

BENEATH THE
CURSE OF SIX

Beneath the Curse of Six

Sample Chapters 1

by Joanna G. Holden

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Ten Years Ago

THE FOREST LOOKED NOTHING like it should. King Dain looked as calm as always, but inside his nerves were in a frenzy. He had spent every autumn in this forest since he was eight. How could he have gotten lost? And where was the rest of the hunting party? It must have been hours since he rode off after that stag. He should have waited for the others. That didn't matter now. He needed to figure out where he was.

Something whistled in the distance. Or was it someone? Dain brought his horse to a halt, ears trained on that sound. Too low pitch for any bird that lived here. He wiped the perspiration from his brow and blinked hard. Was that fog or smoke rolling through the trees toward him? It was coming fast. Unnaturally fast. "Come on, boy," he whispered. He spun his horse and urged him away from the gray vapor billowing between the trees.

The horse darted unsteadily, dodging bushes and fallen logs. Dain kept his head down, whispering encouragement into the creature's ear. The farther they ran, the closer the fog seemed. And the darker the forest became. Suddenly, the flood of fog slipped around Dain and rose like a wall in front of him. The horse reared and Dain flew over its head. He hit a tree and everything went black.

When he opened his eyes again, all he could see was a grey-white blur. He sat up slowly, rubbing his throbbing forehead. Slowly his vision cleared. But the grey surrounding him did not vanish. It hung around him like folds of a silk curtain. He could see a few trees, but not much more. Where was his horse? A soft whiny told Dain he was near. Dain stood and reached until his hand caught the edge of a rein. A smile eased his furrowed brow for a moment. His horse was still as reliable as ever.

"Do my eyes deceive me?" a voice whispered through the fog. "Or has our humble abode been graced by royalty?"

Dain spun, he spun again, searching for the speaker. There was no one within ten feet of him, yet the voice spoke right in his ear. His hand went to the hunting dagger lashed to his belt. "You are indeed mistaken," he said. The tone was too stately. Cursing himself, he lowered his voice to a growl. "I'm but a humble servant of the king. I was sent to fetch the deer he shot."

"What an honor," the voice continued. It was low and unmistakably female. "But why have you not taken up the deer and returned to your master?"

Dain stopped circling. It wasn't helping. "I seem to have lost it."

"The deer? Or your way in these woods?"

"The deer."

The voice chuckled. "You are afraid to admit you are lost. Yes, you are filled with fear."

A darkening in the fog alerted Dain. He whipped out the dagger and stood to face it. Dark patches drew together into a form, then the form solidified into a woman. She wore a tattered tunic of charcoal grey and a faded cloak of wine red. Her face was covered in wrinkles, and her eyes were bold and bright. Her thin lips curved into a smile that told Dain she held all the power in this conversation. It sent chills down his spine.

Then he saw them – the coiling burn marks along the outside edges of her ears. Vandurfahl. He relaxed his stance, then lowered his dagger. Everything in his being told him he was in the presence of the deadliest foe he had ever faced. But she wanted something. Otherwise, he would be dead. No sense fighting her without knowing what dark powers she could summon.

"And in whose presence do I stand?" he asked.

"A humble peasant," she replied. "Do you wish to find your way out of this forest?"

Dain glanced around. "What do you want in return?"

"Right to it, then." She narrowed her eyes as her smile deepened. "You are not married, but you once were. To a woman of great beauty and wisdom who held your heart and soul."

Dain's jaw tightened. If she dared malign his Helene . . .

“And you have children.” She held out a hand for his.

He kept his stance. Did she think he was going to fall for her games? Suddenly, he looked down to find his hand in hers. What happened?

She traced the lines in his hands. As she did, a soft green glow lit up her eyes for just an instant. She chuckled. “Seven of them. My goodness, you were a loving husband.”

He wanted to pull his hand back, but somehow he was frozen. He couldn’t even blink.

The woman let go of his hand and reached up to caress his cheek. “Your children must miss their mother terribly.” The hand slid down his neck and planted itself on his wildly beating heart. “How lonely their father must be. No one to warm your bed or brighten your day or care for the wounds this world has left you.” She was quite close to him now, her aged face still smiling up at him as if she was toying with a pet. “I will tell you the way home,” she whispered. “And I will give you a gift.”

His voice returned to him, but not his movement. “What gift?”

“The gift of love.”

Dain stared unbelieving at her. “What are you talking about?”

