

Incandescent Girl

Mary Borsellino

Copyright © 2025 Mary Borsellino

All rights reserved.

ISBN:

ISBN-13:

For Erin Kyan

Incandescent Girl

The baby is screaming furiously.

“I know how you feel, kiddo,” Robin says, smile twitching at her mouth despite her best efforts. Before Antoinette was born, Robin had decided to be the kind of aunt who had a scathing dry wit and provided sardonic wisdom and, eventually, gave age-inappropriate gifts like daggers and sexy books. Being the kind of aunt who can’t stop grinning and wants to sing nursery rhymes is not anywhere near as chic.

The screaming, against all scientific properties of sound, gets louder. Robin’s impressed that someone so tiny can create a noise that enormous. Then again, Robin’s mother is pretty short, and she’s got a mean set of lungs on her, so there’s precedent in the family.

“Oh, dear, let me take her,” frets Kathleen, collecting Robin’s fractious niece and cooing gently. Robin wants her back immediately. She’d put up with any amount of screaming if it meant she got to look at those miniscule fists beating against the air, as if Antoinette is going to fight the world.

Robin’s gone through enough to know that the world will do its level best to fight Antoinette back. She wishes, desperately, that there was some way to protect her niece from the bumps and

scrapes and miseries of growing up. She wonders if that's how everyone feels about their nieces and nephews and sons and daughters. Did her parents look at her making tiny fists and wish they could save her from heartbreak?

Probably not. Her parents are the type who taught their children to swim by throwing them into the deep end of a pool and waiting for them to work out how to stop drowning.

Kathleen still has that pregnancy glow, or maybe it's a new motherhood glow, or some other womb-related thing. Robin's had to hear a lot about wombs. The moon featured heavily. Robin's father tends to look vaguely pained by the topic, while Robin and her brother have learned to make little 'hm' noises of agreement until their mother is done talking about how Kathleen needs to eat sweet potatoes under clear skies or whatever.

Robin had been surprised to realise she liked Kathleen; she'd expected the best she could manage about whoever her brother married would be to tolerate them. But Kathleen likes spending time in the palace kennel, like Robin does, and she lets Robin try on her dresses, and, best of all, she has given Robin a perfect niece in Antoinette. So Robin could have done a lot worse, as sisters-in-law go.

The great hall is decked out lavishly, if not all that tastefully, for the gathering. Lots of purple drapery hangs from the vaulted ceiling. Robin knows enough about international trade to understand that only very, very rich people can afford purple cloth, and right now she can see an awful lot of it.

It's Robin's parents' opinion that royalty has an obligation to be visibly wealthy. Excessively visibly wealthy, as the case may be, with a crib trimmed in violet and gilt taking pride of place among the general purple theme, so that all the guests can come and pay tribute to Antoinette for accomplishing the amazing act of getting christened.

"You should plan for some children of your own. You're sixteen; I was engaged at that age," her brother tells her. Robin rolls her eyes.

"You were a jerk at that age," she counters. It's about halfway true; any firstborn son of a king and queen is a certain level of insufferable no matter what. He'd certainly had his share of terrible

personality traits. But Robin can also concede that when Ferdie was sixteen, she'd been eleven, and had felt like he was everything that she could never be. Her loathing for him had been as much about her own despair as it had been about his tendency to be a pompous idiot.

Now, older and wiser, Robin's more charitable towards her brother. He's arrogant and overprotective, but at least he likes her, which is more than she can say about their parents. Her father only likes reading books about old wars and drinking expensive wine – though it might just be that he likes drinking wine of any sort, and feels like it has to be expensive because he's king, and has that obligation for excessive visible wealth – and, well. Robin's not sure her mother likes anything much. Talking about wombs and moons, but that's it.

Ferdie says their mother wasn't always like that. But that just makes it worse, because that means it's all Robin's fault.

"I'm being serious," Ferdie presses. "You're going to have to think about it eventually, you know. I see you with quite a few children – maybe four or five."

"No, no, I'm one of nature's cool aunts," Robin disagrees, still watching Kathleen soothe the baby. "I'm going to let her try alcohol when she's twelve and buy her romance novels about pirates."

"Please don't start planning how you're going to corrupt my child. At least let her skull fuse before you think up ways to be a bad influence."

"Hmm. No," Robin tells her brother cheerfully. Antoinette keeps on screaming, no matter what Kathleen does. In that moment, Robin loves Antoinette with the kind of fierce intensity she usually only feels for the black and white terrier that catches rats in the kitchens.

Probably she shouldn't make that comparison to the baby's parents.

"I am sure you'll be the very coolest of aunts," Kathleen says with a small laugh, buoyed enough by the day's festivities that she's not too frazzled by the yelling baby.

Robin can see Kathleen's parents standing a little way off, waiting for their turn at post-christening cuddles with their grandchild. They exchange a look of bafflement at their daughter's words.

Ferdie and Kathleen haven't said anything about Robin to them, then. Ferdie seems to hold out a hope that she'll grow out of it. She knows he'll be disappointed; he might as well hope that she grows out of having brown eyes, or being tall.

Before Kathleen's parents can ask any awkward questions, however, the general hum of conversation throughout the banquet hall is interrupted by a thunderous series of knocks on the high, closed doors. The sound reverberates up to the ceiling despite the hall's sound-dampening drapes hanging, the noise booming in a way that makes some of the more sensitive party-goers wince. Antoinette goes abruptly quiet, all her baby fury cowed by the din, and whimpers softly.

Robin barely has the time to imagine the monstrous size of whatever could make such a noise before it echoes again.

Her hand goes to the pommel of her sword, ready to draw and step in front of the baby if the situation requires it. She's never been as good with her sword as Ferdie is with his, but she's a pretty close second – mostly because she's been trying her best to catch up to him her whole life.

Spite might not be the most noble of reasons to pursue greatness, but it's certainly pushed Robin to be the strongest, fastest, smartest version of herself. She will not be left in the dust by her perfect brother. She might always be a disappointment, but nobody can call her a quitter. She can fight if she has to.

The doors swing open.

Robin blinks in surprise, because all that's in the corridor beyond is a young man, slightly built and scarcely older than her brother. He has black hair, tied back at the nape like her own, and a black velvet frock coat, and a pale, coldly beautiful face.

She doesn't relax. She knows better than to think that because someone looks unassuming it means they're harmless. Nobody could grow up with a mother as acid-tongued as the queen, small and delicate in body and viciously cruel whenever she's in a bad mood – which is usually – and come away thinking ordinary-seeming people, even pretty ones, aren't capable of being threats.

The momentarily quietened conversation rises again at the sight of the beautiful young man. Robin keeps her focus on him, mostly ignoring the individual exchanges taking place, though paying enough attention to register a general sense of confusion.

The beautiful newcomer smirks, gaze roaming over the clusters of nobles as if looking for something in particular. When he catches sight of Kathleen holding the baby, the smirk widens.

“Your Roy—”

“How dare you show your face here?” Robin’s mother shouts, rising from one of the two thrones gracing the dais at the other end of the room. Robin’s father is seated in the other, looking highly uncomfortable about the increasingly dramatic scene.

Usually when he wears that expression, it’s because of something Robin’s done, so she feels a moment of grim satisfaction seeing it directed at her mother for a change. For someone so fond of pomp and decoration, the king hates anything that he considers to be an excess of fuss.

The young man approaches the crib, where Robin, Ferdie and Kathleen are standing with the baby, at a leisurely pace. The crowd parts to allow him, and Robin considers if the time has come to draw her sword. Where are the guards? How did he get in here?

“I merely came to give my blessings to the new princess,” he says, a mocking lilt to his tone as he raises his voice to carry across the room, addressing the queen. His face is like an exquisite painting, fine-boned and smooth-skinned. “My invitation must have been lost in transit. Prince Ferdinand, Princess Kathleen, congratulations.”

Robin watches him nod in greeting to her brother and his wife before turning his attention to her, lowering his voice so that only she can hear. “Princess Robin.”

Her mother’s fury suddenly making sense to her, Robin is moving before she’s conscious of it, stepping forward to shove him backward. “Fuck you,” she snarls. “Leave. Now.”

They must make a striking tableau, her indigo frock coat only a few shades lighter than his, their heights similar despite her youth. They could be bookends, a matched set of perfect young gentlemen,

although neither are what they appear to be.

“Oh, we aren’t grateful for my gift, then?” His smirk becomes a smile, sharp as a knife and wide enough to show his canines.

“If this wasn’t a christening party, I’d kill you where you stand,” she tells him through gritted teeth. Every nerve and fibre of her body is alight with anger, cold and brittle and deadly as winter sunlight on snow.

Sebastian – because that’s who he is, Robin knows that now, a name she’s only ever heard spat like venom by her mother – laughs, the sound as insincere as his smile. She wonders if she’d be able to land a punch on his perfect face before he killed her where she stood. Ideally, she’d like to stab him through his rotten little heart, but she knows he’s too tricky for that.

“Such fire! Hardly becoming of a daughter of royalty,” he chides with faux gentleness.

The words sting like papercuts, and it’s all Robin can do not to flinch. Of course the source of her mother’s viciousness would be even more vicious himself.

After Ferdie was born, there had been years of miscarriages and stillbirths for the king and queen. The royal physician had advised Robin’s mother to stop trying, that every attempt brought greater danger to her.

But the Queen was desperate for a child that could belong to her instead of to the throne. Ferdie would always be the heir first, her son second. Another son would just be a spare to go along with the heir. But a little girl... well, a little girl would be the Queen’s to raise into a miniature version of herself, proud and beautiful and accomplished.

And so Robin’s mother went to an enchanter in the woods, and offered him untold riches in exchange for a healthy pregnancy leading to a daughter.

Robin’s mother is usually a sharply intelligent woman, but that was perhaps not her brightest moment. Robin’s pretty sure ‘don’t make bargains with enchanters in the woods’ is close to being rule number one in the ‘how to avoid unnecessary catastrophe’ handbook.

The enchanter – Sebastian – had assured the queen that there would be no charge for such a service; it was the least he could do as a good citizen. The next time she lay with the king, she would conceive, and she would have a daughter.

Robin's heard the story many, many times. The queen recounts it during her frequent bad moods. How the pregnancy almost killed her, and Robin took forty hours to be born, and after all that... a *boy* baby.

Ferdie has told Robin that their mother wasn't always as harsh as she's become. It was just that the disappointment of Sebastian's broken promise, of the cruel trick that nearly stole her life and gave her an unwanted spare prince at the end of it, had curdled something in the queen.

Robin feels... well, she feels a lot of things about that.

The worst part, though, is that Robin knows the truth: she *is* a girl, just not on the outside. The enchanter, in the wicked way of all fae folk, gave her mother exactly what she asked for and exactly what she didn't want, all at once.

