

A photograph of Cayla Kluver in a wedding dress, sitting on a bed of leaves. She is wearing a multi-strand pearl necklace and a silver bracelet. The image is framed by ornate, golden scrollwork.

CAYLA KLUVER

"I recommend you get this book
in your hands as soon as possible."

—*Teen Trend* magazine

LEGACY

Awards for *Legacy*

- Bronze medalist in the 2008 Moonbeam Children's Book Awards for Young Adult Fiction
- Finalist in two categories in the National Best Books Awards 2008 sponsored by *USA Book News*
- First place winner (reviewer's choice) in the Reader Views Literary Awards 2008 for Young Adult Fiction
- Young Voices Foundation book of the month for January 2009

Praise for *Legacy*

"*Legacy* follows the joys and dramas of a young girl navigating her way out of the safe harbors of childhood and into the uncertain and difficult waters of adulthood. The first in a trilogy, *Legacy* is simple but effective, succeeding largely on the author's ability to craft a sympathetic and human character in Alera.... A thoroughly entertaining read, *Legacy* shows a lot of promise, for Kluver and her princess."

—*Miami Herald*

"Alera's sensitivity and willfulness will win readers over who will sympathize as her choices dwindle. A looming war, characters with intriguingly hidden pasts, and a sad ending set things up nicely for a sequel."

—*Booklist Online*

"Anyone who says teens can't write should meet 16-year-old Cayla Kluver.... Kluver's writing is impressive, fluid and focuses heavily on social customs and deep, complex characters; the skill of the writing and the resulting story make *Legacy* one book that any fantasy fan should pick up at the earliest opportunity."

—*Cleveland Literature Examiner*

"If you're looking for a richly painted tapestry of words, a fantasy sort of book written as if Jane Austen were still alive and had decided to write fantasies involving princesses, then you're sure to love *Legacy*."

—*Curled Up With a Good Kid's Book*, Five Stars

"I enthusiastically encourage readers young and old alike to sample the nuanced richness of Cayla Kluver's *Legacy*—it is both humbling and heartening for this reviewer to encounter tale-craft and youth blended so well in a debut novel."

—*Bookideas.com*, Perfect 10!

"I swear, once you start reading this book, you can't stop. It's SO good. The book ended with me wanting more! I can't wait 'til *Allegiance* comes out!"

—*BookLover* (lizdoglover.blogspot.com), 5.0—The Best EVER!

"Well-paced and well-written, *Legacy* has passages of idyllic prose, tensions between lovers, and a powerful narrative in the description of a tournament battle.... But there are enough story threads left hanging to ensure that book two, *Allegiance*, will be a fitting sequel and to ensure Cayla Kluver's legacy as a stellar author and storyteller."

—*ForeWord Clarion Reviews*, Five Stars

"With likeable characters and vivid details, this is an engrossing story for young adults.... Kluver's grasp of language, dialogue and character development shows that she is as promising as her heroine"

—*Renaissance Magazine*

“*Legacy* is a breathtakingly beautiful story about one girl’s struggle to overcome the expectations of kingdom and find her own happiness.... Full of political struggle, duty, legends, brilliant characters and beautiful prose, *Legacy* will leave readers wanting more.”

—*Chick Lit Teens* (www.chicklitteens.com)

“First let me just say wow. I am in love with this book and with Cayla’s beautiful writing.... I am so impressed with the storyline, it kept me on the edge of my seat. I loved the descriptive details, which helped me imagine the life of Princess Alera.... *Legacy* is a mix of *King Arthur* and *Romeo and Juliet* in a way. I honestly will say it’s now on my top 5 favorite books with *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*.”

—*La Femme Readers* (lafemmereaders.blogspot.com)

“Cayla Kluver, the sixteen-year-old author of *Legacy*, is truly brilliant. Her eloquent dialogue and cleverly plotted tale of kings and queens, romance and deceit will keep you turning the pages and wanting more.”

—*Families Matter* (familiesmatter2us.blogspot.com)

CAYLA KLUVER
LEGACY



This book is dedicated to Mom, Nina, and Grandma Frances,
who would have loved every moment.

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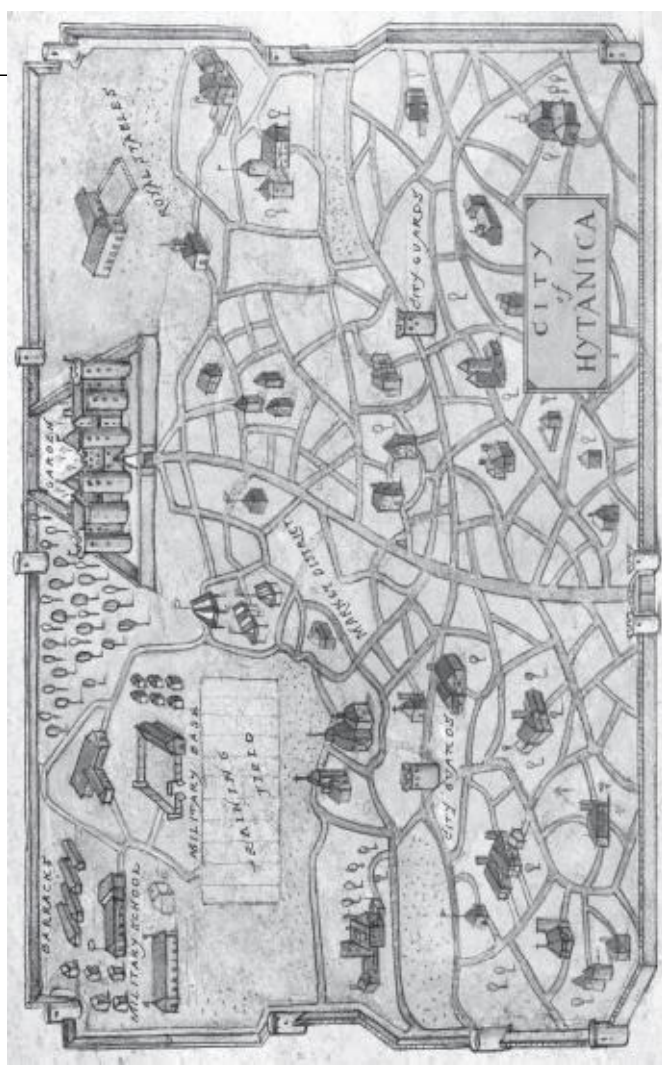
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MAPS





PROLOGUE

THE FIRST BOY DISAPPEARED ON THE DAY OF HIS birth, on a night when the pale yellow moon that ruled the sky turned red and bathed the heavens in the ghastly color of blood, the same night the Empire of Cokyri abruptly ceased its merciless attack.

