

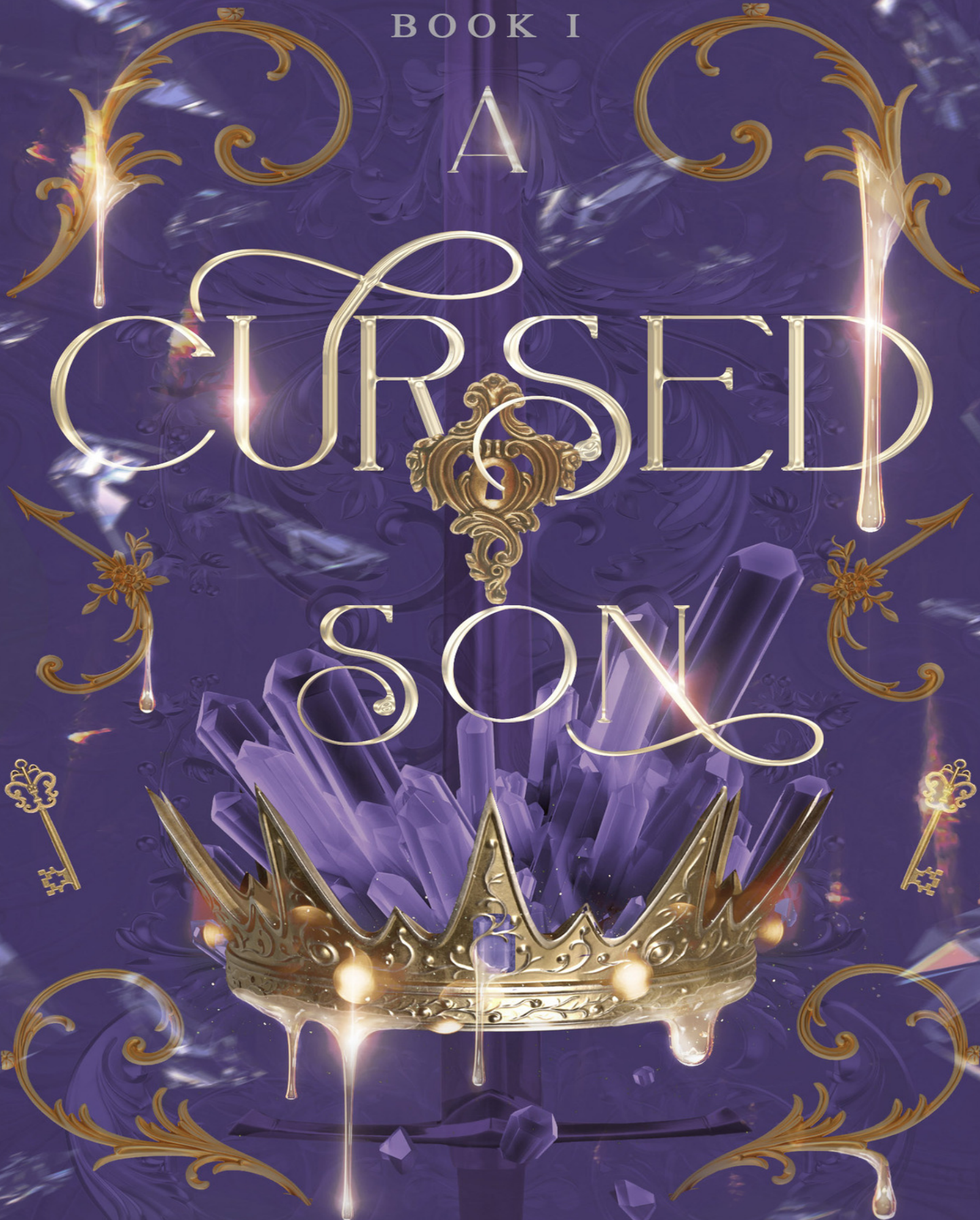
REMNANTS OF THE FALLEN KINGDOM

BOOK I

A
CURSED

SON

DAY LEITAO

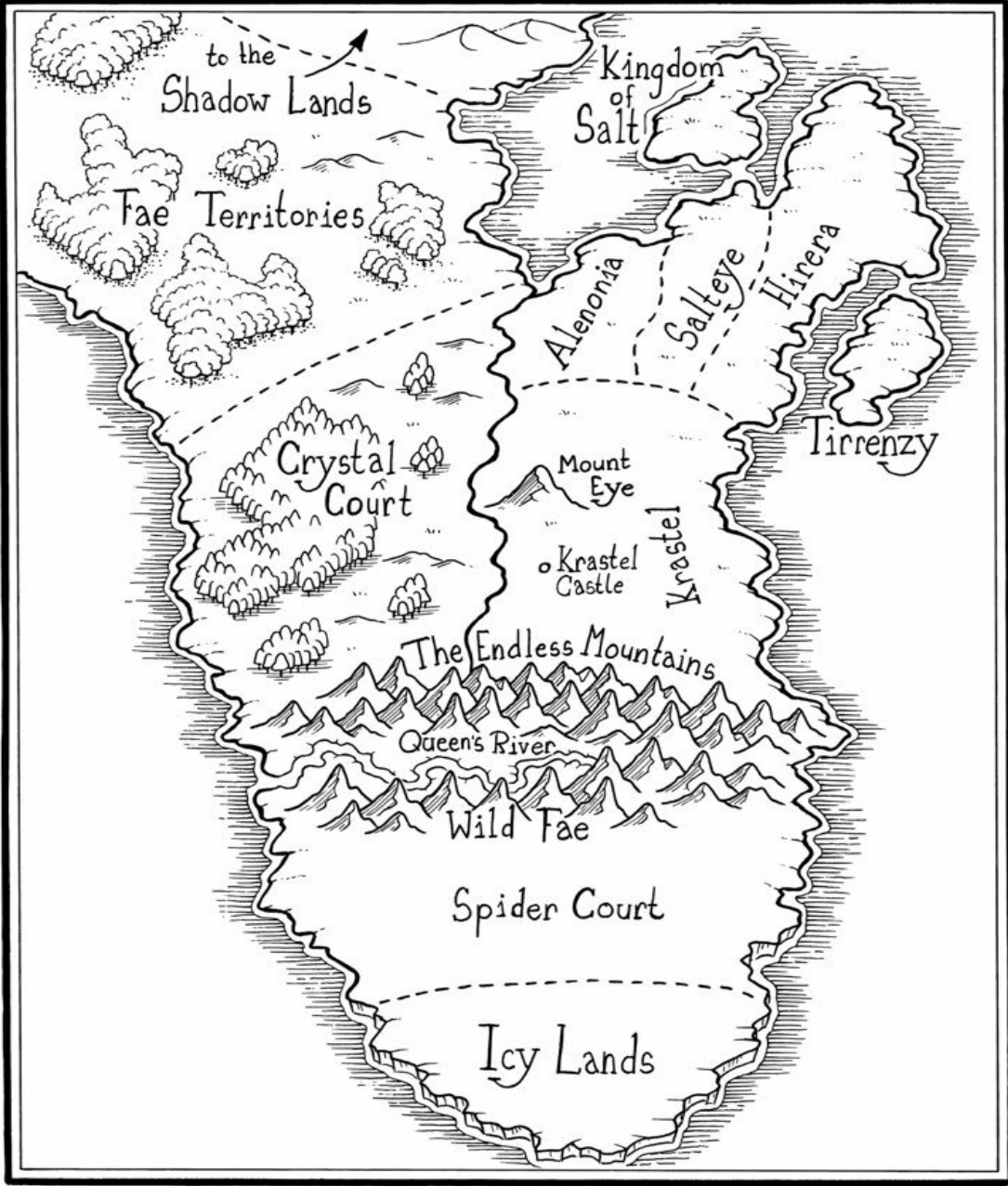


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BOOK 1

A
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SPARKLY WAVE, MONTREAL 2024



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To all those part of us hiding in the shadows, and to everyone who's brave enough to let them step into the light.

