

CHAPTER ONE

Eryn

I slowly open my eyes. “Good morning, miss. Happy birthday,” Rosa says, smiling at me.

“Thank you, Rosa,” I murmur, my voice still thick with sleep.

“I thought you’d like to have breakfast with your dad today. I’ve laid your clothes in the bathroom, where I’ve filled the bath for you.”

“Thank you, Rosa. You’re the best,” I tell my favorite maiden. She is like a mother to me. Ever since Mom died, she has taken over that role.

I push myself out of the heavy red four-poster bed, the silk canopy draping around me like a cage. Rosa sweeps open the dark red curtains lined with gold, and sunlight pours in, bright and harsh. It barely rains in Yxonia, especially in the city.

My eyes drift to the banner hanging next to the window, the Yxonian crest glaring proudly from the red and gold cloth, sometimes I wish I could rip it off the wall. Because it feels like a constant reminder of a life I don’t want.

“Happy twenty-first birthday, Eryn,” Rosa says again before leaving my room.

I get up and take a quick bath, inhaling the lavender and jasmine scent of the burning candles lining the porcelain bath.

I blow out the candles when I’m done bathing and throw on a simple dress. Today would be just me and my dad celebrating my birthday, hopefully.

I walk downstairs and see him sitting at the long wooden table.

The dining hall is way too big for just the two of us. But we used to have feasts in here, I remember it being full of people I didn’t know. Laughter, clattering cutlery, strangers’ voices rising in songs I didn’t know. I like the way it is now, only used by the people I know and love. Though it does feel too empty at times.

Sunlight spills through the stained-glass windows, flashing across the white and gold walls and catching on the polished shields mounted along the hall, each one stamped with the Yxonia crest.

“There’s the birthday girl,” my dad says, his expression softening into something I rarely see in public. I smile as he hugs me tightly. “I know we decided to do gifts tonight, but I want you to have this one already,” he hands me a small present. It’s a little black box.

“Go on, open it,” he urges.

I smile at him, it’s nice seeing my dad like this. He’s only like this when the two of us are alone. He’s different when he has to be the King.

I open the box, and inside is a necklace, a beautiful star necklace.

Glimpses of my mom form in my mind. She used to wear it every day. A diamond sits beautifully engraved in the center of the golden star. She would never leave the castle without it, not even when she went to bed.

“Dad, it’s beautiful,” I say, looking up at him and seeing his eyes growing wet.

“Your dad gave your mother this on her birthday,” he whispers, as tears spring into my eyes. “I wanted you to have it. I think they would have wanted you to have it,” he says, grabbing the necklace and moving behind me to put it around my neck.

“Dad, I—” I start, but he cuts me off.

“I know you don’t typically like these things, but I thought you’d like the thought behind it.”

My dad is right, I never liked these things: jewelry, nice dresses, those uncomfortable heeled shoes. I hate all of it. But this necklace... “I love it, Dad,” I hug him tightly.

As I let go, he just smiles at me. “So, do you have anything planned for today? I mean, before the party tonight? Are you going to celebrate with a special someone, perhaps?”

“No,” I answer abruptly.

“Oh, come on, Eryn. You’re twenty-one now. Perhaps it’s time. You need to think about your future.”

Right, my future. The one thing I definitely do not want to think about, especially not today. The idea alone made my chest tighten. I did not want to be stuck in this golden cage, any more than that I already feel I am.

“I’ll find someone when I’m ready, Dad.”

He sighs. I know he wishes I spent more time thinking about those things, about what my future would look like. But to be honest, my future scares the hell out of me.

“Your majesty,” calls Roland, my dad’s right hand. “You are needed in the council chambers.”

My dad gives me a guilty look. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“Just go. I’ll see you tonight,” I tell him, trying to keep my tone light, though my stomach drops. I know he has his duties as king.

He leaves with Roland, and I sigh. I hate being royal. I hate being the king’s daughter. And what I hate even more is that one day I will be sitting on that throne.

I finish my breakfast alone in silence, absently tracing the necklace my dad gave me as I look at the family painting hanging front and center in the room. On it is my mom as a little girl, holding the hand of my grandpa, King Taygo Youngsteel. If I have to believe the stories my parents told me, grandpa was a strict king, far different than the loving nature of my mom as queen.

