

**UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER**

A Creative and Critical Investigation of  
Transgender Narratives and the Portrayal of Transgenderism  
In Contemporary Young Adult Fiction

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Doctor of Philosophy

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This Thesis has been completed as a requirement for  
a postgraduate research degree of the University of Winchester

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**Abstract**

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Through exploring other writers' portrayals of transgenderism in contemporary young adult (YA) fiction, I set out to see if it was possible to write a novel with a transgender protagonist where transgenderism was not the main focus of the plot. For this, I wrote a YA fantasy novel called *Son of Flames*, which is the first book in the Fallen Sons trilogy. This consists of 79444 words, which is approximately four fifths of my total thesis. To support this, I also wrote a critical rationale where I explore my research questions and how the novel helped me answer them.

Starting with Julie Ann Peters's *Luna* (2004), I track transgender YA fiction through to the year 2016. Taking these works, I compare plot points, point of view and underlying themes. In the vast majority of these novels, the plot revolves almost entirely around issues of transgenderism. These issue novels are important for readers looking for information about the topic. However, because books can be said to function as both windows and mirrors, I argue that it is also important that novels exist where transgender characters take a main role without the whole plot being about their gender identity.

Originally, I intended to avoid issues of transgenderism and coming out completely in my own writing, but I found that this is impossible. Instead, these issues form a crucial part of my protagonist's character arc and provide texture for the surrounding story. Whilst it is therefore possible to write a YA novel dealing with transgenderism where it is not the driving force of the plot, a transgender identity cannot be tacked onto a character only for the sake of diversity. If well-researched, the character's gender identity informs how they react to events and other characters in the story. Transgenderism, therefore, must be only one part of a multifaceted character. This enhances the novel's role as both a window and mirror.

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**Son of Flames**

**Book One of the Fallen Sons Trilogy**

The aging stones of the castle tower were harder to climb than he'd expected.

As Farrow pulled himself up, shoulders aching, his fingers slid into sturdy gaps where they competed for space with soft, moist moss. There was a steady burn in his calves and thighs as he found shallow grooves to wedge his feet in. The grey stones felt rough against his palms, and icy cold where the early morning sun had not yet touched. A thin film of frost coated each stone, sparkling faintly in the weak dawn light, and every so often he had to stop to rub his fingers against his shirt, fighting the painful numbness that threatened to spread across his hands.

*Letting go would be so easy.*

The thought skittered across his mind like a spider and settled, waiting, lurking behind his eyes.

He stopped to catch his breath, looking up. The sky was beginning to fade from an ashy blue to a blush pink, streaked with golden clouds. Beyond the light whistling of the wind, he could hear the beginnings of the dawn chorus. In his eyeline was the sill of a window that jutted out a little, breaking the line of the tower several yards above. His goal. The exhilaration of the climb was almost enough to distract from the bindings that itched under his clothes.

Almost.

It wouldn't be long before he'd be missed. Before he'd be expected to smile and pretend nothing was wrong.

The urge to let go howled again in his ears, black and angry.

He squeezed his eyes shut, clinging to the side of the tower and mashing his face against the hard, cold stone. *Breathe*. Icy air filled his lungs. The howl faded to a low hum.

It was a few moments before he trusted himself enough to open his eyes and resume the climb.

He was sweating and shaking hard by the time he heaved himself onto the windowsill. He paused on his stomach, panting. The small, circular room beyond was decorated in cobwebs and a grey layer of dust, disturbed in places by smears and smudges of cleaner stone. In the centre was a prone wooden chair, missing a leg. The leg itself lay abandoned and dusty. Dirty, moth-eaten blankets were heaped against the wall across from him and, to one side, was a wooden hatch set into the floor.

Heart thudding painfully in his chest, Farrow hauled himself up to sit on the ledge, gripping tightly onto the edge of the window. He adjusted the cap on his head, fingers brushing over the pins that kept it firmly in place. Satisfied, he rested his forehead against the cool stone and let his eyes close as he finished catching his breath.

When he opened them again, the world was laid bare at his feet.

The castle of King's Rock was nestled on the northern coast of Serukis, a bulwark at the entrance to a natural harbour. Countless rivers penetrated the landscape like a web of veins, carving deep grooves into the dark granite. Scrubby plants clung to the sheer rock, covering in the shadows of tall, grey pines. Still black waters separated a myriad of islands and shorelines, sweeping beyond his sight to the distant ocean. Further along the coastline to the west, mountains towered in the distance, their forms made hazy by the morning mist. Even from miles away, they looked as though they scraped against the sky, hunched over and crooked in a space that was too small for them.

The Teeth.

Farrow had first caught sight of them three days out from King's Rock, as they had boarded the barge that had borne them slowly down the inlet towards the castle. Accustomed to the wide plains and patchy woodland of Whitecastle, Farrow found himself sleeping uneasily in their shadow. It was little wonder the Lord of Earth was worshipped above all else in this part of Serukis, with the Teeth for his rocky sentinels. Just one mountain could swallow up the whole city of King's Rock and everyone in it.

Farrow shuddered.

Tearing his gaze away from the mountains, he peered down past his knees and dangling feet. The tower he'd climbed plunged down into the glassy black depths of the water below, its reflection shimmering on the surface. Further out, beyond the shadows of the castle, the water was painted pink and orange by the dawn, broken up by patches of white ice. Small dark boats were already out on the water, and he could see the silhouettes of fishermen casting their nets out in the hope of an early morning catch.

Behind him, the castle was built into the hillside – carved into the rock by the first Seruic kings, his father had told him as the barge made its ponderous approach. The city of King's Rock itself was spread out along the shoreline behind him, tiered and cut into the hillsides surrounding the castle. The docks where they had disembarked made use of the natural harbour the castle guarded and, when Farrow strained his neck, he caught glimpses of dark green sails and tall wooden masts. When they had travelled up to the castle from the dockside, the guards escorting them kept them a healthy distance from the lower city, which was clustered on the water's edge. There, on both sides of the inlet, the buildings spilled out onto the water like stains, balancing on stilts and forming makeshift docks.

On the wind, he caught the pungent scent of coalsmoke and could hear the first sounds of a city coming to life. Somewhere in the castle, he could hear the clash of steel and the barking of dogs. He imagined that Grace would soon be discovering his empty bed and wondered if she would worry.

His eyes dropped again to the shadowed surface of the water. The spider-thought scratched at the back of his skull.

It would only take a moment.

“How'd you get up here?”

Farrow's body jerked as his head whipped around to find the source of the voice, his pulse quickening. A boy had emerged from the pile of blankets. He was around seventeen, half-hidden in shadow and crouched like a cat. Farrow could make out his sleep-ruffled dark hair and smudges like

bruises under his eyes – eyes that were watching him, guarded and wary. Dust motes swirled between them in the sunlight.

“Uh...” The sound escaped without Farrow meaning it to, and he cleared his throat to gather himself, carefully swinging his legs into the room so that his feet were on solid ground. He pitched his voice deliberately low. “I climbed.”

“Impressive,” the boy said, though his face remained unreadable. Then, “Are you breaking in?”

The blood drained from Farrow’s face. He hadn’t stopped to think about how climbing the walls may appear to others in King’s Rock; he did it regularly in Whitecastle, where all the guards knew him.

“No, I – I’m staying here.” Even to his own ears, the words sounded like a lie, and he watched as the boy raised his eyebrows. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down and added, “I came here with the Hargrove family, from Whitecastle.”

The boy’s expression changed from open distrust to guarded curiosity as light and shadows shifted over his angular face. He rose to his feet, slender and taller than Farrow.

The boy’s lips quirked in a grin. “Tell me about the lady.”

*Damn.*

Farrow’s stomach turned over, but he resisted the urge to cross his arms over his chest.

“Which lady?”

The boy blinked once, slowly. “Lady Viola. Our future queen.”

An icy finger curled inside Farrow’s stomach. The betrothal was not yet common knowledge. How did this boy know about it? He wiped his suddenly sweaty palms on his trousers, looking up at the boy’s face.

“Oh,” he managed. He took a step away and picked up the broken chair from the floor, setting it on its three remaining legs. There was a solid lump in his throat as he tried to think of something to say. “Well, she’s... quiet. Keeps to herself, mainly.”

An expectant pause. Farrow risked a glance back at the boy and found his gaze on him. There was an intensity and suspicion in his eyes that made Farrow feel deeply uncomfortable.

“Surely you can tell me more than that?”

Panic flickered in Farrow’s chest. His skin burned with the desire to get away from the other boy.

“Well, I – uh...” His mind drew a stubborn blank.

The boy stepped towards him, and Farrow took a stumbled, instinctive step away. A smile curved the boy’s lips, and Farrow noticed for the first time the faint scar that marred his left cheek.

“Perhaps you’ll be able to share more with the guards,” the boy said, his casual voice at odds with his words. “I’m sure they’d be interested to know why you were climbing the castle walls so early in the morning.”

Farrow’s stomach clenched. The guards being involved would open up a whole nest of problems he was not ready to deal with.

*Think, idiot. Think.*

“There’s no need for that.” The words spilled hurriedly from his mouth. “I serve Lord Hargrove, not the Lady. I don’t know much about her, honest.”

The boy’s head tilted to one side, suspicion still alight in his eyes. “Her father, Lord Trystan?”

“Yes.”

*Please, no more questions.*

“If you serve Lord Hargrove, you should be getting back before he wakes up, I’m sure.” The boy’s tone told Farrow that he didn’t believe a word.

Farrow took a step towards the window, feeling dizzy. Grace would be missing him by now. “You’re right, I really should be going.

The boy’s eyebrows raised. “You’re going to climb back down?”

Farrow froze, looking uneasily from the boy to the window.

“I - I guess.” He’d not really thought that far ahead. The need to get away from this boy was drowning out any other thoughts.

After a moment, the boy sighed and strode over to the trapdoor Farrow had seen before. He opened it up with a rough creak of the hinges, sending a cloud of dust billowing into the air.

“Go this way. It’s safer.” When Farrow looked at him, his stomach twisting with doubt, the boy added lazily, “At the bottom of the tower, you’ll find yourself near the kitchens. As you serve your lord, I’m sure you’ll have no trouble finding your way from there.”

Farrow actually had no idea how to return to his chambers from the kitchens, but to admit that would be admitting that he was lying. From the look in the boy’s eyes, he had the feeling that would be a terrible idea.

Instead, he made himself nod. “Thank you.”

Anxiety rose in him as he realised he’d have to walk past the boy to get to the trapdoor. Though he was slender, Farrow could see wiry muscles that could easily overpower him if he so desired. Forcing those feelings down, however, he made himself walk with purpose towards him, adjusting the cap on his head to make sure it was safely in place. The boy stepped aside as he drew close, and Farrow cast his gaze down, focusing instead on finding his footing on the first rungs of the ladder.

He was almost halfway down by the time he dared to look up. The boy was silhouetted in the opening, his shadowed form surrounded by a halo of light as he watched Farrow descend. As Farrow looked up, the shadow boy shifted, placing one hand on the trapdoor.

“I’ll see you around, I expect.” The words were somewhere between a threat and a promise.

Farrow still felt his eyes on him long after he’d left the tower behind.

\*

The bath was hot, almost to the edge of pain, and a haze of steam rose from the water. He could feel it on his tongue when he breathed, damp and tasting like home.

“So, where’d you go this morning?”

His twin’s voice was somewhat muffled by the screen between them, dark fabric stretched between dark wood, embellished with golden leaves, vines and swirls. Farrow sank deeper into the bathwater, a sigh escaping his lips.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Liar.” Phineas’s voice was amused. “Grace told me you weren’t in your bed when she woke up.”

“Grace has a big mouth,” Farrow said, without heat.

Phineas laughed. “Climbing, then?”

Farrow cupped one palm against the surface of the water, letting a soft yellow flame spark to life in his hand.

“Just one of the towers,” he admitted. “I was feeling restless.”

He concentrated, sending tendrils of flame scattering across the bathwater like ripples. It was nothing like his father could do – Trystan Hargrove could conjure walls of fire with a mere thought – but recently Farrow had found the flames easier to bring to life, as though they were eager to please. Each of the five great houses, when Serukis was founded, had claimed for themselves one of the Five Lords as their patron. In return, or so the legends said, each Lord had granted their house a sliver of their power – fire, earth, air, water, ice. Farrow imagined, lodged somewhere deep in his chest, a seed of Elian, the Lord of Fire’s power.

*Fire destroys, his father was fond of saying. And fire cleanses. House Hargrove will always rise from the ashes of defeat stronger than before.*

Phineas sighed. Though Farrow couldn’t see him, he could imagine him slouched in one of the embroidered armchairs, head tipped back as he rolled his eyes skyward.

“Just don’t get caught, Viola.”

Farrow scowled at the screen as the flames dancing on the water dissipated into smoke.

"I'm not an idiot." He wasn't planning on mentioning his run-in with the strange boy.

When Phineas didn't reply, Farrow looked away from the screen. To his right, the fireplace burned, crackling, a sound so tied to home it made his chest ache. A log cracked as it shifted, sending a bloom of sparks into the air. Bright as fireflies, they burnt out as quickly as they had appeared. In silence, Farrow trailed his fingers through the surface of the water. Ripples shifted away from his touch. The water distorted his view of his body, and he could almost believe that it was as it should be.

That it was male.

*Don't think about it.*

"What are you doing here, anyway?" he asked his twin.

"Checking on you." Phineas's voice was casual, but Farrow could hear the concern there. "It's a big night tonight."

Farrow had tried to run from that reality that morning, climbing the tower he'd thought abandoned, dressed in servant's clothes with his hair hidden under a cap. Yet it seemed that every time he tried to forget the reason he was in King's Rock, something happened to remind him. Like that boy, and his questions about Lady Viola.

About *him*.

"I'm aware," he grumbled, prompting another soft laugh out of Phineas. "I've been thinking about it all day."

Since he'd returned to his chambers that morning, the looming spectre of the ball had hung over him like a shadow. It was to act as the official announcement of his betrothal to the crown prince, a celebration from which there would be no turning back. From that moment, Farrow would be thrust into the eyes of the court as the future queen, with all the expectations and shackles that came with the title. When his father had decreed the betrothal, Farrow had seen no choice but to acquiesce and travel with his parents and younger siblings to the capital.

Everyone else saw him as a woman, after all.

Setting his jaw, Farrow shut his eyes and finished washing himself, giving only cursory attention to what was between his legs.

“How are you feeling?” Phineas asked.

“I’m fine.” The words came out automatically.

“If you say so.”

Farrow opened his eyes. Taking a long breath, he looked around the room, trying to imagine what it would be like to call this castle home. The walls and floor were made of dark grey stone, not the warm, sand-coloured stone of Whitecastle. A tapestry in Elenasia green and gold hung on one wall, telling the story of some past king who had met Faolan, the Lord of Earth, in the form of a great black wolf. In front of him, the orange glow of the setting sun spilled through the window like liquid fire.

“I feel trapped,” he whispered eventually.

“I know.” Phineas sounded sympathetic and more than a little frustrated.

Farrow climbed out of the bath onto the wolfskin rug in front of the fire, his skin pink from the steaming water. Tugging the towel from the top of the dividing screen, he wrapped it tightly around himself and stepped closer to the fire. The warmth rushed over him, and he could feel the water droplets drying on his skin. He could hear Grace, his handmaiden, singing softly in the dressing room, doing something that involved rustling fabric.

No doubt checking on the gown he would wear to that night’s ball.

“The prince seems like a good man, though.” Phineas’s voice sounded closer, as though he’d risen to his feet and stepped up to the screen. “From what you’ve said about him.”

“He’s not disagreeable,” Farrow said carefully, scrubbing his skin with the towel.

In the week he had been in King’s Rock, he’d met with the prince on several occasions – heavily chaperoned, of course. Prince Camber had been polite on their walk through the castle’s

glass gardens and graciously attentive over afternoon tea, but Farrow felt as though all he had seen of the prince was a carefully cultivated mask.

Phineas snorted with laughter. “Damned with faint praise.”

Something in Farrow’s chest tightened, and for a moment he couldn’t breathe. “Shut up.”

“If you’re not going to help, Master Phineas, you can leave.” Despite the elocution lessons Lady Hargrove had insisted upon, there was still something about Grace’s voice that evoked the city and the market on a hot summer’s day. “My lady needs calm.”

Farrow felt a rush of relief.

“Calm?” Phineas demanded. “Since when is climbing towers ‘calm’?” There was a brief pause, and Farrow could only imagine the look Grace was giving him, before his brother added sheepishly, “I’ll behave.”

Grace stepped around the screen, holding a pale cream linen chemise over one arm. She gave Farrow a warm, understanding smile as she held out her hand for his towel. He handed it over to her, and in return took the chemise and pulled it on over his head, wincing as it tugged on a couple of the pins that held his long hair piled on top of his head. He smoothed out the skirt with his fists, hating the way the material swished and brushed at his ankles.

In Whitecastle, he had often got away with wearing tunics and trousers day-to-day, with dresses only enforced with company or for special occasions. Farrow had assumed, somewhat naïvely, that this would continue in the capital. However, his mother had overseen Grace’s packing of his travel case to prevent Farrow from bringing any masculine garments that could embarrass the family. At first, he’d hoped that Grace had somehow managed to sneak at least one pair of trousers into the trunk, but the long weeks on the road and river had already proven otherwise. She had managed to acquire clothes from some of the male servants, now that they were in the capital and not under constant supervision, but their usage had been limited to clandestine outings.

“You’d better be facing that door, Master Phineas, or there’ll be a scandal.”

Phineas laughed softly. "Court life must be boring." There was the loud, grinding sound of a chair being dragged across the floor. "Facing away."

Grace smiled at Farrow, tucking a stray copper wisp of her hair behind her ear. "Let's start getting you ready for tonight, my lady."

Farrow managed to return something that resembled a smile and quietly followed Grace out from behind the screen. Phineas had turned his armchair to face the door of the chambers and all Farrow could see of him was the back of his dark head. He looked away from his brother and back towards Grace, who pulled out the chair from the dressing table.

Farrow sat down obediently in the chair, shifting it back in front of the dressing table and catching sight of himself in the polished brass mirror. Unconsciously, he cast his eyes down, studying the marquetry roses on the surface of the dressing table.

*No. Get used to it.*

As Grace began to unpin his hair in preparation to comb it, Farrow forced himself to meet the eyes of his reflection. The girl in the mirror stared back at him, her jaw set. She had long straight hair, so dark it was almost black. Her face was angular, made sharper by the scowl that grew deeper as Farrow continued to stare at her. Pale skin was complemented by soft, pink, feminine lips. His teeth tugged at them in discontent. The only feature of hers he liked was her eyes. They were the only part of her that seemed to be him. A deep, dark blue, they seemed to smoulder in the mirror, dancing with the reflection of the firelight. In her eyes, he could see the man he should be.

He wished everyone else could see him too.

Grace found his eyes in the mirror, giving him a small, reassuring smile.

"Are you nervous, my lady?"

Farrow avoided her gaze, focusing instead on another strand of hair that had escaped from Grace's neat bun. He wondered how much of his conversation with Phineas she had heard.

“A little,” he admitted. It was not entirely a lie. He *was* nervous, on top of all the other emotions currently swirling around inside his head. “It’s not every day you get presented to the court as the future queen.”

She gave him a sympathetic look. “Through a betrothal you didn’t want, no less.”

Farrow grimaced, but said nothing.

“At least the prince is handsome, my lady, as you said yourself.” Grace was focused on combing a particularly stubborn knot out of his hair, but she still met his eyes briefly in the mirror. “And charming.”

She was trying. He appreciated the gesture.

“You didn’t tell *me* he was handsome,” Phineas broke in from behind him.

“You wouldn’t have cared,” Farrow told him, trying to keep his voice light. To Grace, he added, “You have to say that about the crown prince. It’s probably a law.”

Grace’s grin was so quick he’d have missed it if he’d not been anticipating it.

“Compliment His Highness,” she said, putting on an exaggeratedly affected voice, “or be thrown into the dungeons.”

“You have it wrong,” Phineas said, his voice dry. “It’d be on pain of death.”

The grin lingered this time. “Compliment His Highness or be sentenced to the grisliest death we can imagine.”

Farrow bit back a grin of his own, feeling a rush of appreciation for the two of them. “Exactly.”

Grace gave him a proper smile this time. “Made you smile.”

Farrow met his own eyes again in the mirror. Thankfully, his parents had allowed Grace to come to King’s Rock with him. It was good to have at least one friendly face who would be staying after the wedding; he didn’t want to think about the fact Phineas would have to leave. Grace had been with him for three years now and, although she didn’t understand exactly what was wrong with him, her presence usually helped.

Grace hummed a cheerful tune as she finished brushing out his hair, leaving him to his own thoughts again. Ignoring the clench in his stomach, he focused on the evening to come. No matter his own feelings on the marriage, he knew that he could not bring shame on the Hargrove family. According to his father, it had been over two centuries since a Hargrove had married an Elenasia, and this was a chance for the two powerful families to renew their once close relationship.

No matter his personal feelings, family came first.

Grace disappeared into the dressing room, and he stood, trying to pull himself together. By the time she reappeared, he thought that he looked calmer in the mirror, but under that veneer was a sense of vague and creeping dread.

He turned as Grace laid the two parts of his gown out on the bed and smoothed the skirts out with a reverent hand. From a certain point of view, Farrow could understand why she was so enamoured with it. The gown was the most beautiful item of clothing he had ever owned. For the occasion, his mother had taken him to the most eminent seamstress in Whitecastle and had spent a small fortune making everything perfect. She had told him that this gown was the most important outfit he would ever wear; it even outplayed his eventual wedding gown in terms of significance.

The under-gown was a rich gold damask, embellished with hundreds of amber-glass beads. The over-gown was a heavy, deep red silk, embroidered with a fine gold thread. A belt of golden leaves encircled the waist and trailed down the skirt to its hem, evoking the autumn that had just ended, and paying homage to his future husband's house. It was also strategically padded around his hips and breasts, enhancing his body where his mother found it lacking.

It was beautiful, and he hated it.

"The prince isn't going to be able to take his eyes off you, my lady."

Farrow stroked one of the golden leaves, frowning. "Him and everyone else."

Grace smiled, not saying anything else as she began to help him pull the under-gown on over his head.

"You'll be queen one day," Phineas said. "*Of course* everyone is going to be looking at you."

“Don’t you think I know that?” Farrow snapped, then immediately regretted his sharp tone. “I’m sorry, I’m just... it’s overwhelming.”

Grace touched his shoulder, before tugging his hair forwards over his shoulder so that she could lace up the golden under-gown. Phineas made a noise that was probably an acceptance of his apology, but didn’t say anything else.

After a moment of silence, Farrow said quietly, “I just don’t know how I’m going to get through this evening.”

Phineas twisted in the armchair to look at him, his brow knitted together. “I know it’s overwhelming, Viola,” he said quietly. “But this is your life now. Own it.”

“I’m trying,” was all the reply Farrow had.

Phineas got to his feet, stretching his arms over his head.

“I’ll leave you ladies to it,” he said, though he was still looking at Farrow with disquiet. “I need to get ready myself.”

Before Farrow could protest – and Lords, he wanted to – Phineas had slipped out of the room, shutting the door quietly behind him. It felt as though he had taken a little piece of Farrow’s courage with him. Grace wrapped one arm around him from behind in a hug, and he reached up to touch her hand in thanks.

“He’s just worried about you,” she said quietly in Farrow’s ear. “I am too.”

“I know,” Farrow said softly.

Grace released him and moved to the bed to pick up the over-gown. A soft smile touched her lips as she picked up the heavy garment and held it to herself, but she smothered it quickly. Farrow watched her quietly, wishing that he could take away the longing in her eyes.

“Maybe we could swap places for the evening,” he suggested, half-serious.

Grace looked wistfully at the gown, but then shook her head. “Your family – and the prince – know what you look like. And my low birth would give me away as soon as I opened my mouth.”

Farrow made a face, but remained quiet as Grace helped him into the over-gown. It was split down the front of the skirt so that the material of the under-gown could still be seen and admired, and Grace carefully adjusted it so that it was sitting right. Farrow stroked his fingers over the embroidery on the bodice and tried to hide just how much his hands were trembling.

When she was satisfied with how the gown was sitting on his body, Grace bid him sit at the dressing table again. Biting her lower lip in concentration, she began to braid his hair, weaving in a fine chain of golden leaves. She coiled the braid on his head like a dark crown, pinning it in place with skilled fingers. Not one wisp of hair escaped.

Farrow barely recognised the girl in the mirror. The pale, unhappy maiden of earlier had morphed into someone who could be a queen.

*Who would be a queen.*

He felt vaguely sick at the thought.

Grace left him for a moment and returned with the jewellery box. From within, she drew out a necklace. It was a gold pendant in the shape of a stag, the emblem of the Hargrove family, dangling from a delicate chain.

Farrow was silent as Grace fastened it around his neck. The stag was cold against his skin.

“Ready?” Grace asked him softly, her voice tinged with both worry and wonder.

“No,” Farrow said honestly. “But let’s get this over with.”

Soft music and a rumble of voices floated through a crack in the door.

The Hargrove family were sequestered in a fine sitting room until the king and queen were ready for them to make an entrance. Farrow sat alone on a hard, green sofa, his stomach churning as the royal announcer in the ballroom declared another name he could not quite hear. Trying to distract himself, he looked around the room and attempted to keep his face composed and neutral. It was a modestly sized room in comparison to other rooms in the castle, but what it lacked in size it more than made up for in elegance.

Dark velvet chairs were arranged around a carved marble fireplace, where a fire burned low and sluggishly amongst the cinders. The portrait of an old king – Farrow couldn't tell who – hung over the mantle, gazing out over the room disdainfully. More tapestries hung on the walls, depicting scenes from the Elenasia family histories.

Farrow's eyes lingered on one that hung beside a darkened window. A coiled dragon, emerald green, reared towards the ceiling, its body tangled in grasping vines. Thorns bit into its armoured scales and roses dripped where there should be blood. Its head was twisted around to stare out into the room and embroidered smoke curled from its nostrils. A tear marred the fabric over one of the dragon's wings and the tapestry sagged slightly, exposing the stone wall behind it. Despite this, the dragon's green eyes glittered in the firelight, almost alive.

Farrow forced his gaze away, studying the woven rug beneath his feet as the music swelled in the ballroom beyond. How much longer? He was scheduled after every other guest had already been announced.

The queen had insisted on it, to make a lasting impression.

Farrow wondered how much more of an impression he would make if he vomited down the front of his gown.

There was a rustle of fabric as his mother sat down beside him. She rested her hand gently on his knee, and he glanced up at her. Lady Marisol Hargrove was effortlessly beautiful, as always. She was clad in a sweeping gown of red, so long the skirts spilled onto the floor in a burning river. Golden flames climbed the bodice from a waistband of golden antlers. Her loose, dark hair tumbled down her back, kept in check by a headband of gold and silver flames. A single large ruby hung at her throat like a droplet of blood.

“Appearances matter,” she said in a soft voice, repeating the words that had become somewhat of a mantra of late. “Smile, Viola.”

Farrow swallowed at the sound of his birth name and pasted on a smile. It was what everybody called him, but it still didn’t make hearing it any easier. ‘Farrow’ he had chosen for himself after the main character in his favourite novel. The Farrow of the book was brave, smart, good, and everything Farrow aspired to be. He clenched his fists on his knees to control his shaking hands.

“You look beautiful,” his father said from beside the fireplace. “Relax.”

Lord Trystan Hargrove cut an impressive figure in a black tunic edged with gold. On the back, Farrow knew, was a proud stag embroidered in delicate golden thread. His salt-and-pepper hair was immaculate, cropped short and smart. His blue eyes held a faint note of concern, though his face remained, as ever, impassive. Farrow managed a nod of acknowledgement and then looked back at his hands.

“I learnt to love your father,” his mother said, in a voice low enough for only Farrow’s ears. “You will learn to love the prince.”

“What if I don’t?” he asked her, in a voice just as quiet. He felt as though a heavy rock had been placed on his chest.

His mother smiled in the direction of Farrow’s siblings. Rosalie, at eleven winters, sparkled in a pale pink gown that reminded Farrow of flower petals. She was knelt on the bearskin in front of the fire, cheeks rosy and eyes shining with excitement for the evening to come. Lucas, his youngest

brother, was in an identical outfit to their father, though in miniature. He held himself stiffly upright on one of the chairs; even at only eight, he was a stickler for etiquette. Phineas was in dark red like their mother and was sat with his dark head bent towards Lucas, trying to engage him in gentle conversation.

His mother's hand fell on his own, startling him into looking back at her. Her voice was soft. "Then you will love your children."

Farrow closed his eyes for a moment. He would rather be dead.

He was saved from having to respond, however, by the appearance of a footman wearing the green and gold livery of the royal family.

"My lords and ladies," he said. "They are ready for you." He turned to Farrow and gave him a bow. "Lady Viola, I will return for you soon."

*Please don't.*

Exhaling, Farrow rose to his feet. He smoothed out his skirts with trembling fingers and tried to ignore the way his stomach twisted. As the rest of his family stepped towards the door, Phineas appeared at his side.

"You all right?" he whispered.

Farrow managed a nod, but couldn't quite find his voice to reply. Phineas grimaced in sympathy and offered him his arm. The gesture, sweet but steeped in etiquette, steadied Farrow, and he gratefully took his brother's arm the way he had been taught.

"You really do look beautiful," Phineas said softly in his ear, steering him over to a chair closer to the fire. Closer to Elian's comfort. "And I know you hate it, but it'll make this easier."

Farrow glanced up at him, saw the sincerity on his twin's face, and forced a weak smile. "Thanks, Phin."

He sat down on the chair his brother had steered him to, shuffling towards the warmth of the fire. Phineas gave his hand a squeeze, then followed the rest of the family out of the room. The door shut with a decisive click.

Farrow hugged himself as silence pressed in around him. His heart fluttered like a moth trapped against his ribcage. As the minutes passed, sitting still became more unbearable. He stood and began to pace in front of the fire, wanting to climb out of his own skin.

*I could leave, he thought. His gaze slid to the door. I could run.*

But where to?

The door opened, making him jump. Instead of the footman, though, he found himself looking at Prince Camber, who held a finger to his lips as he shut the door behind him.

Farrow found himself staring at this boy who would one day be as familiar to him as breathing. Tall and garbed in soft dark green, the prince stood in front of him with an easy confidence. His dark hair was artfully messy and fell into eyes that were as blue as the sapphires Serukis was famous for. His jaw was clean-shaven, and his lips were curved into a comfortable smile.

“What are you doing here?” Farrow said softly, forcing his hands down by his sides instead of folded across his chest. “We’re not supposed to be alone together.”

Camber gave him a little grin, stepping closer. “I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

Farrow managed a smile. “I’m nervous, Your Highness, but I’m well.”

It was a lie, but what else could he say to the crown prince?

Camber held out his hand to him, palm upright, and smiled slightly. “I have a gift for you.”

As Farrow watched, a bud appeared in the centre of the prince’s palm, pushing its way out of his skin. Slowly, it bloomed and the petals unfurled, exposing a blood-red rose. Farrow reached out and touched the velvety petals. It reminded him of the flames he could bring to life with his own hands, and it made sense; the royal family had the Lord of Earth as their patron, after all.

Camber plucked the rose from his hand and lifted it up, tucking it into Farrow’s hair where it was coiled in a braid.

“You look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Farrow said softly. People kept saying that, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to believe it.

Camber gave him another smile, then said, "I should go. I'll see you soon."

Farrow watched as Camber slipped out of the room. Left alone as the door closed, he reached up and touched the rose now decorating his hair. His heart thudded in his chest.

*Run, it said. Run, run, run.*

Before too long, the footman returned and beckoned Farrow to follow him. Taking a deep breath, Farrow did as he was told.

He followed the footman across the hall to the entrance of the grand ballroom. To his left was a large arched window made up of hundreds of pieces of coloured glass, depicting a hundred different flowers Farrow couldn't even begin to name. In the daylight, he guessed, it would cast a rainbow of light onto the floor, as though the stone itself had burst into bloom. He wondered for a moment what it would feel like to stand in front of that window as the sun filtered in, bathing in colours. That evening, however, the night outside was pitch black, and the window was dark.

Farrow pulled his gaze away reluctantly. The ballroom doors loomed above him, twice the size of any man and made of dark, forbidding rosewood. Golden vines clambered up the door as though it was still alive. The vines twisted around large brass handles in the shape of roses and curled themselves into the cracks around the door.

Two new footmen bowed and opened the doors to reveal the top of a wide, grand staircase. Dark marble steps lined with golden bannisters swept down to an expansive dance floor of polished dark wood. The sound of soft strings and woodwinds floated above the murmur of conversation, as guests in many colours whirled in dances or clustered in small groups to gossip.

At the opposite end of the room was a dais with a pair of twisted thrones that looked as though they had been carved directly from tree trunks. Branches reached up like fingers to form the backrests, glittering with gilded leaves, and at the bases thick roots snaked out towards the dance floor. Sat upon the thrones were the king and queen. Behind the dais, open doors led out into the dark palace gardens, and sentinels in glistening armour were posted at each one. The ballroom itself

was three times the size of the great hall at Whitecastle, almost cavernous in its construction, with a high vaulted ceiling and four large crystal chandeliers that sparkled like stars amongst the beams.

*Lords, help me.*

Waiting at the top of the stairs, the court announcer turned and looked at him with a wide, simpering smile. The golden rose of the Elenasia family was emblazoned proudly on his chest. Farrow noticed, stupidly, that one of the candles on the closest chandelier had died, and white smoke was curling lazily up towards the ceiling.

“Lady Viola Hargrove of Whitecastle.”

His birth name reverberated over the ballroom, and it was all Farrow could do not to visibly cringe at the sound.

For a moment, Farrow debated fleeing, but then he saw Phineas at the bottom of the staircase, waiting for him. Gathering every inch of poise and refinement he had, he started to descend the grand staircase. He had burnt an offering to Elian that morning, and another before he had begun to get ready for the ball, praying he wouldn't make a fool of himself that night. Hopefully the Lord of Fire was feeling generous. Focusing his gaze somewhere in the middle distance, he concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. He could feel the prickle of many eyes on him, judging him, and a ripple of whispers started to sweep across the dance floor.

“... a betrothal...”

“... the prince's bride...”

“... a Hargrove...”

They knew why he was there.

Farrow's legs threatened to lock up and give way. It took all the willpower he had, and Phineas's eyes on his own, to keep walking. A faint sweat had beaded on his forehead by the time he reached the bottom, but he kept a smile frozen firmly on his face. Phineas's arm slipped through his elbow and he clutched at it discreetly, as tightly as he dared.

“Well done,” his twin whispered.

Farrow couldn't make himself reply.

A warm hand touched his arm. "My lady?"

He turned to face Prince Camber, who had stepped up to his brother's side. Before Farrow could speak, the prince took his hand and bowed low to touch his lips to his knuckles. Heat rose to Farrow's cheeks, but he dared not pull away. Phineas's hand tightened a little on his arm, but he barely noticed.

"You look wonderful this evening," Camber said as he straightened, as though this was the first time he had seen him that night. His eyes crinkled a little in a smile, before he turned his gaze to Farrow's brother. "And Phineas, it's a pleasure to finally meet you. I hope we get to know each other well"

Phineas bowed, and took the hand offered. "Highness."

As he tore his gaze from the prince, Farrow noticed that Camber was flanked by three others, two boys and a girl. The first boy was taller even than the prince, clothed in dark grey with the black rose of House Vasey adorned on his chest. A sheathed sword hung at his hip. Where Camber had the build of a duellist, this boy had the build of a warrior. Neat, snow-coloured hair was swept out of sharp, pale blue eyes. He wasn't smiling. Attached to his arm was the girl, fourteen or so, dressed in a beautiful beaded gown of Elenasia green. She had long, honey-coloured hair that curled into natural waves, and blue eyes, bright with excitement, that were startlingly similar to Camber's own.

The other boy was of a height with the prince, with dark clothes that didn't proclaim an allegiance to any family. He was slender, and looked almost feline in his movements, as though he was poised to pounce on anyone who dared to trouble them. His dark eyes darted across the dance floor, missing nothing. As Farrow watched, he pushed his fingers through his dark hair, pushing it back out of his face. A thin scar shimmered in the candlelight.

It was the boy from the tower.

*Shit.*

Farrow turned his attention back to the prince, sending up another quick prayer to the Lord of Fire to not let the boy recognise him. That would certainly cause his family no end of shame.

“My companions,” Camber said, by way of introduction. He gestured. “Aric of House Vasey, my Shield.”

Farrow had read of the Shields. Each king from the time Serukis had been founded had one, a man sworn to defend him with his life.

The snow-haired boy gave Farrow a polite bow, taking his hand and giving it the barest touch with his lips. “My lady.” He straightened and looked at Phineas, still unsmiling. “My lord.”

“My cousin, Edith, his intended.”

The girl gave Farrow a warm smile and curtsied. “I am so looking forward to getting to know you, Lady Viola.” She gave Phineas a slightly shallower – but no less warm – curtsy and smile too.

“And this is Elery, the son of the man who saved my father’s life.”

And named for the king. Words unspoken, but heard nonetheless. The other boy gave them a bow but said nothing; Farrow wasn’t sure it was entirely sincere.

He’d heard the story Camber was alluding to, though. “The Kingshadow?”

Elery laughed shortly, and Farrow was relieved to see no hint of recognition in his eyes. “The very one.” He jerked his head towards the thrones. “He’s over there.”

Farrow glanced that way. There were two men standing near the king. One stood behind him, eyes trained on the ballroom at large; Farrow assumed that was the king’s Shield. The other man standing beside the king was tall and well-muscled, with messy dark hair, and more than a passing resemblance to Elery himself: that must be the Kingshadow. He was deep in conversation with the king, an easy hand resting on the monarch’s shoulder.

Farrow thought about everything he’d heard about him. Born on the streets, the Kingshadow – Cassian, Farrow remembered – had been in the right place at the right time, and foiled a plot that would have resulted in the deaths of most of the royal family. The story told how the conspirators had fled to the tunnels under King’s Rock, and Cassian had hunted them down like rats. No one had

escaped. King Elery, just a prince at that time, had kept him as a constant companion since that moment twenty or so years ago. 'Kingshadow' was a title that the common folk had given him, and one that had stuck.

As though he felt Farrow's gaze, Cassian Kingshadow looked over at them, his eyes sharp. He gave Farrow an appraising look, a brief smile, and then returned to his conversation with the king. Farrow felt his cheeks grow hot and looked back at Camber, who was watching him calmly.

"Come," the prince said, giving him a reassuring smile and offering his arm. "We must present ourselves to my parents before the celebration can begin in earnest."

A hush had fallen over the ballroom. Though the music was still playing, people were no longer dancing, but instead had clustered to snatch a look at the prince and his intended. Farrow froze. He barely registered Phineas releasing his arm. He must have looked vaguely panicked, because, in the next moment, Camber tilted his head slightly and gently placed Farrow's hand in its proper place on his arm. Without a word, he began to lead him towards the dais, unfazed by the eyes on them or the murmuring of the crowd. Farrow tried to ignore them too, instead focusing on not clutching the prince's arm in an unladylike fashion and on keeping his smile in place, though it felt so fragile it could shatter.

It seemed the longest walk of Farrow's life, though it took only moments. When the prince bowed to the king and queen, he somehow managed a graceful curtsy. An approving murmur rippled through the crowd and he hoped, somewhat inately, that his mother was watching. When Camber straightened, he straightened as well, and looked quietly up at the king and queen.

King Elery the Fourth of Serukis and the Three Isles was resplendent in a tunic of deep green and gold brocade, and upon his brow was a golden circlet studded with emeralds. He was tall and distinguished-looking, with dark brown hair that was silvering at the temples and a sharp, neat beard. His pale blue eyes seemed cold, but they warmed considerably when he graced Farrow with an approving smile. Even seated, he was a commanding, powerful figure. His presence took Farrow's breath away.

Queen Anissa was shorter and younger than her husband, and her dark hair showed no signs of greying. It was, however, her dress that had caught Farrow's attention. The King's outfit looked almost drab beside his wife's. She was arrayed in a dress of the deepest, darkest green Farrow had ever seen, a green that evoked forgotten and ancient woods. Fabric butterflies of all colours studded the bodice and skirts, gathering closer together and in greater numbers towards the hem where they spilled out in a delicate train over one of the throne's roots. Real flowers were woven into the queen's braid, which was draped over her shoulder and breast like a beautiful floral rope. Farrow wasn't sure at first where she'd obtained flowers such as that in mid-autumn, but then he remembered his walk with Camber through one of the great glass gardens, where plants could grow year-round, and the rose Camber had grown from his palm.

The queen gave Farrow a smile, her brown eyes kind.

Then the king nodded, and the gentle pressure of Camber's arm led him away. The whole ordeal had lasted only moments, but Farrow felt as though it had taken a lifetime. He glanced back as Camber guided him out onto the dance floor; the king was already deep in conversation with the Kingshadow, but the queen was watching their retreat intently. Farrow looked away quickly, heart pounding.

"Look at me."

Farrow turned his head to meet Camber's calm gaze. The soft words had the tone of an order, but his eyes were gentle and concerned.

"This is a little overwhelming," Farrow admitted, when the prince said nothing else. "I've attended balls before, but none so..." He glanced around the ballroom, at a loss for words. After a moment, he settled on, "big."

Camber smiled. "Mother does know how to throw a ball. I think half the nobility in the country are here tonight."

It was an exaggeration, but Farrow felt the colour drain from his face. He plastered on his smile again. "Lovely."

The prince's eyes danced, but his expression quickly sobered. He said nothing, just let his gaze roam Farrow's face. Heat rose to Farrow's cheeks at the scrutiny, and he submitted to Camber's gaze. Then, he gathered himself and let his own eyes wander, though he knew his mother would disapprove; if he was going to spend the rest of his life with this boy, he felt he had every right to look at him. The prince's expression turned to surprised, then pleased, and he let Farrow look. There was the barest hint of stubble on Camber's jaw, which Farrow resisted the urge to touch, and flecks of gold in his sapphire-blue eyes.

Camber gave him a mild smile. "I believe we are meant to be dancing."

Farrow pulled instinctively away. "I don't—" Then, he remembered where he was. Who he was talking to. He tried to make himself relax, but his voice came out too high, too polite. "Yes, highness."

Camber made no comment, but Farrow could see him turning this over in his mind. Then, without a word, he took hold of Farrow's arm again and led him to a clear spot on the dance floor. The music was louder there and cut clearly across the chatter of the other guests. Much to Farrow's horror, the crowd parted around them in a wide circle and there was a smattering of polite applause.

The prince released his arm and gave him a low bow. "May I have this dance, my lady?"

Farrow swallowed, then nodded mutely and took the hand that Camber held out to him. He tried not to think about how much bigger Camber's hands were than his, or the delicate grip the prince used, as though he might break. One hand kept hold of his own and the other rested lightly at his waist, brushing the shallow curve of his hip.

"Relax."

Farrow nodded again, biting his tongue. It felt as though a cold stone had settled in the pit of his stomach. The court's eyes were on him still, judging him to see if he was worthy of being the prince's bride and their future queen.

There was no way to say he didn't want to be.

Camber began to lead him in a dance. It was a slow, steady waltz, the steps of which Farrow's body recognised from the years of dance lessons his mother scheduled and he stubbornly tried not to engage with. The prince was a strong, confident leader, and his body followed without a stumble.

"Are they making you nervous?"

Camber's breath was warm against his ear. The feeling sent a tingle down his spine, a tiny seed of what could be attraction.

"A little," he replied, and he was proud of how steady the words came out. "I don't like being the centre of attention."

The prince let out a soft chuckle, whirling him around and then drawing him back into hold. His voice was kind when he said, "You'll have to get used to it."

The cold stone in his stomach grew, but Farrow forced a smile. "I am aware, Your Highness."

Camber's eyes grew serious as he caught his gaze. "Focus on me. Don't worry about them, or what they think. Yes, we've been brought together by our parents, but I intend to do right by you, Viola. As your husband, and one day your king."

Farrow blinked. His heart felt as though it had dropped to the floor.

"And I'll do my best to be a good wife." His throat stuck on the word and his mouth formed it only reluctantly, but there it was, floating between them like a promise.

He was going to have to do his best to be the queen everyone wanted him to be, even if it killed the boy he knew he was. There was no other option.

And then, the screaming began.

What had begun as a nightmare had suddenly become infinitely worse.

Camber's fingers tightened on Farrow's arm. He shoved him behind his body, head whipping around to find the source of the screaming. One hand groped for a sword that wasn't there. Armoured men poured down the grand staircase, brandishing naked blades. They wore no colours – claimed no allegiance. As they watched, one of them cut down a young woman who stumbled on the steps, splattering her dark blood over the polished marble floor.

The screaming grew louder. Frightened men and women started to rush towards the dais and the open doors to the palace gardens. There was no other way out. If there were men waiting in the grounds...

Aric materialised at Camber's side, his sword in his hand. "We need to get out of here. Now."

"We need to help." The prince's face was white, his fingers opening and closing with the need to be holding a weapon.

Aric gripped him by the shoulder with his free hand. "You have your lady to protect now. No heroics."

Camber shook him off, though he nodded stiffly. Before Farrow could protest, he found himself being steered away by Camber's strong arm. They joined the crush of people rushing towards the dais, Farrow searching wildly for any sign of his family. Phineas. Rosalie. Lucas. His parents.

At the dais, the queen had already been whisked away. The king's guards were moving down onto the dance floor, shoving through the crowd of terrified people, their swords drawn and ready. King Elery was on his feet, shouting for someone to bring him a sword. The king's Shield was stood in front of him, his own blade up and ready to meet anyone who dared attack the king. The Kingshadow drew his own in a flash of steel.

Aric almost knocked Farrow flying as he surged forwards, sprinting towards the dais.

For an instant, time seemed to stand still. The Kingshadow's sword glittered in the light from the chandeliers as he turned to face the king. Then he drove the blade through the king's stomach and out through his spine with a loud crunch that was clear even above the screams. The king's eyes flew wide open and his mouth moved inaudibly as he turned his head towards his friend. Blood trickled from his lips.

Camber's scream as he launched himself towards the thrones was almost bestial.

Farrow froze, unable to believe what he'd just witnessed. The Kingshadow grasped the king's shoulder and yanked his sword free. King Elery crumpled to his knees, then slumped onto the floor, unmoving. As the pool of blood grew from underneath his body, Aric mounted the dais with a yell, sword raised. Cassian effortlessly lifted his blade to parry the blow. This seemed to shake the king's Shield out of some kind of shock, as he whirled around and joined Aric in driving the Kingshadow back across the dais, yelling in anger. As Farrow watched, Camber rushed up the stairs and flung himself down beside his father's body.

Steel clashed in all directions as the king's guard collided with the intruders on the dance floor. At the garden doors, there was chaos. Farrow saw one young man knocked down by a stray elbow and then trampled underfoot as the crowd seethed towards the doors. The thresholds were blocked by the sheer number of people trying to get through them at once, but still the crowd jostled and heaved. As he watched, a pair of dark-clad soldiers rushed up and started hacking down the people in the back.

There was no escape.

Farrow stumbled away from the dais and the massacre that was occurring at the garden doors. He had lost sight of Camber, Aric, the Shield, and the Kingshadow; it was as though they had melted away in the confusion. He found himself with his back pressed up against a pillar, breathing hard. For a moment, he covered his face with his hands and found his cheeks wet with tears.

*Get it together, Farrow.*

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, he lowered his hands and cast around again for a way out. The garden doors were no longer an option, but there had to be another way. His eyes fell on the grand staircase. The dance floor was filled with fighting men, but the stairs themselves were relatively clear.

If he could get there.

He wasn't the only one with that idea. Kicking off his impractical shoes, Farrow joined a small crowd of people heading around the edge of the dance floor towards the stairs, trying to blend in. He was certain that, as the crown prince's betrothed, he was somewhat of a target and it was only due to the mass panic and confusion that he'd so far gone unnoticed.

A hand grabbed his arm and he yelled, twisting and hitting out blindly at the body beside him.

"It's me!" Phineas's voice was scared, but Farrow felt a dizzying wave of relief.

He looked up into his brother's pale face, then pressed his face briefly into his shoulder.

Phineas's arm around him was crushing.

*"Move!"*

Farrow jumped at the warning roar, half pulling away from Phineas although his brother didn't let go. A dark-clad soldier stepped over the body of a guard and started towards them, his sword dripping with blood. The group around them scattered, shouting and crying and tripping over each other in their haste to get away. Phineas's hand was torn from his arm, and Farrow lost sight of him in the crush.

A portly noble grabbed hold of Farrow's shoulder, his round face white. A brooch glittered on his tunic, a knotted snake, but Farrow didn't recognise the emblem.

"Run, my lady," the noble panted. "I'll hold him off."

Then he pushed Farrow aside, standing between him and the advancing soldier. Farrow hoped for a moment that he had a weapon concealed, but only his fists were clenched at his sides.

When Farrow didn't move straight away, trying to look around for Phineas, the noble bellowed, *"Go!"*

Farrow ran, his bare feet slipping slightly on the bloody marble floor. Adrenaline and fear spurred him to the bottom of the stairs. Common sense screamed at him to keep running, but he stopped with a hand on the handrail, gasping. He was breathing hard, trying to gulp in air around the lump in his throat. He couldn't help searching one last time to see if he could see the rest of his family. If he could catch sight of Phineas again.

Farrow's stomach turned over; the portly noble was face down and still, the soldier nowhere to be seen. People were still trying to escape through the garden doors, but more soldiers were on them like a pack of wild dogs. Broken bodies in bloodied finery littered the dark marble floor and Farrow tried hard not to search for those he recognised. The air was thick with screams and sobs, and he could almost taste the metallic stench of blood.

His eyes swept the dais and his heart faltered in his chest. His father was there, someone else's sword in his hand, defiantly facing down three of the dark-clad soldiers. Behind him were two dark-haired boys dressed in the deep green of the royal family. The younger princes.

The thought came to him unbidden. *That's the man I want to be.*

He saw all of this in what must have been just a moment, though time itself felt sluggish and unreal. A scream tore itself from his throat as the soldiers advanced on his father, but Lord Trystan Hargrove just grimly raised his sword. A wall of flame burst up out of the dais behind him, shielding the young princes from view, and Farrow's own hands burned. For a moment, the world faded around him as everything turned to a dull roar.

Perhaps he could help after all.

The sound came rushing back as a nobleman knocked him aside in his rush to ascend. Farrow caught himself against the rail, flames flickering between his fingers. His body seemed to gather the courage to fight.

As he turned towards the dance floor, he saw Phineas racing towards him. Blood was smeared across his twin's cheek and stained the front of his tunic. He was so close. His hand reached out for Farrow, and then his eyes rolled and he pitched forward. The full weight of Phineas's body knocked

Farrow down. The world became white, blinding pain as the back of his head cracked against the stairs.

Farrow was trapped as the world span. He could feel the warmth of his twin's blood seeping into his gown. People were shouting, but he couldn't understand the words. His vision faltered and dimmed.

*It's all over.*

Then, everything went black.

\*

Consciousness returned in fits and starts.

Somewhere, someone was wailing. Then the wailing stopped; for some reason this disturbed him more. Dark figures moved at the edges of his vision. At one point, he could have sworn he heard someone screaming his name.

Farrow stirred, a groan escaping his lips. Something heavy was crushing his chest, and his mouth tasted of copper. He forced his eyes open and the branches of a chandelier swam into his vision. Dull pain throbbed in the back of his skull. He tried to sit up, but the weight on top of him refused to shift. He turned his head and his eyes met the dull, lifeless eyes of another boy.

*Lords help me.*

It took a moment before his swimming mind recognised Phineas's face, and his heart ground to a halt. His vision flashed. Farrow saw his brother sitting laughing in a stream after his horse had thrown him. Saw a smile shared over a smouldering prayer fire. Saw him waiting at the bottom of the grand staircase. His throat closed up and he choked back a rising sob, although every inch of his body was screaming. He wasn't safe here.

*No, no, no, no, no!*

"Hey, look at this."

A rough male voice cut through the stillness. Farrow froze, then closed his eyes, doing his best to appear lifeless.

“What is it?” Another male voice, softer spoken.

There was the quiet jangle of metal.

“This’ll be worth about five roses, you reckon?”

“At least that.”

Farrow opened his eyes a little and slowly turned his head. Within ten paces, were two men in dark clothes, their backs to him. One was crouched over a woman’s dead body, holding up a necklace for the other man to admire. Scavengers, like crows that descend on a battlefield once everything is quiet. Farrow closed his eyes again and hoped the two men would pass him over.

Footsteps moved closer to him, and then the soft-spoken voice said, “Hey, look. It’s the Hargrove girl.”

Panic lodged itself under Farrow’s ribcage. He fought to keep his face impassive, to keep his breaths as shallow as possible, hoping that the man would move on. Instead, there was the rustle of fabric as the man crouched down beside him. Cool fingers traced his throat, and he felt the chain of his pendant lifted from his skin.

“This’ll be worth something.”

“Let me see,” the other voice said, louder footsteps heralding the man’s approach.

Less careful, warmer fingers brushed his throat. With a sharp yank, the delicate chain bit into his skin, then snapped. Farrow flinched, his eyes flying open, and he stared up into the faces of the two men who were looting him like a corpse. They were ordinary-looking men, one with the shadow of stubble and eyes as hard as flint, the other boyish and unassuming. Surprise flickered across their faces, but the older of the two smothered it quickly.

“She’s still alive,” the younger man said, his voice faintly unsure.

Farrow tried to sit up, to scoot away, but Phineas’s body was still pinning him down. The older man let out a rough laugh.

“For now.”

A short gasp was all Farrow could manage as a sharp, cold blade was suddenly pressed against his throat. The younger man’s eyes flicked between the knife and Farrow’s face.

“We should hand her over to the captain, as a hostage. Get the prince out of hiding.”

*Camber’s alive.* The thought flickered across Farrow’s mind, and he was surprised at the short flood of relief in his chest.

And then, *Phin.*

The older man’s mouth twisted slightly and Farrow felt the bite of the blade against his skin.

“Go get him, then.”

The other man hesitated. “He said he wasn’t to be disturbed until morning.”

An exasperated sigh. “Then go stand outside his chambers until you grow the balls to knock. This is worth his time.”

The younger man scrambled to his feet in his hurry to obey. The sound of his retreating footsteps inexplicably filled Farrow with dread. He drew in a shallow, shaky breath, willing his voice to return. Any words turned to ash in his mouth.

The dark eyes of the man beside him met his gaze, and Farrow’s stomach clenched at the flare of desire in their cold depths.

“Now it’s just you and me, bitch.”

Farrow didn’t dare move – *couldn’t* move – not with the man’s knife still pressed against his throat and the weight of Phineas’s body still trapping him against the marble floor.

With one careless hand, the man shoved Phineas to the side; his brother’s head hit the floor with a sickening *crack*. Farrow had to remind himself that Phineas couldn’t feel anything anymore. It didn’t bring him any comfort. Suddenly free from the weight of a body above his own, Farrow tried to push himself up on his elbows, but at the movement the world pitched and heaved as the ache in his head reminded him it was there. Then, the opportunity was gone.

In one movement the man was above him, pinning him firmly to the bloodied floor. The blade of the knife was still pressed against his skin and the man's other hand grabbed his arm hard enough to bruise. Ice flooded Farrow's veins and his arms and legs refused to obey him. He tried to speak again, but still nothing came out.

A cold, starless night on the road came flooding back to him. Farrow, his mother, and Rosalie had been sleeping huddled for warmth in the back of a wagon. He had been curled between them as his mother's arm had reached over to smooth Rosalie's dark curls. His sister was fast asleep.

Movement had been heard outside the camp and the guards were on high alert. Farrow listened to them as he lay there in the dark, their sharp whispers and the soft hiss of naked steel.

His mother spoke quite calmly in his ear, though he could feel her arm tremble as she stroked Rosalie's hair. "If the guards are killed, they'll come for us, and they won't give us the pleasure of a quick death."

"What do you mean?" he whispered, as though she had not been clear enough. As though he didn't know what would happen.

"If that happens," she continued, as though he hadn't spoken, "I will leave the wagon. It'll give you time to smother Rose." She said it quietly, though a tremor distorted her youngest daughter's name. "Better she die, than..."

His mother stopped talking then, but Farrow understood. They lay there in silence until sometime later, when a scout reported in their earshot that the source of the disturbance had been a curious bear who had wandered too close. Then, his mother touched his hair, briefly, and turned over to sleep.

Pinned under the body of this man, Farrow could only think that she had been right.

The knife slid away, replaced by the man's crushing forearm. Farrow choked and instinctively tried to shove the man's arm away, but it was like pushing rock. The blade of the knife pricked his skin just under his collarbone and shut his eyes tightly, praying to the Lords for a quick death.

Instead, there was a tugging sensation on his gown and a ripping sound. Farrow's eyes flew open as the man split his bloodstained over-gown right down the middle. After muttered cursing and grunting, the beaded under-gown received the same treatment. For a moment, the crushing weight of the forearm lifted and allowed him to force in a lungful of air.

"Get off me!" Farrow's knee sunk into the soft flesh of the man's belly.

*Crack.*

Farrow's head snapped to one side and he cried out. He tasted blood.

"Stupid bitch!"

A whimper escaped Farrow's lips as the man grew more careless in his movements. By the time his shift submitted to the blade Farrow could feel blood trickling down his ribcage from a myriad of tiny cuts. His face throbbed. He could barely breathe. The knife clattered to the floor as the man pinned Farrow's wrists roughly above his head.

"Barely anything there," the man sneered. "Are you sure you're not really a boy?"

Those words – words Farrow would have given anything to hear at any other given moment – were enough to make hot tears sting the corners of his eyes. He still couldn't make his body move.

The man's hand slipped between his legs, fingers slick with someone else's blood.

He wanted to fight back, to scream and shout and bite and kick, but nothing seemed to work. His limbs didn't seem to belong to him. His voice was strangled in his throat. The man was going to make use of the mistake that was his body and there was nothing he could do about it.

An ugly crunch broke through his panic. The man dropped like a stone, his body sagging on top of Farrow's, unmoving. Standing over them was Grace, her copper hair loose and wild and her face as white as milk, holding an iron pan above her head. As they stared at each other, the pan fell to the floor with a loud, discordant clatter.

"Oh, Lords..."

Grace fell to her knees. She began to shove at the man's body, grunting a little as she threw her entire weight at him. It took a moment for Farrow's mind to catch up, but when it did, he shifted

and helped. Several agonising moments of harsh breathing and straining muscles later, the man's body rolled off Farrow's with a dull thud.

"My lady, they – the servant's quarters – they were asking for Hargrove staff –" The words tumbled out of Grace's mouth in an incoherent breathless jumble.

"They what?"

Farrow forced himself to sit up, ignoring the way his head still swam, and yanked his ruined gown around his body as best he could.

"The cook hid me, but they took the others." There were no tears in Grace's eyes or staining her cheeks, but her expression was tense and fearful. "I came as soon as I could."

Farrow wanted to ask her why she had come at all, risking her own personal safety to reach him, but they were running out of time.