Across the land of Hytanica, in the villages, infant boys continued to vanish. King Adrik turned his blind eye foolishly, seeking no explanation, for he needed to refortify his kingdom's defenses in case Cokyri resumed its brutal onslaught. But when children inside the city's walls began to disappear, he was forced to take notice. A count was made of the number missing, but before he could determine what action should be taken, the disappearances stopped. The last Hytanican child to vanish was the newborn son of a wealthy baron and baroness.

Within the week, as the bleeding moon waned, the bodies of the infants were found outside the gates of the city, a final word from the greatest enemy Hytanica had ever known. Grieving parents collected the rotting remains of their sons, but there was one mystery that would for many years remain unsolved. Forty-nine babies were taken, but only forty-eight bodies were returned.

No one knew why the Cokyrians had withdrawn from the land or why they had not been able to destroy Hytanica and her people. The Cokyrians were superior to the Hytanicans as fighters and strategists and did not adhere to any code of honor in war, but still Hytanica had not fallen. Some thought they had abandoned the effort out of frustration, for they had many times been poised to win only to once again lose ground; others thought the Cokyrian rulers had finally accepted the ancient story of Hytanica's conception.

According to lore, the first King of Hytanica, seeking to protect his foundling home, had been advised by his priests that a sacrifice of blood both royal and innocent would hallow the ground and make his kingdom invincible. After much soul-searching, the King had taken the life of his own infant son and placed drops of the boy's blood at each corner of the land to forever shield the people he loved.

I was born shortly before the end of the war, a Princess of Hytanica, my parents' first heir. As my people settled into a long-awaited time of peace, learning to lead normal lives once more, I was brought before them and grew to be a young woman, living with a freedom the war-torn generations before me had never known. All such things must come to an end, however, and that is where my story begins.

CHAPTER 1

THE OBVIOUS CHOICE

“I THINK I’M GOING TO VOMIT.”

I paced in front of the barren fireplace that spanned most of one wall in my parlor, clasping and unclasping my hands. My younger sister, Princess Miranna, had retired to her quarters after breathlessly assuring me I would have a lovely evening, but then, she was much more enamored with the man I would be meeting for dinner tonight than I was. Now it was only London, my bodyguard and a member of the King’s Elite Guard, waiting with me in the richly furnished room.

“You’re not going to vomit, Alera. Just try to relax,” London advised, one eyebrow raised in bemusement. He picked up a book from the table beside the burgundy velvet sofa and began to leaf through it.

“How can I possibly eat?” I asked, my voice sounding shrill even to my own ears. “I don’t think I can go through with this.”

“It’s going to be fine. He’s just another suitor, and like the rest of them, he has to impress *you*, not the other way around. Besides, as far as I can tell, you have no real interest in him, so I don’t know why you’re working yourself into such a state.”

“You don’t understand! If something goes wrong tonight, Father is going to be so disappointed.”

“Well, unless you’ve made plans to marry Steldor that I don’t know about, you’re going to disappoint your father in the long run no matter what.”

I stopped pacing and faced London, who had set the book back on the table and was now leaning against the tapes-tried wall by the door, arms crossed over his muscular frame. Unruly silver bangs fell across his forehead, contrasting sharply with his deep-set indigo eyes, which were fixed upon me in anticipation of a response. I fumbled for one; every moment I could feel the noose of my impending marriage growing tighter. With my seventeenth birthday just around the corner, a betrothal would soon be arranged, with or without my approval of the gentleman. The idea that Steldor might be the gentleman...

“But I can’t stand him. How can I spend the whole evening with him?”

“It’s just one evening. You can survive one evening.” London hesitated, then teasingly added, “Besides, he may just win you over. I’m not one to underestimate the power of a romantic stroll in the garden.”

“Please say he won’t expect that of me!”

I stared at him, unable to find humor in such an awful possibility, and he tried to alleviate the worry he had inadvertently created.

“If he does, tell him you’re feeling ill and that you must return to your quarters at once. He can’t argue with that.”

I sank into one of the plush armchairs that stood near the hearth, buried my head in my hands, and moaned. My father, King Adrik, had arranged for this dinner between Lord Steldor and me, for he felt Steldor was better suited to be his successor than anyone else in the kingdom. As the heir to the throne, I was to marry on that basis alone, for it was my husband, not I, who would come to rule Hytanica.

Even I had to admit that Steldor was the obvious choice. Three and a half years older than I, he was the son of Cannan, the Captain of the Guard, and had one year ago become a military field command

at the young age of nineteen. He was charming, intelligent and strong, with stunning good looks, but I had disliked him from the moment we had met.

A rap on the door interrupted my thoughts, and London stepped into the corridor while I fretfully plucked strands of my brown hair free of its upswept style.

“We’d better go,” he said upon reentering, and I slowly rose from the chair. “I have just been informed that Steldor is waiting for you in the Grand Entry.”

London opened the door for me, and we left my parlor to walk through the second-floor corridors of the Royal Residence toward the spiral staircase at the rear of the palace. In addition to my quarters and those of my sister and parents, the residence included a library, a family dining room, a kitchen and a visitor’s parlor. The Royal Ballroom and the King’s Dining Hall were the only areas on the second floor that were used for public events.

