

Crown of Flames



By:
By Zainab A. Hawiz
And **Linda H. Sadiq**



KING'S SCHOOL

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By: Zainab A. Hawiz and Linda H. Sadiq

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Dedication

For every adventurer who dares to face the unknown,
for those who stand bravely in the shadow of danger,
for friends who support with loyalty and courage,
and for hearts that never give up, even when the path is uncertain.

Quote

“Courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. Every step into the unknown is a step toward who we are meant to become.”

Note to the Reader

Princess Valentina of Volkaria is no ordinary royal. Trained as both a warrior and a scholar, she has faced deadly creatures and betrayal. After defeating a rare and dangerous dragon known as the Valcon, she discovers a far greater threat—a hidden master controlling powerful beasts.

As Valentina prepares for the kingdom's greatest danger, she must rely on her own quiet strength to protect those she loves. This is a story of monsters, magic, and resilience—the fire that burns within even when no one is watching.

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After her father's death, Valentina defeats the final creature and escapes with Zen while saving Harry. She returns to the kingdom, becomes the new queen, and punishes Harry. Later, she discovers the hidden meaning of the keys, which leads her to a secret box. When opened, it releases a powerful crystal that creates an unbreakable shield protecting the entire kingdom.

Introduction

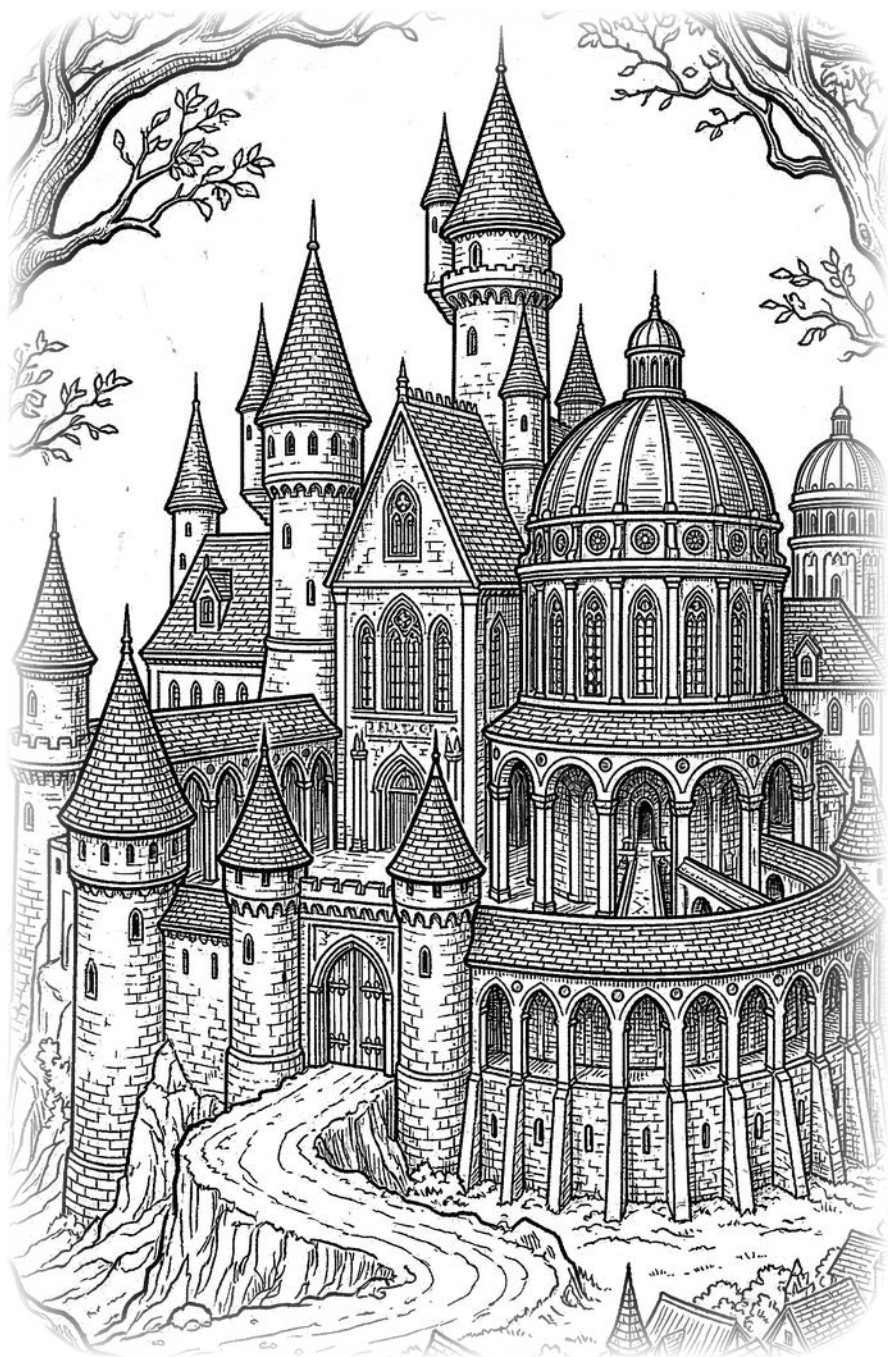
Welcome to the world of Valentina, a realm of kingdoms, forests, mountains, and hidden mysteries. This is a place where magic pulses through the land, where creatures of legend roam in secret, and where the choices of a single person can ripple across nations.

At the heart of this story is Valentina, a young princess with courage and curiosity that lead her beyond the walls of her palace and into adventures few could imagine. From encountering dangerous beasts to deciphering cryptic clues, Valentina faces challenges that test not only her strength, but her heart and mind. Along the way, she discovers that bravery is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to act despite it.

In these pages, you will travel with her to kingdoms both familiar and strange, meet allies and friends who will guide her, and confront enemies whose motives are shadowed in mystery. You will witness her triumphs and setbacks, her moments of doubt and her flashes of inspiration. Every journey she takes is more than a quest—it is a path toward understanding herself, her world, and the invisible threads that bind people, creatures, and magic together.

This story invites you to step into Valentina's shoes, to explore her world with all its wonders and dangers, and to imagine the possibilities that lie in the choices she makes. Adventure, danger, friendship, and discovery await, and the path is as unpredictable as it is thrilling.

Prepare to be swept into a story where courage, loyalty, and the pursuit of truth will guide you through a world alive with magic, mystery, and the power of a young princess who dares to face it all.



Chapter One – The Orphanage and the King

One Thursday afternoon, the sun shone gently over the orphanage, casting golden light across the garden where my sister and I were playing. Laughter echoed as we chased each other between the flowerbeds, but it was abruptly interrupted when Ms. Stella, the caretaker, hurried over, her expression unusually serious.

“You both have guests,” she said, her voice stern, “and you must behave properly!”

My heart skipped a beat. Guests? At the orphanage? Who could it be? Curiosity and confusion swirled in my mind as we followed Ms. Stella down the long, echoing corridor toward the adoption room.

When we entered, the atmosphere shifted. The room seemed smaller somehow, thick with tension and expectation. Standing there were royal guards, their armor gleaming, faces unreadable. And then, I saw him—a man whose presence alone commanded attention. His muscular frame and sharp, fierce features spoke of strength and authority, yet there was a softness in his eyes that hinted at kindness. A crown rested upon his head, gleaming in the sunlight that filtered through the windows.

Ms. Stella whispered urgently, “Bow. This is the King of Volkaria.”

I obeyed, my knees bending before a man whose reputation I barely understood. That was the moment my life changed forever. I became the adoptive daughter of a king, but the world would never treat me equally.

My elder sister, Flora, was adored by everyone—her luminous blue eyes, golden hair, and gentle smile seemed to capture hearts effortlessly. I, Valentina, was different. My fiery red hair and forest - green eyes marked me as the “odd one,” the girl who struggled to earn attention and affection. But being a princess in Volkaria was not about being loved—it was about surviving. I trained tirelessly, learning the art of the sword, studying plants and animals, and commanding the royal guards to protect the kingdom.

The morning sunlight pierced through the curtains, warming my face and pulling me from sleep. A sharp knock echoed against the door.

“Come in,” I called.

The maid entered, carrying a message sealed with the royal crest. “Princess Valentina,” she said breathlessly, “the citizens report a dangerous creature wreaking havoc. They request your immediate intervention.”

I rose, my heart racing, and dressed quickly, strapping my sword to my side. “What kind of creature?” I asked.

She shook her head. “They did not know. It is terrifying and... it breathes fire.”

No time to think. I mounted my horse and urged it forward. Hooves thundered across the palace gates as we sped toward the forest. Smoke and screams filled the air, and I caught sight of the beast: enormous, scales glinting in the sunlight, and flames licking the edges of nearby homes. Citizens fled in terror.

Instinct took over. I commanded the royal guards to lead the people to safety while I charged at the creature, sword raised. My blade scraped across its chest, but it barely flinched. It healed instantly—its rage was unstoppable. My mind raced. I needed another plan.

The saddle of my horse held a rope, and I seized it, aiming for the creature’s V-shaped mouth. I managed to loop it around its jaws, but its strength nearly ripped it from my grasp. I had seconds to think—then my eyes caught a glimmer, a strange diamond-shaped jewel embedded at its neck. Recognition struck like lightning: it was a Valcon, one of the rarest and deadliest dragons in existence. Its only weakness was the jewel.