"It was just a game to you, but this is my *life*," Robin snaps. She is trembling with rage. Sometimes she thinks she's no less angry, no less hateful, than her mother. She wants Sebastian to pay in blood for every moment of the last sixteen years she's had to spend wearing boys' clothing, for every time she's been congratulated on what a fine young man she's becoming. Only her brother and his wife have ever believed her when she said otherwise.

Sebastian cocks his head. "If you're sore about it, I can give you a wish as compensation."

A bitter bark of laughter escapes her before she can stop it. She doesn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing how much he's hurting her, but she can't help it.

"Don't be stupid. Your 'gifts' are traps," she spits. "Get out of here. If you ever come back, I'll kill you."

He looks at her with a keen expression on his perfect features, bright eyes gleaming oddly.

"Oh, you're *interesting*," he says, quietly enough that the words are just for her. Then there's

another thundercrack, as loud as the banging on the doors, and he vanishes in a shower of sparks.

They burn Robin's hands where they strike her bare skin, hot pinpricks that prove he was there.

#

The christening celebration is brought to a close after that, so Robin makes herself scarce in the kitchens with the rat-catching terrier. Her mother, certain to be in the foulest of moods after their unexpected visitor, won't find her down there.

"I heard things went badly at the christening," a voice says from behind her as she kneels to scratch between the terrier's soft ears. Robin glances over her shoulder, then away again when she sees who it is. Lio, the royal physician's son. Of all the people she doesn't want to see, he's high among them.

"Since when do you care?" she snaps.

"Don't be like that. I thought you might want to talk."

"Not to you." Despite her words, Robin turns to look at him again. "Why weren't you there, anyway? Your parents were."

"I don't like crowds."

Robin snorts. "Who does? Must be nice, to get out of things just because you don't feel like doing them."

"Robin, come on, I want to know if you're all right, that's all."

Lio is slightly shorter than Robin, and narrower in the shoulders. He has blue eyes that are closer to the colour of the ocean than that of the sky, and strawberry blond hair that falls in a heavy swoop over his forehead and that he has to push out of his ocean-coloured eyes frequently. His skin is very pale, and looks as if it would freckle easily, but he doesn't have any freckles, which leaves him looking unfinished, somehow.

"I'm fine, now go away."

"Are you sure you're all right? I heard that that enchanter—"

"I'm *fine*," she snarls. Lio doesn't flinch, but she's not surprised at that. He'd have to care about her to be hurt by her mood.

His posture is relaxed, like he's comfortable in his skin in a way Robin can't imagine ever being. Her own back is almost always ramrod-straight, less because of a childhood of deportment lessons than because she never feels entirely at ease. Well, the deportment lessons probably helped. She'd had her knuckles bruised by rulers often enough for failure that they must have done something.

"Okay, if you're fine. See you later," he says, giving her a shallow smile and turning to go. She listens to his footsteps fading.

She can remember, when they'd been children, how envious she'd been of Lio's easy gregariousness with the other kids within the palace grounds, the scullery maids and stable hands and gardeners. Robin, despite not being naturally inclined to friendliness, has tried to be at least polite to everyone, but she always feels the gulf between royalty and servant when she makes an attempt. Lio never had that same problem; his position as the palace physician's child left him in a limbo that wasn't quite noble, wasn't quite commoner.

Which meant that he'd made friends with her as easily as he'd made friends with the scullery maids. He'd been the only friend Robin had, in those early years. Apart from her brother, anyway, and brothers didn't count.

She'd never told Lio her secret. Her mother hadn't spoken to her for days, after the first time she'd tried to explain it. After that she stopped trying to tell people, except for her family. Her parents thought it was a stupid game she was playing. Ferdie didn't really understand, either, but if Robin said she was a girl then he was happy to call her a girl, at least.

So she'd never shared that truth with Lio, but she'd told him the rest: what a bitter disappointment she was to her mother, how hard it was to be the spare to Ferdie's perfect heir. He'd listened to it all with a sympathetic expression on his face. As if he cared.

And then, one day when they were twelve, Lio became withdrawn around her, and started

avoiding her company. Hurt and confused, Robin withdrew right back, and that was that. She can't think of an occasion she's spoken to him in years where she hasn't told him to get lost. If he doesn't want to be friends, that's fine. She doesn't want friends anyway.

It doesn't matter. She has the palace dogs, and her sword tricks, and lately her brother's surprisingly kind wife who lets Robin try on dresses, and perfect little Antoinette. Her life isn't so bad.

The terrier whines softly, pushing its nose into her hand to demand further patting. Robin puts bleak thoughts about the christening and lost friends out of her head, determined to salvage something of the day.

"Come on," she says to the little dog. "Let's see if there's any leftover hors d'oeuvres we can steal."

#

A week after the christening, Robin's mother falls ill. The queen makes a terrible sick person. She always has. She ignores minor ailments, like colds or coughs, completely, charging around and running the palace with the same iron fist as always, her perpetual bad mood making it very clear that anyone who tries to mention her runny nose or easy fatigue will live to regret their mistake.

And when the ailment isn't minor, it's even worse, because Robin's mother will lie in bed, fractious and combative, complaining that the kitchens have left all the flavour out of her soup and that the fires warming her suite of rooms are too hot.

Robin wonders if her mother was full of earnest proclamations about the moon and eating sweet potato when she was pregnant with Ferdie and with Robin herself, or if she'd been a terrible sick person then, too. It's hard to imagine her throwing up every day with good grace.

Robin's mother has an awful lot of pride, but she's never had much in the way of good grace.

So at first, this new illness doesn't seem any different from other times — the queen pushes on, running the palace with all the warmth and tenderness of a military outpost, and everyone pretends she doesn't have the sniffles.

Then things get more serious. Her coughs rattle with phlegm, and she doesn't have the energy to storm around being cross at people anymore. Reluctantly, she retires to her bed, saving up her energy to scold Robin for spending too much time playing with the baby and not enough with her politics tutor.

And then, for the first time Robin can remember, things become truly dire. Lio's father explains in soft, grave tones that the queen's lungs are filling with fluid, making it harder and harder for her to breathe.

Robin remembers learning to swim, those early terrifying minutes before she got the hang of how to move her arms and legs in order to keep her head above water. The thought of being unable to escape that feeling, the frantic, frightening sensation of being unable to draw in air, makes her heart lurch.

"What do we do?" she asks, because naturally there's something that can be done. Her sharp, brusque, exacting mother isn't subject to vulnerabilities like severe illness. Maybe she was, once upon a time, but that softness had burned away with Robin's birth, leaving something brittle but immortal behind.

"I'll send a messenger to the College of Physicians, in Staghold. They can send their best people."

#

It takes three days for the College physicians to arrive, and during that time Robin isn't sure who is worse to be around: her or her mother. Even she will admit they're both pretty horrible. But her mother is very weak, which cuts down on her venom a little, and Kathleen keeps saying "here, hold the baby" to Robin any time she starts shouting at anyone. Robin isn't going to keep shouting while holding a baby, even if the baby herself is pretty fond of shouting. So as bad as they are, they could probably both be even worse if they really put in an effort.

Whether her mother will ever understand it or not, Robin really is the daughter she deserves.

The three doctors arrive by carriage, but Robin is too worried about her mother to go to the stables to see if their horses are any good. Robin loves horses, almost as much as she loves dogs. One

of the few positives about hardly anyone understanding that she's a girl is that she doesn't have to deal with any side-saddle nonsense like her mother does.

The physicians spend a long time in the queen's chambers, then come out to the hallway to confer with Lio's parents. Technically, only Lio's father is a doctor, but for as long as Robin can remember his mother has done just as much of the work.

Watching them all standing together — they haven't told her to leave, and even if they tried she wouldn't go — Robin can easily believe that these newcomers are from the same college where Lio's father trained. There's something in-common about them, like they're all loaves from the same kitchen. It makes her wonder how much good having four of them around instead of one can be, if they're all the same, but the ones from the College of Physicians have brought a huge travel trunk full of possible treatments with them, so surely *something* is going to help.

"It's magical in nature, no doubt about it," one of the Staghold doctors says. "It can occur without a specific trigger, very rarely. We might just be looking at a case of very bad luck."

Robin knows all about bad luck. She's also pretty sure that's not what this is, and suspects the physicians agree with her.

"Considering the, ah, interruption at the recent festivities—" Lio's mother puts in, saying what they're all thinking, "—this may very well be deliberate."

Everyone is very pointedly not glancing in Robin's direction and she burns with it, feeling like a string of fireworks cracking off one after the other. Is her birth destined to be a blight on her mother forever, drawing new misfortune to them all the time?

She wishes she really had tried to kill Sebastian at the christening, even though it wouldn't have worked. She hates him like acid in her marrow.

"You've kept her fluids up, so that's good. The saltwater gargling has helped, too," another of the Staghold doctors tells Lio's parents. "We have a jar of a concoction we can mix into a vapour for her to inhale, which will make her majesty strong enough to recover with rest. We have enough of it to

tide her over until we can have more delivered.”

“What?!” Robin interrupts, furious. “You didn’t bring enough with you for a whole course? What’s the use of you! You knew it was her lungs, and you brought that enormous trunk, and you don’t have enough?! What good are you?!”

“Your Highness—” Lio’s father starts to say, tone calm and quiet. One of the other doctors looks at her with disdain, like she’s a spoiled child having a tantrum, like she’s not *royalty* and *important* and like it isn’t her *mother* who is sick.

Feeling helpless, she turns and runs, wanting to get far away from these self-important old men and their judgment.

The kitchens are too busy for her to be underfoot, really, but at least here they know better than to look at her like she’s a bratty annoyance. Robin goes over to the pallet of rags near the main fire, where the rat-catching terrier sleeps when it’s not earning its keep. It makes a soft grumbling noise at her as she sits beside it, scoops it into her arms, and buries her face against its fur.

She tries to blink back the hot angry tears that want to spill out, but a couple fall despite her best efforts. The dog licks at them, startling a laugh out of her.

“Ew, don’t lick my face! You’ve been eating rat guts!” she complains, trying to pull out of range before going right back to cuddling close.

She can get to Staghold on foot just as fast as a messenger can by horse, because the walking route is through narrow farmland pathways and wild terrain, and is shorter than the proper roads that horses have to use. Maybe she can get there faster than a messenger, and be back with more of her mother’s treatment more quickly. The doctors said they had enough to tide her over, but what if they’re wrong? What if they run out?

Even if she can’t get there any faster, even if the messenger gets there first, Robin has to do *something*. She can’t stand around being helpless any longer. She can’t bear it. She has to go.

She puts the dog back down on its bed and stands up, glancing around to see if anyone’s paying

attention to her. They mostly don't, when she visits the kitchens, and if that holds true today then she might be able to collect some provisions from the pantries without having to go to the trouble of explaining her plan.

Good, nobody cares what she's doing. She goes to the closest pantry, and grabs a muslin bag from a pile near the door to for her spoils. Dried fruit, that would be useful. Nuts, too, though she isn't as partial to those. Not that her personal tastes are important. She needs to take this more seriously! She growls at herself for thinking about whether she likes nuts or not. This isn't some stupid game.