A second shape pierced the fog, leaving a trail of white mist behind her. This woman was young, barely twenty, Dain would guess. Her complexion was pale and smooth, and her hair was gold as sunshine. Her pink lips were full and soft, her grey eyes round and luminous. And her figure was as enviable as Dain

had ever seen, covered in a simple brown dress. She stood with impeccable elegance. How was she only a peasant? She stared at him, brown tight knit.

“This is my daughter,” the older woman said. “And she will happily guide you out of this forest. If you will marry her on the other side of it.”

Dain swallowed hard. She had to be joking. What made her think she could force her daughter on him like this? He was a king. Her hand was still on his heart. Something was pulsing from that hand. Red hot pain gripped his head. The world swayed before him. His hand still gripped his dagger. “I cannot,” he whispered.

The woman’s gaze intensified, her hand pressing harder against his chest. The pulsing quickened. Sharp pangs shot between his temples. The forest rolled and flipped upside down. Suddenly, he was alone again – a dream, he knew it – staggering through the forest, thirsty, starving, his clothes torn, his dark beard long and bedraggled. Then just as suddenly, he snapped back. The woman was no longer touching him. But she was still smiling.

So that was it. He either married her daughter or never found his way home again. Could she do that? He didn’t know. But he didn’t dare find out. He checked the girl’s ears. No burn marks. Not Vandurfahl then. And it didn’t look like he had a choice. At least if he went willingly, he would be in control of the situation once they got out of the forest. But the kingdom . . .

“Have you made up your mind, ‘humble servant of the king’?” The woman’s eyes sparkled at him in victory. She knew what he would do.

But she wouldn’t see his despair. Standing straight, he held out a hand to the girl. “If she will guide me out of this forest,” he replied, “then you have my word. I will marry her.”

“And she will stay in your home as your wife?”

“Yes.” The single word dropped on his heart like a boulder. His wife. He looked at the girl again. She was terrified. At least he could tell himself he was saving her from whatever horrible home she had come from. He looked back at her mother. “But you must vow to never come into my presence again.”

“You have my word,” the woman replied, adding in an echoing whisper, “Your majesty.”

Suddenly, she was gone. So was the fog and the darkness. All that was left was the forest Dain knew so well and the girl. Dain allowed himself a shaky sigh of relief, but he dared not let this girl see more than that. His horse still stood behind him, prancing impatiently to be gone.

Dain petted the animal’s long, warm neck, leaning over to breathe in the musty smell of horse. The sensation soothed his soul. He was back in his world again. He glanced back at the girl. “Are you alright?” he asked.

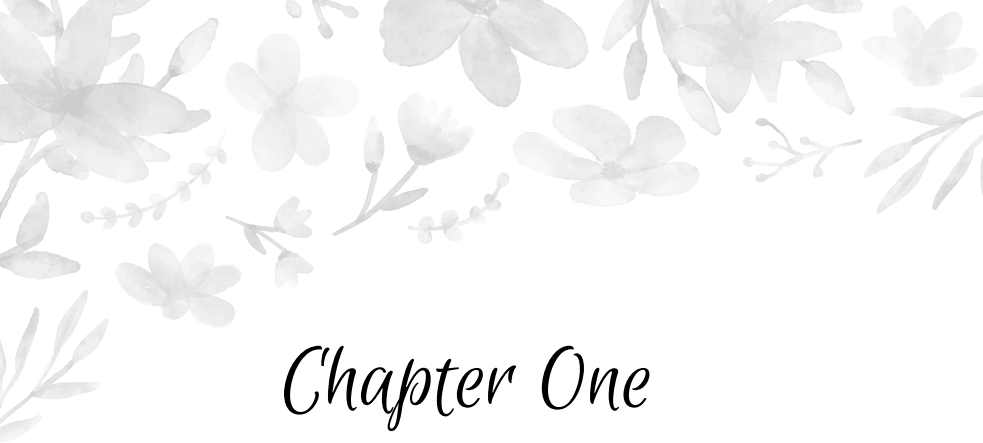
She nodded.

“What is your name?”

“Ayleth, sire,” she replied.

Ayleth. A noble name to match her stately airs. Her hand was trembling in his. Pity momentarily pushed anger out of the way, and he stepped back. "May I?" She nodded, and he propped her gently on the horse. Then he took the reins and began walking. It was only a short distance to the edge of the forest.

