

SNOW

a fantasy
by wheeler scott



Snow

By Wheeler Scott

Copyright © 2005 by Wheeler Scott

ISBN: 978-1-934166-15-4, 1-934166-15-4

All rights reserved. No part of this eBook may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information address Torquere Press, PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680.

Printed in the United States of America.

Torquere Press eBooks are published by Torquere Press, PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680.

Chapter One

Once upon a time she was the most beautiful woman in the world. The King met her while hunting in a snow-capped forest at the edge of his lands, saw her sitting eating a piece of ripe red fruit. The moment their eyes met his heart belonged to her.

Rumors flew when he declared she was to be his consort, whispers that she had created some enchantment, that her beauty could be nothing but result of one. The day she was made Queen there was talk of the forest she'd lived in, stories almost forgotten recalled and passed person to person as the crowd stood waiting. But then she appeared, crowned and glorious, and she was enchantment personified, shimmering as she stepped through the streets with her husband, the King, by her side.

She was so lovely even flowers paled next to her. To look at her was to know you'd seen a glimpse of something extraordinary, and the stories about her faded into silence. The King shone a little brighter every time he looked at her and together they ruled a kingdom made glorious by what they shared, their perfection.

Then things became even more perfect, for there was going to be a baby. The Queen danced the day she found out, a delicate spinning turn that twirled her into the King's arms. The King smiled and the nobles in attendance clapped and cheered. The nation rejoiced.

She grew even more beautiful, ordered baskets of fruit brought from her former home and ate them as she gazed into the mirrors of her room. Her belly rounded and when she walked her feet barely seemed to touch the ground. To look at her face once was to have it burned into your mind's eye forever.

The babe grew but did not come. Nine months passed, then ten, then twelve, and she was still hugely ripe, swollen glorious and glowing. She paid for a witch woman, old and crooked-backed, bent by the wisdom she'd learned, to come to the castle as the thirteenth month started.

"Is my babe dead?" she asked and her lovely voice trembled, tears sparkling in her eyes.

The old woman shook her head and watched the Queen take a bite of fruit as she smoothed her other hand over her stomach. She noted the overflowing basket of it that sat by her side. "He's alive and healthy."

"A son," the Queen said, and her smile lit up the room. "Will I give birth soon?"

The old woman nodded.

"When?"

The old woman reached out and rested her hand on top of the basket, watched the Queen's eyes darken. "When he's more beautiful than you."

The Queen laughed, mouth trembling, and had the old woman sent away. More beautiful than her? It couldn't be. She patted her stomach and looked in the mirrors, took another bite of the

fruit she held. Her reflection glowed back at her.

The babe did not come. The Queen waited. Day after day, alone with her silent attendants and her own thoughts. She found herself staring into the mirrors more, watching her reflection ripple golden back at her. On the thirteenth day of the thirteenth month she woke up screaming. She looked in her mirrors, saw her face drained white and contorted with pain.

"It's true," she whispered, and then screamed again as her belly rippled and the child inside her made himself ready to be born.

Outside, it began to snow.

That was how the prince was born. He was given a long string of unpronounceable names and titles as soon as he drew his first breath. His nurse, upon hearing them, promptly forgot them all and called him David because that was the name of a saint she'd prayed to as a child. She was a simple creature.

His mother closed her eyes when he was shown to her, shrank back when the royal physicians attempted to place him into her arms. "He's beautiful," they told her soothingly. "Look. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"He's taken everything," she said, and turned her face away. When she was left alone, soft words of reassurance whispered to her and a cup of restoring wine placed where she could reach it, she got up. She walked over to her mirrors. She saw a pale creature, bloodied and hollowed out, her beauty taken from her as if it had never been.

She smashed the mirrors with her hands and their pieces sank into her flesh. She closed her eyes.

Outside, it continued to snow.

The King mourned his Queen for six years. His kingdom mourned with him for one year, then two, and then moved on to bitterness, to murmurs of witchcraft and whispers of curses. Winter had descended upon the land, seemingly forever, and starvation drained any remaining sympathy the people felt away.

It wasn't that the King couldn't govern. It was that he didn't want to. He listened to his ministers' reports and agreed that food had to be imported, that something had to be done. He said all the right things and nodded at all the right times, but it was clear his mind was elsewhere. His ministers weren't bad men, but they were men and the temptation to earn a fortune was too much for them to resist. Food prices grew, new taxes added seemingly every day, and the people began to spit whenever the King was mentioned, to grimace and curse his name. They remembered that the Queen had been from a strange place, a forest closed tight around itself, and that with her death it had grown stranger still, and cursed her name as well.

The only thing that could rouse the King was the sight of a mirror. He'd had all of them removed after the Queen died, declared them banned from his sight. A minister surprised by a morning

visit from the King was caught arranging what was left of his hair by peering into one propped up against an open dresser drawer. His head rolled across the great courtyard that very day and the people dared to hope a little. Perhaps the King knew how they were suffering. Perhaps he cared.

Nothing changed. The minister's belongings were burned, the mirror melting down to a silver puddle. It kept snowing.

David saw his father for the first time when he was three. He was trailing down the hall after his nurse, distracted by the windows they were passing. They were covered with a thick layer of ice, rendering the outside world nothing more than a blur of glazed crystal white.

His father was on his way to his afternoon meeting with the ministers. He was not thinking of anything or anyone as he walked down the hall, but the sight of the nurse caused him to stop for a moment, peer at her cowering against the wall. He thought perhaps he remembered her.

Then he noticed the boy behind her. The boy didn't see him. He was staring out the windows, trying to see, and the King saw his wife's face etched in the boy's own, written in his cheekbones and the shape of his chin, the curve of his forehead. It made him smile. He bent down and peered at the boy, then turned to the nurse and said, "How old is he?"

The nurse cowered back further against the wall. "Three," she said softly, and then added, "Your Majesty" in a tripping rush.

The King touched his son's head, ruffled his dark hair. He opened his mouth to greet him, a tiny portion of his heart thawing, waking up.

Then his son looked at him. He gazed up at his father with eyes the King knew. The last time he'd seen them his wife had been staring at him sightless and bloodied on the floor, jagged cold silver pieces of mirror all around her.

He walked away. He did not meet his ministers. He went to his rooms and stayed there for five days. On the sixth day he emerged, told the waiting ministers he was ready to begin his day.

"Would you like to see your son?" one of them asked. His name was Hugh, and he nurtured hopes that the King had drifted so far into melancholy that overthrowing him would be as simple as a question of seven words. He'd told his wife of his plan the previous night, watched her dream of a crown and jewels. He'd dreamed of removing her head with a sword and marrying her cousin, a young maiden who was forever watching him with shyly downcast eyes.

The King stared at him. "I have no son," he said softly, and motioned for his guards. Hugh's head rolled across the courtyard that afternoon. His wife entered a convent and found God to be a far more satisfactory husband.

After that day the King came back to life. He began to take an interest in his kingdom. He discovered what his ministers had done. He had their heads removed, a river of blood racing across the courtyard until the next day's snowfall erased it. He promised that things would be

better and they were. Food became affordable again and the feral starved eyes that gleamed out of everyone's face gradually disappeared.

It continued to snow. There was talk of curses still, but mostly late at night as slurred whispers over cups of ale. Occasionally a prophet would proclaim that there was a way to end the snow. A few of them spoke so convincingly that people believed and gave away everything they had or traveled to faraway lands where all they found were slave traders waiting to make a profit from them.

The snow never stopped falling. The prophets all either lost their heads or were shunned, wandering wrecked through the kingdom cursed by everyone they met.

The day the King announced he would marry again the snow stopped for seven hours and when it started again it fell as a light mist so fine most people scarcely noticed it.

That was the day David's nurse told him he was going to be getting a brother and sister. The nurse noticed that it stopped snowing after she'd given David the news but thought nothing of it. She was just happy to see him smile. She hadn't been sure he could until that day.

Before she put him to bed he asked where his brother and sister were coming from. The nurse laughed and patted his pillow, almost touching his hair. "Why, your new mother," she said, and pulled blankets up around him. "They are her children from her marriage to the King of--oh, a faraway place."

"Mother?" he asked anxiously, and she watched him mouth the word, rolling it around like it was a sweet he'd never had before. He was a strange boy. "What will happen when I see her?"

"Don't worry, love," she said and smiled fondly down at him. "You won't hurt her. You didn't mean to kill your mother. All that nonsense the washwoman spouts--such piffle! Don't listen to a word she says. Now go to sleep and dream of sweet things."

David nodded and closed his eyes. He'd never talked to the washwoman. No one ever talked to him except his nurse. After she left he opened his eyes and stared at the dark corners of his room. He didn't sleep.

The day of the wedding came, finally, and the great cathedral blazed with candles, so many that the ice covering the stained glass windows melted, sending streams of water across the floor that ruined many a lady's fine gown but also tinted the streaming sunlight's glorious colored hues.

David was there. He sat in the very back, his nurse by his side. He couldn't see very well--the cathedral was large and his father and new mother were golden dots gleaming almost out of sight. He wished he could see them. He could see the great windows though and stared at the light passing through them, watched it make patterns on the floor.

He saw a few people looking at him, covert backward glances covered by prayer books or fans but the moment he looked back they always looked away, strange looks crossing their faces as if they saw something other than him when they looked at him.

"People are looking at me," he whispered to his nurse, tugging on her sleeve. "Why are they looking at me?"

"Because you're so beautiful," she whispered back and tapped his knee. He moved his hand away. She shivered and drew her shawl more tightly around herself. "Why don't you read the prayer book for a little while?"

He thought about the word "read". It sounded like what baskets were made of but he didn't think that was what his nurse meant. He looked at the pictures in the prayer book instead. They were pretty. The ice that covered the pew he was sitting on started to thaw. His nurse stopped shivering. David didn't notice. He was wondering when he'd meet his brother and sister. He was looking at the pictures of saints and martyrs and watching the way the light broke them into bright colored fragments.

He met his brother and sister three years later, long after he'd given up hope of ever seeing them. It had been a bad year for the kingdom, endless heavy snows for six months, a white icy blanket covering everything. In spite of all the King did, many starved. His new wife was from a place warm and sunny and she was not thriving in this land. She'd barred the King from her bed two months ago, screamed that he'd never told her about his dead wife and cursed child so loudly even the scullery maids heard. When the King said, "But I have no son," in a gentle voice she slammed her bedchamber door in his face and screamed that she wished she was dead, that the King was crazy and cursed and that now she was too.

The sixth day of the sixth month of those endless heavy snows David's nurse taught him how to make gingerbread. It was the only recipe she'd ever been able to remember and they made it together after dinner, both of them burning their hands as they scooped pieces from it out of the baking tin they'd put on a tray above the fire.

"I'm sorry your new mother hasn't been to see you," she said as he was eating his third piece of gingerbread. "I have half a mind to march up to those fancy rooms of hers and tell her how daft she's being."

"Maybe she doesn't want to see me," David said. Ice pelted against the window, a sharp cutting rain.

"Nonsense," his nurse said stoutly, tucking her shawl more firmly around herself. "You're a love, and you know it. And very clever too. You made that gingerbread all by yourself."

"You told me how to," David said, but there was an almost smile on his face.

His nurse kissed the top of his head. "But you did all the work. Finish up and then I'll tuck you into bed."

David ate the rest of his gingerbread. His nurse leaned forward and let the heat of the fire melt the ice that coated her lips. Outside the furious falling snow slowed, and the clouds cleared enough to allow a glimpse of nighttime sky. Before David fell asleep his nurse told him stories of brave heroes and beautiful maidens and happily ever after, her voice quavering a bit every time the hero said "I love you" and the beautiful maiden said "I love you too." Then she pointed out

the stars to him, smiled at his eager questions. She couldn't answer most of them, but she did name all the constellations for him. She made the names up, of course, but David didn't know that.

He met his brother and sister as he was crossing the courtyard to sit with his nurse while she smoked a pipe and talked to the second chamberlain's wife. David liked going because the second chamberlain's wife made his nurse smile and always gave him almonds to eat. He was thinking about almonds when his nurse stopped so suddenly that he walked right into her back.

"Your Highnesses," his nurse said, and her voice had gone high and terrified the way it did whenever anyone important was nearby. David leaned into the wall behind her.

"Who are you?" a voice asked, low and sweet, and David looked around his nurse to see who was speaking.

He knew they were his brother and sister right away. They were golden and lovely and dressed like his father, in jewels and glittering fabric, matching wreaths of flowers and diamonds on their heads. The one who spoke, the boy, raised his eyebrows when he saw David.

"You must be--" he said and launched into a long list of names that David didn't know.

"I'm David," he said in some confusion when the boy was done. "I'm your brother. And you're my brother. And sister."

"Of course you are," his sister said. Her voice was low and sweet too. "And I suppose we are." She held out her hand and David took it hesitantly, stared down at the rings covering it. It was very warm.

His sister drew her hand away.

"Your hands are very cold," the Prince said, taking his sister's hand with one of his own, the two of them looking deep into each other's eyes. When he looked back at David there was a smile curving his mouth, a strange sharp tooth-filled smile.

"And you're quite pale," the Princess said and the same sharp smile was on her face. "Perhaps you're feeling poorly? Very sickly and soon to expire?"

"Oh no, Your Highness, he's as healthy as can be," his nurse said. "Never ever even been sick, not one--" The Prince looked at her and she fell silent, stared down at the floor.

"Insolent," the Prince said musingly. His eyes glowed bright green.

"But we have to go now," the Princess said, a hot thick regret in her voice that made David press back against the wall, skin prickling. Her eyes were very brown, endless dark. "Father is waiting for us." She looked at the Prince.

"Yes," the Prince said, as if answering a question that only he'd heard. He and the Princess walked down the hall together hand in hand.

David saw his father again as he entered his thirteenth year. He was in the cathedral sitting looking at the windows while his nurse prayed for a cure for her stiff joints. She'd been sleeping with an onion under her pillow every night but it hadn't helped. David tried to help out as much as he could--making gingerbread, singing his nurse the same songs she'd sung to him when he was young --but he didn't think he was being very helpful. She moved slowly now, every step she took seeming to cause her pain. The second chamberlain's wife had come to visit recently bearing a container of strong smelling ointment that she'd made his nurse promise to use. She'd helped her rub it into her hands and David watched his nurse smile for the first time in days, watch the knot of her hands unfurl. The chamberlain's wife sat down next to his nurse's bed then, took her hand and said, "You could ask someone to come and help out, you realize."

"And who would come?" his nurse said tartly, smile fading, and the chamberlain's wife sighed and nodded. David had stared at both of them feeling helpless and miserable, and then he'd gone and gotten the broom that his nurse kept in the cleaning cupboard. He'd never swept a floor before but he'd seen her do it every day. It was easier than he thought it would be and he liked the sound the broom made as it scraped across the floor, a scratchy almost song he hummed along with. When he was done sweeping he bent down and lifted up a corner of the rug just like his nurse always did. He heard the chamberlain's wife's laugh.

"Clearly he learned to sweep from you," she said to his nurse, a twinkling smile dancing across her eyes and curving her mouth. She looked at him then, the same expression on her face. "I'm afraid you'll never be a housekeeper," she said, and although he didn't know what a housekeeper was he liked her smile and the way it filled her voice. He thought perhaps she was the only person besides his nurse who'd ever truly smiled at him. He knew she was the only person other than his nurse who'd spoken to him in years. He smiled back at her and she blinked, eyes widening.

"Goodness," she said, and a flush bloomed across her face, her voice faltering a bit.

"His mother used to smile like that," his nurse said. "Remember? Right before he was born she was the loveliest thing in the world, wasn't she?"

"She was," the chamberlain's wife said softly. A look flitted across her face, something surprised and perhaps a little scared. "She truly was."

He saw his father come into the cathedral, heard murmurs of "The King!" break the silence of the church and saw people turn away from their prayers and look. Even his nurse did, twisting back to look behind her slowly.

His father wasn't alone. David's brother and sister were with him, one on either side of the King, trailing just a little behind him.

His father walked straight to the front of the cathedral, brisk long strides, and knelt by the altar. A priest immediately moved toward him, bent down and listened to his whispered request and then nodded, made the sign of a blessing. His father bent his head down under the gesture as if he felt it touching him. His brother and sister knelt too, their little fingers touching. They didn't bow their heads during their blessing.

His father stood up while the priest was making the final sign of benediction over his brother and sister, turned away and strode back down the cathedral briskly. He looked at everyone as he passed, eyes skimming over them. David held his breath, but his father's gaze flickered across him, right through him.

His brother and sister saw him when they left though. David watched them look at him and then at each other, their expressions a perfect mirror, right down to the arched eyebrows and quick amused quirk of the mouth.

Next to him his nurse let out a soft pained gasp. David looked at her. Her hands had frozen to the pew, rested curved into it and coated with ice. He tried to pull them free but the ice grew thicker under his hands.

"Look at the windows, love," she said, her voice tired and ragged. "Aren't they very pretty?"

They were. David thought he could see colors under the ice that covered them, imagined them swirling and filling the church. Far over their heads the cathedral bells tolled, singing out that the King had been to worship, had been blessed. David hummed along with their song. By the time the song was over his nurse's hands were free and she said she was ready to leave.

"Do you want me to help you stand up?" David asked.

"No, no, don't fret," she said, and he watched her lever herself up slowly, slowly, fumbling to wrap her shawl around herself. Her hands were blue all the way home.

"Do you think he saw me?" David asked later.

"Of course," his nurse said. "He looked at everyone as he was leaving, didn't he?"

"He didn't see me. And he doesn't--he doesn't want to, does he?"

His nurse sighed and pulled the blanket she had wrapped around her knees up a bit, twisting it in her hands. "Did you know that once upon a time there used to be flowers and grass everywhere, as far as the eye could see?"

"I'm too old for stories," David said, and watched as she smiled a faint sad smile.

"There was. I promise you, there were all those things once back before you were born."

He saw what she didn't say in the way her eyes didn't quite meet his. "I changed things."

"Maybe," she said.

"I didn't mean to."

"Oh, love," she said, "I know. You can't help what you are."

"What am I?"

She didn't answer for a long time. But that evening, long after he went to bed, long after he was supposed to be asleep, he heard her shuffle slowly into his room, sit down next to him. "A curse," she said softly, sadly. Her hand touched his hair, stayed there till he could hear her shivering, teeth clattering together. When she got up and went to bed he heard her say her prayers and put a fresh onion under her pillow.

He asked the second chamberlain's wife what a curse was the next time she and his nurse visited. She'd come and rubbed more of the strong smelling ointment into his nurse's hands again, said she'd try to get some more blankets sent to them. His nurse had smiled and said "Thank you," then fallen asleep looking almost peaceful.

"What's a curse?" he said and the second chamberlain's wife looked at him for a long time before she answered. When she was done talking she'd pulled her shawl tight around herself and her fingers had gone blue-white with cold. She said she had to go and she'd come to visit again soon. She didn't smile at him. When she was gone he sat watching his nurse, feeling his eyes prickle hot wet.

"Did I fall asleep, love?" his nurse asked when she woke.

"Just for a minute."

"You look so sad," she said. "Are you unwell? I could make you some tea or--"

"I'm fine," David said, voice cracking, and ice bloomed across the wall behind his head. It took two weeks to melt.

The year he turned fifteen the new mother he'd never met died. She threw herself off the far tower, right down into the frozen river. Her body broke through the ice and came back up encased in it. It took four days in a room full of candles for all the water surrounding her to melt. David saw the funeral from a hallway looking out over the courtyard, stood next to his nurse while far down below his father lit a funeral pyre and then turned to hold his children's hands. He waited while his wife burned, nobles passing by and pressing ornate twisting folds of paper into his hands. "Sorrow notes," his nurse whispered when he asked what they were. David wished he was down there with paper resting in his hands. He wished his father was waiting to touch his hand. He would like to write out words for him, dozens of them, but he didn't know how to. He made gingerbread instead, later, but his nurse ate it all before he could think of a way to find his father.

"You're a love to make this for me," she said, and her eyes were sparkling. David could see the swollen joints in her hands pressing hard against her skin.

"We need to get more onions tomorrow," he said, and passed her the last piece of gingerbread.

Two years later the second chamberlain's wife died of a wracking cough. She said the cough was nothing until the end, until she couldn't hide the red-brown drenched handkerchiefs any longer and blood streamed out of her mouth with every breath she took. In the days before she slipped into a sleep she never woke from David's nurse never left her side. David learned how to cook eggs and brew tea and tried to wash the sheets. The chamberlain's wife said it was fine that they ended up with holes in them. He heard her say, "The King never asks about him?" in a whisper-cracked voice to his nurse toward the end of her last day.

"No," his nurse said. "The poor little love. Almost grown and what will happen to him then?"

"Does he ever ask? About anything?"

"He used to ask about his father. But never about anything else."

"Odd," the chamberlain's wife said, and her voice was a wheeze now, a creaky wind whisper.

"He asked me what a curse was once but then never brought it up again. Never asked another question. He's a strange one, you know. Just drifts along like he's asleep."

"Who does he have to wake up for?" his nurse said, and her voice was sad.

David rested his head against the window and watched the cup of tea he was holding freeze in his hands. He hugged his nurse when the chamberlain's wife breathed her last breath. Her tears rolled down her face in freezing cold rivulets, fell as tiny pieces of ice that shattered as soon as they hit the floor.

Chapter Two

Joseph met them in the forest. Night was falling and he was walking home, a stag slung over his shoulders and dripping blood down over his coat. He was whistling. He stopped when he saw them, two well-dressed figures appearing out of the woods right in front of him, mounted on horses that hadn't ever known hunger.

"You've been hunting," one of the figures said, he dropped to his knees, looking at the ground. There was nothing to see but white, nothing to feel but cold.

"Look at my sister when she's addressing you," another voice said, deeper but a twin to the first one, and he looked up.

He knew who she was as soon as he saw her. His mother's sister had journeyed to the cathedral to pray for the safe return of her daughter, who'd decided to follow a prophet who'd decreed that the world would end unless the faithful journeyed West and visited a sacred spring. His cousin never returned and all his aunt had were stories of her own travels, of the great glass windows in the cathedral, of the priests' soft hands and the oil they used for anointing. Of the Princess and the Prince, who she'd seen at an afternoon service, sitting together with their heads bowed throughout. "So beautiful," his aunt had said. "The Princess--it's like the very stars of heaven shine through her. And the Prince! Oh my," and here her voice had gone fluttery and she'd paused, pressed one hand over her heart and shared a knowing smile with his mother. He hadn't said anything but thought that his cousin's certain death had loosened his aunt's mind. No one shone like the stars.

He was wrong. The Princess did, glowed golden sitting on her horse, dressed in furs and jewels, hair streaming out around her with diamonds woven through it. Her eyes were enormous and dark, soft with an emotion he couldn't name, and her skin wasn't pitted from disease or gray from hunger. Her cheeks were flushed a gentle pink and the rest of her, forehead to the slash of skin that showed where her furs overlapped, was the softest, warmest color he'd ever seen. He'd never seen anyone so beautiful.

She smiled then, a gentle curve of her mouth. "Stand up and tell me who you are."

He did. "My name is Joseph," he said. "I'm a woodsman, Your Highness." Looking at her was making him dizzy so he bowed to her and then turned, bowed to the person riding beside her.

He knew at once it was her brother. They did not have similar faces--her brother's was sharper, longer, his eyes bright where hers were dark -- but there was no way they could be anything but siblings. He had the same glow she did, the same look in his eyes.

"You're a hunter," the Prince said. His voice was low and soft, as golden as his skin. The woodsman actually felt his words rush over him, soothing and exciting at the same time. He wondered if he was about to die. Hunting was illegal except for those of noble birth and blood. He looked at the Prince. The Prince was watching him, eyes bright.

Joseph nodded, and the Prince smiled.

"We won't keep you," the Princess said, and her voice was softer now, warm and low, a caress of words. Joseph looked at her and knew he'd do anything to have her speak to him in that voice again. "Do you live close by?"

"In the village," he said. "In the house with the mark of the stag on the door." He flushed then, saw how the Prince and Princess had turned away from him, were looking at each other. He wanted them to look at him again but knew, somehow, that they wouldn't. He walked home.

"I'll send a summons," the Prince said on the ride back.

"For me?" the Princess said.

"Greedy," the Prince said, laughter in his voice, and smiled at her in perfect understanding.

Joseph was summoned to see the Princess, but before he saw her he was told he had to meet with the Prince. He rubbed his sweaty hands along his best trousers and nodded, watched the guards who had escorted him into the castle stare at him blankly, their eyes giving nothing away.

The Prince was waiting for him in his rooms. "I'm shocked she wants to see you," he said. "But I can deny her nothing. She's my sister, my heart, and I love her. But she is not to be trifled with. Do you understand?"

"I would never--" Joseph said, aghast. "Not ever, Your Highness. I don't know why she would want to talk to me. I don't know what she wants from me."

"But you have hopes," the Prince said, and smiled. "I see them written all over your face."

"I don't--" Joseph said and then broke off, silenced as the Prince moved forward and touched the back of his hand to Joseph's face.

"You realize," he said, "that I want to make my sister happy. It's very important that she be happy."

Afterwards, he helped Joseph straighten his clothes before he went to see the Princess. "That was...you are," Joseph said and reached eager hands out, swept them down across the Prince's golden skin. His eyes shone hot and longing. "I want to stay with you."

"So sweet," the Prince said and yawned, stretching naked into Joseph's hands. He watched Joseph's eyes heat more and then smiled quickly, a sharp flash of teeth. He moved away and said, "She's waiting for you."

The Princess sat surrounded by attendants when Joseph walked in. He knelt down and touched his head to the floor. "I'm so glad you came," she said, her voice rich and warm. Knowing. "You may rise."

He did, and looked at her. She smiled and told her attendants to leave her. She said she had to discuss a hunt she was planning for her brother.

"It has to be perfect," she said as her attendants were leaving. "I only want the very best for my brother."

In the silence of the room she watched him, the space between them. "I suppose you thought you didn't want to leave him," she said, and her voice was still rich and warm.

"I don't--I don't understand," Joseph said.

"Of course you do," the Princess said, and leaned back against the chaise she was reclining on. "I wouldn't have summoned you if you didn't." She closed her eyes and ran one fingertip down her neck, between the valley of her breasts, down over her stomach. Her skirts parted. Her skin was as golden as her brother's, as smooth.

"Come here," she said.

Joseph did.

He was sent away afterwards, dismissed as she arched and stretched and told him he was wonderful, powerful, and that he should not forget to close the door behind him when he left.

When he arrived home his house looked cramped and small and the smell of smoke and dung bothered him. His family seemed coarse and gray, nothing but shadows. The woods held no interest for him but he walked through them, hoping. He hunted, because he knew it was what had drawn them to him, and waited. When another summons came, he went. He went and drowned in skin and touch. Back home again and he attended mass, listened to sermons about evil, about hell and what would take him there. Everything he'd done was listed. He listened and didn't care. No one knew what he did. He thought of the Prince, hands fisted in his hair and golden body wrapped around his, cock in his mouth and legs squeezing him tight. He thought about the Princess, hair flowing down around her back and spilling over his hands as their bodies worked together. He thought of his mouth between her legs, of seeing the bright flushed core of her arching towards him. He knew all of these things and no one else sitting in church with him did or ever would. He felt mighty. He felt like a King. He liked the feeling.

He knew she faded. David could see it, had watched his nurse grow smaller and thinner for years, shrinking from pain and age. He sat next to her when she lay huddled in bed, covers piled up around her and her eyes clouded with agony. She spoke of faraway times, of places and people he didn't know but that she recalled. Sometimes she called him by a name that wasn't his, asked about a cat they didn't have or lowered her voice to gossip about the Queen, about how eleven months had passed and still her babe rested inside her. He knew which Queen she spoke of and thought of questions. He never asked them.

She opened her eyes one afternoon and he knew she saw him because she told him to change his shirt and asked him when he'd last eaten, clucking her tongue when he said he wasn't sure. "You have to remember to do those things," she said. "You're all grown up now."

"I don't--I don't know what that means," he said, and watched as she looked at him, a patient loving smile on her face. "I mean, I do, but I don't--I don't know what to feel. How to--"

"Oh love," she said. "You'll know one day, I'm sure of it."

Each day she slept more and more, fitful slumbers where her body would shake for hours, her eyes flying open glazed over with pain and always staring at something he couldn't see. When she was awake a scullery maid would sometimes come to visit, sit shyly eating gingerbread and talking about a town David didn't know but his nurse did. The maid didn't seem to like him--she always turned red when he looked at her and her voice rose and shook whenever he tried to speak to her-- but the third time his nurse shook from early morning into afternoon he found her and said he was sorry to bother her, that he needed her help. She flushed so red he'd stared at her, entranced by the color in her face.

She tried to say something but her voice came out as a startled squeak. "I'm very sorry," he told her again and took a step back, hoping that would make her smile, ensure that she'd help him. "But I need onions."

