

The Stand In Princess Chapter 1 - 8

Chapter 1 (Cora)

The sound of the slap registers long after the stinging of my cheek takes hold of me. My head whipped to the side as tears filled my eyes. Elanora is upset.

Gripping the laundry basket tighter, I bowed, apologizing for something I did not do. I could feel Elanora's seething gaze on me.

"Cora, do you know why I'm upset right now?" Elanora hissed through gritted teeth.

It could have been anything that had set her off today, but I can't say that. I know the Duke came to the palace for an audience with the king. Elanora was in love with the Duke, though she had only seen him from afar, and he had no idea who she was. Something must have happened when she went to see him.

"Did the Duke disrespect you, your highness?" I could barely stop my voice from shaking as I tried to get the words out.

No matter how I answered, it was going to be wrong. My answer might lead to a beating if it angered her any further. I could feel her moving away, but I didn't dare look up. When I heard her throw herself into the chair across the room, I quickly got up and attended to her, kneeling in front of her.

"Why didn't you tell me the Duke was here to discuss a marriage proposal with my father today?" She looked down at me, and I could see the tears in her eyes.

She was upset with whatever transpired when she went to seek out the Duke. I had heard of his visit but wondered why he was visiting. Living in one of the palace's annex buildings, we heard very little of what happened in the main building.

Elanora Via Floraden was born to a concubine of the king. She was beautiful; her slim, willowy figure complimented her gorgeous brown locks and amber-colored eyes. However, as the second princess, she had very little power in court and has lived in solitude in the annex building since birth. Very few people had seen the princess since birth, and no one truly knew what she looked like besides the annex staff and the royal family.

” How could Father even think of marrying the Duke and my sister when he knows of my love for the Duke?” She wailed.

It was better to let her vent and scream than to try and calm her down; that only led to her throwing things, and I couldn't let her hurt herself. That's when she turned to me, her tear-streaked face twisting again into anger.

“It's all your mother's fault! That mother of yours didn't teach me properly. If I were better at etiquette and politics, my father would marry me to the Duke, not my sister.” She began kicking me from her seated position; her pointed gem-encrusted outing boots still on her feet.

My mother became the king's servant after the king invaded my mother's country. He had taken her as a servant and slaughtered all highborn nobles and the royal family. As the daughter of the fallen countries' Duke, my mother was given a respectable position within the palace as Eleanora's nursemaid. I was almost a year younger than Elanora, and we grew up together for the most part.

With each kick to my gut, her anger subsided. Once she was satisfied that I had truly understood why she was upset, she dismissed me for the night after I helped her change into her nightgown and tucked her into bed.

Limping down to the servants' quarters, I stopped by the kitchen to pick up two bowls of soup and bread the kitchen staff had left for me. Making my way towards the small room I shared with my mother, I opened the door to find my mother where I had left her.

Tucked into bed, her small frame looked weak. Her once beautiful lush blonde hair looked dull and frizzy, and her light gray eyes looked dark and sunken. Most people used to call me my mother's mini-me, and I relished the thought that I could one day be as beautiful as her. She would turn heads as we walked down the palace hallways from high and low-born men. Even with her head bowed, she was the epitome of grace and elegance as she walked. Something no one could beat out of her though many tried.

I could tell by her reddening cheeks her fever was back. Putting down our supper, I laid my cool hand on my mother's forehead. She had been like this for the better part of two months and she wasn't getting any better. The little compensation the palace gave us for working was barely enough to keep us alive, and we couldn't afford a doctor to look at her. I had resorted to picking herbs in the early morning when everyone was still asleep to make homemade remedies for her, which my mother had taught me about in her medical books.

My mother had given up most of her duties after she got sick to Rupert, the head butler, even though she spent all of her days in bed now many of the staff still respected and admired my mother, they always talked about how she had held everything together, even with how powerless the princess was in court. Choking back tears as memories of her old self flood my mind, I stood to grab her bowl of soup as I felt her waking up. I didn't want my mother to see me in this state.

“Baby girl, are you alright?” I could hear the concern in my mother’s voice. She must have noticed the bruise forming on my cheek, from Eleanora’s slap earlier.

Turning around, I smiled so she wouldn’t see how much it pained me to see her lying there sick. I sat on the end of our shared bed while handing her her supper. I told her how the Duke had come to visit and the reason for his visit. I didn’t need to explain further for my mother to understand what happened in Eleanora’s room.

Grabbing my hand, I could feel how skinny her fingers were getting. I could see the veins running along her hand. She patted my hand gently. She never tried to promise me a better tomorrow, we both knew that might never happen, but she did try to comfort me in her own way. I clung to that comfort and love like a lifeline; it was the only thing that kept me going in this miserable life.

My mother chatted with me about all the things she had read in her book today, while slowly eating her soup. I layed down next to her just listening to her. I loved these moments. It reminded me of when I was little and she would lecture Eleanora and I about the things we needed to know about being a part of the noble class and what that entailed. I could feel my eyes getting heavy as I listened to her letting sleep take hold of me.

Before the sun came up the following day, I headed into the forest behind the annex; while it was still part of the castle, no one came out due to the increased monster activity. They had started slowly migrating closer to the kingdom and the palace’s domain when the drought started a little over a year ago. We had seen little rain, and the only source of water we had was the small river in this forest.

Thankfully, Tate, one of the knights of the annex, had given me a sword to protect myself with. Monsters were usually nocturnal beasts, and early in the morning was the safest bet

for going into the forest as they were falling asleep. While I only knew the basics of wielding a sword, carrying one made me feel safer about going out alone.