"Others are on their way." He didn't know if he trusted his legs enough to stand. "Some kind of 'captain'."

Grace stood, and Farrow noticed she had knotted her long skirts above her knees. There were bloodstains on her knees.

"Then we need to go." Her voice was determined, though her freckles stood out starkly against her white skin. "Come on, my lady."

*Get up now.* The voice in his head sounded vaguely like Phin's. *Or you're as good as dead.*

His eyes fell on Phineas's body, still lying crumpled at the bottom of the stairs. Choking back tears, he crawled to him, touching his face with bloody hands and searching for any sign of life. Bile burned his throat at the coldness of his brother's skin and the lack of light behind his open eyes. Behind him, Grace let out a shuddering, sobbing gasp.

Farrow buried his face in Phineas's still chest, eyes stinging, not caring that the fabric of his tunic was stiff with dried blood.

"The person who started this is dead," he said fiercely. "I promise, I'll kill him myself."

In his mind's eye, he saw the Kingshadow standing over the body of the king, his face in shadow and his sword dripping with blood. He was responsible for all of this.

"My lady." Grace's voice was thin.

He wished he could take the time to give Phineas a proper funeral, but that wasn't an option. There was no time to process or grieve.

*Later.*

He rose to his feet, shaking, shoving his feelings to the back of his mind. Grace was looking around the ballroom, hugging herself, taking in everything that had occurred.

"We need to get out of here," she said.

For a brief moment, Farrow considered leaving Grace and running away into the city, seeking refuge where no one knew who he was. He could start a new life as a boy, amongst people who didn't know him as Lady Viola Hargrove. He could seek work, find adventure – be a hero.

It had been a fantasy he had entertained many times on dark nights, whilst he read the great deeds and escapades of the hero Farrow.

But suddenly, with the chance staring him in the face, the fantasy had lost a lot of its lustre.

Even if he could escape the castle and disappear amongst the common people, he had no skills and no idea how to get by on his own. All his life, he had lived in Whitecastle with servants to see to his every whim. Never going hungry. Never wanting for warmth or clothes. Even if he did his best, the city would devour him whole.

Running away was not an option.

And he needed to find out what had happened to the rest of his family.

Above all, he couldn't abandon Grace now. He had already failed Phineas, having to leave him here, alone. He would not fail Grace.

He bent down and rescued the golden stag pendant from where it was lying in a pool of blood, closing it in his fist so tight the tiny antlers bit into his palm.

"The gardens," he said after a moment. "There's got to be a way out that way."

Before he could take a step forward, Grace wrapped her arm around his waist, steadying him. He was trembling much more than he would have liked to admit, and he was grateful for her silent support. Together, they started to carefully and quietly make their way across the lifeless ballroom.

There were so many bodies, enough that the nobility of Serukis would feel the echo of this night for years to come. He dared not look around, to guess at the number of dead, the number of houses that had been torn out at the root that night and would never recover. Instead, he did his best to focus on the doors that still stood open and the black night beyond.

“Bitch.” The snarl stopped them both in their tracks.

They turned to see the flint-eyed man rising from the floor, blood dripping from a wound in his head. His mouth twisted in a grin.

“I’m going to enjoy bringing you to heel.”

He lurched towards them, drawing his sword from his side.

Grace’s arm tightened on Farrow’s waist as she tried to pull him towards the doors. “We have to run!”

“But —”

Farrow bit down on his lower lip hard enough to make it bleed, the sharp taste of copper flooding over his tongue. Though the man seemed dazed and uncoordinated, Farrow had no doubt that running was not an option. He could barely keep himself upright without Grace’s help.

There were only a few steps between them.

“Get out of here!”

As he said the words, Farrow pulled out of Grace’s hold and fell to his knees. His ruined gown hung uselessly off his body.

The man was almost on him, sword raised to strike.

“*Viola!*”

Instinctively, Farrow pushed his hands in front of him and flames erupted from his fingertips. The man screamed as he was engulfed in fire, his momentum carrying him past Farrow and Grace as

he tumbled towards the floor. His sword skidded away across the marble, blackened. The screams continued for several long, horrible moments before they finally faded away. The smell of burnt flesh hit then, and he heard Grace gag behind him. Farrow turned his hands over to stare at his palms, shaking. He could not bring himself to look at what he had done.

“I didn’t –” He cut himself off. He wasn’t really sure what he had intended to do, other than perhaps give Grace a chance to run. He had never been able to channel that much of Elian’s power before.

The noise that tore itself out of his throat was barely human. He stuffed his fist into his mouth, jamming it against his teeth, acutely aware that there could be others around any corner. The tang of blood coated his tongue again as he held back a sob. The sharpness of his teeth bit into the flesh of his fingers.

“We need to get out of here.” Grace sounded as shaken as Farrow felt.

Panting, Farrow again tugged the remnants of his gown tight around his body and struggled to his feet. Grace once more wrapped her arm around his waist to steady him, as though he hadn’t just burned a man alive just in front of her.

He wanted to be sick.

They made their way over to the garden doors, no longer speaking. It grew harder to ignore the bodies there, as they had to step over a few to reach the threshold. As they stepped outside cool air hit them, washing away the lingering stench of blood or burnt flesh and replacing it with the scent of night.

Farrow didn’t know where they were going, only that they had to keep moving. The moon hung low in the sky, half-full, filling the gardens with soft light and long, eerie shadows. The night sky was filled with stars, something that Farrow normally found comforting, but tonight the stars seemed merciless.

They did their best to keep to the shadows, ducking between walls and hedges so as not to be visible for too long if someone chanced to look out of one of the castle windows. The grass was

frosty beneath Farrow's bare feet and, before long, his skin was damp and his toes were numb with cold.

Soon, Farrow heard the sound of a fountain trickling somewhere in the darkness. He remembered lingering beside one during one of his outings with Prince Camber.

"I may know where we are," he whispered to Grace, and quietly, carefully, he led her towards the source of the noise.

When the fountain came into view, Farrow's heart sank. It was not the fountain he remembered after all. It was small and made from stone, though its base was wide enough to sit on. Surrounding it were overgrown bushes that had lost over half their leaves.

"Never mind," he said bleakly.

He stumbled from Grace's grip and sank down on the edge of the fountain, wrapping his arms tightly around himself. The murky water was clogged with dead leaves.

Grace sat down beside him.

"Do you need a moment?" Her voice was soft, understanding.

Farrow scrubbed his hands over his face, trying to pretend he wasn't wiping away tears. "I need this all to be a nightmare."

Grace's breath caught in her throat. "We're not going to wake up, my lady."

"I know," Farrow said softly. "I wish –" His voice cracked. "I wish I'd just accepted the marriage and been happy about it. I would much prefer to be married to Prince Camber for the rest of my life than – than this."

Grace's arms tightened around him. "This would still have happened, even if you'd been happy."

"Would it?"

The thought had been gnawing at him ever since that first scream. It seemed like hours ago now. That morning seemed like a whole other life. He remembered being knelt on the rug in front of

the fire, praying fervently for Elian to intervene, to do something – *anything* – to stop the marriage from going ahead.

He shut his eyes tight at the thought.

*This isn't what I meant. Not like this.*

Grace pulled back and rested her hand on his arm instead. "I think –" Her head jerked up and she turned her gaze towards the shadows. Her voice lowered to a hiss. "Did you hear that?"

Farrow listened, straining his ears.

"– voices," a female voice was saying. He couldn't tell if he recognised it or not. "We need to at least check."

Whoever it was, they were coming no closer.

"No, we can't risk it."

Farrow's body twitched a little as he recognised the voice that responded. It was Elery, son of the Kingshadow, and he did not sound pleased. He clutched Grace's arm, his muscles tensed and his body ready to run. The son of the man who had murdered the king was just as dangerous as the men they had already avoided.

"We need to go." He pitched his voice low enough that only Grace would hear it.

Grace nodded in acknowledgement and the two of them rose to their feet again. As they crept towards a patch of shadows, they heard a hiss of "Edith!", and suddenly they were face to face with the cousin of the prince.

Edith Elenasia's gown was torn and muddy, and she stood frozen for a moment as they stared at each other. Farrow took an instinctual step back, his throat tightening. Surely the prince's cousin wouldn't have betrayed the king as well?

Edith's eyes were widened in shock, her face pale in the moonlight.

"Lady Viola, you're alive!"

She glanced around as Elery Kingshadow emerged from the darkness behind her. He was clutching a dagger in one hand and his lower lip was swollen and bloody. Otherwise he seemed relatively unscathed from the evening's events.

Grace moved then, placing her body firmly between Farrow and the two others.

"Just let us go." Her voice was steady, though Farrow could see her body was trembling.

"Please."

Edith stepped towards them, ignoring Elery's attempt to grab her arm. She held her hands up, palms towards them.

"We mean no harm," she said softly. "We're not with them."

"He's his *son*." Farrow's voice was hoarse.

Elery made a jerky, aborted movement, but said nothing. Edith's eyes grew fierce and she shook her head.

"I trust him with my life. He is *not* his father."

Elery walked forward then, tugging his tunic off over his head, his eyes saying a wealth of things his mouth did not. His white undershirt was soaked with blood, dark under the moonlight, but Farrow couldn't tell if it was his own or someone else's. The other boy's expression was grim.

"Put this on, my lady."

Grace wavered at that, and then moved aside. Chest tight with a storm of emotions, Farrow took the proffered tunic and pulled it over his head. He was glad the fashion in King's Rock tended towards longer tunics, as this one came down to just above his knees. The dark grey material was softer than it looked, although it was sticky with blood.

"Thank you," he said softly. Then, quieter, "I'm sorry."

Elery met Farrow's eyes, his gaze inscrutable. "Are you hurt, my lady?"

Farrow ignored the ache at the back of his skull and lied, "No."

Elery's mouth twitched in a disbelieving frown, but he said nothing to challenge him. Then, his eyes moved to Grace, taking in her clothes and the blood on her knees.

“Who’s this?”

“Grace, my handmaiden.” He hesitated, and then added, “She saved me.”

Elery looked at Grace again, interest alight in his eyes, but he said nothing. Grace, remembering herself, sank into a low curtsy.

“My lord,” she said softly. Glancing at Edith, she added, “My lady.”

For a moment, Elery’s face tightened. “I’m not a lord.”

Grace dipped into another curtsy, but wisely kept her mouth shut.

“I hear more voices,” Edith said softly, after a moment. “We need to keep moving.”

Elery moved into the shadows cast by the hedges, gesturing at them to join him. His eyes looked strained.

“At this rate, they’re going to back us into a corner,” he whispered. “There’s only so many paths in the garden that lead to ways out.”

“They don’t know we’re all here,” Edith reasoned, her voice low. “I could head another way, make noise. Distract them.”

Elery’s mouth twisted. “They’ll kill you.”

Edith looked unconcerned, her voice still soft. “I can take care of myself, you know that.” When Elery opened his mouth to argue, she added, “We *heard* them, Elery. They’re looking for Hargroves. You need to get Lady Viola out of here.”

Farrow’s heart pulsed with fear.

Elery shook his head, turning his gaze towards the source of the voices. “I can distract them.”

Edith moved and took hold of his hand, and Elery reluctantly turned his head back to look at her.

“You’re the only one who knows all the secret ways out.” The whisper was soft, but fierce.

“You need to let me do this.”

“Aric will murder me,” Elery said quietly, though his voice sounded defeated.

Edith let go of his hand. “If you find him, you tell Aric to come back to me alive.”

Before Elery could respond, Edith darted out of the shadows and towards where the voices were coming from. She was quickly swallowed by darkness. Before long came the sound of yells and shifting stone.

Elery's expression was bleak as he turned his attention back to Farrow and Grace, who had watched the exchange in stunned silence.

"Right," he said, his voice quiet as somewhere nearby a man screamed. "We have two options. There are safehouses in the city, but my father knows all of them. I doubt they're safe right now, but we could try them anyway and hope Cam and Aric do the same."

Farrow swallowed down his questions about Lady Edith Elenasia and tried to focus on what Elery was saying.

"Or?"

Elery bit his lower lip. "Or Aric and I have talked before about using the tunnels as a place to hide." At Farrow's blank look, he added, "Under the castle."

Farrow pictured the dark tunnels where the conspirators had died at the hands of Cassian Kingshadow and shivered.

"Knowing Aric," Elery continued softly, "he's more likely to lead the prince there than a possibly compromised safehouse. Unless..." He trailed off, looking over his shoulder into the darkness beyond as there was another lingering scream.

"Unless, my lord?" Grace prompted. Her face was still white.

"Unless he thinks I'm loyal to my father." His voice caught on the word. "But I hope he knows me better than that. And I told you, I'm not a lord."

Grace ducked her head in apology but said nothing.

Elery ran a hand through his hair, before adding, "My father is familiar with the tunnels, which is a problem, but the other men are not, so if he pursued us, hopefully he would be alone."

He didn't mention that the Kingshadow being alone had not saved the conspirators, but Farrow heard it in his voice.

“The tunnels, then,” Farrow said quietly, though he had no clue where they might lead. He felt drained. Empty. “It’s safest.”

“You’re sure?” Elerly hesitated, looking between the two of them. “The tunnels are filthy. Dark. Sometimes there are bodies, old or otherwise.”

His voice told Farrow that he doubted they could cope with that.

The look Farrow gave him was dark. “After tonight, we can handle dirt. Both of us.”

Grace sniffed slightly and held her head up high. “I was raised in poverty, sir. In the slums of Whitecastle. I know filth.”

Elerly nodded and said softly, “Let’s go then.”

He started to move, slipping between the shadows as easily as a ghost. Farrow, somewhat steadier on his legs now, followed with Grace. He knew that, by going with Elerly, he was starting down a new path from which there was no return. The moment the screaming had started in the ballroom, his life had been diverted from the route it was supposed to follow. Ahead of him lay many branches and there was no way to tell which ones, if any, would lead to a good outcome.

But Farrow made his choice, and followed Elerly into the night.

Elery led them back into the castle through a door that looked to be a servant's entrance. Farrow noticed that his hand never strayed from the dagger he had strapped back to his side, and that his tense shoulders never relaxed. They were not out of danger, far from it.

They stopped just inside a door, and Farrow and Grace watched as Elery lit a candle and placed it inside a brass lantern casing. He closed off most of the sides so that only a weak light shone. Briefly, he cupped his hand over it to plunge them into darkness.

"Keep quiet and follow me."

They crept through hallways where dust muffled their footsteps on stone floors and corridors that smelled musty with disuse. Once, Elery drew aside a tapestry, colourful under the dirt, and led them through a passage so low they had to hunch as they walked. Farrow found his thoughts returning often to the now quiet ballroom and the bodies that lay abandoned.

Phineas.

*Not yet, he told himself. You can't think about it yet.*

They followed Elery down a narrow spiral staircase, descending into the bowels of the castle. The air felt heavy, with a damp chill that clung to their skin. The stairs led to a large storeroom, one that evidently hadn't been used for a long time. The guttering candlelight threw deep shadows on the walls and, where the light fell, the stone glistened with moisture. Rotting barrels were stacked alongside dented and rusted armour, and several old wooden coffins were leant up against one wall. The scent of decay settled in Farrow's nostrils and it was all he could do not to cover his mouth and gag.

"There's no way out."

It took a moment for Farrow to realise Grace had spoken, and it made him realise how truly shaken she was. Grace was usually careful to maintain proper etiquette, convinced that if Farrow's mother were to catch her behaving inappropriately she would cast her back out onto the streets.

Once, in the first days Grace was with him, he had found her curled beside the unlit fireplace in his chambers, trembling whilst a storm raged outside, but still attempting to fold his laundry. Ignoring her fearful protests that she had work to do, he had taken her by the hand and led her to his bedroom, where they had huddled under the blankets together, Grace whimpering at every roll of thunder. They had never spoken of it, but since then Grace had relaxed when they were in private, and he would find her every time a storm gathered over the plains. Now, he reached out in the dark and held her hand. She gave him a grateful squeeze in return.

Elery made no reply, but instead strode forward and touched his free hand to the damp wall in front of them. He counted swiftly, muttering under his breath, his hand moving over the stones. After a moment, there was a grinding noise and the scream of metal. Elery stepped back as a chunk of wall swung inwards, leaving a dark hole just large enough for a body to pass through. A metal contraption glinted in the candlelight to one side of the hole, suspiciously well-maintained.

He looked back at them, one eyebrow raised. "Found a way out."

He lay down on his stomach and slowly wriggled forward, holding the lantern in front of himself. Without the weak glow of candlelight, they were plunged into darkness, shadows clinging to them like grease. Grace took a sharp breath beside Farrow.

"Are you coming?" Elery's voice was muffled, dulled by the thick stone.

The only light was the flicker of orange in the hole in the wall, beckoning them forwards with dancing shadows. Turning back was not an option. Not now.

"You first, my lady." Grace squeezed his hand again, and then let go.

Farrow knelt by the hole and then, at Elery's urging, lay flat on his stomach. The stench hit him immediately, a deep, damp rot that made his stomach rebel. He clapped a hand over his mouth and nose, gagging, suddenly wishing for the slightly sweet decay that had caressed them from the moment they had entered the storeroom.

“Are you sure you want to do this, my lady?” Elery’s voice floated to his ears from the opening. His words were polite, but his tone suggested that Farrow had all but confirmed his expectations.

*What choice do I have?*

Farrow forced himself to remove his hand from his mouth. “I’m coming.”

He started to shuffle into the hole, using his elbows to drag himself forwards. The stone floor was moist, cold, and covered in a thin layer of grime. The smell of damp was so strong he could taste it on his tongue, and he held his breath as he continued to ease himself inside. His fingers sank deep into cold sludge as he pulled his legs through and sat up, and the remnants of the skirts he dragged in behind were heavy with muck. Elery’s face looked pale and grim in the candlelight.

“Grace?” he said, looking away from Farrow and moving the lantern closer to the entrance for a moment. “You’re clear to come through.”

They listened to the rustling of fabric and a soft shuffling as Grace lay down on her belly and prepared to join them. Elery raised the lantern again so he could see Farrow’s face.

“How are you holding up?” His voice held a note of concern that touched something deep in Farrow.

Farrow looked away, wiping the dirt from his fingertips on his bare legs. Here in the darkness it felt easier to say what was on his mind.

“I can’t stop thinking of everyone we left behind without the proper rites.”

*Phineas.*

Elery shifted slightly to make room for Grace as she pulled herself through. “Is it true that in Whitecastle you burn your dead?”

Farrow was suddenly reminded that, although they may share a country and a king, he was an outsider here in King’s Rock.

“Traditionally, yes.”

“It’s interesting.” His voice deliberately detached, Elery leaned past them and pressed something; the wall swung back into place with another low grinding sound. “Here, we say different words, bury our dead... but leaving them uncared for bothers me just as much.”

Farrow felt Grace shudder beside him.

“Don’t speak of burying,” she said, her voice soft and imploring. “Not here. Not with rock above us instead of sky.”

Elery sat back on his heels at her words. The tunnel was not high enough here to stand and the top of his head brushed the low ceiling when he sat up straight. Farrow tried not to imagine never seeing the sky again or the cracking of stone as the walls caved in around them.

“Let’s move, shall we?” Elery said; his voice had an odd, light tone that seemed to fight against his words. “Nothing we can do for them now.”

He turned slightly, raising the lantern to illuminate the tunnel ahead of them. The candle guttered and died. Darkness swallowed them immediately, and Elery bit out a curse.

“I need to go back,” he said, his voice strained. “Travelling in the dark is suicide.”

Farrow felt Elery reach past him, moving towards the contraption that opened the wall.

“Wait!”

Without thinking, he reached out and grabbed onto Elery’s undershirt, prompting a surprised hiss of pain. Elery froze in the dark, and Farrow could feel his breath against his face.

“Wait,” he said again, softer. “I can help. Give me the lantern.”

His hands found Elery’s in the dark, and then the warm metal of the lantern was pressed into his palms. Closing his eyes, Farrow concentrated, thinking of fire, picturing flames flowing through his veins and out through his fingertips. He could see the colours of fire behind his eyelids. For a moment, his cold, damp body felt flooded with warmth.

And then it was gone.

When he opened his eyes, the candle inside the lantern was burning. Elery was watching him in the flickering light, though his eyes seemed shadowed.

“I forget some of you can do that.”

Farrow was not quite sure of the ‘you’ Elery was referring to, but he quietly surrendered the now-lit lantern into Elery’s hands as the other boy shifted back to the front. Sweat glimmered on his forehead in the candlelight, and his face had taken on a faintly grey pallor. Blood still oozed from a cut on his lip.

Farrow wondered how much of a toll that night had taken on him.

Then Grace moved up beside Farrow, her cold body pressed against his.

“Are you hurt, sir?” Her voice was quiet and a little shaky, but it made Elery look back at them.

“It’s nothing.” He wiped his forehead with his sleeve, leaving a smear of dirt. “We need to get moving.”

Grace hesitated, and then she moved forward and took the lantern out of Elery’s hand, passing it back to Farrow to hold. Elery seemed so surprised he didn’t resist.

“Let me see.”

For a moment, Farrow thought Elery would refuse, and from the slight cringing of Grace’s body she thought the same. Then he moved and sat down heavily with his back to the wall.

“It was a stupid mistake,” he said, as Grace carefully peeled his bloody undershirt off over his head. “It shouldn’t have happened.”

Farrow lifted the lantern to allow Grace to see better, drawing in a sharp breath as the light fell on an ugly gash in Elery’s abdomen. Grace didn’t reply, gently pressing her fingers around the edges of the wound as Elery bit back a gasp of pain.

“It’s deep,” she said eventually, softly. “But it doesn’t smell foul like it would if your innards were sliced.”

Farrow wondered if she had personal experience with that, but thought it better not to ask.

“Good to know.” Elery’s voice was tight.

Grace pulled back and started to rip strips of fabric from the bottom of her skirts. Farrow could see how hard her hands were shaking.

“You need rest, sir.” When Elery forced a chuckle, she added, “I know that’s not possible right now.”

Farrow watched quietly as Grace began to wrap up Elery’s abdomen with the strips of fabric, taking care to put the cleanest bits over the wound itself. When it was wrapped to her satisfaction, she helped him pull his shirt back on over his head.

“It’s not perfect, but it’ll have to do for now.” When Elery remained quiet, Grace’s fingers twisted together and she looked down at her lap. “I’m sorry if I overstepped the mark, sir.”

Elery shook his head and held his hand out towards Farrow for the lantern. Farrow handed it over without a word.

“No. I’ve been thinking of other things.” He touched his fingers to Grace’s cheek, leaving a smear of blood and muck as he made her look up at him. “Thank you.”

Grace gave him the best iteration of a curtsy she could manage in the cramped tunnel and retreated back to Farrow’s side. Elery shifted onto his knees, wincing slightly and lifted the lantern again.

“Let’s go.”

He started to move ahead of them, easing himself along on his knees.

Farrow followed on his hands and knees, concentrating on the way the soft yellow light flickered across the stone that lined the walls. He felt a little as though he had stepped into one of the novels he loved so much, though the reality was more unpleasant than glorious. He regretted all the times he had ever wished for an adventure. He could feel Grace close behind him and the sound of her ragged breathing reassured him a little.

They pushed forward in silence. In places, the ceiling dropped lower, at one point forcing them to shuffle along on their stomachs before the floor sloped sharply downwards. Every now and then, the tunnel branched, tributaries snaking off into the blackness. Elery navigated each one without pausing.

“What were these tunnels used for?” Farrow’s voice echoed slightly.

Elerly grunted slightly as he paused for breath. "Smuggling, mostly, though probably they were first intended as an escape route for the royal family. This one is a bit impractical for smuggling. Too narrow. But these tunnels go all over the hills for miles, like a maze. Who knows what people were thinking when they dug them."

Farrow digested this bit of information as they continued, but kept his other questions about Elerly's knowledge of the tunnels to himself.

Presently, the passage opened up into a wide chamber. Ahead of him, Elerly stiffly got to his feet, raising the lantern high above his head. As Farrow straightened, shaking out his aching legs, he saw that they stood on the edge of a glittering black lake. A half-rotten dock stretched out onto the water. Beyond that lay the skeletal remains of half a dozen small boats, some with the tattered remnants of dark sails or broken oars. One or two looked as though they might still be seaworthy, though Farrow's stomach turned over at the thought. He didn't do well on the water.

"Where are we?" Grace's voice was barely a whisper as she got to her feet beside them.

"Underground lake," Elerly replied, his voice equally hushed. "It flows out beyond the castle walls."

Farrow recalled looking out across the dark water from the tower.

"Can we get out that way?"

Elerly looked over at him. "That's one of our options, if any of these boats are still serviceable." He lifted the lantern up again, gesturing. "This is one of the main hubs. There's quite a few tunnels we could take from here."

Peering into the darkness, Farrow saw them, patches of blackness that seemed deeper than the darkness around them, leading to Lords knew where.

"Do you know the way, sir?" Grace asked, tentatively.

Elerly nodded. "I have some ideas, but we should stay here. If Cam – the prince – and Aric try the tunnels, this is the most likely place they'll end up. And we could do with a rest."

As he murmured an agreement, Farrow realised just how exhausted he was. His legs were stiff and aching from crawling through the tunnels and his bare feet were numb with cold. He sank to the ground, hugging his arms around his knees. Grace crouched beside him, putting an arm around his shoulders. Eley took the lantern and walked down to the water's edge, staring out into the darkness. His back was stiff, and Farrow wondered what he was thinking.

Whilst Eley's back was turned, Farrow did his best to manoeuvre out of the dirty, wet remains of his gown, before pulling the tunic back down into place. Without the damp, heavy fabric, he felt a little warmer.

Tiredly, he reached up and tugged the rose slowly out of his hair. It was as perfect as it had been the moment the prince had grown it from his hand, vibrant red against his filthy hands. It was the only thing that had seemed to get through the evening unscathed.

"Try to sleep, my lady." Grace's voice was soft, but firm.

Not having the energy to argue, Farrow curled up on the damp floor, pillowing his head on one of his arms. Grace remained beside him, silent but alert.

Farrow fell asleep watching the light from Eley's lantern dance across the water, with the rose clutched tightly between his fingers.

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Farrow slept fitfully.

Several times he woke with a yell half strangled in his throat, adrenaline pounding through his veins, the memories of screams echoing in his head. Each time it was a little harder to drift off again. The ache in his head pounded violently.

It was cold. The borrowed tunic, though tucked tightly around his bare legs, was not enough to keep the chill at bay. Time passed, but it was impossible to tell whether the night had ended. Eley, at some point, had hunted for dry pieces of broken wood and started a fire, which helped. The

sound of crackling flames and the smell of burning wood grounded him, though the heat was only faint.

At one point, he woke to hear Grace murmuring a soft prayer, and saw her forehead pressed to the cold stone and flecks of fire settling in her hair, where they flared and faded like a breath. From his clenched fist, the scent of rose petals lingered in his nostrils.

“Elian, Lord of Fire.” Her voice was barely a whisper. “Take your servants into your halls and allow them to warm themselves by your hearth.”

A memory blossomed vividly in Farrow’s mind. Just over a year before, he had been listening to a cleric say those same words. The heady scent of incense had hung heavily in the air of the great temple as he and his family huddled around the large wooden pyre. His father and older brother, Ezra, had laboured through the previous night to build it, using wood cut from the Whitecastle gardens. A large red cloth embroidered with the emblem of House Hargrove covered the pyre, the golden stag lovingly stitched by his mother. His own needlework was poor, no matter how hard he worked at it, so he’d been tasked with stitching a simple pattern of golden flowers and leaves along the hems.

On top of the pyre lay his oldest brother, Alistair, resplendent in new steel armour and blood red tabard. The embalmer had done decent work and, if it were not for the ugly stitched wound that was visible on his neck above his armour, it would look as though he was only sleeping.

He had hated his father that day. If his father had not sent Alistair, his heir, to quell the growing rebellion led by one of their minor vassals, Alistair would not have been dead. That day, he couldn’t think of any greater coward than his father, who had declined riding out to deal with the threat himself.

A newer memory surfaced. His father, standing in front of the two young princes, a wall of flame and his sword between them and danger. Was that the action of a coward?

Grace’s soft voice continued. “Embrace them in the cleansing glory of your flames. What fire consumes, it also purifies.”

Farrow swallowed, and responded in a hoarse whisper, "What is purified may find peace."

He moved and dropped the now broken rose into the flames. Its petals blackened and curled before the fire swallowed it completely. Grace glanced at him then, the firelight reflected in her eyes, and she briefly covered his hand with her own.

As Farrow tried to fall back into sleep, he found his thoughts returning to Phineas and the other bodies for whom no one was keeping vigil. When Alistair had died, it had been his father and Ezra who had spent the night watching his pyre burn down. He wondered what they had thought about as they had stood there beside each other, the only sound the slow crackle of the flames. Perhaps his father had wondered if Alistair's death could have been avoided, or had thought it should have been himself, or had recalled Alistair's childhood. Perhaps Ezra had contemplated his new role as the Hargrove family heir, or had imagined how Alistair had felt in his last moments.

Perhaps they had just thought about the fact their feet hurt, and that they were cold and hungry, and had tried to block out the lingering smell of burning flesh.

Farrow hugged his arms around himself and tried not to think at all.

Echoing footsteps startled Farrow out of a dream of long dark tunnels. He sat up stiffly, unable to pinpoint where the noise was coming from. Beside him, Grace was curled up, her eyes closed. Across the fire, Elery rose to his feet, the naked blade of his dagger reflecting the smouldering embers.

And then, a voice, unnaturally loud in the darkness. "Is anyone there?"

A sharp *shh* followed this and the footsteps stopped.

"Cam?" Elery said, his voice caught between wariness and relief. "Aric?"

"Elery? Is that you?"

Farrow didn't think he would ever be as glad to hear the prince's voice as he was in that moment.

"Yes." Elery let out a shaky laugh, though it sounded forced; Farrow noted that he did not sheathe his dagger. "I have Lady Viola with me."

“Thank the Lords.” Camber’s voice was so flooded with relief that Farrow’s stomach flipped.

“Is the fire wise?” The stern voice belonged to Aric Vasey.

Elery finally sheathed his dagger, letting out a long, low breath. “Perhaps not wise, but necessary.”

As he spoke, Camber and Aric stepped out of the shadows of one of the tunnels and the prince’s eyes widened slightly.

“Faolan’s blood.” Camber’s oath was a sharp exhale.

It was then that Farrow remembered that he was wearing only Elery’s tunic. There was a silence as the prince’s mind sifted through the possible explanations.

Camber lengthened his stride to cross the distance between them. He looked dirty and dishevelled, and his face was pale in the firelight. Aric followed, inscrutable, his dark grey tunic splattered with blood. Panic rising in his chest, Farrow stumbled to his feet and walked abruptly away to the edge of the water. Behind him, Elery talked quickly and quietly, no doubt explaining all that had occurred since the ball, and he heard Camber and Aric respond in turn. He caught Edith’s name and Aric’s voice sharpened with anger. Elery’s raised in response, and Farrow tightened his arms around himself, trying to breathe.

In an attempt to tune them out, he stared out across the dark lake, watching the firelight glimmer on the water and trying not to imagine what was happening in the castle above their heads.

After a time, he became aware of Prince Camber standing beside him. When he chanced a look at the prince, Camber was staring out into the darkness, a deeply contemplative and serious expression on his face.

“I’m sorry about your father,” Farrow managed. “I’m so sorry.”

Camber’s throat bobbed slightly and then he asked, voice a little rough, “Do you know if yours...?”

“No.” Farrow’s throat closed around a sob, thinking of all the people whose fates he did not know, and turned away from the lake to stare into the fire instead. “I - I didn’t see. But Phin —”

He cut himself off, trying not to think about his twin's lifeless eyes. Camber followed his gaze, his eyes dry, though Farrow could see the pain held there.

"I'm sorry," the prince said. Then, after a long silence, "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking about what will happen to their souls," Farrow said eventually. "If there's no one to give them the proper rites." He sniffed and swiped his face with the back of his hand. "That was always important to my father."

Camber didn't look away from the fire. "I like to think the Lords will claim them anyway." His voice was carefully, academically detached, and Farrow thought again of the king. "Here, we bury our dead in the ground and then plant a tree on the grave. We believe that we come from the earth, so our bodies must return to nourish it." He let out a long breath. "How is it that we have the same gods, yet our beliefs are so different?"

Farrow swallowed, gathering himself.

"The common folk worship all the Lords equally," he said, his voice shaking only slightly. He had learned about it from a book. "It's only the great houses and their vassals that have a patron."

"Then how do the common folk decide what to do when they die?"

Farrow looked over at him, unsure whether the question was genuine or rhetorical. Camber still hadn't looked away from the fire, but now there was the slight glisten of tears on his cheeks.

"I – I don't know."

"I suppose it doesn't really matter." The prince's voice was heavy. "They're all our gods, after all."

They stood in silence for a moment longer, before Camber gave him a rather sheepish look. Farrow wondered if he had imagined the tears.

"Sorry," Camber said. "You're probably not in the mood for philosophical discussions."

"Not really," Farrow admitted, though, weirdly, it had helped a bit. He stared back into the flames. "It doesn't feel real. All this."

Camber was silent for a long moment, before he rested a gentle hand on Farrow's arm. "May I ask you something, my lady?"

Farrow glanced at him and then looked back at the fire. "If you stop calling me that."

"Viola." Camber said his birth name very quietly, as though he was testing it out. "I just... tell me what happened to your gown. Elery didn't say."

The world tilted. For an instant, Farrow was in the ballroom, pinned on his back, helpless, another man's hands crawling over his skin. He flinched away from Camber's touch, hugging his arms around himself unconsciously.

"A soldier." The rest of what he might say stuck stubbornly in his throat, and he shook his head, closing his eyes.

There was a silence, and then Camber said softly, "Did he hurt you, my lady? Did he...?" He trailed off, his voice laced with barely controlled fury.

Farrow wished he had lied. For a moment, he could feel the man's hand between his legs. A shudder ran through him. "Don't be concerned, highness." The words dripped like acid from his tongue. "I'm still a suitable bride."

A sob rose in his throat and he forced it down.

*Stupid*, he told himself. *Nothing happened.*

"Lords," Camber said, and suddenly Farrow found himself wrapped in the prince's arms. His entire body stiffened, but Camber didn't let go. "I'm so sorry. I should have stayed and protected you."

"I don't need protecting." Farrow forced the words out from behind clenched teeth. "There was nothing else you could have done. The whole ball was in chaos."

"I charged off and left you," the prince said darkly; Farrow could feel the anger running through his body as he spoke. "Aric and I both did."

"What happened with the Kingshadow?" Farrow asked quietly, trying to divert Camber's attention away from him. "I saw Aric engage him, but not much else."

He felt Camber's arm tense around him. "Aric's good, but Cassian is better. Jacen – the King's Shield – he pushed Aric aside, saved his life. Reminded him his duty was keeping *me* alive. But Cassian took the opportunity to – Jacen didn't stand a chance." His breath shuddered. "Aric blames himself. *I* thought I could catch that traitor," he spat the word, "but Aric pulled me away, and I lost sight of him. Then when I looked for you, you had vanished."

Farrow disengaged from Camber's arms as politely as he could manage, turning back to face the lake, seeing the events of the evening play out before his eyes over the dark water.

"I was under a dead body." The words were soft, factual, glossing over the true horror of everything. *Phineas*. "Unconscious."

Camber sighed and crossed his arms, his eyes closing. "I can't believe that this is happening."

"I'm sorry about your father," Farrow said again, unable to think of anything else to say. "And the king's Shield."

It was obvious the prince had been close to the man.

Camber's lip trembled slightly, and he covered his face with one hand. Then, abruptly, his eyes flew open and he turned on his heel, fury burning on his face.

"*You!*"

Aric glanced around, and Elery looked up from where he was stoking the small campfire, brow furrowing at the anger in the prince's voice. He rose to his feet.

"Cam? What –?"

He was cut off as Camber grabbed him by the collar of his undershirt and shoved him bodily against the wall of the cave. A grunt of pain escaped Elery's mouth.

"Did you know?" Camber demanded. "Did you know what he was planning?"

"Of course not!" Elery's voice was equally angry, and he jerked himself out of Camber's grip.

"Who do you take me for?"

Aric moved closer, a wary hand on his sword. "Camber."

"Your father was my father's closest friend!" Camber's voice was rough with pain.

“And now he’s a traitor. I *know*, I was there, I saw what he did!” Elery dropped his voice.

“Don’t you think I wish I’d known? That I could have stopped it?”

Camber’s eyes blazed, but he was prevented from saying anything by Grace sliding her body between them and giving him a sharp push.

“Fighting won’t help,” she said fiercely. “You need to trust his words.” There was a moment’s silence, and then all the colour drained suddenly from her face. “Your Highness, I – I’m so sorry.”

Camber stepped back, shaking his head, deliberately calming his breathing. “No. You’re right, my lady.” He stopped and looked at her, seemingly noticing her properly for the first time. “Did you say what your name was?”

Grace sank into a low curtsy, head down. “Grace, Your Highness. I’m Lady Viola’s handmaiden.”

“She’s under my protection,” Farrow said bluntly before Camber could respond, stepping towards them. “I won’t allow you to punish her.”

Camber looked at him, stunned, and then suddenly let out a laugh. It was the most incongruous sound Farrow had heard all day.

“I’m not going to punish her,” he said. “What do you take me for? She has a point.” He turned to Grace and gave her an attempt at a smile as she hesitantly straightened. “Thank you.” Then, his gaze moved to Elery, who was straightening his undershirt with a frown. “I’m sorry, El. This must be hard for you as well. I just... I’m not thinking straight.”

Elery eyed him cautiously. “It’s all right.”

The prince nodded, and then slumped down by the fire, dropping his head in his hands. Elery stood there for a moment, his jaw set, his expression unreadable. Then he moved forward and snatched the lantern from the ground, stalking past Grace and down one of the dark tunnels. Grace took a step forward, as though unsure whether to follow him.

“He’ll be all right.” Aric’s voice was calm and quiet. “Let him stew. We’ve all had a rough night.”

Grace gave Aric a quiet curtsy, and then sank down beside the fire, hugging herself to keep warm. Aric remained standing, his hand on his sword. His gaze kept drifting towards the tunnel where Elery had disappeared. Farrow took a breath, and then forced himself to sit beside the prince, laying a hand on his arm. His mother's words about supportive wives echoed in his head. He was beginning to genuinely like Camber, despite their brief acquaintance, and the distress that was evident in every line of Camber's body mirrored his own.

Camber's hand closed over his, holding his fingers tightly as though he was drowning and Farrow was the only thing keeping him afloat.

The long night was not over yet.

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They roused themselves when the fire had burned down to grey ash, leaving them with only the lantern to see by.

Elery, who had reappeared at some point unknown, and Aric stripped down to their underclothes, wading out into the dark water to capture a small rowing boat that had slipped its mooring and was floating silently in the middle of the underground lake. The bottom of the boat scraped loudly over the stone as they heaved it clear of the water.

Elery passed the back of his hand over his face. "This'll do."

Camber touched the boat with his foot. "Are you sure this is wise? Where are we going to go?"

Elery shrugged. "Well, we can't stay here."

Without waiting for an answer from Camber, he started to rummage in various sacks and crates that were littered around the place, pulling out what looked to be various pieces of cloth. Eventually, he straightened.

"First, we can't be seen in these clothes. We need to put these on."

As he held up one of the pieces of cloth, Farrow realised that it was actually some kind of hard-wearing shirt. He wondered if these clothes had been left down here by smugglers, as Elery had said, or if Elery and his father had done a lot more preparation for disaster than anyone realised.

There were enough clothes for them all, and even some half-decent pairs of shoes. He pulled on the clothes Elery handed to him without complaint and found himself in a tunic made of some kind of sackcloth and loose trousers. The shoes were rough and dirty, but they fit his feet well. For Grace, Elery had found a scratchy cotton dress. It looked as though it may disintegrate in the presence of soap, but would draw a lot less attention than what she was currently wearing, which would indicate her as being in the service of a noble household. Aric, after wrinkling his nose, pulled on his own baggy tunic and trousers and Elery, unsurprisingly, changed without comment. Camber, however, was faintly aghast.

“I can’t wear these,” he protested, holding them away from his body.

Grace studied him wordlessly and then leaned up to say something in his ear. After a pause, the prince retreated and changed.

“What did you say to him?” Farrow asked her quietly, as Elery and Aric moved away to hide the clothes they had removed, including the mess of his spoiled gown.

Grace gave him a small smile, moving to start to unweave the golden leaves from his hair. “I reminded him of his duty to you, my lady, and that he couldn’t protect you if he was dead.”

Farrow bit back his automatic protest and said instead, “That was brave of you.”

He winced as Grace began to remove the pins holding his hair up as they tugged against his scalp, and then lifted his hands to help her. He shuddered slightly as his hair spilled down his back and fell against his cheeks. He wished he had something to cut it with.

Grace gave him a meaningful look. “I don’t intend to die for the sake of fashion, my lady.”

Farrow thought about this as he climbed into the boat, scooting up to the edge of one of the rowing benches to make room beside him. Grace had more worldly experience than all of them put together – though he was beginning to question Elery – and there was a thick layer of fear behind

her words, one potent enough that she would risk the wrath of a prince. It made him feel naïve; if he'd read about the past night in a book, he would have found it glamorous and exciting. The reality was different, and he realised that Grace was all too aware.

He reached over and mutely took her hand as she settled down beside him, holding the brass lantern in one hand. She smiled in response, though it was tight and didn't reach her eyes. He wondered how well he knew her really.

Together, Elery and Aric pushed the boat off the shore and back into the water, before climbing in themselves. Elery sat alone at the rear of the boat, holding the oars comfortably. Farrow noticed that Aric held his sword across his lap, within reach; Camber, beside him, stared off into the darkness, his eyes unseeing.

They were silent as the boat glided across the still water, the only sound the soft splashing of oars as they cut into the surface. The soft yellow light from the lantern glittered on the ripples like stars.

Elery guided the boat into a tunnel that had been almost invisible from the shore, using one of the oars to push it away from the rocky wall. Water dripped from the ceiling as they passed, cold against the skin of their faces and arms, making deceptively loud splashes in the darkness.

Then, as Elery steered them around the corner, a pale light appeared, seeping into the tunnel. Farrow screwed up his eyes as they approached, taking a moment to adjust. In another moment, they emerged, filthy and blinking in the pre-dawn light. Elery shifted in the back of the boat, but continued to propel them quietly across the water to the opposite shore.

As Farrow looked around, he realised that they had emerged almost below the tower he had climbed the day before, back in what seemed like another life. The castle towered above them, nestled into the cliff face, and beyond, the city sprawled out along the shoreline, bigger and more intimidating than it had seemed from above. Across the inlet, ramshackle buildings clustered on the shore, rickety docks reaching out into the water like fingers. Beyond that, rocky cliffs and impossibly tall trees stretched out as far as he could see, towards the mountains.

Camber ran his hand through his hair, glancing around. In the light, he looked more than a little harrowed. "What should we do now?"

Aric shifted his sword in his grip, his eyes wary as he looked over the houses on the shoreline. "We shouldn't linger here. There are too many people who would sell us for a loaf of bread."

Camber looked faintly horrified. "But I'm their prince."

Elery touched him on the shoulder, though Farrow noticed that he hesitated before he did so. "No offence, Cam, but people down here don't give a shit about who's on the throne."

Grace spoke up, her voice soft. "When you don't know where your next meal is coming from, kings and princes don't make a whole lot of difference, Your Highness."

Camber didn't respond, but folded his arms, biting his lower lip and looking out over the water at the houses. There were figures moving around in the early morning mist, fishermen perhaps, but they paid no mind to the boat already out on the water. Elery looked at Aric, and silent communication passed between them before Aric nodded once.

"We head for the forests and avoid the dockside. The trees will provide good shelter and cover, and we can plan our next move."

Grace cleared her throat, the sound tentative. "Sirs, excuse me for interrupting, but I..." She trailed off under Aric's steely gaze and Farrow rested his hand on her shoulder, lending silent support. She swallowed and continued. "Let me head to the dockside and get us some supplies. We shouldn't be unprepared if we can help it."

Aric gave her a long look. "It's not safe, my lady."

Grace gave him a withering look, though she quickly rearranged her face into a more neutral expression. "I'm not a lady. And it's perfectly safe for me. I'm no one."

"Still –"

"No one will be looking for me."

Elery shrugged a little when Aric looked at him, though he was concentrating on steering the boat around morning patches of frost.

"It's true, Aric," he said. "No one's going to be looking for a commoner."

Aric fell silent and looked down, examining the blade of his sword, his face grim.

No one else talked for the short time it took for Elery to navigate his way to an out-of-the-way stony beach. It was about a mile from the docks opposite the castle and well-hidden by rocks and overhanging trees. Elery used an oar to stop the boat a little way out, testing the depth. After a short discussion, Aric and Elery rolled their trousers up and jumped out of the boat. Elery swore at the coldness, and Aric grimaced. The water came up to their knees as they pushed the boat up onto the shore with a loud crunch.

"I'll be back soon," Grace told them, and then she left before anyone else could say anything, stepping lightly from rock to rock before disappearing into the cover of the trees.

Camber climbed slowly out of the boat and sat down quietly on a rock. His expression did not invite conversation. Aric hesitated by the boat, one hand on his sword, and stared at the trees that had swallowed Grace.

Elery sat down heavily on the stony beach, leaning back on his hands and squinting up at the sky. "She'll be fine, Aric. She said she grew up in a place like this."

"And she's right," Farrow said quietly, cutting Aric off before he had a chance to speak. "No one's going to be looking for her. People like us don't pay attention to people like her."

"How do we know she's going to come back?" Aric asked.

"She'll come back." Farrow's voice was blunt. "I trust her."

There was a silence, and then Aric gave a sharp jerk of the head that could pass as a nod; he still looked as though he wanted to go after her.

"Fine. We'll rest, and then when she returns we'll make more long-term plans."

*We need to get out of the country,* Farrow thought to himself, as Aric stalked down to the water and stared up at the castle.

It was a little while before Elery rose to his feet and moved to sink down cross-legged beside Camber instead, not touching the prince but providing support. Camber's hand moved and grasped

his shoulder for a moment, before he pulled it away. Farrow wished he had the words to offer comfort in that moment, as he knew a dutiful wife would do, but he barely had the strength to comfort himself.

Instead, he remained sitting in the boat, his body cold and stiff, hugging his arms around himself. He watched as Aric crouched and picked up a stone, before straightening and staring out again over the water. His fists clenched reflexively at his sides. Then he moved violently, flinging the stone out into the water with a yell of anger. As the yell faded in the wintry morning air, Aric, who Farrow had formed the impression of being made of stone, sank to the ground, wrapped his arms around his knees and buried his head in his arms. Somehow, this shook Farrow more than a lot of the events of the previous night.

*We need to get out of the country*, he thought again, closing his eyes to shut out the pictures that flashed across his mind. *Then, we need vengeance.*

Time passed.

Farrow eventually left the boat and joined the other three, huddled against some boulders that hid them from sight from the water. Seeming to accept Farrow's excuse of 'safety on the road', Elery helped him roughly chop his hair. His fingers were surprisingly gentle, though Farrow had no doubt the dagger he wielded was wickedly sharp. Farrow's head and heart felt a little lighter afterwards, and Elery accepted his thank you with a shrug. As they continued to wait, the four exchanged a few short, terse conversations, but sat for the most part in silence, each lost deep in their own thoughts.

Farrow pushed his fingers through his messy, newly short hair and tried not to think too much about the previous night. He rolled a cold pebble between his palms, listening to the sound of water lapping against the rocks. Beside him, Camber distracted himself making little sprouts grow from a small patch of dirt next to the boulders, though his eyes were focused on something else only he could see. Elery had shut his eyes and tilted his head back against a boulder, looking for all the world as though he was asleep. Perhaps he was – Farrow doubted the other boy had slept at all the previous night. Aric's sword was unsheathed and lay across his lap, and he intently watched the spot where Grace had disappeared into the trees.

Farrow was starting to feel anxious about Grace when she returned, stepping out of the morning mist that still clung to the trees and the rocks. Aric rose to his feet to greet her, though he approached warily with his sword still unsheathed. She was carrying a rough cloth sack in her arms, which Aric took from her without a word. They approached the others and Aric set the sack on the ground, digging through it. Grace sat down beside Farrow, pushing her hair out of her face and redoing her bun tiredly. She didn't comment on his haircut.

"I got as much as I could."

Aric laid out the items on the pebbles one by one. For provisions, there were three waterskins, empty and made of some kind of animal bladders, a package of dried and salted fish wrapped in oilcloth, and a couple of loaves of bread. Also in the sack was a rough-looking metal pot, a couple of simple but well-made knives, and several woollen blankets.

“How did you afford all this?” Aric asked quietly, as he repacked the bag.

Grace reached under the collar of her dress and pulled out the small coin purse she kept there. “I keep my money on me, my lord.”

She tipped out the remainder onto her palm; a single silver thorn and several copper pips.

“I thought you might have traded something of Lady Viola’s.”

A flicker of offence passed over Grace’s face. “Of course not, my lord. I didn’t have permission.”

“That would be a sure way to get us killed,” Elery said, though he didn’t open his eyes. “To trade a piece of jewellery that could easily be traced back to us.”

Farrow was suddenly glad he hadn’t headed out alone. The first thing he would have done would be to trade the golden stag pendent, tucked away in his trouser pocket, for coin.

*Stupid.*

“Let’s get off this beach,” Aric said, as Grace tucked her pouch back underneath her dress. “We shouldn’t stay in one place for too long.”

The beach was at the edge of a rocky forest, in the shade of grey-green pines that stretched up towards the sky. Elery, by unspoken agreement, led the way under the cover of the trees. The pines towered above them, blocking out the sun and blanketing the forest in artificial night. Camber murmured a soft prayer as Elery led them between a pair of moss-covered boulders, clambering carefully, and Farrow found himself murmuring the words in response. The presence of Faolan, Lord of Earth, lay heavily on this place.

A deep silence pressed in around them, broken only by the harsh cry of a crow and the faint burbling of water. A thick carpet of pine needles muffled their footsteps when they weren’t climbing

over rocks, and the deep smell of soil and resin was as heady as any temple incense. Many small, shallow streams cut through the forest, meandering around trees and heading towards the inlet. Farrow could taste damp earth when he breathed in, and the air was heavy with moisture.

It was only a short while before they stopped. Farrow could still make out the glimmer of water through the trees.

Elery turned, folding his arms. "We need a plan before we go any further. A real plan. If we just head off blindly into the wilderness, we won't come out again."

Farrow looked uneasily at the trees surrounding them. He didn't find that hard to believe.

"Can we also eat something?" Camber muttered. "I'm starving."

At Camber's words, Farrow noticed the gnawing pain in his own stomach and hugged his arms around himself. It had been mid-afternoon the day before when he'd last eaten, as the ball had turned sour before the planned banquet could begin.

They clustered together on some rocks next to one of the large trees. Aric handed out chunks of bread to each of them as they began to discuss their options.

"We could follow the Queensroad to Oldcastle," Camber suggested around a mouthful of crust. "Or head inland to Goldenmire. My family owns both castles."

"We don't know who we can trust," Aric said quietly. "The lords there could be involved. They stand to gain a lot from this."

Camber frowned at him. "My aunt's husband is not that kind of man. Lord Richard would welcome us to Oldcastle – he's Edith's father, for the Lord's sake. And Goldenmire... Lord Bryn is only ten, too young to be involved in any plots."

"Bryn is young, yes," Aric said, his voice soft, "but not immune to influence from others. I like Lord Richard – he's a good man – but it would be folly to head to Oldcastle." He sounded pained, and Farrow hoped that Edith was all right. "Even if Richard isn't involved, which I'm sure is true, do you really believe they would not look for you there? That Cassian wouldn't think that'd be the first place you'd run?"

Elery flinched a little at his father's name; he had shredded his piece of bread rather than eating any of it.

"Aric's right," he said, not looking up. "Father knows you too well, Cam. There are probably soldiers on their way there right now."

"Whitecastle," Camber said, looking at Farrow.

Farrow shook his head. "Whitecastle has the same issues, highness," he said, unsure about using the prince's name. "As my home, it would be an obvious place for us to head."

Camber growled a little in frustration, rubbing his hands across his face. Farrow took another bite of his bread and chewed, thinking. Then he glanced between Aric and Elery.

"We should leave the country." Camber's head snapped up to look at him, but he ploughed on, speaking quickly and quietly. "Aric's right. We don't know who in Serukis we can trust." He looked directly into Camber's eyes, thinking of the hero Farrow and imagining his words in this situation. "You're king now, and you need allies if you're going to reclaim your throne. They're not just going to step aside just because you ask nicely."

Aric held up a hand and hissed softly. "Voices."

They stilled, listening, and, sure enough, snatches of men's voices could be heard. Then, a hunting horn shattered the silence with a mournful moan. They got slowly to their feet as Grace stashed the rest of the bread back in the pack. She hefted it onto her back, leaving Aric free to fight if necessary.

"We don't hunt this side of the water," Camber said softly, his tone confused.

Elery's mouth twisted. "They're not hunting game, Cam. They're hunting us."

"Lords," Aric breathed, as Farrow turned in a circle, trying to pinpoint where the sounds were coming from.

"Do we run?" Grace asked.

"If we run, we won't find each other," Elery said. "We stay put – I don't hear dogs. They're covering all routes, and this is one of the least likely."

Grace looked less than convinced, but Camber nodded grimly. Aric looked around at Farrow and Grace, his expression serious.

“If they find us, we’ll hold them off. You two run. Keep the water to your right and get to the road.”

“I can fight,” Farrow protested.

He had trained sometimes with his brothers at home and, although he wouldn’t call himself talented, he thought that he could at least hold his own if he had a weapon.

Which he didn’t.

“You two run,” Aric said again, and turned away as if that settled it.

Farrow scowled at his back and resolved to ignore the command. Grace wordlessly pressed the hilt of one of the knives into the palm of his hand, holding the other loosely at her side. They would not be defenceless, at least.

The five of them hunkered down between the rocks they had been seated on, holding their breaths. Farrow found himself squashed between Camber and Elery. He tightened his grasp on the handle of the knife, his heart thudding. Camber gripped hold of his free hand in what was clearly meant to be a reassuring manner, but all Farrow could concentrate on was the sound of Elery’s pained breathing at his back and the footsteps and voices that grew closer and then further away like the tide.

Then, a set of footsteps – no, two sets – came nearer and did not retreat. The sounds became much louder, and Camber grew rigid at Farrow’s side, his fingers tightening on his hand so much that Farrow felt his bones crunch together.

“... don’t see why...”

“... bloody cold...”

Farrow could only make out some of the words being spoken, but suddenly Camber let go of his hand and stumbled out of their hiding place. Aric hissed in warning, but Camber didn’t listen.

“Ed! Tris!” Camber’s voice seemed unnaturally loud. “Over here!”

“Camber, is that you?” a voice responded. “Hold on.”

The footsteps drew closer. Farrow started to get to his feet, but Elery grabbed hold of his wrist and pulled him back down.

“Don’t.”

Aric moved up beside Camber, his arm out in front of the prince, stopping him from striding forward. His sword was drawn.

“Wait,” he said quietly, and Farrow noticed his words had the tone of an order.

The two men that emerged from the trees were older than the prince, but still young men in their prime. They were similar in build, tall and lean. One of the men swept his gaze over Aric and Farrow could see a resemblance to Camber in the way he held himself and in the line of his jaw. His dark hair was long enough to brush his shoulders and he wore a dark green tunic emblazoned with three golden roses, an echo of the royal crest, over shining armour. The other man had a neat, dark beard, and bore the same emblem on his tunic. He approached, his hands spread out in a cautious, conciliatory gesture.

“You have nothing to fear from us,” he said to Aric. His smile looked rather forced, and his voice was condescending as he continued. “We’re family.”

“We know who you are,” Elery said shortly, stepping out of the bushes. His tone said that he didn’t like the two men much.

The bearded man’s lip curled. “Of course, you’re here too.”

“Always.”

Farrow tried to recall the crests of the minor branches of the royal family, attempting to place these men. They were undoubtedly brothers, but how were they related to Camber? His mind came up stubbornly blank.

“Apologies,” Aric said, his tone courteous. “You will forgive us if we’re wary, Edward. Tristan. It’s been a long night full of betrayals.”

“You need to return to the castle, Cam,” the man called Edward said, as though Aric hadn’t spoken. A glance passed between him and his brother. “It’s safe. The Kingshadow and Lord Hargrove have been arrested and will be tried for treason.”

Farrow’s world tilted.

*My father was protecting the princes*, he wanted to shout, but the words seemed strangled in his throat.

Camber’s body seemed to sag for a moment, before he pushed Aric’s arm aside and stalked forward.

“My mother?” he demanded. “Is she safe?”

Elery circled to Aric’s side, fingers resting on the hilt of his dagger. Farrow felt the touch of Grace’s hand on his arm, and he covered it with his fingers and squeezed.

Edward’s expression had changed at Camber’s question, turning sombre. “The queen hasn’t been seen since the attack. She’s suspected to have some part to play in this treason.”

Camber jerked as though he had been struck. Farrow tried to reconcile his image of the queen with the brutal murder of the king the night before. He didn’t know if he was imagining the fact that Edward’s concern didn’t seem to reach his eyes. He barely noticed that Grace had let go of his arm.

“My brothers?” Camber’s voice broke slightly.

“Still missing, presumed dead.”

*But he was protecting them*. The image of his father standing in front of a wall of flames flooded into Farrow’s mind.

Camber shook his head, looking paler by the moment. He was about to speak again when Grace stepped up to his side. Farrow reached for the place she had been in confusion.

“He’s lying, Your Highness,” she said, her voice soft but steady.

Tristan strode forward, chuckling. “Who’s this common bitch, Cam? Got a bit on the side already?”

Hot colour flooded to Grace's cheeks, but she turned her back on him and faced Camber instead, her tone soft and imploring. "I've seen his type before, Your Highness, in the slums. He's saying things – *anything* – to get you to go with him."

Edward laughed as though the accusation was ludicrous. "Are you a mind reader? Pray tell, *my lady*, how much do you charge?"

Grace ignored him, keeping her eyes on Camber's face. Camber looked unsure, though Farrow noticed that Aric's hand had tightened on the hilt of his sword. Then, Camber looked up at the two men, taking in a breath.

"Tell me true, Ed. Tris." His voice was soft. "Where is my betrothed? Have you found Lady Viola?"

Farrow opened his mouth to say something. Elery caught his eye and shook his head.

"Your betrothed?" There was a strange note to Edward's voice. "Cam, I... I don't think..."

"Ed, we have to tell him." Tristan's mouth was a thin line. "Camber, she was captured with the Kingsshadow. They were..." He shook his head. "Lords, there's no kind way to put this. She was on him like a bitch in heat."

Farrow swallowed another furious protest. An image of the man who had murdered the king flashed across his vision and he bit his lip hard. He could see his feelings echoed in the others' faces; Elery, in particular, was white with rage. Camber's mouth twisted at the obvious lie, his eyes dark.

"Another lie?" Grace asked softly, before the prince could speak. She stood her ground as Tristan turned his gaze on her, though her eyes blazed with fury. "I thought men like you were supposed to have honour."

