

Ash Rising

By **Katya Lebeque**

**Copyright © 2018 by Katya Lebeque
Worldsmith Press
All rights reserved.**

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by mechanical or electronic means without express written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations for purposes of book reviews and critiques only whereby the author has been notified.

Cover art: R.J. Palmer Design & Illustration

A note from the Author

The next instalment in the Ash series will be available soon: *Ashes Slowly Fall*

Readers of Ash Rising can get a special discount on the sequel, which releases in October. Simply visit www.katyaliebeque.com and fill in your email address when the lightbox appears to offer you your free chapter sample. This will entitle you to your copy of *Ashes Slowly Fall* before it's even available to the public at the massively discounted price of \$0,99.

We hope to see you there!

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Acknowledgments

Advanced reader sample of *Ashes Slowly Fall*

One last thing...

KATYA LEBEQUE

About the Author

The bird moves like a scythe through the air.

The black wing tips cut through the dead blue sky with little resistance, moving silently as a whispered threat. Anything it preys on now will not hear, will not see danger until wrapped in the tangle of sword-like claws. All they may feel is a chill as the black feathered mass bocks out the sun.

Only its shadow, big as a tree, gives it away.

The bird is looking. Hungrier and emptier are the days now, between kills. There is less of everything now. In the beginning of its new largeness, there were wingless two-leggers everywhere, almost the only things enough to satisfy the craving for meat. The bird felt a sparkling explosion of animalistic joy the first time it dove into one with its beak, the fingers still twitching.

It still does not fully understand how the tall gods of all its life and the birds before it suddenly became squirming pale things far below on the ground, scurrying to and fro enchantingly as if in some game. It does not care how now. The flesh is sweet and easy to cut through once one is caught and that heady redness to drink in drives out all thought except for more.

Chapter One

An overgrown miracle

Where were they?

Ash pressed her back against the crumbling limestone archway and glared hard into the blue.

She didn't particularly feel like dying today more than any other day, so she looked again. But the sky was empty of oversized wings. Empty of rain too.

A noise came from some other field or gardens in the estate. In spite of herself, a girlish gasp of fright escaped her lips.

Ash silently cursed herself, told herself to toughen up, but her gasp had a point. It was not good, this, venturing out when you couldn't see them. But what choice did she have? There was nothing left. Ash pictured it in her mind, to give her courage: the last measly handful of lentils, barely enough to keep one of them from starvation. Vanita's face flashed before her eyes. That did it. She hoisted her crossbow over a shoulder and darted out before sense could stop her.

As soon as she was out in the open, it was easy to remember that her childhood home was gone. Rhodopalais looked eerie in the grey morning light, with red scrawls of mob profanities graffitied on the walls, the withered remains of mazes lying under the sightless gaze of vandalised statues, staring not at their own missing limbs but out at the pinkening sky. At one point, Vanita had been able to recite every stony ancestor in amongst the statues, for all that they weren't hers, much to the amusement of Ash's father as Stepmother trotted her out for garden parties. It made Ash feel uncomfortable and small to think of it – fine-born ladies in silken flounces and masks tittering through these same mazes, then perfumed with gardenias and imported sage, as some of the

most powerful men of the country chased after them. All were gone now, everyone dead and only she remained. Why?

She looked away and saw that the wall nearest the entry hall of the main drive had a new message today. ‘Nobil pigs R 4 eeting’ someone had written in someone or something else’s blood. Ash sighed, trying to let go of the flare of anger at someone defacing the home she’d lived in her whole life. Hey, at least the poor were expressing themselves. Not that there was any rich or poor anymore.

This was not helping. Ash turned and walked out from the ghost of flowerbeds and onto the main drive and tried to focus herself on the morning ahead. She imagined herself a planet, layers of hardness that had built up over time around an iron core. Standing in this haunted place brought cracks to the surface she could not allow. She deliberately picked up her pace, her mind clearing of its own accord as potential death got closer the further she stepped away from the safety of the house.

Then, footsteps the gravel that were not her own.

She smiled to herself but did not slow her pace. “Honestly Derrick, people have been shot for less,” she whispered over her shoulder, a small lilt in her voice.

“One day, just one, I’ll manage to sneak up on you.”

“Well, not today. Come here.”

The two stood alone and small on the gravel, what was left of a once grand estate behind them. They took each other’s hands as ones who had spent a lifetime in friendship and looked each other in the eye to say the thing they said every time before hunting now:

“What is our promise?”

“Only one of us is allowed to die.”

“I will take care of Vanita and Stepmother and all the house, if you’re gone.”

“And I will take care of it all as if I were you if you’re gone.”

“I promise.”

“I promise.”

“Great. Let’s go.”

They moved fast, homemade crossbows high as they darted across the dead ground, past the rusted trampled things that had once been imposing gates of gilded fleur-de-lis.

Ash's heart was hammering in her ribs, the way it always did. Carriers. She tried to think of something else. But her mind kept coming back to the size of them and the way they tore through flesh like hot butter before their victims had even died. And their sheer heat as they stood over you, cocking their heads from side to side.

She had learned a trick in the two long years since the winged nightmares had replaced their normal birds. She slowed her pace, much as it seemed like suicide and as she moved Ash leaned into the fear, not away from it. Instead of a random person being torn apart she pictured it being Derrick. Instead of herself dying in those foul claws she pictured Vanita there. And the red-hot horror of those imaginings solidified to the icy rage she needed on a hunt.

Everyone died by carrier. Everyone. Today or tomorrow or the next day, they would get you somehow. But not her, not today. Not while Derrick and her family were still breathing and needed their bellies filled.

“So what do you think we'll find today?” asked Derrick on cue.

Ash grunted. “Near death experiences, I suppose. Not hopeful for an amazing haul. You saw when last there were rain clouds it would be –”

Ash broke off. Or rather, just forgot to carry on speaking. Because they had come up a mound of dead grass and she was looking directly at a pumpkin.

A giant pumpkin.

They had scarcely gone half a mile but there it was, standing on its own in the veld-like expanse that had once been green. A pumpkin the size of a doorway.

“One of the overgrown Expansion Project vegetables,” she whispered, not entirely sure why she was doing so.

“It's an overgrown miracle, is what it is. Everyone knows there's no Expansion vegetables left, we wouldn't be starving if there were. And for none of the mob or birds to have got here first... An absolute miracle. Not a good haul today, eh?” Derrick grinned at her.

But Ash's mind was already whirring. “Derrick, we could get killed for a treasure like this. Keep your voice down. We'll need to cut its stalk and get out of here quick.” It had been so long since she had seen one of the freakishly engorged vegetables of the Expansion Project. She

couldn't stop looking at it, half convinced that if she looked away it would vanish.

Still, it was real beneath her hand when they went up to touch it. Derrick whistled. "Indeed - a pumpkin fit for Cinderella."

Ash snorted, too loudly in the dry air. It was ludicrous to connect the very thing that had poisoned the ground with some social-climbing dead celebrity from a time when problems consisted of who to marry.

Still, it *was* a miracle. How was it even still there? After the Expansion Project failed, all the neighbouring estates had sent staff out for weeks to gather up the last of the gigantically deformed produce. Then their elderly and then the children. Until there was no one left to send. Were they the only household left? It was impossible to know. No one ventured outside anymore, because of the birds.

As if she had summoned them with her mind, Derrick's voice rang out.

"Carrier!"

Ash turned away from the pumpkin, just in time to see giant talons coming in for her face.

Before she had time to think, instinct threw her to the ground. Claws the colour and size of poisonous coral snakes landed next to her head.

Pidgeon, her mind told her, her body still numb with terror as the bird passed so close that a gust of cold wind blew over her face. *Coral legs mean pigeon*, her mind insisted again and she willed herself to get up. Shakily, she propped herself up on elbows and looked.

It *was* a pigeon - that was lucky. The pigeon carriers had become large from feeding off of the Expansion grain while it had lasted and technically weren't supposed to eat meat, unlike the scavenger carriers like crows that had taken a liking to humans. The pigeons were among the dumbest kinds of carriers, but that didn't mean they weren't dangerous. Ash had seen plenty of surprised-looking corpses out in the fields that had been crushed to death by being landed on by one of these horse-sized oafs, who would try peck at the body, fail and swoop off again, leaving its kill for the scavengers. Still, at least they were dumb.

The massive bird was in profile to her now, facing Derrick. It bobbed its head and looked at him with yellow-green eyes. For a moment, Ash felt a small wave of awe go through her. The big pest, so

commonplace when it was ankle-height that she had never really looked at it, was magnificent. Within its feathers were flashes of iridescent pinks, lilacs and greens and the smoky grey plumage on its head gave way to downy lighter grey feathers the colour of clouds, dappled on its wings like a horse's flanks.

Then it pecked at Derrick's shoulder, cooing monstrously and the spell was broken. With a winded sound, he fell over backwards. Quickly, Ash readied her crossbow and planted her elbows more firmly into the cracked earth. She breathed out slowly once, twice, then readied her aim. The carrier was about to come at Derrick again and that was good. It was distracted, its heart area exposed. Ash twitched her finger, let her iron bolt fly and felt the meaty ring of satisfaction in her own chest as it pierced straight through the side of the bird.

She must have hit a lung, for it gurgled monstrously without any piercing shriek, then crashed gracelessly to the ground. It was silly after all this time, but she always felt the twistings of guilt in her gut after she'd made a kill. This one had its long neck contorted backward and its eyes closed. Ash did not really want to, but she found herself looking at the soft, downy feathers on the bird's chest and how they were interrupted by the ugly dark bolt of iron she'd put there. It almost looked helpless.

Derrick was hovering in that way he had, massaging the shoulder the pigeon had pecked. "We should get the body back for eating."

Ash shook her head, still looking down at the poor creature. "I know we can't be picky about meat nowadays, but we have to choose. The carrier made a noise when it fell, people will be here soon. There will only be time to make off with one before any mobs come. A measly six of us won't eat this whole bird today - what if the carrier attracts Expansion-sized maggots? Plus, the bird would require plucking and cooking. Who is going to help, Vanita?" She snorted at the idea. "No, I think the priority is the pumpkin." They both looked over at the huge orange globe again and Derrick nodded.

It took the better part of two hours to hack the rope-like stem, find thick enough wood to act as a lever and then finally roll their find onto its side. In silence, the strange procession began: the girl with a crossbow and expectations of only bad things, circling the boy rolling the giant orange sphere like something out of a fairy tale.

Today, it seemed, they would be fed.

Chapter Two

Land sakes

The sun was high in the sky by the time they made it back.

Old Merta was at the kitchen's work table already, her threadbare smock's sleeves rolled up to her elbows. If life had continued, Ash would have been there next to her, making the nobles' pies for the day with no one depending on her for anything other than a pastry glaze. She felt a momentary flare of resentment to the birds that life had gone this way. She felt its heat, then let it pass. There was no time to wish she didn't have to be strong for everyone else.

Old Merta was already in fine form anyway, huffing and puffing over the miniscule food portion she was working, her white hair escaping its cap. Her hair was the only thing in the world Old Merta couldn't control. Everything else saw sense and listened to her.

"Last of the lentils," she said by way of conversation as Ash and Derrick trudged in. Like most houses, they had given up the frivolous luxury of eating every day when no one knew when food would come next. Ash remembered her and Old Merta scraping with their fingernails in the kitchen's hearth just two nights ago, after Tansy had spilled twenty-three precious lentils into the ash by accident. They had scratched and scraped until their fingers were bloody and the moon was high in the sky, until they had salvaged every last precious lentil for one more day's eating.

"And no barley at all," Old Merta was saying. "What I'll make after this I—" she stopped mid-sentence at the look on Ash's face. "What is it?"

"Breakfast, lunch and supper too," said Derrick, grinning. "Come and see."

"Land sakes!"

Old Merta's usually impressive poker face melted at the sight of the thing. "Well, *that'll* need some cutting up."

There was lentil *and* pumpkin soup that morning, which tasted wonderfully exotic to Ash. She slurped down the sweetness almost without breathing. Then she set about her ironwork.

Only a few months ago, she and Derrick had found the bizarre, coal-like clumps of iron that the crazed ground was producing, the only thing to have come out of it since the Expansion Project. Only a few months and yet it had meant the difference between death and survival for them because Derrick had made them both crossbows out of odds and ends. Then he and Ash had learnt how to carve crude crossbow bolts and other weaponry to use on the carriers, talking about it and talking as the food supply dwindled. Finally, one day, the food had been gone for a few days, but the alcohol hadn't. So, they had had a drink, taken their homemade weapons and gone out to hunt. Then they had gone again.

It was a way to last a while longer.

Beneath her kitchen cap, Old Merta threw Ash a disdainful glance. "That's not very ladylike," she sniffed, mostly because the pumpkin had put her in a good mood.

"It's a good thing I'm not a lady anymore then, isn't it?" Ash retorted without looking up.

"Still... what will you two do with the time now? There's no need to go out foraging for at least a week, no foraging means no new iron needed or weapons making and all that. The pair of you, honestly! A groom in a house what's got no horses and a cook's assistant when there's no food - who leaves the cook on her own most of the day, mind. So, what'll you do?"

It wasn't something Ash had even considered once in the hours of rolling the pumpkin to Rhodopalais. After months of scrounging for the barest minimum of food, the pile of voluptuous cut-up pumpkin flesh seemed too vividly orange to be real, even though they had only cut off the barest chunk. Tansy – the one scullery maid still alive – had actually cried at the sight of it.

"Perhaps I could teach you a couple of pumpkin recipes." Old Merta's eyes crinkled at the corners. "With the world not needing saving for the next couple of days, you can finally get back to what you always wanted to do – train to be a cook."

Ash looked down. She *had* wanted to be Old Merta, always, since she was a little girl. Until the Expansion Project had happened. So why was the question sitting in her stomach like one of her homemade bolts of iron?

But before she could answer, a bell chimed somewhere upstairs. Stepmother.

The little officious bells to summon servants had long since been sold for the silver, but Stepmother had clung to one, a last vestige of her former life that fooled no one and so she stayed in her room nearly always.

Ash paused at the top of the stairs, hearing the bell's insistent tinkling coming from the opposite direction to the main rooms. It seemed that Vanita had temporarily captured the bell and was ringing it. A wordless tide of relief washed over Ash as she pushed open the somewhat smaller door.

Where her mother was a statement of fact, Vanita was a question mark, slouched as if constantly anticipating some invisible blow. Ash knew she should envy her - Vanita's hair was bright as a coin where Ash's was like coarse wheat, her face a milky white where Ash's had seen the sun. In any other life, Ash would have been eclipsed by the wraith-like Vanita at those parties and court proceedings that had ended years ago. If the world had not ended, it would be so now. But the world had ended.

Today, Vanita lay spread-eagled on her bed, gasping. When Ash came in, her stepsister's face opened wide with a look too familiar for a lady of the house looking at her cook's assistant.

"Alright Miss?" Ash said, raising her voice and roughing it up a little.

Vanita remembered her place and stopped looking that way at her sister.

"Ca-an you help, please? I can't breathe."

Vanita had had breathing problems ever since Ash had known her as a shy six-year-old. Now, nine years on, they were still there. Apparently, Vanita had always had them. No one else seemed to notice the connection that Ash did - namely, that they had been plaguing Vanita ever since she had known her mother.

Ash moved to help her. On mornings like this, dressed in her one good nightshift, she seemed so much like a noblewoman still and that worried Ash. The noblewomen had been the first to go. Ash remembered a chilling sight she had seen near the beginning of it all when she had been in town bartering for the then-still-existent last of the Expansion food. A crow carrier had happened upon a young lady girlishly foolish enough to wear a fine dress and some family jewels. The crows were attracted to all things shiny still, even at their new gigantic size and smarter than the other carriers. Ash had slunk past in horror as the giant bird had bashed the lady's skull to pieces with her own diamond necklace, cocking its birdlike head sideways and down at the soupy brains pooling out onto the cobbles.

“Ash?”

With a start, she came out of her reverie, to find Vanita pulling the expression she did when asking a grave question. “It was the last of the lentils yesterday, wasn't it? And there is nothing now, again?”

“Actually, Derrick and I found something. A pumpkin! One of the Expansion ones too and it's enormous. It's right here –”

They were interrupted by Vanita's door crashing open.

Ash turned in time to see the flounces and ruffles that preceded Stepmother into any room. Unlike every other person in the country, Stepmother insisted on full dress every day like a proper lady – never mind the fact that the dresses in question were now threadbare, sad old things. You would never guess it from the ramrod-straight back and aloof way she held her head.

Her green eyes flicked briefly in Ash's direction, but she quickly turned and billowed over to Vanita instead. “I had the most peculiar dreams last night. In it, your father was alive and yours too,” she nodded to Ash absent-mindedly. “And oh, how odd it was! Seeing them again!” She shuddered delicately. “How are you, Vanita?” she asked as an afterthought.

“Fi-ine,” Vanita wheezed. Ash glared at her.

But her mother was already starting her next sentence. “It was so strange for us to be all as we were before, before *Ashlynn* left us to be a kitchen wench and a penniless fool.”

Vanita rolled her eyes. “Mother! Good grief, it's only the morning!”

“No, it’s alright Vanita.” Ash straightened her apron purposefully, feeling the comforting coarseness against her palms. “We’re all penniless fools now. And I joined the real world, yes, but I didn’t *‘leave’* you. If I had actually left you, you’d already be dead.”

The anger that was never far away swelled in her chest and she had to turn away. Ash walked from the room as quickly as possible, making sure to keep her head high.

Her annoyance only subsided halfway down the grand staircase. She knew she should tell her stepmother about the pumpkin, but she always seemed to turn back into an entitled noble-brat when they had these ‘conversations’. *She’ll deign to come down to the kitchens if she gets hungry enough*, Ash told herself, even though she knew that this was not true.

Two hours later, Ash was minding her own business in the kitchen when it came. She fell over next to the hearth and stayed there on the ground as her heart beat like a thing possessed. Those eyes. The sound filling your head, that of too-large wings beating the dead air. Then, the pigeon itself: replaying what she had not been able to think on while it was happening and what could have gone wrong, always what could have gone wrong. It had been hours now, but there Ash was, gasping for air on the kitchen floor.

When it passed, she stood as fast as she could and felt foolish, just like every other time it had happened. She looked around to see if there was anyone who had witnessed it, but as always, she was alone. Chiding herself, Ash smoothed her apron. Who was supposed to be strong for Vanita while she wallowed like a maid on the floor?

She looked outside to calm herself. It was dusk. Time to pray.

The orangy horizon made it look like the whole world was slowly burning. Ash watched from the doorway for carriers before setting out for the hazelnut tree.

Everyone thought it was madness to go outside for the sake of a tree, but Ash wasn’t everyone. Something about those ghastly birds being the only ones who got to enjoy the sunsets and the night skies now rankled her. Even if it was only her, she felt it significant that one human still went outside, that it wasn’t *all* just for those great, flapping beasts. Besides, she always took her crossbow with.

Ash's prayer spot was a hazelnut tree off to the north side of the servants' quarters, close to the estate's inner garden wall. Every time she saw the twisty form of the tree, with its paper yellow fringes of dried-up catkin seedlings, something within her lifted. The hazelnut tree was the one thing left standing in the yard that had not been chopped up for firewood. It had born nuts the latest of all the trees after the earth had been poisoned by the Project. It had also been planted by Ash's mother. The tree was barren now, its branches elaborately contorted and curled as if made from wrought iron. But that didn't mean it was dead and Ash wasted a small, girlish corner of her heart on hoping it would bloom again.

Ash knelt on the crusty earth, feeling its hot grit beneath her skirts. Her mother had always been the religious one and she was not really sure how to pray, anymore, since the world had gone mad. She knew that there was a God, could even feel that presence of something higher sometimes, but she did not understand. What sort of God would let things get like this? But now it was more about the quiet and that small bit of peace. Even if she did not understand, even if she did not approve, the fact that there was a God was one thing that had not changed. And unchanged things were precious now.

The sky was fading from orange to black. Ash began to whisper a prayer softly as she loaded her crossbow and checked it, inspecting it as she intoned the comforting words. It was going to be a clear night, she could see all the way to where the forests had been. And, in the distance, the lights of the palace.

Clearly, they didn't have a scarcity of candles and firewood like the rest of the country. Ash got off her aching knees, her eyes still on those faraway lights and wondered what it was like to be in the palace and not have any problems.

Chapter Three

Mystery girl

There was blood on the flagstones. In the stone gloom of the courtyard, the ugly splotch looked almost black, menacing, as if it was waiting for someone to notice it. Rize looked away by habit. He knew almost all of the surviving servants by name now and that blood had likely been someone he knew before it had become another mark on the floor. This place which he and his father were supposed to be protecting. The guilt threatened to swallow him for a moment, but then he would not be able to help anyone. So, he averted his gaze, as everyone else did and carried on walking.

Another day. He bit back a sigh, looking ahead at the same stone walls as every other day. He'd never thought himself an outdoorsman before and the royal library was still his favourite room in this accursed place, but he longed for sunshine like a hungry man might long for food. It twisted at him, when he walked passed a window to see those damned huge birds flying free while he was caged in here.

Pushing his black hair out his eyes, he looked behind him to ensure no one was watching and turned left. Where he was going was not the sort of place princes were expected to frequent.

This morning the stables looked clear and bright as he entered, the straw on the floor seeming to soak up the sun. Horses nickered contentedly in their wooden stalls, an array of glossy coats in rare colourings and prize builds. Rize walked past them all, stopping only once he reached the last stall on the right, where a blur of splotchy grey was making circles in the hay completely at odds with the dignified air of the rest of the horses.

Mouse was Rize's favourite horse in the stables. He hadn't known it before, but it was true. She was a dapple grey that didn't have the usual, refined speckles across her coat, the way most of the royal dapples

did. Instead, exuberant splotches covered her white flanks with a slightly darker one over one eye, giving her a cavalier, pirate look when she was feeling mischievous, which was often. The dapples stopped abruptly halfway down her legs, making Mouse look like she was permanently wearing white socks. Best of all, Rize had come to learn that she had this quirk of tossing her head when someone was talking, as if nodding in agreement. It was silly, he knew, but since she had first tossed her head at his rambles, Rize had come down here often to talk to someone who would just listen.

This morning Mouse was in fine form, moving in agitated small circles and tossing her head as if shaking it. Rize felt a stab of guilt again. This was his kingdom, this was his fault. Mouse was more high-energy than most and each of the horses were used to being ridden once a day, when times were simpler. Since the carriers' favourite meals now seemed to be ponies, specifically the well-fed palace ponies, she hadn't been outside in months now and it showed.

"I'm sorry Mouse, but what do you want me to do?"

Of the previously impressive royal stables, just ten horses were left now. Even in the palace, they were at the point now where they would have to start eating the horses. But Rize had a deal with the head of the stables that Mouse would go last. It was not a deal he liked to think about.

"Well well... If it isn't the Crown Prince Rizend."

Rize turned and grinned into the shadows. His cousin looked completely ridiculous, in a stable dressed in plum velvet, standing in straw. Still, Lorin's special gift was that he managed to look comfortable anywhere – that and sneaking up on people.

"Cousin, when will you start making some kind of noise when you enter a room? And by the way, your survival deals a severe blow to the Pathfinders' theory that only the virtuous have remained."

But his cousin only leaned his slim hips against a stall door. "It's *duke* cousin to you, your highness! Imagine how much more distressed all those sweet ladies facing the end of the world would be without me."

"Oh yes, of course, silly me... Speaking of the end of the world, I have a date with my lord father. Would you care to walk me to his solar? You can tell me about which lady you are terrorising currently."

“Plural, please your Highness! We all have reputations to protect. No, I’m off in another direction, but give my best to His Majesty.”

Rize nodded, then straightened his spine and squared his shoulders to the upcoming task.

The king was choosing his hair.

Ever since Rize had been in man’s breeches, the king’s hair had been falling out and he had amassed a diverse and rather ridiculous array of hairpieces. Coiffured out of various exotic animals’ hair and dyed with saffron, its lurid yellow tuft made him the most instantly recognisable easy-to-mock monarch the country had ever had.

The hair was, for Rize, a study in decline. A few years ago, his father had worn only the finest. But now he had not had a new hairpiece in ages, in the wake of rumours that the king was using the scalps of the dead for his own head and so the toupees had greyed, coarsened, dulled. Just like the king himself.

He was practising his next address at full bellow when Rize arrived, so Rize leaned on a pillar to catch the last part of the show. He doubted there had ever been a less dignified king. When his father had come to the throne, there had almost been an outcry. He simply didn’t seem the part, with his carefully chosen hairpieces and wild, bullish proclamations that came without warning. He had a whole team of advisors trailing behind him often, holding their heads in their hands.

“This country will be great again!” his father was yelling. “It *will* gr – oh. Morning.”

“Father. How are you?”

“Worried. I should have received an ocean of marriage alliance proposals by now for you, but who wishes to partner with a country with no future? An agricultural land with no agriculture left... we are in ruins.”

Rize sighed. He knew that the future did not lie in the past, no matter how his father and those his age still alive wished to look back. He knew it, but he also had no idea as to what that future might be.

“I am not the fool many suppose,” his father the king was now saying, hair affixed. “I know that plans must be made to get my son to safety before the inevitable storm of the castle.”

Rize was speechless, a rare enough feat. The guilt, the guilt. Finally, he found his voice. “Things are not yet that dire.”

“But they will be. And a happy occasion such as my son getting married, with food and a festival promised, could delay things.”

“Just because it’s the way things were done when you were my age, does not mean it is *still* the way things should be done,” Rize said slowly, trying for patience.

“It has always been this way. Married at eighteen. My father did the same and his father before him,” said the king without even looking up from his fussy cravat.

“And how did your father do with the carriers?” Rize snapped. “The world is *different!*”

Luckily, he was interrupted by a nervous-looking servant. “Your Majesty – majesties – I am sorry to intrude...a message from the Pathfinder. She expects to be attended in the cathedral.”

Rize turned upon the messenger. “So, we are *summoned* by her? That’s the second time this month...”

“We will come immediately,” said the king quickly and the servant’s face collapsed with relief as he turned to run back down the stairs. The king shuffled to the door to follow, appearance quite forgotten and Rize sighed as he followed him.

He appreciated pathfinders – really, he did. Their strange religion had largely been ignored before the birds. They had been a group of women who could read and write and had a moral code at the same time, which was rare enough. More specifically, they had acted as tutors to the royal family and those in favour within their circles. He remembered his old pathfinder tutor with affection, but this woman was something else. The current Royal Pathfinder, head of a whole team of them, was arrogant to the point of being ridiculous. He doubted anyone could so much as learn an alphabet from her. Still, it was what it was.

Rize tried and failed to quiet his thoughts as they reached the dust-carpeted floors that were still chequered marble in places. He had voiced concerns about meeting in the cathedral before. It was from the old Christian faith that had become unfashionable long ago and was easily one of the least maintained areas of the castle. Not to mention that a carrier had nosedived through its roof a year ago and left a massive hole open to the air. Still, the Pathfinder met with them there. She claimed she

felt 'good energy' surrounding it and that she 'was not worried about the birds'. Actually, he didn't mind going to the cathedral himself. While much of the palace just looked somewhat shabbier version of its former self, the cathedral had seen carriers, it had seen ruin.

The Royal Pathfinder was sitting in one of the shattered wooden pews wedged to one side of the wall. Here was one person not in ruins, although the orange satin Pathfinder robes made her jaundiced in the afternoon light. She deigned to rise when they entered, then spread her arms wide as though they were entering her living room rather than a part of their own palace. "Welcome, your highnesses. I have had a new direction from the Path!"

So much for preamble, Rize thought.

"I saw a girl," she intoned. "A girl the age of the prince. They danced, at a ball, in this palace and I knew that this girl would change the fate of the country, would change everything!" At this last comment, she spread her arms wide, looking up at the half-decimated ceiling. Then she looked back down, frowning and Rize half-expected he was supposed to applaud.

The pathfinder turned around to face them again, smoothing her robes. "This girl is the key," she continued. "She is not someone I recognise from within the palace walls... In any case, she is to be the prince's bride. Or," at this point she did give a sidelong glance at Rize. "I may say the new king."

The broken cathedral continued to hum with stunned silence after these words. Seemingly oblivious, the pathfinder walked out into the open space where the pews had been, sauntering as if she owned the place. Enough was enough, in Rize's mind. He strode after her and grabbed her arm, spinning her around to face him.

"And if I don't want to be married off?"

"It is your Path," she said, blinking in surprise, as if that explained everything.

"And just who is this girl? If you know so much, Pathfinder, give us her name and residence, this mystery woman and we will summon her directly."

The pathfinder only crossed her arms and took a step back. "I will know her when I see her," she replied stoutly, before turning to the man

of more importance. “Your Majesty... as I have said, the missive -ah – the invitations have been sent. We must prepare the palace.”

The king began nodding but caught the thunderous look on his son’s face. “Might we, ah, might we know something more about this ‘mystery girl’?”

The Pathfinder might be able to evade Rize, but not at least his father. She bowed, a sizeably smaller bow this time. “Your majesty I –”

The Pathfinder was interrupted by a mighty crashing sound, as a raven carrion dove through the cavernous hole where half of the groin-vaulted ceiling had been. It thundered to the floor near the shattered apse and turned its massive head, eyeing the three beadily. Its birdlike logic ignored the somewhat subdued colours of the prince and king, turned to the juicy shimmering oranges of the Pathfinder and went for her.

It took all of three seconds. The giant raven grabbed the Pathfinder in one large claw while the other propelled its bulk off the ground, lurching into the air flapping, crashing through the ceiling as it went and creating yet another hole for the cathedral. No one had time to react, to speak, not even the Pathfinder.

And there the two-remaining stood, in silence, for some time.

Eventually, Rize decided someone should say something.

“What are we going to do?”

The bird cocks its head to the side, savouring the now rare feeling of being filled. Bright, festive orange tatters are all that remain of the meal, it had wolfed down huge chunks whole through the gaping blackness of its toothless mouth, leaving the flesh to break down slowly in its newly enlarged stomach rather than dismembering it piece by piece.

The bird does not know it, but somewhere deep within its brain the fires of recognition are stirring. Without the frontal cortex capable of processing conscious thought, the bird is remembering somewhere deep within. The particular orange of this two-legger has sparked what the two-legger would know as a hippocampus to recall the past. For this bird is a raven, was a raven and had in the past when it was small eaten from the stretched-out white hands of the two-leggers in orange.

Many birds are not good with these featherless faces, but this one remembers. These ones in orange had stretched out deformed wings with feed. The base of the bird's skull tingles with the fact that it became its large size because of some of that grain, new and strange-tasting grain that the two-leggers had developed rather than pulled out of the ground. It had made plant flesh enormous, the raven had seen that too – vegetables it had once fed on fifty times larger than itself now, looming down. Most of the other birds had grown by feasting on the engorged, bitter plants. Then, grain from a two-legger for this one and the feeling of bones breaking as some invisible bird-god stretched it outside of itself to fill more of the earth and more of the air.

The bird cannot consciously recall all of this, but flesh always remembers. And so this feed is particularly sweet as the bird takes in what once loomed high over it and swallows down and down.

Chapter Four

Unheard-of madness

Two hours later the piece of parchment arrived on the kitchen table at Rhodopalais.

Ash held the piece of parchment almost at arm's length, as though she expected it to burst into flames. It was a Pathfinder's message and had arrived somehow when no one was looking in the later hours of the morning. Who knew how the Pathfinders enchanted these inanimate things to send messages all over the kingdom? All they knew was that it had been lying on Old Merta's working kitchen table, spotlessly white, sometime before what would in more plentiful days have been lunch.

It was the second miracle in two days, after the Expansion pumpkin, for it was a rare day indeed that saw Ash, Vanita and Old Merta all gathered around the same table.

"A Pathfinder's message," Old Merta whispered unnecessarily. "In real ink!"

Soon everyone was crowding around the table, peering at the enchanted thing, although only Ash and Vanita could read it.

"What's it say?" asked Tansy again.

"By royal decree of the palace," Vanita read aloud. "All ladies of noble birth and marriageable age are required to present themselves, two nights hence, at the palace for a royal ball."

"How kind of them," Ash muttered. "The Pathfinders can send inanimate objects flying through the air. Do they send the palace's own food? Why no, but they ensure that we catch up on our reading. Anyway, she carried on, "it makes no difference," Ash, looked at Vanita, who rolled her eyes. "How are they going to enforce this stupid decree? It's a death sentence, to try travel across the plains and the countryside, especially at night with the owls out. I wonder how many ladies they think will arrive, still breathing. Six?"

“Imagine,” said Vanita in a small voice. “To go to a ball would be fun, but they would never get to the ball, would they? Poor girls.”

“Not a chance they would,” said Old Merta softly. “In b’tween the owl carriers and the bandits and marauders, they would either die quick or die slow. Not a tree to hide behind, not a thing to fight with and ladies too.” She shook her downy white head. The kitchen went quiet as they all thought of it.

Ash cleared her throat. “Can you believe these Pathfinders?” she said a bit too loudly, more to change the subject than anything else. “Who do they think they are?”

It hadn’t been a question, until Tansy reverentially made the single line with her hand in the air that was the sign of the Path faith.

“Tansy!”

“What? There is only one Path, Miss, s’true.”

Ash snorted again. “I make my own path. I won’t be a puppet for those orange harridans.”

“But they predicted the birds, Miss, everyone knows so. They are real powerful.”

“They are real alright. Real charlatans. No one had ever heard of The Faith three years ago and now? Now they happened to predict carriers, so says whoever – and so they have guaranteed protection and shelter and food in a time gone dark. And how many times do I need to tell you to not call me Miss!”

“Sorry Miss.”

“A ball?”

The room hushed again. Stepmother was standing in the doorway, wearing a fussy green dress the same colour as her flinty eyes. “A ball, you say?”

No one spoke, each trying to recall the last time Stepmother had come down from her rooms. Or the last time she had come into the kitchens. She looked around at the wooden table, pots and desultory dried herbs almost in surprise. It certainly was in better order than her quarters.

“What is all this about?”

“An ‘invitation; came from the palace this morning sometime,” Ash stood and handed her the offending document. “It wants ladies to cross the plains and go all the way to the *palace*. At *night*. For a ball, of all things.”

To her surprise, Stepmother did not stay at the threshold, but minced gingerly into the kitchen, glaring at Vanita until she rose from the single chair at the table. It was only then that Ash noticed that her stepmother had a very tattered, woebegone roll of patterned parchment in her hand and her green eyes were aglow. As she sat down, she smoothed the rolled paper out and Ash groaned aloud, knowing exactly what story she was going to tell. She must have heard all the exchange after all and scampered around her rooms to find that thing before bringing it down here to tell the story *yet again*.