I shouted to the guards, my voice cutting through the chaos: “It is a Valcon! That diamond by its neck is its weak point! We have to destroy it!”

“Yes, Princess!” they yelled, rallying behind me.

They distracted the beast from the front while I circled around, drawing closer to the jewel. The Valcon swiped at me, throwing me off balance, but instinct took over. I hurled my sword—and it struck true. The diamond shattered into glittering fragments. The Valcon roared, its strength collapsing, and then it fell.

The villagers emerged from hiding, relief washing over their faces. We helped extinguish the fires and guided them safely back to their homes. Exhausted, I returned to the palace, my sword caked in ash and sweat, and reported to the royal staff. They sent additional aid to the village, and I finally allowed myself to rest.

But as I lay in my chamber that night, I knew the battle with the Valcon was not truly over. Somewhere, in the shadows, its fury still lingered. And I would be ready.

Orphanage: (Noun) a home for children whose parents are dead or unable to care for them.

Abruptly: (Adverb) suddenly; unexpectedly.

Swirled: (Verb) moved in a twisting or spiraling pattern.

Armor: (Noun) protective clothing worn in battle.



Chapter Two – Shadows of the Valcon

Two days had passed since the devastation in the village of Astria. Though the fires had been extinguished and the citizens restored to their homes, the memory of the Valcon's roar still echoed in my mind. The scent of smoke lingered in my thoughts as persistently as doubt lingered in my heart.

Word arrived that my father, the King of Volkaria, had returned from his diplomatic journey to the southern territories. A formal dinner had been arranged in the royal dining hall to celebrate his return. Flora and I were expected to attend.

I prepared myself carefully.

I chose a long, navy silk gown, tailored perfectly to my frame. The fabric flowed gracefully with every movement, dignified yet practical. Attached discreetly to my right thigh was a slender leather belt that secured a small blade — a habit I refused to abandon, even within palace walls. My hair was gathered into a tight, elegant bun at the nape of my neck. A princess must appear composed, but a warrior must remain prepared.

I studied my reflection for a long moment.

Not searching for beauty — but for strength.

Then I stepped into the corridor.

As I approached the royal dining hall, I slowed. The grand doors were partially open, and through them I witnessed a sight both warm and distant: my father pressing a gentle kiss to Flora's forehead. She smiled brightly, her golden hair catching the chandelier's light like woven sunlight. For a moment, I barely recognized him. It had been far too long since we had shared a meal together.

I entered fully and bowed with proper form.

“Welcome home, Father.”

He acknowledged me with a nod. “Thank you, Valentina.”

His tone was polite. Measured.

But there was no embrace. No warmth. No gesture beyond royal courtesy.

We took our seats. My father sat at the head of the long mahogany table, carved with the ancient sigil of Volkaria — a crowned lion surrounded by flame. Flora was seated beside him. I was positioned two chairs away.

Dinner proceeded with elegance and refinement. Servants moved silently, placing silver platters before us. Crystal goblets reflected candlelight like fractured stars. My father and Flora spoke throughout the meal, their laughter light and effortless. He told stories from his travels; she responded with curiosity and charm.

She brightened the room without effort.

And though a quiet ache stirred within me, I found comfort in her happiness. Flora had always been kind to me. She never allowed me to feel invisible, even when the court did. She defended me in subtle ways, included me in conversation, and reminded me — without words — that I was not alone.

She was my sister before she was a princess.

And I loved her deeply.

When the meal concluded and the servants began clearing the table, I rose. Whatever emotions lingered within me had no place in duty.

I approached my father once more.

“Your Majesty,” I began formally, “I must inform you of a concerning discovery regarding the Valcon incident in Astria.”

His expression shifted — attentive, though restrained.

“Proceed.”

“After the creature was defeated, fragments of its diamond core remained at the site. They did not dissolve nor disintegrate.”

He frowned slightly.

I motioned for one of the maids to retrieve the research journal I had entrusted to the archives. When it was placed into my hands, I turned to the marked page.

I read clearly:

“Upon the shattering of a Valcon’s diamond core, any remaining fragments signify external enchantment. Such remnants indicate the presence of a master — an entity capable of generating and controlling high-tier creatures.”

Silence settled heavily across the hall.

For the first time that evening, my father’s composure faltered. His gaze sharpened.

“A master,” he repeated quietly.

He summoned members of the royal council immediately and ordered further investigation. After issuing his commands, he turned back to me.

“I am entrusting this matter to you,” he said steadily. “You will prepare the royal guard and locate this master. You have two months to capture them.”

Two months.

The weight of those words pressed upon my chest.

He studied me for a moment before adding, “Is that clear, Valentina?”

My spine straightened.

“Yes, Father.”

He gave a curt nod, and we parted in opposite directions — he toward the council chamber, I toward the eastern corridor.

Only two months.

If a master truly existed — someone capable of commanding creatures like the Valcon — then this was not a random attack. It was deliberate. Calculated.

I returned to Astria at dawn the following morning.

The remnants of destruction still scarred the land. I knelt where the Valcon had fallen and examined the diamond shards carefully.

“Collect every fragment,” I ordered the guards. “They are to be transported to the palace laboratory.”

One of the guards hesitated. He was known to be Flora’s closest confidant.

“Princess,” he said cautiously, “what if the fragments pose a danger to the palace itself?”

His concern appeared reasonable.

Yet something in his tone unsettled me.

“How would you know that?” I asked evenly.

He lowered his gaze. “It is merely precaution.”

I allowed the matter to pass — for now. Samples were taken and secured for analysis. Still, unease lingered in my thoughts.

That night, sleep evaded me.

His words repeated in my mind.

What if it is a danger to the palace?

The next morning at precisely six o’clock, I began intensive training with

the royal guards. If we were to face a creature-master, we would require discipline, endurance, and unity.

Steel clashed against steel in the courtyard. Commands echoed across stone walls. Sweat, focus, and strategy replaced hesitation.

By midday, we set out toward the forest beyond Astria.

As we advanced beneath the canopy, I noticed something unusual along the forest floor — a trail of peculiar plants growing in a narrow, deliberate line. Their leaves shimmered faintly with a bluish hue, unlike any species native to this region.

I slowed.

The formation resembled a path.

A railway of nature.

I did not immediately follow it — I had soldiers with me, and caution was essential — but I dismounted and knelt beside one of the plants. Its stem pulsed faintly beneath my fingertips.

This was not natural growth.

This was guidance.

Or a warning.

I rose slowly, my gaze following the unnatural trail deeper into the forest's shadows.

What was this path meant to lead us toward?

Or away from?

Whatever master commanded the Valcon was not merely powerful.

They were intelligent.

And they were watching.

Devastation: (Noun) great destruction or damage.

Discreetly: (Adverb) carefully and without attracting attention.

Sigil: (Noun) a symbol representing a family, organization, or magical power.

Fractured: (Adjective) broken into pieces or appearing fragmented.

Entity: (Noun) something that exists as a distinct or independent being.

High-tier: (Adjective) of the highest level or quality.

Faltered: (Verb) became uncertain or unsteady.

Deliberate: (Adjective) intentional or carefully planned.

Shards: (Noun) sharp pieces broken from glass, crystal, or similar materials.

Unease: (Noun) a feeling of worry or discomfort.

Evaded: (Verb) avoided or escaped from something.

Canopy: (Noun) the upper layer of trees in a forest forming a cover.



Chapter Three – The Hidden Trail

I paced the length of my chamber, my thoughts circling endlessly. The strange trail in the forest would not leave my mind. It pulled at me like an unseen current, dragging me back toward something I did not yet understand. I felt as though I were drowning in unanswered questions, suffocating beneath secrets no one would speak aloud.

By morning, I had made my decision. I would return to the forest and follow the trail to its end. And I would do so without Harry knowing.

Harry — the royal guard and my sister’s closest friend — had always been difficult to read. His voice was rough, edged with command, yet his smile carried an unexpected gentleness. Fair brown hair framed his sharp blue eyes, and a small mole above his lip made him strangely recognizable even from a distance. He had always seemed loyal.

Now, I was no longer certain.

As I descended the palace stairs the next morning, I hoped to leave unnoticed. I had almost reached the entrance when his voice stopped me.

“Ma’am,” he said carefully, “if you do not mind me asking... where are you going?”

I forced myself to remain calm. “I am searching for a rare plant species I noticed during patrol,” I replied evenly.

His gaze lingered on me as though he sensed more. Before he could ask anything further, I moved past him and quickened my pace.

The forest greeted me with uneasy silence. I followed the unnatural formation of plants, the air growing heavier with every step. A foul scent lingered faintly at first, then stronger the deeper I ventured. My instincts sharpened. Something was wrong.

Suddenly, bushes rustled behind me. I turned quickly, hand near my blade. Nothing stood there. No movement. No sound. Only stillness.

I continued forward, forcing my fear aside. The strange plants multiplied, guiding me like markers on a hidden road. Soon the trees thinned, revealing a massive stone door half concealed in shadow. It stood slightly open, ancient and foreboding.

After a brief hesitation, I stepped inside.

The air was cold and suffocating. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw a faint shimmer ahead. A diamond core. Then another. And another.