A sudden clash of steel rang through the trees. Tristan's sword hovered mere inches from Grace's head, kept at bay only by Aric's own blade. The younger boy was implacable in his strength, and Farrow suddenly realised what it meant to be named the prince's Shield. Camber gripped Grace's arm and yanked her behind him, shielding her with his body.

"What are you doing?" he demanded angrily.

Tristan didn't answer. Instead, he pulled back, swinging his blade in wide arcs through the air to loosen his muscles, as Edward drew his sword from its sheath with a hiss of metal.

"You might want to rethink this course of action, Vasey," Tristan said lazily. "Your older brother has never bested us in combat. And I wouldn't want to be the cause of little Edith's heartache."

"I'm not George," Aric said shortly, shifting his weight and looking between the two older men, unconcerned. "And my lady will have no need of heartache."

Elery joined him then, his dagger raised and his mouth grim. Farrow rose to his feet and his fingers tightened more around the hilt of his knife, knuckles white. Camber, weaponless, stood behind Aric and Elery, his hand opening and closing at the place where a hilt should be.

"Why?" he asked.

"Come quietly, Your Highness," Edward said, all pretence dropped, his eyes not leaving the blades in front of him. "Come quietly, and we'll kill them quickly."

Elery let out a humourless laugh and, before Camber could say a word, he leapt forward, his blade slashing up towards Edward's face. Edward blocked it easily, and then unleashed a series of aggressive attacks, driving Elery backwards. Elery dodged each strike, looking for an opening to get in closer. Camber backed up, holding Grace by the elbow and pulling her to where Farrow was standing, as Tristan started his own series of attacks that Aric met blow for blow. The prince stood shielding Farrow and Grace from harm, though his lack of weapon meant he wouldn't be able to protect them for long.

Farrow stood frozen, hating how helpless he felt. His fingers felt numb on the hilt of his knife. He remembered Aric's command to run, but that wasn't an option. In the stories, Farrow never ran from a fight. If he wanted to be like his hero, he couldn't abandon Elery and Aric to die, even if it cost him his own life.

But he couldn't make himself move.

At that moment, Elery tripped as Edward's sword swung down towards his head. He landed on his back on the ground, the wind rushing out of him. His dagger skidded away across the pine needles. Edward planted a foot on his chest, pinning him there. Elery coughed and shoved ineffectually at his leg, trying to twist away as the older man raised his sword up for a final blow.

Farrow's feet moved of their own accord. One moment he stood behind the prince, frozen and helpless, and the next he slammed against Edward's chest, Camber's voice ringing in his ears. Edward, caught off guard, crashed to his back on the ground. Farrow, unable to stop his forward momentum, sprawled on top of him with a grunt of pain. Before he could fully process what had happened, Edward recovered and rolled, pinning Farrow underneath his body. His forearm pressed down against Farrow's throat, cutting off his air.

The world shrank as ice flooded through Farrow's veins. He felt the ghosts of another man's hands on him.

Edward growled. "You'll regret that, boy."

Farrow could hear Elery gasping for air, could hear Grace screaming, but the sounds seemed muffled against the dull roar in his ears. He kicked out, but Edward was as immovable as stone.

His hand tightened on the hilt of his knife as his lungs screamed for air and stars began to dance in front of his vision. His attempt at a blow glanced off Edward's armour, and the knife slid from his fingers as he pulled it back for another go. In desperation, he shoved his hands up against Edward's face, nails digging into his skin.

*Elia, help me!*

Flames pulsed through Farrow's arms and spilled from his hands. Edward's scream tore through the air and the sickening stench of burning flesh flooded Farrow's nostrils.

At that moment, Elery moved, still coughing, and jammed Farrow's knife deep into Edward's throat, turning the scream into a strangled groan. Farrow shoved at Edward's chest with a yell, using all his strength to push him off his body. Edward rolled onto his back, his face burnt and blistered,

blood bubbling from the wound in his neck. His shining armour was slick with blood and the golden roses were rapidly turning red.

A wordless roar was all the warning Farrow had. Elery yanked him back down flat on the ground as Tristan's sword swung past his head with the sound of rushing air. As the sword raised for another blow, Elery covered Farrow's body with his own. Suddenly, vines erupted from the ground, twisting their way around Tristan's arms and legs to hold him in place. The sword clattered uselessly to the ground.

Camber advanced, his eyes burning with anger and his hands held up to maintain control over the vines. His face was white. Aric walked up beside him, sword raised, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. Tristan struggled against the tangle of vines, panting.

"What's the meaning of this?" the prince asked, his voice shaking.

No one moved. Farrow could feel Elery's heart pounding against his cheek, and his own hammered in his chest.

Tristan's eyes flickered to Edward's body. "We were just trying to get you home —"

Camber's hands flexed, and the vines tightened around Tristan's arms and legs. "Stop lying to me."

"It's the *truth!*"

"*Liar!*"

Another silence. Still breathing hard, Elery stumbled to his feet and then reached down to help Farrow up. Farrow did his best not to look at Edward's body.

Camber took a deep, shuddering breath. "What did you tell me that's true?"

Tristan yanked ineffectually at the vines before he forced out, "The Kingshadow and Lord Hargrove are to be tried with treason."

Farrow couldn't help himself. He strode up beside Camber and bit out, "My father was protecting the princes. This treason was nothing to do with him."

Tristan shook his head, letting out a rather mirthless chuckle. There was no recognition in his eyes. "It doesn't matter what's true. Only what the country believes is true."

There was a resounding *smack* as Farrow's fist connected with the side of Tristan's face, snapping his head to his side. He raised an arm to hit him again, but Aric grabbed hold of him, hauling him back. He tried to fight him off, but Aric's arms closed around him, caging him against his chest. Farrow sagged in defeat. His cheeks were embarrassingly wet.

*It's not fair.*

"What about my mother?" Camber asked, as though Farrow hadn't moved.

Tristan spat a mouthful of blood out onto the ground. "She's really gone," he said, wetting his dry lips; his gaze strayed to Edward's body again. "They think she's fled with Lady Hargrove."

Farrow's chest swelled with hope – his mother was alive.

"And my brothers?" Camber demanded. "Don't lie to me again."

Tristan looked up at him properly. "They're safe, for now. As long as they do as they're told."

"They're *children*." Camber clenched his fists and the vines wrapped themselves around Tristan's neck, cutting off his air. "They look up to you, Tris. How can you be okay with that?"

The older man let out a choked sound, any reply he would have made strangled by the vines. The noise seemed to bring Camber back to his senses and he recoiled, his face pale. The vines loosened around Tristan's body. He crumpled to his knees, coughing, one hand on his throat.

"Get out of here." Camber's voice was dull. "Just *go*."

He turned away, pressing his face into his hands. His shoulders shook. As Tristan started to struggle to his feet, Aric released Farrow. He circled around behind Tristan, his face impassive. Just as Tristan found his balance, Aric hit him in the back of the head with the hilt of his sword. The older man dropped like a stone.

Camber whipped back around at the thud. "What are you *doing*?"

"We can't let him leave," Aric said quietly, starting to gather the vines that had fallen limp to the ground. "There'd be more men on us faster than we could blink."

“We can’t just leave him here.”

“There are others searching for us.” Aric’s voice was dispassionate. “He’ll be found before nightfall, I’m sure.”

Elery, still breathing hard, his hair plastered with sweat, rolled Tristan onto his back with his foot. “He’s lucky he’s not dead.”

Camber let out a sound that was something like a sob, but didn’t reply.

Together, Aric and Elery pulled Tristan’s body up against a tree and then tied the vines firmly around him so that he wouldn’t be able to get free. Grace, her face white, came to press up against Farrow’s side, her arm around his waist. Farrow covered her hand with his own, smearing blood on her pale skin.

“Are you all right?” she asked him, quietly enough that no one else would hear.

Farrow unwillingly glanced over at Edward’s body. There were handprints on his face – Farrow’s handprints – the skin burnt and cracked where it had started to blacken. He gagged at the sight and suddenly found himself doubled over on his knees, vomiting up the contents of his stomach. Grace’s hand was cool on the back of his neck.

“We need to get out of Serukis.” Camber’s voice sounded strangely detached. “We can’t trust anyone.” He took another shuddering breath. “I don’t understand. Edward’s wife just had a baby. Why would he –?”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Aric said, his voice a little hoarse as he finished securing the vines.

“Not yet. What matters is getting somewhere safe.”

“I’ve never been able to do that before,” Camber said softer, looking at his hands.

There was silence. Elery approached Farrow and Grace, crouching down, his eyes concerned as he looked at Farrow’s face.

“Are you hurt, my lady?”

Farrow wiped his mouth on his sleeve and shook his head. He felt numb.

“Eshua,” Camber said. “My aunt is married to their king. They have to help us.”

“But can we trust them?” Aric said quietly. “We know now your family is involved.”

“We were there for *four* years, Aric. King Laurent is another father to me, and he treated you as his son as well.”

For a moment, Aric said nothing in response, but then he nodded. “Eshua, then.”

He wiped sweat off his forehead with his sleeve, eyes lingering for a moment on Edward’s body. Camber, Farrow noticed, was deliberately avoiding looking at it, his expression twisted slightly with grief. He wondered how close the prince had been to these men who had betrayed him.

“We should head to the Teeth,” Elery said, his voice soft as he unbuckled Edward’s sword sheath and attached it to his own belt. “It’s safer than following the Queensroad through Elenasia lands, though I don’t think the Throat can be avoided if we want to pass the Teeth.”

The Throat was the largest pass through the mountains and had been the setting for more than one major battle in Seruic history. It linked Serukis with the neighbouring country of Kaien – a safer prospect than travelling through Serukis, perhaps – but it was not a road to be undertaken lightly. They had all heard stories of ill-prepared travellers the Throat had swallowed whole.

But Elery was right. Travelling through Elenasia land was not an option.

“The mountains, then,” Camber said.

Farrow looked up to where the Teeth were just visible through the dense branches of the pines, their peaks scraping threateningly against the sky.

They had no choice.

\*

No one spoke much as they trekked deeper into the forest.

Farrow found his thoughts wandering most often to Phineas, lying abandoned in the cold ballroom, or his father, shut somewhere in a dungeon in chains. He tried to force his mind to his

mother, who he liked to believe had escaped with the queen, but almost immediately he thought of his younger siblings, whose whereabouts were still unknown.

He had nothing to cling onto but hope. And prayer.

*Lord Elian, please keep them safe.*

"I didn't know trees could grow this big." Grace's soft voice broke into his thoughts, and he startled a little as her warm hand slipped into his.

He looked up as they continued to walk. The trees were taller than Whitecastle's tallest tower, with solid dark trunks that he and Grace together would struggle to put their arms around. Their branches blocked out the sky, so much so that each snatched glimpse of blue made Farrow's heart jump.

"They're sentinel pines," Aric said quietly, from behind them. "You don't have them in Whitecastle?"

Farrow shook his head. "Whitecastle is grass as far as the eye can see. No forests like this."

"It is said that the Lord of Earth gifted one of these trees to the first king," Camber said. His voice was distant. "And the king carved magnificent thrones for himself and his queen, and they sit in the throne room to this day."

Camber fell silent and Farrow turned his head to look at him. The prince was keeping pace with Aric, their shoulders almost touching, and Farrow guessed that Camber would have already given up if not for the other boy.

"The thrones in the ballroom, you mean?" he asked him quietly.

Camber shook his head. "No. Those thrones are contemporary imitations. My mother loves throwing balls, so my father—" His voice broke slightly on the word. "He had them specially commissioned."

His expression darkened then, and he lapsed back into brooding silence. Any further questions Farrow might have had died on his tongue and he turned his attention back to the forest.

The trees had swallowed up any sign of the mountains. Every so often Farrow questioned internally whether they were heading in the right direction, or even walking in circles. When no one was talking, the only sounds were the occasional flurry of birdsong or the mournful call of something bigger. A couple of times, they had to take off their shoes to wade across wide, shallow streams, or to step carefully from rock to rock where the water was deeper.

Elery, who seemed to have an unwavering sense of direction, kept several paces ahead of them, his hand resting lightly on his dagger or, occasionally, on the sword he had liberated from Edward's body. His shoulders were tense, Farrow noticed, and every so often his body would weave slightly, as though he had drunk a little too much wine at a feast.

Grace had noticed too.

"Sir, wait," she said, quickening her pace to draw up beside Elery.

His head turned towards her as she laid a hand on his arm, and then suddenly his body crumpled against hers. Grace sank to her knees on the ground, bringing him with her.

"What's the matter with him?" Camber demanded.

Grace didn't reply. Her hands moved to undo the ties on Elery's rough shirt as Farrow knelt beside her. Elery's face was pale, his skin covered in a thin sheen of sweat. Camber thudded to his knees beside Grace, his expression tense. Without thinking, Farrow rested his hand on the prince's shoulder. It seemed like the right thing to do.

As Grace peeled back the shirt, Camber drew in a sharp breath. The rough bandages Grace had applied in the tunnels were soaked through with dark, fresh blood.

"Did you think hiding this was a good idea?" Grace's voice was sharp, but her hands were gentle as she peeled the bandages away from his skin. "You should have told me it was still bleeding."

"It's nothing." Elery's voice was weak, but his eyes fluttered open. "We had to get away."

Farrow's gaze slid down over the wound. The skin surrounding it was crusted with old blood, but fresh blood seeped slowly from the cut that curved over his hip bone towards his stomach. The fight with Edward must have reopened it, if it had stopped bleeding at all.

"I've seen people die from a lot less." Grace's voice was hard, and Elery seemed to think better of replying.

"Is he going to die?" Camber sounded like a frightened boy, and Farrow felt his stomach clench at the thought.

"Lords willing, I won't let that happen. Your Highness." Grace turned and looked up and towards Aric, her expression grim. "We're not going any further today."

Aric's face flickered, and for a moment it seemed as though he was going to disagree. Then he nodded shortly and took Camber by the elbow, helping the prince to his feet.

"We'll find a stream, refill our waterskins. Maybe find some fresh meat." He hesitated, then added, "Lighting a fire is more a help to us than a danger now. Find dry wood that doesn't smoke." He squinted up towards the canopy, though the sky was hidden from view. "When night falls, the light should keep away any wolves."

He crouched and began to rummage in the pack that Grace had put aside on the ground. Farrow noticed that he was careful not to look at Elery.

Camber wrapped his arms around himself, looking distinctly unhappy. "How will we know how to get back?"

Aric straightened, showing them the knife Grace had placed back in the pack; it had likely spent its days gutting fish. "We mark the trees."

Camber looked unconvinced, but he nodded. "Let's go, then." He hesitated, and Farrow startled as a hand touched his. "Will you be all right, Viola?"

Farrow swallowed down his misgivings. "We'll be fine, Your Highness."

Camber's hand tightened for a moment, and then he released him. There was a moment of silence, broken only by the sounds of Grace rustling in the pack, before the prince said, "All right."

Farrow didn't look up as the two boys walked away. He couldn't tear his gaze away from the wound that oozed mockingly, and the shallow rise and fall of Elery's chest. Elery's eyes were closed now, as though he'd finally allowed himself to shut down.

"I thought he'd be all right until we stopped for the night."

Grace's soft voice made him look away from Elery's face and up into hers. She was biting her lip, staring down at Elery with her arms crossed over her chest.

"He hid it well," he told her. "It isn't your fault."

Grace rubbed a hand over her face. "Do you know what Lord's moss looks like, my lady?"

"I do. Do you need some?"

Grace held her hand for Farrow's knife and, once he'd handed it over, began to cut one of the blankets into strips.

"It would prevent the spread of corruption, especially after our night in the tunnels." She paused and frowned. "King's grace would be better, but I don't think there's enough light here for it to grow."

"I'll see what I can find," Farrow said, getting to his feet. "Dry wood, too?"

"I'll manage that." Grace placed the strips of fabric in the pack and got to her feet also. She took Farrow's hands in hers and squeezed. "Don't go too far, my lady. We'll make do if there's none nearby."

He nodded and she released his hands, before she turned away and began to gather dry sticks from the forest floor. Farrow walked a little way from the camp, following the marks Aric had made in the trunks so that he'd also be able to find his way back. Red sap was dripping from where Aric had carved into the wood, looking enough like fresh blood that Farrow's stomach rolled over. He gave each tree only a cursory glance after that, just enough that he could assure himself he was going in the right direction.

As he walked, he looked carefully at the base of each trunk for Lord's moss. Near Whitecastle, the blue-grey moss grew thickly on the twisted roots of the scant trees around the castle, but here in

the pine forest the tree roots were covered in a soft green moss that Farrow couldn't identify. He scowled at the ground and kept walking.

After a short while, he came across a stream. It was shallow, like most of the streams they had crossed, and bubbled slowly over small rocks and exposed tree roots. The scent of pine was stronger here, laced with the smell of wet earth. Farrow crouched down on the bank and scooped up a handful of the cool, clear water, splashing it on his face. The few droplets that found his tongue tasted faintly of soil, but he scooped up another handful and drank it down. The cold water spread down his throat and into his stomach, making him uncomfortably aware how hungry he was. He scrubbed his face dry on his shirt sleeve, and then refilled the waterskin he was carrying.

He straightened and touched a mark Aric had made on a tree close to the water. His fingers came away sticky with sap. Grimacing, he looked around for the next gash – there, on the other side of the stream. He waited for a moment to see if he could hear the voices of the other boys, but the forest was silent except for the slow gurgle of the stream and a flurry of birdcalls.

Instead of following the trail across the stream, Farrow decided to walk a little way along the bank, hoping his search would be more successful amongst the damp wood and soil. He had walked perhaps ten paces when he spotted a blanket of Lord's moss nestled between some tree roots. It was the cold blue-grey he remembered from Whitecastle, its leaves like tiny starbursts. As he bent to prise the Lord's moss from its anchor, he noticed other splashes of blue-grey along the riverbank, speckling the blanket of greyish green pine needles and unidentified green moss. Carefully, Farrow gathered several handfuls of it, before making his way back along the stream to the marked tree.

When he returned to camp, Grace was crouched over a flickering fire, the metal pot from her pack wedged in amongst the sticks. As he came closer, he saw that she had emptied a waterskin into the pot and was trying to coax the water into boiling. Her head whipped around as he stepped forward, a stick cracking under his foot. Her eyes were red-rimmed and damp, but she still smiled when she realised it was him.

“Any luck?”

Wordlessly, he passed her the clumps of Lord's moss he'd gathered, and then slumped cross-legged on the ground beside the fire. Though the flames were small, the warmth brushed against him like hot breath. He watched as Grace stuffed the moss into the pot of heating water and poked at it with a stick to ensure it was fully submerged.

He wondered for a moment what other knowledge Grace possessed. It occurred to him that he had never actually thought to ask.

The minutes passed in companionable silence. Grace's attention was on the bubbling pot and Farrow's mind strayed again back to King's Rock and the people he didn't know were alive or dead.

And Phineas.

*Stop.*

He took a deep breath and forced himself back to the forest. Back to Grace. As he watched, she slipped the knife into the cinders, hilt within reach. Without explaining, she continued to mash the Lord's moss into a pulp within the water.

"That should do," she said quietly after a short while, and eased the pot from the fire with the stick and a hand wrapped tightly in cloth. "First, we need to stop the bleeding."

Farrow looked across at Elery, who was sprawled out on the other side of the fire. The new bandages that Grace had applied whilst he was gone were already stained dark with blood. He crawled over beside Grace as she began to unwrap them, and she handed him a wodge of clean cloth.

"Hold that between his teeth. I don't want him to bite his tongue."

"What are you going to do?"

Grace didn't answer, so Farrow, deciding to just go with it, sat cross-legged and lifted Elery's head onto his lap. He twisted the cloth into a long rope, then eased it between Elery's teeth, gripping it tightly in his hands. Elery's eyes flickered open, his gaze glassy.

"It's going to be all right," Farrow told him, hoping that the coming night wouldn't prove him wrong.

He tried not to look as Grace finished undoing the bandages, but found his eyes irresistibly drawn to the wound. There were stories about blades coated in a poison that stopped wounds closing and a poison that turned blood to water. He bit his lip, not wanting to think about the possibilities. Grace's face remained calm, if pale, and he took a small amount of comfort from that.

As she examined the wound, Grace wrapped her hand in cloth again. Then, gritting her teeth, she wrapped her fingers around the hilt of the knife in the fire and tugged it free. The blade glowed a dull red.

"This will hurt, sir," Grace murmured, smoothing Elery's hair back from his forehead. "But it's necessary."

Farrow's eyes widened a little as he understood what she was about to do. He tightened his hold on the cloth and squeezed his eyes shut.

There was a sizzling sound and the all-too-familiar smell of burning flesh. A muffled scream wrestled its way from Elery's throat. He contorted, fighting against Farrow for a moment, fighting, and then sagged again. His mouth went slack around the cloth. It took a few moments for Farrow to dare to open his eyes again. Grace had cast the knife aside and was smoothing the thick blue paste made of Lord's moss onto the wound with gentle fingers. Elery's eyes were closed.

"Is he all right?" Farrow ventured.

"He's exhausted, my lady." Grace continued to apply the poultice to Elery's skin, making sure that the whole wound was covered, and then began to wrap clean bandages around his abdomen. "He needs rest, and for the Lord's moss and Elian's cleansing fire to do their work."

Farrow freed the cloth from Elery's mouth and then balled it up in his hand. A thought that had been niggling at him since they'd left King's Rock scratched at his head, though he didn't know how to give it voice.

"Where did you learn all that?" he asked instead, laying Elery's head gently down on the forest floor. "The medicine stuff?"

Grace paused for a moment in winding up the remaining strips of fabric. “The herbs, you mean?”

“In general.”

She sighed, packing the fabric back into the pack.

“There was a lady in Whitecastle, in the lower city. Everyone went to her when they were sick or hurt.” She paused as she began to wash out the metal pot with the remaining water. “She wasn’t like your family’s physician, my lady. These are old remedies, passed down from mother to daughter for generations. I picked up a few things here and there.”

The thought scrabbled again at the inside of his skull. He hugged his knees and took in a slow, steadying breath.

“Is there...” He swallowed. “Did you learn of anything that would keep you from becoming with child?”

The words hung there between them.

“There are several things, my lady,” Grace said carefully, her eyes regarding him sharply. “Do you know how children come to be?”

“Yes.” The word came out more defensively than he meant it to. “I mean, it happens when a man and a —” He stumbled over the word. “— a woman come together.”

Grace stowed the now-clean pot back into the pack. “That’s one way of putting it.” She gave Farrow a rather searching look. “It depends whether we’re looking at before or after the ‘coming together’, as you put it.”

Farrow looked away, hoping that he was imagining the faint glitter that indicated Elery’s opened eyes.

“It’s already happened.”

A pause. “The prince?”

“No.” The word was forced from between suddenly dry lips.

Grace was silent for a moment. “Are you talking about what happened in the ballroom?”

Farrow managed a nod.

Grace shuffled a little closer to him, touching her hand to his arm. "My lady... he didn't... what happened would not result in a child."

Hot shame crept up Farrow's face as he realised how stupid and naïve he must sound. He didn't know much about the mystery of childbirth or how babies were created. The births of his siblings had taken place behind closed doors and any information he had was snatched from hushed whispers. It wasn't something his mother had ever cared to talk about. He just knew that it was something he desperately hoped wouldn't ever happen to him. Grace was watching him with a mixture of sympathy and concern, and he suddenly wanted to jump up and run away. Instead, he covered his face with his hands, trying to swallow the rising panic in his chest.

"I promise," Grace said, her voice soft, and he jumped slightly as her arms wrapped around his body.

That was all it took. All the emotion he had been holding inside himself since the night before rose up and burst out of him in choking sobs. He pressed his face against Grace's shoulder, twisting his fingers in her dress, unable to control the sounds that were pouring out of him. Grace said nothing, just stroked his hair.

Eventually, the sobs subsided and Farrow managed to catch his breath, pulling back and wiping his face with his sleeve. Grace reached out and took hold of his hand.

"My lady—"

Whatever Grace was about to say was interrupted by the sound of male voices, soft but drawing closer to them. For a moment, Farrow tensed up. A breath later, he recognised them as belonging to Prince Camber and Aric Vasey, and he sagged slightly, feeling both relieved and drained. He scrubbed at his face with one sleeve and Grace squeezed his hand, but he did his best to avoid her eyes.

A few moments later, Camber and Aric stepped into the clearing. There was colour in the prince's cheeks for the first time since that awful moment at the ball, and Farrow realised that

hunting with his friend had done him a world of good, even if it had just served to help him forget everything for a while.

The prince was carrying a single hare at his side, whilst Aric had a brace of squirrels attached to his belt. Neither animal was Farrow's first choice of meat, but at the sight of them he was reminded again just how uncomfortably hungry he was. Aric sat down beside the fire, stretching out his long legs. The prince wordlessly dropped the hare onto Aric's lap, before crouching down beside Elery.

"How is he?"

Aric made no comment as he started to carefully and skilfully skin the hare, but Farrow could tell by the expression on his face that he was listening intently.

"Resting, Your Highness," Grace said, kneeling beside him and touching her hand to Elery's forehead. "I've closed the wound and set a poultice in place, but it's up to his body to do the rest."

Camber nodded in acknowledgement, his expression grim. He seemed disinclined to speak further, so Grace left his side and instead sat down beside Aric, taking the skinned hare from his hands and beginning to butcher it like she'd done so a thousand times. Perhaps she had. Aric blinked, but he said nothing and began to skin the first of the squirrels in the same slow, methodical fashion he had skinned the hare.

By the time the meat was roasting on the fire, night was setting in. Camber had left Elery's side and had sat down beside Farrow, not saying anything, his mind fixed on things that weren't there. Aric was sat on the other side of the fire, equally quiet, every line of his body radiating tension. Farrow found himself staring into the flames, the flames that had closed Elery's wound, that had swallowed the flint-eyed man, that crackled softly as they turned the meat from pink to brown.

*Lords, let this nightmare end.*

By unspoken agreement, Grace served them each a helping of meat, saving a share for Elery by wrapping it in clean fabric. They ate as though they'd not eaten for days, the grease hot against their fingers and burning the insides of their mouths. The meat tasted strongly of woodsmoke and

fire, and it was gone all too soon. Farrow licked the fat from his fingers, trying to be discreet about it, and tried not to think too much about their next meal. The salted fish was for emergencies only.

With the coming of night, the air had grown colder, a faint frost covering the pine needles on the ground. Grace pulled the blankets out of the pack. They were threadbare in places and needed mending, and one of them sported several suspicious dark stains. Grace tucked one around Elery's body, touching his forehead again with the back of her hand.

"I'll keep watch on him tonight," she said. "To make sure he doesn't get worse."

"And I'll keep watch for danger," Aric said, his tone inviting no argument. "Cam, you get some sleep." He looked at Farrow. "You too, my lady."

Camber nodded wordlessly. Farrow wanted to protest, but his eyelids were heavy and his limbs felt like lead. He watched as Grace left Elery's side and wrapped one of the blankets around Aric's shoulders. He started slightly, before catching her hand with his own.

"Sit with me," he said, his voice low enough that Farrow barely caught what he said. "It'll be warmer, and you can keep an eye on him from here."

"Of course, my lord," Grace said, her voice equally soft, and Farrow watched as she sat by Aric's side and he wrapped half of the blanket around her shoulders.

Farrow glanced up as the prince sat down beside him, the last two blankets in his arms. He gave Farrow a weak smile as he leaned over and wrapped the larger of the two blankets around Farrow's shoulders.

"Let me know if you're too cold, Viola."

Farrow managed a ghost of a smile in return. "I will. Thank you."

Somewhere in the distance, an owl screamed in the darkness. Shivering, he pulled the blanket tighter around himself and curled up on the ground by the fire. The soft heat from the flames caressed his face and he was calmed, feeling the protection of Lord Elian settle across him like an extra blanket. He could see the shadowy forms of Grace and Aric through the flames and, beside them, Elery, still unconscious. After a moment, he heard Camber lie down behind him, close by but

not touching him. He didn't know if he was glad of that, or if he wanted to feel Camber's body heat seeping into his own. He let out a long, low breath, and closed his eyes.

"Anyone know any stories?" Camber said quietly, after a long moment of silence. His tone was light, but there was a slight tremor to his words.

"It's not the time nor place for bedtime tales." Aric's voice was low. "You need rest."

"That doesn't mean we need to be in silence," Camber retorted, his voice sharp. The tremor in his voice was definite now.

Without thinking, Farrow shifted back a little until he could feel the hard lines of Camber's body against his back, wanting to comfort him as his betrothed, but not knowing how. He felt the prince freeze for a moment, and then an arm draped itself over his waist. Even though the blanket remained between them, Farrow felt his body tense up and forget to breathe, but Camber didn't retreat. Instead, the other blanket settled over Farrow's body, covering them both.

There was the rustle of fabric from across the fire as Grace shifted her position to get more comfortable.

"What kind of stories, Your Highness?" she asked, before Aric could respond to Camber's words. "A story about the Lords? About kings and princes?"

Farrow felt a shudder go through Camber's body.

"Not that," the prince said. "Treasure, or dragons. Something like that."

Farrow pictured the torn tapestry in King's Rock, with the unnervingly lifelike green dragon.

"The dragons disappeared lifetimes ago," Aric said quietly. "The Koushan Mai drove them away."

"I know, Ari." Camber drew in a low, shuddering breath. "Just... please, just talk. Someone."

There was a long silence, and then Grace hesitantly cleared her throat.

"Before Serukis was founded, dragons were everywhere." Her voice was soft, and Farrow felt Camber's body relax ever so slightly. "They were men that could turn into lizards larger than horses

– twice the size, even – and they were covered in scales that glimmered in golds, greens, blues, reds, and many more colours besides.”

Grace paused questioningly, and Aric let out a long breath.

“When the first king, Rigel, claimed Serukis, he had as his companion the great dragon, Veli, a dragon of the earth clans.” Aric’s voice sounded as though he was speaking from rote. “Just as the dragons of old fought alongside the Lords, the dragons fought alongside what would become the great Seruic houses, carving the land into five to honour the Lords and the great dragon clans. House Elenasia put down roots in the forests and mountains, taking for their patron Faolan, Lord of Earth. House Hargrove partnered with the fire clans, Vaifale with the sea clans, Reith with ice, and Sybrant with air.

“For the first century in Serukis, dragons and humans thrived alongside each other. The dragons, our closest links to the Lords, were revered, and in return they offered us protection. But the Koushan Mai, the savage natives of this land, did not revere the dragons. They hunted them for meat. They stole their eggs and their young. They made weapons from their bones and clothes from their hides. They turned their scales into paint.

“One day, a Koushan Mai chieftain committed the greatest betrayal of all. He invited the leaders of all the dragon clans to his home, promising peace and a new understanding between their peoples. Seated at the chieftain’s table, they broke bread and drank ale. Then, when the dragons’ guards were down, when they were laughing and joking with each other, the Koushan Mai slaughtered them all where they sat.

“After that, the dragons disappeared. Now and again, we hear whispers of their presence, or of a sighting of a dark wing through some clouds, but no one has seen a real dragon for centuries. No one can say if they’re all gone for good, or if they’re hiding amongst us still, pretending to be human.”

Aric’s voice trailed off and silence returned to the camp. Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled, but Camber’s even breathing remained undisturbed. Lying still, with his eyes closed, Farrow

remembered various iterations of this story being told throughout his childhood. One time, a group of Koushan Mai had come to Whitecastle to perform tricks for coin, hair long and skin covered with dark tattoos, and his mother had forbidden him and his siblings from getting close.

“If a Koushan Mai offers you food or water,” she had told them, “they’re planning on slitting your throat. Never trust them.”

That night, Farrow fell into an uneasy sleep. In amongst the dreams of dark figures and blood splattering against the marble, he dreamt of dark wings and green, glittering eyes.

It took another four days hard travel to make it through the forest. The first day, Elery found it difficult to travel for more than an hour at a time, though Grace was most often the one insisting they stop and rest. Their hunting was never as successful as it had been on that first night, so they subsisted mostly on the salted fish and stale bread Grace had managed to barter for at the fishing village.

On the second day, they had stumbled across a wide trail churned up with cart tracks and hoofprints. They continued their journey out of sight of that trail, though Aric checked it every now and again to ensure that they were still going in the right direction.

The sun was setting on the fifth day when the trees began to thin out and more and more of the orange sky became visible through the canopy. The ground was covered in a thin crust of frost that crunched when they stepped on it. After an hour, the trees gave way almost entirely to farmlands, glittering fields abandoned for winter and scattered stone cottages where smoke curled from chimneys, their windows alight with a warm orange glow. Farrow found his mood buoyed slightly; where there was farmland, it was a good sign that a village was somewhere nearby. The pinks and oranges of the sunset dimmed into a dark, inky blue, and the air took on a biting chill. Ahead of them, the mountains loomed ever taller, close enough that Farrow was beginning to question their plan of crossing them. They looked impassable.

After a soft, quick discussion, they joined the road to start the trek through the farmland, hoping it would lead them through a village where they could resupply and perhaps barter for some warmer, thicker clothes.

Farrow shivered, wrapping his arms around himself as the cold wind whipped around them. Beside him, Camber sneezed and rubbed at his face.

“We’re staying in a tavern tonight,” he said bluntly. “I’m sick of sleeping outside.”

Aric, who had been walking several strides ahead of the group, fell back at that. “Cam, think about what you’re saying. It could be dangerous.”

“I don’t care.” Camber’s voice was flat. “If we’re going to be foolhardy and try to cross the mountains, we should do so on at least *one* night of proper rest.” His voice gentled. “Including you, Ari. You need a night where you don’t feel the need to keep watch.”

“A tavern won’t stop that,” Aric said, but his expression had softened a little. “Fine. We’ll see what the mood is like in the village when we reach it, and decide from there.”

It was another hour at least before the village proper came into sight. Nestled against the base of the mountain, the village was a scattering of torchlight. It seemed quiet, and Farrow doubted that news of the horror in King’s Rock had reached this place yet. Still, Aric was wary, and the group kept their heads down as they trudged along the main dirt track to the centre of the village.

They followed the track to a covered well and an open place where Farrow guessed festivals were held. The space was lit by flickering torches, the flames burning brightly against the darkness of the night. Across from the well was a tavern. Loud, jovial voices and snippets of music floated out as a man pushed open the door and lurched out into the night. A sign that swayed slightly in the wind proclaimed the tavern ‘The Final Rest’.

Camber strode across the square towards the tavern, ignoring Aric’s hissed protest. In a moment, he had vanished inside. Elery let out a curse and raced after him, shadowed immediately by Aric. Forgotten, Farrow and Grace exchanged looks, and then followed the three boys across the square and into the tavern.

A wave of warm air engulfed them, infused with the scents of beer and cooked meats. Men’s voices, the clatter of metal flagons against wooden tables, drunken laughter, and a light-hearted medley of flute and fiddle all rolled together to make a confused ocean of noise. Farrow paused in the doorway for a moment too long, so Grace slipped her arm through his and guided him through the crowd towards where their companions were huddled at the bar.

Elery was in low conversation with the barkeep. Farrow caught a glimmer of gold as a coin changed hands. Aric had hold of Camber's arm and was talking into his ear, his expression grim. Farrow could understand Aric's concern. Every inch of Camber's mannerisms screamed that he was nobility. That fact, carried openly, could be dangerous in a place such as this. They did not know how far the rebel Elenasias' reach was, or who harboured sympathy to their cause. One wrong move, and they could find themselves dead or worse.

Farrow's throat closed up and he kept his head down; his own body language, he knew, could give him away just as easily. Even Aric, though his stance radiated danger, oozed nobility in the way he talked. Elery and – even more so – Grace were their best bets to take the lead here, if they were to stay anonymous.

“New ‘round ‘ere, love?”

Farrow stumbled a little against the wooden bar as a large man in well-worn clothes placed himself in between him and Grace. The smell of leather and iron hit the back of Farrow's nose.

“Just passin’ through,” Grace said, deliberately dropping all knowledge of elocution.

The man reached out and touched Grace's cheek, leaving a smear of soot on her skin. “I ‘ave a warm bed for you for the night, if you want it.”

In a moment, Elery was there, one arm wrapped around Grace's waist, looking up at the man with a genial smile.

“Can't you go for one moment without a man hittin' on you, sweetheart?” All trace of the cultured boy Farrow had met at the ball was gone; instead, Elery's every word and gesture harkened to the lower city.

Grace leaned up and pressed a kiss to Elery's cheek, not missing a beat. “Sorry, love.”

The man grinned at Elery. “Honest mistake.”

“No harm done,” said Elery calmly, but he kept hold of Grace's waist as the man ambled away. “Right,” he said, as Grace made a show of pressing up against his side in case the man looked back.

“We’ve got a couple of rooms for the night, and I’ve ordered some food for all of us. I think we should eat quickly and then head up there.”

Grace touched her hand to where Elery’s bandages were. “Now everyone here thinks we’re a couple, sir,” she said, her voice soft. “We’re going to need to share a room.”

“Absolutely not!” Camber burst out, causing a moment’s silence to fall over the tavern common room. His voice, thankfully, was quieter as he added, “That’s inappropriate.”

Aric put his arm around his shoulders and steered him towards a table in a shadowed corner, muttering in his ear, “Shut up, Cam. There are people listening.”

Camber, wisely, decided not to say anything more as the five of them clustered around the table. Farrow leant back in his chair, sighing softly, letting the warmth of the tavern sink into him. He had almost forgotten what it was like to not feel cold. Elery disappeared for a moment and then returned, passing around mugs of dark amber beer.

“Safer than the water,” he said, when Camber sniffed at it suspiciously. “Sorry, no wine here.”

Farrow took a careful sip, grimacing at the taste. “Are we safe here?”

Elery shrugged a little, glancing around as though making sure no one was listening. “News doesn’t seem to have reached here yet. We just need to lie low – maybe rest up for a few days before trying to travel to the Throat.”

“A few days?” Aric said. “Is that wise?”

They were close to the musicians and Farrow found his attention drifting over to them as Elery and Aric started to argue in hushed voices. There were three men set up against one of the tavern walls; one man played a wooden flute, the second some kind of fiddle Farrow didn’t recognise, and the third sat with a pair of drums on his lap. An upturned hat was tossed on the floor in front of them, glittering with silver and copper coins. The men had long, dark hair twisted into braids and the skin Farrow could see was covered in dark, swirling tattoos.

Koushan Mai.

Camber had noticed them too. “What are *they* doing here?”

Farrow was surprised at the level of disgust in his voice.

Elery glanced over, following his gaze. "That's how they make a living, Cam. Just ignore them."

Camber opened his mouth to say something else, decided better of it and buried himself in his mug of ale instead. Farrow noticed his eyes didn't leave the group of men, though.

A space in front of the musicians had been cleared of tables and several people were dancing to the music. Grace leaned her elbows on the tables, looking wistfully at the dancers, as one of the tavern maids came over and placed several plates of bread, meat and cheese down in front of them.

They were quiet as they began to eat, too hungry and exhausted to waste much time on conversation. Farrow noticed, however, that Grace's eyes kept drifting over to the people on the dance floor.

He wasn't the only one.

"Do you want to dance?" Elery asked her, as he finished a mouthful of bread and cheese.

Grace looked over at him in surprise, and then gave him a slight smile. "I'd like that very much, sir."

Elery took her by the hand and led her onto the dance floor. Farrow chewed slowly on his piece of bread, watching. The dancing was different than he was used to. Instead of careful, choreographed steps, the dances were lively and chaotic, with clapping and laughter generously sprinkled in. Elery twirled Grace with one hand, laughing, and Farrow couldn't help but notice just how comfortable he looked there.

"How does Elery know all this?" he asked Camber quietly.

The prince was also watching Elery and Grace, though from the blank look in his eyes he wasn't seeing them at all.

Aric answered instead. "His father used to take him and his brother to the lower city all the time when they were growing up." He arranged slices of meat and cheese onto his wedge of bread.

"He's used to places like this."

Farrow looked back across at the dance floor, wondering how much of the real Elery he'd seen and how much had been merely a mask. Elery was currently laughing as though he didn't have a care in the world.

Farrow doubted that was true.

After a time, when all the food was gone and the musicians were winding down, they decided they should head up for bed. Camber again protested the room arrangements, quietly muttering that it was improper as they headed towards the stairs.

"Not here," Elery said, his voice low.

He led them up a narrow staircase and onto a slightly wider landing, the boards creaking under their feet. A threadbare rug had been laid out on the floor to add a splash of colour and dried flowers sat in a clay jug on the windowsill. After a short pause, Elery took out a metal key and unlocked one of the doors that lined the landing. The room they stepped into was cramped, with two beds crammed into a space better suited for one. Clean rushes covered the wooden floor and a small window that didn't properly fit its frame was the only decoration.

When they were all squashed into the room and clustered on the beds, Aric shut the door behind them and leant against it.

"I really don't think you sharing a room with Grace is suitable," Camber said to Elery, folding his arms across his knees. "It isn't done."

"Grace is right," Elery told him. "We can't risk the suspicion now."

"If you're concerned about sharing with Lady Viola, Cam," Aric said, from his post against the door, "don't be. I'm a good chaperone." His voice was almost teasing.

Camber scowled, but there was an unmistakeable flush to his cheeks. "It's not Viola's honour I'm concerned about."

Elery gave him a filthy look.

"I can defend my own honour, Your Highness." Grace's voice was soft. "Besides, Lord Elery isn't fully recovered from his wounds and this will allow me to keep a closer eye on him."

“I’m not a lord,” Elery said, but there was no irritation in his voice.

“I still don’t like it,” Camber muttered. “There are rules –”

“Rules that make sense in our world,” Farrow said quietly. “But not in anyone else’s. We don’t have the luxury of doing everything in the proper manner here. This isn’t any different than sleeping close for warmth.”

Camber couldn’t meet his eyes and Farrow knew that he was remembering, as he was, that first night in the forest when they had fallen asleep pressed close together. The prince’s cheeks were pink.

There were no more arguments after that.

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Farrow woke to the cold morning light filtering through the small, cracked window. The mattress was stuffed straw but, despite the occasional stalk poking out through the fabric and rubbing against his skin, he had slept surprisingly well. He sat up, scrubbing his hands over his face as his bladder protested. In the other bed, Camber was curled up fast asleep, his face relaxed despite the dark smudges under his eyes. Farrow turned his head and saw Aric, also fast asleep, sitting up with his back against the door and his unsheathed sword held over his lap. Even in sleep, he looked tense and troubled.

Farrow eyed the chamber pot that sat at the foot of the bed, grimaced, and then swung his legs out of bed. His bare feet slid slightly over the rushes on the floor. Aric’s eyes opened, though he had made barely any noise.

“Where are you going, my lady?” he said, his voice quiet enough that it wouldn’t wake Camber.

Farrow frowned a little as he stuffed his feet back into his socks and shoes. “Privy.”

Aric's eyes flicked to the chamber pot and then back to Farrow, a ghost of a smile touching his lips.

"Fair enough."

He shifted to the side of the door, allowing Farrow to quietly slip out onto the landing beyond. The floorboards groaned as he made his way down the stairs and into the empty common room of the tavern. He stepped out of the back door, letting it swing shut behind him.

Outside, the morning air was cold. Snow had fallen overnight and had covered the ground in a thick blanket. Farrow's feet sank into it as he walked, and he left a trail of footprints as he traipsed to the small wooden hut that served as the tavern's communal privy. As he sat there, shivering, he held his breath and tried to concentrate on the sounds of the morning chorus.

It wasn't until he was heading back inside that he noticed the tavern's common room wasn't completely empty. An older woman with a patched dress and tired face was scrubbing tables, her dark hair pulled into a hurried bun. She looked up as Farrow came back into the room and gave him a warm smile.

"Did you sleep well, sir?"

Farrow tried to ignore the glow he felt inside at the word 'sir' and concentrated on keeping his voice suitably male-sounding. "Yes, I did, thank you." Too cultured. He tried again. "This your tavern?"

"Me husband and I run it together," the woman said, grimacing as she straightened and stretched out her back. "Not many folks come through here this time of year. Where're you all headed?"

"Wherever there's work," Farrow lied, and then retreated back up the stairs before he could give himself away.

As he let himself back into the room, before he even had a chance to orientate himself, Camber gripped him by the shoulders. He tried, instinctively, to yank back out of Camber's hold, but only succeeded in pressing back against the door.

“Where in the Lords’ names were you?” The prince’s voice was tight. His thumbs were painful against the bones of his collarbone. “I woke up and you were gone.”

Farrow looked at him. Camber’s face was pale, with dark smudges under his eyes and a streak of dirt was smeared across one of his cheek. Behind him, Aric rose to his feet from where he had been seated on one of the beds.

“I went to the privy.” Farrow pulled against Camber’s hold again, unsuccessfully, and a flutter of panic started in his chest. “Or did I become your prisoner once I agreed to marry you?”

Camber recoiled as though Farrow had struck him, letting go. Then his mouth twisted. His hands moved to Farrow’s arms, gentler this time, and it took all of Farrow’s willpower not to shrug him off. He wished Aric wasn’t watching.

“Of course you’re not my prisoner. It’s dangerous here, Viola, and we need to stay together.” His brows creased as he frowned. “It’s my job to protect you.”

For a moment, Farrow felt the burn of another man’s hands on him. Hot, unreasonable anger rose up like bile.

“Well, you’ve been doing a *fine* job of that so far, Your Highness.”

Camber jerked back as though he’d been slapped, his face white, and Farrow immediately wished he could take the words back.

“I mean,” he tried, all the venom evaporated from his voice. “I mean, that’s not what I meant. I’m just...” He trailed off, not able to find the words to explain.

“Your position is perfectly clear, my lady.” Camber’s tone was polite, but cool. It was as though the boy he’d been getting to know the past few days had stepped behind a curtain and the prince stood there in his stead. “I will not presume again.”

Farrow made an anxious, aborted movement, as though his hands wanted to grab hold of Camber’s shirt.

“I’m sorry,” he said, twisting his fingers together instead. “None of this is your fault.”

Camber’s expression didn’t change. “Acknowledged.”

Farrow took a deep breath." Camber, I—"

At that moment, the door opened outwards behind him and he stumbled backwards against Eler's chest. Eler's hands tried to steady him, resting lightly on his arms, but he sidestepped and moved to sit on the edge of the bed, his stomach churning.

Eler took in the expression on Camber's face for a moment, and then clasped his arm and tugged him close, murmuring something in his ear that Farrow couldn't hear. Aric moved closer to them, his hand tightening around the hilt of his sword.

"What?" Camber's voice sounded strained. "When? Here?"

Eler's answer was still too low for Farrow to hear. He squashed down the bad feelings he had about his exchange with Camber and rose to his feet.

"What's happened?"

After a glance at Camber, Eler turned his gaze on Farrow, his expression grim.

"Riders in Elenasia colours. They've brought word of the king's death."

"Are they looking for us?" Farrow forced the words out.

Eler shrugged his shoulders. "I wouldn't like to stay around to find out." He ran a hand through his hair. "If they're searching for us, all they need to do is ask if any strangers have showed up lately."

"Have they said anything about my brothers?" Camber said quietly. "Are they safe?"

Eler opened his mouth to speak, hesitated, and then closed it again.

"El? What's wrong?" Camber demanded, though he sounded anxious. "Tell me the truth."

Eler took a deep breath. "Your brother, Remus, is due to be crowned king. They've claimed you as dead, Cam."

There was a horrible silence, and then Aric said softly, "But Remus isn't next in line."

"Indeed," Eler said softly. "Sethan is being tried for treason, alongside my father and Lord Hargrove."

Camber made a sudden movement towards the door, but Aric caught his arm, holding him back.

“We need to go back.” Camber’s voice was raw. “They’ll kill him. They’ll kill him, Ari, and use Remus as their puppet.”

Aric’s voice was soft, but he didn’t loosen his grip on Camber’s arm. “That seems to be their plan, but we need to keep going. Returning will play into their hands.”

“I can’t leave him to die!”

Aric’s hand closed over Camber’s mouth and he hissed a warning. Then, he spoke quietly, keeping his hand there. “They want to portray themselves as honourable, so they’ll follow the laws of treason. They’ll wait for someone from each of the five houses before there’s a trial.”

“Including Hargrove?” Farrow said hoarsely. He hoped his father was able to look after the younger prince, and that they were held somewhere warm.

Aric shook his head. “I assume so, but I’m not sure.”

Farrow opened his mouth to question him further, but Camber cut across him.

“Is there anything else? Any more news?”

Elery scowled, an angry flush creeping up his neck from the collar of his shirt. “They’re calling Viola the Kingshadow’s whore.”

*Ouch.*

Camber made a noise that sounded something like a growl. “Ridiculous.” He paused and took a deep breath. “They’re not going to get away with this. The sooner we get to Eshua the better.”

He turned to face Farrow. There was still a lingering trace of frost in his expression as he said, “Stay here. We’ll track down Grace, and then we’ll move. We can’t afford to stay here any longer.”

Any desire to argue had been sapped from Farrow’s body, so he just bowed his head in acquiescence. Without another word, the three boys left the room, shutting the door behind them and leaving Farrow alone.

Farrow sat there for a while, running through the various scenarios in his head. With his father imprisoned, only his brother Ezra, who had remained at Whitecastle, would be suitable for a representative. If his mother had got away with the queen, which he hoped she had, where did her allegiance lie? Would she believe that he was the Kingshadow's whore?

He swallowed, a cold lump settling in his lower stomach. For the majority of people, his word would mean nothing, even being the truth.

\*

Once the others returned with Grace, who had been out in the village for supplies, they left the tavern immediately. The five of them were dressed in thick fur cloaks that Grace had bartered for, some considerably more patched and threadbare than others. Farrow hoped that they would keep out some of the chill.

As they left the village and started to head towards the mountain pass, snow began to fall again, fat flakes that melted on their skin and stuck in their hair. Farrow pulled his hood up over his head and pulled the cloak more firmly around himself. Beside him, Grace had done the same, her cheeks pink with cold. She had left her hair loose and some of the strands were blowing across her face.

Camber hadn't said a word to Farrow since they'd returned. He was walking with Aric and Elerly a few paces ahead, his fur cloak trailing on the ground and his head held high. Looking at him, Farrow could imagine a crown resting upon his head. Aric, beside him, had his hand resting lightly on the hilt of his sword under the cloak. Every muscle in his body was tense. They had managed to avoid the Elenasia riders on their way out from the village, but Farrow knew that Aric, like him, was on edge, half-expecting the thundering of hooves to bear down on them from behind.

Elerly seemed agitated. The tone of his voice was light, but his easy smile didn't reach his eyes. If Farrow looked closely, he could see that Elerly was still favouring one side of his body. The wound was obviously troubling him.

It took most of the day to travel to the Throat. The snow became deeper as they approached the pass, even though they stuck to the road. The mountains loomed above them, their peaks sharp against the steel grey winter sky. The Throat carved its way between two of the smaller mountains in the Teeth and was the main trade route with the neighbouring country of Kaien. In the summer months, it was a bustling thoroughfare, though the danger of mountain bandits and the clans of Koushan Mai loomed as spectres always. In the winter months, only a few souls braved passage. Aric had stressed that, if they had a choice, they wouldn't be doing so.

They camped in the shadows of the mountains, each lost deep in their own thoughts.

Morning came, but the snow continued to fall. As they entered the Throat, sheer cliffs flanking them on either side, Farrow couldn't shake the feeling that they were being swallowed whole.

The path curved upwards, winding its way between the mountains. Progress was slower than it had been in the forest. Their steps were hindered by the snow on the path and the steady incline. Farrow's legs ached and his feet hurt, but he gritted his teeth and kept his head down, determined not to complain.

They'd been walking for a few hours when the blizzard started. Though they were sheltered in some respects by the cliffs on either side, the wind howled through the narrow passage, drowning out all other sound. The clouds roared. For a moment, Farrow thought he saw a large shadow move overhead, but no one else reacted to it. Snow fell in thick sheets, whipping stinging kisses against Farrow's cheeks and turning the world white. He could barely see Grace at his side, let alone the others in front of them.

Aric shouted something, but the words were snatched away by the wind

They pressed on for another hour, though it seemed like forever. Farrow's eyelashes and eyebrows froze on his face and his nose and lips were numb. Eventually, thankfully, Aric's shadow gestured through the snow, and the five of them trudged over to a small dug-out cave. Farrow was amazed that Aric had been able to spot it through the snow. The cave was only a few feet deep but, pressing in together, they were now protected a little from the wind. Farrow could hear himself

think again, though the storm continued to rage loudly. Despite the fact that Farrow was pretty sure the sun was still in the sky, the cave received barely any light at all, in between the rock above their heads and the swirling snow.

Farrow found himself squashed tightly between Grace and Camber in the dimness.

“A fire?” Elery sounded a little breathless. He was on the far right of their huddle, pressed up against Aric, who was leant forward, peering out into the snow.

“Too risky right now.” Aric’s voice was tight. He pushed some of the snow that had started piling up against the cave mouth away with his foot. “We could be seen.”

“If it gets much colder –”

“Then we’ll risk it.” Aric sucked in a breath. “But I don’t want to draw in riders or brigands if we can help it.”

Grace pressed closer to Farrow’s side, shivering slightly under her cloak, but said nothing. Farrow glanced up at Camber, who was also silent, but the other boy wouldn’t even look at him.

He risked leaning his body weight a little against Camber’s side. The prince’s cloak smelled of wet fur. Camber’s muscles stiffened as he did so, before slowly relaxing. He said nothing but, after a long moment, his arm wrapped around Farrow’s shoulders, drawing him in closer against his side. He shifted a little so Farrow’s body was under his cloak, murmuring something to Grace that Farrow didn’t quite catch.

Grace’s warm weight disappeared from his other side and he looked up as she sat down between Aric and Elery instead. Farrow understood; she would be warmer there, especially as she was already shivering quite violently.

He turned his face against Camber’s chest, the fabric of his work-worn clothes rough against his forehead.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, quietly, so that only Camber would hear.

“Don’t worry,” the prince said from somewhere above his head, equally quiet and muffled through the fur hood that still swathed Farrow’s face. “It has been a difficult time.”

To Farrow's frustration, hot tears burned at the corner of his eyes, and he forced out, "It wasn't your fault, though. What happened. I'm sorry."

Camber's arms tightened on him for just a moment, but he said nothing more. On the right, Grace and Elery were talking in low voices, but Farrow couldn't make out any of the words. He could feel Camber's heartbeat strong against his cheek and he let his eyes close.

He drifted off as the wind continued to howl.

When Farrow woke, the blizzard still howled outside. He could feel Camber's body pressed up against his back and the familiar form of Grace against his front. Each breath they took misted white in the air in front of them. There was still no fire and his face burned with cold.

He could see Aric and Elery huddled up against the cave entrance, which was mostly filled up with snow. Every so often, one of them would reach out an arm and push snow out of the way with a soft crunch so that fresh air could still flow into the cave.

"We made a mistake, didn't we?" The voice was Elery's, quiet, meant for Aric's ears alone.

Farrow shut his eyes, not wanting them to realise that he was awake.

"I think so," Aric said. For the first time, he sounded unsure and that frightened Farrow more than anything else.

"What other choice did we have?" Elery asked him quietly. "The Queensroad? We'd have been hunted down like dogs, especially after they found Edward and Tristan."

Aric let out a breath that could have been a laugh. "Would've been quicker than freezing to death up here."

"I really should go and look for some firewood." Elery's voice sounded defeated, as though it wasn't the first time they'd had the discussion.

"Even if you found wood, you wouldn't find us again. It's suicide to go out there."

"I know."

They were silent for a long while, long enough that Farrow thought about feigning waking up, but Aric spoke before he could move.

"I keep thinking about Jace," he said softly, "and my duty to protect Cam at all costs." His voice cracked a little. "I've failed."

"We're not dead yet," Elery said. His voice wobbled. "I miss Jace too."

The king's Shield, Farrow thought, must have been an important presence in all of their lives before this. Before the Kingshadow snatched it all away from them.

Aric took a deep, shuddering breath, and then seemed to pull himself together. His voice, when he spoke again, was stronger. "When the blizzard dies down, we need to head back. Go along the Queensroad to Gullcliffe and somehow get on a ship headed to Eshua. There's no way we can survive the Throat."

Elerly made a sound of agreement, but there was a note of doubt in his voice. "We're in Reth's hands now."

Reth, the Lord of Ice. In Whitecastle, where snow rarely settled, he was seldom invoked, though evidence of his chill breath was clear on a frosty winter's morning on each blade of grass. Here, in the Throat, they were utterly shrouded in his power.

Although...

Farrow slowly pushed himself upright, rubbing a hand over his face as though he'd just woken up. Aric glanced at him, moving to scoop away more snow from the entrance of the cave.

"No fire?" Farrow asked. The words took form as white mist in front of his lips.

"No wood," Elerly said, drawing his cloak tighter around himself. "And no way to get any."

Farrow held his hands out in front of him and a flicker of understanding passed over Elerly's face. Concentrating on Elian and the seed of power deep inside him, Farrow stared at his hands. His first attempt made yellow flames dance for a moment on his skin before they guttered and died. With a soft sound of frustration, Farrow flexed his fingers and then tried again. This time, a ball of fire glowed strongly, flickering in his palms. Immediate warmth brushed against his cheeks and the cave was lit with a soft orange glow. Farrow felt himself shiver with relief.

"As long as I can concentrate, we can have fire," he said quietly. He didn't know how long he could keep it up for or how much energy it would take from him, but perhaps it would have some bearing on their chances of making it out alive. "I hope."

He jumped a little as Elerly's cold hands wrapped around his own, cradling the weak orb of fire.

“Just do your best.”

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After four days, the blizzard still howled outside.

Farrow did his best to keep a fire burning. Camber tried to create some foliage they could use as fuel so Farrow could get some much-needed rest, but whatever he tried resulted in too much smoke. They needed dead wood and to get that they would have to venture outside. So, Farrow pushed himself to the limit.

A couple of times, he passed out whilst trying to stay awake ‘just one more hour’, and eventually Grace put her foot down and made him rest regularly. Whenever the fire wasn’t burning, the cold crept back into their cave and succumbing to Reth’s embrace seemed more and more like the best option. To ward it off, they told stories, myths and legends they knew off by heart.

If they kept talking, they couldn’t give in.

They slowly ate their way through their last rations of fish and Farrow thawed their waterskins regularly to allow them to drink. Towards the end of the third day, they resorted to eating handfuls of snow, which melted slowly against their tongues and was so cold that it hurt their teeth.

On the fourth day, even talking felt like an effort. Farrow found himself leant against Camber as the prince sat up against the wall. Flames flickered over the skin of Farrow’s hands as he tried to keep the fire burning. The flames stuttered, bursting to life and then dying out every time he took a breath. He could feel Camber’s slow heartbeat against his ear and all he wanted to do was shut his eyes. By the entrance, Elery had his eyes closed, his lips tinged with blue as he slowly breathed in and out. If it wasn’t for the mist that signalled each breath, Farrow would think that he was dead. Aric still made it his job to dig out enough space for fresh air to get into their cave, though he seemed to let more and more snow build up each time before he could bring himself to move. Grace

was curled against Farrow's other side, and Farrow found himself straining to listen to each of her soft breaths.