An ache replaced the numbness he tried to keep over his heart. What would Helene say if she was here? He glanced at Ayleth. She stared back, still wide-eyed and trembling. Clenching his jaw, he turned back to the path ahead. Helene wasn't here. And he had a kingdom to worry about. He would deal with all of this when he got out of the forest. For now, that could be his only thought.

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Chapter One

TODAY WAS THE DAY. Papa was coming.

October winds whistled through the giant oaks and maples, twisting their nearly bare branches like witches' hands. Thank goodness I was too old to believe in witches. The sight still sent chills all along my arms. A great gust sent one branch reaching toward me, its gnarled fingers clawing at the air.

I knelt beside the row of root vegetables, my dark braid falling over my shoulder, and started pulling. This little woodland cottage was the only home I had known for ten years. It sat in the middle of a forest half a day from civilization at the end of a path only Papa and my three older brothers could navigate. Here, there were no gardeners to collect the vegetables, no stableboys or scullery maids to tend the animals and clean the cottage. We had learned to take care of ourselves with only our governess to

teach us etiquette and protocol. Not after today, though. Today, Papa and the three older boys were coming back for a visit.

And after that last letter I had sent back, it was finally happening. I was going back home.

At least, I assumed I was. He hadn't said so exactly. Bertram, two siblings up from me, insisted I wasn't. That it was all some big plot to keep me here forever. I ripped the tops off the misshapen carrots before chucking them into the basket. What did he know? Nobody told him anymore about life outside these walls than they told me. Brief updates on palace life; the occasional scandalous gossip; a newspaper once a quarter that they never saw fit to share with me.

The carrot in my hand cracked. I sighed. I needed to stop getting so worked up. Papa had promised that I could go back as soon as I healed from the mold poisoning. It hadn't flared up since we got here. I was sixteen and as properly educated and prepared for my royal duties as a girl could be. He had to take me home.

I started on the row of fingerling potatoes. These would make a nice addition to the venison stew. My mouth started watering at the thought of soft, smooth chunks of potato with tangy venison slathered in bone broth and parsley. And some of Nonnie's buttered bread on the side. The perfect dish to celebrate.

Above me, fourteen-year-old Cedric swung through the elaborate levels in the five-tree fort. Our oldest brother, Rowan, had helped the boys build it when we first came. As if no one

could see us above the hedges. Or hear Cedric from a mile away when he hooted and hollered.

Bertram had been just as loud, until he grew too old and important to play with us younger siblings. Standing, I realized I really was too old myself. Sixteen and a royal princess. When we moved back to the castle, I would be expected to give up tree climbing and gardening and all the other activities that kept us sane here.

“Hey!” Cedric leaned out as far as he could from the highest tree. “Want to come up? I just redid the ropes course.”

I glanced at the black clouds gathering along the horizon beside the setting sun. “It’ll be dark soon.”

“So?”

“So, aren’t you hungry?”

He worked his face into a heart-wrenching beg. “Just for a minute. Please?”

“No. I need to help Nonnie. And it’s your turn to bring in the wood.”

The pleading expression twisted into a sulk. “You’re no fun anymore.”

I propped a hand on my hip. A prince his age shouldn’t sulk. He also shouldn’t have to grow up without friends to follow him on his wild adventures.

“Fine.” I set the basket down with a sigh. “One time across, alright?”

He pumped a fist in the air and darted back down to the course.

I examined the front of my gown and apron. It was the oldest and least expensive gown I owned, but it was still long enough to trip me if I wasn't careful. Lifting the skirts and switching hands with every step, I pulled myself up the wooden slats nailed into the side of the fattest tree. From there, I zigzagged between the branches till I made it to where Cedric stood. Two long ropes stretched from one tree to another with six ropes hanging from them in loops. I frowned. "Where'd the hanging steps go?"

"I used those on the side of the other tree so we have a back entrance. But you can use these the same way."

"Except these aren't tied together."

He winked. "Exactly." Nimble as a squirrel, he grabbed the loop in front of him and set one foot in it. Then he grabbed the next one and stepped into it with the other foot. Switching feet, he clambered across till he was on the other side. "Okay, Liza. Your turn."

The loops swung in the breeze and ruffled the thick skirts. "I don't know..."

"Oh, come on. Please?"

I wasn't going to miss the whining. Still holding the tree, I grabbed the first loop and set my foot in it. It moved under me, daring me to try.

"What's the matter? Scared?"

