



A CURSED PRINCE WAS NOTHING MORE THAN A titled man who knew how death would claim him.

Unless, of course, he took chances and fate into his own grasp.

Jaemis crouched low on top of the stone wall, assessing the land ten feet below with new eyes. Eyes of an outsider, instead of an heir. The same land he'd run along in joy as a child. The ground of a kingdom that had belonged to his ancestors for generations. The kingdom borne from a legacy he'd been raised to uphold one day.

But the greed and power of Mogran the Mouse King stole that from him and his parents, Nicholas and Gwenyth—the true king and queen of Vartikan—who currently languished in the palace dungeon, captives in their own home. The entire kingdom remained saturated under a dark magick sky while the rest of the realm's royals isolated themselves, afraid for their own lands. For if one could take possession of Ehlfyre Castle, Kingdom of Vartikan—the very center of the Galindria realm—then they were also doomed.

"Your Highness. We beg you." Sir Ulric, who'd he known since childhood and a revered palace knight, had been imploring Jaemis every step of the way. "This is a reckless mission. While *noble*...reckless. The king and queen wouldn't desire you to take such a risk. Should anything happen to you in the name of rescuing *them*..."

Jaemis had already heard this dissent many times before. "This could be my final chance to free my mother and father, Ulric."

"You invite Mogran's wrath if he catches you."

"Encroaching on an enemy always invites death to dance."

Ulric's next words came through gritted teeth. "Yet, you cannot die. Only suffer *more*."

"You speak of things I already know in order to delay me," Jaemis drawled in distraction, looking at paths and entries to get closest to the dungeon with the maximum amount of stealth. "My destiny is set whether I do this or do not, my friend. I've suffered many times over long before this night."

Ulric knew it was a futile argument, but ever the compassionate heart, always had to try until the very end to talk sense into him. "Why won't you let us go with you?"

Jaemis turned on the balls of his feet to meet his friend's gaze below and tossed the rope to the dirt. "I've lost too much to allow it. Besides, that would draw attention. You'll know soon enough if I've failed."

Ulric's leather-gloved hands curled to fists. "And what are we to do if you *do* fail, Your Highness?"

It appeared his friend was already attempting to accept that failure was more of a possibility than success. If the roles were reversed, he would think the same. "What any true friend would do. Honor me by finishing what I started. Now, scatter to the allies. I'll send for you when our army is needed again."

A pause. "You *need* a miracle, not just an army."

Jaemis frowned. Indeed. He did. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen such a thing.”

With a sigh, Ulric told him, “Keep your heart light. I pray you can get the king and queen out. I...” He gestured around at the other soldiers, who stood behind him. “We *all* believe miracles can still manifest. Even now. Even here. You used to believe, too.”

*I still do.*

Jaemis cocked a rueful smile and lifted a hand to his brow in a soft salute. “If I fail tonight, perhaps one will come to fruition in my absence. You know what to do if I don’t make it out. Head to the northern kingdoms. Find refuge with our allies until...until this is over.” Without another word, he jumped down to the palace grounds, landing softly on his feet, sinking to his haunches.

He waited, head down, still as stone.

Goodbyes were unnecessary at this point. He’d had to say many of them in some form or another. When one of his family’s historians died in his arms trying to protect the king. When he heard the cries of the villagers after their crops and livestock perished with the putrid air and lack of sunlight. When he unknowingly cursed himself to save a princess...

Goodbyes to once was. Family. Hope. Joy. A long life. A real future.

The silence pierced his eardrums.

Slowly, Jaemis opened his eyes and pulled his sword from its sheath.

What used to be green was gray.

What used to bloom had died.

Mogran manipulated dark magick to cast the kingdom in a perpetual season of colorless depression. A sky of doom. The air with ash. A ground dry like bone. Just how the Mouse King

and Queen wanted it. Not even the birds that once graced the bushes were around anymore.

He'd been told his parents were in the south end dungeon. Mogran had either killed or cast out else everyone from the palace except for the betraying servants who'd been loyal to his nefarious plan.

But treacherous palace servants were the least of Jaemis' concerns.

The only resistance he really had to keep a sharp eye for were Mograrats: the rat-faced creatures with bodies of men that Yineth had conjured from some wretched realm to do her husband's bidding. Nasty, mute, vile beings whose scratches infected the skin rotten, whose bites stopped one's heart.

He crept along the hedges of the east grounds, his sword gently vibrating in his grip with its power.

However, his aim was not to fight, only to free. After all, he was merely one man. If he could get his parents away and safe on ally territory, then hope in the people would renew.