It always seemed that the early morning air smelled of wet grass and new beginnings. I loved how peaceful it felt. The early morning silence enveloped the kingdom, and all you could hear was the chirping of birds and buzzing of the bugs. Walking along the rooted deer paths towards the river, I could catch a glimpse now and then of either a rabbit or deer alongside the trails.

Hiking down the slight incline within the forest led to a river where I could find the herbs I needed to make a cough syrup for my mother to help ease some of her pain. Crouching down next to the bank, I could feel the cold river water on my fingertips as I grazed my fingers over the top of the water as I washed the herbs I had collected. When I was little, I would come out here with Tate, now a knight of the annex, to play. We would run over the tree roots, find wild fruit trees to eat from and come to this river bed to cool off on hot summer days.

From in front of me on the other side of the river embankment, I heard a soft twig snap; looking up expecting to see a deer or other animal taking a drink, I found myself face to face instead of with a man coming out of the tree line. He was tall and muscular, with a scar running from the side of his temple to the top of his jawline. On instinct, I grabbed for my sword, ready to draw it. He looked up from the stream, as he seemed to have just noticed me he took a step back. Looking me up and down, and as his eyes landed on my sword he smirked, like an adult smirking at a child when they do something amusing.

Chapter 2 (Cora)

As the man slowly emerged from the trees, I saw I was no match for him. The sword on his side looked to be about the same size as me. He continued to walk closer, with an almost predatory amount of stealth. His hand went up in front of him as he bent his knees as if trying to show a terrified animal that he would not hurt them.

“Woah there miss, if you don’t want to hurt yourself, I would slowly take that hand off that hilt.” he eyed my hand, gesturing with a tilt of his head to remove my hand from the hilt of my sword. He began talking again, his tone low and soothing as if I was a hurt animal; he was trying to help before I could respond to him.

“I won’t hurt you; I was just looking for some game meat to return to my camp with. Why don’t we call this an odd encounter and leave it at that.” he winked at me. He stopped in front of the embankment on the other side of the river.

Paralyzed in fear, all I could do was nod. Slowly taking my hand off the sword, I was thankful for the river between us. Who knows what would have happened to me if it wasn’t. It wouldn’t have been hard for him to kill me or, far worse, take me back to that camp he had just mentioned. Getting up slowly like I was facing off with a predator, I slowly began backing up, never taking my eyes off the man till I was far enough away to run back to the annex.

A little shaken but unharmed, I rushed into the bedroom where my mother was awake and waiting. I threw the hand-knitted shoulder bag onto the bed near my mother’s feet and plopped myself beside the bed, trying to catch my breath. The sword made a heavy metal sound as I hit the floor, waking my mother.

“Are you alright, dear?” my mother asked, her voice’s concern and alarm evident.

Not wanting to concern her more than she already was, I slowed my breath and calmed myself down.

“Yea, Mum, I just thought I saw a huge black bear in the forest this morning,” I told her. The animals were far less concerning and dangerous than any man would be in such a setting.

Nodding her head, unsure if she should believe me, she settled back into bed, mumbling for me to be careful and that the herbs weren't worth the risk.

Brushing myself off as I stood, I tutted at her, knowing she wouldn't go easy on me if I said I was okay. Quickly gathering the herbs, I hung them to dry above the small desk piled high with books my mother and I loved to read. Giving Mother a quick kiss on the forehead, I quickly dressed and headed to the kitchen to start the day.

The palace began to buzz the next few days with news of the Duke and first princess' marriage and an impending threat sitting on the border of our kingdom. The King of Andal was demanding a peace treaty between our two kingdoms or for us to go to war with them.

While preparing the Princess's breakfast that morning, the kitchen staff gossiped about everything they had heard from the delivery boys.

Some of the older staff who had fought for their kingdom seemed to be concerned with the threat of war again, while the younger maids chatted about what dress the first princess would wear to her wedding.

But as a messenger boy from the main palace entered the kitchen to deliver news for the Princess to me, all the staff fell into a hush. Everyone seemed interested in the rumors of the bloodthirsty warmonger, the King of Andal himself, who would visit the palace soon. When asked by one of the newer maids, the boy told the stories he had heard at the central court.

The boy told us what he had heard from some nobles. The country of Andal had been in a civil war that lasted for four years. An ex-slave led the citizens by the name of Tarak and successfully overpowered the monarchy there. Since then, he has been slowly trying to expand his borders. He was cutting down all and nobility who dared defy him. He was a cold-blooded man who killed for sport hanging his victims up along his camp like decorations, and his greed for power knew no end. Some said he stood eight feet tall and cut a man down with a flick of his wrist. And the kingdom's nobles were waiting in bated breath to hear the King's decision on whether we would sign a peace treaty or go to war.

The boy went on to say the rumors of him ranged from being a deranged power-seeking psychopath to a God of war hungry for death. Whatever rumor was true about him, that same man had been camped outside the border of Befriel for the last couple of weeks. Just his name struck fear into the nobles within the palace walls to the point even a mere messenger boy knew this much.

Befriel was once a mighty and prosperous country that had even invaded and expanded its borders into my mother's homeland. But with recent droughts and famine plaguing the citizens, the civil unrest was too much for the palace to handle before this threat came to our border.