"I figured you'd be down here, though I didn't guess the pantry specifically."

Robin shoots a glare at Lio over her shoulder before going back to inspecting the shelf of bresaola, trying to decide which pieces she should take. She quite likes cured meat, though she prefers speck to most other kinds. Unfortunately, her mother considers speck peasant food, so the kitchens don't often stock it.

"Don't act like you know anything about me," she says, trying for withering and ending up merely cranky.

"I know you well enough to know you're going to go to Staghold by yourself."

That gets her turning to face him, blinking in surprise.

He rolls his eyes. "Come on, it's not like it was hard to guess. You've always been like this. When you think a problem isn't being fixed quickly enough, you try to fix it yourself," he says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "Remember when we were ten, and I got lost in the woods, and you decided the adults were taking too long to find me and went out to get me yourself?"

Robin remembers. "And we both wound up lost together, yeah, I remember."

"Look, I didn't say it was an *auspicious* precedent, I just said it was precedent," Lio retorts with another of his easy smiles. "I'm coming with you."

"What? No you're not."

"Yes I am."

“I don’t want to you.” Robin turns her back to him, resuming her packing.

“I know, but I’m going to anyway. You’ll need someone who knows about medicines when you get to the College — you don’t even know the name of the treatment you’re going to get, right?”

She grumbles incoherently. Stupid Lio. “Right. So tell me, and then I can go alone.”

“Nope. It’s too dangerous. Your parents will never let you, and if you try to go without telling them, they’ll send guards after you to bring you home.”

Robin’s grumbling increases. “*Fine*. But I’m in charge.”

Lio shrugs. “Okay.”

#

Robin’s parents don’t seem very bothered by her plan, which she grudgingly admits is probably because she isn’t going alone. Lio’s parents are practically frantic by comparison, which surprises Robin, because when they’re doing doctor-y things they’re always very calm and unflappable.

Lio is unfazed, though, so this must be normal. Maybe this is what the alternative to being thrown in the deep end of the pool looks like. Frankly, Robin thinks she’d find it smothering.

His parents fuss over making sure Lio has a spare water bottle, and a spare tinderbox, and spare rations, and Robin can’t help but think that she and Lio will only end up needing even half the stuff he’s been saddled with, if they’ve been delayed by weeks.

By the time they set out, it’s mid-afternoon, and the official messenger has hours of head start on them. Robin doesn’t really care — the whole point is to be *doing* something. If she has something to do, the rest doesn’t matter so much. That’s always been the good part about having a mother who expects a lot; Robin is usually too busy to get lost too deeply in her own grim thoughts. If she’s walking to Staghold, it means she isn’t pacing the corridor outside her mother’s room.

They walk in silence for a while, until Robin is sick of it.

“Aren’t you supposed to tell me that everything’s going to be fine, and not to worry?” she asks scathingly.

“Do you want me to? I figured you’d hate it if I tried to reassure you.”

“I would!” Robin snaps. “But you’re still supposed to do it, aren’t you? Don’t you have faith in your parents?”

Lio’s quiet for a moment, like he’s genuinely considering the question. “I have faith that they’re doing the best they can. I think that’s all anyone can ever really say about anybody, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not! When someone’s mother is sick you’re supposed to tell them that it’s not serious, and that she’s going to be well again before they know it. Everyone knows that.” Robin keeps her gaze straight ahead, refusing to look at him. She clenches her jaw to stop her chin from wobbling.

He doesn’t answer her, and they go the rest of the afternoon without talking. When they make camp that night, they lay out their bedrolls on opposite sides of the small fire, lying with their backs to the warmth and to each other.

There’s quiet for a while, and then Robin feels awkward about the quiet, and says “Goodnight,” but Lio doesn’t answer, so he’s either already asleep or doesn’t want to talk to her. After the way she’s been acting, either one is possible.

Robin knew it would be like this. She never knows how to be anything but rude and sharp with people, even people she likes, and she doesn’t like Lio. Her terrible personality is why nobody except her brother likes her, and that’s mostly just trauma-bonding from being raised by the same dreadful parents, so probably even he’s going to get sick of her eventually.

#

The next morning is still, cool, and quiet, save for the occasional high warble of birdsong among the trees. Under other circumstances, Robin would have found the early walk enjoyable, but it’s hard to luxuriate in the beauty of nature when she’s knotted up with worry about her mother.

She doesn’t speak to Lio. He doesn’t try to strike up a conversation to fill the quiet, which is good because Robin is ignoring him and wants him to know it. She’s going to say the absolute minimum to him that she needs to in order to get things done properly. It’s only for her mother’s sake that she’s

tolerating him at all.

He just walks beside her, keeping up with her hurried strides, not complaining or asking her to slow down.

The bird call trills out again and Robin halts abruptly, hand going to the hilt of her sword. Lio stops a half-step later, giving her a quizzical look.

“That’s not a bird,” she tells him in a low voice. “Someone’s there.”

Lio crouches down, reaching into one of his boots as the foliage beside the road explodes with movement.

There are five of them, a range of ages and builds but all with the same hard look in their eyes. Robin knows that look. Sometimes she’s seen her parents look at their subjects like that, like they’re not really people at all, just a means to an end. She’s always hated that look, hated the idea that someone could think someone else was just a *thing*.

She draws her sword. The one closest to her, a young, rangy-looking man with a scruff of beard, smirks at her. He clearly doesn’t expect her to be much of a challenge, even with the sword, and the terrible thing is she knows he’s right, because she can’t see him the way he sees her: as an obstacle that just needs cutting down. She’s never killed a person. She doesn’t know if she can do it.

A cut-off shout to her right is the first indication that Lio isn’t frozen by the same moral dilemma facing her. She glances over to see him with a short dagger in one hand, presumably pulled from his boot. The blade is bloodied, and the man in front of him is clutching at his chest as he sinks to his knees and then the ground. Lio retrieves the man’s discarded shiv from where it’s fallen. He uses this new, thinner blade to slice the man’s throat open.

Robin stares, open-mouthed, but can’t stay transfixed by the sight because the man in front of her, and a second man on her left, charge at her at the same time. She has no choice but to raise her sword and parry, adjusting her stance to defend herself.

She can tell immediately that her opponents are better at real combat than her, more

experienced at it, but in her desperation she's holding her own as they strike and stab at her. All those hours of not wanting to be a disappointment to her mother, of wanting to catch up to Ferdie, are paying off.

Muscle memory carries her through basic sword forms, her blade coming up to block blows before her mind even registers that she's moving. It's a relief, to be able to survive from moment to moment without thinking, but she knows she'll have to strategise if she's going to come out the victor.

The man's knife swipes in close enough to her to cut the cloth of her jacket and the skin beneath, a searing sharp line of pain that she makes herself ignore. She can handle pain. The important thing is to retain as much control of the situation as she can.

When the second man gets close enough, she aims a blow at his thigh. It doesn't go deep enough to make his leg buckle, but he stumbles and loses the surety of his footing, which gives Robin enough time to properly concentrate on the one with the scruffy beard.

She knows she can't hesitate. She drives the point of her sword *up* and *in*, feeling the horrible resistance of tightly-packed organs inside the man's ribcage parting under her blade. His eyes widen in surprise, and she's sure she looks even more shocked than him in that moment.

She's always known the abstract concept of what swords were for, what the point of learning to dodge and lunge was, but the idea of actually doing it always seemed so absurd. Killing bandits with swords is something that happens in *stories*, like princesses held captive in towers or giants at the tops of beanstalks. It isn't *real*.

Her sword comes free with a slick, silken sound that's as loud as a hurricane to Robin's ears. She wants to... to stop and work out what she feels, because right now she's got no idea. Her mind is a riot. Her stomach heaves. But there's no time, because the other man is charging her, leg bleeding freely where she struck him, and she knows she'll have to kill him too.

It isn't that killing the second man is easier than killing the first one, but it isn't the first time anymore, so at least the hideously new, unique feeling isn't there this time. She already knows what it

feels like to plunge her weapon into viscera, to see the shock and surprise in someone's eyes as they realise this is the end.

When it's done, Robin whirls around, searching for Lio. He's got two bodies at his feet, same as her, and is splattered with their blood, same as her. She breathes a sigh of relief at seeing him safe, then has the split second thought of *wait, weren't there five of them* right as something slams into her and sends her sprawling.

Her vision whites out for a second when the back of her skull connects with the hard ground, and she lets out an "oof" that gets lost under a sudden cry of fury from Lio.

A moment later, he's tackling her aggressor down beside her and stabbing into the man's back over and over and over again. Lio grunts with the effort of the movement, the dagger's blade vanishing down to the hilt every time.

Everything else goes still. He stabs and stabs.

Eventually, Robin finds her voice. "He's dead. He's dead, Lio, it's okay. You can stop."

There's blood all over Lio's face and arms, the delicate splatter of drops across his nose and cheeks looking like the freckles he doesn't have. His hands are slick and gory, and the man's back is a pulpy mess of wounds.

Robin manages to turn her face away before bile burns her throat and sharp tears sting her eyes and she pukes all over the road. She hears Lio stand up, and then he's in front of her and is offering her his water bottle. Robin sits up shakily and takes it, rinsing her mouth out and spitting as much of the taste away as she can.

His expression is grim, but not hard, not like he didn't think of the men as people. They weren't *things* to him when he killed them, at least. That's a small comfort to Robin.

She gets to her feet, proud of how steady she manages to be. It takes her a few moments to find her voice. "I don't want to just leave them here," she says, managing to look at the carnage around them without throwing up again. "We can't... We can't stop to bury them, or anything, of course, but I

don't want to just walk away either."

Lio nods. "We can move them into the underbrush, so they're not visible from the road. If you take the feet and I take the hands, we should be able to carry them one at a time."

He doesn't suggest searching the bodies for coins or other spoils, which Robin is deeply relieved about. Not that they need money, with the comfortable pouch sitting in the bottom of her pack, but he'd been so ruthless in dealing with their assailants that she thought he might be chillingly pragmatic about this, too. But it seems as if efficiently eliminating the threat to them is as far as his coldness goes.

She's not all that bothered by the bodies themselves, she finds — they're just dead people, and dead people aren't all that frightening. They seem a bit sad, if anything. All the threat and fight and life that made her so terrified of them a little while ago is gone now, vanished into nothing. She feels guilty that she doesn't feel guiltier about all of it, but Lio's matter-of-factness makes it easier as he helps her carry them away from the road.

They can't do anything much about the blood, or Robin's vomit, except try to kick a layer of dirt over everything so it's not so obvious that something bad happened.

"We need to change clothes," Robin says next. "Find a stream to clean off, then change clothes, I mean. There's no good putting them on now."

It takes about an hour, Robin feeling extremely self-conscious as they pass fields growing carrots and cauliflower and broad beans in neat orderly rows. She feels like a stain on the landscape, a blot of death within a riot of autumnal life.