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Acknowledgments

Love makes people stupid. And irresponsible.

Barefoot, standing on a thin ledge ten floors above the ground, I'm glad I praise intelligence above all else. But then, perhaps love is what drove me here. A different type of love, the best type of love.

Just a few more steps, and I'll reach Tarlia's window. At this height, the guards' murmurs down in the outer gardens of the castle disappear, drowned by the wind's lullaby. The trail of stars in the sky seems closer than the lanterns on the ground, whose light can't reach me, can't reveal me, even if someone was curious enough to gaze upward.

Sometimes, I wonder if the Elite Guard is housed in the upper levels of the castle's highest tower to remind us of our importance or to render us insignificant, separated from the rest of the world.

Few venture out here, afraid of an impossible fall, even though the ledge is wide enough for my feet. What can I say? Fear distorts reality. Not mine. At least not concerning heights.

Quin's question and his smile flash through my head. *Are you going to Lord Stratson's wedding?* The echo of his words bounces in my head, disarranges thoughts, unveils buried wishes.

Why is it that we can't dissolve thoughts? Can't forget things on purpose? I'm not in love with Quin. I don't know if I'll ever be.

Now, love can lead to stupid decisions, but what about non-love? What about a wisp of hope that maybe this could become something... I don't even know what. And yet that smile...

I clench my hand holding the bag with the drusils, the dessert Tarlia loves so much. Even as a little girl, her eyes would glimmer at the sight of the roasted coconut sweets. I want to bring her some of that joy tonight, perhaps remind her that I'll always love her like a sister. It doesn't matter if she's been failing the tests.

Yes, I study and study, but for me, it's different; I have to be perfect. I don't think it's fair to ground the royal substitutes who miss some questions on our tests, especially when it's about a minor fae court. We don't even have any dealings with the fae, not even with the Crystal Court, right beside us. Of course we need to learn about other kingdoms. And yet, why deprive Tarlia of this little joy? It's not like we have a ton of it.

Quin's smile hasn't left my mind. He's a member of the Elite Guard, trained to impersonate the oldest prince when needed, just like I can stand in for the princess. A little different, I guess. The male substitutes play more of a protective role, while we... Let's just say our job is a thorny tangle. They are also older, in their early twenties, while we are all nineteen.

The thing with Quin is not his obvious good looks. He's brown-haired and brown-eyed like the elder prince, and fit, too, but they're all like that. What makes him different is his relaxed, disarming smile, and perhaps how often that smile is directed at me.

I shouldn't be thinking about him.

Using one hand, I hold on to the grooves of the stone wall and inch faster, aiming to reach my friend's room before my thoughts veer to dangerous paths.

Three more careful steps, and I'll get to Tarlia's window. That's what I have to do, before that sweet smile melts my mind.

One, two, three. There.

As my fist approaches the glass for a knock, the Almighty Mother reminds me to look first.

In shock, I almost drop the bag, but I manage to catch it before it slips. I shouldn't be looking. I should turn away.

Sayanne's words are the ones that cross my mind now. *She's a slut*. Slut. Slut. Slut. A word for women only.

Almost like a reply, I remember Tarlia in a rare moment of honesty. "You think we'll survive this?" Her bitter laugh still echoes in my mind.

Tarlia doesn't seem bitter now, she seems... Blissful. On all fours on her bed, it's as if nothing matters but that moment, a pleasant abandon lulling her into satisfaction. Perhaps it's like me, when training, when only my movements matter, and there's nothing outside the training court.

Of course, in her case, there's something *inside* her, filling her, pushing into her, and judging by her face, it's better than all the drusils in the world.

Her face. It's funny to see her like that, considering how much she looks like me, from her wavy burgundy hair to her upturned nose. A nose that was sculpted, like mine. Burgundy hair that's artificially colored, like mine. Unlike me, though, she doesn't have to fear death if her roots appear, and I've glimpsed some light brown a few times.

