

A Thousand Roads to Happiness
(a novel)

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Lyssa

Mr. Rolfe is supposed to keep his lectures for the religious option, History and Theory of Music. That's why I take Choir, the practical application. So when he uses the modern arrangement of "Thousand Roads" as an excuse to preach to us, I try to tune out. It's the first time in weeks that I actually wish I could get lost in some other place, so I wouldn't have to sit through this.

"Imagine your future: a long road stretching out in front of you. Most of you will go first to college, then marriage and careers and children. Is this a journey you'd like to take on your own? It's possible, I suppose," although his tone suggests it's a fate worse than death, "but consider how much nicer would it be if the Harmonies are there beside you?"

I love the idea. Who wouldn't want faceless voices to sing the world into a better state? I don't need his sermon to realize it would be nice to have them beside me on my journey. However, it's been a long time since I believed in fairy tales.

"Remember that as you travel life's path, you're never alone. Either the Harmonies are with you, or you're walking beside Discord..."

As he drones on, music hums softly. Mr. Rolfe should yell at someone to turn that music off, but he keeps talking. I look around, trying to find the source. No one else reacts at all. Fine, I can ignore it, too. It grows louder, but no one else so much as fidgets. The harmony swells into a crescendo. It drowns out Mr. Rolfe and the entire class.

I jump when the dismissal bell sounds. Class can't be over. It just started. I don't have my notebook with me, which is a relief: a new picture can't have formed while I listened to that music.

I wend my way to the side and search for Tanya. There: I catch a glimpse of shiny blond

hair before she's swallowed by the mob again.

She slips her way to my side of the hall. Despite her three-inch heels, I tower over her. It's a good thing she's as nice as she is pretty. Together, we walk towards our lockers.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

My stomach clenches. I smile. "I'm fine."

I feel her eyes on my face. I watch the shifting bodies for both of us. My heart pounds, and I mentally roll my eyes at myself. As if Tanya would ever try to hurt me, or even push me too far. We both know to leave the other alone after *I'm fine*. If I had any idea what's happening to me, maybe I could talk about it. But how do I explain that either I'm hallucinating or I'm possessed? Neither option is either reasonable or believable.

"Are you hungry, or can we skip lunch?"

My breath escapes in a silent sigh. My smile feels more natural. "I'm saladed out."

"Me, too. Can you help me with the Calc homework?"

"After all the times you've helped me," I say, "I don't know if I can return the favor. The library?"

"That's where I was thinking."

I sing the tune and my locker opens. I grab my notebook and close it again. I still don't understand how the locks work. There are identical twins in our year. They sound even more alike than they look, yet their lockers can tell them apart. Of course, the school lockers are set to open for either the assigned student or the principal or secretary. Harmonies forbid they actually trust us. You'd think we live in Moavsed, the way we're treated: like it's a crime to be a teenager.

Tanya already has her notebook, so we head straight for the second floor. Posters lining the walls invite us to a meeting to *Help us discover the Prom theme*.

"Really?" I ask. "Prom's what, six months away? Who needs to even think about it yet?"

"Oh, it gets better. I overheard someone suggest *The Found Princess*. The idea being that the Prom Queen could pretend to be Princess Melyssande for the day."

"By the Harmonies," I manage through my laughter. "Can you even imagine the principal's reaction? He'd threaten expulsions."

Tanya speeds up. "You shouldn't even joke about that."

Din, I silently swear. She gets uptight about expulsion and exile. Yeah, expulsion would be horrendous, even if they managed to survive without the air purifiers of the city: having to live in the Wilds, with no stores or farmland; buried poison bombs and land mines that could be anywhere; no one around but other exiles.

If we lived a couple of hundred years ago, I wouldn't joke about it. Now, though, the people at the Expulsion Office have to think someone's a threat to society before they'll expel them. And I'm sorry, but murderers completely deserve that fate. "I said 'threaten.' It was a joke. You know tackiness isn't a crime."

What was the Prom committee thinking? I love romance as much as the next girl, but being the missing princess would turn into tragedy way too quickly for anyone to want to be her. How could they forget the prophecy? *When the Princess reaches two and twenty, she will take the throne and the Banora dynasty will end.* I shiver. I feel for the king and queen. They're wonderful rulers, and they deserve happiness. I even feel for Prince Michael, who never got to know his big sister. Maybe the loss, and his parents' continuing sorrow, explains some of his wildness. Even so, I hope the princess is never found; at least, not until she's at least twenty-three and the prophecy is foiled. The last time a dynasty fell, half our world was destroyed in the wars. I don't want the other half to go, especially not in my lifetime.

When we get to the library, I know we'll have plenty of silence for our tutoring session. There isn't even a solitary figure or two pretending they aren't hungry. We sit at the first table. It's closest to the librarian, so it has the least graffiti. Even so, I see several *dins* and *discords*, and even a mis-spelled *cacophony* that no one has managed to buff out. About a hundred years ago, these light-up desks were the latest fad. My guess is, the school got them about eighty years ago. Only this first table lights at all anymore, and it's got a short, so the red lights flash intermittently.

"Number five, right?" I pull up my Calc homework. She fiddles with the friendship ring on her finger. I automatically reach for mine. "You didn't have problems with math. Why the lie?"

"You're falling apart, Lys. I don't know what's going on, but you can trust me. Whatever's bothering you, it won't disappear on its own. Let me help."

Normally, I tell her everything before she even asks. Why can't she leave this alone? I head for the door before she even has a chance to stand up. I hear her heels clicking on the tiled floor behind me when I'm half way down the hall. I don't look back. Why does she think it's okay to ignore me when I say I'm fine, but she won't talk to me about anything in her life? Other than her missing dad, her life is pretty much perfect. There's no way she'll understand this - this insanity. Possibly literal.

The caf will be full of our friends. Hiding out in the bathroom all lunch is too pathetic, even for me. If I felt like returning to the library, I'd have to walk past her to get there. I go outside. My only friends to come out here actually play gravball. If I stand in the audience, no one will notice I'm there.

I pretend to care about one of the games in the courtyard. It doesn't take long for the pretense to become reality; Matias is second goalie. The only question anyone has for me outside is which guy I like, and they don't even care enough to wait for my answer. Most of the girls cheer

for Greg, the first goalie, even though second goalie's the harder job. It's so much easier to block a player's kicks and throws, like the first goalie does. When the ball gets sucked through a portal and comes from a random direction, with the added twist of the gravity disruptor making its speed another unknown, it's almost impossible to block. I've collected my share of bruises from playing second goalie. Matias, though, saves more balls than he lets through. I'm not the only girl who cheers him on. His panache doesn't hurt, either. Or his looks, or sense of humor.

It's almost a relief when lunch ends. For the first time all year, I'm glad I don't have friends in any classes until Calc. I can't believe she'd push like that. After I said I was fine, too.

I stew about her through History, Physics, and Psychology. I get to Calc at the same time she does. Apology is written all over her face: tilted head, wide eyes, drooping mouth. I start to walk past her, but then she scrunches her nose. I take another step, then stop and scrunch mine back at her. Her lips turn up, and the tension on her face dissolves. "Will you still come over later?"

I nod. We head to our seats on opposite sides of the room. Mr. Metzger still acts like we're in preschool, so we have assigned seats. I slink into mine and pull out my notebook. This time, I'm sure my homework's both complete and correct. I'm ready for him to call on me.

Music hums softly again. I hold myself still. How can this melody be so familiar, yet seem so strange? I'm not crazy, so that music has to be coming from a classmate. Right?

"Lyssa?"

Mr. Metzger sounds annoyed, as if I'm the one blaring music. I glance at the clock on my notebook. Discord, how is half the class over already? The equation on the display board isn't one from our homework. I look at my screen, as if the math will have appeared on its own. It hasn't, but something else has: an elegant castle with roses that twine around the spires, nestled between mountain peaks, beside a blue-green lake. It's such a perfect structure, I'm surprised there aren't

knights on horseback in the courtyard. How does this castle keep appearing? It's on my notebook; my stylus is in my hand. I must have drawn it, but that's impossible. I can't draw that well. I can barely draw a stick figure. But if someone else drew it, the rest of the class would have noticed. I hit delete and face Mr. Metzger.

"Can I go to the nurse?"

"Again?" He sounds concerned now, not annoyed. He pulls his medi-scanner from the desk and waves it over me. I've had so many tests lately for the headaches I've claimed, I've learned plenty about these gadgets. I see the green light that means there's nothing wrong with me. Except, of course, that's clearly not right, like the doctors were wrong last week. There's obviously something wrong with me. I don't know if the lack of brain tumor is good news or bad. Which is more easily cured: cancer or madness?

He turns away. "Tanya, could you solve this for us?"

My breathing comes in short, shallow gasps. I catch Tanya's furrowed eyebrows as she glances at me before she returns her attention to her notebook and starts on the equation. Thank the Harmonies one of us knows what's going on in this class.

I follow her, step by step, copying it into my own notebook. When we get to the third line, I hear the melody start up again. I don't try to find the source. Whoever's playing this music won't acknowledge it this time, either. Why won't Mr. Metzger make them stop? Even if everyone else can ignore it, the music's distracting me. I can't concentrate, especially after the high harmonic chimes in. It almost sounds like singing.

A strident bell shakes me from the pull of the song. The music's gone, though the harmony echoes in my head for a minute. My classmates grab their notebooks and stand up. I can't seem to move. Another sketch of that elegant castle covers the screen of my own notebook. According to

the clock, class is over.

"Could I see you for a moment, please, Ms. Jacobs?"

Oh, din. When he uses last names, it never means anything good. I slink further into my chair and shake my hair over my face into an inky curtain. I don't want to see anyone's reactions. I'm not even sure which I'd hate more: their mockery or sympathy. I've never been a trouble-maker, never needed anyone's pity or deserved their laughter.

A hand squeezes my shoulder. I flinch, but shake my hair away. Tanya whispers, "I'll wait for you at your locker."

I manage a smile. She's the last one out the door. Once she's gone, I force myself to stand up. I fiddle with my notebook for a minute, then head up to Mr. Metzger. I study the worn carpet in front of his desk.

"What's going on, Lyssa?"

His voice is warm. My head jerks up. He isn't scowling, like I expected. His eyes show the same concern as when I had to leave class with a high fever. I want to tell him about my lost time, about the music I must be hallucinating. If I do, though, what will happen? I've already been to doctors for headaches and they've found nothing wrong with me. I don't want to end up in an institution. I want to graduate with my class and go on to college. Tanya and I will room together, like we've planned for years. If I admit my insanity, my future is gone. I hear myself say, "Nothing."

He studies me. I can see the questions behind his brown eyes. Can he see my thoughts whirring, too? After a moment, he sighs. "If you need to talk, you know where to find me."

I jerk out a nod. Before he can change his mind, I clutch my notebook to my chest and flee. If I don't figure out what's wrong with me soon, it will be too late. They'll either lock me in a psych

ward or throw me into the Wilds. Either way, I'll have no future at all.

CHAPTER TWO

Casper

Sometimes I want nothing more than to hike into the mountains and disappear. Luckily, there's always someone who needs help or something that needs attention on another side of the middle of nowhere. I get to disappear with the excuse of saving the kingdom. What better past-time for a prince?

Even though no one knows I'm royalty, that doesn't make me any less responsible for the people's welfare. Dad's made that clear from as far back as I can remember. Then, when the prophecy was made and he realized I'd have to claim the throne, my life moved into high speed. No matter how much my friends complain about school, there are times I wish I could be like them. I'd like to have no more responsibilities right now than to go to school, do my homework, and help with the family farm. It would be amazing not to have to care what people think.

Dad's right, though. No one will accept some kid out of the blue as king, no matter close my blood is to King Jasper the Great, especially not some kid from the Wilds. Not even if it turns out the princess actually wants to marry me.

A young man who's shown both his dedication to righting the wrongs of the kingdom and his ability to accept responsibility, though, is more likely to garner the support of the masses. So I spend every waking moment of my life proving my worth. Living in Pacvo with strangers for the last year of high school, so no one will ever be able to claim my education was substandard because I got it in the Wilds. Joining the Knights of the Rose while still in school and fighting for every promotion. Heading to the expulsion camp to rescue the innocent exile.

I'm glad I have an excuse to get away from town for a while. Wheels on the empty road

sing almost as beautifully as the Harmonies. The mountains stretch beside me, up as far as I can see, calling to me. I don't understand why there aren't many refugee towns in the mountains.

People almost seem scared of them. For some reason, they'd rather live in the desert. I don't get it, especially since there are more bombs and mines in the desert. Even during the wars, people must not have liked the mountains.

Then again, city people are pretty naïve. I hear they actually think the air is still poisonous in the Wilds. The wars were almost a thousand years ago. How long do they think the poisons will last, anyway? Not that their ignorance bothers me. They stay in the cities, and I have vast areas of solitude when I want it.

When I do have to move to Pacvo, prove my identity, and claim the throne, this solitude is what I'll miss most. Cities don't have miles with nothing but nature, or quiet so intense I can hear myself breathe. There's so much light in the cities, they might as well have curtains between houses and the stars.

As the sun sets, I open my senses to the Harmonies. Not enough to allow that blasted vision they keep throwing my way; I already know I have to marry that discordant princess in a few years; I don't need to see myself waiting at the altar again. I allow their song in, but focus on my question: is anyone out there, hunting me?

The song fills my mind and body. I don't feel the cloth seat underneath and behind me, or the sticky plastic of the steering wheel in my hands. All I feel is the warm tune that sings through my veins. I force it into the background so I can still see the road in front of me. There are no words, only humming. Even so, I feel-hear their message: *All is well. Have no fear. No one wishing ill is near.*

If only that were true. Still, I take it as intended. I don't have to creep across the night,

headlights off, straining for every sign of motion. I turn the lights on and press even harder on the accelerator.

When I'm close to camp, I pull over and message the guards. They'll see me coming easily enough, and I don't want them to mistake me for an exile. Surrounded by so many people expelled for violent crimes, they're understandable jumpy. My own pulse isn't steady. I've done this before, but never alone. This is why Mom didn't want me doing this yet. I almost wish she'd won the fight with Dad.

When I get a response, I pull back onto the road and finish the drive. I see the shadows that I know are tents. If I didn't know they were there, I probably wouldn't notice them. At least, that's the hope. We don't want to attract the exiles who've managed to survive. Setting up tents is like posting a sign: *No bombs or mines here. Attack at will.*

Everyone's gathered in a clearing in front of the tents. By the way they shuffle their feet and pack together, the guards must have told them they're going to hear their fates. I keep the car running. When I get out, there's a low rumble. The guards raise their weapons, and the grumbling quiets. I don't need to hear the words to know the meaning: who am I, some gawky teenager, to free or condemn them?

"I'm from the group hosting you," I announce and shine a flashlight on my insignia. I can't tell them we're the Knights of the Rose. If any of them ever returns to a city, we don't want our organization exposed. When they were expelled, though, a Knight from another city brought them here and said a group would investigate the charges. "I'm a captain. Yes, I'm young. Yes, I earned this rank. Yes, I'm here officially, and my word goes for the whole organization. Henry Wiggins, step forward."

A giant of a man steps forward. He's even bigger than Dad, a good couple of inches taller

than me and probably twice my weight. His face is set and hard. He's filthy. At least, that's what I think until he nears me, and then I realize it's only his clothes. His face, hair and hands are all clean. I hold out my hand. He hesitates, then grasps it just short of stinging as we shake.

"Please get in the car," I say. "You've been cleared of wrongdoing. The rest of you are guilty. We'll tear down the tents in the morning. I suggest you leave before then."

Henry shrinks a few inches as he sags forward. The protests start small but grow rapidly. Even the guards' guns don't completely quell the men's voices. A short, stocky man steps forward. The guards stop him, but he doesn't back away, either. "What would you know about it? You're just a kid."

"A kid who's risen to captain," I say. "I heard directly from the captains of each of your cities. I've seen the reports – not only the expulsion notices, but also the investigations. I'm satisfied that you're guilty. I won't lodge protests with any of your cities' justice departments, all of whom have found you guilty. You are officially exiles now. Anyone caught entering a city will be tried for treason and executed."

I sound confident and in command. The exiles are too far to hear the my heart pound or see my fingers tremble. I've seen the pictures of their victims. I've seen the evidence of their guilt. I even consulted the Harmonies. Even so, I'm the face of their verdict. I know I'm doing the right thing, but there's still a tremor of fear: what if one of them is innocent?

I shake the doubt away. I might make a mistake, and so might the investigators. The Harmonies, though, would never allow me to condemn an innocent man. These people might not believe in the Harmonies, but I have no choice. They've sung to me since I turned seventeen, as predicted for a royal. I raise my chin a fraction. "May the Harmonies forgive you for your crimes. Go out into the Wilds and begin your redemption."

The small man's eyes follow me. I feel them bore into my back when I walk back to the car. Henry is already buckled in. I can't see him in the dark, but his breath comes in sharp gasps. I fasten my seatbelt, put the car in gear, and drive away. It must be my imagination that makes me feel those eyes still glaring at me.

"Merrick's a mean one," Henry says shakily. "He's not a good man to have as an enemy."

"The Wilds are huge." My voice sounds calm, confident. Good. I don't want to lose what little authority I may have established with him. Besides, maybe if I sound fearless enough, it'll convince me, too. "Dangerous, too. Even if he survives, odds are we'll never cross paths again. I won't lose any sleep over it."

When we're far enough from the camp that I'm sure no one will reach us, I pull over. "We need to discuss your options."

"Options?" Henry cocks his head. "Aren't you taking me back to Spado?"

Discord. I thought that went too easily. Next time, I'll give them all the information they need at once. "I didn't make myself clear. I'm sorry. You're innocent; we know that. Unfortunately, the evidence against you was laid extremely well. The Duke of Spado himself wanted you exiled."

Henry bites his lip, but gives no other sign that means anything to him. "We can't put you back in Spado. If you return, the duke will have you killed. Actually, he'd probably have us both killed. I don't know about you, but I'm not ready to die."

"Then what's the point in coming for me?" Henry asks. "You might as well have left me with the others."

"That's not true. I can't take you back to Spado, but you have other options. You can go to one of the refugee towns. They're small, and of necessity self-sufficient. If you don't farm, you have to have another skill you can use to barter for food. You could also go to a castle I know of,

where people live much like in the towns, except they're also working towards the day when the heir of King Jasper reclaims the throne."

Henry snorts. I can't blame him. A thousand years is a long time to wait for the return of a legendary king. "Or you could go to a different city, under a different name. You can start a new life there."

He studies me long enough to make me want to squirm. I force myself to sit still. Finally, he asks, "Why would you even offer that? If you've already got refugee towns set up, why don't you make me join one of those?"

I smile. "Those were almost my exact words when I was training. There are a couple of answers. Choose whichever you like; they're equally true. For one, we're in the business of righting wrongs. If we make you go to a refugee town, that isn't much better than letting them exile you into the Wilds. For another, although most people who are expelled are guilty, there are enough who aren't that if we put you all in refugee towns, soon the towns would be too big to stay hidden. Especially since the Duke of Spado got so corrupted. Most of his expulsions are false."

"Merrick's from Spado," Henry says.

"Then I guess even the guilty can manage to get expelled from Spado," I say. In fact, I don't think it was a true expulsion. I think the duke sent him, either to try to discover the identity of the Knights or to ensure Henry's death. That's not something Henry needs to hear right now, though. "Do you want to take a while to think about your options? I can take you to a refugee town for a while, so you have a sense of what life's like there."

"My home is Spado. My life is there. I have people who depend on me there."

"People who could be targeted by the duke, if you return."

He blanches at that. I want to apologize, to take the words back. I can't, though. They're

true. If Henry insists on returning, his isn't the only life that will be in danger. The sooner he realizes that, the safer everyone will be. "Why don't I take you home with me? You'll have time to plan a new future there, even if it's not where you decide to stay."

I put the car back in gear before he can answer. It doesn't take him long, though. Before a minute passes, Henry says, "No. If I can't go back to Spado, you said I could go to another city. I can't be starting farming, not at my age. If I'm in a city, though, there'll be something I can do."

I nod, though it's dark enough I don't know if he sees. I turn the car yet again. "Okay. I'll take you to Pacvo. It's big enough for any number of newcomers to blend in."

He can get his new life, in the city I know best. I hoped Henry would choose to live in a city. The investigation into his case was thorough, since the Harmonies told me he was innocent. I learned more about Henry than he could imagine. He definitely didn't kill that girl, no matter what evidence the duke planted. His real crime was in helping people the duke didn't like. Henry offered food to the poor, shelter to the needy, ears to the lonely. Someone like Henry could be a huge benefit to the Knights of the Rose. Now all we have to do is lead him there.

I wish someone could give me the illusion of free will. If I didn't know about the prophecy, I'd be so much happier.

CHAPTER THREE

Lyssa

Tanya and I walk to her house together like we've done hundreds, maybe thousands, of times. The smell of roses assaults me as we pass garden after garden. The sun beats down on us, but I'm cold. I want to tell Tanya everything. I don't want to say a word. If I am crazy, will she still be my friend? "Is your mom home, or will we have some privacy?"

"Oh, whatever."

"Right, sorry. I was thinking of my mom."

"Yeah, it's hard to hide from her."

When Tanya and I met, both our moms were alone. Tanya's mom has never even dated, to the best of our knowledge. Back in junior high, Tanya thought our math teacher would make a cute other half for her mom. She pretended to cheat on a test so her mom would have to come in and meet him, then confessed what she'd done. Mr. Smith liked the idea. Even though Tanya's mom turned him down, she still got extra credit. For creativity, he said. If I tried something like that, I would've ended up grounded and with detention. Tanya claims it's luck. I think it's because, between her blonde hair and ethereal beauty, she looks like a Harmony. She could probably get away with murder if she wanted to.

Tanya's mom seems to like the single life. At least, that's what she wants people to think. She never accepts dates, never joins any of the "girls' night out" attempts to meet people. Sometimes she doesn't look very happy, though. Mostly, she takes care of Tanya and her friends, then lets us disappear.

If I left her step-by-step directions, my mom still wouldn't know how to leave me alone.

Unlike Tanya's mom, though, she remarried when I was little. I don't know what happened to my real father. Mom refuses to talk about him. I don't even know his name, but I don't miss him, either. I've got the best dad in the world. I think he's the reason Tanya tries so hard to set her mom up. She'd love to have a step-dad like mine.

Tanya's house is kind of small, but it's cute, like a cottage nestled among the big houses. The cottage impression is completed by a flower garden lining the front and a vegetable garden in the back yard. We walk in through the side door. It leads into the tiny kitchen, which is one of the reasons we use that entrance.

After we say hi, Tanya's mom gives us a plate of still-hot cookies and a big glass of milk each. We take the loot to Tanya's room and shut the door. We sink into the pink beanbags on the floor. For several minutes, the only sounds are chewing and the occasional slurp of milk. Warm chocolate oozes out in every bite. My family used to bake together, but it's been a long time since anyone in my family made anything other than dinner. I don't remember when it stopped.

I sigh. It would be great if mom still liked to bake.

It's not that I don't love my mom. I do. She's just – dramatic. A little strange, too. What kind of mom checks up on her kid a dozen times a day? I message her that I'm at Tanya's so she won't panic. I don't need her calling the guards out to find me. Not that she's done that. Yet.

Her paranoia used to embarrass me. Now I wonder if she's weird or really crazy. Does she have time lapses, like me? Does she have to check up on me to ensure I didn't disappear in a moment she was absent? Are these missing minutes the first step towards my own break from reality?

I wish Dad was my real father. Then at least I'd know I have one stable parent. Since he's technically my step-dad, and Mom won't talk about my real father, I could have two crazy parents,

for all I know. What hope do I have for my own sanity?

"You have a good mom," I say.

"A little paranoid sometimes, but yeah."

"Excuse me; did you accuse your mom of paranoia?" I place my empty glass on the plate and set my dishes beside hers. "Have you even met mine?"

"Good point." She leans against the pale pink walls. She seems even daintier in her own frilly room. The impression of doll-like innocence is dispelled by her fierce blue gaze. "You don't have to talk if you don't want to, but something's going on with you. You're clueless in class half the time; you spaced out in the middle of a conversation the other day; you didn't even hear Matias ask you out."

"Wait, what? When did he ask me out? Does he completely hate me now?"

"The last one was a test. If you aren't even sure you missed a conversation with Matias, I know there's something wrong."

I study the gray carpet as if it will offer me answers. I can't admit I'm crazy. I don't know what will happen to me if I do, but I know it won't be good. "I'm okay."

There's a moment of silence. She's going to let it go. I think of all the times I stopped pushing her when she said she was fine. Was there ever a time when I shouldn't have listened? When I should have insisted she open up to me? I lean into the wall and sigh.

"This is me you're talking to, Lys. You've seen me have total breakdowns. You can trust me."

"That's different."

"Why?" Her voice hardens. "It's okay for me to have a meltdown, but you have to be strong all the time?"

"No, of course not." I meet her glittering eyes for a moment. I bite my lip. She's always been there for me. I need to talk to someone, and there's no one I trust more than Tanya. "I think I'm going crazy."

Her laughter spills into the room. "Is that all? I think that all the time. About me, I mean. You're totally sane."

I open my notebook and study the latest picture, the only one I haven't deleted. This is the castle every little girl who ever pretended to be a princess probably imagined.

I've seen pictures of the Royal Palace in Pacvo, and this isn't it. The actual palace is beautiful, but it looks as much like a museum or college as the royal residence. The castle in my picture couldn't ever be anything else. It's a fairy-tale setting: the castle sits on a green hill, in front of twin snow-capped mountains. A lake reflects the solid wall and elegant spires. Jasper roses - perfect double-cup flowers on a nearly thornless vine - twine over the stone archway, like preparations for a wedding. All the picture needs is a couple of knights and a dragon or water-monster, and it could be straight out of the legends of King Jasper. I hand the notebook to Tanya.

"When did you learn to draw?" She sounds more hurt than accusatory.

"Like I could keep a skill this big from you? I think if I tried to draw a horse, you'd still mistake it for a volcano."

She laughs, but there's no humor in her voice. "Then where did this come from?"

I shrug. She cocks her head and pierces me with her stare. Doesn't she ever need to blink? I study my shoes as I tell her about hearing music that no one else seems to, and then coming back to reality with nothing to show for my missing time but a picture and remnants of a song playing in my head. She wants to see my other drawings, but I can't show her what's been deleted.

"You said there was music before you lost time, right?" Tanya studies me like I'm her latest science project. "Maybe you're hearing the Harmonies. You just have to figure out what they're trying to tell you."

I turn my lips up and hope it passes for a smile. The Harmonies are one subject we don't discuss. Tanya and her mom are religious. They sing in the temple every week. Mom and Dad used to take me to sing, too, until the old hymn master left. The new one is a lot like Mr. Rolfe: they both think they have all the answers, and everyone else is wrong. I decided I could spend my holy days without his attitude. Besides, I'd studied logic by then, and the Harmonies don't make sense. Not in a world where war happens, and whole species disappear, and fathers don't even get discussed.

Mom and Dad didn't press me to continue when I objected to temple, though. In fact, they seemed relieved. They must not have liked the new hymn master any more than I did. Tanya was the one to protest. Even she gave up on getting me back to the temple choir after a couple of months. Why would she bring the Harmonies up now? "Not likely," I say.

She makes her case. There are records of saints having visions while the Harmonies sing to them. She claims my drawings could be the form the visions take for me. I should embrace them and see where they lead me.

I wait until she's had her say. I even manage not to snort. When she's done, I answer her case with my own. It's not likely the Harmonies would choose some random girl to sing to. There's no threat to the kingdom that needs a hero. If the Harmonies exist, they must have something better to do than make me fail Calculus.

She sighs. "If it happens again..."

"When it happens again, you mean."

She places a hand on my shoulder. "*If* it happens again, message me the picture, okay? I bet

if we study the sequence, we can find some clues."

The weight that's been pressing on my chest for weeks eases, like Tanya lifted an end and now we're sharing the load. I know it isn't likely two high school seniors can solve this mystery. I don't know that there's any mystery to be solved. Still, for the first time in weeks, I feel the heady presence of hope.

CHAPTER FOUR

Casper

Dawn breaks when we pull into Will's office lot. The rising sun paints the metal red. Will's building is probably fifty or sixty years old. It's from the stage when architects tried to outdo one another, each making their buildings more improbable than the last. Most have been razed, since their impracticality outweighed their novelty. Will's though, remains, since the symbolism still resonates with most of the populace. It's a set of five offices, each shaped like a great steel rose bloom. They connect at the edges of the blossoms, then taper down into their own buildings. If they'd built this where I live, the snow would have collapsed those roofs long ago. Here, though, where a half inch on the streets is enough to bring the city to a halt, the extra roof space simply means more solar power. I imagine these buildings will stay for another half century, at least.

When I first saw Will's office, I almost had a heart attack. For someone covertly heading the Knights of the Roses, it's a little too blatant for my taste. The other businesses, though, are completely innocuous: an accounting firm, tutoring, a housecleaning company, and an image consultant. Will claims he's hiding in plain sight. I still don't like it, but at least I don't get palpitations when I pull up anymore.

Will bounds out his front door before Henry and I are even out of the car. "You made it!"

"Dad messaged you, did he?" He knows me too well. Pacvo has two captains, but I nearly always go to Will.

Will laughs and nearly knocks me over with his slap on my back. I don't rub my shoulder. Will's been a friend since I boarded with him when I finished high school. Still, he can occasionally be a bit too enthusiastic. "This is Henry. He might be a good fit for your open position

here."

Henry turns to me, frowning. I shrug and smile. He didn't think I'd take him to a city with no prospects, did he? Of course I have an idea of where each refugee will thrive before I make suggestions. I'm responsible for their happiness in their new lives.

Will leads us into his office. The inside is as bad as the exterior: paintings of knights bordered with roses line the walls. If Will wanted to advertise his true position, he couldn't have chosen better. The funny thing is that the office actually came this way. The surrounding businesses are identically decorated.

I sit in the rose-print armchair off to the side, leaving Henry the leather chair in front of Will's desk. I already forwarded Henry's file to Will, so I don't need to contribute anything to their discussion. Will's business is ostensibly an employment agency, which is the perfect cover for a captain. He and his team arrange to have the newly expelled taken to camps to await the results of both official and unofficial investigations; they investigate covertly, to ensure the official results are fair; and when I bring a refugee to them, they create new identities and help the refugees begin new lives.

Even though, or maybe because, I stayed with Will when I finished high school, he had the hardest time taking me seriously when I started working with the Knights. He thinks of himself as a father figure, though he's only about ten years older than me. After working together for a year, though, we're closer to being actual partners. He trusts my judgment now. The fact that I'm half a foot taller than him probably hasn't hurt my status.

I haven't told him that I hear the Harmonies. He probably wouldn't believe me if I did. When I insist that someone's innocent, though, I'm always proved right. I've had an easier time earning people's trust than most, even though it's through a lie of omission. I wish I could tell

people about the Harmonies. In an age where most people think they don't exist, it's hard to admit to getting visions from them.

While Will and Henry talk, I doze. At least, that's all I intend. When Will shakes my shoulder, though, I startle out of a deep sleep. I was dreaming about something, I can't remember what. A gorgeous girl, a chase, some danger. I shrug it off. "You two got everything settled?"

I learned more about Henry from the investigation than he suspects. In any other city, he'd be held up as a model citizen. As I expected, Henry will be Will's apprentice, both in the employment agency and in the Knights. With how he strived to improve his neighbors' lots in Spado, I thought he'd want to be a Knight of the Rose. With our resources, he'll do even more good here than he managed in Spado, though the Harmonies know Spado needs more people like him. I still wonder if the king can be unaware of how evil his brother is, or if he simply doesn't have the proof necessary to do something about it. One day soon, we'll take him that proof, and then we'll know what kind of ruler King Alain really is.

"Will you be okay in Pacvo?" I ask Henry. "If you don't want to stay here, we can try one of the other cities."

"This is perfect," Henry says. "I didn't know there were organizations like this. Does Spado have one, too?"

"If they didn't, we never would have known about you," I say. "Either that you were being expelled or that you're not guilty."

He shudders and his smile disappears. "That poor girl. Do you think they'll ever find the real murderer?"

"They're looking," I say. "They won't give up until they find him."

I shake hands with Henry, hug Will, and refuse his invitation to stay. "At least come have

dinner with me and Isabelle tonight. We want to thank you, both for introducing us and for clearing her name."

Why he thinks I want to spend another evening with them, I don't know. The night I brought her to Pacvo was enough to last a lifetime. Isabelle was hysterical when I brought her here. I didn't blame her; if I'd been falsely accused of murdering someone and forced to see the corpse, I'd probably be distraught, too. What I didn't count on, and still don't understand, is how that emotion turned from terror to adoration the second she saw Will. If he hadn't been equally smitten, and if the Harmonies hadn't shown me her innocence, I would have thought her over-acting proved her guilt. Since I knew she hadn't killed anyone, though, I had to believe they really had fallen in love at first sight.

That doesn't make me want to suffer through another agonizing dinner of watching them try to keep their hands to themselves. Worse yet, they might have got over the hesitation.

"Thanks, but I think I'd better head home. You know how my mom worries."

I'm halfway home when the Harmonies start singing. I open myself warily, sure they're going to throw that vision at me again, the one where I'm waiting for my bride. I've managed to block her face so far, but they keep trying. They seem to think that if I get used to her face, then it'll be a series of short leaps from knowledge to acceptance to happiness. I might have to marry her, for the good of the kingdom, but I don't have to like it.

Instead of seeing myself at the altar, though, I get a warning. The man Henry warned me about – Merrick – isn't as far away as I hoped. Worse, I must have been right about his status. He's not actually an exile, but one of Duke Braxton's men: he's driving a car, the backseat loaded with guns. He's reading a scanner. If he's looking for me or Henry, he's searching for the locator he'll expect my car to have. If he isn't looking for us, then he's hoping to scavenge something from

whatever victim he can find.

I pull off the road, grab my notebook and stylus, and let the vision take over completely. When it passes, I look at the drawing. He's driving towards me, right where I normally take my break. He can't know my habits; I've never seen any evidence of observation. It must be pure luck that has him on a collision course with me. It's also luck – mine, this time – that I know this area well. I'm close to a stop with no hidden dangers. I pull back onto the road and press all the way on the accelerator. Better to risk injuring the car than to run out of time. I have a gun with me, but Merrick's got at least a dozen, including the rifle on his passenger seat. He's also a seasoned killer. If it comes down to a shoot-out, I'm a dead man. It's all well and good for Dad to say the Harmonies have plans for me. For all I know, their protection only comes in the form of these visions. They might figure that if I can't extricate myself from danger, even with their warnings, then I have no business trying to save the kingdom.

The Harmonies hum again, but I shut them out. I can't take my attention from the road, not at the speed I'm going. I can't afford to slow down, either. The pull-off is coming up, but if I don't get there soon enough, Merrick will still be able to see me. I clutch the steering wheel, as if leaning forward will speed the car.

There: I see the trees and bushes that mark a water hole. I hit the brakes hard enough to slow, but not quite enough to leave skid-marks to mark my presence. I pull off and ease my way down the hill and behind the bushes until I'm sure I'm hidden. I turn the car back towards the highway. If he sees my tracks, it's going to turn into a race, and I'll need every advantage I can get.

I grab a water bottle and drain half of it. My mouth is still dry. The fact that I'm hidden from his sight means that he's hidden from mine, too. All I can see is the dirt cloud over the road that I know leads up to the highway. If he's not traveling faster than I do, I should have at least half an

hour. I'll need that, even with how slowly I came down the hill. The dust hasn't settled back down yet from my drive. If he comes too soon, he'll know someone is down here. If he's hunting for me, it's possible he'll ignore it. If he's scavenging, then he'll definitely come see what he can get.

As the dust settles, it gets easier to swallow. I stare at the road until my eyes water, then blink. Then it's back to staring. I strain for sounds of a car, though I know I'm too far from the highway to hear anything. For one unreasoned moment, I wish for the old pollution-spewing cars that I'd be able to hear from my hiding place.

I take another gulp of water, then close my eyes. I slow my breathing until I feel my heart stop racing. I open myself to the Harmonies, and ask them for their help.

The song flows over me slowly. I welcome both the music and the vision it brings. Merrick is still on the highway, closing in on my hideout. He looks out his side windows more than the front windshield, so he's obviously looking for something or someone. A gust of wind kicks up the dust in the fields, and I thank the Harmonies for their assistance. Now my path won't be so obviously a trail.

Still, I don't know much about Merrick. I don't know how long he's been working for Duke Braxton, or how good a tracker he is. All I know for sure is that he's dangerous.

He gets closer and closer. He slows, and my heart races, but then he drives past my pull-out. I breathe out a heavy sigh, but I focus on the vision. He missed me once, but that doesn't mean he won't head back this way. He stops and takes binoculars out, sweeping in front and behind him. His gaze settles on my water hole, then moves on. After a minute, he tosses the binoculars next to the rifle and pulls back onto the road.

