

CHAPTER SIX  
*A Celebration and a Curse*

Caityn laughed as Gavin regaled her with stories of his recent travels with her betrothed. His alignment of storytelling to dancing was perfect. Something horrifying or exciting was about to happen every time they separated during the dance. The suspense was exasperating and amusing to her, especially since Gavin always came back with another maddeningly ridiculous ending.

At the conclusion of the dance number they bowed to each other. The necklace Caityn had tucked in the bodice of her dress had come loose from its hiding place during the dance, and it hung between them. The candlelight glinted off the gold's shiny finish and Gavin reached out and grasped it.

"What is this pretty thing around your neck?"

"Oh, 'tis nothing." She took it from his inquisitive fingers and slipped it back into the bodice of her gown. At the same time, she used her other hand to hold onto his now empty one.

His raised eyebrows displayed mock suspicion. "Nothing, you say? Then why do you hide a man's ring there?"

Caityn, recognizing Gavin's teasing and apparent curiosity, decided it would be for the best to explain it to him before he pestered her about it all night.

"Come out on the terrace with me. I need to cool off, and I'll gladly explain this ring to you."

Gavin bowed low over her hand which he still held. He then proceeded to tuck it through the crook of his arm.

"I obey your every command, my lady."

Caityn laughed again. The cousins walked to the railing where they stood in the cool, late spring air, while she explained Bimala's request to him under the shimmering night sky.

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Eliya observed Gavin and Caityn's exchange from a distance. She couldn't hear a word being said but their intimately close relationship was unmistakable. Livid, she watched them walk onto the terrace together, sure she'd just witnessed evidence of Caityn's beguilement and deceit with her own eyes.

Theiandar had escorted Eliya to the table to give her a chance to rest. While he danced with Queen Ismene, Eliya sat at the table, incensed over what she viewed as horrid deception. Not only had Caityn flirted openly with one of Theiandar's guardsmen, but the temptress was wearing his ring around her neck! *The lying betrayer! Oh! And to think I found him handsome and dashing!* A scowl screwed up her otherwise pretty face.

The doddering stranger had been right all along, and Eliya was the only one who could save her brother from marrying this deceiver. She knew she had to act without delay. She took a quick drink of wine to solidify her determination. Eliya pulled the tiny vial from her pocket and held it tightly in her hand. She sat there, refusing dances as she stared at Caityn promenading around the room, flirting with what seemed like countless men for the next two hours.

Finally, with the resolve of a mother bear, she approached Caityn with a spiked glass of wine and held it out to her. "Here, Caityn. You've been dancing a great deal, and you look parched. Drink this, and I think you'll feel revived." Eliya held her breath.

Caityn considered the glass then smiled at Eliya. She took it from Eliya's outstretched hand with a look of gratitude. "Thank you, Eliya. I am thirsty." She tipped the glass back and drained its contents.

Eliya expelled a gush of air and took the glass back, nodding in reply to Caityn's thanks. Without a word, she headed back to the table as if in a trance.

*Did I really do that? Did I really poison my brother's betrothed? The man said it was only a sleeping potion, but what do I really know of him other than what he told me? What if . . .* Eliya did not want to consider what she'd done. She went in search of her mother. When she found Queen Zoe, she begged leave to retire for the night.

"I'm sorry you are unwell, dear. Of course, you should go and get your rest. The wedding is tomorrow, and I'm sure you'll want to feel your best."

Her mother's embrace and well wishes were lost on Eliya, and she couldn't quite return the gesture. Guilt already seeped into her soul. She floated from the room in a daze. She couldn't bring herself to linger there and witness the effects of her handiwork.

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Caityn gripped the arm of her dance partner as she felt herself falling to the side.

"Highness, are you well?"

His concern was obvious, but his voice sounded far away. Woozy, she reached for her temple.

"Hmm? Oh . . . what?" She shook her head, trying to clear the cobwebs and steady her vision. "Yes. I think I am, but maybe I've had too much wine. Please help me to sit down for a moment."