I narrowed my eyes at him and grabbed the loop with the other hand. Instantly, I swung sideways. Habit took over, and I reached for the next loop. My body swayed worse than the

branches, but I got my foot into each loop and finally landed on the platform on the other side.

“Ha! Wasn’t that awesome? Let’s run it again!” Cedric launched back into the ropes.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the wind whispered through the branches.

I shivered. “No. You’ve got to chop the wood. And I really need to get inside. Now come on.”

“Yes, ‘Mother’.” Sulking again, Cedric began shimmying back down while I took the proper spiral stairs around the tall, skinny tree.

“And don’t forget to check on the chickens,” I called over my shoulder. I picked up the basket and hurried inside the cottage, closing the door behind me.

Inside, our governess Nonnie waddled around like a mother hen missing half her chicks. Her gray tresses were curled softly into a bun. Her face was wrinkled and her form soft, and she always smelled of rosemary. She muttered and shook her head. Pots rattled. Glass bowls clinked. Finally, she paused, one hand on her hip, the other pressed to her forehead. “Now, what have I forgotten? Prince Bertram?”

“Almost ready,” came a dark voice from the boys’ room.

“Prince Cedric?”

“He’s out getting wood,” I replied, setting down the basket.

“Oh, there you are, princess. Yes, just start paring those. The broth is plenty ready for them. That bone’s cooked down till the meat’s practically falling off.”

I quickly rinsed my hands, trying not to check out the front window again, and picked up the paring knife. The chilling wind drew a groan from the aging cottage. A perfect night for soup. I caught my reflection in the mirror behind the back door and swept a dark brown curl back into place. I'd have to keep a closer eye on my appearance, now, too.

Everything in the royal court was about appearance. Would I impress them, I wondered? Would I impress my stepmother? I turned to the vegetables, my mind piecing together the vague memories of her beauty and presence. In all these ten years, she hadn't been able to come with Papa to see us. She hadn't sent any letters, either. It was almost like she had disappeared.

Rowan didn't like to talk about her. Every time he did, Bertram just made a big deal about how much he hated her and how horrible she was. I couldn't remember. But I didn't believe him. Papa would never marry a horrible person. He was too good a father and too wise a king.

Nonnie was still searching the room. "Where on earth is Prince Gavin?"

"Right here." Seventeen-year-old Gavin's hand appeared over the edge of the reading chair.

Nonnie shook her head at herself and went back to organizing the enormous table shoved into the middle of the cottage just for company. Her sweetness made me smile. Thank the Lord, she was coming with us. I didn't think she could handle the peace after ten years with this crowd.

It was spacious in here for a cottage. The kitchen made up the back half of the big room. And the furniture was arranged to make the front half into a sitting room of sorts. My bedroom was a small hideaway at the top of seven creaky steps. And the boys' room was a large shed hastily tacked to the side. Its doors were hacked right out of the cottage walls to accommodate. Poor Nonnie had only her cot under the stairs. But she insisted she liked it that way.

It was certainly less cramped now that Rowan, Fendrel and Merek had returned to court. Still, it wasn't really adequate.

"Can I help, Liza?" Gavin pushed himself out of the great armchair.

I glanced at the table. All the bowls and serving trays were set. Napkins. Cutlery. "Looks like everything's pretty much ready."

"Alright."

He moseyed over to the table, his cane clicking on the wooden floor. Was his limp worse today? Probably the coming storm. Ever since that fall off a horse, he claimed it was his bad leg's one redeeming quality; the ability to tell the weather. Even at twelve years old, he had been chipper about it. I could use some of that positive energy just now.

He definitely favored Papa more, with his wide-set blue eyes and straight nose. He wasn't the quietest one. But to me he was the one that brought the most calm.

The click of heeled boots from the boys' room was followed by a cough and a careful check at a coat collar. I glanced up at Bertram trying to look every hour of his nineteen years. Every-

one said we were almost twins. At first glance, his dark curls and oval face did match mine. There was a darkness to his eyes, though, and a sharpness to his features. It used to just look solemn. These days, it looked angry.

I chuckled at his perfect appearance. "I don't think 'best dressed gentleman' is an official job title yet."

"Well, spoiled princess still is, so I guess you're in luck."

My chuckle turned to a grin of annoyance. "Oh, I only take my lessons from the most experienced. Have you an opening this week?"

Gavin rolled his head back. "Can't you two get along for one night?"

Bertram ignored him and stepped out the front door.

I blew hard through my lips. If he didn't go off on adventures once we moved back, I was going to find a different palace to live in.