I wish Mom and Dad were here right now. They died when I was around six years old, I can barely remember them. I only really know them from the stories my dad told me. I wonder what they thought of all this. Would they be like dad and enjoy it all, or more like me, despising it?

I miss the stories my dad told me about my mom and other dad, yes, I had two dads. They were in a three-way relationship, which was quite controversial. It still is, dad still has to deal with people judging him for it.

Not me though, from the little things I do remember about my mom and dad was that they all loved each other.

It wasn’t only their relationship together that made people distrust them. My mom and dad were always the least loved of the three because of their ties with the Shadow Court, the number one enemy of Yxonian, who they luckily destroyed a few years ago.

I’m ripped out of my thoughts when one of the guards walks in.

He is clad in full armor, the Yxonian crest engraved in his breastplate, a red and gold cape draped over his broad shoulders, and a sword strapped to his side.

“Oh, your royal highness, my apologies, I didn’t know you were still here,” he says, bowing his head.

“No worries,” I tell him, but he keeps his head bowed like he’s waiting for me to say something. Shit. I should have paid more attention in those royal classes, but they were just so boring.

I clear my throat, and then he looks up at me. He looks young, definitely a few years older than me, but still young for a guard. His eyes are dark brown, almost black. His dark brown, messy hair just reaches above his shoulders. He’s definitely built for the job, I would say. He’s good-looking, maybe Dad was right about finding a suitor. Though I think he wouldn’t be pleased with me marrying a lowly guard.

“I should go. My apologies again, your highness,” he says, turning to walk away.

“It’s Eryn,” I call after him.

He turns around and looks at me, confused.

“You can call me Eryn,” I say to him. I think I see a glimmer of surprise in his eyes, but it disappears as quickly as it came.

“Oh, I really shouldn’t,” he says before walking away.

After breakfast, I sneak off to the east wing of the castle. The polished marble floor slowly changes to creaky wood. The walls no longer adorned with golden wallpaper, but wooden planks. The faint smell of freshly baked bread assaults my nostrils, as the hallway grows smaller the further I walk.

The east wing is reserved for the servants of the castle, hence the lack of . . . well richness. I never understood the divide between these two worlds. It was still one castle, was it not? The palace may try to hide these halls, but I feel more at ease here. The royal side is full of show, this side feels real.

I walk past the kitchen further down the hall to Amber's room.

"Eryn, what are you doing here?" she says as she opens the door for me, greeting me with her curious brown eyes. Her long, curly ginger hair is braided in a long braid sweeping over one of her tawny skinned shoulders.

"That isn't a good way to greet a princess on her birthday," I say jokingly to her. Her mouth quirks up and her eyes brighten as she steps aside, swinging the door wider to let me in.

I step into the small room, where a lived in quilted blanket covers a shabby wooden bed, small enough to have been made for a child. The dried flowers hanging in the windowsill are the only decoration I can see.

It's plain compared to my chambers, but the room feels more like home than mine ever will. The air carries a soft warmth, like the faint scent of bread and herbs that always seems to follow Amber. She doesn't need gold or marble to fill a space—she does that herself. She makes this room feel safe. She makes it feel like home.

As soon as the door closes, Amber hugs me tightly. "Happy birthday!" she yells excitedly.

"Keep your voice down," I tell her as she lets go of me. The guards would drag me out of here if they saw me with Amber. A princess befriending one of the help would be a shame for the whole royal family, at least that's what they would say. But that didn't stop me. Amber was the best thing in this whole damned castle, and I would never give her up.

Amber's eyes go to my necklace. "Come on, how can I top that?" she says, pointing to it.

"You know I don't expect you to give me anything, right?" I mean every word. She might work here, but I knew how little they pay her.

"I got you something anyway," she hands me a box.

"Amber," I say, looking from the gift to her.

"I know it isn't much, but—"

I cut her off immediately. "It's the best gift ever," I pull the red scarf out.

"Look," she says, pointing to a little golden embroidery on it: 'A&E,' it says.

"Thank you," I say, hugging her tightly, immediately wrapping it around my neck.

Amber's grin spreads until her dimples pop out beneath her round cheeks, her whole face lighting up as she sees me wearing it.