When they do find a stream, the water is cold enough to make Robin swear, her revulsion momentarily superseded by indignation. She and Lio keep their backs to one another as they strip off and scrub away the blood. It feels pointless, to give each other privacy after something as raw and revelatory as killing people in front of each other and, in Robin's case, spewing her guts up afterwards, but she's grateful for it. She likes to be in control of who sees her body, and when, and while it's hard to sustain her earlier animosity towards Lio after what they've been through, she still doesn't know him

very well.

They dress in their spare outfits and store their bloodstained clothes in their packs, though frankly Robin would prefer never to wear them again. Ferdie sometimes only wears clothes once and then never again, and she's always teased him for it, but this time she wishes she could do the same.

Ferdie, as far as she knows, has never had to kill a person. It feels strange to be more grown up than him in some way, even if it's an awful one she never wanted.

The next few hours are quiet, with no further interruptions and no attempts at conversation between them. Robin wants to break the silence, but she can't think of anything to say. Everything feels small and stupid.

When night falls, they move off the road and find a clearing with enough space for their bedrolls. It's cold, so Robin lights a fire, but even once it's blazing merrily Lio continues to shiver. Robin can hear his teeth chatter, as if he's freezing.

"Are you all right?"

He shakes his head. His breathing is uneven, panic making the breaths thready.

"Oh," she says, feeling at a loss. She's much calmer now than she was before, the act of throwing up purging her of the worst of her fragility. Everything that happened, everything they did, must have taken longer to really hit Lio.

"No, it's—" He cuts himself off. "It doesn't matter. But... could you hold my hand for a little while? It'll help."

She offers her hand, which he clutches at with what's aiming at a smile. It doesn't work.

"Sorry. I..." His cheeks colour pink, words stumbling uncharacteristically as he speaks in halting gasps. "Since I was twelve, I... I have a permanent enchantment on me. In some situations, it... makes me get more upset than other people."

She thinks of how cool and collected he looked, after stabbing that man over and over and over, long after he was dead. But she doesn't remark on it. It's clear that he's upset now, whatever he

felt then.

Lio's hand grips hers hard enough to hurt, but his breathing is evening out and slowing down, so Robin doesn't ask him to let go. With a distant corner of her mind, she notices that faint traces of the earlier gore still cling to the edges of his nails.

"My parents do what they can to... combat it, but it... well. It'll make me feel better if you hold my hand for a bit, that's all."

She thinks the expression on his face is still an attempt at a smile, but it is an unsteady, uneven thing. Robin does her best to smile back reassuringly, despite being painfully aware that she's a spiky, rude sort of person who isn't very good at comforting anyone.

Her curiosity at his words burns at her — a permanent enchantment? What kind? How had that happened? She remembers Lio at twelve, and he'd lived the same sort of sheltered life that she had, but with different specifics. What calamity had interrupted that, and how had she never heard about it?

There's no way she's going to ask, though. Robin knows better than anybody that things like that are private. If something made you so upset that you gripped people's hands until they hurt, then it was your business to tell or not-tell as you saw fit.

She wonders if it was bad enough that he might understand, a little, if she tells him about the full scope of the trick Sebastian had played on her and her mother. That she's really a girl.

But that might make him awkward around her. Robin knows from books, from watching Ferdie as he grew up ahead of her, that boys often get strange and stiff if they have to interact with girls. Or, worse, he might not *understand*, and even the idea of that makes something sharp twist in Robin's chest. She'd be disappointed if he didn't understand, because she's... well, she's not as angry at him anymore.

It isn't surprising that human contact makes his condition easier to bear. Robin thinks that's true for a lot of things — the simple act of holding someone's hand can make a lot of things better.

There had been more times when she was small than she could possibly remember, where

Ferdie had held her hand after their mother had found some particularly vicious words to hurl at Robin. It had been as if, because Robin had failed at one thing — being a girl, as far as her mother thought — it meant that nothing she ever did in any other area of her life was good enough either.

They're still holding hands across the narrow space between their side-by-side bedrolls when they fall asleep, and Robin feels a little bereft the next morning when she wakes up and they aren't anymore. Maybe she needed it as much as Lio did.

#

More than enough food is left in their packs for breakfast if they wanted it, but Robin doesn't have any appetite and nor does Lio, so once they've had some water and feel more alert they start walking again. The weather got colder overnight, so they add their cloaks over their clothes.

After walking in quiet for a while, Lio laughs quietly to himself.

"It's like that line from *Companion of the Moon*, what was it? 'And, after the mayhem, there was only the chill of oncoming winter left to tell them they were still alive'?"

Robin grimaces. She can't help it. She's had years of diplomacy lessons, but she's just naturally the kind of person who grimaces sometimes. Okay, a lot of the time. It's not like she does it on purpose.

He shoots her an all-too-perceptive look. "Have you even read it, or are you being a snob on principle?"

"I *have* read it, unfortunately, so I come by hating it honestly, thank you very much."

"Most people like it a lot, you know."

She narrows her eyes at him. "Is that your way of saying that *you* liked it?"

"No, I regularly memorise passages from novels I hate," Lio retorts, tilting his chin up in defiance. "A book isn't bad just because it's popular, or simple to read, you know."

"Oh, I don't care about that stuff." Robin shakes her head. "Have you *met* my brother? Every new novel I had handed down to me throughout my childhood was simple to read. If I hadn't also had access to the palace library I probably wouldn't know what a tautology was if one bit me in the face.

No, I hated that stupid book because it has a terrible ending.”

“No it doesn’t! It was romantic!”

“What’s romantic about *dying*?”

“Art that rips your heart out is wonderful. It makes you *feel*.”

Robin rolls her eyes. “I can cry just fine on my own without some maudlin book’s help, thank you very much. I don’t care how many people loved it, I didn’t. I gave my copy away to Kathleen when I’d finished and of course *she* thought it was *wonderful*. Eugh. It was so sentimental I wanted to throw up.”

Lio’s earlier indignation has given way to an upward twitch of his mouth, like he’s struggling very hard not to break into an amused smile at her ire. “I mean, as far as art making you feel goes, I think almost making you physically ill means it succeeded, right?”

“Nope. I refuse to concede any ground in this debate. It was a bad book,” Robin declares. “But... I guess it was nice to talk to Kathleen about it, even if I had to pretend it wasn’t awful. My brother’s not the kind of person who wants to talk about books after he’s read them, and I...” *don’t really have any friends*, she wants to admit, but that sounds pathetic even inside her head.

“I’m kind of a loner too,” Lio replies when it becomes clear that her sentence isn’t going to finish properly. Robin thinks of the easy, gregarious interactions she’s seen him have with other people, and thinks he’s probably stretching the truth to make her feel better. “After... After the enchantment accident, my parents became very protective, and it meant I spent more time with books than with people for a while, as they tried to find ways to reverse it.”

Again, Robin burns to ask for details, and again she forces herself not to. If he wants her to know, he’ll tell her. If he doesn’t, it’s none of her business.

“How do you feel about translated works?” she asks instead, spoiling for another argument. “Do you think they should stay as close as possible to the original text, or take a more relaxed approach to fidelity in favour of being a smoother read?”

“Oh, the second one, for sure,” he replies immediately. “A book should be as easy to read in any other language as it is in its mother tongue. Otherwise you’re not getting the experience that the original readers are — it doesn’t sound foreign and awkward to them, you know? True fidelity is replicating the experience of a native speaker, and that means taking liberties with the actual text.”

“Don’t you think that gives translators too much power? They can twist their word choices to fit what they think the book should be saying, instead of staying true to what the original author meant. They might have their own agenda.”

“Hmm.” Lio considers this for a moment. “I think you still have to take the risk. A translated book is always going to be a case of the translator recounting the original story to you second-hand. They might as well be a good story-teller, at least.”

“But—” Robin starts, getting into the swing of the debate. Her words die in her throat as a shimmer of light, like an incongruous heat haze in the chilly day, appears on the road in front of them, coalescing into the silhouette and then the form of a young man a little older than they are.

Lio takes two steps forward, putting himself between Robin and Sebastian. As if there’s any possible way he could protect her if the enchanter wished her harm.

She’s struck again by how beautiful he is, haughty and amused all at once. Robin doesn’t think she’s ever seen anyone so lovely, but now that she knows who he is the knowledge casts his exquisite face in a different light. He’s beautiful the way deadly things are sometimes beautiful, to get prey in close. Sebastian is a deep-sea fish with a lantern lure, entrancing smaller creatures in range of his jagged knife teeth.

Robin wonders if her mother thought he was beautiful, of if she only cared that he was useful.

“What’s the spare heir doing so far from home?” he asks without preamble, giving Robin one of his playful, wicked smiles. “And with an accomplice!”

Before either of them can move Sebastian has closed the distance between where he appeared and where they stand, moving almost too fast for the eye to see. He grasps Lio’s jaw, like the lord of a

manor assessing a potential new hall boy. He's barely taller than Lio, and doesn't look all that much older, but his casual air of power is enough that Robin can hardly breathe. Lio meets Sebastian's gaze and doesn't flinch.

Whatever Sebastian sees in Lio's face seems to satisfy him — it amuses him, if anything, but Robin is yet to see Sebastian without a look of amusement on his face — and he lets go of Lio's chin. Lio holds his position between Sebastian and Robin. Sebastian looks even more entertained.

"You both smell like blood," he says conversationally, and Robin can't help the revolted frown that pinches her face. A dagger appears from that same shimmery-heat-haze nowhere, and Sebastian balances the point of it on the pad of his index finger, keeping it perfectly still and perfectly in place.

"I've heard it matters, the first time. I can't remember well enough to be sure. It must have mattered even more for you, since you killed more." These last words are addressed to Lio, and followed by a chuckle. "Except that it didn't matter to you at all, did it? There are some things that trump a conscience."

An unreadable expression flits across Lio's face before he schools it back into neutral coolness. Sebastian passes the dagger from one finger to another to another, barely having to move at all to keep it balanced.

"I've always thought people like you were interesting, too. What luck, that the pair of you can entertain me at the same time. I do hope everything's all right at home. I'd hate for anything to break your hearts."

He's gone in a shower of sparks a split second later, the dagger clattering to the ground in front of them. Robin sits down abruptly in the middle of the road, trying to keep from shaking.

She doesn't even have to ask before Lio's taken her hand in his. She holds on until she can breathe again, and then stays holding on, because she doesn't want to let go.

#

They make it to Staghold as night is falling. The atmosphere in the city is generally miserable, which

certainly doesn't help Robin's increasingly frayed nerves. She doesn't think of herself as someone who cares much about sunshine and blue skies and butterflies, but an abundance of their opposites is proving to grate on her. She refuses to attribute her bad mood to Sebastian's unexpected cameo. Robin will not give him that power over her.