If we went to war now, Befriel would be easily overpowered by the sheer amount of soldiers Andal had. I had heard from some of the other servants who worked within the palace that Tarak was now targeting Befriel for a while on his campaign to expand his borders. Instead of developing south towards the fertile land of Driola or to the west towards Ucaros, where it would be more advantageous for him, he came north past the monster-infested forest to the dying country of Befriel.

Once I was done with breakfast preparations, I carried the tray to the Princess's room, hoping that none of the rumors had reached her yet. Silently letting myself into her room,

I put the tray down near her bed and walked over to the curtains to let the morning sun in. Elanora was nestled in her bed under the covers.

I knew better than to wake her. It would only lead to being slapped. Instead, I went to the bathroom to draw her a bath and pick out a gown for the day. A message from the palace that required the young princesses' attendance before the King came this morning. This was rare; the King usually only called Elanora once a year for his birthday feast, which included both his children.

Today I had to make sure Elanora looked her best, so not only was she pleased, but so was the King. Every year for her audience with him, we had the time to put together a splendid gown, but with such short notice, I would only be able to work with what we had, and she would not be happy about wearing an old dress in front of her father today.

As I pulled the dress from the closet, I could hear Elanora stirring from her slumber.

“Good morning, your Highness, today, your father has called for an audience with you.”
Belaying the message from this morning.

Her eyes widened. I could see the excitement on her face from the prospect of seeing her father. Then as the realization hits, her face wilts with suspicion.

” It’s not my father’s birthday. Tell me, why has he called for me today?” The messenger boy had not told me a reason for this unexpected visit.

” I’m not sure, your highness.” I stuttered, knowing that my answer was going to get me punished.

I could see her coming before she had done anything, but reacting would only anger her more. I was yanking my hair up so I was face to-face with her. Her 5’8 slim figure towered over my 5’4 skinny body. Going up on the tip of my toes so my hair would not

rip out of the scalp, the tears started to form in my eyes, but I didn't dare cry out; it only gave her satisfaction.

“My father calls for me, and you don't know why! Why, why are you so useless!!” she screeched at me. Elanora tossed me around like a rag doll by my hair. Finally, she let me go, and I plummeted to the floor, landing with a hard thud. I knew my knees were bruised, and I was bleeding somewhere under my dress. Stepping over me, she made her way toward the bathroom, looking over her shoulder, her long brown hair cascading down her back.

“Cora, come! We don't have much time to get ready.” she barked at me.

Chapter 3 (Cora)

Getting Elanora in the bath, I lathered her hair full of essential oils, making it smell like roses and lilacs. While I bathed her she picked at the meal I had prepared for her, only eating a few bites, leaving the rest untouched. After thoroughly washing her, I grabbed a towel and dried her off carefully to dry her hair thoroughly to not upset her by getting her gown wet.

Putting on her green and gold embellished gown, Her Highness, the first princess, had gifted it to Elanora. It was from the southeast country of Eastria and one of the finest gowns she owned. I did her makeup with rouge around her cheeks and eyes and a red lip to make her amber eyes pop. I pulled her hair back into an updo, letting some of her brown ringlets fall to frame her face, securing a taira to the top of her head, and letting everyone know she was royalty.

By the time I got her ready, the footman from the main building was pulling up in the carriage, willing to take her to see the king in the main hall. Helping her into the carriage,

I followed behind her. Though I am not the most prestigious personal maid like the other royal family members, I was Her Highness's only personal maid.

Unlike the first princess, who had an entire entourage of maids and servants at her beck and call, the second princess only had my mother and me as personal maids and a few select servants who had been banished to the annex from the main palace for various reasons.

The annex was where servants who had lost the privilege of working or entering the main palace came. Because of this, my mother and I were the only ones at the annex who could escort Elanora to the main palace, by the King's decree.

Of those who came to the annex, most were grateful to be under my mother's firm but caring authority, but others resented the fact that they had become an outcast from the main palace. For those who became bitter, it wasn't long before they left the annex to find work together in the city or another country.

The short ride over was excruciating. Elanora sat across from me. I could feel her leg bouncing in anxiety under her gown, even with the usual bumping of the carriage. The air was thick, and her fear came off in waves. The king had never called for her in her twenty-two years of life except for the annual birthday feast.

"What do you think his highness has called me for?" her lips quivered.

"I'm sure whatever it is, your highness, it will be fine." there was nothing I could say or do that would comfort her more than that. We both didn't know what we were facing. I only prayed it was something I could protect my mother from.

As we pulled up to the main building, the main hall loomed above us, set upon a grand stairwell, with its great marble pillars greeting us and gold gilded ceilings meant to show all nobility who the true nobles were.

Bowing my head as we got out of the carriage, I stood three feet behind Elanora. We were escorted by the king's knights, who had been stationed at the top of the stairs and couldn't even come down to greet Her Highness properly. Princess Elanora held her head high as she tried to ignore the smirks from the knights as they jeered about how little her entourage was. With as much courage as I knew she had, she walked toward the throne room to greet His Highness, King Emerson.

We passed by a few noblemen on the way to the throne that I knew were the royal advisors for the king himself. They all looked upon Elanora with either a look of pity or look of contempt. Whatever they had just discussed probably involved Princess Elanora, and I knew whatever we were about to face would not be good.