"Certainly, Princess." He led her to a chair and, with great care, helped lower her to the seat.

Caityn tried to steady her eyes but was unable to bring anything into focus. Another man came to stand by the knight she'd been dancing with, but she recognized his muffled voice. It was her cousin Gavin.

"Caity?"

"Oh Gav, is that you? I might have had too . . . uh, too much to drink. Pl-please help m-m-me to m-my room?"

The words floated around in her head like little clouds, and she couldn't be sure she'd actually said what she was thinking. All she knew for sure was that she needed to retire. She was so very tired.

Gavin pulled her to her feet but the fading room spun, leaving her off-kilter.

He said to the other man, "Let Queen Zoe as well as Prince Theiandar know the princess is retiring and that I'm escorting her to her room."

They made it out into the hallway, but Caityn's consciousness was fading. She could feel the pressure of Gavin's body with one arm wrapped around her waist and his other gripping hers to keep her upright.

She tripped on a rug, and the next thing she knew Gavin lifted her up into his arms, her vision spinning like a top. She rested her head against his shoulder, and squeezed her eyes closed.

"I'm s-sorry, Gav. I-I've never been d-drunk before. I feel awful. Mmm . . . so sl-sleepy."

But with that, the darkness consumed her and she felt nothing more.

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Theiandar was concerned as he watched Gavin lead what looked like an inebriated Caityn from the great hall. He was too distracted to pay attention to what the chancellor was saying about possible war with the Crescent Cave Nation. He watched Kasen approach and focused on his body language. The young soldier bowed low.

"My Lord, I'm sorry to interrupt, but Princess Caityn was overtaxed and ready to retire. Sir Gavin wanted that I should tell you not to worry, and he would escort her to her chamber."

"Thank you, Kasen."

The soldier bowed again before walking away. Theiandar tried to return his mind to the older men's conversation but gave up, excusing himself to catch up with Gavin and Caityn.

He proceeded down the hall and stopped at the bottom of the stairs when he saw Gavin descending. “Is Cait all right?”

“Yes, Raz, sir. She’s fine . . . I think. It would seem she was drunk.” He shook his head with a look of confusion. “Tis strange, though, since Caity has never been one to drink much at all. She enjoys a little bit of wine, but I’ve never known her to be drunk on it.”

“How strange. Maybe ‘tis the excitement of tomorrow making her nervous and causing her to lose track of how much she’d had to drink.” Theiandar’s remark was more of a question than a statement.

“At any rate, thank you for your care of her.”

“Of course, Sire. Not only is she my cousin, she’s my friend.” They headed out to the barracks. “Caity and I grew up together, causing all kinds of trouble for her older brother, Adair. Of course, now their brother, Brennan, has taken on the role of impish younger sibling and performs the duty well!”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Midnight Visitor*

The maid tucked the blanket around Caityn and extinguished the lamp. She shook her head with a rueful smile for the sleeping princess. Even though Princess Caityn seemed dead to the world, there were still signs of life in her intermittent snores.

It had been a bear of a task for the maid to maneuver the princess into her night clothes. After considerable exertion and one last tuck of the covers, the maid exited the chamber with an amused expression on her face.

The chamber, awash in the amber glow from the crackling fire, remained still for quite some time. He moved, a stealthy shadow emerging from the dark, hidden space behind the window curtain and slunk noiselessly across the cold stone floor and intricate rugs. The deeper darkness created by his grotesque shadow loomed large and foreboding.

The silent intruder stopped next to the bed, climbed with great care onto the coverings, and looked down upon Caityn with an adoration he could not conceal. She slept on in a helpless stupor, while evil desires radiated from his dark presence, and knowing that no one was aware of his invasion here caused a brief, triumphant laugh to escape his lips.

His slithery-smooth voice whispered into Caityn's ear. "Sweet Princess, I must thank you for being so beautiful, but mostly for your heart. Oh, I am beyond myself with excitement to obtain the beauty resting within! I could see it years ago, and now is the perfect moment to take it for myself. Your beauty upon beauty will be the best I have ever had and will surely bring me youth for one thousand years!" At this thought, the thing—this 'he'—clasped his hands together in blissful abandon, raising them over his head in a motion of praise.