"Are we going to die here?" Camber's voice was weak.

"Of course not," Aric replied, though there was no conviction in his tone. "I won't let it happen."

Camber let out a soft, sad chuckle. "You can't fight a storm, Ari."

"If anyone would try..." Elery's voice was slightly slurred, and Farrow tried to sit up to check if he was all right.

At that moment, the flame in his palm flickered and died for the last time.

\*

When he woke, the cave was eerily silent. His body was warm, and he felt almost as if he were floating. He forced his eyes open. Cold light filtered into the cave through the entrance. He blinked. Suddenly, he wasn't staring up at a ceiling of solid rock, but at the canopy of a four-poster bed. He sat up, confused, and a brightly-coloured quilted blanket fell off his body. He was dressed in a soft, pale nightdress that wasn't his, its silken fabric soft against his skin.

His *clean* skin.

He crossed his arms across his chest and tried to breathe.

*Where am I?*

Beside him was Grace, hunched in a leather chair and wrapped in a blanket. From what he could see of her face, she was fast asleep. The others were nowhere to be seen.

"Grace?"

His voice came out raspy and weak, but it was enough to rouse her. She blinked a couple of times and pushed her tousled red hair back out of her face, covering a yawn with her other hand.

"My lady, thank the Lords. How are you feeling?"

“Confused.” Farrow took a sip of water from a glass on the side, wetting his mouth. “Where – where are we?”

Grace shook her head, glancing at the door. “Snowbarrow, I think.”

Farrow cast his mind back to his lessons on the noble houses of Serukis. The castle of Snowbarrow, nestled in the Teeth, was the seat of House Farrell, one of House Elenasia’s minor vassals. He didn’t know a lot about the Farrells in general, but he felt a flicker of hope in his chest.

“They saved us?” he asked eventually. “The blizzard…”

Grace moved onto the edge of the bed and covered his hand with her own.

“The maid who came in to light the fire this morning said that a patrol found us passed out in the snow sometime yesterday. They brought us here.”

Farrow’s heart thudded. “What about the others? Camber?”

Grace shook her head again. “I don’t know, my lady. The maid didn’t say.”

Farrow grasped her hand, trying to digest this information.

“Forgive me, my lady,” Grace added hesitantly. “I pretended to be a noblewoman. I was scared they wouldn’t let me stay with you, that they’d put me in the servant’s quarters.”

“Don’t apologise to me,” Farrow said quietly. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Grace didn’t say anything in response to that, but instead clutched his hand tightly. Farrow shifted to the edge of the bed and wrapped his arms around her, hugging her fiercely. As he held her, his thoughts turned to the others. Had they been rescued as well, or had they perished out in the snow?

He swung his legs out of the bed and got to his feet. As he did so, his legs turned to water under him and the world pitched and heaved. Then Grace was there, holding him up and easing him back onto the bed.

“Easy,” she said. “You’re still weak.” She wavered. “We almost *died*, my lady.”

Farrow took a moment and then got to his feet again, much more slowly this time. His legs still felt weak and wobbly, but, as he took a few tentative steps forward, he managed to will himself to

stay upright. The nightdress swished around his ankles, brushing softly against his skin, but he resisted the urge to rip it off his body. Grace hovered, ready to catch him again, but she let him walk the short distance to the door of the chambers without interference. He reached out and took hold of the metal handle, giving it a rattle as he tried to open it.

Locked.

He looked around at Grace, his eyes widening slightly. "Why is it locked?"

Grace just shook her head. "The maid just said it was orders, my lady."

Farrow stumbled back over to the bed and slumped down onto it, his body exhausted. Grace said nothing, only sat back on the edge of the bed and stroked her fingers through his all-too-clean hair.

Lords, someone had been thorough. He hoped it had been Grace, but didn't dare ask.

There was a long silence. Farrow imagined himself back in his chambers in Whitecastle, laying exactly like this as he griped about his day. He remembered Grace dutifully listening whilst she carried out her other duties, stopping every so often to comfort him. If only he'd known then what little he'd had to complain about.

*But what would Farrow do?*

He let out a long breath, letting his face press into the soft blankets. "Do you ever wish you could be somebody else?"

The hand on his hair stilled. Grace's voice was careful as she responded. "How do you mean, my lady?"

Farrow remembered the look in Grace's eyes as she laid out his gown for the engagement ball. Of *course* Grace wished that, though he knew she would never dare voice that desire.

He continued, however. "I mean, do you ever wish you had been born somebody else?"

Grace pretended, he believed, to think. Her hand resumed stroking his hair as she whispered a very soft, "Sometimes."

"I do too," he said. He swallowed. "Always."

Grace's hand pulled away. He looked at her, but she was turned away towards the fire burning in the grate, arms crossed against her chest like a barricade.

Farrow rolled onto his side, hugging himself and watching her. "Speak freely, Grace. Please."

Grace took a deep, steadying breath. She continued looking away from him, towards the fire, as though she was drawing strength from Elian's presence.

"My lady, before all this happened, you had everything you could ever wish for. You had everything I have ever wished for. The dresses. The dances. The food. Never being scared you would have to sleep again on an empty belly, or that your home would be taken away. Never having your –"

She cut off her speech abruptly and fell silent, hunching more as she stared into the fire. Farrow could see her trembling. She had always skirted around the subject of her past and her family, like the truth was too painful for her to speak out loud.

"Grace, I –"

She looked at him then, her eyes blazing and shimmering with unshed tears. He gave her a little nod, permission to speak her mind, and felt the weight of their master-servant relationship press on him for the first time in a long while. Grace sucked in a breath.

"Tell me, my lady." Her voice shook slightly, but the tears didn't fall. "What life, exactly, did you wish to have?"

Farrow had started this conversation, but now he wasn't sure that he wanted to continue it. He tightened his arms around himself, fingers digging hard enough into his arms that he wouldn't be surprised if they left bruises.

"I wish," he began, but his mouth dried up. He had never once spoken his desire aloud, not even to Phineas, with whom he'd shared everything.

"You wish...?" Grace prompted softly, when he didn't continue.

Farrow closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to see the expression on her face. "I wish I was a man."

Grace scoffed. “Why? So you could learn to sword fight? So you wouldn’t be married off to the prince?”

Farrow shook his head, feeling sick.

“No, it’s more than that.” He faltered, then continued, the words tumbling from his mouth like water rushing over stones. “My body feels all wrong. When I look at it, it feels as though the Lords made a terrible mistake. I look in the mirror and the girl I see there – she’s not me. She’s never been me.”

There was a long moment of silence before Grace said quietly, “You can’t change who you were born, my lady.”

Farrow said nothing in response – there was nothing to say.

The quiet stretched between them for a long time – too long – but as Farrow was gathering his nerves to speak again, the sound of the lock made both of them jump. Grace got to her feet, smoothing out her skirts. Farrow noticed for the first time that she was wearing a clean dress in pale blues, much finer than anything he had ever seen her in before.

A woman entered, dressed in a dark gown of crushed blue velvet, silver rings glittering on her fingers. Her dark hair was silvering at the temples. Two handmaidens flanked her, their hair twisted into matching buns.

Grace curtsied. “My lady.”

The lady gave her a nod of acknowledgement, before her eyes focused instead on Farrow. Swallowing, Farrow pulled the blankets up around his chest self-consciously.

“I see you’re awake.”

“Yes,” Farrow said, keeping his voice polite. “I’m sorry, my lady, I am unfit for company and unsure of your name.”

“I am Ava Farrell, Lady of Snowbarrow. My husband bids you both join us for dinner.” Her eyes cut for a moment to Grace, and then back to Farrow. “My girls will help you dress in suitable attire.”

Farrow was about to tell her that he had no need of her 'girls', but Grace's hand took hold of his own, squeezing hard. So, he nodded, and said softly, "Thank you, my lady."

"Dinner is in an hour. My son will come and escort you down."

Ava Ferrell turned to leave and the handmaidens dipped into deep curtsies.

"Are the others –?" The words fell out of Farrow's mouth before he could stop them. Lady Ava paused and turned to look at him, one eyebrow elegantly arched. He tried again. "Are the – is the prince all right? He is my betrothed."

Lady Ava smiled. "He will also be joining us for dinner, Lady Viola."

Before Farrow could say anything else or ask any more questions, she had disappeared through the door. The lock clicked behind her. Farrow looked over at Grace, whose cheeks were pale. She met his eyes, briefly, and her brow furrowed.

Then, one of the handmaidens was beside him, fussing over him, tugging her fingers through his short hair and tutting. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Grace's expression slip into the careful affability he knew so well as the other handmaiden approached her.

Farrow had a creeping feeling that this dinner was not just for mere pleasantries. He schooled his face into a polite, neutral expression, and submitted himself to the hands of the handmaiden.

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The dining hall of Snowbarrow was a warm, cavernous, room. Its stone walls were adorned with bearskins and with dark blue banners embroidered with the Ferrell family crest – a white, elongated humanlike creature made of pale fire. A wight. A large fireplace took up one wall, a well-established fire roaring in its grate. Antlers of a great stag hung above the mantle.

Despite the warmth, a chill took up residence in Farrow's stomach.

He and Grace had been seated together in the middle of a long wooden table that looked as though it had been carved from an old, solid tree. Grace was wearing the same pale blue dress as

before, though her hair had been brushed and pinned in an elegant style on the top of her head. Her face was pale, but he could see that she was trying hard to keep her back straight, to radiate nobleness with every fibre of her being.

Farrow shifted uncomfortably in his own clothes. He had been dressed in an elegant gown of blush pink, a colour his mother had always complained didn't suit his complexion. He wasn't really sure what she had been talking about, but the handmaiden hadn't seemed to care either way.

A drop of Seruic sapphire hung at his throat, cold against his skin.

He stumbled unconsciously to his feet as Camber entered the room with Aric by his side. Both boys were clean and in fresh, elegant clothes, but Aric's face was shuttered as though he was wearing a mask. Elery was nowhere to be seen.

Though he wanted – stupidly – to run to them, to make sure that they were all right, he sank carefully back into his chair. Somehow, this dinner didn't feel like the place for a reunion.

"I'm glad you could join us, Your Highness." The man that spoke, seated at the head of the table, was Lord Frederic Ferrell. He was a tall, intimidating man in his mid to late fifties, his hair and eyes the grey of steel. When he shifted in his seat, occasionally Farrow fancied he saw a skull emerge from the shadows cast across his face, a whisper of the wight that his ancestors had chosen to represent his house.

"It did not seem a request, my lord." Camber's voice was perfectly polite, and it was as though he had morphed back into the boy Farrow had danced with at the ball. His eyes flickered over Farrow and Grace, and then back to Lord Ferrell. "Where is my other companion?"

"The Kingshadow boy, you mean?"

A muscle twitched in Camber's jaw. "Yes."

Lord Ferrell gestured at the table, inclining his head. "Please, Your Highness. Sit."

Camber seemed to wrestle with himself for a moment, but ultimately his manners won out and he sank down into the chair opposite Farrow. Aric sat quietly down beside him, his face like

stone. Farrow noticed for the first time that he didn't have his sword; he seemed almost naked without it.

Beside Lord Ferrell sat Lady Ava, his wife, and arranged along the table were their various children. One, a young girl barely five winters old, had been whisked off by a nanny the moment Farrow and Grace had arrived in the room. At one end of the table, furthest from their parents, were the younger children that remained, a boy of ten and a girl of around thirteen, though Farrow hadn't been offered their names. Next to Farrow sat the son who had escorted them down for dinner, Sebastian, the heir of Snowbarrow, a man of eighteen with dark hair, dark beard and darker eyes. Across the table, next to Camber, sat the second oldest son, Gideon, who was similar to his brother in looks, but taller and thinner. When Farrow looked at him, he shivered at the look in the other boy's eyes.

He started slightly as Sebastian's fingers brushed the drop of sapphire at his neck.

"This was my grandmother's." The words were softly said, but noticeably cool.

"It's beautiful," Farrow said, keeping his voice polite, though it shook slightly.

He could feel Camber's eyes on them, but the prince said nothing.

"She wouldn't approve of this," Sebastian said.

Farrow wasn't sure what to say to that but was saved from having to respond by the arrival of the food. It was a thick, meaty stew, served with warm crusty bread. The rich smell of it coated Farrow's tongue and his stomach twisted painfully. He hadn't realised how hungry he was.

There was relative silence as they began to eat. Farrow tried to eat slowly, with the decorum that was expected of him, but the meat tasted so good on his tongue that he found himself eating faster than was ladylike. He also found he didn't care. Beside him, Grace was eating cautiously, clearly focusing so much on her manners and posture that the food was secondary.

Across the table, Camber hadn't touched his food.

"My lord," he said, voice cordial. "I really must insist. Where is my other companion?"

Lord Ferrell dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. "The Kingshadow boy is currently enjoying the hospitality of the castle dungeons. With the death of the king, there are several people who wish to question him."

"Elery had nothing to do with the murder of my father." Camber's voice was still amiable, but there was an edge to it. "Release him at once."

"I suggest you eat your food quietly, highness, or I may be forced to conclude you are in collusion with him."

There was silence after that, though Camber looked mutinous. Farrow guessed that Aric had trod on his foot under the table.

Farrow cleared his throat softly and Lord Ferrell's eyes moved to him.

"My father is also held for treason alongside the Kingshadow," he said quietly. "Why are you not holding me as well?"

Lady Ava's voice cut in, then. "We are not savages, Lady Hargrove. We do not hold noble ladies in our dungeons."

"No," Lord Ferrell said. "But I am sure the Elenasias will have questions for you too, once they arrive."

Farrow's stomach rolled over at the thought.

"They're on their way?" he asked, though common sense told him to be quiet.

"A messenger rode out the moment you arrived." Before anyone could respond to that, his eyes cut to Grace. "And what house does your companion hail from? I forget."

The colour drained from Grace's face, and she carefully put down her fork.

"House Cressen," Farrow lied, choosing one of his father's lesser vassals. "She is but one of my handmaidens who travelled with me from Whitecastle."

"Cressen, eh?" His eyes remained on Grace, cold and sharp. "And what is your father's name, girl?"

Grace dabbed at her lips to buy herself some time; Farrow hoped that he was the only one who could tell her fingers were trembling. By the look in Gideon Ferrell's eyes, though, he had noticed too.

"Lord Sandor, my lord," Farrow said quietly, covering for her. From the few times he had met Lord Sandor Cressen, he thought that he wouldn't mind taking on an extra daughter for a day or so.

Lord Ferrell banged the table with his fork, making Grace flinch. "Is the girl mute?" he demanded. "Let her speak."

Farrow ducked his head, distracting his fingers by tearing up some of the crusty bread.

"My lady is correct," Grace said, speaking carefully. "My father is Lord Sandor Cressen."

"Her accent is good," Gideon Ferrell said mildly. "But she is not nobility."

Grace, if possible, went even paler at his words. She made a move as though to get up, but then thought better of it and remained in her seat.

Lord Ferrell turned his attention back to Farrow, his brows furrowed. "You're not in a position to be dishonest, my lady. Tell me, who is she?"

Farrow's appetite had shrivelled up. He put his fork down, wincing slightly as it clattered against his plate.

"My handmaiden," he said, the words sticking in his throat. "She's been with me a long time."

"A peasant," Gideon said derisively.

Farrow turned to face him, chest tight. "She's the handmaiden to the future queen and you are merely a second son. Watch your tongue."

Gideon's chair fell back with a crash as he stood, an angry red flush travelling up his neck. "You —"

"*Sit down.*" Lord Ferrell's voice cracked like a whip across the table.

Gideon picked up his chair and sank back down into it, his expression murderous. Farrow swallowed slightly, before looking away from him and back to Lord Ferrell, who was regarding him with an inscrutable expression.

“You are not queen yet, my lady,” he said, after a beat of silence. “Lest you forget, the only reason you’re not currently an esteemed guest of my dungeons is because you’re a noblewoman. Speaking of which...” He snapped his fingers, and two men dressed in Ferrell livery and boiled leather armour appeared. “Take this common girl down to the cells. I don’t want her in my sight.”

Farrow threw an arm out to prevent Grace from rising from her seat, fear clutching at his stomach.

“Please, she’s done nothing wrong. Don’t harm her.”

Lord Ferrell’s dark eyes had not left Farrow’s face. “That depends on how well you comport yourself, my lady.”

The men were at Grace’s side now. Farrow felt a gentle touch on his leg under the table, and Grace said, barely audibly, “We have to do what they say.”

Slowly, reluctantly, Farrow lowered his arm, unable to look over his shoulder at her. Across the table, Camber’s face was pale. There was the rustle of fabric as Grace rose to her feet, and then the sound of footsteps retreating from the room.

“Wait,” Lord Ferrell said, eyes still on Farrow.

The footsteps stopped, and Farrow felt a tiny flicker of hope in his chest. It was immediately snuffed out.

“It’s inappropriate for a common girl to be wearing a dress like that, don’t you think?”

“No!” The word from Grace was a thready plea. Then there was the sound of flesh striking flesh and a choked sound of pain.

Farrow whipped around at that, only to find himself trapped in his chair by Sebastian’s strong arm. He struggled, but the older man was immovable. It seemed that Sebastian’s only aim was to keep him seated, however, as he managed to twist around enough to see what was going on in time to see one of the men drag Grace up from the stone floor by her arms. A trickle of blood leaked from the corner of her mouth.

“My lord,” he managed, though his voice cracked. “This is unnecessary.”

“No,” Lord Ferrell said, his voice cold. “What was unnecessary was your lies, Lady Viola. I do not appreciate being lied to. Undress her.”

This last was directed to his men. The one holding Grace twisted her so that she was trapped against his chest, facing him, and the other began unlacing the blue dress with rough hands.

“Do try not to damage the garment,” Lord Ferrell added, as an afterthought. “It’s worth more than she is.”

Farrow opened his mouth to again beseech Lord Ferrell’s mercy, but no sound came out. It was as though his throat had closed up. Camber was on his feet, white, but Aric had hold of his arm. They could only watch as Grace was roughly and unceremoniously stripped of the blue dress and as the pins were torn from her hair. When she was trembling in her underclothes, dirty tear tracks down her pale cheeks, one of the men released her from his grip. The other turned to Lord Ferrell expectantly.

“That’s enough,” Lady Ava said, before her husband could speak. “The children are present.”

They were, Farrow thought, suddenly remembering their presence. The girl was looking determinedly into her bowl of stew; she, at least, seemed upset by what was unfolding in front of them. The younger boy, however, was watching everything, his eyes wide and round and alarmed.

“Etaine, Jonathan,” Lord Ferrell barked. “To bed with you.”

The children didn’t need telling twice. They fled from the room as though the Lords’ ire was chasing them.

Lord Ferrell snapped his fingers again and a serving girl scuttled in. She gathered up the blue dress from the floor, gave the room a nervous curtsey, and then hurriedly retreated. Farrow couldn’t blame her.

But Grace...

Farrow’s eyes landed on her again. His handmaiden – his *friend*, damn it – was slumped on the floor, arms around herself, her body shaking with silent sobs. He tried to rise again, to go to her, but Sebastian’s arm still held him in place.

"You can't help her right now." The murmur in his ear was so low Farrow was unsure if he'd imagined it.

"I grow bored of this," Lord Ferrell said. "Take her to the cells."

One of the men grabbed Grace by the arms again, hauling her to her feet. She did not resist. Before anyone could protest, Grace had been escorted from the room and disappeared.

After a beat, Sebastian removed his arm and Farrow could move again. He turned to look at Lord Ferrell, fighting to keep silent. This man was dangerous and Farrow was just beginning to realise how utterly at his mercy they were. Camber sank back into his chair, white with anger.

"Now," Lord Ferrell said, his dark eyes never leaving Farrow's face. "If you behave, my lady, no one will come to any harm." His gaze slide to Camber and Aric. "You too, Your Highness. Master Vasey."

Camber visibly bit back a retort, instead asking, "What is it that you want?"

"What do I want?" Lord Ferrell chuckled slightly. "I am merely doing my duty to the crown."

Camber's eyes flashed. "I *am* the crown."

Lord Ferrell's mouth twisted. "There are questions about that, Your Highness. Fleeing the scene was... very suspicious."

"Last I heard, the Kingshadow murdered the king." Farrow spoke before Camber could. "I was there, I saw it happen."

"Perhaps on the orders of Prince Camber."

Camber made a choking sound of rage, and bile rose up in Farrow's throat. "That's not true."

Lord Ferrell smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "And you, the Kingshadow's whore, as I've heard tell... why are you so eager to proclaim his sole guilt, when to do so would also put the blame on you?"

Farrow squared his shoulders and spat out, "I have nothing to do with that man."

"And who do you think the people would believe?" Lord Ferrell asked softly. "You, a woman they believe betrayed her betrothed, or several high-ranking members of the royal family?"

Farrow balled his fists up in his lap, trying to stop his hands shaking. "But it's a lie."

"My sweet Lady Viola," Lord Ferrell said, his voice soft. "The truth doesn't matter, only what the people believe."

Farrow could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and he looked down at his plate, his mouth dry.

"Then what do you plan on doing to us?" Camber demanded.

"Doing? I plan on doing nothing. Like I said, I've sent word to King's Rock that you are here and it shall be up to them to pass judgement." He smiled his cold smile. "Perhaps the new regent will see fit to reward this family for our loyalty."

"When I'm king," Camber said, his voice shaking, "I'll remember this."

Lord Ferrell just smiled. "Finish your meal."

As Camber reluctantly did as he was told, Farrow looked back at the meat stew in front of him, his stomach churning. Beside him, Sebastian resumed eating his meal in silence. Across the table, Gideon was eating as though nothing had happened. Farrow, his appetite fled, tore and nibbled at his bread, forcing himself to chew and swallow the food. It stuck in his throat, but he made himself keep eating.

After all, he would need his strength if they were going to get out alive.

Four long weeks passed at a crawl.

In the evenings, clothed in a different gown by the two handmaidens seemingly assigned to him, Farrow was expected to eat dinner and make polite conversation. For the most part, Lord Ferrell ignored him in favour of the prince, which suited him fine, but Sebastian and Gideon both insisted on making small talk with him. Sebastian, at least, was pleasant in his words, albeit cautious, but every word that fell from Gideon's lips was coated with hidden barbs. Farrow responded to each of them, a polite smile plastered on his face, all too aware of Elery and Grace held in the dungeons below. He did his best to avoid looking too much at Camber or Aric, anxious not to invite Lord Ferrell's anger again.

During the days, he was left to himself. He paced his room in the gowns from previous nights, running through various escape plans in his head. The room he'd been imprisoned in had one large window, the elements blocked out by thick wooden shutters. The shutters weren't locked and on the first day he had flung them open wide with half a mind to leap out. One look at the distance to the ground below had ended that plan before it was fully formed. If he somehow managed to survive the fall, he would be sure to have several broken bones and no way of rescuing the others.

He had spent years in Whitecastle climbing all over the walls of the castle, but Snowbarrow's walls were unknown to him and covered in patches of frost. Snow fell almost constantly from the white sky, the chill sinking into his bones if he stood by the window for too long. Several times, he had debated attempting the climb anyway, and once he clambered up on the sill, leaning out of the window to survey the wall above and below him. As he reached up to find the first handhold, his foot slipped on a patch of icy stone, and he just managed to catch himself before he plummeted backwards to his death. He spent the next hour curled up on the floor by the window, heart pounding in his ears, choking on sobs.

How could he save the others if he could not even save himself?

In the third week, the worst happened. Farrow woke with sharp cramps in his belly and blood smeared on his inner thighs. Misery rose in his throat. Not only was he too weak to save the others, his body took every opportunity to remind him what he was not. What he could never be. A yell clawed its way out of him as he leapt to his feet, ripping the blankets off the bed. He flung the pillows across the room, shouting curses; one exploded in a shower of feathers. The mattress was next, though it took several hard yanks before he wrestled it off the bed. It slumped against the wall like a drunkard and he fell against it, beating it with his fists, starting to sob.

One of the handmaidens found him later, drained and curled up on the floor in a miserable ball. She touched his hair and wiped his cheeks with a clean cloth. Then, she drew him a hot bath and chivvied him into it, ignoring his protests and choked apologies. Shame rose in him as he sank into the water and watched her clean up his mess.

After that, Farrow lost count of the days.

As he lay on the four-poster bed, curled up on his side, he dully ran through different escape scenarios for the umpteenth time. The window shutters were open and through the window he could see a steel grey sky and thick flakes of snow spiralling down to the ground below.

The sound of a key scraping in the lock made him sit up straight, stomach twisting at the thought of another new dress and another tense dinner treading on eggshells. Had the whole day passed by already?

However, it wasn't the two handmaidens who stood there when the door opened, but Sebastian Ferrell, dressed in riding gear and his dark hair dusted with snow. Before Farrow could say anything, he lifted a finger to his lips, shutting and locking the door behind him.

"I don't have much time," he said quietly, closing the distance between them with several long strides. "A messenger has arrived ahead of the party from King's Rock. They're spending tonight in the town at the base of the mountain, but they'll be here tomorrow."

Farrow's heart stopped. There was no more time, and he'd not been able to come up with a plan.

“Why are you telling me this?” he managed, his mouth dry.

To his surprise, Sebastian knelt in front of him and took his hand, brushing cold lips against his fingers.

“Because I am loyal to the prince, my lady, and to you as my future queen.”

For a moment, Farrow’s eyes blurred, but he blinked away the tears before they could fall. He tried to speak, but the words stuck in his throat. Sebastian released his hand but remained kneeling.

“My father mustn’t know I’ve been here,” he said quietly. “But I can’t stand idly by any longer.”

He pressed a key into Farrow’s palm and used his hand to close Farrow’s fingers around it.

“You must leave tonight, when the castle is asleep. I’ll do my best to ensure there are minimal guards, but I can only do so much without raising suspicion.” He took a long breath, which shook ever so slightly. “I need to be able to put them on the wrong track when they discover you’re missing, and I can’t do that if they think I had a hand in your escape.”

Farrow tightened his grip on the key, the cold metal digging into the skin of his palm.

“Tell me the way to the dungeon.” His voice came out stronger than he had thought it would, and for a brief moment he felt Phineas’s presence.

Sebastian dipped his head and quietly explained several routes to the dungeon and a brief outline of what guards to expect on the way. Farrow did his best to memorise the words, feeling sick.

“I should go,” Sebastian said, all too soon. “Before I am missed.”

“Wait,” Farrow said, before he could rise. “Where are the prince and Aric Vasey’s rooms?”

“They are in the room next door to you, my lady, but I couldn’t get a key.”

Farrow’s heart sank a little, but he nodded. He would figure out some way to get them out.

Sebastian got to his feet. The snow in his hair had melted now, leaving it damp. He gave Farrow a small bow and then added, “Don’t treat me any differently at dinner, my lady. This is your only chance.”

Then he was gone, producing a second key to let himself out of the room and to lock the door again behind him. Farrow stared after him for several long minutes and then shook himself back into action, sliding the key safely under the mattress for later that night. He had no idea if he was capable of pulling off Sebastian's plan, but the older man was right. This was his only chance.

Camber's only chance.

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A little later, Farrow sat on the windowsill, staring out into what was now a snowstorm. It was still light, but torches flickered on the perimeter wall below him as guards went about their patrols, the flames guttering in the cold wind. He didn't relish the idea of blundering through the darkness in weather like this, but at least the falling snow would cover their footprints and shroud them from view.

He had to talk to Camber and Aric so they would know to expect help. He couldn't approach them at dinner, where their every move was watched, but he didn't want to leave it until after, when time was short.

He leant a little way out of the window, holding on carefully to the ledge. Where Sebastian said, another window glowed with orange light. It was far enough away that climbing over could have fatal consequences, particularly in this weather, but this was no time to be a coward. Farrow took a deep breath and slid off the window ledge back into the room.

If he didn't do this, the likelihood of death was high anyway.

Hands shaking, he smoothed out the skirts of his dark green and gold dress. Elenasia colours. Lord Ferrell's idea of a joke, most likely. Remembering the way Grace had tied her skirts to allow her freedom of movement as they escaped King's Rock, Farrow attempted to do the same. It was bulky and he was unsure how long the knot he tied would hold, but hopefully it would last long enough that he could make the climb. The furred slippers he wore would kill him on the wall, so he kicked

them off, hoping his bare feet would serve him better. The slippers would also not stand up long to walking through the snow later, but they would have to do. He tucked the key back under his mattress – just in case.

He climbed carefully back onto the window ledge and swung one leg out, feeling around with his toes for a decent foothold. The stone was so cold against his skin that it hurt, but he had to do this. Managing to cram his foot between two stones, he gingerly swung his other leg out, holding onto the ledge with both arms. Immediate, the wind hit him and fat flakes of snow whipped against his face and into his eyes. For a moment, he closed his eyes tightly and sent up a prayer to Elian.

*You can do this, Farrow.*

Slowly, cautiously, he began to climb sideways along the wall, making sure his feet were firmly wedged before each movement. The pain from the cold quickly turned to numbness, making it harder to tell if it was safe to move, but he pressed on. Long, agonising minutes passed. He battled against the wind as it tried to wrench him from the wall and paused every so often to listen for the guards. Eventually, he found himself with one hand on the window ledge, ready to pull himself up.

*Please be the right window.*

He eased himself up enough to peek inside, his heart in his mouth. Camber sat on the edge of the double bed, his head in his hands. Aric paced back and forth, pale and angry, his blond hair sticking up as though he had been constantly running his hands through it. Farrow wondered if he had caught them in the aftermath of some kind of argument. Relief flooding through him anyway, he pulled himself up more on the ledge. He must have made some sort of sound because Aric stopped dead and stared at the window. Their eyes met for a long moment. Then Aric's face changed and he strode over, grabbing hold of Farrow's arms to help him climb inside.

"Lady Viola." He sounded as though he didn't quite believe what he was seeing.

For a moment, Farrow wanted to throw his arms around him and bury his head in his chest, but he restrained himself. Barely.

"Aric," he said instead, softly.

Camber's head snapped up at the sound of Farrow's voice, his eyes wide.

"Faolan's blood," he said, his voice hoarse as he got to his feet. "How did you – how?"

"I climbed," Farrow said, rubbing his hands over his face. His skin was cold and damp from melting snow. "I don't have much time. They'll be coming to get us for dinner soon."

Aric's hands tightened a little on his arms. "Why are you here?"

Camber came over, still staring at Farrow as though he was a ghost.

"Sebastian gave me a key to my room," Farrow said quietly, "and directions to the dungeons. If I can get Elery and Grace out, Elery should be able to pick the lock to your room, right?"

Camber's expression flickered with concern. "There's no way Sebastian can expect you to do that."

"We don't have a choice, Your Highness." The words came out more forceful than Farrow intended. "Men from King's Rock will be here tomorrow – the messenger arrived today. If I don't do this tonight, we're at the mercy of the people who murdered your father."

Aric released Farrow's arms. He looked unhappy and pale. "Viola's right, Cam. If we stay here, we're as good as dead."

Camber shook his head. "We've done nothing wrong. They'll see that."

Aric moved and took hold of Camber by the shoulders. When he spoke, his voice was soft. "Do you truly believe that, after all we've experienced in the last few weeks? The truth doesn't matter to them."

"It should," Camber said fiercely. Then, his voice doubtful, "Do you really think they'd kill us?"

"Maybe not all of us," Aric said quietly. "But I can't see how letting *you* live would be to their advantage."

Camber's mouth pressed together in a grim line and he looked back at Farrow.

"I don't want to risk you."

"You have no choice," Farrow told him. "Just be ready to leave."

Aric touched him by the shoulder. "If you can get Elery out, we have a chance. We'll be ready."

Farrow nodded and, before Camber could protest more, crossed back over to the window. Aric followed him, resting his hands on the window ledge and leaning out to get a good look at the drop below.

“If the sun begins to rise,” he said slowly, “we’ll try to get out this way.” He swallowed slightly. “I’d rather fall to my death than die a false traitor.”

Camber, his face milk white, nodded.

“It won’t come to that,” Farrow said, with more confidence than he felt. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

Cautiously, he climbed back out of the window, starting to make his way back to his own room. As he glanced back, Camber was leaning out of the window to watch him, and then Aric pulled him back inside and the shutters closed. Fighting to keep his breathing calm, Farrow retraced his steps and eventually found himself slumped on the floor underneath the window ledge, covered in sweat and melted snow, his heart pounding.

He stayed there, focusing on calming his breathing, until Sebastian Ferrell came to fetch him for dinner.

Contrary to protocol, the messenger from King’s Rock dined with them, and Lord Ferrell asked him probing questions about his journey. Farrow didn’t have to act anxious or uncomfortable, those emotions were real enough, but he remembered to feign shock at the revelation that the party from King’s Rock would be arriving the next day. From the smugness on Lord Ferrell’s face, he did it well enough. Despite his prior knowledge, Camber’s face grew paler as the messenger talked and he sat staring into the middle distance, his cutlery abandoned on the table in front of him.

Farrow tried to tune out the conversation that ebbed and flowed around him, methodically eating his way through his bread and stew, mind wandering every so often to the key hidden underneath his mattress. He felt Sebastian’s eyes on him several times, though the lord’s son didn’t speak to him more than the usual polite enquiries. Farrow even managed to give Gideon a bland smile when the other boy threw some of his usual barbs his way.

As dinner was coming to a close, Camber met Farrow's eyes. There was something in his expression, something different, that made Farrow nervous. Before he could work out what it was, the prince had stood up, slamming his hands down on the table and making the tableware rattle.

"You won't get away with this!" Camber's voice was angrier than Farrow had ever heard him. "I refuse to go quietly."

"It's true you're making a lot of noise," Lord Ferrell said lazily, "but I assure you. Nothing you can do can stop this."

At his words, Camber lunged across the table, knocking plates and goblets to the floor. Aric jumped to his feet, grabbing for him, but missed. Camber knocked Lord Ferrell out of his chair, pinning him to the floor as guards rushed in from the sides of the room. Two grabbed hold of Aric's arms, holding him back as Camber's fist slammed down with a crunch. Camber snarled a curse as three guards seized him, wrestling him down onto the floor. A silence followed, broken only by harsh breathing and Camber's grunts as he fought against the guards. Lord Ferrell got to his feet, wiping blood from his nose with the back of his hand and looking down on Camber as though he was less than nothing.

"It appears His Highness wants to spend his last night here in the dungeons." Lord Ferrell's voice was laced with cold fury. "Take both of them down. Now."

Farrow remained frozen in his chair as both Camber and Aric were dragged from the room.

He didn't know if this development would make the plan that night easier or not, but he figured the prince's intent was to get everyone in one place. If he was thinking at all.

*Stupid, Camber. Stupid.*

"You'd best behave yourself, my lady," Lord Ferrell said, sitting back down in his chair and righting his clothes. "If not, I think you will find that princes bleed just as easily as other men."

An icy lump settled in the pit of Farrow's stomach and he stared down at his half-eaten food. Unable to do much else, he determinedly looked down at the table until dinner was over and he was finally escorted back to his room.

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The plan had changed.

Taking a deep breath, Farrow retrieved the key from under his mattress. He paused, glancing around the room, then grabbed a few abandoned hairpins from the dressing table. Maybe Elery could use them. He crossed to the door and slid the key into the lock, trying to turn it with minimal noise. The lock clicked. He let out a breath, waiting for a moment to see if he could hear footsteps.

Nothing.

He sent up a small prayer to Elian, pleading with him to keep them safe for the night. Holding his breath, he slowly pushed open the door, just wide enough to allow his body to slip out.

The hallway outside was dark and silent. There were no guards waiting to ambush him, putting to rest the possibility of betrayal that had crossed his mind more than once. He slowly pulled the door closed behind him, then locked it again. With any luck, they would believe he had escaped out of the window.

That done, he leant back against the door for a moment, finding his bearings and recalling the routes that Sebastian had told him led to the dungeons. He should try the quickest route first. If he found that too heavily guarded, he'd try a second, slower route that was less likely to have many guards.

With that plan in mind, he began to walk. It was dark and he kept one hand on the wall to orient himself. The furred slippers muffled his footfalls on the stone floor, but his heart was beating so loudly he thought that anyone lurking in the darkness would be able to hear it.

As he approached the end of the hallway, light began to filter in from the next, larger hallway. He paused at the corner, back to the wall, listening. In the next corridor there were several torches placed in sconces, sending a warm, orange glow flickering over the stone floor. This was one of the

corridors Sebastian had warned him that the guards patrolled during the night, so he would have to be extra careful. He listened for several long minutes, but heard no sound.

He was just about to make a break for it when a soft giggle broke the silence, causing his heart to leap up into his mouth. He pressed back into the shadows in a shallow alcove and held his breath. Several moments passed and then a serving girl scurried into the hall, bare feet slapping softly against the stone. A couple of heartbeats later, Gideon Ferrell followed, and caught up with the girl just past Farrow's alcove. He grabbed her by the hips and she squealed, the sound muffled as he pushed her back against the wall, kissing her mouth roughly.

*Please, Farrow thought. Please keep going.*

The serving girl giggled again and, thankfully, Gideon pulled back and took her by the hand, leading her deeper into the dark hallway. Farrow remained where he was, barely breathing, until he heard the distant sound of a door closing.

He closed his eyes for a moment, sending up another quick prayer to Elian. *Thank you.*

He listened for a few moments longer, before taking a breath and hastening into the lit corridor. He hurried down the hall, trying to be as quiet as possible, and didn't relax until he was out of that hallway and pressed against the wall inside a new, darkened passage.

*You can do this, he told himself. He thought of his books. What would Farrow do?*

Steeling himself, he continued.

The rest of the journey to the dungeons was strangely uneventful. Farrow wondered if it was because Sebastian had made good on his word to try to minimise the guard presence for the evening, or if he'd just been extraordinarily lucky. He only came across a patrolling guard once, but had managed to hide safely behind a tapestry until the man had passed.

He paused at the top of the stairs to the dungeons. It was a long, winding staircase leading deep below the castle and, currently, it was in pitch darkness. Farrow knew that if he ran into a guard on this staircase, there would be nowhere to hide and nowhere to run. It would all be over.

But he had no choice.

He rested one hand flat against the wall and began a slow descent, feeling for the edge of each step with his feet. He took care not to rush, as he didn't relish the idea of missing a step and falling the rest of the way down the stairs. Bruised or broken, his chances of getting out of Snowbarrow alive would be a lot less.

He didn't come across another guard on his way down, though, as he grew closer to the bottom of the staircase, he could hear rough male voices floating up to him through the darkness. Wavering torchlight seeped from the hallway beyond to the lower steps, and Farrow stopped at the edge of its reach, listening. He couldn't make out any of the words the men were saying, and their voices sounded muffled, as though they were behind a door.

He would have to be extra careful from now on.

He walked down the last few steps and paused at the bottom of the stairs. Peeling off the staircase, there was a long, narrow hallway of dark stone, lit by flickering torches in sconces. There were no signs of the guards, though Farrow could still hear their voices. A wooden door was set into the wall of the corridor about twenty feet from him. If he had to guess, he would wager that it led to the room where the guards spent their shift in the dungeon when they were not interacting directly with prisoners. If there was any moment he was going to get caught, it would be when sneaking past that door.

*You can do this*, he told himself again, and began to make his way quietly along the corridor.

As he approached the door, he slowed down, making sure that his footsteps made no noise. The guards – he could hear at least three distinct voices – were laughing raucously and unlikely to hear him, but he didn't want to take that for granted. The door was slightly ajar, a wedge of yellow light spilling out into the dark corridor. He paused for a moment beside the door, and then darted across to the other side, aiming for a deep pool of shadow. He paused for a moment, listening. There was no break in the laughter or the conversation, and after a few breaths, he deemed himself safe.

He continued along the corridor, stopping at the end where there was a junction. The new corridor stretched off to the left and right, narrow and dark except for faint pools of dying torchlight.

The corridor was lined with doors on both sides, but Farrow had no way of telling which doors were hiding the others.

He muttered a curse under his breath. Seeing no other choice, he carefully lifted one of the dying torches from its sconce, feeling the heat of the flames wash against his face for a moment. It was almost a blessing, and he desperately hoped that Elian's favour would remain with him until the night was over.

First, he went left, peering through the small barred openings in each heavy wooden door. The first few cells he peered into were empty, but the fourth one contained a slumped figure he couldn't identify. He hissed a greeting, but the figure didn't move. Making a mental note of the location, he moved on. In the next cell, there was movement as he lifted the torch up to the grate, and Farrow caught a glimpse of Elery's face before the other boy looked away.

"Elery," he whispered, just loud enough, he hoped, for him to hear. "It's me."

Elery was still for a moment, disbelieving, but then he stood up stiffly and came over to the door. As he approached, Farrow could see him better in the torchlight. His face was smudged with dirt and he had a split lip that looked to have been bleeding recently, as well as a vivid purple bruise on his cheekbone. Thankfully, he didn't look as though his movement was hindered.

Elery squinted at him through the bars, eyes screwed up against the torchlight.

"Viola?" His voice was hoarse, and he coughed slightly. "How did you —?"

"We don't have much time," Farrow broke in. "Men came, from King's Rock. If we don't get out tonight — I'm going to get you out of here."

Elery's mouth pressed into a thin line, but he nodded. "Do you have the keys?"

Farrow shook his head, but reached through the bars and offered him the hairpins he had stolen. "Will these help?"

Elery took them from him; Farrow noticed that his fingers were shaking. "I could try to pick the lock."

Farrow nodded, looking around in the gloom as Elery crouched out of sight. "Did you see if they brought Grace down here?"

Elery didn't answer, so Farrow moved away, starting to check cells again. Three cells down from Elery, he found Grace. She was asleep, a filthy blanket wrapped tightly around her body. From what Farrow could see, she didn't look too badly hurt.

"Grace?" he whispered. When she didn't respond, he raised his voice, just a little bit. "Grace!"

She stirred, sitting up and rubbing her hand over her face, mumbling, "I'm awake, my lady."

In the next breath, she seemed to remember where she was, and she hugged the blanket tighter around herself, looking around anxiously. Her eyes focused on the door and the torchlight that was filtering in.

"My lady?"

"I'm here," Farrow whispered.

Grace stumbled to her feet and over to the door, staring out through the grate. Her brow furrowed as she took him in.

Before she could ask any questions, Farrow said softly, "Elery's picking the lock on his cell. Then he'll get you out, I promise."

Grace rested her forehead against the bars and reached a hand through to him. He took her fingers and squeezed, noting the dark smudges under her eyes and the matted, dull colour of her hair. There was a fading bruise on her forehead, which angered him, and he realised that she kept the blanket wrapped around herself. She had to be the priority when it came to finding new clothes; he could not expect her to go out into the snow dressed only in her undergarments.

"Someone's coming," Grace whispered suddenly, and Farrow froze.

Sure enough, there was the sound of footsteps coming along the corridor from the guards' room. Farrow looked around, still holding the torch, and said to Grace in a panicked whisper, "There's nowhere to hide."

Grace didn't reply, her eyes wide. At that moment, a guard rounded the corner and froze as his eyes fell on Farrow. He raised his own torch, taking in, what must have been to his eyes, a pale girl in a fine dress.

"My lady," he said, his voice echoing in the stone hallway. "What are you doin' down here?"

Farrow's hand tightened on the torch, throat closing up. He took a step back along the corridor, but the guard frowned and began to walk towards him.

*Keep him talking,* he told himself.

Farrow planted his feet and stood his ground, giving the guard a sweet smile and trying his best not to look petrified.

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't want to bother you. My door wasn't locked and I just... I just wanted to see my betrothed."

The guard stopped, frowning again. "Even so, you shouldn't be down here, my lady."

*Sell it, Farrow.*

"Please, let me see the prince." He made his lip wobble slightly and deliberately looked down. "I just couldn't sleep without making sure he's all right, but I can't seem to find his cell."

The guard scratched at the back of his head, resolve seeming to waver. Farrow stepped closer again, so close that he could smell the ale on the man's breath, and looked up at his face, his eyes wide.

"I swear, I won't tell. I'll be in your debt."

The guard's head tilted to one side. "Perhaps if my lady graced me with a kiss, I could look the other way for a little while."

Farrow forced back a shudder at the thought and made himself smile. He wetted his lips and did his best to meet the guard's eyes. "Perhaps."

The guard took a step closer and Farrow closed his eyes, using all of his willpower to stand his ground and not to step back. Instead of the kiss he was expecting, however, there was a dull *clunk* and a muffled *thud*.

His eyes opened to see Elery standing in front of him, holding a metal chamber pot over his head. The guard was crumpled on the floor between them, out cold. His torch had clattered to the ground, but was still burning faintly. Elery's eyes were dark.

"Nicely done," he muttered.

Farrow let himself shudder, wiping his hand across his face and feeling the cold sweat that had gathered on his forehead.

"It had to be done." His voice wobbled slightly but didn't break.

Elery bent down to pick up the guard's discarded torch, and then crouched down beside the man's prone body and felt around his belt. Then he held up an iron ring of keys with a soft sound of success.

"You take these. We should get Grace out before the guards realise their friend isn't coming back."

Farrow took the keys from him as Elery got back to his feet. Without a word, he tried keys in the door until the lock clicked and the cell door swung open. Grace, still wrapped in her blanket, almost fell in her haste to get out of the cell. Elery put an arm around her waist to steady her. She clutched at him with a sound like a sob.

"Easy," he murmured. "We're all getting out of here."

Farrow handed Grace the torch he was holding, and she released Elery to get a proper grip on it.

"Do you know where the others are?" she asked. Her voice was thin, but it didn't waver.

"They were brought down here tonight," Farrow said quietly. "Camber made a scene at dinner."

"Great." Elery grimaced. "Let's keep checking cells until we find them both."

First, Farrow returned to the cell he had found the first figure in, lifting his torch to peer inside. The figure inside was awake now, he realised, and with a jolt he recognised the battered form of Camber. His face was a mess of bruises, from purple to deepest black, and dried blood was caked

around his mouth and nose. It appeared the guards hadn't taken too kindly to the prince's attack on their lord. He tried several keys before he managed to open the door, pushing his way inside.

Farrow fell to his knees beside Camber, breath hitching in his throat. Camber's eyelids flickered for a moment when Farrow touched his fingers to a particularly nasty-looking bruise, his breath shuddering a little.

"Viola," Camber managed. His voice was weak and thready, but he forced himself up into a sitting position. "You came."

"I told you I would." His voice shook a little. "That was really stupid, Cam."

"Better than you risking everything to get back up to us."

Farrow took a deep, shuddering breath. "Can you stand?"

"I don't know," Camber admitted. He tried to smile, but winced instead. "I'll try."

Farrow got to his feet and turned to look at Elery and Grace, who had entered the cell behind him.

"Grace, can you stay with him whilst we find Aric? Try to get him on his feet."

Grace nodded and came to crouch beside Camber with her torch, whilst Farrow went back over to Elery and led him out of the cell.

"He doesn't look good," Elery muttered under his breath.

"He attacked Lord Ferrell."

Elery cursed. "We need to get him out of here."

"I know," Farrow said quietly, checking in the cells as they passed. "I just hope he's up for it."

Elery didn't reply.

When Farrow peered inside the next cell, he saw eyes glinting in the gloom and a hunched figure on the far side of the cell. Relief washed through him.

"Aric?" he said softly. "It's me. We're here to get you out."

The figure unfolded itself and, as he raised his torch higher, Farrow realised that it wasn't Aric after all. In the cell was a boy of around seventeen or eighteen, thin from hunger and dressed in

rough leathers. His hair was long and matted, twisted in a variety of braids as it tumbled over his shoulders and chest. Farrow let out an involuntary gasp and took a step back.

Koushan Mai.

Elery approached the door, pushing gently past Farrow to get there. He peered in at the other boy, eyeing him quietly.

“What are you in for?”

“Poaching,” the boy replied. His voice was soft and faintly accented, and he stayed a healthy distance from the door. “Shot a deer on his lordship’s land.”

Elery gently took the keys from Farrow’s limp fingers. Farrow made an involuntary grab for them, but Elery held them out of his reach. Elery met his eyes, shaking his head a little, and then he moved and unlocked the door.

“I’m not leaving anyone in here to suffer. Koushan Mai or not.”

The boy approached them then, his eyes wary. “You are kinder than most,” he said quietly.

Farrow eyed him, but said nothing. All of the horror stories he had heard of the Koushan Mai flooded through his head, but he couldn’t look at this boy and marry them with his appearance. He looked like anyone else, albeit a bit rougher and wilder.

“Right,” Elery said, stepping back to let the boy out of the cell. “Hopefully we can find Aric and get the hells out of here.”

Taking the keys and lifting the torch from Farrow’s hand, he continued along the corridor, checking in each cell as he passed. The Koushan Mai boy gave Farrow a long, level look, and then followed. Not wanting to be left alone in the dark, Farrow hurried after them. After a few cells, Elery stopped with a hiss. Farrow came up beside him and peered through the grate. He could see Aric’s still form curled up on the floor.

When the door swung open, Elery passed Farrow the torch and hurried inside, crouching down at Aric’s side. He touched the older boy’s shoulder, shaking him slightly.

“Aric, wake up. We need to get out of here.”

For one horrible moment, Farrow's chest constricted as Aric didn't respond. Then he stirred, letting out a soft groan.

"El...?"

"Yeah, it's me. Come on, we've got to get out of here before they realise we've knocked out one of their guards."

Aric nodded, questions flickering across his face, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he got slowly to his feet, grunting a little from pain as he straightened. Like Camber, it seemed, Aric had been punished by the guards.

"Where's Camber?" Aric's eyes moved over Farrow and lingered for a moment on the Koushan Mai boy. "And Grace?"

"They're along the corridor a little way," Elery reassured him. "We need to pick them up on the way past."

The Koushan Mai boy shifted his weight a little. "And we need to pick up our gear," he said quietly. "They keep it in a chest in the guards' room."

Before Elery could respond, Aric moved forward, pushing Elery behind him with one hand. "And who are you?"

The boy held up two hands peaceably. "I'm Soren. I have been enjoying the dungeons of this castle, same as you."

There was a pause. Farrow watched as Aric's jaw set, a flicker of emotion crossing his face.

"All right," Aric said. "But if you give me one reason not to trust you, Soren, I will gut you where you stand."

The smile Soren gave him was almost feral. "Likewise."

The two boys stared each other down for a moment, and then Aric nodded quietly and glanced over at Elery. "Let's go."

The four of them headed back down the corridor to the cell where Grace had remained with Camber. Camber was now on his feet, though he was white with pain and looked somewhat worse

for the wear. Aric crossed over to him immediately, sliding his arm around the prince's waist and supporting him with his own body.

*What did they do to him?*

"Wait here," Elery said, passing Farrow the torch. "I'll go and get our stuff."

"I will come," Soren said quietly. "I know how to not be seen."

For a moment, Elery looked as though he was going to argue, but then he nodded and two of them disappeared into the darkness.

"Who was that?" Grace asked in a low voice.

"A Koushan Mai," Aric said.

"He's called Soren," Farrow added quietly, when it seemed that Aric wasn't going to add anything else.

Grace's mouth twisted. "Right now, I trust a Koushan Mai much more than anyone claiming to be loyal to the crown."

To Farrow's surprise, Aric let out a low chuckle. "Me too."

Camber said nothing; from the look on his face, he was turning that statement quietly over in his mind.

Several minutes passed in silence. Farrow placed the torch in a bracket to give them some more light, and then wrapped his arms around himself, wondering how long they should give Elery and Soren before they set after them. He wished he had volunteered to go with them, but he knew that, unlike Elery and, supposedly Soren, he didn't have the skills to remain hidden and get things done.

He was pacing restlessly by the time Elery returned, alone.

"Come," he said, before any of them could say anything. "The coast is clear."

They followed him out of the cell and along to the guards' room. Elery didn't hesitate at the door but pushed it open and headed inside. Farrow shared an anxious look with Grace, before following him inside. The two guards he had heard previously were slumped over a rough wooden

table in the orange torchlight. Their throats were cut, dark blood still slowly oozing from the wounds. Farrow's stomach rolled and he turned away, looking instead to Elery, who was crouched over a large wooden chest.

"Was this necessary?" Camber's voice was faint, but he sounded a little stronger than before.

Elery glanced up at the prince, his eyes dark. "It was necessary."

"We now have until the guards change," Soren said from the doorway. He was wiping a bloody dagger on a piece of old cloth and Farrow guessed that third guard had now suffered the same fate. "We need all the time we can get if we are to make it out alive."

Aric grunted. "Makes sense. El, what's in the chest?"

Elery made a sound of frustration. "Our weapons. Our cloaks. No pack, though, and we won't get far without supplies."

"We get out, then we worry about that," Aric said. "We stand more chance out of the castle than within it."

Farrow looked into the chest unhappily; he had been hoping for a change of clothes, for Grace and for himself.

"We need to get out tonight," he reminded them. "And Sebastian Ferrell told me he'd do his best to make sure there were less guards."

"Can we trust his word?" Aric's voice was clipped.

"He's given me no reason to mistrust him," Farrow said quietly. "None of us would be standing here if he hadn't given me the key to my room."

Aric looked unconvinced, but they spoke no more as they armed themselves and dressed again in their warm fur cloaks. Soren retrieved a carved wooden bow and a cloak of his own, as well as the dagger he had sheathed at his side. After a brief discussion about Grace's attire, Elery and Aric between them stripped one of the guard's bodies. Grace dressed herself in the rough cloth and leather, wrinkling her nose slightly but otherwise not complaining. Farrow debated asking if he could

take the other guard's clothes, but by this point they had wasted more time than he was willing to risk. Aric's fingers were already twitching on the hilt of his sword, his jaw set.

Farrow pulled his cloak tighter around himself, trying not to let it show on his face how much he was bothered by still being in the dress. He noticed Grace watching him with a thoughtful expression and tried to give her a smile, but she looked away.

"Now," Ebery said quietly, when they were all as equipped as they were going to get. "This is the hard bit. We go quickly and we go quietly. Follow me."

Much like Farrow's descent into the dungeon, the journey to the grounds was relatively uneventful. They abandoned the torches in the dungeon, not wanting to risk the light giving them away. Soren, it turned out, had some scant knowledge of the castle, and after a brief whispered argument with Elery, they followed him towards what he said was the kitchen, where there would be a door leading out to the grounds.

They came across no guards on their way to the kitchen, and Farrow wasn't sure whether that was sheer blind luck or because of Sebastian's intervention. He silently thanked the lord's son anyway, and said a prayer to Elian for good measure. It couldn't hurt.

Soren paused at the door to what Farrow presumed was the kitchens, listening intently. Elery moved up beside him, brow furrowed, also listening. Their eyes met for a moment, and then Elery nodded slightly.

"Coast is clear," he said.

The kitchen was quiet and in semi-darkness. The embers of a large fire still smouldered in the hearth, giving off gentle waves of heat. A boy of ten or eleven was curled up in a small alcove by the fire, and he stirred slightly as the six of them crept into the room. Elery pressed his finger to his lips and signalled for them to make their way quietly to the door. Soren drew his blade and kept one eye on the boy. Farrow had the sinking feeling he would not hesitate to end the boy's life if he deemed it necessary.

Thankfully, the boy appeared to be in a deep sleep, and they managed to cross the kitchen without incident. Once they were all standing by the door, Elery opened it quietly and carefully, and they all crept outside into the dark, wintry grounds of Snowbarrow castle.

Frigid wind and snow swirled around them as Aric pushed the door shut behind them. Farrow pulled his cloak further around himself and shivered. Torchlight glinted off the pale snow, giving

them just enough light to see where they were setting their feet. Through the snow, they could see lights on the walls where guards moved on their patrols.

Aric gestured for them all to move back against the wall.

"I think the best move is for all of us to split up," he said. "Maybe in groups of three. A large group of us moving together will attract more attention. Especially between the castle and the outer wall."

Elerly frowned. "What do you suggest?"

"I'll go with the prince and Lady Viola. You take Grace and... Soren, was it?"

Soren nodded, but said nothing.

Elerly blinked snow out of his eyes. "Sounds good to me. We need somewhere to meet up, though. Somewhere we can regroup after we get out of this mess alive."

Aric fell silent at that.

Soren cleared his throat, stroking his fingers over the curve of his bow in the darkness. "There is a river about a mile from here, that direction." He jerked his head. "If we head to the river, we will find each other."

"What if we can't, though?" Farrow said quietly, after a moment of silence. It was a good plan, but any river would be long enough that they could easily miss each other.

"We can work that out later," Elerly said, though he sounded unsure. "For now, it's enough to get out of here alive."

Soren stepped forward a little. "There is a rocky island in the middle of the river, quite near here. We should meet on the bank of the river in view of that island."

Camber shifted, still leaning on Aric for support. "You're coming with us?"

"For now, our goals are aligned," Soren said quietly. "I will stay with you, and make sure you find each other again. That will go some way to settling my debt to you."

Camber nodded, seemingly satisfied with his answer.

"Then we go," Aric said. "We meet at the river near the island."

Farrow glanced at Grace. She had a grim, determined expression and gave him a small smile when he looked at her.

“We’ll be all right,” she told him.

He hoped she was right.

Soren disappeared into the darkness and snow, Elery and Grace close behind him. Farrow was left alone with Camber and Aric, shivering. The sound of their companions’ footsteps were soon swallowed up by the snowstorm.

“We’ll go the other way,” Aric said quietly. “If we follow them, we’re just asking for trouble.”

“Can you walk all right?” Farrow asked Camber, who was still leaning heavily on Aric.

Camber’s mouth twisted and, with some effort, he pushed himself away from Aric so that he was standing on his own two feet. His skin was pale in the moonlight, and it was obvious that the movement pained him. Although Aric looked wary and ready to catch him if he fell, he remained upright.

“Lords, what did they do to you?” Farrow whispered.

“It doesn’t matter, I’ll manage,” Camber said, his voice hoarse. “Getting out of here is more important right now.”

Aric nodded, but his expression remained severe. “Don’t be a hero, Cam. If you need to rest, or if you need help, say. We’ll be less likely to get out of here if you collapse on us.”

Camber’s jaw tightened, though his eyes were anxious. “I’m not going to collapse. Let’s get going.”

Aric led the way. Farrow chose to bring up the rear, partly so that he could keep an eye on Camber for any signs of him wavering, and partly because trudging through the snow in the long evening gown was more difficult than he wanted to admit. Snow clung to the hem of the dress where it dragged along the ground, making it heavier with each passing step. Cold, wet fabric clung to his lower legs, sending icicles of pain through his calves as his skin grew colder. The snowflakes that got through the cloak he tightened around himself were like knives against his skin.

He gritted his teeth.

*This is nothing*, he told himself. *Camber's walking and he's been beaten half to death. You can do this.*

Aric led them along the side of the kitchen and beyond, keeping to the shadows against the wall. There was little sound beside their harsh breathing, the whistling wind and the occasional shout of the guards as they hailed each other. Farrow was glad that the falling snow would cover their footsteps, at least.

As Aric rounded the corner where the castle came closest to the outer wall, he stopped abruptly. In front of them, a guard stood facing the wall, peeing. His eyes widened when he saw the three of them and he took a step back, reaching for his sword with one hand whilst the other began to yank up his trousers.