I have no idea what my true hair color is like, if it's light lilac or dark purple, bright or muted, as it has never been given the chance to emerge. All I see is dark burgundy, like Tarlia's hair. Our eyes are both brown, although mine are slightly smaller than hers.

I should look away, but my eyes are frozen in place, fascinated by their primal, animalistic movements. Did I look like this? I never did it in my bedroom, though. Instead, I climbed down to the outer gardens, where only

hedge walls protected me. I want to bury the memory, bury the shame. Tarlia doesn't have any shame, and it's funny that Sayanne thinks she should have some.

Shame is dreadful.

Behind her, pumping fervently, is Fachin, one of the guards in the Elite Tower, his muscular body contrasting with Tarlia's soft curves. It's odd because I thought she was involved with one of the substitutes. And then, perhaps she was. Perhaps she still is, but likes some variety. These guards should be protecting us, though. Will they start thinking we're all fair game, ready to invite them into our beds?

Great. Now I hear Sayanne's words again. *She's sullyng our names. Men talk. They'll think we're all sluts. A slut's value is zero.*

Not always zero, but I never told her that. I never told anyone.

The schism between my friends is uncomfortable. We always promised to treat each other like sisters, and now Sayanne and Tarlia barely talk to each other. I hate being stuck in the middle. Sayanne thinks I'm taking sides, but I'm not. I wish we could all be sisters again, but I guess there's no return to the time when drusils were enough to bring us bliss.

Sayanne. Will I let her spend an entire day with Quin and his beautiful smile? After her spiteful words?

I notice Fachin leaning over and grabbing Tarlia's breasts, his hips moving faster and faster, and I avert my gaze before I see too much. All the endurance training is paying off, I guess. Or else my standard for comparison is terrible. I know it's bad, and I'd rather not remember it.

Would I want an evening of pleasure with Quin? Not really. I want more. I know I want more, and the Almighty Mother told me there's nothing wrong with that.

In my dreams, I lean against a chest with a star, enveloped in a tender hug filled with love and affection, feeling so safe in those arms. They are just dreams, but what if they're a sign? What if it's Quin? I know he doesn't have a star on his chest, but these things are symbolic.

Great. Here I go, swarmed by hopeless delusions. But what if?

I decide to leave Tarlia's window and bring the drusils another day. This is her room, her private moment, and I've already breached her privacy much more than I should have.

As I step on the ledge to return to my window, Quin's dreadful smile comes to mind again. Could I risk ruining my reputation and all my hard work just for the opportunity to spend a few hours with him? Alone with him, traveling in a carriage to a remote region. An evening away from the castle. We would get the chance to spend time together, without ears overhearing us. I would see some of the kingdom, some of the forest, the River of Tears.

And what if Quin is my kindred soul, the one in dreams, the one I hear whispering those soft words my mind can't comprehend, but my heart can?

See, there's the nonsense talking. But what if? Can I make a stupid decision based on a tiny, tiny chance that going on this mission could bring us together?

That smile.

I step into my room and don't recognize my thoughts anymore. That's a different, crazy Astra, not the Astra who needs to be perfect, the one whose life depends on it.

But it's just one day. One trip. One chance.

A plan forms quickly in my mind.

Who am I fooling? I've had this plan for a long time, but kept burying it deep, ashamed of those rebellious thoughts.

I reach under my mattress and take the small bag with the forty silver ducks. Who would guess that shame could take the form of coins?

They are my reminder never to open my heart again. Never to be silly again. And yet. Yes, it's foolish, but I can't help it. Love, or rather, the possibility of love, is like a strange hot iron. You touch it, get burned, but then want to touch it again.

I open my door, thankful that the hallway is empty. We're not supposed to leave our wing at night, but there are always cleaning maids passing by,

usually collecting laundry. Indeed I see Sofia trailing my way, carrying a pile of towels, and I beckon her.