We descended the stairs, emerging into a lantern-lit corridor, and London offered his arm to escort me toward the palace’s main entrance. As we walked, I hardly glanced at the intricate tapestries that adorned the walls, for my attention was drawn to the end of the hall where Steldor awaited me. Supporting himself with his left hand on the wall, he was flipping a dagger over and over in his right hand, impeccably positioned for maximum visual effect.

“Have fun,” London said glibly, stopping midway down the passage, for my handsome dinner companion had noticed my approach.

“You’re not going far, are you?”

“No, I would wager you’ll need more protection tonight than on most occasions. Besides, I’d be a pretty poor chaperone if I did, although I will try to give you two lovebirds some privacy.”

“Go ahead and enjoy yourself at my expense, won’t you?” I complained, irritated by the tease that London had once more crept into his voice.

Steldor had returned his dagger to its sheath and was striding toward me. Although he was dressed more informally than was usual for him, his deportment would have made any clothing appear elegant. He was tall, broad shouldered and well muscled, with dark brown hair that fell in a perfectly careless manner to just below his prominent cheekbones. His brown eyes were guaranteed to make most girls swoon, and his smile was irresistible, given his straight and even, white teeth. “My lady.”

Steldor bowed and kissed my hand. His eyes swept my form approvingly, taking in my shimmering gray gown and the silver locket that graced my neck. “Allow me to escort you to the dining room, Princess Alera.”

With an uncomfortable glance at my bodyguard, Steldor drew me to his side, and I was certain London’s demeanor had given warning of how closely he intended to monitor the captain’s sojourn. Suppressing a smile, I walked with Steldor through the remainder of the corridor, the savory smell from the kitchen arousing my appetite. At least I would be getting a delicious meal out of the evening.

The first-floor dining room was designed to accommodate intimate gatherings. There were two marble fireplaces, one on each side of the room, with an oblong table that could seat forty-five people centered in between. Three candlelit chandeliers were suspended above the table, and oil-burning lanterns were attached at intervals along the walls. A small, round table draped with white linen had been prepared for us at the far end of the room in front of the bay window. On it, two flickering candles provided subtle illumination, aided by the last glimmer of the day’s sun. I sat across from Steldor and he offered me a glass of wine, which I accepted with some trepidation, having no more liking for wine than I did for the man extending the goblet.

“I have to say,” Steldor observed, “you look exceptionally beautiful tonight, Alera.”

He paused as if permitting me an opportunity to extend my flustered thanks. When none were forthcoming, he smiled.

“You seem a little overwhelmed...perchance from hunger, although it’s not unusual for me

company to have this effect upon women. Some food may restore you.” With a flick of his hand he indicated to a servant that we were ready to receive our meal. “Some sustenance may enable you find your voice as well.”

I stared at the man my father desired me to wed, feeling ill-equipped to deal with his overfamiliar attitude. The arrival of the kitchen staff with vegetable-laden platters, warm bread and roasted grouse saved me from having to reply.

Steldor nodded curtly to dismiss the servants, then placed a slice of the sizzling game bird on each of our plates, permitting me to select my own vegetables and bread. We ate in silence for a time, although I found it difficult to do more than nibble, for his eyes continued to shamelessly peruse me.

“I hope we shall come to spend a great deal of time together,” he finally said, his voice a practiced blend of honey and conceit, velvety smooth but with an undertone of boredom that not even he could conceal. Clearly this was not how he would have chosen to spend his evening free of duties. “Although I should caution you that the military demands much of me. I am well suited for such a life, of course—when I was at the Military Academy, my combat instructors had nothing but praise for me. As you probably know, I was allowed to graduate a year early due to my abilities.”

Finished with his meal, he pushed his plate forward to rest his left forearm on the table’s edge.

“After fifteen months as a foot soldier, I went into officer training and became the youngest field commander in Hytanican history. But despite the demands of my position, I find time to help train the students at the academy in hand-to-hand fighting. The instructors at the military school continue to hold me in high esteem and readily welcome my assistance.”

I found myself paying more attention to his gestures than to his words as he droned on, for his movements were so fluid they seemed almost rehearsed. He paused to settle back in his chair, slowly swirling the wine in his goblet, once more perfectly posed.

“Of course, I didn’t do anything special to win such admiration,” he continued. “I was simply born with enviable talents. It was natural that I would become the favored one. You can understand that, can’t you, Alera? It’s much the same with you.”

“And how is that like me at all?” I challenged, his arrogance at last goading me to reply.

“She speaks,” he gently mocked, then elaborated. “Well, you didn’t *ask* to be born into the royal family, did you? I likewise didn’t ask to be the most admired man in the kingdom.”

“More admired than my father? Well, then, I suppose I should feel honored just to be here with you.”

“Alera, admiration isn’t about wearing a crown. Your father is revered. But I have the eyes of an entire citizenry on me at every moment. That you cannot deny.”

The churning in my stomach could no longer be attributed to nervousness. Just being in Steldor’s company was making me physically ill. When I did not converse further, he glanced to the other side of the room where London was sitting in a chair, booted feet resting on the oblong table.

“It’s a shame London has to be here, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps from your point of view. *I* believe it’s important that he diligently carry out his duties.”

“Don’t take offense, Princess,” he said with a chuckle. “I only meant that, if we were alone, things could be a bit more...intimate.”

He leaned closer and reached for my hand, dark eyes lazily scanning me as if I were a gift for him to unwrap.

“That would be improper, would it not?” I reproached, picking up my napkin to spoil his attempt.

“And have you never done anything improper, Princess?” he drawled, wearing an insufferably indulgent expression. He stood when my only response was a deep blush. “As you don’t seem to be particularly hungry, I suggest we forgo dessert in favor of a stroll in the moonlight.”

I tried to think of an excuse, or to remember London’s advice, but my brain had stopped working.

combination with my dry mouth, I found myself speechless.

