



THE
SHADOWS
BETWEEN
US

TRICIA LEVENSELLER



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS

NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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For Becki

I can't think of anyone more deserving of this Slytherin romance.

Thanks for reading it first!



IT'S COOL NOT GROWING OLD. I LIKE BEING THE ETERNAL STUD.

—Damon Salvatore, *The Vampire Diaries*,

Season 1, Episode 4

CHAPTER

1

They've never found the body of the first and only boy who broke my heart.

And they never will.

I buried Hektor Galanis in a hole so deep, even the devils of the earth couldn't reach him.

My dream was of him, of the day he told me it had been fun but he was done. Some other girl had caught his fancy. I don't even remember her name. At the time, all I could think of was the fact that I'd given everything to Hektor: my first kiss, my love, my body.

And when I told him I loved him, all he had to say was "Thanks, but I think it's time we moved on."

He had other things to say, too. When I sank my knife into his chest, words came spilling out of him almost as fast as the blood.

He couldn't make sense of it. I couldn't, either. I barely remembered grabbing the knife Father had given to me for my fifteenth birthday, three months previous, with its jeweled handle and silver sheen, but I do remember that Hektor's blood matched the inlaid rubies.

I also remember what finally helped my head catch up with my pounding heart: the last word out of Hektor's lips.

Alessandra.

His last word was my name. His last thought was of me.

I won.

That knowledge settles within me now just as it did three years ago.
That sense of rightness, of peace.

I lift my arms into the air, stretching like a cat, before rolling over in bed.

A pair of brown eyes is only inches from my own.

"Devils, Myron, why are you staring at me?" I ask.

He presses a kiss to my bare shoulder. "Because you're beautiful."
Myron lies on his side, his head propped up on a closed fist. My bedsheets cover him from the waist down. It's a wonder he fits in my bed, he's so tall. Floppy curls sprawl across his forehead, and he flicks back his head to clear his vision. The scent of sandalwood and sweat wafts over me.

With a hand, I keep the sheets held up over my chest as I rise to a sitting position. "Last night was fun, but you should go. I have much to do today."

Myron stares at my chest, and I roll my eyes.

"Perhaps again later?" I ask.

He looks up at me, before his eyes flit meaningfully to my chest once more.

No, wait. Not my chest. To the hand holding the sheets in place and the extra weight I now feel there.

There's a diamond on my finger. It's beautiful, cut in an egg shape and buried in gold. It winks in the morning light as I tilt my hand from side to side. The ring is by far the most expensive trinket he's ever given me.

"Alessandra Stathos, I love you. Will you marry me?"

Laughter fills the room, and Myron flinches at it. I quickly place my free hand over my lips.

"What are you thinking?" I say a moment later. "Of course not." I

stare down at the gorgeous ring once more. With this gift, Myron has outlived his usefulness. For some reason, my lovers cease to give me expensive presents once I turn down their proposals.

Alas.

“But we’re so happy together,” he says. “I will cherish you every day. Give you everything you deserve. I will treat you like a princess.”

If only he knew I have my sights set a bit higher than that. “It’s a very kind offer, but I’m not ready to settle down just yet.”

“But—I’ve shared your bed,” he splutters.

Yes, he and three other boys this month.

“And now it’s time for you to leave it.” I move to rise from the bed when the door to my chambers bursts open.

Myron freezes with his hand outstretched toward me, and my father, Sergios Stathos, Lord Masis, looks down at what he can see of our naked bodies.

“Leave,” he bites out in a deathly quiet voice. My father is shorter than my five and a half feet, but he’s built like a bull with a thick neck, wide shoulders, and keen eyes that pierce to the soul.

Myron tries to take the sheets with him, but I’ve got them firmly clamped around myself. When he fails to wrest them from me, he reaches down to grab his pants.

“Leave now,” Father specifies.

“But—”

“Listen or I will have you whipped!”

Myron stands. Barely. He hunches as though he can hide his tall frame. He makes it halfway to the door before turning. “My ring?”

“Surely you want me to keep it? So I can remember our time together?”

Myron’s face twists. He has one foot pointed toward the door and the other toward me.

Father growls.

Myron takes off at a run, nearly tripping over my father's boots as he bolts over the threshold. Once he's gone, Father turns to me.

"You make it difficult for me to find you a suitable match when you're caught with a new bedfellow every night."

"Don't be ridiculous, Father. That was Myron's fifth stay."

"Alessandra! You must stop this. It is time for you to grow up. To settle down."

"Has Chrysanthia found a husband, then?" Father knows very well the law forbids me to marry until my older sister does. There is an order to things.

Father treads over to the bed. "The Shadow King has dismissed a number of single women from the palace, Chrysanthia among them. I'd hoped your sister would catch his eye, rare beauty that she is."

Oh, yes. Chrysanthia is a rare beauty. And she's as dumb as a rock.

"But it was not to be," Father concludes.

"Myron's free," I offer.

Father levels a glare at me. "She will not wed Myron. Chrysanthia will be a duchess. I've already made arrangements with the Duke of Pholios. He's an aging man who wants a pretty girl on his arm. It's done. That means it's your turn."

Finally.

"You've suddenly taken an interest in my future, have you?" I ask, just to be difficult.

"I've always had your best interests in mind."

A complete untruth. The only time Father bothers to think of me is when he catches me doing something he thinks I shouldn't. Chrysanthia has been his focus my entire life.

Father continues, "I'm going to approach the Earl of Oricos to discuss the match of you and his son, who will inherit one day. Soon, I should think, given Aterxes's ailing health. That should make you happy."

"It doesn't."

"You're certainly not going to remain my problem forever."

"So touching, Father, but I've got my sights set on another man."

"And just whom would that be?"

I stand, pulling the sheet up with me, before tucking it under my arms. "The Shadow King, of course."

Father guffaws. "I think not. With your reputation, it'll be a miracle if I can get any nobleman's son to have you."

"My reputation is known by none, save those whom it directly concerns."

"Men do not keep the exploits of the bedroom to themselves."

I smile. "They do when it's me."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm not stupid, Father. I have something on every man who has seen the inside of this room. Myron has an unfortunate gambling problem. He lost a family heirloom in a game of cards. Blamed the missing pendant on a servant and got him whipped and fired. His father wouldn't be happy to hear of it. And Damon? I happen to know he's part of a group of smugglers importing illegal weapons into the city. He'd be sent to prison if anyone knew the truth. And let's not forget Nestor, who's quite fond of the opium dens. I could go on naming all my lovers, but I think you get the idea."

Though his face doesn't change, Father's shoulders lose some of their tension. "Such winning gentlemen you keep around, darling."

"The point is, Father, I know what I'm doing. And I'm going to keep doing whatever I wish, because I am the master of myself. And you? You're going to send me to the palace with the next wave of women to see the king, because if there's anything I'm good at, it's getting men to propose to me." I flash the diamond on my finger in his direction.

Father's eyes narrow. "How long have you been planning this?"

"Years."

"You said nothing when I sent Chrysantha to the palace."

"Father, Chrysantha couldn't catch the attention of a rabid dog. Besides, beauty isn't enough to catch the eye of the Shadow King. He has beauties paraded in front of him all year long.

"Send me. I will get us all a palace," I finish.

The room is quiet for a full minute.

"You'll need new dresses," Father says at last, "and I won't get your sister's bride-price for weeks yet. That won't be enough time."

I pull the ring from my finger and stare down at it lovingly. Why does he think I've taken so many lovers? They're fun, to be sure, but most important, they're going to finance my stay at the palace.

I hold up the ring where my father can see it. "There's plenty more where this came from."