My breath caught.

It was not a single Valcon.

It was a dungeon filled with them.

Their diamond cores glowed dimly in the shadows, embedded within powerful forms that seemed to sleep but not fully rest. The chamber was vast, carved into the earth as if someone had prepared it intentionally.

Before I could move, a hand seized my arm and pulled me backward. I nearly struck my attacker before recognizing him.

Harry.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded.

“No time,” he replied sharply. “We have to leave. Now.”

The low rumble of shifting stone echoed behind us, and instinct overpowered pride. We ran. Branches tore at my sleeves as we fled through the forest, not slowing until the palace towers came into view. My lungs burned, and I struggled for breath.

“We will speak of this when we return,” Harry said firmly.

When we arrived at the palace, my father was already waiting in the courtyard. His expression told me everything — he knew.

“Return to your chamber, Valentina,” he ordered.

There was no explanation, no accusation. Only command.

Instead of going directly to my room, I wandered into the palace garden, needing air. Moments later, Flora approached.

“Val,” she said gently, “trust Harry. He wants to help us.”

I met her eyes steadily. “I can protect us myself.”

She looked uncertain but did not argue.

Soon after, we were summoned to the council chamber. Harry stood beside my father as if he already belonged there.

“Valentina,” my father said, his tone grave, “intensify the guard’s training. We may face danger at any moment.”

I bowed. “Yes, Father.”

I left without protest, though my mind was far from calm. A dungeon of Valcons hidden in our forest. A guard who arrived too conveniently. A father who already knew.

The pieces were moving, and I was no longer sure who was leading the game.

Uneasy: (Adjective) feeling anxious or uncomfortable.

Ventured: (Verb) went somewhere risky or unfamiliar.

Foreboding: (Adjective) a feeling that something bad will happen.

Suffocating: (Adjective) causing difficulty in breathing; oppressive.

Embedded: (Verb/Adjective) fixed firmly and deeply in a surrounding mass.

Instinct: (Noun) a natural, intuitive way of acting or thinking.

Overpowered: (Verb) defeated or overwhelmed by force or emotion.

Intensify: (Verb) to make stronger or more extreme.

Dungeon: (Noun) a dark, underground prison or chamber, often in a castle.



Chapter Four – Secrets of the Oranta

My plan was greater than they believed.

Father doubts me — I see it in the careful way he watches my decisions. If I falter, he will give the mission to Harry. The discovery I made will become his responsibility instead of mine.

Even Flora seems distant, as though she is weighing truths she cannot share.

I will not allow doubt to define me. I will prove that I am capable.

Before sunrise the next morning, I prepared quietly. The palace slept as I dressed in riding gear instead of silk. My sword rested securely at my side, and a leather pack filled with tools hung across my back. Inside were vials, testing solutions, rope, dried herbs, and protective cloth — items I had gathered over years of training.

I rode toward the forest under a pale, early sky. Mist clung low to the ground, and the world felt suspended between night and day.

When I reached the strange railway of plants, I dismounted and knelt beside one. Up close, its emerald leaves shimmered faintly with silver veins. I removed a vial from my pack and poured several drops of a prepared solution onto the stem. The liquid reacted instantly, darkening the veins and releasing a faint hiss.

I studied the reaction carefully.

Oranta.

I had learned of its years ago during survival training, when I was forced to endure the wilderness alone. I had memorized plants and toxins, remedies and dangers. Oranta was rare and dangerous. It thrived in Valcon territory and fed from their presence.

But it also held another property.

If processed correctly, it could destroy them.

Carefully, I collected several samples and secured them in my pack before returning to the palace.

Back in my chamber, I locked the door and opened the hidden cabinet concealed within the stone wall. Shelves of rare ingredients greeted me — powders, extracts, preserved petals, minerals. I laid everything out and began my work.

The Oranta leaves were crushed into a thick paste before being combined with ember-root powder and a stabilizing extract. The mixture shimmered faintly as I sealed it in a glass flask. The potion would require a full day to settle.

While it prepared, I carried on with my duties.

Training that day was relentless. Two full sessions with the soldiers left my muscles aching. We practiced blade work, defensive formations, and coordinated strikes. If danger approached, they would be ready.

As I returned through the halls that evening, I overheard Harry speaking to Flora.

“You know the truth, Flora,” he said quietly. “Why can’t you admit it?”

I did not stop walking, but the words echoed in my mind. Flora’s expression had been troubled, uncertain.

What truth?

The question followed me back to my chamber.

By nightfall, the potion had transformed into a metallic silver liquid, smooth and luminous. It had worked.

Now I needed a way to use it effectively.

From beneath my bed, I retrieved a modified smoke grenade used for

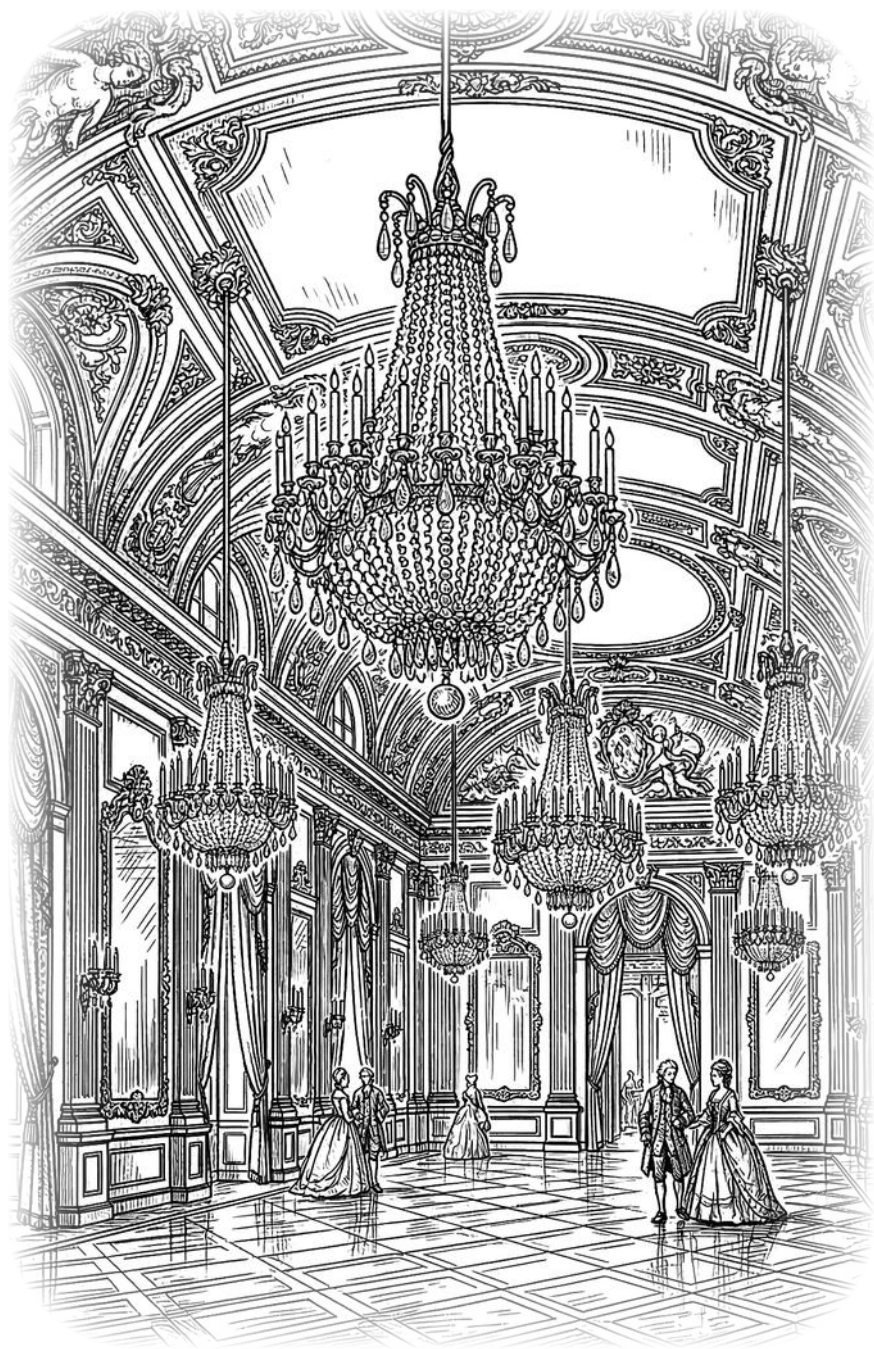
concealment in battle. Carefully, I dismantled the internal mechanism and replaced the compound with the Oranta solution. Once activated, it would disperse the potion into vapor, spreading it through the air.

Efficient. Controlled. Lethal.

I reassembled the device and placed it carefully inside my pack.

In two days, I would return to the forest.

And this time, I would be prepared.



Chapter Five – The Ball and the Prince

Two days passed quickly, though my mind had not rested once.

Everything was prepared. The potion was stable. The modified device was hidden and ready. Tonight, I would return to the dungeon and end what had begun.

I had just fastened my blade beneath my cloak when a knock sounded at my chamber door.

I froze.

The door opened before I could answer. A maid stepped inside, carrying several gowns draped carefully over her arms.

