palace, one upon which the fate of the future king supposedly depended.

The long tables were crowded with food. Roasted meat filled the air with the scent of spices and smoke, golden fruits gleamed beneath a thin layer of honey, and baskets of still-warm bread stood beside dozens of varieties of cheese. Tall pitchers were filled with dark, rich wine.

Chessa soon disappeared among the other servants, leaving me on my own. I picked up a goblet and took a small sip. The wine was stronger than I had expected, and a pleasant warmth spread through me.

Several hours had passed since the celebration began. The wine had warmed my blood and eased some of the tension that had kept me from relaxing completely. The world around me seemed softer now. The colors had lost their sharpness, the laughter sounded warmer, the music deeper, and the golden lamplight had blurred into a gentle haze.

I was just lifting my goblet to my lips when I sensed that something had changed.

At first, it was barely noticeable. Conversations began to fade at the far end of the hall. Someone turned toward the doors, followed by several others. The musicians kept playing, but their melody slipped into the background, giving way to an almost imperceptible tension that quickly spread through the room. One conversation after another fell silent, until dozens of eyes were fixed on a single direction.

The princes were entering the hall.

All five of them.

They weren't walking in formation or trying to attract attention. No one announced their names, no drums sounded, and the courtiers didn't fall to their knees. None of it was necessary. People simply stepped aside as they approached, barely noticing their own movements. Some bowed their heads, while others tried to catch the attention of one of the princes.

I was seeing all five of them together for the first time.

The eldest walked at the front.

Crown Prince Adrian.

I recognized him before anyone said his name. His dark blue doublet was embroidered with silver, its delicate patterns resembling frost spreading across glass. Long fair hair was swept back from a handsome, almost cold face. He looked straight ahead.

The second prince followed.

Ethan.

If Adrian reminded me of a winter sky just before snowfall, Ethan carried a different kind of warmth, one that could burn if you came too close. At first glance, he even seemed friendlier than his older brother. A faint smile played on his lips, and genuine interest shone in his eyes.

But the longer I looked, the more uneasy I became.

His gaze moved over the courtiers, servants, guests, and ambassadors. It lingered on each person just long enough to notice something, commit it to memory, and form an opinion. The prince smiled, but his eyes never stopped working. His dark green outfit, trimmed with gold, was magnificent, yet beside that smile it seemed the most harmless part of his appearance.

I remembered what Chessa had told me about Ethan troubling the king, and for the first time I understood why.

Lucian was the third prince I saw.

Among his brothers, he seemed remarkably alive. His smile didn't look like part of some courtly ritual, and his gaze didn't sweep across the room searching for weaknesses. His embroidered doublet emphasized his broad shoulders, while his tied-back hair revealed a face many women must have considered handsome. And with good reason.

His eyes moved across the crowd and stopped on me. Only for a second, but that was enough. Chessa's words came back to me at the worst possible moment, and now I could no longer convince myself that I hadn't noticed his attention.

Aurik was the fourth, and I almost rolled my eyes.

Even dressed for the celebration, he looked younger than the others. There was still something boyish about him: impatient, self-satisfied, and restless. He glanced around as though he had come not to a royal ceremony, but to a fair where he expected to be entertained at any moment.

Callum came last, but not because he was lagging behind. He had simply chosen that place for himself.

Several steps separated him from his brothers, yet the distance seemed far greater. He truly looked like a man who had somehow found himself among his own family by accident.

He was wearing black again. No gold, no silver, no bright colors. Only dark fabric, a heavy cloak, and the familiar mask covering half his face. Even here, surrounded by music, light, and expensive clothes, there was something dark and dangerous about him. I knew perfectly well that I should keep my distance, yet my gaze stubbornly returned to his figure.

Callum didn't turn his head. He didn't even look in my direction.

The five princes stopped in the center of the hall.

Conversations gradually resumed. The music grew louder, servants hurried to refill goblets, and the celebration continued. But I kept watching the brothers for a long time, trying to understand how the same blood could have produced such different people.

The future king. A dangerous schemer. A kind prince. A spoiled boy. And a man in a black mask who seemed like a stranger among his own family.