The smell of baked goods and cinnamon cling to the scarf. It smells like her, my piece of home in an empty castle. The fabric is soft against my skin, grounding me. When I touch it, I feel like I belong here with her, not in the golden halls where I'm nothing more than an heir being prepared for a throne I never asked for. This scarf feels like comfort, like safety . . . like someone chose me, not the crown I will one day wear.

Amber and I have been friends for over eight years now. She is a few years older and feels like an older sister to me. I remember when she first came to the castle. I immediately knew I would like her.

I once again had sneaked out of the castle. My dad—well, the king—was throwing a party. And let's just say, I'm not a party animal like some of those royals are.

Of course, I went to my favorite spot, the fountain, and there she was sitting. A girl with sun kissed skin, big brown eyes, and curly ginger hair, the complete opposite of me with my light skin and white blonde hair.

She looked rough, with a big bruise under her right eye.

"Are you okay?" I remember asking her.

"I—uhm—yes, of course, I'm fine, y-your royal highness," she said shyly.

"Oh, none of that. Tell me, who did that to you?"

It turned out to be one of the royals here for the ball. He was trying to get her into his bed, and when she kindly rejected him, he tried by force.

I've hated royals ever since. And men—well, the relationship between them and me wasn't so great either. They kind of scare me. Which is one of the reasons I don't date. Why I've never even tried to find a husband.

I know one of these days they're going to force me to find a suitor, but I will do everything in my power to delay the inevitable for as long as I can.

I remember Amber and I talking for hours, deep into the night that day. We've been inseparable ever since. And the man who dared touch her? Yeah, he is no longer with us.

I remember her talking about her life before she came to Yxonia city. Her husband had just died in the Sunset port fires, along with almost all of the people who lived there. Amber and her two kids were amongst the very few who knew how to escape. She came to Yxonia city hoping to rebuild her life here. She started working at the castle as a nursemaid and all-round help. I was the only one who knew about her secret job, she educates kids from poor families who can't afford to bring their kids to school.

All in all Amber is a badass, and the best, sweetest and most amazing person I've ever met.

"So, are you ready for the party tonight?" Amber asks me, breaking the nostalgia and making me focus on my best friend in front of me.

"No," I say coldly.

"Oh, come on, Eryn. It'll be fun celebrating your birthday."

"You know this party is basically meant to find a husband for me, right?" I say, looking at her.

"Of course. You're twenty-one now, Eryn, you can take the throne if your dad wishes so."

I groan, trying not to show her how scared that thought makes me. "But I don't want to yet."

"Then just see if there are any handsome men at the party. Don't think about a husband just yet, but maybe..." she says with a glint of mischief in her eyes. "Maybe you could steal your first kiss tonight."

My stomach turns at the thought. Kissing a boy... I mean, a handsome one, maybe, but knowing there will only be spoiled rich boys there? No, absolutely not.

For a second, the guard I saw this morning flashes before my eyes, but I shake it off. 'He's not a royal, Eryn. He might be handsome, but that's all he is and will be.'

"Just try to have fun...For me," she says, acting like she's sad.

"Oh, come on. I bet that if you were invited to parties like this, you would die of boredom just like me."

"At least you wouldn't be bored when I'm with you."

"That's true, but they would drive us apart if they saw us together," which puts it lightly. If someone saw me and Amber together like that, being separated could mean being separated...permanently. Separated in a way that I would never see Amber again, except when I visit her grave.

I never really understood these policies. Why couldn't I be friends with the help? It made no sense. Amber was my best friend, and no one could take her away from me.

Out of nowhere the door bursts open and Amber's kids come flying in, hugging their mom tightly.

"Gods," Amber breathes out with a laugh, her shoulders finally relaxing fully as she clutches them close. She doesn't get to see her kids much. Kids from the help stay in another part of the castle, where they have lessons in reading, the arts, and manners. Royals seem to be obsessed with those manner lessons. I fucking hated those lessons, mostly because I learn about how I should behave in certain situations and what I should expect from lesser people, peasants they would call them to be exact, gods I hated that term, weren't we all just human.

I can't imagine how much these kids hate those lessons, seeing they get taught how to react to me. Which I see the result of immediately as they bow before me.

"Your highness," the youngest one says, gaping at me.

Gods I hated this. "I should probably get ready," I sigh.

"Well, have fun...kissing," Amber says, her grin turning sly, mischief flickering in her eyes. Gods, I love her so much.