If Stepmother had noticed Ash's exasperation, she didn't show it. "You girls know that once, many years ago, the story of Cinderella actually came from our kingdom."

"Merta is a hardly a 'girl' and is older than you, Stepmother," Ash cut in, but her stepmother didn't even pause. "The story of Cinderella is perhaps our land's most famous story. The one where a girl who is good and sweet can become the princess and leave the horrors of life behind her."

Ash thought about interrupting again and saying that that certainly *had* been their most famous story – until they had started producing bloodthirsty giant birds. But when she looked around, both Vanita and Tansy had dreamy looks on their faces, so she kept her thoughts to herself.

"Did you meet her? Was she awful pretty?" asked Tansy.

"She was certainly *well matured* by the time I caught a brief glance at her. She was advanced in years and I was but a teenager. We didn't speak." Stepmother sniffed. "She seemed awfully uppity for someone who had been a servant wench, but those cheekbones, even at her age, could not be faulted."

"And she changed her life," sighed Vanita. She ma-hade things beautiful ah-gain."

Ash snorted. "She got married, that's all. I missed the part where she had to fight off enormous birds or go three days without food. All she did was look pretty. Where's the bravery in that?"

"Oh, but she was brave," said Stepmother. "It was unheard-of madness, to dream a dream so big in her time. To dare to go to a ball when she had been forbidden by her owner. For the time, it was easily the

single most reckless thing a girl could do and yet she reaped a reward no one would have even imagined before the story.”

With a small ‘hmm’, she rolled the piece of old parchment up carefully, laying it next to the shining white new one from that day. The lined and sunken green eyes skimmed over the cream parchment, then flicked up to rest upon her daughter.

“Vanita, you still have one good gown, do you not?” she said in a calm voice, not like someone who was asking their daughter to die.

Chapter Five

Blood sister

Ash remembered a day not long after her father had brought his new bride to Rhodopalais, when a six-year-old Vanita had decided to follow Ash when she went out to play in the woods. The little girl had fallen behind, on her little legs and had made enough noise to be an elk with her stumbling around. When Ash had turned and glared at her and said she had better find her own way back if she wasn't going to apologise for following, she had surprised Ash by immediately and humbly apologising, looking up at her new sister with big eyes.

Ash would not have said sorry, but Ash would have been able to find her way out of the woods alone too. For some reason, the thought of Vanita on foot and in the dark in her finery on the way to a ball miles and miles away reminded her of that day.

Ash looked at her sister. The blood drained from Vanita's face. Ash could see it leaving, the rosy flush fleeing down her neck until she was corpse-white with shock. For her part, Ash felt as though an ice-cold rock had dropped into her stomach without warning.

"Mother, no... Please. No..."

Stepmother silenced her with a wave of her hand. "Go and fetch your gown. I will want it repaired by Merta and perhaps Ash can take it in where it's loose."

At the mention of her name, Ash came back to herself. Shaking off the cold heaviness, she stepped to the side, blocking Vanita out of her mother's line of sight and squared her shoulders. "Stepmother, have you lost your mind? We have no coach; the horses have been eaten... What do you propose? Vanita go walking half a hundred miles to the palace? She'll *die*."

Stepmother didn't seem to hear this. "I know you have a gown, Vanita. I kept it and packed it away myself, just in case. Go and fetch it."

Vanita's usually sweet voice answered her mother, hard and dull. "Why are you doing this?"

If Ash did not warrant a response, then at least her daughter did. She turned to face Vanita and jutted her bony chin out, almost into her face.

"Because that ball is our survival. If you go, he will most certainly marry you, that boy prince. An easy feat for my Vanita. With the protection of the palace, we could leave this wretched place and be *safe*."

"This wretched place is my home!"

Stepmother looked at Ash as though a speaking cockroach had tried to engage her in conversation. "It's not my home."

An older, more weathered voice broke the knife-like silence.

"Ma'am, if you don't mind me saying it seems a little... odd... sending the Miss to her death being out alone at night, with the point of saving the Miss."

Ash turned and stared. She had never heard Old Merta question Stepmother before. Clearly, Stepmother hadn't either and being spoken back to by not one but two servants was evidently the last straw. She scrunched her previously dainty hands into fists and began to shout.

"Vanita can go to the ball, or she can find another place to live! I shall turn her *out*!"

A small gasp from Vanita and without thinking Ash took her by the arm and shepherded her out. Before she knew it they had exited through the servants' entrance and were standing in the garden, Vanita yanking on her arm violently.

"Ash! We're not supposed to be outside!"

This brought a prick of guilt – when was the last time Vanita had even been out in the daylight, or even near a window without being scolded for it? Just because Ash was marginally used to overcoming the ever-present fear of the birds didn't mean Vanita was.

Still, all she said was: "Well, good, it's something to keep our minds distracted for a while."

"From what Mother just said, you mean." Vanita sighed, remarkably sanguine despite looking up furtively every minute and turned to look around at the house exterior she hadn't seen in so long.

“Ash, you really need to work on your spelling. ‘Nobil pigs R 4 eeting’? Seriously?”

“Oh, that. I came out this morning and it was that way. Someone must have captured one of the last of the noble house’s horses and felt rich enough to splash around some blood, wasting it on that stupid effort.”

“Hmm, yes, or it was the noble themselves that provided the ink.”

Ash hesitated. So often she tried to protect her half-sister from the uglier facts of life. Vanita had a ready smile, always and looked like she was made out of bone china. But not too much escaped her gaze and she could surprise at the strangest times with a cutting, wry sense of humour.

Today was one of those times. “Poor nobles... Ah, us paragons of literacy. I don’t know who I feel most for - the one who was used to paint the ‘4’ or the one who became the ‘R’,” Vanita aid drily, looking at the bloody scrawl steadily. Then, as if suddenly remembering what had just happened inside, she sighed.

“Vanita! Vanita, are you safe?” Stepmother called out shrilly from inside.

“Come out and see for yourself,” Ash yelled back, but got no answer.

“We probably should go back inside anyway. She won’t just forget, you know, or change her mind,” Vanita said quietly. Ash nodded. “Shall we?” she tried for lightness, holding out the crook of her elbow solicitously. “We can get you away from the locals’ spelling lessons?”

Vanita smirked. “Sure thing, blood sister” and took Ash’s arm.

Stepmother had been pacing and ran to the doorway when they were safely inside.

“Silly girl, to take her out like that! I was worried sick.”

“Do you not remember what you just threatened to do ten minutes ago if she didn’t go to your stupid ball?”

“And I meant it. I love you Vanita but, if I have to, I will throw you out this house myself.”

At this, Ash broke into a harsh laugh that didn’t reach her eyes. “Throw her out? I would like to see you try.” She looked over Stepmother’s frail form, letting her see her eyes wandering over the slack and ageing muscles that were never trained in survival to begin with. “If you so much as try, you shall have me to deal with, ‘Ma’am’.” She took a

step closer. “I would *love* to see you try,” she said quietly, feeling the hot blood pump through her vital, eighteen-year-old veins. The old cow, to her credit, didn’t look away. When Ash was sure she had made her point, she turned away and raised her voice again. “What do you say, Vanita?”

When she answered, Ash was gratified to hear no wheeze or falter in her half-sister’s voice. “Go to the ball yourself,” Vanita said and walked out the door.

Ash waited until Vanita was safely out of sight before she backed away from her Stepmother, who was still looking at her unblinkingly. “Besides, what does bravery look like now, Stepmother? Getting prettied up in the hope of getting married when everyone was swanning around at balls? No. It looks like *surviving*. Times have changed.”

Ash’s stepmother did not answer at once, merely looked down at that morning’s decree from the palace. Something in her posture sagged and she closed her eyes for a second. Her gnarled, bony hands brushed over the decree, then gently placed it side by side with her worn old invitation handed down from her mother, the invite to the very same ball Cinderella had gone to all those years ago. Her eyes looked up again to meet Ash’s.

“And yet here we are.”

All the excitement would have tired Vanita out, though she wouldn’t say anything. Quietly, Ash went up the stairs. Vanita tired easily – always had and especially much these days.

Vanita’s room. Ash didn’t much mind herself sleeping on the floor and Stepmother had kept most of the nice things for herself, but whenever she saw the dilapidated remains of Vanita’s room she felt annoyed at that bloody Project and the life they now led. The floorboards were dusty, the starburst patterns of inlaid wood hardly visible anymore beneath the lumpy old bed. It had once been an impressive canopy bed of powder blue with gilt detailing, suitable for a lady, but now its canopy was just tattered lengths of cloth. She would clean it, she would. Give it a thorough scrub and find some less-important curtains or cloth in the attic and change those canopy bed drapes. Soon. Tomorrow. But right now, she needed to check on Vanita and then go downstairs and help Old Merta with deciding how to best carve up the pumpkin.

Sure enough, Vanita was in bed, breathing hard but trying not to. When she saw Ash, her face brightened into a smile all the same, despite having been condemned to death by her own mother less than half an hour ago.

“Vee, how are you feeling?”

Vanita arched an eyebrow and smiled. “I’m going to pretend you mean my chest. It feels strained, like there’s a ton of pressure on it.”

“Are we still talking about your chest, or just you?”

At this, Vanita laughed. How was it that she could always laugh and so easily? Then, more quietly, she added: “Ash, did she mean it?”

Silence filled the room. “Your mother loves you, Vanita,” Ash said at last and turned to leave.

As she did, she felt the small delicate hand on her wrist.

“Tell me a story, please Ash.”

“A story?” Ash blinked at her in surprise. The last thing she was thinking about right now was stories. “What about? I don’t really do stories.”

“Anything, anything that comes into your head. Please, just to take my mind off myself. My chest is hurting.”

“Well,” sighed Ash, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “I can tell you a memory, perhaps.”

“That’ll do.”

“Once upon a time, there was a marketplace. I was a girl of thirteen, you see and I had renounced my titles to Rhodopalais the month before. Your mother had informed me that I would have no dowry for marriage, but that wasn’t really the reason. I wanted to become a cook, like Old Merta, when I grew up. So, I went to work for her in the kitchens. You should have seen her face when I arrived, silk gown and all... Anyway, things were tense in the house for weeks after that, Stepmother not speaking to me and I to her. We made everyone miserable, do you remember? You were so young. Anyway, Old Merta decided it would do me good to get out of the house and so she took me with her on market day. I had never seen so many people in one place, especially commoners. It was intoxicating. I smiled until my face hurt.

“Almost exactly two years later, to the day, I was at market again when I saw my first Project vegetable. You see, the Expansion Project hadn’t been heralded by a town crier or written in decrees on stuck on trees. The vegetables had just seemed bigger and more luscious than usual for a few seasons, before they started really getting freakish.

That day, the marketplace was ablaze with conversation. Everyone was circling around one table with produce and talking instead of buying. I was old enough by then to go alone, but I often had Tansy accompany me to help with the carrying. So, we pushed in for a look. It was an enormous corn ear as yellow as a sun and almost as long as my arm. We both grabbed onto each other and just stared. What was it? “Somew new thing from the palace,” we were told. “*Expansion*,” the peasants had whispered, feeling the abundance of syllable rolling around in their mouths.

“One year later, the corn was double that size and we had to bring Derrick or one of the other grooms along to heave the vegetables into a cart. It was now common knowledge how the king and the royal scientists all talked about the fact that we could boost our economy by doing what we had always done – farming – but with larger produce. They had ensured through something-or-other that humans did not grow from eating it and were not poisoned by the food. But they didn’t check the ground.

“I remember each market day after that. Most of the vegetables were still big, but on the whole food was less and cost more. It was bitter in our mouths, we had thought the Project a miracle that would ensure a bright future for all, no one to ever go hungry again in this little province. But now more were going hungry, bizarre with the huge vegetables about. Bloodier and bloodier fights were starting over the giant produce that remained. Still, the food supplies to the market kept dwindling, until there was nothing left. The last market I ever went to, there were some dried apples that someone was trying to sell their horse for and nothing else.

“That was the day I saw my first carrier. They were less bold then, but they were getting bolder. I had heard rumours, but we all had and for a couple of weeks life hadn’t changed, so how were we to know? I saw a

dark shape against the sky for just a second, but thought I'd imagined it. I clutched my basket and carried on. Then, right there as I was watching, a crow the size of a dog crashed down out of the sky and grabbed a small child only four years old. Not much older than... anyway. I turned and I ran and ran, just like everyone else. I never went to the market again."

Ash patted Vanita's knees and got up. "There. There's your story."

To her surprise, Vanita looked like she was suppressing a smile.

"What?"

"It's just that, when someone asks for a story, you're supposed to tell them something *happy*."

"You never asked for a happy story!"

"It's implied. How am I supposed to go to sleep now?" Vanita giggled, a bright sound in the dusty gloom. Laughing, again, somehow. It was Vanita's gift, to be able to keep sweet in the midst of ugliness. Ash shrugged, mystified and gave her leg a squeeze and turned to leave the room.

"Ash?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry this happened. You would've made a fine cook."

Ash smiled. "Thank you, Miss."

Chapter Six

Team problem

He awoke by moonlight now.

Always the same dream, every detail exact. Rize bolted into sitting position before he was quite awake, the last silvery fingers of night still playing on his bed. Instead of thinking about it, he looked down at his bare torso, still pale but certainly less pale than it had ever been in his life inside castle walls. He had never had these muscles either, contours that made his own flesh look like some unknown country he did not want to claim. He stared at them now, these newly wiry arms and toughened hands, trying to keep his mind away from where it could not help but go. There would plenty of time, in the hours of slow greying as the world turned to dawn, wringing the darkness out of the night in bits and pieces. He would have ample time to lie there and go over every detail, yet again.

Always the same, the dream a malicious memory that seemed near perfect in its recording. The only things that ever changed were the words at the end.

He was halfway through his sixteenth year; and thought himself faced with the biggest problem ever to face: his own cousin had already bedded two girls and he had none. He could not, could *not*, let Lorin bed a third before his first. A respite had come in the form of an explosion of excitement washing over the palace recently when the first Expansion Project vegetables had successfully ripened. He had forgotten about his problem facing the sheer joy of a tomato the size of his head, knowing that their people would never grow hungry again. But a few weeks in to the first Expansion harvest, his thoughts had turned to The Problem once more.

Merrick had always been a kindly man, a guard often positioned in the outer perimeter of the courtyard gardens or the bailey green – two of the most dangerous posts. The king had laughed like a crow when Rize had announced at five that he would grow up to be Merrick. But he was a man himself now, or near enough one and he still found the man wise and true. Rize was known to walk with Merrick around the perimeter occasionally and no one would think it amiss if he went now. Merrick certainly would not tell anyone that Rize had asked him how to sweeten a girl to your advances all the way into the bedchamber and what to do once you got there.

He was coming around to the right words when it happened. Merrick was nodding and listening silently, the patina of a normal day all over his face. There was no sound, nothing. And it wasn't as if Merrick was sickly, old or weak. Rize turned to look at him, just as Merrick's eyes rounded in surprise. As claws, the biggest claws he had ever seen, rested like a hag's old fingers over Merrick's shoulders. Corpse-grey and scaled, there was something prehistoric about them and Rize could not look away. Then they dug in and Merrick was gone, borne up into the air and out of sight before Rize could even blink. He was just there one moment and gone the next.

Red splashed down on Rize's face as he looked up to the sky for an answer. Yet still he saw nothing. The day was suddenly empty. No one else had been there to see. The ear-piercing shriek of a bird close by told him an explanation he could not believe. And there the memory that had become a dream ended.

All that ever changed was that, unlike it had happened in truth, Merrick always wheezed out a few last words as he disappeared into those claws and the sky above. Words from various others that day which had impacted his mind, he supposed.

Today, those words were telling. "She is to be the prince's bride... I may say the new king..." Merrick had intoned as he was lifted, sad-faced, towards his death by the claws.

Married. The very thought was ridiculous. It would probably have been less ridiculous and more useful if the pathfinder had said 'the prince

must stand on his head while singing the anthem to save the kingdom'. At least it would have been good for a laugh. But in a time of doubt and hunger and fear in the gut all the time, what good was a royal wedding? Or any wedding for that matter?

He sighed. It wouldn't do to think ill of the dead. Much as he had disliked that particular one, the pathfinders had been loyal servants of his family for years, decades longer than they had been symbols of a new religion of zealots. And now she was one of the dead, so he would not think badly on her now.

Besides, he had better get dressed to go out and see his men and lead them all out into whatever desolate part of the nearby countryside held the most carriers. Today was the day.

The wastes were shining with an almost angelic purity two hours later. Ochre miles upon miles with not a tree, not a shrub or soul in sight. The heat was like a living thing here – pressing itself upon Rize, whispering down his neck.

The general approached. In the bareness of the surroundings the blue and red uniform made him look like a storybook character that had wondered into the wrong plot.

“We're ready your Highness.”

“Let's go.”

It was a bigger team than Rize would have liked – the general, two infantrymen that had volunteered, a handler for the horses and two of Rize's own men. And of course the prisoners. It made Rize wish that he could simply send the birds an ultimatum – ‘you against me’. He could just walk out into the stark wastes and be done with it. He would die, or they would, or both. It sounded simple. Unlike this fussing with blue and red uniforms and experiments and men.

If only there were a tree to stand under, some form of shade. Shelter. But there was nothing. Just the dehydration pumping a dull ache into his temples and prisoners' grating cries, hanging in the still, hot air.

"Please, sir! Please!"

"Lemme out here!"

"Oy haven't done nothing..."

"Please!"

Two years ago, he would never have thought he would be using prisoners like this. What he thought was moral and right had been like tidy, inviolable fences that divided up the land. But now he had seen fences trampled over, smashed to pieces, as the firewood they were. Barriers didn't exist anymore. Only the birds did.

"Everyone in position?"

"Yes Highness."

"Right. My lord *father*, in his wisdom, has decided that I must be with Sound. But I will be within running distance, to assist Sight if things go bad."

"Yes sir."

The general turned and walked to his position. He was the only one alone, manning the second Smell station. Rize had both his two men with him, but that was because he had a hunch. Quickly, he backed over to where they were and raised his hand ready to signal the general's infantry couple, standing nervously in two drab cloaks next to the prisoner cart and the horses.

Rize splayed his fingers out up high where everyone could see them. *Ready?*

He waited two beats, then brought the hand down.

Immediately, the infantrymen threw off their cloaks to reveal the gold and silver-embroidered clothes they had very reluctantly put on out of Rize's own closet. The handler led the horses silently in a slow walk around the prisoners' cart. Holding mirrors, the infantrymen shone beams of light this way and that, walking around themselves. Each was completely, stonily silent – they had to be. The tension of it made Rize want to cackle with laughter, seeing these military men in his ridiculous finery swanning about in silence. Then a wave of nausea came. He squatted low, his eyes never leaving his men and waited.

The general was freely using his pocket watch now that Sight was on show. He timed precisely ten minutes. Then looked up. Yards to his right, the two gold and silver-clothed men looked up too. Nothing. They put their drab cloaks on again without a word and sat down.

It was the general's turn. He opened the sack on the ground nearly soundlessly and the overwhelming stench of horse guts and fresh blood rose up. Even at his distance, Rize gagged. Smell was the least pleasant one. Next to the dark, muddy colour the blood was turning, the guts looked too clean and pink – almost innocent, like a baby. Rize watched them with horrid fascination until the ten minutes were up.

Stony-faced the general covered the remains in sand, using the little water they'd brought to wash the blood away. They all looked up into the empty sky. Rize felt his stomach coil with excitement. It was his turn.

The king had insisted Rize be on Team Sound because it had received the least reaction last time. But that had been when Sound was first of the three. If Rize was right, he'd be seeing a lot more action today.

At the General's signal, Rize and his men began shouting at one another. The handler came over too and had the horses neigh while trotting in circles. Rize picked up a helmet he had taken from the armoury and bashed it hard into the ground repeatedly, looking and looking at the sky for any sign.

Come on. Come on...

There. A black mark on the sky the size of a hand, winging its way towards them. Rize's men had spotted it too. They were looking up with a curious mixture of triumph and failure on their faces.

"Come on boys, keep going! Let's see what the catch of the day is."

So, then, Rize had been right. It wasn't sight that attracted the smarter carriers, nor was it sound or smell. It was all three – or, rather, the *time* it took to get all three. It was interest. The carriers wanted to see what was happening and were attracted to commotion more than a specific sense.

The thing was close to landing now. Rize felt the knot of nausea in his throat as he saw what it was. Crow. He knew without looking to the right or left that the men were all swallowing down the same fear. There

were few ways out of an encounter with a crow. Most of them involved dying. Rize breathed out slowly until the sick feeling passed, only speaking when he was sure it wouldn't come out in a boyish whisper.

"Everyone, begin crow protocol... Now!"

The triangle widened as the great flapping thing landed. For a split second Rize was reminded of the Pathfinder and felt a pang of sympathy for the woman. Perhaps the only fond thought he'd ever had for her. But now was no time to think of corpses – the bird was swinging its ugly head around at his men.

It was a raven, he could see now. Slightly different in size to crows, perhaps less intelligent, though very similar in both looks and mind. Rize held his hand out for a bow and sighed. The General nodded to Rize and they came from their two angles with bows raised. *Here goes nothing*, he thought and aimed.

The General loosed his arrows first. Rize's heart sank as the first glanced off, the second only landing superficially above the now-annoyed raven's left eye. It was the same every time. The once-powerful arrows made by the finest royal smiths were like kindling to these giant beasts. They just didn't penetrate enough.

Luckily, harpoons did – although ravens and crows alike needed to be distracted well enough to not see the harpoon being readied. Rize began to yell and let off arrows as he saw the men from sound getting ready with what would actually work.

Then something happened which surprised everyone.

The carrier studied Rize with its black eyes for a moment, then abruptly turned around and lumbered in the opposite direction. At first, Rize thought it had seen the harpoon and was moving to attack Sound – but it simply ignored them too. It had its eyes on the prisoners. Specifically, it had its eyes on the flashes of movement as the prisoners stuck their arms out between the bars, shaking impotently at their makeshift prison.

The raven turned its head, intelligent black eyes taking in Rize, his men and all their little arrows and sticks. Then it turned scornfully away, back to the juicy problem of the wiggling arms behind bars.

"... Don't you see?" Rize said excitedly a few hours later. The moon was near high in the sky and still he was repeating each and every detail of the day to a rather bored duke cousin. "It wasn't Team Sight or

Team Sound or even Smell, it was the *problem* to solve that interested it! This could be huge. We understand more about how the smarter carriers *think*. It's interest that attracts that, but what keeps them going is a *problem* – some kind of puzzle or obstacle with humans inside rather than a simple snack. They follow the path of the *most* resistance because they like the challenge!”

“Yes, yes. Fascinating,” said his cousin drily. “What happened to the prisoners?”

“Oh, we let them go, like we said we would. Didn't see what happened after that. The bird saw the harpoon anyway and flew off, so I think they're fine. But the carrier – now *that's* interesting -”

“... Not to interrupt this riveting tale, but can we talk about something of vague interest to my life? Like, what on earth are you going to do about what that Pathfinder said? Throw a party?”

“It seems that way. My lord father is determined to follow her instructions. When I tried pointing out that she didn't exactly finish her mouthing off orders, or that she is quite, quite dead and probably won't care if we don't follow them anyway, he just shakes his head. Just shakes it and says nothing.”

“I see. And how do you feel about it?”

“You sound like an old wet nurse. I feel it's bloody ridiculous, as you well know. We should be out capturing more ravens or crows, not practising our curtsies. But the king has spoken.”

The Duke of Novrecorte smiled for no reason Rize could see. “It seems he has.”

The bird is still shaking as it takes off into the thin air.

Its wings wobble as goes but it knows that it must not stop or it might not be over. They could come, bringing their sticks and pain again.

The two-leggers had come for it today. It had heard strange noises and smelled the rich smell of another bird having killed and eaten its fill, the smell of stale blood and a two legger long dead. Its brain had surged its muscles forward, stomach already secreting juices to welcome in the dead meat.

Then it had seen, and it was too late.

So many of them... The bird had momentarily frozen at the sight of all these two legger's crawling on the ground. It had suddenly felt its old terror from the days when these creatures were big as trees and it was small. They had crowded it around it and its mind had been addled by their squirming. So, when it saw the juicy two-leggers in a box, writhing like gifts for the taking, it had not seen a trap the way it would have another day. Then it had been held fast by something and been which made its mind go cold and blank with fear until it could move again.

The bird dips slightly in the air to one side accidentally. Fear would not do. It had got away, it had survived. That was all that mattered now.

Dimly, it perceived that its flesh hurt. Somewhere on its face, they had hurt it.

The bird keeps flying and recalls the faces of the two-leggers who had attacked it. It is good with faces. If it saw them again, it would know them. It would remember.

The moon was full and unclouded, hanging in the blackness like a jewel waiting to be clawed out of the sky. On nights like this, relatively cool and free of screaming outside the walls, Ash would dream of the world as it was before the Project.

It wasn't great, but it was what it was.

But this was different. It must be, or how could she be thinking about the fact that she was dreaming? The velvet of the seat jolted and bumped beneath Ash as the unseen horses cantered along. Ash was in a carriage, or seemed to be, barrelling through the countryside with what felt now like impossible speed. *This is not real*, said a small faint part of her brain, but it had been so long since Ash was in a carriage that she barely heard. She placed her dream-hands out in front of her like a blind person and they connected with real wood, real velvet and glass that pressed coolly back into her palm. She left them there for a while, caressing the silky coldness. It felt so good to feel again. And then Ash saw something that took her breath away.

The dream landscape outside was green – live plants, tender and budding, whizzing past the coach window. It was a green almost to hurt your eyes, so long had it been for Ash. It was a green to make you believe in God. Dream-tears were on her cheeks but she didn't care, didn't look down to wipe them away. She was trying to memorise the colour of the life outside her window.

Time seemed to mean nothing for this dream, for Ash was suddenly sitting in the breakfast parlour of Rhodopalais, her father and stepmother in front of her. Stupefied, she looked at the man who had raised her, dead these past six years. She did not know she recalled his face so clearly – the way his mouth turned down beneath his bristly moustache, the way he stood straight and tall even in private. Those details burned. Quickly, Ash looked away at the room - spotless and filled with sunlight, still full of all its furniture, now burned or sold or both. *Why am I dreaming of this? The world has gone mad – why am I dreaming of the past now?*

Abruptly, the scene changed. She was in a square, a town square near to the palace it seemed, for there were people in fine dress walking around in the unhurried way no one did nowadays. So many people! Ash could not remember the last time she had been outside, seeing strangers milling around who weren't rushing at her. Out on the town! She looked

down at the cobbled roads beneath her that seemed to lead to everywhere. On her feet were a pair of prim laced ankle boots she did not recognise, noticeably unbeaten down by time, still black and shiny. Ash resisted the urge to hide them. Dream people did not steal or kill you for your shoes.

Suddenly rain came bucketing down, soaking her skin with the memory of water. This was not the desultory few drops and roiling black sky that passed for storms lately, but a real downpour, vertical lines of white liquid goodness pouring down from Heaven above. All around dream people were scurrying for cover, worried about their fine dress, but Ash spread her arms wide and smiled.

The smile did not last long. The rain stopped as abruptly as a water pump no longer being worked. Dripping wet, Ash looked up in time to see a familiar form. The enormous bird shape blocked out the dream sun as it flew over the square, its black feathery torso the size of a man and its wingspan stretching wide enough to knock chimney pots, its dog-sized talons dragging across roof shingles and causing screams. Ash stared grimly as the present intruded on the past. Then it dived. And Ash fell.

Ash's eyes snapped open just in time to feel the shocking cold snap as her cheek hit the cold stone floor. Derrick was shaking her shoulder with Old Merta and Tansy peering down at her.

“Ash, they're coming.” And she knew just who he meant.

It was twilight. Derrick had been checking the perimeter, while the sky was still light enough.

He could have been walking somewhere else, or his sharp eyes could have missed it. But he had seen them – a mob of about ten, ragged and starving, strength only in their hunger as they stumbled through the broken Rhodopalais gates like sleepwalkers.

“Ash, wake up! Did you hear me? Bandits coming up the north-east side.”

Ash had heard. She hadn't realised that she had been waiting for them all this time. Months of stomach-churning tension every waking moment had prepared her for this. Her hand was already on her crossbow by the time she realised that she was breathing fast, with Derrick shouting about commoners coming to loot.

She moved as if in a dream to the broken window that was defensible, while he bolted the doors and shoved the kitchen table towards them.

“This time they’re coming in for the house!”

She nodded, but her mind was still, blank, like unmoved water. She knew that to think now would be to die. To think was to be afraid and to be afraid was to hesitate, just that one instant, before pulling the trigger or running. That was death, hopefully quick and simply, but maybe not. Maybe slow and by the mouthful. These people were hungry. They hadn’t had horses to butcher, conservatories to raise. Who knew how long it had been since their last scrap of food? Who knew how many had already seen their children starve, or worse, eaten them before they could starve themselves?

The first was a bug-eyed, emaciated man with what might have once been blonde hair. Mostly likely a scout for the others, naked except for the threadbare remains of what had been his trousers. His feet were bleeding, Ash noticed, detachedly, as she raised her crossbow. She let Derrick shout the warning, it sounded better in a man’s voice, but they both knew that the thin man would not stop. He could not stop. Wordlessly, Ash and Derrick nodded to each other, timing their movements to be perfectly in sync. Then, as per their usual agreement, they fired at the same time. It was better that way. That way, neither of them knew for sure that they personally had killed someone, another human being.

After the first man, roughly ten or so of them came at once. Ash was grimly surprised to see some in the tatters of upper class dress, banded together with people who in another life may have been their former servants, their former strangers.

A weathered, bandit-looking man with most of his teeth missing was situated right in the middle of the scrawny throng. This seemed to be the leader. He had a sullen-looking woman on a chain, with an old dog’s collar around her neck and the tattered remains of a merchant’s wife’s gown about her shoulders.

“We know ye’v Expansion food,” he yelled from within his posse.

How had they known about that? Ash found herself silently thanking God that they had had the foresight to cover and hide the enormous pumpkin, more from carriers than anything else, but still.

“Bring it out!” the man yelled, causing the woman on her leash to stumble as he raised his fists. He yanked at the woman, moving to bring her in front of him as a shield, motioning to his followers to ready

weapons. “Bring it out and we might not eat you too,” he snarled, quieter this time.

That was all the go-ahead Ash needed. She put an arrow in the middle of his throat without waiting for Derrick.

The remaining emaciated would-be raiders lurched away as the arrow hit home, widening their protective circle as their leader fell to the floor gasping and dying. They muttered words Ash could not hear, did not want to hear, as they tried to regroup around the unforeseen change of plans. They walked to the door, more hesitantly now, with their eyes on the window and door where their enemies stood.

It was the chained lady who at last raised her voice for the others, a broken reed of a voice with anger in it. “We’ll be comin’ back fer that pumpkin!” She shook her chained fist at the closed door, the clinking the only sound in the still air and then slumped over again, breathing hard.

With that, the small rabble turned around and shuffled back the way they came, towards the outer grounds and gates of Rhodopalais, less like pillaging murderers than disappointed children who had come to see a show and found they could not get in.

Chapter Seven

Strained relations

Ash had sat watching the fire for what felt like hours. It calmed her, took the faces of the attackers away and it was an extravagance she decided to permit herself after finding the pumpkin.

It was well after dusk when Derrick ran in again. After the shenanigans earlier, he had stood under cover near the gates for hours, watching. No one had asked him too, but he had. And when Ash had brought him a chunk of raw pumpkin for eating while he was there, he had just shrugged her away and not taken it. She hadn't pestered him, she understood. She never wanted to eat after, either.

But now, now he was different, Ash could tell without even needing to see him first, in that way childhood friends could. When he came up, not quite running but not quite strolling either, Ash felt her shoulders tense and her hands reaching for the crossbow. What was it this time?

"There's a traveller," Derrick panted, leaning on the doorframe. "Just one, coming up through the gates. Looks like a woman."

"A *traveller*?" Ash could not have been more surprised if he had said the king himself, or a travelling circus complete with dancing ponies, had decided to visit.

"No one leaves their homes, Derrick. Even to walk in their gardens. Not the men, *no one*. What on earth would a woman *traveller* be doing out at night? Stay inside, just in case, but you must have seen wrong, is all."

But sure enough, in just a few minutes, the petite figure of a cloaked woman came walking unhurriedly out of the darkness, not even looking this way or that for owls.

Ash let Derrick stand in the doorway holding his crossbow, looking imposing and wheezing less now. She stood right next to him, ensuring that neither Old Merta nor Tansy could be seen behind them. A woman out at night was a strange sight indeed, but she looked harmless enough and Ash could tell from the way she was walking that, at the very least, she was not holding a weapon all ready and armed. Whether she was carrying one remained to be seen.

“Good evening,” the traveller said sweetly from beneath her hood, as though they were holding out a cup of ale rather than a crossbow. “This is Rhodopalais?” she asked, in a voice just shy of uncertain, not really a question.

Hearing the name from someone else sent a jolt through Ash. The signs that had ostentatiously marked the start of their lands had long since been stolen – first for the gold leaf, then for the metal and lastly for anger itself - even before things had got really bad. How had the woman known the name? But more than that, just hearing it spoken sent a shock through them all, in the way that all destroyed worlds feel shock when someone mentions their past, trappings of when times were normal, in such a casual way.

“It was,” said Ash, speaking for the staff. “Although we’d be interested in hearing how you came about the name. Do you come to seek hearth and shelter?”

“Oh, that would be lovely.”

It was a stupid reason to risk all of their safety, but Ash found curiosity burning in her stomach, the first alive thing she had felt for months. She had to know – how did this woman know the name of their estate? And who travelled at night? Who did not watch for birds?

“Please, come in,” Ash found herself saying.

“Thank you ever so,” the woman answered cheerily as though she had expected the answer to be nothing else and walked amicably past Derrick and his crossbow inside and set about taking off her cloak. A bright head of coppery hair emerged from beneath a hood – hair that had most likely been very fine, in times when hair was still tended. The woman came in, patting dust off her cloak ordinarily enough, but Ash felt

as though she could smell the night and wildness on her. This woman had come some way. Who on earth travelled in such times and on foot? Who did not watch for birds?

Derrick squared himself up to her retreating back as though she were a bear and not a woman half his size. “What is it you want?”

“Shelter would be kind, the traveller said without looking at him. “By the fire will serve me well, no need for more.”

“And food?” Ash asked in a low voice.

The woman looked at her full in the face at this. “Of course not,” she said softly. “You must think me blind. Not in these times, no. Just hearth and a few words’ conversation.”