He wrapped a lock of her unruly, soft hair around his crooked finger and brought it to his nose. He inhaled as though smelling the sweet fragrance of a rose, then drew the silken strands across his cheek, smirking as the satiny softness caressed his face.

"It was quite easy to convince that silly, jealous girl to administer the sleeping potion. Ha! Too easy, really! All it took was for a seed of doubt to be planted in her mind. Doubt is a powerful tool, my dear. Soon it took root in her heart. I am master of hearts, you know. Now, with a scant three weeks left before I can perform my ritual, I will have everything I need to own your heart, the very marrow of your being, and live fifteen more lifetimes!"

He released her hair with a flick of his wrist, and it landed across her face. With a crooked smile to match his crooked hands, he jumped from the bed and padded over to the satchel he'd left behind the curtain. The unnatural man slung it over his arm and went to sit by the fire. From the bag, he pulled a long, gold chain with an amulet shaped like a heart. It was half the size of a normal man's palm, and at the center of its intricate design was a minuscule glass chamber.

The chamber was empty, but the sinister man knew that after completing his task, it would be full of the crimson liquid of her true beauty. Experiencing the renewed knowledge of this left him elated and almost giddy. To steal this much beauty! It had been two hundred years since he'd last done it, but when he found *her*, this love she had in her heart, he knew it was worth the wait. He'd been right to choose this one, to remain in the shadows, anticipating the time when her love would deepen and mature into the purest possible form, as it was at this exact moment.

The anticipation of it caused him to fumble the amulet, but before it could touch the floor, he grasped it to his chest and sighed. "Clumsy, clumsy me! Be careful, dolt! Ha! I am talking to myself. You, Princess," he said as he approached the bed once again. "You will not remember any of this. In

fact, your sleep is deathly deep, and you will remember nothing at all—not even the pain I will give to you as my gift in return for the one you give me this night.”

He climbed up on the bed and straddled Caityn’s hips. The little man stared down at her face. He couldn’t help himself; he had to touch her. It wasn’t enough to look at her. He allowed his fingers to slither over the curve of her forehead . . . along her eyebrows . . . down her nose . . . across her parted lips . . . over her smooth chin, until his physical memorization of her features ended at her throat.

His hands came to rest on her neck as though he would choke her, but instead he let go. Using both hands, he pressed the amulet down upon her chest. He grinned and all his jagged teeth shone bright in the dim light as a red glow emanated from the amulet’s center. His whispered words were uttered from behind clenched teeth. He didn’t flinch, even as the edges of the amulet burned into his palms and her chest like a branding iron.

Caityn never stirred, and after the ritual was complete, he gingerly placed the chain around his neck and crawled down from the bed. He shuffled back to the chair, pulled strips of cloth from his sack, and wrapped them around his seared hands. It was almost impossible to keep the hushed gasps from escaping his lips with each pass of the cloth. Still, it wasn’t as bad as the first time he’d accomplished this task—more than a thousand years and many maidens ago.

He lifted the amulet in his throbbing fingers and admired the red glow.

Time stood still for him, and what seemed like no more than a few minutes in this position had actually been much more. The thief let his eyes roam to the window and noticed that soon the sun would rise. How did the time pass so quickly?

He wasted no more of it. It took effort to ignore the pain in his hands and sling his satchel on his back. Once he’d accomplished the simple task, though, he walked back to the bed. He looked at the peacefully sleeping Caityn. “I thank you again, Princess, for I think I might have almost been too late. Another year later and that stupid prince would have ruined this beauty! He might have broken this love, and I certainly couldn’t abide such a thing, now could I?”

His anger, brought on by thoughts of the high prince, melted into a disturbing grin as he stared at her. “Oh, he won’t be likely to interfere now! I have your pure, sweet love, and its power is mine!” He hated her even as he thanked her, and then he slunk out the window the same way he’d come, climbing down the wall with spider-like ease.