"You know," Gavin said, "he's got a bit of a reason to be annoyed."

"Well, he's certainly giving me reason." I threw the rest of the carrots into the stew and slammed the lid down.

Gavin limped after me as I moved to the front reading chair and picked up my knitting. "Come on, Liza," he said. "The older boys all got to leave when they hit eighteen."

"Rowan stayed a lot longer."

"But he chose to stay. B's cooped up in here. He's ready to take on the world. He's...frustrated."

"And that gives him the right to treat me like that?"

“You’re not exactly a sweetheart to him, either.” He gave me that brow raise he only used for ‘big brother lectures’.

Sighing, I checked the rows of yarn on the wooden needles. “I know. I just get so tired of him acting like he’s the only one that has a right to be upset. Papa’s had to tell me no to leaving twice. And I’ve done everything he’s ever asked me to do. And I’m not sick anymore. So if Bertram thinks he’s got a monopoly on family grievances –”

“Alright, alright.” Gavin held up a hand.

I fidgeted with the knitting needles. “As if I didn’t know I’m the reason you’re all still here.”

He gave me a frustrated smirk. “For the thousandth time, it’s not your fault.”

“That’s not how Bertram sees it.”

Gavin huffed. “Well, Bertram can go lick a tree.”

I giggled. “So much for brotherly empathy.”

The front door opened, and the older brother in question strode back in. “Will the soup be done soon?”

“Another half hour or so.”

Bertram meandered to lean against the fireplace beside me. Big fat drops of rain plopped against the windowpane. “I hope Papa and the boys don’t get drenched,” I said.

“The boys’ will be here in plenty of time,” Bertram replied.

“And Papa,” I added firmly.

“If you say so.”

“You don’t have to have my say so,” I replied. “You have his promise.”

“And he’s never broken a promise before.”

“You’ve read as much as I have. There are a million and one things a king must directly oversee.”

“And naturally his children should be at the bottom of that list.”

It was said so coldly, barely any emotion behind it. Yet it raked coals over my already sensitive soul.

Beside him, Gavin turned away and began picking at the beautifully carved raven’s head on his cane.

“You know,” Bertram went on, “he’s not some flawless, perfect knight out of a storybook. He’s a human. He comes with every flaw there is. You’d be better off if you didn’t depend so heavily on his ‘promises’.”

I rolled my eyes. “You can be impossible sometimes.”

“At least I see him for who he is.”

My pulse was quickening. “And who is that, Bertram? Besides the king of Belruvia.”

Bertram leaned forward again. “He’s the father who left us here without an explanation –”

“I was sick. He got me out so I could get better.”

“Then why am I here, Liza? Or Gavin or Cedric or any of the others.” He held out his arms, glancing between me and Gavin. “We didn’t have any ‘symptoms’. I’m talking about the real reason we’re here.”

Gavin nudged him. “Rowan won’t like it.”

Ignoring him, Bertram went on. “Think about it, Liza. A king who owns three family estates – all perfectly safe from

‘mold’, or whatever. Yet he sends you here, and with all six of us. But no guards. Why would he do all of that unless for some reason it was unsafe for us? Why rip ten precious years from your all children’s lives over a mold intolerance from one of them?”

An angry chuckle bubbled out of me. “I told you he’d blame me.”

Bertram rolled his eyes. “Would you stop making this about you?”

I huffed. “I’m terribly sorry that so many of your precious years were ripped away from you. But I had nothing to do with that. And if you’re so angry with Papa, you can yell at him about it tonight when he comes.”

The door burst open, and Cedric trudged in, a handful of sloppily chopped logs in his scrawny arms. “You know,” he said, “in court, princes have other people to carry in the firewood.” He dumped the logs in the wood box. “Oh, I saw the horses coming. It’s just the boys this time. Surprise, surprise.”

Bertram raised an eyebrow at me.

My stomach sank into my shoes taking every ounce of joy with it. Eyes quickly watering, I set the knitting aside and stood. “Forgive me, brother,” I said to Bertram in a sickly sweet voice. “I fear I am not myself just now. Do excuse me.” I stood, curtsied dramatically, and headed up the stairs.



Chapter Two

I SAT ON THE little bed, knees pulled to my chest, face buried in my arms. He couldn't have done it again. He'd promised. As soon as I was healthy, as soon as I'd finished my education., I could go home. Was Bertram right? Was Papa just going to add another checklist to my sentence here? What more could there possibly be for me to do?