"Intruders!" he shouted, stumbling a little as he fought with his trousers. "Intru—"

His shout became a gurgle as Aric sank his blade into his stomach. Blood dribbled out of the man's mouth and he sank to his knees as Aric withdrew the blade. Crimson droplets spattered the white snow. A groan escaped the man and he slumped face first onto the ground, dead.

But too late.

On the walls, bells began to ring, the guards alerted by the man's last, desperate shout. Camber gripped Farrow's hand instinctively, his breathing a little ragged. Farrow kept his eyes on Aric, who was quickly and quietly assessing the situation.

"You two make a run for those steps," he muttered, jerking his head towards some stone stairs that led up onto the outer wall proper. "I'll run in the opposite direction and distract the guards. That should give you both time to escape, and I'll meet you at the river." He paused, taking in a slightly shaky breath. "If I don't meet you by nightfall tomorrow, continue without me. You need to get to Eshua. Your brothers' lives depend on it."

"You can't be serious," Camber said flatly. "I won't allow it."

"I gave my oath, Cam. You are my life." With that, Aric darted away from them and out into the open.

Camber tried to follow him, but he stumbled and fell to his knees in the bloody snow. Farrow, heart pounding as he watched Aric disappear into the darkness, as he heard the triumphant shouts of guards, grabbed hold of Camber's arm, trying to pull him to his feet.

"We have to go. Now!"

Camber stood, gasping, "I'm not leaving him. I can't."

"Camber, you're the crown prince," Farrow said, his voice low and blunt. "It's much more important that *you* live than he does. Aric knows that. And from what I've seen, Aric knows how to handle himself in a fight. You *know* he does."

For a brief moment, Farrow thought Camber might run off after Aric anyway, but then he nodded. Farrow grabbed him by the arm again and started to lead him towards the stairs Aric had indicated. Camber limped beside him, head down, breathing raggedly. Farrow glanced around as they reached the bottom of the stairs. Aric had been well and truly swallowed up by the darkness. Camber stopped at the foot of the staircase, looking up at the wall.

"Come on," Farrow urged him. "We have to go now."

Indecision flickered over Camber's face, but he nodded again and moved past Farrow, starting to climb the stairs. Every movement he made looked laboured, pained. When they reached the river, Camber needed a proper rest, Farrow decided. He started to follow Camber up the stairs, the sodden skirt of his dress dragging behind him. He cursed it and lifted up the skirts as best he could with his hands so it wouldn't drag anymore.

At the top of the stairs, Camber paused again, giving a lingering glance to where they had last seen Aric.

"Where do we go from here?"

Farrow moved past him, peering him down the other side of the wall and the freedom that awaited them.

"I'm not sure," he admitted.

The ground below was not so far that they would risk certain death by jumping, but landing incorrectly could gravely injure them or worse. He could climb down, he thought, but Camber was in no state to.

"We could jump," Camber suggested, coming up beside Farrow, though his voice was doubtful. "There are snowbanks that could break our fall."

Farrow glanced over at him and managed a weak smile. "I'm not carrying you if you break your legs."

Camber gaze was intense. "I'd carry you, my lady, but I fear that my body is not up to it right now."

Farrow felt a blush spreading up his cheeks, and looked away under the pretence of checking out the drop before them again.

"Is there another way?"

Camber bit his lip, looking around and thinking. "We could continue around the wall and see if there's an easier —" He broke off and gripped Farrow's arm. "We need to jump. Now."

Farrow followed his gaze. Along the wall from them was a patrol of guards, the orange light from their torches just visible through the falling snow. There was no way either of them could outrun them, not with Camber injured and Farrow dressed how he was.

"Have they seen us?" Camber muttered.

"They will in a moment." Farrow clutched Camber's hand. "Come on, let's go."

Farrow urged him forward to the edge of the wall. Camber was right; there were some large snow drifts where the wall met the ground. Before Camber had a chance to argue or to second guess, Farrow jumped, pulling Camber with him. They fell through the darkness for a moment, before landing with a thud in a snowbank. Dull pain rolled through Farrow's body at the impact and he heard Camber let out a moan, but as far as he could tell, nothing was broken. The snow was

rapidly melting against their clothing, and if they sat there for too long, every inch of their clothes would be soaked through, including the fur cloaks intended to keep them warm.

“You all right?” he asked Camber softly, breathlessly.

“I think so,” Camber replied, shifting his body next to his. “I don’t think they saw us.”

It sounded as though he intended his last sentence as a statement, but the wavering inflection of his voice had caused it to come out as a question instead. Farrow nodded in response, though he knew that Camber couldn’t see him, listening quietly. “I don’t hear any shouting, but I don’t think we should stick around here to find out for certain.”

He cautiously got to his feet, brushing snow off the fabric of his dress as best he could. When he realised Camber was still sitting on the ground, he held out a hand to him.

“Need some help, or are you all right?”

Camber looked at his hand, grimaced, and then forced himself to his feet, using the wall for support. “I should be the one helping you, my lady.”

Farrow scowled at him. “If you’re going to insist on treating me like a helpless child, this is going to be a very long night. We don’t have time for shoulds and should nots; you just need to trust me.”

The prince moved and took his hand, catching his gaze with his own. “I know, I do. I just...” He shook his head and released his hand. “You’re right. We don’t have time for that now.” He gave Farrow a long look. “We’ll talk later.”

Farrow tried to ignore how ominous that sounded and busied himself trying to brush more snow off his dress.

“Do you know where this river is, or is supposed to be?” he asked, looking around them.

Through the snow that still fell in sheets, they could see that they were on the edge of a mountainous forest. The pine trees here were not as tall as the ones just outside of King’s Rock, but were squat and bushy, with thick trunks that punched up through the snow like weeds. From their position, Farrow could see that the forest sloped down away from them, down the mountain.

Camber shook his head, but said, "Water flows downhill."

"Then we go into the forest." Farrow slid his arm around Camber's waist and added, "Let me help you."

Camber, thankfully, didn't argue, but instead leant some of his weight on Farrow as the two of them began to stumble towards the forest. Behind them, the shouts from the guards and the bells were getting more frantic, louder. Somewhere in the distance, Farrow could hear the barking of dogs.

"Lords," Camber muttered, but the only emotion Farrow could read from him was exhaustion. "We're being hunted."

"We need to hide," Farrow said. There was no way either of them could outrun anyone trying to hunt them down.

"The dogs will find us."

"We have to risk it."

They continued down the slope, Camber still leaning some of his weight on Farrow's body. Every so often, Farrow heard him let out soft noises of pain in amongst the harsh sound of his breathing, though he didn't complain. Stinging snow whipped against their faces and into their eyes. Farrow was grateful for it, though, as the snow would make them harder to follow.

But that would mean nothing if they didn't find a place to hide.

He glanced behind them, back towards the castle. There were lights moving at the base of the castle walls now, meaning that some of the guards at least had moved their search beyond the castle grounds. He tightened his hold on Camber's arm, ignoring the ache of the chill on his skin and the way his lungs protested breathing in the cold air, and tried to speed their walk up.

Visibility was poor as they walked deeper into the forest. There wasn't much canopy cover to protect them and the sparse trees lurched suddenly out of the whiteness.

"Viola." Camber's voice was rough as he stumbled to a halt, and he pointed with a shaky hand.

Farrow followed his gaze. Two bodies, hanging from nooses. They were speckled with snow and swaying slightly in the wind, skin stretched taut across their skulls. In the darkness, Farrow could just about make out the dark tattoos on their withering arms and the long lank braids that dangled from their heads. His stomach rolled and he tightened his grip on Camber's arm.

"Don't look."

As they continued, the ground became rockier and steeper in places, and Camber grunted in pain when he tripped slightly on a wayward branch. Thankfully, he managed to keep his footing, but Farrow knew that they needed to find a place to rest, to hide, and soon.

"There," Camber said abruptly, his voice hoarse, and pointed again.

Farrow followed his finger with his gaze. In front of them was a tree that had fallen over in some storm or another, half-buried in snow. The trunk was splintered and half-resting on the stump it had left behind. The stump itself was rooted deep in the ground, but underneath some of the ground had eroded away, leaving a tangled web of roots exposed to the elements.

"Under the tree?" he asked softly. As they moved closer, he could see that the hollow spaces between the roots left just enough space, perhaps, for the two of them to huddle together and hope that they were overlooked by any pursuers.

But the dogs...

"I think it's our best option," Camber said, his voice a little stronger than before.

As far as Farrow could tell, Camber was trying to regain his bearings and some of the authority he was so used to having. Farrow was content to let him have it without argument, for as long as his ideas wouldn't get them killed. The prince needed to keep hold of his leadership mindset if they were going to stand any chance of winning the allies necessary for him to regain his throne.

Besides, there was no other option.

"Let's go," he said, and helped Camber remain upright as they limped the rest of the way towards the tree.

When they reached the hollow, the two of them peered inside. It was small and awkward, and they would have to press themselves together in amongst the roots, but hopefully it would keep them alive to see the dawn.

“Ladies first,” Camber said quietly, resting one hand against the tree trunk in order to support himself.

Farrow scowled in the direction of the hollow, but said nothing, instead getting on his knees and beginning to crawl inside. It was much more difficult than he had first imagined. The gown snagged on the roots and he had to keep reaching back to free the fabric from the clutching wood.

After a few minutes of struggling, he managed to get into a somewhat comfortable position. He pulled his skirts around his legs so that they wouldn’t catch on any more roots, and hugged the cloak around himself further in an attempt to counter some of the freezing cold. Camber crouched down at the entrance to the hollow, pain flickering for a moment over his face, before he too began to carefully shimmy himself in amongst the tangles to hide under the roots of the tree. He ended up pressed against Farrow’s side, a little too close for comfort, but neither of them had much room to manoeuvre.

It would have to do.

Camber took in a deep, shuddering breath, then lifted his hand and pressed it up against one of the tree roots. There was the sound of cracking and creaking wood, and the gaps between the roots began to close themselves, shutting out the driving snow and enclosing them entirely in a wooden cocoon. Even if the dogs led the guards here, they would see only solid wood.

In utter darkness, they passed what felt like hours in silence. The shouting and barking for a time, grew closer, and at one point they heard what sounded like claws scrabbling at the surface of their cocoon. Then more shouting, and the claws and the barking started to fade away. Farrow could hardly dare to breathe and tried not to think about what would happen if they were discovered. He focused on the sound of Camber’s breath, close to his ear, and the way that, despite the freezing cold, he could feel the warmth of Camber’s body seeping through his clothes into his own.

Eventually, Camber broke the silence.

“Do you think Aric will be all right?”

Farrow glanced at him. He could just about make out the shape of Camber’s silhouette in the blackness, and found only shadow where the prince’s eyes should be.

“He’s your Shield,” he said quietly. “If anyone would be all right, it’d be him.”

Camber drew in a shuddering breath. “You’re right.”

Farrow was silent for a moment, trying to find a topic of conversation that would keep him from dwelling on his friend’s fate, and then said, “How was he chosen to be your Shield?”

Camber was quiet so long that Farrow thought he might not answer.

“When I was about five, my father’s vassals sent candidates to King’s Rock. Second and third sons, mostly, under the age of ten. Jace – my father’s Shield – he put them through their paces, hand-picked Aric from all those other boys.”

“They were close?”

“Jace was more of a father to Aric than Lord Vasey ever was.”

Farrow rubbed his hands over his face, trying not to picture the ballroom. “And Elery?”

“He was born two days before me. We shared a wet nurse.” Camber let out a low breath, and his voice shook as he added, “Cassian betraying my father was as unlikely as Elery betraying *me*. I don’t understand why this happened.”

“I don’t either.”

After a moment of silence, Camber asked softly, “How did you meet Grace?”

Farrow drew in a sharp breath, a point of guilt digging itself into his stomach. “She was recommended to my mother by one of her friends about three years ago.” He took a shuddering breath. “When they took her away, I thought for certain they would kill her.”

“She’s alive,” Camber said quietly. “And Lords willing, she will remain that way.”

“Lords willing, we all will,” Farrow said, rubbing a hand over his tired eyes. “But she wouldn’t be here if not for me. I insisted she come to King’s Rock with me, to serve me in my marriage to you. I should have left her in Whitecastle.”

“None of it’s your fault, Viola.” Camber’s voice was dark, almost black. “None of you would be here if not for me, if not for who I was born. And further than that, all of this is my fault for believing in the loyalty of my father’s subjects and announcing who I was to the Ferrell soldiers.”

“Believing in people isn’t a bad thing,” Farrow said. You had no reason to mistrust them.”

“Besides the fact that my father was murdered by one of his best friends?” Camber’s voice was bitter. “No, Viola. I have no reason to trust *anyone*. I believed – Cassian was a second father to me. If I can’t trust him, who can I trust?”

“You can trust me.” The words fell out before Farrow could stop them. “And Aric, and Elery, and Grace.”

He could feel Camber’s eyes on him in the dark.

“I hope so,” the prince said, and then sighed. Farrow felt his body sag as the brief anger seemed to drain out of him. “I’m sorry. I’m just... I’m working through this.”

Farrow said nothing, just shifted his position so that his head was resting on Camber’s damp chest. They may have been practically strangers before the night of the ball, but he felt strangely protective of the prince, of the boy he was supposed to marry. He startled slightly as Camber’s hand came up to rest on the back of his head, fingers tangled in his hair, but he didn’t pull away.

They were quiet for a while, listening out for any sound of the guards and the dogs over the moaning of the wind. The scent of damp rot pressed itself into Farrow’s nose, laced with the smell of soil and, from Camber, the coppery tang of blood. A cold chill seeped up through his legs from the frozen ground and he shivered as he felt himself pressing closer to Camber’s body for warmth. Beside him, he could feel the tremble of the prince’s body, but he didn’t know if it was from the cold or from the fear of capture. He didn’t ask.

Eventually, the two of them began to breathe a little easier as more time passed without anyone finding them. They didn't dare move from their hiding spot, however, not yet. Not until they were certain that they wouldn't be discovered the moment they tried to make a break for the river.

Again, Camber was the first to break the silence.

"I should be giving you more tours of the glass gardens," he said quietly, his voice distant. "We should be getting to know each other in the company of chaperones and over tea and fine pastries. Not—" His voice cracked slightly. "Not like this."

Farrow surprised himself by huffing a soft laugh. "What would you tell me about yourself over fine pastries?"

Camber's chest was cold against the skin of his cheek, but his heartbeat thudded softly in his ear.

"I hadn't thought that far ahead." He was silent for a moment, thinking, and then said, "Mundane things, probably. What book I was reading." He paused, before continuing, his voice softer. "I would tell you all about King's Rock and what I loved about it, hoping to make you feel at home. I would ask you about Whitecastle and what it was like growing up on the plains. I would ask you about your family, about your brothers and sister. Anything to learn more about you, the girl I'm meant to marry."

Farrow let his eyes close, trying to ignore the hard lump in his stomach.

"And I would have told you what I thought you were expecting to hear, what my mother was expecting me to say, instead of the truth." When Camber said nothing, he added, "You would have learnt of Whitecastle, of the plains and of my family... but I don't think you would have learned much about me."

Camber took in a slow breath. "I don't think you would have learnt much about me, either. Just the me I was trying to impress you with."

Farrow opened his eyes and looked up at him. In the darkness, there was only a vague shadow where Camber's face should be.

“I hope you still like the real me, Viola,” Camber said quietly, and Farrow jumped slightly at the feel of Camber’s cold fingers brushing his cheek.

He wanted to return the sentiment, but the words stuck in his throat, swelling inside him and tightening his chest. Camber didn’t know the real him. He *couldn’t* know the real him.

Not yet.

Thankfully, Camber didn’t seem to be expecting a response. His fingers moved on Farrow’s cheek, and he let out a soft, pained gasp as he shifted position in the nest of tree roots. His hand moved to cup Farrow’s face, and Farrow hardly dared to move. The sound of his own breathing was harsh and uneven in his ears. Every nerve in his body was alight with the desire to run, but Camber’s body and magic were between him and the exit. He was trapped.

“Camber?” The prince’s name dropped from his lips without him really thinking about it, and he wasn’t sure whether the word was a question or a plea.

“I’m sorry for everything, Viola,” was the soft response.

And then, without much warning, Camber’s lips were on his, cold and tasting like blood. Farrow jerked back in surprise, sucking in a breath, but the prince followed him. Camber’s hand curled back in his hair and, this time, when the prince’s lips met his, he didn’t pull away. The kiss was questioning if not hesitant, and Farrow let it happen, his fingers twisting in the dampness of Camber’s fur cloak. His heart pounded painfully in his chest and his muscles were tense, still half-poised to flee, but as the kiss continued, Farrow found his body slowly easing against the prince’s own.

After what seemed like forever, but could only have been moments, Camber broke the kiss. Farrow could feel the prince’s warm breath against his lips, could feel his own ragged, shaky breathing, and his fingers tightened involuntarily on Camber’s cloak.

“Sorry,” Camber murmured again, his voice soft. There was a note in his tone that Farrow had not heard before, but he couldn’t quite pin down what it was. “It just felt right.”

He was still close, too close, close enough that each breath ghosted over Farrow's mouth like another kiss.

"It's all right," Farrow managed, oddly breathless. His cheeks felt warmer than they had any business being. "That's why they insist on chaperones, I guess."

Camber chuckled softly, and Farrow felt it against his own body. "No chaperones here."

"No," Farrow said, quieter. The coppery tang of the prince's blood was strong on his tongue.

Camber brushed another kiss over Farrow's lips, slower this time, and less questioning. Then he pulled back slightly, before leaning his forehead against Farrow's own. Farrow could feel his eyes on him in the darkness.

"We'll get through this," the prince said softly, his voice warmer than Farrow had ever heard it. "And then we'll do this properly, chaperones and all."

Farrow couldn't make himself respond. Instead, he tucked his head against Camber's chest and listened to his heartbeat as the night continued to roll by, the cold lump continuing to make its presence known in his stomach. He wished, not for the first time, that he could be the girl everyone seemed to think he was, and that he could be the queen that Serukis needed.

That Camber needed.

Curled up against the prince in the hollow of the pine tree, Farrow felt like a fraud.

And, sooner or later, everyone would find out.

The sun was beginning to set again by the time they reached the river's edge. It was further away than either of them had anticipated, deep in the valley below the snow line. As they walked, the crunch of snow and ice underfoot had given way to loose shale, and then to a thin scattering of grass and moss. The air was still freezing cold, but the snowfall had stopped. Farrow yanked his cloak tight around himself as they walked. As the day had worn on, his gown had had a chance to dry, but he couldn't stop shivering. Patches of snow still littered the forest floor, especially in areas of shade, but it wasn't deep and didn't hinder their movements.

Camber was struggling, obviously in pain, but he didn't complain. Instead, he walked by Farrow's side, his jaw tight and his expression grim, his gaze fixed forward. Farrow couldn't help but sneak glances at him now and then, a soft fluttering in his chest as he remembered the kisses beneath the hollow of the tree. He tried to shut out the feelings, to focus instead on walking, but every so often the thoughts returned, the touch on his mind as soft as a butterfly's wing.

The river snaking through the valley was wider than Farrow had expected, though choked with large patches of thick ice. In places, the ice had broken, and he could see the water moving below, dark and forbidding. The touch of the setting sun tinged the ice shades of pink and orange, but neither of them were in the mood to enjoy the view.

"There's no island here." Camber slumped down with his back against a tree, his breathing heavy and pained.

Farrow glanced back at him and then scrambled up on top of a large boulder by the river's edge. He stood warily, maintaining his balance, and looked both left and right, hoping to see something – anything – that would point the two of them in the right direction.

"Viola, be careful." Camber struggled back to his feet. "You could hurt yourself."

Farrow gave him a smile, one that felt more genuine than he had given in days.

“This is nothing compared to yesterday,” he said. “You wanted to know more about me, Camber? Whilst growing up, I climbed all over Whitecastle, to the roofs and to towers that my family no longer use.”

Camber limped over, resting his hands against the side of the boulder as he looked up at him. “Why though?”

Farrow returned his gaze to the river. He thought, on the far edge of his vision, in the direction of the river’s flow, he could see something that could be the rocky island that Soren spoke of.

“Because it’s fun,” he said, in response to Camber’s question. “There’s nothing quite like the rush of knowing that the only thing that stands between you and death is where you choose to put your hands.”

Camber grimaced as Farrow slid back down off the edge of the boulder onto solid ground. “I’ll take your word for it.”

Farrow shot him another smile, then gestured with his hand. “I think our best bet is in that direction. The river is sure to widen downstream, and that probably means more chance of an island.” He paused, sweeping his eyes over Camber’s body; the prince seemed in a bad way and, now that they had stopped, it looked as though it was taking every ounce of his willpower to keep standing. “Can you keep going?”

Camber gritted his teeth and made himself stop using the boulder for support. “I have no choice. We need to find the others.”

The two of them began to walk again. This time, Farrow stuck close to Camber’s side, one arm around his waist, giving him support as best he could. The fact that the prince didn’t object told Farrow that it was truly taking everything he had just to keep them walking.

They picked their way along the bank of the river as the sun sank lower and lower on the horizon. The river ice shifted colour from pinks and oranges to the deep purple of a bruise. Somewhere in the distance, an owl hooted as the sound of other birdcalls began to fade.

As they continued, the river widened and the shape Farrow had seen in the distance became more and more like an island. He could only hope that it was the one Soren had mentioned, because soon they would have to stop for the night, for Camber's wellbeing if not for the lack of light.

He was just about to suggest stopping and resting until morning when there came the sound of a twig snapping to his left, startling both of them. He let go of Camber and whirled around, drawing the blade he had strapped to his waist and preparing to defend the prince with his life.

"It's me."

A familiar voice, and then Elery was stepping out of the shadows, his palms up towards them. Farrow wondered for a brief moment if he had allowed them to hear the twig snap on purpose to alert them to his presence, or if it was an actual mistake. He would hazard a guess at the former.

Elery looked much the same as he had when they had split up at Snowbarrow, and he didn't seem to have fared particularly badly during the previous day and night. In the half-light, Farrow could see dark smudges under his eyes and the lines of exhaustion on his brow as he took them both in with an assessing gaze.

"Where's Aric?"

Camber made a noise that could have been a sound of pain or a noncommittal grunt, so Farrow said quietly, "We had to split up. They almost caught us, and he insisted on holding them off."

Fear flickered for a moment across Elery's face, but he clamped down on it so quickly Farrow was left wondering if he had imagined it.

"Hopefully he'll meet up with us soon," Elery said. "Come, we have a camp down by the bank." He looked at Camber, his expression concerned. "Looks like you could use the rest, Cam."

Camber sighed, a rush of relieved air escaping him. "Like you wouldn't believe."

Elery moved past Farrow and took his place, his arm around Camber's waist. Camber leaned into him more heavily than he'd done with Farrow, and Farrow realised that, although he'd let him help a little, he'd still been pushing himself so that Farrow didn't have to take all of the burden.

*Stupid, Camber.*

He moved to Camber's other side, following Elery as he led the way through the dusk along the riverbank. They came after a short while to a rocky overhang and, as they stepped down close to the shore, Farrow saw the orange glimmer of firelight flicker across the mud. They had chosen their camp well, for it was hidden from above, from whatever direction the Ferrell soldiers might still be searching.

As they walked into the glow of the campfire, warmth washed over Farrow as though he had just sank into a hot bath. Grace, huddled in her cloak at the fire's side, stumbled to her feet as the three of them came into view, painful relief clear on her face. Soren, Farrow noted, was nowhere to be seen.

He crossed to Grace, feet slipping slightly in the mud on the bank before reaching the solid ground where the camp had been set up. She took his hands as he sank down beside her, sitting back down also.

"You made it, you –" Her eyes found Camber and looked past him. "Where's Aric? Did he –?"

"Aric will catch up." Elery's voice sounded certain as he manoeuvred Camber down to the ground by the fire. "Don't worry about him."

Camber mumbled something, but almost as soon as Elery had got him lying on the ground, his eyes flickered shut and his breathing slowed. Elery shrugged off his fur cloak and tucked it over the prince's body, mouth twisting.

"We're going to be here for a few days at least, anyway. There's no way Cam's going to be up for walking, so it's safer to lay low than try to keep running. Aric will find us," he added, almost to himself.

Farrow huddled tiredly beside the fire, allowing warmth to wash over him, and watched as Grace moved to Camber's side and checked his temperature with the back of her hand. For a moment, he allowed himself to believe that they might be safe, at least for the time being.

"Where's Soren?" he asked Elery. "Has he left?"

Elery shook his head, moving to sit cross-legged on the other side of the fire, his eyes flicking restlessly over the flowing waters of the river.

“He’s hunting. If we’re going to remain here, we need something to keep us going.”

At his words, Farrow’s stomach clenched painfully, as though suddenly remembering he hadn’t eaten anything since the previous evening. If he was feeling hungry – he who had been dining with the Lord and his family each night – he couldn’t imagine how the others must be feeling. Who knew how much food they had been given in the dungeons of Snowbarrow?

“Sensible,” he said, though he still couldn’t bring himself to trust the Koushan Mai boy.

Elery pushed himself back to his feet, obviously unable to sit still.

“I’m going to keep watch,” he said, and disappeared from view.

When he was gone, Farrow risked a look at Grace. She had settled back down by the fire, not far from Camber’s side, and had managed to tie her hair up out of her pale face. She was deliberately not looking at him. He remembered the last conversation they’d had, before she’d been taken down to the dungeons, and his heart sank.

“Grace?”

“My lady?”

“About what I said, before...”

She let out a low breath. “I can’t pretend I understand what you were talking about, my lady. About wanting to be a man.”

Farrow bit his lip and stared into the comforting orange flames of the campfire. “I don’t expect you to understand, Grace.” He hesitated, taking in a shaky breath. “I just wanted you to know.”

Grace was silent for a moment, also staring into the fire. Then, to Farrow’s surprise, she said quietly, “What would you prefer me to call you? ‘My lady’ seems...” She trailed off, unable to find the word she was looking for.

“Farrow.” The name he had claimed, the one that no one knew, fell easily from his tongue.

“Like your book?” Grace asked quietly, looking over at him.

“Exactly.”

Grace burrowed a little more into her cloak, and said quietly, “I can’t call you that, though. It wouldn’t be proper.”

Farrow surprised himself by letting out a short, harsh laugh. “Nothing about this situation is proper, Grace.” For a moment, he remembered the feel of Camber’s lips against his own and felt his cheeks heat. Softer, he added, “If you like, ‘sir’ works just as well as ‘my lady’.”

Grace shifted then, moving around the fire so that they were huddled together against the cold. She looked him in the eye, eyebrows knitted together as she took in the pinkness of his cheeks.

“In that case... is there something you want to tell me, sir?” She smiled, a knowing look flickering in her eyes.

Farrow could have cried in relief, both at the sound of the word ‘sir’ in reference to him, and at Grace’s easy manner, something that had been missing since this whole nightmare began.

“The prince kissed me,” he admitted softly. “But you can’t tell *anyone*.”

Grace’s eyes glittered as a brief grin spread across her face. “Who would I tell? Your secret’s safe with me.”

Embarrassed, Farrow huddled into his cloak, the backs of his ears warm. His eyes found Camber’s body, swaddled in cloaks with just his face and hair showing. The prince’s eyes were closed, his skin white and bloodless, livid bruises on his jaw and cheekbones blossoming purple and green and yellow. The orange flicker of the fire caressed his face, glimmering in his hair, and Farrow found himself mouthing a prayer to Elian, seeking protection and healing.

To himself, he added a silent vow.

*I will never let this happen again.*

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Three days passed with no sign of Aric.

Elery and Soren kept them supplied with fish and snow rabbit, as well as several types of berries Soren deemed safe to eat. Camber took the time to rest, his bruises fading from deep purple to soft browns and yellows. He barely said a word to any of them, however, his eyes fixed on the snowy forest beyond the river. Grace spent most of her time tending to the various cuts and bruises the others had acquired throughout their time in captivity. Farrow felt useless, unable to muster the courage to ask to join Elery or Soren on one of their hunting outings, and unable to coax Camber into conversation. Instead, he spent his time making sure the fire was well-stocked with wood and praying.

On the third night, the five of them were seated around the fire after a small meal of river fish and berries. Elery was shirtless, sat cross-legged by the fire, whilst Grace inspected the wound he had received what seemed like a lifetime ago on the night of the ball. He had torn it open again, and he hissed through his teeth as she dabbed away fresh, oozing blood with a damp cloth.

“This would be healed by now if you rested more,” Grace told him, her voice faintly reproachful.

Elery scowled. “We don’t have time for that.”

Grace gave him a look. “We’ve been here for three days. You should have rested.”

He met her gaze with a level stare of his own. “We need to eat, and I’m not going to leave all the responsibility up to Soren.”

Soren said nothing, but continued to slowly sharpen one of the long hunting knives he kept strapped on his person. Though his expression was neutral, Farrow could tell he was listening to the conversation and to the wilderness beyond. For a moment, Grace looked as though she wanted to argue, her brow creased in disapproval, but then she bowed her head and started to carefully redress his wound.

Elery let out a long, low breath. “Camber.”

Camber, who it seemed had been barely listening to the conversation, turned his head slowly towards Elery. Elery’s mouth twisted slightly.

“Cam, we need to get moving. We can’t stay here forever.”

Camber blinked slowly, before saying, “Aric’s not here yet. We can’t leave.”

Elerly looked pained, but before he could reply, Farrow shook his head slightly. His eyes narrowed, but then he inclined his head, and Farrow moved to sit beside Camber, taking the prince’s hand in his own. Camber turned his head to look at him, and Farrow could see the maelstrom of worry swirling in the prince’s normally calm blue eyes.

“Aric told us to wait only one day,” he said softly, keeping his voice as calm and level as possible. “It’s been three. You know he would want us to move on.”

Pain flickered across Camber’s face. “I can’t abandon him here.”

Farrow squeezed his cold fingers. “What can we do for him if we remain here?”

Camber’s hand twitched slightly. “We could go in and rescue him.”

Elerly scoffed. “Yes, and all of us would die in the process. *Think*, Cam. This isn’t a game.”

The prince bristled at his words, but instead of angry, his words were infinitely tired. “I know it isn’t, El. I do. But Aric...”

“Aric would want us to keep going,” Farrow said quietly, firmly. “He’d want us to get you to Eshua. That’s the best thing we can do for him right now. We stand a much better chance of rescuing him with an army behind us.”

Camber chuckled, but the sound was drained of all mirth. “And you think you wouldn’t make a good queen, Viola?” He took a shuddering breath, and his eyes seemed to focus, to regain some of the sharpness they had been lacking the past few days. “Fine. On the morrow, we continue to Eshua.”

Farrow squeezed his hand again, but said nothing. Elerly tugged his shirt and jerkin back on and refastened his cloak around his shoulders.

“If that’s the case, we ought to try to get hold of a few rabbits for the journey.”

Grace frowned. “I just told you, you need to rest, or that wound is never going to heal.”

Soren unfolded himself and got to his feet, pushing his long hair back out of his face. "I will go. Grace is right, Elery, you need to rest."

Elery pulled his cloak tighter around himself, his brows knitting together.

"Fine," he said. "Fine, you're right."

Farrow noticed Grace mouth a silent 'thank you' to Soren as the Koushan Mai boy swung his bow over his shoulder and headed into the rapidly darkening forest. Elery hunched down by the fire, his shoulders stiff with annoyance, but in this light Farrow could see the dark smudges of exhaustion under his eyes. Grace was right; he was pushing himself much too hard.

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They set off as the sun began to rise. The morning light stained the river red as they made their way carefully along the shore. The air was cold and they kept their cloaks tightly wrapped around their bodies to keep out the chill wind. Again, Farrow wished that he was wearing anything but the gown, its function more suited for warm, firelit halls than a frosty midwinter's morning. Grace walked close to Farrow's side, one arm looped through his, as Soren ranged ahead and Elery and the prince followed behind, keeping their eyes out for threats.

Four days passed without incident. They followed the flow of the river, camping each night alongside its bank. As they travelled further below the snow line, the river widened in the valley, and the terrain grew flatter and easier to traverse. Under the cover of darkness, they passed a small, riverside village, not daring to stop and seek shelter this close to Snowbarrow. Soren and Elery, who seemed to have struck up somewhat of a friendship, continued to keep them supplied with food, though Elery had finally taken Grace's words on board and was resting a lot more. His wound had finally stopped bleeding.

On the fifth day, they heard voices, the sounds delivered and snatched away by a cold wind. Soren silently held his hand up towards them, stopping them from advancing any further, his other

hand holding a finger to his lips. He gestured towards the forest and Elery, taking the hint, chivvied them under the cover of the trees. When they were out of sight, Soren continued along the riverbank, disappearing around the corner beyond.

Elery leant against a tree just out sight of the river, his shoulders tense and his fingers gripping the hilt of his sword. Camber approached him and murmured something that was too quiet for Farrow to hear, but whatever it was, Elery nodded quickly in response.

He stepped forward to involve himself in the conversation, but, before he could say anything, Soren returned from around the bend and quickly jogged up to join them.

“A barge,” he said quietly. “Two men, not fighting men. They are heading the same way we are.”

“Probably to Gullcliffe to trade,” Elery said.

“Might be worth bartering passage,” Soren said. “If you are still being hunted,” he added, eyes on Camber, “they will not be looking for a barge.”

Elery was silent for a moment, before looking over at Farrow. “My lady, it might be sensible for you and Grace to approach them. We could appear as outlaws otherwise.”

Grace lowered the hood of her fur cloak and untied her long copper hair. “I have no problem doing that.”

Before Farrow could speak, Camber muttered, “Is that wise, El? I will not put my lady in danger.”

Farrow frowned and moved past him, adjusting his filthy green dress as best he could. “Elery’s right. It’s best if we approach alone.”

Camber pursed his lips, looking as though he might argue, before turning to look at Elery. “Go with them but keep your distance. If something happens to Viola, I’ll hold you responsible.”

An emotion Farrow couldn’t place flickered across Elery’s face, before he sketched a shallow bow. “Highness.”

Camber's jaw tightened, but he said nothing else. Grace rolled her eyes skyward briefly, moving past them and beginning to head down towards the riverbank without waiting for anyone else to speak. Farrow, his body thrumming with indignation he couldn't express to the prince, followed, running his fingers through his short hair in an attempt to neaten it. He could sense Elery following behind the two of them, but made a point not to look back. He was insulted, but not surprised, that Camber still believed that he couldn't handle himself.

He sped his pace a little to catch up with Grace, to walk at her side, brushing back of her hand with his knuckles. She turned and gave him a rather grim-looking smile.

"This could be a really stupid idea," she said, voice low enough that Elery wouldn't be able to hear. "They could turn us right into the port guard."

"They could," Farrow muttered. "But I think Soren's right. The prince is still not recovered, and the last day or so he's been really struggling."

Camber wouldn't admit it, and no one had dared say it aloud, but in the last two days their pace had slowed significantly, and precious daylight had been wasted with all too frequent rests. Grace grimaced and nodded.

"If we gain passage, we keep our guard up," she said.

Farrow touched Grace on the arm. "The others may not have faith in us, but I do."

A smile flashed across Grace's face at that but faded as the barge came into view. It was moving slowly along the bank of the river, pulled along by a harnessed brown horse who was being led by a work-roughened man. The barge itself was made of painted brown and green wood. Another figure stood on the deck with a long pole, occasionally pushing the barge away from the bank to stop it running aground.

Grace glanced over at Farrow and then quickened her pace, raising one arm in the air.

"Excuse me?" As the man with the horse turned towards them, she added, "Please, wait a moment. We need help."

The man drew the horse to a stop, and the man on the deck dug the pole into the bank to halt the barge.

“Hail,” the man by the horse said, as Grace and Farrow approached. They could now see that he was an older man in his mid- to late-forties, his dark hair silvering at the temples, and his face weathered by long days in the sun. His expression was wary. “What’re you ladies doin’ out here?”

Grace wrapped her arms around herself, somehow looking small and fragile despite her worn leather armour. “Our caravan was attacked. Us and our companions are just trying to get back to Gullcliffe.”

The man on the boat leant against the rail, looking them over. “We’re headin’ to Gullcliffe, lass.” He was younger than his companion, his brown hair pulled back into a thick ponytail. “Are there more of you?”

“Yes,” Farrow said, trying to ignore the way the younger man’s eyes moved curiously over his dress. “Our companions were concerned you would mistake us for outlaws if they approached.”

“Can they work?” the older man asked. “If so, you’re welcome to travel with us. You ladies can ride the barge if you wish.”

“I can work,” Farrow said quietly, ignoring the flicker of surprise on the man’s face. “I just need some harder wearing clothes.”

“We can all work,” Grace added.

The older man smiled, the expression surprisingly warm. “Right you are, lassies.”

“May I ask your names?” Farrow said. Grace gave him a rather panicked look, which confused him. “I’m Viola, and this is Grace.” His birth name felt like a lie on his lips, but to use Farrow would invite more questions than he would have liked.

The older man inclined his head. “William. And my son, Noah.” He patted the horse’s flank. “And this here is Matilda.”

“A pleasure,” Farrow said.

“We’ll fetch our companions,” Grace told the men, before taking hold of Farrow’s arm and leading him back the way they had come. When they were out of earshot, she hissed, “Try to talk less like a noble. The dress is something we could explain away, but the way you speak is another.”

Farrow flushed red. “Sorry, it didn’t even cross my mind.”

He made a mental note for himself to be much more careful in the future.

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The younger man, Noah, found Farrow a set of well-worn work clothes, and let him into the small compartment below the deck of the barge so that he could get changed in private. The storage was mostly packed full of bags of grain ready to trade in Gullcliffe, but there was just enough room for one person to crouch inside. The ceiling was low and Farrow had to kneel so that his head didn’t brush against it. Above him, Noah lit an oil lantern to give Farrow some light and passed it down to him.

“Keep it away from the sacks,” he warned, before shutting the hatch and leaving Farrow alone in the semi-darkness.

Farrow carefully placed the oil lantern down on the floor. The scent of grain was strong in his nostrils as he began to peel the dress off his body. Shut off from the outside elements, the storage compartment was warm, if cramped. The flickering light of the oil lantern sent shadows skittering over the wooden floor, the colour of flames caressing Farrow’s bare skin. For a moment, he felt the strong, undeniable presence of the Lord of Fire, and hot tears pricked at the corner of his eyes.

Naked, he shifted on his knees and then bowed to the oil lantern, his forehead resting against the floor.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “Thank you for getting me out of there alive.” He swallowed a moment, and then added, “Please, watch over Aric. Bring him back to us or help guide his spirit to Faolan’s halls.”

He remained still for a few heartbeats, until the faint pressure of Elian's presence seemed to ease and a slight coldness began to seep back into the air. Then he straightened, wiping his damp face on the back of his hand, and pulled on the clothes Noah had found for him. They were made of rough fabric and smelled faintly of stale sweat and mud, but he felt as though he could breathe easier than he had in days.

Bundling the gown under his arm, he extinguished the oil lantern and climbed back out onto the deck of the barge. Noah was once again wielding the pole, keeping the barge away from the banks of the river. He was talking quietly to Grace, who sat cross-legged on the deck, deftly skinning three rabbits Soren and Elery had caught earlier that morning.

"It'll be nice to have some fresh meat," Noah was saying, as Farrow approached. "Me and Da haven't had much luck with the snares, so we've been eatin' the dried meat we brought from home."

Grace smiled, but didn't take her eyes off her task. "Cooking's the least I can do for you."

"It's much appreciated," Noah said sincerely, a distinct red tinge to the back of his ears and neck as he glanced over at Grace and away again.

Farrow, feeling awkward, approached the side of the barge. The distance between the deck and the riverbank was traversable without difficulty, but he still found himself hesitating for a moment before he stepped from one to the other. Elery and Camber were walking alongside William, the older man. The prince was stroking his fingers through the horse's mane as he walked, talking softly to her. Soren was nowhere to be seen, which made sense to Farrow. As a Koushan Mai, he couldn't be certain how the two men would react to him. He was sure, however, that Soren was shadowing them in the trees.

Keeping the barge in sight, Farrow walked a little way into the trees and crouched down, starting to scabble in the dirt. The earth was damp and cold and came away easily as he dug with his fingers. He shoved the gown down between the roots of the tree and tried to cover it up again with the loose dirt.

“What are you doing?”

He jumped at the sound of Elery’s voice and glanced up. Elery was leaning against the trunk of the tree, looking down at him with a neutral expression.

“I didn’t think it’d be a good idea to have this on us. It’s very obviously noble.” It was not the whole truth, but it was part of it.

Elery said nothing, but crouched down and helped him cover the fabric of the gown with dirt, fallen leaves and twigs. When they stepped back, Farrow could barely tell that something had been hidden there at all.

“Let’s go,” Elery said, and turned and started to walk back towards the barge, which was slowly making its way down the river.

Farrow jogged to catch up so that he could walk alongside Elery. “Thanks.”

Elery smiled and slid his hands into his pockets. “It’s nothing.” After a moment, he tilted his head and looked Farrow properly in the eye. “I met you in the tower that morning, didn’t I?”

Farrow blinked, cold panic rolling through him. “I – I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Listen, I get not wanting to be who you are for a little while.” Elery grinned and gave him a little wink. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell Cam.”

Farrow nodded slightly, trying to swallow down the anxiety Elery’s words had sent washing through him. For a moment, he imagined how disappointed his mother would be if she knew the first impression he had made on the other boy. If she could see him now.

“Where’s Soren?” he asked, changing the subject.

Elery’s mouth twisted in a grimace. “He’s around. Didn’t want to risk these folks being anti-Koushan Mai. I can’t blame him.”

They were approaching the barge, but Farrow asked in a low voice, “Why is he still with us? Why doesn’t he go back to his people?”

Elery shrugged. “He says he owes us a life debt.” He glanced over at Farrow and gave him a faint smile. “I’d say we need all the help we can get.”

They fell silent as they came up alongside Camber and William. The prince talking quietly to William about horses, his voice soft and sincere. For a moment, Farrow caught a glimpse of the boy he had met before the ball, before the nightmare had begun, and then the joy flickered and was replaced again by exhaustion and grief. Camber's hand rested on Matilda's withers as they walked along the riverbank, and Farrow remembered what he and Aric had said about spending several of their formative years in Eshua, a country famed for their horsemanship. It reinforced just how much he didn't know about his future husband.

He wondered where Elery had been during that time.

Feeling Elery's eyes on him, then, he dragged his gaze away from Camber and back to the boy walking beside him.

Elery was right. They would need all the help they could get if they were going to help Camber regain his throne.

After seven more days, they reached Gullcliffe.

Gullcliffe was a large port at the mouth of the Kingsrush, so named for the towering cliffs that flanked both the town and the docks sheltered within. The town itself sprawled along the riverbank in the long shadow of the cliff. The smell of salt hung heavy in the air, and the shouting and bustling of the town was punctuated with the cries of gulls that circled low over the ocean. After so long in the wilderness, the chaos of the town was overwhelming.

They parted ways with William and Noah at the dockside, though Noah seemed reluctant to say goodbye to Grace. He took her hands in his and said soft words the others couldn't hear. As they walked away, Grace's cheeks were red. Farrow made a note to question her later. They made their way deeper into the town in search of a tavern where they could hunker down and plan their next steps. Without a sound, Soren joined them, falling in step with the group as they made their way along the crowded cobbled streets. His hood was pulled down over his face to hide his hair, but Farrow caught the quick flash of a grin as he greeted them.

"You're good at keeping hidden," Farrow remarked. "I didn't see you once whilst we were travelling here."

Soren shrugged, but his face looked tense as his eyes swept the streets ahead. "You learn to be when it could mean the difference between life and death."

Farrow looked at him then, really looked at him, wondering what the other boy had seen in his life living on the margins of civilisation. The image of the two hanged men flashed into his mind, and he felt it best not to ask.

They found a busy, out-of-the-way tavern a little way from the docks. After a quick discussion, Elery led the way inside, weaving his way around tables and patrons to get to the bar. A tall, hefty man was behind the counter, wiping at a metal tankard with a rag.

"How much for a couple of rooms for the night?"

“One thorn a room.” His voice was rough, but his tone was not unwelcoming.

Elerly produced some coins from inside his cloak, and Farrow wondered briefly if he’d taken them off the dead bodies at Snowbarrow.

Likely.

The barkeeper handed over a couple of simple iron keys and waved Elerly away as another patron stepped up to the counter in search of a drink. Elerly pocketed the keys without a word, and then turned and headed up the narrow staircase at the back of the tavern. The others trudged after him and, within short order, they found themselves clustered in one of the rooms. Farrow sat on the edge of one of the lumpy beds and Grace quietly sat down beside him. Soren sat with his back against the door, just in case. Camber stretched himself out on the other bed, one arm over his face, whilst Elerly paced the floor.

“Our best option is to barter passage on a ship to Eshua,” he said. “Passing the mountains on foot is obviously not an option.”

“We underestimated the mountains,” Farrow said quietly. “We shouldn’t make that mistake again.”

Grace spoke up. “We shouldn’t travel under our real names.” She glanced at Farrow, before adding, “William and Noah knew our real names, if not who we are. To someone asking the right questions, our movements could be easily tracked.”

Farrow thought back to the moment he and Grace had approached the barge, and realised that he had given his real name without thought or question. Hot shame washed through him and he looked down at his hands.

“Right,” Elerly said. “We use false names. Hopefully that’ll be enough to throw anyone off our trail.”

“With respect,” Grace said softly. “False names alone won’t be enough. They’ll be looking for people matching our – well, *your* – descriptions.”

Elerly’s head tilted, and he looked at Grace thoughtfully. “Any suggestions?”

Grace hesitated for a moment, before seeming to gather herself and saying softly, "His highness and my lady should pretend to be brothers."

Camber sat up straight at her words. "Excuse me?"

Grace swallowed slightly but continued. "If they're looking for any of us, they're looking for the crown prince and his betrothed. Not two brothers."

Farrow didn't realise how loudly his heart was beating until Camber's gaze turned to him. He made himself nod in agreement with Grace, though he felt vaguely as though he was going to throw up.

*Pull yourself together*, he told himself. *This is what you've wanted.*

"Grace is right," he said slowly, meeting Camber's gaze with his own. "If it keeps us safe until we get to Eshua, an added deception would be sensible."

Elerly shifted, pulling Farrow's eyes to him.

"Do you have a name in mind?" There was a faint half-smile on his lips.

*He knows.* The thought had a similar sensation to being plunged into an icy river. *He knows what I want.*

"Farrow." The name didn't come from his lips, but from Grace's. When he turned to her, eyes slightly wide, she added, "Like that hero in your books, my lady? The one you admire so."

He swallowed, trying to recall moisture into his suddenly dry mouth. "Farrow works."

Elerly looked over at Grace. "If we're pretending to be siblings, do you think you and I would pass?"

She tilted her head. "Probably best not to risk it." Her eyes darted towards the door, where Soren was sat watching them quietly. "What about —?"

"Do you intend to come?" Camber broke in. "What reason would a Koushan Mai have to accompany us to Eshua?"

Soren shifted, his expression neutral. "I owe you all a life debt. I will accompany you until it is repaid."

Camber sat up properly, swinging his legs off the bed as he looked intently at Soren.

“And will anyone grant us passage if we’re with you? Everyone knows Koushan Mai can’t be trusted.”

“Cam, I don’t—”

Elery’s soft intervention was cut off by Soren’s calm, measured voice. “Why?”

Camber blinked, stunned at the question. “Why?”

“Yes, why?” Soren rested his elbows on his knees. “Why can’t we be trusted?”

There was a long silence in the room as the two boys stared at each other. The question stuck like a barb in Farrow’s gut and made him feel acutely uncomfortable. He found that he had no answer; it was a truth he had been told since before he could remember.

Camber looked just as stumped as Farrow felt.

“You drove the dragons away,” he said eventually. “Everyone knows that.”

Soren’s eyes flashed. “We lived alongside the dragons. It was the Seruic people who drove them away, not us.”

“Even so,” Elery cut in, before Camber could respond. “He’s right. It’s going to be difficult to get any captain to agree to give us passage if we’re with you.”

“I have thought about that,” Soren said quietly, looking away from Camber. “You cut my hair. I will cover my tattoos.”

Elery frowned a little, but said, “That could work. With a cursory glance, they won’t be able to tell.”

Something tugged in the back of Farrow’s mind. “Isn’t your hair... important to your religion?”

Soren’s eyes found his, his expression softening slightly. “Yes. But a life debt is more so.” He turned his head towards Camber again. “As well as this, you are the crown prince of Serukis. Perhaps, if I aid you, it will begin to mend the rift between our peoples.”

Camber’s expression flickered at that. “Perhaps.”

“Are you sure you want to cut your hair?” Elery said quietly.

Soren looked towards him and smiled faintly. "My gods will forgive me. It is a worthy cause."

Elery drew his dagger and moved to sit on the edge of the bed beside Camber, gesturing to the floor in front of him.

"Let me," he said quietly, and the Koushan Mai boy moved over to sit in front of him and allowed him to start carefully unravelling his braids.

There was a moment of silence, before Camber said quietly, "A couple of us need to go to the docks to see if we can find passage for tomorrow, or a few days from now at the latest."

Grace stood up from the bed, stretching with a slight frown. "I'll go. I need to trade for some different clothes, or I'll be the most suspicious amongst us."

Camber stood too. "I'll accompany you. You shouldn't go alone."

"Just let Grace do the talking," Elery said, wicked humour sparking in his eyes as he looked up at the prince. "Or at least let her coach you in what to say."

Camber frowned at him. "I'm not an idiot," he said, though there was little heat.

He opened the door and let Grace leave ahead of him, and soon their footsteps had vanished down the hallway.

Farrow lay down on his side, a wave of exhaustion coming over him as he watched Elery's hands move in Soren's hair.

"You've been quiet," Elery said, and Farrow glanced up to meet his eyes. "Is this plan all right with you, Viola?"

"Farrow," Soren corrected quietly. "We need to live the ruse if it is going to work."

A deep ache blossomed in Farrow's chest and he turned his face into the blanket for a moment, trying to stop the stinging in his eyes. To his left, he heard Soren let out a long, low breath, but he couldn't find the words within himself to answer Elery's question.

"In my culture," Soren said, after a long silence. "We have a long history of women with the hearts of men, and men with the hearts of women."

Farrow turned his head to look at them again. Soren had his eyes closed as Elery continued to unravel his braids.

“What do you mean?” The words shook as they left his mouth.

“Like warrior maidens?” Elery asked. “We have warrior maidens as well.”

Soren opened his eyes for a moment. “No. They are women with bold hearts. The *ashan* are different.”

Farrow’s heart pulsed in his chest, a lump lodging itself in his throat. Elery’s mouth twisted slightly in confusion, his gaze flickering to Farrow before settling back on his own hands as they combed out Soren’s long dark hair.

When no one else spoke, Soren continued. “The *ashan* live the lives their hearts lead them to – marrying, raising children, fighting for them. We believe that the heart is the true soul, no matter what form the body takes.”

“That’s an interesting perspective.” It took a moment for Farrow to realise the words were coming from his own mouth; they sounded strange and far away.

A queer smile crossed Soren’s lips, as Elery started to carefully cut his hair with his dagger.

“What I am trying to say, Farrow, is to channel the *ashan*. Hold the image of who you want to be in your heart, and that is what people will see.”

Elery made a soft sound of agreement, though his gaze was focused on Soren’s hair. “That makes sense, though I’m more concerned about Cam than Vi – sorry, Farrow.”

Soren flashed a grin. “You are correct. He exudes nobility.”

As Elery and Soren continued to talk back and forth about Camber and how best to disguise him, Farrow turned his face back into the blankets, his heart pounding painfully in his chest. He couldn’t tell if Soren knew just how close to the truth his words had struck, or if he was truly just giving advice on how to make his disguise as believable as possible. Either way, the thought of a group of men and women that were, well, *like him*, made him feel queasy – or giddy. He couldn’t tell.

Channel the *ashan*, Soren had said. He could do that.

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It was past dark when Camber and Grace returned. Grace excused herself to the other room to change into the outfit she had purchased, whilst Camber handed out a fresh bread roll to each of them. Farrow sat on one of the beds with his knees up against his chest, breathing in the scent of baked bread and trying not to eat it too quickly. Camber sank down onto the bed beside him, still moving somewhat stiffly from his ordeal at the hands of the Ferrell soldiers, but the bruises on his cheeks had faded now to soft yellow and green, and his skin had a healthier colour.

“We have passage,” he said, without preamble. “On a ship called *The Flotsam*. It leaves for Eshua at noon tomorrow.”

“*The Flotsam*,” Soren repeated. He picked at his bread roll, sat cross-legged on the floor. His newly short hair was by no means neat, but it suited him. “That sounds an unlucky name for a ship.”

Camber shrugged, not quite looking at him. “It was the best we could do.”

“What did it cost?” Elery asked. He was sat on the windowsill, his forehead pressed against the rough glass. His roll hung limply forgotten in one of his hands, dangling by his side.

“A promise of work, and five thorns.” Camber grimaced. “The captain seemed pleased at the prospect of having an extra four able-bodied men, especially when I admitted we didn’t have much coin.” His gaze flickered to Farrow. “I hope you understand what’s expected, Viola. This will not be easy.”

A surge of anger washed through Farrow at his words, and his retort came out sharper than he intended. “None of this has been *easy*, Camber. I’m not the delicate flower you seem to take me for, and I’ll pull my own weight.”

The prince’s mouth twisted. “I didn’t mean —”

“Treat me as you would Elery, or Aric,” Farrow said, his voice softening. “Otherwise you risk our lives.”

Camber’s eyes caught his, and the concern there made Farrow’s breath catch in his throat. “I know that. I do.” His hand came up and cupped Farrow’s cheek, his gaze intense. “But you are my betrothed, and I’m responsible for your protection. I forget myself, Viola.”

Elery cleared his throat, and Camber snatched his hand away as though he had been burned.

“Brothers don’t touch each other like that, Cam.” Elery’s voice was dry. “Unless you want a different kind of trouble than we’re already in.”

Camber met Farrow’s gaze again, and there was sadness there. “My apologies, Viola.”

“Farrow,” Farrow told him quietly. “It’s Farrow.”

“Farrow,” Camber repeated, and the sound of his name on the prince’s tongue sent a bolt of heat sizzling in Farrow’s belly.

There was a soft *snick* as Grace let herself back into the room. She was wearing a clean bodice and skirt in soft browns, with a rough woollen shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

“I think this will do,” she said, retrieving the last of the bread rolls from Camber and taking a bite. She gave the rest of them an appraising look. “I think we’ll pass.”

Elery tilted his head. “So we have Cam and Farrow as brothers. What about the rest of us? Just friends?”

Grace swallowed her mouthful of bread, looking thoughtful. “I’ve been thinking about this. I should pose as the beloved of someone. There’s not much other reason that a woman would be travelling alongside you.”

“It should be me,” Farrow said, before any of the others could speak. “I’ve known you longer than anyone else.”

“That’s why it *shouldn’t* be you,” Elery said in response. “It might be hard for you to sell a different kind of relationship.” He gave Camber a sidelong look. “It should be Cam. He can channel his protective energy for you towards Grace.”

Camber looked as though Elery had just told him to drink seawater. "I don't know if I can pretend something like that."

Grace met Farrow's eyes for a moment, silently asking permission, and then moved to kneel in front of the prince, taking his hand in both of her own. "Highness, this is only make-believe. Pretend I am Viola, just for as long as this journey takes, and we shall make it through."

Camber stiffened for a moment, a heartbeat, and then he cupped Grace's cheek with his free hand, running his thumb along her bottom lip in a careful, quiet gesture.

"You're right," he said quietly. "You don't match what people will be looking for. It'll help us get there safely." He looked at Farrow, his expression pained. "Are you all right with this, Viola?"

"Farrow," Elery corrected.

Farrow tore his eyes away from Camber's hand on Grace's cheek and looked up at his face. A small ball of hot jealousy curled in his chest, but he chased it away with a weak smile.

"Like Grace said, this is make-believe. We need to do whatever we can to survive."

Camber's fingers tucked a lock of Grace's hair behind her ear before he pulled his hand back. "You're right. And once we are in Eshua and safe in the palace there, we'll no longer have to hide who we are."

*If only that were true,* Farrow thought, but said nothing.

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The docks were crawling with people. The air was thick with the tang of salt and the strong smell of fish, mixed with the heady scents of pipe smoke and imported spices. They walked in a clustered group, careful not to lose sight of each other. Grace hooked her arm through Camber's and pressed close to his side, looking every inch the wide-eyed country girl. Farrow walked close to Camber's other side, not touching him, but close enough to hear him when he said softly, "That's it."

Farrow followed his gaze to one of the ships moored at the docks. *The Flotsam* was a relatively small merchant ship, built for durability rather than speed. Its sails were currently furled, and men were walking up and down the gangplank carrying various crates and chests.

Elery had also heard Camber's proclamation, as he nodded and led the group towards the ship, weaving deftly between the crowd. As they followed him, Farrow could feel the presence of Soren close behind. A tall man was standing by the gangplank, directing the others and holding a thick, leather-bound book that he checked every so often.

"Hail," Elery said as they approached.

The man's attention snapped to the group, and he looked between the five of them with narrowed eyes. "What d'ye want?"

Camber released Grace's arm and stepped up to Elery's side. "We spoke yesterday, and I arranged passage for myself and my companions." He was obviously trying to disguise his speech, but he couldn't quite hide his true self.

The man scratched his fingers over his scraggly beard. "That's right. Cameron, wasn't it?" His eyes found Grace. "And the lovely lady."

Grace smiled at him, though it was somewhat cooler than her normal smile. "Faith, sir."

"Faith, that's it." He looked over the rest of them with a discerning eye. "I hope you lads won't object to bein' put to work. We're behind schedule on loadin' this cargo." He gestured up the gangplank. "The lady may wait aboard."

Camber's smile was uneasy, but he took Grace's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Stay where I can see you, love."

As Grace headed up the gangplank and onto the deck, the man clapped Camber on the shoulder. "Don't worry, lad. Anyone who touches a lady against her wishes on my vessel will find themselves overboard quicker than Nereus's anger."

The Lord of Water was known for his unpredictable rages, storms blowing in from the sea in the time it took to draw a breath. Farrow hoped that the man was true to his word, though Camber looked reassured.

“And what should we call you?” Elery asked, as the man returned to his post with the book.

“It’s Darius,” the man said, teeth flashing. “But ‘captain’ will do. Now get to work. This cargo ain’t goin’ to haul itself.”

\*

Despite the cool air of winter, it was hot, thirsty work, hauling cargo under the midday sun. The rough sack of grain itched Farrow’s cheek as he heaved it onto his back, and he blinked as the salt from his sweat stung his eyes. Muscles ached that he hadn’t known he possessed, and he half wondered if he would be able to stand come the morrow. Elery gave him a grimace as he swung his own sack of grain up onto his back with, Farrow noted, comparatively little effort.

“Almost done,” he said, wiping his face with the back of his hand.

Farrow didn’t have the breath to reply. He nodded instead, before moving past Elery to trudge once more up the gangplank. He shifted the weight of the sack as he reached the top, taking a moment to find Grace with his eyes. She was leant against the ship’s railing, gazing out over the docks. For a moment, he thought about the fact that, by all accounts, he should be standing beside her, twiddling his thumbs and waiting for the men to finish their work.