As long as he drew breath, he would never stop—

"This cannot wait any longer, my love."

Jaemis froze at the commanding sound of Yineth's voice up ahead.

And she only had one "love."

Mogran.

Jaemis hid behind a bush and watched as the pair stopped near the entrance of the freestanding stone temple, where his mother used to meditate and pray.

Hard to believe Mogran was once a villager of no consequence. A simple candle maker who'd lived in a house full of rodents, creatures that he treated like kin. Jaemis often wondered what the madman was like before he traded his soul for the power to wield dark magick.

Mogran wasn't young, yet not quite old. His long black

hair held streaks of gray, the corners of his evil, light gray eyes dashed with weathered lines. Nonetheless, he moved in combat with the ambition of a young knight. Dark magick gave him that kind of agility, Jaemis was sure.

The Mouse Queen, Yineth, well, Jaemis knew even *less* about her. Her origin kingdom unknown. A mage obsessed with being worshipped as though she was a goddess, but had the heart of a ghoul. She was part of the reason Mogran had succeeded thus far.

Jaemis had no doubt she was the one responsible for conjuring the unkillable beasts that had infiltrated his home while he'd been away. In contrast to her husband, her black-blue hair was short like a soldier's, her eyes a wild green, with a muscled figure of a woman who'd known hard labor most of her years.

Jaemis moved in silence, out of their line of sight, and pressed his back to the temple's icy wall.

"We are nearly at the pinnacle of our power," Mogran declared. "Doing this will weaken us for *days*. I am not absolutely convinced it's worth it, Yineth."

Music to his ears. Mogran and Yineth, temporarily powerless—for any amount of time—would be a blessing.

The Mouse Queen gave a groan of impatience. "A price we must pay, as I've told you from the beginning. This woman is the final note to our masterpiece. The key. She *must* be dealt with, and it must be done now, or we risk a destiny we cannot design! Once Klara is in our custody, we'll have everything required to become virtually invincible. We'll have no need for the king and queen. And our reign can truly begin."

Jaemis' heart pounded in dread. His knuckles whitened on his grip.

What were they speaking of?

Who was Klara?

The key to what?

That meant Yineth being weakened would *not* a blessing in the end, it would merely be a respite if, in fact, she succeeded.

Mogran growled with stubbornness. “The veil between our realm and theirs hasn’t been penetrated in many years. I dislike going in blind. Not to mention my powers won’t hold there.”

“You’ll still have the ability to call upon the rats if needed, but they won’t be. She’s nothing more than a terraling woman of seven and twenty. You won’t *need* your powers to take her. But she has to be brought *here* and *now* if we’re to move forward.” Her razor-sharp tone left no more argument.

A terraling? From the *Terrene* realm?

The blood drained from Jaemis’ face.

That meant that this Klara was a human... What would Mogran and Yineth want with a human from a realm of fundamentally no magick, of impotent supernatural power, a place they’d long closed the veil to?

Whatever the reason, their goal—without a doubt—spelled absolute terror for this Klara they spoke of. It made no sense to break the veil to bring a terraling here. None that he could imagine was good for Vartikan, that is.

*Gods above. They cannot be serious.*

But they were. As insane as the Mouse King and Queen were, nothing they had done thus far had been anything except serious.

Mogran’s voice grated with reluctance, but acceptance. “Then we must get on with it, my queen.”

Yineth grazed her hand under his chin before going inside.

Jaemis’ mouth drew down to a disgusted scowl.

So, there was much more to their agenda than stealing thrones.

Once Yineth accomplished in lifting the veil long enough for Mogran to kidnap the terraling and bring her to their

realm, then his mother and father's lives would be forsaken. Mogran would probably send them to a realm where they'd never be found, never escape. And, according to their arrogant prediction, they'd be nearly untouchable, and their reign would "truly begin."

The pair entered the temple and closed the door.

Now was the perfect opportunity to get to the dungeon. With them distracted, he stood a greater chance of succeeding. A difficult choice lay before him.

He clenched his jaw. "Damn it."

By rescuing his mother and father, the final phase of the couple's plan would go unchecked. By trying to stop Yineth from opening the veil, he sacrificed his family.

He squeezed his eyes shut at the gut-wrenching indecision.

A choice of which was already made in his head; it was his heart that sank heavy with it. He knew what his mother would say, what his father would do.

Stop the mage. Stop them both.

Drawing in a deep breath, Jaemis exhaled, prepared to do what must be done.

Prepared to fight. Ready to die.

He tested his wrist, twirling his sword a few times before rounding to the temple's door and stood before it with a glower.

Then kicked it in.