As we walked into the grand room, I turned to stand near the wall while Elanora continued down the carpeted walkway towards the steps leading up to a pair of jewel-encrusted thrones. His Highness King Emerson sat with Her Highness Queen Evelyn, the mother of the first princess. His Highness was a proud man. His amber eyes were the only ones he had genetically given, while her brown hair and a willowy slender figure came from her birth mother; her father was a stout man with graying blonde hair and a voice that boomed even in an entire room of people. Her Highness sat with a rigid back, her long black hair braided into a bun above her neck. Her ice-blue eyes never once left Eleanora's figure. Her Highness pursed her lips, displeased by the sight of the second princess.

“Greetings, your highnesses, Keepers of the Brefiel throne, may the sun set upon you.” She curtsied and bowed her head, just as my mother taught us to do in front of the king when we were little.

“Elanora, my child, you have grown into such a fine woman since I last saw you.” His Highness bellowed down from his seated position, not glancing up to look at her. His head hung in his hand, his eyes more intrigued with the ring on his finger than his daughter’s.

“Thank you, your highness.” she managed to squeak out over her building anxiety.

“Pray to tell, have you heard of the impending visit we are to have in ten days? The new king of Andal is to visit with his embassy.” I could hear the lingering resentment in the king’s voice as he talked about Andals new king.

“I have not heard of the news, your Majesty.” Elanora’s voice trembled.

“Elanora,” his voice boomed in the almost empty hall. “Her Highness, the advisors and I have decided. You will be hosting him as the first princess is too busy planning her wedding to the Duke.” Before she could get one word out or try to protest hosting such a vicious man, the king dismissed her with a wave of his hand.

As we returned to the carriage, I could visibly see her shaking from fear or anger I did not know. But I did know that the king confirmed the Duke would marry her sister, the first princess; I knew I would somehow be punished for this news. On top of that, I had to figure out a way to survive hosting the god of war, who was hungry for death. Hopefully, he was full from his earlier conquests.

Chapter 4 (Cora)

As we returned to the annex, my mind buzzed with thoughts of everything that had to be done. The guest rooms had never been used; the main dining room was in shambles as it was being used for storage. Never mind, we didn't have the staff to support such a big event. I mentally went through the list of servants I would have to address as soon as I returned immediately. Ten days was not nearly enough time for us to get ready. As my mind lingered on that list and what it would take to make the annex even remotely respectable for someone of the king of Andals' stature, Elanora snapped her fingers in front of my face to wake me up from my thoughts. As I looked up, I was greeted by disgust on the princess's face.

Yanking me by my hair, my knees collided on the wooden floor of the carriage. I knew what was coming next; I hoped I could still speak after the beating she was about to give me. She continued to slap me as she shrieked about how unfair her life was.

"How could a father do this to me? Not only is my sister marrying the love of my life, but now I have to host a feral beast within my home." Another slap to my face left an open cut near my eyebrow as her ring snagged on the skin. Blood streaked down into my eye, making it hard to see.

My face felt numb and hot. It didn't end till she dug her heel into the back of my hand, pinning it against the hardwood floor.

"Once again, your mother has failed to teach me how to deal with situations properly. If I were educated by my sister's teachers instead of your mother, it would be me standing next to the Duke, not her." she hollered.

Shifting her weight off my hand, I was able to grab it, cradling it against my chest. That was going to leave a nasty bruise. And by the looks of my hand, I didn't want to see my face.

After helping her retire to her room for the evening and having another maid bring up her supper and help her prepare herself for bed, I went on my way to talk to Rupert, the head butler who had taken up his position when my mother had fallen ill.

Heading into his office, He was up and out of his chair, cupping my face in his hands before I could even say anything.

“Elanora?” he questioned, not needing any further explanation. He knew all too well how Elanora always took her frustrations out on me. Rupert had been serving as my mothers’ advisor since she had taken up residence in the annex twenty-two years ago, the day Elanora was born. Rupert had been banished to the annex when the king had been upset, and Rupert just happened to be there to inform the king of the advisor’s visit. Though we weren’t related by blood, I did see him as the closest thing to a father I had.

Just nodding, I let him skim his aging finger over my cheeks and down my chin as he tried to assess the damage she had done this time. He asked for a report from the main palace once he was fully satisfied it wouldn’t leave permanent damage.

Getting us organized took longer than I thought it would, between belaying the message to all staff and trying to devise a solution to the shortage of supplies and staff had taken up most of the evening. After the kitchen staff, maids, and gardeners were all informed of their tasks, I took the task of letting the knights know of the plans to up the patrols, especially at night due to the frequent monster sightings we were having, so Rupert could go to bed. His old age was catching up to him, and I didn’t want him to fall ill due to exhaustion during all this.

After a brief meeting and an enraged uproar by the knight commander, Sir Willard, it was late, well past dinner time. I had already sent a maid to deliver dinner to my mother, but I wanted to see her and see how she was doing. On my way back from the knight’s

encampment, Tate, one of the few knights that were friendly with the annex staff and me, stopped me.

“Cora, before your mother gives a fit about your face, let me tend to your wounds.” he gently lifted his finger, grazing against the eyebrow Elanora had split open earlier that day.

“Oh yea? Is there something wrong with my face? Are you trying to call me ugly?” I teased, feigning being hurt.

“You have been looking quite troll-like lately.” he chuckled, dodging as I went to hit him.

It was late, and he was right about my mother giving a fit. So without a fight, I let him drag me back to the encampment so he could put a salve on my eyebrow and wrap my hand to help with the soreness. Looking up at me as he wrapped my hand with expert ease, he gently squeezed my hand, not enough to hurt but enough to grab my attention away from the never-ending list of things I had to get done in the next ten days.

