

Ellie had started the day like any other day. She had woken up and gone to the palace kitchens to help bake fresh bread and rolls. After helping the kitchen staff, she went to Queen Narissa's rooms.

"I'm here to clean your room, Majesty." She knocked gently on the door. It would not do to disturb her Majesty in her old age.

"Come in," A withered voice called from within.

Ellie put her calloused hand from days of hard labor onto the door handle and opened. The door didn't squeak or groan even though it looked like it should. Giving it a dubious look, Ellie walked into the chambers. The Queen was sitting on a throne of blankets, her tea held delicately in her withering hands, and her lips painted a blood red.

Ellie walked to the Queen's bed and curtsied. She refused to implicate her family because she dared not show respect. Though it's not like this Queen ever deserved it, as far as Ellie can remember, before the King took over for his mother, the court and citizens had been fearful of this Queen's wrath. Her family had fallen from the Ducal claim they held. She would never forget the moment her father and mother had broken down crying in front of her. They had been banished from their home and were lucky they had a small townhouse they had purchased for themselves beforehand. The only thing Ellie's family was allowed to keep.

"You may rise." The Queen sniffed in disdain. "Not like that was a good curtsy for someone who used to be from a Duke's household anyway. Good thing we don't expect much from you."

Ellie refrained from rolling her eyes. For years, since her family's fall from nobility, she's heard nothing but sneering comments from this Queen. She could only hope the King would marry someone soon to shut this old bat up.

As if summoned by Ellie's wishful thinking, the trumpets announcing the King's arrival sounded. The Queen stood from the throne of blankets and rushed past Ellie, knocking her to the ground with a sneer. Ellie stayed there until the Queen left and then continued with her cleaning. At least this way, she could do her job in peace for once.

Later that day, before Ellie was to help in the kitchens for teatime, she was summoned. It's not like she hasn't been summoned before, but back then, it was when she was in an engagement to the King, then her family lost their status, and of course, the Queen couldn't have her precious son marry a commoner, so Ellie's engagement ended then, too. She always knew the Queen was wicked but didn't realize how wicked until the King assigned her to help take care of his ailing mother. Ellie is one of the only ones to know the Queen only has a year left to live anyway.

So lost in thoughts of the past, Ellie didn't realize she had arrived at the throne room until a throat clearing alerted her from her trance.

Startled, Ellie glanced up and offered a soft smile, "Hi, Theo."

Theo, the King's personal guard, had been there since the three were little. Even though Theo came from a Baron's family, his family was in good standing with the royal family due to their extreme loyalty to the crown. His family was also one of the only ones that never believed the claims against her family. Growing up, Theo had always been like an older brother to Ellie. He was there to clean her cuts when the Queen raged and whipped her, he brought her medicine when she got ill from overwork, and he was the one who helped make sure her family stayed fed when the Queen tried shorting them their money. All under the nose of the King, for why would he believe anything wicked that his mother did? She was good at putting on a mask.

“He's ready whenever you decide to go in, Ellie.” Theo prompted. “You're not in trouble this time.”

Ellie let out the breath she didn't realize she was holding. It was rare when she wasn't in trouble. Not that she did anything wrong, but it's not like the King ever believed her. Which is sad since he's known her since childhood. But who's to say what the Queen has poisoned his mind with.

Steeling her nerves, Ellie nodded once to Theo and walked through the doors. The throne room was large with tall, gilded ceilings and stained-glass windows depicting landscapes of the king's hunting ground and how the royal family came to rule. In front of Ellie were the two golden thrones, one where the King was sitting and the other where a young woman was perched, sewing and exasperatedly waving her hands around in sign occasionally.

“Ellie!” The king grinned at her. “I'm so glad you could come on such short notice.”

Ellie snorted unladylike. “It's not like you give me much notice, Highness. I do work for you.”

The King just grinned wider if possible. “Please, Ellie. I've told you before, and I'll tell you again. You don't have to address me so formally. It's Sirius for you. It's always been Sirius.”

Her eyes rolled so hard she's surprised they didn't fall out and roll away. “Sure, Sirius, so I can just get in trouble again for not addressing you correctly in front of your mother and the council? No thanks.”

“You just did!”

“Sorry, your royal Highness, I have no idea what you're talking about.”

Sirius rolled his eyes and changed the topic. It's always been a losing battle with her on addressing him by his name. He knows it's partly due to him not fighting to remain his, and partially due to his mother. He'd never admit that outlook, though.

“Anyways, Ellie,” he gestured to the woman next to him. “Meet my new wife. I don't know her name, but she's very sweet. Also, super quiet.”