The rain is the dour, sporadic, grey kind that isn't dramatic enough to become interesting once they're safely indoors. The inn where they rent a room for the night is probably charming enough, to people who aren't her and therefore aren't a) in a bad mood and b) cold and wet and tired. Lio likes it, judging by how he sheds his travel cloak in a damp puddle of wool on the floor and flops across the double bed with a relieved groan.

"You sound like an old man with an arthritic back," Robin snipes, hanging her own cloak on a peg by the door. Water droplets fall off it and onto the floorboards below with a miserable little plip-plip-plip. They'll be able to get their bloodied clothes laundered, at least. She would prefer to show up at the College of Physicians tomorrow looking at least a *little* bit regal, even if that only means clean, dry clothes.

"Anyone can appreciate a fire and a roof and a mattress after weather like that, not just old men," Lio counters cheerfully. His pale cheeks are ruddy from being out in the chill, which makes the hair falling over his face look brassier than usual.

"It was just a bit of rain," answers Robin, as if she hasn't spent the last few hours growing increasingly cranky at the intermittent downpour that has followed them into town. "Do you think the city looks any more inviting when it's not so wet, or that it always feels—"

"Like an irate groundskeeper is about to round the corner and shout at you for stepping on the grass?" Lio finishes.

Robin snorts, giving a nod. "Something like that."

"It'll probably seem more welcoming after we've had some food and sleep. Going from a feather bed in a palace to a bedroll in the forest is a lot to ask of anybody, even someone with limber

teenage bones.”

“There you go sounding like an old man again. You’re just as limber and teenaged as me. The bedrolls weren’t so bad.”

“If you want to set one out on the floor here, go ahead, by all means. I’ll stretch out on this lovely warm bed all by myself.”

“I paid for it!”

He grins at her. “Very generous of you.”

She transfers all of their bloodied clothes into her pack and takes everything else out, then carries the bag down to the front desk downstairs. The innkeeper’s wife smiles at her, which Robin thinks is probably because the woman knows she has money, but that’s fine. Sometimes transactional relationships are easier than relying on goodwill. Robin’s not especially good at engendering goodwill in strangers.

“I’d like these clothes washed and dried by morning,” she says, handing the pack over. “They’re, uh. Stained from travel. Here’s extra for your trouble.” She hands over twice what the room cost. It’s not like money really means much to her. Lio would probably make fun of her for that.

Thinking of Lio makes her glance around the noisy dining room, filled with other patrons of the inn eating and talking and laughing at full volume. She remembers Lio in the palace kitchens, explaining why he’d missed Antoinette’s christening. *I don’t like crowds.*

“Have our food brought to our room,” Robin adds, and hands over more money.

As she heads back upstairs she thinks of Ferdie, who comes alive in a crowd. It’s interesting how the two young men can be so different from one another, and yet she can enjoy both their company.

A little while later they’re served two large bowls of pork and potato stew, and a pot of tea. This goes some way to mollifying Robin’s cranky mood, because the stew is thick and good, and the warm broth left at the bottom drives away some of her discomfort from the rain as she slurps it down.

She hopes her mother's able to eat something, back home. There's a baby crying in one of the other rooms of the inn, audible through the walls between them. The sound makes Robin miss Antoinette and her tiny, angry fists.

She wonders who Lio misses, back at the palace. She knows his parents are protective, and that he's friendly with everyone but considers himself a loner, but that's about it. The childhood days when they used to play together are a long time ago.

"Do you want to be a physician when you're older?" she asks. Lio shakes his head.

"God, no. I'm glad I have enough knowledge to help you with this journey, but doctor isn't the life for me. I've been subjected to enough tinctures and remedies to put me off having anything to do with them for good." He smiles ruefully. "You know that saying about cobbler's children going barefoot? Not my experience. My parents have always been obsessive about curing anything wrong with me."

"Mine don't seem to understand that I'm a person of my own at all," Robin offers. "They've never really treated me and Ferdie as beings who know things about ourselves, or have opinions and passions of our own. We're just another thing they're in charge of." She chuckles a little, bittersweet, at a sudden memory. "When I was thirteen I said I'd like a lock for my bedroom door. My mother just looked puzzled, and nothing ever came of it. I didn't bring it up again. Children don't get to have privacy or anything like that."

They certainly don't get to have inner lives that they can explain to their parents. Robin still tries, occasionally, to make her parents understand that she's a girl, but she comes away more frustrated and despairing each time. They don't even take her seriously enough to argue with her properly. It would be awful if her mother believed her enough to be cruel about it, but Robin doesn't even get that.

She might as well be declaring that she can sing and fly and catch worms, like her namesake bird, for all the gravity they take her assertions about herself with.

In her more uncharitable moments, Robin thinks that things must be much easier for Ferdie, who was born as exactly who he was supposed to be and has grown up into the right kind of person. But

she knows him too well to truly believe that. Things might be *simpler* for Ferdie, but that doesn't make them *easier*. Even people without cruel fairy jokes in their past still have to get on with the everyday business of living.

"Anyway, that's enough about me," she says, embarrassed at how she made the conversation all about her, when she was trying to find out more about him. "Do you have any idea what you would like to be, if not a doctor?"

Lio shrugs. "I'm a very boring person with very boring problems, Your Royal Highness. I don't make for very good conversation."

Robin snorts. "Shut up with that 'highness' shit; you've seen me puke my guts up. And it's not like I'm especially interesting either."

"No, you are," Lio says, surprisingly serious all of a sudden. Then he blinks, realising his momentary intensity, and picks up their bowls. "I'll put these outside the door to be collected. We should try to get some sleep."

#

The area around the College of Physicians probably looks ethereal and beautiful at night, with its paved streets lit with gas lamps that shine like bubbles in the dark. But in the daytime it looks like the rest of Staghold: overly manicured and arranged, like it's not a place where people live and work and play at all.

"Let me do the talking," Lio says as they approach the large ironwork gate. Robin rolls her eyes.

"That was the point of you coming, wasn't it?"

She refuses to think about the bandits on the road, about what might have happened without him.

The footman who answers the door doesn't look any older than they are, but Robin can tell from his expression that he thinks he's better than them. Okay, so maybe the inn's laundry couldn't

completely get the bloodstains out, and so they're wearing the same clothes that got wet and rumpled in the rain yesterday. She's still got regal bearing, surely.

"I'm Lio Vrach, son of Doctor Vrach of the royal palace," Lio introduces himself. "And this is Prince Robin, also of the royal palace. We're here to collect further supplies of the drug being used to treat his mother, the queen."

"Of course, right this way," the footman says, opening the gate immediately.

They're left in a sitting room that's as orderly and lifeless as the rest of this miserable city.

"I'm glad you don't want to be a doctor," she says quietly to Lio as they wait. "Imagine having to live here for years while you studied? Eugh."

He bites back a smile as the door opens and even more of those bread-from-the-same-kitchen physicians appear. Robin isn't even sure what it is that makes them all seem so similar. Maybe it's the same thing that makes her parents so like each other, even though they're only fourth cousins once removed. Doing a job for long enough turns it into part of who you are.

It makes Robin want to be very careful about what kind of person she lets herself turn into. She's already more like her mother than she really wants to be.

"Your Highness," one of the doctors says, and they all bow to her, which makes her impatient.

"Lio, tell them what we need," she says brusquely.

"The team who came to the palace have worked out the source of the queen's illness. It's magical in nature, though potentially contracted by nothing more bad luck. They're treating it with a vapour of an enchanted mix of melaleuca, thyme, and clove oil, but didn't bring a sufficient amount with them for the full duration of her recovery. We're here to—"

"Do you have a letter from Doctor Ioannou and his associates, outlining this course of treatment?" one of the doctors interrupts.

"The official messenger came by a different route, we came a faster—"

"Using thyme *and* clove oil in the same vapour? I think you must be mistaken, son, that isn't

orthodox. We'll wait for the official messenger and—"

This time it's Robin who interrupts, holding up a hand to silence him. "I don't give a damn about *orthodoxy*, if Lio says that's what your colleagues are using on *my mother, the queen* to treat her illness, then that's what they're using, and you're going to give us enough to get her well again. Is that *understood?*"

The men confer quietly for a moment, though not quietly enough that she doesn't hear one of them comment about how "the younger prince's temper is well known," which just makes her bad mood even worse. After a discussion, they turn to look at her and Lio again.

"We really do think it's best to wait for the official messenger. They should be here very soon, and then we can confirm what the treatment really is."

"Lio *TOLD YOU* what the treatment is!" Robin snaps. If Ferdie was here, he'd be giving her that disappointed look he gets when she starts shouting at people to get her way, and Kathleen would surreptitiously hand her the baby.

But they're not here, just her and Lio. She glances over, to see if he's looking as annoyed as the doctors are because she's making a fuss, but he doesn't look annoyed at all. He's looking at her like he's never seen anything more wonderful.

He was the one they kept interrupting, after all. It's probably quite satisfying to see them yelled at.

A doctor clears his throat. "Your Highness—"

Yet another interruption, this time the footman from earlier, standing by the door with a travel-rumpled looking person in palace livery. The footman clears his throat, too. "A royal messenger, sirs."

Well, that kind of knocks the righteous wind out of Robin's sails. She wasn't even warmed up yet. She had all kinds of names she wanted to call the doctors.

The person in palace livery looks surprised to see Robin there, but not particularly surprised to see that she's in the middle of shouting at a doctor.

“A message, from the physicians currently seeing to her majesty.” They hand over an envelope with a wax seal to the nearest of the doctors. He opens it and reads the letter inside quickly, brows drawing together.

“Enchanted melaleuca, thyme, and clove oil, as the boy said,” he tells the others. Robin very maturely refrains from telling them *I told you so*.

Two of the doctors go to collect the medicine, leaving two behind — presumably to babysit Robin, in case she starts yelling again. They’re jerks, in her opinion, and she’d rather have nothing to do with them, but worry twists in her and won’t let her relax.

“When we were on the road,” she says to them. “The enchanter Sebastian appeared. The way he talked... I think, at the very least, he knows my mother is ill. What... What are the odds that it’s not bad luck? That he’s done something?”

The doctors exchange a wordless look that tells her everything.

“Will she still recover, even if it is him?” she asks, hating how small and helpless she sounds.

She wants them to tell her it’ll be fine. That her mother will be better in no time. She doesn’t want them to give her some thoughtful, considered answer like Lio did. She just wants everything to be all right.

“She survived your birth,” one of them offers, which is hardly reassuring. Robin’s mother *barely* survived her birth, and Robin is pretty sure Sebastian wasn’t even particularly invested in making it difficult. This time, if he’s deliberately harming the queen...

Well, if that’s what’s happening, she thinks she could probably kill Sebastian for real; not just threaten him but truly do it. She won’t throw up or anything. She’ll be as cool and collected as Lio had been against that first bandit, slicing his throat open with his own shiv. Or maybe she’ll be like Lio had been with the last bandit, striking and striking and striking long after it’s necessary.

The thought of doing that makes her feel like the ground has dropped out from under her, like she’s falling into the deep end of a pool and drowning.