~~“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said, slipping a hand under my elbow to direct me to my feet. “To the garden, shall we?”~~

Steldor’s arm snaked its way around my waist as he escorted me from the dining room, and London let his feet drop loudly to the floor, drawing our attention. He rose, his eyes connecting with mine.

“No need to keep such close watch,” Steldor told him with a dismissive wave. “She’s in good hands.”

“That’s an interesting assertion, considering your reputation,” London replied, not about to let the young man out of his sight.

We walked down the corridor that London and I had earlier traversed, toward the rear of the palace and the garden that extended to the northern section of the walled city. Beyond the high stone wall stretched the forest that climbed into the foothills of the rugged Niñeyre Mountains.

Steldor acknowledged the Palace Guards who were stationed at the rear entrance, then held one of the double doors open for me, but I vacillated, reluctant to go into the dusky grounds with him.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” I fussed, still struggling for words, aware that my periodic lapses in speech might be attributed to girlish excitement, when in reality all I wanted was for the evening to be over.

“Of course it is—it’s a beautiful night.”

“I’m a bit cold, and I neglected to bring a wrap,” I said lamely. The temperature was still comfortable, but since it was the beginning of May, a chill would advance as night settled over the land.

“Just stay near to me, Princess. I assure you I’ll be able to keep you warm.”

I nodded, and Steldor again draped his arm about my waist to guide me onward, one of the Palace Guards alerting the others who patrolled the area that I had entered the grounds.

Stars were beginning to glimmer in the clear nighttime sky as we strolled along the stone footpath that wove through the walled garden, dividing it into sections. Although torches burned around the perimeter, their flickering light did not penetrate the garden’s depths, and we depended on the moon for guidance. Steldor led me toward one of four double-tiered white marble fountains located on the paths, and I was certain he viewed our surroundings as spectacularly romantic, even while I dreaded every impending second.

Steldor stopped at a bench near the fountain, dragging me down to sit beside him. Taking my hand in his, he gazed into my eyes as if silently telling me that he had laid claim to me long before I had been aware of his pursuit, and my heart began to hammer in apprehension of what he might do.

“You enchant me, Alera,” he whispered, leaning in close to me, and my senses reeled from his rich and alluring scent. It was deep and musky, but with the warmth of nutmeg and cinnamon, woven with a wistful hint of violet. As the fragrance washed over me, he played with a strand of my hair, then slipped his hand to the base of my neck and pressed his lips against mine in a firm and entirely unwelcome kiss.

I pulled away, eyes widening, appalled that he would make such a presumptuous move. For an instant he seemed angry, but then he dropped his hand with a wicked grin.

“I didn’t know that would be your first kiss,” he chided. “Not that I mind, of course. It’s just that you are more inexperienced than I anticipated.”

He reached out to touch my necklace, letting his fingertips rest against the hollow of my throat.

“Of course, this does mean many other firsts will follow.”

I glared at him in outrage, floundering for words. Just when it looked like he might try to kiss me again, a voice cut through my humiliation, disbelief and detestation, interrupting his advance.

“Princess!” London called, striding into sight. “I’m afraid there’s an emergency in the palace and

must return you to your quarters. You'll have to come with me now."

I sprang up from the bench and almost ran to my guard, warm relief spreading through me. Steldor came to his feet with a scowl, intending to accompany me, but London held up a hand.

"You'll have to go. This is not your business."

Steldor glowered at London, but my bodyguard steadily met his stare. Other than the fact that London was slightly shorter than my escort, the two men were a physical match. They even had the same youthful appearance, although, in truth, London was nearly twice Steldor's age, just one of the things that made the man in whose protective shadow I had lived for sixteen years a mystery to me.

Knowing that London, a deputy captain in the Elite Guard, held rank, Steldor backed down. I left the garden with my bodyguard, imagining my jilted dinner companion reentering the palace shortly after us and stalking down the corridor.

"Well, you were right about the level of protection I would need tonight," I admitted while London and I climbed the spiral staircase that was reserved for my family's use. "Indeed."

He had evidently lost his good humor about the evening and seemed to be fuming, although whether himself or at Steldor, I couldn't tell.

"And your father expects you to *marry* that pig," he muttered.

"So it would seem."

While I was grateful for someone with whom I could share my feelings, I was surprised by London's forwardness in expressing his opinion of Steldor. I had only known him to listen to my complaints and never articulate his own, although having worked closely under Cannan for years, London would know the vagaries of Steldor's personality where my father did not.

As my thoughts returned to Steldor and his kiss, I wiped at my mouth in disgust. London took no notice of what I was doing and raised a sardonic eyebrow.

"I don't suppose that was the way you envisioned your first kiss."

"Why does everyone think that was my first kiss?" I demanded, dismayed that my life was so transparent.

"Don't forget you're talking to me," he replied with a knowing smirk.

I averted my eyes, willing myself not to blush. "Well, in any case, I'm glad you stepped in. Who knows what else Steldor had in mind."

"What happened to telling him you felt ill if you wanted to make a hasty exit?"

"When we were sitting on the bench, I couldn't think straight. He has this amazing..." I lost the battle to stem the color rushing into my face, and my voice trailed away. "Amazing what?"

"Scent, amazing scent," I finished, cheeks now aflame. "He *smells* good?" London teased, breaking into a laugh. "As if he needs another way to attract women. On top of everything else, he smells better than the rest of us!"

Returning to my quarters, I closed the parlor door behind me, murmuring good-night to London. I knew he would be headed for the East Wing, to the first-floor rooms where most of the unmarried guards chose to live. As my primary bodyguard, he was on duty from the time I awoke until the time I retired. At night, Palace Guards patrolled the corridors to provide security.