I sit, barely breathing, for another ten or fifteen minutes. Each minute feels like an hour, but I don't dare leave too soon. I let the Harmonies sing through me, waiting for their approval. It

feels like decades later when I get their message that it's safe to leave. I creep up the dirt road as if a deer could jump in front of me. Finally, I reach the highway. Although I already know it's empty, my shoulders still relax when I'm on the open road, with no other cars in sight. I head back home, even faster than usual. This is why Mom worries every time I leave. This is what she thinks I'll encounter. No wonder she fought with Dad about my involvement with the Knights. For the second time, I almost wish she'd won.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lyssa

As soon as I walk in the front door, I smell tomato, basil and garlic. Mom's cooking spaghetti sauce. I toe my shoes off onto the rack and drop my bag on the table. Now seems like a perfect time to tell her about my lapses. Maybe if I admit what's really happening, the doctors can figure it out. Maybe I'm not crazy; they just didn't know what to look for.

Dad's still at work. If she has this problem, too, she probably doesn't want Dad to know. If she doesn't suffer from whatever this is, I'd rather not have them both learn about my insanity at the same time.

When I get to the kitchen, Mom smiles over her shoulder. "Good, you're in time to make the salad."

I get the lettuce and vegetables out of the sink and wash them. I reach up and take the salad bowl down. I need to tell her. I get a cutting board out. This won't go away on its own. I take a knife from the drawer. I have to talk about what's happening to me. "Hey, we should make cookies this weekend."

The spoon clangs against the pot. She turns and studies me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I feel myself shrink at her tone. What does she think, that I've started robbing people? "It's been ages since we baked together. I thought it would be nice."

"You're right." The spoon clanks against the pot again. "Chocolate chip?"

I scoop the vegetables into the bowl and tear the lettuce. Mom says I do it backwards, but I like to make sure there's plenty of cucumber, bell pepper, celery and jicama. I'd add more vegetables if we had them. Lettuce is a filler, but Mom and Dad both like to have plenty. "What

other kind of cookie is there?" I toss the salad and place the bowl in the middle of the table. "Need anything else?"

She looks around, as if a list of tasks is going to appear. "I think I've got everything under control. Did you have a good day?"

I hop up onto the empty counter. Now that I don't have anything else to occupy myself with, I'll be able to talk to her. I brace myself to talk about everything that's happened lately. When I try, though, the words don't come out. Instead, I tell her about the stupid Prom theme suggestion. "Why would anyone want to be the princess, anyway? I can think of a hundred futures I'd rather have than being the one to bring another hundred years of war to the kingdom. Sometimes I wonder about my classmates. How are they going to survive the world if they don't even understand basic logic?"

Mom's shoulders stiffen. The spoon clangs on the pot faster. There's no rhythm to it. If she speeds up much more, we'll have tomato sauce all over the kitchen.

"That's not funny," she says. Her voice is tight.

"Sorry." I don't know what I've said wrong this time. If I stick around, though, she'll try to trap me into some bizarre failing. I slide off the counter. I might as well get my homework done. She doesn't call me back when I leave.

Dad comes through the front door when I'm about halfway done with my homework. I've worked straight through. Maybe the lapses were some weird anomaly. I'm probably fine. I worried Tanya over nothing.

After dinner, Dad and I clean up the kitchen.

"Have you asked that Matias out yet?" Dad asks.

My face heats. Last week, Dad heard me ask Tanya if she thought Matias was interested.

He told me that boys fear rejection as much as girls. He said that if I'm interested, I should make the first move. Yeah, because that's going to happen, I don't think. He's more interested in gravball than me. I doubt he even we sit at the same lunch table. I'm not sure he even knows I exist. "Not yet."

Dad squeezes my shoulders. "You're overthinking this, Lyssa. What's the worst that could happen?"

"He could laugh at me, tell my that I'm the last person in the kingdom he'd be interested in going out with, tell his friends, pass it around the school, and turn me into a laughing stock."

"That's optimistic." He laughs. "I'm sure none of that will happen. He'll either say yes, and you'll have what you want, or he'll tell you that he doesn't think of you that way."

"And that's why I'm not asking him out."

He chuckles. "I can't say it breaks my heart that you're not in a relationship. If I had my way, we'd go back to arranged marriages."

"No, thanks."

Dad invites me to play a game of cards, but I still have math to do. I get it done without incident. That's two nights in a row I finished my homework with no disruption. Now if I can stave off the madness at school, I'll be as good as new.

It's still early, but I'm exhausted. I can't believe I told Tanya and now everything's back to normal. I didn't have to say anything. Or maybe I just needed to talk about it. Maybe I could have saved myself weeks of worry if I'd spoken up the first time it happened. Whatever; at least I'm back to normal now. I lie down. As I drift into sleep, I hear that familiar melody.

I throw the covers off and sit up. My heart pounds. The music stops. Where did it come from? It was too soft to be close by, yet I could hear the individual notes clearly. I stand and wait

for the music to start again. The only sounds I hear are the creak of a stair and a door clicking closed. Whatever that music is, it's gone into hiding. I lie back down and draw the comforter over me. I hold onto the edge, ready to throw it off again. I hear a bird caw harshly outside and a single bark from a dog. No music. My heart settles into a calm rhythm. My eyes close. My fingers uncurl from the blanket.

The music starts again.

I jump up. I go to the kitchen to get some milk. Mom's already there, sitting at the table. She closes her cookbook and starts to stand even before she talks. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

This is the perfect opportunity. She isn't trying to trap or trick me. I can tell her everything while she's in a good mood. "I can't sleep." Why can't I tell her what's going on? It's like my tongue refuses to cooperate with my mind.

She puts the back of her hand to my forehead. She laughs a little and gets the medi-scanner. She frowns at the result, as if the green light is bad news. "Is it another headache?"

"I don't know what's wrong with me," I say. I almost smile at the truth of the statement. "I can't sleep."

She makes two mugs of calming tea. We take them to the living room. She inhales the steam from her mug. "I haven't been sleeping well lately, either."

I lean back on the leather couch. I wrap my hands around the mug and close my eyes. "Have you been having weird dreams, too?"

Her chair creaks as she leans towards me. "What kind of dreams?"

I take a sip. The tea doesn't quite burn my tongue. I can't taste it yet, though. I'm not sure if I should be happy or sad about that. Mom has some weird ideas about medicinal tea. I study the mini-waves that slosh up one side of the mug, then the other. "They don't make much sense. It's

more of an image than a real dream. Mostly images of a castle."

"A castle? Like Duke Simon's manor house, you mean?"

"No, it's fancier than that. More of a castle than the palace in Pacvo, even."

Her breath hitches. She cocks her head to the side. "Can you describe it to me?"

I try, but without my notebook to show her, it's hard. I tell her about the towers, the mountains and sparkling lake behind it, and the roses twining around the entry arch. It's such an elegant structure, it belongs in fairy tales. "I think it must be King Jasper's castle."

"King Jasper's?"

Her eyes shine. She breathes out a long, quiet sigh. What did she think I was dreaming about? I narrow my eyes. Mom sips her tea. She smiles at me and is back to her usual self. Did she really look relieved? Am I imagining more than King Jasper's castle now?

I take another sip and taste the chamomile, lavender, and honey. It's nicer than I expected. I drain my mug. "I think I'll try to sleep again."

"Good idea, honey. You need to be up early for school." She stands and kisses my head. She takes my mug, and I go back upstairs. I lie down, but I don't expect to sleep. I need to stay awake, to keep the haunting music and visions of castles at bay.

That obviously doesn't work; that melody echoes in my head when I wake up. I stub my toe getting out of bed and my hair won't behave. I want to crawl back into bed and pull the covers over my head. I sigh and get dressed. By the time I make it downstairs, I don't have time to eat. I grab a roll and run out the door. I wish I had my own car. Mom and Dad don't believe in spoiling kids, though, so I eat my roll as I walk over to Tanya's.

"I was about to give up on you." She gets to the sidewalk as I reach her house. We continue to school at pace that's slightly faster than normal for Tanya. I hope we'll have enough time.

"It was a rough morning," I say.

We walk in silence most of the way. Usually, Tanya likes to talk. Today, she looks like she's working on a calc problem. I'm sure she finished her homework last night, but I leave her to her thoughts. When we're almost at school, she turns to me. "I know you don't believe in the Harmonies, but I think you need to talk to a hymn master. If they sing to you, don't you want to know what they're saying? What if you really are the Princess Melyssande?"

She sounds excited by the idea. She must have forgotten that the princess is doomed to destroy the kingdom.

Fortunately, there are so many reasons the idea is ridiculous, it's hard to know where to start. Princess Melyssande would have turned seventeen a couple of weeks ago; I'll be eighteen in a month. There's also the fact that there's no logical reason to believe she's alive. Anyone who wanted to stop the prophecy would kill her. I couldn't even blame them, since she's supposed to bring an end to the Banora dynasty. More than half the kingdom is wasteland from the ancient wars before they took the throne; if war breaks out again, even our cities, the last safe places in the kingdom, might be destroyed.

Tanya's logic doesn't ring true. I don't believe the legends that say the Harmonies sang to royalty when they needed help, anyway. Also, if anyone in Aletra were the princess, it would have to be Tanya. She's tiny, blonde and ethereal, like the queen and the prince. Whereas I'm tall and dark-haired but so pale I have to lather the sun protection on even in the winter. I also have gray eyes, not blue like the king, queen and Tanya. No way could the missing princess happen to be the mirror image of my mom. When we were little, before we understood anything about the prophecy – din, before we even knew a prophecy existed – we used to take turns pretending we were the missing princess. At least, in theory we took turns. Tanya always ended up playing the princess,

since she looks so much more the part. It's no more likely now than it was back then that I could be Princess Melyssande.

I keep most of my thoughts to myself, but share the final one with Tanya. She slouches a bit. I get almost half a block ahead of her before she runs to catch up.

"I'm trying to help," she says.

"I know." I slow down. "I'm sorry. I just want this to go away."

"It will. We'll figure it out."

I only hope we find answers before I go completely insane.

CHAPTER SIX

Casper

It's late when I get home. I get myself a snack, then go to bed. I've only been gone about twenty-four hours, but it feels much longer. It doesn't help that the only sleep I've had in the past day and a half was the nap in Will's arm-chair.

Mom fusses over me when I stumble into the kitchen mid-morning. With yesterday's close call still in mind, I let her hug me as much as she wants. She nearly smothers me, then pulls back, her hands still on my shoulders.

"What happened?"

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

Her eyes narrow. "You didn't tell me to back off. What happened?"

Dad comes in. "Leave the boy alone. It's nice that he lets you show your affection sometimes."

So he knows. He must have had the same vision as me; otherwise, he'd be snarking at me for being such a mama's boy.

After breakfast, I head down to our farm. Everyone has to put some time in on the farming or we won't have anything to eat. There are a couple of people who can't, but they pull their weight in other ways: keeping the facade looking real; making furniture or clothing; tending the little ones while the parents are working.

Over the years, our shelters got more advanced, even though we almost never use them. We have drills every couple of months, to ensure the little kids know what to do. We've never had an attack here. The town Mom and Dad came from, though, was raided by exiles soon after their

marriage. All their family was killed, and most of their friends. Dad brought the survivors here. The townspeople, both old and new, started with tiny shelters. Every spring through fall, they expanded the underground spaces until the hidden parts of town surpassed the visible buildings. Then they turned their attention to making the exteriors look deserted. In the cities, there are always people who have to ensure their house and yard looks better than anyone else's. In the towns, it's the opposite. The house-proud owners, like Mom, delight in the detail work that goes into making our houses look abandoned.

We can't grow anything outside, or our facade would be worthless. Since the shelters rarely get more than an hour or two of use every year, the spaces double as farms. This way, we'll have food if we ever have to sit out a siege. We've got artificial lights, a watering and drainage system, and rotating crops so we have fresh vegetables year round. Our shelters are so big now, we even have trees in them. This month, our crops are potatoes, zucchini and lettuce. We trade food with our neighbors, so we all have a good variety. I go down and weed for an hour, even though Mom and Dad already did my share, since they didn't know when I'd be back. If we don't pull them daily, they'll take over.

When I get back upstairs, I check the program on my notebook that looks for princess sightings. As usual, there are a few. I send them to the captains in each city. We need to find the princess before one of the groups that wants her dead does. If people would use their imaginations, surely they could see there's more than one possible meaning to the prophecy. As usual; prophecies aren't known for being direct. But no, a prophecy declares that the princess will end the Banora dynasty, and everyone thinks she'll bring war back to the kingdom. I send the sightings to the captains of the appropriate cities so they can check them out. At least the Knights will keep her safe if they find her.

Once I'm done, I head to Chris's house. With luck, everyone will be done with school by now and we can hang out. Unlike the year I spent in Spado, we don't spend all day in classes here. After a couple of hours, we're free.

Chris is the only one of us with his own house, now that he's nineteen and done with school. Yeah, I finished at the same time, but I'm a year younger. Besides, I don't see the point in getting my own place. Why put all that effort into creating my home, only to have to give it up in a few years? Besides, I get breaks from my parents and, unlike Chris, I don't have any younger brothers or sisters to drive me crazy. So I take my turn working in the family farm, rather than create my own that might wither or have weeds hijack the crops while I'm gone.

As I hoped, the gang's all here. Chris's house isn't big, but he combined the three small rooms most of our houses have into one large sitting area, so the seven of us fit comfortably, with plenty of room to spare. We mostly have to sit on stuffed bags on the floor, because he hasn't earned enough credit to get the couches he's planning, but that's fine. Couples scoot their bags together to make a cuddle spot, while those of us who are single at the moment sit on our own. The extra bags lining the far wall embody the hope that teenagers from another town will join us.

Chris and Jemma broke up while I was gone: they're sitting on opposite sides of the room. She eyes me when I walk in the door. This is how a mouse must feel when it's cornered by a snake. She can't have forgotten that she's the one who broke up with me, not the other way around. She thought I wasn't invested enough in our relationship – whatever that means. She was probably right, too, so it would be ridiculous date each other again. So why do I think that's exactly what she has in mind? I sit on the empty spot next to Chris. Jemma pouts.

"You can settle this for us," Chris says. "Would we be better off if we moved back to a city?"

Everyone leans forward, as if I'm an oracle about to sing the next great prophecy. I sigh. "It depends on what you're looking for. There are more career options in the city."

Jemma sneers at Chris and me. "And more boys."

"And more boys. And girls. None of whom will have much in common with any of us."

"So we're stuck with each other," Chris says.

Why do I bother coming over? We've had this discussion too many times to count. They come to me as an expert – I'm the only one of us who's left the town and come back again – but then ignore everything I say. That is, unless it's what they want to hear. I've already told them all the options. They can move to the city and try to find someone who will hire a descendant of an exile. Unfortunately, although that's theoretically easy, in reality people tend to assume that descendants of exiles, no matter how far removed, are as dangerous as the exiles themselves. Even if their descendant was exiled back in the days when that could happen for swearing. Part of it is the fear that criminal behavior is hereditary. A larger part is the assumption that only someone dangerous could survive the Wilds.

If they don't want to try the official route, my friends can move to a city with a fake background and start a new life, but never visit their parents again. Another choice is staying put. If they stay here, they already know everyone and everyone knows them; there's safety in that, but no room for growth. The final option is to visit other towns hidden in the Wilds and meet people there.

If I had a say in my future, I'd go with the last option. People in other towns will be a lot like us in the ways that matter. They'll know the importance of community. They'll be hard workers, both for themselves and each other. They might have someone in need of an apprentice. They won't judge anyone on appearances.

They'll be different, though, and that's what we all crave. They'll have different habits,

different problems, different songs. We wouldn't already know each other's favorite foods or what buttons to push to annoy them. We could gradually learn about each other's childhoods. We wouldn't have every adult predicting doom or claiming they always knew we'd end up together if we started dating.

My friends always light up at the mention of other towns. I've planned a couple of trips, but they all suddenly have pressing business that can't wait whenever the time draws near. Fair enough for the ones still in school. Chris's excuses are pretty weak, though. They're all too scared, as if the Wilds teem with exiles ready to kill us all. Maybe they don't trust that my maps show all the bombs and mines. To be fair, after today, I'm not as keen on the idea of joyrides as usual. Besides, if my friends wanted to go, I'd take them. Then I might fall in love and want to stay, but I don't have that option. There's no free will for a prince with a prophecy to fulfill.

"C'mon," Jemma says. "You have an opinion about everything. What are you going to do?"

"Enjoy my time here until I have to move to Pacvo." Their silence is as loud as my own rapid heartbeats. How did that slip out? I force a grin. "Clearly, my opinions are so valuable, I'm going to run the government at some point, right? I'll probably try to meet people somewhere else. I don't know if it'll be someone from another town or from a city yet."

That's true, as far as it goes. I don't get to choose anything, not even where my future bride will come from. I already know who I'm going to marry. It won't be for years, thank the Harmonies, and I haven't met her yet. I truly don't know where she lives, but it's not for lack of searching. I need to find the princess and ensure her safety. If she dies before I can marry her, who knows what form the prophecy will take? It has to come true, no matter how odd the solution seems. If someone kills the princess, then war will no doubt fall on the kingdom when she should have turned twenty-two, probably either because they find her murderer or the prince takes the

throne and brings chaos.

No, we have to find her, alive and well. Sometime in the next five years, Princess Melyssande is going to reappear. She'll marry me, like it or not, and the new kingdom will be united with the old.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lyssa

School is a good place to test my hypothesis that I can keep the music from taking over if I don't relax. I hold myself stiffly throughout the morning. No weird music plays. I'm able to answer every time I'm called on in class. As tempting as it is to lower my guard, though, I know better. Last night, it was when I relaxed that the music started. If I keep alert, I can keep whatever it is from happening.

It's harder than I thought to stay alert. Knowing what to wait for helps, though. In Civics, I hear the music. I stiffen, and it fades away. It was the same melody as yesterday. I've probably been hearing the same melody for the past few weeks, ever since I woke up with images of that cacophonous castle and strains of music all that remained of the night's dreams. If I have to have compulsive dreams, why couldn't they be about Matias? I wouldn't complain if images of the two of us interrupted my concentration. Even if I ended up locked away, at least my delusions would keep me happy. How did I get stuck obsessing about King Jasper's castle? Assuming that's what it is.

Civics hasn't changed since about the third grade, when they decided we were old enough to learn about expulsion and exile. Since we aren't learning anything new, I search for images of King Jasper's castle. There are thousands, each one a different interpretation from what little written material we have about it. I scroll through the first couple of dozen. No two are alike. Most are stone fortresses. A couple are modern palaces. None bears the slightest resemblance to mine. If I didn't come up with the image from some distant memory, where did it come from? Is it madness or am I possessed?

"Lyssa, could you please tell us what happens to someone suspected of having committed a crime?"

I avoid rolling my eyes, since I know in Civics it'll get me detention. "It depends on the nature of the crime."

Anyone suspected of a violent crime is expelled once investigators establish reasonable guilt. Guards escort them out of the city. They have to live in the Wilds, so the rest of the citizens are protected. If anyone contests the charges, then the city conducts a thorough investigation and holds a trial. If they're found guilty, they're exiled; if innocent, the expulsion is rescinded and they can return – assuming they're still alive. If no one contests the charges within a week, the expulsion automatically turns to exile.

People accused of non-violent crimes get to stay in the city while the investigation occurs. If they're innocent, then nothing happens. If they're guilty, they're taken to Moavsed, the prison city. There are so many bombs in the area that no one's going to try to escape. Once the criminal proves they're rehabilitated, they can return to their home city.

At least, that's the idea. It would probably be hard to get a job anywhere else. No one could trust them anymore. It's definitely smarter to follow the rules.

Thea raises her hand. Of course. Thea can't let anything go unargued. She wants to be a lawyer, like her mom. "But couldn't the duke choose to expel anyone accused of a crime? That's still law, right?"

"It's still law that we could be expelled for swearing, too," I say. "I can't imagine Duke Simon doing that. Can you?"

A discussion actually breaks out. Everyone agrees that Duke Simon wouldn't expel anyone over something less serious than attacking someone else. The argument comes in over what

happens next. Duke Simon's pretty old. He's the king's uncle, after all. What if his daughter isn't as good a person? We've heard rumors that some dukes expel people for any crime, even swearing. Legally, Lady Jocosa could do the same when she becomes duchess. Even if she's as reasonable as her father, if Prince Michael demands a return to the old ways, she'd have to comply. Unless, of course, his big sister, Princess Melyssande, turns up and destroys the kingdom. When the dismissal bell rings, we leave the room still debating the topic.

Choir isn't as interesting as Civics, since Mr. Rolfe is still on his lecture rampage. Now that I know how to block that music, I fall into a regular daydream. Matias asks me out and we start dating. It turns out we're both going to the same college, so we don't even have to worry about that. He's studying – I have no idea what. I really need to talk to him more.

When choir ends, we've barely sung anything. The good news is, I managed not to have any more time lapses. I get my notebook and meet up with Tanya at her locker. She takes her notebook to lunch, too. I don't know why. I have mine in case I hear that music start up again and need to focus on something else.

We get our salads and join our friends at our table. Tanya takes an empty spot at our usual end, but the rest of that side's filled. I slip into an open spot at the other end. Everyone seems to be mocking *The Found Princess* idea. I can't judge them. Tanya and I did the same thing yesterday.

Matias leans over another friend. "Where were you yesterday? I thought you were gone, but then I saw you watching gravball. Everything okay?"

I feel a smile spread. He noticed I wasn't at lunch? "I needed some quiet."

"I hear you." He nods. I nod back. The silence starts to feel awkward.

He returns to his own seat. Don't I have anything interesting to say? Other than the debate between madness and possession, that is. I should make a list of topics to draw on next time he

shows an interest. I could get to know more about him that way, too.

Five or ten minutes pass. I study the wilted remains of my lettuce, the floor, the clock on the far wall. Even my shoes suddenly demand my attention. When Matias and his friends head out to play, I move to my regular side.

The bell finally rings. I grab my tray and practically run to the clearing station. I head straight from there to History. I don't even stop at my locker, since I've got my notebook with me. I pull up the pictures of King Jasper's castles again. I'm distracted, though, and don't study them this time.

Was Matias flirting with me? It's probably my imagination. With everyone else around – din, even with just Tanya around – why would he flirt with me?

When my teacher calls on me, I manage to answer. She acts like the Harmonies themselves coalesced into corporeal bodies right in front of us. I haven't been that out of it.

Luckily, none of my teachers check my notebook. Concentrating on making a list of questions for Matias gets me through the day. After Calc, Tanya and I head to her house again. She confirms my hopes from lunch. "He was completely into you. What did you talk about?"

Do I admit that I couldn't think of anything to say? My notebook bleeps that I have a message. I check it and sigh. "I guess I'm not going to your place. My mom's on a rampage."

"What about?"

I shrug. She must have heard from the school. Using headaches as an excuse will only go so far, since tests show nothing wrong with me. Since no one knows how truly off-key I am, the school must have let her know that I'm close to failing almost every subject. Either that or the doctor's office called to say they made a mistake and I really do have a brain tumor. Oh, discord, it was probably the doctor.

"I'll call you later," I say. "Either tonight or tomorrow."

She goes into her cottage and I continue past it. My house is only a couple of blocks farther. I slow down to inchworm pace. Even so, it only takes me a couple of minutes to get home.

No spaghetti sauce when I open the door this time. No scents at all, except for furniture polish.

I ease the front door open just enough to squeeze in and close it gently behind me, twisting the handle so there won't be a loud click. Even so, Mom yells before I turn back into the house.

"Lyssa, get up here this instant!"

"I'm coming." I toe my shoes off onto the racks, toss my backpack onto the table above the shoe racks, and run up the stairs.

She always plays a game when I'm in trouble; she tries to make me more nervous while I wait. When I get up to her office, I know she'll be pretending to read a report so she can watch me squirm. Well, today I'm not playing. Instead of plopping into the hard-backed chair waiting for me, I'll wander over to her bookshelves, which is a misnomer because they're practically devoid of books. Instead, they're filled with pottery and blown glass, with only one shelf devoted to actual reading material: business manuals and a couple of biographies.

Except that today she isn't playing, either. She's sitting behind her desk, with nothing on it but a blank sheet of paper. She doesn't raise her eyes from the paper, even after I plop into the sinner's chair. Her rapid blinking makes my eyes water. I feel as if an elephant suddenly stepped onto my chest.

"What have you been doing?"

"Wait, what?" I blink a few times, struggling for words. "The doctor's office didn't call?"

"Why would they call? No, don't play the innocent with me. What rules have you been

breaking?"

This startles laughter out of me, shifting the elephant enough to breathe. "Yeah, right, Mom. I'm such a rule-breaker. That's why I'm out all night, partying." Her glare withers my smile. "Din and discord, you know I don't break rules."

She arches a slim black eyebrow at me. "You're swearing."

It takes a minute before I understand what she's talking about. "Oh, come on, Mom. You know that rule's completely ancient. It hasn't been enforced in what, a couple of hundred years?"

Her mouth puckers. "What other rules are not, in your opinion, of enough value to follow? Do you want to be expelled?"

Mom has gone completely insane. I mean, the only expulsions I know of were all clear cases of violence. No one even contested them. The expelled accepted exile as their due and disappeared into the Wilds. You know, after the guards threw them out of the city.

"Calm down, okay? I don't break any rules that everyone else in Aletra doesn't break too. Including you and Dad. I'm not going to suddenly become a threat to society. I've never even pretended to hit anyone. I don't know what you're so upset about, but you're completely overreacting."

"Overreacting?" Mom picks up the blank piece of paper and throws it at me.

It flutters halfway across the desk, which takes away some of the drama she intended. Biting back a smile, I reach across and pick it up. Only it's not blank, it was face-down. My name, Lyssa Jacobs, is written in two-inch-high letters, beneath the even bigger print spelling out Mom's panic: NOTICE OF EXPULSION.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Casper

"It's about time to have another drill," Mom says. Dad and I are at the breakfast table; it's Mom's turn to cook this morning.

Dad keeps reading the messages on his notebook. "We had one a couple of months ago."

"It's been nearly six months." Mom slaps the skillet onto the table and spoons some of the eggs and fried potatoes onto each of our plates. "We don't want people getting complacent."

I think of my friends' refusal to leave the safety of the town. "I don't think you need to worry about that."

"Of course I do." She practically throws herself onto the chair, instead of her usual graceful movements. "The way you keep driving in and out of town, the kids are bound to think it's safe out there. Soon there won't be any caution left."

I swallow my laugh. I can't get my friends to visit other towns with me, even though I know the safe routes. If people around here got any more cautious, they'd be scared to breathe.

"Why don't we hold off a week?" Dad asks. "If we have it too soon after Casper's return, people will think something happened. We don't want a full-scale panic."

"I'm not sure it's a good idea to wait so long."

"The chances against anyone finding us are huge," Dad says. His voice is meant to be soothing, I think. It comes across as condescending. "There's a lot of land to the Wilds. We're a small dot."

"See, that's exactly the attitude that's going to get us all killed. You must remember the attack on our old town. I don't want anything like that happening here."

Mom and Dad grew up in the same town; they knew each other their whole lives. They probably would have died in that same town, and I would have grown up there, too. When they got married, though, Dad insisted on taking Mom on a trip. They toured Pacvo and Dad took her to see the castle in the mountains. While they were gone, a band of exiles attacked. They returned to find their parents, as well as most of their friends, dead, their houses burned, their crops destroyed. They took the few survivors and, after Dad talked to his sources, moved to the town I was born in. They improved the existing shelters, turning them into the farmlands we have now. They improved the ghost-town facade, so if an exile gang ever comes near, they won't be interested.

"It's okay, Mom," I say. "We do need to have a drill. But Dad's right, too. If we have it now, we'll have everyone demanding to know what happened while I was out there. Waiting another week won't hurt, will it?"

Mom heaves a sigh. "I guess you're right. Besides, the elders will want some warning."

True enough. We have some who lived in the town that was destroyed by the exiles and moved here with Mom and Dad. We also have some who were here when the refugees came. Both sets need to know ahead of time that it's a drill, or they might have heart attacks from the fright.

As soon as I'm done eating, I excuse myself. Chris is probably still sleeping. Everyone else will be in school for a while. That doesn't give me many choices.

"Where are you going?" Dad asks.

"Out. Yes, I'll have my gun. And yes," I turn to Mom, "I'll make sure I don't need to use it."

I grab my things and head up into the hills. I hate it when Mom and Dad fight. Or more accurately, when Mom tries to fight and Dad ignores her efforts. I follow the winding deer path, careful not to crush any weeds or leave any footprints. The odds against an exile coming so far from a lake or real river are low, but it always pays to be safe. The families in our town are

descendants of exiles or people proven innocent who chose not to return to the cities. Either way, they like it here. I won't let my carelessness shatter their safety if an exile makes it up here.

The sun heats my back. I grab my water bottle and take a swig while I walk. I make it up to a long flat stretch that doesn't even have many weeds. Once, long ago, this must have been a road. I don't see the point of a road so far from water, but there's no other explanation for this leveled track. I find the thick, bush-sized weeds that cover the entrance to my hideaway. I carefully part the branches and weasel my way through.

Inside the bushes is the space I've spent most of the summers of my life creating. There's no lawn – I've got no way to get one started here, and besides, water's too precious to waste on a private luxury. I've got the ground leveled, though, ready for seeding if we ever have excessive rain. Mom and Dad still talk about the summer it rained so much, they actually got tired of it. I wish. If I ever get to see that much water, I'm getting a lawn out of it, too.

Beyond the flattened ground, a couple of leafy trees shade three boulders lining the stream. This is the last section before the stream goes underground. Even though the melt-off destroys it every spring, I build a dam across it every summer, creating a small, cold wading pool. By the end of each summer, I've got my own personal paradise.

Right now, the stream is little more than a trickle. I set my gun, still in its holster, down on the shady part of a rock. Then I take off my shoes and socks and place them next to the gun, but in the sun. When I'm ready to return to town, I'll dry my feet on the heated rock. I roll up the long pants that protect me from cacti and any snakes I might not see. I put my notebook next to the gun. I'm not sure why I even brought it. Habit, I guess. Then I finally step into the stream bank that's little more than mud on the downhill side of the dam. The cold water bites my feet and ankles. The glop squishes through my toes.

I feel my way over to the other bank, sinking into the soft mud with each step. I search out a rock and take it over to my dam wall. There's the perfect opening for it. I shift a few rocks, place my latest find, and replace the others. Then I search the mud for another rock. I place each stone carefully, falling into a rhythm. Too soon, winter will end this activity until I start over again next spring.

It's wonderful to be away from other people. Driving is nice, but I still have to pay attention. Here, it's just me and the rustling of leaves, the soft trickle of water, the buzzing of insects and occasional squawk from a bird. I could be the only human left in the kingdom. I close my eyes for a moment and enjoy the sensation. The Harmonies' music washes over me. It's soothing; there's no vision or message or weight of any kind attached to it this time. I let it soak into me and wash away my concerns.

I find another stone and take it to the dam. When did my friends get so scared of the idea of going outside? I'm not going to think about Chris's refusal to go elsewhere, even while he complains about the lack of options, and the lack of girls. Instead, I focus on my movements. Find a rock, find its place, fit it in. Find another rock.

My family still has the castle in the northern mountains. If Princess Melyssande is willing, we could live there. That would be the ideal way to make changes. The dukes and duchesses, as well as the lesser nobility, would have to drive through the Wilds to see us. They could see both the desolation they're sending sometimes innocent people into, and also the promise of areas like the northern range. We could convince them the time has come to change the laws. If we couldn't convince them, we could always mandate the changes. Living so far from the cities, assassination would be much more difficult. We could eliminate expulsion. Exile might remain, but only after conviction. We should also establish an independent system for determining innocence or guilt,

take some of the power away from the nobility.

Of course, this presumes the princess agrees with me.

I slam the stone down with too much force and several other rocks move. I take a deep breath, then fix the dam. I make sure they're all fit as tightly together as possible. The Harmonies try to sing to me, but I force them away. I don't need another song about my beautiful, wonderful bride. If the princess were as wonderful as all that, why is she still in hiding? Everyone must have heard at least rumors about Duke Braxton by now. Anyone with even a shred of decency would want to ensure he could never take the throne. She should have returned to the palace by now and claimed her heritage.

The part of me that insists on impartiality argues that she's right to be scared. Walking up to the palace gates and announcing her identity could get her killed. But it's hard to believe that a girl who values her own safety over the good of the kingdom will make a good queen. The prince is a spoiled brat. If he takes the throne, the kingdom will be bankrupt by the end of his reign.

On the bright side, if she values her safety so highly, it should be easy enough to convince her to move to the family castle. It's hidden as well as the refugee towns, though not with the same subterfuge. If I manage this right, I might be able to wrest some happiness from my fate. Even if I have to be king, maybe I won't have to live in Pacvo. If only the Harmonies could tell me something about her personality, I could feel more secure.

I almost wish for a Harmony to appear and sing to me in person, like legends say they did to King Jasper. I don't believe it, though. I think that's the last vestige of popular memory of the Faculty.

The Faculty is great, as far as it goes. Its limitations are many and serious, though. If the Harmonies tell me it's safe to drive, I believe them. It's harder to accept their assurance that all will

be well with my future. They aren't human. For all I know, they don't understand happiness or sorrow. I can believe the kingdom will benefit from our marriage. That doesn't mean I will, though.

CHAPTER NINE

Lyssa

I lie on the couch, my head on Mom's lap. The bitter taste of bile lingers in the back of my throat. Even after brushing my teeth and gargling, it's still there, only now it's tinged with mint. Mom slowly strokes my hair.

"When will Daddy be home?" Her hand pauses for a moment, then continues stroking my head and back. I sit up. "You did tell him, didn't you?" She turns away from me. Her silence speaks for her. "You didn't call him? Why not?"

"He'll be home soon enough. I don't want him getting hurt."

I want Dad here. He's always been able to fix everything. Yeah, this is bigger than a flat tire on my new scooter or a doll's broken arm, but of course he'll know what to do.

My stomach cramps and I curl up like a broken doll and chew my lip. My eyes burn. If I have to go into the Wilds, I'll probably never come back. They're filled with poisons and land mines. The car will seal out the poisons, but I can't spend who knows how long inside a car. If I run over a mine, even the car can't protect me.

Sometimes I wonder if there really are exiles out there. How could they survive? If there are, they must know how to find the bombs and mines. That doesn't make me feel any better, though. If I manage to live through my expulsion, I still might run into a vicious exile.

I have no idea how much time passes before the door clicks open. I jump up and run towards the foyer. "Daddy, you have to do something. I can't be expelled, I..."

"Whoa," Dad says. He doesn't even stop to take his shoes off. He rushes over and meets me halfway. He leads me back to the living room. He sits on the couch across from Mom's and pulls

me down beside him in a one-armed hug. I bury my face in his soft cotton shirt that smells of orange soap and motor oil. He holds me tight and I finally cry. I feel the rumble of his deep voice and hear Mom's higher responses, but I don't hear their words over my tears. He wraps his arms around me. My crying slows and then stops. I snuffle and scrub my face on his shirt. Although part of me is sure he can fix everything, the rest of me knows this isn't fixable. I haven't done anything. They'll have to rescind the expulsion. Even after they do, though, it'll remain on my record forever. Any time there's a dispute or a problem, I'll be one of the people they look at first. After this, will I even be able to get into college?

"Where's the letter?" Dad asks. His voice is even, but there's an intensity I don't normally hear. He sounds ready to rip someone's throat out, but his gentle hug still envelops me.

"I didn't see a letter," Mom says. I suddenly feel little again. When we first met Dad and she sounded small like that, why didn't I realize she was scared? "I saw the notice and panicked. I'll get the envelope. The letter must still be in there."

"We'll be able to get it rescinded tomorrow, right?" I ask Dad while Mom goes to get the letter. "I haven't done anything wrong, so we can go to the office tomorrow morning and tell them they've made a mistake. Right?" Even before he answers, I know it won't be so easy. I got an Expulsion Notice, so someone in that office thinks I'm a danger to society. I have to leave the city in the morning. If I don't, they'll send guards for me. Even when I'm cleared of the original charges, I'll still have the refusal to leave to deal with. At best, I'd be sent to Moavsed for six months or a year. "Who can we get to file the dissent for us?"

Dad's grip tightens. It's even harder to breathe with the constriction than when I just had an elephant on my chest. I take shallow gasps of air, but I don't try to loosen his hold. I wish I had more family than Mom and Dad. If I had aunts or uncles, one of them would be the obvious choice

to file the dissent.

Mom walks back into the room. "There wasn't any letter in the envelope. How could that happen?"

"It couldn't," Dad says.

"Maybe it fell out at the office," I say. "Or maybe it's someone's sick idea of a practical joke and they forgot about the letter."

"Maybe." Dad sounds like he's talking to a two-year-old. I can't blame him. Not when even little kids know that expulsion notices come with a letter of explanation. My mind shut down when I saw that notice. Mom should have realized, though. That's the kind of thing she usually pounces on. She must have gone into shock, too.

"Who delivered the notice?" Dad asks.

Mom shrugs. "I didn't realize what it was, so I didn't pay all that much attention. He was a young man, brown hair, gray coat and hat."

That could be any number of people who work for the city. Even so, I perk up.

"If the guards didn't come, I must not be accused of anything too terrible. If they thought I'd killed someone, they would have marched me out of the city at once, right?"

My mind jumps back to Civics class. Duke Simon wouldn't have me expelled for something silly like swearing, but I haven't done anything wrong. What kind of proof could they have against me when I haven't done anything? Yet they must have proof. If the city could expel someone without an explanation, people could be kicked out for nothing more than being mean to the wrong person at the wrong time. If that happened, we might as well all go live in the Wilds.