Ash took a step closer, trying to read the details of the stranger’s face as though there were some hidden meaning there. “I do not think you blind, but I think you brave. It’s been many a moon since we saw someone travelling through here that was not in the claws of a bird.”

The woman spared a small smile like cracked pottery and nodded. There was something so strangely familiar about her, some intangible something in her face. “It was important enough to risk the carriers. I’m looking for someone who once lived here. I am looking for the Lady Cerentola.”

“The Lady Cerentola?” Old Merta came out from the shadows, her eyebrows raised near enough to her kitchen cap and looked at Ash, blinking. Ash returned the look, not needing to say anything. Finally, she turned back to the traveller.

“The Lady Cerentola is unwell, being older now in years, as I am sure you can imagine in these times. You’ll understand if-”

“Not her. The *young* Lady Cerentola. Daughter of the *first* wife of his lordship.”

Silence washed over the room, making even the cozy hearth fire seem cold. It was impossible. How could a stranger know about her? How could she know any of what she apparently did know, able to travel to Rhodopalais on foot by night from who knew where?

“The ‘young’ Lady Cerentola is no more,” Ash said at last. “What business would you have with her?”

The woman paused for a second, her face white with surprise. Then her expression hardened. “No, she is alive. I would have seen it if not. I am sure of it.”

“What do you want with this ‘lady’?”

“That is only for her ears.”

“As I said, she is no more.”

The stranger shook her coppery head smartly. “I know she is alive, I know.” She threw her travelling cloak wide for an instant, the better to get into some inner pocket and with that the conversation went cold. Without speaking, Ash walked the distance between them and drew the cloak back with her hand. Beneath it were the unmistakable orange robes of a Pathfinder.

The woman watched her expression without speaking, her face tense but unrepentant in the firelight.

“We have enough vultures in these parts, stranger,” Ash hissed. “Why come to take the poor’s warmth and their sense too, with your zealot babblings?”

“It matters not what you think,” the woman shot back. “Only the Lady Cerentola.”

“Oh, does it not?”

Old Merta stepped in, coming in between the two and glaring. “Ash! There is no need to be so *rude*.”

But Ash was watching the traveller. The woman stopped her arguing as if she had been slapped and looked at Ash in amazement.

“Ashlyne,” she whispered, her mouth falling slightly open as she looked at the grubby kitchen girl before her with eyes wide. “Ashlyne, is it really you?”

All the world stopped.

“How do you know my name?” Ash managed at last.

The traveller seemed to remember herself and wiped the look of amazement from her face, shutting off her features neatly like a closed book. Again, a wave of familiarity swept over Ash. Something about that face... who was this woman?

“How do you know my name?” Ash said again, louder than she’d intended.

Rather than answering, the traveller continued her business of looking within some inner pocket. At last, she pulled out a tattered and grimy roll of tightly bound canvas, the kind they used to do oil paintings on at court when it was fashionable with the nobility some years back.

Ash took the canvas, but before she could unroll it the sound of her stepmother's shoes came around the corner. Next to this sudden new stranger, Stepmother looked suddenly old and derelict, in her shabby genteel gown.

But Stepmother did not seem to notice this. She also did not ask the traveller who she was or what she wanted. She just stared in astonishment, her bright green eyes nearly popping out of her head. The traveller was staring at her too, although with a much less surprised expression on her face.

Finally, Stepmother spoke. "*Enrosa?* Is that *you?* I did not see... I mean, I knew there were *strained* relations... Well. This is a surprise."

Ash stared back at the mysterious traveller. "You two know each other?"

But both women were still watching each other. At last, 'Enrosa' broke the silence.

"The Path guides us all, Jadene. To some it shows some things, to others a different view of the same. Besides, I wanted to see how you were keeping the place."

None of this was making sense. Ash turned back to the canvas in her hand and unrolled it.

And gasped.

There was her mother, in the pomp of court that no one had seen for so long. And there, beside her in similar array, was the coppery head of the traveller before her.

"Your lady mother was my sister, my younger sister. When I became one of the royals' Pathfinders, I forswore my right to inherit. And so Rhodopalais went to your parents, while I went north.

"I'm your aunt, Ashlynnne."

There was nothing but quiet in the previously warm kitchen. Each stared at the other, no one saying anything. Ash did not know what to think. She could not have been more surprised if someone had announced her queen.

At last, one thought came, after minutes of tense silence. "Why have you never come? If you are my aunt, you are my only living relative, is that not so? Why have you not come before now, to see me?"

The 'aunt' looked at Ash in mild surprise as though, bizarrely, she hadn't expected this question. "I am a Pathfinder," she explained

patiently. “And years ago, I received instructions that on my Path I would meet my niece just once in this life, when I would give her a very important message that was to change the fate of our nation. Today our leader in this region confirmed it – confirmed it even with her dying breath.”

“So, you, you knew about me, knew I was here, but you never came to see me, not after either of my parents died or after the Project, never... never even *told* me I had one blood relative alive, somewhere... because the *Path* told you so?”

“Yes.”

There was no sorry, there was no hesitation. It had all apparently been decided for her, years ago. Not by people, or at least any who cared for her, but by some unfeeling unhuman path.

Ash could hear no more of this. She turned and walked out of the kitchen and into the night.

Chapter Eight

Bad things happen in three's

Old Merta had always said bad things happen in three's.

Ash was so angry, her head seemed to be filling with white rage that was expanding like steam and turning the whole world into a hot mess, blurring her vision. She sat down abruptly on the dry earth. If a carrier came, well, good. She couldn't do this anymore.

One: an invitation to die arrives from the palace. Two: a stranger arrives and it's a Pathfinder. Three: your only surviving blood family never cared for you, Ash. She left you to think you were all alone in the world. Old Merta strikes again.

On the one hand she has a point, Ash could see that. When she looked back on being a child now, she could see the three's everywhere.

One: half-kneeling and half-fidgeting as an eight-year-old, watching as her mother lay slowly dying. Two: the velvet swish of a fashionably bustled skirt as it exited the carriage attached to her 'new mother', who shook hands like a gentleman with a grip fiercer than a vice and met Ash's gaze head-on with green eyes like cold steel. Three: the sickly crunch of her father's skull hitting the ground, as the glossy flank of his fallen horse came down to meet it.

Ash could see how that seemed reasonable, but it didn't seem as simple as all that. One: within the smell of old sweat and fear, tangled up in the sullen bedsheets as Mother lay dying, she had made Ash promise to pray each day. And so, she had and had learned a kind of peace that became a gravity to her, in a time gone mad.

Secondly, her stepmother had, for all her flaws, kept the household from the hunger and hysteria when most estates fell apart after the Expansion Project. Her steely gaze and her firm grip held on, when there was no lord and master to do so.

And Father... Father. Still, the other two held true, especially the first.

She sank down to the ground. Ash had only ever come to pray during the daylight hours before. The carrion owls were the most dangerous of all. But tonight, she didn't care. If she stayed in that house with that woman she may well kill her – she'd rather be carrion food than a murderer. Even Pathfinder blood could stain the hands, she imagined.

Ash was barely alone for five minutes before the soft sound of grounded footsteps came.

“Ashling?”

Old Merta. She never come outside. Ash sat up straight in the dark.

The cook did look more than a little uneasy, Ash could see that now. But she had brought a lit candle with her – probably the only one she had left. Without quite meaning to, Ash lurched toward her as soon as Old Merta was close enough and clung to her like a child.

The old woman just held her. “Sweet girl... it's not done well, I give you, this whole business is not done well at all. But, this lady be your family and, well... family is hard to come by for all of us these days. Perhaps just go to her ball, just to be a good girl? What do you say to that?”

Ash said nothing, but in spite of herself a few tears leaked out onto the fleshy arms that had once always been dusted to the elbows in soft flour. If Old Merta noticed, she was kind enough not to say anything.

Too soon, Old Merta got up uncomfortably, looking fruitlessly up at the black sky. “I won't stay longer, you know, because of them birds. But, just think on it Ashling.”

Off went Old Merta, with the candle, back towards the kitchens. Taking all the light with her.

Once she was out of sight, Ash felt like crumpling again. This time she knelt, pressing her forehead into the dry, unforgiving earth. *Help me, help me, help me*, she said to the ground. When she started to feel wet on her face, she realised she was crying again, but she could not stop. *Help me help me...*

“Ash.”

Derrick's voice. Ash dried her eyes quickly, before he came any closer. Seeing her crying had always upset Derrick.

He moved almost silently in the dark – not quite as nervous as Old Merta, but not oblivious to the dangers either. Ash looked at his outline in the gloom, watching her. She turned and looked away. The hazelnut tree looked sinister at night. Sitting this close to it, it's twirling, curved branches looked like deranged talons.

The wooden clunking sound of Derrick holding his crossbow was audible in the dark. Then she heard his voice, also sounding wooden, as he sat down next to her.

“How are you?”

She almost laughed. “How *am* I? Oh Derrick... I don't know. I feel angry but also... also ashamed. Because we both know Stepmother. She'll make Vanita go to that stupid ball come hell or high water, most likely hell. That should be reason enough for me to go but...”

“But?”

“I don't want to die,” she whispered.

“You're not going to die, Ash. What's our words?”

“Only one of us is allowed to die.”

“Right. And I'm coming with you, which is final by the way, if you do go, we'll take all the crossbows, the daggers, the hooks and spikes. So then it's got to be me to die, isn't it, because you still need to take care of Vanita and all. I'm not saying you should go, I'm just saying that if you do I will come with you.”

“I know you would, I do.” *And that's part of the problem*, she thought, but did not say.

“Go inside, Derrick. I'll be fine. Really. I just want a few moments alone. Then I'll come in.”

Only when he was finally gone, did she let slip the hardness in her face and truly cry.

The third time the footsteps were different, unrecognisable. The Pathfinder. Her family. Ash didn't want to, but she found herself looking up anyway.

There was no candle and yet something was making the Pathfinder's hand glow like a dying ember, lighting up the desolate garden around her with some invisible illumination. Her silky orange robes looked almost molten and inexplicably Ash was reminded of the Expansion pumpkin. She felt dwarfed. She felt fear and she hated that.

As soon as the Pathfinder got to where Ash was sitting, she somehow turned the light down to a gentler glow. She said nothing, merely stood in front of Ash.

“I had heard that Pathfinders practised magick,” said Ash, when she trusted herself to speak.

She started when the woman laughed, a high clear sound like crystal in the cooling night air.

Instead of responding, the Pathfinder opened her hand and held out a strangely shaped glass orb, almost like a diviner’s ball, which the orange light seemed to be emanating from. “We practise self-contemplation and awareness. Through it, at necessary times, we can to an extent alter our surroundings slightly. Some call that magick and we let them. The more important role each Pathfinder has is to dedicate her life to the expansion of science and technology. Even more people call this magick and that I am not so fond of.”

“So, you aren’t magical?”

“Not at all. I have merely mastered some of the power of my mind through the lifelong training all Pathfinders who show gifting and aptitude receive. Most learn at their mothers’ knees. It has little to do with the religion that masses seem to have invented for us – believe it or not I am actually of the Christian faith by birth – but there you are.”

“That makes sense. My mother was Christian.” The orange robes were less offensively bright now that the light was dimmed. They looked well with the Pathfinder’s coppery-red locks, making her seem alive even with worn face and a middle-aged body beginning to sag and soften. She must have been a beauty to rival Mother, once.

“We use it when we need to.” She studied Ash again, then dropped down to sit cross-legged on the floor. Now that Ash knew who the woman reminded her of, the ghost of her mother’s features were constantly in the Pathfinder’s face. And seeing the image of her proper mother sitting on the floor shocked Ash like a slap in the face.

“I must confess Ash, I was slightly nervous about this meeting. Even this, look at me, pulling tricks out from my sleeve like some hedge magician! This garden is – or rather was – as familiar to me as it probably is to you and I admit I did not truly need light to see the way. But I did

need you to see what I am capable of, so that you can believe what I am saying is true.”

“I know that what is true is that you left me abandoned, an orphan without family. You let me believe I had no blood relatives left. *That* is true to *me*.”

The Pathfinder didn’t contradict Ash, nor did she apologise. She just sighed and sat in silence. Ash noticed that she didn’t cringe and look up at the sky, either, like the others had. It galled her to think that this woman was living without fear when the rest of them watched for their lives every second of every day.

“Ashlynne, I know you don’t think so, but believe me I know you better than you think I do. Your mother was three years younger. We grew up at Rhodopalais, this home. And I was to inherit this home when I was called by the Path and I left the life of being a lady behind me.

“Your mother, she was the younger one, the prettier one. She had hair like sunshine, everyone said so and eyes deep and black. I didn’t mind. Since she was followed around by an array of admirers, always, there was little pressure on me to marry for security, even though I was heir. Your father, he was the most smitten. Pathfinders may marry and inherit land, but those pledged to the crown may not. And so, when I ceded my titles to Rhodopalais and the family name, they married. Your father moved here to take up ownership, which was quite controversial. They didn’t care about the talk. They cared only for each other.”

Ash had not realised how much she had missed hearing talk of her dead parents. In the current times talk of death was not for those gone in years past and she had not known just how hungry she was for this. But Ash was used to going hungry by now.

“You think you know me but you don’t.”

“Very well and you think *you* know what is right from what is wrong in this situation. So, which of us is correct?”

Ash had no response to this. “I think you should go,” she replied stiffly.

“I think *you* should go,” the Pathfinder retorted.

Ash turned to face her, not bothering to wipe the tears off her face. “You know, if you had ever bothered with me, if you had decided to even get to know your one niece, your only family, even a *little bit*, perhaps I would have gone to your stupid ball. Also, if you knew me, you would

know this: I make my own path. Always have.” She looked the orange robes up and down. “And you would know that I hate your kind and that didn’t start with you waltzing in here today. I think you’re spineless, blaming things on some path instead of facing the fact that the way your life turns out is because of you. Maybe it’s not ‘the Path’s’ fault that you don’t know me, that you never knew me. Maybe it’s yours.”

Ash stood up to go, but the Pathfinder stood too and was easily taller. She merely sighed, looking down at Ash, as if she had been expecting all this and it was but a minor inconvenience in her life. In her plan. “You must be, what, seventeen years old now? I cannot decide for you Ashlyne, nor sway you. I can see that you already have your own mind, just like I did and your mother and all the women in our family. But perhaps I can appeal to your sense of right. This may well be the *end* – of this country, this way of life, do you understand that? And who knows but that you going to the ball would mean a marriage to the prince – a happy marriage, of course – that would change the fate of this nation and save it? Would you not go for that?”

“You are wrong, Aunt – if that’s what you are. The way of life you talk about has already ended.” With that, she pushed past the hateful woman. She wanted to be back in the kitchen, back with Old Merta and a life where people didn’t ask ridiculous things of her.

A thin silhouette was in the doorway when she got to the servants’ entrance.

“Oh great,” Ash muttered, not slowing her stride. What was her stepmother doing there? Since when did she use, or even know where, the service entrance was?

The woman looked so much thinner than she had been, even in all her ruffles and bows. In spite of herself, Ash did stop walking, just before barrelling into her stepmother. She did not flinch or move aside. She looked at Ash without blinking.

“Are you going to go and take Vanita with you?”

“Let me get inside.”

“Are you going to go?”

“Stepmother! There are owls out at this time of night, for those of us that live in the real world. Let me inside!”

“Are. You. Going?”

“No.”

Rather than step aside, she squared her shoulders and Ash noticed she was holding a piece of paper. Ash hadn't even known that they had had luxuries like paper lying around. No wonder people were trying to plunder them.

Her stepmother held the piece of paper between them, almost like a talisman. "Then here," she said brusquely, handing Ash the paper and finally stepped aside.

'Notice of end of service' the paper said on it in shaky handwriting.

Ash stomped up to her stepmother, to stand on the step in the doorway and stare her down. They were almost touching. Ash could have reached out to strangle her.

"You cannot be serious," she near shouted, not bothering to read any further.

Stepmother looked her full in the face. Her eyes glittered like jade, like shiny hard things. "Oh, can't I? Let me ask you something *Ashlynn*. Do you really think Vanita I the only girl in this country who is being forced, tearful, into a ballgown? No. Perhaps you are not a beauty to become a royal bride, like she is, but you have leadership in you. I see it. What about all the other Vanita's out there? What will you do for *them*?

"Besides, I think we can both agree that Vanita needs to be safe. Where would she be safer than at the palace? She cannot go alone across these plains, never has but you –"

"I've never been across the plains either! No one has! It is *death*. I know you don't care whether I live or die, but her?"

"No, you're wrong... you could protect her."

"Woman you are out of your mind! How can you not see that this is ridiculous! How can you just not think...?"

"Oh, have I not thought? Do you not think that I have gone over this a thousand times in my head? Marriage into the highest places of power is the *only way* to protect and to survive longer than one day, one hour. The prince and king can protect her and you, while you are there, can find a way to help those other girls. Who would not want my Vanita?"

"That is not the way things work anymore! Vanita cannot be protected by *marriage* of all things! The world has moved on since your

generation – look around you! Which bride is safe? Which palace is safe?”

“I did not *ask* for your *opinion* Ashlynn! Since you so gracelessly gave up your position in this household and want to be treated like a servant, I shall indeed treat you like one. I can force you out any time if you do not obey my wishes. So, you *shall* go to the ball.”

Ash expected a slap, or a wave of verbal abuse from her stepmother, but instead, she took two steps forward and held Ash’s hands in hers. Which was much worse.

“I know you think me a monster to even think about turning you out – that is not it. It is rather that I would do anything to get you to go and take Vanita with you. Anything. Without you, we would not survive and you know that better than I do. But if you do not go, we are dead anyway.”

Stepmother’s voice warbled, then steadied. She took one more hard look at Ash, then turned and went inside without looking back.

That was when Ash looked again at the piece of paper in her hand. She turned it over. It was Stepmother’s cherished old invitation from the Cinderella ball, still folded with utmost care, with the notice of end of service scrawled on its back.

Chapter Nine

Magick something up

Ash went inside, to find Stepmother leaning against the kitchen table, head hung low. She was so thin now.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” she said softly.

Her stepmother did not look up.

She tried again. “Even if I were to go to this idiotic ball, there is absolutely nothing for me to wear.”

At this, Stepmother lifted her head.

“I could help.”

Ash turned around a bit too suddenly. She had almost forgotten the Pathfinder was there. How long had she been standing and listening to them squabble? “How do you two know each other?” she asked instead.

A look passed between stepmother and Pathfinder. “Never you mind that. Enrosa, are saying that you can magick something up?” her stepmother was straightening now.

“It’s very simple. I can perform minor acts of awareness on myself, temporarily altering the perception of reality so my form appears invisible to raiders or brightening a dimming candle’s light should I need to read. In times of need with enough mental preparation I can temporarily transform other things not on my person, too, into something else – as long as it is the right size and shape. So, I could, say, turn one dress into another dress.”

This was clearly the right thing to say. Stepmother was standing fully upright in an instant. “I kept one of Ash’s mother’s dresses, for posterity.”

“Excellent. That should do.”

Ash looked at the two women incredulously. “And just how do you suppose we get to the palace? On foot? I’m sure Vanita will be thrilled.”

“You have no carriage?” the aunt frowned, mildly scandalised.

Ash glared at her. “We are not all kept women, Pathfinder. Not all of us live off the palace. We sold the coach long ago. And all the horses have been eaten. Just like everyone else’s.”

“I have an idea,” said a small voice in the doorway. Vanita, looking small and sleepy, stepped into the hearth light. She must have been standing there the whole time, listening.

“What about the pumpkin Ash? She said as long as something is the right size and shape for a carriage...”

Ash groaned. “Seriously? Like Cinderella?”

Vanita blushed a deep crimson, but only shrugged her shoulders. “Well, why not?”

“No! Vee, listen to yourself! We *cannot*. That is our food, our survival.”

“Vanita is our survival if we get her to this ball,” replied Stepmother smugly.

“What is *wrong* with you people? Am I the only one who ever thinks?” But they were no longer listening - Stepmother, Pathfinder and Vanita were walking out of the kitchen the walled-off vegetable patch where she had hidden the pumpkin.

The Pathfinder went out first and as soon as she had, Ash stepped in front of the doorway and looked hard at her family.

“Vanita, how do you feel about all of this?”

Her stepsister shrugged in a childlike way. “I was scared before but now we have Pathfinder magick to use. And besides, you won’t let anything bad happen to me Ash, I know it.” She smiled with all the innocence in the world, the smile that made Ash’s heart close up in fear, but before she could say anything, Vanita was heading out the door.

As her stepmother moved to pass her, Ash gripped her forearm and pulled her close.

“If I do this thing, this ridiculous thing and we somehow survive, you have to promise me that you will never jeopardise Vanita like this again. I don’t care if the prince and king both are waiting in a chapel to marry Vanita in a second. Never. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

She released Stepmother’s arm. “Good. Make sure there are candles on and that someone is awake at all times to unbar the door. If

there is a chance, I will lure any bandits or carriers to myself and Derrick and send the coach back with Vanita inside. You have my word.”

Something that was not hardness glittered in Stepmother’s eyes, but she said nothing. She simply walked out the door.

“Yes, this would do nicely,” the Pathfinder was saying when Ash caught up. She was making her robes glow like a candle again, looking the Expansion pumpkin over. “I can always simply tell it to go on a certain path at certain times, if there are no horses. And make it look like a coach, of course.”

Ash sighed, still unwilling to believe this conversation was even happening. Just like some Cinderella parody... Then she stepped in between the Pathfinder and the pumpkin.

“You have to give your word that it will turn back afterwards, Pathfinder. Without that pumpkin we’ll die.”

“Yes, yes,” she agreed impatiently. “So, how about it being a coach for two days? The longer it stays, the more unpredictable the magick will become. Around forty hours, enough time for both nights at the ball. Yes?”

“We won’t need it for two nights.”

“Well, we shall see. And in terms of it returning to Rhodopalais, it will have to be on a certain time, as I will be using my own awareness to make it to leave, so only my awareness can bring it back.”

“How could we know exactly when it will leave?”

“I will make sure of a certain, easy time. Say at the start of sunrise?”

“We wouldn’t need that long at all. It is not yet eight o’ clock!”

“Oh, well, good, that’s easier. Then after the last stroke of midnight. That should be well heralded enough, thanks to the Cinderella tradition.”

“Now, shall we go back inside? Cinderella was right about one thing – dress *is* important. I assumed I’ll be magicking old ballgowns and if I remember both your mothers’ styles correctly, this is going to take some energy.”

That was how Ash found herself talking about dresses and hair three hours after shooting arrows at a mob.

“Higher,” Stepmother said to herself as she piled Vanita’s bright hair on top of her head. “It must look like a crown...”

Vanita in turn was brushing through Ash’s hair and Ash felt like she would rather have faced a carrier than go through this pain. “There *are* only knots, Vanita, leave them be! I haven’t brushed my hair for longer than I can remember and you know it!”

“Well, there hasn’t been a ball for longer than you can remember either,” said Vanita, uncharacteristically sternly.

“Shush Vanita.” Stepmother seemed to at last be happy with Vanita’s hair. To Ash, it looked a bit like a copper-coloured cat had fallen asleep on her head. “Now stop fussing you two and come get your dresses seen to by Enrosa.”

“But Mother, Ash’s hair is hardly done! It’s still loose!”

“Yes, well, it’s also almost barely past her shoulders. Scandalous. If she wanted properly dressed hair, she shouldn’t have hacked it off with a carving knife!”

“It was getting in the way of me hunting! Anyway, I’m fine with it loose.”

The swishing noise of silken fabric filled the room, just a little bit more loudly than fabric ordinarily would. The Pathfinder entered, looking impatient. “When you’re all ready? There *is* a ball to get to, that begins at a certain time...”

“Vanita first,” blurted out Stepmother, pushing her daughter forward with a little shove. The hair wobbled dangerously as she did but managed to right itself.

“Fine. Where is the dress? Is it this one she’s wearing?”

Vanita blushed beneath her bouquet of hair. It was her second gown, the one kept in her wardrobe and not worn anymore. Its flattened bodice was fashionable years ago and it was the ruined beauty of a once russet rose colour. She was clearly mortified and her mother was not helping. “She has no stomacher, no gloves or muff! And look – the train is completely ruined”

Vanita looked about to cry. “Hush Stepmother! She happens to be a lady of marriageable age not eaten by a carrier. Who cares if she has a stomacher? Not that she needs one, or any of us for that matter. I could fit two of my current waistlines into one of my old stomachers. And

remember, she's going across the wastelands for *your* stupid idea. Is that not enough?"

"Yes, yes... Silence now." The Pathfinder waved them impatiently into silence, staring fiercely at Vanita's dress as though she expected it to burst into flame. After a few moments, the Pathfinder frowned and tucked her head down as though concentrating. Then, with a genteel swish of her hand, some subtle thing in the air began moving.

Apart from earlier in the garden, Ash had never seen magic – or whatever the Pathfinder wanted to call it - done at close range before. She had to admit that despite her beliefs it certainly was aweing. A hush fell over the room, something like whispers echoed in Ash's mind, though everything was perfectly still. Before her eyes, Vanita's dress began a softening, a fluffing up, a finishing, a filling. In a graceful swoop, the neckline sank, revealing just a hint of cleavage, straightening into an arc off the narrow white shoulders with a dancer's grace. Ever so slowly, the sleeves shortened just an inch and filled out just below the shoulder into decadent cream puffs of sunset-coloured fabric. Almost imperceptibly, the waist came in, caressing the flat chest and waist where the dress had ballooned just moments before. Then, with an almost audible sigh, the various layers of silks seemed to gather themselves together at the waist, as though gathering their strength and gushed forth like a fountain of pinks and oranges right down to the floor where they pooled, contented. The whispering, sighing feeling was gone from the room and Vanita stood in an entirely new dress.

Vanita looked not to her mother, but shrugged her shoulders and arched her eyebrows at Ash: *how do I look?* Ash smiled her approval. The gown was perfect. The silk and brocade shone against Vanita's copper hair and pale face. It was the sweetness of Vanita, a pink like spun sugar, with the grace of her good nature in the way the gown moved and a fiery orange beneath that was Ash, strengthening her. Her white slim form looked swanlike, transcendent. Ash turned aside, almost embarrassed by her sister's beauty, to see that her stepmother had tears running down her lined cheeks.

Ash's aunt pulled a small mirror from some hidden pocket within her orange robes and held it up to Vanita so that she could see herself. When she did, the smile that shone out was like the sun itself. As if by some further enchantment, she was the beauty, not the dress.

“Oh Vee,” Ash sighed in spite of herself. “You look... Wow.”
“Well and so will you! It’s your turn now.”

The three women turned on her and Ash found herself suddenly nervous, standing there still in her smock and ragged chemise. She felt like a serf in front of a queen beside Vanita. And she had no russet coloured dress to transform.

She turned to her stepmother. “Well, it’s not quite the same raw material as Vanita. What do you think?”

Stepmother walked out the room.

“Come here Ash,” said the Pathfinder quickly, too quickly and Ash tried to compose her face into not revealing what she felt inside. “Just stand the way Vanita did, right there, that’s fine.”

Unperturbed by her lack of dress, Ash’s aunt walked towards her, looking at her intently as she had done with Vanita’s dress. Only, this time, she was looking at Ash herself and not the rags she wore. “Do you know why your mother named you Ashlyne?”

Ash shook her head, still looking down.

“Ashlyne means a dream, a dream that is roused by the rustling sighs through a grove of trees. Your mother believed in the power of looking up, beyond circumstances, into the eternal beauty of trees. After she got sick, she used to say that no matter what happened, if you could hear the wind sighing through the trees, you could still dream. And if you could still dream, all was not lost.”

“I remember hearing that story when I first married Lord Cerentola.”

Ash had not seen Stepmother come back in the room, but now she was there, right there,

so close that she could feel her warmth at her elbow. She did not know when last they had been so close to each other. And she was holding something.

“Ash, this was the dress of your mother’s that I kept.”

Ash stared down at her mother’s old receiving gown, from her salon days, her breath catching in her throat. She thought she would never see something of her mother’s again, had no idea that Stepmother had kept it. Ash ran her hands along it, feeling the weave of the fabric and taking in every detail. It looked old now and hopelessly old-fashioned with its high waistline and its ratty long train. But it was her

mother's. The sea green satin had the extra sheen of age, it's lining a dull gold colour inside, not far from the colour of Ash's hair. Inside, sewn in at the waist was a label, hand-written in green ink. '*From Ashes to beauty*' it said. The words were familiar. Was it a play on her name? Her mother had never called her Ash. But before Ash could think on it further, the Pathfinder cleared her throat nervously.

Ash smiled at her aunt for the first time. "That story about my name was beautiful. Are you going to turn this sea green darker, change me into a green tree?"

"No, you are bigger than that. I am going to turn you into the air that moves the trees, its sighing and the whole night sky."

The aunt stepped back and began bigger, more deliberate arm movements than she had with Vanita. As she did, the whispering in the room came back and then heightened into a hum, a buzz that flowed with energy and seemed to flood the room before it all came upon Ash, filling her completely.

It was like being in a cloud. She could see the room and her family, but it all seemed misty and far away. She was higher up, somehow. The air rustled around her, seemed to go through her and she looked down with a curious, detached sense of rightness as her dress changed shape and colour, lengthening where Vanita's had softened and shining in the candlelight.

Aunt's arms stopped moving and slowly the room quieted down. Although Ash could swear she had not moved, she had the uncanny sense of drifting slowly back to the floor, her feet once more on the ground. Her aunt held the mirror up to her this time and Ash gasped.

She was dressed in deep, iridescent blue, the colour of a very special sky just before midnight. Underneath, as though it were a deep pool, she could catch glimpses of varying shades of azure blue, cornflower and turquoise. Some kind of a shimmer to the fabric left it glittering as she moved, as though her waist and skirt were beset with stars. As she turned, Ash saw that the flounces from the gown were all gone and the slim waist fell in a majestic pyramid to the floor. The sleeves were scandalously short, showing her whole forearm, carrier scars and all and even her upper back was mostly bare from some sorcery that made the fabric completely transparent halfway down her spine, the delicate buttons of the dress looking as though they were sewn into her

skin. As she moved, her deep blue train rushed behind her like a river. She had never seen anything like it.

Vanita almost tripped over her own dress in her rush to come over to Ash and hug her. “Ashling! You look on the outside how you always were on the inside...”

It always unnerved her when Vanita did things like this, crying happy tears she wasn’t even attempting to brush away.

“Come now Vee, you’ll ruin your hair! You look beautiful too. And besides, we’re not fully ready yet.”

“Indeed. Shoes girls,” said Stepmother, coming forward with a very tattered old pillow with four dainty shoes perched on top, which looked like they might break if they fell to the floor.

“Glass slippers,” she announced proudly.

Ash looked closer, incredulous. They looked like silver embroidered cloth and satin – intricate and detailed, but cloth nonetheless. “These are made of glass?”

Stepmother snorted. “Silly girl! No, these are *Glass* slippers. Made by the great Phillipe Glass, outfitter of queens! He used to work for Cinderella herself. Not just any family has Glass slippers. And with him dead now, well... This pair, Ash, was your mother’s.”

They were indeed beautiful shoes. Ash felt enchanted just looking at them, noticing a new tiny flourish or embroidered detail each new second. But no. The world was different now, life was different. And someone had to take care of Vanita.

“I don’t know if I could walk in those, never mind shoot a carrier. I’ll wear my boots.”

“Your *boots*?” said Stepmother, Vanita and the aunt, all in unison.

“Yes. I need to be able to run. Especially if Vanita can’t. Anyway, you won’t be able to see what shoes I’m wearing under here. You can’t even see half the floor.”

“Good grief. Very well. And you Vanita? I suppose you want to wear men’s shoes as well?”

“Oh no. These are worth dying for!”

The four girls went down the staircase, Stepmother and aunt ahead to make way for the two rippling trains coming down the stairs after Ash and Vanita, one like dawn and one like midnight water. “You look

lovely,” her stepmother said in her ear, just low enough for only them to hear. Ash could not remember the last time she had smiled so much.

Old Merta and Tansy were standing at the bottom of the grand staircase. When they saw Ash, Tansy gasped and Old Merta wiped her eyes on her ragged apron.

“Now, are all preparations ready?” said Stepmother in a louder voice. “Do we have everything?”

At the foot of the stairs, hearing these words, something made Ash look back up.

And there, coming down from the attic, another miracle.

“No,” Ash whispered, looking up. “Not everything.”

There was Derrick, looking abashed. He must have heard everything, for he had stolen into the attic where the last of the family keepsakes were. And he had washed himself and combed out his shaggy brown hair into a genteel coachman’s style. He was wearing one of Father’s old doublets, green and amber embossing that lit up his tanned skin and made his eyes look like a forest.

Ash gulped. He seemed nervous, gripping the worn banister like a young girl, but he looked... Ash could not help but notice how the small buttons strained against the muscles of his chest in a way they never had done with Father.

Everyone watched in silence as he descended the stairs. He looked... He looked...

“I told you,” he whispered as he came near Ash, standing motionless as if bewitched on the last stair. “I told you I would come with you.”

She swallowed. “I know.”

He looked down at himself. “I thought it best to look more... I hope you are not offended?” he asked, studiously avoiding Stepmother’s gaze.

“Derrick you look very proper,” said Vanita, breaking the tension.

“Who is this?” said the Pathfinder, looking Derrick up and down.

“He was a groom in our stables, now he’s one of the few surviving servants. I think this could be is our footman for the coach,” said Vanita before Ash could open her mouth. She looked quickly at Derrick, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“Ah, well then, we need to see about that carriage, coachman. Come on down – I hope you won’t mind pushing that enormous thing out in your finery!”

It had been almost a day since Ash had seen the pumpkin last and in the dark she was struck again by just how large it was, like a great hulking beast. Vanita gasped aloud. Standing in such a dress, shivering slightly in the night air and facing a giant about to be magicked all contributed to a curious form of detachment in Ash, like she was wading through a dream. So much so that she had almost forgot her crossbow on the kitchen table and even now was not looking up furtively in the way that had become second nature.

“That should do it there, boy, yes,” the Pathfinder was saying, holding her arms up purposefully and posing herself, as though she were waiting to begin a complicated dance. Instead, she walked full circle around the pumpkin, frowning. At first, Ash could not see what was happening in the gloom. Then, Old Merta came out carrying a candle and Ash could see a lacquer-like patina had come over the entire pumpkin, with jacquard shapes popping up like wildflowers over its shiny, hard surface, transforming into clear glass in two pools for windows. With sleepy, creeping grace it sprouted dark iron vines that rounded into coach wheels, propping the pumpkin up to an even more formidable height. It was now taller than Ash. Finally, some kind of internal pressure could be heard. Then, with a loud bang that scared everyone, a door in the pumpkin flew open and the transformation was complete. Ash and Derrick both peered inside in wonder. The interior was no pumpkin anymore, but rather a proper, very ordinary-seeming red velvet interior of a usual carriage. There were even drapes at the rounded windows.