She frowns, but approaches me. “Yes, my lady.”

Lady. I wish. Oh, I wish.

I pull her hand and put three silver ducks in it. I’ve clung to these coins for so long, treasuring my pain, and yet all I feel now is relief to get rid of some of them. “Convince the kitchen to make passion fruit custard tomorrow for dessert at lunch, and I’ll give you three more ducks.”

She stares at the coins, then back at me. “I don’t choose the menu, my lady.”

With my hands around hers, I close the coins in. “Certainly the ducks can do some talking. I’m just... craving it.” I give her an innocent smile.

Sofia looks at me up and down, in a calculating gaze, then whispers, “Seven more. For the cooks. And I want them now.”

No, I can’t give her my coins now. What if she doesn’t do what I ask? Odd how this part of the plan, which should be the easiest, is already encountering obstacles.

I decide to remain firm, instead of trying to be friendly. “Tomorrow night. Five more.” I show her the palm of my hand, as if to take back the coins. “But if you don’t want the deal, I understand.”

I’m applying some of what I learned in our personality class. In a negotiation, you can’t show how much you care for something, or people will exploit you. You need to act as if you are ready to give up at any moment, that you don’t care.

Sofia lowers her head. “You’ll get your custard, my lady.”

The reason I want passion fruit custard is that it’s going to disguise the taste, and Tarlia doesn’t like it, so only Sayanne will eat it. This is disgraceful behavior, for sure. But then, don’t I deserve to give destiny a push?

The woman disappears down the hall and I ready myself to walk on the ledge once more. Am I truly going to break into my master’s study and steal some poison?

The question is odd, considering I’m already outside the window.

See, there are two versions of me. One of them is giddy with excitement, willing to do whatever it takes to go on this trip, while the other is horrified, facepalming and shaking her head. I'm both of them, so I have the awful experience of being stupid and aware of my stupidity at the same time.

But then, I don't hear the Almighty Mother censoring me, so my conclusion is that I'm on the right path. A very crooked, immoral path, but right nonetheless.

For a trip. For a chance. Perhaps a foolish chance, but I'd rather seize it and see what happens than bemoan what could have been.



I'M LEANING on his chest again, tracing my fingers over that strange star. His voice is a low, comforting rumble in my ear, while he caresses my hair with gentle strokes. The movement is so soft, so soothing—

The bells ring outside, jolting me back to my bed, where I'm alone, and yet they can't erase the feeling of his hands holding me. A phantom touch, still there, still protecting me.

These dreams have been my solace for a while now.

When my heart was broken—which was my own fault, but that's beside the point—the priestess told me about this trick of faith to see my kindred soul. I knew it wasn't dark magic, and indeed I felt the Almighty Mother's presence as I lit a candle on my windowsill and burned a strand of my hair, visualizing the sacred cords connecting souls.

Since then, he's been in my dreams. Not always, but often enough that I can close my eyes and recall his comforting presence, his warm touch.

I've never told anyone.

Master Otavio would freak out. He insists that I, more than anyone, need to show that I praise the Almighty Mother, need to show that I'm not a heathen, and yet he doesn't want me talking to the priestess. My sisters... I know they would say I'm foolish, and plus, Otavio always told me to hide my tricks of faith.

But I don't need to tell anyone. My kindred soul brings me peace at night when I sleep. Brings me joy, even when I do something so irresponsible. If anything, I felt him closer than ever tonight, almost as if he had been truly lying beside me.

Perhaps it's a sign.

I don't want to think he's Quin, I don't want to raise that hope, but I can't help but wonder.

I just... I can still feel that love, a cocoon of protective light surrounding me, and there's no way to ignore that calling.



OUR TRAINING GROUNDS are on the roof of our tower, since so much of what we do has to remain a secret. A canopy covers part of it. Under it, there's a long table for our masters, and a small open area for training. I should consider myself lucky that on a hot summer day like today, I have to remain in the shade. It's not that I have some special privilege, but that my skin can go from beige to brown in the blink of an eye. Princess Driziely is only moderately tanned, so her substitutes have to be about the same color. I'm not going to complain that I get to train in the shade.