“Princess Valentina,” she said with formal calm, “this evening His Majesty will host a royal ball. Nearly every noble family in Volkaria will attend, along with guests from neighboring kingdoms.”

She paused, then added, “Your presence is expected. It is not optional.”

Of course, it was’t.

My mind raced. If I attended, I would lose valuable time. If I refused, suspicion would fall upon me, and I might lose my chance entirely.

“I will be there,” I replied evenly.

The maid placed the gowns across my bed and exited.

I stood there for a moment, staring at them.

One was a deep red gown, fitted at the waist with a flowing skirt and a sharp V neckline. It was bold, powerful — but it did not feel like me.

The second gown was breathtaking. Its rich emerald-green fabric shimmered softly under the light, adorned with delicate black lace and subtle touches of gold that gave it a quiet, magical glow. The fitted bodice

shaped perfectly to my form, while the full, flowing skirt moved with effortless elegance, like waves of silk with every step. It felt graceful, enchanting, and impossible to forget.

Strong without shouting.

This one.

By evening, my hair had been styled in soft waves, pinned back elegantly. I applied a muted red lipstick and secured my blade discreetly behind the folds of my dress. Hidden — but reachable.

The ballroom glowed like captured sunlight.

Crystal chandeliers shimmered above polished marble floors. Classical murals lined the walls, depicting past victories and ancient alliances. Music drifted through the air as nobles in silk and velvet filled the hall.

It was extraordinary.

And suffocating.

My father sat upon his elevated royal chair at the far end of the hall. I approached and bowed.

“Enjoy yourself,” he said. “Later, I will make an announcement.”

An announcement?

“I look forward to hearing it, Your Highness,” I replied.

For the next hour, I greeted families from across Volkaria and beyond. Conversations were polite, brief, and forgettable. I have never been skilled in social performance. Diplomacy feels far more dangerous than combat.

Eventually, I escaped to the refreshment table.

I reached for a glass of fruit punch when a voice spoke beside me.

“Allow me.”

I turned.

He had brunette wavy hair and sharply defined features softened by a warm, composed smile. His voice carried quiet confidence — not arrogance, but wisdom.

He handed me the glass.

“Thank you,” I said.

He studied me with interest rather than obligation.

“You are Princess Valentina,” he said. “Second to the throne of Volkaria. Skilled in botany and creatures of rare origin. And one of the finest warriors your kingdom has.”

I blinked in surprise.

“And you are?” I asked carefully.

“Zen,” he replied with a small bow. “Prince of Argon. It is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Prince of Argon.

My thoughts moved quickly. Argon was known for scholarship and military precision. If anyone outside Volkaria knew of the Valcons or the Grand Master, it might be them.

But I could not ask. Not here.

“It is a pleasure, Prince Zen,” I said. “May I offer you a drink?”

He smiled slightly. “No need. I was simply fascinated. It is my first visit to Volkaria, and I had hoped to make... meaningful connections.”

He hesitated briefly before adding, “I hope we might be friends.”

Friends.

The word felt foreign.

My heart raced — not because he was charming, but because he had noticed me. My work. My knowledge.

Something my own family rarely acknowledged.

“If it would not burden you,” I said softly, “I would be honored to be your friend, Prince Zen.”

We spoke for what felt like minutes but must have been far longer. He knew the plants I described. The rare creatures I had encountered. The spoke of studying them himself. He even claimed skill in swordsmanship.

No one had ever matched me in these conversations before.

I felt... seen.

Eventually, the music quieted. My father rose.

The hall fell silent.

Flora and Harry stood beside him.

My father thanked the guests for attending, speaking of unity and prosperity. Then his gaze shifted toward Harry.

“I am proud,” he declared, “to have a guard such as Harry — who will soon save our kingdom from all danger.”

The words struck like ice.

Save our kingdom?

I had been the one sent to confront the creatures. I had found the dungeon. I had prepared the solution.

Yet he praised Harry.

In front of everyone.

I stood motionless as applause filled the hall.

It did not matter what I said. It would not change his decision.

I left before the announcement concluded.

“Princess Valentina.”

Zen caught up to me near the corridor.

“I would very much appreciate,” he said gently, “if you might show me around Volkaria tomorrow.”

Despite everything, I found myself smiling. “I would be happy to.”

The next morning, I woke before sunrise, restless and uncertain.

Zen was already waiting outside the palace gates on horseback when I emerged. The guards brought mine, and we rode through the capital streets.

He admired the markets at the kingdom’s center — the vendors, the crafts, the aroma of fresh bread and spices. He tasted local dishes with genuine curiosity, asking questions with thoughtful attention.

He seemed sincere.

Eventually, he turned toward the forest.

“I would like to see it,” he said. “I hear your lands are rich with rare flora.”

A flicker of hesitation passed through me.

But I nodded.

We rode until the trees thickened. Once inside, we dismounted to examine several plants Zen claimed did not grow in Argon.

As we walked deeper, unease returned.

We were nearing the railway of Oranta.

Was it coincidence?

Zen paused beside one of the plants, studying it carefully.

Too carefully.

Suddenly, heavy footsteps echoed through the forest floor.

My blood ran cold.

A Valcon.

The ground trembled faintly as it approached.

I reached instinctively for my blade.

But Zen did not.

Instead, he calmly withdrew a small notebook and began sketching.

Sketching.

My stomach twisted.

Had he befriended me to gather information? To study the Valcons? To learn of the dungeon?

The creature emerged from the trees, its diamond core glinting in the dim forest light.

I felt something sharper than fear.

Betrayal.

Swordsmanship: (Noun) the skill of fighting with a sword.

Motionless: (Adjective) not moving; still.

Restless: (Adjective) unable to relax or stay still; uneasy.

Flicker: (Noun/Verb) a brief or slight movement of light, emotion, or feeling.

Instinctively: (Adverb) done naturally, without conscious thought.

Befriended: (Verb) became friends with someone.

Betrayal: (Noun) the act of being disloyal or breaking trust.



Chapter Six – Shadows of Betrayal

I'm confused. Why is he betraying me? Does he want me dead? I'm lost in thoughts, I'm betrayed. I try to remain focused. As soon as I looked back, I saw the Valcon trying to attack me. I shifted myself to the other side, further than Zen. I barely dodged the Valcon.

I lost balance as I was getting up. The Valcon headed towards Zen, and he was busy sketching. I got up as quickly as I could and reached for my potion as I was going towards him. I got the perfect chance. Before he attacked Zen, I threw the potion in its mouth, and he just vanished. I was really surprised—my potion actually worked on the Valcon.

Fiercely, I said, "Prince Zen, do you know you almost got yourself killed? Do you really think this is the proper time to sketch?"

Prince Zen replied, "I had to do that, I have a reason, but I must not tell you."

"A reason? At this time?"

"Well, you must keep your reasons aside! Can't you see we are in the forest and, worst part, we are near the dungeon?" I spoke.

Silence grew, but the silence stopped once we heard roaring sounds approaching. They were Valcons—many of them!

I said, "Prince Zen, this may not be royal of me, but you ought to get somewhere a bit further from here so you won't get harmed."

He replied instantly, "What about you?"

"I will be fighting the Valcons, so get to a safe place now!" I spoke. He got up and hid.

The Valcons approached. I got my potion in one hand and, in the other, my sword. I got up in a tree. It was a tall one. The Valcon tried to breathe fire at me, but before he could, I threw a potion in his mouth. He vanished. I killed a few with the same trick and ran out of the potion. I used my

sword. I jumped off the tree and took charge at the Valcon, but it was no use—I got hit.

I kept dashing and dodging it, but it was tough. I hid behind a tree, breathless, sweating, covering my body, and my palms burned because of using the sword effortlessly. I got hit badly, which left a scar on my right thigh. My reaction was slow. I heard the Valcon close to me and trying to breathe fire at me. That's when I saw Prince Zen with a sword. He has a sword, and it was hidden. I'm not sure what he did, but I know he killed the Valcon.

He rushed to me. "Are you okay? We should go now!" he said in a worried tone. I tried to gather my last bit of strength. We went on his horse because mine ran off. I was behind him as he was going fast through the maze of the forest.

We got far, so he slowed down his pace and asked me, "Why did you save me back there? I betrayed you, and you still decided to save me."

I could not answer that question. I was still in shock from what happened earlier.

We got off the horse in an area, deeper in the forest. I asked with a questioning expression, "What was the reason you started drawing the Valcon?"

He replied, "I need the Valcon back in my country as an armor. I can't explain any further."

I was unhappy about the situation, but I cannot forget his kindness at the ball. It was getting dark. I said, "Let's go back to the palace."

He said, "No, we cannot because the Valcons are all over the forest at night."

How did he know information that even I did not know? I had to make a fire because, at night, the forest is chilly, but I could not collect rocks because my thigh was so injured. He started looking around for rocks and specific kinds of plants. He knew I was injured, so he returned with the

plants and started to make an antidote to heal my thigh. I realized he took out his notebook and started sketching. I was hitting the rocks at each other and made fire. My stomach started growling.

He stood up and said, “I will look for something that we can eat.” I followed him. We found some plants that can be eaten. That night, we slept in the forest.

The next morning, I got up as the sun hit my eyes. I said, “Let’s leave. It is morning.”

He replied again with a “No.”

I asked, confused, “Why we cannot go back?”