“Cora, why don’t you defend yourself against Elanora? I can’t stand to see her do this to you, and I know how much it hurts your mother as well.” he sounded wounded, as if my pain was his.

Taking my hand back from his, I ruffled his hair with my good hand like I did when we were kids. Tate’s mother had been banished to the annex when I was about three, and Tate and I were only a few weeks apart in age. Elanora, Tate, and I had pretty much grown up together, as she was six months older than us.

It wasn’t like I couldn’t defend myself against Elanora; I didn’t want to. Tate had made sure I knew the basics of sword fighting and hand-to-hand combat when he found out I was being harassed by some of the other maids who knew of my lineage.

How I saw things, though, was if it were not me, it would be one of the other maids; I could handle Elanora's outburst, but I didn't want anyone else to bear that pain, especially if she turned her attention towards my mother.

"I'm fine, Tate; if you must worry about me, ensure the knights guard Elanora without fail the entire time that man is here. I don't need her getting upset while he is here. That way, we may all have a chance of surviving his visit." I was already exhausted by the whole idea.

It was well past midnight when I went to see my mother. I could see an entire bowl of soup I had another maid deliver to her on the corner of her bedside table. She lay in our bed in a fitful sleep, plagued by the many nightmares that took hold of her dreams each night. Going over to the bedside, I sat beside her, laying my cold hand on her feverish forehead. It still had not gone down. Standing up, I went to mix up the dried herbs I had gathered into a powder so I could pour it into a cup with hot water. That way, she could swallow it with ease. If only I had worked at the main palace, I would have had enough money by now to help my mother, but I couldn't dwell on that fact; she needed me here and now.

She was slowly getting worse by the day; the home remedies helped to soothe her symptoms but did little to cure her. I just hoped she could hang on till I could save up enough so a doctor could examine her and give her the medicine she needed. Until then, I would do everything in my power to keep her alive and healthy.

Chapter 5 (Cora)

Taking the few hours before dawn to close my eyes and rest, I crawled into bed next to my mother's sleeping frame. As I drifted off, I couldn't help but feel apprehensive about tomorrow. My dreams were filled with nightmares of barbaric men cutting down all those

I knew and considered family. By the time I woke up to collect herbs, my body felt heavy, and my hand was throbbing from where Elanora had dug her heel into it. Pulling on the cloak my mother had mended for me out of two ragged blankets, so I didn't freeze in the crisp morning air, I couldn't help but feel her love for me cloaking me as well. I also grabbed my shoulder bag and threw it over my shoulder. I went into the kitchen to find the staff there already hard at work for the day.

“Cora, child, are you going to the forest again today?” The head cook, Maxi, chided me.

Grabbing an apple from the counter, I gave her the biggest grin I could without hurting my eyebrow. I ran out before she could swat at me with her wooden spoon for taking it and not eating a proper breakfast. Maxi always tried to be stern to hide her soft side, but when Tate and I were little, and Elanora hit us, Maxi would always be there to make us feel better. Because Elanora wouldn't be scolded since she was a princess, she would often act out against us. Maxi would give Tate and me leftover pastries from Elanora's tea time and tell us how good we were for not hitting her back.

Biting into the sweet, crisp apple, the juice dribbled down my chin as the morning fog rolled in, coating me in a fine cold mist, waking up my body and mind. I knew the next few days would be busy, and I wanted to ensure I collected enough herbs so I only had to come out for the next couple of weeks until the Andal king left. I also wanted to treat the staff with fresh herbs for tonight's soup. Hopefully, it will boost morale and help us get through the next few weeks.

Along the path and a few steps off the path leading down to the river, I collected wild mushrooms, garlic, chickweed, and red clovers. My bag was bulging by the time I got down to the river bank to collect all the other herbs I needed. As I inspected everything I already had, I didn't even notice the man from last time sitting under a tree on the other side of the river, a fishing pole stuck in the dirt next to him and a book in his hand. His

gentle chuckle carried over to me by the wind, startling me as I looked up to see where it had come from.

“Aye, Lass, that’s a big load for such a small girl,” he smirked, looking at the bulging bag at my side.

That’s when he looked at my face catching a glimpse of the cut on my eyebrow down to the bruising and swelling of my cheeks. His gaze swept over me as it landed on my wrapped-up hand. Even from the other side of the river embankment, I could feel his eyes on my body.

“What happened to you there, girlie?” his voice deepening, coming out in a low growl.

Like last time I was too stunned to talk. It wasn’t until he took something out of his pocket and tossed it over to me that my words returned. Taking it suspiciously, I looked into the tin to see a type of salve.

“It’s a mixture of different herbs, but I promise nothing dangerous in there. Just used it on my calf I nicked last night.” he pulled his leg pant up to show me the gash on his leg.

That was no mere nick of the leg. It looked like something big had clawed him from the top of his knee down half of his calf. It was most definitely going to scar. The only thing big enough to do that out here was a particular type of monster called razorback gnoll. Nasty dog-type creatures who hunted in packs tormenting their prey until the end and then killing it. They were known for being vicious and carnivorous creatures whose claws were poisonous.

To say I had a look of confusion and suspicion laced through my face was an understatement. He obviously had come face to face with razorback gnoll and lived to tell the tale, but he was here instead of trying to get his leg treated. I had just met this man for

the second time. Why would he give me such a valuable thing as a salve and not use it on himself? He obviously needed it more than me. The herbs to make a salve were costly, and this was an entire tin. Looking up from the small container in my hand, I didn't know how to thank him.