Neither Quin nor Sayanne are here. There's nothing unusual about that, as we are sometimes taken aside for individual training and advising, but I know they are being briefed on their trip. I also know that my plan is despicable, but I've gone too far to step back now. Step back. I'm doing quite a lot of that now. Dodge, dodge, step back, try to attack, dodge again, and dodge some more.

I need to focus on my movements because my partner is Fachin and I have to bury my memory of what I saw last night.

I'm wearing a heavy dress and wielding a training dagger, while he's mock-attacking me with a training sword. It might seem odd, but we need to mimic a real-life scenario, and Princess Driziely is not going to carry a sword

or wear trousers. The idea is just to find an opening to attack, or at least get good at dodging.

I try to bury my anxiety, but it's like an itch, reminding me that I might be caught. And then, perhaps some of the anxiety is because I might *not* get caught and then I'll spend time away from the castle walls, away from this tower, close to Quin. I have absolutely no idea what's going to happen, and this lack of control is unnerving.

When the noon bell rings, I walk to the dining hall, mindful not to show any anxiety or anticipation. People tend to give themselves away, as they don't know what it means to *act natural* because they never bothered learning. I had a lot of training on that, so it shouldn't be a problem for me—at least in theory.

The dining hall occupies the entire top floor of the tower and has vaulted ceilings and tall windows. I wonder if one day this room held extravagant parties and balls, despite our isolation from the rest of the castle.

Nowadays it has some ten small round wooden tables, and it's where the Elite Guard eats, always at the same time, and if we're even ten seconds late, we'll just have to skip a meal. Our instructors and masters sit at a larger round table, from where Otavio and Andrezza are always watching us. They're already there, in fact, but I don't pay attention to them because it's not something I'd usually do.

The three princes and the princess have a table here too, even though most of them never come. Princess Driziely used to eat some meals and study with us, but she hasn't been around much lately. I feel that she doesn't like us, which is unfortunate, since our job is to protect her. But then, I don't think I would appreciate my parents training other girls to replace me in public ceremonies and even in a potential marriage, as if I were an incompetent idiot. Well, I would like to have known my family. Would like to find out who they were, at least. No point in stirring this pain.

I sit at the table reserved for the three female substitutes, where Sayanne and Tarlia are already sitting in silence. Between them, an invisible wall I can't manage to break.

From the corner of my eye, I glimpse Quin entering. I turn and give him a friendly nod, even if my natural impulse would be to ignore him, but then I wouldn't be acting natural and it would be even more suspicious. He gives me that gorgeous smile that warms my heart. I'm not crazy; it *is* for me.

And he told me he'd been assigned to Lord Stratson's wedding. Isn't that a subtle hint? Perhaps not even *that* subtle.

My life's already too complicated, considering I might have to replace the princess in a marriage alliance. It's something I try not to think about, even if I yearn for an opportunity to prove my value. And then there's that other complication about hiding who I am. I can't forget it, obviously.

Still... Do I have to look that far ahead? I should, but perhaps I can't help being foolish.

The kitchen staff comes in, pushing trays of food on metal carts. There's a chance they never made the custard, but I have a workaround for that, too. A little more complicated, but it should work.

Your plan should never depend on somebody else. See? I pay attention to what Master Otavio says. In fact, I'm just putting into practice a lot of what he's taught me. If anything, he should be proud.

Sometimes I wonder if he thinks I'm only good inside the walls of this tower, if he fears my nature will take over and then I'll spoil everything, but I won't. I know it's an honor to serve the kingdom, and I take my job seriously. One more reason why going on this trip is a brilliant idea; I'll prove my worth.

As they remove the covers from the trays, the plate with the yellow dessert emerges like a sun from behind clouds. Yes! The silver ducks ended up being useful, after all. I take my plate to serve myself, and then I think the Almighty Mother is indeed watching over me, as the perfect distraction is coming into the hall—and walking in our direction.