Ash ran her fingers across the seating, half expecting it to vanish at her touch. Leather. It felt like real leather.

“Ash,” called the Pathfinder’s voice behind her, sounding sad and strangely human. “Ashlynne come and let me say goodbye to you.”

Ash’s hand stopped midway across the carriage seat. Of all the things Ash had expected of this night, she had not expected to feel this pang in her chest, head still inside the pumpkin-carriage when she heard those words. This Pathfinder that she had hated almost immediately, this family that she had not known she had. And now was leaving her again.

“Ash did you hear me?”

She turned around and in one swift motion, Ash did what she did not think she would ever do when this night started. She put her arms around her aunt and held her.

“I heard you.”

Slowly, she felt the Pathfinder’s own hands come up to embrace her back. “It has been a wonder to know you, however briefly,” she whispered in Ash’s ear. She pulled away and looked at Ash in a way she imagined had more to do with the dead sister than her child still breathing. “You look so beautiful, you look li-”

The Pathfinder stopped abruptly as if she had seen someone just over Ash’s shoulder. Ash turned, but there was no one there. Still, her aunt had the look on her face of a traveller who had seen someone or something coming down the same road and they didn’t much like it.

“Here, take this,” she said to Ash in a suddenly business-like voice, holding out an oddly shaped blue glass bottle the size of her hand. “It’s my own personal supply that I take with me whenever travelling. Should anything happen, it greatly speeds up healing and saves flesh that is wounded from turning corrupt. Some might call it magick,” she smiled slightly, handing over the bottle.

Ash’s throat had closed up. “Do you mean... Did you see something? Is something going to happen to me?”

“Ah, no child, I am sorry to have worried you. No, you are strong. I haven’t foresee anything happening to you, don’t worry. But still, time marches on and you must go. So, goodbye Ash.”

Ash pulled away to look her in the face. “So, you are going? And never coming back?”

“As I told you when this night started, yes. I am.”

“And I will never see you again?”

Her aunt shrugged helplessly in her orange robes. “Not that I have seen, but who fully knows the Path Ash? I hope to see you again. If our paths should cross.”

Ash looked away, trying to bite down on words she should not say. A hand reached under her chin and pulled her head up.

“You have the beauty of your mother, Ashlynn. You look like water. This land needs water. Go now and refresh.”

Ash looked at her aunt warily. “Refresh? How?”

“Just by being yourself.”

“But what do you want me to do once I get to the palace?”

“Nothing. I want you to be yourself.”

“And to take care of Vanita,” Stepmother added.

Ash had almost forgotten there was anyone else here. She nodded at the comfortingly familiar silhouette of her stepmother. Now that she could do.

The Pathfinder was putting her travelling cloak back on and hiding her face once again beneath its hood. This somehow made it easier to look at her.

“Goodbye Ash of House Cerentola. May the Path guide you always.”

“Safe travels Aunt. I shall never forget this night, that’s for certain.”

The hooded figure nodded to her, then gestured to Derrick to come forward and help the ladies into their coach.

And then she simply vanished. Leaving nothing but empty air behind her.

Chapter Ten

Fairy tales

They all stared in silence at the empty air for some minutes. There was so much to say, so none of them said anything.

Derrick was the first to recover. He cleared his throat, then held his arm out to Vanita. She took it quickly, still staring at where the Pathfinder should have been and he gracefully enough helped her up into the pumpkin coach in her spun-sugar gown.

Ash took one last look at her aunt in her mind's eye, in her memory, then gave her hand to him as well.

Neither of them had gloves on and the shock of Derrick's cool skin against hers electrified Ash. She had to pause, lean on him, until the fluid lengths of her skirts could be managed and she could hoist herself up into the carriage. She fell rather clumsily into her seat, hoping she hadn't torn the miracle dress somewhere in the process. If Derrick had felt what she had, he didn't show it and he didn't even look at her as he closed the carriage door with a deferential click. A slight shift in weight as he sat up on his perch in front and then, they were off.

Ash leaned as far as she dared out the window to see the spooky sight of a horseless carriage speeding along by itself. Up ahead, the derelict gates of Rhodopalais looked spidery and eerie, like graveyard gates. The cold night air speeding past was like a slap in the face, forcing Ash awake and she was thankful for it. She pulled herself back inside, fished under her voluminous lengths of dress and found her crossbow, then shifted herself so she could peer out the window with it propped at the ready.

A sigh from within the coach. "Ash, can you not just enjoy this?"
"Vanita, someone needs to be careful. To be the one to protect," she stuck her head back in and turned around to face her stepsister, but as she did, her arguments died. Vanita looked calm, as calm as Ash had seen

in a long time and she realised suddenly that she hadn't heard Vanita wheeze in hours.

"Ash. Everything is fine. Not forever, but in this moment, right now, it's alright," she said gently.

"Something could happen, though."

"Yes. And that would be then. But this is now, this gorgeous night. It is only here once."

Her sister looked soft in the moonlight. Open. Openness was Vanita's strength, not Ash's. Ash was made powerful by closing up and hardening when something struck. Now, here, against the moonlight and the stark loveliness of the evening landscape, for all its danger, she was weaponless. Still.

"Vanita, owl carriers would be bad enough – they are the second worst after crows – but what is even more likely is a group of bandits or starving beggars attacking the coach for some gold leaf or even just the coach itself to sleep in. Even with no candles lit, we would be heard a mile away. And people are desperate. I must watch." It would not do to let her live in a fairy tale world, however happy her sister looked.

Clearly Vanita realised this was one she was not going to win, for she just sighed and nodded, waving her hand at Ash's concerns while still staring out at the moon. When Ash was sure Vanita was not looking, she propped herself up to look out her own window.

It *was* a beautiful night. Unbelievably, there were others travelling across the barren, moonlit plain – not many, but some. The moon was clear and high, a duplicitous half-moon that kept some of its face unseen. *You don't know where you stand with a half-moon*, Ash's mother used to say. Still, it cast a good light and there were no clouds. It should be easy to see any carriers well before they swooped.

But as time went on and no carriers appeared, something softened and she looked out at the world before her. The way Vanita seemed to be doing.

Ash knew about life. She knew that it was dirty, scary and hard and that wishing it were some fairy tale wouldn't make it any different. She reminded herself sternly, every few minutes, but soon a hulking big shape emerged on the horizon. The palace. It was hard to remind yourself that

life was no fairy tale when you were headed in a horseless carriage toward a palace.

“Ash... Oh Ash...”

“I know...”

It seemed like only half a second before they were within the palace grounds. The silhouette walls now looked so large and towering. There were other shapes too and Ash realised that they were under the cover of bare trees – real trees! After some time, a rushing burbling sound filled the air as the carriage began to take them alongside a rushing stream, almost invisible in the dark but for the moonlight reflecting off it in snatches. Later, in the vast expanse of land, orange blossomed beneath the bare trees. Servants had lit candles to light the carriages’ way. So many hundreds of lights, so bright against the deep dark blue of the night sky, their reflections flickering on the water.

No, this was not real life. This was a dream, a one-night dream.

Ash could not remember the last time she had seen anything beautiful. The stream widened and then, suddenly, there it was up close: the palace. Six different turrets soaring up from the ground, blazing with light. The palace’s stone walls seemed yellow as they flickered with hundreds of candles within and without and looked as though they could be warm to the touch. Ash could now see where the stream came from as it became a canal that flowed out of the palace’s moat like the train of a fine gown. And there were people getting out of coaches, as much as nine or ten people all in the same place, talking and laughing. It seemed so gloriously, beautifully normal that she started to cry. When she stuck her head back inside the carriage, Vanita’s cheeks were wet too.

Quite a few heads turned at the sight of their horseless, vividly orange carriage and Ash felt suddenly nervous. To curtsy at just the right height, to dance, to demur and giggle – these were things she never thought she’d needed to do again. What if she’d forgotten how? Vanita, quite unaware of her inner angst, took Ash’s hand and gripped it tightly. “All those stories we read as children Ash, all that silly dreaming as you call it... This, right here, this is enough.”

And it was. The outer courtyard was gravel and dominated by a large marble fountain, where footmen and servants were waiting outside in the open night air to escort the guests to safety. One could see that the soil was an arid here as anywhere else, but the palace had turned it into a

beauty instead of a blight. Dry bushes of lavender lined the walkways, with dancing candles in amongst the bushes. Ochre-coloured turrets and picture windows overlooked the bare trees, these festooned with jars in branches which seemed to be filled with fireflies and white fabric hanging motionless in the air.

And too soon, all too soon, the carriage slowed and stopped. And at once the palace was no longer a disconnected scene of wonder, but something Ash had to now participate in. Her heart hammered in her ribs, beneath her dress and her mouth felt dry. She had never been in this position before. She did not know how to behave.

Derrick opened their door, eye on the ground, looking for all the world like a deferential footman. The Pathfinder's words suddenly came back into Ash's mind: 'just be yourself.'

Well, the normal Ash would never be helped down from a carriage like a helpless lady. She twisted around and opened the other carriage door herself and jumped down, walking around the back of the coach to stand next to him.

If she expected him to look surprised, well, Derrick knew her too well for that. He just shook his head and smiled a small smile. Together, they each extended a hand toward the carriage and helped Vanita down.

Ash and Vanita looked up at the tall stone walls and their blazing lights. Vanita let out a nervous giggle. It was like time had magically sped backwards eleven years and they were playing dress-up in their mothers' gowns. Soon they were both laughing too loudly, holding each other and gasping.

Suddenly, Vanita's face changed and the laughter died away as abruptly as it had begun. "I've never been to a ball Ash."

"Neither have I. I wasn't of age yet when all of this Expansion nonsense started."

"Yes, but... No parties, no court proceedings. I've never even seen the palace before, except in Mother's pictures." She looked around her, at the empty fountain and the light-filled trees and the night. The expression on her face reminded Ash of the way Old Merta looked up at the sky.

"I... I'm scared Ash. It seems a ridiculous thing to say, but I am."

She was just newly sixteen, although they had not celebrated her birthday and her worried expression combined with her sumptuous gown made her look like a spooked thoroughbred pony.

“Vee, no one is quite in their element here. No one’s ever been in this exact situation. But you have been trained from birth to be a lady and a lady is what you are. You know how to dance, you are already polite and soft-spoken. You will do well.”

She nodded, her shoulders inside her pink silk trembling slightly. “Will you do well too?”

Ash snorted. “Probably not. But tonight is not about me. Come on, let’s go inside.”

“Agreed,” put in Derrick from behind them. “I hate to break up a sisterly moment, but there are other carriages trying to get in and everyone is pointing and staring at our creepy horseless one.”

They walked across the gravel and up to a servant in full livery, who directed them towards the outer staircase that became the grand staircase.

There, their breath left them.

Everything was the purest white marble as the staircase soared up out of the night air, continuing inside with curving marble bannisters. To the girls’ left, enormous windows displayed the indigo night sky, which truly made the snowy engraved steps shine. Ash, as a servant, could not help but think of how many hours and servants it took to wash such a thing. Still, a royal carpet had even been rolled out and its deep, sensuous velvet made Ash’s heart beat faster, though she would never have admitted so to anyone.

As the windows were replaced by pillars and arches along the gleaming corridors, Vanita turned to Ash. “I’ve never been to a ball, Ash.”

“And nor has anyone else, not for years at any rate. You’re well-bred and sweet, you’ll do well.”

“Will you do well too?”

Ash snorted. “Probably not.”

The corridor widened into a fussily gilded double door entrance to what appeared to be the ball. Two servants – so many servants! – bowed and opened the doors for them, where a somewhat finer dressed man in similar livery and a pompous expression waited at the top of yet more stairs.

“Invitations please, m’ladies.”

Ash looked at him, stricken, but luckily Vanita pulled out the written missive from within her sleeve. “Mother,” she explained to Ash, winking.

“This is only one invitation and the Royal Pathfinder was careful to send them to all households in which there were ladies of marriageable age present,” said the steward doubtfully.

“Just so,” said Vanita smoothly. “And we are of the same house – House Rhodopalais.”

The steward looked doubtful but took in Ash’s cascading dress and unbent posture and merely nodded. “It is customary for the older of two sisters to be announced and present herself to the ball first...”

“I will go, but you needn’t announce me. Announce my sister Vanita after I’ve descended, we have the same name anyway.” Ash began to descend the stairs, trying to think ladylike thoughts. It wasn’t easy, considering that everyone was looking at her. As she reached the bottom stair she let out a breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding and her the steward’s voice ring out behind her:

“Lady Vanita Cerentola of House Rhodopalais!”

Ash couldn’t help but smile as she watched Vanita come towards her. She looked like a real lady. This room was lucky to have her – the one other lady Ash could see waiting to descend the stairs was nowhere near as lovely or untattered-looking as Vanita. She turned to get a sense of the other ladies but was instead greeted by the sight of Derrick standing right behind her. He gave a gallant bow.

“Good grief Derrick, you startled me!”

“Sorry, Milady.”

“Oh, don’t call me that, you know well enough I am no lady anymore. How did you get here?”

“*You* know well enough that there are servants’ entrances for everything. Besides, you two need a chaperone with you constantly, Madame said so.”

“Well ‘Madame’ should have been the one to chaperone us if she was such a stickler for correct etiquette, but personally I don’t mind this arrangement. I’m in for a more fun evening if it’s you – if you can call it ‘fun’ to risk your life crossing a barren wasteland only to talk about the weather with some dull prince who’s probably either ten years old or fifty.”

“Whose fifty?” Vanita was nearing the bottom stair.

“No one. Just my nerves. Come on, you two and let’s get this over with.” Ash straightened her skirts purposefully, as if they were her apron and looked around at the ballroom properly for the first time.

It was as Ash had thought. There were barely ten other maidens in the cavernous ballroom, with their chaperones and the effect was ridiculous: a set of daintily attired ants was what they must look like, this handful of girls laughing nervously and making small talk that boomed across the empty wooden floors and gilded balconies. Clearly the king followed the age-old tradition of ‘if it’s a ball, it must be held in the ballroom’, even if there were less than thirty people in attendance. Still, it was impressive. The ceiling was high, higher almost than Rhodopalais’ roofs and gilded mouldings and *boiserie* snaked up all the panelled walls like golden vines, self-satisfied-looking cupids frolicking around fatly on the ceiling. As they began to walk across the floor, Ash could see that the plush red carpet looked ever-so-slightly sun-bleached and worn and that a few of the receiving chairs and ‘wallflower seats’ to the sides of the dancing area were mismatched. Absurdly, this made her feel a bit better.

At least there was food. Ash headed straight for the banquet table, supressing a smile when she saw that all the other ‘maidens’ were doing the same. To see so much food! There was a whole roast goose, with real vegetables and fresh bread. It was either a normal-sized gose or a carrier-sized swallow. Either one would be as rare as the other, she hadn’t seen such in years. Her family could eat for a month off of this feast. She piled her plate high quickly, ladylikeness be damned and crossed the acres of floor again to sit next to Derrick and Vanita with more food than she had eaten at once in two years.

Derrick eyed the plate hungrily as she arrived. “That looks so good... Do you think... Well, do you think I could have some? I know it’s a ball and there are procedures for servants –”

“To hell with procedure. You sat on top of a magicked carriage less than an hour ago in plain sight of carriers and marauders for this stupid thing. I think that entitles you to some food.”

He shifted uncomfortably in his finery. “Yes, but, well... I don’t know how,” he said at last, quietly.

Of course he didn’t. Ash cursed her insensitivity. If she felt out of her depth, who knew what he might be feeling. She and Vanita knew the

basics of which fork, how to approach someone and all the other niceties without even thinking. Derrick had seldom left Rhodopalais and he had surely never been inside a ballroom. “Come on Derrick, I shall escort you,” she said gallantly, putting her plate down and giving him her arm.

“I can’t believe all this... I’ve died and gone to Heaven,” Derrick said minutes later, eyeing the roast goose up close. No, I’ve died and gone to the palace.” He promptly set about piling his plate as high as Ash had.

There was a man on the opposite side of the table from Derrick, just barely visible behind the neck of the browned goose. He was leanly handsome where Derrick was muscular, with black floppy hair that he kept pushing out of his eyes. But that was not what had attracted her attention. Rather, he was one of the grumpiest-looking people she had seen in years. Ash noticed how he looked around the room distractedly, barely helping himself to any food.

“Humph,” the man said to the goose-swallow bird, glowering at it as if wishing it would disappear.

As Ash and Derrick came close to the table, the man moved aside for them without glancing up. He was scowling at the potatoes now. Derrick certainly hadn’t noticed. He had enough food on his plate to feed a carrier and was looking around himself by now. “I say, there are some nice-looking offerings here,” he said, eyeing the other young ladies in their slightly shabby gowns. “It must be nice to be a prince.”

“Must it now?” said the man across the table from them suddenly. He glared at Derrick as if it had been his idea to have this ball.

“What is your problem?” Ash watched Derrick’s chest puff out like a pigeon’s, as he stood a little taller.

Ash was about to step in, but the glowering man deflated all at once, gesturing apologetically to Derrick. “I am sorry. That was very ill-mannered of me. It’s just that I do not approve of this ball at all. The whole purpose of it is so *stupid*. I wish I could be somewhere else, but that’s not your problem. Truly, sorry.”

“Well, at least there’s food.”

The man barked a dark laugh out, his eyes unsmiling. “Yes. But at what cost?”

Derrick eyed him curiously. “Who’re you then?”

Another laugh. “Part of the food on offer. Something for someone to take home.”

“What?” Derrick was now looking very pale, but Ash out a restraining hand on his arm. She had seen the whiteness of his clothes now, had heard the culture in his voice and a picture was beginning to form. “He doesn’t mean someone will eat him, he means someone will marry him if he’s not careful.”

“Who?” Derrick looked between the man and Ash suspiciously, but Ash put a hand on his arm again. “Don’t. We wouldn’t want to put *his highness* off of his food.”

He looked at her, then back at the floppy-haired man. “Highness?” he squeaked.

The man smiled for the first time. “Not feeling very up in the clouds at the moment but yes, Highness. How do you do.”

Without another word, Derrick gave a rough bow and scuttled off.

The black-haired man chortled as he watched Derrick go. Ash scowled at him.

“Your boyfriend?”

“Oh no, just another one of your adoring subjects.”

“We try,” he said in a quiet voice. “How did you know I was the prince anyway?”

Ash looked him up and down as though wondering whether or not to spare his feelings. “Your plate,” she said at last. “You’re the only one here without a heap of food.”

The prince blushed scarlet at this, looking down at his meagre amount of food. “The palace is very fine,” Ash said quickly, feeling guilty. “I came here only twice, both when I was quite a little girl. And that, well, that was lifetimes ago, several versions of me ago.”

“That palace is lifetimes ago for all of us,” he agreed.

A single lute began playing, then a violin. The prince groaned.

“What?”

“That’s my cue. I’m supposed to be entertaining. Would you like to dance?”

“Me? Why?”

“Because those instruments starting means that the dancing must commence. And I have to start the proceedings. I could just stand here

with my empty plate, but my lord father will kill me if I don't dance with every single eligible lady here. And, well, since we have established that you're so charming, I may as well start with you."

"Well, when you put it that way..."

The prince took Ash's hand and as he led her into the cavernous empty space of the dance floor she remembered too late just how many years it had been since her last dance lesson. Not that she had been bad at dancing, it had been the only part of being a 'lady' she had enjoyed while she had still been one. But that was many years – and a whole different Ash - ago. What if she'd forgotten?"

All eyes were on them, the room awkwardly silent apart from the reedy tones of the lute and violin. When the prince glanced at them, the rest of the flustered quartet began playing. Ash smiled at them in thanks, wondering why on earth she had agreed to this. Everyone was still staring and she felt her face becoming hot. Then the prince put his hand to her waist and involuntarily, she jolted, cursing herself internally.

He frowned, taking the first diagonal step forward of the dance, placing their hands in the correct position. "I'm sorry, have I done something wrong?"

"No... No. It's just that I can't remember the last time someone touched me," Ash explained, realising as she said it that it was true.

"I find that hard to believe. Are you alright now?"

"Ye-es..." said Ash, wondering what had happened to her normal voice, but trying not to show it.

He stared into her eyes as they moved awkwardly back and forward. "It's not me, is it? You're nervous about the dancing. The last ball was years ago... you haven't been to a ball in years, is that it?"

Ash shook her head, still trying to concentrate on the right steps. "It's not appropriate to go to a ball before sixteen, even chaperoned. I was sixteen two years ago, when the Project happened."

He nodded in amazement, not even losing the rhythm of the steps. This prince was a natural. "So, you've never been to a ball? And you've never danced with a man?"

"Apart from my rotund, old dance instructor? No."

"Good grief. Now *I'm* nervous. Would you like to stop?"

“Oh Lord, that would be even worse. Everyone’s already staring at us. Just distract me, tell me something about yourself or talk to me. I’m hoping muscle memory will take over.”

“Your not-boyfriend is bowing to other ladies.”

“What?”

Ash used the first turn to spin around. Derrick was standing nearby in front of three ladies, bowing absurdly low to each one in a manner which would usually be appropriate only for a member of the royal family. It seemed to be working – the ladies tittered behind their fans, thinking him ironic and held out their white unworked hands for him to kiss.

Ash turned the other way, not wanting to lose her concentration and make a false step. But the other side was even worse. A slim, fussily-dressed man was leading a stammering, blushing Vanita out onto the dance floor. His reddish hair and the way he held her reminded Ash of a fox.

“Who’s that man?”

“That is the Duke Novrecorte, my cousin. Third in line for the throne, if my father and I are killed by carriers or some such – which we may well be. Why?”

“Because *that* is my sister he’s dancing with.”

At this, the Prince laughed aloud. “Oh dear! Well, be prepared to see her being swayed into a rather dark alcove at some point in the evening.”

Ash tried to read his face to see if he was joking. He seemed to be serious. “I think I’d rather put an arrow through his neck,” she retorted, equally seriously.

“Is that so?”

“Indeed. But I may have to settle for putting one through his leg only if this dance goes on for much longer. Grief, dancing was never this hard before.”

“Does it feel bizarre to you too? Twirling and exchanging niceties while the world goes to hell outside?”

Ash nodded, not really listening to the prince. A couple of the other ladies had taken to the floor to dance with each other, the better to show off their marriageability there, Ash supposed. It was all severely unequal,

especially since Derrick could not dance, although he seemed to be doing just fine regardless.

“Where is the king?”

The dark-haired prince frowned. His hands were still holding Ash, so he tossed his hair out of his eyes in a way that looked like a vexed horse. “He thought it best not to show his face on the first night, the better not to antagonise the people. There have been threats, attempts...” He looked down but did not lose his step. It suddenly occurred to Ash that, in his own way, things may be rather hard for him.

Ash had not noticed the music stopping, but the few people around them on the dance floor were standing still and curtsying to each other. Before they could quit the floor, the music started again – a lively gavotte this time. The prince looked into her eyes.

“Another?”

“Another.”

She gasped a little as the young prince grasped her waist in his hands and began the dance steps. He moved surely and Ash had to concentrate to keep up. At least there was less time for conversation while they skipped and spun around each other. At least she was wearing comfortable shoes.

Somewhere before the second crescendo, Ash found with some amazement that she was having fun. She even let herself smile a bit at the spinning, sparkling room.

This fact was not lost on the prince, in between the swirls and spins required and lifting of his dance partner. “What’s wrong with your face? Just so you know, it looks happy.”

She smiled once more. “Oh dear. I must change it then.”

He tactfully said nothing, but on the next turn he lifted her so high that her heart was in her mouth. “Nice boots. Those look comfortable.”

Ash felt the heat in her cheeks as she blushed and not from the exertion of the dance. “They are good for outrunning carriers, Highness.”

“I’m sure... In fact, I might just steal them as my princely right, but they do seem to look oddly good with that dress, which I am not so sure would suit me.”

Ash laughed, surprised, to even hear the sound of her laugh again. She decided to be honest. “I don’t want to think about carriers in this

moment. I want to think about dresses and balls and I want you to dance with me, Your Highness.”

“Now *that* I can do.”

And so they danced. Right at the end, on the last swelling note, he took Ash up into his arms and spun her in a circle, held as high as a prize. All of time stopped while she was up there, looking down at him.

But then the dance ended and she curtsied deeply, without irony. “Thank you, Prince Rizend, your highness.”

“Rize, please.”

“I cannot call you that! Everyone calls you ‘Your Highness’ in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“I noticed.” ‘Rize’ grinned toothily, bowing. “Something tells me you’re not everyone. Would you permit me to show you something?”

“Something involving a dark alcove?”

“If I said yes would you agree?”

“No.”

“No dark alcoves, then. On my honour.”

He led Ash through one of the archways, as she had suspected, but made a couple of turns around corners hidden by fussy marble statues and, suddenly, they were outside in the cool night air.

To Ash, this was more beautiful than the interior of the palace. The white marble and bleached stone glowed in the moonlight, the leafless trees down below seemed dramatic and sculptural from here instead of sad.

Rize was standing slightly ahead of her, his spotless white uniform displaying him effortlessly as a part of here. He gestured to a short staircase leading down to the gravel. “Come on.”

Ash certainly was glad she hadn’t worn Glass shoes now – whatever they were, they sounded expensive – and she could easily keep up with the prince as he loped across the expanse towards a dim shape beyond the bare candlelit trees she had seen when they first arrived, in what she assumed had once been the palace gardens.

As they walked closer, Ash could see a not-very-tall building of some kind, in an odd pointed shape, like a chapel in miniature, with rounded walls.

“I wanted to show you my favourite place. Wait here.” The prince walked toward the odd building alone, clearly at home here and seconds later a few candles were lit, showing Ash the building’s true form.

It was the palace conservatory, or had been, when plants had still grown. It was made entirely out of slightly green glass misty with age, ensconced around each of the long panes with girders of wrought iron that frilled into lattice work at the edges. The front was made into an enormous arched window the height of Ash herself, cunningly turned into double front doors for the conservatory that opened like windows would. With the slight shriek of unused metal, Rize opened the doors and Ash stepped inside.

The inside bore the signs of neglect, with dried brown leaves and cobwebs covering the abandoned work surfaces and the forlorn empty plant pots. But the clear glass simplicity of it was still achingly lovely, quiet and pure in the candlelit night. Through the domed, paned ceiling, Ash could see the stars. A slight breeze came in from the places where a glass pane or two were missing. In one corner, barely perceptible in the light, was a work bench littered with glass vessels and scientific-looking oddities more suited to an apothecary than a greenhouse.

“In the daytime I sometimes work there. Don’t tell anyone, but I actually enjoy that sort of thing. My Pathfinder tutor growing up had the Biological Arts as her favourite subject and it rubbed off on me.”

“Tutor? I thought Pathfinders were more professional wearers of orange and eaters of other people’s food.”

“Harsh! They taught me everything I know.”

“I’m still trying to figure out whether that’s a good thing or not.”

“Well,” the prince sidled up to her, “it was the Pathfinders who were the first ones not to think I was crazy for actually enjoying reading. Once, one of my tutors got drunk on honeyed wine and told me that when my lord father had been young they used to send him to the library for penance if he’d played one of his many practical jokes. I would have found it a reward. He wasn’t supposed to inherit the throne, but when the Spring Sickness had taken the other heirs, the people saw that he was strong and lusty and liked to hunt and spar and had served time in the army. So, they said ‘alright, he has the look of one who could be king’. When I was born, it was never a question that I would hunt and fight just like him. I learned to, that was my ‘library’. And now I’m glad. These

days, hunting is not for fun.” The prince’s face was unreadable as he looked off into the dark, a shadow of something contorting his features for a brief moment.

“Sounds like quite an upbringing. And the Pathfinders, they accepted your less... kingly side?”

“Yes. And, more relevantly, they gave me an appreciation for stars. That’s why I thought you’d like this place.”

Ash looked up again, the dusty glass giving the inky night sky an antique feel, with its white-hot stars looking down. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

Rize came up next to her and took her hand, his still warm from the dance they’d shared. “Come on, what I actually wanted to show you is this way.”

There was some scuffling to her left and suddenly candlelight bloomed in the dark. Rize held the flame up high as he led her through the small maze of littered small wrought-iron tables and trays everywhere, until he came to a far corner in which there stood a larger wrought iron table than the rest. This one had once been white. As Rize held the candle closer so Ash could see what was on the table’s top, she gasped aloud.

“Where on earth...” she whispered reverently, rushing to the table where exactly three flower pots were standing. Beautifully, unbelievably, there were flowers in them. One was a deep, sensual purple, the two others an angelic, snowy white. Ash could barely believe what her eyes were seeing and reverently stroked the softness of one white flower’s petals. She did not know when last she had seen something so... *alive*.

“These weren’t easy to keep alive, but they are the last of them,” Rize said. “Sometimes the guilt with what happened due to the Expansion Project threatens to overwhelm me. But these help, it feels as if I’m at least growing or changing *something*. I’ve been down here almost every day for a year, tending to these. It’s funny – I never really much cared for flowers before, I always thought they were girly. But now...”

“... Things are different now. I understand. And Prince?”

“Yes?”

“I was wrong about you.”

Rize smiled, barely perceptibly in the flickering yellow light. “I was wrong too. About this night, about the ball.” Before Ash quite realised what had happened, his hand was in hers.

There seemed nothing else to say and together they walked out of the conservatory and back into the starry night.

They were halfway across the gravel when a new sound came - the unmistakable beating of carrier wings.

KATYA LEBEQUE

The bird does not like the never-ending rattle of the crows. Like it, they too have become slaves to the annual hormone peak that brings the need to breed, so strong it is like a thirst for water.

It understands. The urge to sit with another or fly with another, wingtips touching, is almost unbearable. It is so real, like another bird, a ghost one, beside it in the empty afternoon.

The bird had a mate once. They had made eggs over several seasons and watched their hatchlings grow and turn to sleek, black-feathered mirrors of themselves, staying some seasons before flying away to find their own mates. But all of them were dead now - or must be. And the bird had watched its mate stabbed through the heart by the two legger it was trying to eat. The two-legger had eaten it instead. A different two-legger smashed its nest, it's too-tiny nest, the same one the bird and its mate had used Spring after Spring for years. Even now sometimes, the bird wishes it could go back to that nest.

*Still, the urge is there, even though its own mate is in the ground and in the belly of its enemy.
So the bird waits, trying not to listen to the rattle of lonely crows.*

Chapter Eleven

Punishable by death and all that

“**Owl,**” they both said simultaneously. Ash crouched instinctively so fast that she only realised a few seconds later that, across from her in his pristine white, the prince was doing the exact same thing. He pulled out a gilded dagger from his sleeve, Ash a homemade iron one from her skirt – and they stared long and hard at each other.

The beating of wings intensified for a second, then began to fade as the owl, or whatever it was, moved away.

They stayed crouched in silence for a moment longer in their mirror-like postures. Then Rize stood, shaking his head in disbelief.

“You too? I hunt carriers... and you – you do too?”

The incredulity in his voice irritated Ash. “Yes, me and every other person who doesn’t have paid bodyguards. What?”

“It’s just a surprise, that’s all.”

“Why? Because I’m a girl, your Highness?”

In spite of her tone, he grinned. “I’m not surprised because you’re a girl, I’m surprised because you’re *good*. I’ve had training for war since I was seven. I’ve seen plenty of people fight carriers, but just look at the way you’re standing,” he waved a hand in the dark to her low, feline posture, almost ridiculous in her sparkly long gown. “I’m guessing you haven’t been trained in war.”

Ash shook her head, still frowning at him. “Trained in carrier.”

“Fair enough. Let’s get back inside before another owl comes.”

The ballroom seemed overly bright after the darkness of outside and too obvious after the quiet magic of the conservatory. Ash turned to smile at Rize, but before she could, Derrick strode up to her.

“Ash, you may want to check on your sister.”

“Why? What’s the matter? Is she okay?”

“Depends on who you ask.”

Ash walked quickly into the thick of the ballroom before he could say any more, looking this way and that for Vanita. Finally, she saw the tell-tale pink of her ballgown on the floor.

“... If you were to ask Vanita, I think she’d say she was *very* okay,” said Derrick’s voice behind Ash, tinged with amusement.

Vanita had never had wine not watered-down before, there had not been such reckless luxuries since she had come of age. Now, she was sitting on the edge of the ballroom floor talking to two other ladies, skirts ballooning around her as she talked animatedly to the two strangers, stroking their hands and hair and laughing merrily. As Ash came near she looked up, glowing, at her sister. Her hair was mussed and her face shone, rosy from excitement. She looked less like a lady than a sweet that had been left outside to melt.

“Ash! I’m so happy you’re heere! Isn’t this all just lovely?”

“Van – ah – Lady Cerentola. This, ah, boy has come to inform you that your carriage awaits.”

“I did?”

“Yes, Derrick, you did. It’s near midnight anyway.”

Minutes later, Ash watched her normally graceful sister clamber into the carriage, the back end of her pink skirts looking like a pig trying to get through a keyhole.

“Vee! Come on, it’s ten minutes to twelve!”

“I’m tryyying – these feet aren’t working properly!”

They were both laughing when they sat down, cheeks flushed from dancing.

“What a night!” Vanita giggled, looking at Ash with a tender devotion that made her heart unexpectedly crack open. “Did you have funne Ash?”

Ash sighed. “More than fun... but yes. Yes.”

“And the Prince quite liked you!”

“The Duke quite liked *you*.”

Vanita blushed scarlet. “Ye-hes welll... I’m not the one who may be married to a *prince*!”

Ash scoffed. “Married? No thank you I’m not ready to be married to *anyone*, much less the heir to a dying kingdom.”

Vanita laughed merrily, the effects of the wine still loosening her tongue. “Oh, come now Ash, don’t tell me you’ve forgotten? You can’t say no to a prince if he proposes marriage to you – it’s treason! Punishable by death and all that.”

Ash whipped her head around to look at Vanita, hoping to see some sign she was joking. “They can’t be serious about that, no one would enforce that law anymore. Look how things have changed -”

Vanita merely laughed, wagging her finger tipsily at her sister. “Not everyone is as fluid at adapting to change as you are. Look at Mother! They probably still *do* have that law, because that’s what’s always been done. Just look at Cind-Cinderella... how do you think that story might have turned out if she had been legally allowed to refuse marriage, hmm?”