I shudder when I realize that's where we'll be tomorrow. My voice comes out as a squeak and I have to clear my throat. I sound more like myself when I try again. "I'm scared."

"Of course you are," Dad says.

We've all learned about the Wilds. Even babies need to know they can't leave the city limits. Not that they'd succeed if they tried; the guards would stop little ones from going out and getting hurt. Adults are free to come and go as they please, though I don't know many who would choose to leave. I don't know any, for that matter. The Wilds are too dangerous. There aren't any force fields and air purifiers, like in the cities. You could start breathing poison the second you leave the car once you're beyond the city gates. If anyone survives out there, it's criminals who've been exiled. Maybe around other cities, that wouldn't be so bad. Near Aletra, though, the exiles are people I never want to meet, even in nightmares. The guards are there to keep them out.

"There probably aren't as many exiles as you imagine," he says. "There are also communities of people who don't want to live in cities anymore. Descendants of exiles, sometimes."

I cough. It probably would have been a laugh if I didn't have such a lump in my throat. Descendants are allowed back in the cities. If they choose to stay in the Wilds, they'd have to be as dangerous as their parents. If they banded together in a community, they'd be strong enough to invade a city. Suddenly I don't feel like laughing, after all.

"Don't worry," Dad says. "I know of a safe place where you can stay."

"How do you know – wait. What do you mean, where *I* can stay? You and Mom will be with me, too. Won't you?" My parents wouldn't send me into the Wilds by myself. They've always been slow to let me do anything. Other kids got to start going to the vids in groups when they were about ten. I wasn't allowed until I was twelve. My friends could date when they were twelve; I couldn't until fourteen. Even now, when I'm practically an adult, Mom panics if I get home fifteen minutes later than I said. They're overprotective in a safe environment like Aletra; they wouldn't

send me anywhere dangerous alone.

"Of course we will," Mom says.

Dad holds my hand so hard it stings. "We can't. That missing letter means something. I need to go to the Expulsion Office myself, see what's going on."

"Okay." Mom's voice is even smaller and higher. "We'll go to your safe place, and you'll join us as soon as you've figured things out."

Dad looks at Mom and his lip curls. Then the sneer disappears behind a smooth alarm, so fast that I might have imagined it. I must have imagined it; Mom and Dad love each other.

"They won't take both of you," Dad says. "If I could go with you, maybe. But I don't want either one of you stuck in the Wilds. If I send her, alone, I know they'll take her in."

"But..." Mom starts.

"It's not safe for women in the Wilds," Dad says. Mom flinches and shudders, as if she knows exactly what he's talking about. "I've got a way to keep Lyssa safe, but I can't guarantee it will work for two. Do you want to take that risk?"

She'll take the risk. It has to be safer for the two of us to be together, no matter where we go. The elephant on my chest presses down until I can barely breathe.

"Nessa," Dad says, "you only have two choices. You can go with Lyssa and take her into the Wilds. You know what that means. Or you can trust me. You know I don't make promises I can't keep. And I promise to keep her safe."

Mom stares down at her feet. No. They can't mean this. I can't go into the Wilds alone. I don't realize I've spoken aloud until Dad answers me. "It won't be long. And you won't be completely alone. I'm sending you to people I trust."

I fumble for my notebook. I have to tell Tanya what's going on. Dad grabs it from me. "You

can't tell anyone what's happening. With luck, we'll get an early appointment on Monday and have you back in school by Wednesday. We'll tell everyone you're sick."

"But I said I'd talk to her."

"I'll take care of it."

"What if you can't get an appointment for weeks?" My voice isn't much more than a croak.

Dad's drops my hand, then pulls me in for a hug. "I have a friend at the office. I'll get an early appointment."

"Can you call him tonight? Isn't there anything he could do now?"

Dad lets out an almost-laugh. "If I had his personal information, I'd be talking to him already. I only know how to reach him at the office. He has weekends off. I'll try normal channels tomorrow, but I'll probably have better luck waiting until Monday."

This can't be happening. None of it.

"Okay," I say. "I won't message Tanya. But I need to pack my notebook."

"You can't take it into the Wilds. Some of the exiles have tracers. They could find you by its signal, even if you don't message anyone."

I stand and stumble for the stairs. I make it to my room without falling. Without turning on my lights, I stagger to the bed and fall down. I have to get to sleep so I can wake up and find this is a dream. Below me, Mom's voice grows high and shrill. Dad's low rumble gets louder. I don't understand anything that's happening. Dad's always been the one to fix whatever's wrong. Why did he turn on me like this?

I can't believe he took my notebook. He's supposed to trust me; Mom's the suspicious one. Besides, Tanya would never say anything. We've been friends longer than Dad's been my dad. She won't let me down even though he did.

Somewhere in my closet, I'm sure I still have my old notebook. No matter what Dad says, I'm not leaving town without talking to Tanya.

CHAPTER TEN

Casper

The afternoon peace is broken by a ping from my notebook, telling me I have a message. I ignore it, grab another rock, then pause. I never bring my notebook when I head into the hills. Maybe the Harmonies led me to bring it today. I set the rock I'm holding onto the dam for a moment, then walk over to the notebook, drying my hands on my jeans as I walk.

The message is from Mike, our captain in Aletra. He must have messaged everyone he knows at the same time. It just says *Something's wrong*.

I hop onto the boulder and message back, *What's going on?* I get an automated message that he's offline. Weird. I try to connect to the Aletra Knights' database, but it's offline, too. There must be something wrong with my connection. I connect to Pacvo, with no problem, though. I message Will, asking him to see if he can get through to Mike.

While I wait, I dip my feet into the dam side of the creek, cleaning off the caked on mud. Once they're clean, I put on my socks and shoes. I clip my holster back around my waist and squeeze my way back out into the real world. I make my way back down the mountain, careful not to leave any footprints or step on any plants.

The notebook pings again. Will couldn't connect to Aletra, either. There are only two possibilities: either Aletra's group of Knights has been discovered and the Duke of Aletra severed their connection with the rest of the kingdom, or Mike himself decided everyone was safer if their contact was broken. Either way, his message must have been an understatement.

A snake rattles and I stop with one foot in the air. I look around, but it's hidden. I back up slowly until I find another path, then pick my way around the threat.

I open myself to the Harmonies. They sing, but not of any warning. I open myself wider, letting their music cloud my sight until I can barely make out the path in front of me. I pause, steeling myself for whatever Mike's going through.

Instead, I see myself standing at the altar again, wearing a black suit. The high hymn masters from Pacvo are behind me, dressed in their purple and blue robes. I'm smiling, and surrounded by smiling men, also dressed in black. Most of them are friends from the Knights of the Rose, but the guys from town are there, too. Chris is right beside me; he must be the best man. A boy and girl come skipping down the aisle together. He holds a blue pillow with rings tied to it. She has a basket of purple flower petals she's supposed to be scattering, but isn't.

I push the vision away. I already know I have to marry the princess. I've known that since the prophecy was made, when she was two and I was almost four. I don't need this constant reminder, especially when I've got bigger things going on.

Of all the places I worried about, Aletra was least likely to have trouble. Their duke is a good, honest man. I thought that if he discovered the active branch of the Knights, he'd either support or ignore us. If it's not the duke, though, I don't know what could have happened. There haven't been any expulsions from Aletra, justified or not, for over a year. There haven't even been many minor infractions for the duke to deal with. Aletrians are, for the most part, law-abiding people. Maybe some of them are still paranoid from past tyrants, but they've reacted by being more law-abiding, unlike the people of Wefpok. Now there's a city I thought would cause problems.

I make it to the rocks that hide the tunnel entrance. Even though I know I'm alone, I look all around and open myself to the Harmonies to ensure there aren't any spies around. Then I open the entrance, squeeze in, and close it behind me. Once I seal the entrance, I run home.

Dad's already in the office when I get there. He looks up from his screen. "I haven't been

able to reach Mike since he sent that message. Have you had any luck?"

"Will can't get through, either. Do we have anyone closer? Is Jane still in the area?"

"She was heading back to Pacvo already. She's already turned around. She'll be there before you could get there, even if you drive all-out."

Luckily, Jane isn't one of the agents who insist on driving like a granny. Otherwise, I wouldn't count on that.

"Aletra doesn't have anything happening," I say. "The only report I was going to have Mike check into wasn't even a real concern, just a request for a psych eval on a student. I thought she might be the missing princess."

"If she is, that could explain the panic."

That was my first thought, but I already dismissed it. She's been there for her entire schooling, so if she is the missing princess, she probably moved there shortly after disappearing from Pacvo. If she's been there for thirteen years, it doesn't make sense that someone would only discover her now. A couple of weeks ago, maybe, when her Faculty started to kick in, but not now. Besides, the girl was almost a year too old. There's no way the princess could have been passed off as a three-year-old when she was taken, no matter how smart the king and queen claimed she was. Whatever's happening in Aletra, it's more likely to have to do with the Knights of the Rose than that report.

"How far away is Jane?" This is the first time I've ever wished we kept the trackers on our cars. I'd love to be able to bring up a screen and watch her progress. I don't want any of the exile bands doing the same thing, though, so I'll continue to live with the inconvenience.

"She's closer to Pacvo than Aletra. No, you're not going anywhere. She'll still get there before you."

I sit back down. I know he's right, but it's impossible to sit here, doing nothing. I contact the captains in every city, asking if anyone has any news from Aletra. No one does.

Dad turns to me when I stand up again, but I smile. "I'm going over to Chris's. There's nothing I can do, anyway. I need someone to take my mind off things."

"He should be good for that, anyway."

Nice. Dad doesn't like Chris. There's a shock: he doesn't like much of anyone. He specifically dislikes Chris, though, because he thinks Chris could be a force for good if he'd exert himself. One thing Chris doesn't like to do, though, is exert himself at anything.

To be fair, Dad doesn't understand what it's like for my friends. Sure, he grew up in a refugee town that was probably a lot like this one. I grew up here, too, obviously. The difference is that Dad and I have both always known we had other options. If we wanted to, we could live in our castle. Or we could live in any city, like the year I spent in Pacvo. My friends don't have that same sense of freedom. Their parents lived in refugee towns. Their parents' parents either grew up in refugee towns or were born to exiles and came to live in a refugee town after failing to find work in a city. My friends think there's no other future but staying here and becoming apprentice to one of their parents. In Chris's case, that means farming. Only the childless will train anyone other than their own child, and Chris is even less interested in blacksmithing than farming. Of course he doesn't see the point in trying to be anything else. What Dad sees as laziness is Chris's attempt to keep despair at bay.

When I get to Chris's house, he's in his shelter. He yanks a weed so hard that his hand flies over his shoulder.

"Still hating the farming, even now that it's your own land?" I ask.

"You're back." He throws the weed in his container and sits on the edge of the raised

planter box. I sit on the box opposite him. "How long are you sticking around this time?"

"It should be a while before I have to leave again. You could come with me one of these times."

He pulls another weed and tosses it in the container. "Yeah. I'm sure I'd have no problem finding a job, a place to live, a girlfriend. I'll announce I'm from the Wilds, and everyone will run to welcome me."

"With your brains..."

"Because nothing will make them more secure than knowing I'm good at science. That'll only convince them I'm even more dangerous than the average exile."

The worst part is, he's right. I wish I could tell him that in a few years, things will be different. I can't tell him about my future, though. Dad's convinced that if anyone knows who we are, not only will we be assassinated, but the whole town will be killed. He's probably paranoid, but why take the chance?

Still, this is Chris. "Remember when we were kids and I pretended I was a prince?"

He leans back and grins. "Harmonies, I haven't thought of that in years. You had me completely convinced."

"What if it were true? What if I were going to rule the kingdom some day? Would you be willing to relocate then?"

He laughs. "Who wouldn't, with the king for a friend?"

"But would you be willing to take the chance now, before anyone knew who I was?"

He stands and wrenches another couple of weeds, one in each hand. "What does it matter? It's not like it's true."

I weed the box I've been sitting on. He's growing green beans in this one. They're starting to

climb the trellises. "But could you stand a couple of years of suspicion from your neighbors and coworkers?"

"I'm too old for what-ifs and games of pretend."

"I know, but..."

"Stop it." His vehemence is startling. I turn to see him glaring at me. "It's hard enough accepting that I'm destined to be a farmer. Don't make it harder than it needs to be."

I nod. "Fair enough. Just do me a favor. Work on your degree. I know you have your farm now, but study what you can here. I'll help you build a lab if you need one. I don't want you to turn into a bitter old man. And I have a feeling things are going to change."

"In a few years, I suppose? How long am I supposed to hold my breath?"

"Give me five years. Okay? Just don't give up on your science for five years."

He shakes his head and returns to his weeding. "You are a strange person, Casper. You know that? But you've been right about weirder stuff. Okay. If you'll help me build the lab, I'll be glad to study. Just don't tell my parents. They're convinced I'll blow myself up if I mess with 'that science stuff.'"

"Can you blame them?"

He laughs again and lobs a weed at the back of my head. Even though I know he only agreed to humor me, I feel about twenty pounds lighter since he agreed to keep studying. When I have to become king, at least Chris won't have to be a farmer anymore. One of us should have some say in our futures.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lyssa

While I dig for my notebook, I pack. Kind of. When I'm going to a sleepover or slumber party, I fold everything neatly. I make sure my outfits match my shoes and makeup. Now I grab handfuls of clothes and throw them in the bag.

After my third handful, I find the old notebook. I set it to charge while I grab my toiletries and toss them in with the clothes, instead of placing each in its separate compartment.

When everything's in the bag, the notebook has enough charge to turn on. I message Tanya.

I've been expelled. I don't know why. My parents aren't coming with me. Dad says he knows a safe place I can go to, but still. What is going on?

She doesn't answer. I throw the notebook on my bed and go through my bag again. Oops, I need socks and underwear. I chuck those in my bag, too. Who cares if my outfits match when I'm in the Wilds? I hope I live long enough to need the clean clothes.

The notebook chimes. I run over and read Tanya's reply.

You're not going alone. Pick me up at the park. Message me before you leave.

I tell her she's crazy. Both of us don't need to die. Just me. She insists she's coming; she'll follow me alone if I don't stop to pick her up. Although I know she shouldn't come, it's suddenly easier to breathe again.

Don't bring your notebook. Dad thinks exiles can find us with them.

Even if they can't, she messages back, my mom could. I'll leave it behind.

I need to sleep. I don't know exactly where I'm going, but I'm sure it'll be a long drive. I get in bed, but flop around like a fish. I can't turn my brain off.

It still doesn't make any sense. I haven't done anything to warrant expulsion. This isn't the dark ages. Even though I know the Expulsion Office is closed, I want to go demand answers. It's probably a good thing they're closed; if I stormed in there, I'd probably make things worse and end up permanently exiled. I shudder and slip onto my stomach.

I must fall asleep sometime, because music echoes in my head when I wake to the smells of cooking. Nothing specific, just cooking. It's like walking by a row of restaurants: everything mingles into one delicious smell. Except today, instead of getting hungry, my gut clenches. I'm not going to be able to eat anything.

That doesn't turn out to be a problem. Mom and Dad can't eat, either. Mom packed a cooler with everything she cooked, so I won't be hungry while traveling. It's already in Dad's car, along with bottles of water. I suddenly feel like I can fly. "You're coming with me."

His hand is heavy on my shoulder, pinning me back to the earth. I study my shoes. I don't want to hear what he has to say.

"Nothing's changed," he says. "I can use a car from work while you're gone. I'll get your suitcase."

I insist on getting it myself. That gives me the time I need to message Tanya before I head back downstairs. Each step feels final. No matter what Mom and Dad say, I feel like I'll never see our home again.

When I get back outside, Mom pulls me in for a long hug. I feel her tears on my shoulder, but I'm dry-eyed. This still feels like a dream. A nightmare. Dad hugs me, too. I'm stiff in his arms. I get into the car.

Dad hands me a map. "Leave by the south gate and then follow this exactly. It'll keep you safe."

I jerk my chin.

"There's a thousand roads to happiness..." Dad says.

"And each is its own song," I finish. "Yeah, Dad. I know. Thanks." The weird thing is, the cliché actually does make me feel a bit better for a minute.

I start the car and check directions. They blur. I blink until they're clear again. I bite my lip as I back out of the driveway. The pain reminds me this is real. I'm actually leaving Aletra. Thank the Harmonies Tanya's coming with me. My eyes sting. I don't know what I've done to deserve such a wonderful friend. I'd like to think I'd do the same for her, but I'm not sure I'd find the courage.

She's already at the park when I arrive. We wedge her bag next to mine in the trunk, leaving the food and water easily accessible in the back seat. She scrunches into the space between the front and back seats. I cover her with blankets, so no one will see her. I head through the city, going through areas I didn't know existed. I drive through the lush neighborhood I grew up in, then through several identical neighborhoods before they start to change. As I approach the gates, the lawns become smaller. Some lawns are as lush as those in my area; others look parched and sickly. Where do these kids go to school? If their houses are this small, they can't afford the kind of clothes we wear. I've never seen anyone this poor at school. At least they get to stay in the safety of the city, though. I'd trade places with them right now, if I could.

I don't have to stop to show ID when I leave the city gates. I have no idea how they're supposed to know I'm me. I'm tempted to turn around to see if they stop me from returning. The threat of permanent exile is all that stops me.

Once I'm far enough that I'm sure the guards can't see me, I pull over. We're still in farmland, so there must still be air purifiers here. I help Tanya out of the back so she can get into

the passenger seat. We read Dad's hand-drawn map. I have to take a convoluted path that ends up heading north. Does that mean I can't even trust the people of Aletra? My stomach cramps. I'm glad I didn't eat much.

It isn't until I leave the farmlands that I realize how artificial our landscape is. Even the small houses close to the gate have at least small patches of green in front of them. Right outside the gates is a long stretch of farm, but I don't see any workers. Not even an automated tractor. How do they grow enough food for us without any farmers? I thought they worked seven days a week. I can tell when we leave the force field and air purifiers, though. The landscape abruptly turns barren and lonely. As we continue, the view remains much the same: dead grass with an occasional tree. Boulders surrounded by brown fields. Every now and then, I think I see an animal. I keep an eye on the odometer. I don't want to pass the turn-off. It's still a long ways away, but Dad thought I could get there before dark. I hope he's right.

When I start to yawn, Tanya offers to drive. I stop in the middle of the road. Dad said there weren't any bombs or mines on the route he mapped for me; I don't know if that's true for the shoulders, too. With no traffic anywhere, it's safer to stop where I am.

"Do you think it's safe to get out?" Tanya asks.

"Dad promised the whole path is explosive-free."

"But the air..."

She doesn't need to finish her sentence. I don't know how safe it is, either. I climb over the partition. I kick Tanya at least once and end up face-down in the back seat, jammed between the food and the water. She maneuvers into the driver's seat, stabbing me with her ridiculous heels a couple of times. When I grab the front seat to pull myself up, I feel my elbow connect with her.

"Sorry."

"Next time, let's risk the air," she says.

I make it into the passenger seat without injuring either one of us any more. "We can hold our breath that long. And the car's purifiers will clean whatever poisons we let in."

A couple of hours later, Tanya needs a break. We count to three, then take deep breaths, open our doors and run around to the other side. We hold our breath as long as we can, even after we're back in the car. When I can't hold it any longer and gasp, I don't feel any difference in the air. Tanya gasps right after me. The purifier must have worked; we're alive.

We're still miles away from the turnoff when it gets dark. I start to turn on the headlights.

"Exiles," Tanya says. I snatch my hand back. I stop, put the car in park, and lock the doors. We lean the seat backs as far as they'll go, which is almost enough to be comfortable. I leave the engine running and the heater on. Dad says the desert gets cold at night.

I pull the blankets from the backseat. I hand one to Tanya and fluff the other around me. The well-worn fuzz smells of Mom and drying in the backyard. I bundle Dad's jacket up to use as a pillow, and his motor-oil and lemon-soap scents mingle with Mom's. Ready to sleep now, I close my eyes.

A second later, they snap open.

"What was that sound?" Tanya's voice is as unsteady as my heartbeat. We sit up at the same time.

I click the flashlight on, searching for the exiles we heard scratching to get in. I don't see anything.

Oh, discord, I forgot about the light. I fumble to switch it off. Is it too late? Did someone see it? It's too dark to drive, but I can't stay here. I put the car back in drive and let it inch itself forward, my foot hovering over the brake.

My hands hurt from clenching the steering wheel, but I can't loosen my grip. A shadow looms ahead, to my right. Is it another car? The sound of my breathing fills the air: short, sharp gasps that barely fill my lungs. Should I gun it? I stop. The other car does, too.

Is it a car? I squint, but I can't make out any real form. When I ease my foot off the brake, it starts moving, too.

"Should we stop or keep going?" I ask.

"Don't stop." Her voice is high, almost unrecognizable. "I didn't think we'd actually see exiles."

They're pacing us. I hit the brakes. The other car stops, too. I wait. Do they think I'm stupid enough to get out and go to them? I take my foot off the brake and we start moving at the same time.

My laughter verges on hysteria. "It's just a shadow." Tanya's laughter echoes mine.

"I'm not going to be able to sleep," Tanya says.

"Me, neither."

We raise our seat backs again. I press down on the accelerator – not hard; barely enough to go faster than walking speed. If I'm too big a baby to sleep, at least I can make some progress at night. I hope we'll get there – wherever "there" is – before dark tomorrow.

As we continue, my heart slows and my breathing evens out. The occasional shadow figure darting across the road still panics me, but soon even that becomes routine. Then I hear that familiar humming start.

"By the Harmonies, not now," I say out loud.

"What?" Tanya asks.

"I heard the music again."

"Do I need to drive?"

Her voice is thin. She must not like the idea of getting out in the dark any more than I do.

"I'll be okay."

Just talking stopped the music. If it starts again, I know what to do. I look from the road to the odometer and back again. I think Tanya fell asleep. That's good; she'll be ready to drive when I'm too tired.

Finally, the sky lightens. The landscape isn't so threatening in daylight. In fact, it's pretty in a stark, deserted kind of way. Tanya's still asleep, but I need a break. I stop the car again, put it back in park, and check the locks. I cover myself up. Even if I can't sleep, I need to rest my eyes for a few minutes. Humming fills my ears, but this time I melt into both the harmony and the dreams it brings.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Casper

Everyone comes over to Chris's as soon as temple's over. We claim our usual spots. The others fall into the bags as if they've been farming for days without break.

"Tough homework this weekend?" It comes out more sarcastic than I meant it to.

Jemma tosses her hair. "Yes, thank you, Casper, we realize it's nothing compared to the schools in the city. I'm sure your senior year was much harder than all our years combined."

"That's not what I meant." Have I come across like that? "Honestly, I think the schoolwork at Pacvo was easier than here."

"Whatever." She turns to Chris, since he's the only other single guy. Apparently the boyfriend she broke up with is less offensive than talking to me. If that's what she's heard me saying for the past five years, who can blame her?

"Seriously, any of you could pass their finals with no problem."

"We know that," Jemma says.

"Still, it's nice to hear you admit it," Alli says.

If Alli's been hearing the same thing as Jemma, then I've definitely been saying it. If Allie met an unwashed, armed exile, she'd assume he was a friend she just hadn't met. I lean back against the wall and prepare to grovel for the rest of the day.

"Lay off," Chris says. "It's not his fault we all made that assumption."

"I don't know if it helps," I say, "or if it makes things worse, but I wanted to stay here. It was a lot easier to finish school in Pacvo than put up with a year of Dad's nagging."

Jemma sits on the empty bag closer to Chris, her back to me. If she thinks that's some sort

of punishment, she's forgotten the four months we spent dating. I should have broken up with her the first time her silent treatment came as a relief. I don't know why I stuck it out for so long. Maybe because it annoyed Dad so much.

Alli pulls away from Ken. She screws her mouth up on one side. If I wait for her to say what's on her mind, we could wait all day. Ken's hand reaches out, then falls back to his side. She won't give up until she talks, but she won't start the conversation, either.

"What is it?" I ask. Ken nods his thanks.

She bites her lip for another moment. "If it was so much easier in Pacvo, then why do you keep discouraging us from going to the cities? I thought you were telling us we're not smart or sophisticated enough."

"It's not a matter of being smarter or more stupid. Or of being more or less sophisticated." I grope for words to make them understand. "We simply don't think the same way as people who live in cities."

Alli huffs and leans back into Ken. He grins, but her frown deepens. After a couple of minutes spent trying to get Alli back into a snuggling mood, he gives up. "Who wants to play cards?"

It's not as easy to play, now that we're in Chris's house. He doesn't have a table yet. Still, we manage. Since Ken suggested it, he deals first. When we each have our seven cards, I look at my hand and groan. Four fours, a two and a ten. The only good card I have is the nine. Since the game is more about playing each other than the cards we're dealt, I have a decent chance.

"I have three fives I'll trade you," Alli says. I check everyone's faces. Chris pulls at his lower lip: he probably has a five or two but can't decide if anyone else does. Ken squints at his cards: he must have at least one, too. With six fives in the deck, it's worth the risk.

I toss three evens into the center, face down. "You do not."

Alli scrunches her nose and takes my cards. "You're right, I don't."

We work our way around the table. Jemma offers two ones. No one's willing to question her, so she puts them back in her hand and discards two others, face down. When it's my turn, I offer my nine. My groan must have worked, because Ken says I don't. I show him the nine, then give him the rest of my evens.

"That was quick," Jemma says. She tosses her hand at Ken. "You should have let him give one up."

"But he groaned," Ken says. "Who groans when they have a nine? It doesn't make sense."

"That's the point," Jemma says. "How long have we been playing together? You can't trust anything he says once the cards are dealt."

Their bickering mutes as the Harmonies' music attacks. I brace myself. They don't normally sing to me when I'm with friends, so it can't be their usual nagging. I let the music flow over me until the vision forms. At first, all I see is the town. Then I see it: a dust cloud in the distance, heading towards us. I shake the music away and jump up. Chris's house is positioned wrong. There's no good view to the east, just other houses. I can't see the highway from here at all.

"Head to your shelters," I call as I dart to the pantry.

I can't tell if they follow my directions. It doesn't matter much anyway. If they ignore me now, they'll have the same warning as the rest of the town. That is, if the vision is about the present. I wish the Faculty were more exact.

I grab my flashlight and turn it on as I press the release. As soon as the entryway opens, I squeeze through and hurtle down the stairs into the tunnel. I don't pause to turn on the lights. I sprint all the way back to our stairs and take them three at a time. I don't wait for our door to finish

opening, either. I squeeze through the entry into our pantry, and run through the kitchen and across to the big one-way windows in the living room.

The car is still closer to the highway than to us. I wouldn't notice it if I hadn't had warning. Since I know what I'm looking for, I see the trail of dust winding towards us. "Sound the alarm, Dad! Someone's coming."

The sirens blare and overhead lights flash and then he emerges. "What's going on?"

I point to the dust cloud. He squints until he sees it, then turns to me. His face is calm, as usual, but I can see the worry in his eyes. That's enough to double my fear. "Your mother's at the Rossis. Get to the shelter."

"You go to Mom," I say. "If you check on the elders over that way, I can help the others."

We run down the stairs and through the tunnel until the first branch. Dad heads north and I turn south. Families jam the tunnel, each getting to their own shelter. Even with the teeming activity, there's no talking. I hear the shuffling of feet on tile, the creak of a door that needs oiling. The tunnel is lit only by flashlights that cast wavering shadows on the walls. Despite Mom's worry, no one takes this as anything less than the crisis it is.

My chest aches into my shoulders. I'm panting as if I were Dad's age. Still, I take the stairs three at a time and open the release into the Allington's pantry. They're dressed as usual: Mr. Allington in a fluffy robe over worn-thin pajamas and a pair of slippers that are more thread than fabric; Mrs. Allington dressed for tea in a dress, low heels and a string of pearls. Mr. Allington wraps a bony arm around his wife. His other hand is white from clutching his walking stick.

"Tell your father to warn us about drills," he says. "The shock isn't good for those of us long in years."

I give Mrs. Allington's my arm to hold and help her down the stairs. I almost apologize. I'm

afraid of giving one of them a heart attack if I tell them the truth. Then I remind myself they've lived through the real thing. They deserve to know what's happening. "It's not a drill."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Allington's voice is shrill and thin. She squeezes my arm.

"It could be nothing, but I saw the dust from a car. It looks like it's headed towards us. It's probably nothing, but we don't want to take any chances."

Mr. Allington stumbles. He catches himself before he falls, thank the Harmonies. I don't know if he'd survive the shock of a broken bone on top of the raid. Besides, I don't have time to tend to an injury or even call the doctor.

They walk so slowly, even knowing what danger they're in. I want to pull Mrs. Allington along, to hurry her up. I take a deep breath. The Harmonies gave us plenty of warning. I can make it to the other two elders' homes and still make it back before the car arrives. I'm sure I can. Still, I wish they could hurry up a little.

Ages later, we make it to their shelter. I try the release, but they've got it locked. Finally. I run to the next elders' house. They've almost made it to their shelter by the time I get there. The last set of elders are already locked in when I arrive. I sprint home, racing against a car I can't see.

Mom and Dad get back right after me. I can't tell if Dad's face is red from running or because Mom's upstairs instead of safe inside our shelter. My guess? A little bit of both. I make it to the one-way window before they do.

Although the car is still out of sight, there's no longer any doubt. It's coming here.

"Get down to the shelter," Dad says. "Both of you."

I open the gun vault and take a rifle, a pistol, and ammunition for both out. Mom doesn't like pistols; she takes a rifle and a dagger. Dad huffs over and takes his own rifle and pair of pistols and enough ammunition to take down an entire city's guard.

We stand shoulder to shoulder, watching the dust creep nearer. It's a smallish cloud, so it isn't a gang approaching. Even a single exile could raze our town, if he's scrounged a bomb and it's still live. We've always assumed a live bomb would detonate along the way, even if an exile could dig one up. This is not how I want to be proven wrong.

I remind myself to breathe. Mom must do the same; I hear her uneven, ragged breaths. Dad continues to grumble that we should be in the shelter.

The car rounds a bend and comes into sight. It's not a tank. If there's a bomb, it's held within an average city car. Nonetheless, Mom, Dad and I all load our rifles and follow the car with our sights. It slows, as if the driver knows we're watching him. I press my finger against the trigger.

When it gets to the clearing, the car stops. I feel Mom tense beside me; she's ready to shoot, too, even though she's too tenderhearted to even kill a chicken. The driver's side door opens. A girl about Jemma's age gets out. She's tall and dark-haired. She looks at the town and I want to swear. She looks innocent and afraid, and I want to throw caution to the wind and run out to comfort her. There's still someone in the car, though. Besides, I know better than to judge a girl by her beauty. The other door opens, and the passenger steps out.

This time, I do swear.

The petite, blonde girl is completely out of place in our clearing. Like her companion, she's dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. Unlike the dark-haired beauty, this girl has high heels on. She's probably never had to walk in nature in her life. Definitely a high-maintenance kind of girl. No wonder strangers arrived: she must be the princess. I don't know how she found me. I should have a couple of years, at least, before I have to deal with her. Obviously, she's not as big a fan of procrastination as I am.

Since she's here now, though, I guess I'd better be nice. If she doesn't marry me, the

prophecy will mean war, rather than marriage. If she chooses to destroy the kingdom, it won't be my fault.

"Cover me," Dad says. "I'm going down to question them."

"You'll scare them to death," Mom says before I can protest. "This calls for a woman."

Naturally, Dad refuses to let her go alone. While they argue about who should greet or interrogate the new arrivals, I put the rifle down and make sure my pistol's loaded and the safety's on before I slip it in my pocket. After I open our pantry door, I turn back. "I'm going to greet them. I won't scare them, but I won't be too easy on them, either. Cover me."

Before they recover, I slip down the stairs into the tunnel.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lyssa

Maybe the town Dad talked about is hidden. I walk over to a boulder and climb up onto it. The rough stone scrapes my hands. I stand up and look around. There's still only a ghost town in one direction, mountains in another, and practically desert lands in the other two directions. I sit on the boulder. Tanya trails after me.

"What can we do?" My voice cracks. "I guess I can take you back to Aletra. You'll have to walk home from outside the gates, though. I'm not allowed back in."

"I'm not leaving you." She hops onto the boulder beside me. "Do you think it's safe out here? What if poison killed everyone off?"

I hold my breath. Would we notice if we were breathing poisoned air? Is it already too late, or will we be safe if we get back in the car? Then I look at the deserted town and blow my breath out. "We're probably okay. People were able to build these houses. I think that took long enough to assume the air is safe."

That doesn't mean we can stay here for long. If the air is clean, this place might attract exiles. If any of them lived long enough to find this place, that is. I don't know which is worse: staying where there might be exiles or going where the air could kill us. I curl onto myself.

A rock clatters downhill, landing almost at my feet. Tanya and I jump up together. She wobbles on her stupid-high heels.

A tall, skinny boy walks towards us. His hands are in his jacket pockets. I scuttle backwards, my hands behind me, groping for the car. Tanya steps towards him. No doubt she's counting on her charm to win him over. This is the Wilds, not school.

I grab her arm. "He's probably an exile."

"You're practically an exile, too. And you're not dangerous."

I drop her arm and back away. How could she even think that I'll be exiled? I back towards the car again, careful not to let the boy out of my sight. Tanya doesn't even glance at me. She steps forward with her easy, confident walk. No doubt she's got a flirtatious smile pasted on. I stretch my arms out behind me. I can't tear my eyes away long enough to check for the car I should have reached by now; it was only a few feet away from the boulder. I take another step backwards. He's walking towards us faster than I can back away.

"Who are you?" My voice is higher than I'd like. I pull my hands forward and ball my fists. "Don't come any closer. We're armed."

His lips quirk at the same time his eyebrows draw together. He stops and glances my way before returning to Tanya's face. "I would hope so, the two of you alone in the Wilds like this. What are you doing here?"

"Her dad thought this would be a safe place," Tanya says. "Clearly, his information is out of date."

Before Tanya even finishes talking, he swivels to face me. His blue eyes are intense, especially against the dark amber of his skin. It's hard to look away. They'd probably be pretty if he were happy. As it is, I take several deep, steadying breaths to keep from running to the car and abandoning Tanya.

"What does your father know about this place?" His voice is as sharp as an icicle.

"Obviously not enough."

His eyes narrow. He stalks towards me like a tiger. "How did you find us?"

I scramble backwards until I bump into the car. I reach behind and fumble for the handle. I

don't know how I'll get to Tanya without running the stranger over. If he doesn't get out of the way, maybe I'll have to hit him. My fingers close around the handle and I pull. Finally. The door bangs into my hip. I turn and shimmy around it. A large, brown hand slams it closed.

He isn't touching me, but I feel the heat of his body. I can't breathe. I don't dare turn around. If he's going to kill me, I hope it's a quick death, and that Tanya has time to escape. I shouldn't have let her come. If we both die, it's all my fault. I close my eyes and clench every muscle.

"I said," he growls in my ear, "what does your father know about this place?"

"I don't know." My voice squeaks. I cough and try again. "He said this was a safe place, that he had friends here who would make sure I was safe while he looked into my expulsion."

"Your expulsion?" The hand pulls away. "Aren't you here to protect the – your friend?"

I feel him move away and turn. His head is tilted and his whole face contorts: his eyebrows scrunch together, his mouth turns down on one side. He's almost a parody of confusion; I half expect him to reach up and scratch his head.

"Tanya? She's here because she wouldn't abandon me. Please don't hurt her. She's a good person."

"He's not going to hurt either one of us." Tanya finally makes it to the car. "Are you? I'm sure not all exiles are dangerous. Right?"

"Who is your father?" he asks me. "And how did you find us?"

Okay, then. Apparently he isn't going to answer anything until we answer that question. Since I don't actually have any weapons, I don't have much of a choice, especially since Tanya refuses to acknowledge the danger we're in. I open the car door. He slams it again.

"I'm not trying to run away this time," I say. "I just want to show you the map my dad gave me."

He removes his hand. When I open the door, he grabs it. If my lips would stop quivering, I might smile. Does he think that holding the door would stop me from driving off? Only Tanya's presence manages that.

I put a knee on the driver's seat and reach over to grab the paper. As soon as I stand, he snatches it from me. A moment later, those deadly blue eyes bore into me again. "Who is your father? What's his name, and what city is he from?"

It's like the legends of snakes who can hypnotize people with just their eyes. I can't talk. I can't move. All I can do is gape.

"We're from Aletra," Tanya says. His gaze transfers to her and I take a deep breath. "His name is Michael Jacobs."

The tension rolls off his shoulders. I look at the ground by his feet, as if an actual puddle of tension will appear. "Mike sent you?"

"How do you know my dad?"

He lets go of the car and jerks his chin. Apparently, information is only going one way. "Come on. I'll take you to the safe place Mike promised."

"How do you know my dad?" I'd stomp my foot if I thought either leg was steady enough to hold me up.

"We're heading up there." He nods towards the ghost town and takes Tanya's arm. "Why don't you go in front of us?"

It comes out as a directive. I hesitate. His glacial eyes make me scramble up the path. The way he keeps one hand in his pocket, he probably has a weapon of some kind. I'd rather not find out by making him too mad.