Prince Ziven has an odd position in the kingdom, or maybe no position. His father was the former king, but when he died, the crown went to his brother, Ziven's uncle, now King Leonius, protector of the Kingdom of Krastel.

Ziven... sometimes I wonder if he's shrewd and knows the mess he could cause if he decided to step up and demand the throne. That's hardly a problem, of course, considering most of the time he can't even step forward without stumbling.

Like the other princes, he wears a bracelet with a blue opus stone on his wrist. That stone, if activated properly, with training and meditation, can become a conduit for elemental magic. There are two common types of opus stones; water and air. There used to be one for earth as well, to help grow plants and crops, but I guess it's not destructive enough, and fell into disuse. Fire magic is too dangerous and unpredictable, said to have a will of its own, so there aren't beacon stones for that. Air magic is volatile, but some sailors have air opus stones to move their ships. In Krastel, a few royal members and rich merchants carry water opus stones.

The joke that goes around is that if his opus stone controlled alcohol, Ziven would be an expert at it. Alas, his stone controls water—or should.

In Prince Ziven's case, it controls nothing, since he never learned to use his magic.

Despite being a useless drunk, there's something about him that's strangely fascinating. I swear I tried to read the *Book of Seduction*, but it says girls like powerful, strong, confident men. Ziven is a skinny mess of wasted potential, and yet perhaps it's his almost golden, light brown hair, or his hazel eyes. None of that is unique or uncommon, but on him, it looks fascinating. His secret is a mystery to me.

I ignore him because he has never acknowledged my existence. Fascinating or not, there's nothing appealing in someone who can't see the difference between me and a wall.

Sayanne keeps staring straight ahead, her shoulders square, as if he didn't exist. Tarlia glances at him, her jaws slightly dropped, her expression wistful. I don't think she's flirting or even aware of the look she's giving him.

And that's the perfect time for me to grab some custard.

As I'm serving my plate, Ziven collides with our table and laughs. "Ladies, ladies. I'm used to seeing double. But triple?"

I take the opportunity to spread the calapher powder over the dessert, my plate covering my hand, and say, "I know, right? With me, it's my ears. I'm hearing the same joke echoing for the tenth time now."

Rude, sure, but I've always wanted to say that, and it diverts attention from my hands.

Unfazed, he laughs again and walks away.

Sayanne still ignores him, while Tarlia's eyes follow him. Would Tarlia want to bring him to her bed? For some reason I conjure the image of Ziven and her together. It doesn't look bad. I've seen him shirtless, making a fool of himself on the training grounds, and even though he's slim, he's quite fit.

"Astra, that's disgusting!" Sayanne's words startle me. "You're going to eat custard with your food?"

True. My plate has rice and chicken stew, as well as the custard, but I had no choice. I wanted to make sure I also ate it, so I had to take some before poisoning it. "I was craving it."

Sayanne raises an eyebrow. "Careful with your cravings."

"Stop it." Tarlia places her cup on the table with more force than needed. "At least she does something to appease her cravings, instead of annoying the rest of us."

Master Andrezza shoots us a glare all the way from her seat.

"Better annoying than sullyng." Sayanne's tone is calm, but she's looking only at me. "When I say something, it's because I care."

"It's just custard." I pretend it's the most harmless thing in the world. "They haven't served it in months."

Tarlia eyes the plate with the dessert. "It's usually leftover from banquets, and we didn't have any lately." She taps a finger on her chin, thinking.

"More reason to enjoy our luck." I manage a relaxed chuckle, even though I'm rattled to realize I had forgotten that Tarlia is always sharp on details.

To ensure Sayanne has some of the dessert, I take a spoon and close my eyes, trying to convey a sense of bliss. "It's incredible."

Now I'm thinking about Tarlia's face last night and wondering if I'm doing that. I really need to stop thinking about what I saw last night.