The warmth of the ballroom was wearing off. Ash felt chilly in her seat and wrapped her arms around her shoulders, hugging herself. Vanita seemed to be feeling no such cold and was relaxing languorously in her seat, woozily watching the scenery go past. With a start, Ash realised that she hadn’t thought about carriers in hours and quickly peered out her window to make up for it.

“Asshe... what do you think it would be like to live in the palace and be married to royalty?”

Ash sighed crossly, not looking back at her sister but instead at the empty night-time horizon. There *were* carriers, damn it. She mustn’t forget, for both their sakes. “I don’t know, Vanita.”

“Oh come onnn... You must have thought about it?”

Ash slammed her palms down angrily on the window opening and turned fiercely on her stepsister. “I don’t know, alright? I don’t think about those things. The prince, he was... different. After so long, how can it not be amazing just to talk with someone you don’t know, after being surrounded by people you’ve seen every day of your life. He was so... other. And I liked that. But I don’t think about him, now. I think about how many days we can last on what food we have, about carriers, about what I’d do if you died. Alright? That is life now. That has been life and I had to change, so I did. To now just sit back and think like a child about marrying princes and fairy stories... I can’t! Okay? I just can’t.”

KATYA LEBEQUE

The two sat in silence as the coach trundled horselessly on, into the uncertain dark.

Chapter Twelve

Be water

It was a relief to get out of the carriage once they got back to Rhodopalais, although in Vanita's case she spilled out more than stepped out. Ash said goodnight to Derrick and then helped her up the stairs.

"Ash, who put the stairs in the wrong order?"

"Shh Vee, the rest of the house is sleeping."

"Then they should have left the stairs where they found themm."

Finally, they were up. Vanita's threadbare bedroom looking far less luxurious, even for its real bed, after the dizzying sights of the palace. Without waiting for Ash to shut the door, her stepsister tripped the last few steps over to her bed and puffed down onto it, her skirts like a billowing pink sail being let down. Less than ten seconds later, gentle snores were emanating from somewhere inside all the pink fabric. Ash smiled and made sure she was properly tucked under the covers, before turning to go back downstairs.

"Ash?" said a sleepy voice from within the dress.

"Yes?"

"I love you."

Ash's hand paused on the door. "I love you too," she whispered, turning away.

Idiot girl, her heart said to her as she closed the door and leaned for a second against its cool wood. *And if she dies tomorrow? If a carrier comes and plucks her away?* She made her way alone down the stairs, skirts trailing like stars behind her.

The kitchen was warm with yellow light when Ash entered. Old Merta was sitting by the kitchen hearth, as Ash knew she would be. The old woman didn't exclaim about the dress or ask about the evening. She just gestured to the wooden stool next to her and poured a cup of hot water from the kettle standing over the fire. Ash took the cup and sighed

as she sank into the stool. It wasn't just the warmth of the fire, it was the reassuring sameness. This was her fireplace, this was her Merta, this was her life.

They sat in silence for a while before Ash said what was on her mind. "Old M'... do you really think the laws are true? That if the prince asks for you in marriage you have to accept?"

Old Merta sniffed. "Can't say I've had much reason to think on that law, but I'd expect so. Why not? Royals have a law for everything." Then she saw Ash's face and understood.

"I'm only eighteen. That was the age Stepmother was when she first married and she by no means married old. There are women who marry as old as twenty-five..."

Old Merta looked at her sideways, the fire between them. "So, the prince didn't go for Vanita then, I take it?"

Ash said nothing.

"What will be will be, Ash. You know that. And it was one night and a night to be enjoyed. Being married, becoming royalty... well, that's another night. Not this one. So, sit in this night now and hush."

But Ash looked down at the last embers of the evening's fire, where Old Merta had cooked Stepmother's supper, like always. Life had gone on, this life that Ash had chosen. It had gone on while she had been in a fantasy at a ball.

Ash leaned over to grab the poker and rake through the coals for something to do. The straw pile she slept on was the one closest to fire thanks to her former 'status', so it was her job to tend to the fire. She had been the first to give up her bed for selling and in truth she liked being here by the ashes. Reminding herself of that was comforting. Tending the ashes – that was her job.

"This is what's true now," Ash said, turning to Old Merta. "What's the point in pretending any different?" To prove her point and just to treat herself, Ash spat heartily into the fireplace, relishing how unladylike it felt. Then, feeling slightly guilty, she raked the ashes some more.

"Good lord, Ashling!"

"What? I'm no lady. I can do what I like."

"Can you now? Because you look quite the prisoner to me."

Ash frowned. She sat the poker aside and inhaled the smoky smell of another day. She remembered how Vanita had once asked if she was

not afraid of mice or insects in the straw she now slept on. Ash had laughed in her face without quite meaning to. If there had been bugs or mice, she would have eaten them long ago and thanked God.

Ash was suddenly tired. Talking about eating bugs seemed as far away from the world of the palace as dreams were from waking. She straightened and felt the new muscles in her arms and along her spine coiling and releasing - muscles she never would have had as a lady. They felt good, even if they were constantly stiff now from all the running. These were true now, too.

When Old Merta spoke again, she was clearly trying to change the subject. "You look beautiful, Ashling. That gown... you look like water."

Ash shook her head, feeling the beginnings of tears forming as she gazed down at the hearth. "Water? I don't want to be water. It's used by other people, people like that Pathfinder and Stepmother, or a prince or..." She looked at the grey remains in the hearth. "I want to be fire."

Old Merta just tutted. "Silly girl. What do you want to be fire for? Your stepmother is fire - all fuss n' bother and then a little bit of wet or suffercation and it dies down again. It can cook alright and scare, but water... When I was wee still, there was a flood in the lowlands. My father took me to see it. Water moves, it changes, goes right round you and you can't stop it, not for lack of trying. Water will go through a rock, it'll go through a whole mountain, that it will." Old Merta took her Ash's chin in one rough hand and met her eyes. "You're no fire Ash, you're water. And whatever happens, you will move with it. You'll make a way and it'll be your own way."

That night, when Ash lay down in her straw at the hearth, she had a dream. In it, she was beneath the hazelnut tree. Then the tree became her mother, familiar thin waist sprouting up out of the spidery calligraphy of the tree branches, yellowed catkins hanging from her sleeves. It was night and the wind howled around them both. Ash was trying to pray but she had no voice. She was trying to talk to her mother also, but her mother only looked silently down at her. Then the yellow catkins moved and her mother held out a closed palm to give her something. When she opened her hand, it was a piece of the iron clumps that were now found in the earth.

“I don’t understand,” said Ash, finding her voice at last. But then a carrier with a leering grin came and snatched the tree and her mother away.

Chapter Thirteen

In the bedchamber

It was well after midnight when he heard what had happened.

It's amazing how you can expect something every minute of every day, but the one moment you aren't thinking about it, that's when it happens.

"The last maiden, gone." The Duke was putting back on his gloves and looking around the empty ballroom in satisfaction. "I must say, the Prince's body double was quite convincing tonight... It couldn't have been you surely, Rize? That lookalike smiling and dancing and flirting with some girl?"

"Well, I'm allowed to have a little fun once in a while."

"Words I never thought I'd hear you say."

"Anyway. It was important to make an effort. And, yes, it was surprisingly fun. Don't you dare tell my father though – he'll make it a ten-day thing."

"He won't hear it from me... Who was that girl?"

It was then that Rize realised he hadn't asked her name.

Lorin was still laughing when they were walking up the last staircase, which they never used, after the last of the carriages had departed.

"I can't believe... Of all the things to forget! A beginner player if I say so myself!" And he roared with laughter so fully that Rize couldn't help but laugh too.

There they stood, laughing, talking about girls after having had an evening of dancing. And then the king's second steward was suddenly in front of them, saying "Your Highness" in that particular tone. And Rize knew.

Stupid. If he hadn't been having fun, not thinking for once about it, would it have happened?

"This way Your Highness and my lord." They sped down the main hallway and on to the servants' shortcut to the royal apartments.

"What happened?" Rize demanded as "My lord father... is he...well?"

The second steward hesitated. "He is alive, your highness."

Alive? What did that mean? And where was Sir Pevann, the first steward?

Rize soon found out where Pevann was. The minute he entered the king's solar, the unmistakable stench wafted to Rize's nostrils, one he knew well now: that of a corpse not long dead, but not too recently either. Around the side of the carved table at which the king took late-night eats and, more rarely, wrote letters, there was the fallen mound that had once been Sir Pevvan, his face mottled blue and purple with dried blood splotching the corners of his stiff mouth.

"Poison?"

"Yes, your highness."

Rize wasn't sure what to say. He had seen Pevann nearly every day for all his life and had spoken to him of things other than the king less than once in all that time. "Well, get this man a blanket, cover him and send for a shroud – one from the royal store."

"Rize?" came a smaller, older voice than should have belonged to his father. Rize went through to the royal bedchamber to find it.

His father was leaning against the foot of the canopied bed in bedclothes, an ermine cloak hastily thrown over his shoulders to ward off chills. He still had his hair piece on, but other than that, all of his royal trappings were taken off for the night, everything that separated him from any other ageing man who could die in his bed, alone.

"He was here Rize. He was right here... In the bedchamber! Right here. Right where I sleep..."

"Who was?"

The second steward stepped in. "An assassin, highness. A single man, masked and cloaked. When he failed to – when he failed, he slit his own throat with the dagger meant for the king. The body has been taken by the armed guard for searching, to see if anything identifiable can found."

“When did this happen?”

“I don’t know. Well over an hour ago.”

“Father! Why didn’t you send for me?”

“What, while the ball was in play and alert others to the fact that something was wrong? No, Rize, that would not do. To show any more weakness is to bait the vultures that already gather around the throne.”

The king began pointing his index finger rigidly at Rize, then at the room – a lifetime’s habit of being in command. It was a comforting sight for Rize, to see this return of the dictator he knew and not the scared old man who was a few minutes before.

“An assassin in my own chamber! Hiding behind the drapery nearest the bed. Nearest the *bed*, Rize! And Pevann... oh, Pevann. It was largely just a ceremony, a precaution really, how he had started to taste the royal meals before I ate, about a year ago. Not one incident in all that time. But tonight... he fell down, grasping at his lace and there was nothing I could do to stop him, to help... But when a figure jumped out from behind the draperies I fought him and he ended his own life. By the time it had all happened, Pevann was dead on the floor.” For one terrible instant, Rize was afraid the king would cry, but rage took over instead.

Rize turned to the quivering second steward, still trying to remember his name. “Have an extra armed guard posted at these chambers at once! As well as at the prince’s. The fact that a single killer could get so far into the palace is preposterous! Clearly the work of the excitement of the ball in part, but still!” The yellowed hair piece tuft on the king’s head waved around violently as he spoke, his face turning a shade of crimson to match the brocade draped of his own canopy bed. “And find out who that was, damnit!”

As his father paused for breath, Rize took the opportunity to address the second steward himself. “Walters, can you leave me for a minute alone with my lord father?” As soon as he was gone, Rize asked the question that had been plaguing him. “Were there girls?”

His father used to delight in doe-eyed, expensive-looking young girls that always seemed just about Rize’s age, but he had been strictly abstinent with all but the queen since the security threats had increased as the post-Expansion fallout had worsened. Now that the latest queen was dead, he was worried that his father had been entertaining teenagers again, but his father merely shook his head. “Alas! It would have been

easier to bear a well-breasted, sweet young thing of an assassin than *this*.”

“Well, how else could anyone have come into the king’s bedchamber?”

The king wiped his hand over his face as if to clean the unpleasant experience away. “That *is* the question. It was no doubt intended to be menacing, threatening. And it is. If he had come to your quarters...”

“... He would have had them all to himself. I was at the ball, remember?”

“This time you were, yes. But this country is getting unhappier and unhappier and more willing to strike. There needs to be a change.” The king looked at Rize in the eye, measuredly, in the way he had. Many years ago, Rize had been fishing with his father and some of the courtiers in favour and he remembered his father looking at a worm the same way before he speared it on his hook.

“Rize, a royal wedding will bring some joy to people – and I mean a *significant* one, not another of mine. I mean to follow the Pathfinder’s advice, dead though she is and make a marriage for you from this ball. And Rize, sometime after that, I mean to consider formally handing the crown over to you.”

“Father!”

“I have spoken, Rize. This is not the first I have thought of it, but this, this *incident* tonight has decided it. It will be best for the kingdom, Rize. These people associate me with the Expansion Project. We all know that it was not meant to end in disaster – giant agricultural produce in a country built on agricultural wealth and trade should have meant no one ever needed go hungry again – but it did end in disaster. You will be roughly the age I was, when you come into kingship and you will do well.”

“Father I cannot, I can *not* –”

“You can and you will, my boy. Now, this all has shaken me. Call Walters back inside as you leave, for better or worse he’s my steward now. I will take my rest.”

Like an old man, the king shuffled into his enormous canopy bed. He closed the brocade drapes in Rize’s face.

The bird has never had a high like this one.

It was flying at its new height when suddenly some strange wind had picked it up and lifted it higher still into the endless blue.

To be free is everything. The bird stretches its wings wider.

The bird looks down on the tiny world and warbles shrilly. Dopamines pulse through its head and chest as the wings beat hesitantly, unused to the thermals of this altitude that seem to not require the flapping that is as automatic as breathing. Intercostal muscles and lungs burst with the fresh, clean freedom of the thin air.

Nothing can hurt the bird up here, it has sensed this. The grey, pulpy reward centre of its brain has exploded into living colour. It is like the thrill of killing prey to eat for the first time in days, but cool instead of hot, like the rain. The bird remembers the rain. It belongs to another time, when people were as big as trees and food was a challenging trophy half one's own size. When things were tinged with awe – everything, not just flying – before the world became small and too easy.

To be free is everything.

At some point the bird must descend and land. Back to hunger and being hunted. But not yet. With its short bird's memory this high wonder is all there is and that is enough. That is everything.

King.

King...

No.

For the second time in a week, Rize was walking around the servants' level of the castle. He hadn't even meant to come here, had not even watched his steps as the word 'king' clanked around in his mind like some ugly gold ornament.

He was not even sure why he was so surprised. All his life he had known that this would come for him sometime, must come, so why was he acting this way?

It might not even be that bad...

But, that word. King. It had a weight, like something falling to the floor. He could not even think about it, it was too big and bulky. And Rize felt heavy. He needed something simple, something same. He was stooping as he reached the stable doors.

At least Mouse hadn't changed. She tossed her head in the approximation of a nod when Rize walked into the stables and gave a soft whinny as he put his hand onto her flank. The muscles and the suede-soft coat reassured him some, but Rize's mind was going over and over what his father had said in the same crazed circles Mouse was wont to make. Poor horse, cooped up in here so long, when each royal horse no matter how small used to be able to ride out at least once each day.

"You want a bit of exercise?"

Mouse tossed her head.

"Okay, let's do this."

It wasn't something Rize had dared do too often and only ever before sun-up. While the servants were still sleeping off the exhaustion of cleaning up after the ball, Rize bridled Mouse, then took her for a speedy gallop – not towards the grounds or gardens, but into the lowest floor of the castle to trot around in the passages surrounding the kitchens, outer courtyard and great hall.

Mouse for her part loved it. She tossed her grey mane this way and that with abandon. Riding bareback as he was, Rize could feel the graceful stretch and coil of her muscles beneath him and it was good to feel something so alive. Mouse even gave an ebullient neigh at the new sight of the great hall and Rize had to shush her while muffling his own

nervous laughter. Some things, it seemed, would never change. When he was king, would he have time to ride like this?

It was a calmer Mouse and prince both who re-entered the stables an hour later. The grey light of day was beginning to come in and the first stirrings of kitchens being readied could be heard. While his problems had not been magicked away, they seemed slightly less heavy to Rize after the simple, instinctual act of riding. It was only when a voice broke the gentle quiet that he realised he wasn't alone.

“Long live the king.”

Rize started, then turned to face his cousin, annoyed. “When are you going to stop sneaking up on me like that?”

The Duke merely smiled, toying with the bridle Rize had just hung. “Probably when it's an act of treason. Quite the night last night.”

Rize sighed, not answering and his cousin dropped the aristocratic swagger for a moment, as he stared at his oldest friend. “How are you, truly? What are your thoughts?”

“Honestly?”

Yes.”

“My thoughts are that I don't want to be king.”

“I was afraid you may say that.”

“My father was a third son of the second-in-line. He wanted to be a merchant, a royal envoy and he was perfectly suited for it. The Spring sickness struck only three days before he was due to leave on his first venture to France. His papers were all in order, his horses and men were chosen. And then he was king, at twenty years old.”

“He was still *himself* though, Rize.”

“Was he? How can either of us tell? We were not born and the Sir Derumpe, the aspiring merchant youth who wasn't king, has all but been erased from everyone's memory. All they see is the crown now and I think it may be all he sees too.” Rize sighed. “I just want all this weight removed from off my shoulders.”

The duke pushed himself away from the wall he'd been leaning on, dusting off his morning breeches. “Well, there's an easy fix to that,” he said lightly. “Simply go outside and make a noise like a horse, wave something shiny and be snatched by a carrion. Then someone else will have to be king.” He looked hard into Rize's eyes again, the persona of a royal dandy slipping a second time. “It's not your fault that you were

born prince, Rize. Just like it's not your fault that the carriers came... But it *is* your responsibility. This country needs a king who cares, a king who will try make things right. If you *do* care what happens to these people, there is no better way to ensure their wellbeing, even if it doesn't quite fit with your plans."

His cousin nodded to him once more, then slipped out of Rize's sight, back into his dukely life to leave Rize to his princely one. He sighed, kicking the unforgiving ground, cursing the Project and cursing his cousin a little for his rightness too.

Chapter Fourteen

Worse things

Ash was striking at the hard ground.

After her late conversation with Old Merta and all the excitement of the ball, she had woken after sun had already risen, feeling emotion heavy in her chest. The combination of that and not needing to go foraging for food made her feel even more at sea. Last night's dream was the first time in so many years she had seen her mother. Before, months would go by before Ash missed her long-dead mother and now she seemed to have had occasion to think of her a thousand times in just a week. Life had been turned upside down and she had forgotten in the festival-like whirlwind of the past two days just what life was like now. It was like survival, she reminded herself and nothing more.

The pick was barely making a dent in the parched ground as Ash swung, struck, pulled and hoisted her forearm up again in a way that was second nature by now. Down again, into the hard soil, feeling the clash of it jar in her bones as iron met earth. *This* was real, this was life now. Don't forget Ash and don't dream. Survive.

And yet, as she brought down the pick again, the prince's face flashed through her mind. Images of the palace, the ballroom, the dancing all spun around her. Had the carpet really been that red, the lights that brilliant? The colours from the night before seemed almost too colourful for real life, like the garish bright colours from travelling puppet shows she had seen as a child. They made the world around her seem grey.

"Stupid," she said aloud to herself, her pick finally breaking far enough into the stubborn ground to force her fingers in and find yet another of the strange rough chunks of iron that the Expansion left behind. This one was close to the size of the palm of her hand. She did

not need more arrowheads or harpoon-like shafts, not yet, but it would keep her hands busy.

Trundling inside with her bounty, Ash found the knife Derrick had made her from the same ground-dug iron. Nothing else was hard enough to chip at it. Wedging the new rock in between her knees, Ash sat herself on the small step above the hearth and began to clumsily chip away at this thing that looked nothing like the white palace and its white-clad prince.

“Ash?”

It was Vanita, hovering tenuously in the doorway. Usually she couldn't get up and dressed alone, but here she was, combed and everything. “Morning. What is it?”

Vanita drifted a little closer. “I ju-just wanted to say sorry for last night.” She abruptly turned as pink as her gown had been. “In the carriage I – I had had wine and –”

“There's nothing to apologise for Vanita, don't fret.”

“Still, I shouldn't have spoken so cavalierly about you and the prince... It wasn't my place.”

“The prince is harmless, from what I saw last night. It was more the ‘illegal to refuse an offer of marriage’ part that gave me concern.”

“Oh, I shouldn't worry. When we were dancing Lorin – ah, the Duke of Novrecourte – he said that the prince wasn't interested in marriage just yet.”

Ash smiled at the near use of the duke's first name but said nothing.

“Well? Was it a successful evening?” Stepmother, downstairs and fully dressed too, in the kitchens. It was indeed a week of surprises. “Good morning, Stepmother. Yes, it was quite fun in fact.”

Stepmother glared as if Ash had mentioned something as irrelevant as last week's weather. “And the prince?” she asked with customary bluntness.

“Oh, yes, the prince –” began Vanita but a warning glance from Ash silenced her. “The prince was very nice, very courteous,” she finished lamely.

“The prince's first cousin, the Duke of Novrecourte, took an especial liking to Vanita,” Ash put in smoothly. “He is third in line for the throne.”

“Well, that *is* something...” said Stepmother, eyeing Vanita with renewed interest, while Vanita in turn sent a murderous glare over her shoulder at Ash, but before Ash could respond, Stepmother had turned and was facing her. “Will you go again tonight?”

It sounded so simple when she said it that way. Ash had been thinking of the prince, the palace and the unlikely, transcendent amount she’d enjoyed herself the night before. She could go again – of course, it was so simple. The second night was bound to be more steeped in reality, she less girlish and it might prove the perfect antidote for all this mooning.

“Well?” Stepmother repeated.

“We haven’t got second dresses to wear and my aunt made it clear that she won’t be around again. The pumpkin will stay a carriage until tomorrow’s dawn, but –”

“You must go to that ball again,” Stepmother finished sharply. “Or find yourself another *kitchen* posting in these times. Vanita must go to the ball and marry the prince. Or at least duke whatever-his-name-is.”

“Mother!”

“No excuses.” With that, Stepmother swept from the room, leaving daughter and stepdaughter staring at one another, not trusting themselves to speak.

It was Old Merta who came in from the larder, that put things in place the way she often did. “Don’t listen t’her, but if you have a carriage, if ye’d have fun, why not go in any case? Who knows how long any of us have to enjoy life – actually *enjoy* it, mind - before one of them birds makes off with any of us, before we’re dead an’ gone? Have fun now, dears and appease Ma’am all at once. Why not?”

“Old M, I *can*’t go in the same dress!”

“It will be fine Ash,” said Vanita. “I will go in the same dress too. You said so yourself last night – we are both marriageable and alive! Who *cares* if we are in the same dresses?”

I care, thought Ash. *I don’t know why but I do*. Out loud, she said “well, you’re marriageable at any rate.”

“So, will you think about it?”

“I don’t know! All this thinking and dancing and, and... All I knew a few days ago was how to kill carriers. This... I don’t know.” Ash

turned away from Vanita, turned away from Old Merta and back towards the outside world, where the carriers were. “I’m going to be alone.”

She took her crossbow and she walked. She walked out from the dirt yard behind the kitchen entrance and out into the featureless scrub ground beyond that was once the garden and further into the hunting grounds beyond them. Everywhere she went, the ghosts of what once had been sprung up around her – here, the topiaries and in the distance, the ‘story oak’ she used to climb. She saw where stone benches had sat behind lush hedge walls, small mirror pools reflecting the commissioned statues of family ancestors looking disapprovingly down at the green.

Ash thought as she walked of cooking the way it had been

before and how she had wanted to be a baker, in her own stall, when she grew up. She had moved downstairs into the kitchen and taken up a disgraced apprenticeship under Old Merta, it had all seemed wildly exotic. Ash had found the grooming of ladyship all very airy-fairy, long term and yet surprisingly tense and stifling. One had the impression that with one bad stitch, one wrong note, one false step, everything would be ruined and no one would want you. In contrast, making a pie was an immediate, satisfyingly tangible thing. There was a certain recipe for everything, which did not take years and things were bound to look a certain way afterward. It was simple and that was nice.

Ash shook her head, almost stumbling mid-stride. Now that the stopper had been pulled from the past by all this talk of her mother and balls, it seemed she could not put it back again. How was Ash supposed to protect anyone like this? A pigeon carrier swooped overhead and Ash crouched, almost resignedly, but the bird flew straight past her. It added yet another surreal element to her day and with a sudden chill, Ash realised that in the past few days, the past had become more dangerous than the present.

She was almost upon the story oak now. With its now-bare branches open wide to the skies, Ash could easily see the form crouched up near the top, on the crude wooden platform they had once made as children.

“Derrick?”

“Morning,” he said, without looking at her.

It was as good a thing to do as any. She took her spare leather strips from out her smock and tied her crossbow to her back. Then, she began climbing.

“Do you ever wonder where the carriers nest?” Derrick asked by way of greeting when she’d got to the platform herself.

“No.”

“Oh. Well, I do. I was worried they’d try our old lookout here, so I came here to guard it a few times. Now, I come here because it’s peaceful.”

Ash supposed it was, in a stark kind of way. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d come here. They were scarcely three metres off the ground, yet up here the world looked different, slightly more manageable, cross-hatched over with the black of the bare branches. It was not the cosy green hiding place that they had shared as children, that fluttered with the slightest breeze. Now there was no breeze, no green and all the current evils were spread bare on the landscape below them. But, in a blackly humorous sort of way, the term ‘lookout’ had certainly come true.

“I come up here to remember,” Derrick said in his shirt, his chin resting on his collarbone, away from her. “I was just remembering the time we’d played pirates and you insisted on being the pirate captain for once and I had to be the princess. You almost fell off your rope, but when you landed you put your arm around my waist and kissed me on the cheek. I was so angry. It was *my* job to kiss *you* on the cheek and I’d never dared to do it and now it was done.”

Ash nodded, even though he wasn’t looking at her. She was in her own memory, one she’d never shared with Derrick. She had stomped into the solar at six years old and informed her father that she was going to marry Derrick and they would live in the treehouse with their fifty children. He had roared with laughter and pulled her close. “A servant’s life will never be enough for you, little one, nor a groom like Derrick either. You will want more.”

And yet a servant’s life had been exactly what Ash had chosen. Hadn’t she?

“I had wanted to ask you if you were going to the palace tonight again, but I’m so tired now. Tired of all of it. I should be getting back,

Ash.” She turned to him. Derrick’s nails were bitten down to the quick. In all the excitement of the past few days, she hadn’t noticed. She had wondered when he’d started doing that – Derrick, who was the first to think of making weapons, who had made her this crossbow, then taught her how to do it in case he should die. Derrick, who had made her daisy chains at six years old and pulled the wings off butterflies with the same fingers.

“When did you come up here?”

“I came up after we made it back last night. I must not have realised how tired I was - woke up thirty minutes ago.”

“Derrick! You could have been killed!”

He shrugged. “There are worse things,” he answered without looking at her.

The past, its ghost, had come up the tree with her. Ash could not look at Derrick as the crossbow maker, the carrier killer, without seeing the little boy he had once been. And with that, his yellow-haired best friend, Ashling. It was not an easy thing to see and to look out for carriers at the same time.

“Derrick, we need you here. What would become of Rhodopalais and all of us if you were to be killed by carrier in this old tree last night? Come now. *We need you.*”

But Derrick only shook his head angrily like a well-trained horse. “And we need you too. So, if you go off to the palace then, tonight and get killed? What then?”

Ash just stared at him, which seemed to fan the fire. “And if you leave and marry this prince then?” He was speaking too loudly, a carrier might come, but he didn’t seem to care. “What then Ash? Then, even more so. Who will help Old Merta? Who will see to the Madame, or Vanita, or Tansy or...” but he refused to finish, though there was no one else to name. Just him.

Up here, amidst the bare wood looking down on the hard ground, at last Ash could say the truth. “I don’t know what is going to happen. And I don’t know what I feel.”

“So, will you go that ball tonight again, then?”

“I don’t know.”

Silence. Derrick looked at her for the first time. “I will take you, if you go. I won’t leave you alone.” She put her arm around his waist, the

same way she had once when they were children. “I promise,” she whispered. “Only one of us is allowed to die and I promise I won’t die.”

“If you die, I will take care of Vanita and Stepmother and all the house, if you’re gone.” I will take care of it all as if I were you if you’re gone,” he whispered back.

A lump rose in Ash’s throat, but he had stood up and was no longer looking at her. “Let’s go home, Ashling.”

The two friends walked side by side across the dusty brown ground with its cracked remains of dried-up fountains, which had in years past been many things – pirate seas, enchanted forests, running race competitions grounds – but had never quite been this.

At last they came to the curlicued shape of Ash’s hazelnut tree, which heralded the servant’s entrance not far behind it. “I never understood how you could pray to some god in a time like this,” Derrick commented as they passed the tree.

“I never understood how you couldn’t,” Ash responded lightly. “How does one get out of bed with nothing to believe in.”

“I believe in survival.” He sounded so much like her a few days ago. But Derrick wasn’t finished. “I also believe in you. I do, Ash.”

He was looking straight at her, his eyes blazing even next to the sun overhead. Ash cleared her throat, trying not to get snagged by those lovely eyes. “You know Derrick, I think I’ll stay here awhile and pray after all. I have my crossbow, I should be fine.”

It clearly hadn’t been the answer he was expecting, but Derrick nodded graciously enough, turning and walking towards the kitchens on his own. Sighing, Ash sank onto her knees next to her tree. What was wrong with this day?

It was not yet the time Ash usually came to pray, but now that she was at the tree, she found her heart automatically calming itself and preparing for reflection. The elaborate, twisting arms of the tree and its stumpy gnarled trunk were the same as always, at least and she closed her eyes for just a moment.

It had been so hard to pray. With the giddy magic of ball and old dresses transforming into new ones, it seemed frustratingly invisible to simply sit and look within. It had been so long since she had felt that she had truly had revelation from this daily prayer and this twisted, writhing tree and it was almost out of rote that she asked her question now:

“Should I go to the ball? What is the right thing to do?”

But a dry wind only blew up from the empty grounds that had once been Rhodopalais and the dry hazelnut tree looked down in silence. Nothing.

Ash was standing to go, hoisting her crossbow onto her back, when a tell-tale screech filled the air. Carrier. Ash crouched behind the unconvincing shelter of her tree and readied her crossbow, but when the carrier came into view, she nearly stood in wonder.

A miracle of iridescent feathers - of teals and violets and midnight blues most of all, the colour of Ash's dress – suddenly flew across the sky. *Starling*, Ash's analytical mind said, but the rest of her was awed into silence. The giant bird was a jewel, if a deadly one, winging its way from roughly the direction of the story oak, towards the house.

As it came closer, Ash saw that it had something in its talons. The shape and size of the carrier's cargo was unmistakably a human body and Ash relaxed slightly, knowing that the bird wouldn't aim for her as a kill with one already in hand. As the starling carrier winged closer, the length of the dark flop of hair in between its talons told her that it was a woman that this bird had just killed.

It swooped, near enough the hazelnut tree to buffet Ash with the gust of its wings beating and Ash flinched lower to the ground, in spite of herself. If she had looked down, had not been used to watching carriers for her life's safety, she might not have seen it. But she did. The starling carrier flexed its talons, dropping the body it had been carrying onto the dry earth.

Ash had never seen a carrier do that before and as it circled around she startled, sending a warning arrow at it that made the bird squawk indignantly. Some of its miracle-dark feathers fell out as it startled at the arrow flying past its head, but it did not dive at her. Instead it only flew off, leaving Ash gaping after it. After some minutes, Ash returned her eyes back to the ground in front of her and the lady's corpse lying there.

She had been sallow once, olive-skinned and the golden dress must have suited her well. Now, the paleness of death had taken that away. Ash had seen more corpses since the Expansion Project than she cared to remember and this one must have been recently caught and killed, to still be an unstiffened corpse not yet blue and black. What had this woman been doing in a ballgown during midday? Preparing for tonight's ball

perhaps, but it was still hours too early. More peculiarly still, her dress was unruined and her body unmangled – she looked almost peaceful, with eyes closed, as though taking a nap on the hard Rhodopalais ground. As Ash came closer, she could see a deep talon puncture – just one – in the side of the lady’s neck. A quick death at least and one that had not got any blood on her pretty dress.

Ash’s eyes roved further down the body and her practical mind took over. It *was* a lovely dress, with wistful layers of fluffy tulle in dull gold colours and shimmering silvery glints of lace dotted across its embroidered waist, its full underskirt and hem, the clouds of tulle beginning in corn-coloured gold and the bodice and fading to a fluffy white at the dress’s hem. By the time Ash’s eyes had travelled to the bottom of its skirt, she was decided. This woman deserved a decent burial and there was enough iron around to make her a decent-sized hole with a few hours’ work. But the dress she would not waste in the ground. This lady was dead. And Ash, Ash had been surviving but had learned in the last twenty-four hours that she actually wanted to live.

Derrick, Old Merta and Tansy all looked up wide-eyed when Ash came inside for evening meal, dirtied with soil from head to toe and holding a pristine white and gold dancing dress that seemed to have come from her prayer tree.

If she registered their surprise, she didn’t show it. “Tansy, I’m going to need help with Vanita’s dress.”

Chapter Fifteen

Stranger in a dress

With some of the starling feathers sewn on, Ash's blue dress looked completely new on Vanita. Each large, iridescent feather greedily swallowed the fading daylight and glimmered seductively from shin height all the way down to the floor. It looked fierce, almost tribal, in a way that fit beautifully with the refined elegance of the dress's shimmer. Vanita looked star-like in it and the midnight blue cloth making her pale face a moon and her hair the sun. She modestly lowered her eyes when Old Merta exclaimed on her beauty and it struck Ash suddenly that her sister was growing up. She wasn't sure why, but in all the chaos of the Expansion Project and its aftermath, she had expected such everyday normalities such as age to pause. Oh well.

"You look amazing, Vanita. Better than I ever did in that dress, I'm sure and more of a lady. I will just get into my dress and we can be off." But as Ash turned to retrieve her dress from the pantry, Stepmother stopped her, an authoritative hand lightly on her arm.

"You will be a lady tonight, Ash, no matter what your choices for the everyday. And a lady is in wont of preparations, some ceremony for the flutter of getting dressed for an occasion like a ball..." She sighed, looking down, suddenly old. "Your mother should be here for this but, well, needs must."

Several minutes later, Ash was upstairs in her stepmother's own bathing room.

Tansy was lower than Ash in rank and tended to chamber pots and bathing buckets, one for the bathing chamber Ash and Vanita had shared as children and one for the lord and lady of the house, stepmother's own bathing room for all these years. As such, Ash had not been in this bathing room ever before. It deepened the patina of strangeness on her day. The cloth curtains were tattered and ghostly, but the wooden floors

were clean enough. When Ash moved to pick up the buckets and take them down for water to put on the fire, she saw that all the buckets were full of unused water. When was the last time her stepmother had bathed?