The doctors return with a large leather bag that clinks gently as they hand it to the messenger. “This is everything they’ll need to treat the queen,” they assure Robin. “She’ll be better in no time.”

“Save it,” Robin snaps, because now that she’s heard the words she longed for, they only make her feel more anxious. She turns to the messenger. “Return to the palace. We’ll head back on foot.”

The messenger bows, then nods thanks to the doctors and departs. Robin and Lio leave too, because if she has to be in this stuffy room full of stuffy men any longer she’s going to scream.

“Heading back on foot?” Lio says sarcastically as they pass back out through the gate. “Is that what they call ‘going to find Sebastian and probably trying to murder him’?”

“Don’t act like you know anything about me,” Robin grumbles. “You can go back, I just have to... whatever. Yes, all right, I’m going to find Sebastian.”

“Did you forget the part where we nearly died a couple of days ago? Yeah, sure, let me abandon you while you go find an evil enchanter in the forest, I’m sure your parents will be *thrilled* when I come back alone.”

“They know what I’m like. They won’t blame you for my choices.”

They walk through Staghold’s orderly streets without paying much attention, too busy arguing to be aware of anything but each other.

“Real nice opinion you have of me, that you think I’m going to save my own skin and not worry about you!” Lio bites out. “*Thanks.*”

“Oh, that’s fair. I tell you that you don’t have to come do something that might be dangerous, and you get nasty about it.”

Lio glares at her. “Like you’re one to talk about ‘nasty’! I don’t think I’ve ever seen you go a full hour without scowling.”

“That’s not true.” Robin scowls. “Look, all I’m saying is that I know this isn’t what you signed up for when you said you’d help me talk to the College. So if you want to go home, I would und—”

He shakes his head. “You really must think I’m an asshole.”

“You’re acting like one!”

“It’s just.” Lio abruptly stops walking, turning to face her directly. “You’re risking your life—”

“And I said you didn’t have to come along!”

“Will you let me finish? You’re risking your life for your mother, and your mother is *horrible*.

Especially to you! Everyone knows that! People who’ve never been near the palace know that!

Probably people here in Staghold know that.”

“So?” Robin snarls, her hands balling into fists at her sides. “What’s your point?”

“Just that... if *you* want to go home, I would...” he trails off with a sigh. “I would understand, okay?”

“She’s my *mother*.”

“That doesn’t make you obligated to love her!”

Robin can’t help but laugh. Her voice cracks on it. Does he think he’s telling her anything she hasn’t thought of herself, hasn’t wrestled with in her most private, secret heart of hearts? Does he think his words are some kind of revelation to her?

“Maybe not. But I do. We don’t choose who we love.”

Lio gives a loud scoff. Robin glares.

“Fuck you, Lio.”

They don’t talk for the rest of the day.

#

It isn’t raining, at least, so they can have a fire against the cold when they stop for the night. Lio lights it with one of his multiple tinderboxes, and Robin thinks of how worried his parents would be if they knew what she’d gotten him into. Guilt curdles her stomach and stops her appetite.

Lio doesn’t eat either. Their bedrolls are back to being on opposite sides of the fire, but they’re sitting close together despite the discord. Robin doesn’t really want to be alone.

“You know how I said I’m under a permanent enchantment?” Lio asks in the quiet, not facing her.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t—”

“No, I want to. I know you’re angry at me for what I said earlier, about your mother. I want to tell you, so you know that I know what it’s like when parents are... complicated.”

Robin considers this. “Well, to be fair, if I wasn’t angry at you for that, I’d probably be angry at you about something else. As you pointed out, I’m pretty good at it.”

Lio’s mouth quirks into a small smile. “I don’t think I put it like that. You make it sound like a compliment.”

Robin shrugs. “Ferdie inherited the few nice bits of our parents that there were to go around. Not my fault. Anyway, if you want to tell me, I’ll listen.”

Lio adjusts his position, uncrossing and recrossing his legs to make himself more comfortable. The fire paints dancing golden light across his face. It suits his colouring.

“So you remember how, when we headed out from the palace, my parents kind of made a fuss? Well, they always do that, whenever I get sick or hurt or anything. They wanted more children, but I’m all they managed, so I’m precious to them, I guess.

“When I was twelve, I developed a heart problem. It came out of nowhere. They were terrified. Wrote to the College for advice, scoured every book in the library that might offer them some hope. They would have done anything to save me... they believed that then, anyway. I’m not so sure if they’d say the same thing now. Sometimes things you thought were unconditional end up revealing conditions you didn’t know you had, you know?”

Lio breathes in a deep sigh. His hand shakes as he pushes his hair back from his face in order to see better. “The College said the best way to save me was to strengthen my heart, and that the best method for that was a love potion. Kind of extreme, sure, but my parents decided twelve was old enough. They’d make sure I didn’t see any girls in the first few hours, so I didn’t imprint on anyone in

particular, and then if worst came to worst they'd have to put up with a romance-crazy teenager for a few years. Better than having a dead kid, right?

"So they made the potion. Extra potent, just to be safe. It felt... weird. Very weird. I don't know how else to describe it. I've looked in books, to see if anyone has ever written about it, but I haven't found anything. It was like... all of a sudden, I knew who I was. Everything made sense. Even though I knew I only felt like that because of the medicine, it didn't matter, because things were *clear*."

"I knew who I was," he says again, a trace of wonderment in his tone even now at the memory. Then he looks down at his hands, which have begun to shake even harder. He tries to still one with the other, but it doesn't work. It makes the shaking worse.

Robin reaches out to take one in her own, but Lio pulls away from the gesture. She drops her hand in the space between them, awkward and rejected.

"I... saw a boy. The world made sense. Everything made sense." The words are quiet. "My parents... they've been trying ever since. To fix it, I mean. All their spare time and money goes on new remedies, to make me like girls instead. It... it doesn't work. None of it works."

He dashes away tears from his eyes with trembling fingers. Robin doesn't know what to say.

After a long moment, she makes a quiet sound. "Calling them 'complicated' is making that word do a lot of heavy lifting, especially when you straight up called my mother 'horrible' earlier."

That startles a wet laugh out of Lio. "Hey! They... They just want to protect me. I think. This is what that means to them."

Robin heaves a deep sigh. "It sure does seem to matter a lot to parents, doesn't it? Girls and boys and all that stuff. Not that I don't think it's important, obviously it's important—" Her life would be considerably easier if it didn't matter so much to her that she was a girl. "I... just... I just wish they were better at loving the kids they *get*, instead of wishing they had the kids they *want* instead."

#

They find Sebastian's home the next morning. It's a castle in miniature, located within the forest exactly

where Robin's mother has described when recounting her own ill-fated visit to him.

It's lovely, and welcoming-looking, far more than the austere lines of Staghold. Elegant wooden windowsills, so graceful they look like they flowed into place rather than being set there, frame the windows, and the door has a brass knocker in the shape of a hand clutching a garland.

It's too easy. Much too easy, like cheese in a mousetrap, or the pollen of those flowers that snap closed around flies and devour them.

Robin thinks of her sharp, clever mother, letting herself be fooled because she was too desperate, wanted something too badly. Robin can't let the same thing happen to her.

Squaring her shoulders, doing her best to feel confident, Robin reaches out and bangs the knocker.

"Good morning!" Sebastian says cheerfully, appearing out of thin air right beside her. She takes an automatic step back before she can stop herself from flinching.

He looks almost the same as he had at Antoinette's christening, but a touch stranger, more uncanny. His hair gleams with a sheen that doesn't seem right for the way hair is meant to catch the light, as if it holds the glow of invisible candle flames among the glossy locks. His ears are delicately pointed, and Robin can't remember at all if they'd been that way when he'd trespassed into her home, or when he'd taunted them on the road. She hadn't had time to notice details like that, or like the way his slightly elongated eye teeth gave every smile a bloodthirsty air.

Or maybe that's her knowledge of him skewing her perspective. He could look like a painfully ordinary human, not special in the slightest, and she'd still know he's a dangerous viper, a calculating fox.

This close, she can see a light scattering of pale freckles across the tops of his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. That throws her off-balance, because it makes her think of Lio's face, which looks as if it *should* have freckles and doesn't.

Lio doesn't have freckles because he's shut away all the time, because his parents are ashamed

of something about him they think needs fixing, and all the while someone as terrible and destructive as Sebastian gets to be out in the sunlight often enough for it to leave freckles on his nose and cheeks. The unfairness of it all burns at her.

He's dressed more ornately than she is, unlike the christening, because Robin has been on the road, while Sebastian doesn't have to account for practicality. He wears an elegant grey silk capelet over a matching waistcoat, closed with two rows of silver buttons. His earrings are silver, too, with small dark stones in them that Robin thinks might be garnet.

Of course he's drawn to the colours of ash and blood, no matter how tastefully he might present them. She can't let herself forget she's face to face with a monster.

"You should have sent a card ahead, so I knew you were coming," he scolds. "Come in, come in." He pushes his own front door open and steps inside, bowing low as he gestures for them to enter.

Robin wishes she could hold Lio's hand. Instead she walks inside first, letting Lio follow. She's sure he would go first if she let him, but this is her battle to fight. Her mother to save.

"I was about to have brunch, would you care to join me?" Sebastian asks, walking with almost a skip in his step. "I make a delicious pomegranate salad, if I do say so myself."

Neither of them reply. He laughs merrily. "Don't worry, the food isn't bewitched. If I wanted to hold you prisoner, you'd be prisoners already."

Robin doesn't buy it. She doesn't believe he'd do anything so straightforwardly if he could play a trick instead.

They continue not to answer him as he leads them through an echoing foyer, the floors a black-and-white chequerboard of glossy tiles.

They follow him through champagne-coloured double doors into a sunlit room with a huge table in the centre, laden down to practically groaning with a lavish feast. The air wafts with scents of hot coffee and buttered toast and bacon.

"Well anyway, I'm going to eat, and if you're going to be churlish about it, you can just sit and

wait until I'm done," Sebastian tells them in a bright voice. Robin stops walking.

"No," she says, as firmly as she can manage. Anger puts an unwanted wobble in her voice.

"We're not playing this game. You've made my mother ill, and you're going to fix it."

"Am I now?"

Her hands are shaking along with her voice, which makes her even angrier, which makes her voice come out in a snap. "Yes. What do you hope to gain out of tormenting her more?"

"Hmm..." Sebastian pretends to consider the question, staring off into middle distance above her head. "It's fun? That's the only reason to do anything, sweetheart."

"It's her life!" Robin swallows her pride. "*Please*. You have to stop this."

"What will you give me in return?"

The question is asked so simply and guilelessly that it takes Robin aback. "What do you want?"

He looks like he very much wants to laugh. "Ah, now that's a dangerous question to ask, honeybunch. What if I said I wanted you to stay here?"

"What?"

"What if that was my price? I'll cure your mother, and you'll stay here as my consort—"

"No!" Lio cuts him off before he can finish, sounding frantic. "You can't!"