I dragged myself through the parlor toward my bedroom, my limbs heavy. Upon entering the room that had been my refuge since I was a little girl, I sank into the chair that stood before my dressing table, removing the pins from my hair and shaking my head so that my thick locks tumbled about my shoulders. I looked into the mirror, letting my eyes wander over the familiar furnishings reflected therein: a generously sized canopy bed, topped by a cream-colored spread and deliciously soft, overstuffed feather pillows; a pair of velvet lounging chairs that beckoned from in front of the fireplace; a dollhouse and a few other toys from my childhood, including a top and a skipping rope; and an overflowing bookcase. These were the things that would never change; the things to which

clung, knowing the events of the coming year could not be predicted.

~~I stood and crossed the room to pull open one of the double wooden doors that led onto my balcony~~ my feet sinking into the thick rug that lay on the floor. Despite a cool breeze that sent a shiver through me, I stepped outside to await the arrival of Sahdienne, my golden-haired, round-faced personal maid. During daylight hours, I had a clear view of the rolling terrain that spread toward the lake marking the western border of our kingdom. At this time of night, I could see only what the moonlight permitted—the looming shapes of the buildings in the city.

Knowing from the creak of my bedroom door that Sahdienne had entered, I retreated inside. She unlaced the back of my gown and drew the drapes across the window to the right of the balcony while I donned my nightdress. Then I slipped under the covers that topped my bed, nestling my head amongst the pillows, and fell asleep before she had finished tidying the room.

I was a princess of Hytanica, protected and sheltered from all the world's horrors, except those of my nightmares. They were rife this night with visions of a future with Steldor: I was a meaningless ornament to an arrogant king, as quickly forgotten as a leaf blown past by the wind.

Perhaps my birthday would alter more than my age. Perhaps, this year, I would at last be able to resist the places nature wanted me to go.

CHAPTER 2

AN UNWELCOME ENCOUNTER

IT WAS DUSK, MY FAVORITE TIME OF DAY. I cherished the moments when I could stand on the balcony off the ballroom and gaze beyond the courtyard gates of our palace into the walled city, watching for the points of lantern light that would appear to ward off the darkness. Beyond the city, farm fields sloped gradually toward the untamed Recorah River, which flowed out of the mountains and defined our eastern and southern boundaries.

It was the occasion of my seventeenth birthday, and the upper society of Hytanica had gathered to honor me on this tenth of May. There was an added air of excitement to this celebration, for it was custom that at eighteen, a female heir would marry the man who would become the next king, and I was therefore expected to choose a husband within the upcoming year. When the whispers and speculation about who was in my favor had at last gotten the best of me, I had retreated to the balcony, hoping that the fresh air would provide relief from the conversation as well as the stuffiness of the ballroom.

Though arguably I should have been allowed to rule—it was not unheard of for women to reign in many of the texts and stories I had read—Hytanican tradition steered my father's and the kingdom's views on leadership, dictating that they put their trust into the hands of a man and not those of a woman. My father having no male heir, I would be crowned Queen, but not ruler, and would play no role in actually governing the kingdom. The function of the Queen was to supervise the household, plan and execute social events and raise the children. While the line of descent would continue to flow through my blood, the man I married would reign in my stead.

Hearing footsteps from behind, I turned, expecting that one of the young men who sought my attention had followed me. Instead, Miranna glided to the railing, radiant in a sky-blue dress, her strawberry-blond hair falling in waves and curls down her back. With her porcelain skin and delicately sculpted features, she was destined to break the heart of many a suitor.

"Are the celebrations too much for you, sister?" she asked, her blue eyes sparkling, for she knew I rarely enjoyed festivities that cast me in a starring role.

"I confess I find myself struggling to breathe in that ballroom."

We stood in silence while I inhaled the refreshing air, then Miranna lightly touched my hand. "Tell me, has anyone managed to draw your interest this evening?"

"No one who would meet Father's approval," I said, trying to keep from sounding bitter. "And I cannot marry without his approval."

"True, but there are so many intriguing possibilities!" My sister's face shone with enthusiasm, for she had, since turning fifteen, developed quite an interest in the male population. "I know Father can be a bit demanding, but he is not unreasonable. He has many times proven himself to be a good judge of character."

"He may very well be, but this time he seems to have his sights set on judging only *one* man." My halfhearted attempt at humor fell flat, for unlike Miranna, I saw no pleasure in the task before me. "Let's review a few of the candidates, shall we? Lord Thane is kind and witty, but he has chosen to study medicine. This disqualifies him, for Father insists a military background is necessary for a king. Then there is Lord Mauston, who is in the cavalry, but his family has fallen on hard times, so he wouldn't bring enough wealth to the marriage. Baron Galen is a field commander who inherited his

father's title, lands and holdings, which ought to make him acceptable, but he is Lord Steldor's best friend and *not* the Captain of the Guard's son, so is relegated to second choice at best. And Father wants me to marry someone older than me, someone with the maturity to ascend to the throne at once, which eliminates all the noblemen of my age." With forced pleasantness, I concluded, "So, you see the problem is not a lack of interest on my part, but Father's rather extensive list of qualifications."

"And what of Lord Steldor? I don't know if you've spoken with him tonight, but he is looking very fine indeed."

Miranna, like my father, had a preference for the Captain of the Guard's son, although I suspected she was for quite a different reason.

"I have never seen an occasion when he did not look fine. Since he has attracted *your* notice, have no misgivings on my account about pursuing him, Mira."

"What is it that makes you dislike him so?"

"It's his ego. Steldor doesn't walk, he struts. He doesn't converse with someone, he blesses them with his presence. And word amongst the observant members of the nobility is always about his temper. That notion frightens me more than I care to say."

Miranna twirled a strand of hair around the fingers of her left hand, and I knew she understood my point, at least with respect to Steldor's temper. A Hytanican woman was the property of her husband and he could deal with her as he saw fit. This alone made me a poor match for the captain's son, for I was, at times, more outspoken than was wise. I suspected that Steldor's reaction to such behavior might prove unpleasant.