Path is too charitable a term for the route we take. Clear areas interrupt the grasses and

cacti I pick my way around. At least I have decent shoes on. I look back at Tanya. She clings to the grumpy caveman's arm. Not surprising; she stumbles over every stone and plant. If she didn't have his arm to hold onto, she'd probably break her neck.

Despite having Tanya's hand, his smile is only on his lips. She doesn't seem to notice that the rest of him is still coiled, though not as tightly as before she told him Dad's name.

"Did Dad fix your car or something?" It's a stupid question. Fixing a stranger's car wouldn't warrant getting information that's obviously secret.

He doesn't even glance my way. He's more interested in the dirt under our feet than in me or my concerns. I'm not surprised that he's more worried about Tanya than me. She has that effect on people, especially boys around our age. Usually, though, boys are capable of acknowledging my existence, even when she's around. I pinch my arm; it's still solid. I haven't suddenly turned invisible.

"Stop," he says.

I'm standing in front of the first of the abandoned houses. It doesn't look any better up close. The roof over front porch used to be supported by four columns. Two have collapsed into each other. The other two remain standing, but they're more rot than wood. Jagged holes in the porch floor illustrate the decay that must riddle the entire house.

"Up the stairs."

No. Even if he has a dozen guns in that pocket of his, that's not enough firepower to get me up those stairs. I'd rather die by a bullet than by having a house collapse on top of me. I realize I'm shaking my head.

"It's safe," he says. "Go up the stairs."

My head keeps shaking. "There is no way I'm going onto that porch."

"Fine." He sounds angry, but his lips twitch again and his eyes thaw a little. "Take my other arm. We'll go up together."

That doesn't sound much better. Still, a slight improvement is better than nothing. I wait for them to catch up. He doesn't take his hand out of his pocket. I put my hand on top of his arm. On his other side, Tanya's still clinging.

He steps onto the first stair. Tanya and I go with him. It's surprisingly sturdy. Even so, I grab the railing with my free hand. One step isn't so far to fall if it collapses, but there are three more stairs waiting.

I could happily stand here for an hour before testing the next step. The boy doesn't give us that luxury. He walks up as if they were solid stone. When we get to the top, he casually steps over the gaping hole in front of him.

I look up at the roof above us. Then I wish I hadn't. It's as decrepit as the columns and porch. As decrepit as the stairs, for that matter, but they felt solid. I squeeze my eyes shut, then change my mind as we continue forward. I want to avoid any holes that might trip or trap me.

"Why are we here?" Tanya asks. Her voice is steadier than my legs, but not by much.

"Mike promised you a safe place. I'll take you to someone who can give that to you."

"Someone you'll find here?" Her voice isn't any stronger this time. Mine wouldn't be any better, though. That is, if I could find it.

He knocks on the door. Although it looks like I could kick the door in with little effort, it sounds as solid as my own front door. I don't smell any decay or mold, either. Maybe terror messes with our senses in ways they never told us about. Maybe this is all a dream. Maybe I've actually gone completely crazy and nothing will ever be normal again.

The door opens and I'm sure my insanity theory is correct. The front door and porch still

look decrepit and dangerous. Inside, though, a warm light shines on a beautiful reddish wooden floor that stretches through to a great room as large as mine at home, and as inviting as Tanya's. A small, beautiful woman with dark brown skin smiles at us from the doorway. Slightly behind her, a bear of a man with skin as pale as mine glares at us.

"Who are you?" he asks.

I take a step back. Maybe there are worse places to be than on this ancient porch, after all.

"Be nice, Jason," the woman says. "Come in, girls. You must have a story to tell us. Two such beautiful girls, alone in the Wilds. And to have found us, too!"

"This is Tanya," the boy says. I don't know when she had time to introduce herself. I was there the whole time. "And this," he adds, finally taking his hand out of his pocket to gesture at me, "is Mike Jacob's daughter. Or so she says."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Casper

"Nice to see you again, Lyssa," Dad says. "You look just like your mother."

"What are you talking about? How do you know my parents?" the dark-haired girl – Lyssa – asks. She's certainly persistent. Not that I blame her; I'd want to know, too. If she really is Mike's daughter, and he's never told her anything about us, she must be so confused. If he manufactured the expulsion to get the princess to safety and didn't warn her, she's probably terrified. That's not something Mike would do, unless the situation was dire, especially to his own daughter.

Actually, her question is good. How does Dad know her mother? It's not like the Knights have family picnics. I make a mental note to ask Dad when we're alone. Not that I expect him to answer, but he certainly won't tell me if I don't ask. We stare at him as he walks away, into the office. A moment later, the all clear siren and lights flash. Dad returns.

"Mike," he says, "your dad, I mean, sent Tanya with you?"

Lyssa blushes and looks at the floor. It only makes her cuter. The princess lifts her chin defiantly. "He told her not to tell anyone, even me. He was sending her into the Wilds all alone. Can you even imagine? Of course I came with her. She's my best friend."

"So he doesn't even know you're here?" I ask. That doesn't make sense. Aletra hasn't had any expulsions in months. If Mike didn't send his daughter here to protect the princess, then what is going on? Jane better get there soon. We need more information. Maybe Tanya isn't the princess, after all.

"He will by now," Tanya answers. "I left a note for my mom."

Her mother is probably hysterical. Mike will have to tell her something. Hopefully he can

calm her without mentioning the Knights. If he'd contact us, or let us contact him, we could help him figure something out. My fingers itch, but my notebook is in the office.

Although Lyssa's face is still flushed, she raises her head and meets Dad's eyes without flinching. "How did you know my name? And what did you mean, it's nice to see me again? When and where did we meet?"

"Your dad hasn't told you anything about what he does, has he?"

She blinks a couple of times. "Of course. He's helping me build a car. I'll not only have my own, but know how to take care of it, too."

Dad smiles. It's not his usual sardonic smile, but an actual show of amusement and tenderness. Who is this girl and what has she done to my father? "Being a mechanic makes him money, but it's the lesser of his positions. He actually helps ensure that only the guilty are exiled. He also helps the innocent from other cities find new lives."

She shakes her head. "That doesn't make sense. If he had anything to do with exile, he wouldn't have – oh. Is that how he knows someone in the Expulsion Office? And what does that have to do with meeting Mom and me? It's not like we were exiled."

Dad's smile disappears. "Not exiled, no." From Mom's sharp inhale, she must recognize the story. It sounds familiar, like something from a dream. Maybe I heard Dad telling Mom, long ago.

Dad got a call from a guard at an expulsion camp that a woman and her daughter had arrived with the captain from Spado. Back then, Duke Braxton was still fair and reasonable, so we rarely had anyone expelled unfairly. This woman, however, hadn't been expelled. She'd taken her daughter and run from an abusive ex-husband. In fact, this was her second attempt at escaping him; she'd moved to Spado in hopes of freedom. She wouldn't press charges to have him expelled from either city; there was no proof, and she didn't want him to end up with custody of their

three-year-old daughter.

They had to stay in the camp while Dad checked out both her background and reports from all the cities on expelled women. They ended up calling in extra guards to protect them; even then, the expelled men harassed her so much, she rarely left the tent except for meals. Once they came up clear, Dad took the refugees to Mike. They set up new identities for both the woman and her daughter and got them set up in a house, a job, and a daycare.

"Less than a year later," he concludes, "your dad thanked me for bringing the two of you to him. He said you were the family he'd always wanted."

"All this time I've known him," Tanya says, "I never knew he had anything to do with exiles."

"Me, neither." Lyssa clenches her hands.

"Of course not," I say. "The fewer people who know about us, the safer we are."

Mom shows the girls to our guest room. We only have one, but they agree they'd be happy to share it. While Mom makes their bed and gathers towels for them, I hike back down to their car and park it in the garage. The odds of anyone outside of our town getting close enough to see it are low. Still, better to minimize all risks. The exiles who survive in the Wilds become the most vicious. They're usually the craftiest, too, or they wouldn't survive.

I haul their suitcases through the tunnels and up our stairs. Mom's already in the kitchen. She's starting dinner, even though it's my turn to cook. I consider keeping quiet. It's not like I'd object to an extra night off. I sigh. "It's my turn to cook. Remember?"

"You're a good boy," Mom says. She kisses my cheek, then turns back to the cutting board and her onions. "We have new guests in town. We'll have to have a party and potluck. I'll make my deviled eggs, but I'd like you to let people know. And after the girls have rested, I'd like you to

introduce them to your friends."

Just about anything's better than cooking. At least this time, I'm delivering good news. I'm not looking forward to seeing my friends again, though. They're going to ask me how I knew about the raid before the alarm. I should have thought of that before telling them to take cover. Then again, how could I not warn them? I'd probably do the same again, if I had to.

I message the entire town that we'll have a welcome potluck for our two visitors this evening. Then I message my friends to tell them our visitors are girls about our age. Pretty soon, the responses start coming. Not surprisingly, almost everyone says they'll be at the party. Equally predictably, the boys all hope they can meet our visitors before the party starts; the girls are much quieter. In the excitement over our newcomers, no one even asks how I knew to warn them.

The newcomers stay in the guest room for quite a while. I've been called nosy before, and it's not entirely inaccurate. While the girls are gone, I look into Aletra. My connection with the Knights is still down, but I worm my way into the city directly. The schools are easy enough to get into. I find Lyssa Jacobs and I feel like someone punched me in the gut. She's the girl a teacher requested an eval on. She was the possible princess. And now I find out she was also relocated shortly after the princess went missing? That's a big coincidence. Still, Dad said she looks like her mother. That would be an equally big coincidence, if she were Princess Melyssande. I look up Tanyas in Lyssa's class until I find her: Tanya Miklagaard. Then I go back to the city files to look at her birth records.

No father listed. It's still possible she's the princess, even if Mike didn't send her here deliberately. I look into her mother's records and sigh. She's not the princess. Tanya probably knows nothing about her father and I won't volunteer any information. However, if she asks, I won't lie, either. I close the records and worm back out of the city link, making sure I don't leave

any traces of my snooping behind.

Half an hour before we're supposed to leave for the party, I wonder if we shouldn't have scheduled it for tomorrow, instead. They might want to sleep through the afternoon and night, after their drive. Mom leads them down the stairs a couple of minutes before we're supposed to leave, though. They still look tired, but not as rough as when they arrived. They're both wearing jeans again, with nicer blouses this time. Lyssa still has her walking shoes on; Tanya's got a different pair of heels. She clearly hates being short.

When they see all the deviled eggs Mom made, Lyssa offers to help carry them. A beat later, Tanya repeats the offer.

"I think you'll have to concentrate on navigating the stairs," Mom tells Tanya. She accepts Lyssa's help, though.

We gather in the temple; it's the only building big enough to hold everyone. We're the last to arrive, as planned. Lyssa and Tanya are welcomed to the town by our best singers. After they finish, Dad invites Lyssa and Tanya to sing. Lyssa steps forward, but Tanya beats her to the stage. She straightens and lifts her head. Clearly, she's used to performing. Lyssa, still off-stage, sags. Tanya must be the better singer.

Sure enough, Tanya's voice is a pure, crystalline soprano. She sings a hymn I'm not familiar with, though it seems to be a version of the creation story. It's hard to tell; her voice is beautiful, but I can't make out the words. When she finishes, the temple rings with applause. Poor Lyssa looks slightly green when she steps onto the stage, though she tries to smile. I don't blame her for wanting to go before that performance.

Then she opens her mouth. Her voice isn't as high as Tanya's, but it's clear and beautiful. She doesn't sing any words, but the melody doesn't need any. The song rises to the rafters and

echoes until she seems to be singing a duet with herself. The temple is silent except for the song. There's no whispering, not even any rustling. We all stand, awed by having a conduit in our midst. I've heard this melody before, many times, but only in my head. For most of the townspeople, this is the first and probably only time they'll hear the song of the Harmonies.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lyssa

I have no idea where that song came from. Okay, I know it's the song I've been hearing in my dreams and during my time lapses, but I never thought I could sing it. I wouldn't ever have tried. I haven't been to temple in so long, I thought I'd croak my way through the traditional welcome. Especially since Tanya sang first; she knows every hymn and could sing them in her sleep, practically. When I finish and turn to share my relief with her, her smile is crooked and brittle. She couldn't have wanted me to look bad, could she? Surely that isn't why she insisted on going first.

The townspeople crowd around me, welcoming me like I'm a duchess or something. They must still cling to the belief that a beautiful voice is the mark of a beautiful soul. Obviously, they've never met some of the divas at school: gorgeous-voiced, gorgeous-faced, spiteful, mean-spirited people like Georgia and Mark.

The townspeople welcome Tanya, too, but hers is secondary. The world is slightly out of sync. Not enough to make anything unrecognizable, just to make everything a little bit off.

When Casper introduces us to his friends, though, life returns to normal. The girls cling to their boyfriends the moment they set eyes on Tanya. The only single girl, Jemma, smiles more crisply at Tanya than me. Chris, the other single boy, says hi to me as he hones in on Tanya with a much warmer welcome. I'm pretty sure I could howl at the moon and the boys, at least, wouldn't notice. The girls probably wouldn't either, in their eagerness to keep their boyfriends away from Tanya's charm. They don't know her well enough to realize she'd never steal a boy from anyone. She wouldn't even go out with Matias if he asked, and he isn't my boyfriend. Yet. Besides, she

wouldn't want to date anyone who couldn't be trusted like that.

Jemma asks me if I'd like to go get some food. I grin. "Sounds great."

She leads me to the buffet table. The others follow behind us. I look back to see Chris and Casper escorting Tanya between them. She shares her smiles and chat impartially. Until she spends more time with them, she won't know who to favor. Chris is likely to win; he's much more focused on her. Casper talks to other people, too. He even asks if Jemma and I need help carrying our plates.

I already knew the acoustics in the temple were amazing, or my singing would have been flat. What works for a single singer – or even a choir – is a drawback to a big party like this. Conversations echo over each other until it's hard to hear the small group I'm with. Casper says something, I don't know what. Jemma and Tanya nod at the same time, and everyone stands up. I scramble up, too. I grab my plate and cup and follow the others down the stairs into the tunnels.

The door closes behind us. I close my eyes and breathe the silence in for a moment, then run to catch up with the others. We end up in a messy but comfortable great room. The only furniture, for lack of a better word, is a bunch of huge pillows on the floor. They're mostly clumped together in pairs, which makes sense when the couples all plop down in what are obviously their usual places. Chris drags a couple of pillows from against the wall. On the plus side, they're obviously new. On the minus side, they're still just giant pillows. I ease myself onto one. It's surprisingly comfortable. It's more like foam than stuffing; I don't feel like I'm going to lose my balance, even sitting in the middle of the room.

"These are harmonic," I say. "I want one for home."

Tanya moves hers between Casper's and Chris's before she sits down. There's a huge circle of open space between me and the other pillows. I want to move my pillow, too, but I'm already

sitting. That would be even more awkward than staying by myself.

"So, that was quite a performance," one of the girls says. Alli, I think her name is. She doesn't look sarcastic.

"Thanks. The acoustics in your temple are amazing."

"Where did you even learn that song?" Tanya asks. "I know you didn't learn it at choir, and you never go to temple."

The room exhales with relief. The tension in the air drops. Alli smiles. "Oh, good. I thought you must practically live at the temple and we'd have to be super-good around you."

"Not me," I say. "I haven't been in years. Not since we got a new hymn master."

"So where did you learn it?" Tanya repeats. I shrug.

"She's obviously a conduit," Casper says.

His friends nod. Tanya's as confused as I am. Although they talk over each other, Casper and his friends explain the term to us. They gesticulate so much, I'm surprised they don't fall off their pillows. The foam must be even better support than it feels.

In ancient times, the Harmonies would choose a few pure souls to sing through. These people were called conduits. The Harmonies would sometimes sing through a conduit on a regular basis. Other times, the conduit would only be used once. Either way, they would be welcome anywhere they'd sung for the Harmonies. They were virtually the most respected people in the kingdom. Only kings, queens, princes and princesses held more honor than a conduit.

"There, see?" Tanya says. "I told you the Harmonies were singing to you. That explains the pictures, too."

"What pictures?" Chris asks. Casper leans forward. His blue eyes are more intense than they've been since we met his parents.

Tanya lights up. "Nothing," I say before she can speak. She huffs. "It's not important. Right, Tanya?"

"Whatever." She flicks her hair, tilts her head, and smiles at Casper. "I'm sure we have more interesting things to talk about. How did you all come to live here? Were you born here?"

If her intention is flirting, she fails. Everyone except the two of us stiffens. She looks at me, wide-eyed. I shrug. She angles her head in a silent appeal. I sigh. "I take it that's not considered polite here?"

Jemma's laugh sounds like a big dog's bark. "It's kind of like asking, hey, what crime did you commit?"

Tanya's apology is long, confused, and adorable. Of course everyone forgives her immediately. Also naturally, the boys are quicker and more sincere with their forgiveness than the girls. Jemma draws Tanya into a conversation about fashion. I can't tell if she actually cares about city styles, or if it's an excuse to preen for the boys. If the latter, they both take full advantage. It's as much fun to watch the boys goggle as to listen to their debate.

I still don't understand the objection to Tanya's question. Since they consider it insulting, though, I don't pursue it. Tanya talks to Chris and Casper almost equally, although Casper gets a little more of her attention. Weird, since Chris devours every word she says. He's not as cute, though. At least, he doesn't dress as well. At home, he would definitely fit into the too-studious crowd, which is probably why Tanya's leaning towards Casper.

"You look confused," Alli says.

"It's nothing." Everyone looks at me. Even Tanya and Jemma stop vying for Casper and Chris's attention.

"It's about my question," Tanya says. "Isn't it?"

I feel my face warm. I repeat that it's nothing, but no one will let it go.

"You're a conduit," Jemma says. "You get a free pass. Ask away."

I explain my confusion. Since Dad said this was a safe place, there's no reason to think anyone here committed a crime. I thought of it as a question of whether they'd been falsely accused, or if they'd been born here and chosen to stay. Which still confuses me. Why wouldn't everyone choose to live in a city, where it's safe?

Although I don't voice the last question, everyone seems to read my thoughts. Chris tells me that he'd love to go to university, but doubts anyone would take a student whose ancestors were exiled. Jemma wants to try life in the city, but her parents are scared she'll be ostracized. Alli's boyfriend, whose name I can't remember, says he's going to try, after he graduates. If he can find a decent job, he'll be able to give his sister a home in the city, too. He doesn't care which city, as long as it's not Moavsed.

I shudder. This town is definitely preferable to the prison city, from what I've heard. According to Civics class, descendants of exiles are welcome in any city. I've never met one, though. I hadn't thought about it, but Chris and Jemma are right. It would probably be a lot harder to find a job coming from the Wilds than for those of us who grew up in a city. I think most people get their first jobs through family connections.

"Surely the universities would take you, though. I mean, none of you has done anything wrong. You've as much right to be there as I do. More, at the moment."

Chris meets my eyes. "Would you go to school with someone from the Wilds?"

I start to nod. Then I think back to a couple of days ago. "Now, absolutely. But you're right. Before I came here and saw what it's like, no. Probably not."

"Not everyone is so prejudiced," Tanya says with a pretty pout. "Some of us know that not

everyone who's exiled deserves it."

That starts another round of debate. Casper leans back, his hands between his head and the wall. He listens, occasionally shaking his head. He doesn't offer an opinion, though his eyebrows raise and lower in a way that tells me he's following the debate closer than he wants us to think.

Suddenly, the music starts again. I stiffen. Casper opens his eyes pierces me with his gaze, but I concentrate on pushing the music away. Once it quiets, I stand and yawn. "I'm sorry, everyone. I need to get some sleep. I look forward to talking to everyone tomorrow. Hopefully then, I can actually make some sense."

Tanya and Casper both stand, too. I wave them away, saying I can make it back by myself. Tanya sits immediately. Casper hesitates, then sits, too.

As I walk through the tunnels back to Casper's, I remind myself I told them I'd be okay. I said I wanted them to stay and have a good time. So why does it feel like Tanya abandoned me?

I didn't lie about my exhaustion. My eyes are gritty and yawns keep stretching my mouth. Even so, I'm still awake hours later, when Tanya returns. She comes in quietly and turns the handle so the door won't make noise. She creeps through the dark, obviously trying not to disturb me. I've long since adjusted to the dark and can see her more clearly than she can see the room. She barely misses a suitcase on the floor.

"I'm awake."

She flinches. She continues to creep for a moment, then turns on the light. Her eyes are red and swollen, and dark makeup smudges run down her cheeks.

"What's wrong?" I jump up and run over to her. She jerks away. I freeze. A moment later, she hugs me. I wrap my arms around her and lead her to the bed. We sit down and I rub her back. When I repeat my question, she sobs.

Finally, she calms and pulls away. In a dull voice, she tells me what happened. After they left the gathering, Tanya asked Casper if he could help her find out what happened to her father. He warned her that it might be better left a mystery, but she insisted. So Casper showed her the search he'd already run: her father was expelled before she was born – about nine months before. He wasn't innocent, as her mother had always said. "He raped my mother, and that's why he was exiled. My mom must hate looking at me."

I stiffen. Is this why she came with me? Then I shake my head. She's still my best friend; she still came with me when she didn't have to. I squeeze her tight. "Your mother loves you. She only lied to protect you. I'm sure."

For a moment, she relaxes into my hug. Then she pulls away. "I knew a man was exiled for rape. I always thought he was your real father. Not mine."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Casper

Even though they're supposed to go to school today, my friends start messaging me as soon as the sun's up. Their parents agreed they could take the day off, since there are visitors in town. They're probably hoping the girls will be the contacts their kids need to get decent jobs in the city. If Tanya had turned out to be the princess, that would certainly work. Since she found out her father was justly exiled, I doubt she'll be in the mood to help anyone for a while. Lyssa, though, is a definite prospect, especially since Mike's her dad.

We meet up at Chris's, as usual. Everyone sits in their usual spots. The couples snuggle, but they aren't obnoxious about it as usual. It's much less *I've got a partner and you don't* and more seeking comfort from each other.

Jemma sighs. "They really are different from us, aren't they?"

"What do you mean?" Alli, as usual, jumps to the defense. "They seem nice."

"I didn't mean it as an insult," Jemma says. I believe her. She sounds mellow, almost sad. "I always thought Casper was exaggerating when he said we wouldn't meet people like us in the cities. I figured, we're all people, how different can we be? But they don't think like us. Like, how Tanya asked if we'd all grown up here. None of us would make that kind of mistake. But if you put us in a city, I bet there are hundreds of different mistakes we'd make. And we'd never really fit in, just like Tanya and Lyssa could stay here for years and never be one of us."

Alli nods. She presses in closer to Ken and lays her head on his shoulder.

Mom messages me. "I have to go home. They're up. She wants me to be there when they come downstairs."

"Come back when you can," Alli says. "I want to talk to them more."

Tanya's still asleep when Lyssa comes down, less than an hour after the sun rises. She greets me and my parents with a smile that wouldn't fool a child.

"Did you sleep alright?" Mom asks.

"The best sleep I've had in days," Lyssa says.

I swallow my laugh. Mom smiles and accepts the non-answer. She cooks eggs and potatoes for breakfast. I could get used to having guests, especially if it means Mom does the cooking.

I ask Lyssa if she wants to wait for Tanya before we go over to Chris's. She looks up the stairs, as if Tanya's likely to appear as soon as we mention her name. Then she sighs and gives me a smile as sincere as when she stepped onto the stage yesterday. "We should let her sleep. She had a rough night."

Lyssa did, too, by the looks of it, but she doesn't mention that. Pretty, clever, and loyal. Could there be a more perfect girl out there? If I had a future in front of me, I'd completely be going after this girl. Discord, I might have to go after her, anyway. I still have almost five years before I have to marry the princess.

I message my friends before we leave, and ask Mom to let me know when Tanya emerges. Lyssa writes a note for Tanya and leaves it on the table. I'm curious, but there's no way to read it without being obvious.

Lyssa moves her pillow closer to Jemma's, so she's not stranded in the middle of the room.

"Where's Tanya?" Jemma asks.

"Still sleeping. We've had a long couple of days."

"Why aren't you in bed, too?"

Lyssa shrugs. "Can't sleep."

There's an uncomfortable silence. I don't know about my friends, but I'm thinking about how strange our way of life must be for her. Unlike the others, I know she wasn't expelled; we would have known before she even got the notice, when the city guards were investigating her. I wish I knew why she's here.

"Do you want to see the rest of the town?" Alli asks.

Normally, Ken would scowl at the suggestion. Anything that keeps them from snuggling is a waste of time in his books. This time, he perks up. Lyssa says she'd love to see it; he's half way to the door while the rest of us are still working on standing up. He's not oblivious to the huge gray eyes in her heart-shaped face. Maybe it's the long legs he's attracted to, or the pouty lips she constantly pulls between her teeth.

It's also possible he hasn't noticed any of that. Maybe he's thrilled to meet someone new. He already has a girlfriend, though. I move towards Lyssa at the same time Chris does.

Alli is the last to stand. She'd be happier right now if Lyssa and Tanya hadn't arrived. I'm not sure she's even going to join us on the tour. Not that I'd blame her if she stayed behind. Then Lyssa steps towards her. "Are you coming – Alli, right?"

Ken flushes. He steps towards Allie, but she turns away. She smiles at Lyssa. "I wouldn't miss it. When we're done – in about five minutes – you can tell us about the city."

Jemma positions herself so that Lyssa's in between the two girls. I can't tell if she and Alli like her, or if they're teaming up to keep her away from the boys. Either way, it makes for a nice picture. Lyssa doesn't hurt in comparison, even though both Jemma and Alli are both pretty.

We take her on the grand tour. She's already been in the temple, but we stop by anyway so she can see it without the clamor of the whole town bouncing off the walls and ceiling.

"It's gorgeous," she says. "So much natural wood. It must be easy to worship here."

We don't stay long. I'm the only one who has real faith in the Harmonies. Even Lyssa sounds doubtful, despite being a conduit. That must have been the first time they sang through her, or she'd have to believe. I heard an echo of the music last night; I wonder if she hears it even when they aren't singing through her, the way I can hear them even when they aren't throwing visions at me.

Our stop at the school is even briefer than our tour of the temple. When we walk in, Lyssa steps towards a study carrel, but Jemma takes her arm and leads her away. "The school's boring. Yours must look the same. Right?"

"Where are the teachers?"

Jemma stops so abruptly she pulls Lyssa backwards, who in turn pulls Alli. "You have actual teachers?" Jemma asks. "People who have no other job than to teach school?"

"How else would we learn?" Lyssa asks.

"We have vids," I say when it's clear no one else is going to answer. They must have thought I made the stories about school up.

The store is already bustling when we arrive. It's the biggest building in town; even bigger than the temple. Unlike the open spaces of the temple, though, the store has aisles filled with everything we need. Dried and canned foods, clothing, and small machinery. Jewelry, toys, and even notebooks.

"This is amazing," Lyssa says. Which city do you get all this from? Or do you go to different cities, depending on what you need?"

My friends talk over each other in their eagerness to answer. We're an extremely old-fashioned town. We'd fit in during the dark ages, practically. Like ancient towns, we have a blacksmith, carpenter, glazier, miller, doctor, weaver, electrician – everything we need, we have

someone to create or maintain it. We even have livestock and the ranchers and veterinarians to tend them. We're pretty self-sufficient, although I pick up special orders any time I go to a city.

The main difference between us and the ancient towns is that we're more isolated than they were way back then. Also, in our town, almost everyone farms. With modern technology, we don't need the sprawling farmlands of ancient times to grow enough food for ourselves, and we can create artificial seasons so that we always have fresh vegetables.

"Wait," Lyssa says. "Go back. Livestock? Farms? Where? How?"

"It's all part of the tour," Ken says, as if he's personally responsible for the set-up. "We'll go there next."

As we head for the right tunnel, I hear the distinctive *click, click, click* of Tanya's heels. Lyssa stiffens. A second later, she asks us to wait, then runs off. She returns with Tanya a few minutes later, walking on opposite sides of the hallway. They aren't talking to each other. They don't even look at each other. Lyssa's face is tight and her arms are crossed. Tanya practically trots in her efforts to walk faster than Lyssa; her face, too, is hard and unyielding. Jemma and Alli look at each other. Jemma walks over to Lyssa and Alli joins Tanya.

We continue on our tour. Tanya's brittle laugh sounds every couple of minutes, although Alli rarely joins in. Lyssa chews her lower lip. Every now and then, she glances at Tanya with glittering eyes.

I open the door to my family's garden. We have rows of planter boxes, with enough room between the rows for a couple of people, or one person with a wheelbarrow, to walk through. The boxes closest to the door lie fallow; they're in the winter phase right now. Like everyone else in town, we divided our boxes into quarters so that we'll have fresh vegetables regardless of season.

"This is bigger than your house," Tanya says. "Isn't it?"

Chris jumps in with the explanation. Even though his parents are from this town, they remember when the refugees, including my parents, arrived. He tells them how our parents and grandparents disguised the town to prevent future attacks. His house took a couple of years to build; most of that time was spent on the excavation.

"I don't know why they bother," he says. "There can't be that many exiles left, anyway. Even if there are, we could fight them off."

A couple of days ago, I would have agreed. Between my close call with Merrick and my conviction that we were under attack yesterday, now I'm not so sure.

"Let's go to the caves," Jemma says. Her voice is slightly too bright. She must share my doubts.

"Caves?" Tanya asks.

"It's where we keep the livestock."

"Livestock?" Tanya's tone suggests she'd rather visit an exile camp. That is, if she knew about them.

"We don't have to," Chris says. "We could go back to my place."

Tanya and Chris lead the pack towards his house. Lyssa half-shrugs and starts to follow them.

"We could finish the tour," I say. "If you want to."

Her smile is bright enough we could be standing outside, instead of in my artificial garden. I ask if anyone else wants to join us, but they all troop after Chris and Tanya. Fine with me; I'll get some time alone with Lyssa. I ask her what Tanya meant about the pictures.

She stiffens. In a high, tight voice, she tells me Tanya was joking. I doubt that, but pushing her isn't going to get me any answers. Instead, I tell her about our life here. She's especially

interested in the apprenticeships. Naturally, she wants to know Mom and Dad's crafts. I can't very well tell her that I'm a secret prince, or that I'm destined to marry Princess Melyssande. I say that Dad's in charge of the town safety, and that Mom is an architect. She designs and supervises the shelter gardens. I tell her I'm learning from my Dad. It's the truth – as far as it goes.

Comparing our town to the ancient village, we're the merchants. The town doesn't need an architect. Yeah, they needed plans for the first shelters, but we basically use the same plans now as the first time. Since the temple, Mom hasn't designed anything new. Our family has money from Dad's castle and properties, so we supply whatever the town needs that can't be made locally: silver and gold for the jewelers, cement for a new shelter or repairs, or silk for a wedding dress. No one begrudges us our lack of labor; no one else wants to venture into the Wilds.

It's a long walk through the tunnels. As I talk, she thaws. We reach the caves and I pause. "You're sure you want to see this?"

She nods, and I open the door.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lyssa

I brace myself for the worst, whatever form it might take. Cramped, dark spaces that reek of animals and refuse, maybe, or thick, sticky spiderwebs we have to fight through. I take a deep breath and hold it while Casper opens the door to a cave.

That's what he said it was, but from everyone else's eagerness to go anywhere else, I expected something more sinister. There are no hissing snakes, no evil omens, not even visible spiders. It's just a dark opening, although I see a faint light in the distance.

"This is supposed to be scary?"

"We aren't at the pastures yet," he says.

It must be the stink they're avoiding, then. Years ago, our class went on a field trip to the farmlands. The smell was overwhelming, even before we got near the barns. I'm curious, though, so I'm willing to deal with the stench. I follow Casper towards the light. It grows stronger as we get closer, until I almost believe it's daylight. If I hadn't already seen the indoor farms, I'd be sure we were heading outside.

The acrid smell of animals creeps up on us as we approach the light. His mom must be an incredible architect, if she managed to design pastures inside the caves. Either that, or they open into a huge area. My steps quicken until I see the pasture, and then I stop and stare.

Cave is a misnomer. It's more of a tunnel. A huge pasture rolls out in front of us, covered with grass, wildflowers, and animals. Not just the cattle, but actual wildlife. I thought the wars had killed off most animals, but I see birds, insects, and even a squirrel. Cliffs surround the pasture, as if the Harmonies sang it into being for the people of this town.

"It's gorgeous," I breathe. "Why would anyone be scared of this place?"

"It's outside."

He sounds as if that explains everything. Thinking about why they have their farms inside, I guess it does. Mom and Dad have to get my mess sorted out so I can go back home. Coming outside shouldn't be unnatural.

"Can we stay out here for a while?" I ask.

A real smile breaks his perpetually earnest face. When Casper's happy, he's as cute as Matias. Maybe cuter. He holds out a hand. I only hesitate for a second before I reach for it.

It's firm and warm. I almost yank away – not because it's unpleasant, but because I feel an immediate tingle. The kind of thrill that should only happen when I finally hold Matias's hand. The way his fingers press into my palm, he must feel it, too. He pulls me after him, like he's too excited to walk slowly. We break into a run and I laugh. My worries and fears float away for a moment, as if I had a real future.

The pasture looks flat, but that's an illusion. We run uphill until I can't breathe. We must be higher than I thought; at home, I can run for miles. I pull on his hand. He looks back at me, then stops. I lean over and gasp. Even with the ache in my shoulders and chest, I still feel lighter than I have for a long time.

This must be what Dad meant about the thousand roads to happiness. Yes, my road took an odd turn, but if it hadn't, I wouldn't know Casper.

He leads me up a trail. It's too narrow for two, yet neither of us releases the other. He stretches his arm back and I stretch mine forward so that we don't have to let go. He walks slowly enough for it to be easy for me. I pull him to a stop again, this time because I see a deer. She's beautiful. She looks at us with liquid brown eyes before she bounds away.

"How is this possible?" I ask.

"What?"

"Animals. I thought they all died in the wars."

His fingers twitch against my hand. He inhales sharply, then explains that certain areas were protected before the wars started. Not many, but enough that both people and animals survived. After the wars, cities were established near water sources. The construction crews installed force fields and air and water purifiers before erecting any buildings. They even filtered the soil to eliminate lingering poisons. People moved into the cities and learned to live without birdsong and insects. Scientists developed mechanical substitutions for pollination and composting. Only a couple of generations after the war, people thought of their lives as normal; the cycles of nature were forgotten.

Meanwhile, the plants and animals thrived in the protected lands. Eventually, when the poisons receded, the force fields were lifted. The nesting animals remained in their home lands; when this town was settled, people brought the animals with them. Other species drifted away from their old habitats and explored the new open spaces.

"The poisons are gone?" I ask. I think about me and Tanya holding our breath and running around the car. My face heats.

"It's been a thousand years," Casper says. "The poisons are long since gone. There are still bombs and land mines out there, though. No one knows if the poison in the bombs will have any effect now. I, for one, don't plan to find out."

That makes me feel slightly less idiotic. Still, I wonder why we're taught it's not safe to breathe outside the cities. I wouldn't have been happy about leaving Aletra, but I wouldn't have been quite so terrified. I wonder if that's the real reason. Fear of expulsion and exile makes us more

likely to behave.

Before I can sink into gloom and paranoia, Casper tugs on my hand and leads me up the hill again. We pass all kinds of flowers that I've never seen before. Most of them are smaller and weedier than anything we'd plant at home, but the patches of blue, yellow, pink and red lift my spirits in a way the manicured gardens seldom manage.

At home, there's always the noise of traffic and people talking, laughing, even fighting; here, the only sounds are our footsteps, breathing, and the chittering of insects and chirping of birds. Casper and I talk to each other, too, but there aren't other voices clamoring over each other. In Aletra, there's always the mingled scents of different cooking, too many bodies in too small a place, the faint smell from the sewers, despite the air purifiers; here, although there's an undertone of animal, I mostly smell trees, grass, and sun-baked dirt. The elaborate underground tunnels notwithstanding, this valley feels more comfortable than Aletra.

We turn a corner and come upon a clearing so perfect, it must be man-made. Flowers border a flat square of grass, with enough space in the center of each flowerbed to walk through. We walk over to a huge tree and sit down. The trunk is large enough for both of us to lean against.

I can't remember the last time I noticed leaves rustling in the wind, but I know it wasn't accompanied by birdsong. One bird squawks while another repeats a four-note melody. I close my eyes and relax into the exotic sounds of nature.

I relax too much. The song that's been haunting me starts playing in my head again. I sit up, away from the tree. Casper stiffens beside me.

“What's wrong?”

I shake my head. Denial hovers between us for a moment. Then I remember all the couples I've known who broke up because of secrets. If we're going to have a chance, I can't start off with

a lie.

“I’ve been hearing things lately,” I say. “The music I sang at our welcome. It comes at the strangest times.”

“Is that all?” I hear his smile as he relaxes back onto the trunk. “That must be part of being a conduit. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

I wish I could believe that. If the music and drawings didn’t always go together, I might be able to. Hope flutters. “Is there a hymn master in town?”

“Of course. Do you want to meet her?”

“I think I need to.” Hopefully, she’s more open-minded than the one at our temple. I can make small-talk with her and get an idea of her views before asking her about my problem. Maybe Casper’s right and I’m a conduit. I don’t know anything about them; maybe all conduits get these bizarre time lapses and nonsensical messages. Maybe the hymn master can help me figure out what’s wrong with me.