“A woman at her first ball is a mystery reveal,” Stepmother said, chasing away sad thoughts. “She is an important part of the nobility, but one that has not been seen before by that nobility. And so, with her family name and her irreplaceable role that she brings to that family and her class, seeing her at last as a debutante at ball is the joy of a puzzle piece revealed, an important part of the whole.” Stepmother carried on talking as she lifted the dark blonde tangles of Ash’s hair and ran her own brush through them, as Ash warmed the water on the fire and watched the flames.

“I remember the first time I saw you. A little slip of a thing, caked in mud, eyes blazing! You were just a child... Then, when you were thirteen, a blink away from your first ball, you quit this house for the kitchens.”

“You had called me into the solar a week after my father’s death and informed me that I would have no dowry, Stepmother.”

“You don’t have to call me that ridiculous title. I never told you to, anyway. Just you being contrary. And yes, there was no money after your lord father’s passing for dowries for both you and Vanita. But my point is this: years later, I do finally get to see you at ball.”

Ash looked up and found herself facing a cracked mirror above the fireplace. She barely recognised the long neck and the face that looked younger, somehow. Stepmother had discreetly taken some of the dress’s lace without her looking and used it to fasten Ash’s hair high onto her head – as high as Vanita’s had been the night before. It was uplifting and unsettling all at once.

After pouring the buckets of water in, Ash lowered herself into the tub with a sigh, the bath linens hot against her skin. When last had she had a bath? Stepmother waited until she felt weightless in cloudy warm water, then asked two simple questions before leaving the room.

“Ash, do you dislike the prince’s company and find him unappealing?”

“No.”

“Then, would it be such a bad thing to marry him?”

“You don’t understand. The weight of it... Good grief, the irony! I renounced a title less than a tenth of the size I would get should I marry the prince. To refuse to become a lady and then instead become a princess, maybe even a queen consort... I would be the first to laugh, I hope. No, no - it would be ‘out of the pan and into the fire’, as Old Merta would say.

“Indeed, it would... And do you remember what I said to you before you agreed to go on the first night of the ball?”

“That there were other Vanita’s out there and who was going to help them?”

“Just so. There may be comfort in a small cooking pan, but there is power in fire. Think on that, Ash.”

Twenty minutes later, her words were still burning in Ash’s brain, as she got into the dress alone. It was uncannily close to the colour of her hair, a dusky wheat-ripened yellow that fell in tulle clouds to the floor, with lace roses embroidered throughout, the colour of silver. Taking cue from her stepmother, she had torn an unnoticeable strip from its hem and used it to tie a tulle ribbon around her neck. In the cracked mirror, she looked a faerie-like, golden dream of a girl.

Who was this stranger in a dress?

As she stepped out of the room and into her stepmother’s bedchamber, Stepmother was already there, with her worn old boots for her to put on as she had the night before. But things had changed since the night before. The night before, she had not known the prince, or what was waiting for her. “May I wear the Glass shoes now, please?” she asked in a small voice.

Some minutes later, a more unsteady Ash emerged, colt-like on long legs, to get into the pumpkin-coach again. As Derrick handed her up into the carriage, her foot slipped on the stair and he had to catch her, his arms feeling sure and strong beneath the thin fabric of her dress. “It has been a long time since I last wore such shoes,” she said to no one in particular, feeling the heat of blush spread across her cheeks and neck. But no one said anything on the matter and Stepmother merely stepped up to the coach and wished her and Vanita “to have fun and be charming to the prince” through the window. As the coach pulled off in its eerie, horseless way, Ash watched the shrinking figure of her stepmother and

realised that that was the first time since the Project that she had seen her outside the house.

Ash kept an eye out for the paradise colours of more startling carriers as they sped towards the palace, but there were none. In fact, there were no carriers at all. When she commented on this, Vanita said that it was probably because they had had their fill from plenty of young ladies leaving the ball last night, which Ash thought was most unlike her.

Still, Vanita's telling her what the duke had said about the prince not wanting to marry now had left her free to enjoy herself and she found herself sighing girlishly when the tall, bare trees of the palace grounds came into view, standing like sentinels and festooned with candles as they had been the night before. Vanita did not sigh, said nothing. How strange it was that, all of a sudden, she was getting older and Ash was getting younger.

As Derrick opened the carriage door for them, Ash was almost sure that she could smell the heady waft of lavender coming off of the dried bushes surrounding the gravelled drive and its central fountain, although of course that was not possible. The walk to the stairs was more vexing now, in the Glass shoes, than it had been in her comfortable old boots. Still, this dress was shorter than her aunt's offering and the tips of her heels could be seen. And Ash wanted to look pretty.

"Welcome, welcome," said the same servant as the night before, when they arrived at the top of the grand staircase. "Please pause a moment while I announce you."

"There is no need to announce myself, only my sister -"

"Yes, yes, I remember. Please note ladies that, should the prince choose a bride at the ball in honour of the Cinderella superstition, the announcement will be made just before midnight according to tradition," the servant carried on in a bored voice. "Please remember that all ladies must be present at the announcement and that it is unlawful for a proposal to be made binding when the bride is not present, as it is unlawful to refuse an offer of marriage from a crown prince, regent or king. Enjoy your evening."

Ash stared at Vanita across the servant's dry-looking legal paper and list of attendees. "I'm sure it was just tradition, him having to say that," Vanita whispered as they descended into the ballroom together. "Don't worry."

The same small supply of ladies that had been shy and hunted-looking the night before seemed to have got a scent of the prey since then and flocked around the prince much more boldly than before. Ash could see only some of Rize, surrounded by a gauntlet of three or four flounced skirts and tattered fans all demanding his attentions. She smiled and waved, seeking a quiet pillar somewhere where she could watch the hunt in peace.

It seemed that there was to be a dance to begin the festivities. The king, speaking to a laughing duke, formally made an elaborate bow to one of the simpering ladies not directly around Rize's person. The duke bowed to another and, with pointed glances between all three, Rize led out a third. A slow, simple tune rang out as the music began. Pavane.

Ash leaned back against a pillar, a strange sense of vertigo overtaking her. She wondered at the fact that her brain still remembered what a pavane was and yet at the same time she didn't. Here, things like carriers and starvation seemed ridiculous, like the stuff of bad dreams. Her muscles coiled at the thought, but as the dance progressed, she leaned against the pillar once more and enjoyed watching everyone else moving.

A gentle brush of cloth on her bare forearm. Ash looked up - Derrick had moved from standing next to her to standing in front of her. Slowly, awkwardly yet determinedly, he lowered himself into a bow. Then he straightened and looked Ash in her eyes. "Dance with me."

Ash followed him out onto the floor, worry bubbling up in her stomach. Derrick was a good hunter and a great servant, a kind and loyal friend. She did not want these people to stare at him and snigger, these who knew nothing of his life. To snub him would have been worse, but how was a commoner going to pull off dancing before the king in the royal ballroom?

And then his hand was on hers and she could not worry anymore. Then his other hand went to her waist. He sank into the rhythm of the tail end of pavane and took her with him, just swaying gently with his body moving close to hers.

They moved together like water. He began to step out, turn her and lead and it felt right. When he began to improvise steps to dances, holding a palm up here, spinning her while holding her hands there, she somehow knew what he was going to do and followed him without

pause. It took Ash a moment to realise they weren't following the proper steps, because it was so effortless. It was the same dance they had been doing since they were six years old.

Derrick smiled at her in her father's doublet and Ash smiled back. There was nowhere to look but in his eyes. It seemed as though all the world was standing still. He was looking into her eyes too – deep down, below the dress and the carriers and the fear, below even the children they had been, once. That felt right too.

As the music faded, they slowly came to a stop. It took a moment for Ash to tear her eyes away, to see that everyone else in the ballroom had stopped some time ago.

They were all looking at her.

Rize was looking at her.

Ash felt the heat rise to her face. The concern for Derrick returned – it was simply not done, this, he did not understand...

Before she could worry further, Rize stepped away from his partner and bowed – another thing that was simply not done if you were a crown prince. He held out his hand and, again, did the customary bow for a dance well performed – he, the prince, bowing to Derrick.

And then the whole ballroom had to bow, dipping their aristocratic necks and clapping their un-calloused hands for Derrick.

Thank you, she mouthed to Rize when Derrick was not looking and let her fellow servant lead her off the floor.

As soon as she was back in the shadows, she felt a cool, small hand take her arm. Vanita. She turned around to see her sister's white face, unsurprised. She knew Vanita knew the rules as well as her and unlike Derrick she had some idea of the social sins just committed. As Ash looked her full in the face, though, Vanita's own face softened.

"Ash?"

"Yes Vanita?"

"I just love you, that's all."

Her heart swelled for the fiftieth time that night as she took Vanita's hand and squeezed it. When had she become so prone to such self-indulgent feelings? It was not good, this. But before she could think of anything to say, any way to remove herself, someone was tapping her on the shoulder.

"Evening Ash."

She curtsied low, trying to be as graceful as possible in the accursed heels. “Your Highness.”

“Might I interest you in a walk?”

“Rize, I –”

But he leaned in close and whispered in her ear. “Don’t worry, I’m sure your not-boyfriend won’t mind.”

It was actually refreshing to feel the night air cool on her skin and Ash was glad she came. The prince, she noticed, was wearing gold brocade tonight – much fussier than the simple white of yesterday, but it suited his black hair and tanned skin.

“It was nice, what you did in there. Thank you.”

Rize shrugged. “Actually, I thought it was nice what he did for *you*. Don’t think I haven’t noticed how hard you are on yourself and how you never let yourself have fun.”

The night air grew colder. “Life has changed. Believe me, I used to have fun. I was the most fearless on the whole estate. I climbed trees like a man, rode in breeches and dived into the lake in my full dress. But back then, there was nothing to fear. Now there is.”

“And someone to fear *for*. Your sister is younger than you, I take it?”

Ash frowned in the dark. “Yes. Why?”

But when he turned to her, she found he was smiling. “That was even better than I thought – I had a bet with myself about how protective you would sound when I mentioned her. Looks like I won.”

“Well, congratulations to you.”

“Oh come on, I was only teasing. She seems sweet, your sister. Now, follow me. The conservatory’s been missing you.”

Ash allowed herself to smile at this impossible prince’s retreating back. The smile lasted exactly four seconds, until the conservatory came into view.

A flickering yellow light was coming from inside. Rize was standing still now, looking at it. Ash started walking faster on her unsteady heels, neck craning towards the light. “There must be a fire,” she said to the prince over her shoulder, but she only heard him chuckle in the dark.

Inside the conservatory, there was no billow of acrid smoke to suggest a blaze. As Ash's eyes adjusted, she found something quite different to what she expected.

A few jars of caught fireflies were illuminating a dark circle that became the remains of a fountain when Ash came near it. While it wasn't the source of the light, it was lovely. The light was just enough to illuminate the ghostly white, fine petals of a few waterlilies, sleepily floating on the fountain's surface.

Rize came up beside her. "I wanted to show you some more flowers, but these were the only ones I could think of. For some reason, they haven't died like all the other plants – something to do with living in the water." Quietly, almost tenderly, he took her hand and began pulling her away from the fountain. "There's something else I want to show you."

As they came nearer to the end of the conservatory they'd been in the night before, the yellow light increased until, rounding a corner, its source was revealed. The old table with the three blossoms on it had been transformed by several wax candles and two wrought iron chairs had been set out with – unfathomable luxury – a bottle of wine. Ash looked at Rize, dumbstruck and he seemed suddenly bashful and coy.

"I know it isn't much – I didn't want to trouble any servants, especially before a ball, but... Well, I wanted to thank you for last night. I had a certain idea of how the evening was going to go and I was prepared to be polite, to be prince, to stand and smile... But then you arrived, in your boots and that dress, with your brutal honesty and and I felt like a real person. You were different, you felt real and that made me feel like I could be real too."

Ash noticed that Rize still hadn't let go of her hand.

And when we danced, well this may be too much to say but I felt like a boy, who's met a girl. I've never been so forthright with a lady before but, hell, we could both be dead tomorrow. What's the point in dancing around?"

A wave of insecurity broke over her, staring at him. "Why me, Rize? I am not fair, I am not soft and meek..."

He wouldn't let her finish. "Don't listen to our parents, our teachers – they're from the old world. They do not know how it is now, but what they think doesn't matter. What is needed has changed." He

paused, raking her with his eyes. “What is wanted has changed.” He took her calloused hands in his and pulled her closer. “Your legs are long, good for running,” he said huskily. “Your eyes are clear, good for seeing into things. Your arms are strong, good for pulling your own weight. And your lips –”

“Alright, that’s quite enough of that, thank you. You’re not getting near my lips so fast, not if you’re the last eligible man on Earth. Which, for all I know, you may well be.” Ash looked at the prince, at the gentle candle glow reflected on the glass panes around them and the softly romantic flowers on the table. She took in the moment, drank in the quit beauty she never expected to feel again. Then, she kissed him full on the mouth. “I like dancing with you.”

He was coming in for another kiss when a bell chimed out, breaking the moment in two as Ash jumped at the sudden sound. Rize laughed. “They’re calling us back into the ballroom. Or me, more specifically.” He extended a hand to her and they walked out into the night air again, not quite touching but closer, somehow, than they had been five minutes ago.

As they entered the well-lit ballroom hall again, Rize’s face blankened into a bland, politically correct smile and the way he held Ash subtly changed into a something more polite than familiar. Oh well, she supposed it must be the way of life of a royal – you are not your own. Rather him than me, she thought, as he deposited her on the one side of the dance floor and walked over to the other, to stand with the king, duke and some other, official-looking people.

“Hear ye, one and all, for the king has an announcement to make.

All at once, Ash knew what was happening. It was her. He was going to marry her. And once he’d asked, she could not say no.

At exactly the same time, she felt Vanita come up and grip her hand. “Ash.”

“I know.” It was her. They were going to announce her.

“Ash.”

“It’s me,” she whispered to her sister idiotically, staring at the floor in shock. “What do I do Vanita? What do I do?”

“Ash!”

“What?”

“Ash, this must mean it’s just before midnight. The coach, Ash.”

She had completely forgotten about the coach, set to leave for Rhodopalais at the last stroke of midnight. Sure enough, the ‘Cinderella bell’ rang out, the one that legend stated was the exact clocktower that had chimed when she made her famous escape from this same palace. All at once, Ash knew what to do.

She ran.

She ran and ran, tripping out of the ballroom through the archways and into the passages, not even looking if Vanita or Derrick were behind her. She heard the crash of footsteps behind her in pursuit, but she dared not look back, or she would fall. One servant made to stop her at the grand staircase, but she barrelled into him, flying down the steps so fast that she tripped, tumbling, down the unforgiving white marble.

Arms around her. Ash started, but it was only Derrick, hauling her up in quite an unladylike fashion. One shoe had come off and it was her mother’s, but Ash did not think, did not hesitate, but pulled the left shoe off quickly and dashed after Derrick barefoot across the shining floors and down the outer staircase.

It took a second for Ash’s eyes to adjust to the gloom, looking at the seven or so carriages outside on the gravel. Which was theirs? Then, as she looked, a carriage right at the front of the line eerily came to life, wheels beginning to turn as it manoeuvred itself out onto the drive to begin its driverless journey. In horror, Ash watched it start moving by itself towards Rhodopalais.

“Ash, run!”

That snapped her out of it and she ran after Derrick, cursing as her feet pounded into the hard gravel, shooting pain all through her. Then, only then, did she wonder where Vanita was.

“Ash!”

As if on cue Vanita’s high voice rang out somewhere behind her and she turned to see her stepsister struggling in that ridiculously long blue dress, panting as she called after her, not used to running the way Ash and Derrick were.

“Vanita come on! The coach won’t stop!”

She could see her trying, but Vanita was just not that fast. Behind Vanita, she could see the white and red uniforms of the palace guard running after them. There was no way Vanita could outrun them and

there was no way to stop their only ride home. To go back into the palace meant being proposed to and to say no meant death.

Suddenly, Ash felt arms around her. She had been running looking backwards at Vanita and had not realised how close to the coach she was. Derrick took her by the waist in both hands and, still running, somehow threw her forwards. Ash's outstretched arms hit the thankfully still quite slow-moving carriage in full force and the shock of impact jolted her bones and teeth, but she managed to hang on, pulling herself up the doorframe and inside.

As soon as she was in, she leaned back out of the carriage window in time to see Derrick running back for Vanita, her arms outstretched to him. Ash almost cried with relief, seconds later, at the sight of a red-faced Derrick, Vanita slung like a sack of potatoes over his shoulder. She grabbed onto Vanita's form and yelled at Derrick to let go, hauling her sister in through the window. Then Ash threw open the coach door and held out her arms to Derrick, pulling him in too. At last. The palace would not come after them now, at night, out in the open once they had left the grounds. They were safe.

There wasn't that much space in the carriage for the three of them, Ash didn't care. Each sat in silence for a good few minutes as the coach trundled on. It was Derrick who broke the silence.

"Did what I think just happen, happen?"

It was Vanita who answered, her face unreadable in the relative dark of the coach interior. "Ash was picked for the prince's upcoming marriage. She ran before he could propose."

Ash did not answer, just folded in on herself and cried noisily all over her ballgown.

"It's alright Ash, really," Vanita cooed. "It's illegal to ask for a woman in marriage if she is not present."

"It's probably also illegal to run out of the room when the king is making a speech," Ash mumbled. "How did this all go so wrong? A week ago, we were only thinking of where our next meal was going to come from. What do I *do*?"

"It's going to be alright. We'll just –"

A menacing thud jolted the entire carriage. "What was that?" Ash hissed, though she already knew. There had been no sound, no shriek, no nothing. But in her heart she knew.

The carriage thudded again, this time shuddering with the impact, a swift, loud scratching sound coming off of the roof for just one second before eerie silence descended again.

As one, Ash and Derrick both opened the window drapes of the carriage. It was Derrick that cried out on his side.

“Carrior! Owl carrior!”

Ash and Vanita both leaned over to his window in time to see a ghostly white shape spread-eagled across the dark night sky, its pale feathers – thankfully – reflecting the moonlight so it could be seen. Then it circled around and swooped back down on them.

Ash was mesmerised, watching this thing of awful beauty. It tipped silently towards them on angel’s wings, its inhuman face hungry with the taste for blood. The pale wings tipped diagonally at the height of its arc like knives through the air, wings angling downwards towards them and their carriage. The black, slanted eyes were suddenly clearly visible in the moonlight and Ash could see the carrior looking right at their faces.

“Get away from the windows!”

Seconds later, the giant talons crashed through the glass, shattering the window and Vanita screamed.

Silence again. The foot had pulled out as quickly as it had come and they could hear nothing of the owl’s silent winging, or calculating mind, so much cleverer than other carriers. Tentatively, Ash kept the others behind her so that both her and Derrick were in front of Vanita and leaned closer to the still in-tact window for another look.

It was lower now, lower but coming in again mercilessly fast and quiet – so quiet! – as it swooped without flapping straight towards Ash’s face. Then, at the last minute, its snowy feathers covered its face and wings seemed to fold in on themselves, hoisting up from the joint as though pulled by an invisible puppeteer’s string. Then the owl flapped its mighty wings and soared up out of view, sending a gust of wind across that rocked the coach.

“What’s it doing?”

A bloodcurdling scream cut the night and the sound of already-broken glass, as the giant talons shot through the other window and grabbed Vanita around the head, face, neck, shoulders.

“No!”

Ash lunged for her sister as the owl made to pull her out of the coach, skin crawling at the scaly feel of those murderous talons, like dragon's skin. Vanita screamed again as the creature half-pulled her through the jagged window up to her waist, with Ash pulling in the other direction.

"Hang on I'm coming!" Over her shoulder, Ash barely saw Derrick hoist himself out the second window and hoist himself up and out of view. With the owl tethered to the carriage by its half-caught prey, he was going to aim at it from on top of the roof and try shoot it down.

An ear-piercing shriek and Ash screamed as she and Vanita jolted further out the window as one of Derrick's arrows found its mark. The owl looked furious, flapping and trying to twist Vanita out of the window, the metal spike of something sticking out of its one wing. Vanita had gone heart-sickeningly quiet. Then, with another shriek, Ash almost let go of Vanita as the owl suddenly let go, screaming and in the moonlight, Ash could see the glinting metal spike of an arrow sticking out of its one eye. Vanita, slack and still silent, hung from Ash's grip and lolled dangerously close to the ground.

"Derrick, help!"

Derrick leaned over his precarious position on the top of the coach and grunted as he scrambled for the skirts of Vanita's dress, eventually managing to pull her dead weight up enough so that Ash could haul her back through the window, trying not to cut the skin anymore that was already gushing red with deep gouges, glass cuts and punctured holes.

"Vee! Vanita! Wake up, wake up..."

She was a mess, blood soaked all the way through her hair, Ash moved Vanita's matted sticky hair out of her face and screamed. Where her eye had once been, there was only an angry, gaping red gash.

"Vanita!"

Her chest was barely moving, but Ash could feel the weak thud of a heartbeat beneath the sound of her own crazy pulse. Vanita was alive, she thought, but only just. The blood everywhere, mixed with the refined pretty glitter of the blue dress, sickened Ash and now the feathers on the end of her gown seemed woefully prophetic.

A ripping sound and Derrick was shoving her out of the way, his doublet in ribbon as he tore fabric and bound Vanita's bleeding arms and chest with it. The sight woke something up in Ash and she began to do

the same with her dress, trying to get the more intimate areas so that Derrick didn't have to do them. Yes, Vanita would have wanted that. She sobbed aloud as she realised that she had already begun thinking of her sister in the past tense.

“What do we do what dowedoo?” she wailed, slumping against Derrick, her syllables all running into each other as she began to cry again.

“Nothing we can do, just wait until we are home. Old Merta will know how to patch her up. We – Wait, Ash!”

Derrick pulled a vaguely familiar blue bottle from under him. The Pathfinder's bottle.

“Give it here Derrick, quickly! I don't know exactly how... It's better than nothing.” Carefully, she trickled a few drops everywhere she could see blood, last of all Vanita's face, which she could barely look at. Her sister didn't even stir. Second by second, she was slipping away.

“What now? Is there some spell? Derrick, what do we do?”

“There's nothing we can do Ash. Just wait. Wait until home.”

Now the slow pace of the coach that seemed a boon before was a nightmare. Ash just stared down glassily at her sister, bleeding on the carriage floor in her lap, as the coach rode on and on.

KATYA LEBEQUE

The bird does not understand. The sense-making section of its brain thinks that if it cannot see danger or hear danger, there is nothing to fear. Yet it feels fear. Soon it may taste the sharp claws goes through its neck as it tries to scream.

It is night time and the owls are out. Cold and dark, without the flames the two leggers made for illumination before, the bird is utterly blind in the blackness. It cocks its head, but owls do not flap. They do not hesitate or cry out, make no show of exertion as they glide noiselessly out of the darkness to feed. The only sound the bird can rely on is the shriek of victims as other carriers nearby get plucked off one by one. The sound is chilling, but good. It means that it was not the bird, not this time.

But next time it could be.

No other carrier eats every day, but the owls do. There were giant rats everywhere at first, but thanks to the owls there is not a single one left. Owls. The perfect hunters. Sometimes they are white but more often they are dark like their hunger and, on a moonless night, totally invisible.

It has been an hour or more that the bird has hunched beneath a tree it cannot see, hoping the branches will give away the approach of an owl. Yet there is nothing and there are no carriers' screams.

The owls must have other meat tonight.

Chapter Sixteen

Put this pain away

Things were quiet, very quiet, when the coach finally arrived. Ash couldn't be sure, but it seemed that the derelict gates which had long broken down, were slightly more skew on what remained of their hinges. As they arrived at the house, they found it in complete darkness.

That puzzled Ash. She knew they had a few candles still and though they tried to be frugal, Old Merta would surely have left one burning in honour of the special occasion and be waiting up at the kitchen table to hear how it was, just as she had last night. In fact, Ash was counting on it, for who else could stitch up Vanita? Ash longed for the comfort of the old woman's practical arms and no-nonsense advice and she hurried as much as she dared with carrying Vanita's feet as Derrick held her upper half and they went inside.

The quiet. It was different in here – a nervous, ticking thing, but also as though the place had been abandoned for a hundred years. It felt like one of those fairy stories, where the owner of the home happily set off for the hunt or a festival in the woods, then returned home at the end of the day to find that in the real world a century had passed. Ash shivered, in spite of herself and called out.

“Old Merta? Merta?”

A scuffle in the dark and then Ash collapsed under the dead weight of Vanita as Derrick let go. “Ouch!” he cried and then, another voice, calling his name. Not Old Merta's, but Tansy's.

“Derrick? Ash? Ohh, Ash!”

“Tansy what is all this nonsense? Get a candle at once.”

Crying in the dark. Ash could now make out the hunched form of Tansy in front of them.

“Tansy, go get a candle!”

After a few minutes, the form of Tansy, still blubbering, came into full view, as she lit a candle. And the horror behind her as lit up.

The kitchen was torn apart as if by a disaster, scabbling hands had pulled down shelves, broken what remained of the dusty, empty jars. Blood on the floor. The table was overturned, the table where Ash had hoped to put the bleeding form of Vanita that she was still holding, staring around the shell of the room. Gently as she dared, Ash placed Vanita onto the floor and walked slowly to what she knew she would find.

She was by the hearth. Of course she was. Where she would have been waiting for Ash to get home. At first it was the starch white apron she saw – starched every other day and so clean, despite all the madness around them. Old Merta’s usually pristine self was lying in a pool of her own blood, staring up sightlessly at the ceiling. Her arms were flung wide as though in greeting, her face slack and open as though surprised at herself for this show of leisure, lying down on the floor like this. Ash repressed the urge to get into those arms and snuggle there. This wasn’t Old Merta anymore.

“What happened?” asked Derrick’s voice and it sounded so far away.

“Th-there were bandits. They said they had come for the p-pumpkin. Mi-Miss Ash, believe me, we tried t’ stop ‘em but they turned nasty, sayin’ they would be back for the pumpkin.”

Ash was petting down the body, righting the cap and smoothing the apron, when her hand felt a terrible absence, an emptiness beneath the skirts. She lifted the top skirts to reveal where Old Merta’s right leg had been hacked off at the thigh. As though she were a pig, as though she were nothing.

“Th-they said if you want a full body for burial, you’ll give them the pumpkin, Miss. O-or, or they would at least... at least have some meat for the eating.”

That was enough to turn Ash’s head to face Tansy. “What?” she whispered, but Derrick came to her instead and took her shaking hands in his. There were tears on his face.

“Ash. Listen to me. Old Merta is gone and no one loved her more than you. I’m sorry. But Vanita is going, she will die soon. She needs you. Can you put this pain away? Lock it away in your mind for an hour,

or two, or do you want to let Vanita die? It is your choice, she's *your* sister. And Old Merta cannot be saved, but maybe Vanita can."

He was right. Ash noticed that Derrick had righted the kitchen table and put Vanita on it as she had thought to. Already, the wood was mostly red from the sheer extent of the wounds. Ash took one last look at Old Merta and put her hands to the cold, soft, papery skin, closing her eyes. It was one of the hardest things she had ever had to do, but she pushed the cracking, writhing, crushing pain down, down below the surface of her conscious and locked it there.

"Derrick, do you still have that Pathfinder's bottle? Bring it here. Tansy, put something over Old Merta. If I look at it I won't... Thank you. Right, well, I've never done this before."

Derrick nodded grimly but seemed in control of himself at least. "The silk from this dress should be strong enough to cut threads from. I can use some of the crossbow bolt iron to make me a long needle?"

It was a good idea. Ash nodded, then steeled herself inwardly and turned towards her dying sister.

And so it was that Ash stitched Vanita's body back together. Breathe, use the dress scraps to clean the blood, using more of the Pathfinder's liquid, which was water for all she knew. Breathe. Bind up the more superficial wounds with rags from her own dress. Not stitching, not putting something sharp in her sweet sister's soft flesh, not yet... Breathe. Remember to breathe.

She was not under her tree, but she found herself praying as she worked. Not a complex prayer, not one like the ones her mother used to teach her. The prayer of a single word: *please, please, please*, said over and over long into the night and the beginnings of the grey morning.

When at last the gashes were stitched, the wounds washed. The hole where Vanita's eye had once been was treated and bound. The sun was up. Ash's legs gave way where she stood and she slumped on the floor for tiredness, for sadness, for fear. It was Derrick who carried the near lifeless thing up to her bedroom to sleep and, hopefully, to live.

And Ash, Ash crawled into the cinders, the blackened remains of the long-dead evening fire where Old Merta had last been alive.

Ash rolled over in her sleep. Her mother was sitting there. Straight-backed in one of the old chairs that no longer existed, Ash doubted if she

had ever seen her so clearly. Her mother was embroidering something in her lap, not looking up. Then she spoke:

“Sitting in ashes was a practise of mourning in biblical times.” Ash had forgotten how pious, how correct, her mother had been. “They would sit in ashes, roll around, revel in sadness. If you were in ashes, everyone knew you had lost someone dear. But then you would rise from the ashes, clean yourself, dress correctly and go back o your life and your position in the community. This time she glanced up and looked meaningfully at Ash in that way she had.

Ash sighed. “I have two choices, Mother. One is to stay in this dying house with dying people, with the knowledge that my Merta is dead and not coming back. The other is to play make-believe by going to become princess of a dying kingdom, reduced to a marriage I am not entirely sure I want.”

This time, Lady Cerentola put down her embroidery. “Do you remember what you said to my sister?”

“That I make my own path.”

Her mother nodded. “Just so. And you will do so now.” Her mother held up the circle of embroidery she had been doing for Ash to see. It was a lump of the iron ore rock from Expansion earth, looking very incongruous rendered in her mother’s pretty stitches.

“You will know what to do.”

Ash opened her eyes, seeing only ashes leaking out from the hearth onto the kitchen floor. It didn’t change anything. She rolled over again and went back to sleep.

Chapter Seventeen

Do something

She cannot believe she didn't think of it sooner. Ash woke up, sun high in the sky, with her heart pounding and one word resounding in her skull: *Stepmother*.

It was chaotic, of course, but she should never have simply forgotten about the other member of her family, whose bloody corpse may be strewn anywhere in the upper house. How could she have been so selfish?

"Tansy? Tansy!" Tripping over the still-bloodied table, Ash stumbled from the kitchen. "Tansy, what of the mistress? Tansy? Stepmother!"

These mobs had been known to be especially cruel to anyone from the formerly wealthy class, who knows what could have happened to her. Ash called her, by her first name, in a voice that sounded like a child's as she climbed the grand staircase. When she finally reached Stepmother's door, it would not open. Icy dread fell like a rock into her stomach and Ash began throwing herself against the door.

"Stepmother? Ida! Step... Mother, can you hear me? Are you in there?"

It seemed to be barricaded from the inside. Ash did not stop, but began hammering on the door as well, as much as her tiredness would allow.

"Miss?" Tansy came up the stairs slower than usual, eyes looking bruised with fatigue.

"Tansy...last night, with the, the men... where is stepmother? Did they do something to her?"

"The men were shouting in the kitchen and Stepmother came down and shouted too. But they hit her on the head something fierce. I thought they would... You know... But Merta, she let out a sound and ran at

them... When Madame got up from the floor she ran, up to her quarters. They never came up here, Miss.”

Ash looked at Tansy, trying to see if there were a message somewhere in her words that made sense. But there was none. Ash looked back at the closed door. Now that she quieted herself, she could hear the reedy lilting of off-key singing coming from the room and shuffling steps that sounded like they were going around and around in a circle.

When Tansy spoke again, her voice was hard and cold. “They had knives, some had gardening tools, the men. After they had rounded us two together and slapped us about a bit, there was a quiet moment and we heard the scrape of wood upstairs. We thought it was Madame, with an old sword or a something, come to help us. But I think it was the wardrobe being pushed against the door.”

There was nothing to say. Ash turned away and walked back down the stairs.

“Miss?”

“I’m going to be with Old Merta.”

Tansy’s voice sounded confused behind her, but she still asked: “And what about her?”

“Just leave her. Maybe she’ll starve in there. Maybe she should.” Ash put her hate carefully in the box she had put grief over Old Merta in last night and crawled back into her fireplace, seeking the warmth that she had lost.

The palace was too small for all of Rize’s thoughts and the stable was not much better. Each time he tried to think, to reason, his mind would circle back stubbornly to three things.

The way she’d looked at him. The way she’d kissed him. And the way she’d left.

Rize growled, setting off a nodding Mouse beside him. He paced around angrily, trying to get perspective or understanding on what had happened at midnight. Not even the sight of Mouse copying him, walking fierce circles in her straw as she eyed his pacing, could cheer him.

Perhaps he was in love. Yet how could someone care for somebody in two days? It was no more or less ridiculous a reaction than most,

although you would have thought that his heart would be more cautious in a time where people were dying like flies.

And as for her, the way she felt seemed clear. She did not want him, she did not want to marry him, so she had ran – literally *ran* – rather than be proposed to. If she wasn't there, he couldn't propose. Now that she had left without enlightening him as to where she stayed, she was gone for good. And clearly that was what she wanted.

Then why had she kissed him?

“Good morning cousin.” The duke had made an especial effort to not sneak up on him, using the door like everyone else. Rize half-smiled at the act of kindness. He could use all the kindness he could get.

“Morning cousin.”

“What an evening!” The duke breezed in, in a spotless white outfit, for some reason carrying a drab travelling cloak on his arm. “To do the Cinderella, of all things! It's a good thing that there are only about ten ladies still alive in this place, or it might start a trend or something. The tradition was stupid and this was ten times more stupid.”

When this got no response, the duke carried on talking in a gentler tone. “So, I see we are moving on to option B for marriage?” He gestured at Mouse, who tossed her head noddingly. Rize smiled. “Would that I could. But Mouse would not make a very patient monarch.”

The duke smiled wryly, looking him up and down. “And the girl was picked for her... monarching skills? As evidenced by the way she filled out that dress?”

“Actually, yes,” Rize answered, surprising himself. “I didn't realise it at the time, but when I was with her I did think that she would be an excellent ruler – you know, for these times. She was just, *different*, like this –” he puffed out his chest theatrically and exhaled with puffed cheeks under the sceptical gaze of the duke. “Fresh air. You know? I feel this simmering panic in people, mixed with the whole prince thing, all the time. And I have to be calm for them, I have to be strong for them. But her... I didn't need to be strong for her.”

This did seem to make an impression on the duke and something changed behind his eyes. He leaned forward, suddenly serious.

“So, what are we still doing here?”

“What do you mean? She didn't want the... me.”