SEWING HAS ALWAYS BEEN a hobby of mine, but it is impossible for me to make all the new clothing required for my upcoming plans in such a short amount of time. Working with my favorite seamstress, I design and commission ten new day outfits, five evening gowns, and three appropriately indecent nightgowns (although those I make myself—Eudora doesn't need to know how I intend to spend my nights).

Father takes no part in the planning, as he is much too busy with his accountant, worrying over the estate. He's bankrupt and desperately trying to hide it. It's not his fault. Father's quite competent, but the land just isn't producing as it once was. Disease swept through a few years ago and killed most of the livestock. Every year, the crops grow thinner. A well has already gone dry, and more and more tenants are leaving.

The Masis estate is dying, and Father needs to acquire decent bride-prices for my sister and me in order to keep his lands running.

Though I'm aware of the situation, I haven't bothered to worry about it. My lovers all feel the need to give me nice things. Very expen-

sive things. It's been a fun game. Learning their secrets. Seducing them. Getting them to shower me with gifts.

But to be honest?

I'm bored with it.

I have a new game in mind.

I'm going to woo the king.

I suspect it won't be longer than a month before he's helplessly in love with me. And when he proposes, I will say yes for the first time.

For once the marriage is official and consummated?

I will kill the Shadow King and take his kingdom for myself.

Only this time, I won't have to bury the body. I'll find a convenient scapegoat and leave the Shadow King for someone to discover. The world will need to know that I'm the last royal left.

Their queen.

CHAPTER

2

Father exits the carriage first and holds out his arm to me. I grasp it with one gloved hand, hold up my heavy overskirt in the other, and descend the steps.

The palace is a grand structure painted entirely in black. It's positively gothic in appearance, with winged creatures resting atop the columns. Round towers sweep up the sides, roofed with shingles, a recent architectural style.

The entire length of the palace is built near the top of a mountain, with most of the city winding its way downward. The Shadow King is a grand conqueror, spreading his influence slowly across all the world, just like his father before him. Since the surrounding kingdoms try to retaliate from time to time, a well-protected city is vital, and the grand palace is said to be impregnable. Guards patrol the grounds with rifles slung over their shoulders, a further deterrent to our enemies.

"I'm not sure black was the best color choice for your attire," Father says as he leads me up the steps to the main entrance. "Everyone knows the king's favorite color is green."

"Every single girl in attendance will be wearing green. The point is to stand out, Father. Not blend in."

“I think you might have erred in excess.”

I think not. With the king’s conquering of Pegai, some of the ladies at court tried the Pegain style of loose pants with jeweled hems below a fitted top. After a while, the style faded away. It was too different for most ladies to adapt to.

I’ve designed a combination of the Pegain style and our heavy-skirted Naxosian style. I wear close-fitted pants beneath a floor-length overskirt, which parts in the middle to show off the pants. Heeled boots raise me an extra inch off the floor. The overskirt is short-sleeved, but I wear gloves so long they overlap the sleeves. My top is tied in the back beneath the overskirt, the neckline just short of my collarbone. Modest and yet not matronly.

A black rose pendant rests on a choker around my neck. Matching earrings dangle from my lobes, and my hair is half up in a loose twist.

“I assume you have a plan for once you’re introduced to the king?” Father asks. “He will receive each lady one by one up to the dais. He barely even looked at Chrysanthia when it was her turn. The Shadow King never descends the steps to interact with the partygoers. He doesn’t even ask anyone to dance.”

“Of course I have a plan,” I respond. One doesn’t go into battle unprepared.

“Are you going to tell me this plan?”

“It doesn’t involve you. You don’t need to know.”

The muscles in his arm bunch slightly. “But I could weigh in. Help you. You’re not the only one who wants you to succeed.”

I pause at the top of the steps. “Have you ever seduced a man before?”

Father’s cheeks redden. “Of course not!”

“Then I don’t see why I should need you to weigh in on anything. Rest assured, Father, if there’s any way in which you could prove useful, I will tell you. For now, I can handle things.”

We continue on at a leisurely pace. The doorman nods a greeting at us as we pass him by, and Father leads me toward the ballroom.

But we can't come within a hundred feet of it, because a line of green extends nearly all the way back to the far wall. Nigh a hundred girls chitter with their families and one another, all waiting for an introduction with the king. I'm certain they can't all be eligible for marriage. Many look like younger sisters of the older ladies in line. Still, should the king show any interest in the younger ladies, I'm certain their fathers will *make* them available.

Father tries to take me to the end of that line, and though it appears to be moving at a somewhat quick pace, that simply won't do.

"No, we're not waiting in line," I say.

"That's the only way to get an introduction with the king."

"Let's go into the ballroom first."

"You'll be lost in a sea of people in there. That's not going to catch his attention."

I blow out a breath through my nose before turning to face Father. "If you cannot do as you're told, then you can leave. Remember, Father, all your tutelage with Chrysantha did nothing. Your way doesn't work. I am in charge of this plan, and I will execute it as I see fit. It simply won't do to have us quarreling once we enter the party, so make a decision now."

Father's lips press into a thin line. He doesn't like being told what to do, least of all by me, his youngest child. Perhaps if Mother were still alive, he'd be more gentle and kind, but illness took her when I was eleven.

Finally, Father nods and holds out his free hand in front of us, inviting me to lead the way.

I do.

The upbeat music of an orchestra wafts out a set of open doors farther down the way. They appear to be used primarily for exiting the

party, however. I watch girls with handkerchiefs pressed to their noses to muffle their sniveling and angry mothers chastising them for it scamper into the hallway, making hasty retreats.

Has the king been openly rejecting the women who come to get an introduction? I smile at the thought of his forwardness. That's exactly the sort of thing I would do in his position.

Father and I push past a few more nobles leaving before we're finally caught in the thick of the party.

Couples glide together on the dance floor. Gentlemen drink wine from goblets, and mothers gossip to one another from the sidelines. Groups of girls giggle behind fans or shawls as they stare up at the dais.

At the Shadow King.

I've never laid eyes on the man before, and now I'm free to observe him as long as I like while momentarily hidden among the other guests.

His name, it would seem, is well deserved and in line with the rumors I've heard. Tendrils of shadow halo his entire outline. They swirl as though alive, caressing his skin and dissolving into nothing before reappearing again.

It's fascinating to watch.

They say the Shadow King has some sort of power, but no one knows what it is. Some say he can command the shadows to do his bidding, that he can use them to kill—choke the life out of his enemies. Others say they're a shield. That no blade can pierce his skin. And even others say that the shadows speak to him, whispering the thoughts of those all around.

I certainly hope that last one isn't true.

Knowing what I have in store for him after our wedding night simply won't do.

Once I adjust to the outline of shadow, I'm able to take in other features. His hair is as black as the shadows around him. The sides are cropped short, but the hair up top has some volume to it, parted to the

side. A strong brow shades his eyes. The lines of his jaw are so sharp they could cut glass, and a healthy dose of stubble covers them. With a straight nose and full lips—

He's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, even when his features are set somewhere between boredom and irritation.

Seducing the king will prove to be a most enjoyable task, indeed.

We match, I note, as I take in his clothing. While all the dresses around us vary from mint to teal to olive, we are both decked in head-to-toe black. The king wears sleek dress pants. A black undershirt, tie, waistcoat, and overcoat. Brilliant silver buttons don his jacket. A chain dangles from the shoulder to a pocket above his left breast, holding a watch, no doubt. Black leather gloves cover his hands, which rest on the arms of his chair. A sheathed rapier leans against his throne, one for style, not use, I'm sure.

Though he doesn't bother with a crown, there is no doubt as to the man's status.