“Up a little ways north from here, a herd of deer graze in an open field. Last time you were looking for game meat to bring back to your camp. Here take this as well. Make sure to boil the root. It will counteract the poison in your system, but it is quite bitter. “I grabbed at a plant on the river's edge, making sure to get the root up to. Chucking it as hard as I could to clear the river, it landed next to his foot. It wasn't a great thank you, but it did suffice in my book.

“Also, there are no fish in that river since the monsters started plaguing this area. So you're wasting your time out here.”

“Thank you for the advice and medicinal root, but as far as wasting my time, I'll decide if it was wasted.” his voice became slightly lighter from his deep aggressive tone earlier.

Nodding his head, he got up from his seated position now that I knew he wasn't going to kill me. I could appreciate how tall he was. He must have been just under seven feet tall. I watched as he bent over to pick up the root I had thrown at him. He was muscular but not overly muscular for his body shape. He could be dangerous if he wanted to be. His body screamed hardened warrior. The scar on his face looked ragged like something rough had cut him. His black curly hair framed his chiseled jaw, highlighting the scar more. He was too far away for me to notice the color of his eyes, but something told me that if I looked into them closely enough, I would be met with the most intense bold gaze.

After exchanging goodbyes, I quickly headed back to the kitchen to show them all the herbs and mushrooms I had procured for today. I only did this on special occasions, but

everyone truly needed that today. Maxi quickly went to work cleaning the goodies I had brought her. Grabbing breakfast for my mother, I returned to our bedroom to get dressed and dry the herbs I had gathered.

My mother tutted me as she watched me meticulously hang each plant to ensure nothing would rot instead of dry. I then went over to her, ensuring she was set before heading out to get the Princess up for the day.

I made sure to bring Princess Eleanora's favorite foods up for breakfast. I had the kitchen staff work on afternoon tea desserts knowing she would want tea in the garden today. Eleanora would be in a foul mood due to the devastating news yesterday. The next few weeks would be awful for her, and I wanted to make sure she stayed in a pleasant mood so everything else would run smoothly.

As I slowly crept my way into Eleanora's bedroom, I could see broken glass from smashed vases and upturned chairs from where she threw them. Last night must have been rough on her attending maid. I made a mental note to check up on the maid later today. Putting her tray down on her bedside table, I picked my way through the wreckage to the curtains, opening them up to let the sun in. That's when I was smacked in the back of the head with a pillow, thankful it was not something breakable or heavy.

"Get out!!" she screeched, not removing her head from her pillow.

Ignoring her demands, I went about cleaning up the wreckage from last night, tidying as much as I could without a broom. As I got up to grab a broom from the kitchen, a bedside lamp swizzed past my head, barely missing me. The lamp shattered into million pieces as it impacted the wall. The lamp shattered into million pieces as it impacted the wall. Holding in my yelp with a bite of my tongue, I couldn't help but think that. Hopefully, this god of war was a little more civil than our Princess.

Chapter 6 (Cora)

After cleaning up all the broken glass, so Elanora wouldn't get hurt, I helped her out of bed and to the couch so she could eat in peace. I drew her a bath and put an outfit together, an A-frame light floral gown perfect for a hot afternoon like today.

"Cora, please tell the others I'll have tea in the greenhouse today. I want to be alone, so I may paint." She called out while picking at a scone.

"Of course, your Highness, after your bath, will begin the preparations for that," I replied, concentrating on my task.

Once Elanora was all set in the garden, I was dismissed so she could paint in peace. This left me with an entire afternoon to help prepare for the king of Andal.

Checking in on the maids, they had about a third of the rooms open after talking to them about what they needed to open all the rooms and fix up the dining hall. I headed to the knights' encampment to ensure they didn't need any supplies to host the king's soldiers before heading to the gardeners and the kitchen.

I compiled a list of supplies and goods needed for the next few weeks while talking to Maxi about the menu plan and what would be served over the week. So I could hand it to the head maid and Rupert so they could order things as needed.

This was an unprecedented event, and with my mother no longer able to run things, it was hard on everyone. I stepped up to fill her role as best as possible but could do little with what we had to work with.

By the time lunch had come and gone, I had compiled a hefty list from all of the employees of the annex. When I went to Rupert's office, he was hunched over paperwork going over the budget. I knew we were working with a tight budget, but I was hoping the

main palace would up ours this month due to the king's arrival. Judging by his expression, I knew we were in for a tough couple of weeks.

“Cora, were you able to get all the lists compiled? Please tell me it's not a lot of things. The financial affairs office has given us nothing in terms of money to help us.” He sounded defeated as I handed over the paperwork

“I was able to compile everything, sir, but judging by the number of things on this list, we may need to have the gardener and the knights cut back so that we have enough money to smooth things over within the bedrooms, grand dining room, and kitchen.” Judging what the King of Andal would take offense to was hard, but I hoped we could make it work.

Nodding in agreement, Rupert made an amended copy of what every department would receive, which was menial. Still, it would have to do so we could make it through to the next month with our limited budget.

No one seemed happy about the news, but no one seemed surprised this whole thing felt like a sham. Having the disgraced princess with no political power host the King of Andal was already an offensive thing to do, but to give no budget as well was going too far, even if we had to host a vile man like the ruler of Andal.