“Rize, I was kidding earlier, about the Cinderella thing. Their coach was formed and ordered by a Pathfinder because they had no horses left, Vanita told me on the first night. She ordered it to leave for home at a certain time. Their carriage left at midnight because that was when the clock chimed the hour. As soon as the clock chimed, she ran.”

Rize turned and looked at him full in the face, searching for the joke and finding none. “Really?”

“Really.”

As Rize digested this, his cousin moved over to Mouse and led her gently from her stall, looking her up and down. “Mouse looks ready for a spin... how about you? I made a point of checking where the Rhodopalais estate was after the first night. It’s my custom, how I often get new girls. I listen to when they’re announced and go and ask the footmen which direction their coach came in. Then I go and look it up on one of the maps. And that Vanita did look a delectable thing to me, so I did the same with her.”

He came over to Rize’s side. “I know how to get there, get your girl. Aren’t you tired of sitting in this stuffy palace, waiting to be rescued? How about we go. Leave. Right niw, just you and me.” Rize found himself nodding as he looked into the duke’s eyes. “Let’s do it. Let’s *do something*.”

Chapter Eighteen

Door to door

Ash had tried to wallow in the fireplace again, she really had, but thoughts of Vanita kept waking her up. Finally, when it seemed late enough and the kitchens deserted enough, she snuck upstairs.

When she opened Vanita's door, the still form in the bed was so similar to every other normal day she had woken her stepsister, that Ash almost felt she should have a tray of breakfast in hand. She was still asleep and so Ash snuck closer to check on her late-night handiwork.

Vanita's hair had been chopped off at the scalp in patches where Ash had had to get to gashes and cuts. The rest was matted with dried blood. Angry red lines of sewn up skin ranged all around her shoulders. The face was remarkably unscathed apart from the eye, looking like porcelain next to the murderous red marks surrounding it. It made the bloody silken rag tied diagonally around her eye look like a masquerade, a game. Ash looked as much as she dared, trying not to sigh loudly and wake Vanita up. Then, checking that no one was coming first, she sat down to do some embroidery.

Perhaps it was the dream with her mother, but her hands and mind itched for something to do that was mechanical and dreamlike, a safe enough pen for her ragged thoughts to wander a bit but not too far. Making arrow heads was too new, but embroidery had been forced on her from the age of nine when her new stepmother had pronounced her "boyish". She would rather have been eaten by a carrier than admit it to anyone, but she found the mindless dancing of hands soothing.

As she began on the battered old embroidery ring, a slight wheeze emanated from the bed. Ash turned her head. Vanita's eye open and looking at her.

"Vee... are you awake?" Whatever had been in that Pathfinder's solution must truly have been magic. With the amount of blood lost, the trauma of being stitched up, she should by rights be unconscious for a

day or more, yet here was her sister looking at her silently. “Vee... how are you?”

Vanita nodded carefully, a small dip of her head that seemed to bring a wave of pain, for she lay back again.

“Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

Silence.

“Well, nevertheless, you must eat and take a lot of water in. You lost so much blood last night.”

The chapped bloody lips opened and closed, testing. “Mo-mother”

“Something happened last night. Stepmother is in her room, she won’t come out. She has locked herself in.”

This news did not seem to surprise Vanita. She looked down, seeming so small without her cloud of hair, so pale and so young.

“Thank,” she whispered, as Ash left the room to get her food.

While Ash was spooning pumpkin broth into Vanita’s mouth, it started. A whining, off-kilter, keening noise was seeping through the walls and Ash realised that it was Stepmother singing to herself, then muttering.

“I’ll just call for Tansy, to take this bowl down to the kitchens,” Ash said quickly and a little too loudly, trying to drown out the sounds of Vanita’s mother going insane. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

Ash could not have been on the landing for long when she heard a thin, strangled scream coming from the room she had just left.

She ran into the room but couldn’t see Vanita anywhere. But then there she was in the corner, peering into the cracked mirror there and just screaming.

“Vee! Vee, what? What? Is there pain? Talk to me!”

“My m-my eye!”

Ash sank down on the bed, her chest like lead. Vanita didn’t remember, of course not. And now she had found out in the most brutal way that she was disfigured forever. It was too much. Ash just shook her head and cried with her sister.

Eventually, sanity returned and Ash spoke soft words she would not remember later as she bundled her Vanita back into bed. As if punctuating the moment, dull thuds echoed from the other side of the wall. Stepmother, it seemed, had begun running around in her closed-off room.

“Why...”

“I think your mother has gone into shock and is in some way reliving last night. That is my best guess. I told you, something happened last night.”

“No. Why things... fall apart. Ash?”

It was a good question and it must have taken a lot of energy to voice it. Ash looked out the dirty window as if for help, but there was nothing.

“Get some rest, Vanita.” She did not know what else to say. She got up to leave for her own grief, downstairs and closed the door behind her, imagining Vanita lying there listening helplessly to the sounds of her mother falling apart.

Derrick was in the kitchens when she returned. Whether to eat something or to block her way so she could not crawl back into the fireplace, Ash could not say. But instead of making his intentions clear, he gestured towards an insultingly pristine missive on the table.

“That came from the palace.”

“What?”

“It says that the prince is venturing out of the palace to ‘find his bride’.”

“The prince?”

“That’s what I said.”

Ash snorted. “That’s ridiculous. He is the only heir to the throne; do you really expect me to believe he would just ride around from door to door with carriers about? What’s he going to do, take my shoe and try it on all twelve of us maidens? And if we all happen to be a size five? And how did a magicked missive come here anyway – jut how many bleeding Pathfinders does that palace have anyway?”

“Ash? I don’t think he’s going from door to door.”

Derrick picked up the paper and held its reverse side up to her. It had the address of Rhodopalais on it and no other.

He knew where she lived. He was coming straight here.

The air felt fantastic – clear and bright and cold as it rushed past Rize’s face. Just being out of the palace grounds felt like flying and Rize could not remember the last time he had galloped. He thought his heart would burst in his chest: for the sun, for the wind on his face, for Ash.

“Take it easy Rize, she hasn’t been out in quite a while,” said the Duke, pulling up next to him. Mouse certainly didn’t seem to share his sentiments, she was tossing her head ecstatically as she went.

But his cousin wasn’t finished. “Are you sure it was a good idea to send that missive?”

“Why would it not be? You said yourself that she left because of the magicked carriage, not because she did not want to be proposed to.”

“Well, with my not inconsiderable experience with women, I have learnt that it tends to be dangerous to assume you know what a woman is feeling. They seem to not like the idea of feeling only one thing at once.”

Rize shook his head and focussed on the riding. He did not know what his cousin was talking about, but his heart was sure. He wanted to be around that person, Ash, for her to breathe life into the stale palace with her muddy boots beneath ballgowns and her sharp eyes and fearlessness. If he had to marry her to have that, so what? There were worse things – like each and every day continuing to be the same.

“Why did you bring that thing?”

Rize blushed, knowing exactly what the duke was referring to. The shoe sitting inside the satchel strapped to Mouse’s flank, the shoe that Ash had fallen out of and left lying there in the corridors. Left for him to find? Who knows.

“Are you planning on trying it on her foot?”

Rize blushed hotter. “Of course not. I just – I just wanted it with me.” How could he explain to his cousin that wild, raw panic had flared in his chest when he had seen her running and had run after her in a very unprincely fashion, all seeming to be chaos, when he came across this shoe in the corridors? And when he had looked at it, it had had a small, perfect phrase inside: ‘from ashes to beauty’. Those words had struck him straight to the heart. There was little enough beauty left in the world.

“I just wanted to give it back to her, it looked expensive, that’s all.”

The duke nodded, not saying anything. Rize felt the need to fill the silence, so he did.

“We’re doing the right thing. You’ll see.”

The pair rode on.

Ash stared at the page Derrick was holding as if trying to fathom a hidden code. Then her eyes widened and she walked swiftly out the door.

Derrick stopped her in less than ten paces.

“Why is he coming here?” Derrick all but shouted. Ash turned and faced him, raising her chin. “Why do you think?”

“How does he know where we live?”

“That I don’t know. I never mentioned it to him and as I am no longer a lady I have no rights to property so he – oh. Vanita. Vanita was announced at the ball.”

Ash tried to carry on walking, but Derrick placed a hand flat on her chest. “Don’t go talk to your God. Talk to me. Do you have feelings for this prince?”

“I – I don’t know.”

“That’s a yes.”

“It is *not*. I don’t... I don’t know what to do, alright? And I have to think of everyone here. If it would help Rhodopalais –”

“You sound like your stepmother.”

Ash placed her hands on his chest this time and pushed with all her strength, sending Derrick stumbling back. She walked past him to go and sit beneath her hazelnut tree and try to be alone.

“Are you really going to marry someone you’re not sure you love?” he called after her. “Are you really going to tie yourself to this kingdom for the rest of your life when it might be the biggest mistake of your life?”

As the riding wore on and they passed the wasteland plains without incident, some exhilaration of the novelty wore off. Finally, they entered the rocky country that came just before the open plains that housed Rhodopalais, according to the duke. It was a deathly quiet place, grey as a tombstone with its rocky hillsides laid bare by lack of grass, riddled with holes as though giant worms had made their way through. Some of the caves were too small for a child to enter, some large enough for a man – or a carrier? – to pass through. Rize had often wondered where such massive birds slept. Apparently, someone had had the idea of these caves as a refuge, for there was the hacked-off remains of a gate flung to one side of an especially large cave. Clearly, it hadn’t worked out in their favour. The prince rode on.

Rize and the duke fell into the old ways of hard riding, sparing thoughts only for the gait of the horse, the position of the sun in the sky and safety. Even less for conversation. So Rize was slightly startled when his cousin spoke:

“So what is the plan when we get there?”

“Ask her to marry me.”

“And you’re sure that’s what you want to do?”

“Why wouldn’t I? It would be good for the kingdom.”

“Yes, but you’re used to thinking about the good of the kingdom and just doing things ‘for the kingdom’. She is not. You may need to explain it to her. So, why exactly would she be good for the kingdom? In what way?”

Rize turned in his saddle to look at his cousin. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. “She would... inspire me, make me a better leader, I suppose. Bring fresh life and new ways of doing things in to the palace.”

The duke stared hard at him.

“She also knows how to kill carriers,” Rize finished lamely.

The duke looked politely away, focussing on his reins and bridle for a moment. “Hmm, not the most romantic proposal I’ve ever heard, but desperate times I suppose...”

They both looked at each other, neither one wanting to break eye contact first and lose.

“I know it’s not the most *romantic* but well –”

“Rize look out!”

The duke pulled on his reins hard and Rize whipped his head around to face forward again, doing the same.

There was a giant black crow sitting on the path in front of them.

Ash was not sure how long she had been sitting under the hazelnut tree when he came back. She was so lost in thought that Derrick sneaked up on her completely, forcing a gasp of surprise out of her as he bodily hauled her up by the arms into a standing position. If he had been a carrier, she’d be dead.

“Right, he said menacingly, “there’s something we need to talk about.”

Without another word, he stalked off towards the back of the house. Ash stood there, annoyed and stupefied, for less than a minute before his voice rang out from behind the wall as he came back towards her.

“What’s our promise Ash? That only one of us is allowed to die. That I will take care of Vanita and Her Highness and all the house, if you’re gone. Right?”

“What does this have to do with anything?”

Derrick came back into view, this time walking slowly, almost shyly, holding a burlap sack. Silently, he handed it to her.

Ash felt something papery inside and pulled her hand out of the sack with its precious cargo. Her breath caught in her throat and she looked up at Derrick’s face. They were lilac roses from the old garden, lovingly dried so that they had maintained their original shape and hue, only the tiniest veins of brown discolouration on the edges of the petals. She could not guess at how long ago he must have done this, how he had planned to give them to her.

“Derrick...”

“Just listen, Ash. I know that things have changed a lot over the past week, but there has been something I have wanted to ask you for a while. For years.”

All this time, rising at dawn and hunting carriers together, going to balls together, facing starvation and mobs and death, these lilac roses were sitting in a sack right here, waiting for her.

“When we were children, I knew you were a lady and there was no hope. I knew that... But then you renounced your title. It was like a miracle. That was when I started saving. I thought that we could have a farm and, well, it’s not a palace but...”

Ash stared at Derrick, her hands dropping to her sides, nearly crushing the flowers.

“Ash, will you marry me?”

The massive, ink-black bird cocked its head to the side as it studied them.

Rize had seen many carriers. He had tracked them, hunted them, shot arrows at them from a distance and even a few times at close range, with the backing of a select armed guard, of course. But he had never

been attacked by carrion, that just happened to be a crow and he found it quite, quite different.

The bird watched them without moving a muscle and Rize was almost scared to break eye contact. He looked ahead of them for an escape, but the only thing in front of them was the tall, thick skeleton of a tree, bare branches like bones in the sunlight. As if it had heard his thoughts, the crow launched off the ground, cawing and alighted on one of the sturdier branches. It looked unblinkingly down at its prey and they looked back. Time passed and still the crow kept on staring. Rize tried to keep his thoughts on Rhodopalais and on her, so close now, to try and keep away the feeling of numb dread sinking in and stared back.

After minutes of silence, Mouse seemed to get restless. She pawed the ground, then tossed her head and neighed. That seemed to be all the invitation the carrion needed. It dived.

It went straight for the silver flicker of the duke's bridle, swooping down so fast Rize could barely keep track of it. As it extended out its scaly massive legs the duke pulled his horse back, doing a sharp circle, missing the cruel talons by less than an inch. Mouse neighed again loudly.

They never left the palace walls, even for the shortest time, without donning peasant garb and blackening any shiny bits and bridles with mud. But today they had hurried. And today, Rize noticed too late, the duke was sporting a fine silken white shirt beneath his cloak. Even to Rize, his cousin looked a bright and shiny thing ripe for the taking as he circled now nervously on his horse.

The bird waited until the duke's back was to it as he led his horse around. Then it hopped forward and pulled at the horse by its tail, the sheer size of the bird almost managing to drag the terrified creature. The duke turned in his saddle and drew his sword, stabling at the crow that hopped smartly out of his reach. He waved his sword again. One raspy cry and it was upon him again in less than a second, giving a short, sharp tap with its formidable beak on the back of his head before flapping up into its tree again.

The duke fell.

"Lorin!" Rize forgot all notions of staring the crow down and raced for his cousin, before that beast could come again.

He seemed dazed but unhurt, but Rize wanted to make sure. As he neared the fallen duke, some instinct made him look up.

A black shape against the sky, coming closer. Another crow.

“Duke, you have to get up. Come on. Here, I’ll hold her steady for you just, please, hurry!”

He leaned down. “Listen, I say we go back for those caves, that one with the gate alongside it could help, the horses will both fit in. We’ll just make for there and –”

Suddenly a sensation like being hit by a charging bull ploughed into Rize. He gasped winded, shocked to find himself on the floor. That first crow must have attacked again. Now it was the duke shouting. Rize was gratified to see that he was back on his horse now. He looked around for Mouse, wondering where she had got to.

Then he saw her. The other crow was watching her, landed now and standing a head taller than his horse, eyeing her beadily. His dappled grey stood still, tense.

With sinking dread, Rize knew what she was going to do.

Mouse tossed her head. And the crow lunged.

As it pecked at her head, the crow in front of Rize did an ugly jump, swooping into a dive that ended with it landing full force on Mouse’s back. A terrible scream and Rize saw a splash of red on his horse’s neck.

“Leave her alone!” He was screaming, crying both, with his sword out and charging at them. But carriers would not be stopped. They ripped and cawed and pierced and even as his cousin threw his arms around him and roared at Rize to stop, he still kept going at them.

When the metal of his blade finally connected with some part of one of the crows, they both launched off the ground for the nearby tree. And the Mouse Rize knew was gone.

A sound escaped as he finally reached her and fell on his knees next to the ragged scraps of flesh. He couldn’t look at her face – no, not that, not at that head she was tossing just a few minutes ago – but there was a piece of unruined flank that still had her dappled grey and he stroked it. He looked down at the shin with its white socks. He could not believe. Mouse, his Mouse, gone.

Hands on his shoulders, not comforting but pulling him up. “Rize, not now. We have to go.” When Rize refused to hear him, the duke

hauled him away from the carcass by force. Rize didn't exactly resist him, or leave willingly. He just stared and stared at that one white sock-like leg until he thought his chest would explode.

"You can mourn later" the duke said gruffly as he propelled Rize towards the surviving horse. As they retreated, the crows hopped towards the remains again, to eat.

"The cave was a good idea. Thank you for saving me cousin."

Rize looked at what was left of his Mouse and didn't say anything.

The hoarse, raucous cawing of the crows broke the silence and the duke hurried them both onto the horse. The sound of the horse starting off at a swift canter seemed to be more interesting than their meal, for the carriers both looked up and the one launched into flight to follow them.

The duke kicked his heels in, shouting at his horse to go faster. He was so panicked that he almost rode past the cave entrance when they saw it, yawning wide in its dismal surrounds. As the crow landed the duke led the horse inside and Rize got an idea.

"Here. Hold that gate against the cave entrance. Crows are the smartest of carriers. I'm going to use that." Deafening his ears to his cousin's protests, Rize jumped off the horse and crouched down at the side of the rocky hillside near the cave entrance and lay in wait.

The carrier hopped over, cocking its murderous head. It glanced briefly at Rize, but its curiosity was captured by the puzzle of fresh meat behind a cage-like door. The crow tried to poke its beak through the gate's openings, but the horse had been walked out of reach and the duke held firm. It seemed to consider this for a second, then abruptly pushed itself off of the ground and flew off.

"What now? It's gone?"

"Keep holding on, cousin. I saw a crow do this once. Watch."

A sharp cracking sound some way away and the bird was back, with a torn-off branch from the tree it had perched on. Beady eyes gleaming, it tried jabbing the added length of the branch through the gate, the duke yelping at the force of it.

"Cousin, when it does it again, grab that branch and don't let go."

"But I won't be able to hold –"

"Just for one second... Now!"

The duke lunged for the branch, clumsily grabbing it in both arms and holding it in a desperate embrace. As the duke held the struggling

carrier steady, Rize swung his sword. Hatred erupted in his chest as he looked at the ungainly back of the creature that had killed his friend. It had jumped on her back, so he struck it in between the shoulder blades with his blade and all of his strength.

“How does *that* feel?” he screamed and the crow screamed also. A couple more hacking motions and the crow still had not stopped cawing in pain. He didn’t care. He kept swinging.

It was a hand on his arm that stopped him. The duke had somehow come out of the cave to stand next to him without his noticing and Rize felt a sudden wave of exhaustion as the crow stopped moving. Saying nothing, the duke took his sword from him and, with a clean and practised movement, cut off the crow’s head.

“There. Now, let’s go bury Mouse.”

“Plenty of space to run around here, my girl,” Rize whispered to the freshly turned earth an hour later. The sun was starting to sink towards the horizon, casting a slightly less harsh light on the barren stretch of rocky land. He knew that had to get moving, to make it to Rhodopalais and shelter before dark, but he didn’t want to leave her all alone. Part of him felt sure that if they just headed back to the palace and stopped in at the stables, he would see her there, running circles around her stall and neighing and tossing her head. Rize sighed.

“You be good, Mouse. Goodbye.”

There was nothing more to say. They rode on.

KATYA LEBEQUE

The bird eats fiercely, though it was not that hungry, as it stands over the pulpy remains of the dead crow.

One of the bird's offspring had been killed by a crow just like this one. It had been flying, when the crow had come out of nowhere. She had rolled onto her back mid-air, clawing at the crow from underneath, but the crow had known that trick too. It was over before it even begun. The bird had watched from a distance as its spawn fell to the ground.

The bird dips its beak again into the black feathered mass again and tears hard as though the crow can feel it.

There is nothing more to do. The bird eats on.

Chapter Nineteen

The shoe must fit

Hours later, Vanita lay in her bed staring up at the ceiling, listening to the sounds her mother was making in the next room. Her mind was a curiously quiet place, thinking in simple sentences. The sun is out. That noise is from my mother. I am in pain. To keep her mind off of the latter two, she looked around at the room. How funny that now, with one side of her head bandaged, she saw it with new eyes.

It was atrocious. She could only see out of one eye now, so why was it so much worse today? She had no idea how she had lived like this for so long. The fussily embossed powder blue drapes that had made up her canopy bed were knotted in places on all four sides, to cover the bad rips and thinning of the aged material. Some of the mouldings on the walls and ceilings had given way to disrepair and flaked off, rotted wood from the ceiling beams exposed. And the dust! It was everywhere, clouding the whole wooden floor with a patina of neglect. Vanita shuddered, remembering for the first time in a long time the former splendour of this room. She had been a spoiled child then, thought nothing extraordinary about it. And now, look at her complaining, when Ash was sleeping on the kitchen floor.

Ash. She remembered some of their conversation that morning vaguely, but not enough to know how long it would take for her to be alright again. Not that this was bad, lying in this bed felt safe. But still... After some thought, Vanita decided that for the sake of variety, she would test out her legs and see if she was on the mend. It took five tries to get up – for some reason the left side of her face exploded with pain every time she leaned forward – but she eventually rocked herself up enough to sit, then stand, shaking, beside her dusty bed.

The wooden floorboards in their star-shaped pattern flickered in and out of focus as she wobbled, but one step at a time, Vanita made it to

the bathing chamber she and Ash had once shared, a million years ago. There was an uncracked mirror there.

If Vanita could have whistled she would have, looking at the various red scars and bandages all over her body. She knew she shouldn't be undoing Ash's hard work with the bandages but, well, how bad could it be? She sensed that she couldn't remember things from last night and she wanted to see if not understand what had happened with that owl. One bandaged gash just below the left shoulder hugging her armpit told her one part, an ugly red vertical gash from her jawline to her breast told her another. She looked, with these marks and this face bandage like a pirate, a warrior. She felt a curious sense of vertigo for a split second, as though she were crossing a threshold, but Vanita shrugged it off. She retied the shoulder bandage as best she could and reached up and undid the one around the top left side of her face.

And screamed.

Ash was suddenly there, holding her, saying soothing things in her soothing voice. Vanita wasn't sure how she had ended up on the floor, but she was there, crying choking sobs that sent searing salt water down what remained of her face.

"M-my my eye..."

"I didn't realise you didn't know."

"My eye!"

"The owl carrier... one of it's talons pierced through and it, it was just gone when we got you back home and I could attend to you."

"My eye."

"I know. I'm sorry."

In that clever, coaxing way she had, Ash had managed to get Vanita standing and was shuffling her across the dirty floor. "Why not lie down, Vee. Get some more rest."

She said some other things, but Vanita wasn't listening. Then she was gone and Vanita was staring up at the ceiling again. Now, though, she couldn't stand this inactivity, couldn't stand the dirt in this room, couldn't stand herself and how she now looked. She had to get away.

Perhaps it was mostly in the mind, for she found it was far more difficult to get out of bed now. More difficult still to walk in the other direction towards the landing and slowly, slowly, down the stairs. But it was easier than thinking.

“- that’s not an answer” Derrick was saying as she hobbled the last few steps.

“No,” Ash’s voice sounded quiet, subdued, sad, worlds away from what it had been an hour go, or however long it had taken to get down the bloody stairs. “No, but I don’t have an answer for you yet. It’s not a ‘no’ it’s just a...” Silence.

“Just a what?” croaked Vanita as she came into the room.

“Vanita! You’re not supposed to be up and walking around! You need *rest*, good lord!”

“I am tired of listening to my mother who, for some reason, seems to have been rearranging furniture for hours now.”

Ash and Derrick looked at each other.

“What?”

“Nothing, just... Stepmother had a shock last night.”

Vanita nodded grimly. That made sense. She had all her hopes pinned on her daughter marrying the prince and now she had come home a mutilated near-corpse. It seemed a good thing after all that she couldn’t remember some of last night.

“Wh-what have I missed?”

Derrick whistled but said nothing. Vanita was beginning to get irritated and her head’s continuing pain was beginning to make her lightheaded. She made her way to the one kitchen chair, dimly wondering where Old Merta had got to. As she sat, the pristine white of the missive on the table caught her gaze.

“What’s this?”

“It came from the palace. It says that the prince is coming here for his bride. Here, to Rhodopalais.”

Vanita shivered. “The prince is coming here?” she repeated unnecessarily. Her head hurt, she knew some of what this would mean, but Ash’s white face was making her feel weak.

“If that prince thinks he can just swan in here and ‘claim his bride’ and ride off into the sunset...” Derrick began menacingly, but Ash put a hand on his arm.

“What’s going on here?” said a quiet voice from the doorway.

Stepmother sounded strange, stepping out from the shadows of the kitchen doorway like an apparition. Her hair was a mess, a long bedtime

plait that had been pulled wildly to resemble a bird's nest more than anything. She was still in her old nightgown and had not washed her face, her eyes ablaze. In all these years, Ash had never seen her like this. It frightened her more than she could say.

“Are you alright Stepmother?”

She looked at Ash and nodded slightly, but when Ash brought her water to drink she just stood, glassily, with the cup in her hand and did not drink. Her eyes passed right over Derrick and Vanita.

In spite of herself, Ash shivered. To see the wife of her father reduced to this... But no. They had other problems right now. And she couldn't quite forget what had happened last night, what this woman had done to Old Merta. “How could you have done what you did last night?” she asked.

The woman shook her head as if baffled and said only: “I... I wasn't thinking I... could not. I just could not.”

“Convenient!” barked Derrick, his voice raised. The change was instantaneous. At the sound of a man's voice, the old woman fell to the ground. Then, before anyone could so much as move, she was on her feet again, swinging her cup and water both at Derrick as though it were a sword.

“What the hell?”

But she was already gone, running as though her life depended upon it up the stairs.

Ash and Derrick turned to look at each other, but a strange noise was coming from Vanita.

“Vee, it's alright, your mother will be alright...”

“No... N-not it...”

“Well, that was interesting,” Derrick put in. Having got over his shock, he was wrestling with his face and trying to keep from laughing. “Where has she gone?”

“The same place she always goes. Somewhere she won't have to face what she's done.”

In the middle of all the chaos, Vanita's hand on Ash's made her jump.

“Ash, pl-please check the drawing room,” she said in an eerily quiet voice.

“Your mother's not in the drawing room, but don't worry.”

“No Ash, I... I saw something... it’s difficult to explain. Men, blood...” she paused, gasping, then used the last of her strength to finish in a whisper. “In the downstairs reception room, the one where Mother used to host her salon? Please.”

“What?”

“Please just go and check. I’m afraid.”

The salon room was high-ceilinged and cold and not how Ash remembered it. Rhodopalais was a grand home and life was no longer grand. And so without meaning to the Cerentola family had shrunk its existence to certain key rooms – the sleeping apartments, the servants’ quarters, the informal solar, the halls. Ash had not seen the downstairs formal drawing room for some time, since survival had replaced cleaning in the Rhodopalais servants’ list of duties.

The salon was unique in that it was filled largely with Stepmother’s furnitures from before her second marriage and as such she was much more reluctant to sell or burn these. The result was a strange setting – a chandelier adorning a patterned pastel ceiling with ornate mouldings, which looked down upon a sole threadbare rug peppered with a few isolated lounges and chairs showing slight signs of age beneath their gilded craftsmanship. The prized family artworks had been taken down and stowed in the attic for safekeeping and now empty gilded frames hung on the walls. Still, Ash had forgotten how grand it was, how fine. Where before she had seen the stuffiness only, she now saw the beauty and the sheer good fortune in its dusty floors and wide glass French doors looking out upon the gardens. *What a strange place to starve in* thought Ash, feeling like a little girl again in such a room.

Still, it was undoubtedly empty of marauders. She wondered what had got into Vanita. Ash turned on her heel in the dust and walked back to the kitchens.

When she got back, Vanita was on her way to becoming hysterical, shouting even though bent over from pain at the kitchen table. Derrick was looking slightly annoyed, but he spoke patiently enough:

“Tansy has gone to shut all the doors. The pumpkin is in the vegetable patch, which is walled off. And we can easily see all the way down to the gate from the second storey.”

Vanita just carried on shrilly. “You and Ash need to get your crossbows, or knives, anything!”

“What’s going on? Vee, what is it?”

“The salon and balcony, they’re under attack!”

Ash listened keenly, hearing only the usual dusty silence of the house as it was now without Old Merta. When Derrick sighed loudly, she shot him a warning look before he could say anything too rash and came to kneel next to Vanita so she could speak into her ear in soothing tones.

“Vee, you have had the worst day of your life. You’re injured and tired. You need rest. Can we go upstairs and I will put you in bed?”

“Ash you’re not listening I –”

“There we go, good girl, lean on me and I’ll support you.”

As Ash hoisted Vanita up from the table, the resounding crash of breaking glass came from somewhere else in the house.

“What was that?” Ash whispered.

Her sister’s voice was small but calmer now, more resigned.

“I tried to tell you. It’s the men who want to kill us.”

Chapter Twenty

Parlour games

The noise came again.

Ash and Derrick looked at each other.

They had made so many fortifications. They had created new bolts made of the new iron for the front doors, lookouts for the front gate, had placed heavy wooden beams across the windows – everything to block those left living in the open fields’ cottages and rocky plains beyond them from storming up the drive. They had made so many fortifications – to the front of the house.

“Vanita, you stay here, do you hear me?”

“Don’t go trying to find your mother, we will do that. I promise. Stay low and keep quiet.”

“Ash I –”

“Do it!” Without waiting for an answer, Ash scrambled for her crossbow and ran from the room.

Derrick was already ahead of her, running along the hallway that connected the servants’ quarters to the solar and sitting room they still used. Ash cursed herself for not locking the drawing room doors while she had been there, but how was she to know? Already she could hear raised commoners’ voices and thumping sounds coming from the drawing room or, even worse, closer. She willed herself to be faster.

It was like a dream to see the rough men running down prim hall, arms raised and shouting. They were the same ones as those Ash and Derrick had shot at, or seemed to be. Their dirtiness and starving anger made them all look the same. When they saw the comparative splendour of Ash and Derrick, the roaring got louder and they ran straight at them.

Ash fired off a few shots and Derrick did the same, but all missed and the ragtag mob did not stop or slow their running. Derrick darted to the side just as the men were getting close and pulled down a rickety

armoire with Ash knew not what strength. It was big enough to crash down most of the hall's width and that at least slowed them a bit, giving Ash and Derrick both time to land a few arrows properly, felling two of the ragged mob falling with horrid gargling noises. Ash pulled out her knife and kept shooting, trying to fire around the form of Derrick standing protectively in front of her. Three down now, four. The mob was standing now, roughly ten of them left and growling menacingly, but not retreating.

With a deep breath, Ash willed herself to aim. She readied her crossbow and fired it at one of the ornamental vases at the far end of the hall, purposefully glancing it so that it did not shatter but fell with a dull crash to the floor. Instinctively, the men looked to see what was making noise behind them and Ash and Derrick ran.

As he headed straight, she pulled him right, into the parlour. "We can't lead them to the kitchen, they already know it too well and Vee and Tansy are there."

They stood, breathing hard, in the familiar space and shut and locked the doors.

"Why are there locks on these? The drawing room and others don't have any."

"Parlour games."

"I don't want to know, then."

The door thudded inwards as the scrawny men threw their collective weight against it. Without talking they both moved for the hacked-up, lidless remains of the pianoforte and pushed it against the bucking door. It would hold the mob another second. The room was sparse otherwise, but at least there was room to fight in: one table, two sitting chairs, the fireplace.

Ash drew and checked her knife and crossbow in each hand unnecessarily and looked to her side to Derrick, who was looking at her too.

"Ash, if we get through this, I want you to know something —"

The door gave a crack and gave in. Two muddy, bloodied men poured through, followed by more in twos or threes. Thank goodness for the pianoforte, which made them have to clambour over it two at a time, making terrible plinking noises as hands and feet and knees clambered over its unprotected keys.

Derrick made short work of the first one, then two, still standing protectively in front of Ash, but the combined weight and anger of those outside pushed the door and the pianoforte with it, inward enough to let the remainder of their scrawny mob slither in around the sides of the doorway and pile into the room. Some were women, Ash could see now, although they were just as shapeless and screaming as the men. Ash vaguely recognised the torn-off, gilded limbs of some of Stepmother's salon furniture, which was solid oak. What had these people done, what had they said to themselves and for how long, as they had walked up to this house, walked all the long way round through former hunting grounds, for the sake of some food? Screaming, the one woman fell on her. Ash decided to hit her over the head rather, but the woman clawing at Derrick got less mercy, receiving an arrow in her chest instead.

A dull thump as one chair leg hit her from behind and Ash found her face in the fireplace as a man stood over her, then another one. As the one came down to paw at her, she laid hold of the fire poker and gave it to him full in the face, swiping the sharper back end at the second man's shins and then felling him with the spike tip in the knee. She got up with both knife and poker raised, ready to fight.

But by then another man had claimed her fallen crossbow and was pointing it, albeit badly, at Derrick. Bitterly, she threw her weapons down and he smiled a toothless smile, then shouted orders to someone not quite inside the room. With sinking dread she heard someone undoing the bolts on the front doors and opening them wide. Then one of the rabble clawed at the room's drapes, opened them and showed Derrick and Ash a sight to make them weep.

At least ten more angry peasants coming up the main drive, murderous looks in their eyes.

"You will take us to the pumpkin, or you will die."

"We will die anyway, without that pumpkin."

The man reached forward and slapped Ash and in turn got slapped by Derrick, who got the butt of Ash's crossbow in his stomach from the man. Ash made sure he was done before she slapped the scrawny man back.

This time, though, he did not retaliate, but called harshly to someone outside the room again. When a muffled reply Ash couldn't quite understand came back, the man smiled toothlessly again. He yelled

“here” to the unseen person and two minutes later a tall, muscled man and a grim-looking wench came in holding the struggling forms of Vanita and Tansy.

“You will take us to the pumpkin, or they die.”

Tansy suddenly launched herself like a cat at him, clawing and screeching, trying to put herself between Vanita and the burly man. The wench caught her easily as the muscled man held Vanita away from Tansy’s reach.

His accomplice sighed dramatically, the scrawny man, the opened his mouth wide to see the gaping red, toothless leer on his face. He walked over to the still-squirming form of Tansy. Her dark curls were splayed all over her pointed, plain face, her cheeks flushed with struggling. Ash could not remember the last time she had ever looked at Tansy and seen her so clearly: the set, determined little mouth, the docile eyes and kind features.

Pragmatically, almost casually, the scrawny man slit her throat.

“Tansy, no!”

Ash and Vanita both screamed as one person, Ash launching herself forward, skinny man be damned. Tansy’s brown eyes were widened in surprise and she was fading before their eyes, her life’s blood pumping out her neck to the floor. Without being asked, Derrick covered Ash as she held her friend, silly sweet Tansy who had only ever wanted to get married in a pretty dress and live as the servant she was dying as. She did not speak, although her mouth worked once or twice, and did not fight the dark blood pouring out of her. She stopped stirring, became motionless. Ash held her as she went.