And why couldn't he just tell me himself?

I gripped my dress as the tears flowed faster, soaking my sleeves. Ten years I had stood up for him to Bertram. Ten years, I had waited patiently. He had let Rowan come back, then Fendrel, then Merek. Why wouldn't he let me? Or was he going to make me wait till I was an old maid and couldn't have a life of my own?

Unless...I lifted my head to look out the small round window. Did someone else not want me home?

I traced Bertram's conspiracies to a single name. Ayleth. Bertram claimed she had tricked Papa into marrying her and that she hated us. I had spent so long trying to convince him that wasn't true. Did she actually hate us? Hate me?

Horses neighed outside.

I pulled out my handkerchief and washed it in the water by my bedside. That was all ridiculous and I needed to pull myself together. I wiped my face gingerly, careful not to leave marks, then patted it dry. Clearing my throat, I opened the door and marched downstairs to stand beside my brothers. I was not going to act like a child.

The front door creaked loudly. And the pair of sea gray eyes that met mine lifted the weight off my heart just for a moment. "Rowan!" I cried and wrapped myself around my oldest brother.

The scents of leather and horses smothered me. Rowan pressed a kiss into my curled hair, then leaned back to look at me. The stubble beard and curly mouse-brown hair made him look nearly thirty now. But that twinkle in his eye reminded me he was always ready to play like a child.

"Liza, I'm telling you – you've got to stop it. You get more beautiful every time. It's not fair to the other princesses."

I giggled and snuggled back into his arms, ignoring the way the royal crest of the swan scratched my cheek.

"Are you doing all right?"

"Infinitely better now that you're here."

He let me go and reached out a hand to Bertram. "You're looking well, B." He studied the smart suit and carefully combed hair. "I supposed we should start calling you Bertram."

The next-oldest brother pushed Rowan into the room. Poor Fendrel had to lean down to fit his six-foot-three-inch frame under the doorway. Then, there he was – his square jawline and mile-wide grin flashing impeccable white teeth. "Don't bother making room for us poor souls shivering in the cold." His voice was as dark and loud as the thunder outside. He shook his dark curls and sprayed us all, then dumped an armful of swords wrapped in a leather cloak on the floor. "There she is!" He scooped me up in arms as hard as steel till I grunted. "Sorry," he said, setting me down.

I massaged my rib cage. "It's all right. I was hoping to get a broken back."

"What doesn't kill you gives you a great story." Fendrel patted my shoulder, then pushed past me to Bertram. "Well, look who's getting ready to join the ranks of the devilishly handsome." He ruffled Bertram's hair with a boisterous laugh

Bertram ducked away, smoothing the hair back with a scowl I found satisfying.

"You're here!" Cedric yelled from the other side of the cottage. He ran up and found himself in a bear hug.

"How are you almost as tall as me?" Rowan measured Cedric's height against his chest. "Nonnie must have gotten stricter about you and vegetables."

“Now,” Fendrel boomed, slipping past us to the reading chair, “where is the bookworm?”

They moved on to greeting Gavin while I turned back to the door. Merek had sneaked in and closed it behind him, quiet as always. His broad face and far-set blue eyes reminded me the most of Father. His boyish smile betrayed his twenty-one years even as those eyes hinted at wisdom beyond his age.

He gave me a hug and a kiss. “Sorry we couldn’t come earlier. We brought some presents, though.”

Forcing joy onto my face, I laughed emptily. “I hope it’s not another mini trebuchet. Nonnie still hasn’t forgotten about that window.”

The woman in question was now walking over, drying her hands on her apron. “My princes.” She stopped a few feet away and creaked into a surprisingly deep curtsy. “What an honor it is to have you here again.”

Merek crossed the room and took her withered hands in his. “Dear Nonnie.” A kiss to each cheek, and then he stepped to the side.

Rowan was eyeing the book in Gavin’s hand. “Which piece are we in now?”

Gavin’s eyes brightened as he held up the history with care. “Handorvan.”

“Mmm.” Rowan shrugged. “Good theories. Tough rhetoric. You should try Elever’s *Common Histories* next. Fills in the gaps well.”

“I have that one on the list.” Gavin pointed at the table and the paper with one hundred titles written in perfect penmanship. Half of them were already crossed out. “I was waiting to put in another request. Father forgot it with the last box.”