"He's so striking," I say at last. And young. I know he was only crowned about a year ago, but he can't be much older than I am.

"Remember, if you approach him, you're not permitted within five feet of him."

Yes, I know the law. No one is allowed to touch the king. To do so is punishable by death.

Oh, he is a delightful mystery that I can't wait to solve.

"Dance with me, Father."

Having learned his lesson, Father places a hand at my waist and leads me into a slow-moving Naxosian dance without question. We turn along the outskirts of the dance floor, but I order Father to lead us closer to the center.

To our left, two gentlemen dance together. The taller one twirls the shorter one in perfect form. To our right, a man and woman scoot

indecently close to each other, and I silently cheer them on. The rebel in me loves to throw dirt in the face of decorum.

After a minute passes, I spot a few men looking over the heads of their dance partners to catch a glimpse of me. My black attire is doing its job splendidly.

But mostly, I think it's the fact that my pant-clad legs are a rarity in the room. Most men aren't used to the style. And I've opted for tight-fitted ones that show my curves to their best effect.

"People are staring," Father says.

"That's the point, isn't it?"

I imagine what the scene must look like from up on the dais—the black center of a daisy amid sage petals.

More and more girls exit the ballroom after obtaining their introductions. I hope the line ends soon. There can't be *that* many girls of noble blood.

A sudden spark of heat lands on my neck and spreads down to my toes. I'm being watched. "Tell me, Father, have we attracted the notice of the king yet?"

Father glimpses the throne out of the corner of his eye. They widen. "I believe we have."

"Excellent. Keep dancing."

"But—"

"Father," I warn.

I let myself get lost in the steps. I do so love dancing. I love the way my body becomes light and fluid when I go through the motions, the way the spins send my hair over my shoulders, the way my skirt twirls around my legs.

When the song is nearly over, I ask, "How many women are left in line?"

"Ten."

The song ends, and the orchestra strikes up another.

“Should we—?” Father starts.

“I’m parched. Let’s go to the tables for some refreshment.”

“But—”

At my glare, he takes my arm once more and leads me up to a table laden with red-filled glasses and tiny samples of food on trays.

I select a glass, holding it in my fingers by the long stem, and bring it to my lips.

“Lord Masis,” a bright voice says from the other side of the thin table.

I look up. Before us is a golden-haired noble older than I. Perhaps thirty. He still appears young in the face, but he’s much broader in the shoulders than the men I’m used to entertaining.

“Lord Eliades!” Father greets, forgetting me for a moment. “Where have you been? We haven’t seen you in weeks at the club.”

I haven’t the faintest idea what club he’s referencing, but I suppose I should have known Father wasn’t spending his evenings at a mistress’s. He never has gotten over Mother.

Father stretches out a hand to shake Eliades’s, and I note that the younger gentleman has quite the calluses on his right hand. How unusual for a lord. But as I take note of the distinct muscles visible through his dress pants, I’d deem him an accomplished horseman.

“Alas, my estates have needed my full attention this long while. I’ve needed to . . .”

Already bored with the conversation, I don’t bother listening in. Instead, I turn around to survey those dancing. One gentleman steps on his partner’s foot during a turn because he has his eyes on my legs.

“Ow,” she protests.

I smile down into my glass, taking another sip, careful not to look anywhere near the throne. I swear I can still feel a ray of heat bearing down on me from that direction.

“Forgive my rudeness!” Father suddenly exclaims more loudly.

“Orrin, this is my daughter Alessandra. Now that Chrysantha is betrothed, I’m permitting her an outing at the palace.”

I stifle a groan before turning. I suppose it only helps my cause to be seen interacting with other guests and not showing any interest in the king. But I’m also certain I will find any friend of my father’s to be intolerable.

I grasp my overskirt in my free hand and curtsy. “A pleasure.”

Eliades’s eyes sparkle before he dips into a bow. “She’s as beautiful as the elder. Is her temperament just as sweet?”

Before Father has to scramble for an answer to that question, Eliades adds, “I’m still put out that you did not give Chrysantha to me. My money is just as good as a duke’s!”

“As an earl, I’m sure you understand that I had to give her the best title offered. As much as I appreciate our friendship, my dearest Chrysantha . . .”

I close my eyes tightly. Chrysantha is the last thing I want everyone to be discussing. This night is about *me*.

“Father, another dance is starting.” I set my empty glass on the table and tug at his arm.

Remembering the purpose for this excursion, Father excuses us and pulls me in line with the other dancers. I try to hide my ire. Even at a party where Chrysantha is absent and Father is bent on helping me catch the eye of the king, he can’t help but speak of his favorite. The daughter who looks like Mother and shares her gentle demeanor.

“The line is gone,” Father says as we perform the first steps, his focus now returning to the king.

“Just keep dancing. Do not look at the king any longer.”

“But he’s watching us.”

“*Ignore him.*”

In my periphery, I see the king shift in his seat, as though he caught himself in one position for too long because he was occupied.

Occupied with me.

My anger drifts away at the thought. This song is faster, requiring more dexterity and concentration. As Father's face blurs in front of me, I'm able to forget all about the king. There is nothing but the tempo pounding in time to my heartbeat and the feel of my feet sweeping across the floor.

Before the song can come to a close, the music cuts off abruptly. The couples around us scatter, and Father brings our dance to a halt.

The king is approaching, his shadows sweeping behind him as he moves. I try to quiet my breathing from the exerting dance as Father takes my arm in his and turns to greet our sovereign.

"Your Majesty," Father says, bowing.

I curtsy along with him.

"Lord Masis," the king says with a nod. "I don't believe I'm acquainted with your dance partner."

I keep my eyes just to the right of the king. Though I don't see it, I can feel the king's eyes taking me in from head to toe. He's been watching me for the last fifteen minutes at least, but now he takes his time with his close-up view.

"Forgive me, sire," Father says. "May I introduce my second-born, Lady Alessandra Stathos."

The king tilts his head at an angle. "You did not get in line with the other ladies, Lady Stathos. Is the dance floor more interesting than I am?" His voice is a deep baritone; not quite soothing, but powerful.

I fight a smile as I allow our eyes to meet for the first time. A delicious jolt shoots through my entire body at the connection.

His eyes are the green of the sea, of crashing waves and violent winds. There's something dangerous in the depths of them, something exciting, and I realize right then that feigning disinterest will be difficult.

When I finally manage to pull my gaze away, I let it travel down-

ward, taking in the king slowly while he watches. Assessing him properly from the tips of his black hair to the base of his shined boots.

“Yes,” I conclude.

The air leaves my father in a painful-sounding squeak.

But the Shadow King lets out one low laugh.

“I saw ladies leaving the ball in tears,” I continue. “It seemed speaking with Your Majesty was a sure way to get kicked out. I wasn’t about to let that happen before I joined in the dancing.”

“Is it the dancing you like? Or are you merely looking to show off your”—he darts a quick look down to my legs—“dress?”

“Are you mocking my outfit? I designed it myself.”

“Quite the opposite. I rather like it.” A pinch of humor lurks at the edges of his lips. I think it might be at my expense, and I don’t like that one bit.

I say, “Give me your measurements, and I can have one made for you.”

Another grin stretches across the king’s lips, and I can’t help but admire how much more handsome he becomes with the movement.

“Dance with me,” he says.

Father goes so still, one would think he’d been turned to stone.

“Is that an order or a request? I’m told you hang girls who get too close to you.”

“Not hang. Those girls are asked to leave the party. So long as you mind your distance, I will not have you dismissed as well.”

Still, I’m not ready to concede just yet. “Is there any fun in a dance when you can’t touch your partner?”

“Accept my invitation and you will find out.”