“You will take us to the pumpkin, or *she* dies,” the scrawny man said calmly.

Ash did not even look at him as she stood and drove her fist into his face.

“Oh I wouldn’t do that again,” growled the tall man over his accomplice’s splutterings, holding Vanita. He was strong enough to lift her off the ground and made a show of almost closing his meaty fist around her slender, scarred throat.

“Cinderella?” said a quiet voice from the doorway.

The bird senses an ending, even as it launches off the ground and takes to the air.

It's mind and rudimentary consciousness are unaware that even now this feeling of anticipation, of a closed circuit, is thrumming through it. Only its hollow bones know as it flies through the air.

It has been a good day. Instead of getting eaten by one of its own, which it seemed it would, it has eaten instead the stringy, mean meat of the crow that would have murdered it if their roles had been reversed. The terrifying toying that the two-leggers seemed to have been doing to that one could have been it, but instead the bird had watched from a distance and the crow had died painfully instead.

Now the bird's belly is full, two times in one week and the sun is not too hot as it beat down on the bird's dark feathers.

In the distance below is a two leggers' nest, a fine one, lying nestled in the ground. Within its hollow bones the bird thrums with recognition, although its brain identifies that it has never been there before.

It changes course and dives.

Vanita's mother was dressed again, although her face was still haggard, as she strolled into the room as though there were no bloodthirsty marauders there. Everyone was silent, motionless, watching her.

"You *shall* go to the ball," she intoned to a splintered chair in the corner.

What was this now? Ash did not have the energy to face another problem she thought to herself, as she watched her stepmother saunter passed. She tried to ignore the way the woman's frayed skirts brushed against the fresh corpse of Tansy, lying in her dark red blood still, and how her eyes did not seem to see the man with Vanita by the throat.

"Mother?" squeaked Vanita.

"Well well, the prince is coming here for his bride," Stepmother all but whispered in response, speaking in a voice so low that it was a struggle to hear. But her movements were doll-like and jerky as she came into the light.

"Stepmother?" But what was left of Vanita's mother kept walking around the room with an odd, wind-up grace, stiff-backed and formal as though she were at court. At some point, she abruptly stopped and addressed a spot in the room where no one stood.

"So, he will not marry Cinderella?"

Ash and Derrick looked at each other in alarm. Cinderella, who had died years ago at a ripe old age... Ash knew they were all thinking the same thing: *this is worse than we thought*. Meanwhile, the rabble seemed to be enjoying this and were laughing jeeringly. Even the man who had held Vanita had set her down so he could lean on the fireplace and guffaw.

"No, well, if the Prince won't marry Cinderella then he will marry one of my daughters... Yes... I must get my daughters ready. What time will the prince arrive?"

Ash glanced at Derrick. It was a good question. He shrugged. "If the missive was sent just after dawn as we thought then, with hard riding straight from the palace and no stops... Well, it could be any minute now."

"Excellent." Stepmother's jade green eyes gleamed. She began walking around the room again in circles. "Excellent, everything is going

to be alright. Everything is going well,” she said again and again in a measured, sunny voice, talking to no one in particular.

A sharp gasp of pain brought her attention back to the room. Stepmother had pulled on Vanita’s arm, still not seeming the slightest bit aware of the burly, laughing man just next to her.

“Mother!”

“Lovely, lovely,” said Stepmother in a singsong way, completely blind to the angry red scars, the bandages and the look on Vanita’s face. “All we need to do is get you fitting into that shoe.”

“What shoe?” asked Ash, although she wasn’t sure if Stepmother knew she were here.

“The Cinderella shoe,” said Derrick wearily, adding, unnecessarily, “she’s gone mad.”

“We will do something, we will think of something,” she singsonged to herself, wafting about the kitchen and into the pantry. As soon as she was out of sight Ash, Derrick and Vanita all turned on each other.

“What *happened* to her?”

“Last night... she clearly went mad from the fright. What are we going to *do* with her?”

“Tie her up? Use her as a weathervane?”

“Derrick!”

“Seriously though, there is not much we can do. With no doctors, no herbs alive anymore, we just have to watch out for her. There is nothing else.”

They were so focussed on one another that they did not see her, wafting slightly to the right. They did not see her expression They did not see the shiny thing in her hand.

“Everything is going well,” she trilled.

Ash looked up just in time to see her stepmother raise a knife she had somehow sneaked into her skirts as she stood above her daughter. Vanita screamed.

“The shoe must fit! The feet must be smaller!” she trilled.

“Hold her,” said the mob leader, amused. “We ain’t got nothing for making that one take us to the pumpkin if she kills our hostage.”

The burly man at the fireplace lazily took a still-raving stepmother by the arm. Somehow, the knife had vanished in all the commotion.

Vanita was crying, huddled in on herself and anger burned fresh and hot in her chest. Forgetting the men for one moment, Ash came over and slapped her stepmother across the face.

“See what you have done to your daughter. And this house. This is your fault, all this.”

She turned to the man who seemed to be commanding the mob. “Alright, we’ll take you to the pumpkin, but we will all go together. I will not leave them in here with the likes of you.”

As the man stared hard at her and Ash stared hard back, the ten or so more of the mob came pouring in, shouting, through the entrance doors. While by the sounds of it most of them were sacking the house, others spilled into the parlour to watch the scene. One of them was a man in half-burnt priest’s robes cut off ragged at the knee, ranting in a booming rhetoric voice and seemingly oblivious to the undignified way his malnourished legs were showing.

“And I will give thee,” he was yelling. “I will give beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, a garment of praise for a spirit of heaviness...”

All the world went quiet, as Ash finally remembered where that phrase ‘ashes into beauty’ came from. She still had a murderous mob at her throat and she was still heart-poundingly scared, but in that moment, she breathed slow. In that moment she knew, beyond all reason, that everything would be alright.

As she breathed out, her eyes met Stepmother’s, whose gibbering had abruptly stopped. She gave the smallest of nods to Ash, before driving the hidden knife straight into the neck of the tall man next to Vanita.

“Witch!” the wench screamed, throwing herself forward and aiming to hit Stepmother with a chair leg, but she got the end of Ash’s knife instead. The leader holding her crossbow received one arrow from Derrick. Ash threw her knife high in the air without having to speak, aiming Derrick’s crossbow arm at the man holding Vanita. While he was watching her, Stepmother caught the knife gracefully and brandished it at his throat.

“Touch either of my daughters and you’re dead.”

He struck her savagely, knocking her savagely to the side, but the mob had already come to his defence. Screaming and clawing like cats,

they descended on the family like one giant, crazed being and Ash shoved her dazed mother and sister out into the hall without thinking.

Just in time. Already hands and teeth and fists were falling on Ash and Derrick everywhere. Derrick threw over the table to stall them for a moment, they both threw chairs as well, but it barely did anything. Ash dived in front of her family and fought and fought, but even with arrows and aimless stabbing, she was losing. The hands were closing in on her face, her mouth, her hair, when a woman's voice somewhere in the room screamed.

“Look!”

Several hands paused in front of Ash and she hacked at them, driving them back. But they were going back anyway, stumbling for some reason towards the parlour window.

There, on the same main drive that the marauders had come up, was a magnificent, charging horse.

“Make way in the name of the king! A voice and horn proclaimed. Make way for the king's armies!”

Ash was looking out the parlour window too now. There was Rize, for some reason behind his cousin on the same horse. They were galloping up the main drive. Ash absurdly wanted to giggle at the sight of it, tasting blood in her mouth as she smiled.

“Make way for the king's armies!”

The marauder stared at each other from around the room, not moving. Ash could almost hear their brains clicking. For who believed in kings anymore? Who believed in armies?

What was there left to believe in?

Ash looked at her sister and mother, who had a hand against her bleeding temple. She looked again at Rize and his cousin, staring sternly through the parlour window at the mob, as if at naughty children. They were still a few yards off from the front door – though they didn't know it was barred and bolted.

Ash was still looking at them as their faces darkened, a shadow throwing them and their horse into a pool of grey. She was still watching, uncomprehending, as the shadow deepened and enlarged over them as if in slow motion, before overshadowing the house.

Ash did not have time to think of anything else before the ceiling exploded.

KATYA LEBEQUE

Chapter Twenty-One

A proposal

Ash's body was flung back, feeling what she assumed was the fireplace hit her back. She didn't understand what was happening. The whole world was just noise and splinters, upside down, with no right way up.

Ash tasted even more blood in her mouth now – blood and foggy thoughts, a dully thumping head and arms and legs that refused to move properly. Somehow, she got to understand which limb went where and pulled herself up to sitting, groaning as she did.

Only then did she see.

A raven carrion the size of the front hall entryway had crashed straight in through the roof and into the parlour, obliterating most of it. The bird was screeching in pain, its enormous black feathers reigning over the ruins of furniture and the twitching limbs beneath it. It wasn't even trying to grab any people – just lay there screaming.

Ash struggled to sit up, her mind refusing to take in what she was seeing. Almost the whole front side of the house was gone. At least five of the marauders that she could see lay scattered like dolls in the remains, not breathing. One had been impaled on a beam from the roof, another's head lay beneath a tile. Ash's heart clutched tight and she whirled her head around, looking for her family.

They were shaky but alive, miraculously still standing. Her stepmother and sister looked like orphaned children, clutching onto each other in front of the disembodied fireplace that barely had a wall behind it anymore.

The bird was still on the floor, screaming.

The marauders left alive had an answer to the invisible question that had hung in the air just seconds before. What did anyone believe in anymore? This. With one heart they leapt at the one thing that

summarised all their pain and fury, coming at it with chair legs and stolen knives and, eventually, just the bare hands.

Ash could not watch. She turned her head to one side.

“Ash? Ash!”

Rize’s voice. The prince and duke had walked right in in spite of the bolted door, because there was no bolted door anymore. His dark eyes were alight with worry as he stared down at her and when she began to sit up he breathed out deeply.

Ash looked around, to see the marauders largely ignoring their crown prince, dismounting his horse. But they peacefully dragged what remained of the dead carrier through the obliterated hole that had been the front of her home. It was slow going, with their scrawny arms, but they shuffled the black and red tangle of meat along. Rize and Ash turned to watch them go.

A wheezing sound snapped Ash’s attention back to the room.

“Where’s Derrick?”

Stepmother didn’t seem to have heard, but Vanita looked at her in silence, eyes wide. They could not see him anywhere.

Five minutes later she found him, underneath the splintered remains of her mother’s old chair. He seemed alive, but not waking, his face sweet and so much like the boy he had once been.

Two shiny black boots asserted themselves into Ash’s line of sight, next to Derrick’s unconscious face. For the first time that day she smiled then, smiled the way she had when she had been dancing with those same boots what felt like years ago. She composed her features, wiped her hands on her apron and stood up.

“Hello again.”

“Hello yourself,” Rize said and kissed her.

After the noise of the fight, the room seemed awkwardly quiet, as the prince and the kitchen girl stared at each other. Luckily the duke was there to break the silence, somehow still immaculate in his white uniform and cloak. He smiled at her pleasantly as if they were on a picnic and walked straight over to her sister, ending in a deep bow.

“Hello again, Vanita.”

“You-you recognise me, sir?”

The duke’s eyes crinkled as it was his turn to smile. “Of course I do.”

Vanita's face seemed to lose some of its scars in seconds as she smiled back.

The prince turned again to Ash. "We were coming up and saw the rabble ahead of us, so we followed them in. I am glad we were not too late, although it seems you had the situation well in hand."

He stopped, smiled meaningfully at her. Ash smiled at him, smile faltering slightly as her eyes fell on Derrick's slumped form.

The prince cleared his throat. "And now, Ash Cerentola, of House Rhodopalais, there is another hand I am interested in." After a dignified pause he took her hand and, without breaking eye contact, sank down onto one knee.

"Ash!" squeaked Vanita.

"Ashlynnne," began Rize formally...

"Stop."

He paused abruptly mid-breath, looking up at Ash quizzically. She sighed and sank down to kneel on his level in front of him.

"Rize, you know I like you. But is this what you want, truly?"

"I... Of course, I—"

"Rize, I know you want the kingdom saved. But do you want to be *married*? Truly... Rize?"

He looked away. "Well, it is rather a big thing for at our age but, well, if it's for the good of the realm..."

"Rize, what if, for the good of the realm, you didn't have to marry anyone?"

"What are you saying?"

"I have a proposal for *you*, Prince. I've had an idea, from a strange dream I had. From here it wouldn't work but..."

"Ash, what are you saying?"

"Let me come with you, to the palace. Derrick too. As munitions and weapons experts. We can win against these carriers with the right weapons."

Rize sighed, running a hand through his black hair. "We've tried weapons on them Ash. Our entire guard have used arrows and swords and spears and all number of things."

"But did they use the Expansion iron?"

The hand stopped working through hair and the crown prince looked up quickly, sharply. "What?"

“It’s something you said that first night at the palace. I didn’t think about it at the time, but you said ‘arrows don’t work on them, not even most swords do’ and I thought about how easily *our* crossbow bolts work and thought ‘he doesn’t know’...”

Rize licked his lips quickly and put his hand down, his eyes glowing. “Are you certain?”

“Certain. The clumps of iron ore in the ground now after the Project. This area is rife with it. It is hard enough and can be sharpened enough to kill carriers outright. I have done it, many times.”

“What are you saying?”

“With palace resources, Derrick and I could make new developments on weapons that could kill multiple carriers at a time. And with the carriers out of control now, flying all over, but the Project earth with its iron only here, other neighbouring countries will need our weapons. They will need to buy from us to survive themselves. Food, grain, new earth shipped in... Anything. We could name our price.”

Rize’s eyes were gleaming properly now, whether from unshed tears of sadness or from hope, she did not know. And he was nodding.

The duke was next to them, she realised, without her ever having heard him walk up. He too nodded at Ash.

“I didn’t hear anything mentioned about a marriage proposal as of *yet*, did you cousin?”

Rize seemed to understand. Slowly, he shook his head no. “My father would need to see you both in person, and you’d need to gain his trust. He is difficult lately... But we can try it, yes.”

Ash nodded back, relieved. Vanita hugged her. Stepmother looked scandalised.

“Very well, two weapons experts instead. And Ash?”

“Yes?”

“Just so you know, I may not particularly want to be married, but if I were to be married, I *would* want it to be you.”

Ash smiled again and, with Derrick safely unconscious, lifted her lips up to his for a kiss. When they pulled apart, both were smiling.

In the scattered remains of the room, they shook hands.

Some time later, the carriage arrived. It horselessly approached the wreckage of the mansion without pause, stopping only when it was in

front of its royals and new charges, sitting on the remaining chaise lounge together amidst an ocean of splinters and rock.

Ash looked over at her sister for the thousandth time.

“Will you be alright?” She turned to Rize. “Are you absolutely sure that we cannot all fit into the coach?”

“I’m sure. But the men will be here any minute to provide armed protection.”

“I don’t like just leaving them.”

“I know, but my father the King is highly suspicious lately and if you did not show up with myself *and* the duke to convince him, I’m afraid they’d try to shoot you before you even reached the drawbridge.”

Ash turned back to Vanita. “Are you sure you’ll be alright? We can always wait until the soldiers get here to guard you all.”

“Then you’ll be travelling at night Ash. It’s *fine*. He said they’d send a coach for us after you and Derrick arrive. Go.”

“Humph.”

Derrick was now awake and scowling at the ceiling. Having heard the plan, he seemed in no rush to ingratiate himself with his new employers.

“And where will I live?”

“In your own quarters, within the palace.”

“And where will Ash live?”

“Also, in her own quarters.”

“Alone? Or with you?”

“Good grief. Alone, man! Do we really have to bring your boy with? The carriage would really be much less crowded with three.”

“Derrick is the one who invented most of the weapons.”

“And I want to make sure we are both treated correctly –”

“Derrick, shut up or I’ll leave you here.”

“How *do* you get him to shut up, just out of interest’s sake?”

Ash sighed. “Feeding him works, usually.”

Needless to say, the carriage had arrived not a minute too soon, although everyone seemed to make their way rather slowly to it. Once there, Ash took her sister’s shoulders in her hands and looked hard at her.

“Vee, we are going to send a carriage for you and Stepmother as well. Alright? A nice one. I’ll come myself.”

She took her sister's face in her hands – still beautiful, in spite of it all. Ash forced herself to look at both Vanita's remaining eye and the bandaged gash. "Soon. I promise. Take care of your mother until then."

Vanita smiled a small smile back. "I promise I won't die. And if you die, I will take care of Mother and all the house and everything if you're gone."

A shiver ran through Ash. There was no way Vanita could possibly know her and Derrick's words. It was just a coincidence. She kissed her sister and turned away.

Both the prince and Derrick standing at the carriage, waiting for her. The duke seemed to be hovering at her shoulder without much reason, peering at Vanita as if she were his sister not hers. "The soldiers will be here directly, my lady. Will you be alright until then? I can always wait with you?"

"Lorin there won't be space for you in that carriage. Now come on."

Yesterday Ash would have said something sharply overprotective to the duke about how he gazed at Vanita and shuffled him away, but that seemed a lifetime ago. She walked to the coach without any more goodbyes – any feeling of goodbye and she would never leave this, leave Rhodopalais, her home. It was time to get up out of the ashes, for this country to be a thing of beauty again. And if Cinderella herself was long gone, who else was there?

Ash looked back at her sister, her somewhat-mother, her home as the carriage set off. Even long after they passed through the gates she closed her eyes and looked at them, standing there, in her mind's eye. When she opened her eyes and took in the scenery around her again, she imagined it reborn again into a world of green.

THE END... FOR NOW.

Acknowledgments

Here in Africa, we have a saying: it takes a village to raise a child. Well, it takes a village to raise a book to maturity too. My heartfelt thanks go out to my amazing husband, my business partner and family for their support, for countless cups of tea and tentative suggestions.

To my editors Chloe and Dee and the immensely visually talented Rox Palmer, you guys made this book.

For all my beta readers' help, thank you! Especial thanks go out to Lameez, Murry, Elaine Dodge and Daniella Chapman. Kind agreements from Claire Davis, Jeru and Daniel led to sterling reviews that were both useful and encouraging simultaneously. Thank you guys.

Lastly but not even remotely leastly, thank you for you. A book is a waste of trees and pixels without someone to read the words and feel the feels, make it their own and take it to new heights. Thank you for letting me fly that high, it's an honour to write for you.

Please turn the page for your own super special free sample of the sequel to *Ash Rising*, *Ashes Slowly Fall*, next!

Advanced reader sample of *Ashes Slowly Fall*

The body moves like a dream dying and it, rather than the mind, wakes me up.

There is only movement, only instinct now. Not memory, not yet. Somewhere within the yellowed, deep cartilaginous remains of my brain the fires of consciousness are stirring. They want me to move, need to move, they say.

I gather my strength. The hollows of mind form a message that sluggishly travels along the fibres and the sinews of what makes up the rest of my world. Still, I am groggily exultant. Still me, still mine. The gnarled hands and their overlong nails stretch like a miracle, responding to the message, and something within me relaxes.

Still mine.

Now, the pieces can slowly come back. I remember that this is my adopted home, what is left of it. I remember that the pale, half-drawn shape looking down is my daughter, what is left of her. Her face asks a question without words, but I am tired now, and it is enough to know that I am not gone yet.

Chapter One

The corpses looked up at the shattered remains of mansion and sky. One or two looked another way, necks broken to the side, toward the one-eyed lady sitting, composed by panting, on a chaise lounge in the middle of the rubble.

Vanita had sat down for a moment to rest. Disposing of the dead was hard work. Sweat trickled down in rivulets, past the place where her one eye should have been, down into the bony remains of her body in her

too-big bodice. Ash would have been done by now, but there was no Ash anymore. There was only her, her and what was left of Mother, and the rising smell of rotting men's meat.

Sighing, Vanita gathered her strength again, and reached for the nearest corpse's hand. When she felt strong enough, she hoisted herself and dragged the body slowly to the where she had laid the other three, out outside the house where she didn't have to see them.

"Mother, stay out of the pools of blood."

"Hmm hmm" said her mother, drifting absently between the bodies in a weaving pattern that existed only in her head. Her sanity had not returned in the minutes, hours, since the events that were so huge in Vanita's mind they couldn't possibly have happened just this morning. Instead, she had begun aimlessly weaving in between the corpses in a looping pattern. It reminded Vanita of Ash's mother. Although she had never met her, the noblewoman's death was still fresh when Vanita had arrived at Rhodopalais, and one of her dying wishes had been that a servant read a story from her curious Bible text each morning. In it, there was the story of a man whom God had made a pact with by cutting several animals in half, including a bird, and walking in amongst the remains in a figure of eight pattern. The symbol for covenant. She hadn't liked that story when she was little, and she liked it less now.

"Mother, go and sit down. I'm going to. I don't know how much longer I can stand."

The shock was there still for Vanita. The shock of finding her eye gone and her body irredeemably scarred, so wounded she had almost died. Then the contorted rage in the sunken faces of the mob that had broken into their home, the icy feeling of their steel against her throat as her sister watched on. The prince and, oh heavens, the duke... Then the mind-reeling black mass of the giant bird crashing through the ceiling, blocking out all else.

It had all been too much. She was ashamed to admit it, but the first thing Vanita had done when the carriage was out of sight was sink onto the only daybed still standing near enough by and wish to fall asleep and, when she awakened, for fairies or elves or some other nonsense to have come and taken care of this mess. But when she put her head down a pain has flashed like lightning through the half of her skull where her eye had

been ripped out, and sleep would not come, could not, to those who had not yet honoured their dead.

Vanita did not care about the festering bodies of the oafs that had tried to kill them, but she did care about Tansy. She would not let her lie open to the sun, uncared for, the way Ash had described seeing corpses lying outside every other day. And so slowly, Vanita had pulled the white lengths of cloth off of some of the disused furniture. Slowly, she had lowered her aching body down to the floor and wrapped Tansy up and held onto her as she never had in life. Then she had dragged the body out beyond the rubble to spot where flowers had once grown in the garden. A pansy for Tansy. But there were no flowers now, and so she had taken dried bits of twig, and whatever wood that had fallen from the ceiling which she could lift and had dragged them over and made a lopsided mound of sticks around a girl she could not believe was no longer alive. She mumbled what words she knew of prayer from her sister over the sticks and had turned away.

“Come Mother, come inside. Yes, inside... Remember?”

The older woman bucked and stared at her as though she were an insolent servant. She had never seen the lines on her mother’s face so clearly before. “Come now Mother, shall we sit?”

“Sit,” her mother parroted.

“Yes, now come and let me sit you down...” The chaise lounge was the only seat left not in pieces. Now, it seemed absurdly floral. Vanita’s head was throbbing, the space behind her good eye seemed ready to explode and her thin frame was shaking with hunger and exertion. But she led her mother over carefully and lowered her onto the seat.

And the old noblewoman sat, hands placed primly in her lap. She stared blankly out from her ornate chair at the tangled bits of ceiling shards and open sky above her, as if at a recital. In her line of sight, the emaciated frame of her daughter heaved the corpses of their would-be murderers out the shattered remains where their mansion had once been.

Miles away, there was nothing shattered left. The horseless coach trundled along as peaceably as a woman on the way to market, belying all the horror of before.

Ash looked around for the thousandth time at the pink velvet surrounding her like a lung. It was strange to be in this small, near-silent world clicking along, when just hours before the world had been the broken bodies of the mob that had tried to kill her and her family, before the bird had crashed through their home. Ash thought about her stepsister, her sister, again and immediately tried to think of something else. They would go for her soon, she told the clenching in her chest. Rize had promised it and, more importantly, so had she.

The air in the pink cage was stultifying. Ash would have been happy to never see the inside of a carriage again, yet here she was staring at cushioned walls once again. Had anyone outside the palace ever been in one so often in so few days?

“It is extremely fortunate that it was today of all days that we rode for you, as we the carriage followed us,” Rize had said earlier. She had not really listened at the time, her head still singing with the clamour of battle and bird as the remains of her family home lay scattered around her. Now, she wondered at the words, but said nothing as the scenery trundled by. The interior of any carriage, however pink or however royal, still held the memory for her of her sister lying bleeding on the floor. Her sister. She shook the thought out of her head and looked at the flat landscape again instead.

Some time later, she did not know when, Derrick broke the silence. “How far is it still by carriage?”

Ash turned her head to see the prince and Derrick staring at one another, with Rize’s cousin the duke appearing far more comfortable as he lounged at his own window, a slim ankle resting on one knee.

“We are not too far off, I think. A few hours at most and in the gates safely just at sunset, I should think,” said Rize.

Ash and Derrick looked at each other. Sunset? It seemed far longer than their hazardous journeys across the wasteland plains. Perhaps the coach was setting a more stately pace than they thought.

“Are you comfortable?” This time, Rize was looking at Ash.

“Yes, thank you.” She tried for a smile.

“Because if there is anything I can do –”

A loud, fairly un-noble cough came from Derrick, who was trying in vain to look unimpressed by the carriage. “So, what is it Ash and I are to do, then? As these ‘royal weapons experts’ of yours?”

“Well, we aren’t quite sure yet. It will be a new position, created just for you. But I would assume that a start would be to bring you onto the war council, which meets every –”

“And how do we know we will be well treated, pray tell?”

“Oh, for crying out loud, Derrick, leave be. It’s a palace, not a brothel. You’ve been there, why are you acting like you’re being sold for a penny?”

An audible silence descended on the carriage which Ash did not quite understand. For the first time, both Rize and the duke looked actually uncomfortable.

“What is it?”

“Well... The thing is... we’re not going to the palace.”

Chapter Two

“Stop this coach.”

“It can’t be stopped, it’s magicked.”

“I said stop it!”

Ash’s voice sounded anaemic and childlike even in her own ears. As though she were having a tantrum, or a spoilt noble brat that hadn’t been allowed ices after their meal. Not like someone who had just abandoned their entire family.

“Ash, what is it? I said to you that we would –”

“It’s her sister, you idiot!” Derrick was bellowing even louder than she was. “Her only *sister* has been left alone there with those birds and that mob, what’s left of them, still out there. Don’t you understand?”

“But we are going back for her soon. I don’t see what the problem is.”

At last, Ash found her voice again. “When is ‘soon’, Rize?”

“The very next changing of castles, I swear it to you.”

“And you don’t see what the problem is? Pray tell, when was the last time either of you two ever did anything without help from a servant or soldier. *Anything*. The servants at my home are all dead. My father is dead.”

“Ash!” the prince looked panicked, and so did the duke, they were each glancing at each other nervously. “Why did you not tell us your servants were all gone? If I had known...”

Ash silenced him with an angry look. She wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of justifying himself. “Of *course* they are all dead. Everyone who is not a prince have *all* lost their servants. That’s how life outside a palace *is*. And now you have *tricked* me into leaving my sister for dead. She can’t hunt, or boil water so it’s fit for drinking. She’s never even dressed herself without help before. And now I – I have left her...”

Her voice cracked, sounding childish once more. She refused to have this conversation surrounded by pink velvet, so close to her face that she couldn’t breathe.

“Stop the coach,” she said again quietly. “Stop it so I can get out or I will get out regardless.”

“The pathfinders magick the coaches so that on each day that the royals move residences, designed to be random to make it difficult for marauders.”

Ash threw him a scornful glance. At least he looked stricken and truly upset. Rize had looked so handsome this morning. Now his royal trappings and clean, pressed clothes were an affront to her. Without another word she turned the handle and opened the door, jumping from the still-moving coach.

The duke’s horse had been following them from a distance since they left Rhodopalais, and it started when Ash thumped to the ground, almost catching her footing but at the last moment overbalancing and thumping hard into the dust. Still, it came over to her obediently enough

when she recovered and stood, clicking her tongue gently and holding out her hand.

“Here boy, here...”

Thank goodness it hadn't been eaten by a carrier yet. In fact, there weren't even any in the sky. A queasy feeling dropped like a rock into Ash's stomach. Perhaps they were all feasting off the dead at Rhodopalais. Ten or more carriers, greedy with fresh corpse meat, and her defenceless sister in the midst of them all...

“Come on boy.” The horse was reacting to her fear and bucking when she tried to mount it. Ash tried for slow breaths, calming thoughts, until the horse stilled. She was no use to Vanita or anyone flapping like a milkmaid. Finally, she was able to get up, and back in a saddle she found her thoughts returning with more sense.

She could always turn the horse around, and head back to save Vanita. But then what? The horse did not have space for three, and Vanita and her stepmother were still there. She could not leave her stepmother to die, but if she put the two of them on the horse, they wouldn't know the way to this new castle. In fact, neither did she. And if she left the coach, what would they do to Derrick? Nothing, she hoped, but if they needed her and Derrick's skills with iron weaponry like she suspected they did, then what would they not do? He would be a hostage, and he had no noble family, no rights...

“Ash!”

Rize was leaning halfway out of the coach window like a lovesick maiden.

“Don't listen to him Ash!” Derrick's tawny head popped out the other window.

Good grief. Ash wanted to sigh and roll her eyes, but before she quite knew what was happening, there was a flash of black hair and movement, and she had to rear up the horse. Rize was lying in a royal puddle in the dirt. She had almost ridden over the crown prince.

“Rize!”

“I'm sorry,” he panted, “but I just had to get out of there. I feel terrible, and I can't sit there in a carriage while you are out here on horseback, it's not right...” He peered up into her eyes, still breathing heavily.

“Look, we will hatch a plan between ourselves to steal away some of the horses, just as soon as they have rested and we have introduced you to the council and started. I promise you. Please Ash, I was stupid. I didn’t think... forgive me.”

Her throat closed up with emotion, and she turned her head away, back in the direction she imagined lay her old home, and Vanita.

“...Or, at least, please give me a ride to the castle?”

“Oh alright. Climb on.”

True to his word, the prince pointed to the horizon just as the sky was beginning to blush with the first pinkening signs of dusk. Ash could make out the shape of a castle almost straight ahead of them. Perhaps it was the lack of giddiness from her last soiree with royalty, but to Ash it looked distinctly squatter and sturdier than the palace.

“Ash?”

This time it was the duke craning his sandy-coloured head out of the carriage. “Ash, can you come back within the carriage? I’m afraid it won’t stop, you’ll need to jump it. Please, it’s important.”

“You know something? I am really beginning to hate coaches.”

After she was safely ensconced in the carriage after yet another ridiculous jumping experience, Ash turned to find the duke looking uncharacteristically serious. She and Derrick exchanged glances.

“Sorry about that, but really, it couldn’t wait. We are almost at Castle Blindé, and I needed to talk to you both before we get there.

“At the looks on your faces when we spoke about the castle, I realised something that should have been obvious to me. You don’t know how it works, how to play the game.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I call it ‘the game’ but it’s really quite serious. At court, even now, everything is about appearances and procedure. What is underneath is only accepted, or more importantly protected, if you look the part and play the part well.

“Rize is no use with this, and he likely never even mentioned it. That’s because he was born heir to the kingdom and has stayed that way. He’s young, strong, educated and charming, but all of that is of little importance compared to the fact that he’s *heir*. He doesn’t need to play the game, he was the one born with the royal flush. But you two, you will need to play, and play well.”

“Listen here, Duke. We are not coming to the palace to be simpering courtiers. We have a job to do. We don’t want to be a part of your court - ”

“First off, it’s not my court, it’s Rize’s and his father’s, and the fact that he likes you so much already puts you in danger. Secondly, I’ve lived at court my whole life and I know what I’m talking about.”

They were fast approaching the castle now. She could make out the thick walls and battlements of stone. “Go on,” Ash said before Derrick could speak.

“Let me use an example. It was not an accident that I called you into the carriage. First rule court: there are always at least two reasons anyone says or does anything, often more. Do not be content with looking at just one. My second reason for calling you into the carriage is this: appearance is everything, the way things are done is all people have left. To approach the castle with the crown prince on the back of your horse like some tavern wench, while I helped down Derrick like some maid, would not have garnered you any favour. This way, he is seen as the hero riding, bravely, without cover from the carriers. You arrive with station, with trappings of wealth, whether they are yours or not. Each gets what they need from the public’s eyes.”

They were crossing the drawbridge now, the portcullis opened wide like rusted iron teeth, the castle ready to swallow them whole. Ash tried not to stare and listen instead to what the duke was still saying.

“If you two want to survive here, listen very carefully to what I am about to tell you next.”

***Ashes Slowly Fall* will be available for purchase on Amazon in October 2018.**

Pay **\$0,99** instead of **\$3,99** for your copy by visiting www.katyalebeque.com and filling in your email address when the lightbox appears to offer you your free chapter sample.

One last thing...

You cannot possibly know, unless you have one of your own print-babies out in the world of Amazon and such, how much an honest review or a rating means. If you enjoyed *Ash Rising* or if you didn't, please post a review on Amazon and a star rating, even a GoodReads review if you're that way inclined.

I'm also always happy to hear from readers so please check out my contact details on my website: www.katyalebeque.com If you liked some aspect of what you read or there was stuff you didn't like – especially if there was stuff you didn't like – please do let me know.

Indie authors are something that exists because of *you*. Just you. When *Ash Rising* began gathering momentum and threatening to coalesce into a book, I spoke to the few people I know in the publishing world. Many were enthusiastic about the premise and characters and said it had great promise, but regrettably publishing is a business and they were too scared that it would seem as though they had 'missed' the fairy tale retelling trend. I asked them the gold standard question: would you for reals read this or are you trying to be nice? Many said yes, they would read it and encouraged me to self-publish on Amazon because amazing books are born there all the time that are excellent and heart-changing. Which brings me back to you. All this is for you, not some VP publishing suit who has ratings to consider, but people who like some things and don't like others regardless of what's in literary fashion right now, irrespective of who everyone's talking about this year at Frankfurt. So please let me know and let other readers on Amazon and other platforms know, what your thoughts are so that you can be tailored to.

Thanks in advance you amazing people, you legends-who-ride-books.

About the Author



Katya Lebeque is a twenty-something South African with an incorrigible writing habit that was started young, but certainly not helped by the fact that she has been a journalist and professional writer for the past nine years. She burst (okay, tripped and fell) onto the writing scene way back in 2010 when she won *ELLE* magazine's Best Short Story competition

and, later, a *Writer's Digest* 'Dear Lucky Agent' contest in the Sci-Fi and Fantasy category.

She lives in Sandton with her husband, a fairly entitled Maine Coon, a car called Eva Marie-Saint and a motley crew of Lindt slabs that never seem to last long.

Ash Rising is her first novel, but it sure as hell won't be her last.