Rowan nodded. “Well, now you can go and get it yourself whenever you like – future master of the king’s libraries. Eh?” He clapped his younger brother’s shoulder. “How will that title suit you?”

Gavin gaped up at him. “Father approved?”

“He said no one else deserved the title more. Give yourself a few years to catch up on the social scene, and the position is yours.”

I nibbled my lip, waiting. Gavin was going. Did that mean...

Rowan looked around me. “And Bertram, Father has discussed your future with the members of his cabinet. They have some ideas, but it’ll be your choice. You can talk it over with him as soon as you’ve settled.” Finally, he looked at me, and his façade of joy faded.

That was all it took. My bubble of hope popped and fizzled away. “Did Papa get my letter?”

“He did. But he wants you to stay on another year, you and Cedric both.”

I took a step backward. Already, tears of frustration were ready to flood again, but I stubbornly held them back.

“What?” Cedric cried. “How’s that fair? Gavin gets to go.”

“Let me explain,” Rowan started.

Gavin leaned forward on his cane. "She's completely healed, Rowan. And Cedric is healthy as a horse."

"That has nothing to do with it."

"Then what is it?" Bertram demanded, leaning back against the doorframe and crossing his arms.

Taking a deep breath, Rowan explained. "He only wants to make sure they're truly ready. It's a big shock returning to royal life after growing up in isolation." Rowan set a hand on my shoulder. "He knows how disappointed you must be. But he hopes you understand."

I grimaced and slid out from under his hand. "Understand? What, that we're being left behind again? After being promised over and over that if we did everything right, if we followed the protocols, we'd be allowed to go back?" Pressure was building in my core. I wanted to scream.

"Think of it as a chance to prepare yourself," Rowan insisted. "With Gav and B gone, you'll be able to fit in twice the studies and completely shock Father when he arrives."

"I'm ready to shock him now." I brushed past him to stare out the window with hands twisting. A thought pierced to the tender truth. "Am I that much of a mess, that I can't come home and just be his daughter?"

"No," Fendrel stepped up. "That's not it at all."

"Then what is it?" I spun to stare up at my warrior brother. "Because I have passed every test in every book Papa sent us. Nonnie's worked day and night to help me prepare." I pointed

to where my sweet governess was resetting the table to avoid our quarrel. "She says I'm ready. Is that not good enough for him?"

"Liza." Merek's low, steady voice breached the tension. I stared at him, hovering inconspicuous by the dinner table. "We must ask you to trust him. Not everything is as it seems." His lips closed again, and he went back to being a ghost in our midst.

My mouth opened, a scoff lingering as I sorted through ten snarky replies.

"Let's have some supper," Rowan said. "We'll all have cooler tempers with food in our bellies."

"Yes, please." Nonnie gestured toward the colossal table squeezed into the kitchen. "The food is all ready for your highnesses to enjoy."

Rowan watched me with pleading eyes. "Please?"

I nodded, and slowly the boys made their way to the table.

I stood by the window a moment longer, peering out into the oncoming night. A gust of wind rustled the trees. And through the wind came a sound like a whisper. I examined the forest more closely. Nothing there but those empty trees with their long-reaching fingers.

A hand touched mine, and I turned to find Gavin still beside me. Something akin to rage boiled beneath a thin veneer of calm. "I'm not going to let them leave you here, Liza," he whispered. "We'll figure something out." Then he hobbled to join the others.

Bracing myself for the fight I knew was coming, I went to my seat and lay the napkin across my lap. Nonnie set out the enor-

mous bowls laden with thick, savory stew. Full bellies wouldn't make a difference. Once Papa had made up his mind, none of us could change it. At least I hadn't been able to yet.

Rowan said grace for the meal, and then the boys began passing dishes of bread and butter back and forth. The only sounds were the clinking of metal spoons against porcelain bowls. Cedric and Merek clashed their bowls against each other.

Merek winced. "Sorry, Ced. I'm a bit rusty I guess."

Cedric shrugged and maneuvered his bowl around Merek's.

I glanced at each brother in turn. Who was going to break the silence? I knew it wouldn't be Nonnie. She was fully focused on her meal and keeping out of this situation.

Finally, Rowan leaned back in his chair and tossed his napkin on the table. "Does everyone think they can communicate calmly and quietly?"

"We just want to know what's going on," Gavin replied.

"That's not an answer." Fendrel's eyes were on Bertram as he folded his musclebound arms over his equally brawny chest.

Bertram glared back at him, but his tone was all civility as he said, "I'll be nice." And he smiled.