CHAPTER

3

The dance floor clears until it is only the king and me. The orchestra strikes up a new song, one that only we can share.

Keeping his eyes on mine, the king advances a step, and I move backward with the motion, following his lead. This style of dance is more improvised, rather than having a set choreography to adhere to, and I can't help but wonder if the king is somehow testing me with it, seeing if I can keep up. When he steps to the side, I mirror him. He keeps his arms crossed behind his back, but dancing is not meant to be so stiff, so I let mine move with me.

At first, it's difficult not to become distracted by the tendrils of black dancing around him. The shadows are so unusual, so fascinating. I wonder what would happen if I reached out to one. Would it curl around my finger? Dissipate at the touch of my skin? Feel as though I'd plunged into a fog?

I remember myself when the Shadow King holds an arm out to me. I know I'm not meant to take it, so instead I twirl for him, letting my overskirt lift off the floor to show more of the tight-fitted pants beneath. I close my eyes and feel the motion more deeply.

The tempo picks up and so do the king's movements. I seem to

sense his actions rather than watch for them. The dance turns exhilarating and frantic, almost as if there's something desperate in the music itself. As the song grows faster and faster and the king's eyes burrow into mine, I can't help but feel as though he's trying to communicate something to me through dancing alone.

I see nothing but those green eyes, feel nothing but the floor against my feet. I lose all sense of time and purpose.

When the music comes to a crushing halt, I dip my head backward as the Shadow King lets one gloved hand tilt toward me in the imitation of a caress.

I'm breathing heavily while staring up into two swirls of emerald green. We right ourselves seconds later.

When the king finally looks away from me, he raises his voice for all to hear. "That's enough revelry for one night."

And without another word, the king turns on one heel and stalks from the room, grabbing his sword on the way out.

I'm staring at the spot where he disappeared in stunned silence.

In the next instant, servants dressed in silly wigs usher everyone from the room. Father takes my arm, and I silently follow his lead.

What just happened?

I thought the dance was perfect. I didn't touch him. I didn't get too close.

The king, who has never publicly danced with anyone since his coronation, asked *me* to dance.

And then he left without another word.

Men do not dismiss me. No one has since Hektor. I feel my nostrils flare and my face heat up.

"It was a valiant attempt," Father says as he hands me up into the carriage. "Devils know you achieved more than any other woman has. Not only did His Majesty bother to look at you, he asked for a dance. He will remember you. This isn't necessarily over."

The carriage moves slowly, halting and rolling in small increments as the traffic backs up from all the other people leaving the palace.

“Just a moment!” a voice calls out. The carriage comes to another jerking stop.

The head of a man appears in the open window of the carriage. A palace servant, by the way he’s dressed.

“Lady Stathos?” he asks.

“I am she.”

He sticks an arm into the carriage and presents me with a black envelope. When I take it, he doesn’t leave. He waits patiently for me to open it.

Forgive me, Lady Stathos, but I've changed my mind. I do not wish for you to leave just yet. You're far too interesting for that. Will you come join my court? Consider this an invitation, not a demand. My man will await your reading of this note in the event of your acquiescence.

—*JKM*

I wonder at the signature. Could those be the king’s real initials? I suppose I shouldn’t have expected him to sign *SK*. *Shadow King* isn’t his name, after all.

Elation rushes through me as I realize what this means.

“What is it?” Father asks.

“The king asks for me to stay at court.”

“Then why are we still sitting in this carriage?”

I turn toward the servant. “I will accept His Majesty’s invitation.”

“Very good, my lady.” He opens the carriage door for me but shuts it before Father can descend the steps. “I’m afraid the invitation extends only to the lady, my lord. You’re free to return home.”

And before my father can utter a word of protest, the servant leads me back toward the palace.



WE DON'T GO THROUGH the main doors. Instead, I'm taken through a side entrance, something that appears to be used only by the servants.

Indeed, curious laundresses and kitchen workers stare at me as I'm taken down long corridors with black carpeting. Past sconces in the shape of thorny vines. Through doorways lined with vases painted with stallions and eagles.

Is the king trying to hide me? Or perhaps simply not make a spectacle of my more permanent arrival?

Eventually, the servant deposits me in front of a door. He reaches for a key within his coat and lets us in.

The room is grander than anything I've ever stayed in, with thick light-blocking drapes, wooden furniture detailed with exquisite roses, and cushions of the softest down, but it is nothing compared to what a queen's rooms would look like, I'm sure.

A maid is waiting in the room, likely having just finished turning down the bed.

"The king has already sent for your things, my lady. They should be here first thing tomorrow," the man who led me here says.

"But I've only just agreed, and you haven't yet told him I accepted."

The servant holds himself a little higher. "The king was hopeful you would accept."

Hopeful? More like presumptuous. Arrogant.

"I see."

I have a lot of work ahead of me.

CHAPTER

4

The next morning, breakfast is delivered to my room, along with my possessions. I spend the morning ordering servants about. The wardrobes are filled with all the dresses I've designed. A vanity has my powders, perfumes, and jewelry placed upon it.

I'm not especially fond of reading, but I did bring several books with me to the palace. Most are works on philosophy, mathematics, agriculture, and other topics of importance. They exist to hide the only three books of interest. To the outward eye, they appear harmless: three tomes full of plants and herbs used for medicinal purposes. But in each one, there are several chapters on poisons and antidotes, highly useful for me because I will have to kill the Shadow King once I've secured his hand in marriage.

Hektor's death was messy, disgusting, so very difficult to hide and clean up. I'm reluctant to stab anyone ever again. Poison is a much cleaner way to kill, and it will prove much easier. Not to mention, it's nigh impossible to root out the poisoner.

I order the maids to place the books on an empty shelf in the room. Then I step back to admire the entire ensemble.

Yes, it'll do.

A maid helps me to dress. I select a deep blue overskirt to wear over matching pants. The fabric is a simple cotton, unlike the taffeta of last night's outfit. Lace hems my ankles, the pattern that of a trail of roses. Instead of boots, I opt for day slippers. My blouse laces up the front in a fashion similar to a corset. It will be highly scandalous, and I suspect none of the men at court will be able to keep their eyes off me.

That's the point. When a man sees something that several other men want, he can't help but want it, too.

The maid pulls all my hair up onto the top of my head, heating tendrils into curls spilling down my neck and over my ears.

Just when I'm starting to feel ready for the day, another servant is admitted into my rooms.

He bows low. "My lady, the king hopes you will join him and the rest of the courtiers in the orchards for tea."

"Have I missed lunch?"

"I'm afraid so, but the king expected you would. He assumed settling into your new room would take most of the day."

I'm glad to know the king is thinking of me even when I am not around.

"If I may also add, my lady, the king doesn't usually make an event of afternoon tea. I expect he's arranged it all for you."

"For me?"

He crosses his white-gloved hands behind his back. "It is my understanding that this is your first time at court. There are many new people with whom to become acquainted."

That brings a small smile to my lips. "Then I suppose I shouldn't disappoint His Majesty by not showing up."



BRICK-LINED TRAILS WEND UNDER trees filled with cherry blossoms. A thin creek trickles by to one side, and the birds fill the air with their music.

Plenty of cushioned seating has been added outdoors, and a long table filled with thin sandwiches, sliced fruit, biscuits, cakes, and other sweets is constantly replenished by servants.

Excitement sparks through me at the thought of all the opportunities ahead. My father isn't here to ruin things this time, and I'm surrounded by the most influential people in the world.

A group of ladies sits by the creek, sharing the newest gossip. Three gentlemen stand huddled together under one of the cherry trees, tea-cups in hand, laughing over something one of them said. A few couples have branched off from other groups. I watch a pair of courting ladies walk with hands clasped together, the hoops of their skirts touching. Really, the ladies at court could do with some fashion advice from me. I hope I will start some new trends.