"Still, he has many exceptional qualities," she finally countered. "And though the issues you've raised may make him a less appealing husband for you, they hardly affect his ability to rule. Besides, he will be guided by both our father and his. He will make a good king, Alera. Everyone sees it. Why can't you?"

"I think it's time we return to the festivities," I said. "Father and Mother will be making the entrance soon and will be expecting me to join them."

I turned from her and reentered the ballroom, sweeping my long hair over my shoulders and forcing a genial expression, the ball gown that had been commissioned especially for this occasion swishing around my ankles. Made of white silk chiffon that followed the curves of my body, it had lace accented bell sleeves that almost touched the floor. Upon my head I wore a silver tiara, its delicate diamond flowers offset by tiny leaves forming three gentle arches that crested in the middle. The ensemble had looked regal in my mirror, but now it seemed to press on me as if the weight of the world rested on my head. Miranna walked at my side, no doubt hoping to resume our discussion, but she prevented her from doing so by greeting everyone we passed.

The voice of Lanek, the palace herald and my father's personal secretary, rang out from the front of the ballroom in his traditional announcement. Although he had incredible lung capacity, Lanek was rather short and stocky and bore a marked resemblance to an overfed and contented cat.

"All hail the King, King Adrik of Hytanica, and his queen, the Lady Elissia!"

Everyone, including Miranna and I, bowed or curtsied before my parents as they entered the Royal Ballroom from the Dignitary's Room onto a raised platform. The Dignitary's Room was adjacent to my parents' quarters and was a waiting area for the King and Queen, and occasionally for special guests, prior to their formal appearances.

My parents were accompanied by the Captain of the Guard, Cannan, a tall and imposing man with dark hair and eyes who rarely smiled. Similar in age to my father, he was a member of the nobility and the commander of the Hytanican Military, having assumed that position during the Cokyrian Wars shortly before my father had become king. In the years since then, he had earned my father's respect and friendship, and he often accompanied the King as an adviser and bodyguard.

My father and mother were dressed in similar colors this evening, in accordance with tradition governing formal occasions. My mother wore a golden gown with red stitching on the bodice; a crown set with rubies adorned her upswept honey-blond hair. My father, whose hair and eye color matched my own, was likewise clothed and crowned in gold, and he shouldered a floor-length red robe with thick cording on the sleeves and at the neckline. While my mother was demure and dignified, my father was jovial in nature, with laugh lines around his brown eyes and a little extra weight padding his girth.

“Welcome!” my father proclaimed, inclining his head toward the crowd. “This celebration is not to honor me or my queen, but in honor of our daughter, Princess Alera. By the end of her next year, she will marry, and the man who becomes her husband will be my successor. When the day comes for him to ascend the throne, I trust that you will grant the new king the same loyalty and respect you have shown me throughout my reign. Until then, long live Princess Alera!”

My father motioned to me with his hand, beaming broadly, and our guests repeated his petition, shifting their attention to me. As I curtsied, I saw my father look to Steldor, who had conveniently located himself close to the platform upon which my parents stood. Baron Galen, Steldor’s counterpart, was with him and a few feet away stood the rest of Steldor’s entourage—two burly soldiers of aristocratic birth called Barid and Devant.

A little shorter and less handsome than Steldor, Galen had wavy ash-brown hair and warm brown eyes. His father had died in the war when Galen was three years old, and Cannan had been as much a father to him as he had been to Steldor. The young men had both become field commanders upon graduation from the Military Academy and were practically inseparable, though Galen was noticeably less cocky and more levelheaded than his friend. I sometimes wondered if it was solely Steldor’s influence that brought out the reckless side of Galen’s personality.

Barid and Devant had become Steldor’s tagalongs during military school. They seemed less intelligent than their leaders, though they had to add value to Steldor in some way or he would never have allowed them to remain among his comrades.

I had not had many encounters with Steldor and his associates as a group, but their rowdy reputation preceded them. They relished making life unpleasant for the people they considered beneath them (which, for Steldor, seemed to be just about everyone), though they primarily concentrated on terrorizing the young cadets at the Military Academy. They never did anything truly harmful, but it was certain the students were tired of having their horses untethered, their boots filled with mud, their rocks and their water salted so it was undrinkable.

Steldor and company also had a reputation for making the rounds of all the taverns in Hytanica in a single night, growing a little louder with each drink and pulling some fairly outrageous stunts. It was both amusing and irritating to me that regardless of how quickly the rumors about Steldor’s behavior circulated, as long as he acted the perfect gentleman around my parents, they were content to judge his unseemly conduct as the antics of youth.

My father and mother stepped down from the stage and approached me, accompanied by Cannan with the King’s personal guards falling in behind. The guests resumed their conversations, and Galen gave his best friend a good-natured shove in my direction, though I doubted Steldor, who was quite accustomed to conquering the ladies, needed any such encouragement.

“Alera,” my father said cheerily, arriving before me with my mother at his side, “how do you like the decor? Do you find it tasteful for this occasion?”

I scanned the torch-lit hall, noting the glorious flower arrangements set against its walls and the white chiffon and lace that draped the edges of the refreshment tables in the same way it draped my body.

“Yes, the decorations are splendid, Your Majesty.”

“Now, now,” my father chortled. “You know I don’t stand on ceremony.”

“But how can I help myself when you look so majestic?” I teased.

“You are just as deserving of that title as I am, my dear.” He reached out a hand to brush my cheek.

“I would like to speak to you later this evening about the selection of your husband. I know you understand the importance of this decision, but all the same...” He trailed off as Steldor, with impeccable timing, came to stand beside me.

“Your Majesty, My Queen,” Steldor said with a bow before turning to face me. “Princess Alera.”

He kissed my hand, a self-assured grin touching his lips, and my father, looking immensely happy, gave me a wink.

“Lord Steldor.” I acknowledged him coolly, and I had the feeling my father would have taken back his approving wink if such a thing were possible.