Ellie raised an eyebrow and gestured to the woman frantically waving her hands again. “She said her name's Celia. She's been trying to tell you this whole time.”

Sirius stood up and gaped at her. Very unhinged, like. “How do you know what she's saying? Can you read minds?”

Ellie just gave him a don't look. For a King, he's never been very bright. “No, you clotpole, she's been signing this whole time when not sewing. She's also been trying to tell you her brothers are cursed, and she can't talk as part of the reason to break the curse.”

Sirius glanced between the two and nodded. “That's it, I've decided.”

“Decided what?”

“Ellie, you're going to be Celia's lady in waiting and help her learn the ways of the court here.”

“What? No.”

“You can't refuse me, I'm the king! You're her lady in waiting, congrats! Someone will take over for you, and you'll help Celia immediately. Congrats, Ellie!”

If it hadn't been so disrespectful, Ellie would've made a rude gesture at him, but she refrained for once. “Sure, I suppose. You wouldn't give me a choice anyway. Can I go home now?”

Sirius waved her away and walked back to Celia. “Have a good night, Ellie. You start early tomorrow, so be prepared.”

Ellie was not in fact prepared. She had stayed up late the night before and met a strange but handsome man. He had randomly shown up as Ellie was sitting in the family garden of their townhouse. She watched the moonflowers sway in the night breeze as the full moon shone down, bathing her in an ethereal glow. Her thoughts were stuck on the Queen, Celia, whom she had met previously. Celia had been signing that she was pregnant and needed help telling the King. Although Ellie didn’t think that was her place to say anything.

“Silver for your thoughts?” A deep rumbling voice interrupted her thoughts.

Ellie startled and glanced behind her. Standing there was probably the most handsome man she had ever seen. He was tall with dark hair and glowing silver eyes. If love at first sight were real, then Ellie would swear she had fallen in love.

“How did you get into my garden?” Ellie gestured around her.

The man pointed behind him. “Your gate was open, and I couldn’t help but notice your beauty as I walked past. So,” He gestured to sit next to her, Ellie dipped her head. He sat. “I’ll ask again, silver for your thoughts?”

Ellie debated answering him before deciding it couldn’t hurt; it’s not like she’d see him again. So, she told him everything, from how her family fell from grace with the wrongful accusations of the Old withering Queen and the end of her engagement to Sirius. To how now she served his mother and now his new wife. She went on to tell him about what the new queen was saying and how she had to help her navigate the court.

The man sat there staring at the moonflowers before gazing up at the sky again. “I think you should tell the king, let him know she’s trying to tell him that. I also think the new queen could use a friend in this foreign land she’s in. She might be hoping you can be that person who can help her communicate with her new husband and extend the hand of friendship. Maybe she’s also hoping you can help her break the curse on her brothers.” He shrugged. “But what do I know, I’m just the stranger you met in your garden.”

Ellie sat and thought for a moment on what the stranger had said. Maybe he was right? Maybe she should help the new queen, no, Celia, with her dilemma. Tomorrow, she would talk to Celia and ask her about everything. Get to know her better as a friend.

Right as Ellie was about to tell the stranger this, he stood and left. No goodbye, nothing, just a quick sprint out of the garden and around the corner, followed by the squawk of a swan. Ellie stood with a sigh and walked in. She didn’t think she would be seeing him again. If only she got his name so she could look for him later.

As mentioned, Ellie wasn’t prepared. She wasn’t prepared for Celia to grip her arm in panic and say she was going into labor. She wasn’t prepared for the doctors to come storming in and push her out. She wasn’t prepared for two hours later when she heard the cries of the three babies, or when they were declared missing, not even a minute after. If she had been prepared, maybe she would have noticed the signs ahead of time.

“I will ask once more, Ellie, what happened?” Sirius paced around the room, Celia lying in her bed, sobbing silently as she continued to sew. Ellie could see now that it was belts, she was making.

“I’ve already told you, your highness, I don’t know what happened. One second, we were talking, and the next she was saying she was in labor!” Ellie roughly tugged her hands through her hair. They had been over this five times already.

“I don’t understand how my children could be missing Ellie! You were right there. It’s your job to watch over Celia.”

“That’s a little hard to do when I get thrown from the room by your supposed doctors,” she snapped, gesturing around them at said doctors. “They said they couldn’t do their job with me in the way. If I had to say, I would think they would be told by your mother to make sure I wasn’t around.”

Sirius’ face turned cold. “Leave my mother out of this and get out. From this moment on, we no longer require your services.”