"Onions," the maid said, and her voice was still a little startled but different somehow. He liked the sound of it. "Is that all?" She moved closer and he stared at her shaking raw red hands. She smelled like potatoes. He loved potatoes, loved wrapping them up and baking them in coals, the hot earth smell of them filling the room. He smiled and moved a little closer, trying to think of something to say to her. He thought it would be nice to talk to someone.

"A lot of onions," he said, and dared to touch her hand. "As many as you can get. My nurse--they'll make her better." The scullery maid stared at him.

"Oh," she said, and another expression crossed her face. This one David knew. He saw it on most people's faces when they looked at him. He wasn't surprised when she drew her hand away, stared down at it with wide eyes. He knew she wouldn't bring him any onions.

After that, he started sleeping on the floor by his nurse's bed. He stopped when ice began to coat the floor, growing in time with her pained cries. He piled more blankets on her and sat leaning into an old cane chair, afraid to close his eyes. He watched the blankets rise and fall and wished he knew what to do.

"He killed her," she said in the middle of the night, and her voice was loud and strong and young. "That baby killed her. Did you see her face when she saw him? Did you hear what she said? I want to go home. It's not an honor to be here! And if it is, why don't you be his nurse? I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken like that to you, my lady. Please don't hit me again. It's just that I don't want to be his nurse. I told you so before he was even born, remember? So please, please--I know he's just a baby! But I don't--I don't want to die."

She started to shake then, convulsive moments that shook the bed. "It hurts," she said, and her voice had faded again, become the one he knew. He went over to the bed and knelt by her side. He was careful to keep his hands off the bed, away from her.

"I was young," she said when the shaking stopped. "Young and scared. Your mother, dying like that--all the blood, those pieces of mirror everywhere so all you could see was her lying on the

floor. I was there when the witch woman told your mother about you, you know. I was there, waiting for you to be born, and when she told your mother what she knew I wanted to go home so badly. But I wasn't allowed to and then you were born. You were such a strange baby, so silent, too beautiful. And all that snow, that started the day you were born, got worse every time you cried---we all knew what you could do. What you were doing. They had to tie me to a chair to feed you the first few weeks. It was the only way I would..." She started to shake again. It was a long time until she stopped. He stayed kneeling by her side, feeling the floor slick and cold under his knees, the stones cracking as layers of ice bloomed across them.

"I'm tired," she said when she'd stilled again. Her voice was a faint whisper he could barely hear. "Take my hand, please."

He did. "I'm sorry," he said. Her skin was warm, so warm, but it chilled as he held it, a blue tinge creeping across it. "I don't mean to do it. I would make it stop if I could."

"Oh love," she said. "I know you would." Her eyes closed. He knew they would never open again.

The snow fell fierce and thick after she died and the day of her funeral it was bitter cold, the snow falling so fast it was almost impossible to see. The only other person present, the priest who was there to say one last mass for a departed soul, stood shivering, feeling snow soak through his fur-lined boots. He had not wanted to perform this mass, but when David had asked him, found him in the church and stared at him with anxious beautiful eyes and asked for a death mass in a pleading voice, he'd found himself saying "Yes, of course," right away. Anything to get the strange, quiet, disturbingly beautiful young man away from him. He'd heard the stories of the King's lost son--everyone had--but he'd never believed they were true. Not until that day. And now, standing, watching snow fall hard and fast, he prayed only that this moment would be over soon.

David got the pyre lit. As the priest watched he pressed a flame to the wood and blew gently on it. The flame sputtered and shifted, its color fading from red-yellow to white. The priest watched as the fire burned, consuming everything by ice, the body on the pyre swirling into a cloud too fine and too cold to be smoke.

"Dear God," the priest said, and it wasn't a prayer. He crossed himself and walked away. David didn't notice. He stood watching the fire, shaking not from cold but from grief. He stood watching the fire and snow fall from the sky like tears.

Across the courtyard David's brother and sister stood watching him. They were wrapped in furs, shielded from the falling snow by attendants standing, shivering and holding a canopy over their heads. They were supposed to be on their way to a party, but they'd stopped when they saw the brother they'd forgotten they had, when they saw the way the snow fell harder and faster with every shuddering breath he took. They watched the fire burn, saw its white flame, watched it consume by cold. They looked at each other for a moment and then the Princess lifted one hand up, held it towards the sky. Snow covered the dark rich fabric of her glove in a moment.

"The rumors--"

"Yes," the Prince said. "We'll have to do something. Let me send someone to get you another glove."

"You're too kind," the Princess said, and turned toward him, arm still outstretched. He peeled the ruined glove away from her skin, captured her wrist with his fingers. They left the glove lying on the ground when they went inside. It was covered with snow by the time the doors closed behind them.

"Do you love me?" the Princess asked. It wasn't really a question. She was lying naked on her bed, golden skin draped by soft dyed sheets, staring, smiling at the man standing, watching her.

"Of course I do," Joseph said. His voice was kind but strained, wrecked by want. It was written all over him. He wanted nothing more than to be hers forever.

"How much do you love me?"

"I'd do anything for you," he said, and knelt down, placed one hand on her thigh. His hand didn't shake at all. "Anything."

"Good," the Princess said, and spread her legs. "Come here."

"Do you love me?" the Prince asked later. It wasn't really a question. He was lying naked on his bed, golden skin draped by soft dyed sheets, staring, smiling at the man standing, watching him.

"Of course I do," Joseph said. His voice was kind but strained, wrecked by want. It was written all over him. He wanted nothing more than to be his forever.

"How much do you love me?"

"I'd do anything for you," he said, and knelt down, placed one hand on the Prince's thigh. His hand didn't shake at all. "Anything."

"Good," the Prince said, and spread his legs. "Come here."

Chapter Three

David drifted. He was alone now and the rooms he'd shared with his nurse, rooms that had seemed cozy when he was young and cramped when he was older became cavernous, full of space he knew he could never fill. He went through her things; folded her shawl for the last time, ironed her sheets and made the bed she'd never sleep in again. He folded her tobacco pouch and put it with her pipe, took her shoes and put them where she liked them, pointing out towards the door. There was nothing else left of her except a coin with a woman's smiling face stamped on it that he found tucked into the pocket of her favorite coat. He touched the coin, traced the woman's smile and knew it as his own. He put it back in the coat.

He slept a lot, curled up on the bed he'd had his whole life, watching the small window glazed with ice and listening to snow fall. He went down to the kitchens at night and took food; tea and bread and ale and apples, ate them alone and watched the bread heels turn blue and green, the apple cores brown and melt into mush. One day a servant came and cleaned the room, directed a bent old washwoman to strip David's bed and then David, had a tub brought and said, "There's soap and towels on the table."

"Thank you," David said, and his voice came out sounding cracked and hoarse. He wondered how long it had been since he'd spoken.

"Thank your brother and sister," the servant said. "They've asked me to look after you."

"Please tell them thank you," David said. "Tell them I'm grateful and that they're too good to me, too kind, too--"

"Yes," the servant said abruptly. "I'll tell them." He looked at David. His eyes were cloudy, filmed white like snow. "They're always happy to hear from those who appreciate their kindness."

He thought his brother and sister would come see him then but they didn't. The servant did though, came almost every day. Most of the time he said nothing but occasionally he told David things. The snow was very bad now, worse than anyone could remember. The King had sickened, withdrawn to his rooms. "He is fading," the servant said. "Cries out for his dead wives. Mostly the first one. Sometimes he asks for his children."

"Does he ask for me?" David said, unable to keep hope from his voice. The servant paused, then put down the tray he was holding.

"No," he said.

The Prince and Princess ate dinner together every night. They ate in their own gilded dining room, late at night and all alone. They asked that all the food be served before they arrived. Neither of them liked waiting.

"Tonight is the night," the Princess said when they met in the hallway. Her face was aglow, her eyes shining dark and eager.

"I thought so too," the Prince answered. His eyes shone brightly, dancing with an eagerness that matched hers. "Our guest--"

"will be here soon."

They smiled at each other and walked hand in hand into the room.

Joseph knew what was going to happen as soon as he opened the door. Normally a servant from the Prince or Princess came, rapped once on the door and told him curtly when to arrive at the palace and what entrance to use, but tonight a pair of guards were waiting for him, their faces too perfectly blank to mean anything but that what he'd been doing had been discovered. He'd known it was forbidden but couldn't help it. They were both so beautiful. But woodsmen did not sleep with Princes. They did not sleep with Princesses. He had. He had and knew that if he could he would again. Wanting burned inside him and he saw no need to hide it. It had gained him something greater than he'd ever dreamed of desiring.

He went to what he knew would be his death, walking with his head held high. He walked into the castle flanked by silent soldiers and thought of golden skin and golden hair and wide knowing eyes. He thought of arms holding him, urging him on, sweet voices crying his name. He looked at the soldiers. They'd never know anything like what he'd had, what he'd found. They'd never do anything like what he'd done. He walked into a golden room and thought *it was worth it*.

Death didn't come. Instead they were waiting for him, just the two of them surrounded by crystal bowls full of food and crystal glasses full of wine.

"I thought--" he stammered out, surprised by seeing the two of them together, by not being greeted with an axe slicing through his neck.

"Shhh---" the Prince and Princess said at the same time.

"You said you loved me," the Princess continued, and smiled a tender-eyed smile. She ate a bite of meat, mouth opening into a perfect round O, a flash of her tongue before her lips closed.

"You said you'd do anything," the Prince said, and smiled a tender-eyed smile. He drank a sip of wine, mouth opening into a perfect round O, a flash of his tongue before his lips closed.

"I do," he said. "I would. Anything, I swear."

The moment he said those words the Prince and Princess smiled at each other and he felt a chill crawl up his spine.

One afternoon the servant handed him a piece of paper instead of bringing him food. David felt the weight of the paper in his hand and stared at the soft cream color of it, the gilded edges that curved into silhouettes of his brother and sister. His stomach rumbled a little but he ignored it.

"They--they sent this for me?" he asked and unfolded the paper. Great slashes of words raced across it, all of them a curious mix of sharp curves and delicate loops. It was as if two people had written the letter at the same time. David wished he could read it. He looked at the servant, then back down at the letter.

"I'll return for you after the evening mass, then?" the servant said, a hint of impatience in his voice. His eyes were as impossible to read as ever, still fogged a snowy white.

"Yes," David said. "I'll be ready. And then we'll go and--?"

A frown crossed the servant's face. "You did read the note?"

"I--"

"Just be ready," the servant said, bitterness in his voice that David knew wasn't directed at him but at something else, someone else. "Their Highnesses don't like to be kept waiting."

"I'm going to see them," David breathed and smiled.

"Yes," the servant said, and didn't smile back.

They were waiting for him, sitting on long sofas across from each other and smiling at one another over a scurrying maid's head. They looked over at him at the same time, rose from their sofas together and walked towards him. The Prince waved the maid away, smiling a little as she flinched and raced from the room. The Princess said, "Thank you, that will be all," to the servant who'd led David to them, smiled as he blinked his fogged eyes and turned away.

"I'm so glad to see you," David said when they were alone. "I've --"

"Yes, yes," the Prince said. "We're glad to see you too. But we asked you here for a reason."

"Yes," the Princess said. "You see--"

"We've planned--"

"a gift--"

"of a trip--"

"just for you--"

"our dear brother."

"For me?" David said. "Really? No one's ever--really and truly just for me?"

The Prince and Princess smiled at each other. "Yes, dear heart," the Princess said, her voice laced with laughter that David wanted to enjoy but couldn't. Something about it didn't seem to include him.

"Just for you," the Prince said, and his voice was a deeper counterpoint to the Princess's, laced with the same excluding mirth. "You'll leave in the morning."

"Where am I going?" David asked eagerly. "What will I see?"

"A new land," the Princess said at the same time the Prince said, "You'll see things most people don't see until they are very old."

"Thank you," David said, and hesitated for a moment, then reached out and hugged each of them like his nurse used to hug him. They were both warm and it felt nice to be close to someone, to know they cared for him. Their arms didn't close around him like his nurse's had but it didn't matter. He didn't think he'd ever been so happy.

"Farewell," they said at the same time as he left the room. He turned back to wave at them but they'd turned away, were looking out the window.

Outside, the snow had stopped falling.

"We did it," the Princess said late that night, lying curled on her side with a smile on her face.

"Yes, we did," the Prince said. He stretched and then curled his body down into an echo of hers, the two of them looking deep into each other's eyes. "And now--"

"Dear Father," the Princess said with a sigh, her smile sharpening. "He can pass on to the next world. We'll--"

"We'll tell him about our brother together. He'll cry--"

"He'll howl."

They shared a smile.

"He thinks he's forgotten," the Prince said. "But we'll--"

"We'll make him remember." The Princess sat up, pushed her hair back and stood, spun around in joy. "Now," she said. "Let's do it now."

"Not yet," the Prince said, and she stopped moving, a small frown crossing her face. He took her hand. "Soon," he said. "Remember the woodsman and his task?"

"You want to go now," she said, and linked her fingers tightly around his. "You don't want to wait."

"And you know we should," he said, and tugged her down next to him. She smiled at him.

His brother and sister came into his room in the morning, the familiar white-eyed servant trailing behind them.

"We came to make sure you were ready to leave," his sister said briskly but not unkindly. "Where are your bags?"

"I just need--" David said, gesturing around the room. "I have to take my nurse's shawl with me."

"Anything we can do to help," his brother said, an amused drawl in his voice, and clapped his hands at the servant. "By all means, make sure to find and pack the--your nurse's, was it?--shawl."

"What a sweet thing you are," his sister said. "It's almost a shame to see you leave." And then they both smiled at him, broad satisfied smiles that David wasn't sure he liked. But they'd arranged a trip for him and they'd noticed him and that was enough; that was amazing. David smiled back and they both blinked at him and then looked at each other.

"He might not have to go just yet," his brother said and placed one hand on his sister's shoulder, sliding his fingers under the robes she was wearing to trace over the gilt trim that framed her collarbone.

"That's what I was thinking," she said, a tone too rich and satisfied to be surprise filling her voice. She looked around the room, eyes darkening as she took in its small size, the lack of furniture, the pile of David's nurse's belongings still stacked neatly folded, as if she might be coming back to claim them at any time.

"You must be so lonely," she breathed, and took a step towards him. "We should have come to see you long before this." She took one of his hands in hers, brought it up so it was cradled between their bodies. Behind her his brother watched them both.

"You wouldn't mind waiting a bit before you go, would you?" he asked, his voice gone low and hinting at things David didn't know. He crossed towards them, stopping when he was by David's side, both him and his sister in his sight.

"I--" David said, and his brother took his other hand, rubbing his thumb across David's knuckles. David stared at him, then looked at his sister again. He felt very strange, something hot and shivery and dark stretching inside him. His sister tugged on his hand, placed it where his brother had touched moments ago, draping his fingers to rest along the edge of her dress, nudging them a little so they scraped over trim and onto skin. David let his fingers drift and heard his brother draw in a breath. His sister smiled. It was the most unpleasantly beautiful thing David had ever seen.

The servant coughed delicately, and his sister's smile faded.

"I've packed the shawl, just as you asked," the servant said.

"I don't remember--" his brother said, and his sister finished, "giving you leave to speak," a sharp wild heat in her voice. "Leave us."

"I'll tell the... guide you hired to return another day, then?"

Between him, his brother and sister locked glances, looking at each other as if he wasn't even there.

"The guide. He's--"

"All heart."

His sister dropped his hand. "It has to be today then. Too bad," she said with a little sigh. "And you," she told the servant, turning towards him in a swirl of glorious silks and furs, a shining star in the small dim cavern of the room. "I'm going to want to talk to you later." Her voice was like a song, light and sweet, but the melody behind it made David's skin crawl. The servant paled, but nodded.

As they walked through the castle to meet the guide David listened to the servant breathing behind him. He sounded winded, his breath coming in quick sharp pants like he was in pain. His brother and sister were in front of him, walking arm in arm and somehow not with him at all, moving as if they were in their own world. Their footsteps sounded unusually loud and the air around them somehow shimmered, as if with every step they took they somehow changed the world around them, shifted it into something different, brighter. Everyone they passed bowed to them; bending so low their foreheads touched the floor.

David looked at everyone curiously but no one seemed to notice him. When they reached the end of the last hall and passed through its doors his brother and sister stopped, paused at the top of the steep stairs that led down to the courtyard. His sister snapped her fingers. A blast of air hit David in the face and as the doors closed behind them he could hear a voice saying, "Was someone with their Highnesses? I thought I saw--." Behind him he could hear the servant moving carefully, his breathing still irregular, coming in great jagged gasps.

"They wanted to spend time with me," he said and turned, took his bag out of the servant's hands. It wasn't heavy. He didn't own much. "For the first time ever I could have talked to them, really talked to them." He could hear the hurt in his voice, couldn't help it. He could feel snow begin to fall, hear it as a whisper filling the sky, felt it drifting cold and dry down over him.

The servant looked directly at him and David had to fight not to turn away from the empty white of his gaze.

"They once spent time with me," he said quietly. "They were the last things I ever saw."

David looked at his brother and sister. They'd descended the stairs and were standing in the courtyard talking to a bearded man, their faces alight with smiles, his sister on one side of him, his brother on the other. As David watched, his brother trailed one hand up the bearded man's arm as he turned to signal the guards to open the gates. The bearded man's eyes went soft, glowing helpless and hot. A smile crossed his sister's face and she said something, her mouth barely moving. The bearded man turned to look at her then, the same helpless look on his face.

His brother turned to him then, motioned for David to come join them.

"There is no trip, is there?" he said. He knew as soon as he said it that it was true.

"They know about you," the servant said in a rush. "What you can do. They want it to stop. They paid for a spell to make sure no one would see you leaving. You must have noticed it. It didn't hurt you though. You could breathe just fine. You have power. You could--"

"Did you pack my nurse's shawl?" David said, and the servant's face shifted, a look of pity and scorn crossing it.

"I did," he said, and then, as if he couldn't help himself, "Don't you care? Don't you realize you could stop them? Don't you--"

"Thank you," David said, and turned away. It had started to snow harder. He walked down to meet his brother and sister, watch them look up at the sky and then at him. He said hello to the guide, who said his name was Joseph and didn't look at him at all. He said goodbye to his brother and sister, watched them smile at each other. He brushed snow out of his eyes.

"Can I--may I take the servant with me?" he asked. His sister's smile disappeared and something deeply unpleasant flashed in her eyes. His brother put a hand on her arm and she looked at him. When she did her smile returned, as if he'd reminded her of something she'd forgotten.

"Of course," she said. "Joseph can easily take care of the two of you. How silly of me to think otherwise." She smiled at Joseph, who paled before his eyes heated, staring at her as if she was the only thing he could see. When he nodded the Prince clapped his hands, motioned for the guards to bring the servant to them.

David turned back as they left, the servant walking pale and silent by his side. He noticed Joseph turned back too. His brother and sister were watching them. They waved farewell at the same time then turned away, arms linked about each other's waists. Joseph finally looked at him when the gate closed behind them, a quick glance as if he wanted to pretend David wasn't there, as if he didn't want to look at him. His hands were shaking. "You'll need a walking stick," he shouted at the servant. "I'll go find a branch for you to use."

"Of course," the servant said politely and just as loudly. "But I'm not sure I heard you, what with my inability to see. Would you repeat yourself, please?"

"I was just trying to--" Joseph said, and broke off. "Never mind. Just wait here till I get back."

"Go," David said as soon as Joseph disappeared into the trees. "I'll tell him I changed my mind and sent you back."

"What?"

"There must be somewhere you can go."

"I--" the servant stammered. "I have family, or used to. I could--"

"Then go. Find them."

"No, no, I can't," the servant said quickly, anger thick in his voice. "We have to go back. I have a friend who works at the gate. It's all he can do now thanks to--thanks to *them*. He'd let us in, take care of the murderer they've hired to kill you. We could find them and --"

"You should leave," David said. "I'm not going back."

"Look at what they did to me!" the servant said and pointed at his face, his eyes. "You can see it. I can't. I *can't*. Do you know what it's like to live in darkness? She was the last thing I saw. She stood in front of me and laughed, held her brother's hand and watched him.... They should pay. I want them to pay. And you could do that. You could make them suffer. You could--"

"I could," David said. "But I don't want to. I don't want to be like them."

"You're a million times worse already," the servant said, and spit on the ground. "You're a curse and a fool."

David stayed silent, stood listening to the snow fall, stood watching the servant's clouded eyes.

"Good riddance to you, then," the servant said and ran off, stumbling as he went, hands stretched out in front of him so his skin could see what his eyes couldn't.

"Goodbye," David said, and waited for Joseph to come back.

Chapter Four

He'd promised, Joseph told himself. They needed him to do this. They were counting on him. The Princess had whispered that to him right as the gate was being opened, a throaty, "I need you. *We* need you," rushing into him.

The Prince had clapped him on the back before he crossed through the gate, his fingers sliding up and crossing warm over the skin at the nape of Joseph's neck, a brief caress, a reminder of what he'd had and would have again.

He looked at the pale man beside him. He's no one, The Prince and Princess had told him, our brother but an embarrassment, hidden from sight because he's nothing more than a simple fool, and they were right. He'd asked for a servant and then sent him back, stared at everything as if he'd never seen anything before and never asked where they were going or what they'd do when they got there. There was nothing to him. Killing him wouldn't be any different than killing a stag. All it would take was one blow to the heart and then he could go back and they'd be waiting for him, call him to them right away.

They might even be waiting for him together, both of them lying curled up and golden, arms reaching towards him. The night he promised them he'd do this one thing--a simple thing, they'd said, a nothing -- he'd had them both at the same time, the Princess writhing against him, her mouth biting his neck as he pushed inside her while behind him the Prince's teeth raked across his shoulders as he pushed inside him, both of them promising him more nights like this, promising him forever, their hands linking together and wrapping him between them.

Just thinking about it--he took a deep breath and forced himself to focus. They'd been walking for at least half a day. They'd come far enough. If he hurried, he would be home tonight. Perhaps they'd already have someone there waiting for him. Of course they would. They'd promised. Just as he'd promised them.

"Do you want to stop for a minute?" he asked.

"If you want to."

Now, Joseph told himself. Do it now. He isn't even looking at you. He's staring at the trees. He brushed snow out of his eyes and let one hand fall to the handle of the knife resting snugly in a sheath by his side.

"Thank you so much for doing this. I've never seen a forest before, you know."

"I'm sure you've seen trees before, your Highness," Joseph said, and let his fingers close around the knife. He could see the Princess's face; hear the Prince's voice. He could feel them all around him. He couldn't wait any longer. He had to do this. They wanted him to.

"David," the man said. "I told you before, remember? And I haven't. Well, in pictures. But that doesn't really count, does it? This--" he swept one arm out, "is much better." He smiled at him. And it was nothing, Joseph told himself, just a smile and nothing more. No promises like those that lay behind the Prince and Princess's, no memories. Just a smile, but he knew he'd never seen

a look of such pure happiness on anyone's face. He knew he'd never seen anyone so beautiful. His fingers slid off the knife.

"I--" he said, and he could hear the Prince and Princess urging him on but for once their golden call wasn't warming him, wasn't drowning the world around him. He saw himself standing poised in the middle of the deepest forest ready to kill instead. He tried to picture them the way he loved them and that they said they loved to be, all of them naked and together, but instead thought of the light of their eyes the night they told him what they wanted him to do, the way their smile at each other had made his flesh crawl.

Even then he'd known what they were going to ask him was something he wouldn't be able to do. He'd known it.

"I have to go on ahead and check the path," he said helplessly. What was he going to do? Their voices weren't as strong as they'd been, their faces not as clear, but they were still what he wanted to see. "Sometimes hunters put out traps and I don't want you to get hurt."

"Really?" David said. "You don't?"

"Of course," Joseph said automatically, mind racing through possibilities. A fall, maybe? There was a hill not too far away, one that dropped into what had once been a river but was now nothing but solid ice. No, he couldn't do that either. Maybe--

It stopped snowing. Joseph blinked and shook his head, not sure if what he was seeing was real, but it was. The snow had stopped. He looked up. Gray clouds were rolling across the sky, moving so fast it was as if they were being pushed. Behind them he thought he almost saw hints of blue. He shook his head again. He'd heard stories--he looked at David, who was still smiling and who had actually sat down in the snow, as if submerging himself in it didn't bother him. As if he didn't feel it.

But he would. No matter what the stories were, Joseph knew no one could survive a night in the forest. The cold was too bitter, too strong. And if by some chance the cold didn't kill him--well, he knew the wolves would. As soon as night fell they'd come out eager for food. Years of living in this snowy world had made them merciless, willing to strike at anyone or anything. David wouldn't live to see the morning. All he had to do was walk away.

"I'll be right back," he said. "Wait here."

"I will," David said, wrapping his arms around his knees. He waved as Joseph walked off. Joseph pretended he didn't see, and kept walking.

He looked back once, when he'd walked far enough ahead so that he could veer off the side and circle back without David ever seeing him. David was just a dot, a blur in the white of the snow that lined the forest floor, impossible to truly see.

"I'm sorry," he whispered and then turned, headed back out of the forest, and he was sorry. But not sorry enough to stop. He walked away, headed back home to wait for the Prince and Princess to summon him, back to what and who he wanted more than anything else.

The Princess shook when she announced the King was dead and the Prince had to hold her up, cradling her in his arms. Everyone wept at their grief, at how it had made them lean so strongly on each other. They continued to hold each other as they announced with tear-filled voices that now they'd have to assume the burden their father had worn, that they would rule wisely and justly. They looked fragile standing there, as if their only support was each other, and everyone vowed silently to do anything to help them, anything at all. The Prince folded the Princess more tightly into his arms and let her hair drape over them so no one would see her smile. So no one would see his.

No one asked about David.

Joseph arrived home safely. He did not sleep well his first night home. He didn't sleep at all on the second night. His family chalked it up to amazement over the snow finally stopping. They hadn't slept well either. It was hard to since they were in the midst of a miracle. Everyone kept racing outside and staring at the clear sky. The town priest proclaimed a new world had arrived, God returning what was and always should have been to his faithful and a few people even whispered that the snow would melt soon, that soon things would return to how they used to be.

Joseph no longer wanted to go into the forest. He sat at home instead, sat always watching the door and moving eager-eyed whenever a knock sounded, racing to open the door as if his life depended on it. His eager eyes always faded though, as if every visitor was not the one he was waiting for. His mother made him broth and patted his hand, kissed the top of his head.

"It's so beautiful now," she said, and strained to look out the window. For the first time in so long there were things to see in the sky besides snow. She didn't want to miss anything. "And they say the snow might melt soon. Can you imagine that? God has truly blessed us. You should go outside. The sky is so blue it's a miracle."

"It's not a miracle," he muttered. "Why haven't they called for me?"

"What did you say? I didn't hear you."

"Nothing," he said. "I'm tired, that's all."

"Go sleep," his mother said. "You'll feel better once you've rested, I promise."

Joseph went and lay down on his simple wooden bed. He thought about golden skin and voices whispering his name. He thought about promises.

He didn't sleep.

When it grew dark David knew Joseph wasn't coming back. He opened his bag and looked through it. His nurse's shawl wasn't there. The servant hadn't packed it after all. David knit his fingers together and thought of it sitting faded on a shelf in his room, of how it was there for him to touch whenever he wanted and how whenever he did he thought about her and didn't feel so

alone. Around him the snow crackled, crisping into ice. He took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. Clouds were starting to fill it, shading out the stars. He took another deep breath and thought of his nurse's face. He thought about gingerbread and the trees in front of him, watched their scratchy tall shapes move in the wind. He lay down and felt the snow sink around him, welcoming him. Overhead the clouds shifted, drawing back, the stars shining brightly again. He found all the ones his nurse had told him about, watched them grow brighter as the night grew darker, stiller. They seemed so close, like he could just reach out and touch them. He liked that.

He heard the trees moving, singing a peculiar moaning song as the wind scraped across them. He tried to sing along with it but the song kept changing, becoming new every time the wind shifted. He heard other songs too, songs that didn't sound like any he'd heard another person sing, strange wordless cries that he thought sounded like a plea, like how he'd felt when his nurse died. When they grew close he sat up and sang along with them. They grew louder and he saw eyes watching him, saw animals like the dogs some nobles kept sitting watching him, lean and shaggy-haired and eager. When the song was done a few of them sang another song, meaner and lower, all snarling sharp teeth, and moved closer still. He thought of his brother and sister and sang back. The animals' snarls faded, their bodies drooping and bending low to the ground. Ice started to cover their muzzles. David kept singing, caught up in the song and feeling a dark heat curl inside him, beating strong and fierce. One of the animals twitched, a full body shiver, and then collapsed heavily, falling into the snow with a peculiar cracking sound. David stopped singing. The animals were staring at him with wide eyes, their bodies quivering. He got up and looked at the body in the snow. It had shattered, become nothing but tiny frozen pieces the wind was already trying to pick up and carry away.

"I'm sorry," he told the animals, but they backed away from him anyway, still shivering, and he could see the ice coating their faces was still there. "You don't have to go," he said. "I won't sing anymore, I promise."

They didn't listen to him and soon he was alone again. He tried to lie back down but the ground around him had frozen solid. He lay down anyway and watched the sky, pictured himself floating up into the stars. He wondered if his nurse was up there and decided she was, pictured her sitting by one of the bright stars twinkling down at him, smiling and telling him it was time to sleep.