With all the courtiers distracted by their current companions, no one takes notice of my arrival yet.

I make a show of walking toward the refreshment table, letting my eyes wander in search of the king, when something barrels into me from behind.

I nearly lose my footing, but I catch myself, though a huge pressure impedes my overskirt.

A reprimand is already on my lips as I turn, but I'm brought up short.

There's a dog panting before me.

At least I think it's a dog. It also has a startling likeness to a bear. In both size and color.

"Hello," I say, bending over and holding out my hand.

The dog takes a few sniffs before nudging my fingers with its nose. An invitation to pet it if I've ever seen one.

I've always wanted a dog, but my father forbade it because he has such a terrible reaction to them.

I stroke it—*him*, I correct after a quick look down to confirm the sex—behind the ears.

“Good boy,” I say, “though I’d appreciate it if you got off my skirt.”

He lies down, covering even *more* of my skirt, his wet nose digging into the fabric.

“What are you doing, silly creature?” I adjust myself to avoid losing my balance and end up bumping into something with my foot.

A ball the size of an apple. Hidden beneath my skirts. I reach down for it.

“Oh, is this what you’re looking for?” I ask.

The dog jumps to a standing position, tail wagging, finally freeing my skirt. I cock back my arm, throw the ball as far as I can, and watch the giant mongrel race after it.

And then, out of the corner of my eye, a wisp of shadow.

The king is watching me. His shadows darken once our eyes meet, swirling more thickly about his form. I wonder if they change with his thoughts. If I could learn to read them if I studied them long enough.

He stands in the shade cast by one of the trees, leaning his frame against the trunk. Today he has his hair brushed back from his forehead, and I can’t begin to guess what sorcery manages to hold the strands in place with such volume. He wears a long-sleeved black dress shirt, matching gloves, a waistcoat of deep blue brocade, and a black cravat.

I hadn’t realized I’d been smiling at the dog until I feel my features shift into surprise.

And then I watch the dog trot over to the king and drop the ball at his feet.

With a quick adjustment, I right my overskirt and sweep toward the king, stopping when I’m five feet away. I cross my arms over my chest.

“Is that your dog?” I accuse, even though I already know the answer.

“Good boy, Demodocus,” the Shadow King says, picking up the ball

and tossing it away again. Demodocus races after it once more. To me, he says, “You have a good arm.”

“And you have impressive aim.”

He lifts a brow. “Surely you’re not accusing me of intentionally throwing the ball at you.”

“That’s exactly what you did.” But why? “If you wanted my attention, all you had to do was ask for it. Though I’m disinclined to give it now that I know you practically ordered your dog to tackle me.”

The corners of his mouth turn up. “It wasn’t your attention I wanted. I was curious to see how you would react to Demodocus.”

“Why?” I ask, baffled.

Demodocus gallops toward us before dropping the ball at the king’s perfectly polished shoes. He raises it in a black-gloved hand before hurling it toward a group of ladies sitting in chairs along the creek. Demodocus streaks in front of them, racing to catch his prize, and a volley of shrieks rises into the air.

The king arches his neck slightly, as though this proves his point. Whatever that may be.

“You react well to the unexpected,” he says at last. “And you like animals. That’s two things I didn’t know about you before.”

“And you are devious.” Siccing his dog on unsuspecting ladies.

“Now surely you’d already guessed that about me,” he says, pushing off from the tree. He steps into the light, and I step backward with the movement, keeping the appropriate distance. His grin grows as he looks me up and down.

“Something funny?” I ask.

“I’m merely admiring your attire once again. Tell me, is the corset not meant to go underneath the blouse?”

“It’s not a corset. It’s merely styled after one. I like the way the laces look. Why hide them?”

The king takes a moment to digest that. “You are going to cause all kinds of trouble in my court.”

I can’t tell if he’s worried or amused by that.

“Just look at how you’ve already changed things. If you will excuse me.” He turns to the side. “Demodocus! Come, boy!”

Demodocus reaches the king, and the two take off at a brisk jog through the trees, shadows streaking after the king like a comet.

Already changed things? But whatever could he mean?

I put my back to where the king disappeared and instead focus on the other forms in the garden.

Oh.

The ladies at court—they’re dressed in head-to-toe black. Not a speck of green in sight.

They’re imitating me from last night. How did I not notice this immediately?

I caught the eye of the king. He asked me to dance, and now he was seen talking with me in the orchards. People are staring openly at me now. And—

And a group of older lords and ladies is walking toward me. There are five of them, each somewhere in their forties or fifties, I expect. They look important. I can tell by the way they don’t spare glances at anyone else around them, the way individuals move for them to pass.

And in the way other people who were about to approach me halt to let these five reach me first.

“Lady Alessandra Stathos, isn’t it?” the man at the front of the group asks, holding out a hand. “My name is Ikaros Vasco. I am the head of the king’s council.”

I offer my hand, and he bows over it with a head of hair more white than brown. Lord Vasco has aged well, save for wrinkles about his eyes.

“Yes. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lord Vasco.”

He doesn't bother to introduce the rest of his companions, who must be the other advisers to the king.

"I'm afraid I don't know much about you," he says when he rights himself. "Second daughter to an earl. Never seen in society until last night. Although there are a few gentlemen at court who claim to know you, having done business with your father."

He's looked into me. Gone digging into my background. Of course he did. It's his job to know everything he can about those whom the king spends his time with. The real question is, was the king the one who ordered my past looked into? Or is the council acting on its own?

"I'm afraid you have the law to blame for that," I answer honestly. "My sister just became engaged. I wasn't permitted to attend events until recently. The only people I've had a chance to meet are those whom my father does business with."

"And their sons, it would seem."

I blink. "Excuse me?"

"I found it rather curious that none of the ladies at court have ever heard of you. I mean, your sister was here at the last ball. She stayed at court. Made friends. And yet she never once mentioned you. It's like you didn't exist then."

I smile politely as a lead weight rests at the bottom of my stomach. Trust Chrysantha to cause problems without even being here. Once again.

"And yet," Vasco continues, "Myron Calligaris and Orrin, Lord Eliades, say they know you. They had a lot to say about you, in fact. Eliades couldn't speak enough on your charms." Vasco makes a face. "Calligaris had . . . other things to say about your character."

I'll bet he did. Myron is still bitter over my rejection.

My sister and my gentlemen friends are painting a horrible picture of me without even saying anything damning against me. But I can fix this.

"I'm afraid Lord Calligaris had asked my father for permission to court me *before* my sister was engaged. As a law-abiding gentleman, my father was obliged to refuse his request." I let my face fall into a look of sadness. "I'm afraid Lord Calligaris blames me for it. Can you believe it? It's as though he has no respect for those who set and carry out our kingdom's laws."

Which, of course, would be the five men and women before me.

Lord Vasco nods with new understanding. "Indeed. I shall have to revisit my earlier conversation with him."

And before then, I shall have to remind Myron about what will happen should he divulge the nature of our previous acquaintance. Ladies aren't permitted lovers before marriage. Just one of the many laws I will change once I'm sitting on the throne.

Just a hint of a rumor like that would ruin me and all my plans.

"Do enjoy your time at court, Lady Stathos," Vasco says. "I'm sure you will be happy to see many old faces, but might I suggest—if you're hoping to spend more time with the king, that is—that you make some *female* friends. Hmm? And perhaps try for some more traditional attire?" He looks down at my clothes with some distaste.

"I already have female friends, Lord Vasco. Perhaps you didn't question as many ladies as you ought to have at court."