“Thanks again for the gift.”

“It’s nothing. Happy birthday, Eryn,” she says before I leave.



I stare at myself in the golden mirror. I look different, older. I sit behind the marble vanity, which is full of all sorts of powders and paints, though I have no idea how they use it all.

They’ve done my makeup so I look more like I’ve turned thirty instead of twenty-one. It’s beautiful though, just...not me.

They dressed me in a white gown tonight. It’s tradition to wear white on the night a girl turns twenty-one—a dress to show her future husband what his bride will look like on her wedding day. The corset digs into me, making it hard to breathe. Whoever invented these things clearly didn’t like women.

I wish I was brave enough to wear something else, anything else really. First off, I hate the color white, and secondly, I hate wearing dresses altogether. But disappointing my father tonight isn’t an option.

A knock pulls me from my thoughts. “You look beautiful,” my dad says as he walks in.

“I hate it,” I admit honestly.

“I know.” He sighs, then steps behind me, grabbing a brush from the vanity to comb my white blonde hair. He’s done that ever since Mom died. He’s the only family I have left.

I glance at him through the mirror. His beard is neatly trimmed, and his blond hair—adorned with a golden crown set with red gems—gleams under the light. He’s dressed in the royal colors of Yxonia: red, white and gold.

“Did Mom and Dad hate it as much as I do?” I ask.

“Your dad did,” he says, his tone softening. “He really hated it. The whole kingdom was against him, though. Your granddad despised him, and so did the people of Yxonia,” he explains.

“Why did they hate him so much? He couldn’t help that the Shadow Court made him a mercenary. They brainwashed him, made him that way—it wasn’t his fault.”

“People hate what they fear,” he murmurs.

“But he was okay, right? He got them out of his head?”

“For the most part, yes.”

“What about Mom?”

“Your mom didn’t like it either, but she was good at it,” he replies, smiling softly.

“And you?”

“I didn’t mind, as long as I was by their side,” he says, his voice cracking.

It’s silent for a while. I know he still misses them, probably even more than I do. But I didn’t realize it would still hit him like this.

“Haven’t you found someone else you like...or love?” I ask, curious.

“No—and I’ll never find what I had with them. I don’t want to,” he answers firmly.

“But—”

“You are all I need,” he finishes the braid in my hair.

“You really loved each other, huh?” I murmur, watching as he pins a golden flower into the braid.

“I really did. I still do. I hope you’ll find someone like that too.”

I turn to look at him. “I don’t have that privilege, though, do I?”

“That everyone expects you to marry royal doesn’t mean you can’t fall in love,” he says, holding my hands.

“I hate royals,” I confess. “They all just want one thing—the throne—and nothing else.”

“I don’t think that’s true. Any man would be lucky to have you. And any woman too,” he says, his tone a mix of seriousness and warmth.

“I wish you were right,” I say quietly, because I know he hopes I’ll find something like what he had with Mom and Dad—but realistically, that isn’t likely to happen.

“I’m the king, I’m always right,” he teases, smiling.

“I really hope so.”

“Just enjoy tonight. You still have time.”

“I know,” I smile back at him.

He puts his hand out. “Are you ready, princess?” he jokes, knowing I hate that term.

“As ready as I’ll ever be, Your Majesty,” I laugh, placing my hand in his as we walk toward the ballroom.

On our way, I spot the young guard from this morning out of the corner of my eye. He stands against the wall, talking in hushed tones with another guard. I could swear he looked at me, but maybe I imagined it.

A trumpet sounds as we stop by the massive wooden doors adorned with the Yxonian crest—like it needs to be even more obvious where we are.

“Ladies and gentlemen, His Majesty King Redsnow and his daughter, Princess Eryn Redsnow,” one of the men announces before the doors swing open.

As we step inside, I feel every gaze in the room on me, and I hate it.

I can barely see any women—most are mothers eager to introduce their spoiled sons.

I look down to avoid their judging eyes, almost seeing my reflection in the polished marble floor.

“Just enjoy it. No rush—you have time,” my dad says gently before leaving my side. He walks toward his golden throne at the far end of the ballroom. At least he gets to sit and watch; I have to be here—on display—mingling. Ugh.