He said, “Last night, when you were sleeping, I saw more dangerous creatures. It is crazy how we made it here yesterday, but we have to wait for rescuers.”

At the meantime, I told him to teach me about plants that I did not know about. In my opinion, plants are just like humans—they are unreadable at the beginning, but you will know them better if you interact with them. He introduced me to a plant that was new to me. He described that this plant can live for many years. I saw my favorite plant, and I introduced it to him. He looked curious and wanted to learn more from me and this kingdom.

After we had talked about plants, I felt more comfortable with him. I forgot and forgave him for the betrayal. I asked him, “Why did you approach me on the ball night?”

He replied, “Because you seemed kind-hearted and clever.”

We were in the forest, still waiting. I was thinking how to get them to rescue us, but Zen started sketching again. I got too curious. I wanted to see how he sketched the Valcon. I decided to ask him, “Can you show me the drawing you did?”

He replied, “Yes, I can, but it better stay between us.”

I wanted to know why he acted this way, but I still wanted to know what he drew. He gave me his notebook. The second I saw the paper; I was in total shock.

Antidote: (Noun) a substance that counteracts a poison or harmful effect.

Maze: (Noun) – a complicated network of paths or passages.



Chapter Seven – Shadows in the Forest

His sketching was beautiful. He drew the Valcon so nicely and designed it as an armor. I looked at him with complete shock and admiration.

I told him, “What is this for? It is so beautiful. What are you planning to do with that?”

He gave a soft expression and replied, “Well, Val, I must not say yet, but when things end up going well, I will tell you.”

I gave a suspicious look and asked, “How am I supposed to believe you?”

“I promise you, I will,” he answered.

I gave a nod. It was still morning, so we headed off to explore more of the forest. Soon, we came upon a beautiful waterfall deep within the trees. We walked toward its river.

“We need to catch some fish, or we might starve to death,” he said.

“Then we shall catch some. I know how to—leave it to me,” I replied.

I picked up a branch from the ground near me and used my blade to sharpen one end. I used it as a spear. Once I made it sharp enough, I showed him.

“Am I not great?” I said in a sarcastic tone. “Lunch and supper shall be on me today.”

He agreed, and I started getting to work. I rolled up my sleeves and trousers and stepped into the water, fully focused and still so I could have the perfect chance to catch a fish. I saw one—it was big enough. I aimed steadily, and as fast as I could, I struck.

“I caught it!” I shouted happily. “Prince Zen, look!”

He stopped whatever he was doing and looked, surprised. “That is one nice-looking fish. Well done,” he said.

I was happy. I caught a few more and came out of the river. He set up a fire, and I grilled the fish. I used some nearby plants as herbs on top. We ate.

It was evening, and the sun was still shining brightly. We walked through the forest a bit more, trying to find a good place to rest. Out of nowhere, I saw a strange-looking shadow behind a tree. I placed my hand on my sword, ready for whatever we were about to face.

Prince Zen looked confused.

The shadow moved. I sprinted toward it—but it vanished. It looked like the shadow of a man.

Something felt wrong.

I tried to push the thought away for now. We continued our search, passing many new and strange plants and trees. I collected some and placed them in my bag, while Prince Zen sketched them.

Eventually, we found a good spot. It had enough shelter for the night. We made another fire. Night had fallen.

We ate some leftover fish and drank the water we had filtered from the river. We talked, trying to know each other better, and I realized he truly was a great man.

Suddenly, we heard a noise in the bushes.

I drew my sword, expecting danger—but what appeared was an odd-looking creature. It was adorable and fluffy: a baby red fox. These red foxes are rarely found.

I put my sword away and signaled for it to come closer.

“What are you doing?” asked Zen.

I did not answer. The fox slowly approached us.

“Princess, what are you doing? What if that fox attacks us?” he repeated nervously.

“Do not worry, Prince Zen. These foxes are harmless when they are babies,” I replied.

The red fox came closer, still hesitant. I fed it some fish, and it allowed me to touch it. Its fur was very soft. It was a male.

Prince Zen looked surprised.

I grabbed his hand and placed it gently on the baby fox.

“Cute, right?” I asked.

“Yes, indeed,” he said. “I never knew you were good with dealing with little creatures.”

“Well, I am used to being with creatures,” I replied.

He gave a confused look. “Is there a reason for that, if I may ask?”

I paused for a few seconds before replying.

“Well... a few years back, I came to this forest to be taught many things. One of the royal staff made me survive here on my own. I had to rely only on my physical ability.”

I continued slowly, “I had to survive alone for a week.”

He gave an unreadable expression. It seemed he pitied me.

After a moment, he asked, “How could they do such a thing? You were just a child. You have gone through a lot. I am sorry.”

He sounded saddened.

“Honestly, I am not sure of the reason myself. But you must not feel sorry, Zen. If it were not for that, I would not have learned to fight or

survive,” I said.

The atmosphere grew heavy, so I tried to change it.

“What shall we name this little one?”

“Maybe... Red,” he replied.

“Red? That is a random name—not even a name, just a color. Yet I like it. Red it shall be.”

I placed Red beside us, but he did not leave. Zen and I tried to sleep. Red stayed with us through the night.

Today was a long day. Tomorrow might be longer.

But we cannot let our guard down—something still lingers in the shadows.

The next morning, I stretched my body while Zen returned to drawing. I looked around, hoping we would be rescued soon.

Then I saw it again—a shadow behind a tree.

I thought carefully. I needed a way to approach it without letting it escape.

I told Zen what I saw.

“Even I felt something was around us,” he said.

We made a plan: Zen would move away while I stayed alone, so the creature might approach.

Red stayed beside me.

Suddenly, a giant red fox leaped out from the shadows.

It was Red’s mother.

But why was she attacking me? I had not harmed Red.

The fox lunged and slashed toward my face—but at that exact moment, Zen rushed forward and pulled me away. I fell to the ground, covered in dust.

I could not bring myself to draw my sword. It was Red's mother.

"We must communicate with them," I told Zen. "They need to know we will not harm them."

The only way to do that was with food.

"Get fish from the river," I said. "Until you return, I will handle her."

"You were nearly killed earlier. I will stay," he said.

I could not argue. If we were too late, the fox might kill both of us.

I ran. My shoulders struck against branches, and I could barely breathe. I reached the river and quickly caught several fish.

When I returned, the fox was attacking Zen.

I threw the fish in front of her.

She stopped and began eating.

"Phew... we are safe."

Red came close and leaned against me. It felt like an apology for what his mother had done.

Admiration: (Noun) a feeling of respect and warm approval.

Suspicious: (Adjective) having a feeling that something is wrong or someone is dishonest.

Pitied: (Verb) felt sympathy or sorrow for someone's suffering.

Lingers: (Verb) remains or stays in a place longer than expected.

Lunged: (Verb) made a sudden forward movement, usually to attack.



Chapter Eight – The Return and the Rising Threat

Back at the castle, I am not sure how things are going. I am not sure if they have even noticed that I have been missing for almost a week. Zen decided to search the forest and find what else there is to eat. The past week we have just eaten the same meal over and over, and now we have another member to take care of as well. Zen is gone. He said he will be back in the afternoon.

In the meantime, I am trying to train by myself. I am engaged in combat with feeble creatures all around us. None of the meat is edible. The sky started to turn dark, so I headed back to our camping area. Zen was not there; he had not returned from the search. Could he have left the forest? Or is he in danger? I started to worry more as time passed. I am not sure what to do. I hope Red has kept him company in case of any danger.

I was about to head out from our area when I saw a shadow getting closer. It was Zen. I was both relieved and furious. “Where were you all day? And you don’t even have food with you,” I asked angrily. “What were you doing in the forest?” The way I responded left him stunned. He replied, “I went out to discover the forest.”

I said, “You should have told me that from the morning. You said you would get food.” Zen did not know how to respond. He apologized and said, “I was going to get food, but I got distracted by nature and the forest, so I started sketching around.” I had to agree with him—this place is interesting and deep.

The next day, I woke up starving because yesterday I had not eaten anything. While Zen was examining his notes, I played with Red. I took Red and we started to look for something to eat. Zen followed us, and it seemed he was searching for something, but I was not sure what exactly it was. I paid no attention and kept looking.

Zen said, “Let’s go back to Volkaria. I am starting to miss our homemade food.” I was confused. “Did you not say it was dangerous for us to go back?” He replied, “The past week I have been studying the forest. I do not think we will face any trouble on the way back.”

“How can you be sure of that?” I asked curiously.

“Well, we ought to leave early in the morning, and the creatures’ population will decrease as we get closer to the start of our journey, so we will make it. Although it might take us a day or two because we have come far.” I paused for a moment, thinking about what would be best, and he was right. “We shall begin our journey back to Volkaria first thing in the morning,” I said. “Do you have any idea where to go from here?”

He replied, “Of course I know. We will head south.” We took a nap. As soon as the sun rose, we collected our things and some fish so we would not starve on the way. We began the journey, trying to save time, so we rode the horse as it sprinted between the trees, dodging branches.

After a while, we slowed our pace because it started getting dark. I told Zen it was too risky, and we must take shelter and call it a night. He agreed.

Halfway through the night, I woke up to some sounds. I looked with my tired eyes and saw many bright lights. They looked like fire torches.