Better yet, maybe she’ll discover there’s nothing wrong at all. Being a conduit sounds infinitely better than being insane.

I try to calm down, but my enjoyment of the day, the valley, even Casper’s company, is gone. I’m on edge, waiting for that melody to attack again. Casper drops my hand and sighs. “You want to see her right now, don’t you?”

“Do you think she’d have time?”

“For a conduit? Absolutely.”

Our walk back is more hurried. I wonder if I misjudged him completely; my chest tightens. I grab Casper’s hand. He squeezes it and smiles at me before releasing it again. That tension loosens. He isn’t mad at me for needing to leave.

He leads me past the temple and up the next set of stairs. The entry at the top is already open. Instead of entering through a pantry, like at his and Chris's houses, we step into a library. Bookshelves cover every visible wall. They even run above the doorways. Three armchairs and a small round table with a lamp are the only other furnishings.

"Hello," Casper calls. "Are you free?"

A woman nearly as tall as Chris walks through the far door. She's dressed in flowing purple robes. Her hair is a mess of auburn curls piled haphazardly on her head. A couple of tendrils have come loose and bounce in front of her face. She bats them away a couple of times, then tucks them behind her ear.

"Lyssa," she says as if we're old friends. "Thank you for coming. I'm honored to have you in my home."

"Lyssa," Casper says, "this is our hymn master, Master Bennett."

"Please, call me Imani."

We stand awkwardly for somewhere between a minute and a lifetime. Finally, Casper leaves. He closes the door behind him. On this side, it's a bookcase, complete with leather-bound tomes.

"You're a conduit," Master Bennett says.

"That's what Casper says."

"You doubt it? After the way you sang?"

She invites me to sit down and offers me something to eat or drink. I'm not hungry, but I gladly accept a glass of water. She leaves and returns a moment later with two glasses that clink with ice. She sets them on the table, then leans forward and asks me what's wrong.

I look in my water, holding the glass with both hands. "What exactly is a conduit?"

“Extremely rare.” I look up from my water to meet her laughing eyes. “Rare enough that we don’t have as much information as you’d probably like. Some of them don’t even remember singing. Conduits usually have extraordinary sensitivity, voices, or both.”

I chew my top lip. “Do the conduits ever do anything besides sing?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” The books all look so scholarly; maybe one of them holds the answers I need. “Did any of them hear the music when they weren’t singing, or have visions, or anything like that?”

She leans towards me and her gaze sharpens. “Has that been happening to you?”

“No,” I say too quickly. I resist the urge to fidget. “Of course not. No, I was just wondering. Do I have to worry about becoming a prophet now, too?”

“Oh.” She falls back against the chair. “Well, if anything like that happens, let me know. The High Hymn Master would want to know about it.”

“I will. Thank you.”

I can’t excuse myself without sounding rude. I sip my water and turn to look at the books behind me.

“Do the Harmonies interest you?” Master Bennett asks. She chuckles. “Silly question. Of course they do. How long have you known you’re a conduit?”

“Since Casper told me.”

She blinks, then laughs. “When did you first sing the Harmonies’ song?”

“At the temple,” I admit with a shrug.

“Oh, my. This is new to you. Did you just turn seventeen?”

It’s my turn to blink. “I’ll be eighteen next month.”

“Odd.” She stands and walks to the bookshelf covering the door.

“Why? What’s wrong with my birthday?”

She turns long enough to smile at me, then turns back to the shelves, placing her index finger on top of one book after another. “Your birthday’s fine, dear. The Harmonies usually choose conduits right around their seventeenth birthdays.”

“Maybe I’m a slow learner?”

“I doubt it.” She pulls a book out and gives it to me. “This should answer most of your questions. Make sure you give it back, please. It was my father’s.”

Her father was a hymn master, too? Weird. I know Casper said that people usually only take their own kinds on as apprentices, but that can’t be true for everyone. People must have some kind of aptitude to apprentice to a hymn master. Right?

I can’t think of a polite way to ask her. In fact, I’m nervous about asking anything. I don’t know how she’ll react if she learns I haven’t been to temple in years or that until I sang that melody, I didn’t even believe in the Harmonies. Din, I’m not sure I do now. There’s no way to be sure they were singing through me. Maybe it was a fluke that I sang that when I meant to sing “A Thousand Roads.” Maybe it’s something I heard a long time ago and came up out of my subconscious. Or maybe I am a conduit.

When I leave, I clutch the book to my chest. The answers I need might all be inside the leather covers. Soon, I might understand everything that’s happened to me. Aside from the expulsion, of course; I certainly hope that had nothing to do with the Harmonies.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Casper

My friends' laughter and talking flows around me. We're sprawled on our pillows, as usual. What's different is that I care about the empty pillow. How long is Lyssa going to stay at Master Bennett's, anyway?

I can't believe how well we're getting along. She's as close to the perfect girl as I'm likely to find, other than two small facts: she lives in Aletra, and I'm supposed to marry someone else. Even so, there's no reason not to make this work while I'm still free. Discord, if it lasts long enough, she might be worth letting the kingdom fall apart.

In order for it to last, though, I'll have to get to know her. All I'm sure of, right now, is that she electrifies my skin.

Chris throws a pillow at me. "You've missed half this conversation. Which of our new arrivals are you mooning over?"

I roll my eyes. What a question to ask, especially with Tanya in the room. "Why do you always assume it's love whenever someone's distracted?"

"Lust, you mean. And I've got dibs on Tanya."

"Hey," Tanya says. "Don't I have any say in this?"

"No," Chris and I respond in unison.

"Don't mind them," Jemma says. "They mistake their stupidity for wit." Chris clutches his heart and falls off his pillow. Tanya giggles; Jemma shakes her head. "Don't encourage him."

My notebook buzzes, so I check my messages. Lyssa's already leaving the master's house. I jump up and go to meet her. Our tunnels get confusing, so she'll need help finding her way. The

group's laughter as I leave doesn't bother me. They have no idea what it's like to be sure I've finally found my soul mate and know that, for both our sakes, I should have nothing to do with her.

She's already half way to Chris's. She probably doesn't need my help. The way she smiles when she sees me, though, I'm glad I came. I want to take her back outside, either to the pastures or to my stream. Her eyes light when I suggest we slip away, but she shakes her head. After Tanya came all this way with her, Lyssa doesn't want to desert her.

Tanya had ulterior motives. I don't point that out, though. Lyssa knows it as well as I do, probably. I doubt Tanya could keep such a big secret from her, especially not when they're sharing a room. Although part of me wishes Lyssa would express her anger by coming with me, the larger part approves of her loyalty.

I carry the book Lyssa's holding, *When the Harmonies Synged to Mortals*. Not exactly light reading. Still, it makes sense. I'm sure she wants to know more about what's happening to her. She didn't grow up knowing she'd hear the Harmonies one day, like I did. I wish I could tell her about my experiences. It might make accepting her status as a conduit easier, knowing that I can understand.

I can't risk it, though. We've only known each other a day and a half. If I'm wrong about her, if we don't make it as a couple, she could out me. The same people who would kill her to keep the kingdom stable would be happy to destroy my whole town to eradicate the last of the direct descendants of the Beaufried dynasty. If I can't even entrust Chris with my secrets, there's no way I can tell Lyssa.

I pull at my collar, as if that will loosen the tightness in my throat. I clasp her hand tighter. We slow our steps; neither one of us wants to join the group.

"Was Master Bennett able to help you?" I ask.

She shrugs. “Maybe. If I can get through that book.”

Tanya looks up when we walk in, then joins the group’s laughter. While my friends sound natural, hers is over-bright. Lyssa relaxes her grip, but I hold on to her. She lightly tugs once, then curls her fingers back around my hand.

“Oh, no,” Chris says, “your mind wasn’t on anyone in particular.”

“I didn’t deny it. I only asked why you always make that assumption.”

Tanya’s curled lip and wrinkled nose don’t become her. They’re not flattering towards Lyssa, either. Or me. Tanya seems to think any male is hers for the asking. She might not be the princess, but otherwise my first impression was dead on: she’s high maintenance all the way.

Even though it’s an unofficial holiday, we still break up for lunch. The couples either split up or go to one house or the other; it depends on whether their parents approve or not. . Jemma invites Tanya over, and then Chris asks them both to stay.

Mom and Dad are both out when we get home. They’re probably at friends’ houses, gossiping about the new arrivals. That works for me, since it gives me and Lyssa more time alone. I’m pretty sure Dad would do his best to end this relationship if he had any idea it even started.

Too soon, Tanya joins us. We haven’t even finished our spaghetti lunch yet. She huffs as she plops into the chair beside me. “I thought Jemma was nice.”

“What did she do?” Lyssa asks.

“She obviously doesn’t like having more girls come to town,” Tanya says. “The minute you were gone, she turned.”

The first statement is certainly true. I have a hard time believing the implication, though. Jemma wouldn’t be catty, at least not directly. Jemma’s aggression is the sugary-sweet kind. She’ll lay compliment after compliment on her rival. Most of her compliments are sincere, with only the

odd barb thrown in so subtly her victim is never entirely sure she insulted them. The kind of outright nastiness Tanya suggests is out of character. I don't know why Tanya lied.

"I wish we could go outside," Tanya says.

"You should have come with us to the pastures," Lyssa says.

I half agree. If she wanted to go outside, she shouldn't have opted out of the rest of the tour. I'm glad she did, though. If the rest of the group had come, Lyssa and I wouldn't have had our time together. Din, I wouldn't even have held her hand. We still wouldn't know how perfectly our chemistry works together.

"I want to be really outside," Tanya says. "Not on farmland with animals. Just people and plants and fresh air. The kind of outside we have in the city."

I swallow my laugh. It's not her fault our town is so different from what she's used to. Lyssa's mouth twists. She doesn't want to laugh at her friend, either. Tanya's even prettier when she pouts. She probably gets her way most of the time, at least when dealing with boys.

"You couldn't go outside, anyway," I say. "You'd kill yourself in those heels."

She runs away. I raise my eyebrows. I didn't think she was the type to cry because she can't get her way. Lyssa shakes her head when I tell her that. A smile plays on her lips. When I tell her I can take it, her laugh bursts out. Even though I don't know the joke, I join in.

A minute or two later, I get it. Tanya returns, fresh-faced and wearing walking shoes. I shake my head. I don't understand why she'd wear her heels when she has something far more comfortable with her.

I don't want to take her to the pasture. Even though it's open space, even though the ranchers and the animals spend more time there than I ever have, it feels special now. It's our place, mine and Lyssa's. The girls both head for the door as if I promised them a trip outside,

though, and I don't want to let either one of them down. I follow them into the tunnel, but lead them in the opposite direction from the pastures.

It's a fairly long walk, even though my house is on the edge of town. We pass the last house, then the garage, and finally make it to the exit. I open the door and realize I didn't check with the Harmonies. I climb up the stairs first and scan the area. There's no one around, of course. Still, I take several deep breaths. I haven't been so careless since I was a kid.

These hills are a stark contrast to the pasture. We haven't dug any irrigation tunnels anywhere except leading to the pastures. They're dry and dusty; they enhance the town's deserted appearance.

Lyssa's breathing is deeper than mine, but we go slowly enough she manages fine. Even without her high heels, Tanya struggles with the climb. I lead them to a couple of boulders less than halfway to my stream.

"Harmonies." Tanya gasps. She collapses onto the smaller stone. "Are you trying to kill us? I'm never going to ask for the outdoors again. Give me good old, flat, smooth floors any day."

"It's the shoes," Lyssa says solemnly. "You're not used to having such a stable base."

I expect Tanya to get mad. Instead, she playfully shoves Lyssa. Lyssa bats her arm. They make rabbit faces at each other, then grin.

"Jemma's not so bad," Tanya says. "I've been in a mood." They lean against each other's backs. Lyssa faces the town; Tanya studies the mountains. "They're more barren than I expected. I thought all mountains would be like the ones in your pictures."

"Do you draw or paint?" I ask. I want to see her work.

Lyssa pulls away from Tanya and closes herself off. She draws her knees to her chest and wraps her arms around them. "I've never been artistic."

“Oh, stop it,” Tanya says. She turns and places her hand on Lyssa’s shoulder. “You should be proud. She drew a gorgeous castle surrounded by mountains as lush as these are – not. You could practically smell the roses on the archway.”

“Roses.” I hear the frost in my voice, but I don’t even try to warm it. She’s not a conduit. If she claims she isn’t artistic, yet drew my castle, there’s only one conclusion I can draw. She has the Royal Faculty. I was right about why they came; I just had the wrong girl pegged as the princess. “Do you want to keep going or head back to town?”

Lyssa and Tanya exchange a glance. I don’t have to be an expert on girls to know they wonder what happened. It’s not my fault that Tanya gave the game away.

“Can we hike a little bit longer?” Lyssa directs the question at Tanya, not me.

My original plan was to take them up to my stream, if they could make it that far. That’s not happening now. I don’t even try to go slowly. They can catch up with me or not, as they decide. It’s bad enough that I thought Lyssa was someone else. It’s worse that I liked the someone I thought she was. I should have taken them to the pasture; there’s nothing special about that place, anyway.

Lyssa catches up to me when we get to the flat stretch. She grabs my arm, but I pull away. “What’s wrong?”

I shake my head. Like she doesn’t already know? Maybe she doesn’t realize that I’d be able to figure out her identity when Tanya told me about the Faculty. Then again, if she didn’t know, then why would she care that Tanya let it slip? “Are you even Mike’s daughter?”

“What? Of course I am.”

She sounds genuine, but that doesn’t mean anything. I thought she truly liked me, too, and now I have no idea if she does or if she’s a brilliant actress. She’s certainly good enough to disguise

herself. I can't even tell if Tanya knows who she is.

I rub my nose and roll my shoulders. Maybe that's not entirely fair. After all, I haven't even told Chris who I am. Keeping secrets is a direct result of knowing you have enemies who want to kill you. I didn't tell her that I'm a prince, either.

"Would you have told me earlier, if I'd admitted it to you?" I ask.

"Would I have told you what? What do you need to admit?"

That's too much. I stride away, grinding my teeth. My hands are clenched. I want to go work on my dam, but I'm not sullyng my refuge with her lying presence. I'm so angry, I can't even see straight. Then I realize it's not anger obscuring my vision. I didn't even notice the melody begin. The Harmonies can't be trying to show me my bride, now that I know her identity. I should have let them show me before. Then I wouldn't have made such a fool of myself.

I stop and let the music take over. It's Merrick, and he's studying his notebook again. This time, though, he's with a caravan of armored cars and they're approaching our town.

"Cacophony."

I shake the vision off and run back towards the town. I hope they're warning me about the future. When they show me such a clear danger, though, it's usually the present. I need to get home and warn everyone.

"What's going on?" Lyssa asks.

"We need to get back now." I don't say anything else. I need to save my breath for the run. As long as I'm on the flat path, I sprint. I hear the girls puffing after me. When we get to the end of the path, I hold up a hand. We can't leave any obvious signs of humans. I tell them to go first and as quickly as possible, but to take the time to follow the deer path. I follow behind, scuffing out shoe prints. I clench my teeth so I won't snap at them to hurry.

I can see the dust in the distance; Merrick and his army are on their way now. I hope the Harmonies showed Dad, too. I close my eyes for a second then check again. They're definitely coming towards us. I should have seen it when we were hiking up. If I could kick myself, I would. I don't have the luxury of time for that, though. I need to get the princess into the shelter. If my arrogance and complacency gets us killed, the kingdom is doomed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lyssa

Casper won't tell us what the hurry is, but his impatience and worry radiate from him. I feel the elephant stepping back into its position on my chest. It's even worse when I'm already short of breath from hiking. In front of me, Tanya gasps. She trips. I reach out to grab her shoulder, but she rights herself. Casper grumbles behind us. I want to snap that we're not used to this kind of terrain, but I bite my tongue. Whatever's going on, fighting isn't going to help.

I stumble and a couple of stones clatter down the hill. He barks at me to be careful and not make so much noise. It's good to know how he reacts to stress or bad news or whatever happened. I don't know if I want a boyfriend who's going to turn on me the second something goes wrong. It's just as well I found out before we became a couple. The tightness in my throat and the elephant on my chest are due to his infectious fear, nothing else.

We're halfway down the hill when I see a brown cloud in the distance. It seems to be moving towards us. I swallow several times before I can form words. "Are you expecting visitors?"

He doesn't answer. It was a stupid question, anyway. If the people headed this way were friendly, Casper wouldn't be rushing us back like this. Tanya and I both speed up. I can't look away from that trail of dust. Casper's friends acted like they've never met anyone from outside the town, yet more people are coming the day after we got here.

My ankle rolls. I suck a sharp breath in through my teeth. I know we can't stop. The first few steps are agonizing, but walking it off works. I barely feel it by the time Casper tells us to stop by a big boulder. We still have probably half a mile to go before we get to the town. Maybe only a

quarter mile. Still, it doesn't make sense to stop here, unless he wants to spy on the intruders from here. He wouldn't do something as crazy as that, would he? I'd like to have some say in the plan if he does.

He reaches around the weeds at the base of the boulder and the rock moves. That is, part of the rock moves. A door slides open. Tanya and I run down the stairs. Casper follows a couple of seconds later. He sprints past us. We both speed up, but he pulls way ahead. There's a sharp stabbing in my ribs, and Tanya's gasping beside me, but we keep going.

Casper stops at a smooth section of the tunnel. There are no stairs here, so we're obviously not back to his house. He kicks the wall and a door opens. Once we're all inside, he closes the door again.

This isn't a shelter, but a garage. My car is here, along with three others. They're all backed into their spaces. He unplugs a car the same red-brown as the hills and opens the driver-side door.

"Hurry up," he says. "We have to go. Now."

I'd rather get into his family's shelter, but I wouldn't know how to get in even if I found it. Besides, it might already be locked down. Maybe that's why we're leaving. I get into the back, leaving the passenger side for Tanya. Instead, she slides in beside me. Casper starts driving while we're shutting our doors. I fumble for my seat belt. I'm still trying to fasten it when we leave the cavernous garage and drive into the daylight.

"Which one of you brought the notebook?" Casper asks.

"We didn't." I realize I sound like an indignant toddler, but that's how I feel. If we weren't in a car, I might even stamp my foot. "Dad told us..."

"I did." I turn and stare at her. She shrugs and offers a half-smile. "I turned it off and everything. But then last night, I had to message Mom. I only had it on for a minute, maybe two. I

didn't think such a short time would be dangerous."

"It's long enough, if they're looking," Casper says. "They must have wormed into Aletra's records and found your signals. As soon as one of them popped up, they traced you."

"Isn't it more likely they found one of your signals?" I ask. "I've seen all of you with notebooks. They could have traced any one of yours."

At first, I think he isn't going to answer. Then he tells me that they all have scramblers on their notebooks. If anyone found their signal, it would show different locations, as if they were hopping from one side of the kingdom to the other.

He must be right, then. Someone must have known what they were looking for. Why would anyone care where two high school seniors went? It doesn't make sense, unless Tanya's mom is part of the cavalcade. I suggest that, but Casper doesn't even answer. It would take her longer than this to get here, anyway.

"Do you have your notebook with you now?" Casper asks. He swears when she answers no. "We'll have to draw them off the old-fashioned way, then."

If we're the reason the town's under attack, it's fair enough that we're the lures to draw the enemy away. That doesn't mean I have to like it, though. I'd cry and argue and protest if I weren't afraid that I'll vomit if I open my mouth.

Casper speeds down the deer path considerably faster than Tanya and I drove up. I clutch the door handle with my left hand and Tanya's hand with the right. I want to close my eyes, but I want to see what's happening. I can't decide if it's better to see death coming or not.

Tanya's nails dig into my hand. Mine probably gouge her, as well. We see the car – no, the cars. There are at least half a dozen, all heading right for us. It's definitely better not to see this. I squeeze my eyes shut.

A moment later, I fall onto the door. Tanya presses into my other side for a minute and then we both tip the other way. We're still moving forward. I pry one eye open and then the other. We're not on the deer path anymore.

"What about bombs?" Tanya squeaks, voicing my thoughts.

Casper doesn't answer. I twist around and look behind us. The cars are following us. One is close enough to see two people. I can't make out any features, but I can see the shapes of a head and torso in each of the front seats behind the tinted glass.

"Faster," I manage.

The dips and bumps bounce us around. The car kicks up a rock that hits the windshield of the car behind us. The man flinches, but he doesn't slow. All the others are on our trail now, too. I hope Casper knows where he's going, because we don't have much room for error. I can't seem to rip my eyes away from the nightmare behind us.

"Hold on," Casper says.

I turn forward. Before we have a chance to follow his directions, we're crushed together again. Once again, I'm between Tanya and the door. Even as tiny as she is, I can feel the bruises forming. Tires screech, then I'm pinning Tanya to her door, and then we're back in our own seats. Casper made it onto a real road.

I spin around again. The first car overshot the road slightly, so we pull ahead. It doesn't take him long to make it onto the road, though. The other drivers have time to see the road, so they make the turn more smoothly.

Even after our pursuers are on the road, we pull ahead. The passenger of the first car aims a gun at us. I freeze. I tell myself to duck, or at least to yell a warning, but I can't move. As he fires, the gun lurches to the right. A moment later, the gun disappears into the car.

We pull farther and farther away from the people chasing us. It looks like Casper did know what he's doing. I can finally begin to breathe. I turn and face forward, bending over and taking great gulps of air.

I don't understand what they could possibly want with us. We don't have any valuables with us, not even cash. It doesn't make sense that they'd follow the three of us and leave the entire town alone.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"Not yet," Casper says. "We're still not safe."

I almost laugh. "Safe" has become a foreign word. I can barely remember what it feels like. I long to go back to security, to Mom and Dad and all their idiosyncrasies, to knowing what tomorrow looks like. I want to know there's going to be a tomorrow.

There's an intersection coming up. Tanya and I both brace ourselves, just in case. Casper doesn't slow down. When we approach, he yanks the handle to the left and the tires screech again as we turn. Almost as soon as we turn, he slows the car and pulls off the road. We creep downhill and hide behind bushes.

We sit in silence. I long to say something, anything, to break the spell that seems to bind us. I can't speak, though. It feels like a single word, a cough, or even a loud breath will draw attention to us and lead our enemies right to our hiding place.

I hear the music again. I stiffen, but it doesn't recede. It's odd, though: although it's still inside my head, it feels different. It's like I'm overhearing someone else's thoughts. I glance at Tanya, but her attention remains fixed on the bushes behind us. I chew my lower lip and decide not to say anything. At least I haven't lost any time with the music.

When the music ends, Casper says we're safe. I narrow my eyes at him. I wonder if he was

listening to the melody and seeing something, but then I realize he didn't draw anything. It's still a weird coincidence. I'd ask him, if he weren't still so bent out of shape. How long is this mood going to last, now that we're safe?

I suddenly realize it started before the danger. He froze up on us during our hike. In fact, it was when Tanya talked about my drawings.

"It happens to you, too," I say. "Doesn't it?"

"What are you talking about?"

The frost in his voice doesn't stop me. "You hear the music, too. Don't you? You don't draw pictures with it, but you lose time and end up with some sort of – of vision. And that happened right now, didn't it?"

His eyes thaw a little. Instead of glacial, they're only icy. "Are you trying to tell me you don't know what's happening?"

"If you have an explanation," Tanya says, "we're all ears. Lyssa's convinced she's going crazy. Hey, do you think the water in that stream is safe to drink?"

"No," Casper practically yells. In a calmer voice, he tells us that running water has microscopic bugs that could make us sick. With no doctors around, they might even kill us.

My tongue, which was fine until now, suddenly rasps against the roof of my mouth like sandpaper on a smooth board. Then he tells us there are a couple of bottles of distilled water in the back, along with dried meat and fruits. Tanya and I both open our doors and jump out.

I swallow my scream so it only comes out as a whimper. I collapse back into the car and reach for my ankle. It's nearly as big around as my calf. I don't know how I didn't feel it before, but now it throbs.

"Discord," Casper swears when he sees it. "How did that happen?"

I tell him about rolling it during our dash down the hillside. I thought I'd walked it off, but clearly I was wrong. He gets me some water from the back and rummages around the glove box until he finds a first aid kit, then hands me a pill. He wraps the ankle. I squeeze Tanya's hand and bite my lip. Din, but that hurts.

Casper has me use him as a crutch as I hobble around to the passenger seat. Tanya sits behind Casper so I can slide the seat back and put my foot up on the dashboard. I hope I don't have to do any running soon. If the bad guys come after us again, Tanya and Casper will have to leave me behind.

"Not gonna happen," Tanya says. Casper agrees.

He backs up the hill and onto the road, then goes back the way we came. He turns left, back onto the original road. This time, though, he turns slowly and doesn't leave any marks. I wish we were heading back to town.

"Where are we going?"

"I haven't figured that out yet," he says.

That's not very comforting.

"Do you have an explanation for the music and drawing?" I ask. "I've never heard of such a thing."

He eyes me long enough that I remind him to watch the road. His lips twitch, but he returns his attention to the driving. I exhale and close my eyes. I don't know what kind of anti-inflammatory he gave me, but I'm ready to sleep. That is, until he starts talking.

Way back in the Beaufried dynasty, all kings and queens had the Royal Faculty. The Harmonies would sing to royalty and answer their questions. Sometimes the answers weren't as helpful as the people could wish, but it helped the monarchs rule justly. King Jasper, of course,

used the Faculty to best purpose, and the kingdom had its golden age.

Then Prince David, Jasper's grandson, reached seventeen and didn't hear the Harmonies. He had no Faculty at all. The kingdom, particularly the nobility, split into factions. One side said he didn't need the Faculty to be a good king; the other swore that his lack proved the Harmonies didn't think him worthy. War broke out. Even after David disappeared, the wars continued. Poison bombs killed half the kingdom, destroying not only human life but even the very soil. Only a few areas with force fields survived: Pacvo, Spado, and the Beaufried's castle lands.

The wars finally ended with the marriage of a son and daughter of the heads of the two factions, beginning the Banora dynasty. They were chosen because they both had the Faculty, which was almost unheard of for anyone outside the direct line of the king. Since the wars started over lack of the Faculty, the Banoras didn't talk about it much. Soon, it became part of the legend of King Jasper and his golden age.

"Then I was right," Tanya says. "You are the princess."

I shake my head. "I'm almost eighteen. She would only have turned seventeen a couple of weeks ago. It might be almost unheard of, but I'm not the first. I'm one of the commoners who somehow ends up with the Faculty."

It might not be likely, but it has to be the explanation. The Harmonies begin singing to me again. Now that I know it's real, that it's not a sign of madness or cancer, they're calming. I close my eyes and let the song and the medication pull me into sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Casper

The meds I gave her knock Lyssa out. That's good; she needs the sleep for her ankle to heal. She must have had some serious adrenaline surge to not feel that right away. When I get tired, I stop and Tanya takes over the driving for a while. Luckily, she's short. I'm not too cramped in the backseat. While Tanya drives, I relax and let the Harmonies sing to me. This time, when I'm standing at the altar, I don't push them away.

Three hymn masters stand behind the altar, all dressed in blue and silver ceremonial robes. I'm in front, facing the audience, with my retinue beside me. Prince Michael is the best man, but Chris is in the line. A boy and girl, both of whom look vaguely familiar, walk down the aisle together. The girl throws a single petal at a time, and the boy carries a blue pillow with a ring tied to it with silver ribbon.

Bridesmaids walk down the aisle. I recognize Jemma, but the others are strangers to me. Then Tanya appears, and finally the bride. Even though Tanya's presence must mean I'm marrying Lyssa, I let the vision continue. She walks down the aisle in her blue wedding gown, poised and graceful, with her face covered by silver netting.

I reach for her and she takes my hand. My face could be a stone carving and, of course, I can't see Lyssa's at all. I have no idea how we feel about this marriage. We turn and face the masters, who begin to sing. When I raise the veil, there's no surprise. Of course it's Lyssa. No matter what she claims or how she feels about it, there's no doubt she's Princess Melyssande.

It's a good thing she's asleep. I want to yell at her. I want to ask her a thousand questions. How could she be oblivious about her identity? Why didn't she talk to a master as soon as the

Faculty began to manifest? How could she believe she was expelled with no letter of explanation?

Now I'm sure the expulsion was faked. I don't know if Mike figured out who she is and had to get her to safety, or if someone set her up to try to kill her. I'm only sure that she was no more expelled than Tanya was.

I take longer shifts in driving, mostly because I need to get to Pacvo quickly and Tanya drives as if there's bumper-to-bumper traffic. I shook Merrick and his companions, but that's only good for the short-term. If they think we've gone back home, that's where they'll go. Din, they might even attack the town out of fury. I need to get Lyssa to the palace soon, so the entire kingdom will know the princess is found. Whoever set Merrick on us will have to send him to the city, where we'll have more protection.

Lyssa finally wakes up. She looks around and asks where we're going. "Pacvo."

She falls silent. Then she asks what we're going to do there. Her words are high and too fast, tumbling over each other. She reminds me that we left everything behind. All her things are either in Aletra or at my town.

"Besides," she says, "I can't go to any city. Not until my expulsion is rescinded. You've got a very nice town, but I don't want to be an exile. I still want to go to college and – and have choices about my future."

I want that, too. Neither one of us is going to get it. Still, I tell her that I don't think her expulsion was real. We had no warning about it, and Mike has his contact in the office. If his daughter was in any trouble, he would have known long before a notification could have been delivered. His contact would have told him before any investigation even started.

"Then why would he send me away?"

It's an excellent question. Before I've figured out how to phrase my answer, Tanya speaks.

“Because he wanted to protect you. He must have thought you were safer in the Wilds than at home.”

When night falls, I turn the headlights on. I’d rather risk being seen than slow down. In fact, I want Merrick or one of his spies to see us, but I don’t want them to catch up too soon.

Lyssa asks about the lights, but I tell her I’m sure we’re safe. I answer her questions about the Faculty and she begins to experiment with control. When Tanya takes over driving, Lyssa offers to take the back seat. I tell her to keep her leg elevated. If anyone catches up with us, we might end up having to run; I want her to rest as long as she can.

It’s hard to join the conversation from the back seat. The road noise is louder than it should be; I wonder if I did something to the car while getting away from town. As long as we make it to Pacvo, I won’t care.

Even though it’s hard to hear her, I coach Lyssa on using the Faculty. Finally, she can call the music at will. I hear the echoes of her Harmonies as she falls silent. Several minutes later, she speaks again. “I’m tired and my ankle hurts. Has it been long enough for another pill?”

Tanya stops the car so Lyssa can maneuver enough to get in the glove box without banging her ankle. I get us each more water, and Tanya and I switch places again. As soon as the sun went down, she switched into granny-mode. I’ll drive non-stop until we get there, if that’s what it takes to go real speed. There’s no point in taking the fastest car if we’re not going to use its full capabilities.

Lyssa fakes sleep. Her breath slows and evens out, and soon she falls into the real thing. Behind us, Tanya falls silent, too. It’s just me, the night sky and the Harmonies humming. It’s different, though, having them in the car with me. I think it would be more comfortable, under normal circumstances. As it stands right now, it means I have three people to keep alive instead of

one.

I see a light in the mirror. In the Wilds, light is a sign of desperation. In my case, it's to get to safety. I suspect the light behind me is Merrick. Either he's looking for us, or someone saw our light and reported it to him. Either way, he's probably on our trail.

Even though I'm already going full throttle, I press harder on the accelerator. I lean forward, as if that will speed the car up. Every time I look back, the light is still there. They must know where we are. As long as they don't have someone between us and Pacvo's gates, we should make it. I clutch the steering wheel and lean forward again.

"Want me to drive?" Lyssa's voice is thick with sleep.

"Someone's behind us." I don't want to scare her, but she needs to know. "We can't take the time to trade. Besides, I doubt your ankle's up to the kind of pressure we need."

"What can I do to help?"

I start to say nothing, then realize there is something she can do. I ask her to consult the Harmonies and make sure her notice wasn't real. She puffs out an almost-laugh. "I already did. You're right; I wasn't expelled."

There's a long silence. I think she's gone back to sleep. Then she says, "Mom made it."

Ouch. "Did you see what led up to that?"

I hear her hair hit the window as she shakes her head. I can't offer any comfort. Right now, I can't afford to consult the Harmonies myself. I can't even think too much about what reasons there might be. Later, when we're safe behind the Pacvo gates, I can try to comfort her. Right now, I need to keep us all safe.

"Can you see anything behind us?" I ask.

"Just a light. It's pretty far away."

Not far enough for my taste. I'd rather have them heading after us than going back to my town, though.

The light doesn't draw closer, no matter how many times I check the mirror. It doesn't drop back, either. Their cars can't be as fast as mine, not when I was able to lose them before. Not unless I damaged the car.

"Please get us to Pacvo," I mutter.

"What?" Lyssa asks.

I don't repeat it. This was all my idea. I'm the one who decided to drive away, rather than take shelter. I'm the one who let Merrick see us before turning away. I'm also the one who put both the Beaufried prince and the Banora princess in the same place. Now I have to be the one to get us away from Spado's go-to killer.

The only thing I don't understand about Merrick's involvement is why he hasn't tried to kill anyone. I'm pretty sure he kept his passenger from shooting us. I don't know why he'd try to keep us alive unless that's what the duke told him to do. That doesn't make sense, either. I shudder. I'm probably happier not knowing his intentions.

We finally reach the Pacvo gates as the sky lightens to gray. What should have been a two-day drive took us over fourteen hours. We stop at the gatehouse. The guard eyes us sourly.

"Names?"

"Casper Blakney, Lyssa Jacobs, and Tanya Miklagaard."

He checks his notebook. I hold my breath until he nods. "Reason for visiting?"

"Family."

Beside me, Lyssa stiffens.

The guard's eyes narrow. Although he directed his other questions at me, this time he

addresses her. “And who might that family be?”

I hesitate. I want to lie and say I have a sibling here. Lyssa made a good point earlier, though. We don't have anything with us. We have no clothes, no food beyond the dried emergency rations, no money. Will would help me, but I don't want to put him in danger. Besides, I need to get Merrick out of the wilds and away from my family and friends. To do that, I have to make sure they know we didn't go back home.

I smile at the guard. “Lyssa Jacobs is the name she grew up with. She's actually Melyssande. The missing princess.”

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Lyssa

My jaw is so tight, I can't even talk. Not just to Casper, but at all. When Tanya wakes up and asks where we are, he has to answer her. My teeth won't open enough to get a single word out.

How dare he claim I'm the princess? Even if it were true, which it's not, that would be my secret to tell, not his. I told the guard that he was wrong, for all the good it did me. We're still getting an armed escort up to the palace. The only upside is that the people chasing us, whoever they are, won't be able to kill us.

That's probably what Casper was going for, but he's not the one who had to justify our appearance. Actually, yes, he is. I'm on record denying his claim. When the palace guards demand to know what an imposter is doing there, I'll tell them exactly what happened. Then Casper can be in trouble, instead of me.

Tanya is suspiciously quiet. She probably agrees with Casper. After all, isn't that what she said when I admitted my lapses – the Faculty – to her? They both like the idea, but it doesn't make sense. It's much more likely the Harmonies would sing to some random girl than that I'm seventeen and not related to the woman who raised me and looks so much like me that everyone comments on our similarity.

When we get to the palace, the guards lead us to a back door. They must not believe the claim, either. Otherwise, they'd take us to the main entrance.

I swing myself out of the car so I can put most of my weight on my left foot when I stand up. My ankle hurts, but it's not nearly as bad as it used to be. At least, that's what I think until I step on it and nearly fall down. One of the guards scoops me up and carries me. My face burns.

Despite the early hour, the palace is full of activity. I wonder if it's because of our arrival, or if there are always so many people rushing around. I don't have time to gawk, though. I follow the guards through a labyrinthine path. If I wanted to run away, I wouldn't be able to find my way.

The guard puts me down on a bed and leaves me alone in a small room. I don't know where Tanya and Casper went. The guards won't talk to me at all, let alone answer my questions; even the one who carried me wouldn't say anything. I wonder what the punishment is for pretending to be the princess. At least if I end up exiled, I know a place to go. That is, if Casper's family and friends stay there after those men found them.

I'm clearly in an exam room: white walls and floor, exam table, desk, rolling chair, and cabinets. There isn't even a clock. I have no idea if ten minutes or two hours pass before a woman walks in. Unlike the people we passed on our way here, she has bedhead and rumpled clothes. She, at least, isn't used to being up so early.

"So you think you're the princess?"

If I thought so, I'd be upset at her tone: condescension mixed with amusement and annoyance. I smile at her. "I'm sure I'm not. It's my friend who claimed I am. I have no idea why."

"Humph." Oddly, her scowl lightens at my answer. "We have to check everyone who might be, whether you think you are or not."

"What do you have to do?"

I didn't mean to ask that. I certainly didn't mean to sound scared. She tells me that it won't hurt. My eyes narrow.

"Can't you just say you did? We both know I'm not the princess, so what's the point?"

"The claim was made and is now on record. Like it or not, we have to test you. Besides, what if you're wrong?"

She takes a machine out of the cupboard and puts it on the desk. Then she gets a long, scary needle out, and something that looks like a small hoe. I squeeze my eyes shut and scoot against the wall.