The king and queen never appeared. Their thrones remained empty.

Two enormous chairs made of dark wood, decorated with gold and delicate carvings, stood above the hall, silently reminding everyone of the power that had chosen to remain behind closed doors that evening.

Why?

The question caught unpleasantly in my mind. If the heir's purification ceremony was so important, and the entire palace had spent weeks anticipating it, why hadn't the king and queen appeared before their guests? Why had they left their sons to receive the court's attention without them?

I looked toward the raised platform again, a strange uneasiness settling over me.

To keep myself from dwelling on it, I turned my attention back to the crowd and almost immediately noticed a shimmer of silver fabric.

My mood soured at once.

The courtiers stepped aside for Aurelia almost as readily as they had for her brothers, and the princess accepted their attention as her due. I turned away. The last thing I wanted tonight was to run into her. After our previous encounter, I had a fairly good idea of how another conversation might end, especially after a few glasses of wine. So whenever I caught the silver gleam of her dress or the sparkle of the jewels in her hair, I quietly changed direction. I hid behind columns, slipped behind groups of courtiers, or found myself near the tables of food, anything to avoid meeting her eyes.

I raised my goblet and took another small sip. The wine was smooth, with a hint of fruity sweetness and a tart aftertaste. There was a pleasant buzz in my head, just enough to stop me from expecting trouble every second.

And that was precisely why I looked in the direction I should have avoided.

Callum stood a little apart from his brothers. He wasn't talking, drinking, or smiling. The celebration continued all around him, but he seemed entirely indifferent to it. His gaze kept moving across the hall, pausing on certain people and parts of the room as though he were searching for something no one else could see. A chill crept down my spine. His presence made the evening feel less like a celebration.

Lucian, on the other hand, seemed made of light. He was dancing with Celia, and I caught myself smiling as I watched them. The air seemed softer around the two of them. The color of his doublet brought out the green in his eyes. He leaned toward Celia to whisper something in her ear, and she laughed, genuinely and easily, as though the palace really were a safe place.

Adrian stood a little farther away, talking to Ethan.

There was something cold and distant about the eldest prince, something almost kingly even without a crown. Perhaps that was how future kings were supposed to look. Ethan, by contrast, seemed tense. His movements were sharper, his smiles too quick. There was an unmistakable crack between the brothers, something invisible but impossible to ignore.

Aurik...

The fifth prince was flirting.

He was surrounded by ladies-in-waiting, laughing, leaning closer to them, and allowing his fingers to brush their hands and elbows. The young women played along willingly, and judging by their smiles, they seemed to enjoy the prince's attention.

I couldn't help noticing Chessa's gaze. She tried to hide it, pretending to be busy, but her eyes kept returning to Aurik, lingering on his smile. There was so much quiet, almost innocent admiration in her expression that I felt a pang of sympathy for the secret hope she carried. In a world where the distance between a prince and an ordinary servant was so enormous, even the most harmless affection could become something far more complicated.

Everything changed in a single moment, so suddenly and completely that I could barely remember what had been happening just before it.

The first to fall was a guard at the entrance.

I heard a dull, strange sound—not quite a cry, not quite a blow—and only then saw his body jerk and collapse onto the stone floor. An arrow protruded from his back.

The music didn't stop immediately. A few musicians still managed to move: a bow slid across the strings, someone drew breath to continue the melody. Then one clutched at his throat, another dropped to his knees, and a third let his instrument fall. Silence swept over the hall so abruptly that my ears began to ring.

Then came the screaming.

It rose all at once, swelling into a deafening wave of hundreds of voices, terror, confusion, and panic. Everything around me erupted into motion. People shoved against one another, grabbed at those nearby, and some fell, calling for help without even understanding what was happening. I was suddenly pushed against the wall. Someone seized my shoulder, another hand caught my elbow, and my back struck the cold stone hard enough to drive the air from my lungs.

That was when I saw them.

People wearing identical lion masks were emerging from the crowd. Their frozen, predatory faces concealed their identities, while the dark slits for eyes made them even more frightening. The strangers weren't attacking everyone indiscriminately. They moved with purpose, almost in unison, cutting through the crowd and making their way toward a single target.

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