I woke Zen and told him to look. He seemed happy, as if he knew who it was. As they got closer, all of them knelt and said, “Your Highness, Prince Zen.” That was when I realized they were guards from his country—they had come looking for him. Zen looked different. His face was shining with happiness. They returned his sword and gave him news about what was happening back in their country.

I was happy for him. Zen told them that we would stay here for the night and return in the morning. My family was not with them, so I figured they truly had not noticed that I was gone for a week. I felt a little down, but I must not. I learned a lot this past week and improved my sword skills, all thanks to Prince Zen.

Red was still with us. He would spend the night with us until sunrise, then we would part ways.

We woke as the sun began to rise and started heading back to Volkaria.

It was closer now. We walked for another hour or two when I spotted strange-looking footsteps. I assumed it was another creature in this area of the forest.

I showed them to Zen, and he looked at them with a slight smirk. He pulled out his notebook and began drawing them. He seemed pleased because this was good evidence that such a creature existed. We inspected the steps further. We were not sure if they belonged to a human or a creature. Zen and I exchanged a nod. We both understood, and we began to follow the trail.

It was a baby Valcon—newborn. We fed it some leftover fish. We could not kill it because it was harmless. We decided to take samples from its environment and bring them back with us for examination. It would help us fight Valcons more easily in the future.

When we finally reached Volkaria and arrived at the castle, I did not want Zen to see how I was treated in the palace, but I knew I had to face it.

The guards greeted us at the palace doors. We entered. My sister was standing there, looking shocked. She greeted Prince Zen and then asked me, “Val, what are you doing with Prince Zen?” I was about to answer when my father’s guard approached and said, “The king is waiting for you inside.”

I took a deep breath and walked through the hall, my footsteps echoing behind me.

Relieved: (Adjective) feeling happy because something unpleasant has not happened.

Furious: (Adjective) extremely angry.

Distracted: (Adjective) unable to concentrate or focus because attention is elsewhere.

Dodging: (Verb) moving quickly to avoid something.

Smirk: (Noun) a smug or conceited smile.



Chapter Nine – Trials of Steel and Shadow

My father was waiting for us. He was calm, seated in his chair. With a serious yet controlled voice, he said, “It is a pleasure to see you again, Prince Zen.” Zen bowed respectfully and replied, “Your majesty, the pleasure is mine.”

My father looked surprised when he noticed me standing beside them. He asked, “Valentina, what are you doing here?”

I answered, “Prince Zen and I were stuck in the forest and had no way out. It has been over a week. Thanks to his guards, we made it out safely.”

My father and my sister looked at me suspiciously, but I ignored their glares. Zen broke the silence and said, “Your Highness, while we were in the forest, I discovered that the forest is divided into five levels. We must pass through and defeat the creatures in the first four levels, and in the final and main level lies the king of the forest. The only way this kingdom can be saved is by defeating that king.”

I already knew this from long ago. I thought they knew as well, but apparently, they did not. Once, I had attempted the first level, but at that time I was too young and too weak, and I never considered going back.

My father then commanded, “Valentina, I want you to train your guards well for these levels.”

I replied calmly, “Yes, Father.”

Inside, I was over the moon and excited for this challenge. I said my goodbyes to Zen, as he left to rest elsewhere. I returned to my room and threw myself onto the bed, exhausted and drained of energy. After taking a shower, I fell into a deep sleep.

Early the next morning, I woke up and prepared my sword for training. When I reached the training field, the guards were already lined up and ready. I instructed them to run ten laps around the field. This was only the beginning—day by day the training would become harder and more challenging.

I was so excited that I decided to exercise with them. After the ten laps, they were already tired, but there was much more to do. They needed to memorize their movements while using their swords. It sounded simple, but it required intense focus. They had to think about every motion and consider how to defeat an opponent in the simplest and fastest way.

While they practiced, I brought them water. Their next exercise focused on fighting without swords. I trained them to use their hands, feet, and even their body strength to defeat creatures if necessary.

Soon after, I decided to take them to the surface level of the forest so they could face weaker creatures. When we arrived, Zen was already there, fighting. With one swift slash, he defeated a creature. I was impressed by how easily he handled it.

I greeted him and said, “I brought the guards here to fight simple creatures. I would be pleased if you could help them.”

He smiled slightly and replied, “I would be glad to help.”

I signaled the guards to begin.

One by one, the beasts dashed toward them and were struck down. I observed from a distance, carefully watching their movements and identifying their mistakes so I could help them improve. After some time, I noticed that although the number of beasts was decreasing, the remaining ones were becoming stronger.

The soldiers looked exhausted, so I commanded, “Well done, everyone. Take a break. I will handle the rest.”

Relief spread across their faces. I stepped forward and began fighting the remaining creatures myself. As I fought, something felt wrong. The beasts were increasing in size and strength.

I quickly moved toward Zen. “The number of beasts is decreasing, but their power is increasing. We might—”

Before I could finish, a loud scream echoed through the forest. Zen and I

rushed toward the sound.

What we saw before us was not an ordinary creature—it was something legendary.

The beast stood like a living storm. It looked part leopard and part ancient guardian. Its massive muscular body was covered in golden-brown fur marked with dark spots. A wild black mane ran along its spine like shadowed flames. Long curved fangs shone like sharp daggers. The sound it made was deep and ancient—not just a roar, but a warning.

I fiercely commanded the soldier to get up and leave immediately. As they stumbled away, Zen and I quickly took cover behind a nearby tree, trying to identify the creature's weakness.

Zen whispered, "I have read about this creature. There was not much information, but I know one thing—we must slice off its head and avoid looking into the third eye on its forehead. If we do... the consequences will be unbearable."

I nodded and replied, "I will take the left side. You take the right. We attack from its blind spot—its back. And Zen... be careful."

He gave a light nod, and we separated.

I faced the leopard-like beast directly while Zen moved behind it. The creature lunged at me with sharp claws and powerful bites. It was incredibly fast. One of its claws slashed my right arm. Blood began to flow down to my sword, but I ignored the pain.

Zen pulled out a metal rope and signaled to me that he would restrain it while I delivered the final strike. I forced myself to stay conscious as the battle continued. After several tense moments, he managed to wrap the rope tightly around the creature's neck and jaws, holding it in place.

I ran toward a nearby tree and climbed quickly. I needed height.

With the last of my strength, I jumped from the branch, gripping my sword firmly. As I fell, I swung the blade across the creature's neck.

Blood—both mine and the beast’s—splashed across the steel.

The creature collapsed.

What had once seemed impossible had suddenly become real.

As its body hit the ground, a small glowing key dropped beside it.

In that moment, I realized something shocking—we had just completed the first level without even knowing it.

Intense: (Adjective) very strong or serious.

Opponent: (Noun) a person or creature you fight against.

Swift: (Adjective) very fast.

Guardian: (Noun) a protector.

Consequences: (Noun) results or effects of an action.

Restrain: (Verb) hold back or control.



Chapter Ten – The Mystical Key and Hidden Shadows

At first, Prince Zen and I examined it closely without touching it, out of concern that it might contain poison or a curse.

The key was little, with odd markings—numbers from an old language—all over its surface.

During my years in the orphanage, where the library served as my best instructor, I had studied such symbols. I had taught myself a lot of things since I was a young child. That knowledge now, at nineteen, had a purpose. I read the phrase etched into the metal after carefully examining the markings: Leokar, the beast's name. Prince Zen took the chance and grabbed the key. Nothing took place. We started to examine it more thoroughly after determining that it was safe.

Zen gently remarked, "Val, give me this key for the time being. I'll protect it. It's getting dark; let's head back to the palace."

"Prince Zen, I trust your care," I answered.

"Let's leave." We went back to the soldiers, who were surprised and impressed.

"What's wrong?" I inquired.

One of them remarked, "You two were amazing, Your Highness. You worked as a fantastic team."

I gave a quiet smile. "You all performed admirably as well. You deserve to rest, so let's go back."

When we got to the palace, I walked back to my room, and Prince Zen proceeded to his guest chamber. My arm's wound was still open, but the blood had partially dried. I tried cleaning it in the restroom, but the bleeding persisted. I opened the first-aid kit after taking a big breath.

I carefully stitched the wound myself with a needle and thread. Even though every stitch hurt, I would not give up. I applied a tight bandage on

the wound after I was done. I was exhausted and had lost a lot of blood. I had to go to supper, though.

I was dressed in an off-the-shoulder, dark violet dress with long sleeves. The waist was embellished with belts and little embellishments, and the skirt was shorter in the front and longer in the back. When I saw Prince Zen at the royal dining hall, I was shocked to see Harry there too.

He had also been absent for a week, the same week that I had vanished, according to Flora.

She accepted his justification that he had been preoccupied with his job. No, I did not. I greeted everyone and then sat down next to Prince Zen, leaning slightly in his direction. I muttered, "There is someone at this table we should be careful with." Calmly, he looked around.

"Who?"

I gestured to Harry. "That is Harry. We have to be mindful of what we say." Zen gave a silent nod.

My father came into the hall at that very moment, his face beaming with joy. Everyone gave him a polite greeting. My father remarked,

"It is nice to have you here, Prince Zen."

Zen answered, "I am honored to be here."

Then my dad turned to face me. "I heard you and Prince Zen finished the first level, Valentina."