"I'm not really tired," he told her, and she laughed and said he was and just didn't know it. She patted the ground near his head and he sighed, stretched out and sank into snow. He slid his hands under it, felt it cradling his skin, covering him, and closed his eyes.

He woke up when something hit him in the shoulder.

"So considerate of you to die right in the middle of the path, really," a voice said, and then sighed. "God, I'm going to have to get the shovel out. I thought the wolves around here were supposed to be especially vicious. *'Don't travel at night, the wolves will eat you.'* Ha! I should have known better. Next time someone tells me that I'm going to tell them where they can stick the flea-infested mattress they're trying to overcharge me for." Something kicked him in the shoulder and he opened his eyes and saw a boot with a hole at the toe. "You'd better have some gold on you when I dig you out. No, make that gold and jewels. A lot of gold and jewels."

The hole was filled with a bright red piece of fabric. It looked brighter than fire. David touched it cautiously. It wasn't hot. He pulled at it a little, just to make sure, and it fell out of the boot and into his hand.

"Oh hell," the voice said, and suddenly two hands were grabbing him and pulling him up out of the snow. "Just great. A thieving corpse. My day could not get any better."

David blinked and brushed snow out of his eyes. Someone he'd never seen before was standing scowling up at him, a man with dark eyebrows drawn together over equally dark eyes.

"Here," he said, and held up the piece of fabric. "I was just seeing if it was hot."

The man opened his mouth and then closed it. "Of course you were," he finally said. "I suppose you always sleep lying in the snow in the middle of the forest too."

"No," David said. "In a castle. There isn't any snow inside it."

"Right," the man muttered. "A castle. I should have guessed. I tell you what, you help me dig my cart out and I'll leave you right here to do...whatever it is you're doing."

"All right," David said. The man's eyes widened and then he scowled. David smiled at him tentatively, and the man scowled more.

"Oh," David said. "I'm sorry." He held out the piece of fabric. "I suppose you want this back. I didn't mean to take it."

"Fine!" the man shouted. "I'll give you a ride to the next town, but that's it. And you have to get the cart out of whatever it is I drove into so I wouldn't run over you. Go get the shovel and get started."

"What's a shovel?"

"Oh hell," the man said, and rubbed his hands across his face. "This is going to be the worst day ever. No, scratch that. This is already the worst day ever."

The man's name was Alec. David learned that while he was sitting, watching him shovel snow.

"I should have just run you over," the man had muttered. "I mean, I thought you were dead. I even said to myself 'Alec, whoever is there is already dead so they won't care' but what did I do? I tried to go around you. Next time I'm just closing my eyes and --"

"Your name is Alec?"

Alec stopped shoveling and looked at him. "No, I just always call myself that. My real name is far too long for most people to say."

"Mine too!" David said, and smiled at him. "I can't even remember all of it, actually."

"That sounds about right," Alec said, and started shoveling again. David watched him for a while. Alec's hands were dark at the ends, all his fingertips turned black like night. His hair was dark too. Looking at it was like seeing nighttime even though the sun was actually shining. David looked up at the sky. He hadn't realized the sun was so bright.

"You do realize my name really is Alec, right?" Alec said after a few minutes. "And that you're staring directly at the sun."

"It's very bright," David said, and looked back at Alec. He looked like a blur now. "I've never really seen it before."

"Because you live in a castle. And they don't have windows in them or anything."

"It has windows. They're just always covered with ice."

Alec snorted. "I did mention I'm only taking you as far as the next town, right?"

After Alec dug the cart out he said they were ready to go. "Check on the horse," he told David, who walked up to the front of the cart and looked at the animal standing there. It looked disinterestedly back at him. David patted the side of its head tentatively, thinking of the animals he'd sung to last night and feeling fear trickle through him.

The horse twitched its tail and snorted. David patted the horse again. It was very warm and its fur felt nice on his fingers.

"I said check on him, not pet him," Alec said. "You live in a castle, right? You must have a horse. Probably a magical horse, but still you must have learned how to check and make sure it was harnessed properly."

David shook his head. "My father has some. I saw him riding one once."

"Just the one time, huh? You two don't get along?"

"He doesn't--he doesn't want to see me."

"Uh huh. Let me guess, you're a forgotten Prince who was locked in a tower for years and who's just escaped the clutches of evil relatives who are out to kill you. Am I close?"

David looked at him. Alec's eyes were even darker up close. He was smiling, but as David looked at him his smile faded and he looked off to the side, as if seeing him was something he didn't want to do.

"No," David said softly. "I'm just--I'm--I'm sorry I didn't know what to do with the horse."

"It's all right," Alec said. "Go get in the cart."

As the forest thinned they began to see homes. David stared at them, tiny stone houses made wet, dark by the snow. There were people too, and not one of them looked like anyone he'd ever seen before. He was used to the glow of pictures, saints in a prayer book or portraits lined up in hallways, to the drape and colors of the castle and the people who swept through it, even the servants dressed in bright colors that showed who owned them.

The only color he saw now was on the faces of slow-moving children whose cheeks and noses were red from cold, in the dark circles under most everyone's eyes, in the white circle scars that pitted almost everyone's face. Everyone was shrunken and grayer than people he'd seen in the castle or in pictures, as if they were sketches waiting to be filled in. He looked over at Alec.

Alec's lips were cracked from the cold and he had circles under his eyes and his fingertips were still cracked dark. He had two white circle scars on his neck, just below one ear, and another one high up on one cheekbone. He didn't really look any different from anyone David had just seen. But he was different somehow. Maybe it was how he was sitting. He sat--not like anyone David had ever seen, not languidly like everyone in the castle, not wearily like everyone they'd just passed. He sat as if he was ready to move, as if everything around him wasn't enough to contain him and he knew it. Or maybe it was how he looked at things. At him. Not with fear or sorrow or strange heated expectation or as if past him was someone or something else. Just looking at him, directly at him. He liked it. He smiled at Alec.

Alec turned away. David was used to that from people so he didn't mind. Not really. He went back to looking at the houses, the people, the slowly fading forest.

It started to snow.

Alec wrapped the horse's reins around one hand and reached under the seat, pulled out something dark and shapeless. As David watched he pushed it down over his head, the fabric fanning out around and over him. It wasn't like any coat David had ever seen. It was covered with pockets around the hem, neat little rows of them, and the whole thing was covered with something, small shining flakes like starlight.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing at the flakes.

"Mine dust," Alec said tightly. "You have a problem with that?"

"No. You have some in your hair too. It--"

"Put on your coat."

"It shines," David said, still looking at Alec, who was determinedly looking straight ahead. "It looks like stars."

"Just put on your coat, will you?"

"I don't have one."

Alec's face was now flushed like the scullery maid's had once been, stripes of color across his cheekbones. David wished he could see his eyes. He moved a little, so he could see them, but Alec moved too.

"There's a blanket in the back," he said shortly, and his voice was another different thing about him, David thought. Looking at him you'd think--you wouldn't think about his voice at all. You wouldn't expect to notice it. But it was impossible not to. Everything he said came out quick and light and edged sharp. He moved closer again.

Alec shot him a glance then. The color was gone from his face and he just looked exasperated. "Grab the damn blanket and wrap it around yourself so you don't freeze to death. And please don't tell me you don't know what a blanket is."

"I know what a blanket is," David said, and smiled.

Alec's mouth parted and his face flushed again. "Then stop talking and get it already." And the words sounded angry but his voice--his voice didn't sound angry at all. David grabbed the blanket out of the back and wrapped it around himself. It smelled like the horse and Alec. He felt--awake, he thought. Real.

"And now, of course, it's not snowing," Alec said. "Never fails. Get out the jacket and all of sudden it's sunny and..." He kept talking. David tucked the blanket tightly around himself and looked up at the sky, watched blue push past gray. He felt as light as the clouds racing across the sky. He liked the feeling.

Chapter 5

They reached town as night was starting to fall. David wished he could see more but all he could make out were close clusters of buildings, the huddled shapes of people moving through the streets, bowed against the cold, and the occasional flicker of fire or candlelight in a window. The ground sounded different though, like the inside of the castle, and when he peered over the edge of the cart he saw they were riding over stones buried in the ground, slicked by ice and snow but still barely visible.

The cart stopped. David straightened up and looked at Alec, who said, "We're here," and didn't quite look back at him.

"Oh," David said. "Okay." He put the blanket away and grabbed his bag, climbed off the cart. The stones felt strange under his feet. They weren't smooth like the ones in the castle. They were pitted, cracked from where they'd iced over and split open again and again. He looked around. There was a child sitting huddled in a doorway nearby, scrawny with white pitted scars all over his face and too-wise eyes that met his and quickly looked away. Some of the buildings had signs on them, a few with words but most with pictures. One had an eye, another a pot. The stones led off in three directions, one back the way they'd come, one branching up and off into a curl that snaked out of sight, and one that went straight ahead. David squinted, but all he saw in that direction was dark.

"The pale," Alec said. "You do know about that, right?"

"No," David said, because he didn't. "It doesn't look very pale. What is it?" The child in the doorway laughed, a sharp coughing bark.

Alec looked at him for a long moment, eyes glinting. Then he sighed and said, "Never mind. There's an inn down by what used to be the river. They probably won't overcharge you too much. You do have money, right?"

"Yes," David said, because he did. He'd packed the coin his nurse had kept in her coat.

"Great," Alec said and lifted the reins, turning to look out at the street. "Good luck with...whatever it is you're doing."

"You too," David said. "Thank you for being so nice to me."

Alec's mouth tightened. "How much?" he said abruptly.

"What?"

"How much money do you have?"

David fished in his bag and held up the coin.

"Why did I even ask?" Alec muttered. "All I had to do was keep driving. I swear I am never ever--" He got out of the cart and pointed at the child, said, "If you have someone steal this I'll find you and cut off your thumbs."

"Four bits to watch the horse," the child said disinterestedly. "Eight to watch so your stuff don't get taken."

"Eight? Do you think you're bargaining with--" he pointed at David. "Five."

"Seven."

"Okay, three."

"Five," the child said quickly. Alec nodded and walked off. After a minute he turned around and beckoned to David.

"Come on," he said impatiently. "One glass of ale and you'd better not order anything that comes covered in sauce because that always costs extra. And then that's it, you understand?"

"Not really," David said.

"I supposed I asked for that one," Alec muttered.

He took David inside a building that had a sign hanging from it, a swinging picture of a cup and a swirling word underneath. The first letter looked like a tree, long with two branches winding off it on either side. Inside it was smoky and dark and smelled like his nurse used to on holidays, a warm yeasty smell. It was hot too, almost furiously so, and David saw two fireplaces, one on either side of the room, both of them glowing red bright. It seemed every inch of space was filled with people, all of who were looking at them. At Alec. And the expressions on their faces at the sight of him were ugly, twisted mean smiles and angry frowns. Alec didn't seem to notice them.

"Troll," someone muttered as he passed by, eyes narrowing to slits.

"You mean miner," Alec said, and kept walking. David followed him, watching everyone watch Alec and feeling the room grow warmer still, as if something was starting to simmer under its surface.

Alec sat down at a table wedged against the back wall and motioned for David to sit across from him. As David did the men next to them got up and moved away, distaste on their faces. Alec didn't seem to notice that either but then David saw his hands resting folded on the table in fists curled so tightly his knuckles were white, and knew that he had.

A woman walked up to them then, tall and raw-boned with a coil of gray hair snaking around her head and an enormous white circle scar on her chin. "We don't serve dirt dwellers in this tavern," she said. "Take yourself elsewhere."

"Are you sure?" Alec said. "About your policy, I mean. Because you look really familiar to me. Blue gem mines over the southern mountains about four years ago, right? You were the one who was too stupid to realize that blue gem mining meant picking out the blue rocks."

"Shut your worthless mouth," the woman hissed. "Go back underground and stay there."

"Do you own this place?"

The woman glared at him. The scar on her chin quivered as her mouth worked and settled into a heavy frown.

"That's what I thought. Bring us two glasses of ale," Alec said, and added "Please" in a way that made the woman's mouth frown more.

"Fine," she said. "Coming right up." Her knuckles cracked as she squeezed one hand into a fist and then made a motion with it as she turned away, a gesture that made Alec strain forward in his chair for a moment before he sat back, a fake mean smile on his face.

"I don't understand," David said. "What's going on? Why is everyone--?"

"Shut up," Alec said fiercely, not meeting his eyes, and David heard laughter from the men nearby. It didn't sound like anything that made him want to smile. It made him hurt inside, cold sparking scraping hurt that made him think of the song he'd sung to the animals in the forest.

The woman came back carrying two glasses. "Ale for you," she said, and slammed them down hard enough to shake the table. David looked down at his glass. It was full of dark brown liquid and smelled like the yeasty scent he knew, that he'd recognized when they'd first come in. But floating on top of the liquid in both glasses was something else, a thick yellow blob. The woman made a peculiar throat clearing noise, liquid sounding like it was rattling up from her lungs. She spat on the floor and a yellow blob just like the one in the glasses landed next to Alec's feet.

"Ten bits," she said. "You want anything else?"

Alec pushed his chair back and stood up. He barely came up to her shoulders. The woman smiled then, baring brown yellow teeth that were clearly made of wood. David stared at her. She didn't look at him, was still staring at Alec. Behind her the two men stood up from their seats, their faces creased with anger.

"Just try it," one of them said to Alec. "Breaking you in half would be the best thing that's happened to me all day."

Alec looked at them and then at David, who was still staring at the woman's teeth. His mouth twisted into a bitter smile and he reached into his pocket, slammed a handful of coins down on the table. "I'm leaving," he said, and his voice was a furious snarl. He stalked through the tavern without looking back.

The woman bent down and put her face close to David's. "You see something you like?" she hissed. "Bet not, coming in here with that ugly dirt splitter. I ought to--"

David touched her hand then, black sparking behind his eyes. "I didn't know people could have teeth made out of wood," he said and there was no need to call forth the darkness inside him. It was everywhere already, flowing out of him. The woman's hand turned blue and the color raced down her fingers, across her wrist, up her arm. Her eyes widened and she pulled away from him. Now the look on her face was one David knew. He smiled at her.

She took another step back, eyes heating and filling with terror at the same time, and he watched her try to speak. She couldn't. Ice had coated her mouth, sealing it closed. Behind her the two men were staring at him, alarm in their eyes. When David stood up they backed away and he heard words whispered all around him. King. Queen. Son. Cursed. He pushed through the crowd, heard the woman fall to the floor as he walked out the tavern door.

"You need to go," he said to Alec, who was standing staring out at the street. "Now."

Alec looked at him. Then he nodded and tossed some coins to the child sitting in the doorway still, climbed onto the cart. Behind them noise was building, voices in the tavern rising in terror and anger strong enough to spill out into the night.

"Do I want to know what happened?" he asked.

"No," David said, and listened to the voices. They were growing louder. They'd be outside soon. He thought of the animals in the forest, of their angry smiles and sharp teeth and felt shaky inside, the fury that had driven him cooling. He looked at his hands.

"Hey," Alec said impatiently. "You can stare at yourself later."

David looked at him.

"You pick the oddest times to be slow," Alec said. "Just get in the cart already, will you?"

David did and held on as it lurched forward, racing down the street.

"So who are you, really?" Alec said. They'd left the town behind, were crossing through another forest. The pale. David still didn't know what it was but looking around he saw that there was no snow, that the trees looked lush and full, their leaves rustling as they swayed in the dark, the ground underneath them littered with small dark spheres that dripped trembling from their branches. He felt something in the air, could taste it sharp and bitter on his tongue.

"I'm--" he said, and thought of who he was supposed to be, knew he wanted to leave it behind. "I'm David. I mean, that's who I am. It's my name."

"Is it?" Alec said quietly. "Because I've heard stories. Stories about a King and a Queen and--" he paused. "You ever heard any of those stories?"

"No," David said hastily, too hastily. He felt like he couldn't breathe, the something in the air coiling tight around him.

Alec was silent for a moment. "Okay," he finally said. "Thanks for whatever you did back there, David, but I don't need saving. You got that?"

"I wasn't--"

"What I'm looking for is 'Yes, I understand'."

"I was--I was angry. What they said to you--"

"I'm used to it," Alec said flatly. "And I can take care of myself. You, on the other hand--I thought you couldn't but I guess I was wrong. Did you--whatever it was that you did--the look on your face when you came outside..." His voice trailed off. "You liked it," he finally said. "What you did."

"Yes," David said softly.

This time, when it started to snow, Alec just reached in the back and handed him the blanket. "If we have to stop don't touch anything, okay?"

David nodded and wrapped the blanket around himself, watched Alec pull on his coat. The wind blew some of the shining specks sprinkled across it into David's eyes. He rubbed at them and his fingers came away glowing slightly. It made him think of his father. Of his brother and sister. He rubbed at his fingers and the glow went away, faded into dark dust that stung his skin.

"Why--" he cleared his throat, "why not? And why is this called the pale?"

"There was a Queen once, a Queen who--" Alec paused. "I think you know this story."

"I--I don't," David said. "I--"

"Grew up in a castle and never heard about the people who lived in it?" Alec said lightly, but his voice was edged sharp.

David stared at the snow swirling around them. "I only know part of the story," he said softly. "The part after--after she was gone."

Alec was silent for a moment and then he said, "She was born here. When she died it changed. People moved here, thinking they could escape the snow but everything is--"

"Cursed," David said dully. The wind picked up speed, blowing the falling snow back up into the air, as if trying to push it away, and the trees rustled and creaked fast, sharp cracking sounds like a scream. This was his mother's world and he knew she felt him here. That she didn't want him here.

"Poisoned," Alec said. "The trees, the ground, everything. Some people say it's a curse. Others--" he shrugged. "It doesn't really matter. It's easy enough to deal with. You just ride straight through. But tonight--" he looked at David and in the dark his gaze was impossible to read, "tonight something else is going on."

"I--" David said. "How do you know?"

"It never snows here," Alec said grimly. "In all the stories I've heard, that's always been the end. That this is the one place where no snow falls."

The trees they were passing under bent down, branches heavy with fruit that dropped into the cart, onto David's lap, resting there just waiting for him to push it off. Calling out for him to. Just a touch, they seemed to say. He thought of his nurse, of the things she said when her life was fading. What his birth had brought. What he was. From the stories he'd seen in pictures in prayer books or heard whispered in his nurse's voice he knew what he was supposed to do. He should get off the cart, face whatever was left of his mother and let her speak to him. He should let Alec go on his way, watch him drive off and know he'd be forever safe.

He moved, sliding across the cart seat, the fruit tumbling away. He didn't move toward the edge. He moved toward Alec.

"Are you--?" he said and felt words clogging his throat. He knew what he should say but he didn't want to say it. He didn't want to be like a story.

"I'm not going to stop," Alec said.

As dawn broke over the pale the trees shaded from dark shadows to tall brown trunks capped with deep green. They continued to sway and moan and the horse strained forward as if frantic to be free of where they were. Fruit continued to fall from the trees, one piece landing softly next to David. In the light he saw it was beautiful, a perfect circle colored a deep dark red. It looked like it would be warm to the touch and he wondered what it would be like to taste that, have all that warmth inside him.

"You know what happens if you eat them?" Alec said.

David shook his head.

"Me either," Alec said. "But I don't want to find out. And neither do you."

David curled the hand hovering over the fruit back against his side. The cart hitched over a bump and the piece of fruit fell away. He saw it split open as it hit the ground. Inside it was white, the deep endless color of snow.

It cleared the moment they left his mother's forest. David could feel it, the air no longer rushing thick and bitter around him. He could see it too. Dawn had broken in the pale but outside it was day, bright and full. The sun lit the world, casting shadows and calling forth colors David had never seen. He stared at everything, enchanted. The trees weren't as green but there were different kinds of them, leaves shaped long and pointed or short and round, the wind rustling gently through them. Under them were flowers, not like the diamond and gem-colored ones he'd seen women in the castle wear but delicate ones with petals that blew when the wind crossed them and green stems trailing down into the ground. And the ground--the ground wasn't white from ice, from snow. It was green, dark in some spots, worn and faded brown in others, speckled with pebbles and the marks of other carts, of feet.

They crossed a river mid-morning, wide and almost crystal smooth, and David trailed a hand through it as Alec spoke soothingly to the horse and crossly told David to "try lifting your feet up" when he told Alec there was water rushing into the cart, pooling around his ankles.

On the other side they stopped, Alec doing something with the horse, unhitching him from the cart and walking him over to a patch of tall grass. David realized the horse was eating after a minute and watched for a while, fascinated--he knew horses ate but had never actually seen them do so--before realizing he was hungry too.

"Can I have something to eat?" he asked.

"Sure," Alec said. "Drink all the water you want. River's right behind you."

"I'm not really thirsty," David said and Alec looked at him.

"Oh," David said. "You don't have any food?"

"I was planning on eating in town. But then--" he shrugged.

"Oh," David said again. Alec looked away. The horse twitched his tail and started eating flowers.

David knelt by the riverbank after Alec hitched the horse back up to the cart, looking down into the water.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"There," David said, and pointed at a figure rippling up at him.

There was silence for a moment before Alec said, "That's you."

"Me?"

"Yep. Let me guess, you've never seen yourself before."

"Not really," David said. "In ice, sort of, sometimes."

"Uh huh. And you've, what, never heard of a mirror?"

"I've heard of them. My father didn't like them." He touched his face tentatively, watched his fingers trace across his cheekbones. He stood up and the man in the water rose too. He smiled and the man looking at him smiled back.

"Well, at least you don't have any ego problems," Alec muttered.

David smiled more, seeing Alec's face next to his. "You're a lot shorter than I am."

"And to think I didn't comment on your nose," Alec said sharply. "Are you just about done?"

"I'm looking at you," David said and watched, fascinated, as the watery Alec's eyes grew wide, surprised. "When we were in town that woman--" he paused for a moment. "She said you were ugly. Why did she say that?"

"Because I'm a miner," Alec said tightly. "Or maybe because she'd just finished looking at you. Who knows? Now shut up and get back in the cart."

David sat in silence for the rest of the day. Mostly he was looking out at what they passed but sometimes he thought. He thought about Alec's face, the shape of his eyes, of his nose, the way the hair at the nape of his neck curled.

"Oh for god's sake," Alec finally said as the sun was setting, exasperation in his voice. "I'm sorry I said something about your nose. There. Can you stop sulking now?"

"Sulking?"

"The whole staring at nothing and not talking routine."

"But you said--"

"I know what I said."

"Can I ask you something?"

Alec sighed. "What?"

"Why did that woman call you ugly?"

"I already told you why," Alec said tightly.

"But I don't understand. It's the wrong word to use for you."

Alec's face flushed dark red. "You're not funny."

"I'm not trying to be," David said, bewildered. "You look--"

"Go back to not talking," Alec snapped, and urged the horse to move faster, stared straight ahead as if David was no longer there.

When night fell they stopped. Alec took care of the horse and lit a fire. Then he rigged a contraption up over it, a mass of sticks and wires with a pot in middle that hung suspended over the flames. He put water in the pot, whistling a little, and then walked off into the dark. When he returned he dumped two handfuls of dirt in the pot and sat down. David looked at him. Alec looked back, one eyebrow raised and a small smile on his face, and that's when David knew they wouldn't be eating dirt for dinner.

They ate potatoes. Alec stuck a stick in the pot after the moon had risen and pulled out two of them, wrinkled gray with steam billowing from their skins.

"I like potatoes," David said and tossed his from hand-to-hand, trying not to burn himself. Alec watched him for a moment before shaking his head and picking up another stick, spearing David's potato with it.

"I wouldn't think a...you would eat potatoes."

"All the time." David had figured out how to eat his potato now. Copying Alec he carefully blew on the skin, peeling it and bits of flesh away and popping them into his mouth. "Boiled and baked and," he closed his eyes, "fried with drippings and made into cakes and sliced with egg. The best ones are the little ones, the ones as long as your fingers. My nurse used to--" he broke off. It was the first time he'd spoken about her to anyone. "She grew up in a village," he finished softly. "She said they grew everywhere."

Alec nodded. "Except in mines," he said and something in his voice, in the way his eyes almost met David's but didn't, let David know that Alec understood what it was like to have memory rise, that it was sweet and hurtful all at once.

"I could fry up some," David said shyly. "I know how. You can slice them into rings and then shape them like a flower and--"

"You do realize all I have is the pot, right?"

"Oh," David said. "Right."

"But since you apparently know what that is," Alec said with a smile, "you can wash it."

David washed it, drank some water, and then went back by the cart by way of the horse, stopping to carefully pet it. It looked at him placidly, tail twitching a little when he scratched its ears.

"What's his name?" he asked when he walked back to the fire.

"What?" Alec said. He was staring into the flames, a distracted look on his face.

"The horse. What's his name?"

"Her," Alec said with a small smile. "And she doesn't have one. I'll be selling her once I'm off the road."

"Oh," David sat down next to Alec and passed him the pot. "What does that matter?"

Alec took it, tossed it into the cart. The horse snorted, then quieted. "It doesn't. That's the point. It's a horse. It doesn't need a name."

"Sure she does. She has a white mark on her ear that looks like a star. You could call her--"

"What was your nurse's name?"

"What?"

"Her name," Alec said slowly. "What was it?"

"I don't--I don't know."

"Then maybe you should shut up about the damn horse."

David put his hands on his knees, miserable. He stared into the fire and thought about his nurse. He didn't even know her name. He'd never even thought about it. But she'd had one. He wondered what it was. Next to him Alec sat tapping the fingers of one hand against his leg over and over again, a rapid drumming.

"I called her Star for a while," he said abruptly, and his voice was so soft David could barely hear it. "Back when I first bought her. But when I realized I was going to have to sell her I didn't--I didn't want her to have a name anymore."

"You'll miss her less that way?"

Alec shrugged.

"I still miss my nurse," David said. "I always will. And I-I never even knew her name."

"It'll get easier," Alec said, and his voice was mild now, so carefully even David knew the tone was forced. "You can forget anything or anyone if enough time passes."

"I don't believe that."

Alec laughed a little, a harsh bite of sound. "Yeah, well, I have to."

David was almost asleep when the singing started. It took him a moment to recognize the song but when he did he smiled. It was an old song, one about three birds and a little bear and his nurse had sung it to him. The voice singing was nicer than his nurse's, not shaky at all but high and rounded and strong. Alec's voice. It was beautiful. David hummed along at first, softly, until his favorite part, where the bear asked each of the birds a question, and then he started to sing along.

Alec stopped singing.

"Why did you stop?" David asked.

"I don't--I don't sing anymore," Alec said. "I forgot--I forgot you were here."

"Oh," David said. "But I'm right next to you."

"I didn't really forget," Alec said sharply. "I just--I thought you were asleep and I was trying not to think about the damn horse. Thanks for that, by the way."

"You're welcome," David said and Alec rolled his eyes, shook his head. "You have a nice voice."

"Yeah," Alec said. "I do. But not nice enough for people to forget--"he gestured at himself.

"Forget what?"

"Me. I look like--" he looked at David. "A miner. People don't want to see that. They want to see--well, someone like you."

"Me?"

Alec sighed. "The next town, you go into the square and sing and you--you'll do fine."

"Have you done that?"

"Done what?" Alec said, and then smiled a smile that wasn't one at all. "I tried. But...it didn't work. Not like I thought it would. You though--you'd make a fortune."

"I don't know if I could do anything like that." David paused. "If I should." He held his breath for a second before saying, softly, "I'm not like other people."

"No shit," Alec said, and the smile on his face was real now. A moment later he said, carefully looking at the fire, "You're running from something. Someone."

David hesitated. Alec's eyes in the firelight were dark, impossible to read.

"Yes," he said quietly, hesitantly.

"I've been told stories, stories about a King and his first Queen--"

"I--"

"Haven't heard them, right," Alec said. "But you know, they say there was a child."

David bit his lip, waited for Alec to speak again. When he didn't he took a deep breath, heart hammering in his chest. "What if there was?" he said. "What if there is?"

Alec gestured up at the sky. "Then everything they say, all the talk about the snow, it would be true." He looked at David. "And it would mean that you--you're--"

"Yes," David said, and bowed his head. It started to snow.

Alec was silent for a moment. "We can leave at first light," he finally said. "There's a city over the mountains, the capital of another land. I--I know it, and you'd be safe there."

"But you know," David said wonderingly. "You know what I can do. Why aren't you--?"

"Asleep yet? Because you keep talking." Alec lay down, wrapping the blanket around him. "Try not to make it snow so much that I've got to dig us out again in the morning, okay? Because I'm more than willing to teach you how to use the shovel."

"But--"

"I know what it's like to be trapped by who--and what--everyone thinks you are," Alec said. "I know it all too well."

David looked at what he could see of Alec--the top of his head, shining darkly in the dying firelight, the curve of his shoulders under the blanket, his boots with the red fabric stuffed back in them. He lay back down and looked up the sky. He could see stars. It had stopped snowing.

"Thank you," he whispered softly and smiled up at the stars. He didn't want to float up toward them now, but he was still happy to see them.