“Open your mouth, please,” she says.

My eyes pop open. The needle is still on the desk, but she’s holding the hoe. I start to ask what she’s going to do, but as soon as I open my mouth, she puts the hoe in. The cold metal pulls at the side of my mouth. There’s a not-quite-tickling, not-quite-painful pull on my cheek, and she takes the hoe out again.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it? Give me a few minutes and you’ll have your answer.”

I thought it would be more complicated and take at least a week. She taps the gunk into the long needle-thing. She puts it into a slot on the machine and presses some buttons.

A few minutes later, she takes the needle-thing and leaves the room. I hop over to look at the machine, but it doesn’t tell me anything. I hop back to the exam table and sit with my legs up. My ankle throbs again. I want some of Casper’s meds. Hopefully, they’ll at least give me a walking stick when they kick me out.

The woman takes longer to return than she did to get here the first time, when they had to wake her up. I close my eyes and try to sleep. I’m pretty sure they won’t exile me for this, especially since I told them I think Casper’s wrong. They might send me to Moavsed, though. That might be better than exile, but I still won’t have any real future. No one wants to hire a convict, so I’d pretty much have to live there the rest of my life. Either that, or see if I could move to Casper’s town. I don’t have any skills to add, though, and I don’t think I’d make a very good farmer.

A man comes in with a medi-scanner. He must be either a doctor or nurse. He runs it over my ankle.

“It’s not broken, but you’ll need to keep off of that for at least a couple of weeks.”

He unwraps the bandage and I gasp. It’s not as swollen as it was before I took the meds, but it’s blue and purple. He tsks as he re-wraps it. Then he gives me some meds and a tiny cup of water.

The woman returns, looking even more frazzled than when she left. I think it’s because she tried to flatten her hair. It didn’t work.

I ease off the exam table, onto my good foot. I’m ready for whatever punishment she’s going to give me. I hope it’s being escorted from the castle. I wish I knew if claiming to be the princess is a crime. The man tells me to stay off my ankle, but I don’t move. Maybe he’ll instruct the guards to take it easy on me.

The people who come in next aren’t guards, though. They’re sleepy and as rumped as the nurse or doctor woman, so it takes me a minute to recognize them. When I do, I sink into a curtsy.

“Lynessa,” the queen whispers.

“Sorry,” I say. “I’m Lyssa.”

She envelops me in a hug. I almost collapse onto the table. This must be the weirdest dream in history. It’s probably the meds Casper gave me.

“You’re back,” the king says.

I shake my head. The test must have been wrong. Maybe it was supposed to be done with blood, but the woman thought I was too big a wimp for that. They’re all blonde and blue-eyed; I look nothing like any of them. “There’s been some kind of mistake. I’m not a princess.”

The prince mutters something under his breath. The king and queen ignore both of us. The man and woman both leave.

“Look at me,” I insist. “I’ve seen pictures of the princess. Everyone has. She was – well, if

not blonde, closer to it than to my black hair. This is natural.”

“My sister’s hair was like that,” the queen says. “She was blonde until she was four or five, and then it darkened to black. You look just like her.”

“Your sister? Lynessa?” I suddenly feel hollow, remembering the name she called me. “Mom’s name is Nessa.”

A guard wheels a chair in. He and another guard pick me up.

“Hey, I can walk that far,” I say.

Apparently, being the princess means that everybody ignores me. They carry me over to the wheelchair and set me in it gently, with my right leg extended. The doctor or nurse man returns and places an ice pack over my ankle.

“She needs to stay off this for at least two weeks,” he says.

“You told me that about two minutes ago,” I say. “I think I can remember those instructions, complicated though they are.”

Prince Michael grins at me. A moment later, the expression is gone, replaced with his blank mask.

“Where are my friends?” I ask the king and queen. Their blank faces are all the answer I need. “Two friends brought me here; Tanya and Casper. They’re the ones who were convinced I’m the princess.”

“We’ll make sure they’re taken care of,” the king says. He talks to a guard, who pulls out a mini-notebook.

The king pushes the wheelchair. The queen follows us out of the room, then walks beside me. Her hand flutters from my arm to my hair to my shoulder and back to my arm again. I stiffen. I want Mom and Dad here with me, not these strangers.

“Did you even try to find me?” I ask.

Behind me, there’s a male grunt. The queen’s hand tightens on my arm, then relaxes. “Of course we did. How can you ask? You must have seen the efforts, even wherever you grew up. Where was that?”

“Aletra.”

There’s another male sound behind me. This one sounds almost satisfied, but that doesn’t make sense. Now that I’m here, what does it matter where I came from?

I swallow a yawn. I don’t know if the meds I took are the same kind that Casper has, but I’m so tired. My ankle doesn’t hurt anymore, but that’s about the only thing that seems to be right. Nothing makes sense anymore. If Mom and Dad aren’t my parents, am I even really me?

I drift into a sleep filled with dreams. I’m burning in the center of a bonfire. Mom, Dad and the royal family dance around me. They all turn into imps and devils, poking the fire and making the flames hotter and higher. As I scream and writhe, they all laugh and dance around me.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Casper

When I wake up, it's still dark. For a minute, I think I've slept all day and into the night, even though sleep clings to me, threatening to pull me back in. Then I realize the curtains are so thick, they completely block the sun. When I open them, light spills into the room. I blink and rub my eyes until I can handle the brightness.

I still haven't seen Lyssa since they took her away this morning. They must have already confirmed her identity, or I wouldn't be staying in a suite almost as big as my house. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do now. The palace is huge; I don't know if I'll be able to find my way to the kitchen, or dining rooms, or wherever I'm supposed to go to get some food.

I start with a shower, which is the closest I've ever been to heaven. A hot shower at home is nice; here, it's fantastic. It isn't a single showerhead. Instead, the water comes from all around, like I'm standing in perfectly hot rain. Long after I'm clean, I finally get out, dry off and get dressed in the clean clothes that magically appeared while I slept. They fit perfectly. Now all I have to do is decide what comes next.

I yawn. I'm too tired to think quickly. Before I have a chance to reach any conclusions, there's a tap at my door. At least, I think it's at my door. I open it cautiously.

Tanya stands there. She's also dressed in clean clothes. While mine are jeans and a t-shirt, hers is a lavender dress with matching high heels. Whoever the magicians are, they even got our personalities right. She comes in and looks around the room.

"I was afraid you might be asleep," Tanya says. "I have no idea where to go or what to do."

"Me, neither." I gesture to a chair. "Do you want to sit, or should we go exploring? If we

get lost, at least it will be together.”

We don't have a chance to get lost. Once we turn off our carpeted area, Tanya's heels echo in the hallway. The sound seems to draw attention; two women and a man all appear, as if we'd called for help. One of the women leads us downstairs to the dining room. Although I don't turn around to see if they're following us, I feel the others' eyes on me the whole way. My back prickles.

The huge table could easily seat thirty or forty people. Tanya's eyes mirror my relief when the woman leads us to the two place settings on the table, right next to each other. We won't have to eat in silence or try to yell at each other.

Shortly after the woman leaves, a man enters with a pitcher. He pours water for us, then asks if we want anything else to drink. “The kitchen is preparing roast beef sandwiches. Will that be suitable, or would you prefer something different?”

The imp in me wants to say that nothing less than prime rib, freshly prepared will do. I stifle the impulse. I agree that sandwiches sound wonderful, even though I don't want one. When they arrive, I discover that I'm wrong. Either that, or these are in a class all by themselves. “Roast beef sandwich” sounds boring. In this case, it's not.

The filling is paper-thin slices of medium-rare beef, crisp lettuce, grilled onions and mushrooms, sharp cheddar, and a creamy horseradish sauce. I close my eyes and savor the experience. I hope Lyssa got one of these, too. The sandwich is big enough that I barely touch the salad that came with it. Tanya takes the opposite approach; she fills up on the salad and only has a bite or two of the sandwich.

“How can a sandwich be this good?” she asks. “And why didn't anyone tell me? I didn't need another salad.”

“I know,” I say. “And here I thought I didn’t like sandwiches.”

Almost as soon as we finish, two women appear. Either there are cameras in here, or people are standing right outside, listening to us. My skin prickles.

One of the women begins clearing our places, and the other tells us to follow her. Tanya asks if we’re going to see Lyssa. I lean forward, smiling until she repeats that we’re to follow her. If we were going to Lyssa, she’d probably tell us.

We don’t have much choice, though. I wouldn’t know how to find my car. Besides, until the kingdom knows the princess is back at the palace, Merrick might decide to attack my town. Now that I’m here, my family and friends have one less person to fight off invaders. I couldn’t leave even if I wanted to, not until there’s an official announcement. If I have to, I’ll leak it to the vids myself. Surely Will would know how to get in touch with them.

She leads us around enough corners that I lose track of where we are. I’m going to need help getting anywhere in this maze of a palace. I still haven’t shaken the fog of exhaustion, even after lunch. Maybe after a few good nights’ sleep, it’ll be easier to find my way. Of course, I hope I won’t have to stay here that long. I need to get home and make sure everyone’s alive and well. I wish I had my notebook so I could message Mom or Chris.

We finally stop in a formal waiting room. It’s luxurious and designed to inspire awe, with mahogany tables, mahogany and deep blue chairs and couch, and a massive mahogany desk. It’s also empty.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” the woman says. “His majesty will be with you shortly.”

Tanya looks ready to bolt. I wouldn’t mind running away, either. I take Tanya’s arm and lead her to one of the chairs, then sit in the one beside her. We’ve done nothing wrong. In fact, we brought the princess back. If anything, he’ll want to thank us.

I don't convince Tanya any more than I convinced myself. If he were that happy with us, he wouldn't make us wait like this. He must be trying to make us nervous. It's working.

The door finally opens. Tanya and I both leap up before the king can enter. He's surprisingly normal. He's not a giant, like Dad. He's not overly formal.

I shouldn't expect pomp and circumstance. Dad and I are royalty, and we're regular people. The difference is, we're in hiding and King Alain is the ruling monarch. Even Dad prefers to wear slacks and button-down shirts. The king has on jeans and a t-shirt. He could almost blend in with the general public.

Almost. Despite his casual clothes, he still has an aura of command. It's partly his military bearing, probably. Mostly, though, it's the knowledge of his own power. He doesn't need to wield it like a sword; it's simply part of his identity.

Instead of sitting behind the intimidating desk, the king sits in an armchair across from us. "Thank you for bringing our daughter back to us."

I stifle a smile. I hear Tanya swallow a giggle. I compose myself before answering. "You're very welcome, your majesty. How is she?"

I really mean, *Where is she*, but that seems rude. His smile is both knowing and understanding. "She's asleep. The doctor gave her some medicine for her ankle and it knocked her out."

"Big surprise," Tanya says. "If she takes any meds, she falls asleep. Even if they're supposed to keep her up."

"Like her mother."

Tanya shakes her head, then stops. She must have realized he meant the queen. Poor Lyssa. It must be overwhelming, realizing that your parents aren't who you think they are. No wonder she didn't want to be the missing princess.

"Is there anything we can do for you, as thanks?" the king asks.

It sounds like we're about to be kicked out. Not that I blame him; the royal family must be eager to get to know Lyssa. Still, it seems harsh to take away the only people she knows. I almost ask if we can stay for a while, to help her adjust. I have my town to think of, though.

"Will you announce her return soon?" I ask.

He narrows his eyes at me. "Why does it matter?"

It's hard to break the silence of a lifetime. The only people who've ever known about my town are Knights or people who were unfairly exiled, at least until Lyssa and Tanya showed up. I bite my lip, debating whether having the announcement made outweighs telling the King that there are towns in the Wilds.

"We were attacked." Tanya makes the decision for me. "I only used my notebook for a minute, just long enough to message my mom, and these people must have found the signal. We had to run away."

The king begins shaking his head almost as soon as Tanya begins, so it's no surprise when he says the announcement will be postponed. He doesn't want everyone to know where she is until they've found the people trying to kill her.

"Then may I stay here?" I ask. "I'll do what I can to find them."

He doesn't actually laugh at me. His skepticism is clear, though. When he looks at me, he doesn't see a Knight. He doesn't see a prince. He just sees a gangly teenager with delusions of grandeur. Even so, he finally nods.

“We can use all the help we can get. Thank you.”

“May I stay, too?” Tanya asks. “I don’t think I’ll be any help finding the attackers. I might be a comfort to Lyssa, though.”

He nods. “If you would, I’d also like you both to speak to the captain of our guards. Even if you don’t think you have any useful information, you might have some clues that will help him track these people down.”

I have more than a clue; I know who one of them is. There’s no guarantee anyone will listen to me, though, not when I only saw him through the Faculty. If I admit what I know, I’ll have to explain how. The king might be happy with me now, but I doubt that would last long if he found out my lineage. Even though I don’t want to claim the throne, there are always people who think they’d do better with a regime change. All it would take is a few of those banding together and claiming my right to the throne to start another war.

Still, there are things that I might now even without the Faculty, like the kind of cars they drove and the direction they came from. If the king has the Faculty, he’ll be able to find out as much or more than I know.

I tell him I’d be happy to talk to the captain if he thinks it will help. The sooner, the better.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Lyssa

I hide in my bedroom long after I wake up. For one thing, I don't know what to do or where to go. For another, as long as they think I'm sleeping, my new family won't expect me to talk to them. Besides, I don't have any clean clothes, and I don't want to put my filthy things back on. Also, the bed is really, really comfortable.

I finally get up. There's a pair of crutches by the bed, so I grab them and go to the bathroom. There's a whole set of clean clothing there, along with half a dozen towels and the thickest robe I've ever seen. I let the water run until it's hot, then step into the steamy shower. It wakes me up all the way, and I think about my situation.

Maybe I am the princess. The tests are probably conclusive. That doesn't mean that I'm welcome here, though. The princess disappeared when she – when I – was two. I'm seventeen now. They had fifteen years to try to find me. I used to feel so bad for them when they'd implore the public every year on her birthday to help them find their daughter. Now that I know about the Faculty, though, I know they could have found her any time. They could have found *me* any time.

Not that I can totally blame them. According to the prophecy, I'm going to end the Banora dynasty. That means war. The last time we had war, we nearly extinguished the entire human race. If war breaks out again, it could finish the job.

Still. My real parents didn't want to find me; the mom who raised me faked an expulsion notice to get rid of me. I might as well return to the Wilds. Everyone would be happier then.

I turn off the shower and grab one of the fluffy towels. Just because no one wants me around doesn't mean I should drown myself, or waste the water, either. I put on my new, clean

clothes: shorts and a t-shirt. They're soft and comfortable. At least I don't have to wear ball gowns all the time.

I crutch out to the sitting room that's attached to my bedroom. It's a beautiful, soft teal: exactly the shade I would have chosen. White bookshelves line the walls, with poufy white beanbags around them. Two white armchairs sit on either side of a fireplace. A woman sits in one of them.

She jumps up when she sees me. "Good morning, your highness. Your mother, the queen, asked me to bring you to her as soon as you awoke."

Oh, good, that ought to be fun. She can pretend she's thrilled to see me again, and I can pretend to believe her. It's not like I have a choice, though, so I follow the woman out the door and into the vast hallway. The *click, thump, click, thump* of my progress echoes in the hall. It's not nearly as refined a sound as Tanya's heels.

"Where are Tanya and Casper?" I ask.

"I'm sure the queen will answer all your questions."

That makes one of us. I follow her through a twisting path, down a stairway, and through another winding route. She finally opens a door and waits for me to go through. As I pass her, she says, "Welcome back, your highness."

"Thank you," I say, but I'm too late. She already closed the door behind me. I close my eyes and swallow. Then I open them again and turn around.

The whole royal family is here. Either my guide messaged them that I was up, or they've been sitting here waiting for who knows how long. Prince Michael is the only one to show that I'm not welcome here; he has a slight sneer. The king and queen both smile as if they're thrilled to have me back. I don't tell them I know better, but I can't return their smiles, either.

Then I look around the room. It's bigger than our living room at home, but more inviting. Blue sofas and armchairs surround a square table. The silver-gray walls are covered with framed sketches, rather than the formal artwork of the rest of the palace. As I take them in, I realize they're mostly sketches of me. I'm learning to dance, much against my will. I'm singing at a concert, when I was ten. I'm sitting in the caf, laughing with my friends. Image after image, my life on display for the parents who couldn't be with me. I sink into one of the chairs.

"You did try to find me."

"Of course we did," the queen says. "You're our daughter."

The king narrows his eyes. He asks what I mean. I wave a hand at the pictures. "I didn't think you used the Faculty, or you would have found me a long time ago."

"How do you know about the Royal Faculty?"

He sounds suspicious. I remember Casper saying that the Banoras kept it secret; the king would probably distrust anyone who knows about it. I tell the truth, just without mentioning Casper's name. I tell them about thinking I was going crazy because of my time lapses that ended up with drawings. I say that while Tanya and I were in the Wilds, I sang the Harmonies' song, so everyone thought I was a conduit. That started talk about all the legends, and someone said that King Jasper had the Harmonies appear and sing directly to him. That led to talk about the Beaufried dynasty, and how they supposedly had the Royal Faculty. It sounded so much like what I have that I started experimenting. I'm not sure I could fight off a warning vision, but now I can call them on command to answer some of my questions.

"I thought I needed more practice," I say. "To get them to answer the questions I want, I mean. But you couldn't find me, either. So maybe it's not me, but the Faculty that's not as accurate as I'd like."

“If you can control it at all,” the king says, “when you’ve only been seventeen for a few weeks, you’re doing very well. It took me a few months before I could manage that.”

“What’s Aletra like?” Prince Michael asks.

I shrug. “Normal. I don’t have anything to compare it to. What was it like, growing up in the palace?”

“Kinda discordant,” he says. “I mean, pretty much everyone’s attention was on trying to find you. What little was left over was spent on making sure I didn’t go missing, too.”

“Michael.” The queen sounds shocked. The king glowers at him. Michael apologizes. I’m glad he said it, though. At least I can count on one person in my family to tell me the truth.

Only it still doesn’t feel like this can be my family. If it is, then Mom and Dad must be the bad guys, and that’s simply not possible.

“They couldn’t have spent that much time looking,” I hear myself say. I address the king and queen, not the prince. “It’s not like I grew up in the Wilds. If I look so much like your sister, and if you had pictures to show people, why didn’t anybody ever recognize me?”

“You can be sure,” the king says, “that’s a question we’ll be asking the Duke of Aletra.”

“Do you mind if I go rest?” I ask. “I’m kind of tired.”

The prince huffs. “No wonder the Banora dynasty’s going to end. You’ll sleep through the invasion.”

“Michael.” This time it’s the king. The prince’s apology is more sincere than last time. The king must be less forgiving than the queen.

“I’ll show you to your room,” the queen says. If I weren’t afraid of getting lost, I’d find my own way. As it is, I smile my thanks. The king stands up, too. The prince, thank the Harmonies, stays sitting down.

I try to memorize the turns we take. Even before we get to the stairs, I've lost track. I follow silently. Sullenly, if I'm honest. The palace is beautiful, but it's not home, and these people who claim to love me don't even know me. I want to be back with Mom and Dad. I want my life back.

Mom leads me into the room with an air of expectation. I don't understand why, since I've already been here. It's still beautiful. I walk over to the bookshelves, even though they're probably all picture books from when I was a baby. I gasp when I see a shelf identical to one of my shelves at home. I pull my favorite book out. "How could you know?"

"The drawings were useless for finding you," the king says. "They told us so much about you, though, we sometimes felt like we actually knew you. That shelf is from one of the drawings. Your mother - Queen Beatrice - and I have both read all the books I saw you reading."

Long after the king and queen leave, I hug the book to my chest. They did care.

I flop into one of the armchairs, still clasping the book. It's my own personal talisman, a bridge between my two impossibly disparate lives. The book that both sets of parents got for me, and that both families read.

I don't know how long I sit there. A knock startles me out of my immobility. I want to ignore it, but don't dare. I'm pretty sure even a princess doesn't get away with ignoring a royal summons.

It's not the king or queen, though. It's not even a messenger from them. Tanya stands in the hallway, as uncomfortable as me. She shifts from one lavender-clad foot to the other.

"Nice shoes."

A smile lights her face, and she straightens. "I know, right? They're perfect. Why aren't you wearing a dress, too?"

"This was sitting out for me."

“I’m dressed more like a princess than you are.” She comes into the room and stops dead.
“This is so you, Lyssa. It’s like they know you.”

“They kind of do. You, too.” I try to tell her about the pictures in the king’s study, but the words don’t come. In a way, it’s sweet. It’s also strange, like they were stalking me and I never knew. These strangers, at least the king and queen, are in the public eye all the time, yet they know more about me than I do about them.

I feel dizzy and unwell. I hobble back to the chair and sit down.

“What book is that?” Tanya asks.

I forgot it was in my hands. I hold it up so she can see the title. She frowns. “Why did you bring that? Wait, never mind why. *How* did you bring that? I left everything behind when we bolted.”

“So did I,” I say. This time, the words fall over each other in their haste to get out. I tell her how the king used his Faculty to try to find me. He wasn’t able to figure out where I lived, but he learned about my life and shared it with his wife and son. They know all about my life, but they’re complete strangers to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Casper

My interview with the captain lasts less than five minutes. He wants me to tell him exactly where our town is. He even gives me a map so I can mark it. When I tell him that's not going to happen, that there's no way I'll tell anyone our location, the interview's over. He doesn't want to hear about our attackers. He doesn't care that I can identify one of the men who tried to kill the princess. He writes me off as an uncooperative teenager and all but throws me out of the office.

I remind myself that the mark of royalty isn't displaying a temper, but controlling it. If the guard won't let me help them, I'll have to do this on my own. I grit my teeth and look for someone who can help me find my car.

Three dead-ends and several curse words later, a man coming out of a room nearly collides with me. I ask him for help and he leads me through a twisting path until we get to the garages. I'm pretty sure I'll never find my way back. That's okay, though; I'll pull up front and ask for help again, assuming the guards let me back in again. If the captain bans me from the castle, then I guess I'll go home again. If I can't do anything here, at least I can be useful if Merrick and his men attack.

The obvious place to start is at Will's. He knows the city; he'll know where to start looking. When I get to his office, though, his car isn't there. I park in his empty space and go in. Henry's manning the front desk.

"I didn't think I'd see you again so soon," he says. "I don't suppose you've come to tell me you were wrong, and I can go back to Spado?"

"Sorry, no." I know it's too soon for him to have adjusted. Still, his question feels like a bad omen. "Is Will around?"

Not only is he out of the office, he's out of town. His fiancée took him home to meet her parents. There goes my best resource. Luckily, there's more than one captain in Pacvo. Although I've never worked directly with the other captain, I'm sure he'll be able to help, if I can convince him to take me seriously.

The crowds at the mall almost convince me to turn around. If I can't talk to him alone, there's no way I'll be able to get any help. Still, if I don't even try, how can I hope to accomplish anything? I take the first open spot I find and start hiking across the asphalt.

Inside isn't nearly as crowded as I thought, although the insane level of noise coming from the restaurant area ensures that I won't head that way. The farther I go from the restaurants, the quieter it gets and the easier it is to breathe.

I finally find the store. There aren't any glittering displays to draw people in. There's no gaudy sign to draw attention to the space tucked into the corner. There isn't even anyone standing behind the counter. There's small script in the window beside the door: Leigh Thomas, Jeweler. According to the girls in high school last year, he's the best, yet he doesn't have a single item on display. It must be his own brand of bragging: showing the world that he's so good, he doesn't have to lure anyone in.

A soft bell sounds when I enter the shop. It's as empty inside as the display cases in the windows. A moment after I enter, a door opens and a man nearly as tall as me walks out. He's built like a gravballer past his prime: wide shoulders and powerful arms and legs, all marred by a protruding belly. He carries himself like he's still the crowd's favorite. I look around the barren room.

"How can I help you?" Like his shop, the voice is atypical of a salesman. He's gruff and grumpy.

“Mr. Thomas?”

“That’s what it says on my door.”

I look around. No one followed me in. There isn’t even anyone in the halls. I feel like a little kid trying to be secretive. I clear my throat to make sure it won’t crack. “I mean, Captain Thomas?”

He mimics my movements. I feel less like a five-year-old when I see a middle-aged man looking around as if the walls have ears. He opens the door he came through a moment ago and motions me to come back. He closes the door so closely behind me it blows cold air on my back.

As soon as the door clicks shut, he lunges toward me. I press back into the room. He stops barely short of hitting me. “What do you know about the Knights?”

I hold my hands in front of me in the gesture of peace. If I didn’t know anything, if I’d only heard rumors, he would have confirmed that there’s something to know. It’s a good thing I know about the organization already.

I tell him that I’m from the outlier organization, but he doesn’t want to believe me. One day I’ll look like an adult and people won’t treat me with such suspicion. If I had my notebook, I could show my credentials. I usually like to deal with Will, so I haven’t sent many messages to Captain Thomas, but I remember one I sent when Will had too much to deal with. I remind him about the investigation he lead on a man who turned out to be innocent.

He screws up his mouth like he bit into chocolate that has a bug in it, but he finally nods. He leads me into his back room, which is part office, part workshop, part bedroom, and entirely organized. I thought artists were supposed to work in creative chaos, but Mr. Thomas clearly prefers order. He sits at his desk and gestures for me to take the bed. Since there’s nowhere else to sit, other than his silver- and jewel-covered counters, I perch on the edge of his mattress.

At home, our jewelsmith is secretive. He doesn't want anyone stealing his methods; the only people allowed into his shop are his two apprentices. Here, everything is out in the open, although I don't know how many people he lets back here. The walls above the workbenches are lined with drawers of different sizes, each neatly labeled: 18 ga silver, 24 ga gold, raw emeralds, cut rubies.

Necklaces and earrings crowd each other in a glass-doored cupboard above his desk. An entire store-worth of jewelry loses its appeal when it's crammed together. Instead of beauty, all I see is a mess.

I tell him I'm not from Pacvo, the only person I know well who would normally help is out of town, and I didn't even have time to grab my notebook before we left. I need his help to find the people who tried to attack the princess.

He harrumphs. "If she really is. I don't know how many girls have made that claim over the years."

"Whether or not she is, they obviously think so." I don't know why I don't tell him her identity was confirmed through DNA. The king's paranoia is obviously catching. "Otherwise, they'd have no reason to target her."

He hems and haws until I want to shake him. The longer it takes to convince him, the more likely Merrick is to think we headed back to town. When this is over, I need to talk to Dad about Captain Thomas; Knights are supposed to be people of action. Yes, caution is important, but right now we should be out hunting, not debating.

"If Princess Melyssande is still alive," he says, "maybe we shouldn't try to find her. We don't want her to start another war."

Despite my best efforts, I roll my eyes. Don't adults remember anything they learned in school? Once the prophecy was made, it was bound to come true in one form or another. If someone killed Melyssande, the war would undoubtedly start the day she would have turned twenty-two. The way prophecies like to twist events, it would probably start when the guards caught the murderer. We need her to stay alive and well and marry me. Better to have the two of us miserable than the entire kingdom. Now that I've met her, I'm not sure even we'll have to suffer.

I finally push myself off the bed. It's not nearly as satisfying as sending a chair flying would be. I hold myself stiffly upright and carefully place one foot in front of the other. He's already dismissed me as an empty-headed kid; I won't allow my temper to confirm his prejudice. I close the door softly behind me and then stuff my hands in my pockets and ball them into fists to prevent temptation. It's just as well the shop is eerily empty: there's nothing to throw even if my hands manage to free themselves.

One foot is still in the shop and the other is in the hall. The door opens again and Mr. Thomas calls to me. I pause and turn my head. He's going to offer a condescending explanation for why we can't do anything, or why we shouldn't do anything. He'll say that we're better off waiting to see what happens. I can't tell him that my town's in danger, or he'll be as pushy as the captain of the guard and I won't reveal our location to anyone. Even though I know all this, I can't help waiting for him to speak.

"If you're right," he says, "we need to find those men. Give me a minute to close up my shop, and we'll go."

It takes supreme effort to stand straight when I want to sag against the doorway. I nod. "Great."

The number of locks on his office door solves the mystery of his empty storefront. He's got more security than a bank. I still don't understand how he manages to sell anything with no display, though. When he catches up with me, the curiosity disappears. I focus on the more important question: where could Merrick and his friends be? Hopefully, they came to Pacvo. It's certainly the most logical place to look. She has to end up here at some point, if she's going to claim her heritage.

His car is probably more comfortable, but my armor is state of the art. He doesn't argue, just suggests he drive me to my car so I can follow him. I ask him where he thinks we should start. He pulls out a notebook and as we walk. He finally gives me an address. When he lets me out at my car, he waits for me to pull out before driving on.

We don't end up at a seedy motel. We don't go to a greasy restaurant. We don't even drive to the poor fringes of the city. Instead, I follow the twisting city streets to a comfortable house with pink and yellow flowers out front. I want to pound the steering wheel and scream. I can't help wondering why Captain Thomas won't help.

I need to find Merrick and have him arrested. Failing that, I have to find a reporter who can leak Lyssa's presence. Melyssande's, rather. Right now, this Knight is my best hope to achieve either option, if I can get him to cooperate. Even though I'm silently seething, I follow Mr. Thomas up the driveway.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Lyssa

I want to stay in my rooms all day, with only Tanya around. She knows me better than anyone. She can tell me I'm still the same person I was yesterday, or last week, or last month. A different name doesn't make me a different person, does it?

My suite is so much like my bedroom at home – except bigger – that she should plop into the other chair and start gossiping about what's happening back home and what tests we're missing. Better yet, she could talk to me about my parents. My real parents. The ones in Aletra. The parents that everyone here thinks are actual kidnappers, even though I know that's not possible.

Instead of doing any of that, Tanya walks around the room, avoiding my eyes. She reaches a hand out to grab a book, then pulls it back. She finally sits in one of the armchairs, but she still doesn't relax. She perches on the edge of the seat, as if she wants an excuse to leave.

“I'm still me.”

Her laugh has the tight and uneven edge of nervousness. She reaches for a bag and notebook that aren't there, then wraps a strand of blonde hair around her finger. Finally, although she still won't meet my eyes, she looks at me.

“You aren't, though,” she says. “Are you? I mean, you're a princess now.”

“I don't feel like one.”

She watches her finger twist her hair into a tight coil. She releases the tightly wound spiral, then combs her fingers through the strand and starts over. I don't understand how she could abandon me now, even though she stuck with me when I was expelled. I bury the only answer I can

come up with: that she didn't come for me, but in hopes of finding her father.

When someone knocks, I grab my crutches and rush over to the door. Then I hesitate, my hand on the knob. I hope it's Casper, but I'm afraid it's the king or queen. I can't avoid them forever, though. I turn the handle and take a startled step backwards. Prince Michael gives me a salesman's smile and tells me he wants to get to know his sister. As he talks, he looks over my shoulder. He must see Tanya, because he lights up.

He was a baby when the princess – when I – disappeared. I always thought Tanya was a month younger than me, but it turns out she's almost a year older; that makes her more than three years older than the prince. He clearly doesn't think the difference is insurmountable. Then again, he's not any cocky teenager. He's a prince, and one who's reported to be wild. I wish I'd paid more attention to the gossip column, so I could remember what led to that reputation.

Regardless, he's the prince and my brother. I let him in and he bounds across the room and takes the chair across from Tanya. He's actually pretty cute, even though he is only fifteen. In news vids, he's either pressed and ironed or red-eyed and haggard. Today, he's wearing jeans and a soft blue t-shirt. His hair is ruffled in a deliberate attempt to look uncombed. That hairstyle has always equal parts amused and annoyed me. Lucky for the prince, Tanya's a sucker for it.

"I love your dress," he says.

The hand that was twisting a single lock combs through the tangles. "Thanks, but it's not mine. I found it in my room this morning."

"It was clearly meant for you," he says, "even if they didn't know you when they made it."

Tanya giggles. I walk over to the bookshelves. Some of the titles are among my favorites; others, I've never even heard of. There's only one I hate: *The Curtain and the Veil*. It's considered a classic, and supposedly it's a romance, but it's tedious and long-winded, and the heroine is a

complete idiot.

I take down one of the books I've never heard of and read the back cover. It sounds like a typical high school romance plot. Normal, sweet, easy: everything my life currently is not. I sink into one of the beanbags and open the cover.

"Oh," the prince says. "I almost forgot. Mom wants you in the blue parlor."

I jump up and grab my crutches. I'm already opening the door before I realize he means the queen. I stop and ask for directions.

"Yeah, I'm supposed to take you there." He stands, much more slowly than I did. Then he holds a hand out to help Tanya up. "Do you want to come, too? I'll take you on a tour of the castle."

The blue parlor is downstairs. I'm not sure where it got its name; the walls are a soft rose, and the furniture is upholstered in pink and white. The tables, and the legs of the couches and chairs, are a pale, almost white wood. The only blue is in the picture hanging on the walls, one of the women's dress, and a couple of bolts of cloth.

"Oh, good, you're here." The queen rushes over. Her arms open and I shrink away. She steps back and lets her arms fall to her sides. She smiles brightly. "We'll have to get you a new wardrobe. Shorts or jeans and t-shirts are fine for around the palace, and for things like school, but you'll also need formal gowns and some day dresses. We'll have to do something about your hair and make-up, too."

"What's wrong with my hair?"

She doesn't answer. Neither do any of the half-dozen other women in the room. I end up in my underclothes; I'm not sure how that happened. I don't even have my crutches to lean on, so I balance on one leg. One woman takes my measurements while another writes them down. Two other women take turns holding fabric up to my face, then place the bolts on one of two different

piles, depending on whether the fifth woman nods or shakes her head. I have no idea why the sixth woman is there. As far as I can see, she's here to observe. That's great, because I completely need another stranger staring at me, I don't think.

"I have clothes at home," I say. Everyone continues with their jobs. No one answers. Even the queen talks to the observer, rather than reply.

After the woman finishes measuring me, I get to put my clothes back on. The women with the fabric pause barely long enough for me to pull my shirt on. When I'm putting my jeans back on, one of them almost jabs me with the bolt.

"Careful," the woman in charge of approving or disapproving the fabric barks. "We don't need bruises to deal with."

"How are you holding up, daughter?" the queen asks.

Her voice is soft and gentle. She doesn't inflect the final word. Even so, the woman stammers out an apology. In a weird way, that almost makes it worse. I'm sure she wouldn't have said she was sorry if I were still myself, rather than a princess. Maybe Tanya's right, and I'm not me anymore.

When the women finally finish going through the fabrics, I'm ready to go back to my rooms. I don't get to. Instead, the sixth woman takes over. She has me sit in a chair that's placed on a drop-cloth. I know she's going to cut my hair. I want to place my hands on my head so she'll leave it alone. It took me years to get this length; she has no right to lop it off.

The queen, however, has every right. She obviously approves, since she's standing here, letting it happen. I squeeze my legs so I can't make a fool of myself by covering my hair.

"Don't worry, I'm just going to give it some depth and shape," the woman says. "It'll still be long and beautiful."

They don't let me look when she's done. I feel hollow inside. It must be horrific if they won't even hand me a mirror.

She tells me to close my eyes. I flinch from the makeup brush. It's so much easier to apply it myself, but she won't let me. "When we're done, I'll teach you how to apply it."

"I'm a senior in high school," I say. "I know how to apply makeup."

"Don't move," the woman says. She rubs something off my cheek and continues to paint me.

Nobody else answers. I didn't know that becoming the princess would turn me into a doll to play dress-up with. My throat almost closes. My grip on my thighs might leave bruises, but I can't pull back.

"There." She finally steps away, leaving me space to breathe. "Come see yourself."

While she messed with me, someone set up a full-length mirror. My head feels a couple of pounds lighter than it did when I walked into the room; I don't want to see why, but I have to look.

"Wait," the queen says. My throat tightens again and my stomach clenches. It must be bad if she doesn't even want me to see it. "Leigh made something for you, before we even knew where you were. It was his way of showing his faith that you'd return."

"Leigh?"

"Leigh Thomas. The jeweler."

He's supposed to be the best in the kingdom. A couple of years ago, a girl wore one of his necklaces to Prom and people still talk about it. The women stifle grins; this time, I don't think they're aimed at me. There's something mean about them, like they want to laugh but know they'll be in trouble. I think it's because the queen called him Leigh. Of course he'd make jewelry for the royal family, but I doubt the queen calls many craftsmen by their first names. There's definitely

something off. If the women won't show their amusement, though, they won't tell me what it is, especially not with the queen in the same room.

Cold metal whispers by my collar bone and I shiver. A moment later, it lies in place and I finally get up and walk to the mirror. I don't want to see Princess Melyssande. I don't want to become someone else.

It's not a stranger looking back at me. My black hair curls down from a slightly-off center part. My eyes are bigger and more obviously gray than usual, while my nose looks smaller. I look like me, only better.

The necklace is a silver chain with a pendant. It's a hawk clutching a rose in one claw: the Banora shield. It's casual enough to not look odd with my t-shirt, but I'm sure it will be equally stunning when I'm dressed up.

"Melyssande," the queen whispers.

She envelops me in the kind of hug I only ever get from Mom and Dad. I force my arms to wrap themselves around her. She stiffens. I know she wants a real hug, that she wants me to be as happy to be here as she is to have me. All I want is to return to a couple of weeks ago. I just want to be home.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Casper

I feel for my holster, but of course it's not there. I took the girls up into the hills without a weapon of any kind. Not just any girls, either, but the princess. If Dad were around, I wouldn't be breathing anymore.