I hated that smile. He used it a lot with me. This was the first time I had seen him use it against an older brother.

"Why do I have to stay?" Cedric whined. "I wasn't sick."

"We've been over this, Ced," Rowan replied. "We can't leave Eliza all alone out here."

"Alright." Gavin set his spoon down. "Then I'll just stay here another year, too."

Rowan sighed.

The usual waves of guilt weighed down my already-sinking stomach. “Gav, you shouldn’t have to do that.”

“Any more than you should,” he whispered back.

“Come on,” Fendrel said. “Father needs you at the palace. Those books aren’t going to organize themselves.”

Gavin didn’t look amused. “I’m serious. You said this has nothing to do with her sickness. She’s had just as much education as I have. If I’m ready for royal duties, then she is, too.”

“And she will be,” replied Rowan. “When the time is right.”

Sighing, Gavin scratched his neck. “Alright, fine. Then why not bring in an official lady in waiting? Or two – or ten even.”

“Gavin’s right,” Bertram added. “There must be dozens of young noble’s daughters who’d give their left thumbs for the recognition.”

That surprised me. I had expected Bertram to say something about how there was no point in ripping precious years off their lives, too.

“Security,” Fendrel paused demolishing a second gargantuan serving to answer. “Right now, we’re able to get away without guards or servants being privy to your location. The minute we add in someone else’s children –”

“How *are* we able to get away without guards?” Bertram leaned forward eagerly, still wearing that nightmarish smile and now blinking his eyes in mock innocence.

Fendrel looked unbothered by it. “The same way we explained the last time you asked.”

Bertram raised an eyebrow. "Because that explanation made so much sense."

I pushed my bowl away. "Rowan," I said quietly. Everyone paused and watched me. "Bertram's right. For once," I added with a chuckle that nearly let out the tears. "None of this makes sense. If Papa has a legitimate reason, I'll let it go. But if this is all you have..."

Merek cleared his throat. "Sometimes it's better not knowing." His eyes locked onto mine for an instant. Then he went back to eating.

What was I supposed to do with that?

Bertram leaned back and sighed. "Well, I'll stop asking questions if you can answer one last one for me." He was looking at Rowan.

Rowan nodded.

"Can you tell me without lying that this has nothing to do with that woman our father married?"

I stiffened and glanced at our older brother. It was a horribly rude way to ask. But I couldn't help hoping we'd finally hear the answer to it.

Rowan sat with his mouth tightly shut for a long minute. "Bertram," he said at length, "as long as we've lived in this home, I have allowed you to speak freely, more freely than would ever be allowed in court. I felt we all needed the honesty. But these last few years, you have abused that freedom. Some might even say you've gotten away with speaking treason. So from this moment forward, you will only speak as a royal prince should.

Or you will not be going anywhere.” And he gave Bertram a look I had never seen him use before – tense, angry. Dark.

The candles fluttered, and the wind howled around the cottage. The sound of whispering echoed around me again. Was it one of the pines? I shuddered and rubbed my arm. It was silly to pretend I could eat. I looked up at Rowan to politely excuse myself.

Then I froze. Was that fear in Merek’s eyes? “What’s wrong?” I asked.

Fendrel popped out of his chair. “Did you see it, too?”

“I think so.” Rowan rose, too, and they hurried to the window.

“What it is?” I repeated.

We were all out of our chairs now. Gavin stood by me and Cedric while Merek guarded Nonnie. Bertram joined the others at the window.

“He was just there,” Fendrel pointed into the trees. “Was there a second one?”

“Possibly two more,” Rowan said, gesturing around the forest. “There, then there.”

Intruders. The word chilled me. I thought through the plan we’d memorized in case enemies came for us.

Grabbing three swords from the ground, Fendrel said, “I’ll go around back. Merek,” he pointed at him while striding across the room, “with me. Gavin, you stay and guard Liza and Nonnie. Cedric, you stay with them for now.”

“What’s going on?” Cedric demanded.

“Nothing to be alarmed about,” Fendrel assured him. Then he tossed Merek and Gavin each a sword.

Merek caught one, his face tense. “Have a seat,” he gently encouraged us. “We’ll be back soon.” He stepped around the table and disappeared out the back with Fendrel.

Rowan and Bertram were already out the front door and had closed it tightly behind them.

I gripped Gavin’s hand.

“It’s alright,” he said. “I’ve got you.” But he sounded just as scared as me.