Before I could respond, Zen responded, "Your Majesty, it seems we finished the second level, but we thought it was the first."

I stared at him bewildered. "How are you aware?" He raised the key a little. "It has five tiny marks on it. There are two that are bright red. This indicates that someone else advanced past us in the first stage. Someone powerful enough to take down a whole level by themselves." I could not shake the thought.

Despite my injury, I practiced with the guards after supper. There was nothing that could prevent me from being ready for what lay ahead.

Later, I strolled by myself in the palace garden in search of quiet. I started giving the plants a little care in the hopes that the silence would help me think. Harry came and joined me. He spoke to me for the first time since I came back.

“Princess Valentina, who do you believe finished the first level before you?” he said. His tone was informal, but I could see he was curious.

“I do not suspect anyone,” I said cautiously. “But everything might change once we find out who it is.”

He did not say anything else. Later, I went to see Ms. Honey, the royal nurse, to have my wound thoroughly cleaned. She was among the palace’s most benevolent residents.

“Princess Valentina, are you okay?” she softly inquired. She handled the wound with care when I told her what had happened. Although it was painful, it was lessened by her serene demeanor.

I thanked her and turned to return to the palace.

Prince Zen suddenly materialized.

“Val, we have to be ready for the third level,” he urged hurriedly.

I stopped. “Why? Who is coming for us?”

Etched: (Verb) cut or carved into a surface.

Embellished: (Verb) decorated something to make it more attractive.

Preoccupied: (Adjective) busy thinking about something or busy with work.

Bewildered: (Adjective) very confused.

Cautiously: (Adverb) carefully to avoid danger or mistakes.

Benevolent: (Adjective) kind and caring.

Serene: (Adjective) calm and peaceful.



Chapter Eleven – The Dungeon of Stone and Shadows

Zen seemed grave. I wanted to know what he meant. “What do you mean by they?” Curiosity struck me.

“I will verify my speech, but first let’s get going. Bring necessary supplies,” he responded.

I rushed back to my chamber. I got extra small blades, healing ointments, a smoke grenade, and a couple of other things. I put my hair in a ponytail and headed out. Prince Zen was outside with two horses beside him. He got on his horse and I hopped on mine. We tried to make our way to the forest.

Prince Zen started explaining. “I thought it could be someone from our enemy country, but we were not too sure.” He also mentioned that alongside the beast we would be battling, there would be smaller creatures’ side by side with their leader, the final authority figure. I was trying to take in the information he gave. He added, “It will be getting harder, so do me a favor and do not get too reckless while battling, and we must sort out a plan.” He continued, “We will first focus on the smaller beasts, then the final beast.”

I got a bit uneasy since I was basically told I could get reckless with my actions.

We made it to the third level. It took a while since it was in the deeper part of the forest. Before we got to the dungeon of the third level, we left the horses a bit far away so they would not get attacked. We walked to the dungeon, which was bigger than the last one.

We opened a quarter of the iron door. I used a magic-made bomb and a bit of my strength, and I threw it. We shut the door as quickly as possible and hid behind a rock. We heard a big explosion, and we could hear creatures roaring and bumping into the iron door. They kept pushing and pushing. The door fell, and beasts were running wild.

I had an arrow. I started taking aim at the wild beasts, killing them one by one. Almost every beast that came out, I took a shot at it. Some did not

die with my single arrow, so Prince Zen stepped in and used his sword, slashing their heads one after another. We killed about fifty creatures and more. After a while, they started to decrease.

I was glad I prepared a lot of spare arrows. I was running out, so I started using my sword with Prince Zen. We managed to kill all the small beasts. We knew that it was not the end of this fight, but we heard humans talking a bit further from us.

I told Zen to crouch behind anything and not let them see us. Zen believed me and didn't ask questions. I heard them say, "Such an appealing forest, we can do our things here."

I wondered who they were, or what they were doing here. Or maybe Zen knew them, because he wants to use valcons as his armor. It could be his friends.

I looked at Zen and asked, "Are they from your country?"

He stared back and replied, "No. If they were, I would tell you."

I told him, "I still do not know why you need Valcon as your armor."

He could not answer that question because a man was staring us down.

Oh no—we got caught.

The man was not speaking; he was just looking at us. I gave him a cracked smile. Zen stood up and asked him, "Who are you?"

It looked like he didn't want to answer, but he replied, "We are from another country. We are here because it is a tourist area."

I was reading his expression and his movements. I was sure he was lying. I gazed at Zen, and he was telling me the same thing with his eyes.

I got up and held a knife to him, demanding an explanation. He looked frightened. His friend from the other side came and said, "You cannot hold a knife against him. Your country does not allow this against tourists."

I spoke, “I am Princess Valentina of Volkaria.”and I just threw him aside.

They were both petrified, and all of a sudden, they tried to run away from us. They started sprinting. Zen told me to stay, and he would follow them.

Zen was gone too long, and the creature was not coming out. I said to myself maybe that was all for level three, but we had not gotten a key, so it was not the end for this level.

Finally, Zen came back, and he was not alone. Both of the men were with him. I was impressed—he caught two men all alone.

Zen came up to me and said, “These men are from the enemy country, and they want to camp here. They are planning to get the next key. We do not have to worry about them. My guards are coming right now to capture them.”

Zen’s guards arrived and took these men away.

Zen and I were waiting for the creature to come out because we could not go in. It was kind of risky, and it was getting dark.

I suggested, “Why not go in the dungeon?”

Zen thought about it for a few minutes. He said, “But it is not safe. What if one of us gets killed?”

I told him, “Maybe we should collect some food and plants. Get going inside because it seems like this creature will not be coming out anytime soon.”

Zen got curious and said, “I wonder how it looks inside the dungeon?” He gave me a hand signal toward the dungeon door. He meant let’s go.

I was ecstatic—it was my first time entering a dungeon.

We were walking, and it was getting darker, but we had flashlights, so we were fine for now. The smell of the area was getting worse, and there were light bulbs on the ceiling. I turned off my flashlight, putting it back

in my bag.

There was a hiss.

Could it be a snake—the creature?

We moved further into the dungeon. We spotted a swamp. A big, deep swamp. Zen and I kept our distance.

And I am glad we did, because a massive stone snake coiled beneath the swamp and emerged to the surface. Its enormous body was thick and muscular, covered in overlapping plates of dark, jagged rock that looked like natural armor. Each movement made its stony segments grind and scrape against one another. Its head was broad and heavy, shaped like a blunt wedge meant for breaking through soil and rock, with two long, curved fangs jutting downward like scythes. When it opened its mouth, a dim orange glow flickered deep inside it. It had small, nearly sightless eyes, giving it a cold, lifeless stare, and its body coiled tightly like a living boulder, powerful and solid enough to split the ground apart when it rose.

The ground of the dungeon trembled as dust rained from the ceiling. Cracks spread across the stone floor, and the massive Serenta— a beast with the body of a snake and the head of a scorpion—forced its way upward, grinding rock against rock.

Prince Zen pulled me back just as the creature's head burst through, its fangs striking the place where we had stood. Our swords were already drawn. I tightened my grip.

“It cannot see well.”

“Then do not let the Serenta feel us,” he replied.

The Serenta thrashed wildly now, smashing the columns and pillars. Pieces of the dungeon collapsed.

We split in opposite directions. Prince Zen ran toward its flank, slashing at its armor. Sparks burst from the blade, but the Serenta barely reacted.

I watched its movements instead of attacking. I noticed how the plates shifted, how they overlapped. When it turned, the armor separated for a heartbeat.

“There!” I called.

Zen understood instantly. He rushed again, this time waiting. The Serenta twisted, trying to crush him with its coils. At the last moment, he slid under the rising body, driving his sword into the narrow gap between the plates.

The beast roared, the sound echoing through the dungeon like an earthquake.

“Get back!” I shouted. Prince Zen rolled behind a broken pillar.

“We have to finish this fast!” he said.

I gave Prince Zen a nod, breathing unevenly. “We have to strike together.”

We ran. I charged straight ahead, drawing its attention again. The beast lunged at me, jaws wide. At that moment, Prince Zen sprinted up the fallen rubble, using the shaking stones as steps. He jumped, landing on the serenta’s back. The plates shifted beneath his feet, trying to throw him off.

He plunged his sword into the same wound I had opened.

I followed, striking from below. Cracks spread across the armor, deep and glowing faintly from the heat within. The Serenta writhed, slamming its body against the walls, but we held our ground.

With a final coordinated strike, both blades drove deep.

The dungeon fell silent for a single moment as the creature froze.

Then the stone began to split.

Our second key lay on the ground.

Zen and I used one of the potions I had brought with me. We both drank it and regained some of our energy. Some of the injuries we had taken began to heal.

We were catching our breath when slow clapping sounds were heard from the entrance.

Scythes: (Noun/Verb) a tool with a long-curved blade used for cutting crops; as a verb, it means to cut in a sweeping motion.

Thrash: (Verb) to move violently or uncontrollably.



Chapter Twelve – The Ring, the Shadow, and the Secret

It was Harry who was clapping at the entrance. Zen and I looked at each other, confused. He had a smirk on his face. He said, “I am here under the king’s command. I came to escort you and protect you back to the palace.” After we killed a ginormous creature, he still wanted to protect us. I laughed out loud and said, “It does not seem like we need your protection.” I should keep a close eye on Harry. Whatever we do, Harry knows.