Now Sebastian really does laugh.

"Ah, you can always rely on the lovesick to put on a good show."

Robin glances at Lio, concerned. "Lio?"

Sebastian cocks his head to one side, examining them both with narrowed eyes before speaking to Lio.

"She doesn't know, does she?"

Robin's breath catches in her throat. No. *No*. Not like this.

She makes a small choked sound and Sebastian's raptor gaze swings to her. Slowly, his mouth

widens into a huge, delighted grin. He looks at her for a long, understanding moment, then turns back to Lio.

“Oh, *you* don’t know. Everyone’s been keeping such wonderful secrets from each other!” A glance at Robin. “Do you want to tell him, babycakes, or should I?”

Her hate for Sebastian is a roaring sound in her ears, making it difficult to think about anything else. How dare he take this moment from her, too, like he’s taken so much else?

“I’m a girl,” she grits out, unable to bring herself to turn and meet Lio’s eyes. What if he hates her for lying? What if he doesn’t *understand*? “That was the other part of his spell on my mother. I’m really a girl, just like he promised her.”

A long beat of silence, and then the room rings with laughter. At first Robin thinks it’s Sebastian, still so dreadfully entertained by his own trick after all these years, but after a moment she realises the unhinged, wild sound is coming from Lio.

Now, she looks at him. He’s doubled over, clutching at his stomach, his breath coming in uneven gasps. “Of course!” he chokes out. His voice cracks. “That explains *everything*!”

“What—?” Robin starts to say, too confused to be hurt yet, though she knows the hurt will come.

“Don’t you *get* it? I saw *you* after drinking the potion! All these years, my parents have been desperate to turn my love to girls, and you were a girl the whole time! All their... All the remedies just made it stronger and stronger!” Lio’s voice cracks again on another laugh, bitter and crazed, as he falls to his knees. “I prayed, you know? I *prayed* to fall in love with a girl. And all the time I was already!”

“...Me?” Robin manages to say faintly. “It was me?”

“Of *course* it was you! Couldn’t you *tell*?”

“I think,” Sebastian cuts in, “our dear Robin isn’t especially acquainted with what love looks like.”

She thinks of the bandits on the road, Lio driving the dagger down into the last one’s back over

and over, long after the man was dead. His hands, the fingernails still rimed with gore, clinging to hers that night as he shook and shook.

He hadn't been scared about what he'd done. He'd been scared at the thought of losing her.

She wants to go to him now, to hold his hand, to try to make him stop laughing that awful, broken laugh. But she's scared that if she moves away from Sebastian, something terrible will happen.

Lio sounds as if he's making himself sick, not taking in enough air with each gasp, breathing too fast. Sebastian looks at him with what could almost be mistaken for fondness, if Robin didn't know better.

"Oh God, oh God. They shocked me with bottled lightning, once. Have you ever felt it? The bite of it? I was fourteen." Tears are streaming down Lio's face. "It just made it *stronger*."

"As delightful as this little breakdown is, it's put a dampener on our conversation. He needs to sleep it off," Sebastian says dryly. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Don't hurt him!" Robin cries out, but Sebastian has already flicked his fingers towards where Lio is gulping for air.

Lio's eyes roll back in his head and fall half-closed. He stays kneeling for a breath's length of time, swaying in place, before he falls forward like a dead weight. His cheek slams hard onto the marble floor with an audible thud, and Sebastian grimaces theatrically.

"Oops, that's probably going to bruise. Oh well, sometimes they're prettier that way."

"I said not to hurt him!" Robin snarls. "It's me you want, leave him alone."

He tilts his head to one side, observing her thoughtfully. "All right. Let's leave him be, then."

He starts walking towards a door on the left-hand wall of the room, gesturing for Robin to follow. She glances down at Lio's unconscious form, then decides he's probably safer here than she'll be wherever Sebastian's going, and trails after.

She'd say that the situation has rapidly spiralled out of her control, but she knows she was never in control to begin with.

Beyond the dining room is a library. It's a lot more chaotic than the one in Robin's home, books in teetering haphazard towers all across the floor, some dusty with disuse, others shiny and new. The whole place smells like paper and ink. There's a threadbare chaise longue with an empty teacup and saucer perched on its edge in one corner, where the light from the window is strongest.

Sebastian crosses the space with the carelessness of someone who has navigated the same mess so often that it has become invisible to them, heading for another door on the opposite wall.

"I'm deciding what to ask you for. That baby was charming. Would you give her up, to save your mother?"

Robin feels like her heart's being ripped in half. It's an impossible question.

He knows it's an impossible question, too. He glances back at her with a pitying expression, like she's a gambler who's run out of chips to play. "Come on, put some spirit into it. Offer me riches, like your mother did in order to have you. Offer me treasures I don't care about."

"What do you *want*?" she asks again, pleading. "Why are you *doing* this?"

Robin expects another glib one-liner about how amusing her turmoil is, so it surprises her when Sebastian stops walking and faces her, his expression absolutely serious. It changes the whole look of his face.

"You don't understand this because you are very, very young," he says in a quiet, even voice.

Robin, who has never felt young in her life, forces herself not to interrupt.

"But when you have had so much time that time itself has become meaningless, you realise that the only thing that makes life bearable is to make your own amusement."

Ah, there it is, just as she'd expected. No deeper explanation, no nuanced motivation that gives the slightest bit of meaning to all she's gone through. Just his same old bullshit.

"No court jester or theatrical troupe or written comedy will do the trick. Everything is meaningless except the games you devise to entertain yourself."

Sebastian begins to walk again, reaching the door and opening it. Beyond is a narrow corridor,

stretching long to both the left and right. He turns right.

“I tormented a holy knight once. Killed all his comrades, burned his village, even vanquished his enemies for him. I took and took until he had nothing left, until his unshakable faith in his righteous God crumbled.” Robin watches as Sebastian’s grave expression is briefly interrupted by a smile at the memory of his cruelty. “That was a worthy distraction, while it lasted. He made quite a charming companion by the time I was done breaking him down into shattered pieces of himself. But he’s dead now. That’s the other problem; when you do manage to find something fun, it proves to be so ephemeral. Then you have to start all over.”

There are so many doors on either side of the corridor. Robin doesn’t think the inside of the house could possibly fit without the outside that she and Lio had seen in the forest. There are lamps at regular intervals, but deep shadows between their pools of light.

“I tried being insane for a while,” Sebastian tells her breezily, his usual good humour returning. Their steps are almost silent on the thick carpet. “Falling wildly in love with girls and boys. Luring them into my home and keeping them prisoner in the most sumptuous of jails. I’d bewitch them so they forgot they’d ever belonged anywhere else, forgot that they’d had fathers and mothers and homes. I could do that to you, if I wanted. Make you forget the king and queen and that scrappy doctor’s child whose blood is shot through with sweet poison.”

Robin halts, mouth set in a frown. “Why would you want to do that?”

Sebastian shrugs. “Why do anything? You might be fun to have around. You’re more interesting than the rest of your family, that’s for sure.” Then he shakes his head. “I won’t, though. Being insane became tiresome. All the girls and boys died, in the end, and after a while I became so accustomed to their dying that I hardly mourned at all. Keeping lovers as pets can feel empty.” His broad grin returns. “Then again, anything can feel empty eventually.”

He begins walking again, assuming she will continue to follow. To her chagrin, Robin does. “That’s why it’s important to invent games. Your mother’s plea made for a wonderful game. The very

notion of you was a marvellous, glorious game that I've been playing for sixteen years and which is now, with your arrival, finally coming to its denouement."

"Fuck you. I'm not a game," she spits, unable to keep her cool any longer.

"But you are!" Sebastian looks like he would spread his arms wide in an effusive gesture, if not for the confines of the hallway. "The heartbroken queen, her hopes dashed, her dreams curdled into bitterness! The invisible daughter, everything her mother had hoped for and was blind to even as she was right in front of her! A daughter so heroic she'd do anything to see her mother well, no matter how unloved she is! It's my best, cleverest game yet!"

It's as if he can hardly believe his good luck.

"That physician's boy is a good joke, too. I would have loved to have known that one sooner, to have laughed over the exquisite *misery* of it." Sebastian chuckles. Robin balls her hands into fists at the sound. "A boy in love, the simplest story of them all, and yet fear and meddling made it so complicated that it became a snare to trap him in."

He shakes his head again, still smiling. "Maybe I should keep *him* here. The potion means I can't make him forget you, so you'd have to stay too. But I can make him forget the rest, and if you're here he won't worry about trying to recall what he's forgotten."

Lio's not here this time to cry out in objection when Robin considers the words, forcing herself to bank her fury. "Would you heal my mother?"

"Hm?"

"If we stayed," she explains, "would you heal my mother?"

"What would it matter? You wouldn't remember her anyway," Sebastian reminds her dismissively.

Her rage is hissing and spitting inside her, like hot oil on iron, but she forces herself to remain detached. This may be the best chance she gets, while he's taunting and mocking and assured of his upper hand.

“Yes, but,” Robin keeps her voice even, “would you? If... If you made Lio forget everything but me, and made me forget everything but him.”

The world narrows around her as she considers her options. She can't fight like her sword is an extension of herself in this constricted space. Robin thinks of Lio with the bandits, fighting as dirty as he needed to, getting in any kind of hit he could at any opportunity, slitting throats and stabbing backs.

Sebastian's gale of laughter is as merry as Lio's was fractured. He laughs and laughs and laughs. “It's not fun if you *agree*, sugarplum.”

She punches him in the mouth, hard enough that her knuckles split against his teeth. His lip splits and bleeds, too, so when he staggers she's not sure whose blood is smeared at the corner of his grin.

Before he can regain his footing, she charges forward, grabbing at his thighs and knocking him back, hearing the satisfying thud of his head hitting the wall. Robin tries to tackle him to the ground but there isn't room at this angle. The wall keeps him upright for long enough to get his hands in her hair and pull.

She grunts in pain and steps back without letting go of him, giving her enough room to slam his back into the wall again, eliciting another thud as his skull connects. This time she turns them slightly before Sebastian recovers from the blow, winning enough room in the corridor to throw him down onto his back.

Standing again quickly, she draws her sword and points it down at where he sprawls at her feet. She presses the tip against the pulse of his throat. The blade doesn't break the skin, yet. He grins at her through bloodied teeth.

Robin is pretty sure she's not going to throw up, this time. Maybe it really does get easier, the more people you kill.

She knows Lio will still love her even after she does it, even though she's not doing it out of self-defence or to save someone else's life in the heat of a skirmish, but rather out of sheer spite and hate, fury at all the harm he's caused.

Lio will still love her. He can't help but love her.

She's breathing hard, but her sword is steady. It hasn't drawn a drop of Sebastian's blood.

Maybe... maybe that's why she shouldn't do it. Because Lio can't help but love her. She has to deserve his regard, if she has it regardless.

"You're taking us to the palace, and you're healing my mother," she tells Sebastian in a cold voice. "And then you're leaving us alone, forever."