"Sleeping," Alec muttered, but his voice was soft, warm.

Chapter Six

It was cold in the mountains, so cold even David felt it, the air thin and stinging in his lungs, stealing his breath before it could form. The air became fuller as they crossed down, sweeter and warmer as the land around them shaded from gray to vibrant green again. As they reached the bottom they passed a long curving path carved into the rock, a path that disappeared back inside the mountains. David could see a group of figures standing at the end of it. One of them looked over and moved toward them, raising a hand stained dark and shining in greeting. "Knew you'd come back," he called. "Don't know that the foreman will be so welcoming, though. Everyone remembers what you said to him."

"I should hope so," Alec said lightly, but his hands were tight on the reins, the cart merely slowing, not stopping.

David looked over at the man who was talking to Alec. "Hello," he said politely.

The man's eyes widened and he leered at Alec. "Haven't done so bad for yourself after all then, have you?"

"Don't suppose that's any of your concern," Alec said tightly.

"Oh ho," the man said. "So then I guess there's no need to tell you they've moved the digging?"

Alec stopped the cart. "Moved it?"

The man nodded. He coughed, fingers moving away from his mouth to drop a pile of shining dark dust on the ground. "We're down on the fourteenth level now. The eleventh collapsed--you remember that vein we found--well, that was all that was holding it up--and the two they dug after that didn't yield anything."

"And now?"

The man shrugged. "Well enough. Some of us," he shot a pointed glance at Alec, "are content with things as they are. Don't go dreaming stupid dreams, dreams that lead to trouble and--"

"I'd say I'd hope to see you soon," Alec said, his voice a snarl, "but you know I hate to lie." He flicked the reins, the horse moving forward.

"Sure," the man said, and grinned a mean grin. "You'll be back inside with the rest of us soon enough. I know it. You know it. What else is there for you?"

Alec flicked the reins again, his mouth tight. When David asked him, quietly, "Do you know that man?" Alec looked right at him, right through him, and didn't say a word.

The city was enormous, stretching out in all directions and capped with a hill at one end from which a tall white building bloomed.

"A castle," David breathed.

"King's palace," Alec said, "King--" his voice trailed off. He stopped the cart. When he spoke again his voice was strained, almost angry. "I'm off to drink ale. You--you're on your own." When David didn't move he gestured for him to get off the cart.

"You don't like this place," David said. Off the cart the city looked even grander, the rocks of the street under his feet smooth and polished, the house and stores gleaming clean, like they were scrubbed every day. He thought it was pretty but he didn't like the look on Alec's face, a tight pinched unhappy look.

Alec sighed. "I like it fine. I just didn't plan on seeing it again."

"Why not?"

"Don't bother thanking me or anything," Alec said nastily, not answering his question at all, and twitched the reins. The horse started forward, the cart rattling as it moved down the street. Alec didn't look back.

It took David a few hours to find the square. It was enormous but not quite in the middle of the city, was closer to the palace than anything else. At first he merely walked along its edges, staring at the stalls and the people thronging about them. There was a fountain in the center with a grand stone shaped like a young man in the middle, gorgeous and shining brightly in the sun. It was surrounded by a sea of people, and David saw a million things for sale, anything and everything a person could ever want. He saw men and women playing instruments. He saw people dressed in brilliant robes and drab rags. He saw plump cats and skinny ones, big dogs running free and tiny ones carried cradled in sacks by their owners. Even as the sun set the square continued its activity, soldiers coming through and lighting torches. As the stalls closed and people slowly dispersed, David moved closer to the fountain. As the torches burned low he found a place to sit. He wondered what Alec was doing. He wrapped his hands around his knees and thought of songs to sing.

Only a few people stayed in the square all night, huddled shapes curled against rocks and the wall. He talked to a few of them. They all spoke strangely, drifting twisting sentences, and had odd eyes, unfocused and filmed with what looked like wriggling creatures. They would ask him questions and not listen to the answers, instead reply by asking if he knew where there was wormwood to be had, leaning in close enough so he could smell the scent of spicy bitter smoke that clung to them.

"I don't know what that is," he'd told one old woman and she'd sighed, her eyes clearing for a moment.

"Lucky you," she'd told him. "It's strange cursed stuff. It makes your blood race, takes your mind where you want it to be. Backwards, forwards, it's madness but you're there, all those faraway places you want to be at once...but then it's over and you have to find your way back, have to--surely you know where I can get some. I can tell you know. You've got the eyes for it." There was a knife in her hand, small and rusty. Her fingers were shaking wildly.

"I can't help you," he said, and touched her hand.

The knife shattered when it fell to the ground and the woman shuffled off, hand tucked under her other arm, teeth chattering and face blue from cold.

No one else approached him that night. It wasn't cold and he was used to not having anyone to talk to so it wasn't so bad. It was an adventure, he told himself. A story, and he was part of it. Still, he felt alone when the sun rose and it wasn't a feeling he'd had for a while. He didn't like it, hadn't missed it. He looked for Alec before he could help himself, wanting to see his face. Wanting him in his story.

He didn't see him, not even when the sun pushed its way fully into the sky.

He sang. He didn't know what else to do and it made him feel better.

He was singing a song about clouds when a coin was pressed into his hand. He paused, stared at it for a moment. There was a face carved on it he'd never seen before, beautiful and smiling. It looked like the face of the man whose statue stood in the fountain. And it was his now. If Alec was here David could ask him how much it was worth. He tucked the coin away. He kept singing.

A few hours later a woman walking by with a little brown dog stopped and looked at him, then pressed a piece of bread from a loaf she was carrying into his hand. "Like a lost angel, you are, aren't you?" she said, and her eyes were kind; they reminded him of his nurse's, but her fingers on his arm were different, curved possessive, and when she pulled him close her other hand touched him in places his nurse never had. He stared at her, wide-eyed, his blood singing. "I'd pay for a private show," she said. "Later today, when my husband is at the courts. Shall I give you the address?"

He arched into her touch as her dog yipped around his ankles. He let his fingers touch hers, thinking of things he didn't have a name for and couldn't quite picture but was sure he wouldn't mind having. He liked the way his body felt. Her face paled at his touch, her hand falling away. David looked at his fingers. There was a thin sheen of ice on them. He couldn't feel it. He ate the bread as the woman faded back into the crowd. His fingers dripped water onto the ground. He kept singing.

He was given a glass of ale by a stall owner midmorning, clapped on the back and told, "That voice of yours is good for business. Keep it up!"

Midday, when the church bells sang their song and David sang along with them, a passing priest gave him the address of a church and suggested he join its choir, bought him a glass of wine and talked to him of the great mysteries. "They say that over the mountains lies a land cursed by snow, forever forsaken because its inhabitants forgot to honor God."

"Some people like snow," David said and drank all the wine. He liked the way it tasted but the priest's words left a bitter taste in his mouth.

As the day progressed he was given more coins and a handful of grapes, a sweet wrapped in paper by a little girl who smiled when he said "Thank you" and replied "It dropped on the ground" and then ran away laughing. In the afternoon a man with a green hat stopped and

listened to him sing three songs. When David finished the third he walked up to him, smiled and stood so the edge of his cloak brushed David's arm. It was green too and made of the softest velvet, sprinkled with glass colored to look like jewels.

"You sing wonderfully," the man said and though the look in his eyes reminded David a little of the woman who'd touched him earlier, it reminded him of the way his brother and sister had looked at him more. He wanted to look away but didn't, stayed staring into the man's eyes, watching them flicker hot and feeling his body spark in response.

"I have money," the man whispered "Do you like my cloak? I'll buy you one like it. Just come for a short stroll with me."

"A stroll?"

The man smiled. "There are corners everywhere. Pleasure's not hard to find, if you're willing to look."

David looked at the man. He was pleasant-featured, smiling. There was a stain on one of his fingers, a tiny teardrop of brown red. Across from him another singer was staring at David with wide warning eyes, shaking her head slightly and pointing to a long white curving scar on her face.

David touched the man's arm and the man shivered but didn't move away. Instead he moved closer. The man's eyes were definitely like his brother and sister's and when David stared into them he felt something dark stir inside him, something he couldn't name but knew wouldn't settle easily if it was released. He started to sing. The man frowned. He said something else, lower, his face angry, but David didn't hear him. He didn't listen.

He grew sad when the sun began to set, but wasn't sure why. He'd made coin, talked to people--he was living a life like all the stories his nurse had told him. He'd journeyed to a strange land and was making his way through it. But something was missing. He didn't feel like he was in a story. He felt like he always had, the square just a larger noisier version of the quiet room he'd lived his whole life in. He felt alone even though he was surrounded by more people than he'd ever been before.

Then he saw Alec at the edge of the crowd passing through the square and knew what he was missing. Who he was missing. He waved, but Alec didn't seem to see him. David waded into the crowd and followed him.

Alec walked slowly, hands in his pockets. At the end of the second street they'd passed since the square, he stopped and turned to face him.

"Doing pretty well for yourself," he said. "Lots of coins."

"I guess," David said. "I haven't counted it yet, but--"

"That's good." Alec said. "What do you want?" There was a faint hint of impatience in his voice.

"I--I just wanted to talk to you," David said. "How was your day?"

Alec stared at him for a moment. "You have somewhere to stay?" he finally said.

"I--I guess I do," David said, thinking of the woman with the little dog, the man with the green hat. He knew there could be others. He didn't know how he knew, but he did.

Alec scowled for a moment before smiling, broad and not real. "That's great." He started to walk off.

"Wait," David said.

Alec turned around slowly and the not smile on his face had totally faded. "What?"

"Dinner." David said. It was the first thing that popped into his head and he thought frantically for something else to say. "I--I owe you a dinner!" he said triumphantly.

"No, you don't," Alec said. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

"But--I--I miss talking to you."

Alec's expression shifted for a moment, going soft, startled. "Pretty hard up for conversation then, aren't you?" he said quietly.

"That means yes, right?"

"Yeah," Alec said. "But I don't see what you're smiling about. I heard you say you were going to pay, you know, and I'm holding you to it."

They ate dinner in a tavern as small and warm as the last one they'd been to but this one was filled with men like Alec, all of them marked with dark cracked hands, with starlight sprinkled on their clothes. No one said anything to him but David saw more than a few people looking at him and then at Alec with raised eyebrows or hungry wondering expressions.

A few people spoke to Alec, stopped by and leaned in to talk to him in hushed whispers that David could barely hear and couldn't understand when he did. He heard things about veins and picks and levels, saw a few men shake Alec's hand with smiles on their faces. A few more said nothing, just looked at him with smirks and shakes of their heads. Alec either ignored them or said something that made the smirks fade.

He'd tried to pay for their food but Alec hadn't let him. "Keep your money," he'd said and waved away David's stammered thanks with a frown.

"Well," he said when they walked outside and his voice sounded a little unsure. There were torches lit on this street too, and David stared at them in wonder. Even at night the city glowed like it was day. He started to ask Alec about it but noticed Alec was already starting to turn away from him, hands shoved back into his coat pockets.

"You didn't have to pay," David said. He wondered if Alec didn't like to show his hands in the light.

"I'll see you around," Alec said, and there was a scowl on his face, like he knew what David was thinking.

"Really?" David said. "Tomorrow, then? I could meet you somewhere."

Alec's mouth tightened and he didn't say anything for a moment. "What do you want from me?" he finally said, and his voice sounded weary.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I just--I liked traveling with you," David said. "And I could help you now. I know how to clean and um, cook and--"

"You want to come home with me?"

"I need somewhere to stay and--"

"You have somewhere to stay. I saw the woman talking to you, the one with the little yippy dog. And then that guy with the green hat."

"You saw that? But that was this morning and then later, in the--"

"I was just passing through on my way to--somewhere. Stop changing the subject. You have a place to stay. Or could. Just go find--"

"But I want to stay with you."

Alec flushed, red darkening his face, his eyes going soft for a moment. "No," he said, and his voice was gentle. "Look, David. I'm not--I don't do--" He gestured between them. "This."

"What?"

Alec narrowed his eyes for a moment. "You--" He sighed. "You don't know, do you?" He was silent for a moment. "So you want to stay with me and what? Cook and clean?"

David nodded.

"Why?"

"I like you," David said. "I like being with you. I thought about you today, when you weren't around. I wondered what you were doing."

"That's just boredom."

"No," David said, and his voice was so sharp he surprised himself. "You make me--you make me feel like smiling."

Alec smiled. It transformed his face, lit it up. David's breath caught. "Like that," he breathed. "I like how you make me feel. Alec--"

Alec's eyes went wide and David felt his heart beat fast and heavy in his chest. He'd made Alec look like this, flushed and wondering, just by saying his name. He liked that. He took a step closer. He looked down, directly into Alec's eyes. Up close and in the flickering torchlight they were brown, deep and dark. The look in them made him realize he could lift a hand and touch Alec's face. He wanted to do that and thought that maybe Alec would let him. That maybe Alec wanted him to.

He did. The tips of his fingers touched Alec's face. It felt different than he thought, soft skin right above his cheekbone and the rasp of stubble below it. David stroked his fingers back and forth, liking the feeling, the simple act of touching.

"Hell," Alec said and took a step back. "Don't. Don't do that."

"Why?" David said. "I liked it. You--you liked it. I can tell. Your eyes, they--"

"Just don't," Alec said, closing his eyes momentarily. "You can, god help me, stay with me. Come by tomorrow. Tan door, third street past the farmer's stalls at the far edge of the square. I have to leave at sunrise so be there a little before that so I can let you in. But you--you can't do what you just did again, okay? No touching."

"I'm sorry," David said, shamed, remembering his nurse, pain on her face and ice around her. "I forgot about--the cold will go away. I just--you looked--I just had to touch you and-- "

"Cold?" Alec said and his voice had gone agitated, not with anger but with something else that sounded almost like fear but sweeter, sharper. "Oh. Right. The cold. Yes. Very cold. So no more touching. In fact, no talking about it either. You got it?"

David nodded.

"Okay," Alec said. "Tomorrow, then. Before sunrise."

David nodded again.

Alec sighed. "You do have somewhere to sleep tonight, right?"

"No."

"That's what I get for asking," Alec muttered. "Why can't you just lie like a normal person?"

"But I want to stay with you."

"That's too bad because--" Alec said, and shook his head. "Fine. I don't have any extra pillows or blankets so it's the floor, okay? The bare cold floor." He started walking down the street. "You'll probably like that," he muttered to himself.

David watched him walk, smiling at the sound of his voice.

"You do realize I'm going to take my offer back in about five seconds, right?" Alec called back to him. "So you might want to hurry up."

David caught up to him easily. "I'm going to make you breakfast," he said happily.

"Well, that would be a miracle," Alec said, "as all I have is a bottle of ale and a bunch of grapes." He paused for a moment. "You do realize by miracle I mean 'please don't cook me a dish with those two ingredients in it,' right?"

"Of course," David said. "You probably drank the ale already anyway."

"You know," Alec said, "sometimes I think you're much smarter than you let on."

On the third street past the farmer's stalls at the far edge of the square a tan door rested in the middle of a long wall. David smiled when he saw it and pictured a house like the ones his nurse had told him about, small and snug with a roof of straw that dripped down sweet smelling onto the floor.

It wasn't like that.

Behind the door was a long hallway dotted with doors and capped with a set of stairs at the far end, the roof dizzyingly far away and not made of straw at all. Up the stairs was another hallway and more doors. Alec lived up the stairs and behind the eighth door, at the very end of the hallway. And his house wasn't a house at all. It was a room, airy and wide with high ceilings and a large window high up on the wall, a bed bracketed to the left of it, tucked up and into a sort of loft. There was a fireplace set into the right wall and a long empty shelf running along the wall next to it, a cabinet tucked beneath it at the far end. The room was empty except for a table, a chair, a tin tub resting on its side, the bottom coated with fine black dust, and a basket that held a snarl of clothes.

"Well?" Alec said, his voice edged sharp. When David looked at him, he gestured around the room like a challenge.

"Can I sleep under the window?" David said, walking over and looking up at it. "You can see the stars!" He looked around the room again. There was a ladder built into the wall.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"Climbing." Alec's voice was, if possible, even sharper but when David looked at him his eyes weren't angry but confused, like what David was saying was what he hadn't expected to hear.

"Oh." David looked at the ladder again. "I've never seen a ladder inside a wall before. How does it work?"

Alec didn't move for a moment but then he grabbed the ladder. It slid right out of the wall and he propped it up against the edge of the loft. "There," he said, and his voice was back to normal again, light and wry. "Takes you right up to what the landlord calls 'the second room'."

"What do you call it?"

"A fancy way of overcharging for a bed."

David laughed. Alec grinned at him and the confusion in his eyes had melted into something warm.

"I can't believe I get to stay here," David said happily, caught up in Alec's smile, in knowing he was exactly where he wanted to be.

Alec stared at him for a moment, his grin fading. "Lucky you," he finally said, and his voice was flat. "You do realize this is it, right? One room, no servants, no fancy whatever's. And you really do have to sleep on the floor."

"I know," David said, and sat down under the window. "Here is okay, right?"

"Sure," Alec said slowly. "One night on the floor, probably an adventure for you."

"I slept on the floor when my nurse died," David said, staring up at the stars. "She was sick for a long time. If I lay just right on the stones I could reach up and hold her hand. I had to stop when--when it got too cold. It--I was hurting her. I just wanted to be near her."

Alec didn't say anything for a while and then he cleared his throat and said, "I'll get you a blanket."

He climbed up into the loft and tossed down one blanket, then two. Then he muttered under his breath for a moment and threw down a pillow.

"Thank you," David called out, but Alec didn't reply.

The pillow smelled like Alec. David slept with his face turned toward the window and one arm under the pillow, curling his fingers into it and holding it close. He woke up when it was barely light and saw Alec moving around. He was rubbing the back of his neck.

"Are you hurt?" David asked, sitting up with his hand still holding the pillow tight, smoothing over it.

Alec shook his head. He wasn't looking at him exactly, his gaze trained on David's hand moving over the pillow. "I have to go," he said abruptly. He rocked back on his heels for a moment and then said, "See you around."

"I know," David said. "Tonight."

"Sure," Alec said and there was something in his voice, almost like laughter but so bleak David knew whatever he was thinking about wasn't amusing at all. When he left he closed the door quietly behind him.

After the sun came up David cleaned. Or rather he tried, but Alec didn't even own a broom. He ended up borrowing one from the woman who lived two doors down. She was red-haired and red-eyed and coughed constantly, fingers coming away dripping a darker red than her hair. She said her name was Gladys and stared at him warily as he talked.

"A broom," she said. "That's really all you want?"

He nodded.

She squinted at him for a moment and then coughed again, a deep racking sound. When she was done she said, "What do you want it for?"

"I'm cleaning," he said.

"Cleaning."

He nodded. "I'm--" he pointed to Alec's door, "right there. I'll bring it back as soon as I'm done."

She narrowed her eyes at him for a second but then shrugged, passed him the broom, and shut her door.

He took it back when he was done and said, "Thank you for letting me borrow this. It was very nice of you."

She looked startled and then laughed. "I think that's the first time I've ever been called that. You want a cup of tea?"

"Yes, please," he said. His stomach was growling.

He ended up staying with Gladys for most of the day, listening to her talk and watching her heat water over a rigged up flame, the tea leaves she had so well-used all they produced were cups of water colored the faintest brown. She'd lived in the house for a long time--with her father before she was married and then once she had, in a room of her own. Her husband died in a cave-in before they'd been married a year and then she'd gone to work in the mines. "Till last winter," she said, "when I got the sickness. Now I stay here, earn coins where I can." She jerked her head in the direction of the bed. David looked but just saw rumpled sheets that were much mended and stained in places. When he looked back at her she was sitting stiffly watching him, eyes wary and calculating all at once.

"I'm sorry you're sick," he said.

She relaxed, took another sip of tea. "You been with Alec long?"

He shook his head.

"Everyone said he'd be back," she said, "but I thought--well, I thought he might make it. I used to hear him singing while we worked--it passes the time, makes the dark less dark--and oh, such a lovely voice he has. And he was sure that if he could just get away from the mines--I've never seen anyone believe like he could." She lowered her voice. "Of course, with all the talk he almost had to leave, but you know all about that."

David didn't know and he wasn't sure Alec believed in anything but he nodded and asked about the fireplace. He needed to make dinner. She told him where to get wood and when he filled the room with smoke came and showed him how to open the damper.

"Where on earth did Alec find you?" she said.

"In the snow."

She laughed and then coughed. "You are a strange one, aren't you? No matter. It's about time he had someone who appreciated him and I think--no, I can tell you do. Go do your marketing and I'll watch the fire for you."

"You don't mind?"

She looked at him for a moment. "I haven't been near a fireplace for more than a moment or two all season and you know what it's like out. And with my cough--"

He pulled the chair over to the fire. "Sit down and rest," he said. "Can I get you anything?"

She shook her head. "You really are a strange one," she said. "Go on now, before there's nothing left but potatoes and salt fish."

She was asleep when he got back and he didn't wake her, just put more wood on the fire and then looked around for something to cook with. She woke up coughing as the sun was setting and stared at him when he gave her a small packet of tea.

"You want a go," she said, narrow-eyed and a disappointed look on her face. "In the future, spare me the gesture and just give me coins." She stood up and started unlacing her shirt.

"Gesture?" David said as she walked toward him. "It's not really that. That's more--" He moved his hands around to show her but she didn't seem to notice, kept unlacing her shirt. Whatever was making her sick was eating her from the outside in; he could see it in the stark line of her ribs, the bony ridge running down the center of her chest. She took one of his hands and put it against her skin. It was paper thin and hot under his fingers. "Look, I could just keep it here," he said. "And you could use it whenever you wanted. Or not. I, um, didn't mean to upset you. Can I move my hand now?"

"You don't want a go," she said, surprise in her voice, and held up the tea. "Then what's this for?"

"Drinking."

"Drinking," she said slowly.

"You know, it's tea. I just -- the leaves you have are old and I thought you might like some new ones. What did you think it was?"

"Tea."

"Oh. Then why did you --?"

She shook her head, started lacing her shirt back up. "Honey," she said. "I'm starting to think what you said about Alec finding you in the snow is true. You're like a just hatched chick. Buying me tea for no reason!"

"You could share it with me."

She grinned. "Not so wet behind the ears after all. Come over tomorrow and we'll have a cup."

"Okay," he said and smiled at her. "Tomorrow."

She stared at him for a moment. "Saints," she said a shade breathlessly. "Alec is a lucky one, even with you being as strange as you are. I bet the first time you met you snagged him with that smile."

David shook his head. "He kicked me."

Gladys laughed. "Why on earth did he do that?"

"He thought I was dead."

Gladys laughed again, then coughed once more. "Hell," she said when she was done, wheezing loudly. "You really are something."

Alec returned when it was dark, his face drawn and his hands caked with dark sparkling dust, one arm dangling strangely by his side. He looked surprised to see David, started to smile and then said, "You're still here," surprise in his voice and a strange look on his face.

"I made dinner," David said.

"You made dinner." Now Alec sounded nervous.

David served gingerbread. Gingerbread and potatoes. Alec grinned at the potatoes--David had baked them, then split them open and filled them with tiny salted fish--and laughed when David told him about what Gladys had said before he left to go to the square. He'd laughed more when David told him about the tea, said, "She hasn't changed a bit," and then, more quietly, "It was nice, what you did for her. She deserves more kindness than most show her." And then he ate most of the gingerbread.

"So how did you get all this?" he asked.

"I went to the square."

"I know that," he said with a smile. "What I mean is how did you pay for it? Did you borrow money from Gladys?"

"No."

"Then how did you buy--?" Alec swept an arm over the table, his smile fading. His other arm was still dangling by his side, strangely motionless, and David realized he hadn't moved it once.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

Alec's mouth tightened. "How did you buy all this?" he said again.

"I had money."

"The money you made singing?"

David nodded.

"How much did you spend?" Alec's voice was clipped, curt.

David told him and Alec got up and disappeared up into the loft, returned carrying a small leather pouch. He opened it and pulled a handful of coins out, put them on the table. "This is for what you spent today." He pulled out another handful and put them next to the first pile. "And this should last you for the rest of the week."

David pushed the first pile of coins back across the table. "I don't need this."

"Take it."

"Why?"

Alec's face tightened. "I don't want anything from you. Not now, not ever. Got it?"

"No."

Alec stared at him. "You shouldn't have spent your money on me," he finally said.

"Why not?"

"You should go back to the square tomorrow," Alec said abruptly. "You liked that, right?"

"I'm going to have tea with Gladys tomorrow."

"You're free of whatever held you before," Alec said, his voice almost desperate. "You can do whatever you want."

"I know," David said. "Do you want the last piece of gingerbread?"

"I don't understand you," Alec said.

"Yes, you do," David said. "You just don't want to."

Alec stared at him, open-mouthed. After a long silence he said quietly, "I'll get you a chair tomorrow. And some blankets. And a pillow."

Chapter Seven

Alec didn't own much to cook with. A couple of plates. A handful of utensils. Three cups. A pot. A tin. A saucer. Everything except the saucer was chipped or dented.

The saucer was painted all over with roses and if you held it up to the light it was made so finely, so delicately, that you could see right through it and the roses looked almost real, shed red light. It was beautiful. David found it in the very back of the cabinet one afternoon and set it out that night, put it on the table with a piece of gingerbread resting on it and wondered what Alec would say.

Alec didn't say anything, not at first. He stared at it when he sat down, no expression on his face, but David saw a muscle jump in his jaw. Then he picked it up and dumped the gingerbread onto the table, holding the saucer gingerly, like he feared it might break or didn't want to touch it or both.

"Where did you find this?" he said, and his voice was so quiet it was barely a whisper.

"It was in the cabinet," David said. "Way in the back. I thought maybe the people who lived here before left it but--it's yours, isn't it?"

"No," Alec said and pushed away from the table. "Get rid of it. Don't--I don't want to see it again."

David looked at his still face for a moment. "Okay," he said, and took the saucer. He went out into the hallway and knocked on Gladys's door. She didn't answer but he heard her inside, coughing as her bed squeaked over and over. He left it on the floor.

Alec was sitting by the fire eating the gingerbread when he got back. David looked at him, his carefully blank face, his still shaking fingers, and didn't say anything. He knew what it was like to have a memory you didn't want to own.

The day David bought the chicken started well enough.

The night before Alec had said, "Potatoes again?" and then, "David, do you know how to make anything else?"

"Well, I can make--"

"Besides gingerbread."

"Then no." He waited for a second, wondering if he should say something else, but Alec was shaking his head and smiling.

"Tomorrow," he said, "when you go to the square, get a chicken. Just put it in the pot with some potatoes--make sure you pluck the chicken first, okay?--and let it cook for a few hours. Maybe throw an onion in or a carrot. Easy enough. Right?"

David nodded. It sounded easy.

He bought the chicken from a girl in the square. She was tall and thin with ale-brown hair and painted patterned hands like women in the castle used to have, decorations to show their fingers, highlight the curve of their wrists. But when she said, "Want me to do the butchering for you?" He realized what the dark spatters on her hands were. He looked at the chicken. It stared placidly back at him from the crook of her arm.

"No," he said faintly.

She gave him a look. "Just a quick chop to the neck if you can't wring it yourself. Sharper the knife the better, and mind you, make sure you've got space, because they do like to run around a bit after." She clucked her tongue at something she saw in his face and said, "You sure you don't want me to do it? Won't take but a moment."

David shook his head and took the chicken home. When he got there he put it on the floor and got out the pot. The chicken looked at him, looked at the pot, and went back to wandering around the floor, scratching at it occasionally.

By mid-afternoon David had learned that chickens didn't like being put in pots, that they scratched, and that when they had to go to the bathroom they went, even if the spot they'd picked was in the middle of the floor right where you'd left a plate of cooling gingerbread.

He picked up the chicken as the sun started to set and looked at it. He put his hands around its neck. It flapped its wings uselessly, trying to move away from his suddenly very cold hands. Its eyes were placid, small and stupid. He took it outside, holding it gingerly, and let it go.

One of the miners found it. David heard a cry of "Look here!" as they began to trickle in, returning home. "Found myself a chicken just wandering around out in the street. Luck is shining on me today!"

"Wandering around in the street?" Alec's voice.

"I swear by all the saints. Must have gotten away from a nodding housegirl, eh?"

Alec laughed. He was still laughing when he came in.

"So I guess we'll be going out to dinner," he said.

"I didn't know I'd have to kill it," David said. "I can't--I don't want to do that."

Alec started to say something, the smile still on his face, but as he looked at David his smile faded. "You can get fish tomorrow," he said quietly. "Already cleaned and ready to cook. I'll show you where after we eat."

David nodded. "Thank you," he said softly.

"Sure," Alec said. "So where's the gingerbread?"

David tried to do laundry a few days later. He was able to handle the washing part well enough-- he purchased soap at the square, a creamy white bar that smelled nice and lathered up thick suds when he rubbed it over Alec's clothes -- and rinsing them was easy. But he wasn't sure about drying them and after an hour draped over a chair they were still dripping on the floor. David pulled the chair a little closer to the fire and then a little closer still. And then Gladys came and knocked on the door and had biscuits shaped like stars and by the time David got back it was dark and Alec's clothes were decidedly dry, his pants speckled with tiny holes, round blistered burns.