I glance up at the massive chandelier glittering above me. Crystals dangle like frozen rain, and I can’t help thinking it would crush at least fifteen people if it fell. My eyes drop to the dance floor where couples turn to the music. Everyone is dressed to impress: men in tailored suits, most in black, though a few dared to wear color.

The few girls I see wear chiffon dresses in bright shades, their hair glittering with crystals. Some sparkle so much they look more like decorations than people. Maybe that’s the point. They can fight over the men here. I don’t want them.

I push myself into the crowd. Mothers watch me like hawks, whispering to their sons and nudging them forward. A few boys hover nearby, but none are brave enough to actually approach the princess. For a moment, I almost think I’ll make it through this without having to talk to anyone.

Then one finally breaks from the safety of the group and heads straight toward me.

“Your Highness,” a young man greets, bowing low.

I freeze. Shit. I really should have paid more attention in Miss Du Clare’s royal lessons, but they were just so boring.

“Good evening,” I reply as he straightens up.

“Can I get you something to drink?” he offers, his expensive cologne hitting me like a wall. I have to fight the urge to gag at the intensity.

“No, thank you,” I say politely.

He’s handsome—taller than me, with tanned skin, light-brown hair, blue eyes, and dressed in the finest clothes—a clear sign of wealth. It would be easy to have a relationship with someone like him, but I know he probably only wants a crown.

“You look beautiful tonight, Your Highness,” he adds, an arrogant smile curling his lip.

“Thank you.”

He steps closer—way too close for my liking. Surely that’s not how you’re supposed to act around a princess.

“What do you say we get out of here for a bit? Somewhere...more private?” he murmurs, his hand sliding to my waist.

My eyes fall on the large gemstone ring on his finger and the family crest etched into another. Definitely rich.

“I must decline. There are more people I need to speak to. Have a great night,” I try to step away, but his grip tightens.

“You didn’t even ask my name. I’m Aaron Winsor—son of Baron Winsor,” he boasts.

The name hits me. The kingdom would probably be thrilled if I married him. His father owns half the land around Yxonia. Every woman wants to be his bride. But not me. I’ve heard the stories—the gambling, the affairs, the cruelty. His fiancée’s father lost everything, and Aaron called off the wedding, claiming the child she carried wasn’t his.

“Well, Mr. Winsor, I enjoyed our conversation. Have a great night,” I say, trying to walk away, but his hand clamps around my wrist.

“I asked you to talk in private,” he hisses in my ear.

My heart pounds faster—anger, fear, both. Sure, my dad taught me basic self-defense, but this man is stronger, and I have no idea what he’d do if we were alone. The memory of Amber’s bruised face flashes through my mind.

“There you are, Your Highness. The king asked for you,” a voice calls. The young guard from this morning strides toward us. Aaron releases my wrist instantly, his confidence evaporating in the guard’s shadow.

“Have a great night, Mr. Winsor,” I say coolly before walking off with the guard. But he stops me.

“Are you okay?” he asks, eyes searching mine like he already knows what happened.

“I am. Thank you. Now I need to talk to my dad.”

“Oh, he didn’t actually call for you,” the guard admits.

“What do you mean?” I frown.

“I just thought you were in trouble, so I stepped in,” he explains.

“Oh. Well—thank you.” I look at him—really look. The stubble along his jaw, the thin scar above his cheekbone, the softness of his hair that doesn’t belong on a soldier. He’s...really handsome. Then there are his eyes—so dark they pull me in, refusing to let me go. I like it. I want to stay there, staring at them for ages.

And I realize he’s staring back.

“You look beautiful tonight, Your Highness,” he says quietly, a small smile tugging at his lips.

“Thank you,” my voice is rougher than I intended. Heat rushes to my cheeks. I turn and walk away before I do something stupid.

I look around the room and see people staring—mothers and sons—all with their eyes on me, desperate for a single minute of my time so they can tell me why I should marry their son.

Their gazes feel like ropes tightening around me, holding me in place. Judging me. Weighing me.

My heartbeat quickens. My vision blurs as the walls seem to close in, pressing me in from all sides.

I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. I can’t—

All I wanted was a normal birthday with the people I love and a gods-damned cake or something—not this. Not another reminder of the life that’s already planned for me.

People judging my every move, watching my every step. It’s suffocating.

My breath comes in short gasps. I need to get out. I can’t stay here. I can’t fall apart in front of them.