"Is that so?" he asks.

"Yes, if you will excuse me."

I have three seconds to survey the orchards. First my eyes land on the group of ladies who screamed when Demodocus bounded in front of them. I mentally shake my head. *Not them*. Then my eyes light on a gathering of lords and ladies in a huddle. They look far too friendly for me to be seen there.

And then I spot two ladies apart from the rest. They sit on a bench before the creek a ways down, enjoying some quiet away from everyone else.

Yes, they'll do.

I stride with purpose toward them. I feel the council's heated gaze on my back. They watch me the entire distance, which thankfully is much too far to be overheard.

"Hello," I say when I reach the pair. "My name is Alessandra Stathos. Might I join you?"

The first girl brightens instantly, and I let my shoulders slump with relief. This is exactly the kind of response I needed the council to see.

"Of course, please sit! I'm Hestia Lazos. Please, call me Hestia."

I like her instantly, for that alone. Only friends exchange first names.

Then I take in her attire. She's wearing pants underneath her overskirt. I doubt she had the outfit on hand. I wonder how many seamstresses had to stay up all night in order for her to wear it the next day.

Hestia's coloring is a rich umber with yellow undertones. She wears her hair short, only about an inch from her scalp, the strands wrapping in tight coils. The lack of length shows off her gorgeous earrings, a pair of garnets encased in complicated brasswork.

"And this is my good friend Rhoda Nikolaides."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lady Stathos," Rhoda says. She wears a black gown with terribly heavy-looking petticoats. She barely manages to fit on the bench with the thickness of her skirts. Though all the nobles are dressed in fine clothing, I can tell that this lady is fabulously wealthy. Her skirts shine so brightly, I can practically see my reflection in them. Her hair is done up in a coiffure so intricate, it would take no fewer than three ladies to manage it. The strands are the same color as my black hair, but her skin is a bit darker, more amber than my dark beige.

"Please call me Alessandra," I say, following Hestia's lead. Besides, I need to make friends quickly, don't I? I haven't had many opportunities to make friends, and it has been my experience that most ladies do not like me. Not when I'm their competition for the attentions of men.

But these two are all sincere smiles.

“At last we meet!” Hestia says. “I was going to approach you, but then I thought perhaps I shouldn’t, since I didn’t want to overwhelm you. What with everyone wanting to know who you are! And then I saw the council, which made the decision for me. I’m so relieved you’ve asked to join us. I’ve been dying to ask you who made the gown you wore last night. It was simply darling!”

“And deliciously scandalous,” Rhoda adds. “I adore how adventurous you are with your wardrobe. It certainly caught the king’s attention quickly.” She smiles as though we’ve just shared some wicked secret.

They both look at me expectantly.

I say, “I actually design the outfits myself. I love to sew, and I hire a seamstress to help when I run short on time to make everything.”

“You’re joking!” Hestia says, her long earrings swaying with the turning of her head. “No wonder you wore it so well. You designed it with your own figure in mind. I wrote to my seamstress as soon as the ball was over and offered her triple her usual rate if she could finish this outfit for me. She did her best to heed my written instructions, but I still don’t quite like the fit of the pants. It’s simply brilliant to wear an overskirt over the top of them. Did you know? The reason the Pegain style faded away so quickly was that”—she lowers her voice to a whisper—“most girls couldn’t handle having their bottoms so exposed. But you solved that problem, didn’t you?”

I don’t quite know what to make of the conversation, but a voice suddenly sounds from behind us, making me jump.

“Forgive me for interrupting talk of bottoms. I would gladly continue the conversation, but I simply must secure an introduction.”

The newcomer strides around the bench to stand before us. “Leandros Vasco. At your service, my lady.”

“Vasco?” I ask as he takes my hand and kisses it. “You’re related to Ikaros Vasco, the head of the king’s council?”

Leandros sighs. "I'm afraid he's my uncle."

I don't see the resemblance. Leandros looks a couple of years older than me. He's long and lean—like the king, but his hair is a light brown, which he wears down to his shoulders. His short beard is neatly trimmed. He wears a red silk waistcoat atop a black shirt, his cuff links in the shape of roses. His nose was broken once, but it was set well. Only a small notch near the bridge gives anything of it away. It manages to make him look dangerous and dashing all at once. Were it not for the fact that I have to give the king my full attention, Leandros is exactly the sort of man I would find myself dallying with.

Rhoda presses her lips to my ear. "Leandros wasn't able to take his eyes off you at the ball last night. I think he's already taken with you. But, then again, who isn't?"

"I certainly can't fault you for your relatives. It is a pleasure to meet you, Leandros," I say, daring to use his first name. Just because I can't bed him, it doesn't mean I can't flirt. Our eyes meet, and he suddenly sizes me up in a new light. As a possibility. It's terribly mean to give him hope, but I just can't help myself.

"And where are your companions?" I ask. I'd seen Leandros earlier in the orchards. Before Demodocus plowed into me. He was talking with two other men his age.

"Distracting the masses, of course." He nods over my shoulder.

I turn to see his friends intercepting other gentlemen coming my way.

"Wanted me to yourself, did you?" I ask.

"Can you blame me?" he asks.

I grin. "How long have the three of you been at the palace?" I ask, including the girls in the conversation.

"About six months," Rhoda says, "but Leandros has been here far longer, haven't you?"

"Yes," he says. "I've lived at the palace for years. Being on the king's

council necessitates my uncle's living here. I asked to join him. I'm not really fond of living out in the country."

"Did you grow up with the king, then?" I ask.

Something on Leandros's face looks saddened by the question. "During our adolescence, yes. We were quite close actually. Along with my friends."

"Were?" I catch on to his use of the past tense.

"He pushed everyone away once he became king. He doesn't trust a soul. I suspect that's why no one is allowed near him."

"I suppose," Rhoda says after a pause in the conversation, "that I would be distrustful, too, if I were a king, knowing that the last one had been murdered."

I don't know much about the late king and queen or their murders, but I do know that the culprit was never caught. Some, of course, speculate that the new king is responsible. But that hardly matters to me.

It has no bearing on my plans.

CHAPTER

5

As we rise from our bench, Hestia and Rhoda invite me to join them and the rest of the ladies in the sitting room for some embroidery before suppertime.

“And that’s my cue,” Leandros says. “Farewell, ladies. Alessandra, I do hope to see more of you in the future.”

I nod, shading my eyes slightly with my lashes, before turning to Rhoda and Hestia. “I’m not much for embroidery, but I could bring one of the new outfits I’m working on.”

“Yes!” Hestia exclaims. “Then you can teach me some stitches. Oh, won’t you, Alessandra?”

There’s something so genuine behind the question. I can’t help but answer with “Of course.”

“Wonderful,” she answers. “I can already tell we’ll be fast friends.”

We start for the palace together, and a servant standing farther down the creek joins us. I don’t usually take note of servants, but this one is quite handsome.

“Oh, this is Galen, my manservant,” Rhoda explains. “He accompanies me most places and will be carrying the embroidery supplies to the sitting room for us.”

“My lady.” He bows, a head of chocolate-colored curls dipping toward the ground.

Unaccustomed to being introduced to servants, I merely incline my head, but neither Rhoda nor Galen seems offended. In fact, as soon as we reach the castle, they both start off in what must be the direction of Rhoda’s embroidery supplies, the two already deep in conversation.

After I gather my own things, I have a servant escort me to the sitting room. I’m told the room belonged to the late queen, which she used for social activities with the ladies at court. Apparently, the Shadow King has permitted the female nobility to continue their needlework there, since there isn’t a current queen to make use of it.