"Oh no," he said, staring miserably at them, thinking of how few things Alec owned and how he'd ruined one of them, and the fire sputtered and hissed and then froze over, shattering on the floor. Out in the hall he could hear the returning miners muttering about how it had suddenly gotten cold, like it might snow. Alec came in and looked at the shattered pieces of the fire on the floor, at the pile of his clothes next to it, and then at him.

"Hey," he said softly. "What happened?"

David handed him his pants.

Alec looked at them for a moment. When he looked back up at David the gentle expression on his face made David's heart skip a beat.

"You know what?" he said. "I never liked these pants anyway." He climbed up into the loft, opened the window and tossed the pants out. He turned back and the smile on his face made David laugh delightedly. Alec's grin grew wider and he said, "Let's go out. I'll buy you an ale and dinner."

"Really?"

"Sure," Alec said. "All you have to do is promise you won't ever do my laundry again."

David laughed again and the ice on the floor began to melt.

Alec disappeared when they were at the tavern. One moment he was sitting across from him, laughing as David told him why he'd forgotten to check on the clothes, shaking his head and saying, "Biscuits shaped like stars?" and the next he'd pushed away from the table, a stricken and almost panicked look on his face, and said, "I'll pay the bill. You go on back," before he disappeared into the crowd.

David didn't leave. He saw Alec talking to a fat man wrapped in a heavy cloak in the corner, watched as the man rose and pushed his way to the door, Alec following close behind. He took a deep breath and followed.

Outside Alec was standing in the alley, the fat man next to him.

"This? Won't buy but two lungfuls. You'll be back here before you know it," the fat man said. "It really all you got?"

"No, I have six invisible bits here too. What do you think?"

"I think," the fat man said slowly, pausing to spit on the ground, "that instead of two lungfuls, you just talked yourself into one."

"Fine," Alec said sharply. "Just give over already. All it has to do is last long enough for me to go back in and drink enough to forget about going home."

"Grief waiting there?" the fat man said.

"Something like that," Alec muttered, mouth set into a thin tight twist. David heard a shifting crackle under his feet and looked down to see ice blooming across the street stones. He thought about walking back, about sitting and waiting and how, when Alec finally returned, he'd think of things to say and not say them, be afraid to. He was good at waiting, at not asking questions, at not asking for anything. He'd done it all his life.

He wanted to know what had made Alec leave. He wanted to know enough to ask. He went back inside.

When Alec came back his eyes looked different, gone glazed over and lost. He stood looking at him for a moment and then smiled like he never had before, open and sunny and warm. "Always strange to see you looking like you actually want to see me," he said, and sat back down. He tilted his head to one side. "Talking about biscuits and for a moment I forgot you'll go." He closed his eyes and then opened them again. "I should be somewhere else now."

"Why did you leave like that?" David said, and his voice only shook a little.

Alec ignored him and leaned across the table. Up close his eyes were odd looking, filmed with what looked like thousands of tiny wiggling creatures, and he smelled like strange pungent smoke, spicy and bitter.

"Wormwood," David said slowly, thinking of the night he'd spent in the square, of the old woman with her shaking hands and rusty knife and desperate voice. The things in Alec's eyes twitched and swam sideways, then flipped over.

"If you aren't here I can do this," Alec said in a whisper, and rubbed a thumb across David's wrist. It was the first time Alec had touched him, really touched him, since the night he'd said David could come live with him, and it felt good. It felt better than good. He wanted to ask Alec why again but all he managed was a soft sound, a plea.

"I knew you'd sound like that," Alec said and something in his voice, his smile, made David shiver. Alec saw it and smiled more, linked their fingers together and tugged him up. "Come on," he said, and tossed a handful of coins down on the table.

Outside he put one hand on David's back, fingers brushing along the line of his spine. David froze, breath catching, and turned toward him, stopping in the middle of the street. Alec was a

dark shadow next to him, his face impossible to see, but his hand curved lower, a caress that turned David closer.

"You're going to disappear," Alec said. "Any minute now."

"I am?" David said, confused, and Alec's fingers were still moving, sliding softly across his back, his other hand coming to rest on David's arm. David let himself touch in return, one hand sliding up Alec's shoulder and around the back of his neck, coming to rest on the warm skin that lay just above his collar.

"I see you in the rocks," Alec said, and his voice had gone lilting, dreamy. "There you are, in the clump of purple over there. But I don't want to be in the mines. I'm leaving." He closed his eyes and then opened them again. "I'm in the cart. I'm far away. But you're sitting next to me. How did you do that? Why won't you leave? I know you will."

"I don't want to," David said, and Alec's mouth brushed against his lightly, a teasing slide.

"Why?" He could feel the word, Alec's lips shaping it against him, a hint of the taste of his mouth, ale-sweetness cut with a bitter ash tang.

"You," David breathed and Alec's mouth opened against his and his hands pulled him close. He was still talking, murmuring words into David's mouth, and David was shaking all over, straining toward Alec.

"Please," he said, and Alec pushed him back against a wall, breathed hotly into his ear. "Want you," he said, voice slurred, and kissed him again when David shuddered. Then he froze, one hand sliding up under David's shirt and stroking along his stomach.

"David?" he said quietly and David shifted a little, moving to rub against Alec, and Alec let out a strangled, shocked sound.

"David," he said again, and his voice was urgent, strained. David opened his eyes. Alec was staring at him. The film of wriggling things covering his eyes was gone and they were clear, startled. He moved the hand that was resting on David's stomach a little, fingers flying away when David arched into the touch.

"I thought--" he said, and moved his other hand away, took two, then three careful steps back. "You're here."

David nodded.

"Shit," Alec said and the word was loud and edged with something wild, sharp. "You didn't leave. I told you to leave."

"I didn't want to."

Alec closed his eyes. When he finally opened them his face was carefully blank. "I'm sorry," he said carefully. "Did I--did I hurt you?"

David shook his head. Alec walked back with him in silence but didn't come in and when David turned around to ask him why Alec was gone, faded into the night.

He didn't come home until morning and when he did he didn't say anything, just splashed water on his face and then changed his shirt in the faint light of the fading moon and the slowly waking sun. When he was done he looked over at David.

"I'm not sorry about last night," David said carefully, heart pounding in his chest. He'd never said something like that to anyone. Before Alec all he'd had in his life were things to be sorry for.

Alec's expression didn't change but David saw something flare, briefly, in his eyes. It was too dark for him to tell what it was.

"I am," he said quietly, and then he was gone again.

That night David expected awkwardness. He pictured a silent Alec, a strained meal. He bathed and washed glittering dust from his stomach. It had left a faint red scratch behind. He touched it, tracing where Alec's hands had been. He pictured--deep down and in a place he didn't know existed, not the dark place that called him before with his brother and sister but something deeper, sweeter--Alec turning to him like he had last night. He waited for night to fall.

It finally did and Alec brought Gladys in with him, said she was staying for dinner. He looked almost at David but just a little past him as he said it. She stayed until it was very late, the two of them telling stories about places and people and times David didn't know. She tried to include him but Alec would always turn the talk back around to what he said was "real," which seemed to be about dirt and rocks and people dying and nothing else.

"Things aren't always like that," Gladys said, and glanced in David's direction.

"Yes, they are," Alec said, and Gladys yawned, then coughed. "I best be going," she said and glanced at David carefully. "Come see me tomorrow?"

He nodded. Alec walked Gladys to the door.

"Listen to me," she said to him, low-voiced, as she left, and held one hand out. David watched as Alec pressed a handful of coins into it. "I'm not one to turn down a real dinner, a night where I'm not--but you--you're a fool for doing this. You know that, right?"

"I know what's real," Alec said.

"No," Gladys said sharply. "You don't. Open your eyes, will you?"

Alec never talked about the mines but David could tell the work he did there was hard from the way Alec walked at the end of the day, an almost hunched slow shuffle, nothing like his loose quick strides in the morning. And there was always the dust, dark and shining, that fell from him, that seemed carved into his hands, would sometimes drip to the floor as they sat in silence after dinner. Even just washed his hands were always speckled dark, the water clearing just enough

dust to show cracked raw skin underneath. David skimped on his breakfasts and lunches for a week and brought a tin of salve in the square from an old woman who swore it would heal any cut, smooth all skin. He looked at the tin. It had a picture of a horse on it.

"Is this for horses?"

"Some people use it for horses."

David bit his lip. "But it works for people?"

The woman nodded and David took the tin home. It smelled nice enough, he thought, light and like lemons. He'd brought a few of those a while ago, cut them in pieces and put them in with the fish he was cooking. He thought they'd look pretty but they'd made the fish taste good too, added a wonderful tang and a smell that reminded David of the sun, of brightness. He put the salve on the table.

"What's this?" Alec said when he saw it.

"It's for you."

"It's for horses. I don't have a horse."

"You did."

"I did," Alec said slowly. "But I don't now."

"You sold her?"

"No, she's in the corner over there. Of course I sold her. The cart too."

"You miss her," David said softly.

"What?"

"Your mouth is all tight. When you're upset--"

"I'm not upset."

"Who did you sell her to?"

Alec ran a hand through his hair. "First person who made an offer. I just--I wanted to get it over with. I shouldn't have gotten attached but I did and--it was stupid. Things change. People change. They move on. It's the way of the world. Nothing lasts."

"I don't think that's true."

"Of course you don't. You bought me horse salve. What do you know?"

David looked down at the floor. All his life he'd either been ignored or told not to worry, passed by or been soothed. He'd never had anyone talk to him the way Alec did, never had anything he said challenged.

He'd never really been listened to.

"I know I think you're wrong," he said quietly.

"Look around you," Alec said furiously. "You know what you have? A couple of pieces of furniture, a few blankets. Enough food to get through the week, maybe. That's nothing. There's nothing in your life worth holding on to."

"You're wrong," David said again and looked up, looked at Alec.

"Oh yeah? Name one thing, then. Just one."

"You."

Alec sucked in a breath and took a step toward him, eyes dark and hot in the firelight. "David," he said softly and David stood perfectly still, waiting. Then Alec stopped, put his hands on the table. A muscle was twitching in his jaw. "You shouldn't have bought me anything."

"I wanted to."

"It's a waste of money."

"It'll make your hands hurt less."

"How do you know they hurt?"

"Gladys said her hands always hurt. She said--" he took a breath. "She says it's dark there. In the mines. That it's always dark. Is it?"

Alec shrugged, opened the salve and sniffed it.

"That's why you live here," David said. "You pay more than anyone else, you know. Gladys told me. But you have a window. You like the light."

"I'm going to bed," Alec said, and his voice was sharp, abrupt.

"Good night," David said. He didn't know what else to say.

Alec didn't reply for a long time. But when he was up in the loft, nothing but a shadow David could see lit by firelight, he spoke. "Thanks for the salve. You shouldn't have--you shouldn't waste money on me."

"I wanted to buy it."

"It won't help."

"I don't like thinking of your hurt," David said. "In the dark. It's not--I want you to be happy."

"I'm happy," Alec said softly, slowly, like he didn't want to but had to.

David looked at him but Alec's shadow was gone, tucked down into his bed. David stared at the fire and thought. Hoped. And for the first time ever, planned.

He didn't make dinner the next night. He built a fire instead, piling on the wood and not being careful to make sure it was arranged so he could cook over it. He built a fire that flickered fast and glowing like the way Alec made him feel and then pulled his chair over toward it, put it next to Alec's.

"Kind of smoky in here," Alec said when he came in, taking off his jacket like he always did. "How much wood did you put on the fire?" He looked over at David and then froze for a moment, eyes narrowing.

"What's this?" he said quietly.

"I thought--I thought you might want to sit by the fire."

"No," Alec said slowly, pointing at the two chairs. "What's this." It wasn't a question.

"I thought--I thought we could sit together."

"Why would I want to sit with you?"

"You don't hate me," David said. "Why do you try and act like you do?"

"Because of what will happen if I don't."

"But what if I want something to happen?"

"Why should I care what you want?" Alec said and his voice was harsh. Scared.

"I don't know," David said. "No one ever really has. Why do you?"

"I don't know," Alec said, and looked away from him for a moment, stared at the fire. "I shouldn't," he said softly. "I know that. I do anyway." He looked back at David. "But you already know that, don't you?"

"Yes," David said. "I see it in your eyes." He took a step forward, closer to Alec. Almost close enough to touch. He stared at Alec's hands, waiting.

"This isn't what you really want," Alec said and looked down at his hands, turned them so David could see the dust coated heavy on them, how even the pads of his fingers had been worn down, scoured away by the mines. His voice sounded weary, sure.

"What do you see in my eyes?" David said, and reached out, took Alec's hands in his.

Alec looked at him.

"David," he said softly, pleadingly, his hands shaking against David's own.

David kissed him. He thought about cold, about ice, fleetingly, a thread of worry cut away by Alec's hands on him again, finally, by the sounds he heard himself making as their mouths met and clung.

He climbed up the ladder first. Alec pulled it out of the wall carefully, watching him the whole time, eyes solemn and heated. The sheets were worn and soft under his hands. He could hear Alec behind him, turned around and saw him watching him from the edge of the bed, one hand still curled around the ladder. He reached for him.

"You don't have to do that," Alec said, voice cracking, and David shook his head and said, "I want to," softly, helplessly. Alec made a noise deep in his throat and kissed him, teeth grazing David's lower lip.

"Can I touch you?" David asked hesitantly as Alec's mouth moved down his neck, gasping as he bit his throat and then arching up toward his mouth.

Alec laughed sharply, and there was a hint of bitterness in his voice when he said, "Why are you even asking? You already are."

And he was. His hands were echoing Alec's, sliding under clothes, over skin. He drew his fingers away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to. I just--I wanted to touch you and I forgot. Are you...the cold. Does it hurt?"

"I don't feel it," Alec said. "I've never felt it. When you--when you touch me I've never felt anything but you."

Under his clothes Alec was paler than even David was, rimmed with the smudges of glittering dust on his hands, a trail of it snaking down around his wrists. David watched streaks of it bloom across his own skin. It stung, sharp prickles. He didn't care, watched with heavy lidded eyes as Alec knelt above him, a strange smile that wasn't one on his face.

"This will hurt," he said.

"I don't mind," David said. "I know you don't mean it."

"But I do," Alec said, and pushed inside him. "That's the thing. I do mean it."

In the morning David woke up when Alec stirred, rolled over sleepily and watched Alec get up and pull his shirt over his head. He stretched, then winced, and Alec put a hand on his hip, smoothing his fingers across David's skin. "I'll see you tonight," he said quietly. David smiled at him and Alec, after a moment, smiled back.

David spent his days talking to Gladys, visiting the square, walking across the city. He liked its neatly cobbled streets, the signs hanging from the shops, the way the King's chapel bells sounded when they chimed midday. At night when Alec came back from the mines he'd take off his coat and then wash his hands, flashing a quick grin at David as he rubbed salve into them. Everything was exactly how it had been.

Except that it wasn't. Now Alec would pull him close, kiss him. Sometimes in the morning, a whispering of his mouth against the curve of David's lips before he left, and always at night, a strange little surprised smile on his face when he returned from the mines. Sometimes they'd end up leaving dinner to grow cold. Sometimes they didn't eat dinner at all.

And now when David wanted to touch Alec he could and did. He'd never been able to do anything like that, had never been able to reach out and run his fingers along someone's skin, never had anyone turn to him when he did and smile. All his life he'd been careful when he touched.

David had never been so happy and looking at Alec's face when he came back at night, the way his eyes lit up when David said his name, he thought that maybe Alec felt the same way, too.

One night Alec came in carrying a small box. "Here," he said gruffly, and handed it to him. Inside was something round and gleaming creamy white, covered with a sprinkle of tiny sugared berries.

"What is it?" David said.

Alec looked at him strangely. "A cake." He took the box out of David's hand and put it on the table.

"It's pretty. Do you want something to eat?"

"You've never had cake?"

David shook his head. Alec leaned over and cupped his jaw with one hand, staring at him with gentle eyes. He looked like he wanted to say something but in the end he didn't, just pulled away and got a knife, cut a small piece and passed it to him, a smile on his face.

After his first bite, David kissed him.

"I'll bring home cookies tomorrow," Alec said.

A few days later Alec came home very early from the mines, returning when the sun had just taken over the sky. David was still in bed.

"So now I know what you really do all day," he heard and rolled over to see Alec smiling at him.

"I must be dreaming," he said and touched Alec's face.

Alec snorted and said, "Some dream," but kissed the inside of his palm before gently tugging him up.

"Get dressed," he said. "We're going to a fair."

"A fair?"

"It's--never mind. There'll be cake there."

David grabbed his pants.

Everyone they passed on the streets was smiling, happy. "Holiday," Alec told him as they walked. "King's celebrating something."

"What?"

Alec shrugged and didn't look at him when he said, "A peace signing."

"With who?" David said, and then Alec looked at him, dark eyes solemn.

"Prince and Princess of a land you know," he said and paused for a moment before adding, "They rule it now."

"Oh," David said and a breeze swirled around them. "Then my--my father is...he's..." He'd never known him, could barely picture him, but still. He was gone. The people walking in front of them shivered, said they wished for warmer coats.

"Hey," Alec said, and took his hand. David waited for him to let go but he didn't. After forty steps David linked his fingers tightly through Alec's, so he would know he was still holding him.

Alec didn't let go.

The fair was enormous. David had seen lots of people before--the castle had been full of them--but never like this, shifting crowds moving this way and that, not vying for any one person to look at them but rather being cajoled by calls from everywhere, promises of entertainment and food and drink. It was as if everything in the world was there waiting just for them. He saw jugglers and acrobats and fire-eaters and players acting out stories of every kind. There were even singers too, and both he and Alec stopped to listen to them. Alec's face, as he watched them, was wistful, and David saw him glance down at his hands, start to shove them into his coat pockets.

"You sing better than they do," David whispered to him, and caught one of his hands with his own.

"You too," Alec said, grinning at him, and the next verse they both picked up the words, sang them quietly to each other, their voices blending together into one.

Later Alec bought him a cup of something with a name that was all vowels and l's. "From the far hills," Alec said, a wicked grin on his face. It was clear like water but tasted like a flash of light,

a bright shocking blur. David blinked, looked at Alec. He could feel the drink rushing warm inside him. Everything looked brighter and Alec was right there, right next to him, his grin grown even wider.

"I like this," David said after his third sip. He leaned in to whisper it in Alec's ear, nuzzled his neck.

"I can tell," Alec said and motioned for another.

Halfway through a play about sheep and miracles David leaned over and rested his head on Alec's shoulder. The world was swimming around him, a dizzy blur. Alec felt so good, so solid. And he smelled nice and warm and like...like he always did. Like himself, his own special Alec smell. It was wonderful. "I wish we were home," he said, and bit Alec's earlobe gently, licked his neck.

"Hey," Alec said quietly and when Alec turned toward him David kissed him, open-mouthed and eager.

"Mining trash," someone hissed behind them and David reached back with one hand, let his fingers brush against the knee of the man who'd spoken. He heard a crack and then a gasp, a whimper. Then Alec was tugging him up, hurrying them through the crowd.

"What were you thinking?" he said when they were on the street, turning back to look behind them.

"I was thinking about you," David said, and put a hand on Alec's shoulders. They were framed under his hands. Alec looked at him and the worried look on his face faded, his eyes flaring hot. "You and me." He slid his hands down Alec's chest, leaned in and kissed him. Then he moved his hands lower.

"We're in the middle of the street," Alec said and then gasped, pulled him closer.

"I don't care," David said. "I want you."

Later and forever what he would remember about that afternoon was the way the sun and the sky had swirled together overhead, a color he could remember but would never see again, the cool stone of the arch he and Alec were pressed against, the dark brown of Alec's eyes staring into his when David pushed into him. The sound of Alec saying his name over and over, voice wild and pleading.

Alec was quiet that night and again the next. He didn't touch him at all, kissed him in the evenings quickly and then slept carefully curled away from him.

The third night David got up when Alec fell asleep. He climbed out of bed and sat on the floor, stared out the window looking up at the stars. He heard Alec wake up and roll over when the street lamps outside were starting to flicker, burning low. There was a sharp intake of breath and then Alec's voice saying "David?" softly, almost hopefully.

"Down here," David said and wondered if the sigh Alec made at the sound of his voice was happy or sad. He didn't know what had changed, what Alec was thinking. He wanted to. "Come sit with me."

"I--all right," Alec said. In the moonlight he was all shadows and he sat down near him but not next to him. David moved closer, reached out and put a hand on Alec's leg when he started to move back.

"You have to sit here if you want to see the stars."

"David--"

"I like it when you say my name."

Alec was silent for a moment. Then he reached out and put his hand over David's and pushed it away, as if he couldn't bear his touch. "Except it's not your name."

"It--"

"It isn't. You--people like you have other names. Titles. And we both know I'm not ever someone you were supposed to meet, much less--"

"But I did meet you."

"Always with the obvious," Alec said, and smiled at him then, a strained smile.

"I want to be with you," David said softly. "I'm not sorry about it."

"Of course you aren't. You aren't sorry because people like you don't ever have to be sorry." His voice was bitter now, full of something past the two of them.

"But you do?"

Alec didn't reply. David wrapped his arms around his knees, sat silent, curling himself up tight and staring fixedly at the sky. His fingers were cold. He didn't know what to do, to say, and wished he did.

They sat that way for a long time and then Alec sighed. "I want to be with you too," he said quietly and moved closer, hesitated and then put a careful arm around him. "Tell me what stars you're looking at."

David looked at him, then back at the stars. "That's the Loom," he said, and pointed at a bright cluster in the middle of the sky.

"What are you talking about? That's the Bear."

"No, no, I know it's the Loom. See how it forms the shape of one? With the hump and the--"

"Have you ever seen a loom?"

"No."

Alec laughed, pulled him close. David smiled up at the sky.

"Look," Alec said. "See the curve there? That's the bear's back. Have you ever seen a bear?"

"No. Well, in pictures."

"Figures," Alec said and told him a story about a bear who'd ended up in the stars. David listened, nestled in Alec's arms.

The next morning people woke up and found flowers blooming even though the trees were still bare and there was a chill in the air.

David picked some of the flowers and put them in a glass. They made Alec sneeze violently but when David went to throw them away Alec stopped him, one hand on his arm.

"I can tell you like the damn things," he said. "Leave them."

"Really?"

"Yes," Alec said sourly, and sneezed again. David pulled him close, watched Alec's eyes melt from narrowed and suspicious to something else, something sweeter.

"I'm happy," David said. "All the time. It's amazing. I think of you and I want to smile. Do I make you want to smile?"

"No," Alec said, and kissed him. David could feel the curve of his mouth against his own.

Chapter Eight

"Want some?" Bash said.

Alec shook his head. Even in the guttering flicker of minelight he could see the things in Bash's eyes swimming crazily, flipping and twisting so hard he thought he might be seeing Bash leave in a bag before the end of the day.

"Dragons," Bash whispered to him and whistled low under his breath. Alec grunted and swung his pick. The rock shuddered but didn't split. Beside him Bash threw up. "Inside an egg," he said afterwards. "Very yellow." Then he threw up again.

"You sure you don't want some?" Bash said when he was done. Alec thought about it for a second but then shook his head again. Wormwood wouldn't help, not like it should. Now any time he took it all he saw was David and he was everywhere already. Behind his eyes when he closed them, right around the corner no matter what he thought about. And always there every night, waiting for him like he didn't ever want to leave. Touching him...he swung the pick again. The rock chipped, but only enough to spit fragments at him. He got most of them off his face before they could scratch deep enough to draw blood.

"Heigh ho!" he heard the worker at the top of the shaft sing as he'd finally gotten the rock to give way a bit. Foreman coming.

"Up," he hissed to Bash who'd slumped over his rock, tracing patterns in the air with one finger. His eyes had started to bleed a little.

"Lohoheigh!" Bash giggled, but he got up and swung his pick. It hit the rock at the perfect angle, cracking it all the way open. Alec felt the shudders of the split travel up his own arms, making them ache more than usual. He picked up the gleaming stuff inside, pressed it into Bash's hands. When he didn't move Alec punched him in the face. Bash stared at him and the things in his eyes rolled over, almost faded back but then didn't, twitched and pushed even harder.

"Keep your head down," Alec told him and shoved him in the direction of the collection bin.

"Frogs," Bash said, but patted him on the shoulder as he left. Alec sighed and swung his pick again.

The foreman came too soon. He'd heard the call but had hoped, foolishly, that it wasn't as close as it sounded, that he'd have a bit more time. He took another swing at the rock and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. The foreman looked at him and shook his head, then said, "Where's Bash?"

"Got a vein."

"Three for him this week. How many for you again?"

"None," Alec said shortly and swung his pick again.

The foreman put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed down hard, stilling his arm mid-swing.
"What was that?"

Alec gritted his teeth. His arm was screaming, the foreman's fingers pressing into every sore and torn joint. "None yet, sir."

"Well then, best try harder," the foreman said and squeezed one last time, hard enough for Alec to feel his arm pop, the shoulder slide back and out of place. His first day back the foreman had come and found him as he was waiting for the cart down with everyone else, called him aside with a grin of utter hatred marking his face and said, "So you decided working here with... what was it you said? Oh yes, an imbecilic idiot of a foreman. Decided that wouldn't be so bad, have you?" He'd grinned when Alec mumbled something and said, "So how's the arm?" motioning for someone to hold him down while he'd twisted it out of place. When he was done he'd pulled him up by it, yanking so hard Alec saw black yellow spots everywhere, and then slapped him once, twice, hard enough for the spots to bleed away and for the mine to blur back into view. "Too bad your arm didn't have a chance to heal up proper while you were gone," the foreman had said. "Guess we'll put you on half pay till you heal up again." Then he'd sent him down.

"Oh," the foreman said now, tongue clicking against his teeth, a sound Alec dreaded and hated. "I almost forgot. How's your bit of stuff?"

He swung his pick again. Bright hot pain all down his arm. He pictured the foreman's head splitting open.

"Not as nice as what had you before, I hear," the foreman said, and cuffed him on the back of the head.

When Alec didn't reply he did it again. His head hit the rock and it finally split wide open. There was a vein inside, a bold bright purple.

"Well now," the foreman said. "There's progress. I guess you just have to use your head." He laughed and walked away. Alec gritted his teeth and pushed himself up, sang out "Heigh ho!" to signal that the foreman was moving on. His voice sounded fine.

Alec would only talk about leaving the mines late at night, when it was too dark for David to see his face. During the day he never said anything and if David mentioned them Alec would just shrug and turn away, fall silent like there was nothing to say. It didn't matter. David heard dreams in Alec's voice at night and always thought about when he first met him, about what Alec had said about where he'd been. About singing, about trying, about what people saw when they looked at him.

"I'd love to never see another rock again," Alec would sometimes say and then he'd always laugh and add, "but then I haven't done very well at getting away from them so far." Sometimes when David reached for him Alec would sigh, shift into his arms. But usually he'd say, "One day, maybe," and pull back slightly, talk about going far away.

He never mentioned taking David with him, never seemed to weave him into his dreams.

"I'd like to see that," David said one night, Alec's hand tight in his. Alec's voice had been softer than usual when he talked of leaving, of wandering across a desert where a sea used to be to unknown lands past that, not sad but just quiet, and when David had reached for him he'd kissed him gently, whispered his name.

"Maybe you will," Alec said. "But not with me."

"Why not? We could--"

"No. This won't last. Everything you think you feel--it won't last."

"Why?"

"It just doesn't," Alec said, and even though he was still holding him David knew he was somewhere else, somewhere he'd never be. "It never does."

Alec helped carry Thomas out at the end of the day. He was talking a little as they reached the outside, a few slurred words full of pain. Alec fanned his face with one hand while Bash poured cold water on him and muttered a prayer. It didn't do any good. "Got three little ones at home," Bash said a few moments later and Alec nodded, closed Thomas's eyes. Bash put him in a bag.

As they were taking him down the hill Bash got his shoulder caught by a messenger horse, moved too slowly taking Thomas to the side of the path for the rider. "King's business," the rider said, "get that trash out of the way," and then the horse's hooves were flashing and Bash was underneath, the foreman saying he was sorry and was there anything His Majesty's servant wanted, needed?

"You know," he said after the rider had passed, turning around to grin at Alec as he and Bash struggled with Thomas, Bash's arm hanging awkwardly and his face ghost white with pain, "He came out once after you left. Wanted to look at a perfect blue we'd found. Never asked about you, not one word. Just like you were nothing to him."

When they reached the city and Thomas's body had been taken to the burning house Bash looked at him and said, "If there was ever a day for forgetting."

Alec nodded. And later, when Bash looked at him with dark swimming eyes dripping brown-red tears as he sang a laughing lament for his arm, he said, "Share?" and surrounded himself with burning smoke, swallowed it down till the world dissolved around him, till he couldn't think about anything or anyone.