For a moment, that seemed easier.

*This is what you wanted, idiot.*

“Quit your daydreaming, boy.”

Farrow glanced up at the rough voice, stammering an apology. The sailor that stood in front of him was a tall man, well-muscled and tanned from long hours working under the sun. His eyes were the hard grey of steel.

“First time on a ship?” Before Farrow could reply, the man plucked the sack of grain from his shoulder and slung it over his own. “First rule. Daydream after the work is done.”

Then, he turned and walked away, leaving Farrow to stand there, humiliation climbing up his neck and face. Ducking past Elery, who had come up behind him, he hurried back down the gangplank to fetch one of the last sacks of grain, determined to do the job right. He would not allow anyone to be able to accuse him of shirking, or for Camber to look at him and see only Viola.

*This is what you wanted.*

\*

It was mid-afternoon by the time *The Flotsam* raised her anchor and set sail. Having no sailing experience between them, Farrow and the others were told to stay out of the way as the sailors set to work. Aching, Farrow leant against the rail of the ship, his chin on his arms, watching quietly as *The Flotsam* navigated its way out of the docks and onto open water. The sound of the docks faded, replaced by the sound of sailors shouting to each other and the rush of waves. He could taste the spray of salt against his lips.

He started slightly as Camber joined him, the prince leaning against the guardrail with both hands.

“I don’t think I’ve ever worked that hard,” Camber admitted. There was a brief hesitation before he added, “You did well.”

Farrow remembered the look in the sailor’s eyes as he had taken the grain sack from him and made a non-committal noise. “We’re doing what we must.”

The two of them stood in silence for a while, watching the white-capped waves and the rocky coastline recede behind them. Farrow chanced a glance over at Camber. His expression was pensive as he stared out over the shores of Serukis, the sea breeze catching his hair and making it dance in front of his eyes. His hands tightened on the wooden guardrail, but he said nothing.

Farrow bumped him gently with his shoulder. "We'll return home, Cameron," he said, making sure to use the prince's fake name. "This isn't the last time we'll see Serukis."

Sadness flickered behind Camber's eyes. "That remains to be seen." He lowered his voice, so that no one would be able to overhear. "The crown is mine by right, but that means nothing without others behind me."

"You have us," Farrow said quietly. "You have me."

Camber looked at him properly, and a smile ghosted across his lips. "What are we against an army?" His hand came up as though to touch Farrow's face, but he caught himself at the last moment. He dropped his hand with a soft sigh, his eyes on Farrow's. "My Viola."

A mix of conflicted emotions rose up in Farrow at that, his stomach twisting. He shook his head slightly and turned his gaze back towards the shore. "Farrow, please. We can't mess this up."

A burst of breath escaped from Camber's mouth and he leant his elbows back on the rail beside Farrow.

"Farrow, yes. Forgive me."

"Just try not to forget, Cameron."

Camber's fingers opened and closed on the guardrail. "I'm not built for subterfuge, I'm afraid. All of this... it feels wrong."

Farrow glanced around to make sure that no one was looking, or listening in. It didn't appear so, but he lowered his voice anyway.

"This is how we survive long enough to make things right. These lies are for the greater good."

"And for my people."

Farrow looked up at him. The prince was gazing out onto the horizon, his eyes stormy and his jaw tight.

"And for your people," he repeated quietly. "If the usurpers were content to murder a ballroom full of nobles, how do you think they would treat the common folk?"

Camber's gaze moved to Grace, who was laughing with Elery and Soren a little way apart from them, before he looked back at the cliffs of Serukis. "Not well, I'd wager."

"Which is why we need to reach Eshua alive. Serukis needs its true king."

Camber's shoulders slumped slightly at the word 'king'. "I'm not ready."

Recalling the words his book hero had spoken on more than one occasion, Farrow bumped him gently with his shoulder again. "Is anyone truly ready for what life throws at them?"

Camber looked away from the shoreline and to Farrow's face, smiling faintly. "You have no idea how much I want to hold you right now."

Farrow's chest fluttered. "Best not to."

Camber smiled again, properly this time, and turned back to face the shoreline. "Thank you, Farrow. I'm glad I have you by my side."

Warmth swelled inside Farrow's chest. "You're welcome."

Camber didn't say anything else, so Farrow contented himself with leaning on the guardrail beside him and watching also as the land receded into the distance.

\*

Nothing had prepared Farrow for the realities of sea travel. The moment a breeze stirred the sails and the ship rolled in the waves, Farrow's stomach rebelled. As such, he spent much of the first few days of travel shivering and sweating and wanting everything to end.

Worse, on the second day, his monthly bleed started. He had to rely on Grace to smuggle him rags, and to smuggle the used ones away without anyone noticing. If anything would blow his cover, it would be that.

The ship's sleeping quarters consisted of one large room with many hammocks and cubbies. Grace, as the only woman aboard, had been tucked away somewhere on her own, but only Captain

Darius knew exactly where. The first night, Camber balked at the idea of sharing with so many other men, but Elery had jabbed him in the side with his elbow and he had quickly shut up.

On the fifth day, Farrow was curled up miserably in his cubby, wrapped in a rough blanket. The sea sickness had mostly eased, but sharp cramps plagued his lower belly. He couldn't stop crying, tears leaking constantly from his eyes and soaking the dirty cloth he had fashioned into a pillow. Grace sat beside him, rubbing his back and doing her best to deflect attention away from him. He could hear footsteps above him as sailors moved across the deck to do their work. The others had been doing their best to make themselves useful, learning the arts of seamanship, and Farrow wished more than anything that he could be up there with them.

"What did he say to you?" he asked Grace, trying to focus on anything but his body. "Noah?" Grace's hand stilled for a moment on his back, and then continued to make soothing circles.

"He asked me for my hand," she admitted softly. "For me to stay with him."

Farrow's stomach clenched. "Did you want to?"

There was a long moment of silence.

"Yes." Grace's voice was a whisper. "I wanted to."

Farrow turned over onto his back so that he could see her face. "Why didn't you?"

Grace's eyes glistened. "This is more important, my – sir. Serukis is more important than what I want."

Farrow's heart hurt. "You could have stayed. I wouldn't have minded."

Grace let out a wet chuckle. "No, I couldn't. Those boys would get themselves killed without me."

Farrow sat up and wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tightly. It was only a heartbeat before she hugged him back just as fiercely.

\*

Things felt easier after that.

That night, unable to stomach the enclosed quarters any longer, Farrow made his way up to the deck of the ship. His stomach rolled a little as the cool air whipped against his face and he stopped, taking several deep breaths. The queasy feeling ebbed away and he finally allowed himself to turn his attention to his surroundings.

The night sky stretched above him infinitely, an inky blackness with no end. There were more stars than he could count, peppered in the sky like sparkling frost on the plains of Whitecastle. The moon hung low and round, swollen with light. He walked over to the railing, trance-like, and leant against it, staring out into the black, endless sea. Stars sparkled on the waves too, and the reflection of the moon was a shimmering pool. He couldn't tell where the sky ended and the sea began.

"Beautiful, is it not?"

Farrow's heart leapt into his mouth and he jerked away from the railing. Soren was leant on the railing a little distance from him. He had been so wrapped up in looking at the sea and sky that he hadn't noticed the other boy right in front of him. Farrow crossed over to him and leant back on the railing, letting out a long, low breath.

"It really is."

Soren didn't say anything else, but stretched his arms over his head, cracking his neck. He ran his fingers through his short hair, tugging at it and muttering something in a language Farrow didn't understand. As Farrow looked at him, he could see the tension in the other boy's eyes.

"Are you all right?" Farrow asked quietly.

Soren looked over at him, his mouth twisting in a grimace. "It is nothing."

"Doesn't look like nothing." Farrow looked back over the water, enjoying the taste of salt on his tongue. "It might help to talk."

Soren let out a slow sigh. "Some of the sailors were making crude jokes about my people. It took a lot to keep my head down and keep quiet."

As Farrow looked at him, Soren crossed his arms across his chest and held himself, his hands trembling slightly. Anger flared in his eyes.

“They might not have said those things if they knew who you were,” Farrow said quietly.

Soren huffed a laugh. “No. They would have said or done worse.”

Farrow looked at him for a long moment, feeling the weird sensation of ancestral hatred warring with his growing respect and like for the boy beside him. He was beginning to realise that he wasn’t even sure *why* the Koushan Mai were reviled, beyond the fact they always had been. He was also beginning to suspect that some of the stories he had always been told about them were false.

And then, there were the dragons.

“You told Camber that it was the Seruic people who drove away the dragons,” he said, after a long moment of silence. “What is the story that your people tell?”

Soren gave Farrow a long, appraising look. “You are truly interested?”

“Yes,” Farrow said quietly. “I want to know more about you, and I don’t want to ask you about some of the other things my people say about the Koushan Mai in case they’re true.”

Soren’s face was impassive, but his green eyes were wary. “I am sure nothing that you have been told about us is true.”

“Then educate me.” The words came out fiercer than Farrow intended, and he softened his voice. “If I am to be queen, I want to know the truth. I want – no one should be treated like your people are treated based on lies.”

Soren rested his elbows on the railing, chin on his hands. Farrow could just make out the hint of a tattoo under his sleeve.

“Please, teach me about the dragons,” Farrow said quietly again.

For a moment, he felt as though Soren wasn’t going to answer him. He remained staring across the ocean, his face expressionless. Then, he began to speak.

“Years ago, before the Seruic people came and claimed this land for their own, the dragon tribes and the Koushan Mai lived and worked side by side. The dragons were shape changers, able to

take human form, to live amongst us. To love us. To fight with us. Our tribes mixed, aided each other in tribal wars. Had children together.”

“The Koushan Mai had children with dragons?” The idea was shocking, to say the least.

“Dragons are merely humans who can take another form, to us.” Soren turned his head to look at him, his brow furrowed. “Listen to me, and do not judge.”

Farrow blushed. “I’m sorry. Continue.”

Soren turned his gaze back to the ocean, letting out a soft breath.

“Then the Seruic people came, led by Reth who proclaimed himself a king. They came from Kaien, from where Reth had been banished, and his followers came with him.”

Farrow nodded slightly. This was history he had been taught, though Soren’s words put a much more cynical spin on it.

“They began to take over this land, destroying tribes who had been there for hundreds of years. Some dragons allied with them, sensing a shift in power, the most powerful of which they began to call the five Lords, who they believed were the embodiment of their gods.”

Farrow frowned at that. “We brought our own gods with us from Kaien.”

“Yes,” Soren said quietly. “But the dragons were intelligent and ambitious. They convinced Reth and his followers that they were the avatars of the Lords.” He took a breath. “And together, they rained destruction down on the Koushan Mai and the other dragons. And soon, the dragons disappeared, hiding themselves even from the Koushan Mai.”

“And the ones who had allied with King Reth?”

“They too disappeared, which made Reth angry. He blamed the Koushan Mai for the dragons’ disappearance from that moment on.” His lips curled in a thin smile. “And the rest is history.”

Farrow was silent for a long moment, before asking, “Why would the dragons who had allied with King Reth also disappear? Surely they had betrayed their own kind?”

Soren sighed. “No one knows for sure, but it was common knowledge that Reth and his followers were turning the skins of the dragons they slew into armour, or decorations for the castles

they were building. Perhaps the so-called avatars of the Lords could not stomach the flaying of their own people.”

“That’s...” Farrow’s stomach turned over at the thought, but his mind went to the magnificent red dragon skin that decorated one wall of Whitecastle’s great hall. “Perhaps they couldn’t.” He looked over at Soren, and said quietly, “I don’t know if your myths are any more true than mine, but I’m sorry for the injustices done to your people.”

Soren gave faint smile. “I appreciate the words.” He straightened up, tugging discontentedly at his short hair. “I should rest. Goodnight, Farrow.”

“Goodnight.”

Farrow leant his chin on his arms, listening to Soren’s footsteps as they receded, his eyes on the glittering of the dark waves. The Koushan Mai boy had given him a lot to think about, and he wondered if there was any chance of harmony between their two peoples.

And he wondered the truth of the dragons, and where they had disappeared to.

\*

Another week passed, and Farrow began to help out the sailors on deck. He learnt how to tie a couple of knots, though he couldn’t do them as quickly and dexterously as the men who had practically grown up on the waves. He learnt the names of different parts of the ship, and how to play a game of dice. Elery was particularly good at that. He even learnt some colourful language that would probably make the guard captain at Whitecastle blush. Now that he wasn’t spending all his time with his face in a bucket, he could appreciate the beauty of being on the open water.

Sunlight glinted off the waves, sending sparkles scattering over the surface of the water. To one side of them, the rocky coastline rose up as they continued to follow it north. According to a sailor the day before, who had been showing Farrow the best way to join two ropes together, the coast now belonged to Eshua, though to Farrow it looked no different. Salt spray whipped him in the

face as he leant over the rail to watch the ship slice its way through the waves, coating his lips with the unmistakable tang of the ocean.

Farrow looked up as Elery came and leant on the rail beside him, the wind tugging at his chestnut hair. His face was a little more tanned than it had been when they'd left Gullcliffe, and his eyes seemed more alive. He gave Farrow a quick grin.

"Did you see them?" he asked.

"See what?"

Elery pointed, and Farrow followed the line of his arm and finger to where a group of grey fins were cresting the waves. As they watched, one of the creatures leapt above the waves in a flash of silver, before disappearing back into the deep.

"What are they?"

"Who knows?" Elery grinned again. "They're just fascinating to watch."

Farrow laughed at that, keeping his eyes on the group of creatures as they continued to travel alongside the ship. "You seem in a good mood today."

Elery made a sound of agreement. "We're a couple of days out from the port, and Cam is looking healthier than he has done in days."

Farrow glanced across the deck of the ship to where Camber was sat with a couple of crew members, untangling a haul of fish from *The Flotsam's* drag net. His expression and body language were filled with an easy friendliness, and he handled the fish as though he had been doing it from birth.

"It's good to see him laughing," Farrow agreed, turning his gaze back to the creatures in the water. "This has been good for all of us."

Elery tilted his head. "Especially now you seem used to the water."

Farrow grimaced. "Don't remind me. If the ship moves slightly wrong, my stomach still feels as though it's going to rebel."

“Sorry,” Elery said, though his eyes danced. Then, his expression turned serious. “Honestly, though, you seem... more comfortable in your skin.”

Farrow rubbed his wrist with one of his hands, deliberately not looking at the other boy. “Do I?”

“You do,” Elery said frankly. There was a pause, a breath, and then he said, “You can’t stay like this, you know that. He cannot love you like this.”

Farrow took in a breath, trying to pretend that his stomach hadn’t just filled up with ice. “Who says he can’t?”

“He needs a queen, Farrow. Not... this.”

Farrow turned to look at him, ignoring the tears that burned in his eyes. “This is just a ruse for safe travel.”

Elery looked back at him, his expression level. “You and I both know that is a lie.”

The two of them looked at each other for a moment, staring each other down; Farrow looked away first.

“Don’t you think I know that there’s no way this can be my forever?” he said quietly, willing the tears not to fall. “Do you think I don’t tell myself that every night before I fall asleep?”

Elery’s voice was quieter now. “I don’t want you to get hurt. Camber doesn’t mince his words.”

“I am aware.”

Elery sighed and leant back against the railing, turning his head up to face the sky. “I know how it feels to not want to live up to the expectations that have been with you since birth.”

Farrow felt himself bristle at the other boy’s words. “You have no idea how I feel.”

“No?” Elery didn’t look at him, but kept his gaze on the clear blue sky. “I was born to the Kingshadow. Growing up with a legend for a father is not easy. And now...” He scowled. “Now the weight of his expectations is heavier than it has ever been.”

Farrow let out a long sigh, staring down at the water as it slapped the sides of the ship. "You are a better man than he is, Elery."

Elery scoffed. "Since he murdered the king, that hasn't been hard."

Farrow frowned at him, though Elery still wasn't looking at him. "You know what I mean."

"I do." The words were soft. "And I thank you."

They were silent for a while, each lost in their own thoughts and staring at the sea and the sky, before Farrow made himself straighten up and cross his arms against his chest.

"Thank you for the warning," he said reluctantly. "I know it comes from a good place, but, truly, I am already aware of the reality of my situation."

Elery finally looked at him. Farrow had never quite noticed the depth of colour in his eyes before and he found himself unable to look away.

"You have a choice," the other boy said quietly. "I know it doesn't seem like it, but you do. You don't have to be his queen."

Farrow tore his gaze away, arms tightening around himself. "Thank you, but I do. I made a promise."

The chuckle that broke from Elery's lips was almost bitter. "So did my father."

Farrow didn't have a response to that, so he frowned and shrugged. He started as Elery's hand came up and clasped his shoulder.

"Just think about it, all right?" Elery said softly.

"I do." Farrow risked a glance at him. "Every day."

Elery squeezed his shoulder, and then released it. Farrow looked away, trying to ignore the emotions that were swirling in his stomach. His eyes caught a dark shape as it disappeared deeper into the water below the ship. He grabbed hold of Elery's shirt sleeve before he could walk away, yanking him closer.

"Did you see that?"

Elery pulled his arm out of Farrow's grip, but leaned over the side to get a better view. "Did I see wh—?"

As he asked the question, the ship suddenly heaved to one side with a terrifying *boom*, flinging Elery over the rail and into the water beyond. Farrow grabbed hold of the rail with a yell as the world tipped. Then the ship pitched the other way, tearing the rail from his hands and sliding him across the rough wood. Freezing water rushed over the deck as the ship righted itself. Farrow scrambled to his feet unsteadily, coughing. There was saltwater in his nose and eyes, but he blindly reached for the railing.

"*Elery!*" The other boy's name tore itself from his throat as chaos erupted around him.

Sailors rushed past him this way and that on the deck, shouting to each other, lashing ropes and yanking on sails. Above the roar of the ocean, the captain's voice bellowed orders.

"*To arms! All hands on deck!*"

Hands were grabbing him, shaking him. Coughing, he clutched hold of the figure in front of him. As his vision cleared, he looked up into Camber's face. The prince was white and sopping wet.

"What's —?"

Farrow didn't have a chance to finish his sentence. There was another loud *boom*, and the ship rolled sickeningly to one side. His feet slid out from underneath him, Camber falling with him, and together they tumbled painfully across the slick deck and slammed into the railings as the ship groaned. All of the wind rushed out of Farrow's body, and he was almost grateful for the painful grip Camber had maintained on his arms.

Without thinking, he thrust his arm up and wrapped it around the railing, just as the ship began to roll the other way. Camber cried out, and Farrow's arm suddenly felt as though it was being wrenched out of his socket. It was the only thing stopping the two of them from sliding across the deck yet again. His shoulder screamed in pain, and he twisted his other hand uselessly in Camber's shirt. The few seconds they hung there seemed like an eternity. Just as Farrow felt that he could

hold them no longer, the ship righted itself with a yawning groan and the ominous sound of splintering wood.

And then, the ocean erupted.

A wall of water shot itself into the sky and poured over the railings in a gushing torrent. The icy cold wave hit them like a rockslide, slamming them back against the railing, and Farrow's gasp of pain turned into a choking cough as water forced itself into his lungs. Camber let out a wordless cry, eyes squeezed shut, covering Farrow with his own body.

A road split the air and it felt as though the world trembled. Through stinging eyes, as the water cleared, Farrow saw the source of the roar, the source of the chaos.

A dragon.

Its body was as long as the ship itself, not including the tail. Water dripping off its shimmering blue scales, it stretched out its immense wings and flapped powerfully, sending another wave of water crashing over the rails. Its wings beat strongly to keep it hovering, and with an unearthly growl it opened its mouth and roared, displaying long, needle sharp teeth. Seawater sprayed from its mouth, battering the deck and making the ship sway horribly. Farrow's stomach churned and he retched, rolling to the side so as not to vomit all over the prince.

"This isn't happening," Camber pleaded to the air. "This can't be."

The dragon twisted in the air, tucked its wings into its side and dove back into the ocean. The resulting wave drove the ship irresistibly towards the coast, making a mockery of its now tattered sails.

And then, calm.

Farrow struggled to his feet, Camber at his side. He pushed his soaking wet hair out of his eyes and looked around. The crew of the ship seemed to have been somewhat thinned, but all around them men were struggling to their feet. He couldn't see Grace or Soren, though he cast his eyes around desperately for them.

“Is it over?” A sailor close by seemed to be addressing the sky, not really expecting an answer. A smear of blood was streaked across his forehead.

“I hope so,” said another, who was trying to pull another man to his feet. “What in the seven hells –?”

“*There!*” The cry came from a sailor who had somehow remained clinging to the rigging the entire time. “It’s coming back!”

Sure enough, a dark shape rippled through the water towards them. It passed under the ship, causing it to rock gently, and then disappeared deeper into the water.

“It’s toyin’ with us,” someone muttered.

“Nah, it’s gone.” This voice was thready with hope.

Farrow couldn’t quite make himself let go of Camber’s arm. Every muscle in the prince’s body was tense, but his expression was lost, fearful. To their left, a sailor was desperately pounding on the chest of another who was sprawled out on the deck, not moving. Someone somewhere was sobbing.

*Boom.*

The ship lurched to the side once again. Pain exploded in Farrow’s face as he sprawled on the deck. The dragon’s tail rose up from the water like a giant tentacle and then came whipping down. Wood splintered and the ship shuddered under the assault. The tail crashed down again and, this time, ship broke apart with a groan of breaking wood. Screams echoed from all around them, but there was nothing anyone could do.

The dragon erupted out of the water again, seawater pouring from its scales, but instead of spreading its wings, it let itself fall. The huge body of the creature came down on one half of the ship, smashing it into splinters. The screaming grew louder. The half of the ship Farrow and Camber were on pitched and yawed as water rushed over the deck from the impact, and Farrow found Camber’s arms wrapped around him in a tight embrace. He could taste blood from where his face had hit the deck. Every nerve in his body wanted him to scream with fear at what was happening, but all that escaped was a strangled squeak.

“Can you swim?” Camber’s voice in his ear was rough and shaky.

Farrow spat blood out of his mouth. “Not well.”

Camber laughed, though there was no humour in the sound. “Me either.”

*Boom.*

Their half of the ship rolled to the side as something large and heavy rammed into its side, and Farrow yelled as the two of them were sent sprawling again over the deck like ragdolls. Beside them, a sailor hit the rail with a sickening crunch, his body unnaturally twisted as he slumped there, unmoving. Farrow couldn’t help but let out a yell of horror. He screwed his eyes shut tight and waited for the dragon to body-slam the remaining side of the ship, to end it all.

*I know you’re there.*

The words blossomed painfully inside him skull and from the sound Camber made he had heard them too. There was the sound of creaking wood, and Farrow looked up to see the tail sweep overhead.

And then the tail came crashing down. The deck seemed to disintegrate under them with the horrible sound of splitting wood, and then Farrow found himself ripped apart from Camber’s body and plunged into the ocean.

The breath rushed out of him at the coldness of the water in a spray of bubbles, and every inch of his body screamed in protest. For a moment, two moments, he couldn’t move, his body sinking through the dark water. Around him, planks of wood and other men were floating under the surface, and the sudden silence pressed in around him like a tomb. The sunlight glimmered above him.

A long way above him.

And then sense returned, and he thrashed his arms and legs, trying to desperately reach the sky. His eyes stung with salt, but he tried to keep them open, to keep focused on the sun above him. Movement in the darkness beyond caught his gaze, the glimmer of dark scales, and he kept trying to surface even as his lungs screamed for relief.

But the sky only seemed to get further away, and his limbs heavier.

His last thought before the blackness took him was of Camber.

Every bone in his body seemed to hurt, and there was a deep violent ache that jabbed in his gut like a knife. His skin felt as though it was on fire, scraped and filled with grit. Everything tasted of salt and blood.

*Open your eyes*, he told himself, but his body didn't seem to want to obey.

Was this what it was like to be dead? Somehow, he had pictured something much more peaceful.

Sounds began to return to him. The slow, rolling crash of waves and the harsh calling of sea birds washed over him, followed by the rough sound of his own breathing. The potent mixture of salt and seaweed stung his nostrils. A cool wind ruffled his damp hair.

It took a few more minutes, but eventually he forced himself to open his eyes. The world was dark, the sky a deep midnight blue peppered with a spray of stars. The moon hung in the air, glowing with a soft, faint white light. As he watched, the sky seemed to rotate as his vision spun.

*I'm alive*, he thought, with no particular emotion. It just was.

He sat up with a quiet groan. Every inch of his body throbbed with pain, and even in the darkness he could see that his skin was bruised and scraped from the encounter with the dragon.

With the *dragon*.

He shut that thought off viciously and gingerly rubbed his hands over his face, wincing as his palm brushed the bloody, tender skin on his cheek. He didn't want to think about what the attack meant, not right then.

He was on some kind of rocky beach. Though it was dark, he could still see the outlines of the rocks and pebbles, and moonlight glistening on the wet sand. The ocean was deceptively calm now, shimmering prettily as the waves rolled and lapped at the shore. He could make out pieces of wood and rope, tossed against the shore, half-buried in the sand. As his eyes passed over the beach again and his vision became sharper, he dreaded seeing anything that looked like a body.

*Camber, he thought. Grace. Elery. Soren.*

He had to find them.

Getting to his feet was tricky. His legs trembled as he stood, and his body wanted nothing more than to flop back down in the sand and go back to sleep.

But that wouldn't help anyone.

*Come on, Farrow.*

He hugged his arms around himself and forced himself to stand there, waiting until his legs stopped shaking so much. His whole body shivered with cold, and his clothes were somewhat damp. Not soaking wet, like he had expected, but damp, as though he had been lying on the beach unconscious for some time.

It wasn't a particularly comforting thought.

When he could trust his legs not to give way beneath him, Farrow began to pick his way slowly across the beach. It wasn't long until he found his first body, a sailor he vaguely recognised as having laughed at his first attempts at a knot. In life, the man had been bright, with a wicked smile and sharp golden eyes. In death, he was pale and his eyes stared unseeingly at the sky above, dulled to a lifeless brown. The sight made Farrow want to throw up, but he forced himself to take in a shuddering breath and keep walking.

He tried not to think about what the others would look like if he found them. If their eyes would have turned to lifeless glass. If their skin would have turned the cold grey of the uncaring sea.

He searched for at least an hour, his body aching and exhaustion pounding through him. He was about to give up and find somewhere to curl up and sleep and maybe cry until daylight, when the sight of a crumpled figure caught his eye. Half-buried under planks of wood, the body was unmistakably Camber's. Farrow's heart felt as though it stopped in his chest. He rushed over to the prince's side, dropping to his knees in the sand.

"Don't you dare be dead," he growled, as he hauled the planks aside. "I'll never forgive you if you're dead."

"I feel too sore to be dead." The prince's voice was weak, but there was no mistaking it; Camber was alive.

Farrow let out a strangled sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a sob, and collapsed over the prince's body, burying his face in his neck and twisting his hands in his damp shirt.

"I thought I'd lost you." His voice was rough and far too shaky.

Camber's hand tangled itself in Farrow's hair. His chest rose and fell against Farrow's cheek, and Farrow could hear his heartbeat slowly pounding in his ear. He screwed his eyes shut tight, trying not to let the tears start to fall.

"Something dragged me to shore," Camber said quietly after a while. "At least, I think that's what happened. It's all... hazy." He shook his head. "All of it feels like a nightmare."

Farrow didn't reply, just left his face buried in Camber's chest. The prince's hand moved in his hair and he took a deep, shuddering breath, punctured by a soft gasp of pain. They lay there in silence for a short while, each lost in their own thoughts, before Farrow realised that Camber was shivering from the chill breeze rolling in off the surface of the sea.

"We should move to somewhere a little more sheltered and wait for morning," he said softly. "There's no way we can look for the others in this light."

"You found me," Camber pointed out.

"I... didn't know what else to do."

It took longer than it should have done, moving to a sheltered overhang by the cliff wall. Camber was moving gingerly and every muscle in Farrow's body ached. The two of them sat down heavily with their backs against the wall, and Farrow wrapped his arms around himself, shivering. The moon had disappeared behind a cloud, and the night had grown deeper and colder. There was only a brief moment before Camber's arm wrapped itself around his shoulders, huddling them together. Though they were both damp, sitting close together allowed their body heat to seep into each other.

"I'm glad you found me," Camber said after a long moment of silence.

Farrow let his head drop onto Camber's shoulder, closing his eyes. "It was pure luck."

Camber let out a weak laugh. "I think we're going to need some more of that luck before the end."

They sat in silence for a short while, listening to the sound of the waves crashing against the shore. Then, Camber spoke, his words hesitant.

"Do you think that I'm going to be able to do this?" He had obviously been thinking about this for a while. "Regain my throne? At every turn, fate seems against us."

Farrow looked up at him, but Camber wasn't looking at him. Instead, he was gazing out into the darkness, seeing something that wasn't actually there.

"We owe it to your father to try," he said quietly. "And to everyone else who lost their lives that night. You can't leave Serukis in the hands of someone who would do that to their own people."

A muscle twitched in Camber's jaw. "You're right. That throne is mine by right, and I need to get it back."

Farrow reached up to touch Camber's cheek, gently turning his head towards him and making him look at him. The prince's eyes focused on his face and softened.

"You will," Farrow said softly. "We'll do our best to help you."

Camber closed his eyes at that, pain flickering across his face. "If anyone else survived."

Something in Farrow's stomach turned very cold, but he whispered softly, "We need to have faith."

Then, on impulse, he leant up and pressed a kiss to Camber's mouth. The prince's lips were cold and tasted of salt, and it took him a moment to respond to the kiss. When he did, his hand came up and twisted in Farrow's short hair, and the kiss shifted from gentle reassurance to something desperate and chaotic. Farrow's hands twisted in Camber's damp shirt as the sharpness of Camber's teeth grazed his lower lip, and then he was in his back in the rough sand, Camber's warm weight pressing down on his body.

Then Camber's hands were under his shirt, and his mouth was on his neck, and Farrow's fingers found the bruised skin on Camber's back. The prince was cold to the touch, his skin still slick with seawater, and he let out a hiss of pain as Farrow's fingers skimmed a raw, still-bleeding welt. Farrow's apology was swallowed by another crushing kiss, and soon Camber's hands found their way to the fastenings of Farrow's trousers.

"We shouldn't," Farrow managed, even as his own fingers were fumbling with the buckle of Camber's belt.

Camber said nothing, but kissed him again, and soon any clear thought was overwhelmed by a barrage of sensation, the sound of their own harsh breathing above the sound of the waves, and the coarse sand scraping across his bare back.

Afterwards, the two of them lay in each other's arms and held each other, their breaths slowly calming as the waves continued to gently crash in the distance. Farrow's heart, which had been pounding wildly in his chest, eventually slowed. He tried to speak but no words came out. Camber's hand came up and stroked Farrow's fringe out of his face, catching his eyes with his own.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he said softly, his fingertips gentle against Farrow's skin.

Farrow, who had been feeling warm and fuzzy and content, felt as though he had been plunged back into the icy depths of the ocean. He pulled out of Camber's arms and sat up, pulling his damp shirt around himself in an attempt to shake off the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. Behind him, he heard Camber also sit up with a faint grunt of pain.

"Did I say something wrong?"

Farrow shook his head automatically. He could hear Elery's warning about telling Camber the truth echoing inside his head.

"I—" The words didn't want to come.

He jumped slightly as Camber's hand rested on his shoulder, and tried to ignore the shiver as the prince's thumb stroked his collarbone.

“Viola, talk to —”

“It’s Farrow.” The correction was barely a whisper.

Camber gave a soft laugh, the sound putting every nerve in Farrow’s body on edge. “We don’t need to pretend anymore, Viola. We’re in Eshua, and there’s no one here but you and me.”

*Please let Eley be wrong*, Farrow thought, and he shifted his body to face Camber.

The prince was half-shrouded in the darkness of the cliff face, moonlight tracing the sharp angle of his jaw and glowing in the depths of his blue eyes. His brow was furrowed with concern, despite the half-smile on his lips.

“Farrow doesn’t feel pretend to me.” The words came out like a croak, cracked and broken on his lips. He could not make himself meet Camber’s eyes. “I feel as though, my entire life, I have been pretending to be Viola.”

Silence.

After a moment, Farrow dared to look up at Camber’s face. The furrow of the prince’s brow had deepened, and his mouth had taken on a slight frown.

“I don’t... understand what you mean,” Camber said eventually, when Farrow couldn’t make himself speak anymore. “How can you pretend to be the person that you are?”

Farrow took a deep, steadying breath. “All my life, I have felt as though the Five made a mistake with my birth. This —” He gestured at himself. “This is all wrong. I have watched my brothers and wished I could be them.”

Camber let out a sigh. “If you wish to learn to fight, to do all the things a man can do, as my queen I could allow that. Within reason, of course.”

Farrow shook his head. “It’s not about that, Camber. I don’t want to be *like* a man. I want to *be* a man.”

Another silence, this one heavy and cold. Farrow could not recall if he had ever said the words out loud before, at least not as straight and bluntly as that. Camber’s expression flattened, and it was all Farrow could do to keep looking at him.

“I think we have just proven that you are *not* a man, Viola. Just now, you were all woman. Or was that a mistake?”

Farrow tried to swallow past the lump in his throat. “No, I –”

“Are you trying to tell me you can sprout a cock at will?”

The words felt like a slap in the face. “No, but –”

“Listen to me.” Camber grabbed him by the shoulders. Unlike before, his grip wasn’t gentle, and Farrow expected it would leave fingertip bruises on his skin. “You will never be a man. To think otherwise is an affront to the Lords.”

“You’re hurting me.” Farrow’s voice was a whisper.

Camber looked down for a moment and his hands loosened on his shoulders, before he looked back up at Farrow’s face. “It’s been a long few weeks, and it’s been rough, and you’re traumatised. We all are. This feeling is just a reaction to all that.”

Farrow’s eyes burned and his voice was thick as he replied, “You don’t understand.”

Camber kissed him then, and it was all Farrow could do not to jerk away.

“I need you as my queen.” He reached up and brushed Farrow’s hair out of his face, mouth twisting as he tried to ignore the tears that spilled down Farrow’s cheeks. “We should get some sleep and forget all about this, all right? Things will look better in the morning.”

He released Farrow then and turned away, stretching out against the cliff wall with his back to him. It was as though he had slammed a heavy door in Farrow’s face. Farrow’s mind waged a war with itself, as pain and anger rose up in his chest like some kind of monster. Most of him wanted to clutch Camber and cry, agree that everything was nonsense and beg his forgiveness. Another part of him, a small, dark angry part of him, wanted to pick up a rock and beat it against Camber’s skull.

Instead, he curled into himself, stuffing a fist in his mouth to hold back the sobs that threatened to burst out of him. His whole body shook with choked gasps that he was certain Camber could hear but chose to ignore.

*Stupid*, he told himself, as his heart threatened to split itself in two. *So stupid*.

And the long dark night stretched on.

\*

Neither of them spoke much the next morning, as a weak sun rose over the ocean and bathed the shore in a soft rosy light. Farrow, not having slept, knew he must look awful. His throat burned from the effort of holding back tears and his eyes felt swollen and sore. Camber barely looked at him, though, as they began to pick their way across the stony beach. There was an unspoken understanding between them that they would search for survivors, though what would happen beyond that Farrow didn't know.

Several times, he opened his mouth to say something to Camber – anything – but one look at the prince's stern back caused the words to die in his throat.

They had been scouring the beach for at least an hour before they came across the first familiar body. Farrow saw it first, sprawled out in the sand and lapped at by seafoam. The glassy eyes of Captain Darius stared lifelessly up at the sky as a small crab crawled across his bare chest. Farrow stopped before he reached him, covering his face with his hands, breathing shakily and feeling some sick sense of relief that it was not Elery that now lay unblinking in the sun. Footsteps crunched beside him and halted also, and Farrow heard Camber let out a soft, frustrated curse.

Then a hand touched his shoulder briefly, before pulling away. "Come. We can do nothing for him now."

They continued their slow trawl of the beach, Farrow following behind Camber and trying his best to silence his own thoughts, trying to focus only on his surroundings and the search for their friends.

It didn't take long after that for them to stumble across Soren, crumpled by some rocks, his face crusted with blood and sand. Camber reached him first and crouched by his side, sliding his

hand under his chin and lifting it up. Farrow jogged the last few steps to join him, falling to his knees beside Camber and ignoring the way that pebbles jammed into his skin.

“Is he —?”

As he asked the question, Soren coughed. Relief flooded through Farrow’s body and he gripped Soren’s shoulder, yanking him onto his side as he suddenly and violently vomited seawater. He choked something in a language that Farrow didn’t understand.

“Soren, it’s Farrow,” Farrow said, ignoring the sharp breath from Camber. “It’s okay. You’re alive. We’re alive.”

Soren’s eyes flickered open, and he licked his salt-crusted lips, looking dazed. “W-water?”

Farrow shook his head, suddenly realising how thirsty he was as well. “Sorry, we don’t have any.”

Soren grimaced and struggled to sit up, touching his hand gingerly to what Farrow now noticed was a large gash on the side of his head.

“The others?” His voice was hoarse.

“We haven’t found them yet.” Camber’s voice was dull, but then it sharpened. “Do you have any idea what in the seven hells happened?”

Soren let out a weak, raspy laugh. “You think I know why a bloody great *dragon* attacked us? I assure you, I had nothing to do with it.”

Camber’s cheeks coloured and he looked away. “Of course you didn’t. Forgive me, I’m not — I’m not thinking straight.”

Soren rubbed his hands over his face, and then slowly and gingerly got to his feet. “Come, we must find the others.”

“If they’re even still alive,” Camber muttered.

\*

Night was falling before they saw any other signs of life.

As they were walking across the beach in weak, exhausted silence, Farrow's eyes caught the flicker of light against the cliff, an orange glow that could only be fire. He pointed it out to the others, and they approached cautiously, wary that the owners of the fire could be of the less than friendly variety.

"Who goes there? Identify yourselves!"

Farrow's knees went weak with relief at the sound of Elery's voice, and he clutched reflexively at Soren's arm to stop himself from sinking to the ground. Soren briefly covered Farrow's hand with his own, and Farrow had the sense that the other boy had picked on at least some of the tension between him and Camber as they had continued their search.

"*E!*" Camber broke into a full sprint across the beach, throwing himself at the figure that stood wreathed in firelight. "I thought you were *dead*."

"I feel half-dead," Elery admitted, arms around the prince as he looked over Camber's shoulder at Soren and Farrow as they approached. "I *should* be dead, by all reckoning. Something dragged us ashore."

"You too?" Camber asked, at the same time as Farrow blurted out, "*Us?*"

As Elery nodded, Grace appeared from what seemed to be a gap in the cliff, bathed in firelight and looking somewhat worse for the wear. Farrow released Soren and rushed to her, throwing his arms around her and holding her to him.

"Don't you ever do that to me again," she whispered fiercely, as she hugged him back tightly. "I thought I'd lost you."

"We all thought that," Farrow said thickly, and pressed his face into Grace's shoulder for a long moment as he tried to gain control of his emotions. He could feel Grace's body trembling against his own and held her tighter. "I'm sorry."

"I hate to break up the reunions," Soren said quietly. "But would you happen to have any water or something to eat?"

Elery disentangled himself from Camber, clearing his throat. "I spent the day gathering crabs and shellfish. It's not much, but it's hot and will fill your bellies. And there's a clear stream in the cave."

"Thank the Lords," Camber muttered, and headed inside where Grace had appeared from.

After a brief hesitation, Farrow followed, Grace at his side. The narrow passage opened up into a rocky chamber. A stream flowed down one side of the chamber, disappearing under the wall as it continued to make its way out to the sea. Farrow didn't wait for an invitation, but knelt down at the side of the stream and scooped the water up in his hands to drink. The water was cool, clear and refreshing, and at that moment was the best thing that Farrow had ever tasted.

He glanced up at the dull thud Soren made as he fell to his knees beside him. The other boy was paler than usual, but his eyes seemed to brighten a little as he drank. After he had drunk his fill, he splashed water on his face to get rid of the blood. Farrow thought for a moment about how bad he must look, and then he too washed his face. The cold water was a shock against his skin.

As Elery busied himself setting some crabs on the fire, Farrow made his way back over to Grace's side, huddling down with her against a wall of the cave a little out of the way. She rested her head on his shoulder for a moment as he did so, her arms wrapped around her knees as they watched the three others settle around the fire.

"Did something happen?" she asked him quietly, straightening up.

"What do you mean?"

Grace nudged him gently with her elbow. "I mean you looking at the prince like the world has ended."

Farrow thought he'd been doing a good job at hiding his emotions. He grimaced and looked at Grace's face; she just raised an eyebrow at him as though she would not take silence for an answer. He let out a soft sigh, and then curled up on the floor beside her, resting his head in her lap. She rested a hand on his hair in a familiar gesture, smoothing out the tangled, salt-stiffened mess.

"I told him," Farrow admitted quietly. "It... didn't go well."

He felt Grace's low exhale. "Did you expect it to?"

Farrow's eyes suddenly stung and he closed them. "Not really. I just... wanted it to."

Grace was quiet for a moment. "You're falling for him."

Farrow's heart throbbed painfully. "Yes," he whispered.

He couldn't tell Grace of those rough, stolen moments they had shared, lost in each other. Not now it had all gone so very wrong. Grace's hand moved in his hair, stroking his head as though he was a child. The movement was comforting, and, in that moment, he wished with all his might to be back in Whitecastle.

"Could you be his queen?" Grace asked softly after a long moment of silence.

The answer came without thought. "I would rather be dead."

Grace hand stilled, and then continued to slowly stroke his hair. She didn't seem to have any answer to that, and after a moment, Farrow forced himself to open his eyes and look up at her.

"I'm sorry."

She pushed her matted hair out of her face and shook her head. "Don't apologise for your honest feelings, my – sir."

Farrow managed a faint smile. "Will you come with me if I'm sent off somewhere in disgrace?"

Grace paused and tilted her head to one side. "If I could be sure my family would be all right, yes."

Farrow turned his face back into her lap. "Thank you. That's all I can ask."

\*

The next morning, Farrow was roused by men shouting.

After eating, he and Grace had fallen asleep, curled up together and lulled by the soft sounds of the others' voices and the faint crackling of the fire. Now, as he sat up, a rough blanket fell off him

and Grace stirred beside him. A little way away, Camber and Soren still slept, but Elery was crouched by the entrance to the cave, listening intently. Without looking around, he held a finger to his lips.

Farrow carefully made his way over to Elery's side, crouching beside him and peering out. A group of men in leather armour were scouring the beach, swords strapped at their sides and shields on their backs. They were displaying colours that Farrow didn't recognise, a deep and vibrant blue.

"Soldiers," Elery said softly. "Eshuan, by the look of it."

As Farrow looked again, he saw the Eshuan royal crest emblazoned on the shield the men carried, a griffon rampant.

"What are they looking for?"

"Survivors, maybe." Elery's voice was low, and his eyes didn't leave the soldiers on the beach. "Or us, depending what news has reached them from Serukis."

Farrow winced. "You think it might not be safe here?"

"I don't know." Elery glanced over his shoulder at Camber, who was sitting up now, rubbing his hands over his face. "I don't know if we can afford the risk."

"There is no risk," the prince said eventually, looking over at the two of them.

"There's always a risk," Elery countered. "We have no idea who was in on the murder of your father. For all we know, Eshua has a stake invested in this."

Camber pushed himself to his feet and came over, crouching beside them to get his own look at the men. "My aunt wouldn't do that."

Elery gave him a flat look. "Do I need to remind you of your cousins? They tried to kill us."

Camber returned his gaze and, for a moment, in his expression, Farrow could see the king he would one day be. "Trust me."

Before Elery could say anything else, Camber straightened up and walked out of the cave, his feet crunching against the pebbles. Farrow made to stand up, to follow, but Elery gripped hold of his arm, keeping him at his side.

"Not yet."

“Over here!” Camber said loudly, holding his hands up towards the men to show that he wasn’t armed.

The soldiers turned, their hands on their weapons. After what appeared to be a brief discussion, two men approached Camber, clutching the hilts of their swords, but not unsheathing them. One of them asked a question in Eshuan that Farrow, whose grasp on the language was rusty, didn’t catch, and then the other said, in accented Seruic, “What is your purpose here?”

Camber replied smoothly in the first language, lowering his hands, but he was speaking so fast that Farrow could only make a few random words. There was some back and forth, and Camber appeared to become slightly more frustrated as the conversation continued. Then, one of the men reached out and attempted to grab his arm, but Camber stepped out of the man’s grasp. One of the soldiers drew his sword, his tone turning aggressive.

Elery let out a soft curse.

Then, Camber straightened, his voice coming out clear and strong in his native language. “I am Prince Camber Lucien Elenasia, heir to the throne of Serukis and the Three Isles, and I demand to be taken before the king and queen.”

Farrow followed Camber and the others as the group of soldiers led them along the beach and up the cliff path to a quiet fishing village nestled between two hills. Still wracked with exhaustion and filled with aches and pains, each step was harder than the last. Farrow wasn't the only one struggling, though; a couple of times, Soren stumbled on the cliff path and had to be caught by Elery, and Grace's skin was white against the red of her hair. No one said a word, and Farrow wasn't sure if they were prisoners or if Camber had managed to persuade the soldiers that he was who he said he was.

Though it was early morning, people were out and about on the streets of the village, and some of them stopped and stared at the ragtag group as they were escorted to the tavern. A banner was planted outside the tavern, flying the crown's colours, and it seemed that the military had overtaken it as a makeshift base for as long as they were in town.

They ducked into the tavern, flanked from the front and behind by soldiers. A fire was roaring in the grate and weak sunlight filtered in through the windows, but it was still darker in the tavern than it was outside. Farrow blinked a little as his vision got used to the dark, smoky air, the scent of ale and pipe smoke filling his nostrils. A couple of men were seated at a table near the bar. From their outfits they were a higher rank than the soldiers that had brought them there. Instead of leather armour, these men wore metal that glinted under the blue cloth of their tabards. Farrow could only see the face of one of the men, an older-looking gentleman with a scar across his face and eyes that were hidden in darkness. From the side of the other hung a scabbard that sparkled with inlaid gemstones.

One of the soldiers approached the two men, hit his fist against his chest in a salute and then bowed deeply.

*"Domine. Highness,"* he said, in Eshuan. *"This man claims to be the crown prince of Serukis."*

*Highness?*

The older of the two men rose from the table, taking in them all with a sweeping glance. As he did so, Camber stepped forward, further into the firelight. His clothes were ragged, his skin cut and bruised, but he still carried himself as a prince should, with an air of power that seemed to roll off him as he stood there.

“It is true,” he said quietly, in Seruic. “I am Prince Camber, and we have travelled a long way to get here.”

The other man turned around now and Farrow got a good look at his face. He was young, maybe in his early twenties, with dark brown hair and brown eyes. His eyes had widened at Camber’s voice, and he rose to his feet and took a step towards the prince.

“Camber. We were told you had died.” He cleared his throat, taking in the prince’s appearance, and then added something Farrow didn’t quite catch.

He needed to work on his Eshuan.

Camber gave him a shaky little bow. “Prince Stefan. My companions do not understand Eshuan, so forgive me for not conversing in your native tongue.” He straightened up again and added, his voice a little choked, “It’s good to see you again.”

Prince Stefan, Farrow knew, was the second son of the king and queen of Eshua, which made him Camber’s cousin, but beyond that he knew only a little of the Eshuan royal line.

The other man stepped up to Stefan’s side, his hand still curled around the hilt of the sword at his side. “Are you claiming we have been deceived?” His Seruic was clipped.

Stefan looked at him, frowning. “*Domine* Gaspard, I see my cousin before me with my own eyes. That is proof enough for me.”

The man called Gaspard bowed. “Forgive me, my prince, I only mean to suggest Prince Camber tell us his own version of events.”

Camber’s shoulders stiffened. “I would be glad to, *domine*.”

From the man's stance and dress, Farrow guessed that a *domine* was some kind of military leader. Prince Stefan strode forward, resting his hands on Camber's shoulders, his quick brown eyes looking at Farrow and the others over the top of his head. His brow furrowed.

"Baths, fresh clothes, and something to eat first I think, Camber. *Domine*. Let us not forget our manners in all this excitement." He released Camber and turned to a couple of the soldiers who were still standing in the tavern, giving them some soft orders in Eshuan. They bowed and exited, and Farrow allowed himself to breathe.

Perhaps this would all be all right after all.

\*

After that, everything seemed to move rather quickly. In a matter of hours, Farrow found himself clean, warm, and clothed in a soft blue tunic and dark breeches. He had introduced himself as Farrow and no one, not even Camber, had contradicted him. The clothes he was wearing weren't made of any particularly fine material, but they were softer and cleaner than anything he had worn since the horrors at Snowbarrow, and he was grateful for them.

The innkeeper, by the time they were all clean and dressed, had put together a somewhat hearty meal of meats, cheeses, and bread. Farrow found himself sandwiched between Elery and Grace. As the ale began to flow, Camber told Stefan and *Domine* Gaspard everything that had happened since the night of the fateful engagement ball. He didn't look at Farrow as he told the story and, to anyone not in the know, it could appear that Lady Viola Hargrove had died in King's Rock. Farrow was not mentioned at all.

Elery leaned in close as Camber continued to talk, his mouth close enough that his breath brushed Farrow's ear as he spoke.

"Did something happen between you two?"

Farrow's cheeks warmed. "I told him the truth. It went just about as well as you said it would."

Elery's hand briefly touched his shoulder. "I hoped I would be wrong."

Farrow took another mouthful of bread, chewing quietly as he glanced over at Camber. The prince was deep in conversation with Prince Stefan and *Domine* Gaspard, and he had his back half-turned to them. Farrow swallowed carefully, though the bread stuck in his throat.

"Do you know Eshuan?" he asked Elery quietly, in an attempt to change the subject.

"No." Elery sighed and tore a hunk of bread from a loaf in the centre of the table. "Cam and Aric spent a few years here, but I was left behind. I continued my education with my father."

"Were you lonely?"

Elery looked at him sharply, pausing in layering cheese on his bread. "My father kept me too busy for me to feel lonely for long."

Farrow could read in his eyes that that wasn't entirely the whole truth, but felt that it was best not to push him any further.

"What kind of things did you learn?" he asked instead.

Elery took a mouthful and chewed thoughtfully, his eyes distant. "I learnt how to survive on the streets. How to steal. How to get around the castle and the city unnoticed. Things my father had found useful in his youth and thought I would benefit from knowing." He sighed. "My brother and I were raised in his image."

"You have a brother?"

"Had," Elery corrected quietly. There was a lot of pain visible in his eyes. "Whilst Cam and Aric were in Eshua, the castle was hit with the wasting sickness. My mother passed, and then Caleb a few days later. I caught the sickness as well, but somehow survived."

Farrow recalled the wasting sickness sweeping through the city of Whitecastle, and the long months where the castle doors were barred from all-comers.

"I'm sorry," Farrow said softly. "That must have been hard."

"Hard," Elery echoed, but said nothing else, methodically chewing his bread and cheese, his gaze fixed on a point very far away.

Farrow wished he hadn't pried so far, but it was a bit late to take back now. He turned instead to Grace, who had barely touched the food and who was sitting very straight with her hands folded in her lap. She was wearing a soft-looking dress in browns and creams, and her long hair had been washed, brushed and allowed to flow loosely down her back. Her face was an uncomfortable shade of white.

"Are you all right?" he asked her quietly.

"I'm waiting for them to realise I'm not nobility," Grace said, her voice shaking a little.

Farrow got a very acute memory of the dress being ripped from her body in Snowbarrow and scowled

"That won't happen here," he told her softly. "I won't allow it." He could tell that Grace didn't entirely believe him, but he had no further words to reassure her. "Eat," he said instead. "We all need our strength."

Grace managed a weak smile at that, and quietly started to nibble at a slice of bread. Farrow started as he felt Elery's arm reach across behind him to touch Grace's shoulder.

"You're part of this group," he said quietly, in a voice that told Farrow he had been listening, despite his distant gaze. "No one here can take that away from you."

For a moment, Farrow had the insane urge to lean into Elery's side, but he smothered it by eating more cheese.

"Thank you," Grace said quietly.

Elery nodded, took his hand away.

"Tell us about the dragon." Prince Stefan's words were loud enough that silence fell over the rest of the tavern.

Camber's demeanour changed a little at his words, and he wrapped his arms around himself as though holding himself together.

“There’s not much to tell,” he said. “It came from beneath us, and started to hit the ship from below. Then it burst from the ocean and slammed its body down, and the ship came apart like so many splinters.”

“What did it look like?”

“Silvery-blue. Scales.” Camber grimaced. “I wasn’t paying all that much attention, to be honest. I was afraid for my life.”

“Stuff and nonsense,” Gaspard said, his clipped voice loud in the silence that followed.

“Dragon’s don’t exist. Not anymore.”

“I know what I saw.” Camber’s voice was equally loud. “It was a dragon.”

“A whale, perhaps. It’s bad enough that rumours of this dragon attack are spreading up the coast like wildfire without them being backed up by you.”

“We all saw it,” Farrow said, without really meaning to contribute to the conversation, and then sank back in his chair when everyone looked at him.

Gaspard sighed and pushed his hand through greying hair. “We simply cannot allow this panic to spread without hard proof. There will be riots in the streets. Legends don’t just suddenly come to life.”

“What you mean to say,” Camber said quietly, “is that you would rather we keep our mouths shut about this until it can be verified.”

“That’s exactly what I mean.” He bowed his head, a gesture that included both Camber and Stefan. “If that’s all right by your highnesses.”

Stefan sighed at that, and then said, “I guess it wouldn’t do to encourage panic. We’ll keep this quiet, *domine*, but my father will want to know the truth.”

“Of course,” Gaspard answered. “I would expect nothing less.”

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It was decided that Prince Stefan and his entourage would accompany them to the capital, a few week's ride, whilst *Domine* Gaspard would remain in the village with a group of men to continue to look for any sign of the dragon.

Farrow found himself astride a large paint gelding, riding at Elery's side in the middle of the group of soldiers assigned to escort them on the journey. It had been a while since he had been in the saddle, and he was well aware that his arse and hips would ache when they stopped for the night. Elery, to Farrow's surprise, looked ill at ease on the chestnut mare he was riding, his mouth and jaw set. To Elery's other side, Soren was on a large grey gelding with Grace riding pillion, which made sense as she had never ridden a horse before in her life. Soren looked as at ease in the saddle of a horse as he did in everything he did, and Farrow was satisfied that Grace was in good hands.

"Don't ride much?" he said to Elery, as they rode out of the village down a wide dirt road.

Elery grimaced. "Not much call for it in the castle, and I don't often go beyond city boundaries." He jerked his head at Camber, who was riding ahead with Stefan. "Cam, on the other hand, lives for this. Has done ever since he returned from Eshua."

Elery was right. Camber did look as though he had been born in the saddle, confident, with a lightness in his expression that Farrow hadn't seen since they had danced together. Looking at him for long made Farrow's chest hurt, so he looked away and shifted his weight in the saddle, letting out a long breath. As he did so, the sword he had been given and had strapped to his side knocked against his leg, an unfamiliar sensation that pulled his attention away from Camber again.

"So, riding isn't your thing," he said slowly to Elery. "How about swordplay?"

Elery gave him a shrewd look. "Passable. I'm more comfortable with daggers," he said frankly. "And not engaging directly. But I can hold my own in a sword fight."

Farrow took a breath. "Any chance you could teach me some?"

Elery shifted and edged his horse closer to Farrow's, giving him a searching look. "How much do you know?"

Farrow shrugged. "My older brother, Alistair, he used to take me out to the training yard sometimes when I was really wound up." Saying Alistair's name didn't hurt as much as it usually did. "I know a little, but it's not really something taught to daughters."

"No," Elery agreed. "You know, Camber won't be particularly happy about it."

"I don't much care," Farrow said shortly. "He thinks it's enough to allow myself to be protected, but it's not enough. I can't stand by whilst people I care about fight for their lives."

Elery's eyes were full of understanding. "My mother was much the same. She used to keep at least three knives hidden in her bodice at all times."

Farrow let out a snort at the thought of what his own mother would think about that, and then looked up at Elery, brows knitting together in concern. "I don't want Camber to be angry with you."

Elery shook his head, chestnut hair falling in his eyes; it had grown long and slightly wild in the weeks they had been on the road together. "I'm not worried. He has a temper, yes, but most of it is a lot of hot air with not much behind it."

Farrow thought about that as they continued along the road, relaxing with the faint swaying of the horse as it walked.

"Do you think that he'll come around when it comes to me?" he asked quietly. "When he's had a chance to calm down and now we're not fighting for our lives every day?"

Elery's eyes were full of sympathy, and that was all the answer Farrow needed.

\*

They camped for the night by the side of the road. The soldiers with them quickly and efficiently set up a campsite, showing their years of practice, as Farrow and the others stood by and fed and watered the horses. A latrine was dug, a campfire was set, and several hard-wearing tents were erected. After, they sat around the fire and ate a hearty stew, with rabbit, potatoes and

onions. It was warm and filled the hole in Farrow's belly that had been grown by riding all day. His legs and arse were sore, but in a good way.

After dinner, Elery gestured to him and led him a little way away from the camp. The flickering light of the fire still reached them where they stopped by the tree line, but they were out of the direct view of the others and any watching soldiers.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Elery asked. "I won't go easy on you just because you're new at this."

Farrow rolled his shoulders and then drew his sword. "I wouldn't expect you to"

The blade was functional, inelegant, and somewhat lighter than the training swords Farrow had used once upon a time with Alistair. He gave it a few experimental swings. Elery watched him with a critical eye, arms folded and head tilted to one side.

"You're holding it wrong," he said eventually, and moved to Farrow's side to correct his grip. His hand, covered in a myriad of tiny scars Farrow had never noticed before, covered Farrow's own and moved his fingers on the hilt of the sword. "Try holding it like this. It'll give you more balance."

Farrow gave the sword another exploratory swing. Elery was correct; it felt easier and less like the blade was going to fly from his hand.

Elery drew his own sword and moved to stand in front of him, blade held loosely in one hand.

"Try to hit me."

Farrow looked up at him, startled. "What if I hurt you?"

Elery grinned at that, amusement alight in his eyes. "Do you think you can?"

"But —"

"Don't worry about me," Elery said. "Focus on hitting me, and I'll focus on not getting hit."

Farrow made a half-hearted swing at him, still anxious about what would happen if the blade connected with Elery's body, but Elery's arm came up and parried the blow with what looked like almost no effort on his part.

"Pathetic," he said, but he was smiling.

Farrow shifted his weight between his feet and swung properly at him the second time. Their blades clashed together with a ring of steel, and Elery stepped back, pushing his hair back out of his face.

“You give yourself away. Again.”

It must have been at least an hour that Elery kept him at it, suggesting little corrections here and there, but ultimately making Farrow swing at him again and again. He was a hard taskmaster, blocking each attempt of Farrow’s with seemingly little effort, making sharp comments about his grip and his stance. Farrow was gasping for breath and dripping sweat by the time Elery called a halt to the training session, but thankfully it seemed that no one had broken away from the fire to watch them. For that, Farrow was grateful.