“Are you okay, Your Highness?” a guard asks, but I don’t even look at him as I push past, nearly running for the door. It feels like I’m burning from the inside—I need air.

I rush outside and stop when I reach the fountain. “Okay, Eryn, breathe,” I whisper, staring at the cascading water. I focus on the sound of it—the steady rhythm of the falling streams, the soft splashing against the marble basin.

The statue on top of the fountain—a goddess with her arms outstretched—watches me with a calm expression, as if promising that everything will be okay.

Slowly, my breathing evens out. The night is quiet except for the fountain’s trickle and the distant hum of the party inside.

I sit on the fountain’s edge and tilt my head back toward the mesmerizing full moon.

This place has always been my refuge. I used to come here whenever the castle felt too heavy, especially after my twin brother, Barden, died.

I can still remember it as if it were yesterday. My parents panicking because he was gone. The nightmares followed me long after that day, and whenever another nightmare woke me up screaming, my dad and I would always come here.

It continued to be a place to calm down or sometimes just cry my eyes out, missing my mom and dad, who died soon after Barden did. They never returned from their trip to ‘the dangerous land’ where my dad told me they went that day. I wish I had known it before they left. I would have hugged them just a little longer.

Now I sit by the fountain, thinking about what my future will hold.

“Are you okay, your highness?” I startle at the sudden voice and see the young guard standing a few feet away from me.

“I’m alright, and please just call me Eryn, or Miss Redsnow is fine too.”

Again, he gives me that look like he’s not supposed to, like he thinks it’s a trick.

“I just want someone to treat me like a person and not like the future queen.”

“As you wish, Miss Redsnow,” he says as he sits down next to me. “I’m Kieran,” he smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. As if he’s still debating if he really should call me by my name.

“Are you alright?” he asks after a moment of silence.

“Yes, I just needed some air... It’s just...” I debate what I should tell him.

“It’s just what?” he asks, sounding like he genuinely wants to know. He sounds different from the other guards, who ask out of manners.

“It got too crowded in there. I hate parties like this,” I tell him.

“But it’s your birthday party,” he sounds surprised.

I let out a cold laugh. “No, it’s my ‘now that I’m twenty-one, I need to marry one of those losers’ party,” I tell him, which earns me a small smile.

“I guess that must suck on your birthday.”

“Yeah, it really does. Not that I have friends to celebrate with otherwise though.”

He looks at me surprised.

“Oh, don’t give me that look. I only socialize when I have to, and let me tell you, those people inside there? They’re not the people I want to spend time with.”

“Yeah, some of those people are spoiled pricks,” Kieran says with a quick grin, but it fades almost instantly when he realizes who he’s talking to. “I shouldn’t have said that. My apologies,” he says, correcting himself.

“Please, you’re absolutely right. I hate all those spoiled royal pricks,” I smile at him.

“How long have you been working here? I haven’t seen you that often,” I ask, wanting to know more about him.

“I’ve been working here for about three months now.”

“Oh, really? Aren’t you a bit young?” I’m curious now. It isn’t exactly royal to ask guards those kinds of questions, but hey, I won’t be queen for a long time. Better enjoy the here and now.

“I was fifteen when they started training me. My dad, Roland, taught me,” he says.

“You’re Roland’s son?” I look at him, shocked. “You don’t look like him at all!” I almost scream.

“Should I take that as a compliment?” he asks, an almost cocky grin appearing on his face, and guess what? He has dimples. Dimples! Which makes him even more handsome.

I feel my cheeks flush, but I don’t answer.

Kieran smirks, like the blush on my cheeks is answer enough for him.

I stare at him again—even closer this time, without the noise of the ballroom around us. The rough edges I noticed before are still there: the faint scar, the stubble along his jaw. But now I see the smaller things. His jaw shifts like he’s holding something back. A crease between his brows eases only when he looks at me. At the corner of his mouth, there’s the faintest twitch, almost a smirk he won’t let himself show.

And then his eyes catch mine again. Dark, steady, unblinking. They don’t just hold me this time—they swallow me whole. They’re so deep they feel endless, like black holes pulling me in, and I don’t want to look away.

Maybe I should take Amber’s advice and kiss him. Why not? It’s my birthday, after all. We’re sitting close together. If I move a few inches toward him...