Alec didn't come home when night fell. David waited and waited and finally went and knocked on Gladys' door when the streetlamps had been lit, long after the sounds of returning footsteps had stopped.

He knocked till his knuckles ached and Gladys gave him a hard look when she opened the door a crack, said "What is it?" in a toneless voice. From inside a deep voice David didn't know called out, "I'm not paying you to chat with the neighbors."

"I don't know where Alec is," he said.

She sighed, a short exasperated sound. "The way you were pounding on the door I thought it was an emergency," she said, and then turned away, said, "Won't be but a moment, I swear," to whoever was in the room with her, voice honey-sweet and hard.

"I have to go," she said when she turned back to him and then coughed, doubling over with her hand curling tightly around the doorframe.

"But--"

"I'm sure he's fine," she said impatiently, straightening up and rubbing her hand across her mouth, leaving a faint brown red trail behind. "Go on now, and don't come back tonight. Once everyone comes home I don't have time to talk. Understand?"

David shook his head but she'd already closed the door.

Alec came home when night was giving way to the first flicker of morning. He wasn't quiet when he came in--he bumped against the table, swore, and took off his coat too carefully, like moving was hard for him or something he had to think too much about, and swore again when it fell on the floor.

"Are you hurt?" David said, scrambling out of bed, and Alec looked at him. David sucked in a breath. Alec's eyes were crusted red in the corners and his shirt had been buttoned wrong, gaped open across his collarbone. "What happened?"

"You should be asleep," Alec said, and his voice was sharp, angry.

"I was waiting for you to come home."

Alec's mouth twisted, drawing tight, and then he stalked across the room. Up close he smelled like ale and bitter smoke and David could see a few twitching creatures swimming in his eyes. There was a mark on his neck, blue purple, a bruise. It was shaped like a mouth and when Alec saw David looking at it he smiled, ran his fingers along it. Then he moved his fingers a little lower. There was another mark just like right below his collarbone, this one punctuated with tiny little indentations. Teeth marks.

"You shouldn't have," he said. "I forgot you were here."

"Because of the wormwood?" David said, feeling sick and sad and confused, and watched the things inside Alec's eyes flip slowly, losing strength.

"Because I wanted to."

"You--you wanted to? Why?"

Alec shrugged. "I suppose I could share the details, if you wanted," he said, and leaned in closer. His mouth looked bruised, his jaw line marked red like it got after they--

"Oh," David said and he wasn't confused anymore.

"He was gorgeous," Alec continued and his voice was lilting and mocking, mean. "I couldn't help myself."

David felt the floor crack cold under his feet. "Are you coming to bed?" he said quietly.

Alec laughed, a sharp sneer of sound. "I don't think I'm up for another round right now."

"That's not--the sun will be up soon. You--you need to sleep."

"So understanding," Alec murmured, and the words were sickly sweet, false. The things in his eyes were gone, leaving only the dark angry brown of his gaze. It was worse somehow, to have Alec looking at him that way with clear eyes.

"I--" David bit his lip. "I don't know what I've done. Will you--"

"Shut up," Alec said harshly, cutting him off. "I don't know why--why are you still here?" he shouted and then stopped, clenched his hands into fist by his sides. When he spoke again his voice was harsher still but barely a whisper, like the words were being torn out of him. "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to be happy," David said quietly.

Alec's face shifted, something in his expression shattering, but he didn't move any closer. "Go to sleep," he said and went over to the fire, sat down in his chair facing it. He never came to bed.

He didn't say goodbye before he left either, and when he came back that night he wasn't alone.

"This is Henry," he said as he took off his coat and the man standing next to him stared at David for a moment, eyes widening, before he unhooked his own cloak and turned to look at Alec with one eyebrow raised. He was tall and blond and as he turned toward Alec David saw the line of his shoulders was long and broad.

"He's going to stay for a while," Alec said and his eyes were clear and very bright, sparkling with challenge and something else, something desperate. David nodded but Alec wasn't even looking at him, was looking at Henry who was staring at Alec with a knowing grin on his face. He was handsome and golden, looked strong and sure, like he understood the world and everything in it. And when he said something, low-voiced, Alec smiled and then shrugged. David knew that smile.

"Do you--" he cleared his throat, voice gone all sticky. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Nah," Henry said, looking at him again, and his voice was playful, soft. Wanting. "What's your name?"

"Oh," Alec said, and his voice was pure honeyed poison. "I forgot to make introductions. That was stupid of me." He looked right at David and said, "I guess I forgot you were here." Then he put a hand on Henry's arm, stroking once, twice, and said, "That's David. You don't mind that he's here, do you?"

"Not at all," Henry said, still looking at him. "In fact, I think--"

"We all know what you think," Alec said, sharp laughter in his voice, and Henry looked back at Alec, grinned broad and shrugged, then leaned in toward Alec and said, "And if I remember right, you like how I think."

"Something like that," Alec said and kissed him. It was the first kiss David had ever seen and he watched, startled and confused and intrigued, saw Henry's smiling mouth open under Alec's, watched the brush and twist of their lips against each other's. It was pretty, tall blond Henry bending down toward short dark Alec, the two of them straining toward each other, kissing like they had to, like they couldn't stop. It hurt. His hands were cold. He'd left the lamp lit, burning strong, and Alec's tongue was a bright flash of red sliding into Henry's mouth. Henry moaned, pulled Alec closer. David folded his fingers into his palms. They were shaking. Alec's eyes were open, looking directly at him, his gaze hard and glinting.

Then he closed them and that's when David knew Alec wasn't going to stop. That this was something Alec wanted him to see.

It hurt, watching, but at the same time he couldn't look away, couldn't stop watching Alec's face, his mouth meshing with Henry's, their hands and bodies moving, flashes of skin and then more than that, Alec's head tossed back and Henry's mouth moving across his chest and then down, lower. Henry tossed him a smile as he backed Alec into a corner, a backwards glance and a sly tug of his mouth, and then he turned away, back to Alec. There was sound and movement, most of it blocked by Henry's shoulders, but David heard Alec moan, saw his hands on Henry's arms, heard him laugh lilting and say something, his voice no different than how it was when it was the two of them together. Henry sank to his knees and suddenly Alec was in view again, looking at him.

"I told you," he said, and he was smiling.

"I know," David said, because it was true, and Alec's smile faded, mouth working. Then he closed his eyes again and his hands fisted in Henry's hair, hips thrusting hard, deep. David wanted to be where Henry was. He wanted to be where Alec was. He watched and thought of Alec telling him that they were just now, that what they had wouldn't last, couldn't. He watched the red of Henry's mouth, the red of Alec's cock, how they moved in tandem. He was so cold he was shaking with it and the floor was slick underneath him, his feet sliding across it, drawing him to where Alec and Henry were. Henry's mouth was moving furiously and Alec shuddered once, twice. David was close enough to touch him now. He reached out and put a hand on Henry's head instead, curling his hair around his fingers. It was smooth and golden, soft.

Henry turned toward him, licking the corner of his mouth, a slow lewd slide. "Not so shy after all," he said, and his voice was silky, beautiful. David stared at his red mouth and didn't move.

"I should probably ask first," Henry said and grinned at him, easy and knowing, and then slid his hand across the front of David's pants. "But I don't want to give Alec a chance to get pissy."

"He wants this," David said as Henry's hands stroked, shaped. His skin was cold, painfully so, and he needed warmth, needed something, anything. This. He pushed his pants open. Henry's eyes flashed sharp and then filled with pure heat, eagerness, and David could feel the dark bitter part of himself waking, rising, wanting Henry to touch him. Wanting Alec to see it.

He looked at Alec then, saw him watching them, his expression impossible to read. It wasn't what he wanted to see, he wanted more, but then Henry's mouth was on him and David didn't care about anything, was sinking inside a place he'd never been.

It wasn't like it was with Alec. He wasn't aware of anything but what was freezing over inside him, a rising dark tide. Henry's mouth was hot and that was all he thought of, wanting more and more and now. He sank both hands into Henry's hair, holding him tightly, and felt it crunch brittle under his hands. He watched ice bloom on the walls as Henry sucked, heard it crackle as he pushed, pushed. Inside him he knew he could do more, whatever he wanted. He pulled Henry's hair hard as he came, and the dark shadow inside him stretched, pushed forth. He twisted his fingers into Henry's scalp hard and groaned, body shuddering again as he saw the tears that came to Henry's eyes roll crystal sharp down his face to plink shatter on the floor. He was so cold he was burning with it. It didn't hurt at all anymore. He shoved Henry backwards, watched him sprawl on the floor and felt a smile shape his face.

"Get out," he said and his voice was empty, dismissive. Henry's mouth was open, the pink of his lips tinged blue-white and his eyes were shocked, dazed. Lost. He nodded dumbly, standing up and backing toward the door, staring at David as if he couldn't look away.

"Don't forget your cloak," David said, and he was laughing, watching Henry fumble for it, watching the fear and want in his eyes and seeing his mouth still frosted with cold. He could call him back right now and Henry would come, do whatever he want, stare at him like that forever and ever. He thought of the guide, Joseph, suddenly, of the way he'd looked at his brother and sister, and shuddered, clamping his mouth shut. He could still hear his laughter echoing though, could still feel cold commanding words welling up inside him, see things he could do and wanted to, not caring who he hurt, what he did. He looked around then, desperate and terrified of himself, and saw Alec staring at him. He wasn't looking at him like Henry was, wasn't staring at him with dazed eyes. Alec was just looking at him, and David knew the expression in his gaze was mirrored in his own, saw pain and regret and grief. The ice on the walls split, shattering, falling just like snow. He turned and stumbled blindly to the loft, fumbling.

"You need to go," he heard Alec tell Henry. He lay down on the bed and pulled the blankets up around himself. He didn't feel any warmer. His pants were still open. He closed them with shaking hands.

After the door closed he heard Alec cross the room, heard him climb up and felt him slide down under the blankets next to him. David turned his head and Alec was looking at him. "Don't," David said, and squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to see what was in Alec's gaze. He didn't want to see anything.

Alec moved toward him then, pulled him into his arms. "You're safe," he said. "I shouldn't have-- I'm sorry." David shuddered, once, twice, and then pressed his face into Alec's neck, breathing in his scent, his warmth.

"You just--you have to understand," Alec said as the sun was starting to rise, light testing the corners of David's closed eyes. They'd lain together all night, nothing but silence between them. "I can't forget that you won't always be here. I had to--I can't let you--you and I can't be everything for me."

"I know that," David said, weary voiced. "You've told me. Shown me. And now I just--I have to know--do you want me to leave? I..." and he had to pause then, force the words out. "I will, if you want."

"No," Alec said and his voice was sharp, pained. "That's just it. I don't. But you will one day. That's what you have to understand. What I won't forget. You and I aren't forever. The world doesn't work that way. This--" he touched David gently, a hand curving over his ear, fingers tangling in his hair, "--this is just now. It isn't anything more." He kissed him softly. "I won't forget that. You can't forget it either."

"But I--I like now. I want you. I don't care about anything else."

"You should."

"Maybe," David said and finally opened his eyes, looked directly at Alec. "But I don't."

Chapter Nine

She heard the rumors first. A miner, they went, gone away and returned again, a careful pause on every word. A miner, they went, living with someone different. Someone who wandered through the city looking as if he'd never seen anything like it before. Not lost, she was told, but like it was all brand new. She didn't care about that; country-bred souls always saw the city that way. But the miner and those pauses--she asked discreetly, delicately, and the miner's name was one she knew, the place where he lived familiar. She steepled her fingers together when she heard that and then nodded once, decision made. "Wait," she told the person standing in front of her. "Watch." She didn't ask if she was understood.

When she spoke, people listened.

Alec came home from the mines, face drawn tight with exhaustion and something else. He kept his head bowed as he shrugged off his coat, shook his head when David asked if he wanted to eat.

"I'm tired," he said and stepped carefully around him.

"Alec--" David said, and when Alec looked back at him he wouldn't meet his eyes. David waited until he was asleep. It took a long time but David finally heard his breathing even out, deepen. He turned out the lamp and went to bed. In the dark Alec's face was nothing but shadow but David waited and his eyes grew used to the dark, showed him the curves of Alec's face. They were softer in sleep, gentler, not pulled with worry or anger or fear. David traced the curve of his cheek with one finger, then two. Alec didn't stir.

David kissed him. Softly at first, careful to be gentle, and then, as Alec's mouth opened sleepily beneath his, harder, deeper. Alec woke up when David began to touch him but kept his eyes closed. David kissed the curve of his closed eyelids, touched him until Alec moaned and spread his legs, urged him forward by locking his legs around him.

Alec kept his eyes closed. David linked their hands together as their bodies moved, felt Alec's fingers close around his. He kissed him again, open-mouthed and deeply, and then whispered, "Wake up," in his ear as his hips flexed. Alec arched up under him. His eyes opened.

"This isn't just now," David said. "All I'll ever want is you."

She received word in the evening, a sealed note waiting for her on a gilded tray as she stepped into a long crystal hallway. She read it as she walked. Her face, reflected a hundred times in the clear shining walls, never changed expression, kept the same disarming smile she always wore. When she was done she folded the note in two. She did not hand it to a waiting servant. She continued to smile.

When she was admitted to see him he called her close and embraced her, said she was always a joy to see.

"I may have something for you," she said, and watched as his eyes lit. It was her duty to see him happy. Safe. She'd devoted her life to that, to him.

Later, alone in her rooms, she burned the note and changed. Dressed in drabness she left, rode down into the city. It was cold still, the new season yet to bloom, and her hands were red and white when she arrived at a tavern she'd been to many times before, mottled with cold. She sat down at the bar and signaled with one hand, a careful crook of a finger.

"I'm expecting someone," she said when the bar girl stood before her, head bowed, and slid two shining green coins across the counter. The girl bobbed her head and went back to the bar, rang the bell and announced they were closing early, shooed everyone home.

"I'll have a cup," she said when everyone was gone. The girl nodded and brought her one full of a deep rich wine, one she had them hold just for her.

He came in as she was setting her empty cup down on the bar, smiling in that easy way he had. She wasn't fooled. She knew him, had trained him, and the look in his eyes told her he had news, perhaps greater than his note had implied.

"I was surprised to hear from you," she said as he sat down. "It's been quite a while."

"Been busy," he said. "Waiting, watching. Wasn't that your request?"

She ignored that. He knew better than to really question. "You said you had news."

"Spent some time with a miner recently. Lives over in their district."

"Behind the tan door." He nodded and she signaled the bar girl for another drink. "You approached him?"

"No. You said to wait, and so I did."

"He came to you?"

"Is it so hard to believe he'd notice me?" He gestured at himself, grinned charmingly at her.

She waited, and his smile faded. "He'd taken wormwood," he said shortly. "And was desperate about something. I didn't do anything more than start a conversation."

The drink came and when he reached for it she put her hand over it. "Henry," she said slowly, warningly.

"You weren't there, Judith. You didn't see him. I could tell something wasn't right. And it paid off." He reached for the drink again and she moved her hand away, watched as he took a sip. He sighed with pleasure, grinned at her again, and she knew now he'd tell her what he thought she'd want to know. "He's with someone."

She laughed. "That's your news? He's filling his head with smoke and sharing his bed with someone? Dear heart, I told you that before I sent you out."

He winced at the endearment. He knew she only used them when she never meant them. "The man he's with--he's not--he's different."

This wasn't news either, but his voice--"Different how?"

"Beautiful," Henry said, and laughed, a hollow sound, then tilted the cup to his mouth and drank deeply. When he put the cup down on the counter she signaled for another. Henry rattled enough to be silent was something she'd never seen before.

When the bar girl placed a cup in front of him he seemed to regain some of his composure, smiled the smile she'd taught him to use. The girl blushed and he said, "What's your name, love?" She'd taught him about endearments too.

"Go," she said sharply, judging Henry's composure to be well enough restored, and the girl bowed her head and left.

Henry looked at her. "Strange," he said slowly, his smile fading away. "Quiet. Lost. Like something out of a story."

"A story."

"Like those told in another country."

Judith sucked in a breath. "One we know?"

"Yes."

"An ally?"

He nodded. "A new and dangerous one, even."

"Go on."

You've heard the rumors," Henry said. "There was a third child in the cold land past the mountains, born of the old king."

"A child who disappeared after birth, who the king never mentioned."

"Like he'd never been. All we heard were stories about how beautiful he supposedly was."

"And cursed," she said carefully.

"Yes," he said, and his voice was angry now. "You might have told me about that."

She took a deep breath. This was not at all what she had expected and she was almost dizzy with it. The possibilities..."It's true, then."

"As to whether he's the old King's son or not? That I couldn't say. But he's cursed for sure." He leaned toward her, head bowed, and even in the dim light of the tavern she could see that a patch of hair on his scalp was gone, the skin the strange mottled color only winter's strongest kiss could bring.

"Froze it," he said. "My hair--it broke right off in his hands. And the room we were in--" He took a deep breath. "Coated in ice, Judith. I saw it form, watched it spread. And he did it. He--"

"And how did you manage to provoke--" she asked and then broke off, shook her head. "Idiot," she said, but her voice was almost fond.

"He really is beautiful," Henry said. "I couldn't help myself."

"I'm sure."

He grinned at her, gave a lazy shrug of his shoulders. He knew the news he'd given her held worth. "The miner he's with--are the rumors true?"

She gave him a look and he grinned again, took a sip of his drink. "Just asking."

"Is he still with the miner?"

Henry nodded. "Comes and goes during the day some, but always back at night. Doesn't seem to want to leave."

"He's in hiding, afraid--"

Henry shrugged again and she stood up, not bothering to finish her sentence. She knew all she needed to.

"Be careful," he said as she was drawing on her gloves and she watched him run a hand across his scalp, wincing. "He's--there's something in him. Something--" He broke off and the expression in his eyes made her pause. She'd never seen Henry afraid before.

"I'm always careful," she said, and placed a pouch of coins on the counter. Henry picked it up, weighed it in his hand. He slid it into his cloak.

He didn't speak again till she was at the tavern door. "He's in love with the miner."

She looked back at him impatiently. "What does that matter?"

"Nothing to you or I," he said. "But I think it might to him."

David came back from the square late one afternoon, Gladys coughing next to him as they walked up the stairs. She'd needed to buy a length of fabric and David had gone with her, the two of them wandering through a maze of gleaming cloth toward a section of smaller stalls, where

everything for sale held no color and was thinly woven, rough to the touch. Gladys had sighed at one point, said, "Sad stuff, this," and looked back at the stalls they'd passed. Then she'd turned to him, a gleam in her eyes.

"Come on," she'd said and grabbed his hand, steering both of them back into the very heart of the square, to a stall where the counters were piled high with cloth of every color. She'd run her fingers longingly over a piece of rose cloth, motioned for David to feel it too. It was soft under his fingers. They'd stayed and looked at it until a stall worker moved toward them, a frown puckering her face. When she'd reached them she tried to pluck the fabric out of Gladys' hands, hissed at her to go away. "Don't want your kind near our customers," she'd said. Gladys had shrugged and let go of the cloth.

"I'm sorry," the assistant had said and her features rearranged themselves into a fawning smile as she turned to David. "I promise you we sell only the finest cloth to only the finest citizens. And clearly you--" she'd blushed a little. "Well. You must be newly arrived. Need a suit for Court, perhaps?" She'd moved the cloth Gladys had been holding toward him and said, "Look how fine the weave is on this," draping it across his arm. He'd looked at her and what she saw in his eyes must have startled her because she'd taken a step back, mouth opening in shock. David pushed the fabric off himself and it fell stiffly to the counter, making a heavy cracking sound, little pieces of it flying up around them.

"Saints," Gladys had said and tugged him back into the crowd, pulling them both all the way across to the other end of the square and then into a tavern where she'd sat them both down and ordered two mugs of ale, frowning when they came and the bar girl named their price. "Wait here," she'd told him and disappeared for a short while, returning with her mouth swollen and a handful of small change. She'd sat down and slapped the coins on the table, drank her ale in one long swallow and then, seeing his untouched glass, drank his.

She hadn't said a word about what had happened until they were walking back and even then all she'd said was, "You shouldn't mind what people say about me."

"It's not--it's wrong," David had said and she'd stopped in the middle of the street and stared at him as if he had two heads.

"It's not anything except the way it is," she'd said slowly, as if she was talking to a small child, and then sighed. "All this and I still didn't get my cloth."

"I'll go get it."

"Oh sure, trust you to bargain and pick out fabric?" she'd said, but she was grinning at him. They went back, circling around to the small stalls and he'd listened to her bargain furiously with a stall owner before purchasing a length of cloth colored a washed-out blue.

They'd walked back quickly, Gladys urging him to move faster, muttering about evening approaching and things she needed to do, and as they'd walked up the stairs she'd begun coughing. By the time they'd reached the top she'd stopped, leaned against the wall, and coughed until her face was as red as her hair.

David took the bundle of cloth out of her hands and motioned for her to give him her key, ran into her room and got her a cup of water.

When he came back out Gladys' color was better and she was staring at his door. "What is it?" he asked. The look on her face frightened him.

"King's messenger has been here," she said huskily. "Look."

He did, saw a piece of paper pinned to door, folded and sealed with a huge gilded crest.

"You best read it straightaway," she said and David went to the door cautiously, touched the paper. It was heavy and the pin that pressed it into the door was finely made, thin but strong enough to be driven clear through the stout wood. "I can't," he said. "Will you--"

She laughed. "You think they teach miners to read?" Then she cleared her throat and fell silent, an uncomfortable look on her face.

"What is it?" he said, crossing toward her and handing her the cup. "Do you want me to make some tea?"

"Alec can read it," she said quietly. "Best take it down and wait for him to come home."

When Alec came in he was whistling, pressed a quick kiss to David's mouth after he took off his coat. "You look a little lost," he said, and grinned at him. David tried to smile back but he knew he hadn't succeeded when Alec said, "David?" concern in his voice. He handed him the note.

"What's this?" Alec said and then he turned it over, saw the seal. For a moment the look on his face was raw, broken. And then he opened the note and read it. David had only heard people read out loud before, prayers at church or proclamations issued in his father's name, but Alec read silently. When he was done he folded the note back in half carefully and then set it down on the table.

"What does it say?" David asked.

"The King wants to see you," Alec said and he wasn't looking at him anymore, was staring down at the floor. "Tomorrow."

"Oh," David said. "Why?"

"David," Alec said slowly.

"He--he knows? About--about--"

"Yes," Alec said. "He knows who you are."

David pushed away from the table, unable to think past the memory of his brother and sister promising him a trip, of how he'd felt when he realized what they'd meant and he'd been left alone in the forest, of his mother's former home whispering thick and bitter all around him, and

Alec finally looked at him. "Don't," he said when he saw the look on David's face and stood up too, crossing toward him and pulling him into his arms. "You'll be safe, I promise."

"But--"

"I promise," Alec said. "Trust me?" David nodded.

Alec kissed him.

They didn't eat dinner. They went straight to bed, Alec's face intent as his hands skimmed over him, touching like he was reading him, like he was memorizing this moment, this night. He got up once, returned to bed with a little smile on his face and a plate piled high with gingerbread. "I think about this--you--sometimes, when I'm in the mines," he said.

"Really?" David said quietly. Alec had never mentioned the mines directly before. He'd never said that he thought about him, ever.

Alec nodded. "When they're calling down from the top--"

"Calling?"

"Heigh ho," Alec sang softly. "Means the foreman's coming. And sometimes, when the call comes, for a second I don't think about the rocks or the dark. I think about you and what you're doing and I can see you here, making more gingerbread, and I--I've never had anything--anyone--like that. That...that wanted to be here. With me." He cleared his throat, looked down at the bed.

David leaned over and took the plate out of his hands, pushed it toward the end of the bed.

"Heigh ho," he sang softly and Alec looked at him, his eyes huge and shining.

"You've wrecked me," he said, but when David moved closer he didn't move away.

"We could leave," David said as dawn was beginning to break. As soon as he said the words he felt his heart leap. "We should leave. Right now. If we hurry--"

"David," Alec said, but David was already getting out of bed, touching things and looking toward Alec's trunk, planning. Dreaming.

"David," Alec said again and he'd climbed down out of bed too, put a hand on his shoulder. He drew him over to the window.

It was almost as bright as day on the street outside, the lamps burning fierce. "Look," Alec said and David saw three huge men, tall and thick with muscle, standing right outside, right across from the door.

"How far do you think we'd get?" Alec said and his voice was tired, resigned.

"I could--" David said and touched a finger to the window. The glass bloomed frosty under his touch and he could feel that fierce darkness welling inside him. It scared him but for Alec he'd do anything.

"Don't say that," Alec breathed and David realized he'd spoken out loud.

"I would though," he said and looked down at the men below them. They might have families; children, parents, someone who looked at them and felt the way he did when he looked at Alec. He didn't care.

"There would be more," Alec said. "Even if you--we'd never make it out of the city. The King knows who you are and when he wants something or someone he gets it. And when he meets you--sees you--you'll be safe. Safer than you've ever been. He has power."

"I don't want that. I want--" He tugged Alec close.

Alec closed his eyes. "Come back to bed," he said softly, brokenly. "It's not morning. Not yet." When the sun finally did rise Alec was arched up over him, pushing deep inside him while one hand stroked David's cock, smiling when David twitched, gasped and then said his name.

"You're so beautiful," Alec said, and his voice was barely a whisper, "the most beautiful person I've ever known." And looking into his eyes David saw Alec wasn't talking about what he saw when he looked at him, about what he was seeing now. Alec was talking what was inside him, about his heart.

Alec saw him, saw all of him.

"I--" he said and felt words well up, words he'd only heard about in stories. Words he'd never heard directed at him, never said. Alec kissed him, stroked him harder, faster, pushed until all David could manage was a quick broken cry, his heart's song.

They rode to the palace in silence, seated inside a magnificent carriage. The three men that had been waiting outside were with them, one on either side of David, the third glowering at Alec.

"Didn't expect to see you again," he'd said when he saw him, and spit into the street. Alec had merely shrugged and said, "Still as pleasant as ever, I see," in a sharp voice, but David saw his shoulders tense. He saw the way he was sitting in the carriage, his fists tight knots resting on his legs, his feet tapping restlessly over and over, an impatient helpless rhythm. He saw Alec's eyes dart toward the carriage door, then to him. He saw a moment, saw Alec's gaze veer toward recklessness, toward hope.

Then the palace came into view. When that happened Alec stilled and that's when David knew that once they were inside only one of them would be leaving. He looked out the window, saw stone and towers and tall walls. He saw a place of many rooms and wondered which one would hold him.

Chapter Ten

Inside the palace looked nothing like the outside. It was made of clear rock, of crystal, all long tall clear hallways and rooms where the walls and floors and even the ceilings shone, sparkled and reflected light back and forth, making rainbows everywhere.

It looked like it was made of ice, and David felt trapped as soon as he walked inside.

They were taken down an endless series of glowing hallways and left waiting outside an enormous crystal door. David looked at it and thought of the window, of the three men waiting outside for them, of what he'd wanted to do. He was very afraid of what he'd see when the door opened.

Alec's hand brushed against his. "Gems," he whispered. "From the mines. That's what this place is made of. It's not--" He squeezed David's fingers. "Touch a wall."

David did. It was rough and warm under his touch, and the little rainbows sprinkled across his fingers. He wiggled his fingers a little, watched the colors dance. It looked pretty.

After a moment Alec let go of his other hand.

They were admitted in to see the King then, the enormous door pushed open and a long lustrous carpet woven of fabric so fine it shimmered like sunlight marking the path they were supposed to walk, a ring of silent armed figures guarding the perimeters of the room and watching every step they took.

The King was eating breakfast. David saw a gilded tray laden with bowls of porridge and a pot of tea. Next to the tea sat a cup and saucer, the edge of both dangling over the tray. The cup and saucer were made so finely, so delicately, that the roses painted on them looked almost real. David had seen a saucer like it before. He looked at Alec. Alec looked back at him steadily.

"Well," the King said, standing up, and David finally looked at him. He was beautiful--tall and lean, with blond hair cropped short and bright sparkling eyes--and David realized who the statue in the fountain in the square was of, saw that it had failed to capture the King's energy, his glow. In a grand room with shining crystal walls and a carpet that gleamed like the sun he stood out brighter than everything. He made David's brother and sister's shine seem like candlelight, like nothing. He was looking at him and he was smiling, a beautiful pleased smile. "You are--well, I don't think I've ever seen anyone so lovely. What's your name?"

"David."

"David. Surely that can't be your entire--oh," the King said, surprise in his voice, and now he was looking at Alec, his smile gone crooked, pained. "I--you--that is, I'd been told you were gone but--you--you're here."

"Surprise for me too," Alec said. His voice sounded like the King's smile.

"I thought--I was told you'd said you weren't coming back."

"I hadn't planned on it."

The King nodded, looked at David, the smile on his face trembling, and then back at Alec again. "Are you still living in that awful little room?"

Alec nodded.

"I can't believe I ever visited there. But then," and the King's voice softened, dipped into memory and David watched, fascinated and jealous, "it's where you were."