By the time I finished everything, I had a few hours to check on Elanora before returning to my mother for the night. I found Elanora in the greenhouse where I had left her for her afternoon tea. She was in the middle of painting a sunset scene when I walked in. I knew how much she enjoyed this time to herself. It was the only time she was content. Letting her finish, I stood beside her, waiting for my chance to speak with her.

“Your Highness, I have made sure all the preparations for the King of Andals' arrival are running smoothly. With the tight budget His Majesty gave us, we are doing all we can to

make this event successful for you.” I hoped that would make her somewhat happy. I knew how hard it would be for her to entertain such a horrible man.

She made no move to answer me or even acknowledge that I had spoken. Putting down her paintbrush, she stood walking to the other end of the garden where her tea and snacks were still on the table, untouched from the afternoon. Before I could register what she was doing, she started throwing the fragile china on the floor, smashing it to pieces.

“How dare he insult me like this! Not only do I have to entertain and host such a vile man, but now I must do it on my own budget!! Does Father truly wish to see me die!?” She whimpered.

I stood still, not wanting her to turn her attention to me. She took a few deep breaths as she hovered over the table before turning to me.

“Make sure it goes smoothly, or when the King of Andal comes for my head, I’ll give him yours instead.” Venom dripped on her every word.

Without much more to say, she headed back towards the annex on our way in, and we were intercepted by the king’s personal messenger boy. He bowed as he approached Elanora, but the way he stood back up, head held high, looking down his nose at her, I knew he had no respect for the princess.

“Elanora Via Floraden,” he used her full name, which wasn’t a good sign. ” his Highness, King Emerson demands your presence immediately in his private quarters.....please get ready to depart.” He added, looking her up and down.

Without a word to him, Elanora huffed as she called back to me to hurry so I could help her get ready. As we rushed to find her a suitable outfit and do her hair and makeup, I

wondered what could be so urgent the king could not wait to send for a proper audience with the princess.

Chapter 7 (Cora)

It took a little bit of time to freshen up the princess, skipping the formalities of a bath first and only putting on light makeup for how late in the night it was. We took less than an hour to get ready. Elanora's hands shook as we walked towards the awaiting carriage that had just arrived from the main palace.

I was tired from the day I had, running around helping with the preparations, and my body seemed to scream at me as I stepped up into the carriage. All I wanted was to go see my mother and go to bed. Instead, I took my seat, knowing I was going to be in for a long night.

Like the last time, I sat across from Elanora in the carriage. Her leg was bouncing from anxiety, her eyes darting back and forth at the passing landscape. This time though, she gripped the skirt of her dress, her knuckles white from how hard she held on.

Elanora had every right to be anxious the last time we went before the King. He had given her devastating news. God only knew what he wanted this time from her. I prayed he had changed his mind that he would host the King of Andal or the King's visit had been canceled altogether. I prayed not only for Elanora but all those back at the annex awaiting our return with bated breath.

The trip over to the main building seemed much longer this time. Not knowing what to do with my hands as my anxiety built, I unconsciously began to pick at a loose thread on my dress. The silence in the carriage was almost too much to bear, but breaking it would have been worse.

As we pulled up, we were greeted by the King's personal butler, this time. Bowing his head as Princess Elanora stepped off the carriage, taking her hand so she wouldn't trip as she got down. He escorted us to the King's room. As we passed the throne room, we headed up a marble staircase and down a long, carpeted hallway. It was the first time we had ever been past the throne room and led toward the King's personal chambers.

Portraits and statues of the royal family lined this hallway. Their faces seemed almost smug, and to look down at the person looking at them. The eyes of the portraits seemed to follow us, taunting us as we walked by. This hallway may have been a reminder of the nation's founding family. Still, it was a reminder that our princess was not good enough, that we were not good enough to walk these hallways.

We could hear a group's harsh whispering as we turned a corner. We came up on the advisors we had seen the other day. This time even those whose eyes were filled with contempt the other day looked upon Elanora with pity. Their whispering stopped as we passed them and continued turning down another hallway.

The butler stopped in front of two huge oak doors intricately carved with an image of a knight slaying a monster. I had seen this scene before. It was a scene of the first king of Befriel who had slain the King of monsters to take this land and make it the kingdom that we know today. It was imported here from the old palace when Befriel took the kingdom of Salaria and made this domain their new capital. All of it seemed too grand, too intimidating. Besides the throne room, I had never seen such grandeur before.

The butler knocked with two curt knocks; we were greeted with a rough come-in in response. We were quickly ushered into the room by the butler. Taking a moment to glance around before bowing my head, I could see we were in a room substantially bigger than one entire wing of the annex. The King sat in a wingback chair in front of a vast

marble fireplace with two elegant stags carved into each side of it. His face looked like it had aged ten years since we saw him last a couple of days ago.

Quietly I bowed my head staying behind Elanora, as she stepped into the middle of the room a few feet away from his Highness to greet him properly.

“Greetings, your Highness, Keeper of the Brefiel throne, may the sun set upon you.”

Elanora curtsied and bowed her head. With a wave of his hand, he dismissed her greeting as Elanora picked her head up.

“Child, how are the preparations coming along for the King of Andal’s arrival?” his voice was monotone, like he could care less if things were coming along or not.

“Coming along smoothly, your Highness, we were left with no budget to help us prepare, but we are doing everything we can.” Elanora’s voice shook. I could only imagine how much courage it took her to talk back to her father like that.