The doors are opened for me, and I enter into a circular room with marbled floors and a beautifully painted ceiling made to look like the night sky, stars and all. Tall windows let in plenty of natural light, and a chandelier dangles down, lit with a hundred candles. Though the palace has already been fitted with wires for electricity, I love that the queen kept such a beautiful light fixture.

Plush cushions and chairs spiral around the room, most of them already occupied. The few empty ones I spot are embroidered with black roses on the seats and backs. I’ve noticed the design throughout the entire castle, and I wonder the reason for it. The royal family’s coat of arms is a black stallion kicking its front legs into the air. So this must symbolize something else.

“Alessandra!”

I startle at the voice.

“Over here. I’ve saved you a seat!”

Right in the center of everything, Hestia stands and waves me over. She’s somehow managed to change her entire outfit, grab her embroidery, and beat me down here. Now she wears a blue overskirt over the top of her black pants. Little bluebirds are sewn over the fabric.

I'm not sure whether to be flattered or annoyed by the blatant imitation of my blue attire.

I tread over to her, clutching a swath of fabric in my arms.

Ladies have their skirts settled around them so they can sit more comfortably on the settees and chairs. Since I'm wearing pants, I opt for a large pillow on the floor, crossing my legs at the ankles as I sit.

Whatever conversation had been ongoing when I entered continues. Hestia babbles on about the lord she spent the most time dancing with at the ball last night.

Rhoda joins me on the ground, uncaring that her ankles are exposed when she sits.

"If it's not too rude to ask, may I inquire as to your age, Alessandra?" she asks.

"I'm eighteen," I say. "And you?"

She huffs out a breath. "Twenty-four. I'm fairly certain I'm the oldest unmarried lady at court."

"Surely not," I say, spreading out the fabric along my lap so I can find where I left off.

Rhoda nods. "I must admit, however, that I've already been married once. So perhaps it doesn't matter that I'm currently single?"

"What happened to your first husband?" I ask.

"Oh, nothing so dreadful as leaving me. He only died. Not even the richest man can escape old age."

I raise a gloved hand to hide a smile. "Not a love match, then?"

"No, but he left me quite a lot of money, so I suppose I shouldn't complain too much. And he gave me Galen! Galen was his valet, you see. And after my husband died, I just sort of kept him. He was such a huge help in making all the funeral arrangements and helping me adjust."

"Yet you're in a hurry to be wed again?" I ask.

She straightens her skirts. "Oh, I don't have to marry again. Not with my fortune, but I would very much like to have something heated and

passionate. I was wed at far too young an age to a shriveled old man. I'm ready to be with someone young and healthy. Someone I can love. Don't you want that?"

I've done passion before. That's what it was with Hektor. It didn't go over well. Passion doesn't lead anywhere good. It turned me into a murderess.

However, I'm beyond flattered that she would confide in me about her desire for passion without marriage. She's trusting me with this information. It prompts me to answer her honestly.

"I've already had my love match."

She quirks a brow. "But you are unwed. How did it end?"

"He decided he didn't want me anymore. Passion leads to fierce heartbreak, Rhoda. You might think twice about how badly you wish for it."

"I hadn't thought of that." She looks off into the distance at nothing, lost in thought for a moment. "Either way, I'm getting ahead of myself. I still have four months of mourning left."

"Mourning," I repeat.

"Yes, I'm not wearing black because I wish to. A wife is required to be in mourning for a year after her husband's death. I'm to only wear black, and if I attend social functions, I'm not allowed to fully participate; I must watch from the sidelines."

My mouth drops open. "You can't be serious!"

"Very serious, I'm afraid."

"No, no, no. This won't do at all, Rhoda! I take back what I said. You *do* need a passionate tryst. There's no sense in mourning after a man you never loved. We must find you someone immediately. Is there anyone at court who brings out a passion in you?"

It turns out there are several men Rhoda is interested in. I promptly forget all the names she tells me, but she titters on about their looks and titles.

At first, I'd chosen my two new friends as a way to appease the council, but I'm realizing now just how useful the two will prove to be. Rhoda is knowledgeable about all the men at court. She's been observing them carefully (from afar, of course) since her husband died. She might be my opportunity to better fit in with those at court. And Hestia is almost obsessed with how I dress. I suspect she'll be the primary source on all gossip about me, since she's making such an effort to be like me. Knowing how those at court view me at all times is invaluable. It was only luck that the council revealed what little they knew of me already. I need to be on top of how I'm perceived constantly if I'm to know what the king and his court think of me.

At a break in Rhoda's discourse, I ask her, "Is this why you came to court? For the men?"

"Oh, no. I came to court because the king requested it."

"He requested it?"

"Yes, many of us were invited to stay. Well, to be honest, it's almost a bit of a command. I don't think I could leave if I wanted to, but I'm having such a fun time sizing up all the men at court, I don't mind one bit."

A command.

A thought strikes me. "Rhoda, were you in the palace on the night the king's parents were murdered?"

Sadness shadows her features. "Yes, oh, it was a horrible night."

"And Hestia was here, too? And Leandros?"

She thinks. "I believe so."

"And he's commanded you all to stay at court? He's commanded everyone here to stay at court?"

She looks up at me suddenly. "Oh, you think—"

"Yes."

The Shadow King is trying to root out his parents' murderer. He's invited everyone who was there the night they died to stay at the pal-

ace. He's *ordered* their indefinite stay so he can keep an eye on them and find the culprit.

But that can't be why I'm here. I wasn't here when his parents died. And according to Leandros, the king doesn't let anyone get close to him. All his social interactions are elusive at best.

So why has he invited me to stay at the palace? Can it truly be simply because my plan is working?

I ponder this as I finish the hem on the skirt I'm working on. I'm fashioning something new, a skirt that hangs down to the floor in the back but rises to above mid thigh in the front. I will, of course, be wearing tight pants underneath the outfit. I don't think even the king could avoid kicking me out of court if I showed off my legs outright.

The finished product is even better than I imagined, but I need to fashion a top to match, and I haven't thought of the design for that yet. I'd hoped the skirt would inspire me. I hang the garment in my wardrobe for now.

The note arrives just as my stomach grumbles for supper.

*My dear Lady Stathos,
I'd be honored to have you join me for dinner tonight.*

—*℞*



ANOTHER SERVANT LEADS ME through the palace. I take careful note of all the turns and staircases, trying to acquire a mental map of the place in which I'm now living. Eventually I'm taken through a doorway and led into a large room. I was expecting a parlor, but this is a library. Books span shelves that reach clear up to the twenty-foot ceiling. As far as I can tell, not a speck of dust coats a single tome, despite how old some of them look.

A fire has already been built into the hearth on one wall, and two

rather large armchairs stretch out before it, one on either side of a short table. Tea has already been laid out.

The servant holds out one of the chairs for me, and I sit.

“His Majesty will be just a moment.” And with a bow, he leaves me alone in the room.

At a hint of movement on the floor, I snap my neck in that direction. What I’d written off as a fur rug placed between the table and the fireplace, I now realize is Demodocus.

“Hello again,” I say.

Demodocus cracks open one eye for a brief second before resuming his nap in front of the fire.

“Had a busy day, did you? All that fetching got the better of you, I suppose.”

Demodocus rolls over, putting his back to me.

“Message received. I’ll let you get back to it. But where is your master?”

I glance around the room, taking in the colors on the spines, when the king arrives.

Only he doesn’t use the door.

He walks right through a wall of books.

My back snaps straight in my chair as I watch the Shadow King take shape through the books, the shadows around him growing lighter when he’s all the way through the wall.