"Michael--" Alec said, and his voice was quiet, full of memory too. David heard the collective intake of breath of all those silent figures on the edge of the room at the use of the King's name and how Alec had said it. Simply, and like he'd said it before. Like it had once been familiar to him.

"I had to--" Michael said and his voice was soft, pleading. He looked as if he'd forgotten everyone except Alec was there. "It couldn't go on. You knew that."

"I did," Alec said and his voice was steady now, calm. "It's the way of the world."

"Always right to the point. I remember when you--" Michael broke off and for a moment his smile faded and David saw regret in his eyes. When he spoke again his voice was different, commanding, and David knew he'd remembered where he was, who he was. "You know why you were summoned here?"

"Yes."

"Is it true?"

Alec shrugged. Michael made a face at him, a wry twisting of his features, and for a moment Alec smiled. But he still didn't say a word.

"Is it?" Michael said again, voice sharper, as if surprised by Alec's silence. He looked hurt, lost, and David couldn't look at him anymore. It wasn't--he hadn't expected this. All he could think about was the saucer and the look on Alec's face when he saw it, Gladys telling him that no miners were ever taught to read but that Alec could, the way Alec had looked at him that first night when he'd come back and David was still there. He looked at Alec.

Alec was looking at him. There was no expression at all on his face but his eyes--his eyes were furious, sad. Frightened. He realized that even though Alec had always said he'd known this moment or one like it would come that somehow he'd still been surprised by it, that he wasn't prepared. That he was hurting.

"It's true," David said quietly and Alec's eyes flashed pain and sorrow and something else, something that made David's own eyes sting.

"The lost prince," Michael breathed. The lost look had faded from his face and he was looking directly at him, motioned for him to come forward with one hand. He had long, beautiful fingers. "Come here."

David looked at Alec but Alec wasn't looking at him anymore, was staring straight ahead, gazing at the crystal walls.

Up close Michael was even more beautiful, with eyes that looked at him as if he was the only person in the room and a smile that was warm, kind. "You really are lovely," he said, and his voice was husky, gentle. He put a hand on his shoulder. His hand was warm and large, stroked up over the collar of his shirt and onto his skin. "Is it true?" he said softly. "What they say about you?"

David nodded jerkily, let everything that was inside him push forth and waited for Michael's hand to fall away. He could feel Michael's hand growing cooler, waited for Michael to look at him like everyone did.

"Oh," Michael said, voice gone surprised but soft, and his hand stroked across David's skin again. The part of himself that David had felt roar to life with Henry stirred, prickled his skin and made him lean into Michael's touch. Painted pictures that made sound vibrate in his throat. "You'll stay here," Michael said, leaning in to whisper in his ear and when he pulled away his eyes were bright and curious, a slow heat flickering through his gaze.

"I--" David said, surprised and dismayed by how strange everything was, by what he'd learned, what he felt, and looked around for Alec. He wasn't there.

He looked back at Michael.

"He's gone," Michael said quietly and there was kindness in his eyes now, understanding. "It's his way."

"I--gone?" He'd known it was coming but to have it happen like this, to have him not even see it -- "I have to say goodbye," he said. "Please."

Michael tilted his head to one side a little, looking at David as if he were a puzzle he needed to understand. "I've never been one for farewells," he said softly. "But you--" His smile grew broader, softer. "I guess you are. Go on, then. Say goodbye. Someone will help you find your way back when you're done."

She was waiting for him in the hallway. He walked past her like she wasn't there.

"Alec," she said and then he stopped, turned to face her. He looked like he always had, the same dark dust all over his hands, the same thin smile, the same sharp eyes that looked right at you and saw exactly who you truly were. She'd always been able to see what had drawn Michael to him.

"Judith."

"It was necessary. He couldn't stay with you. He's--"

"I know."

"This wasn't done--" she paused, not sure what to say. "This wasn't done to hurt you. I didn't think--I didn't think you'd ever come back here, least of all with someone like--"

"I know," he said again. "Believe me, I never planned on it." He paused for a moment. "I know you love M--the King. I know you want him to be happy. Just..."

"What?" she said, unable to help herself. He'd never asked for anything, not even when she'd been waiting for him when he returned from the mines one evening, when she told him the King would be unable to see him again, that he'd been reminded of who he was, what his duties were. He had just stared at her and then said, "Tell Michael," slowly, carefully, letting the name detonate between them, "that I understand."

"Promise me you'll be careful with him, Judith. David doesn't--he doesn't understand how things are. He needs...." His voice cracked. "Just promise me."

"You--" she said, shocked by the look in his eyes. When she'd told him about Michael she'd seen that he'd known what was coming and had guarded his heart well because of it. With Michael he'd been hurt. Hurt but able to move on. But now...now she saw he'd tried to do the same and that he'd failed. He'd given his heart, given everything. He'd fallen in love. She hadn't thought he was so stupid.

"Promise me," he said again quietly, brokenly, and she nodded. He turned and walked away.

"I'm sorry," she said after he was gone and she was, a little. Her words echoed back at her through the crystal hallway, unheard. She folded her hands together and walked back down the hall, toward the King.

He couldn't find Alec. David ran down one hallway and then another, endless twists of gleaming rock. Then he saw him, impossibly far away, and called his name.

Alec didn't stop. David called his name again, louder, and ran faster, breath rushing out of him, the walls echoing the sound of his breathing, of Alec's name, back to him over and over again.

Alec stopped.

"I just--" David said when he reached him. "You have to say goodbye."

Alec started to say something sharp, cruel--David saw it in his eyes--but then he looked away from him, as if he couldn't bear to see what was in his face. "You'll be fine here," he said. "You'll be happy."

"I won't."

"David--"

"I'm not the Ki--I'm not Michael." His own voice tightened saying that name, at the thought of hearing Alec say it so easily.

"No," Alec said, and now he was looking at him. "You're not."

"I want to stay with you. I--I love you." He'd never said it before and knew, as soon as he did, that he wouldn't say it again. It didn't matter. It wouldn't change what was happening. It wouldn't change anything.

"No," Alec said softly. "You don't love me. You ran away and straight to me. That's not love. You don't--you don't know what it is."

David nodded, biting his lip. He couldn't feel it. He bit harder and still felt nothing. He could see the walls around them clouding, crystallizing with cold. He didn't feel that either.

"Don't," Alec said, and touched his face, traced a thumb across his mouth. "I'm not worth it."

"You--" David said and there was something scratching at his throat, clawing up behind his eyes. He stared at Alec, saw the way his hands were resting shaking by his sides, a dark smear across the glittering black dust that covered his thumb. He could feel bits of the dust stinging into his mouth now, into his heart. "I won't forget you."

"Of course you will," Alec said gently.

And then he walked away.

Michael courted him. That's what he'd called it anyway, afterwards, and David thought it was a good word. It sounded nice, slow and gentle and exactly like Michael coming to see him in the rooms he'd had him put in, a gleaming suite with enormous windows that looked out onto gardens sculpted to look like oceans and forests and hollows where nothing but flowers bloomed. There was even one made into a desert, piled high with brown sand and covered with blue yellow glass shaped to look like sun and sky.

"You can go see them anytime you'd like," Michael said that first day, only hours after David had been led down one hallway after another to a maze of rooms he was told to call his own, the image of Alec walking away still strong in his mind. "And I'd--I'd love to show them to you." He sounded shy and sure and perfect and David hated him so much it scared him. The chair he was sitting on cracked and splintered but didn't fall apart. It just hung there, frozen and broken. He waited for Michael to say something, to do something--he'd seen what was in his eyes earlier--and heard his quick intake of breath, but Michael surprised him.

"I'm sorry," he said, and sounded like he meant it. And then he'd left, closing the door quietly behind him.

A group of people came to see him later. They were dressed elaborately and spoke in measured tones, not pleading but almost, and the moment David looked at them he saw they'd been told who he was. What he could do. He saw what was in their eyes. They called him "Your

Highness" carefully and stayed clustered in a knot by the door. They talked and talked, words about who he was, who he was supposed to be, and he grew tired of listening, turned away and looked back out at the gardens. Eventually they left. He heard their robes rustling, their voices fading.

"They're worried," someone said and he looked toward the door again, saw a woman standing there. He'd seen her before, with the others, but hadn't really noticed her.

"I'm Judith," she said, and her voice was kind, her smile warm, her gaze welcoming. "We all stood here, talking, and never introduced ourselves, did we?"

He shook his head, then looked back out the window again. The blue yellow sky of the desert garden still glowed brightly. Judith didn't leave and when he glanced over at her again she was looking at him very carefully, and the way she was, that careful expression, as if she was looking through him, down past everything and directly at him, made him think of Alec. He folded his hands together.

"I suppose it doesn't matter," she said. "I know who you are and now you know who I am. Do you want to know what they're worried about?" Her expression was still kind but her voice was a little sharper and that reminded him of Alec too. He thought about snow, about the quiet it would bring. He could almost hear it. When he still didn't answer she moved closer, kneeling down beside him as he sat in the still broken chair.

"They're worried about what you might do," she said and now her voice was very calm, precise. "They don't know that you've been here for quite a while and the land--" She pointed toward the gardens. "Still as it ever was. Whatever power you have, it's not as it was, not here. But where you were," she paused for a moment and looked directly at him and in that moment he knew she was the reason why he was here. "Did you know it's still bound in snow? Oh, it doesn't fall anymore but all that did when you were young--it's still there. It's never melted and the land is still locked in winter. Your brother and sister would give anything to have you back with them, don't you think?"

"If you were going to send me back," he said slowly, carefully, "you would have done so already. But I'm here instead and you're the reason why, aren't you?"

She looked startled for a moment, but only for a moment, and then she said, "Yes. I'm why you are here. I found you, told the King."

"I was happy," he said softly and thought about her arm, lying so close. He could touch her easily and watch her face change. "I had--I had a home."

"The King needed to know," she said and didn't move but the softness in her eyes had faded away completely. "Every advantage that can be found is his by right. He deserves no less. And if you--if you dare to try and hurt him--" Her voice was proud, fierce. Frightened, and when he heard that he understood why she'd stayed.

"So you've come to tell me to be careful," he said and heard winter in his voice. "To warn me not to forget where I am, why I'm here. You, who told the King about me. You, who made sure this

is where I'll forever be." He paused and then let one finger brush against her arm, whispered, "I'll be careful. I won't forget. Not ever."

He looked back out on the gardens again. Snow wasn't falling yet but he could hear it, feel it building. He closed his eyes and waited. He heard Judith's footsteps cross the floor, moving away.

Out in the hallway Judith stood silently by herself, waving away the servants that fluttered toward her. She thought of Alec asking for her promise, of his voice cracking when he asked her to be careful with David. *He doesn't understand how things are.* She had expected sadness, a fragile spirit matching all the stories she'd heard, a beautiful prince doomed to bear a curse. She hadn't expected such anger, such grief. She hadn't expected that David would love Alec as Alec loved him.

She would have to be very careful indeed.

Chapter Eleven

It snowed that night, the sky filling with clouds and then endlessly drifting streams of snow. David had waited for it, longed for the soft sounds it made, for how it would fill the sky, and when it finally came he thought of himself wrapped in it, of the entire palace surrounded by it, and smiled. There was a mirror on the wall and he looked at his smile, at his mouth stretched up wide and cruel, and liked it. He watched himself until the mirror iced over and then shattered, and then he watched the snow again. He willed it to fall faster, farther. Forever.

When it was still dark he watched a group of servants enter the gardens, stamping their feet and blowing on their hands, shoulders hunched against the cold. They began to clear everything carefully, wiping away the snow so it looked like it never fell at all. The pleasure he'd felt before faded and he thought of his nurse's hands trapped on a pew, of the look on her face as he watched her wait helplessly for them to warm. He watched the servants, working in the dark because of him, and thought of Alec underground, trapped in the dark and digging because rocks there held value to those with power.

The snow stopped and when the sun rose it cut through the gray clouds, scattering red-yellow light everywhere. David watched one of the servants cleaning the gardens stop and lift his face up toward it, smiling a little before turning away to brush snow off a clump of flowers. The servant's hands were shaking from cold but he still moved them carefully and when he was done the flowers looked beautiful, shining bright in the early morning light.

David looked at the shards of glass on the floor. After a moment, he got up and picked them up, placed them in a shining pile on a table in another room, out of sight. A maid, tall and strong and clearly not a maid at all from the short sword worn strapped to her side, came in when the sun had risen higher and the servants were gone, leaving the gardens empty once more. She asked him if he wanted another mirror.

"No," he said. "I don't."

Michael came back when the sun had reached the top of the sky and David sat watching the gardens with a tray of uneaten food in front of him. He slid across the ice-coated floor, a look of surprise crossing his face before it was replaced by a grin shaped by surprise and heat. He stopped near him and shifted from one foot to another, low laughter as his feet slipped again. "Cold in here," he said, and as David looked at him his smile faded into something softer. Something hopeful. David looked back out the window and hated the sharp pricking of joy he felt hearing Michael's soft sigh. He knew staying in this place would turn him into what he never wanted to be.

"Does--" Michael cleared his throat and he sounded like David had when he'd talked to Alec on a long-ago night, when he'd known what he wanted but was so unsure of how to say it, to ask. *But I want to stay with you.* "Does it--the cold--bother you? Because I could have someone build a fire or bring you some blankets or..."

"I don't feel it." He wondered what it would feel like to walk through the pretend desert Michael had created, what he would find on the other side. Who he would think about if he looked up at the fake sky.

"Oh." Michael was silent for a moment and then he moved a little closer, looked out at the gardens. "Which one is your favorite? I like--" He pointed at the one filled with flowers. "And Alec, he liked--" He broke off and when David finally looked at him Michael was watching him.

"I used to wish that--" Michael said, and David shook his head. He didn't want to know about Michael and Alec, didn't want to hear their story. Not now. Not ever. He knew that if he did he wouldn't be able to bear it. Michael nodded and there was understanding in his eyes. After that they didn't talk. They just looked out the window together, at all the perfect worlds laid out before them.

Michael came to see him every day. Every day he'd come and David would wait, a long while at first and then less as loneliness bloomed inside him, before he would turn away from the window and see Michael sitting there, a hesitant smile on his face.

At first Michael only asked if David needed anything, if he'd slept well. Polite questions, soft questions, and the first time David answered him the smile that lit Michael's face cast rainbows around the room, the ice that had coated everything cracking and yielding to the sun because David had never seen anything as lovely as Michael's smile. That day he let Michael take him to the gardens, walked through one laid out with trellises of climbing flowers and soft blue grass blowing in a wind that wasn't real.

After that Michael asked other questions. Nothing about David's life before, a kindness David resented and desperately needed, but he was endlessly curious about everything else. What colors did David like? What sort of foods did he dream of eating? If Michael showed him a map of the city, would David tell him what he thought of Michael's plan for a new harbor? And when David said he sang Michael didn't ask him to sing for him. He sang for David instead, created rhythm and words with his voice and smiled far away when he was done. "I always wanted to be a singer," he said. "That's how I met--" He broke off and cleared his throat, then reached over and touched David's hand.

"I didn't mean to--" he said. "I just--when I'm around you, I can't think," and he meant it. David moved him past thought, past reason. It was there in his voice and it was easy to lean in close, to watch Michael's eyes flutter closed. The power of it was heady in him, rising dark and singing through his body. It was all he had now.

Michael's mouth was smooth and warm and tasted faintly of roses. David bit down because he knew he could and the rose taste faded into something warmer, flavored hot and metallic-tinged, and Michael moaned, mouth opening wider under his. The walls frosted over and when they parted their breath came out as soft white clouds, mingling over and around them to fall freezing to the ground.

David put a hand on Michael's chest, over his heart, and watched Michael's breath catch. He curled his fingers and pictured cold stabbing through skin, past bone, into the soft flesh underneath. So easy. Such a little thing, a heart. So easy to break.

He moved his hand lower, heard Michael's breath start again, race rapid, form his name in wonder and heat and more than a hint of fear, and let loose the roaring darkness inside him. Michael called him David but only when they were alone. In public he called him by names David didn't know but was told were his own, a long lyrical line of them that he learned to

respond to only when he turned them into song, a string of words running together in his mind. He told Michael that once as they lay curled together, sated and empty and tired of feeling alone, and Michael had laughed and kissed him, said, "But it's who you are."

Everyone else called him "Your Highness," and bowed low whenever he walked by. Only Michael's eyes were allowed on him although sometimes, when he was sitting by Michael's side during his morning meetings, he would feel Judith looking at him.

"David is--it's like a secret," Michael said one night, the two of them lying in Michael's bed. It was a lovely bed, carved and tall and piled high with the softest blankets David had ever felt. "It sounds like one, don't you think? Something private. Something only we share." He kissed him and David opened his mouth, swallowed down words there was no point in saying. Michael gasped and arched into him, skin prickling with cold.

David called Michael by name when he came, sometimes, when the roaring inside him was a scream, when Michael was shivering and pleading and staring at him with dazed almost frightened eyes. The rest of the time he never called him anything, just closed his eyes or opened his mouth or smiled. Michael never noticed. He knew who he was and it was who he wanted to be.

Michael never mentioned Alec to him, never again tried to tell him their story or get David to share his own, and David was grateful for that. He wanted his memories to be his, hoarded them tightly inside himself, the one tiny place he could go and feel free. And Alec and Michael--all he knew was that it had ended and that itself was too much, rubbed a raw place inside him that roared every time Michael smiled. He didn't know how Michael had found Alec and then given him up. He never could have done that.

If he'd had a choice, a real choice, he never would have.

Michael was proud of who David was. Of what he could do. The first time he told someone, David sitting by his side in a banquet room that spanned so far he couldn't see the end of it, David had been shocked, hearing everything he could do--had done--laid out, Michael's voice lilting as he talked of land that David had ruined, of how he could cloud the skies if he chose. After a while, he grew used to it. He would listen to the stories of what he could do, what he'd done, and let his mind drift away. Sometimes he would see Judith watching him, a frown creasing her forehead as she looked at his fingers lying still and quiet within Michael's, being held but never holding.

Michael wanted him to be happy.

"I'm going to make you happy," he'd told him, not the first time David woke up to find Michael smiling at him but the second, the third, the fourth. He said it every time after that and eventually David said, "I am," and "You do." They were just words and they were easy enough to say. Sometimes it frightened him, how everything inside him seemed hollowed out, gone.

And then one morning, standing silently while the maid who wasn't one watched the dressers hovering around him, a thought came to him. As it bloomed it was like a flame inside him. The

tan door and Gladys living behind it. She would still be there. She might--he stopped the thought before he could finish it.

The maid who wasn't one was watching him with flat eyes, and when he smiled at her she looked right through him. He could see Judith all over her.

He looked out the window. The gardens were as lovely as ever. He looked at the one shaped like the ocean and thought of the last time he'd seen Gladys, her red tired face and the look on it as she stared at what had been his door.

For the first time in what felt like forever, he hoped.

He asked that night and knew as soon as he did that he'd done something wrong because Judith smiled at him, the careful slow one she used when she didn't like what was being said, and let her gaze skim to Michael. He pressed his hands together and moved them off the table. Only the edge of the dish nearest to him was changed, a thin layer of ice coating over the roses that bloomed across it. It was hard to believe he'd once thought they looked beautiful.

"You miss her?" Michael's voice was as always, warm and kind. David nodded and then let one hand come to rest near Michael, close enough for the edge of his finger to curl up against one of Michael's hands.

Michael grinned at him. "You should go, then. Tomorrow, the day after that, as soon as you'd like." Judith didn't move at all but David watched her eyes flash.

"With an escort, of course," Michael added. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Of course," David said, and curled his finger around one of Michael's. He watched as Michael's skin paled, fading white.

"Leave us," Michael said, his voice gone soft, lost, and he wasn't talking to David. Judith bowed before she left and closed the door very carefully behind her. David pushed Michael down across the table. He breathed out once, twice, and let the happiness over seeing Gladys sink through him, fade away. It was easy.

He held Michael too tight, made everything too cold, and Michael had bruises when they were done, a crescent of them fanned out, finger-shaped, across his skin, and stared at David, wide-eyed with a face tinged a lovely pale blue.

"Come here," he said and David hesitated for only a moment before curling himself around him. It wasn't until he was being walked through the tan door, carefully stepping past a row of servants with their heads bowed, blocking the street so that no one but him could pass, that he really thought about being back. He couldn't help thinking *maybe* as he walked up the stairs and knew what--who--he wouldn't see. He'd missed that, missed truly feeling, and was glad of it even as it ached inside him.

He saw the door at the end of the hall. Whoever lived there now had hung dried flowers on it. They dangled from a faded ribbon. There were shoes next to the door. Five pairs; two big, three little, and when Gladys opened her door--he wasn't allowed to knock, the maid who wasn't one

had trailed behind him up the stairs and did it for him--she looked thinner than he remembered, more tired.

"Oh," she said, and she didn't seem particularly glad to see him, opened her door with a strange pinched look on her face.

He realized why as soon as he tried to walk inside, the maid not holding him back--he was never touched, not directly, by anyone but Michael--but moving around him silently, turning so Gladys had to move back and David couldn't move forward.

"A moment, Your Highness," she said and David watched her carefully inventory Gladys' room, Gladys casting him a quick sideways glance he couldn't read before she started coughing and turned her head away. When the maid was done inspecting the room--a long stare at the burning flame Gladys had rigged and a thin compressed almost sneer at the bed, the closest thing to an expression David had ever seen on her face--she moved so David could enter the room. Gladys was still coughing, her face a dark almost purple red, and David went to get her a glass of water. His robes snagged on a loose nail in the floor and the maid moved around him, poured the water and passed it to Gladys with her fingers holding the cup by one edge, face turned away. Gladys took it and David watched the maid's fingers twitch away from Gladys' raw hands still caked with traces of mine dust.

"Surprised to see you," Gladys said when she'd drained the water. Her face was still bright red and David could almost see the blood pumping under her skin. Even her eyelids were flushed, the skin so worn he could see the tracework of blood vessels lining them. The maid who wasn't one shifted a little and David watched her rest one hand on her side, on the hilt of the short curving sword.

"Your Highness," Gladys said and bowed low. It made her cough again and David watched her fight to keep her mouth closed. A thin trickle of brown red bloomed on her lips anyway, dripped down onto the floor.

"Can you wait outside?" he asked and the maid stared at him with her flat eyes before nodding once, slowly. She went out into the hallway but didn't close the door behind her, stood perfectly still watching them.

The rags were still where she'd always kept them and Gladys grinned at him for a moment when he handed one to her. It should have made him feel warm but her smile was coated in blood and her eyes weren't happy at all.

After she'd wiped her mouth she said, "I was going to have some tea," her voice raspy from coughing. Out in the hallway the servant shifted slightly, her sword hilt glinting as it caught the light. Gladys put the cup she was holding down and added, "Would Your Highness care for some?"

David nodded. They drank their tea in silence, Gladys sitting on the floor as she always did and David standing because when he'd tried to sit down Gladys's eyes had gone panicked, darted over to the servant still standing silent watching them.

"Don't come back," she said when he was done, her voice a quiet whisper as she leaned forward, head bowed and hands open for him to place his cup into it.

"I--" he said, startled and hurt and she looked up at him then. Her eyes had been gray once, he saw. Under the tracework of red that bloomed through them, there was a hint of it. Once her eyes had been beautiful.

If she'd heard from Alec she would never tell him.

"King's people coming around--it makes folks nervous and life here is hard enough already," she said, the merest whisper, and took the cup from his hands, rising and motioning for him to head toward the door. She'd done it before, dozens of times, marked the end of a day they'd spent talking by doing the same thing. It was different now. He saw her eyes flicker over the robes he was wearing, saw her standing there in the same dress she'd always worn. She'd patched the sleeves with pale blue cloth. He wanted to take her hands but knew that he couldn't. That she wouldn't let him.

"I'm sorry," he said and she shrugged, eyes meeting his but not looking at him, and shut the door. After a moment he told the maid he was ready to go back. She looked at him but he realized suddenly that she wasn't, not really. She gazed near and around him with that always flat gaze and he realized that was how he was going to be looked at by everyone except Michael, forever.

Chapter Twelve

David felt alone but he wasn't. He had Michael. And Michael wasn't ever tired from working, would do things like spread rose petals all over a room or arrange for dinners of David's favorite foods. He knew how to do things that David's body wanted, that made him tired and sated, brought him to moments where he couldn't think of anything but pleasure. He always whispered sweet words and never asked for any in return. He even wrote songs and sang them to him. He was bright and lovely, full of joy. It was easy being with Michael.

It was easy because Michael liked it when David forgot everything, liked it when David made him cold, liked it when David left him shivering and blue-tinged and called him back for more. He liked it when David pulled his hair and bloodied his back. He liked it when David placed a hand on his chest and curved his fingers so the cold would sink, threaten. He liked it when the darkness inside David guided him to care about no one and nothing but himself, his own needs. He needed it.

Michael needed it because it kept him kind. He knew, instinctively, that having everything led to a dark edge, a place that called you, wanted to consume you, and David could tell Michael didn't ever want to go there. He knew that when they were together Michael saw what was inside him and wanted it, but would never create it in himself.

Michael wanted to be loved. And he was; everyone said so, offered up the words with joy in their voice and light shining in their eyes. Michael was loved because he was a beautiful man, a kind ruler, and had as soft a heart as any King ever could.

Michael was easy to love, but David would never love him.

Michael liked it when David made it snow, would take him up to the palace roof and hold him, plead and then gasp when David tumbled them both down onto sweet smelling blankets as snowfall rained down around them. He would smile afterwards, wide and joyful enough to crack the sky, and hold his hand.

"I love this," he said once. "Don't you?" There were snowflakes caught in his hair, swirling around his face. He looked beautiful.

"I like the sun," David said. "Light."

Michael smiled at him. "But that's everywhere. This is special. You and I--we're like magic together."

David looked up at the night sky. There was nothing to see. No stars, just clouds and streams of gently falling snow.

"Don't you think?" Michael asked, a thread of worry in his voice. David looked at him and saw that his smile had faded.

"Like a story," he said softly, thinking of those his nurse had once told, of brave heroes beloved like Michael was, and Michael smiled again, radiant, and said, "Just like a happily ever after."

David thought that in a story it would be. He was safe and no matter how much he made it snow it didn't ruin the land. He was safe and so was everyone else. He lived with a king in a shining castle, was part of a gleaming gilded world. He was cherished.

In a story it would be everything.

David thought about Alec every day. He missed his black moods, his sharp tongue. His smile. His touch. The little room they shared, Alec's arms closing drowsily around him and murmuring that he had to get up, that he'd see him later. He missed Alec's scratchy cracked hands on his skin. He missed the gentle way Alec would look at him. He missed how angry he could get. He missed eating potatoes and washing in a tin tub and watching Alec fall asleep after dinner, exhausted and face gone soft in a way it never was when he was awake. He missed the way Alec looked at him, the way he saw who he was and looked past that, straight through to him. He missed Alec and realized that Alec had been wrong.

He knew exactly what love was.

The act that had passed through before--dancers, John had said with enough of a smile for Alec to know what that meant--had been cleared out in a hurry, chased out or run off. Either way they'd left behind pots of pinkish and yellowish paint, robes of cheap sheer fabric, and a pile of belongings that had been owned by those who had been there taking their pleasure. Alec had been slow to arrive, waking with a throbbing head from too much drink or not enough sleep or life in general, and when he did all that was left was a pair of shoes, the soles rotted through, and a few crumpled pieces of paper, dispatches of news from faraway places.

The papers had been stamped with an elaborately inked crest, the sign of a minor official wishing to have more power, and it covered most of the print. Roberta came by as he was holding them and said, "Next time get yourself here earlier," in that soft rolling voice of hers and showed him the robes she'd taken, twisting them up small in her hand when John walked by with an ease born of long practice. She'd been with John for a long time. He'd asked her how long once and she'd moved toward him gracefully, as if starting to dance, and then snaked a hand in front of his face, snapping her fingers so that her nails stung lightly against his skin. He knew enough of her by then to know what that meant. He knew what dancing had become to her.

"Enjoy your reading," John told him, his great wide grin eating up his face like always. "Maybe you'll share the news with us later?"

Alec shrugged and let John have his laugh, folded the papers into a tinier and tinier square and watched him walk off to inspect the crowd. John kept the money they made in a lockbox and wore the key around his neck. He complained often and bitterly about how little it was. He also wrote down the amount and kept the figures neatly folded in a pouch he never bothered to guard because he assumed none of them could read. Alec figured that might come in handy someday.

Roberta patted his shoulder. "Best get ready," she said and he said he would, that he just needed to get his things.

The wagon was out back--close enough for them to pile into and flee should a hostile audience or overly interested inspector arise--and he went and sat in it, gathering his gear and sitting cross-legged, leaning against one side.

There was still joy to be had in the world, he thought, sitting there with the sun shining down through the bars to land on his face, and he almost believed it. Then he read the papers.

There was news of lands he'd never heard of, spice routes and wars and great delegations running alongside ornate lines penned to honor births and deaths, royalty and nobility dancing in and out of the world.

Then there was Michael's name in dusty print swimming across the middle of a page, and Alec held the papers tight and read.

