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• ONE •

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THREE WEEKS LATER

I received news of the attack on Libeth at sunset while standing on a wide grassy field near the castle walls. Facing me were Kerwyn, Amarinda, and Mott, but I barely saw them.

Libeth was a peaceful town, long insulated from the troubles that had plagued other settlements near Avenia. Its citizens were the families of farmers and traders, and the raid certainly would've come without enough warning for even the strongest to form an adequate defense. I couldn't begin to comprehend the horror of what they'd faced in the night, the destruction left to them now. The thought of it sucked the breath from me.

And, there was more. Imogen had been taken during the attack.

Everyone seemed to be talking at once, none of them realizing that my head was swarming with questions that no one here could answer. Did we know if she was still alive? If so, had she been harmed? What would they do to her if they thought it

could hurt me? For that was surely the reason King Vargan had sent his armies after her.

If Imogen was still alive, then Avenia would seek our total surrender in exchange for her return. They would know I couldn't grant that, so I would have to attempt a rescue. She was nothing but bait to them, and I, their prize.

Beyond that, the war I'd been anticipating for several months had finally arrived. But everything I had so carefully planned seemed irrelevant now. So little of this news was what I'd expected. And Kerwyn was steadily making it worse.

"We've also just received word that Gelyn and Mendenwal are advancing from the north and east," he said. "This was a coordinated attack and we are surrounded. Jaron, the war has begun."

They all returned to talking again, but I couldn't hear any of it, or at least, I couldn't separate one word from another. It was impossible to comprehend what they wanted from me.

Amarinda touched my arm. "Jaron, you've gone pale. Say something."

I stared at her without seeing and began back-stepping. "Forgive me," I mumbled. Then I turned and ran, led blindly by some force inside me that had to get away. I needed a place to think, to understand. Somewhere to breathe.

I sprinted toward the castle, only vaguely aware of the sharp pain that still came to my right leg whenever I worked it too hard. The broken bone from Roden remained soft, and yet

I pushed myself faster. If anything, I wanted to feel the pain, to give my panicked emotions somewhere to go.

Servants and soldiers were blurs beside me as I ran. I wasn't sure where I was going, or what I hoped to find there. Only one thought remained locked in my mind, that Imogen had been taken. And they would demand everything for her return.

I soon ended up in the King's Gardens, the one place I could be alone. Hoping to hide myself on a ledge, I tried climbing the vines of the castle wall. Up there I could think. With enough time, I could piece together this disaster into a world that made sense again. But I wasn't even halfway up the lowest wall before the muscles of my weaker right leg failed me and I fell back to the ground. I rolled into a sitting position and leaned against the wall, but made it no farther.

Maybe it had been a mistake to come to the gardens. I'd find no more answers here than anywhere else. As I looked around, the walls loomed over me. It was dizzying, and I couldn't put any single idea in front of the other. Instead, the worries, plans, and choices all swirled around me like smoke, suffocating me just the same.

"Your Majesty, forgive me for invading your privacy."

I stood when I saw that Harlowe had come. After bowing, he walked forward.

"I thought it'd only be Avenia that attacked," I said. "Maybe Gelyn too, but not Mendenwal. And not this way."

"None of us saw that coming."

“There’s no reason for Vargan to attack Libeth. Destroying that town gave him nothing.” Images of the horrors that must have occurred that night came again to my mind. “Nothing except Imogen.”

“I know.” Harlowe licked his lips, and then added, “We must have your orders, sire.”

“What orders?” I yelled. It was irrational to be angry, especially with him, but I couldn’t help it. “I can’t fight this! I don’t have a plan for anything this big. I couldn’t even protect *her*. She should’ve been safe, away from me.” My eyes widened as I gulped in a breath that wouldn’t release. “I can’t . . . can’t —”

Harlowe put an arm on my shoulder and pulled me to him. He’d hugged me this way once before, sensing my fears on the eve of going to the pirates. It was the embrace of a father to a child, and I needed that comfort again.

Despite all my planning, the thought that war was now upon us terrified me. My father had seen a few battles in his youth, before he took the crown. In a small way, I began to understand his dread of conflict. Maybe it wasn’t weakness that kept him from standing up to our enemies’ demands, as I had always thought. Perhaps it was simply that he’d already paid the price of war.

There would be a price if Carthya fought back this time; there always was. I had a good idea of what it might cost me, but our options were failing. As long as I had enough strength to wield a sword, I would not accept Carthya’s defeat.

## THE SHADOW THRONE

Harlowe held me until I drew back, with a clearer mind and a resolve that if Carthya was surrounded by enemies and had no chance of victory, then at least we would make a spectacular end of it.

“All right,” I said to Harlowe. “I will present my plans in one hour. Gather everyone who needs to be there.”