He’s already watching me when his eyes take shape beyond the tomes, and I wonder if he was observing me, waiting for my eyes to land on that exact spot on the wall before stepping through solid shelves.

My eyes harden of their own accord. “Is that supposed to impress me?” Belatedly, I tack on, “Your Majesty.”

His knee-high boots tread softly on the carpet as he crosses the room. “I have already guessed it takes quite a lot to impress you.” He pulls the opposite chair out for himself and sits.

We watch each other for a moment in silence, but finally, curiosity gets the best of me. “How long have you been able to do that?”

“Walk through walls? The ability runs in the royal family, though it doesn’t develop until a child starts to grow into adulthood.”

“A side effect of the shadows, no doubt.”

The Shadow King grins as he brings his teacup to his lips. “No doubt,” he says after a swallow.

I can tell he’s greatly amused by my questions, and that realization has me shutting up. I put my full focus on my teacup instead, drinking while looking around at the great expanse of a room. I can neither give him exactly what he wants nor be too predictable. I have to walk a very fine line. It is the same with every man.

“I see Demodocus is performing his duties excellently as watchdog,” the king says to the dog’s back.

I stifle a smile. “Is that really what he’s for?”

“When he’s around, I’ve noticed those at court are less likely to approach me. When I bought him, he was meant to be a source of protection.”

“And instead you were stuck with a teddy bear,” I say with a fond look at the dog.

After a knock and the king’s call of “Enter,” servants bring in our supper. It would appear they’ve brought all four courses at once. A bowl of soup is set before me, and the smell of squash and cream wafts upward, making my mouth water. Next to it is placed a tray of fruits, neatly sliced, with a serving bowl of sweet yogurt for dipping. The main course is cured elk, cut in spiced strips and placed on a bed of greens.

And finally, a slice of chocolate cake for each of us is positioned in the center of the table, chocolate drizzle steaming along the sides.

The men in tights and wigs halt along the edges of the room.

“Leave us,” the king says. “We won’t need anything else.”

There’s something about watching him give orders that has my

blood flowing faster in my veins. He has such power. Men are forced to obey him without a word of protest. They would do anything he commanded.

I want that power.

Seeing it up close has my resolve hardening.

When the door closes, I shift the plates and bowls in front of me, moving everything to the sides of the table until my path is clear to the chocolate cake. That, I bring forward, until it's directly in front of me.

I don't look at the king, but I get the sense that he's watching me closely. As I take a bite, the soft cake practically melts in my mouth, and I know I made the right choice to start with it while it's still warm.

When I can't take the awkwardness any longer, I deign to look up. The king has his own slice of cake in front of him.

"How alike we are," he says after licking a drop of drizzle from his lips.

"Because we both enjoy chocolate? You can't get out much if you think that an uncommon trait."

He takes a drink from one of the goblets that was brought in with the food. "I didn't mean the chocolate. When I see something I want, I reach for it without hesitation."

Perhaps if he were looking at me another way, I would think he also meant to convey that he wanted me. But his gaze isn't heated. It is relaxed, and I am getting the distinct impression that he doesn't get to do that often.

"What are you reaching for now?" I ask.

He takes only a moment to think. "The world," he says simply. "I want to own all of it. For every city to bear my coat of arms and for every person throughout the continent to know my name and recognize my reign."

I let myself imagine it for a moment. For the whole world to know my name and live under my rule. What better way to feel complete and whole and accomplished?

“And you?” he asks, cutting into thoughts of me standing on a tower, overlooking all that is mine. “What do you reach for?”

Perhaps I should think longer about my answer. I should be careful and calculated, but I say truthfully, “Acknowledgment.”

He tilts his head to the side.

“I am a second daughter. Practically ignored. Never invited to parties or balls. Never thought of or really seen. I long to truly live. To be a part of everything.” No longer kept hidden away while Chrysantha experiences it all. I never wanted to wait my turn.

“I see you,” the king says, and the shadows around him heighten ever so slightly, as if they, too, are acknowledging me. “Tell me, Lady Stathos, what would you do with the acknowledgment you so desire if it was suddenly given to you?”

“How do you mean?”

“It can’t be just the attention you’re after, can it? That would be very petty, and you do not strike me as the petty type. So tell me—this acknowledgment. Why do you want it?”

I take a slow sip of wine while I think through my answer, wondering what he expects me to say. In the end, I opt for the truth again.

“I want friends. I want to be a bigger part of the world around me. If I’m seen and respected, others will value my opinion. I want the power to change things.”

“Change? Such as changing a law that prevents younger daughters from entering society until the eldest is engaged?”

“Exactly,” I answer.

“I think we might have some common goals, Lady Stathos.”

I remember my earlier conversation with Rhoda and the realization that the king is looking for a murderer among those at court. That, coupled with all the questions he’s presented me with tonight, prompts my outburst.

“Why am I here?” I ask.

The king interlaces his fingers in front of him and leans his chin over the top. "I have a council breathing down my neck. I am nineteen. A young king, they say, and until I am twenty-one, I have to go to them for permission for everything I do and heed their counsel in all things. What they want most is for me to find a wife and ensure that, should anything happen to me, an heir is already taken care of."

I don't breathe as he says the next bit.

"I have no intention of taking a wife or making heirs. I have an empire to build and traitors to root out of my very court. What I need is for the council to stop hounding me, and if I were to have the appearance of courting someone, they would do just that.

"You are here, Lady Stathos, because I'm looking for a friend. Someone who isn't seeking to be a queen, as you are not. Someone who isn't afraid to tell me what they are thinking, no matter if they think I will dislike it. And our friendship will also have the benefit of appeasing the council.

"You are beautiful," he continues. "But not so beautiful as to tempt me. You are everything I am looking for. You are perfect."

I don't have words. So as not to have my jaw hanging down to the table, I put another bite of cake on my tongue.

You are perfect, he'd said. Right after *not so beautiful as to tempt me*.

I want to slap him. I want to kiss him. I want to throw the rest of my cake in his face as much as I want to finish off the delicious dessert.

I take another bite. I have too many thoughts swarming my mind, but I can grasp one thing.

"You would use me," I say. Flat. Deadpan.

He sets his fork back onto the plate beside his cake. "I'm not looking to use you. I'm offering you a trade. Remain here at court. Allow everyone to draw their own conclusions about the two of us. And in return, everyone in this castle will know your name. You won't miss

another party or ball ever again. Every invitation will be given to you, so many that you couldn't possibly accept them all."

"What makes you think I don't want to be queen?" I ask.

"If you had, you would have gotten in line with the rest of the girls. You wouldn't try to insult me every chance you get."

Good. He doesn't see through my charade.

I stare at the goblet on the table. After leaving him to squirm in his chair for a while longer, I say, "You will have to make up for the incredibly rude comment you just made if you expect us to become friends."

"Rude?"

"You said I wasn't beautiful enough."

His mouth drops open. "No, I said you were the right amount of beautiful. I said you're perfect."

Now I am just being petty.

Tamp it down for now. Put on a smile and accept his offer.

"Forgive me," he says a second later, surprising me. "It has been a long time since I've had a friend who didn't walk around on all fours. My words didn't come out the way I'd meant them."

But they did. And that's what's so infuriating.

But I say, "I accept your offer and all that comes with it."

"Excellent." The Shadow King switches out his cake for the still-steaming soup. "If we are to be friends, then surely I should call you Alessandra when we are alone?"

"We are not friends just yet, Your Majesty, but once we are, what shall I call you?"

A faint smile still lingers on his lips. "My name is Kallias. Kallias Maheras."

"Kallias," I say, letting the syllables drift off my tongue: *kuh-LIE-us*.

I have been entrusted with the name of a king.

Now I need him to give me his heart.