Steldor crossed his arms, a trace of a pout tainting his features, and I stole a glance at the Captain of the Guard, who stood as impassively as always. His job was to protect the royal family, not to become emotionally involved in its dealings, but I thought I could detect the faintest urge within him to rove his eyes at his son’s behavior.

Conversation resumed, with surprisingly little input from Steldor, for he was watching me intently. Displeasure at his manner flared within me, for I had the feeling he was plotting his next move. I shifted farther away from him as Miranna, clasping the hand of her good friend, Semari, floated in our midst.

Semari’s parents, Baron Koranis and Baroness Alantonya, were among those who had suffered the loss of a child toward the end of the Cokyrian War. Their lives had always been clouded by tragedy and mystery, for their firstborn had been taken in the night from his cradle a week after his birth, and his body was the sole one that had not been returned by the Cokyrians. The family had moved on the best they could, and two years later, Semari had been born, followed over the next five years by two more daughters and another all-important son, for only a male could inherit titles and property.

Now that my effervescent sister and her friend were capturing everyone’s interest, I seized the opportunity to exit the ballroom. With a nod to the Palace Guards in the corridor, I stepped onto the landing of the open double staircase and peered over the railing to the floor twenty-five feet below. Seeing no signs of movement other than that of the guards stationed by the front doors, I descended the set of stairs to my left and stepped into the Grand Entry Hall, from which one could pass under the Grand Staircase and into the Throne Room, or proceed into either the West Wing or East Wing of the palace.

I headed into the West Wing, which contained, among other things, the King’s Drawing Room, the small dining room that had been the scene of my date with Steldor, the large Meeting Hall and the service areas of the palace. As I strolled, I listened to the scuffing of my leather-soled slippers against the stone beneath my feet. These floors had not been kind to me in my youth. Running up and down the halls barefooted had made my feet sore, and tripping had resulted in more than a few skinned knees and bloodied noses. My parents had at times been unable to tend to me when I was hurt, for my sister had been very sick when she was a child and had needed special care. They had also, of course, been trying to put the kingdom back together in the aftermath of the war. For these reasons, my personal bodyguard had stepped into the parental role during my early years.

I glanced around, but London was nowhere to be seen. A smile crept across my face at the thought that he might not have seen me leave the ballroom. He had not been at my side but had been moving among the crowd, alert for signs of trouble.

Reveling in my unexpected freedom, I turned to walk past the Meeting Hall and toward the rear of the palace, intent on seeking sanctuary in the garden. When I reached the back entry, the guards drew open the heavy oak doors and I stepped outside. In accordance with procedure, one of the guards

announced my presence to his peers who patrolled the area's perimeter.

~~My father had often warned Miranna and me not to enter these grounds without a bodyguard. I~~ feared the garden was an ideal target for enemy infiltration, as access to the palace estate could be gained by scaling only one barrier, the garden wall that was also the northernmost wall of the city. This concern was counterbalanced in part by the wildness of the forested and mountainous terrain that lay to the north of the city, and in part by the fact that this portion of the city's barrier rose ten feet higher than the rest. In any event, I had never believed there could be danger amidst such beauty.

It was now fully dark, and only the moon and the torches anchored to the stone walls of the garden provided light. I took a deep breath of the scented air and walked forward into the shadow land, glad for the opportunity to savor the quietude of the evening alone.

"Don't think I didn't see you leave the ballroom."

I jumped and spun around to find London leaning against the palace doors with one eyebrow cocked. He was dressed, as always, in a brown leather jerkin layered over a long-sleeved white shirt. Leather bracers covered his wrists and forearms, and twin long knives hung from his belt. He wore tall leather boots folded down below the knee, and I could see the handle of a dagger extending from one of them. An unusual silver ring shone on the first finger of his right hand.

"I was—I was just going for a walk," I stammered. "I didn't want to bother you with something as trivial as that."

London smiled in genuine amusement. "Nice try. It's my job to protect you and make sure you don't go off and do something foolish—like this. I'd like to see you try that excuse on your father."

"You're not going to tell him, are you, London?"

I felt a rush of panic, for years of war had left my father extremely paranoid, which was the reason Miranna and I were almost constantly accompanied by our bodyguards. I knew only too well how displeased he would be if he learned that I'd deliberately slipped away from the man charged with my protection, for I had been bruised by his anger in the past.

"No, I won't tell him." London laughed. "I only made the comment because I knew you'd lose your nerve if I did."

I fixed him with my most withering glare and turned to stalk down one of the pathways.

"I suppose you'll have to come with me then," I tossed over my shoulder. "Just drop back to the extent you're permitted and don't say a word."

"Whatever you say, Princess."

"I *mean* it, London."

"Of course. I can appreciate your desire for some peace."

I walked along the path, soothed by the rustle of the plants and the trees in the soft breeze. Crickets chirped around me, and I found myself enjoying the sounds of the night as much as I did the garden's fragrance. True to his word, London was silent, to the point where I wondered if he was even behind me.

I turned a corner and gasped, barely stifling a scream. Eyes—luminescent green eyes—stared at me from the darkness. I struggled to focus, fear coursing through my veins, not wanting to believe what I was seeing. A figure stepped toward me, and the sinister outline of a man clad in black took form, the glint of moonlight off metal telling me he held a sword in his right hand.

"Princess," he said slyly, the pitch of his voice unexpectedly high.

I backed away, but before I could turn to run, London seemed to fall from the sky and land between the intruder and me, twin double-edged blades drawn and ready. He and the young man engaged in combat while I stood rooted to the spot, mesmerized by the clashing of the blades and the concomitant explosion of sparks. When the trespasser's weapon soared through the air to land a few feet away, my trance broke, but it was no longer necessary for me to flee. Dropping his left blade, London twisted

one of the intruder's arms behind his back, pressing his other knife against the man's throat. "Tell me the name of this Cokyrian," London spat, as if the name were a bad taste in his mouth. "How many of you are there?"