Robin knows, on some level, that Sebastian is letting her hold a blade to his throat and make demands, but she can't let herself think about how tenuous this upper hand is. He seems content enough to play the hostage, so that's something. Maybe she managed to find a game more interesting than the one he thought he was playing.

They walk back down the corridor and through the library; back into the room where Lio lies in a crumpled heap on the floor. Before Robin can say anything, Sebastian strolls over and scoops him up into his arms, one arm under his knees and the other against his back. Lio murmurs a sleepy string of syllables at being moved and Robin wants to reach out, brush his tousled hair out of his eyes, but can't waver from training her sword on Sebastian.

She wants to tell him not to touch Lio, to put him down, but she remembers how heavy the bandits' bodies were to carry and knows she wouldn't be able to lift Lio like Sebastian is.

"Try anything clever and I cut," she growls instead.

"Yes, yes," he says with a longsuffering sigh. "Are you sure you don't want anything to eat? He'll wake up on his own soon enough."

"No, we're going now," Robin demands. Sebastian hums acknowledgment, readjusting his hold on Lio in order to draw a sigil in the air with the hand beneath his knees.

The air shimmers around them and Robin feels a momentary lurch, like on the deck of a ship caught in rough seas. The world blurs like watercolour around them before coalescing back into focus, now in her own bedroom at home.

“You know it’s incredibly creepy that you know which room is mine, right?” she snaps at him. Sebastian gives her a sunny smile, which is marred by the fact that it splits his lip open again and sends a rivulet of blood down his chin.

“Put him on the bed,” Robin orders. Sebastian raises his eyebrows.

“That’s very forward of you, young lady.”

Robin rolls her eyes. “God, can you just *shut up* for a change?”

As ordered, Sebastian sets Lio down atop the quilt on Robin’s bed. Lio’s mouth is parted, his face soft and slack. He looks so vulnerable, cheek blooming into a bruise, that Robin doesn’t care that Sebastian is watching, that there’s no lock on her door, that anyone could come in at any moment. If that happens, she’s got bigger things to worry about.

She leans down and presses a kiss to Lio’s forehead, his skin clammy with sweat. It makes her lips taste faintly of saltwater.

Robin straightens up again and turns to Sebastian. “I’m going to keep my sword lowered as we walk to my mother’s rooms, but if you try anything I will run you through, do you hear me?”

“Loud and clear, Your Highness.” He salutes. Ugh, she hates him *so much*. What an *asshole*. Maybe she’ll kill him after all, morality be damned.

It’s strange to walk through the palace, to pass people going about their ordinary everyday business. Nobody pays Robin and Sebastian any attention. Robin assumes this is Sebastian’s doing, but it makes her life easier so she doesn’t object.

Lio’s parents and the other doctors are in the hallway outside the queen’s bedroom, conferring quietly.

“Oh, Your Highness, you’re back!” Lio’s mother says in surprise. “Is Lio—”

“He’s sleeping,” she says, neatly avoiding mentioning where he’s doing so. “He’s absolutely fine, he’s just exhausted. The messenger will arrive with the concoction soon. May I see my mother?”

“Her Majesty is asleep too,” one of the doctors says. Robin notices that none of them mention

that Sebastian is standing right next to her, grinning cheerfully.

“I won’t disturb her. I’ll only be a moment,” Robin says, letting an edge of sharpness into her voice so that they know she’ll make a characteristic fuss if they try to tell her no. Without waiting for permission, she moves past them and opens her mother’s door, gesturing for Sebastian to walk ahead of her.

“I knew you would be a game worth the wait,” Sebastian says in a stage whisper once they’re inside. “This is the most fun I’ve had in *ages*.”

Robin considers stabbing him, just a little bit, so he’ll stop being so insufferable for a few minutes. Probably it’s bad form to treat your prisoners like that, but she really, *really* wants to.

The room smells of the enchanted vapour the doctors have been administering, but even with its scent thick in the air the queen’s breaths are a wet rattle. Robin’s heart clenches at the sound, the audible struggle for every inhale.

“You know, I could have done this from home,” Sebastian tells her as he waves a hand, as if it’s an afterthought. “We could be eating brunch right now.”

Her mother’s next breath is smoother, easier, deeper. Robin lets out a breath of her own.

“I know,” she answers. “But I needed to be sure. You can go now. I never want to see you again.”

“Ah, never say never!” Sebastian admonishes playfully, and then he’s gone in a shower of sparks that burn her hands where they hit.

#

Ferdie finds her in the kitchens an hour later, before she’s had a chance to change out of her travel clothes or do anything other than eat some bread and cheese and play with the dog.

“I missed you the most, yes I did, you’re my favourite out of everyone in the palace,” Robin tells the terrier conversationally. It whines at her for another piece of her cheese.

“I hope I’m the second favourite, at least,” Ferdie says. Robin shakes her head.

“Nope, that’s Antoinette.”

Ferdie nods. “Correct choice.” He pats her on the shoulder. “Mother’s awake, and the doctors have told her that you’re back. She wants to see you.”

Robin stops herself from making a face, but only just. “All right, I’ll be there soon.”

Her mother is propped up on a bank of pillows, looking even more diminutive than usual among all the voluptuous furnishings. The sight sends a surge of protectiveness through Robin. There’s something bittersweet in realising how fragile and fallible your parents are as you get older.

“Robin,” her mother says, sounding more like herself than she had in the days before Robin left on the journey. “It’s good to see you got back without getting into any kind of stupid trouble. I suppose I should thank you for going, even if it proved totally unnecessary. I’m feeling better already from the vapour treatments, and the messenger isn’t even back with the extra supplies yet. I knew you were making a fuss about nothing. You’re always so melodramatic.”

“I don’t need a thank you,” Robin assures her, conscious that her mother has not, in fact, offered one. “Of course I made a fuss. You’re my mother.”

Robin takes a deep breath, and continues speaking before the queen can say anything else. “From now on, you’re going to acknowledge that I’m a girl.”

Her mother frowns. “You’ve asked for this nonsense bef—”

“You misunderstand. I’m not asking. I’m telling,” Robin explains evenly. “I may not be the daughter you wanted, but I’m the daughter you got, and that’s the end of it.”

She leaves the room, not bothering to wait for her mother’s reply.

Kathleen and Antoinette are in the nursery, the former singing a silly nonsense rhyme to the latter. Robin stands in the doorway for a moment, watching, glad to be home. She knows Ferdie will give Antoinette a childhood wholly unlike his own, and the thought makes her heart warm.

“Do you want to hold her?” Kathleen asks. For once, Robin shakes her head.

“No, I was actually wondering if I could borrow you for a moment.”

“Of course.” Kathleen hands Antoinette over to one of the nurses, and follows Robin as she walks towards Kathleen’s rooms.

“I was thinking... I’d like to wear that dress today, if it’s all right with you. I’ll get my own ones made up soon, so you can have it back, but for now it’s the only one I’ve got, and—”

“Robin,” Kathleen cuts her off gently, resting her hand on Robin’s arm. “Of course. Let me help you do up the lacing at the back.”

Once she’s changed clothes, washed her face, and combed her hair out of the ponytail she’s always worn it in, Robin goes back down to the kitchens. She wants to play some more with the dog, because the dog has always liked exactly who she is. The dog won’t make it weird.

She wonders if the kitchen workers are staring, but doesn’t bother to look. She doesn’t care about anyone’s opinions anymore.

“I thought you’d be here,” Lio says. Robin looks up from where she’s sitting with the dog. The bruise is large and dark on Lio’s cheek, like Sebastian predicted, but he looks otherwise normal, if extremely weary.

“You’ve got a knack for predicting what I’ll do,” Robin notes dryly. “I’m not entirely comfortable with being so easy to read.”

Lio shrugs one shoulder. “Be less predictable, then.” He pauses, then speaks again. “You look nice.”

“Thank you,” Robin answers, and finds that maybe she does care about some people’s opinions.

“Can we go for a walk outside for a minute?” Lio asks. Robin nods and stands up.

It’s too cold outside for the dress, really, but Robin has never cared less about practicality.

Everything has happened so quickly that Robin hasn’t had any time to think about her and Lio, what the future could hold for them. The problems of the present have been so pressing, so relentless: a sick mother and bandits and doctors and Sebastian. It’s only been a handful of hours since she even

found out the true nature of Lio's enchantment.

She hasn't had time to *think*. Can she even think of Lio romantically with a clear conscience, when he doesn't have any choice about how he thinks about her? Did he have the right idea, staying away from her all these years?

"I—" they begin in unison, and laugh awkwardly.

"You go first," Robin says, because she has no idea what she wants to say.

Lio stops walking, turns to face her, and takes her hand in his.

"I like you."

Robin rolls her eyes. "Yeah, I know, the potion—"

"No, I *like* you," Lio repeats. "The potion made me love you, but I didn't... it's been years since we spent time together. I loved you but I didn't *know* you. It's like... like how nuns get married to Christ, you know?"

"Comparing me to God isn't the best way to prove this is a good idea, I'm just saying."

"Stop talking and *listen*. Nuns love Christ, and the idea of him makes them want to be the best person they can be. That's what loving you has been like, all these years. But... nuns don't see Christ get cranky in the rain, or argue with him about whether a book was good or not. They can't eat pork and potato stew together in their room at an inn, because Christ has remembered they don't like crowds." He squeezes her hand, giving her a small smile. "They can't hold hands with him when they need comforting. I like *liking* you better than I ever liked *loving* you."

"It doesn't bother me that I'm this way. I'm not sad about it. I bet you're not sad about the way you are, despite everything."

Robin thinks about it, and blinks in surprise. "That's true. I'm glad to be me."

His smile broadens. "I'm glad you're you, too."

"But what about your parents?" she asks, hating to ruin the moment but needing to bring them back to reality. "I don't think that they're going to care that I've started wearing dresses. They'll

probably just want to cure me, as well as you.”

Lio gets that same cool, collected expression on his face that Robin has seen him wear as he fights bandits to the death and stares down mad enchanters. “I’m finished with letting their fears be my pain.” He laces his fingers with hers. His skin feels warm.

“...Good. That’s good,” she manages to reply, feeling a hot tear strike her cheek when she blinks. If Lio’s got no choice but to love her, then she wants him to love himself with at least as much intensity.

“I—” he starts to say, but before he can get any further she turns her head and pulls him closer to her by their joined hands. Because he’s shorter than her, there’s a moment before their mouths meet where he’s looking up at her through his eyelashes, and Robin’s heart flips in her chest. She likes him so much.

Then they’re kissing, and his lips are soft and wet and he makes a little noise of surprise, which she thinks is funny, because how can *anything* still be surprising to him after everything they’ve been through? She can’t help but smile.

“Oh,” Lio manages when they break apart. His cheeks have gone very, very red. Robin suspects her own are a similar shade.

“Yeah,” she agrees, and kisses him again.

#

#

* * *