Ellie stood straight and tightened her lips. “As you wish your Highness. But don’t come crying to me when you realize how your mother was probably involved.” She turned to Celia. “I’m sorry this happened to you, My Lady. The only advice I can give you is stay away from his mother as long as possible and don’t trust anyone but Theo.” She turned on her heel and started towards the door.

“Be grateful I’m not throwing you in prison for your treasonous words Ellie,” Sirius called from her retreating figure.

Ellie gave him the rude gesture she’s been dying for and left.

Later that night, saw Ellie in her garden staring at the moonflowers again and trying hard not to sob. She had finally been making a friend when this happened. She didn’t know Sirius and Celia had been married for almost two years at this point. He had been hiding her in secret for

fear of what his mother would say, but then he finally decided to bring her to the castle when she was pregnant. But it took almost eight months to get there from where she was hidden.

“What saddens you, sweet face?” The man from the night before was back.

“Oh, it’s you,” She hiccupped, wiping a tear away. She told him everything that happened, including her suspicions of what the Old Queen had done.

His face was cold when she finally looked at him. “You're not wrong, Ellie.” He finally said. “I saw the Old queen pay the doctors to have the babies hidden so Celia would get kicked out, along with you.” He turned his face to her and gripped her hands. “Tomorrow, go to the abandoned house outside of town. I’ll meet you there, and we can get the babies together.” He stood once more and left.

Ellie stared after him, wiping the last of her tears away. She stood and entered her house. Tomorrow, she would meet him. She would rescue the babies and maybe finally get his name.

Tomorrow came sooner than Ellie expected. She got up and dressed in her black leather suit she had made when she was learning sword training a few years previously. Before they lost their old titles and home. The suit still fit her.

Ellie left her home and started towards the meeting spot. Upon arriving, she noticed a swan standing there. The strangest thing was that it had the same eyes as the man who had met the past two nights. Not seeing the man, Ellie crept towards the house and peeked in a window. There was no one inside except for three sleeping babes. Ellie gasped and ran into the house.

The babies, thankfully, were alive. Ellie quickly got to work and tied the babies to her with their blankets. Just as she got the last one settled, she heard the swan make a warning call. Ellie turned and saw the Old Queen standing there.

“I can’t let you ruin this for me.” The Queen spat, striding towards her. “You ruined it for me once before; I refuse to allow you to do it again.”

Ellie furrowed her brow and took a step back. “What are you talking about?”

The Queen let out a chilling laugh. “Don’t give me that, you ruined it with my son all those years ago. If it wasn’t for you, he would’ve let me kill your entire family. They were the only ones who questioned where I had gotten all the gold from, blaming me for laundering it. But today, today you and those children die.” The Old Queen launched at Ellie with a dagger.

Ellie dodged and grabbed a pan sitting on the table. She couldn’t fight like this, but she could defend. She smacked the dagger away and raised the pan. Before she could do anything, a foot came down on the old queen, kicking her to the ground. The Old Queen screamed in rage but couldn’t get up. Her body was too weak. With another angry shout, she slumped to the ground, dead.

Ellie didn’t pay attention to that, though; she was busy looking at the man before her. It was the same man who visited her and told her to meet him here. The only thing that didn’t match was the swan wing dangling from his side. He noticed Ellie glancing at it.

“My sister didn’t get to complete my chain in the belt before the curse was up.” He gave a forlorn smile. “Though then again, maybe this is what I deserve for my foolishness that got me cursed in the first place.”

Ellie reached out and gripped his shoulder, pulling him into a hug. “I disagree. I think it’s a badge of honor for all the hardship you’ve gone through.”

The man stilled before breaking down in Ellie’s arms, crying. “Thank you.” He sobbed.

Ellie just shushed him and rubbed his back, being careful of the babies still strapped to her.

After a bit, he stood back from her and grazed her cheek with his wing.

“I never got your name,” Ellie mentioned as they left the house.

He smiled a blinding smile and turned to her. “It’s Draconis.”

Ellie smiled and slipped her hand into his as they walked back to the castle. “Glad to finally meet you, Draconis.”

When they arrived back at the castle, Theo led them to the King and Queen. There, they explained everything, and Celia was finally able to talk. She broke down crying and explained how her father and mother cursed her family, turning her brothers into swans, and she would be the only one to save them by completing the belt in three years and staying silent for that long. Sirius was glad to have his family together again and, finally believing that his mother was evil, restored Ellie’s family to their Ducal house.

Ellie was just glad everything turned out ok in the end. The highlight for her with all this was being able to marry Draconis and have their little girl.