The Cokyrian made no reply, and I took a small step closer, wanting to get a better look at the assailant, even though my body still tingled with fright. I squinted through the darkness and my mouth fell open in surprise. "You're...a woman?"

The intruder made no response except to snort at my stupidity for thinking she could be anything *but* a woman.

"Stay back, Alera!" London barked, and I halted, unaware that I had been about to put myself in danger. "Call for the guard!"

I hesitated, for the only guard I'd ever had to call was the one in front of me, but London sharply reminded me of the urgency of the situation. "Now!"

"Guard!" I shouted, hurrying toward the palace, repeating the call several times.

By the time I reached the pathway that formed the perimeter of the garden, three of the men on patrol duty were rushing my way.

"London needs assistance," I sputtered, pointing down the path from which I had come. "There is an intruder!"

I followed the men as they hastened to my bodyguard's aid.

"Take her to the dungeon," London commanded when the guards reached him, releasing the Cokyrian into their custody. "I will alert the captain and the King."

London grabbed my wrist and hurried me back inside, and I stumbled along behind him up the spiral stairway to the second floor.

"Where are you taking me?" I demanded when we emerged into the corridor, trying to plant my feet to prevent him from dragging me farther.

"To the King. I must tell him what has happened."

"And what exactly did happen?" I asked, hoping I did not sound idiotic.

London swiveled around to face me so suddenly that I almost crashed into him.

"Do you not know who intruded upon your precious garden?"

"N-n-no, I—"

"Well, perhaps you have heard of her people—the Cokyrians."

"I have, but what does this mean?"

London did not answer but merely tightened his hold on my wrist and continued down the corridor. I did not fight him but insisted once more that he explain.

"Tell me, London!"

"This may be a shock, but it is imperative that you refrain from asking inane questions. I need to think!"

I hated the tears that welled due to London's abruptness. He had never before snubbed me in such a manner, and I felt as if I had been slapped. Wiping the excess moisture from my eyes, I sped up so as not to hinder him any more than I could help. He stopped outside the door to the ballroom and faced me.

"I'm not going to haul you in there. It's better if we don't make a scene. Just follow me and go straight to the King."

His manner invited no response, so I simply nodded, trailing him through the crowd of revelers. He advanced on my father, who stood beside my mother in a group that included Baron Koranis and Baroness Alantonya, along with Cannan and his wife, Baroness Faramay. Without waiting for anyone to acknowledge him, he addressed the King directly, ignoring Cannan, his commanding officer, to whom he should have been reporting.

"Your Highness, there's been a disturbance. I would advise that your guards escort you and you

family to your quarters at once.”

~~My father smiled at London. “This is a little unorthodox, don’t you think?” he asked with an~~ unconcerned chuckle.

“Your Majesty, I believe you to be a man of some intelligence, therefore, I expect you are wise enough to follow my suggestion. Please, Sire, do as I say.”

Turning to the captain, London brashly issued an order. “Come with me. We must secure the palace.”

Cannan’s brows drew together at London’s blatant, though not uncharacteristic, disregard for chain of command, but given the urgency in the Elite Guard’s voice, he said nothing. Instead, he glanced around for Kade, the sergeant at arms in charge of the Palace Guard, who was already moving out of way. Upon his arrival, Cannan gave the sergeant his orders and then set off with his deputy captain. Fear swelled within me as I watched their retreating backs, for this night, my home was not safe.

CHAPTER 3

ENEMIES REVEALED

I ONCE AGAIN PACED IN MY PARLOR, TOO intrigued and perplexed to sit down or rest. I had been escorted to my quarters for safety, with one guard stationed inside the room with me and two more in the corridor. The guard who had temporarily taken over for London stood in front of the windows, trying not to look uncomfortable in my quarters. He wore the uniform of the Palace Guard and the sword that had been issued to him upon completion of the training regimen hung from his belt. He was no more than a few years older than Steldor, and clearly had not expected to end up protecting the Crown Princess of Hytanica.

“Do you know what is going on?” I boldly inquired, breaking the nerve-racking silence.

“I’m afraid you have a better idea of what this is about than I do, Your Highness.” He shrugged, but I could see curiosity in his eyes. “If you don’t mind my asking, Princess Alera... What exactly did happen in the garden?”

I stopped pacing and relayed the entire story to him, including London’s identification of the intruder.

“Cokyrian?” he repeated.

“That’s what London said.”

“What are they doing here?”

“Well, actually, there was only one of them.”

“There’s never just one of them, Princess.”

“But what does this mean?” I grumbled, feeling as though we were playing a game.

A dramatic pause followed, and I would have laughed at his histrionics if not for his next words.

“It means the war could begin again.”

His statement hit me with sufficient force to expel the air from my lungs, and I finally understood London’s reaction. I knew enough of the tragedy and the horrors of the war that I had no desire to experience such things firsthand, and most definitely not during the reign of my future husband.

“We haven’t seen or heard from the Cokyrians in sixteen years,” he continued. “The fighting stopped with no victory for either side and no treaty signed, which means the war could resume just as suddenly as it ended.”

I nodded, then resumed my pacing, clenching my fists to the point where my fingernails pressed into my palms. I drew up short at a rap on the door, but it was only a servant to start a fire in the hearth, for a chill was now descending upon the room. Eventually, I took a seat in a gold velvet armchair and flipped through a book in a vain attempt to distract my mind from the slowness of the passing hours.

When my tolerance for waiting had been all but exhausted, there was another knock on my door and London entered, dismissing the young man who had been standing in for him. The guard bowed to me and departed, as London appeared to be in a foul mood.

“Who is she?” I clamored, springing to my feet, the book sliding off my lap onto the floor.

“I assume you mean the woman in the garden,” London said, leaning against the wall by the door. Either in deep thought or out of a reluctance to encourage my interest, he folded his arms across his chest and seemed to be scrutinizing the pattern of the rug that covered much of the wood floor.

“You asked me if I had any idea who had intruded upon my ‘precious garden.’ I believe those were

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