“You’ve got a lot of work ahead of you,” Elery said, as he sheathed his sword. “You need to keep working on the grip until it’s second nature and to keep working with the sword until it’s part of your body, not just a tool to flail around.”

The words sounded learned, and Farrow wondered how much of the Kingshadow he was seeing as Elery taught him.

The next night, it was about half an hour before Grace and Soren joined them, approaching with a quiet caution that said to Farrow that they were concerned about throwing him off balance. Grace held Soren’s sword loosely at one side, and wore a fierce expression on her face as though she was expecting Elery to argue. He just smiled and began to include her in the lesson. Soren sat down in the long grass and watched, his eyes quietly assessing, and as the lesson continued he began to make soft observations about footwork, or grip, or paying attention to one’s surroundings.

It became a nightly thing, the four of them quietly going off and finding a quiet space to train. Soren would sometimes step in, making Grace or Farrow try to hit him instead of Elery, or to lift their own swords and parry his blows. His attacks were different from Elery’s, Farrow discovered, no less quick, but they came from different directions and with different tells. Elery himself pulled no

punches when he was on the attack, and Farrow found himself going to bed sore and waking with bruises blossoming beneath his skin.

As they continued to travel along the road towards the capital, the road that the soldiers called the Serpent, Farrow came to realise that the countryside was not much different to Serukis. Here, the country was wild, with sweeping grasslands and rocky outcroppings where bandits could hide. At night, under the moonlight, the sea of grass turned to a soft, silvery blue. They had travelled similar roads on the journey from Whitecastle, except then Farrow had been confined to the wagon and had not been allowed to ride.

The scent of the grasslands was strong on the wind, fresh and sweet-smelling as they travelled, each man lost in his own thoughts, and Farrow found the quiet companionship calming. He found himself watching his companions as he rode, though he found his gaze always drifting back to Camber.

Camber, who had not said one word to him in over a week. Camber, who rode ahead, apart from them, and smiled only at his cousin. Camber, who had turned back into the prince, and walled off the rest of himself.

Farrow noticed Elery watching him as well, deep concern in his eyes and a frown on his lips. Once, when he had caught Elery's eyes, the other boy had given him a brief, faint smile.

"I daren't yell at him like I want to," he told Farrow quietly, sidling his horse up alongside him so that only he could hear. "Not in front of all these men who he needs to make a good impression to. But when I get hold of him alone, I'm going to have a few choice words to say to him. He's being an arse."

Then, he had clicked his tongue and rode ahead slightly to move up alongside Soren and Grace, saying something to make the Koushan Mai boy grin. Farrow had watched him as he left and wondered how much blame he himself had for how Camber was acting, and how much was Camber's sheer terror at finally making it to their destination.

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Two weeks later, Camber's disposition had not changed.

Farrow kept mainly to himself during the days, letting his horse stolidly follow the horse in front of him, and allowing his mind to wander. He found his thoughts often returning to Serukis and his family, and especially to Phineas. Each time his twin crossed his mind, the pain hit him in the chest like a physical blade, sharp and unforgiving. It almost took his breath away. He also kept questioning whether the rest of his family were still alive. Ruthlessly, he made himself clamp down on those thoughts, to stop himself thinking about it; if he didn't believe that they were alive, there was barely anything to keep him going towards his destination.

Even if they would want nothing more to do with him when he went back.

One afternoon, his mind was following the familiar morose track when he noticed that Soren's horse had been sandwiched between two others. Grace was riding with Elery that day, now that he was more confident, and it seemed as though a couple of soldiers had taken advantage of that absence. Soren was sitting with a straight back, his hands on the reins, and he was looking straight ahead. From behind, Farrow couldn't see his expression, but he was willing to bet that it wasn't a happy one.

Frowning, Farrow guided his horse closer, close enough to hear that one of the men was talking, a low stream of Eshuan that Farrow couldn't quite make out. Occasionally, there was a word that he *did* recognise, a word that transcended the gap between their languages.

Koushan Mai.

And then, the other man reached over and cuffed Soren around the face with a gloved hand.

Farrow moved to urge his horse forward, but Camber got there first. The solid gelding he was riding blocked the three horses with his body, snorting, as Camber sat up straight in his saddle and fixed the two soldiers with a piercing gaze.

“What in the hells do you think you’re doing?” he demanded in Seruic, a consideration for Soren’s benefit, no doubt.

The soldier who had hit Soren spat on the ground and answered in Eshuan. Though Farrow didn’t recognise every word, the meaning of the man’s words was clear – *we didn’t sign up to ride with a filthy Koushan Mai.*

The look Camber gave the man was icy cold. “Soren is my companion, and it would do you well to treat him as such.”

“We were only teasing,” the other soldier said, in heavily accented Seruic. “We did not mean anything by it.”

Camber turned his gaze on him, like pinning a butterfly to a board. “I’m not convinced.” He glanced around as Stefan rode up beside him, then turned his attention back to the men. “If any of you treat *any* of my companions any worse than you would treat me, I will hear about it and I will make sure there are consequences.”

With that, he wheeled his horse around and rode back to the front of the group. Prince Stefan snapped something to the men in Eshuan and they immediately peeled away from Soren, looking suitably chastised. With that, Stefan gave Soren a long, quiet look, then turned his horse and rode back up to join Camber.

Farrow urged his horse forward so that he was riding alongside Soren and glanced over at him. The other boy looked over at him and gave him a quiet smile, though it didn’t reach his eyes. His lower lip was swollen and bloodied, and he sucked on it experimentally, wincing.

“Are you all right?” Farrow asked, when Soren didn’t say anything.

Soren rolled his shoulders in a slow shrug. “It was expected. They must have noticed my tattoos.”

The previous night, Soren had stripped off his shirt during a particularly intense practice bout with Elery, and Farrow had seen properly for the first time the dark tattoos that criss-crossed his back and chest and down his arms.

“Why do you have tattoos if they mark you as Koushan Mai?” The question had been on his mind the night before, when he realised Soren had always been careful to keep the marks covered.

Soren looked over at him. “Some of us do not, for that reason. The fear is real, though perhaps less so in Serukis and Eshua than elsewhere.”

Farrow thought for a moment of the rumours that sometimes trickled in from the Seruic border with Caillah, where Koushan Mai were hunted down like dogs, and of the two bodies hung from a tree outside of Snowbarrow.

“Then, why do you?” he asked eventually.

Soren sighed and turned his gaze back to the road ahead. “I am proud of who I am, of my people’s traditions and stories. I do not want to let fear rule my life, any more than you want to let it rule yours.”

The words were acute and hit Farrow like a punch in the chest. That was the truth of it, at the heart of his need to tell Camber how he truly felt, despite the consequences. Looking up at Soren, Farrow knew exactly what he meant.

“Sometimes,” Soren continued, “that means unpleasant things happen as a result. But I will not let myself hide out of shame or fear. It is not me who has the problem with who I am.”

Farrow was quiet for a while, digesting that, and Soren seemed content to ride alongside him in silence, the sound of the horse’s hooves and the soft snort of their breathing the only sounds.

“I don’t think anyone here will mess with you again,” Farrow said, after a while. “Camber seemed serious.”

Soren smiled slightly, a real smile, though it was gone in an instant. “He did, did he not? I had the impression that he did not like me, but perhaps I was wrong.”

“You’ve made an impression on him,” Farrow guessed. “Before he met you, he only had stories of the Koushan Mai to go on. We all did.”

Soren’s eyes were warm as he regarded him. “One change of heart is all it takes.”

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*I do not want to let fear rule my life.*

Soren's words rang in his ears as he looked for Camber that evening. He caught up with the prince as he was exiting one of the tents and, from the way Camber jerked away from him, his presence was an unpleasant surprise.

"Can we talk?" Farrow asked him bluntly, before Camber could make polite noises and excuse himself.

He saw the hesitation flicker in Camber's expression, but then he seemed to steel himself and nodded. "Of course."

Together, they walked away from the main camp, across a wide field of long, silvery grass. Silence stretched between them, thick with tension, and for a moment, Farrow wanted to fling himself against Camber's body, press into his arms and ask his forgiveness.

*I do not want to let fear rule my life.*

Instead, he sat down heavily with his back against a boulder, gazing back the way they had come. The orange glow of the campfire was like a beacon in the darkness, and Farrow could see shadows moving around it as men ate their evening meals and relaxed after a long day's riding. Moonlight rippled across the field as a soft breeze rustled the grass.

After a long moment, Camber sat down in the grass beside him, picking a long blade of grass and starting to tear it apart with his fingers.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" he asked quietly.

Farrow looked over at him. Camber's gaze wasn't on him, but on the piece of grass he was slowly shredding.

"I don't like this... whatever it is between us," Farrow said frankly. "I have... strong feelings for you," he admitted. "And I respect you. But I can't continue on this path with you if you're going to distance yourself from all of us."

Camber dropped the piece of grass and folded his arms across his chest, before he turned to face Farrow. It was dark enough that Farrow couldn't clearly see his eyes, but the moonlight highlighted his frown well enough.

"I don't know what you expect of me," he said eventually, quietly. "You told me that you want to be a man. What am I supposed to do with that information?"

Farrow looked away, finding that his own fingers moved to the grass to begin picking at it instead.

"I really meant what I said, about being a good queen for you. But the more we travel together, the less I can do that. Being Viola for you... it feels like I'm lying, and I don't want to lie to you anymore, Camber."

There was a long, heavy silence, and it was clear that Camber was turning this over in his mind.

"It was easy to believe that I could keep being Viola when I didn't know you," Farrow said eventually. "When you were just a prince I had to marry because my family wanted me to. But... you're no longer just the prince my family chose, Cam." His voice broke slightly. "You're the boy I love."

Camber was silent for a moment, keeping his arms folded across his chest. When he spoke, his voice shook. "I can't marry you. There's no way I can marry you."

"I know." Farrow's voice was barely a whisper.

Camber was deliberately not looking at him. "I will be King. I *am* King, crown or no crown. There are expectations, not only of a queen but of an heir. Even if I could love you as a man, it's just impossible."

"Could you love me as a man?" The question fell out of Farrow's mouth before he could think about it. He was not even sure that he truly wanted to know the answer.

Camber looked at him then, and Farrow clearly saw the pain that was knitted on his face.

"No," he said quietly. "I couldn't."

It *hurt*.

It hurt like a punch to the stomach. Farrow heard a stifled gasp escape his mouth and clamped his lips tightly together, crushing the sound. Something flickered across Camber's face, and then his arms were around him and Farrow's face was pressed into his chest. Farrow's eyes burned and he knew that the sensible thing to do would be to pull away to protect himself from any more pain, but he couldn't make himself. Camber's scent was warm and familiar, and the heartbeat against his cheek was comforting and strong.

"I'm sorry," Camber said eventually, his voice thick with emotion.

Farrow didn't trust himself to speak, but he twisted himself more against Camber's body, fisting his shirt in his hand, his knuckles white. He flinched slightly as Camber's hand stroked through his hair, but Camber didn't let go.

Neither of them spoke for what felt like an eternity.

"If anyone asks," Camber said eventually, his hand slowly stroking Farrow's hair, "we tell them that Viola died escaping from Snowbarrow."

Farrow pulled back at that, making himself look up at Camber's face. Camber's eyes were red-rimmed, but his cheeks were dry. The cool night air chilled the dampness on Farrow's own cheeks.

"The five of us are the only ones who know Viola Hargrove still lives. If Viola is dead, the marriage contract is dissolved, and you don't bring shame to your family for not following through."

"My family—" Farrow started.

"Can't know you're alive," Camber finished for him. "If you want to live your life free of the consequences of breaking a marriage contract, this is what you must do."

It felt as though iron bands had wrapped themselves tightly around Farrow's chest. It was hard to breathe. Visions of his family flashed through his mind. They were already broken from the death of Alistair. Of Phineas. From the impending trial of his father. Would his mother be able to handle losing another one of her children?

Were they even alive to care?

Camber's hand touched his damp cheek.

"Viola is dead," the prince – the *king* – said softly, the finality in his tone making Farrow shiver. "Farrow, however, is alive, and I still need him by my side if I'm going to retake my throne."

Farrow looked up at him, chest tight, a hard lump lodged in his throat. There was a lot of pain in Camber's face, as though the words cost him a lot to say. He had obviously been thinking a great deal about the situation over the past couple of weeks, and, in Farrow's eyes, the decision he had come to hurt him greatly.

"You wouldn't have been happy as my queen," Camber said, after a long moment of silence. His voice was slightly husky, as though it was taking a great deal of effort to keep his voice steady. "I see it now. I see you training with Elery and Soren, and I see Grace training, and I see the difference between you. I can't explain it, but it's there."

"I'm sorry," Farrow said hopelessly.

Camber closed his eyes for a moment, and then pulled away, opening up a distance between them before either of them gave into the urge to clutch each other again. Farrow's body felt cold where his had been.

"I wish I could be happy as Viola." The words were stilted and painful to say. "I've wished that my whole life, Camber, and I was willing to try –"

His voice cracked and broke, and Camber's hand came up to cover Farrow's mouth with gentle fingers.

"I know," he said, voice soft. "And I thank you."

Then, he pulled his hand away, leaving Farrow's lips burning at his touch, and got to his feet, brushing stray bits of grass off his legs. Without another word, he started to walk away across the field, back towards the camp, his dark figure outlined by moonlight. Farrow watched him go, his whole body numbed, his chest feeling crushed by a thick wedge of emotion.

Somewhere, there was the rustle of wings of a bird taking flight, and the spell of numbness was broken.

A deep stabbing pain blossomed in Farrow's gut and he doubled over in the grass, letting out choking, wracking sobs that he could only hope no one at the campsite could hear. He pressed a fist into his mouth, trying to muffle the noise, face against the cold dirt, his body shuddering as all his feelings poured out of him into the night.

At some point, Grace was there and she was holding him and he clutched at her, pressing his face into her chest and sobbing as though she was his only lifeline. She said nothing, but held him for what felt like hours, until his sobs ran out and his body stopped trembling and the aching numbness once again spread itself out through him as though he would never feel anything ever again.

His face was stiff with salt when he finally pulled away from Grace's embrace, rubbing determinedly at his eyes. When he looked up at her, Grace's eyes were filled with soft sympathy.

"Did he tell you what happened?" The words came out hoarse and blunt, and Farrow coughed to clear his throat.

Grace's mouth twisted. "Viola is dead."

Farrow ducked his head to scrub his face clean on the fabric of his shirt. "Apparently that's the only way I don't bring shame to my family." He paused, and then let out a long, shuddering breath. "He's right. It's the only option."

Grace gave him a long look. "It's not. The other option is telling your family the truth."

Farrow winced at the thought. "I think it would be easier for them to believe I'm dead."

"I disagree," Grace said quietly. "But I will go along with it if it's what you want."

"'Want' is not the right word," Farrow muttered. "What I want is for nothing to have changed, to be happy as Viola. But... that's not possible."

Grace gave him another strong look of sympathy, and then got to her feet, offering a hand up.

"Come, you need rest."

He took her hand and got to his feet, trying to ignore the shakiness of his legs and the deep ache in his chest.

“Thank you, Grace,” he made himself say, as the two of them walked side by side across the grass towards the campsite. “For being here.”

She gave him a weak smile. “If you ever change your mind, if you ever want to tell your family the truth, I’ll be there for you.”

Farrow’s stomach turned over as he contemplated the disappointment on his mother’s face, the anger in his father’s usually placid eyes.

“Maybe one day,” he said eventually. “Maybe one day when all this is over and Camber’s back on the throne and he has a queen he can be proud of. Maybe then I can tell them the truth.”

Grace said nothing to that, but she slipped her hand inside his, and squeezed it.

Later, when he was alone, Farrow drew the sword from its sheath and looked down at himself in the metal. The girl he had once seen in his reflection had vanished, though a trace of her still lingered around his lips. His face was all sharp lines and angles, and healing bruises still marred the colour of his skin. His dark hair, though long enough now that it hung in his eyes, was shorter than he had ever seen it before, and he brushed it out of his face with trembling fingers. His eyes he recognised, even with dark smudges under them, though there was knowledge in them that had not been there before.

In the reflection in the blade, he could see the boy he had always wanted to be, though he was not sure the price had been worth it.

Viola Hargrove was dead.

Farrow lived.

**A Creative and Critical Investigation of Transgender Narratives  
and the Portrayal of Transgenderism in  
Contemporary Young Adult Fiction**

## Introduction

Throughout this project, there have been two main research questions that I sought to answer through the combination of both the critical and the creative. However, before discussing the research questions, it is important to highlight the difference between “transgender narratives” and “transgenderism” in this thesis. A “transgender narrative” is the specific journey of a transgender character, following their character arc and exploration of their gender identity. “Transgenderism”, on the other hand, is an umbrella term that I am using to cover all aspects of being transgender that are explored in these stories, including attempts at education on both gender and transgender issues. The distinction between the two became particularly important when I was writing the creative side to this thesis, *Son of Flames*.

For my first research question, I looked at how transgenderism and transgender narratives are portrayed in young adult (YA) fiction written in English and published between 2004 and 2016. *Luna* by Julie Ann Peters, a book heralded as ‘the first novel to feature a transgender character,’<sup>1</sup> was first published in 2004, which gave me the starting point to my research scope. Though it could be argued that there are other characters in previously published novels that could be interpreted as transgender, such as Alanna from Tamora Pierce’s *Alanna: The First Adventure* (1983) or Lani from Carol Plum Ucci’s *What Happened to Lani Garver* (2002), I wanted to focus solely on books where the character was unambiguously transgender.<sup>2</sup> When I began this research, the number of books with transgender protagonists was small and I did not intend to have a latter end point to my research scope. However, in recent years the number of books that fit my criteria have increased and, as such, I have chosen to limit my research scope to the end of 2016. In 2016, seven different YA novels were published, so to prevent an ever-expanding bibliography and to not spread my focus too thin, this decision was made.<sup>3</sup> From *Luna* onwards, I have been exploring the decisions each author had made in portraying their transgender character, from point of view to important story beats, and have used this to inform my own creative practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Cart, ‘What a Wonderful World: Notes on the Evolution of GLBTQ Literature for Young Adults’, *The Alan Review*, 31.2 (2004), <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v31n2/cart.html> [last accessed 17 April 2017].

<sup>2</sup> Tamora Pierce, *Alanna: The First Adventure* (New York: Atheneum Books, 1983); Carol Plum-Ucci, *What Happened to Lani Garver* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books for Young Readers, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Eric Devine, *Look Past* (Philadelphia: Running Press Teens, 2016); Donna Gephart, *Lily and Dunkin* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2016); C.B. Lee, *Not Your Sidekick* (Chicago: Duet Books, 2016); Anna-Marie McLemore, *When the Moon Was Ours* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2016); Matthew J. Metzger, *Spy Stuff* (Virginia: JMS Books LLC, 2016); Meredith Russo, *If I Was Your Girl* (London: Usborne, 2016); Brie Spangler, *Beast* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2016).

In the early stages of compiling a list of published novels with which to work, the discovery that these consisted almost solely of “issue” novels<sup>4</sup> led to my second research question: is it possible to write a YA novel about transgenderism without this being the driving force of the plot? “Plot”, in the context of this thesis, refers to the series of events that make up the action of the story and not the story – or narrative – as a whole.

In answering this research question, I wanted to avoid having a transgender main character without this having any effect on the surrounding narrative, which would give the impression of diversity for the sake of it. I wanted to strike the delicate balance of having the transgender identity of my protagonist be important to the narrative, without being the central conflict of the plot. The aim for my creative work is to contribute to the array of YA novels that allow young adults to have a window into the world of others without it being confined to a niche, only sought out by readers dealing with their own gender identity. To this end, I wrote the first book in the Fallen Sons YA fantasy trilogy, *Son of Flames*.

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<sup>4</sup> The term “issue novel” will be discussed in greater depth later.

## Assigned [Redacted] At Birth: What is Transgenderism?

When reading about the terms “transgender” or “transsexual”, one is likely to also come across the phrase “born in the wrong body”.<sup>5</sup> In 2015, for example, Channel 4 hosted a *Born in the Wrong Body Season*, where they broadcast three different documentaries and a series of eight short films exploring what it is like to be transgender.<sup>6</sup> Though this saying is currently widely used by popular media, it is not accurate; the word “transgender” is much more complex and nuanced than this phrase demonstrates. Everett Maroon, a trans author, states that the phrase was ‘a throwaway comment in an early interview with Christine Jorgensen in the 1960s, because the interviewer could not get his mind wrapped around the idea of a transsexual,’ and goes on to call it ‘ridiculousness.’<sup>7</sup> Slam poet, Ollie Renee Schminkey, puts it more forcefully:

I was not born into the wrong body.  
I was born into a world that does not know what my body means.<sup>8</sup>

Schminkey’s words emphasise the idea of gender as a social construct, and support a growing school of thought that being transgender can best be described as being perceived as the wrong gender by society at large. There are as many definitions of transgender as individuals who identify as such, but academia requires a much more clear-cut definition.

Transgenderism, in its most basic form, is ‘a clash of sex and gender.’<sup>9</sup> People who identify as transgender typically have a biological sex that does not match up with their sense of gender identity. However, as stated above, “transgender” is widely used as an umbrella term that covers a much wider range of people:

A trans identity is now accessible almost anywhere, to anyone who does not feel comfortable in the gender role they were attributed at birth, or who has a gender identity at odds with the labels ‘man’ or ‘woman’ credited to them by formal authorities.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Transgender” and “transsexual” are often used interchangeably. In general, however, older sources are more likely to use the word “transsexual” where more modern sources would use “transgender”. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be using the word “transgender” unless I am specifically writing about the word “transsexual”.

<sup>6</sup> *Born in the Wrong Body Season*, Channel 4, <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/born-in-the-wrong-body-season> [last accessed 4 December 2016].

<sup>7</sup> Everett Maroon, ‘Trans Representation in YA Is Only the Beginning’, *Gay YA*, 16 November 2015, <http://www.gayya.org/?p=3327> [last accessed 12 April 2018].

<sup>8</sup> Ollie Renee Schminkey, ‘Boobs’, *College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSI)*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pi7Vss4GYks> [last accessed 12 April 2018].

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Whittle, *The Transgender Debate: The Crisis Surrounding Gender Identities* (Reading: South Street Press, 2000), p.11.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Whittle, ‘Foreword’, in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.xi-xvi (p.xi).

For the purpose of this thesis, I will be focusing on the much narrower definition of “transgender”, where there is a disparity between biological sex and gender identity. The intricacies of the term “transgender” and all the identities encompassed under that umbrella could be a thesis topic in and of itself.

There are, of course, other narrower terms I could have used – for example, “gender dysphoria” or “gender identity disorder”. “Gender dysphoria” is the medical term for ‘a condition where the person experiences discomfort or distress because there’s a mismatch between their biological sex and gender identity.’<sup>11</sup> Whilst this term would be an acceptable term to have used, I felt that it was too clinical and detached. “Gender dysphoria” also describes a symptom – ‘feelings of unease or (mental) discomfort’ with one’s biological sex – and using both terms in this thesis would cause confusion.<sup>12</sup> “Gender Identity Disorder (GID)”, while medically accurate perhaps, would be a much more problematic term to use, as the word “disorder” implies that something is inherently wrong with being trans.

The term “transgenderism” itself has its own controversies. In recent years, trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) have purposefully misused it in a negative way.<sup>13</sup> According to Julia Serano, a trans activist,

This incorrect usage seems to purposefully capitalize on the fact that transgenderism is not an everyday word (so it will strike trans-unaware readers as somewhat alien) and seems intended to invoke certain oppressive ideologies (e.g., sexism, racism, fascism, and others) that also just so happen to end with the suffix “-ism.”<sup>14</sup>

However, the term “transgenderism” has ‘a long history of being used in a nonjudgmental and neutral manner, often by trans people themselves,’ to describe the ‘phenomenon of transgender people,’ and to describe the ‘state of being transgender.’<sup>15</sup> Serano believes that words should not stop being used just because some have tried to twist that word’s purpose. She argues that it ‘is not the words themselves, but rather the negative or narrow views of trans people that ultimately influence how these words are viewed and used by others.’<sup>16</sup> Challenging these views is ultimately

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Gender dysphoria’, NHS Choices, 12 April 2016, <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Gender-dysphoria/Pages/Introduction.aspx> [last accessed 31 October 2016].

<sup>12</sup> ‘Dysphoria’, *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com.winchester.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/58900?redirectedFrom=dysphoria#eid> [last accessed 31 October 2016].

<sup>13</sup> Julia Serano, ‘Regarding Trans\* and Transgenderism’, Whipping Girl, 27 August 2015, <http://juliaserano.blogspot.co.uk/2015/08/regarding-trans-and-transgenderism.html> [last accessed 22 October 2016].

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

the best way forward, and I believe that part of this is to continue to use words such as “transgenderism” in the way they were originally intended to be used.

## The Nebulous Market: What is Young Adult Fiction?

The definition of what constitutes YA fiction is a matter that is up for debate. Even the age range YA fiction is aimed at is something that does not have one clear answer. Whilst it is generally accepted that YA fiction is aimed at readers between the ages of twelve and eighteen, these age boundaries are hazy at best. Adolescents change dramatically between the ages of twelve and eighteen, so it stands to reason that not all books shelved under the umbrella of YA fiction will be suitable for both. To make matters more complicated, it is not only readers between the ages of twelve and eighteen that read YA fiction. Michael Cart points out that the term “young adult” ‘must now also include nineteen- to twenty-five-year-olds,’ as ‘scientists have demonstrated that the brain continues to grow until the early or mid-twenties and that the last part to mature is the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for such adult behaviour as impulse control, the regulation of emotions and moral reasoning.’<sup>17</sup> In addition, a 2012 study by Bowker Market Research showed that more than half the consumers of YA fiction are adults over the age of eighteen. In fact, the study showed that 28% of the readers of YA fiction are between the ages of thirty and forty-four.<sup>18</sup> It is difficult, therefore, to define YA fiction merely by its audience, a definition that, in any case, primarily would be used for marketing purposes. Instead, the definition of YA fiction used in this thesis will focus predominantly on the contents of the text itself.

Regarding content, there are several definitions. This could be because, technically, YA is a target demographic rather than a genre, an umbrella term much like “transgender”. Therefore, YA fiction stretches across many different genres, and can even encompass verse novels and other more experimental texts.<sup>19</sup> This engenders broad definitions and generalisations, which can make pinning down a precise meaning difficult. Jonathan Stephens, in his definition of YA fiction, states,

... the label “Young Adult” refers to a story that tackles the difficult, and oftentimes adult, issues that arise during an adolescent’s journey towards identity, a journey told through a distinctly teen voice...<sup>20</sup>

According to this definition, YA fiction has two key features. Firstly, the story should tackle an adolescent’s journey towards adulthood and the issues that occur during that period. Secondly, the

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Cart, *Young Adult Literature: Romance to Realism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: Neal-Schuman, 2016), p.139.

<sup>18</sup> ‘New Study: 55% of YA Books Bought by Adults’, *Publishers Weekly*, 13 September 2012, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/53937-new-study-55-of-ya-books-bought-by-adults.html> [last accessed 7 December 2016].

<sup>19</sup> Examples include *Freakboy* by Kristin Elizabeth Clark (2013) and *Illuminae* by Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff (2015).

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Stephens, ‘Young Adult: A Book by Any Other Name...: Defining the Genre’, *The Alan Review*, 35 (2007), <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v35n1/stephens.html> [last accessed 10 December 2016].

story should be told from the point of view and in the voice of a young adult. Whilst I would argue that neither of these rules are set in stone, this definition creates a good foundation on which to build a YA novel.

Another angle to keep in mind is that ‘a great YA novel is written solely for the reader.’<sup>21</sup> Alongside children’s fiction, YA fiction has the potential to be censored by the adults surrounding the reader. It would be easy for a writer to get caught in the trap of catering to these gatekeepers, which, whilst it might get a book into school libraries, has a good chance of turning away intended readers. Whilst it is perhaps not advisable to include explicit sex scenes or graphic violence, a writer should do their best to stay faithful to an authentic YA emotional experience.<sup>22</sup> If a writer shies away from darker, more adult subjects and consequences where they would be appropriate, the YA reader will most likely feel patronised and stop reading. YA fiction gives readers a chance to explore difficult topics and emotions in a safe, chosen environment. Therefore, I believe that sanitising books for YA readers to appease gatekeepers is doing a disservice to the reader.

Providing a safe space to explore difficult themes is arguably one of the most essential functions of a YA novel, but it is not the only one. YA fiction allows readers to explore different experiences and identities whilst they are in the process of figuring out their own. Vanessa Harbour states that ‘the search for identity... is pivotal to [the YA’s] development as part of their maturation, both personally and culturally.’<sup>23</sup> Being unable to explore identity in a safe way can be damaging to a young adult’s psyche, and YA fiction allows the reader to explore different facets of identity, to make up their own minds as to the characteristics that define them.<sup>24</sup> For some YA readers, a certain novel (or novels) can be crucial to the development of their maturing identity. Chief amongst these is a certain type of YA novel, the bildungsroman or coming-of-age novel. According to Robert Wood,

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Wood, ‘The 3 Golden Rules Of Writing A Young Adult Novel’, Standoutbooks, 30 June 2015, <https://www.standoutbooks.com/writing-young-adult-novel/> [last accessed 10 December 2016].

<sup>22</sup> For example: *Junk* by Melvin Burgess (1996) deals with heroin addiction; *Forbidden* by Tabitha Suzuma (2010) deals with sibling incest; and *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2007) deals with the aftermath of suicide.

<sup>23</sup> Vanessa Harbour, ‘Problems of representation/representing sex, drugs and alcohol in contemporary British young adult fiction’, PhD Thesis, The University of Winchester, 2011, p.215.

<sup>24</sup> A 2016 study found that, over a period of sixteen months, 145 young people in England aged nineteen and under died following a suicide attempt, with five of these deaths being children under fourteen. The study also lists the main causes of suicide in young people, including these that are related to a sense of identity and fitting in: bullying, in person or online (22%); social isolation (15%) or withdrawal (10%); and academic pressure (27%).

(‘Suicide by children and young people in England’, *National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide by People with Mental Illness (NCISH)*, University of Manchester (2016), [http://research.bmh.manchester.ac.uk/cmhs/research/centreforsuicideprevention/nci/reports/cyp\\_report.pdf](http://research.bmh.manchester.ac.uk/cmhs/research/centreforsuicideprevention/nci/reports/cyp_report.pdf) [last accessed 7 April 2017].)

[each] bildungsroman is in the prime position to be the most important book a person will ever read, something vital to their sense of self.<sup>25</sup>

It is for this reason that I believe novels that represent a wide range of diverse experiences should be available to young adult readers. As the author of *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2013), Kirstin Cronn-Mills, says, '[s]haring stories is the way we understand the world, and if you never see a story about you, about how you see yourself, that's not very life affirming.'<sup>26</sup> The opposite is true as well. By reading about experiences that are other, YAs can put themselves in another's shoes and 'take away the "othering" aspect of the Other.'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Wood, 'The 3 Golden Rules Of Writing A Young Adult Novel', Standoutbooks, 30 June 2015, <https://www.standoutbooks.com/writing-young-adult-novel/> [last accessed 10 December 2016].

<sup>26</sup> Kristin Tillotson, 'Two transgender YA fiction titles by Minnesotans up for Lambdas', *Star Tribune*, 31 May 2013, <http://www.startribune.com/two-transgender-ya-fiction-titles-by-minnesotans-up-for-lambdas/209698991/> [last accessed 2 March 2016].

<sup>27</sup> Laura Lam, 'The Grey of Gender: Intersex and Gender Variant/Non-Binary Characters in YA', *Gay YA*, 3 June 2013, <http://www.gayya.org/?p=586> [last accessed 2 March 2016].

## Creative Writing as Research

Having a creative element as an integral part of a research thesis places this project in the field of practice-led research. Jen Webb points out that '[c]reative writers who are also... academics face two apparently contradictory imperatives: the need to answer important research questions, and the need to produce works of the imagination,' but that they are not 'irreconcilably different.'<sup>28</sup> Much of the discourse on practice-led research, however, focuses on what Gaylene Perry calls the 'non-verbal'; that is, on art forms such as painting, sculpture or dance, that operate on a visual level and are not readily translatable into the 'verbal', or textual, form.<sup>29</sup> Creative writing, on the other hand, is text-based, sharing its medium with traditional academic research, causing it to be seen, as Perry says, as 'part of the problem,' adding to 'the dominance of text-based disciplines in the academy.'<sup>30</sup> This leaves 'writer-researchers', as Webb calls them, in the space between traditional and practice-led research.<sup>31</sup> To borrow a phrase from Anthony Eaton, writer-researchers can be said to be occupying a 'liminal space.'<sup>32</sup> Whilst Eaton's definition of the writer-researcher's liminal space places this research in a position that blurs the line between the creative and critical explicitly, I believe that this space can and should be narrowed, putting the research of writer-researchers between practice-led research (which occupies Eaton's wider definition of this liminal space) and traditional research.

When it comes to creative writing as research, I find it difficult to separate the two. Stories are integral to how humans understand the world, and 'a powerful story can have a hand in rewiring the reader's brain.'<sup>33</sup> Cognitive scientist Steven Pinker states that '[f]ictional narratives supply us with the mental catalogue of the fatal conundrums we might face someday and the outcomes of strategies we could deploy in them.'<sup>34</sup> This is particularly true in the oral tradition, where stories often served as warnings or moral lessons. To my mind, exploring the outcomes to various different scenarios is the definition of research.

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<sup>28</sup> Jen Webb, *Researching Creative Writing* (Newmarket: Creative Writing Studies, 2015), p.x.

<sup>29</sup> Gaylene Perry, 'The non-verbal and the verbal: expanding awareness of practice-led research in creative writings', in *AAWP 2008: The creativity and uncertainty papers: the refereed proceedings of the 13th conference of the Australian Association of Writing Programs*, Australian Association of Writing Programs (Sydney: November 2008), pp.1-11, <http://dro.deakin.edu.au/view/DU:30020035> [last accessed 9 July 2017].

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>31</sup> Jen Webb, *Researching Creative Writing* (Newmarket: Creative Writing Studies, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Eaton, 'The spaces between: examining young adult creative practice within an academic context', *TEXT Special Issue 32: Why YA?: Researching, writing and publishing Young Adult fiction in Australia*, eds. Jessica Seymour and Denise Beckton (October 2015), <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue32/Eaton.pdf> [last accessed 27 April 2020].

<sup>33</sup> Lisa Cron, *Wired for Story* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2012), p.2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

However, the neuroscience behind stories is not the only reason research and creative writing go hand in hand. To write creatively, you must engage in research about the subject you are writing about. Then you interpret that research – the data, if you like – and what results is a fictional piece. As Webb states,

[r]esearch practices can invigorate writing, creative practices can invigorate research, and creative writing operates as mode of knowledge generation, a way of exploring problems and answering questions that matter.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, though usually engaged in the exploration of subjective ideas rather than objective facts, and experiences rather than empirical data, creative writing can teach a reader just as much about the world as an article in a scientific journal or an archaeological report. As Ali Smith says, ‘fiction is one of our ways of telling the truth.’<sup>36</sup> In my case, my novel, *Son of Flames*, is the result of researching gender norms, what happens when we challenge those norms, and the experience of someone who does not identify with the sex they were assigned.

As I have shown, creative writing can count as research for both the author, whose output is the culmination of their research, and the reader, who takes the contents on board as part of their own research into many facets of life and society. Books exist as both windows and mirrors<sup>37</sup> to society, and viewing literature through that lens ‘helps us understand that, in addition to texts being stories to be enjoyed, they are powerful tools of social justice.’<sup>38</sup> As Chad Everett explains, mirror texts are texts in which the reader can see themselves reflected in the characters and the story; window texts are texts that allow a window into the lives of people different than the reader.<sup>39</sup> A book that might be a mirror for one reader, therefore, could be a window for another. Mirror texts are especially important for young adults and children, as ‘[w]hen children don’t see themselves reflected in books they read, or when the few images they see in stories, TV and movies are negative or stereotypical, that sends a powerful and silencing message.’<sup>40</sup> Young adults and teenagers are still

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<sup>35</sup> Jen Webb, *Researching Creative Writing* (Newmarket: Creative Writing Studies, 2015), p.x.

<sup>36</sup> Charlotte Higgins, ‘Fiction is a way of telling the truth – Ali Smith in Edinburgh’, *The Guardian* (21 Aug 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/aug/21/fiction-not-lies-is-a-way-of-telling-the-truth-ali-smith-in-edinburgh> [last accessed 1 March 2020].

<sup>37</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop, ‘Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors’, *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer 1990), pp.ix-xi, <https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf> [last accessed 11 August 2020].

<sup>38</sup> Chad Everett, ‘Windows and Mirrors: Why We Need Diverse Books’, Scholastic, <http://www.scholastic.com/bookfairs/readerleader/windows-and-mirrors-why-we-need-diverse-books> [last accessed 26 July 2016].

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Robin Stevenson, ‘Pride: LGBTQ Books for Young Readers’, 49th Shelf, 20 June 2016, <http://49thshelf.com/Blog/2016/06/20/Pride-LGBTQ-Books-for-Young-Readers> [last accessed 18 July 2016].

exploring their identity so, when they see characters in books that are like them, it relieves the sense of isolation.

Whilst the benefits of mirror texts are often a compelling argument for diversity, the fact that these same novels can be window texts is just as important. Books can allow young adults insight into how people different from them see the world. As Michael Cart writes, fiction 'offers us essential opportunities for cultivating empathy, for feeling sympathy and for experiencing emotional engagement with others.'<sup>41</sup> Focusing only on mirror texts in the argument for diversity is erroneous, therefore, as these texts benefit all readers and not just the reader they reflect. In fact, whilst both are important, the effects that texts have on readers are not as simple as these labels imply. As David Levithan states, 'I think there is a danger in saying that some books are windows and some books are mirrors, because that totally negates the fact that the best mirror in understanding yourself is a window into other people.'<sup>42</sup> As far as my own creative work is concerned, my goal is to provide a window into the life of a transgender protagonist, whilst also challenging the subconscious, socialised gender roles may hold. In that way, whilst it is ostensibly a window text for many readers, it will also be their mirror.

In regard to transgenderism, window and mirror YA texts feel particularly important, not least because the number of children identifying as gender-variant is growing. The NSPCC helpline, Childline, reported that calls about gender dysphoria and transgender issues doubled from 2015 to 2016, which mirrored an increase in referrals to gender identity clinics across the UK.<sup>43</sup> Though the reason for this increase is, as of yet, unclear, it does not necessarily mean that there has been an increase in the number of children that are or identify as gender-variant. It is likely that the growing awareness of transgenderism and transgender issues is allowing children and young adults to more openly question their identity and encouraging them to seek help sooner. After all, identifying as transgender in childhood is not a new phenomenon. A 2012 international survey of transgender adults found that 108 out of 110 respondents identified their gender variance before the age of eighteen, with 106 of these identifying this before the age of twelve.<sup>44</sup> Though acceptance is

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<sup>41</sup> Michael Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2016), p.159.

<sup>42</sup> David Levithan and Jennifer Hubert Swan, '2016 Margaret A. Edwards winner David Levithan talks about his work and craft', *School Library Journal*, 1 June 2016, <http://www.slj.com/2016/06/interviews/2016-margaret-a-edwards-winner-david-levithan-talks-about-his-work-and-craft/> [last accessed 18 July 2016].

<sup>43</sup> Kate Lyons, 'Childline receives eight calls a day about gender identity issues', *The Guardian*, 13 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/dec/13/childline-eight-calls-a-day-gender-identity-issues-children-nsppc-helpline-transgender> [last accessed 6 April 2017].

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Ann Riley, Lindy Clemson, Gomathi Sitharthan and Milton Diamond, 'Surviving a Gender-Variant Childhood: The Views of Transgender Adults on the Needs of Gender-Variant Children and Their Parents', *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 39.3 (2013), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0092623X.2011.628439?needAccess=true>, 241-263 [last accessed 6 April 2017].

generally growing, transphobic violence and suicide have lowered the life expectancy of transgender people – transgender women of colour in the US have a life expectancy of only 35.<sup>45</sup> I believe that YA fiction, by providing these window and mirror texts, can nurture acceptance and understanding in the younger generations, particularly during a time where transgenderism has become politically charged.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Addison Rose Vincent, 'State of Emergency Continues for Trans Women of Color', *The Huffington Post*, 13 August 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/addison-rose-vincent/the-state-of-emergency-co\\_b\\_7981580.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/addison-rose-vincent/the-state-of-emergency-co_b_7981580.html) [last accessed 6 April 2017].

<sup>46</sup> For example, the recent conflict in the United States about the bill commonly known as 'The Bathroom Bill', a bill that defines access to public restrooms for transgender people.

## Write What You Know

When I first decided on my research topic, I was struggling with my gender identity. During the time I was writing *Son of Flames*, I went through periods of identifying as transgender, feeling dysphoria and uncomfortable in my own body. Due to some mental health struggles, however, I am moving forward as a cisgender woman until I can trust myself to separate my gender identity from trauma and anxiety. As a result of these struggles, though, I empathise with Farrow and am confident I can tell his story authentically; I have battled with the feelings he is battling with, and I have dealt with other people's reactions to that. However, as I currently identify as cisgender, it is important to explore the debate around writing outside your identity.

Kirstin Cronn-Mills states that '[s]ome trans people may see [her] as an invader, a plunderer of stories.'<sup>47</sup> It is certainly true that there are a lack of transgender stories told by transgender authors; of the books that I have studied in detail, only two are written by authors on the trans spectrum. It is, however, presumptuous to assume that a transgender author would want to write books about "the transgender experience", just as it would be presumptuous to assume that a black author is automatically going to write books about "the black experience". Unfortunately, this pigeonholing of minority authors is still prevalent in the publishing community, with black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) authors 'being pressured to write about their ethnic or cultural heritage' or 'being asked to emulate the writing styles or content of prolific creators or colour.'<sup>48</sup> Whilst gender identity and sexuality are more invisible than race or ethnicity, it stands to reason that transgender or gay authors feel a similar pressure in their own writing. This is separate from the scope of my thesis, but it is an important issue to consider. In essence, authors should not be restricted by their identity, though the reality is often different.

One of the largest concerns is how authentic a novel can really be if the author lacks the real-life experiences to back it up. John Jacobson outlines this, stating,

... [i]t's very easy for you to think a character is three-dimensional if all you have to go on is a set of stereotypes; it's much more difficult when you live that experience, and understand how hard it really is.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Kirstin Cronn-Mills, 'YA Pride: "Am I allowed to write this?"', 11 June 2012, <http://www.malindalo.com/2012/06/ya-pride-am-i-allowed-to-write-this/> [last accessed 11 March 2016].

<sup>48</sup> Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, 'Representation of people of colour among children's book authors and illustrators', BookTrust, April 2019, <https://www.booktrust.org.uk/globalassets/resources/represents/booktrust-represents-diversity-childrens-authors-illustrators-report.pdf>, p.37 [last accessed 27 April 2020].

<sup>49</sup> John Jacobson, 'Should I or Shouldn't I? On Writing Trans Narratives Respectfully', Gay YA, 17 November 2015, <http://www.gayya.org/?p=3334> [last accessed 2 March 2016].

I do not dispute this; as Cris Beam puts it, authors who have not had the same experiences as the minority they are writing about can only ‘know a kind of truth by proxy.’<sup>50</sup> However, I would argue that this, whilst true, runs the risk of judging minority characters as defined *only* by the fact they are a minority, and casting all of their experiences in the light of this one fact. In addition, the idea that there is a “right” way to write any given group of people is one that comes perilously close to the stereotypical clichés that lead to typecasting, or using race as an indicator of personality.

Being transgender is just one aspect of what should be a multi-faceted, three-dimensional character, and should not under any circumstances be a substitute for giving the character a defined personality. The character’s personality will have an effect on how that character experiences being transgender. As Everett Maroon writes, there is ‘no singular narrative that describes the emotional and physical nature of being trans, and there is especially no singularity with regard to how one understands coming to identify as trans-anything.’<sup>51</sup> No two people are the same, regardless of gender identity, sexuality, or race, and no two characters should be the same either. Authors, in their lives, have also lived a variety of experiences, some of them common themes across the whole of human experience.

Being transgender is, at its core, an extreme version of the search for identity that most adolescents go through. Ami Polonsky, author of *Gracefully Grayson* (2014), says of the matter:

I felt that, emotionally speaking, I could put myself into the shoes of a child that appeared to be someone she wasn’t. After all... [h]aven’t we all felt like the world can’t see us for who we truly are?<sup>52</sup>

In practice, of course, it is a lot more complicated than that, but this core theme of identity should serve as a strong foundation to build a transgender character on. In theory, these shared themes or emotions should allow an author – and therefore, the reader – to empathise with a character through whatever they are experiencing, even if they belong to a different “group” than them. With these points in mind, I believe that there is no wrong way to write a character, as long as that character is well-rounded and not only born of offensive stereotypes.

The need for these books to be written outweighs the need to police who can write what. When Roland Barthes talked about the death of the author, he was referring to the author imposing a single meaning on a text, and that ‘[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text...’<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Cris Beam, ‘Author’s Note’, in *I Am J* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), pp.329-32 (p.331).

<sup>51</sup> Everett Maroon, ‘How Trans Happens’, Gay YA, 1 June 2011, <http://www.gayya.org/?p=277> [last accessed 15 March 2020].

<sup>52</sup> Ami Polonsky and Nadia, ‘Author Interview: Ami Polonsky’, Gay YA, 17 November 2014, <http://www.gayya.org/?p=1445> [last accessed 4 March 2016].

<sup>53</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp.142-8 (p.147).

The death of the author theory, at its core, is giving the power to the reader, who can then take any meaning they want from that text, that meaning flavoured by their own prior experiences and biases. However, the theory of the author's death should perhaps extend not only to the author imposing a meaning on the text, but also to the reader censoring texts because of the identity of the author. Walter Dean Myers makes this point:

If we do not write about all our children, write about them with hard truths and harder compassion, we have, in a very significant way, failed our own futures.<sup>54</sup>

If we impose limits on who can write certain stories, the result is that, as readers, we are deprived of books that could have been written, whether window or mirror or both.

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<sup>54</sup> Tina Frolund, ed., *The Official YALSA Awards Guidebook* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 2008), p.101.

## The Basics: Genre and Target Audience

When I began this thesis in 2013, there was a clear dearth of YA novels that had transgender individuals as main characters.<sup>55</sup> As my research has continued, more novels dealing with transgenderism have been published, though, at the time of writing, the number still stands at less than thirty. When held up against the sheer number of books that have been published under the umbrella of YA fiction, this is still a tiny amount. As well as this, overwhelmingly, the YA novels already published focus heavily on the issues of coming out and acceptance, and of transitioning. Whilst it is important to have books that tackle these issues, I believe this lack of plot diversity contributes to the ‘difficulty [booksellers have] in handselling trans titles to nontrans readers,’<sup>56</sup> as, in general, young readers who seek out overtly queer literature are queer themselves, searching for themselves in the books they read. Sometimes, though, even LGBTQ+ readers will avoid these books. As V. S. Wells puts it, ‘[f]or teenagers scared of coming out of the closet, being seen to read a book covered in rainbows might be terrifying.’<sup>57</sup>

The fact that the majority of trans YA novels focus on coming out, acceptance, or transitioning puts them squarely in the “issue novel” subgenre. Whilst issue novels are a necessary subgenre of YA literature, this quite often limits their audience to those seeking information on the particular “issue” the book is about. Issue novels dealing with the difficult realities of adolescence ‘inspire the reader to feel empathy’<sup>58</sup> – empathy being, as Michael Cart points out, ‘one of the most important lessons a young person can learn.’<sup>59</sup> I would argue that this does not have to be limited to novels dealing with specific issues, but should extend to books that tackle these issues more organically, as a small part of an overarching plot. To reach a wider audience and to normalise different realities, such as being trans or gay, books need to be written where this is just an integral part of the character and not the focus of the plot. A novel with a transgender protagonist that is all about their transition runs the risk of reducing the character to an identity, unintentionally putting across the point that their transness is the most interesting part of them. We need ‘more books with trans characters where their transness isn’t a major plot point. They are just there. Because they *are*

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<sup>55</sup> At the beginning of this thesis, I had collated less than ten books that would be relevant to my research.

<sup>56</sup> Natasha Gilmore, ‘Transgender Titles for Young Readers’, *Publishers Weekly*, 22 May 2015, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-book-news/article/66750-lgbtq-publishing-books-for-every-body.html> [last accessed 16 May 2016].

<sup>57</sup> V. S. Wells, ‘Queer Young Adult Fiction Comes Out Of The Closet’, *DIVA*, 1 March 2013, <http://www.divamag.co.uk/category/arts-entertainment/queer-young-adult-fiction-comes-out-of-the-closet.aspx> [last accessed 27 February 2015].

<sup>58</sup> Michael Cart, *Young Adult Fiction: Romance to Realism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: Neal-Schuman, 2016), p.173.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.173.

just here,'<sup>60</sup> and they are just as capable of having as many adventures as their cisgender counterparts.

In the case of transgenderism, there are only a few books currently published that it could be argued fit this description. The first is *Look Past* (2016) by Eric Devine, which is marketed as a thriller and murder mystery. The main character, Avery, has interests outside of being transgender, and the plot seems, at first, to be disconnected from his gender identity. However, it turns out that his transness is the motive for the murder, and the killer then begins to target Avery himself.<sup>61</sup> Though this is not an issue novel in the traditional sense, the main plot is still entirely driven by the fact that Avery is transgender. Whilst *Look Past* is a step away from an issue novel, it does not entirely escape the trappings of that subgenre.

The second book that could be argued fits this description is the magical realism novel *When the Moon Was Ours* (2016) by Anna-Marie McLemore.<sup>62</sup> In it, a girl called Miel grows roses out of her wrists, and a boy called Sam hangs painted moons in trees. The antagonists of the story want Miel's roses for their own and are willing to blackmail Miel with secrets she has always tried to protect. One of the major secrets Miel must protect is Sam's transness, but Miel's roses are driving the plot and it would be hard to argue that *When the Moon Was Ours* is an issue novel. However, the magical realism and the lyrical prose give this novel a dreamlike quality, distancing both Miel and Sam from the reader and giving the novel a sense of unreality. This ethereal, fairy-tale quality serves to separate the novel from reality, which allows the reader to avoid the real-life actualities of being trans and adds a safety net of "this isn't real." Therefore, it makes it harder for the reader to identify with these characters, and can complicate the mirror and window dynamics that are vital for empathetic development.

C.B. Lee's *Not Your Sidekick* (2016) is a superhero novel with a variety of queer characters. Their queerness is taken as a given in-universe; '[p]ronouns are exchanged naturally with every introduction of a new character, and characters can be located anywhere at all on the spectrums of gender and sexuality without anyone blinking an eye.'<sup>63</sup> Though the protagonist is not transgender, her best friend, Bells is.<sup>64</sup> Bells's superpower is shapeshifting, however, which takes away much of

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<sup>60</sup> Natasha Gilmore, 'Transgender Titles for Young Readers', *Publishers Weekly*, 22 May 2015, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-book-news/article/66750-lgbtq-publishing-books-for-every-body.html> [last accessed 16 May 2016].

<sup>61</sup> Eric Devine, *Look Past* (Philadelphia: Running Press Teens, 2016), p.51, p.106.

<sup>62</sup> Magical realism can be defined as novels that are set in the real world but that have fantastical or magical elements.

<sup>63</sup> Christina Tesoro, "'Not Your Villain' by C. B. Lee", *Lambda Literary*, November 16 2017, <https://www.lambdaliterary.org/2017/11/not-your-villain-by-c-b-lee/> [last accessed 4 March 2020].

<sup>64</sup> The second book in the series, *Not Your Villain* (2017), features Bells as the main character, but this novel fell outside my research scope.

the reality of being trans for him – ‘if putting on a binder for the day is too much, he’s got it covered.’<sup>65</sup> Though I admire the universe Lee has built and the acceptance that resonates through the characters, shapeshifting somewhat lessens the impact of Bells as a window and mirror character, and instead makes him more of a wish-fulfilment character.

Characters such as this are needed in YA fiction, so this is not a flaw in Lee’s writing, but it allowed me to realise that for *Son of Flames* I wanted something different. For my work, it was important that Farrow acted as a window and a mirror, and that meant his transgenderism took a larger role in the novel than I originally intended. His personal journey with his own identity and his relationship with Camber, both influenced strongly by Farrow’s trans identity, are highly important to them both as characters.

“Being Viola for you... it feels like I’m lying, and I don’t want to lie to you anymore, Camber.”<sup>66</sup>

If I did not want Farrow to seem as though he was transgender for the sake of being transgender, I needed to make it clear through my writing that it had a wide impact on the novel as a whole. Much of Farrow’s internal conflict is between the desire to please his family and marry the Prince, and his discomfort presenting to the world as female. Therefore, whilst I did not want Farrow’s transgenderism to drive the plot of *Son of Flames*, as I wrote it became an integral part of his emotional arc throughout the book and a vital point of conflict in his relationship with Camber.

Related to this, the idea of “coming out” has always seemed to me to be firmly rooted in the realm of issue novels, and when I first started writing I did not want *Son of Flames* to have a typical coming out scene. However, when I wrote the first draft of the novel, Farrow’s coming out turned out to be an important theme and trying to excise that from the narrative resulted in less character development and unrealistic motivations. Farrow comes out to several characters over the course of the novel, with varying reactions, in places where it felt natural. Though *Son of Flames* is not a traditional “coming out” novel, coming out is an important part of life. As Damian Barr says, ‘[#comingout](#) isn’t one moment - it’s a lifetime.’<sup>67</sup> This Tweet resonated with me in that I realised that, personally, I come out every time I mention my wife to someone. It is not an event that occurs just once in your life, but a constant necessity. To try to wipe it out of my novel completely to avoid

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<sup>65</sup> C. B. Lee, ‘Not Your Villain’, <https://cb-lee.com/books/sidekick-squad/not-your-villain/> [last accessed 21 October 2019].

<sup>66</sup> Emily Vair-Turnbull, *Son of Flames* (2020), p.241.

<sup>67</sup> Damian Barr (@Damian\_Barr), ‘I came out to my mum when I was 16 - I refused to read one of the grimmer bits of Leviticus at a family wedding. Yesterday I came out to a woman in bookshop who clocked my wedding ring & asked me if missed my wife while working away. [#comingout](#) isn’t one moment - it’s a lifetime.’, 11 Oct 2019, 9:30am, Tweet, [https://twitter.com/Damian\\_Barr/status/1182574249174818817](https://twitter.com/Damian_Barr/status/1182574249174818817) [last accessed 21 October 2019].

the typical issue novel fare would be doing a disservice to my characters and to everyone for whom coming out is a regular occurrence, including myself.

Contemporary<sup>68</sup> novels are well-suited for issue novels, as the real-world setting is relatable and allows for a stronger focus on characters and character development, as minimal world-building is needed. For plots focusing on coming out and acceptance, this is ideal. However, as I wanted to move away from typical issue novels and coming out stories, I decided that the fantasy genre would best allow me to avoid the expectations that come with an issue novel.

According to Ellen Renner, ‘fantasy is one of the best literary tools for asking... difficult questions.’<sup>69</sup> In fantasy, you can focus on contemporary, realistic issues, just as you can in contemporary fiction, but I believe that these issues can be dealt with in a more intense, deeper way. As you are not writing about real life, but working with allegory and metaphor, a fantasy plot ‘allows writers and readers sufficient distance from [their] messy, complicated lives in which to think more clearly.’<sup>70</sup> This distance means that contentious issues in fantasy novels can often be much less controversial than the same plot in a realistic contemporary novel. Writing in 2007, Beth Webb explains that fantasy ‘begins as the psychological process by which a child learns to fill the gaps between knowledge, reality and experience, and becomes a vital adult coping mechanism.’<sup>71</sup> As children, fantasy allows us to come up with explanations for the things that frighten us, such as creaking in the night. Fantasy gives us a safe space to explore difficult topics, separate from the politics of real life, with the assurance that it is “just fantasy”. Of course, all fiction, especially YA fiction, offers a safe space to explore difficult topics, but the fantasy genre has the added distance that can allow both writer and reader to broach a subject they might not otherwise. For example, a reader who would never seek out a book dealing with racism might willingly pick up a fantasy novel dealing with the subjugation of elves.

As using modern terms for subjects such as mental illness, trauma, or sexuality would be jarring in a fantasy setting, these subjects have to be approached in a slightly different way, so often avoid the buzzwords that could upset gatekeepers or turn a reader off a book without reading further. In *Son of Flames*, I could not explicitly use the word “transgender” as it would be out of

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<sup>68</sup> “Contemporary” in this context means novels set in the time in which they are written, whereas “contemporary” in my thesis title means novels written in the time in which I am researching.

<sup>69</sup> Ellen Renner, ‘Rewriting the World: Fantasy and Social Issues (YA Shot Blog Tour with Ellen Renner)’, Thoughts from the Hearthfire, 23 October 2015, <http://www.hearthfire.bethkemp.co.uk/rewriting-the-world-fantasy-and-social-issues-ya-shot-blog-tour-with-ellen-renner/> [last accessed 10 March 2020].

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Beth Webb, ‘The real purpose of fantasy’, *The Guardian*, 23 April 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/apr/23/bridgingthegapswhyweneed> [last accessed 7 August 2017].

place in my world, so I was required to show how Farrow felt and rely on inference from the reader. For example, early on I write,

As Grace began to unpin his hair in preparation to comb it, Farrow forced himself to meet the eyes of his reflection. The girl in the mirror stared back at him, her jaw set.<sup>72</sup>

This approach allowed me to explore his feelings slowly and allows readers to get into his head and empathise with him. If I was to write ‘Farrow was transgender’, then most readers would make a snap judgement about his character, and some would close themselves off to empathy or even shut the book all together.

My target audience is what is traditionally seen as the upper end of young adult. My intention was for *Son of Flames* to be dark, gritty and realistic, whilst still remaining in the YA genre. This is in line with several books that I have looked at, such as *Almost Perfect* (2009) and *The Art of Being Normal* (2015), which have scenes of sex and violence. On top of this, books in the YA fantasy genre, such as *Six of Crows* (2015) by Leigh Bardugo, have shown that the darker side of humanity is just as prevalent in teenagers as it is in adults, and fiction should reflect that. Melvin Burgess, talking about his young adult novel *Nicholas Dane* (2009), which deals with child sex abuse, says that his ‘feeling is, if that if it’s real, and if it’s true, and if it’s in context then people can deal with it.’<sup>73</sup> I agree with him, especially when it comes to challenging or taboo topics. YA fiction gives readers a chance to explore difficult topics and emotions in a safe, chosen environment, and acts as ‘a valuable antidote that lead young people to harm themselves and so become[s] a force for positive transformations in young people’s lives.’<sup>74</sup> As discussed earlier, I believe that fiction should not be sanitised, particularly when it is dealing with difficult issues and themes.