He seemed to ponder this for a moment before nodding his head. We sat silently as the King seemed to mull over his next thought. Getting up from his chair, he came towards Elanora. He seemed to exude power with every step he took toward her. Gently placing one of his meaty hands on Elanora’s slim shoulder, it seemed to engulf her. I could tell by how rigid her back became that she was trying not to flinch at the sudden contact. This was the first time in Elanora’s twenty-two years of life that the King had ever touched her.

“The king of Andal will be arriving a little later than previously announced, but word has come from his messenger that they are prepared to invade our borders due to a breakdown in our negotiations over a peace treaty he wishes us to sign.”

Putting his other hand on Elanora's other shoulder, he seemed to be holding her in place. She had no room to move as if he was trying to stop her from running before he continued with what he had to say.

"Elanora, my child, our people are starving from the recent droughts plaguing the land. We can not meet his demands monetarily, but we may be able to give him something else to show our good faith in this treaty. A bride." His words seemed to pierce Elanora like a knife. She crumbled to the floor, tears streaming from her eyes. Her screams seemed to bubble out of her as her body began to shake uncontrollably.

Chapter 8 (Cora)

I stood there frozen. The image of Elanora crumbling to her knees, begging her father for mercy, was etched into my mind. That's when Elanora looked at me, her pleading demands subsiding. I could see her thinking of a way to get out of this.

"Please, your majesty, I'll live peacefully in the annex, quiet as a mouse. You'll never hear from me. Please do not send me to that barbarian of man." She clung to her father's robe, trying to persuade him.

"Use that useless wet nurse Maia's daughter instead of me. It's not like anyone knows what I look like." she screeched, pointing a finger at me.

The king's eyes seemed to alight at the mention of my mother's name. My heart began to race as the king looked at me. I didn't want my mother dragged into this, especially if she was excused for being useless. My mother had run the annex for twenty-two years without fail or having to ask for help from the main palace. My mother was anything but useless.

I stood in fear as the king acknowledged my presence for the first time since I had entered the room. His Highness eyed me up and down as if appraising a new piece of livestock. Taking a small step towards me, I could hear him muttering to himself about how it may just work. I couldn't comprehend what was going on. How could he even entertain the idea of me replacing a Princess to marry a foreign king?

“you're the daughter of Maia. How you've grown.” there was an odd twinkle in his eye as he mentioned my mother's name.

“Yes, your majesty.”

“Don't be shy, girl. What is your name?” his tone had gone from desperate talking about marriage to inquisitive about my mother and me.

“Cora, your majesty.” I sputtered with all of the courage I had.

How is your mother? I didn't see her at the annual feast last month.” His line of questioning didn't make any sense to me. Why would he care about a mere wet nurse?

She's ill, your Highness, but when a doctor can visit her, I know she'll make a full recovery. ”

I didn't want him to know how sick she was. I didn't want him to kick her out of the annex for being a useless servant. Nodding his head, he sighed as if saddened by the news of Mother.

“My daughter wishes for you to take her place as the King of Andals bride. A much better position for you than a mere personal maid. You'd be a queen.”

His attempt to twist the fact that marriage to such a man would be a death sentence would have been comical if it wasn't now my death sentence. My knees became weak, and the

room began to spin, but I refused to show weakness in front of him and Elanora. If his majesty ordered me to marry the king of Andal, there was no way I could refuse. To refuse would be treason.

“Yes, your majesty, it would be.” my voice shook as I held back my tears.

“Father, she has also studied alongside me. She knows how to conduct herself in a royal court not only as a servant but as nobility too. It wouldn’t take much to teach her all of the proper etiquette one would need to serve a king as his wife.” Elanora piped up as she realized her ridiculous outburst was working.

The king continued to nod, agreeing with Elanora as if her idea was the most brilliant thing he had heard all night. My vision became blurry as realization hit me. I could feel my world crashing down around me. I had nowhere to run, and my fate was sealed. My head hurt, and my body felt like it was shrinking. Everything felt too tight on me.

Rubbing my arms, I tried to bring myself back to reality. As I looked up, I could see both His Majesty and Elanora standing, looking delighted at the turn of events.

With a clap of her hands, she went from looking like a woman about to be hung to a little girl on her birthday awaiting her presents. She started to ramble on about how much there was to plan and what needed to be done.

“My mother,” I mumbled, trying to find my voice.

“Please, your majesty, if I do this, will you promise to care for my mother?” I asked, trying to talk around the lump in my throat.

If my life had to be forsaken for this kingdom, at least I could save my mothers’. I wouldn’t beg for my life or mercy, but I would beg for her life. A look of compassion as I spoke of my mother briefly crossed the king’s face.

“By you standing in for Elanora, you are not only helping her but also stopping our nation from going into a war we can not possibly win. I will personally see to it that Maia is taken good care of.” His words did little to reassure me of my fate and my mother’s fate.

Trying to control my shaking, I thanked him, bowing my head in gratitude for his promise to take care of my mother. He dismissed us after telling Elanora that the financial advisor would send a message for a new budget for the time the King of Andal would stay with us. So we could take care of the wedding plans.

Once inside the carriage, my mind seemed to realize the situation I had been dragged into. My thoughts seemed to bounce all over the place, from who would take care of my mother to telling the staff and my mother about my upcoming wedding to what Elanora would need before I left.

When I had imagined my wedding when I was little, I thought I would marry a citizen or maybe another palace servant, someone I loved surrounded by family and friends. Instead, I would marry a rumored psychopath surrounded by political figureheads and people I considered my enemy. Hopefully, my new husband would be too busy killing nobility and starting wars to even realize I was there. One could only hope.