Not that I'd have a gun with me, anyway. It would have been confiscated by the guards as soon as I got out of my car. In fact, if I'd had a weapon on me, I doubt I'd worry about safety right now. I'd sit in a prison cell, waiting for a trial and possibly death for treason. Still, I wish I had something with me; if not a weapon, then at least an ally I know and trust. Instead, I'm following someone I've barely met and who's slightly off-key.

Mr. Thomas gets to the front door and sings it open. I want to hit him; if he'd told me we were going to his house, I wouldn't be ready for an ambush. I pause and then follow him inside. "If we're at your house, what were you looking for on your notebook?"

He smiles at me as if I were five years old. His tone is equally patronizing when he says that he'd hoped to find information on the notebook. Since nothing came up, it only made sense to come to his house, where he has more equipment. That makes sense. I go in and shut the door behind me.

It's clear that he has both taste and money. The front room stretches out in front of me, the dark wood floors gleaming with polish. Two beige sofas and a longish red-wood coffee table are the only furnishings, and three largish paintings hang on the walls. They're abstracts, which have never appealed to me, but the bold colors look good against the otherwise austere room.

He leads me down the hall to his office. Like the rest of the house, it's simply furnished,

with only a few pieces of art to give it color. Unlike the rest of the house, it's cramped. It's smaller than Dad's office at home. Then he opens a closet that's as big as the office. It's filled with notebooks, trackers, and tools I don't recognize. He takes a notebook and hands it to me.

"You can use that as long as you need to," he says. Seriously? He must be willing to help more than this. He laughs at my expression. "Yes, I'll do more than give you a notebook. If I'm gone from my shop too long, though, people will notice. You see what you can find, I'll work on my end and get my Knights on it. My contact information is already programmed into your notebook, and I've got yours. We'll keep in touch."

I deflate. I thought we'd start hunting today. He's right that it wouldn't make sense. Not only would people notice that he's not at the shop, we also have no idea where to start. I want to drive around the city in the hopes that I'll see Merrick, but it makes more sense to go back to the palace and search electronically first, assuming they'll let me back in now that I've returned the princess.

The guard at the gate-house searches my car, then he opens the gate. I find my way back to the garage and take the same spot the car was in when I left. There are several open spots on the way, but I don't know if they belong to anyone in particular. I head for my rooms, then stop and retrace my steps until I'm back at the captain's office. He glowers at me, but asks what I want.

I hand him the notebook. "Could you check to make sure there isn't anything malicious on here? Someone loaned it to me, and I don't want to take any chances. If the palace security goes down, I don't want it to be my fault."

He tells me to sit down, then takes the notebook and disappears. I sit back in the chair and close my eyes. He could have left me a clean notebook so I could amuse myself, at least. I want to snoop, but I'm sure someone watches me on a camera I can't see. The captain wouldn't be naïve

enough to leave me completely unattended in his office, especially since he already thinks I'm trouble. It's been a long couple of days; I doze.

I startle awake when the captain clears his throat. He hands me the notebook and tells me it's clean. His voice is still gruff, but it's less unfriendly than the last time he talked to me. Even though I didn't need to be paranoid, I'm glad I brought it to be tested.

I should go back to my rooms and search. The problem is, I have no idea for what. I've only ever let people at the expulsion camp know that they're cleared or, more likely, permanently exiled. I've never led an investigation of my own. When I should be at my own door, I tap on Lyssa's.

She doesn't answer. I knock again. I'm about to leave when she opens the door about half an inch. When she sees me, she opens it wide and steps back.

"Who did you think I was?" I ask. "The kidnappers?"

"The prince," she answers. "Or the king and queen. Anyone who expects me to be Princess Melyssande."

I hold out my arm and she curls into me. One of the crutches thuds to the floor. I close the door behind me and hold her until she's ready to back away. Instead of the tear stains I expect, her face is clean and fresh, with only the set jaw and fierce eyes to hint at strong emotion.

I pick up her lost crutch and hand it back to her. I'd rather pick her up and carry her, but I don't think she'd appreciate it. We sit in the armchairs, facing each other.

She frowns. "Where did you get your notebook? You didn't have it when we left, did you?"

Secrecy runs deep. I'm ready to lie: to tell her that it was in my pocket, or that I went to the mall and bought a new one. I feel like I owe her, though. She doesn't know that I assumed she lied, but I did. She opened up to me, and I shut her out because I thought she wasn't telling me

everything. I take a breath and close my eyes.

“I borrowed it from one of the Knights of the Rose. I need to find the people who attacked, both so you’ll be safe and so we can tell the world you’re here. I don’t want them going back to hurt my family.”

“Knights of the Rose?” she asks, then shakes her head. “No, never mind. You can tell me later. Your family’s what’s important. What can I do to help?”

She’s as practical as she is wonderful. And to think that all my life, I’ve railed against the necessity of marrying the princess. Now I can only hope we’ll all survive long enough for the wedding to take place.

I haven’t told anyone where our town is, but I can’t take all the precautions I normally do. I have to know that everyone’s still alive, that the men didn’t come back and kill everyone. I message Mom and Dad. They answer so quickly, they must have had their notebooks on, waiting for me to contact them. They tell me that everyone’s out of the shelters and fine, and that they’ve been worrying about me. Although the words are similar, Mom’s manages to sound worried while Dad’s scolds. I can only thank the Harmonies they’re both well enough to be themselves.

I send a message telling them what happened. Mom’s never liked the Knights – rather, she’s never liked Dad’s or my involvement with them. I’m ready for their usual messages: from Dad, the implication that I shouldn’t bother him but instead handle it on my own; from Mom, the plea to come home and let someone else handle things.

Mom messages me that she’s proud of me and Dad and all that we do. She knows I’ll do whatever needs to be done, and to let her know when I’m done. Dad’s is even more out of character. He says he’ll see what he can find out, then tells me to be careful.

I show Lyssa their messages. She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth again. “Do they

usually send this kind of message?”

She’s only known them for a day and a half, and she already knows my parents’ notes sound wrong. She leans forward, pats my knee, and tells me we’ll figure it out together. I want to hug her, but I know that it isn’t the time. We have to get rid of the danger first. Then I’ll be able to kiss her without fear that someone’s going to break through her door.

I heave a sigh. “I have to apologize for my behavior on our hike.”

“It’s okay. You were stressed about the attack.”

I want to let her think that’s what turned me into a jerk, but I can’t compound my imbecility with lies. I tell her the truth: that I thought she knew she was the princess and I was okay with her not telling me, because I’ve kept enough secrets in my life to understand. But then I tried to share one of my darkest secrets with her and I thought she understood and rejected it. Naturally, she asks what secret I wanted to share. It’s hard to manage. Even now that I’m sure she’s the princess, the words stick in my throat. I force my shoulders down where they belong, instead of up by my ears. With a lopsided smile, I admit that I have the Faculty, too. I expected her to understand my confession on our hike and tell me about hers.

She starts to tell me she didn’t know about it, but I cut her off. “It’ll be a lot easier on both of us if we agree that I’m a discordant idiot who will try to do better.”

“I don’t think I can agree,” she says. Her face tells me she’s about to kick me out of her life: big, serious eyes and lips turned slightly down. Then she grins. “You were a discordant jerk who needs to do better, but I think you can agree that I was the idiot. We’ll both have to work on self-improvement.”

“Then we’ll agree to disagree.”

She twists her mouth. “The Royal Faculty isn’t as great as it could be. It would be nice if

we had a name and address to go with the picture of that man.”

I tell her what I know: a first name, Merrick, and that he was exiled from Spado. It isn't much to go on.

Her eyes shine and she leans forward. “It's a start. Even if you don't want to tell anyone about having the Faculty, the king and queen already know I do. We'll tell them I saw the picture, and you recognized the man. They can look into the Spado records and have people who know him, question him.”

Her enthusiasm is contagious. We set off to kind her parents and ask for their help.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Lyssa

We're already going down the stairs when Casper looks around and asks where Tanya is. I stifle a giggle; all it takes for a boy to not notice her absence is a matter of attempted kidnapping or murder. I tell him the prince is giving her a tour of the castle.

"Not a big fan of your brother, I take it?"

I didn't realize it was so obvious. I'll have to watch my tone, especially when the king and queen are around. Of course, I doubt I'll have to talk to or about him much. If he has his way, I'll only see him at official functions.

The palace is huge; I doubt I'll ever learn my way around. Casper isn't much more confident than I am. When I see a man, I stop him to ask if he can point me toward the king's office. He tells us the king isn't there and leads us back upstairs. He and Casper both have to wait at the top. I can get along pretty well on flat ground, but stairs are killer.

The man knocks on a door down the hall from mine and opens it to a living room bigger than ours at home. The king and queen are sitting together on a poufy silver sofa. They both half stand when they see me. They look so hopeful I want to leave. They're probably good people. They've certainly been good rulers. If I accept them as my parents, though, then I'm saying that Mom and Dad are kidnapers and terrible people. If they were terrible people, wouldn't it stand to reason that I must be terrible, too?

Some of my thoughts must show on my face, because they sit back down again as the man closes the door behind us. The queen smiles and she invites us in, but it's the kind of smile that means she's trying to mask her hurt. I sit in one of the armchairs across from them. Casper takes

my crutches, leans them against the wall, and stands beside them until the king tells him to sit down. Casper thanks him as he takes another chair.

“You brought our daughter back to us,” he says. “You’ve earned the right to sit in our presence.”

For a minute or two, we stare awkwardly at each other, the floor, and the paintings on the walls. Then I tell them we have an idea of who was attacking us. I don’t precisely lie; I simply tell them that Casper recognized one of the men the Faculty showed attacking his town, one of the men who chased us rather than go after the town.

The king stops us and calls for the captain of the palace guards. While we wait, the king tells us not to mention the Faculty; tell him what we know, not how we know it.

I doubt that’ll go over well with the captain. When he arrives, we follow the king’s directions. As I expect, the captain asks how we know anything. The king interrupts and says we’ve already explained to his satisfaction. If I’d tried to say that, even if Prince Michael tried to say it, I doubt the captain would accept it. Coming from the king, though, he doesn’t have a choice. He promises to see what he can find on no-last-name Merrick and leaves.

The queen doesn’t quite ask Casper to follow the captain out. He and I both understand it’s what she means. I silently plead with him to stay; he shrugs back and I know it means *She’s the queen. What else can I do?* I can’t even get mad. I know if she not-quite commanded me to do something, I wouldn’t fight, either.

I’m left with the parents I don’t know. I almost wish the prince was here so I wouldn’t be alone with people who think I belong in their family. They ask me questions about my home, my school, and my friends. I try to answer, but my voice clogs. The queen pulls me up and hugs me, but I can’t force my arms around this stranger.

“We never stopped loving you,” she says. “I hope one day you’ll be able to see how much we love you still.”

My eyes burn. They can’t have loved me as much as Mom and Dad did. No one could love me more. The queen sighs and sits back down. The king holds her in the hug I can’t give her. Their disappointment envelops me like fog. He tells me he knows it’s too soon to expect me to feel like a daughter to them, but asks me to share a little about my life and allow them to tell them about theirs.

“Why don’t you pick a picture?” he asks. He takes a photo album from a shelf filled with identical covers. “Tell us about that day. Then you can choose a picture from one of our albums and we’ll tell you about it.”

That sounds like it might be okay. I open their book to a group of us wobbling on ice skates. It was my tenth birthday party. Then I stop and can’t say anything else. It wasn’t my tenth birthday, but a month and a half after my ninth. My parents weren’t my parents, but my kidnappers. We were all so happy – but did they have a load of guilt underneath that joy?

I can’t even look at the king and queen. If they hadn’t made me look at these pictures, I wouldn’t have to think about my parents’ guilt. That was probably their plan, anyway. They’re trying to turn me against Mom and Dad.

It won’t work.

My parents couldn’t have been better. They loved me and taught me right from wrong. They came to all my recitals and competitions, even when I didn’t want them to. That’s not how evil people act, and kidnappers are evil. There has to be some massive confusion. I should have messaged them when I was alone with Casper, when I saw his notebook. There must be a little part of me that thinks they are guilty. Otherwise, I would have messaged them immediately.

The queen tells me about a day in their photo album. I was almost two and the prince was three days old. I wanted to hold him, but they didn't think I was strong enough. They put us both in the middle of their bed, me sitting up and him lying on my lap. I thought he'd be like a doll; when he flailed and hit me in the nose, I screamed and didn't want to go near him again.

She keeps talking, but I can't hear her. Her voice is dim and distant, like it's coming through a long tunnel. I stand up and walk to the door. The queen falls silent. The king says they want to see me again later today. I nod; anything to get to be alone for a while.

Even when I leave, I'm not alone, though. Tanya and the prince are in the hall. She insists that the prince and I get to know each other. Either she doesn't notice or doesn't care that neither one of us is interested in her efforts. She takes the prince's hand (when did they get to the hand-holding stage?) and drags him into my room behind me. They sit in the two armchairs. I pace the room. The thick carpets mute the sound of the crutches.

"Is this what your room in Aletra looked like?" the prince asks.

Tanya and I snort in unison. He clearly has no idea what a normal bedroom consists of. "More like what I dreamed it could be."

Prince Michael and I maintain an awkward silence that Tanya tries to break. She talks about Aletra to the prince, and about the palace to me. Neither one of us answers her, but she keeps chattering as if it will break some insidious spell.

"Are you going to see your parents when they get here?" the prince asks, interrupting Tanya mid-sentence.

I freeze. The crutches are in front of me, ready for another swing, but I can't move. "My parents are coming here?"

"Well, yeah." By his tone, I might have asked if A comes before B. "They kidnapped you.

The Aletra guards are bringing them now. They should be here – oh, I don't know, maybe an hour or two from now?"

He's right; I should have figured that out. I demand that he take me to wherever the guards will bring my parents. He tells me I can't make him do anything. Even while he's saying that, though, he gets up to show me the way.

It's on the first floor, of course. The guards will have to park, after all, and bring my parents in. It's the back door, the one I came through last night. This morning. An eternity ago.

There are as many people around as there were when I arrived. I don't know if they were mostly guards when I came in, but that's certainly the case now. One of them types on a notebook. A couple of minutes later, the captain appears. He tells me that I can't stay here; it's too dangerous.

Dangerous? My parents? Nothing makes sense anymore, especially not Prince Michael jumping to my defense. He does, though; he tells the captain that only the king or queen can tell me I have to leave. I'm the princess, and I can stay unless their majesties tell me otherwise.

I try to thank him, but the words won't come. I can't even smile my appreciation. He must understand, because he nods his acceptance. Then he shows me the most comfortable place to sit. Tanya sits next to me and Michael squeezes in beside her.

There aren't any clocks, so I have no idea how long we sit here. All I know is that my butt and back hurt and although this might be the most comfortable seat, that's a reflection on the discomfort of the hall in general. This is clearly a place for the palace workers, not royalty. If I have to be queen someday, I'm going to make sure there's comfortable seating throughout the palace.

Guards suddenly become a flurry of movement. My parents must be getting close. Although I meant to keep sitting, calm and collected, I move towards the door. I feel people

surround me, but I don't check to see if they're guards or Tanya and Prince Michael. It doesn't matter who else is here; I need to see my parents.

A van arrives. It looks a lot like an ambulance, except there are bars on the back windows. The elephant stomps on my chest. My parents can't be in the prisoner side of a guard car. The sun might as well stop shining if my parents are criminals. Guards surround the van, guns aimed, as if my parents are going to attack. Someone opens the door. Dad climbs down, his hands in cuffs. Mom follows.

I don't realize I've called out until they turn to me. Dad sags into Mom. "Thank the Harmonies you're safe, Lyssa. You found my friends alright?"

A guard starts to butt him with the gun but stops when I cry out. I run to Mom and Dad, but the guards surround them, a human fence that won't let me through.

"Melyssande." The queen's voice comes from behind me, but I can't turn around. I claw at the guards, trying to find a way in. "Lyssa. The guards are trying to protect you. Come here. I'll take you to see – your parents – as soon as it's safe."

It's safe now. Mom and Dad have always kept me safe. Tanya wraps her arm around my shoulders and pulls me away. My ankle, which I didn't notice a minute ago, throbs. I hobble back to the bench and collapse onto it. The guards shuffle past, maintaining their wall between me and the parents I love.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Casper

The king and queen are making a mistake. I understand why they want to be alone with their daughter, but they're pushing her too hard and too fast. She isn't ready to accept that she's the princess yet, let alone that she has different parents than those she grew up with. It's not my place to tell them, though.

I go back to my rooms, but I can't sit still. Somewhere out there, Merrick and his associates are planning – what? To either come here and kidnap or kill the princess, to go back and destroy my town, or to ambush me. Is it Princess Melyssande he's after, or me? He almost got me before she even showed up. I don't know why I didn't realize that before. He's probably out to get me – and if he knows anything about me, he'll realize soon enough that attacking my family would be a far worse punishment than killing me.

I message a picture of Merrick to the captains in every city; for Aletra, I message the two lieutenants. Lyssa might not realize it yet, but there's no way Mike's still free. They'll have arrested both of her parents by now. Mike couldn't have known about the kidnapping; it's against everything he stands for. They'll free him eventually, when the investigation is over. I hope. In the meantime, I have to count on his lieutenants to keep an eye out for Merrick.

As soon as I send the picture, I message Mom and Dad. They need to be even more alert than usual. Dad messages back that it's probably a coincidence. Mom tells me to be careful. They both promise to keep guards posted around the clock. Thank the Harmonies they take me seriously.

I don't dare try to worm into Spado's network on a borrowed notebook that the palace guards have looked over. If Mr. Thomas doesn't see what I'm up to, the guards will. I don't think

they'd take kindly to the act, even if it is partly for the safety of the princess.

I message Henry. Maybe I misunderstood, and he only knew Merrick from the camp. When he replies, though, he tells me Merrick is from Spado. Merrick Nash. I run a search with his last name, but nothing recent comes up for that, either. This can't mean anything good. If Merrick wasn't even expelled, he shouldn't have been in that camp. I can only think of two possibilities: his legal name is completely different, or Duke Braxton sent him intentionally.

I tell Mom and Dad that I won't contact them for a while now, unless I have news. If Merrick found our town, there's every reason to think he has their signals. He's already several steps ahead of me; I don't need to give him an added advantage. Mom and Dad agree, with one caveat: we'll message each other every morning to say we're still safe.

I go back to the garage. Lyssa's going to be with the monarchs for a while; I can't rescue her. Even though I know the chances of finding Merrick through dumb luck are minimal, looking for him beats sitting around doing nothing but worry.

Not for the first time since fleeing home, I wish I carried money with me on a regular basis. Then I'd have the means to get people to talk. As it is, I have nothing but my charm. It doesn't get me very far.

I realize I'm hungry. I must have been driving for hours, and I have nothing to show for it. I head toward the palace. I can't even feed myself, not unless I want to live off my dried emergency rations. It's lucky for me that their majesties are willing to house and feed me, though I don't know how long their charity will last.

The notebook chirps. I pull over to check the message. Mr. Thomas wants me to meet him at the shop. He thinks he found something.

It only takes me about five minutes to get there. He's already closing the shop gates when I

run up. I follow him to his car.

“That was quite a picture you sent,” he says. “Did you have a sketch artist draw it?”

I tell him I drew it myself. I don’t know why I add that I showed it to the captain of the guard, too. Something about Mr. Thomas feels a little off-key. That’s ridiculous, though. He’s been a captain for years; he’s helped way more people than I have. I have to watch my paranoia; it’s getting out of control.

He tells me one of his men recognized the picture. He’s been following Merrick all afternoon, and should be able to lead us right to him. When I ask why they didn’t get the guards to arrest him, he says they don’t want to let anyone know about the Knights. That makes sense; we’ve kept our identity secret for so long, we don’t want to give it away now, especially since he has no idea that the future king will already know about the Knights. That is, if Dad’s right about the prophecy’s meaning.

The sun sets as we drive through the wealthy, center circle. I silence my notebook as we wind around through the rings, into upper middle class, through the lower middle class, into the poor sections. Fewer people are out at night in the poorer areas. The people who are out aren’t the kind of people I’d like to meet in the dark.

Mr. Thomas drives through the poorer rings, into an area that I wouldn’t particularly like to visit even in the daylight. Many apartments don’t have any foliage, not even grass or weedy bushes to offset the hole-ridden parking lots filled with cars that might not start in the morning. The places that do offer a lawn have more weeds than grass. Trash piles up against buildings and lies trapped in weeds. The entire area has an aura of hopelessness. If we’re going to find Merrick, this is the type of place I’d expect him to hide out in.

“Do you have a gun?” Mr. Thomas asks.

“I left home in a hurry. I couldn’t bring anything with me. Not that they’d let me keep a gun at the palace, anyway.”

He doesn’t offer me one, like I hope. He tells me to keep my wits about me, like I’ve never been in a dangerous situation before. I roll my eyes and follow him across a half-empty parking lot. I ask him why he parked so far away; he shushes me. I grind my teeth. When this is over, we’re going to have a discussion about respect. Just because I’m not middle-aged doesn’t mean I have limited mental capacity.

He sneaks from car to car. In my experience, people are more likely to notice this kind of behavior than if we walked normally. Since he’s the one with the car, the gun, and the Knights in Pacvo, I follow his lead. We make it to the back of the apartment, where we sidle up to the wall. We might as well carry strobe lights for all our stealth. I wonder how he managed to rise to captain, when he clearly has no idea how to hide in plain sight.

We inch our way around the building. It’s not even full dark yet; anyone looking out a window or walking on the street will see us. The discussion we’re going to have will include lessons on leading a stealth operation. If Mr. Thomas has done this before, it’s been such a long time that he’s forgotten everything he ever knew. It might not be a bad thing, having captains who are more at home behind a desk than in the field. If that’s the case, then, they need to know when to yield command.

We finally make it to the front corner of the building. Mr. Thomas makes hand gestures that I don’t know, but I guess to mean to be quiet and follow him. I respond with the standard signals that mean I’m ready and will follow. He hisses at me to follow him and I nod. What kind of joker doesn’t even know standard hand signals when he’s supposed to be leading a veritable army? I change my mind; I’m not going to have a talk with him. I’ll have Dad do it. Mr. Thomas won’t be

able to blow him off, the way he would me.

Voices drift towards us. Mr. Thomas stiffens. I widen and lower my stance, preparing for attack. A couple of guys about my age walk by. They look over at us and laugh. I don't blame them; I feel as ludicrous as we obviously look. The guys stroll over to a car. We don't move until they start the engine and drive away.

Mr. Thomas makes the ridiculous hand signals again. I nod at him. He creeps around the corner and I follow. The front is entirely empty, although laughter and yelling come from inside. The familiar noises reassure me. I remind myself that even though some of the inhabitants are leading normal lives doesn't mean Merrick isn't hiding in silence, waiting to attack.

The door to the complex is unlocked. Either the guys were unforgivably careless, or this place has no security. The only reasons for that are the owners don't care or the occupants don't need it. Given our current mission, I suspect it's the latter.

I breathe deeply, slowing my pulse and gathering my strength. Mr. Thomas sneaks up the stairs, making more noise than he would if he'd walk. I follow on the balls of my feet, so there's no sound. He cracks the third floor door open, then slides through. I follow him into a dark hallway.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Lyssa

I follow my parents as the guards take them away. Tanya hands me my crutches and I can't even find the words to thank her. I scrunch my nose at her and she scrunches hers back. I keep up with the group until they head down a set of stairs I haven't seen. I should have gone on the palace tour with Tanya.

The guards are still in sight when I make it to the bottom. I have to speed along to catch up, but I'm getting good at that. I hear people following me, but I don't look to see who it is. I have to talk to Mom and Dad. They have to tell me what happened. They must have a reason that will make sense out of everything that's happened in the past – how long has it been? A week? A few days? A year? They'll explain everything that's happened since the expulsion notice. They have to be able to.

The guards finally part and I see Mom and Dad. I close my eyes and shake my head. They're behind bars – in separate cells, even. I didn't know the palace even had dungeons, but here they are, holding my parents. I feel moisture on my cheeks and realize I'm crying. I can't wipe the tears away; I'm too busy holding on to the crutches so I can make it to my parents.

“How could you?” I demand when I'm outside Mom's cell. “I thought you were my real mom. How could you kidnap your own niece? And you,” I turn to Dad. “How long have you known? Why didn't you tell me?”

“Your dad never knew,” Mom says. “I've been telling the guards, but they won't listen. He never knew.”

The weight on my chest lightens for a moment. Only a moment, then Dad shakes his head.

“I should have known. I suspected, when we first met. You both had red hair then, though, and you were the wrong age, Lyssa. Almost a year older, and bright for your age. Even so, I should have called the guards. I shouldn’t have trusted the reports.” He sits on the concrete slab that’s supposed to serve as both chair and bed. He’s aged about a decade since I last saw him.

“What reports?” the king demands from behind me.

Dad doesn’t look up from the floor. The king repeats his question, but Dad acts like he can’t hear. Behind me, the king practically growls.

“Reports from the people you work with, right, Dad? The people who ensure that only the guilty are exiled, or find new homes if someone’s unfairly exiled.” Dad finally raises his head. I almost wish he hadn’t; he looks beaten in a way even a prison cell couldn’t manage.

“The Knights of the Rose?” It’s a whisper, but I still recognize the queen’s voice. We all swivel to gawk. Her smile wobbles. “Leigh told me about them after you disappeared. He promised to help us find you.”

Mom shakes her head. It’s not a denial; it’s more like she’s trying to dislodge water from her ears. “But he’s the one who helped us escape. He convinced me I needed to take her.”

The king barks at the guards to leave. More than half follow his directions before he speaks again “Wait. Unlock the prisoners and escort them to my chambers.”

The captain protests. The king cuts him off, repeating his order. This time, the captain obeys. He has to ask me to move so he can get to the lock. He lets Mom out and she caresses me like I’m a porcelain doll. The captain releases Dad and I hug him. He pulls me in like he can shield me from the world if he squeezes hard enough. He releases me from the hug and we follow the guards, but he keeps an arm wrapped around me. He props me up on one side, carrying that crutch so I can lean on him.

We're in the middle of a grim parade. Half the palace guards must surround us, and they all have a hand on their weapons, as if Mom and Dad could take them all down. Tanya and Prince Michael walk a couple of steps behind the king and queen. I half expect the maids and cooks to show up to watch the procession.

The king dismisses most of the guards when we get to his apartments. He posts two in the hall outside the door and another pair on the bedroom side of his door. He tells the prince to take Tanya on a tour of the castle. Neither of them says they've already done that. They leave, and I'm suddenly alone with all four of my parents.

Mom sits on a couch with her head down. "When Melyssande was born, Leigh claimed he was the father."

"And you believed him?" The queen's voice cracks.

"Of course not." Mom's head snaps up, but she immediately returns to studying the carpet. "He never had a chance. You and Alain were so much in love. It was clearly wishful thinking. But then the prophecy was made."

I'm the one to break the silence. "And you thought that's what it meant. That I'd take the throne, even though I wasn't really a Banora."

Mom nods. She says Leigh came to her and frantically told her he'd seen a petition to have the princess tested to ensure she was a Banora. Mom panicked. She didn't know what would happen to me, but she was sure the queen would be humiliated and divorced, at the least. She tears up as she says she couldn't bear that. So, following Leigh's directions, she took me to his house. He helped her bleach and dye her hair; I didn't need the bleach, but they dyed my hair red, too. He brought me boys' clothes and told me we were playing a game: his name was Johnny, Aunt Lynessa's name was Gloria, and my name was Stephen. Whoever forgot first, lost.

“You must have stuck to that for days,” the king tells me. “You always hated to lose.”

I half-laugh, half-shrug. “I still do.”

Mom blinks the moisture away. “Guards were looking for a dark-haired woman and a blonde girl. No one noticed a red-headed mother and son.”

The king nods once. “A good story. However, until and unless we get some proof, that’s all it is. Melyssande, go outside, please.”

“But I want to talk to...”

The queen takes me by the arm and pulls me out of the room before I can finish my sentence. I stumble trying to keep my balance on my crutches, but she doesn’t notice. Only when we get to the stairs does she realize I can’t keep up. Even then, she makes me go down first. She knows I’d run back to Mom and Dad if I had a chance. She posts guards at the bottom of the stairs and tells them not to let me up.

I’m shaking when I get downstairs. I race down a hallway towards I don’t know where. Anywhere, so long as it’s away from the queen. Tanya calls after me, but I don’t slow down. I find a door leading outside but I can’t get it open. Tanya catches up. She turns the knob easily enough, and holds it for me so I can storm outside.

“I hate them,” I say. I’m not sure which set of parents I’m referring to. “I hate them, I hate them, I hate them.”

The necklace the queen gave me feels like it’s burning me, branding me. I reach up and unclasp it. I hold it in my hand, ready to hurl it as far as I can.

“It’s too pretty to throw away,” Tanya says. “Can I wear it for a while?”

My laugh is rough and harsh, but it clears some of the anger away. I can see without the edge of red haze. “Sure. Maybe if you wear it, they’ll let you be the princess, instead. You’d make

a much better one.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” she says. She puts the necklace on while she answers.

“It suits you,” Prince Michael says. I didn’t realize he joined us. He asks me what happened, and I tell him that Mom and Dad told his parents what happened, but they wouldn’t listen. My parents are locked up and I’m not allowed to see them. I think they’re being moved so I won’t even know where they are, but probably back in the dungeons.

Tanya bites her lip. “I know you love them, Lys, and they’re awesome parents. But I kinda see the king and queen’s point. Your mom kidnapped you.”

I double over. I feel like she punched me in the stomach. I turn and retreat as fast as I can. The prince calls me, but I can’t answer. The lawn blurs; I’m an island in a green lake. I speed away until a crutch catches on something and I stumble. I catch myself before I fall, but I stop and wipe my eyes. Prince Michael catches up and steps in front of me. I was wrong; his eyes aren’t blue. They’re the same gray as Mom’s. The same gray as mine.

“Our parents have spent my entire life looking for you,” he says, “and worrying someone would take me. I’m not sure if their refusal to have another child was because someone could steal another child, or because if they had another girl, she might be the princess of the prophecy – which would mean I’d have to disappear, too.” I open my mouth, but he takes my shoulders and shakes me. “Of course they’re going to protect you. They’ve waited fifteen years to have the chance!”

My eyes burn. That’s undoubtedly true, but during those same fifteen years, Mom and Dad were protecting me. That has to count for something, too. I clench my teeth. The prince jumps back and then runs back the way we came. I turn my head, and then chase after him. A man holds his hand over Tanya’s mouth and drags her toward the back garden. She kicks backwards at him, but

she struggles to stand up. Her heels don't even make contact.

The prince sprints towards them. I follow as quickly as I can on the uneven ground. Tanya stumbles but the man doesn't slow. He drags her as if she were no more than a rag doll. I place the crutches farther ahead and swing myself even faster. Even though she's tiny, she slows him down. Prince Michael and I are both gaining on him – but he's too close to the gate. He'll get there before we catch up.

I speed up. My left crutch rolls off a stone or slides off the grass. I don't know how it happens; just that it suddenly slides away. My arm flails, and I let the crutch go as I fall. It flies from me right before every part of me – from my already hurting ankle, to my hip, to my ribs, to my arm – jars against the ground.

The crutch hits the would-be kidnapper on the leg. He stumbles, and Tanya lands a kick on his other knee. Their legs tangle and they fall. Tanya rolls away, pushes herself up, and runs. The man scrambles after her, but the prince tackles him. A dozen guards dart toward the flailing heap, guns drawn but unable to shoot without endangering Prince Michael. Another half dozen appear at my side.

I refuse to leave. Michael is still tangled up with the man who tried to take Tanya. I need to know how he got close enough, and why he'd try to kidnap her. Two guards pull Michael off the man; two or three hold the man while another pulls his hands behind his back and snaps cuffs around his wrists. The prince and Tanya run to me.

“You completely saved me,” Tanya says. “Did you even aim?”

“You know me. If I tried to get him, I probably would have hit you, or maybe Prince Michael.”

Tanya edges behind the prince when the guards march the attempted kidnapper by us. He

struggles to get free and I step up to her side, so he can't even see her.

"You can't stop me," he says. "We can't allow the princess to destroy the kingdom. If you stop me, someone else will get her."

I block the guards and face the man. "How did you identify the princess? 'Cause you got it completely wrong."

"I got the right girl," he says. "Only the princess would wear the royal crest."

The king and queen arrive, panting, in time to hear his claim. The queen gasps. "The necklace Leigh made. Lynessa was telling the truth; he is behind the kidnapping."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Casper

There isn't a single light on, not even a glow spilling through a door. I step into the hallway cautiously, waiting for my eyes to adjust. The floor beside me creaks. I spin around, fists up. I don't see as much as hear something coming towards my head. I jump back, slamming into Mr. Thomas. He grunts. So does someone else, someone he must have run into.

Something isn't right. I should have paid attention to my gut when we were in the parking lot. I knew then that I should leave, but I didn't. I didn't even take thirty seconds to listen for the Harmonies. If Dad were here, he'd tell me he told me I was too careless – right after he rescued me. He isn't here, though; I'll have to save myself.

I weave from side to side and drop to the floor. The scuffling and muffled grunts continue as I back up on my hands and knees. I run my hands along the sticky wall until I hit the bump of a door casing. I rise into a crouch, then push the door open as I hurtle through and down the stairs. By the shouts behind me, I don't have much of a head start. There are probably residents who would help me, but there's no time to find them. I take the stairs three at a time and race out the front door.

I expect the guys who laughed at us to lie in wait for me, but they must not have been part of the plan. I cut through the empty parking lot and run down the middle of the street. A car honks and swerves to avoid me. The smell of burning rubber fills the air as another car screeches to a stop. I pull the passenger side handle and silently thank the Harmonies; the driver was too cocky to lock his doors. Even better, when I hop in, he changes from tough guy to five-year old.

“Hey!” His voice cracks. “Get out or I'll call the guards.”

“If you don’t call them,” I say, “I will. Drive!”

He gapes at me for a minute. Then Mr. Thomas and about half a dozen other men run around the apartment building. Someone fires and asphalt spatters the car. The guy’s eyes widen and he steps on the gas.

“Who are those people?” he asks. “Who are you? What did you do?”

I curse. I left my notebook in Mr. Thomas’s car. “I’m trying to save the kingdom.”

I don’t blame him for the snort. I doubt many people would believe my claim, even though it is the truth. I tell him to head towards the palace. He glances at me, then looks in the rearview mirror longer than I’d like. I turn around; four cars pursue us.

“Cacophony,” he says. I silently agree.

“Where’s your notebook? I need to message the guards.”

He doesn’t answer in words, but the quick look he shoots at the glove box is enough. I take his notebook and message the palace and city guards, Will and Henry. If I had the contact information for the king, queen or prince, I’d message them, too. I tell everyone what happened and, after barking at the driver, message everyone again with our cross-streets.

The notebook chimes several times in quick succession. I check the captain of the palace guard’s message first. He asks me if I recognize anyone chasing me. I don’t want to; he’s a respected jeweler and I’m a stranger and a teenager. Nevertheless, I admit that the only one I can identify is Mr. Leigh Thomas. Almost immediately, he messages me that if it’s possible, I should keep them in sight. I relay the information to the driver.

“I’m never taking a shortcut again,” he says. “I don’t care what the guards say; I’m losing them.”

“Sounds good to me.” The gap between us and our pursuers isn’t getting any wider. “I’m

Casper. Thanks for saving me.”

“Like I had a choice?” He swings around a corner. All four vehicles follow us. “I’m Jack.”

A light up ahead turns red. Cars start crossing the other way; Jack doesn’t slow. I squeeze my eyes closed and grip the sides of the seat. Horns blare, but he keeps going. I finally open my eyes when I hear metal smash together. We’re on the other side, and a crash blocks the intersection. The first car is totaled, and the others can’t chase us.

Jack takes several turns: left, right, left, right. He checks his mirrors again, then pulls over. “They’re not after you anymore. Out.”

I open the door. I thank him before I get out, but he doesn’t respond. As soon as I close the door, I hear the locks engage. He drives off. I don’t think he looks behind to ensure I’m okay. He takes the first right and his taillights disappear.

At least he left me near a restaurant. The spices, charcoal and chicken on the grill blend into one scent that makes my stomach growl. I have no money, but there’s a crowd inside. As long as this group is friendlier than Mr. Thomas and his gang, I’ll be safer inside than on the streets in this part of town. I message the captain with an update and the name of the restaurant.

The bell on the door jingles when I open it. It’s more of a bar than a restaurant, despite the small kitchen at the back. Most of the customers are men who are marginally less hostile than the group I escaped. At least no one aims a gun at me.

One of the men at the bar stands up. He’s nearly as tall as me, with a lot more muscle on his frame. “You ain’t from this part of the city.”

A laugh escapes me. His eyes narrow and he steps towards me. “I’m not from any part of the city. Any city, for that matter. I’d like to be, but who wants a kid from the Wilds around?”