I slowly move toward him, closing my eyes, but then out of nowhere we hear loud noises coming from the castle.

Kieran and I turn around to see the castle in flames, and people are screaming as they come running out.

The entirety of the east wing up to the ball room in the middle of the castle is on fire as flames lick out of windows. The east wing seems to be burning the most, probably because that part is mainly wood, while the ball room, and other portions of the castle, are made out of stronger materials like marble and stone.

Guards shout orders to people dressed in fine clothes, escorting them out of the main gate of the castle, close to the ballroom.

The west wing of the castle seems to be intact and untouched by the fire. Though it looks bad enough.

Dark gray clouds obscure the castle towers as the smoke fills the night.

At first, I stand there, frozen in place, like I’m watching a dream play out. The acid stench of the fire finally reaches me, as it sinks in what I’m seeing.

I look for the face in the crowd, hoping she’s there. I look around frantically, trying to spot her in the chaos.

‘Where are you, Amber?’ is all I can think, frantically searching for her in the sea of panicked people, most are royals who attended the ball, but I see some servants run out too, screaming for someone to help.

Finally, I see Miss Du Clair with some of the other tutors running out with the kids under her arms, including Amber’s kids. They are safe at least, though their part of the castle seems intact from the outside.

“Princess, I need you to come with me,” Kieran says, his attitude changing into the guard he’s trained to be.

My eyes glide over all the people running out, but still no Amber. I sprint toward the castle. I won’t let my only friend die.

“PRINCESS!” I hear Kieran yell behind me, but I block him out as I run into the flame-lit castle.

I run towards the east side of the castle, to Amber’s room, close to the ballroom. I try my hardest not to breathe in too much smoke.

I run and run as fast as I can, adrenaline coursing through my body, barely feeling the heat as smoke obscures my vision.

I burst through the door of Amber’s room, and flames roar past me. I duck, but not fast enough. The acrid smell of burned cloth reaches me first, making my stomach turn. Then the sting hits: sharp, biting heat spreading across my skin. My sleeve clings uncomfortably to the tender spot, every shift of my arm sending a fresh jolt through me.

But the pain fades to the background as I take in Amber’s room. Everything is on fire. The bed is burning, and a wooden beam seems to have come loose. Where did it come from? I can’t quite see through the smoke and fire. My eyes follow the trail of the wooden beam.

“No,” I choke out as I see Amber’s lifeless body on the ground. Burned, skin melting off her body and black spots everywhere. The room smells like burned flesh. Her eyes are open, none seeing. Her face frozen in a scream, like she died a slow, agonizing death, trapped under the wooden beam that was too heavy for her to lift on her own.

Tears spring into my eyes and not from the stinging of the smoke. “No,” I whisper again, while I try my hardest to not throw up at the gruesome sight.

The wooden beams creak as the fire keeps spreading.

I’m ready to run up to her. I need to get her body out of here before there is nothing left to bury, but someone grabs me tightly.

“Your highness, you need to come outside with me now,” the guard says.

“NO!” I yell at him, trying to get out of his grip. I can’t leave my friend here to turn to ash.

“Your highness,” he says.

“No, no...NO!” I yell, but I’m being pulled away by Kieran.

The next moment, I’m outside, frozen in place. People rush past me, stumbling over each other to get away. Guards form lines with buckets, throwing water from the pond onto the blaze.

Further down, others huddle together, whispering with grim faces. But I can’t catch their words.

“Are you okay?” Kieran asks me.

I don’t react, still seeing Amber’s lifeless body before my eyes.

“W-who did this?” is all I can ask, as silent tears run down my face.

“We don’t know. We’re trying to figure that out,” Kieran says in a calm tone, but I see something in his eyes. I have no idea if it’s panic, shock, or something else entirely.

“I want to go to my dad. Where is he?” I ask him, as ash rains down on us.

“Your highness, we—” Kieran begins.

“Don’t call me that! Where is my dad?” I now yell at him.

My best friend is dead, and I want to cry while my dad holds me. I want him to tell me it’ll be okay, even though I know it won’t bring Amber back.

“His majesty is...” Kieran says, hesitating.

My heart stops. No, he’s not going to say it. No, he’s not.

He and all the other guards and royals kneel before me.

“Your majesty, the king is dead,” Kieran says softly. “You are the queen now.”