For a while, I debated aiming even older than my target age group, perhaps even venturing into “new adult” fiction, which is a relatively new category for books aimed at readers in their late teens and early twenties. At first, I thought that new adult was part of the YA genre – and would therefore fit under my research scope – but the more I researched, the less that appeared to be so. Books marketed as new adult are most often contemporary romances, with protagonists who are at university or living on their own for the first time, but the label is expanding to cover books such as Sarah J Maas’s *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015), a fantasy novel about fae. With contemporary romance being new adult’s dominant genre, however, it is often criticised as being ‘basically [YA

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<sup>72</sup> Emily Vair-Turnbull, *Son of Flames* (2020), p.16.

<sup>73</sup> Melvin Burgess, *Front Row*, BBC Radio 4 FM, 5 June 2009, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00kn34b> [last accessed 1 September 2017].

<sup>74</sup> Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children’s Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.113.

fiction] with sex and cursing thrown in.’<sup>75</sup> Others believe it is not related to YA fiction at all, but that it is ‘an offshoot of romance.’<sup>76</sup> I disagree. Whilst, yes, the new adult category allows for more explicit sex than is customary in YA fiction, these novels appeal to a generation of readers, who, due to economic constraints and high house prices, are much more likely to still be living with their parents and thus are stuck in the transitional phase between dependent child and independent adult.<sup>77</sup> The new adult category allows them to easily find books relevant to their interests, precluding the need to wade through the general fiction section. It is my opinion that the umbrella of YA fiction could cover the so-called new adult category as well, due to the similarities between the two, but the sheer chasm between the experiences of the lower and upper ends of young adulthood means that delineation is necessary. Therefore, I decided to keep my novel aimed at readers in their mid- to late-teens so that *Son of Flames* was firmly rooted in the category of YA fiction.

It was also important to decide whether I was aiming the novel primarily at a cisgender or a transgender audience – that is, whether I wanted *Son of Flames* to be more of a window or a mirror. Either approach would require different emphases, so it was crucial for this to be decided at an early stage. For a transgender audience, I would want to skew my narrative to be a little more informative, whereas for a cisgender audience I would want to focus on making the character of Farrow empathetic so that the audience could step into his shoes. I decided to focus on a cisgender audience; being cisgender myself but having gone through the questioning of my gender identity, I felt I could create an authentic, empathetic character. Whilst *Son of Flames* therefore functions primarily as a window text, I am hopeful that transgender readers can recognise themselves in Farrow too.

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<sup>75</sup> Lauren Sarner, ‘The Problem with New Adult Books’, *The Huffington Post*, 14 October 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lauren-sarner/the-problem-with-new-adul\\_b\\_3755165.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lauren-sarner/the-problem-with-new-adul_b_3755165.html) [last accessed 20 August 2017].

<sup>76</sup> Michael Cart, *Young Adult Literature: Romance to Realism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: Neal-Schuman, 2016), p.143.

<sup>77</sup> ONS Digital, ‘Why are more young people living with their parents?’, Office for National Statistics, 22 February 2016, <http://visual.ons.gov.uk/living-with-parents/> [last accessed 20 August 2017].

## The Window: Point of View and Narrative Structure

Point of view is important to consider when deciding to write a novel; decisions have to be made on whether the novel is written in first or third person, past or present tense, who the plot is focused around, and whether to have a single or dual narrative. In YA fiction dealing with transgenderism, it is also important to decide whether to tell the story from a cisgender character's point of view, or a trans character's point of view.

Although writing a novel from a cisgender character's point of view is tempting when the author themselves is not transgender, it can have the effect of distancing the reader. *Luna* (2004) is a prime example of that. It is the story of the eponymous Luna as she comes out as transgender, but the story is told through the eyes of her younger sister, Regan. Kimberley Reynolds believes that this set up 'works well because it encourages readers to first care about Liam/Luna and then to accept that continuing to live out the masquerade is intolerable,'<sup>78</sup> but I disagree. The reader is distanced from Luna and, as a consequence, she comes across as mysterious rather than relatable. Regan, on occasion, refers to her as 'Moon Girl',<sup>79</sup> which emphasises her transient and enigmatic nature. This means that the reader never gets a proper look into Luna's head as she very rarely opens up. It does not help that Regan constantly refers to Luna as 'Liam', 'he' or 'my brother'<sup>80</sup>, which makes Luna seem even less real in comparison to the identity she is trying to escape. This misgendering<sup>81</sup> is somewhat understandable from a narrative point of view – Regan is still struggling to accept that Luna is transgender, after all – but this does not make the misgendering acceptable.

Other novels in my body of research approach the cisgender narrator with varying degrees of success. *Almost Perfect* by Brian Katcher is written from the point of view of Logan, a boy who falls for a girl and discovers that she is transgender. His reaction when he discovers the truth is an honest – albeit somewhat negative – portrayal of a confused, heterosexual male from a small town being confronted by things he does not understand.

I'd call Sage, all right.... Tell her if she ever told the world what she really was, or if anyone ever found out, then I'd hurt her. I would.<sup>82</sup>

At first, Logan is repulsed and feels nothing but hatred for Sage. His kneejerk violence – though he never goes through with hurting Sage, he does almost punch her when she tells him she is

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<sup>78</sup> Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.129.

<sup>79</sup> Julie Anne Peters, *Luna* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2006), p.100.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, various.

<sup>81</sup> To "misgender" someone is to refer to them by the wrong pronoun.

<sup>82</sup> Brian Katcher, *Almost Perfect* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2009), p.103.

anatomically male<sup>83</sup> – emphasises how dangerous it is for transgender individuals to reveal their status. The reader is inside Logan’s head, and sees outright his feelings of anger, disgust and of being deceived. Despite this initial disgusted response, Logan struggles to refer to Sage as anything but a girl – ‘[e]ven after her little revelation, I still could not think of Sage with masculine pronouns.’<sup>84</sup> This neatly sidesteps the issue of misgendering and (somewhat) redeems Logan in the audience’s eyes, paving the way for his acceptance of Sage by the end of the novel.<sup>85</sup>

*Jumpstart the World* (2011) by Catherine Ryan Hyde is about a girl, Elle (a minor), living on her own for the first time. She falls in love with her neighbour, Frank, who she discovers is a transman. She struggles with her acceptance of him but, like Logan in *Almost Perfect*, Elle never misgenders Frank. Frank is older and, as such, is comfortable in his identity as a transman in a way that Luna and Sage are not with their identities as transwomen. He also seems more down to earth and “normal” than either Luna or Sage; where Luna is Moon Girl and Sage is an abnormally tall, frizzy-haired redhead with an unusually husky voice, Frank is portrayed as an ordinary, soft-spoken man.<sup>86</sup> Where Luna is stereotypically feminine and Sage is almost eccentric in her behaviour, Frank is forgettable and ordinary. This is brought into sharp focus when Elle crashes a party where Frank is trying to raise money for a double mastectomy, before she truly believes that Frank is a transman:

I don’t know any other way to say this, so I’ll just say it. Like men in dresses. Like you could just see by their faces and shapes that they were men.<sup>87</sup>

Though the other transgender individuals at the party ‘looked and felt strange’<sup>88</sup> to Elle, she still does not equate this to Frank. Through her eyes, the reader sees him as an ordinary man, even, arguably, after she discovers his transgender status. His being transgender is not the most important thing about him as a character. This is what I have strived for in my portrayal of Farrow in *Son of Flames*. Katcher’s Sage could also be seen as a good example of a fully-developed transgender character – she has a personality outside of being transgender, after all – but the way Logan views her through his narration somewhat undermines that:

Why couldn’t she just be a real girl? Our lives would be great. She was so close to the real thing. But close didn’t count.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Brian Katcher, *Almost Perfect* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2009), p.101.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p.103.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p.336.

<sup>86</sup> Catherine Ryan Hyde, *Jumpstart the World* (New York: Ember, 2011), pp.4-5.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p.77-8.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.78.

<sup>89</sup> Brian Katcher, *Almost Perfect* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2009), p.285.

This could be seen as a problem with having a cisgender character for the main narrator as, if *Almost Perfect* was written from Sage's point of view, the undermining of Sage's character would have been completely eliminated.

Though there are a few other novels that have a cisgender narrator, the last novel I want to look at is *Beast* (2016) by Brie Spangler, as this is a much more recent example. Despite the seven years between them, *Beast* has echoes of Katcher's *Almost Perfect*, especially in the male narrator's responses to discovering their love interest is transgender. In both cases, the reaction is vitriolic, transphobic and uncomfortable to read:

My hand balls up and I punch the mirror. The glass cracks and the reflection of my face is splintered – a crawling spiderweb of broken shards breaks it up into pieces. Jagged chunks of a jigsaw puzzle.<sup>90</sup>

Dylan's mindset in this scene is both from finding out that Jamie is trans and getting dumped, though he makes a point to the reader that he was not dumped because 'how fucking dare that kid think he can dump me when we were never a thing.'<sup>91</sup> Despite this, *Beast* ends much more positively than *Almost Perfect*, and Dylan's attitude towards Jamie changes to where he does not undermine her identity.<sup>92</sup> In contrast to Logan's constant references to Sage not being a real girl, by the end of the novel, Dylan says in the narration, '[t]his is the girl.'<sup>93</sup>

In *Son of Flames*, I decided to write from Farrow's point of view rather than from the point of view of one of his cisgender companions. I wanted the reader to have an intimate look at Farrow's thoughts and feelings, and to not have that diluted by seeing him through another character's eyes. It also meant that the fact Farrow is transgender is not treated as a reveal, as it is in *Almost Perfect* or *Beast*, but is an established part of his character from the beginning.

Another feature that many of these texts share is a dual narrative. Whilst I chose to write *Son of Flames* from a single point of view, to emphasise the points made above, dual narratives have the advantage that you can tell the same story from different sides, doubling the chance that the reader will relate to your narrator. In most of the texts with a dual narrative, the story is told from the point of view of one transgender character and one cisgender character. This is a rather literal interpretation of window and mirror texts, with one character acting as a mirror and the other as a window. This is important, as '[w]ith access to mirror texts, students are able to see that their narrative matters, and with access to window texts, students learn to understand and appreciate the

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<sup>90</sup> Brie Spangler, *Beast* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), p.131.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p.129.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p.327.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p.327.

narratives of others.’<sup>94</sup> However, this narrative structure can be problematic, diluting or confusing the message, or contributing to misgendering the trans character. For example, in *Being Emily* (2012) by Rachel Gold, the story is told from the points of view of Emily, who is transgender, and her girlfriend, Claire. Claire’s sections focus mainly on her coming to terms with Emily’s transition, doing research on the computer, and soul-searching through God and the Bible. Whilst this side of the narrative is necessary, she spends most of the novel referring to Emily as Chris and thinking of her as male. This makes sense in the context of her narrative, but I did not want to contradict the deliberate choice I made in *Son of Flames* to refer to Farrow in the narration with exclusively male pronouns.

*The Art of Being Normal* and *Freakboy* (2013) both have more than one transgender narrator which was an option I considered for my novel in the early stages. Whilst *The Art of Being Normal* has one trans male and one trans female narrator, in *Freakboy* both narrators are trans females. In both, one character is questioning and on the verge of coming out, struggling with this new facet of their identity, and the other character is both further along in their transition and somewhat – if not fully – “stealth”, meaning that few people know of their trans identity and know them only by their new selves. Having a dual trans narrative is useful to show the contrast between one trans experience and another. As Everett Maroon states, there is ‘no singular narrative that describes the emotional and physical nature of being trans,’<sup>95</sup> and dual narratives allow authors to emphasise that.

Unfortunately, I could not make this dual narrative idea work in my fantasy setting without it feeling contrived. However, I also did not want to limit my portrayal of trans identities to just Farrow. One of my other characters, Soren, comes from a minority religion and culture within the country *Son of Flames* is set, and in their culture people like Farrow do not have to hide. The Koushan Mai do not see gender as binary, and call people like Farrow “ashan”, seeing them as occupying a space between male and female. During the course of the novel, Soren tells Farrow of this:

“The *ashan* live the lives their hearts lead them to – marrying, raising children, fighting for them. We believe that the heart is the true soul, no matter what form the body takes.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Chad Everett, ‘Windows and Mirrors: Why We Need Diverse Books’, *Scholastic*, <http://www.scholastic.com/bookfairs/readerleader/windows-and-mirrors-why-we-need-diverse-books> [last accessed 26 July 2016].

<sup>95</sup> Everett Maroon, ‘How Trans Happens’, *Gay YA*, 1 June 2011, <http://www.gayya.org/?p=277> [last accessed 15 March 2020].

<sup>96</sup> Emily Vair-Turnbull, *Son of Flames* (2020), p.200.

This is intended to give the reader the idea that Farrow's experience is by no means the only experience out there, and that everybody's journey is different. It also serves to comfort Farrow and help him along in his own journey.

One of the most important decisions I had to make regarding my novel was whether to write about a trans man or a trans woman. Empirically, there are less YA books published that feature trans men than trans women, which mirrors society's perception of transgenderism; trans women are much more visible in the media than trans men. For example, the disparity in the amount of media coverage given to Caitlyn Jenner's transition as opposed to Chaz Bono's, or the fact that the current transgender toilet debate focuses almost entirely on the idea that men would pretend to be trans women to gain access to women-only spaces.<sup>97</sup> Interestingly, books that deal with cross-dressing are the opposite, where there are more instances of females dressing as males than the other way around. This is partly because the female cross-dressing model tends to be focused on proving that girls can do anything boys can do, and on 'exposing the redundancies of two polarised gendered identities and ridiculing the limitations that such a system imposes on supposedly autonomous individuals.'<sup>98</sup> At the end of such narratives, these characters often go back to presenting as female, having proved themselves and the author's point. As female-to-male cross-gender behaviour is more socially-acceptable, it tends to be more invisible than male-to-female cross-gender behaviour, which is seen as more subversive and 'inherently sexual in nature (either in a fetishistic sense or in a homosexual context).'<sup>99</sup> Today, even the most feminine of cisgender females can wear trousers and will not be questioned; a man who wears a dress is a different matter. In essence, I would like to bring more visibility to trans men.

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<sup>97</sup> Katy Steinmetz, 'Why LGBT Advocates Say Bathroom "Predators" Argument Is a Red Herring', Time (2 May 2016), <https://time.com/4314896/transgender-bathroom-bill-male-predators-argument/> [last accessed 13 March 2020].

<sup>98</sup> Victoria Flanagan, *Into the Closet: Cross-Dressing and the Gendered Body in Children's Literature and Film* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2008), p.23.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49.

## Transgenderism in Young Adult Fiction

In writing *Son of Flames*, I had to consider how I established Farrow as transgender in the narrative. From my research into other texts, there were a number of different ways this could be achieved. From the outset, I knew that I did not want to go the route of another character seeing Farrow's genitalia, as this has the problematic side effect of reducing a transgender character to his or her genitals. The recent furore about which toilets are acceptable for a transgender person to use<sup>100</sup> is just one example of the assumed right to knowledge of the status of a trans person's genitalia, and I want no part in furthering that.

In *Luna*, the reader learns quickly that Luna is transgender from narrator Regan. The first hint the reader gets is when she says '[y]eah, I loved her. I couldn't help it. She was my brother.'<sup>101</sup> A couple of pages later, she states it outright:

Was his fascination with playing house the first indication I had that Liam was different? In his head and heart he knew he was a girl? That he was transgender.<sup>102</sup>

This works in *Luna* because it is not written from the transgender character's point of view. Regan is there as a proxy for the audience, to explore transgenderism from the outside. This would not work for my own writing, as Farrow is my point of view character, but I wanted to emulate the fact that there was no reveal, as such, in *Luna*. The reader just knows that Luna is transgender from the beginning, and that is the status quo. It is not treated like a plot twist or a shocking revelation.

In *Almost Perfect*, the opposite is true. The reader spends a significant time with Logan and Sage before it is revealed that Sage is transgender, including becoming invested in their budding romance. Before it goes any further, however, Sage has to tell Logan:

I suddenly didn't want to know. Somehow, I realised that I was going to regret asking her to reveal this much. But I couldn't stop.

"Yes, Sage?"

"I..." She swallowed, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes. "I'm a boy."<sup>103</sup>

This provokes a negative, 'disgusted' reaction from Logan, who is the filter through which the reader is experiencing the story.<sup>104</sup> This comes across as a plot twist and is meant to shock. Whilst I have Farrow coming out to Camber later in the novel, and Camber's response is just as negative as

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<sup>100</sup> Katy Steinmetz, 'Why LGBT Advocates Say Bathroom "Predators" Argument Is a Red Herring', Time (2 May 2016), <https://time.com/4314896/transgender-bathroom-bill-male-predators-argument/> [last accessed 13 March 2020].

<sup>101</sup> Julie Anne Peters, *Luna* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2006), p.3.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>103</sup> Brian Katcher, *Almost Perfect* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2009), pp.98-9.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100.

Logan's – "Are you trying to tell me you can sprout a cock at will?"<sup>105</sup> – I did not want to sensationalise the reader's own revelation that Farrow is transgender.

*Luna* and *Almost Perfect* are both examples from novels where the transgender character is not the protagonist. In novels where the transgender character is the protagonist, the character tends to tell the reader that they are trans early in the narrative. In *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*, Gabe says this:

My birth name is Elizabeth, but I'm a guy. Gabe. My parents think I've gone crazy... but I know I'm right. I've been a boy my whole life.<sup>106</sup>

One thing I really like about this example is Gabe does not say that he is transgender, he says that he is a boy, and that he had been a boy his whole life. That is the impression of transgenderism that I want to get across in my own writing.

For *Son of Flames*, I knew that I would have to establish the fact Farrow is transgender early in the narrative. There are a few hints peppered through the first few pages, for example, references to his chest bindings and the line 'everyone else saw him as a woman, after all.'<sup>107</sup> He has never seen himself as a woman and I wanted to get that across. The way I chose to establish Farrow as transgender, though, was to have him look at his reflection.

The girl in the mirror stared back at him, her jaw set.... The only feature of hers he liked was her eyes. They were the only part of her that seemed to be him.... In her eyes, he could see the man he should be.<sup>108</sup>

Usually, describing the protagonist by having them look into a mirror is rather predictable and seen by some as lazy writing. I wanted to reverse the expectations of such a scene and make it an integral part of understanding some of Farrow's inner psychology. By having the fact that Farrow is trans be the status quo, as in *Luna*, I should therefore avoid any kind of sensationalism.

Both gender dysphoria and the concept of passing as the right sex are important aspects of the novels in my body of research, and I have found Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and romantic grotesque to be useful for inspiration in my own creative work. The metaphor of 'describ[ing] reality in a distorting mirror'<sup>109</sup> is particularly accurate for seeing the world through a transgender character's eyes, particularly regarding their self-body image. According to Maria Nikolajeva,

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<sup>105</sup> Emily Vair-Turnbull, *Son of Flames* (2020), p.218.

<sup>106</sup> Kirstin Cronn-Mills, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (Woodbury: Flux, 2013), p.8.

<sup>107</sup> Emily Vair-Turnbull, *Son of Flames* (2020), p.14.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>109</sup> Maria Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p.10.

Bakhtin applies the concept of carnival to literature, viewing it as a narrative device used to describe reality in a distorting mirror, in a state of temporary deviation from the existing order, as well as total freedom from societal restrictions.<sup>110</sup>

By seeing the world through the eyes of a transgender individual, the world of the cisgender reader is turned upside down. Their notions of gender as it relates to anatomical sex and identity are reversed. The cisgender world the reader is comfortable in becomes a threatening place for the characters in the novels we read; the threat of exposure is real and expounded upon. Everyday tasks, such as going to the toilet in public and buying clothes, become loaded with the potential for disaster. On the other hand, activities that are normally frowned upon are celebrated in these novels, such as gender experimentation and the discussion of sex and genitalia.

Whilst Nikolajeva sees Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque as liberating, Victoria Flanagan, in her book *Into the Closet*, sees it as an 'appropriate theoretical framework... for the comic construction of male cross-dressing,' as it deals with a world turned 'upside down.'<sup>111</sup> She goes on to say that the world turning upside down 'is exactly what happens when males cross-dress and the conventional gender hierarchy is inverted, laughter ensuing as these boys or men wrestle inexpertly with feminine subjectivity.'<sup>112</sup> In the YA fiction I have studied, the cross-dressing aspects have been both exhilarating and frightening for the characters involved, not comic. For example, the first time Emily, from *Being Emily*, goes out in public in women's clothes, she feels both terror and excitement:

I walked in and across the store without actually taking a full breath.... Out of my peripheral vision, I thought I saw a woman turn and look at me, but I didn't stop to find out.<sup>113</sup>

Whilst the comic aspect of the carnivalesque may work for the stereotypical trope of a male cross-dresser failing to act feminine (although that trope is problematic in and of itself), I feel it is inappropriate to apply it to transgender characters.

Gender dysphoria, which, along with 'feelings of discomfort and anxiety' includes 'a strong desire to change, or get rid of, physical signs of their biological sex.'<sup>114</sup> This, in my mind, has a strong link with the notions of the grotesque and the carnivalesque; the anatomy that most people take for granted is the cause of self-loathing in transgender individuals. The character of Sage in *Almost Perfect* by Brian Katcher describes it thus:

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<sup>110</sup> Maria Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p.10.

<sup>111</sup> Victoria Flanagan, *Into the Closet: Cross-Dressing and the Gendered Body in Children's Literature and Film* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2008), p.16.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>113</sup> Rachel Gold, *Being Emily*, (Tallahassee: Bella Books, 2012), p.115.

<sup>114</sup> 'Gender dysphoria', NHS Choices, <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Gender-dysphoria/Pages/Introduction.aspx> [accessed 8 May 2014].

I want you to imagine that instead of a penis, you had some sort of deformed tentacle, or a gaping, oozing sore.<sup>115</sup>

This rather graphic and disturbing image, rather than being a part of the medieval grotesque where laughter reigned supreme, is instead much more at home in Bakhtin's description of the Romantic grotesque, where '[a]ll that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognised by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile.'<sup>116</sup> In this case, a penis, which is 'ordinary' and 'commonplace', is likened to a 'tentacle' and an 'oozing sore', both of which are 'dubious' and 'hostile' images.

Gender dysphoria is not just in relation to what your body physically is, but also what it lacks and cannot do. In *The Art of Being Normal*, Kate, referred to as David throughout the majority of the novel, finds out her younger sister has started her period:

All I can think about is how I'll never experience what Livvy's experiencing tonight. It's a biological impossibility so unfair it makes my entire body throb.<sup>117</sup>

Menstruation is seen as a rite of passage for a lot of women, more so than other markers of puberty, and, unlike more visible changes like breasts, it is currently impossible to replicate with hormones. For trans men, periods are often a source of great dysphoria, as Anton from *Spy Stuff* articulates:

"I felt disgusting. I was *eleven* when they started, it was so awful, none of the other girls at my primary school had one yet, and I felt so vile whenever it happened. I'd destroy my clothes and my bedsheets if they got anything on them..."<sup>118</sup>

These realities are intrinsic to the dysphoria experienced by transgender youth; being transgender is not just about not being comfortable in your own skin, or wanting to dress as the opposite sex. It is important that all aspects of dysphoria are addressed in fiction, to ensure greater understanding and to reassure transgender youth they are not alone. Menstruation, in particular, is a taboo subject in general and is not often addressed at all in YA fiction.<sup>119</sup> Like transgenderism, menstruation is another subject that needs much more representation in novels for young people, so that no one feels alone or abnormal. Rhian Ivory, author of *Hope* (2017)<sup>120</sup>, a YA novel dealing with postmenstrual dysphoria disorder (PMDD), says,

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<sup>115</sup> Brian Katcher, *Almost Perfect* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2009), p.169.

<sup>116</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p.38-9.

<sup>117</sup> Lisa Williamson, *The Art of Being Normal* (Oxford: David Fickling Books, 2015), p.160.

<sup>118</sup> Matthew J. Metzger, *Spy Stuff* (Virginia, JMS Books LLC, 2016), p.108.

<sup>119</sup> Whilst searching for critical sources about menstruation in YA fiction, I only found a few non-academic blog posts.

<sup>120</sup> Rhian Ivory, *Hope* (Cardiff: Firefly Press, 2017).

*Hope* is the book that I have received the strongest response from in terms of letters, emails, social media contact and face to face interaction.<sup>121</sup>

This shows how important it is for YA fiction to be able to open discussion about potentially difficult topics like menstruation. Inspired especially by *Spy Stuff*, I wanted to include menstruation in *Son of Flames*; menstruation coincides with the peak of Farrow's dysphoria in that he sees it as an inexorable sign of his biological womanhood.

Misery rose in his throat. Not only was he too weak to save the others, his body took every opportunity to remind him what he was not. What he could never be.<sup>122</sup>

Later in the novel, there is a particularly important scene where he begins his period on a ship in the middle of the ocean, and the threat of exposure is high.<sup>123</sup>

Several of the novels in my body of research deal with the important topics of transphobic violence, self-harm and suicide. These are all crucial subjects to explore in trans YA fiction, as in the UK 'nearly one in 10 (9%) [transgender pupils] have received death threats at school' and '84% say they have self-harmed and 45% have tried to take their own lives.'<sup>124</sup> Exploring this in fiction opens pathways to dialogue with young adults. With transphobic violence in particular, this could help build empathy in readers who might not otherwise understand that, first, being transgender is not a choice, and two, how dangerous and scary it is. In this way, it may lead to these readers being kinder and more understanding when they meet a transgender person in real life.

*Almost Perfect* has one of the most graphic representations of transphobic violence out of the novels I have looked at, though we only hear of it second hand. Sage, after the event, tells Logan,

[The man] fucking tackled me, then really started pounding on me. I kept begging him to stop, but he just smiled and said he was going to fuck me up the ass.<sup>125</sup>

This violent act is foreshadowed earlier in the novel when Logan almost punches Sage when she reveals her identity to him.<sup>126</sup> This emphasises that transphobic attacks are not isolated, rare incidents; for the transgender individual, an attack could come from anyone, from a trusted friend (symbolised by Logan/the narrative viewpoint) or from a stranger (the later attacker).

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<sup>121</sup> Rhian Ivory, 'April Artist of the Month – Rhian Ivory', Authors Abroad, <https://www.authorsabroad.com/news/2019/2/5/author-of-the-month-april-rhian-ivory> [last accessed 29 April 2020].

<sup>122</sup> Emily Vair-Turnbull, *Son of Flames* (2020), p.134.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p.198.

<sup>124</sup> Sally Weale, 'Almost half of trans pupils in UK have attempted suicide, survey finds', *The Guardian*, 27 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jun/27/half-of-trans-pupils-in-the-uk-tried-to-take-their-own-lives-survey-finds> [last accessed 18 August 2017].

<sup>125</sup> Brian Katcher, *Almost Perfect* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2009), p.290.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p.101.

Not only is the attack on Sage physical violence that could easily have killed her, it threatened to escalate to sexual violence. This was not an isolated finding; several of the novels that depicted transphobic violence also referenced or directly depicted sexual violence. For example, in *The Art of Being Normal*, Leo is lured to the woods, tied to a tree, and his clothes are slashed.<sup>127</sup> In *If I Was Your Girl* (2016), Amanda is punched and almost raped by a boy after she is outed at the school prom:

“You coulda had this the easy way. Now let’s see how close you are to the real thing.”

....

I kicked and slapped at him but my feet couldn’t get to him and he quickly pinned my wrists down by my head. He had just kicked my knees apart when I heard a metallic click from behind him.<sup>128</sup>

This is a reflection of real life, where it is estimated around half of transgender people will experience a sexual assault; a case that immediately springs to mind is the rape and murder of Brandon Teena in 1993.<sup>129</sup> Even *Lily and Dunkin* (2016), a middle grade<sup>130</sup> novel, had an instance of sexual assault:

In one swift, surprising motion, Vasquez bends and yanks down my shorts *and* underwear. “Well look at that,” he says. “You are a boy. Barely.”<sup>131</sup>

Though this is a relatively minor incident, it is important to remember that this is a middle grade novel and the characters are relatively young; this is still sexual assault. Unfortunately, there are no consequences for this in the novel.

In *Spy Stuff*, one of the reasons that Anton has to move schools is that the boys in his school threaten to rape him:

“One girl threatened to knife me if I went in the girls’ toilets anymore, but the boys would threaten to rape me and said I just hadn’t worked out what a vagina was for if I went in the boys’ instead.”<sup>132</sup>

This example of “corrective” sexual assault, where this is being used as a punishment for not conforming to societal norms. Corrective rape is often used to refer to ‘the rape of gay men and

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<sup>127</sup> Lisa Williamson, *The Art of Being Normal* (Oxford: David Fickling Books, 2015), p.208-9.

<sup>128</sup> Meredith Russo, *If I Was Your Girl* (London: Usborne, 2016), p.250-1.

<sup>129</sup> FORGE, ‘Sexual Violence in the Transgender Community Survey’ (2005), unpublished data; reported by: Office for Victims of Crime (2014) [https://www.ovc.gov/pubs/forge/sexual\\_numbers.html](https://www.ovc.gov/pubs/forge/sexual_numbers.html) [last accessed 23 August 2017].

<sup>130</sup> A middle grade novel is typically aimed at readers from eight to twelve years old.

<sup>131</sup> Donna Gephart, *Lily and Dunkin* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2016), p.301.

<sup>132</sup> Matthew J. Metzger, *Spy Stuff* (Virginia: JMS Books LLC, 2016), p.113.

lesbians to “cure” them of their sexual orientation<sup>133</sup>, but, again, one of the first cases that springs to mind is of Brandon Teena, a trans man. There is another example in *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*, where one of Gabe’s bullies presses Gabe’s face into his crotch.<sup>134</sup> Like in *Lily and Dunkin*, there are no consequences for this, even though Gabe goes to the police.

The officer who talks to us is polite but distant. Another officer stands in the corner of the room and scowls the entire time. He asks one question: “So you’re... a dude... but you’re still sort of a girl?” After I nod, his lip curls into a permanent sneer and stays that way for the rest of the time we’re there. The polite officer promises to check into it.<sup>135</sup>

In some ways, this is almost more disturbing than the “corrective” assault itself, as it makes authority figures – who one is supposed to trust – complicit in the act.

*Look Past* by Eric Devine is another novel I would like to highlight in relation to transphobic violence, as the plot is centred around it. A girl is murdered because she accepts Avery, the trans main character, and then the killer turns their attention on Avery himself.<sup>136</sup> Whilst the plot of *Look Past* is unrealistic and extreme, it is a reminder that murder statistics for transgender people are high, especially in the United States where the novel is set.<sup>137</sup> Hopefully, through fiction, this statistic will change.

In the first draft of *Son of Flames*, there was a rape, but it was not linked to Farrow’s transgenderism; I did not want to link all violence in the novel to being trans, because I did not want to perpetuate the idea that transphobic assault is inevitable. Whilst writing this, especially in regard to the second draft and beyond, I found that writing a graphic scene like this hit too close to home for me and was negatively affecting my mental health. Though ‘[w]riting is a means of articulating difficult feelings and unhappy memories,’<sup>138</sup> I am not yet at a comfortable stage in my recovery to deal with this particular scene. In subsequent drafts, the assault is interrupted:

An ugly crunch broke through his panic. The man dropped like a stone, his body sagging on top of Farrow’s, unmoving. Standing over them was Grace, her copper hair loose and wild and her face as white as milk, holding an iron pan above her head.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Clare Carter, ‘The Brutality of “Corrective Rape”’, *The New York Times* (27 July 2013), <http://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/07/26/opinion/26corrective-rape.html> [last accessed 14 March 2020].

<sup>134</sup> Kirstin Cronn-Mills, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (Woodbury: Flux, 2013), p.168.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p.171.

<sup>136</sup> Eric Devine, *Look Past* (Philadelphia: Running Press Teens, 2016), p.51, p.106.

<sup>137</sup> Human Rights Campaign, ‘Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2017’, Human Rights Campaign, <http://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2017> [last accessed 18 August 2017].

<sup>138</sup> Debra Penman, Deborah Philips, and Liz Linnington, *Writing Well: Creative Writing and Mental Health* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999), p.13.

<sup>139</sup> Emily Vair-Turnbull, *Son of Flames* (2020), p.41.

This allowed me to keep the scene, which had become part of Farrow’s character arc, whilst also allowing me to protect myself.

Suicide and self-harm are less common than transphobic violence in trans young adult fiction, possibly due to, as Michael Cart writes, ‘fear of creating a copycat effect’<sup>140</sup> – as he points out, though, this taboo is slowly lessening thanks to the success of books such as Jay Asher’s *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007).<sup>141</sup> *Almost Perfect*, in addition to its depiction of transphobic violence, frankly discusses suicide:

“No, Logan. I tried to slash my wrists.”

....

I pictured an effeminate junior high boy who needed to be a girl so badly that he wanted to die if he couldn’t.<sup>142</sup>

The juxtaposition between what Sage ‘needs’ (to be a girl) and ‘wants’ (to die if not) is particularly poignant here. Even though Logan does not truly understand Sage, he understands on some level that being a girl for Sage is not just a choice. The blunt way that this sentence is phrased, that Sage would rather die than be a boy, supports Sage’s lack of choice in how she feels, and is much more effective in putting that across to the reader than a statement explicitly saying it is not a choice would be. In *If I Was Your Girl*, the reader meets Amanda after she has transitioned, but, in flashbacks, it is explained that a suicide attempt was the reason she started to get help:

“What if your son told you he was your daughter?”

My mother was quiet for a moment....

When she spoke next, I listened. “Anything, *anyone*, is better than a dead son.”<sup>143</sup>

Amanda’s mother’s words are similar to Sage’s declaration in *Almost Perfect*. It emphasises that being transgender is not a choice, and that, for many trans people, being allowed to transition is a matter of life and death.

In *Son of Flames*, Farrow contemplates suicide at the beginning of the story, as a way to get out of the betrothal that will trap him in a role he does not want:

His eyes dropped again to the shadowed surface of the water. The spider-thought scratched at the back of his skull.

It would only take a moment.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Michael Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 3rd Edition (Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2016), p.171.

<sup>141</sup> Jay Asher, *Thirteen Reasons Why* (New York: Razorbill, 2007).

<sup>142</sup> Brian Katcher, *Almost Perfect* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2009), p.165-6.

<sup>143</sup> Meredith Russo, *If I Was Your Girl* (London: Usborne, 2016), p.17.

<sup>144</sup> Emily Vair-Turnbull, *Son of Flames* (2020), p.8.

He is not thinking about suicide with any intent, but the thought crosses his mind several times. I wanted to highlight just how deep his feelings went that suicide, even briefly, felt like a valid alternative to going through with his marriage to Camber.

Regarding self-harm, there is one particular book I want to highlight. In *Lily and Dunkin*, reference is made to Lily wanting to cut off her penis:

“She told me she wanted to cut her penis off, Gary. That it didn’t belong.” An unbearable silence, then Mom’s voice: “She was five years old, Gar. She knew when she was five.”<sup>145</sup>

Though this seems extreme, it is an echo of at least one real-life case where a young transgender girl tried to cut off her own penis at aged four.<sup>146</sup> This highlights just how distressing the symptom of dysphoria is, and shows that it is much more than just being uncomfortable with your body. It is worth mentioning that Cris Beam’s *I Am J* also deals with self-harm, but focuses on Melissa, J’s cisgender friend, and her struggles with cutting.

One aspect that is relatively consistent through the novels in my body of research is that most of them try to give the reader some education on transgender issues. This is important, as readers will often specifically seek out these novels to further their knowledge on what being transgender means and, for some transgender teens, these books will be their first port of call in their journey to discovering their identity. An author, therefore, must be careful that the information they include does not come across in a didactic manner, or in a way that feels dry and textbook-like. In *Parrotfish* (2011), for example, Grady at the beginning of the novel is already quite knowledgeable about gender and being trans. Consequently, he knows a lot of the terminology already, so a reader who knows nothing at all about transgender issues might struggle to keep up. Grady imparts this information in passing, as if it is no big deal, and this helps avoid the text sounding obviously educational. Occasionally, though, Grady will monologue tangentially about gender assignment and comes across like a mouthpiece for the author:

And why was changing your gender such a big honking deal anyway? People changed lots of other personal things all the time. They dyed their hair and dieted themselves to near death.... Why was gender the one sacred thing we weren’t supposed to change? Who made that rule?<sup>147</sup>

It would not be an issue if this happened just once, but the fact he rants about this on more than one occasion jolts the reader out of the story and makes it feel as though Wittlinger is preaching.

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<sup>145</sup> Donna Gephart, *Lily and Dunkin* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2016), p.50.

<sup>146</sup> Francine Anker, ‘My son tried to cut off his penis at 4 – now he’s a girl!’, *Closer* (02 October 2012), <http://lifestyle.one/closer/news-real-life/in-the-news/son-tried-cut-penis-4-now-s-girl/> [last accessed 24 August 2017].

<sup>147</sup> Ellen Wittlinger, *Parrotfish* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), p.132.

Cris Beam in *I Am J* uses the opposite approach, having J know absolutely nothing about being transgender. In this way, the reader learns along with him about all the different options, in particular about chest binding and taking supplementary testosterone.

In the novels where the focalising character is cisgender, knowledge is generally imparted by the main character asking questions of the transgender character. This works well from the point of view of a cisgender reader, where it serves an introduction to transgender issues. *Beast* by Brie Spangler uses Dylan's ignorance to debunk a common myth about transgender people:

"You always knew you were a girl trapped in a boy's body?"

"Nope."

Every clip I researched on YouTube has lied to me. "But... that's what everyone says."

"That's fine for them, but I say something different.... But when I was twelve, I started to realise that I wasn't a boy who liked glitter and who had crushes on boys... I was a girl who liked glitter and who had crushes on boys."<sup>148</sup>

In my opinion, however, whilst useful for cisgender readers, this is not the best way for a transgender reader to learn about transition options. In *Almost Perfect*, when Sage tries to explain the intricacies of gender confirmation surgery, Logan sings loudly over her so he does not have to hear:

"They won't actually remove my penis," lectured Sage. "They'll slit it laterally to create..."

"O say, can you see? By the dawn's early light!" I sang at the top of my lungs.<sup>149</sup>

This wilful ignorance is in contrast to the transgender narrators, who are generally trying to find out as much information as possible.

In *Just Girls* (2014), Ella has had gender affirmation surgery and goes through some of the aftercare involved. Though imparting a lot of information, Gold uses Ella's emotions and thoughts about the process to personalise the explanation:

These instructions involved dilating it daily with a series of glass rods so that the newly rearranged tissue would develop adequate depth and width. For that I was really glad I had my own room.<sup>150</sup>

This, in my opinion, is the best way to get across information without being didactic. It needs to be worked into the story and made personal to the character, rather than having the character sound like they are impartially rattling off an encyclopaedia. In *If I Was Your Girl*, Amanda has also had gender affirmation surgery, and it is treated even less academically than in *Just Girls*:

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<sup>148</sup> Brie Spangler, *Beast* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), p.158.

<sup>149</sup> Brian Katcher, *Almost Perfect* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2009), p.168.

<sup>150</sup> Rachel Gold, *Just Girls* (Tallahassee: Bella Books, 2014), p.188.

I took a dose of hydrocodone when I was done dilating. Everything between my thighs and hips felt like it had been run through a wood chipper, the dilation ritual was a degrading chore, the painkillers reminded me of the time I tried to kill myself – and I still couldn't have been happier.<sup>151</sup>

In this novel, it is treated less like a learning experience for the reader and more like an experience the character is going through. This makes the information easier to absorb for the reader, who will not feel as though they are getting lectured.

This turned out to be difficult to implement in my own work, as talking about hormones or gender affirmation surgery was not possible in my fantasy setting. I was able to have a brief mention of binding, though again, due to the fantasy setting, it was not able to be portrayed in an instructive way.<sup>152</sup> In this way, my choosing of the fantasy genre was limiting. I was unable to give the reader much education on practical transgender issues. However, I feel I was able to instead focus on the social and emotional side of being transgender and was able to avoid didacticism. Partway through my project, however, this lack of being able to educate worried me and, for a while, I tried to switch my novel to the contemporary fiction genre. Unfortunately, I found it much harder to come up with a plot that was not centred around my protagonist's transgenderism, particularly as it is a genre I am not particularly comfortable with writing. I also had trouble getting invested in this new story when I was already so invested in Farrow's story. After a couple of months, I switched back to my fantasy novel, accepting that I would not be able to cover the modern, practical issues of being transgender in today's society.

One fact I would like to highlight in my creative work is that transgenderism is not necessarily about society's view of gender roles; you do not need to like dresses and make-up to be a trans woman, or like trucks and football to be a trans man. However, societal pressure means that, often, trans people are stuck in traditional gender roles more often than their cisgender counterparts. Deborah L. Davis, a developmental psychologist, states that

[u]nfortunately, when a trans woman isn't superfeminine, some people are confused by why she would go to the trouble of coming out, when she's not going "all out."<sup>153</sup>

This brings to mind Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity. She states that 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.'<sup>154</sup> To her, gender is created by the acts people perform

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<sup>151</sup> Meredith Russo, *If I Was Your Girl* (London: Usborne, 2016), p.203.

<sup>152</sup> Emily Vair-Turnbull, *Son of Flames* (2020), p.6.

<sup>153</sup> Deborah L. Davis, 'Are Transgender Women Just Reinforcing Gender Stereotypes?', *Psychology Today*, 15 September 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/laugh-cry-live/201509/are-transgender-women-just-reinforcing-sexist-stereotypes> [last accessed 7 August 2017].

<sup>154</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.25.

in their day to day life, and that there 'is no inner essence of gender.'<sup>155</sup> This does not mean, however, that gender can be whatever an individual wants it to be without consequences. She also states that '[p]erforming one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect.'<sup>156</sup> A transgender person not acting overtly as the gender they identify as would, in the majority of cases, prompt questioning by the people around them, stares, or, in some cases, violence. This is because '[o]ur gender enactments are regulated by powerful social norms'; these punishments, then are examples of 'the policing of [these] gender norms.'<sup>157</sup>

Claiming that there is no inner sense of gender goes against much of the common ideas of transgenderism; indeed, it seems to go against the idea of having a sense of self. However, more recently, Butler has directly addressed transgender people in an attempt to explain further. In an interview with The TransAdvocate, she states,

Some trans people thought that in claiming that gender is performative that I was saying that it is all a fiction, and that a person's felt sense of gender was therefore "unreal." That was never my intention. I sought to expand our sense of what gender realities could be. But I think I needed to pay more attention to what people feel, how the primary experience of the body is registered, and the quite urgent and legitimate demand to have those aspects of sex recognized and supported.<sup>158</sup>

In this, Butler seems to be stating that, although she believes gender is created by the acts we do rather than any inner self driving these acts, the sense of identity we hold within ourselves is still a powerful force and should not be swept aside. Personally, I believe the inner sense of self is the most important part of gender. In *Son of Flames*, the inner sense of self was critical to Farrow's identity. He is clear that 'everyone else [sees] him as a woman'<sup>159</sup>, but this is not how he sees himself. The girl he sees in the mirror is separate from him, and by the end of the novel, she has disappeared entirely.<sup>160</sup>

Though Butler sees gender as performative rather than a performance, expressing gender identity by performing a role was a common thread in a couple of the books I read. Both *George* (2015) by Alex Gino and *Gracefully Grayson* by Ami Polonsky had a school play as a central plot

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<sup>155</sup> Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, 'Gender' in *Critical Psychology: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. Dennis Fox, Isaac Prilleltensky and Stephanie Austin (London: Sage, 2009), pp.232-49 (p.241).

<sup>156</sup> Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec 1988), pp.519-31 (p.528), <https://www.jstor.org/winchester.idm.oclc.org/stable/3207893> [last accessed 29 October 2019].

<sup>157</sup> Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, 'Gender' in *Critical Psychology: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. Dennis Fox, Isaac Prilleltensky and Stephanie Austin (London: Sage, 2009), pp.232-49 (p.241).

<sup>158</sup> Cristan Williams, 'Gender Performance: The TransAdvocate Interviews Judith Butler', The TransAdvocate, May 1 2014, [https://www.transadvocate.com/gender-performance-the-transadvocate-interviews-judith-butler\\_n\\_13652.htm](https://www.transadvocate.com/gender-performance-the-transadvocate-interviews-judith-butler_n_13652.htm) [last accessed 29 October 2019].

<sup>159</sup> Emily Vair-Turnbull, *Son of Flames* (2020), p.14.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p.245.

point. For George, seeing her performing as a girl in the school play would help her mother see her for who she really was:

“It’s just...” George sighed. “I just thought that... you know... if I were Charlotte in the play, my mom might...”  
“See that you’re a girl?”<sup>161</sup>

George is ten, so this logic makes sense. If he is allowed to perform as a girl, without the concern of social sanctions, everyone can see how comfortable he is and perhaps they would believe him when he tells them he is a girl in ‘real life’. Grayson has similar reasoning for being in the school play:

Ms. Landen helps me step into my golden gown for Act One. And even though Finn is leaving because of it, and even though Aunt Sally thinks I’m a monster, when I look at myself in the giant, floor-to-ceiling mirrors, I finally see myself the way I’m *supposed* to be - my inside self matched up with my outside self. And now, everyone else will finally see it, too.<sup>162</sup>

Both George and Grayson use the school plays as a vehicle to gain confidence in themselves as girls, and to get visibility for their true selves. Especially for younger children, perhaps seeing gender as a performance is helpful and healthy.

In *Son of Flames*, performance is not so much an overt part of the story, though it is not entirely absent. The donning of gendered clothing could be likened to putting on a costume. Farrow’s gown for the engagement ball, for example, symbolises his reluctant acceptance of his new role as future queen.<sup>163</sup> Similarly, when forced into feminine clothing whilst at Snowbarrow, Farrow is also being symbolically put in his place as a woman.<sup>164</sup> In Farrow’s eyes, too, he is playing a role when he acts as Viola:

“Farrow doesn’t feel pretend to me.” The words came out like a croak, cracked and broken on his lips. He could not make himself meet Camber’s eyes. “I feel as though, my entire life, I have been pretending to be Viola.”<sup>165</sup>

This is intended to emphasise that Farrow is his true self, and the girl everyone sees him as is only a role he has been forced to play. At first, he was willing to perform the gender roles society expected of him – that of a wife and a mother, in particular – but as the story goes on, and he gets to know Prince Camber and falls in love with him, these roles feel more and more like a performance and a lie.

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<sup>161</sup> Alex Gino, *George* (London: Scholastic Children’s Books, 2015), p.146.

<sup>162</sup> Ami Polonsky, *Gracefully Grayson* (Hyperion: New York, 2014), p.214.

<sup>163</sup> Emily Vair-Turnbull, *Son of Flames* (2020), p.20.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p.125.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p.217.

One of the most common themes between all the YA novels I read for this research project was that of romance. This makes sense; as well as exploring their identity, young adulthood is often the age where one explores relationships and sex for the first time. In most of the novels, being transgender has a negative effect on the romantic relationships. For example, in *Almost Perfect*, Logan is disgusted by Sage and even thinks about violence – ‘if anyone ever found out, I’d hurt her. I would.’<sup>166</sup> However, in *Spy Stuff* by Matthew J. Metzger, the opposite is true. Anton is stealth in his new school, and starts to go out with his friend, Jude. When he is outed to Jude, Jude reacts calmly:

“But you *did* mean to tell me?”

“Yes,” Anton whispered, digging his fingers into Jude’s back. Suddenly, it seemed vital that Jude understand that. “I was going to tell you that afternoon, actually. That was... that was the thing we needed to talk about.”

“Okay,” Jude said simply, and pulled away. Anton immediately felt cold again, and kept a tight grip on Jude’s upper arms. “Then I’m not mad,” Jude repeated.<sup>167</sup>

This is important, as it reminds readers that coming out is not automatically a negative experience, and not everyone is going to react with violence.

In *Son of Flames*, I would have liked to portray a romantic relationship like Anton and Jude’s. However, with Farrow and Camber, this just did not work out. Firstly, due to the fantasy setting and without our modern knowledge and acceptance of transgender people, Camber found it much more difficult to process after Farrow came out to him.

“If you wish to learn to fight, to do all the things a man can do, as my queen I could allow that. Within reason, of course.”<sup>168</sup>

At first, he assumes that Farrow wants to be able to do the same things that men in their culture do; he does not understand the difference in what Farrow is telling him. When he finally does realise what he is telling him, he lashes out angrily.<sup>169</sup> In Serukis, gender is linked inextricably with sex. They have not come as far in their theories around gender and sex as we have in the real world.

However, towards the end of the novel, I wanted them to at least come to an understanding, even if they could not be together. I wanted there to be hope. I also wanted it to be clear that societal expectations were a large part of forming Camber’s feelings on the matter:

“There are expectations, not only of a queen but of an heir. Even if I could love you as a man, it’s just impossible.”<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Brian Katcher, *Almost Perfect* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2009), p.103.

<sup>167</sup> Matthew J. Metzger, *Spy Stuff* (Virginia, JMS Books LLC, 2016), p.105.

<sup>168</sup> Emily Vair-Turnbull, *Son of Flames* (2020), p.217.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p.218.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p.241.

Camber, as the crown prince, needs to marry a woman because he needs an heir. Of course, that is not the only reason their relationship cannot work out – he tells Farrow that he could not love him as a man, because his sexual orientation is straight. However, they end the conversation as friends, despite no small measure of sadness on both sides.

I have always intended *Son of Flames* to be the first in a trilogy, but after the first draft was written it became clear that it also needed to stand on its own. Whilst it is still the first book in the Fallen Sons trilogy, I have made sure it has a fulfilling ending. The plot of *Son of Flames* has always been about journeys: firstly, their physical journey from the danger of King's Rock to the perceived safety of Eshua, and secondly, Farrow's inner journey into outwardly becoming his true self. In the first draft, I ended the story with disappointment that the King of Eshua would not help them as they had hoped, and with their plans for going forward in the second book. This left *Son of Flames* without a satisfying conclusion. As it stands now, *Son of Flames* ends instead with the conclusion of Farrow's journey, on the road to the capital of Eshua:

In the reflection in the blade, he could see the boy he had always wanted to be, though he was not sure the price had been worth it.  
Viola Hargrove was dead.  
Farrow lived.<sup>171</sup>

As well as this, Camber's mindset has shifted from 'I will be King' to 'I am King.'<sup>172</sup> These two changes give the novel a much more definite ending, whilst still leaving scope for a future sequel. Despite my original intentions to not have Farrow's transgenerism be a major part of the plot, it ended up being much more important to the overall story organically. As an integral part of Farrow's character arc, it was not something I could drop in at the beginning of the story and ignore. Though it was not the driving force of the plot, it wove itself into the story threads and became part of the fabric that made up the overall narrative.

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<sup>171</sup> Emily Vair-Turnbull, *Son of Flames* (2020), p.245.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p.241.

## Conclusion

No two novels are going to be the same, even when dealing with the same topics. *Junk* (1996) by Melvyn Burgess<sup>173</sup> is not the same as *Crank* (2004) by Ellen Hopkins<sup>174</sup>, though they both deal with drug addiction in young adults. *Speak* (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson<sup>175</sup> is not the same as *Asking for It* (2015) by Louise O'Neill<sup>176</sup>, though they both deal with rape. A quotation that I have kept returning to throughout this project is one from Elliot Maroon:

There is no singular narrative that describes the emotional and physical nature of being trans...<sup>177</sup>

The more texts that I have looked at throughout the course of my research, the clearer this has become. From Luna, who has to leave home in order to live her truth<sup>178</sup>, and Sage, who cuts off Logan and starts a new life after a violent assault<sup>179</sup>, to Lily, who finally gets accepted by her father<sup>180</sup>, and Anton, who finds himself accepted by his boyfriend and friends<sup>181</sup>, each story that I have read has been unique. In other words, there is no singular transgender narrative that runs through contemporary YA novels, but an amalgam of different stories and realities.

Though all stories are different, this does not mean an author can write whatever they want. Without proper research, even the most well-intentioned portrayal of a minority can become marred by harmful stereotypes. Reading a variety of different sources or talking to people who have lived these experiences can help authors to write a well-rounded and unique character. These characters should not be exact clones of people or stories the author has researched, but should be informed by a rich tapestry of others' stories in order to stand on their own.

Despite the fact that each author's portrayal of transgenderism is different, there are still many similarities between the novels. The vast majority of the YA novels I looked at are realistic contemporary fiction, and many of these fall into the issue novel subgenre; that is, they are novels about what it is like to be transgender. For *Son of Flames*, I wanted to do something different, to provide an original contribution to my field, so I chose to write in the fantasy genre. Fantasy has a

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<sup>173</sup> Melvin Burgess, *Junk* (London: Penguin, 1996).

<sup>174</sup> Ellen Hopkins, *Crank* (London: Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2004).

<sup>175</sup> Laurie Halse Anderson, *Speak* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

<sup>176</sup> Louise O'Neill, *Asking for It* (London: Quercus Books, 2015).

<sup>177</sup> Everett Maroon, 'How Trans Happens', Gay YA, 1 June 2011, <http://www.gayya.org/?p=277> [last accessed 15 March 2020].

<sup>178</sup> Julie Anne Peters, *Luna* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2006), p.239.

<sup>179</sup> Brian Katcher, *Almost Perfect* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2009), p.351-4.

<sup>180</sup> Donna Gephart, *Lily and Dunkin* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2016), p.325.

<sup>181</sup> Matthew J. Metzger, *Spy Stuff* (Virginia, JMS Books LLC, 2016), p.219.

reputation for being a genre equipped to deal with ‘difficult questions’,<sup>182</sup> so I felt it was a suitable space to explore transgenderism without making the plot a slave to the issue.

Choosing the fantasy genre did not come without downsides, however. I was unable to inform the reader much about the realities of being transgender in the modern day, particularly in regard to current medical interventions, such as hormone therapy, or cosmetic tools like binders or packers. This would not have made sense with the worldbuilding and would have come across as incongruous or didactic, both of which would turn off readers. Instead, I focused on the emotional realities of being transgender and the social consequences of coming out. Ultimately, I feel that the resulting novel is stronger for that.

As previously discussed, novels act as both windows and mirrors, allowing readers to both view the lives of others and see themselves reflected through the stories they read. This is crucial in YA fiction, as this both helps young adults to learn empathy for others – and in particular to ‘take away the “othering” aspect of the Other.’<sup>183</sup> As Neil Gaiman says, a reader ‘learn[s] that everyone else out there is a me, as well.’<sup>184</sup> That is, through YA fiction, readers learn that every person is an individual with their own thoughts and feelings. This realisation allows readers to put themselves in others’ shoes and therefore develop empathy for characters – and, as a consequence, other people – with different stories than themselves.

YA fiction also aids readers in discovering their own identity in a time when their sense of self is in flux. It gives readers different opportunities to find characters they can relate to or that resonate with them. For transgender readers, this can be particularly important. In the UK, ‘45% [of transgender pupils] have tried to take their own lives.’<sup>185</sup> Being able to read about characters like them and to relate to the thoughts and feelings of those characters goes a long way in helping these young adults feel less alone. Because of this, it is important that not every portrayal of transgenderism in YA fiction is the same. If a reader cannot relate to one character, there is a chance they will relate to a different character with a different story. Authors, as a collective, must provide a wide range of windows and mirrors to best enrich the identities and empathies of a larger spectrum of readers.

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<sup>182</sup> Ellen Renner, ‘Rewriting the World: Fantasy and Social Issues (YA Shot Blog Tour with Ellen Renner)’, Thoughts from the Hearthfire, 23 October 2015, <http://www.hearthfire.bethkemp.co.uk/rewriting-the-world-fantasy-and-social-issues-ya-shot-blog-tour-with-ellen-renner/> [last accessed 10 March 2020].

<sup>183</sup> Laura Lam, ‘The Grey of Gender: Intersex and Gender Variant/Non-Binary Characters in YA’, Gay YA, 3 June 2013, <http://www.gayya.org/?p=586> [last accessed 2 March 2016].

<sup>184</sup> Neil Gaiman, Empathy Lab UK, <https://www.empathylab.uk/empathy-and-stories> [last accessed 28 April 2020].

<sup>185</sup> Sally Weale, ‘Almost half of trans pupils in UK have attempted suicide, survey finds’, *The Guardian*, 27 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jun/27/half-of-trans-pupils-in-the-uk-tried-to-take-their-own-lives-survey-finds> [last accessed 18 August 2017].

My second research aim was to look at whether it is possible to write a YA novel about transgenderism without this being the driving force of the plot. Originally, I wanted to avoid the issues of transgenderism completely; that is, I did not want to have the typical coming out scenes that were commonplace in the books I looked at. I wanted Farrow's gender identity to be incidental to the plot. However, as I was writing, it became clear that to approach it from that angle was to do a disservice to Farrow's character and to my readers. Firstly, having Farrow be transgender without it having any impact on the plot made it seem like I was including diversity for the sake of it. Therefore, it felt as though *Son of Flames* was not functioning as either a window or a mirror. Secondly, coming out is not a one-time event in someone's life and, therefore, should not be reduced to an issue to be ticked off. In order for Farrow's character to grow and change throughout the novel, he had to come out to different characters when it felt natural and as he grew more comfortable in his gender identity.

Once I realised this, my aim for *Son of Flames* was instead to strike the delicate balance of having Farrow's transgender identity be important to the narrative, without being the central conflict of the plot. Though the main plot of *Son of Flames* is concerned with the usurping of Prince Camber's throne and the journey to safety in Eshua, Farrow's transgenderism informs his actions at every moment. It is a large part of his character – though, crucially, not his only defining trait – so to exclude it from his character arc would only serve to make him less believable. As his transgender identity is so important to other parts of the narrative, such as character and theme, ignoring it in the plot felt forced. The crux of the matter is to remember that a transgender identity is merely one part of a fully formed, well-rounded character. Dealing with the consequences of Farrow's transgenderism throughout the story was not merely reducing him to his gender identity, as I feared it would, but was breathing life into his character by allowing his other traits to shine through in how he dealt with these situations.

Farrow's character arc – his transgender narrative – is just one strand that makes up the story of *Son of Flames* and, as a plot thread, is wrapped up by the end of the novel. Whilst the decision to "kill" Viola and fully become Farrow will have consequences later in the trilogy, particularly in regard to his family, the plot dealing with Farrow's identity is not the plot that drives the trilogy forward. The *Fallen Sons* trilogy is driven by the plots of Camber wanting to reclaim the Seruic throne and the uncovering of the conspiracy that led to the murder of the King, his father.

Therefore, I have found that it is possible to write a YA fiction novel portraying transgenderism without it being the driving force of the active, literal plot. However, Farrow's transgender identity is an important part of the narrative of *Son of Flames*, even if it is not the main plot. In order for the novel to function as a window and a mirror to readers, a transgender identity

cannot be tacked onto a character for the sake of diversity. It must be a fully realised part of their character, well-researched and not stereotypical. As a consequence, the transgender identity will inform how the character reacts to the plot and may act as a catalyst to certain subplots. As I see it, this is not a bad thing, and only serves to emphasise the novel's role as a window and a mirror. As Everett Maroon writes,

[a]t the end of the day, if we are able to say we opened up space for readers to see themselves or understand each other, we've had a damn good day.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Everett Maroon, 'How Trans Happens', Gay YA, 1 June 2011, <http://www.gayya.org/?p=277> [last accessed 4 March 2016].

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