David was to be crowned consort, had been chosen to be forever by Michael's side. There was a description of the crown he would be given, a list of attendees. Judith's name was second from the top, a long title resting next to it. At the end was a notice that the city would be decorated and that a day of celebration had been planned along with a call for blessings, right down to the preferred words one should utter.

He tossed the papers on the ground and looked at them lying there. After a moment the wind carried them away and he pictured them drifting, floating back to the desert he'd crossed and sinking into the hot sand. It didn't make him feel better but he was used to that now.

He'd hoped for a while and that had carried him across an endless sea of sand with a caravan full of traders who tolerated him because he asked no questions about the wares they carried, but then he'd passed to the other side and learned the land beyond contained nothing new. There were mines, resting inside mountains at the far edge of the horizon, and wherever he went that's where he was told to go. Even with the dust on his hands fading he wasn't able to escape who he'd always been told he was supposed to be. He thought about moving on, going farther, but knew that no matter where he went every land would be the same. It always was and always would be.

That was when he'd met John. He was standing in a square in a tiny parched town, singing and watching people stare markedly at his hands, at him, as they walked by and left nothing behind and John had stopped and asked him to sing a song. When Alec was done he asked him to sing one more.

"Miner, are you?" he asked, looking at his hands, and Alec said,

"Do you see me standing in rock now?"

"Surely don't," John said, a grin crossing his face and seeming to swallow it, and then he'd offered Alec a job. Singing, he'd said and there was a little pause at the end of the word. Alec hadn't much cared about the pause then because suddenly there it was, a chance at the one thing he always thought he'd wanted more than anything.

The watcher John employed came out and squinted yellow-eyed at him then, cracked the knuckles on one hand slowly, fist flexing. "Almost time," he said and when Alec was ready, the watcher would be the first one he'd tell about how much money John held.

He went back inside. He could hear the crowd, rowdy and laughing, calling for more, more and tossing coins at the stage. He sat down in a corner and painted dark onto his hands. He hadn't lost all the dust and knew he never would but it wasn't enough for John. He wanted Alec to look like he'd just staggered out into the light. He laced up his boots and hefted the pick John had made for him, lightweight and dull-edged--John was careful when it came to those kind of things--into his hands.

Beside him Roberta shrugged her shoulders and shuddered, her neck and shoulders rippling into pale green flesh laced with tiny moving mouths. She was half mer, she'd told him once, had left the sea town that had been her home in hopes of becoming a dancer. "Wanted more than sliding about in the sea gathering pearls for princes," she'd said and he'd nodded. They didn't talk much but they drank together sometimes or sought out those who sold wormwood and shared a few lungfuls, held each other while they dreamed.

She went out before he did and he stood exactly where he was rolling the pick around in his hands. He didn't need to see her perform, didn't want to. Roberta had wanted to be a dancer and now she was, of sorts. She swam in a small clear tank John had made, dipping and twisting through water so those who had never seen her like before could watch.

He thought about the papers, about the words on them. He'd never loved David. He was sure of it. But he hadn't ever stopped thinking about him. He'd waited and waited but David was still there, drifting through his mind. Drink didn't wash him free and wormwood only made him more real, took Alec back to moments between them and made his life now seem like even more of a shadow.

"I never loved him," he said and the moment he heard himself say it he knew it was a lie.

When he was called he went on stage. "A miner with a voice of gold," John's voice boomed. "See what the earth has yielded and marvel at its strangeness, at this creature that forgets who he is. See him squint as he steps into the light--truly, he was never meant to be here and yet here he is, just for your entertainment!"

That was John's gift. He'd figured out their dreams and saw them for the impossibility they were and then sold them, let others watch them wish for what everyone knew would never be.

And so now here he was. He stood and looked at the crowd, the bright lights John had beaming down on him showing row after row of faces he couldn't quite see watching him, only him.

He thought about David. About how he'd told himself he would forget him, that what he felt was nothing. He'd been wrong. What he felt wasn't nothing and all he thought he'd forget he never would. He sang and looked at all the washed out faces he couldn't see.

Chapter Thirteen

Michael didn't tell her first. He always told her everything first but the day he announced David would be his consort Judith was caught surprised, stood staring at him as he sat holding David's hand and spoke.

Everyone bowed and murmured praise and promises of prayers of blessing and she waited until they were all gone before she said, "Consort?" She knew there was sharpness in her voice, a fury she'd never shown Michael before, and his mouth parted, shocked. She saw his hand tighten around David's momentarily.

"It pleases me," he said and his voice was tight. Hurt. Maybe even a little angry. "And the Prince and Princess--what else must they do but sign the agreement I've sent forth? They know I can muster an army far greater than theirs and now a ruler to replace them, of truer blood than they, if I so desire."

"You've thought of everything," she said softly. She couldn't bear to hear him speak in his voice of before again. Not toward her.

Michael grinned at her then, appeased, and pressed a kiss to David's palm. "My heart's desire and the land stronger than ever," he said. "What more could any man ask for?"

She looked at David sitting holding Michael's hand. Sitting silent and unsmiling beside him. So beautiful, she thought. And so cold.

"I wish you much joy," she said to David, the formal words of praise.

"And I you," he said, looking steadily back at her, and she knew there was nothing else she could say.

The day a royal courier arrived every noble in attendance at the castle trembled. The news from afar had not been good for a long time and had been even worse lately and that never boded well. The royal herald's voice cracked when he read the name of the King whose courier had been sent and felt the Prince and Princess's eyes on him, began to tremble so badly his throat closed up tight.

"We shall expect you in our rooms later," the Prince said and reached for his sister's hand.

"Yes," the Princess said and wrapped her hand around her brother's, her fingertips sliding over his.

The herald threw himself off a parapet that afternoon. His body was burned in the courtyard. There was no one there to mourn him. To be seen was to risk attention and everyone knew better than that now.

The Prince and Princess received the royal courier in silence and sent him away without saying a word, even when the courier said, "Surely you wish to send along blessings of joy to King Michael and the consort he has chosen?"

For a long time after the courier left they didn't speak and their attendants trembled, knowing what such silence meant.

"Leave us," the Princess said as the sun was setting and watched as everyone who served them scurried away, running as if there could be an escape.

"He's alive," the Prince said and his voice was low, steady. The Princess pressed a kiss to the back of his hand and could taste his fury.

"Yes. The woodsman we sent with him--"

"I'll summon him," the Prince said. The Princess smiled.

He no longer sat waiting for them but he never left the house either. Joseph had never been able to venture back into the forest, not even when he'd finally realized that the Prince and Princess were never going to send for him, that they'd forgotten him. He stayed at home and listened to the cries of excitement that had come when the snow had stopped falling, watched bleakness return to everyone's gaze as the land stayed blanketed in winter, in snow. His mother found joy in the shining sun still, sometimes, but those moments were few and far between.

He never looked at the sky. He sat indoors, never facing a window, never facing the door. He sat in his room and remembered and dreamed dreams he knew would never come to pass, gorged himself on them because they were all he had left. And so when there was a knock on the door one evening and his mother's voice rose sharp and surprised he thought nothing of it.

He thought nothing of it until she came into his room and knelt before him, said, "You've been summoned to the castle." Her eyes were wide, terrified. The joy that had greeted the Prince and Princess at the beginning of their rule hadn't lasted long. Winter never let go of the land and taxes had risen and then risen again and those that grumbled, even the faintest of complaints, were led to gruesome deaths. "I'll tell them you aren't here. I'll say you've gone to your cousin's. It will take them a few days to journey there and meanwhile you can--"

"I've been summoned?"

She stared at him, her mouth parting, shocked at the joy in his voice, and then nodded once, slowly.

He got up and walked toward the door. There were two guards waiting for him. "Take me to them," he said and could not contain his smile, watched the guards blink startled at it. Finally he'd been called. And finally he would go. He would see them again. His mother hugged him tight and kissed him before he left. He returned her embrace absently, his mind already racing far away.

He began to shake when they reached the castle. After so long he would see them, touch them. For the first time in ages his body began to stir, heat. Hope and lust filled him and he felt alive, eager.

They were waiting for him in a room he'd seen many times before, a beautiful room filled with mirrors and tapestries and soft pillows blanketing the floor, two long, low wide couches the only furniture. He pictured them pushed together and knelt down, still trembling.

"There, now," the Prince said, and his hand was gentle on the back of Joseph's neck. "Did you think we'd forgotten you?"

"Because we wouldn't," the Princess said and her hand joined her brothers, traced over and around the Prince's, her nails scoring the skin at his nape lightly. "We never forget." Her other hand touched his chin, lifted his face up toward them.

They glowed as brightly as he remembered, golden and perfect and smiling at him. "I missed you," he told them. "It's been so long."

"Too long," the Prince said, still smiling, and slid his other hand inside his sister's robes. Joseph watched, blood racing, and then the hiss of a knife being drawn filled the room, the Prince's hand tracing delicately across his sister's stomach, the gleam of a blade showing through his fingers. The Princess shuddered, mouth parting.

"All we asked was for one small thing," she said and her hand moved to his mouth, fingers tracing across his lips. "And yet you--"

"Betrayed us," the Prince finished, and the Princess sank her other hand into Joseph's hair, tilting his head back. Now all he could see was them. And all he could feel was their knife at his throat.

"But I--" he said. "I didn't. I took him out deep into the woods, just as you said. I just--I couldn't kill him. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I wanted to but I--"

"You meant well," the Prince said soothingly and pressed a kiss to his mouth.

"You tried," the Princess said and pushed a finger inside his mouth, tracing where her brother's kiss went.

"Yes," Joseph gasped. "I left him and I'm sure he perished. No one could survive in all that snow." They were looking down at him and the smiles on their faces were heated, hungry. He looked at the couches and then back at them, hoping.

"You have missed us," the Princess said, voice warm, honey-sweet, and he looked at her.

"Yes," he said, and stared at the diamonds woven into her hair and onto the sheer robe beneath the gilded one she always wore. Beneath that shone a glimpse of golden skin and he wanted her so badly, had missed her so much. "You know I love you so--"

"Not enough," the Princess said and the knife at his throat cut into his skin.

"I--" Joseph said, staring at the Prince with surprise on his face as the skin on his neck widened, stretching, and blood began to flow. "Please. I love you."

"Not enough," the Prince said, and twisted the knife, pushing deeper.

Joseph breathed his last breath and his blood spilled over the Prince and Princess's hands, dripped down onto the floor. They pushed his body away from theirs at the same time and stood looking at it for a moment, at Joseph's wide startled forever opened eyes, at the knife dug deep into his throat.

"We'll send our brother--" the Prince said.

--a gift," the Princess said.

"A flask--"

"Of special wine?"

"Very special," the Prince said.

"From the Pale. A mother's gift--"

"To her only son."

"Yes," they both said.

The Prince held out his hand and the Princess took it, stepping neatly around the body on the floor as they headed toward the door.

"There's a washwoman," the Prince said.

"The one who always cries?"

"Yes."

"She'll never be able to remove this stain," the Princess said, and pointed to Joseph's blood drying in a dripping trail along the hem of her gown. "But still, she must try. I'll have her summoned."

"Save some tears for me," the Prince said and she smiled at him. They walked out of the room together. They did not close the door behind them.

Chapter Fourteen

The day David was crowned consort was beautiful--flowers blooming everywhere, sprinkled on the streets and woven through the trees, the sky empty of clouds and a brilliant shade of blue. He had woken up early and looked out the window, stared at the perfect looking sky and felt the breeze that blew into the room curl around his skin as if it was a living thing. As if it was measuring him, marking him. When he was being dressed he heard Judith out in the hall talking to someone, her voice rising as she talked about cost, of wizards and witch women that had been paid to make the day perfect. "It's what Michael deserves," she said and he touched the saucer that had held a cup of tea that had been brought for him, watched the roses on it continue to shine bright.

Michael came in to see him once, a mischievous grin on his face as he peeked around the door and said, "Look at you," his voice shining and proud. The dressers all giggled and blushed.

"Bad luck for you to see him beforehand," the maid who wasn't one said. She was standing by the door watching as she always did, those flat eyes never showing any emotion at all.

Michael shook his head at her and then grinned wider, darted across the room and pulled David close, kissing his forehead, his mouth, cupping his chin with one hand. "I make my own luck," he said and winked at David, then darted back out of the room. The dressers giggled again and talked animatedly for a moment, then fell silent as David didn't join in, just stood patiently waiting for them to finish. They did so in silence and after they left the maid who wasn't one gestured for him to sit down, combed his hair out and then pulled it tightly, holding it in one hand as she wove strands of diamonds through it with the other. Her fingers moved quickly, and he was glad there was no mirror in which he could watch her work.

"Thank you," he said when she was done but she'd already turned away, walking across the room to hold the door open for him. As he stepped through it he saw Judith in the hallway, watched her look at the maid who wasn't one and saw the maid nod once, slowly. He saw Judith nod back, a satisfied smile on her face, before she vanished into the throng of nobility that had been chosen to escort him to the cathedral.

When they arrived at the cathedral David waited outside, a noblewoman he didn't know standing on his right side, a nobleman he didn't know standing on his left, both of them so happy to be where they were that he could feel it. He glanced at each of them, at the smiles on their faces. When the great doors were opened and the trumpets sounded he walked inside, down the length of the church to where Michael was waiting.

Michael's voice was strong as he declared that David was his now and would be forever more. "This I vow before God and you," he said and turned toward him. Behind Michael's head a great window showed sun and sky. David looked out the window and thought of a day when sun and sky had swirled together in his mind, created a color he'd known he'd never see again. He looked out the window and wished for what he knew would never be. He repeated Michael's words back to him and watched a smile bloom across his face. He thought about someone else's smile. Every time he took a breath he could feel himself being held securely, bound so that nothing inside him could leak out. His eyes didn't sting at all, stayed clear and focused on Michael's face.

Two songs were sung after a priest had blessed them and promised them joy forever, a chorus of voices singing praise, and then Michael took his hand and the two of them walked outside. The sun was still shining and the sky was still a lovely endless blue. People pressed flowers into David's hands as he and Michael walked up a flight of stairs toward a decorated archway where everyone who'd gathered could see them. He looked at the flowers, at how they bloomed beautifully, every color he'd ever seen alive and cradled in his hands. He'd always wanted to live in a world like this, full of color and light and happy people who weren't afraid to look at him.

And now he did. He held the flowers tightly, closed his eyes when Michael placed a crown on his head and then kissed him, listened to the crowd roar their approval, their joy. He had never felt so empty. So alone.

A banquet was held in the evening, the castle filled with nobles from every corner of the kingdom. So many people had come for the ceremony that the banquet was held outside in a pavilion Michael had specially built for the occasion. He and David sat at the far end of the pavilion, up on a raised dais so everyone could see them. Those closest to Michael, those he trusted most, were seated right below them. David was not surprised when Judith sat down next to him, her smile warm when she greeted Michael and fading when she turned to him.

During a lull, when they were waiting for servants to come with the next course and Michael was talking to the person sitting on his other side, a pleased smile on his face, Judith passed him the wine and said, low-voiced, angry, "He's given you everything and yet you just sit there, silent and far away. He deserves more from you."

David took the wine and poured it into his cup slowly. Then he turned to Michael and spoke his name gently, smiled and asked if he wanted any. Michael nodded and wrapped a hand around his wrist as he poured, kissed the skin there gently. David pulled his hand away and waited, watched Michael's face and saw his eyes flare hot and eager. Then he put his hand against Michael's face briefly, willingly, and smiled.

When he turned back toward Judith she was looking at him. Her eyes were very bright and hard.

"I'm sorry," he said and he almost meant it. She loved Michael with an intensity, a ferocity, that he understood. "This is all I have to give."

Later, when the two of them were alone, Michael brought in some of the gifts that had been sent. He passed all the jewels to David and motioned for him to put them on, smiling when he did so. He looped a finger through a bracelet shining on David's wrist and tugged him close, kissed him. "You outshine all of it."

The next gift was wrapped in lovely gilded paper. David touched it as Michael ripped it open. It was heavy and smooth against his fingers, somehow almost warm to the touch.

"It's from your brother and sister," Michael said and turned toward him, the gift in his hands. It was a basket, gleaming golden and studded with gems, and inside was a pile of round red fruit.

"Strange ones, aren't they?" Michael said, pushing the basket away. One of the pieces of fruit fell to the floor, split open. Inside it was white, the deep endless color of snow. David had seen fruit like that once before.

"Ah," Michael said, voice satisfied, and David looked at him. Michael was holding a bottle. It was made of crystal so fine it even outshone the splendor of the walls around them. "Now this is lovely," he said. "And the label says the bottle and the wine it holds were made in honor of you. Shall we drink?"

David stared at his sweet sunny smile, at the bottle shining in his hands, and then nodded once, slowly. The diamonds in his hair were digging into his scalp, painful pressure that made his head ache. When Michael handed him a glass he took it. The wine sparkled, tiny bubbles dancing in it, and smelled lovely, sweet and tempting.

"A toast," Michael said and he was holding his glass up high. David stared at his still smiling mouth and lifted his glass up too.

"To forever," Michael said, a promise, and then lowered his glass. His mouth parted and the wine shimmered in his glass, sparkling as it rose toward his lips.

"Wait," David said, and Michael paused, a question in his eyes and past that, hope. All he wanted was for David to reply, to say that forever was what he wanted too. All Michael wanted was what David didn't want at all.

He took a sip of wine. It sparked heavy and rich on his tongue and when he swallowed he could feel it inside him, cool at first and then spreading warmth, a sweet glow. He leaned forward and took Michael's glass out of his hands, dropped it and then his own onto the floor. The sound they made as they shattered sounded very far away.

"I'm sorry," he said, and this time he meant it. And then the warmth inside him sharpened, twisted, burned as he'd known it would. He could feel himself falling before he actually did, felt something inside him give way, melt.

Michael's voice saying his name was the last thing he heard.

She was by Michael's side moments after David collapsed, pulled him away from David, from the puddle of wine on the floor, from the golden basket of fruit. There was no reason to do it, just her desire to not see Michael like that, mouth open and face blank, body curved as if it was broken, his voice saying David's name over and over again, cracking higher and becoming more of a question each time. He shoved at her, hard, when she did but she held on tight, fear giving her strength. She was glad of it when the guard who went to pick up the basket collapsed, staring perplexedly at a piece of fruit that had fallen and he'd caught in his hand, when the maid who came to clean wavered on her hands and knees before tumbling over, a wet rag in her hands and shards of glass haloed around her.

"Poison," she gasped, stunned, and Michael turned to her, his eyes huge and devastated and then, suddenly, furious.

"Poison," he echoed, and within moments he was summoning messengers to send orders to his commanders, instructions for them to be ready to march by morning and speaking of war. He

would not discuss what had happened, acted as if she hadn't spoken whenever she tried to ask about it. The royal physicians appeared as he was calling for maps, bowing low and clustering around David's body on the floor. When they looked at her, their eyes filled with fear, she knew what they were going to say. She nodded at them and said "Your Majesty?" quietly, waited for Michael to look at them. They were sorry, the physicians all said as one when he did, their heads bowed. They were so sorry. Michael nodded and stared fixedly at David who was still lying where he'd fallen, eyes closed and a small smile on his face. He looked, Judith thought, happier than she'd ever seen him.

She looked over at Michael, saw the turned down line of his mouth. "You could tell them what happened," she said. "And perhaps they could--"

He shook his head, continued to issue orders for the gathering troops. The physicians looked at her seeking direction, waiting to be dismissed.

"Thank you," she said. "As you leave, direct the guards outside to come in. Tell them the body should be taken--"

"No," Michael said, his voice sharp. "Leave but tell the guards to--tell them to put him in bed." Silence fell.

"In bed?" one of the physicians ventured. "Your Majesty, there hasn't been time to make a suitable burial--"

"No," Michael said. "My bed."

"Your Majesty," she said, waving away the doctors and praying they wouldn't gossip while already calculating how much they'd have to be paid to keep silent. "You can't--"

He looked at her and what she saw in his eyes took her voice.

"We leave at first light," he said. "I want you with us. Go and prepare."

The war, if it could be called that, was over in no time at all. Michael marched them forward relentlessly, passing into the snow-covered land that had once been David's home and laying waste to it. They first crossed an eerie forest where no snow was to be found, a place that bloomed green and beautiful and made Judith's skin crawl, the wind that blew through the trees sounding like bitter whispers, like fading screams. Michael ordered it burned as soon as they passed through, stopped and stared back at the ripe red fruit littered on the ground as it charred and popped in the flames, no expression on his face.

They reached the castle where David's brother and sister lived easily, the snow that covered the ground melting away as they marched, and Michael killed them both himself. He wouldn't let her be present when he did and his face, when it was done, frightened her. He didn't look like a man whose fury had been appeased. He ordered their severed heads displayed on poles and their bodies placed on raised platforms that were covered with carrion in hours and she thought perhaps then he would look more at peace.

He didn't. He ordered everything that could be burned torched and had the rest of the castle pulled down, the very stones broken up into pieces and the land salted, and even then his expression stayed grim, haunted.

Judith had expected the people to be terrified by Michael's actions, to hide from him and his army, but they weren't. They seemed eager, hopeful, and by the time the castle ceased to exist and the snow had completely melted away, joyful. She had never seen people so happy to view mud, watched grown men and women dance blissfully through it.

"Look at that," she told Michael as they were seated on horseback watching the last of the castle stones be smashed, pointing at the people covered in mud and grinning as if they hadn't smiled in years. "You've set them free."

Michael nodded, looked, but didn't smile. "We have to go home now," he said. "David is waiting for me."

"But--" she said. "Your Majesty. He's--he's not--he isn't--"

"He's waiting," he said again. "I've made everything safe for him and now I can go home."

"Michael," she said carefully, hoping the use of his name would call him back.

"He's not dead," he said fiercely. "His--" he spit on the ground, "brother and sister told me he'd cursed the land and so they'd cursed him in return--something about his mother...you should have seen them. They were--" He shook his head. "I wish I could kill them again."

"You've avenged him," she said. "He's at peace now."

"I'm not," he said and spurred his horse forward. "Tell the commanders we'll be leaving in the morning. Pick two of them to leave behind to set up a governing council."

"You should pick who stays, talk to them and tell them--"

"No," he said. "I need you, Judith. Take care of this so I can go home."

She could never refuse him anything.

When she did return home she found that he hadn't attended any meetings, had delayed the court of petitioners, had not even made a progress through the streets. He had retired to his rooms and stayed there, visited by a stream of wizards and witch women and sages and sibyls. David's body had not been buried. It had not left his rooms. People were talking and worse, talking openly. She sent him a note, carefully worded, and received a reply granting her an audience two days later.

She did not see him alone. David was with him. She had expected that. Michael was in his bedroom, sitting in a chair, and David was lying on the bed. She stared at him, shocked. His body had not begun to rot. She had not expected that. David looked as he always had, perhaps even more beautiful, a kind of contentment in his closed-eyed expression, and she stared at him for a long moment, startled by how alive he looked.

"You see?" Michael said. "I can tell from your eyes that you do. But yet everyone that comes, they all say--" he broke off. "He isn't gone! They know nothing!"

She looked at him. He wasn't looking at her, was staring at David. The look on his face made her heart clench.

"Your Majesty," she said, crossing to him and kneeling on the floor in front of him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I know this is hard. But you must think of your kingdom, all you've built. Your people need you."

He still didn't look at her. "Please," she said softly. "He's--"

"He knew," Michael said. His voice was quiet, low. "When you asked before, I didn't tell you anything but he knew. He knew what the wine would do. I saw his face. When I showed him the--the gift--" he spat the word, "his family had sent he didn't say a word but he--his eyes. He knew. I offered him a glass of that wine--that damned wine!--and he took it. I made a toast. I was ready to drink and he said--he said, 'Wait.' I thought--I thought he was going to say something. Tell me something. And instead he drank."

"Michael," she said, tears in her voice, and held him as she would a child, as if he were her child, leaning him into her and running a hand down his back, small soothing circles. She wished David was alive so she could kill him. She would do it slowly, with great care.

"He drank," Michael continued. "Drank and then took my glass away, looked at me. He was smiling. He looked--he looked happy and I thought--I thought it was because of me. He told me he was sorry and I didn't understand but then he smiled more and the look on his face... He knew he was dying and he was happy. Happier than I'd ever seen him and he...he made sure I couldn't come with him. He didn't--he didn't want me to."

She had brought this upon him. She had found David, made sure to bring him here. She had started all of this. She had wanted Michael to be happy, safe, and now--"I'm sorry," she said and it wasn't enough, would never be enough but she would never ever fail him again. Never. "I'm so sorry."

"All he ever wanted was for me to let him go and now..." His voice cracked. "Now I have to," he said and then looked at her, mouth trembling. He said "Judith?" a question pleading for her to help him, to make everything better, to fix things for him as she always had before.

"Yes," she said, "now you have to." And the look in his eyes broke her heart.

They picked out the room together. "Something big," Michael said. "With windows, lots of windows." She thought of a room at the top of a tower, one that was far enough away that if Michael ever went there she'd be told in time and could reach him, talk to him, call him back to now and make him remember who he was.

She suggested it to him and he frowned, then looked at her face and nodded. "We should do it soon," he said. "Before I--before I can't."

They did it that day. There was no burial procession, no priest mumbling final prayers. She knew Michael couldn't bear it and wasn't sure she could either. It had to be over. It was the only way.

She had servants carry David up the stairs. He lay inside a great crystal burial bed Michael had made for him, lay resting in it looking as if he were asleep. When it had been placed in the room she sent everyone away. Michael was standing outside the room, leaning against the door.

"Promise me you won't have a canopy made. Nothing like that. Nothing like a lid. Nothing like a--a coffin."

"I promise," she said, and started to shut the door.

"Wait," he said, and walked inside. She held her breath and prayed as she never had before.

"I'm not--" Michael said. "I told you this once. Do you remember? I'm not good at farewells. And you--you're too beautiful to place in the earth. I can't bear to think of it. I can't--. So you'll stay here. You'll be safe. I made sure there are lots of windows. I know you like the sun. Don't you?"

There was no answer.

"David," Michael whispered, and leaned over him, pressed his mouth to David's. There was no response. David lay still and silent on the bed. His eyes never opened.

Outside, it began snow.

Alec left John behind finally, his heart telling him he should go so strongly he could no longer ignore its cry. He whispered to the watcher one night and was free in the morning, a purse full of coins to take him wherever he wanted to go. He'd headed toward the desert, traveling quickly, planning, hoping, but in a land where the rivers ran swift and pale purple blue, he'd heard two noblemen talking as they waited for a ferry.

"Sad story," one of them said. "To lose a love like that."

"Indeed. King Michael has another consort now, but they say he still mourns."

"Still?"

"His love was very beautiful," the nobleman said. "I once saw a portrait the King had painted of him. Lovely like you wouldn't believe. They say that when he died the King went almost mad with grief." His voice lowered, "I even heard that he couldn't bear to part with the body, had it--"

Alec got on the ferry and stood shaking at its bow, stared down at the water as they crossed the river. On the other side he'd walked through the town until he found what he was looking for, passed over a handful of coins and sat in a corner smoking until his mind was far away, in a place where wishes could come true and his memories were more real than anything else. He smoked and forgot to eat, to sleep. He smoked even though his eyes burned, bled. He smoked until his money was gone, until he was tossed out squinting into the sunlight.

After that he went back. He had to, knew that he had to see what he'd lost. What he'd been too afraid to believe in.

It was snowing. Snow everywhere, drifts of it blowing, glowing in the sun so brightly it dazzled the eye. He walked to the palace with a heavy heart.

The palace was even larger than he remembered, glittering in the snow. He saw Michael once, smiling with lost eyes as he rode through the streets.

Michael didn't see him.

It was easy to get into the palace, to slip in with the merchants and traveling entertainers and visiting dignitaries and petitioners waiting for an audience with someone, anyone from court. It wasn't easy to find David.

He walked through hallways, head down. His feet began to ache, and day darkened into evening. As the stars bloomed, dim lights against the snow-filled sky, he walked across a room emptying of people and saw the portrait of David. He stopped, stood staring at it with his heart thumping fast and hard inside his chest.

When he turned around Judith was standing at the edge of the room. She told him where to go. She handed him a candle nestled in an ornate holder.

"Set him free," she said, her eyes weary, and then she turned away.

Inside a once glorious room now thick with dust and dark from spider webs, David lay quiet and still. Alec stood over him, reached out one hand to touch his face. It was cold under his fingers and he bent, pressed his forehead to David's and murmured his name.

Silence. Alec knelt, held the candle close to the bed. The flame flickered, and he thought of Judith's request. He thought of David's last words to him, of David telling him he loved him, that he would never forget him.

He blew the candle out and then leaned over, touched his mouth to David's.

Warmth bloomed inside him, through him, and David's lips moved against his own. Alec sat back and watched his eyes open. He smiled and watched as David smiled back, his eyes filled with joy.

It became green everywhere, green and fragrant and glorious, every kingdom blessed with sunlight and happiness. A golden age, every sage proclaimed, and in every land voices rose in joyful song.

Alec saw it all with David beside him, and never once did it snow.