Conversation stops, then resumes at a higher volume. Although no one else will even look

in my direction anymore, the standing man studies me. Finally, he nods and invites me to sit next to him. I thank him, but admit that I'm not here to drink; I'm waiting for the guards. The temperature drops a couple of degrees. The man asks me what a kid from the Wilds is doing with the guards.

“Trying not to get killed.”

I can't tell them the whole story, of course. I have to leave out not just the part about me being a prince, but also anything about Lyssa. Most people think she was killed long ago. Even if they believed me, they might agree that she should die so the prophecy can't come true.

Instead, I say that I trusted the wrong person and ended up in the middle of something bad. Most of them nod sagely, as if they, too, had their trust betrayed at some point. They hear about the car chase, but not the reason behind it.

Flashing lights roll to a stop outside the bar. Everyone stiffens, even the bartender. I walk to the exit before the guards have a chance to come in. “Thank you for letting me stay,” I say. “It's good to know there are some good people and safe places left, even in a city the size of Pacvo.”

The guard isn't someone I recognize. He tells me he's from the city guard, not the palace; it makes sense I haven't seen him before. I want to go back to the accident and make sure Mr. Thomas doesn't get away. The guard tells me we're not going anywhere but the palace. Arguing won't do me any good; I have no options but to go with him or try to find my way back to the palace. The only thing I know is that I'm not in a good part of town; I get into the car.

Lyssa waits in the foyer, sitting between the king and queen. She jumps up and grimaces; she must have put weight on her ankle, despite the crutches. She swings her way over to me. “What were you thinking, going out on your own? You could have been killed.”

“You think I don't know that?” I squeeze my temples with my palms, then drop my hands

and meet her eyes. “I have to find Merrick. I can’t let him destroy my town.”

“Merrick?” The queen turns to the king. “That name sounds familiar.”

He shakes his head. “That’s Braxton’s seneschal’s name. It’s an uncommon name, but not unique; we can’t mean the same man.”

Lyssa asks if they have a picture of Braxton’s seneschal. As we troop down the hall together, King Alain insists his brother wouldn’t have anything to do with either the princess’s kidnapping or an attack on my town. It’s hard to believe Duke Braxton is the king’s brother. They look similar, with the same blonde hair and blue eyes and the same muscular build. The king has a reputation for being fair and reasonable; the Duke of Braxton is notorious for the opposite.

When we get to his office, the king opens his notebook and types. After a minute or so, he turns the notebook around to show us several pictures and we crowd around the desk. Although I didn’t think Lyssa ever saw the man, when she sees the fourth picture, she gasps. I nod. “That’s definitely the man.”

The king sags. He ages in front of us. The queen rubs his back. “We need to give your brother the same courtesy we offer every citizen. You have to hear his side. You know your brother is – easily influenced.”

“You mean he’s as bright as a broken bulb.” He shakes his head. “He probably knew nothing about it. Merrick’s meant to essentially run the city, since my brother isn’t capable.”

The room suddenly sways, like we’re on board a ship. I step back to find my balance. “But if it’s the seneschal who’s in charge, why don’t you fire him? He’s exiled so many innocent people.”

The king spears me with his eyes. I’ve given myself away; he knows that I’m more than an average teenager now. He doesn’t press me for an explanation, though. Instead, he tells me that

Merrick hasn't actually broken any laws. The king and queen recently learned of his heavy-handed tactics, but updating the laws takes time. As they're written now, Merrick can exile anyone who breaks any law, no matter how obsolete: he's even within the law to exile someone for swearing.

If Duke Braxton is innocent, and even the seneschal hasn't broken any laws, then nothing makes sense anymore. Maybe the queen is right, and he never meant the princess any harm.

"There's an easy way to find out if he wants to hurt me," Lyssa says. "We need to make the announcement that I'm back."

"No." The king and queen speak together. I don't entirely blame them; they just got their daughter back and aren't ready to put her in any danger. At the same time, I want to scream. She's seventeen now; practically an adult. She should be allowed some say in her own life.

Lyssa doesn't argue. She smiles serenely. "If you won't go through the official channels, I'll manage on my own. If I message my friends, including a picture of me inside the palace, how long do you think it will take word to spread throughout the kingdom?"

Harmonies, I love this girl. I mean, I love how clever she is. Her parents argue, but she's clearly going to win. I should have asked for her help from the beginning.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Lyssa

Acting like a toddler won't get me far with my attempts to be treated like an adult, so I manage not to scream. I grit my teeth for a few minutes, instead. I sit on a couch, close my eyes, and take several deep breaths. Then I look the king in the eyes as I tell him and the queen that I'll be eighteen in less than a year; if they want to see me again after I'm adult, I'd appreciate being allowed some say in my life. They fall silent.

I turn to Casper, who leans against the wall, grinning. I tell him he's no better; he should have let me know on the way to Pacvo what he needed me to do.

He nods, his blue eyes turning puppy-dog soft and pleading. "You're right. I assumed you understood what I was thinking. I'm sorry."

How can I stay angry after that? I turn back to the king and queen. "I want to see Mom and Dad."

They wince, but I can't help it. Mom and Dad will always be my parents, no matter what the tests showed. Of course they refuse; they probably don't want me to ever see my parents again. I need to confront Dad. I understand why Mom wouldn't tell me what happened – I'm not sure I'll be able to forgive her, but I understand. Dad should have told me his concerns, though.

Would his fears have hurt me? Yes. Would I have worried, too? Of course. Would it have been as stressful as fleeing into the Wilds without any idea what was going on? Not even close.

The king and queen won't listen to my arguments, though. They insist that my parents are too dangerous, even though I've lived with them for fifteen years and they've never tried to hurt me.

I say that if they won't let me see my parents, then they have to tell everyone I'm the princess and I'm back, like Casper asked. They disagree. They want the two-year-old princess back, not a teenager to argue with them.

I cross my arms. "Even if you take all the notebooks away from every teenager in the palace, I bet Prince Michael would be able to find one if Tanya asks him to. Then all I have to do is take a picture with the three of us together and message it to a single friend, or get Tanya to. The news will spread, along with gossip about why you didn't announce my return."

I know the king and queen both think I'm a brat. They don't understand that I can't let Casper's parents and friends die because of me. I couldn't even if I'd never met them, let alone had them rescue me. I try to explain, but they won't listen. The queen tells me it's better to let someone destroy a small town than the entire kingdom.

"Maybe that would be true, if destroying the town ensured the safety of the kingdom. I'm going to find a way to save them both."

"I think..." Casper says, but the king cuts him off.

"It's wonderful that you want to save the world, but sometimes it's not possible."

"I'm not going to let Merrick – or whoever it is – destroy that town if I can help it."

The king finally arranges for a reporter to come in the morning, although he doesn't tell them why. He says he has an announcement to go on live vid.

"Thank you," I say, but he doesn't answer. I'm sure he's wishing for a different result from the test. I wish that, too. I want to go back to my old life and find them a princess who thinks like they do, or at least someone who doesn't argue. After fifteen years of waiting, they deserve the daughter they lost. Despite the genetic reality, I'm not that daughter.

When we're finally dismissed from their royal presence, Casper and I leave together. I

hobble up the stairs; even with the crutches my ankle hurts enough to make me want to cry, after my fall this afternoon.

Our house in Aletra is easier to get around in, especially with an injury. The palace is too big to ever be a home.

We get to my door, but I walk past it. I don't want to go into the rooms that feel so much like the most perfect apartment I could hope for. I don't want to look at the bookshelf that matches the one at home. I want to find Mom and Dad, but I know I can't. This building is not only huge, but also a maze. I'm more likely to lose myself than find them.

Casper walks beside me. He doesn't need to talk all the time, like some of my friends at home. He simply offers me the comfort of his presence.

We turn a corner and nearly run into Tanya and the prince. They walk close together but they aren't holding hands this time. We all stop before we collide.

"Where were you?" Prince Michael asks Casper. "You missed all the excitement."

He leads us into his rooms. They're only a few doors and a corner away from mine, but I didn't know how close he was. It takes me a couple of minutes to realize the layout of his sitting room is the same as mine. His walls are a fiery combination of red and orange that should be jarring but isn't. Books line half his shelves. While the prince and Tanya tell Casper about our afternoon, I study the trophies that he's jammed into the other half of the shelves.

"Why don't I know about these?"

His head jerks around. "You weren't around."

That isn't what I meant, and I'm sure he knows it, like I understand he doesn't want to talk about it. Too bad. He knows everything about my life – the king has an entire room filled with details; I want to know something about this stranger who's my brother.

“The vids show you as a spoiled wild child,” I say. “Why don’t they ever talk about your accomplishments?”

He shrugs. “They don’t want normal or happy. If I don’t give them something to report every couple of weeks, they start hounding Mom and Dad or the guards about progress on the search for Princess Melyssande. It’s too hard on them.”

“I’m sorry.” My voice is barely more than a whisper. He shouldn’t have had to protect his parents like that, but what choice did he have? He couldn’t abandon the king and queen any more than I could abandon Mom and Dad. I want to offer him consolation, but I don’t know how. I can’t stop loving my parents just because I found out I have another set. No matter what the prince thinks, my parents need me more than his do.

I ask the prince if he can pretend to be glad I’m back tomorrow long enough for the vids to catch it. He doesn’t deny the accusation, but he agrees to pretend. I bite my lip and ask if he knows where Mom and Dad are. He turns to Casper and asks about his day.

My eyes burn. I struggle with the door; it’s harder to open with blurry vision. Once it opens, I leave, closing it softly behind me. I’m practically an adult; I can’t go around slamming doors. I head down a hallway, with no idea where it goes. As long as I’m heading away from the prince, I don’t care where I end up.

Casper catches up with me before I even turn a corner. He syncs his step to my awkward gait. Click-thump. Click-thump.

“You’re not going to destroy the kingdom, you know,” he says. I laugh harshly. He stops me by standing in front of me and won’t move until I meet his eyes. “Really. Will you either come to my room or let me come in yours? I have something to confess, and I don’t want anyone else to overhear it.”

My heart lifts for a moment when I think he's going to tell me he somehow faked the tests and that I'm not the princess. Then I realize that isn't possible: Mom is the queen's sister. Mom admitted to taking me.

I can't answer, so I nod. We turn around and go back to my rooms. Confession is never good. Since he can't be telling me I'm not the princess, I don't want to hear it. Nevertheless, I let him come in. I sit in an armchair. He places my crutches against the wall and then sits opposite me. I almost ask him to light the fire. Even though it's a warm autumn, I'm suddenly cold.

"When you first arrived at our town, I thought Tanya was the princess," he says. My laugh is more natural this time. Tanya should be the princess: she looks and acts more royal than I'll ever manage. He shakes his head. "You don't understand. I thought she was the princess, and that you'd come to our town on purpose. I thought she'd come looking for me, to see what her future husband was like. You're not going to destroy the kingdom, you'll change it. Hopefully for the better."

He tells me that he's the direct descendant of King Jasper. I smile and nod. I don't know when he turned insane, or why none of us noticed. I hope it isn't the dangerous kind. I've got enough people out to hurt me without adding him to the list.

He laughs. "I'm not crazy, I promise. Consult the Harmonies. It's harder in the city, but the palace is pretty quiet. I bet you can hear them. Think about your wedding day; ask them to show you who you'll marry."

I don't want to close my eyes. Then I realize it's like with Mom: he's had plenty of time to kill me, if that's what he wanted to do. I take the notebook and stylus, close my eyes, and concentrate on my wedding. It takes less than a minute before they start singing. The vision is more metaphorical than usual: Casper and I stand at the altar. Behind me is the palace; behind him, the castle I've been drawing ever since I started hearing the Harmonies.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Casper

There's no easy way to tell parents who've just found their missing daughter that they're going to have to let her go again. Fortunately, she's still young; it will be years before we actually get married. Also fortunately, the engagement should quell the potential uprising at her return.

I can't possibly get the ring before the reporter shows up tomorrow. Still, I message both Dad and our castellan. The sooner it gets here, the sooner I can put it on Lyssa's finger. Then I head downstairs to talk to the king and queen. It'll be hard enough for them to hear it now; they don't need to find out during a live vid.

There's a guard stationed outside the door to the king's office. He leaves me in the hall for a minute while he consults the king, then lets me in and returns to his station. The king and queen both sit on a sofa. She invites me to sit down. I can't. I pace around the room until the king barks at me to sit; he says I'm making him nervous.

I perch on the edge of the seat across from the royal couple. I stare at the blue carpet; there's a faded patch by the king's feet. It must be a favorite spot. The queen finally asks me why I came. With my head still down, I tell them that I'm the latest in a direct line from King Jasper. After a long silence, I raise my head. The king's face is so red that I jump up to call a doctor.

He stands up when I do and blocks my path. He jabs a finger in my chest. "If you think you can stay in my palace and say you want the throne..."

"I don't," I say. He blinks. I tell him I'll gladly submit to the identity test that proved the last claimant a liar. Then I explain what our family has always believed: the prophecy doesn't mean the destruction of the kingdom, but rather a union between the Banoras and the Beaufrieds.

Princess Melyssande won't bring chaos, but a return to the old dynasty.

"I'm not here to ask for the throne. I'm here to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."

"She's too young." Again, they speak in unison.

"So am I," I say. The king finally smiles, though for less than a second. "I want to get engaged and explain to the public what that means. Hopefully, that will end at least most assassination attempts. We won't get married for – what, four or five years?"

They sigh in unison, too. It takes nearly half an hour, but I finally get approval for my plan. Tomorrow looms. I don't know how I'll make it another fourteen hours, but fourteen hours is too few. I only have fourteen hours left as my own person.

I stay in my rooms at dinner time. I can't eat, anyway. I wish I had a notebook so I could message my parents. Mom will be heartbroken if she finds out about my engagement from a vid. On the other hand, Mr. Thomas has an entire network of Knights. He undoubtedly convinced them they're working to save the kingdom. If they intercept my message, there's no telling what they'll do. They might storm the palace, they might trace the signals and raze our town, or they might do nothing.

Night falls, but I can't sleep. Lyssa's wonderful, but I've known her for less than a week. I'm crazy to tie myself to her. If I don't, then she'll still be in danger. Din, even if we got married tonight, there might be people who want to kill her. If we make our relationship – and my identity – public, at least we can minimize the danger.

I must doze, but when I wake up, it feels like rocks nestled in my eyes overnight. A shower reduces them to pebbles. I still want to crawl back in bed and sleep for a couple of hours. Instead, I dress in the suit someone left for me. The palace tailor is excellent. He never took my measurements, but it fits perfectly.

I don't go down for breakfast. I doubt I could even swallow water or juice. Besides, the less I have in my stomach, the less I can lose when we're live in front of the entire kingdom. I don't need to be known as Prince Puke for the rest of my life.

I go to Lyssa's rooms but she's not there. Tanya's and Michael's rooms are empty, too. No one else must have the same appetite issues as me. For Tanya and Michael, that makes sense. Lyssa's world is changing even more than mine, though. I'm impressed she even went downstairs. If she's going to be that brave, I guess I can be, too.

She sits at the breakfast table with the king, queen, prince and Tanya. She even has a plate of fruit and a crepe in front of her. She moves the fruit around the plate, but doesn't take a bite. Maybe she isn't as calm as I thought. Maybe I can manage some juice, after all.

Even though she chews her lip more than any food, Lyssa smiles when I join them. When the others say hello, she waves. I put three squares of fruit on a plate and sit next to her. Neither one of us contributes to the conversation at the table. In fact, I have no idea what they're talking about.

As soon as breakfast is over (Lyssa's plate and mine both have the same food we started with), the queen whisks Lyssa away. Michael takes pity on me and walks with me. I've already seen the palace grounds, but that's probably for the better. I don't think I'd be able to remember anything new.

The vid crew arrives. They glance incuriously at me and the prince. If they didn't know they have a scoop coming up, they'd probably be working on what they could make out of this innocuous scene: Prince Michael has a Boyfriend! Prince Michael's Latest Fling! Drug Dealer on Palace Grounds?

They might be considering the possibilities now, in case the king's news isn't all they hoped for. I sigh. In less than an hour, they'll have much bigger news than any gossip about the

prince they could manufacture. They'll have two princes' reputations to slaughter for the people's entertainment.

Michael's notebook chimes. He checks it, then tilts his head at me. "A couple claiming to be your parents are at the gates."

I start running before he finishes the sentence. He catches up to me easily and matches my pace. "What's going on?"

Lyssa's right: he should be known for athleticism. Anyone who can run and talk at the same time is clearly not spending every night partying, like the vids say. Maybe soon he can get the recognition he deserves. I don't answer, since I need my breath. He types something on his notebook. That's showing off. No one should be capable of messaging while running. It's against all the laws of nature.

A minute later, I'd rather hug than hit him. He must have messaged to have them come here: my parents' car comes into view, followed by two guards' cars. I slow to a jog, then a walk, then stop and wait for them, belatedly realizing I'm in a suit.

They stop just short of me and Michael. Mom jumps out even before Dad turns the car off. She runs over and hugs me, then apologizes to Michael and introduces herself. Although the entire kingdom knows who he is, he reciprocates the introduction. I stand still, stunned. I never messaged them. How did they know to come?

Mom reads my mind, as usual. "Your dad kept tabs on you. Of course we knew you'd need us today."

Dad arrives and hands me a small black box. I gasp; it's not possible. He smiles. "As soon as the princess sang for us, I knew who she was and messaged our castellan. By the time you messaged him, your mother and I were halfway here. With the ring."

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Michael says timidly. It’s oddly comforting that Dad intimidates even the prince. “Dad said to make sure you got tested before the vids start. We should probably get you there soon. Um, what, exactly, are you being tested for?”

“My identity,” I say. “It’s basically the same thing Lyssa went through.”

Mom places her hand on my shoulder. “I know secrecy is hard to break, but don’t you think Prince Michael deserves to hear before the rest of the kingdom?”

Of course he does. He asks the guards to lead my parents to meet the king and queen, then takes me to the exam rooms. On the way, I tell him everything. He’s as skeptical as his parents, but at least he doesn’t accuse me of trying to steal the throne.

“How will they even know if you’re related to King Jasper?”

At first I think he’s joking. Then I realize he’s only fifteen; he would have been too young to pay attention a decade ago, when someone claimed to be King Jasper’s heir. I wouldn’t have cared much, either, except I knew they had to be wrong. Since that title belonged to me, I followed the vids avidly.

When Prince David, Jasper’s grandson, didn’t have the Faculty, the first thing they did was test him to make sure he was truly Jasper’s grandson. Despite the inability to hear the Harmonies, he was definitely the heir. The test results went on file and remained there. A decade ago, the would-be prince submitted his sample and discovered the probability that he’s related to King Jasper was too low to mean anything. The same tests that disproved his claim will prove mine.

“Wait,” he says. “You know they can tell, and you still want to be tested?”

It’s a reasonable reaction. I doubt many people have any certainty of their ancestry. If we didn’t have the Faculty, it would be harder to believe in my descent. A tiny part of me hopes we’re wrong. It’s possible some long-ago ancestor was David’s squire and told his son he was a prince,

instead, but it's not likely. A descendant or two of a squire might have the Faculty. For the entire line to have it, though, we must be royalty.

Michael stays in the exam room with me, and I don't ask him to leave. Whether he's here out of curiosity or because his parents want an eyewitness to the test is irrelevant. Either way, he has a right to be here. We'll find out together if he's the only prince in the room or if I'm one, too.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Lyssa

For the vid, I don't get to wear jeans and a t-shirt. I'm not surprised, but it is disappointing. I know lots of girls who like to get dressed up for Prom and other dances; I'm not one of them. Give me comfortable clothes any day of the week. Three women come to dress me. If it takes three women, the clothing is way too complicated.

I'm pretty sure I'm getting more than the usual Prom experience. While I'm in the shower, my clothes disappear; only a robe hangs on the hook when I get out. I dry off, wrap a towel around my hair, and secure the robe with a double knot. Then I head off to find the dress I'm sure they've laid out for me.

Instead of clothing waiting for me in the dressing room, there's a massage table. One of the women I don't recognize tells me to remove my robe and lie face-down under the sheet. She rubs my back, arms and legs. As her hands knead and smooth, it hurts, but when she moves on, my body relaxes in her wake.

When she's done, I'm face-up and half asleep. I'm not sure I'll be able to move again in the near future. That's turns out not to be a problem. When she leaves, another woman comes in. This one looks familiar. She's one of the women from my makeover, but I'm not sure which one. She has a huge light with her, possibly to wake me up with. She puts something soft and cool on my eyes and spreads cream on my face. I start to fall asleep, but then she pricks the skin on my forehead. I jump.

"Just removing a blemish," she says. "Don't worry."

I'm not worried, exactly. This is so strange. She returns to the soothing motions and I drift

off again.

When she removes the eye covers, I cringe at the harsh light. She clucks at me to stop creating wrinkles as if I'm an old woman already. Maybe that's what happens when your life turns upside down: you age overnight.

I feel my muscles clenching up again. I keep my face as smooth as I can for her while she applies makeup. It's backwards, though; shouldn't I have clothes on before the makeup? It's beyond weird to have someone apply my makeup while I'm lying down. I pull the blanket up to my chin. She folds it over and places it at my collarbones.

She takes forever on my eyes. It might be war paint, for all her concentration. Actually, that's exactly what it is. It's my camouflage, turning me into a princess before I get in front of the vids. I wish that being myself could be enough. I wonder if it ever will be again. Maybe someday, I'll become the princess the king and queen want. If I do, will I still be the Lyssa Mom and Dad love?

"There." She studies me from five or six different angles. "Perfect. Go ahead and get your underclothes on. Then you can join us out here."

At least she gives me that much privacy. They don't give me any choices, though: I have a lacy bra and matching underwear sitting out for me. I might have chosen them myself, if I'd gone shopping. Since they're sitting out for me, though, I want something different, something grungy and as far from elegant as I can find.

I put the lacy things on. I bet if I did find another set, they'd make me change in front of them. I wonder if I'll have as little say in my life once I'm an adult. At least when I'm queen I can do my own shopping and dress myself, even if it means I have to pass a law first.

The women all but tap their feet in the sitting room, waiting for me. As soon as I appear,

they pounce. One takes my crutches and removes the robe, tsking as if I disobeyed direct orders. Another woman tells me to lift my arms, then slips a soft red dress over my head. The makeup woman dashes over and brushes my cheeks before they return my crutches.

They go through the same motions as during my first makeover: I'm not allowed to see myself while they work. It doesn't matter; my nausea has nothing to do with their ministrations and everything to do with the reason for them. I wish I didn't have to talk to the reporter. I could almost wish I hadn't insisted, except that I still couldn't live with myself if I endangered Casper's town with my cowardice.

When they finish primping, the seamstress – at least, I assume that's who she is – brings out a pair of heels the same shade as my dress. “You have to be joking,” I say.

“As a matter of fact,” she says and a grin peeks through her frown, “you're right. I'm joking. Are these better?” She gives me a pair of black flats.

I follow one of the women downstairs. Soon I find myself sitting with the royal family in front of a vid crew. My mouth is too dry to swallow. The reporter is a blonde woman who knows she's beautiful. She takes a compact mirror out and checks her face, turning left and right, up and down, then snaps it closed and smiles. She eyes me like I'm a steak fresh off the grill.

“Excellent,” she says. “Are you all ready? Remember, this is going live.”

When the cameras are on, the king smiles at her. “Thank you for coming, Ms. Roberts. I have wonderful news to share with the kingdom. It seems there's far more royalty in the kingdom than I knew. Not only did our daughter return, but she brought a prince with her, too.”

Ms. Roberts's smile freezes. She asks him to repeat himself. He tells her he'll do better: he'll have someone else explain it to the public: Dr. Ashdowne, the leading expert on DNA analysis.

The woman who used the hoe on me steps out. So she's a doctor, not a nurse. She has the machine that she used and a small bag. She sets the machine on a table and explains it to Ms. Roberts. It connects to a database where all known DNA is stored. When she puts a sample in, the machine either analyzes it and compares it to all known samples or, as in the case with me, she tells it to compare my sample to the samples for their majesties, King Alain and Queen Beatrice. In my case, there was a 100% match: I'm definitely the missing Princess.

Ms. Roberts huffs. She asks if there's any possibility of tampering. "If someone altered the records on file, it could show a false positive, couldn't it?"

Dr. Ashdowne smiles. "It's extremely improbable. The security surrounding our database is the best in the kingdom. However, we can verify the findings another way."

She connects an attachment to the machine that holds three tubes – what I thought were needle-things – instead of one. She presses a button and it displays an error that the tubes are empty. She takes the tops off of all the tubes. Then she takes one of the empty tubes over to the king and opens a sealed bag holding a mini-hoe. She takes a sample from the king's cheek and taps it into the tube, then returns it to the machine, puts the cap on it, and labels it. She repeats the process with the queen, and then with me. She presses a button and we wait for about half a minute. Ms. Roberts doesn't breathe while we wait.

The screen on the machine lights up. I can't see it from my angle, but the reporter and cameraman must both be able to. Ms. Roberts sucks in a huge gasp of air, and the cameraman doesn't move the camera from the machine. Dr. Ashdowne reads "Specimen C – which, as you can see, is the princess's sample – is the child of Specimen A – King Alain – and Specimen B – Queen Beatrice. As you see, conclusive."

Ms. Roberts objects that it could have been pre-programmed. Dr. Ashdown holds a hand

out toward the machine. “Place them in any order you want to. Say it out loud, please, so we all know which goes where.”

I expect Ms. Roberts to back down, but she doesn't. She moves the tubes around, and Dr. Ashdowne says what letter corresponds to the placement. She runs the test again, with the reporter standing right beside the machine. The results come up again, and I'm still the child of the king and queen.

“How wonderful! It must be such a relief, having your daughter back.” Ms. Roberts's smile resembles a shark's. Before either the king or queen can answer, she turns to me. “How do you feel, knowing that you're destined to destroy the kingdom?”

Holy Harmonies, this woman hates the royal family. She's probably the one who keeps reporting Michael's wildness. King Alain jumps in before I can answer. “Actually, that's the other half I wanted to tell you about. Dr. Ashdowne can explain the particulars.”

Dr. Ashdowne reminds the reporter of the man who claimed to be the rightful king, descended from King Jasper the great.

Ms. Roberts nods. “He was proved to be a liar by that very machine, right?”

“One like it, anyway,” the doctor says. The database has all known current DNA on file – but it contains historical files, as well, including that of Prince David, who never became king, and his grandfather, King Jasper. When the man appeared, they ran his DNA against King Jaspers. There were too few matches for him to be a direct descendant. “When we ran this young man's sample, however, it came up as a definite match.”

Ms. Roberts doesn't want to believe it. Once again, she claims tampering. Dr. Ashdowne provides a printout of the test results for both Casper and for the other man whose claim they disproved. Prince David's are identical. She hands the results to the reporter and suggests she

compare them to the original data that's still on file, if Ms. Roberts is still suspicious.

"I believe you," the reporter says, though her tone disagrees. "I don't understand what this has to do with my question for the princess, however."

"That's easy." It's Casper who answers. "I'm Casper Blakeny, direct descendant of King Jasper." He falls to one knee in front of me. He's holding a small black box; when he opens it, I see a ruby ring cut into the form of a jasper rose. "Princess Melyssande, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife? After a long enough engagement for you to go to college, of course."

I manage one word, but that's enough. He sweeps me into a very public hug. Then he turns back to the reporter. "I'm happy to announce the prophecy was correct. When Princess Melyssande takes the throne, the Banora dynasty will end. We'll be co-rulers, and as such, will return to the reign of the Beaufrieds."

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Casper

I move my chair so I can sit beside Lyssa. The vicious reporter won't accept a happy ending. I thought King Alain was crazy to insist on live vid, but now I understand. If Ms. Roberts had time, she could splice and manipulate and change the story completely. Since we're live, she can't paint Lyssa as the destructive princess. She changes tacks.

She tosses her blonde hair and aims a sugary smile at Lyssa. "It must have been so hard when you discovered you've been living with kidnappers. Do you have a message you'd like them to hear?"

"Of course." Lyssa's smile is equally sweet. "I want them to know I love them. I know they were only trying to protect me."

"Then you're asking the king and queen for leniency?" she asks. "Do you want them to make an exception for the people you love?"

Lyssa maintains her smile. "I'm sorry. I don't know the laws for this situation. I'm sure my parents – that is, the king and queen – will be as fair and as just in this situation as they've always proven themselves to be."

Ms. Roberts wants anything but contentment. She asks Lyssa about changing schools; about adapting to her new family; about the possibility that she'll be the catalyst for another war. Finally, she gives up. "I'd like to congratulate you. You've shown great maturity and I'm sure you'll be a wonderful queen. It's clear you're the good child in the family."

Lyssa tenses. Her smile hardens, but her voice remains calm and serene. She says that when she lived in Aletra, she believed the reports about Prince Michael; she had no reason not to.

Since discovering her true identity and coming to the palace, though, she's learned what a devoted son he is.

"He's allowed himself to bear the brunt of public disapproval," she says, "so that our parents wouldn't have to answer endless questions about their missing daughter. Before I met him, I thought he was going to be the ruin of the kingdom. I didn't know he even played gravball, let alone collected trophies for his skill. I thought he partied every night, when he really stays home studying to maintain his status as the top student in his grade. What kind of reporters don't bother to check their facts?"

Ms. Roberts asks a few more questions, but the bite is gone. She came in polished and pert, but now she's practically tarnished. I wish I could count on her career ending with this catastrophic interview, but she'll probably bounce back. The worst part is that she'll have every reason to try to ruin Lyssa.

As soon as the vid crew leaves, Lyssa runs to her rooms. I follow her and sit on the couch beside her. I wrap my arm around her; she curls into my shoulder and cries. I pat her back gingerly. She's wound so tight, it feels like any solid contact could shatter her. She wipes her eyes, snuffles, and manages to curve her lips up into a semblance of a smile.

She straightens with a sigh. "I wish the castle were real."

"The castle you drew?" I ask.

She nods. "That would be the perfect solution. If Mom and Dad are exiled, they could live there."

I gape. She's right, it would be perfect. For them, for her, and for me, too. Mike wouldn't be able to conduct investigations there, not unless it was for a crime in or around the castle. He could set up a headquarters for the Knights, though, and review investigations and coordinate

efforts. When Lyssa and I become queen and king, he could help me make the Knights an official part of the administration.

Lyssa's mom could do something there, too. I'm not sure what she does now, but I'm sure she could keep busy. The castle isn't technically part of the kingdom, and won't be until Lyssa and I are crowned. When that happens, of course we'll pardon her parents and they can live wherever they want to.

When I tell Lyssa my family really does have the castle, Lyssa hugs me. I swear my heart stops, no matter how scientifically impossible that is. Then she backs away, blushing. I pull her back into my arms. The Harmonies might be forcing us to marry, but that doesn't mean we have to be miserable. Maybe free will is overrated. Maybe the Harmonies arrange all happy marriages. I liked Lyssa from the moment we met; it's not her fault she's a princess any more than it's my fault I'm a prince.

She feels so right in my arms that I don't want to let her go when she pulls away. I'd love to shelter her for the next couple of months.

"I need to tell them," she says. "Both sets of parents. They all need to know."

I stand, then hold out my hand to help her up and hand her the crutches. I tell her I should just carry her piggy-back.

"Oh, sure," she says. "Offer that now, when I'm wearing a dress and can't take you up on it."

Michael reaches the top of the stairs as we approach. He stops, steps down a stair, and then comes back up. He bites his lip and manages to look at Lyssa. "Thanks. For what you said about me."

Before she can answer, he rushes past us.

Neither the king nor queen is downstairs; at least, we can't find them. Lyssa wants to return to her room rather than disturb anybody. Before she can leave, I stop a man in the royal uniform and ask him if he can help us find one of them. He leads us back to the king's office and tells Lyssa to please make herself comfortable while he locates the king.

She walks from one sketch to the next. She slouches over her crutches, like she can barely hold herself up anymore. She touches a picture with a finger. I walk over; it's an image of her with Mike and the woman who must be her mom. They're all working on a puzzle together.

The office door opens and Lyssa jumps back. I steady her before she puts her bad foot down to balance. The queen comes in. She looks from the picture to Lyssa and back again. She sags. The king comes in a few steps behind her and rubs her back.

"We'll have to exile her," she says. "She kidnapped you. It's either exile or execution."

Lyssa pales and wobbles against me. I hold her shoulders. I want to pull her into a hug, but I'm not ready to do that in front of her parents. Either set. I walk Lyssa back to the couch and help her sit down. She leans over until her head's between her knees. I rub her back.

"Can I see them?" Lyssa's voice is barely a whisper. "Please?"

We walk in pairs: the king and queen lead the way; Lyssa and I follow behind. I want to hold her hand, but the crutches are in our way. I wonder if Mom and Dad saw the vid, and what they thought of it. I wonder if Chris saw it, and the others. If they didn't see it live, they'll hear about it from someone and watch it soon enough. I wonder if I'll still have all my friends. I long for a notebook so I can message them. I need to apologize and explain why I never said anything. I want to know what university Chris wants to go to so we can get him in for Spring semester.

When we reach the staircase, I expect to go down. It makes sense that Mike and Lyssa's mom would be back in the dungeon. Instead, the king and queen go up towards the living quarters.

We turn left at the top of the stairs, though the rest of us all have suites to the right. We turn left again and stop at a door with guards posted out front. They might not be housed in the dungeon, but Lyssa's parents are still locked up.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Lyssa

I almost double over when I see the guards. Although I knew my parents were locked up, it physically hurts to see the proof. The guards part for us and the queen taps on the door, then unlocks and opens it.

Dad's at a desk. Mom's in a chair, holding a book that falls from her fingers a second before she runs across the room and hugs me. Although Dad's farther away, he reaches me right after Mom does. I can't see their faces through the moisture in my eyes, but they feel exactly right. Mom still smells of vanilla and fresh air; Dad's still got the scent of motor oil lingering under his orange soap.

"I'm sorry," Mom says over and over. I don't know if she's talking to me or the queen. Maybe she's apologizing to both of us.

I don't know how we end up on the couch. I'm squeezed between Mom and Dad. When the haze clears from the room, I realize the king and queen are on the loveseat opposite us. Casper leans against the fireplace. He stares at the grate as if a fire holds him mesmerized. He must feel my eyes, because after a couple of seconds he smiles and comes over to stand behind me.

I don't see any notebooks. I ask if they saw the vid. Dad nods.

"It's too soon to announce her return," Mom tells the queen. "Merrick says there's another group forming to find and kill her."

"Merrick?" The king, queen, Casper and I all speak at once.

Mom jumps. "Yes, Merrick. Braxton's seneschal. Leigh sent us to him when we left." Her voice trails off. She shudders and tears run silently down her face. "But Leigh's a traitor. Is

Merrick dangerous, too? Harmonies, did I do anything right?”

The queen kneels in front of her and takes her free hand. “You kept Melyssande alive and happy. I still want to strangle you, but you got that right.”

Mom’s laugh burbles through her tears. “I’m sorry for everything. For listening to Leigh to begin with. For not trusting you two enough. Most of all, for making you execute your own family.”

The queen sucks in a gasp. It’s the king who tells her my plan, though. Mom and Dad both jerk. Mom cries again, but Dad smiles. He pats my shoulder. “You’ve always been good at solving problems.”

When we leave, the king tells the guards that I have free access to visit. I drop my crutches and hug him. He pulls me into a bear hug and rests his cheek on my head. I think I feel a kiss on my hair, but it’s too light to be sure. He gives me another squeeze, and then slowly lets me go. I hop over to the queen and hug her, too. She holds me longer, but I don’t pull away. It isn’t their fault I don’t know them. They’ve loved me all these years. They even love me enough to let me keep Mom and Dad. It’s time for me to try to let them into my heart.

The king and queen follow us down the stairs, even though I hop so slowly. Prince Michael and Tanya run up when we’re half-way down.

“They got him!” Michael shouts.

He and Tanya talk over each other, but we finally get the story sorted out. Once Casper told the king and queen that Merrick chased us, the king sent guards out into the Wilds. Not very far; just around the city, as extra protection against another attack. Merrick must have watched our vid, because he tried to sneak out of Pacvo halfway through. The guards at the gate tried to stop him, but he sped off. The gate guards messaged the patrol, who easily surrounded him and brought him

in. He's in a cell downstairs, right beside Leigh and the others who chased Casper. Soon we'll be able to have the trial. Soon the nightmare will be behind us. I may not be able to go back to my real life, but at least I have a life to look forward to.

I still don't understand why Leigh Thomas tricked Mom. He was supposed to love the queen, not hate her. Then again, even at school jealousy made people do crazy things. It's a good thing Casper and I don't have reason to be jealous. We'll have to make sure it stays that way.

The king and queen hurry downstairs to question the prisoners. Tanya, Michael, Casper and I make it to the bottom of the staircase. We look at each other and head outside, rather than follow. We'll have to deal with the reality sometime. If we're going to be adults – and, at least in Casper's and my case, rulers – we can't hide from ugliness forever. For now, though, we need a reminder that alongside the ugliness, there's also beauty.

I bump up against Casper and wrap my arm around his waist. His hand cups my shoulder and he pulls me even closer as we walk. In front of us, the single track divides into four. He asks me which way I want to go. I laugh.

“What's so funny?” he asks.

“Dad told me there's a thousand roads to happiness,” I say. “I don't think it matters which path we take. We'll get there in the end.”

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