Zen seemed completely out of it. I called out to him, “Zen, are you okay?” I shook him, and he came back to his senses. He asked, “What just happened?” He looked bewildered. I think the fight had an effect on him. I gave him another potion to help him feel better. I helped him stand up. I said, “Zen, let’s go back to the palace. Everything is going to be alright.”

I still did not know why we had to kill the creature of the third level so soon. I had so many questions that Zen had not answered yet. We started to collect ourselves. Harry was by the entrance, ready to guide us back. Zen and I followed Harry. The horses were still there. We trailed Harry throughout the forest, and we returned to the kingdom.

When we got back to the palace, Zen commanded that I take him to the baby Valcon, so I did. He said, “Val, do you know why I decided to make you bring this baby Valcon back to the palace?”

I replied, “No, I do not. Why did you?”

He replied, “Because my country is about to be destroyed by its neighboring countries, and I wanted to study this baby Valcon to protect my country from being destroyed.”

He got closer to the Valcon and petted it as he said, “I am sorry to have you here, and I will take you back to the wild.” He gave the baby Valcon a last piece of meat and carried it to the carriage. He felt guilty for keeping it.

I said my farewell to them. As I returned to my chamber, I felt somewhat

at ease. I was glad to have Prince Zen and his company, especially after seeing how well he treats creatures. Prince Zen is a kind-hearted prince like no other.

I was in my chamber, wondering who was behind all this. Why was the first level already completed? And who finished it? I planned that tomorrow I would go to the forest alone to find answers to those questions.

The next morning, I woke up a little late because I was extremely tired. I got dressed and went downstairs to leave, but my father caught me and said, “Valentina, why not come and have breakfast with us?” It was the first time he had asked me to have breakfast with them.

I said, “I appreciate the offer, but I have some important matters to attend to.”

He gave me a curious look. “And what might that be?”

“I will head to Prince Zen’s. He asked for my presence,” I lied.

“If it is Prince Zen, you ought to go now. We do not want to keep him waiting,” his expression lightened.

My father and I parted ways. I headed to the kitchen and took a few bites for my horse and me. While feeding my horse, I saw Flora heading toward me. I quickly got on my horse and started moving. I acted clueless, as if I did not see her.

She shouted my name, “Val, wait, Val!”

I did not even turn back. As much as I love her, I had more important things to do.

I made my way into the forest. I reached the first level. Everything was wrecked. Trees were burned down, the ground was covered in ashes, rocks were scattered everywhere, and there was a human skeleton. The skeleton was inside a long-hooded cloth. It looked like a soldier—one of our soldiers. Who could it be?

Or maybe this was a setup—a setup for me to find, to make me worried and apprehensive. I mapped everything out to show Zen. He once mentioned that he is good with evidence and where it comes from. I began searching for anything useful.

As I walked around, I tripped over a rock and fell straight onto my face. When I tried to get up, I spotted a ring. A ring with an “F” initial engraved on it. The ring was marked with the royal crest, and there is only one like it. It belongs to Flora.

Could it really be hers? Could she be behind this? I dusted myself off. While inspecting the ring, I suddenly felt pain shoot through my side. I looked down—it was a blade. I looked up and saw a shadow vanish instantly. I was losing a lot of blood, and I had nothing to wrap the wound with.

I took the dead skeleton’s cloth, ripped it, and slowly forced myself to pull the blade out. The pain was unbearable. I used the cloth to wrap the wound. Soon, I started losing consciousness, and I fell to the ground.

When I began to open my eyes, I was in a room—all white. I saw Prince Zen walking around the room, worried. I sat up.

“What happened? Why am I here?” I asked.

Zen rushed toward me. “Are you alright? Do you feel better?”

“I am good, do not worry. But what happened?”

He gave a sigh of relief and said, “I had planned to investigate the first level, just as you were. The sky was getting dark. I made it to the area, and that is where I saw you on the ground, unconscious.”

He continued, “I was worried sick, Val. You lost a lot of blood. I brought you back to the palace. Ms. Honey has treated you, and no one knows.”

I was pleased to hear that. “How long was I out for?”

“You were out for two days.” “Where are my supplies? Did you leave

them behind?” I asked.

“I brought everything back,” he reassured me.

“You should rest, Val. I will get you supper,” he said before leaving.

I lay back down, trying to rethink what had happened. The shadow was there once again, and I lost it once more. I got up and searched my bag. All the evidence was there, including the ring.

Prince Zen returned with a tray of food. He brought me some broth. I ate it while he stayed by my side. My family did not even notice, but I paid no mind.

I got up, took my sword, and tried to head out when Prince Zen stopped me. “Where do you think you are going, Val?”

“I am heading to the lab to get the evidence tested,” I said while limping.

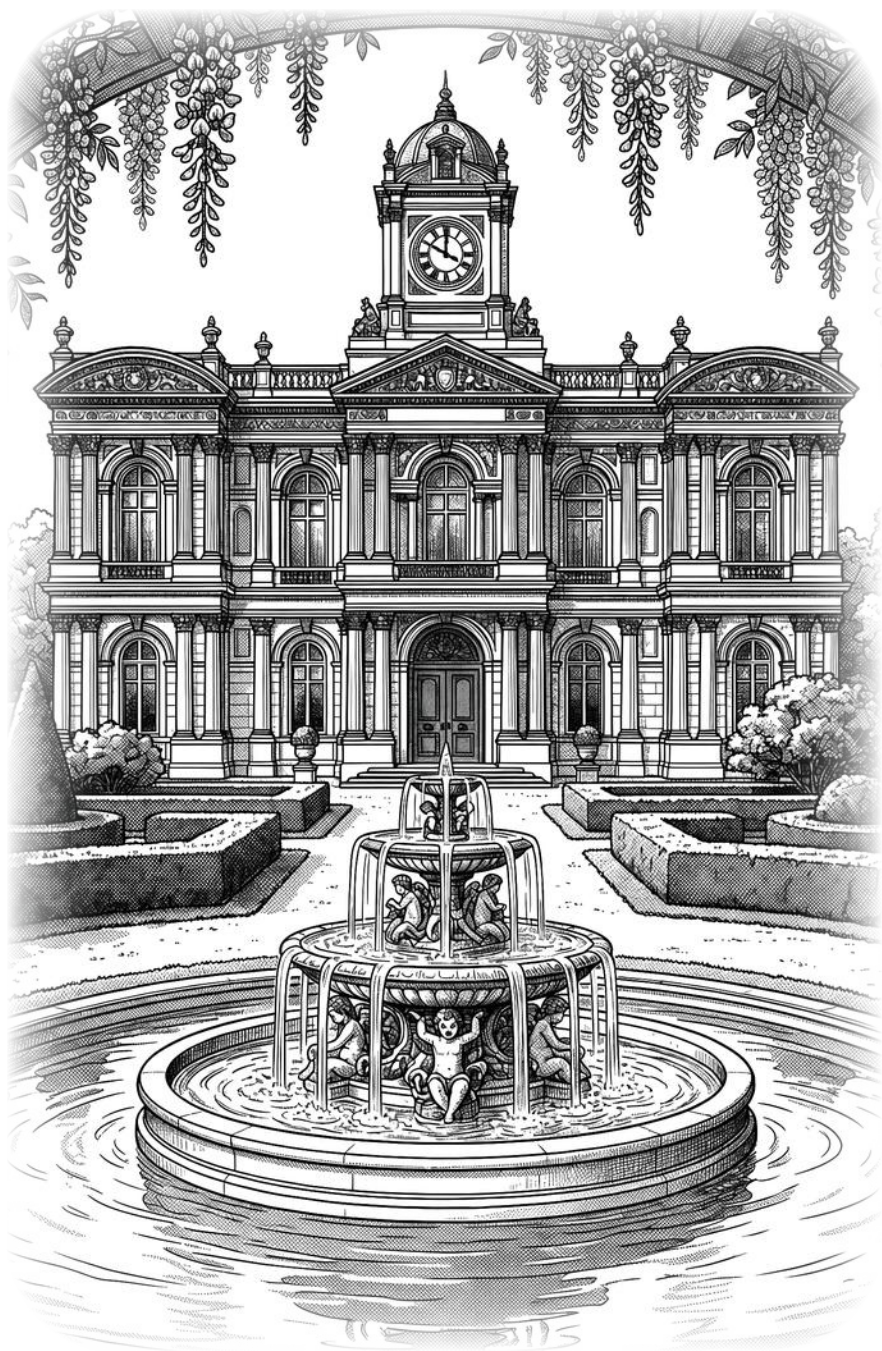
“No, you will not. Give them to me. I will examine them now and later take them myself.”

I handed him the extra piece of cloth and the ring and told him everything else. I explained the incident and how there is only one ring in the entire nation like that—and that it belongs to my sister.

He listened carefully while inspecting the items. Then he made me go back to bed. The pain was still strong. This room looked different. I think Prince Zen bought a palace. Is he planning to live here?

Jumbled: (Adjective) mixed together in a confused or untidy way.

Apprehensive: (Adjective) worried or frightened that something unpleasant may happen.



Chapter Thirteen – The Ivor Arrival

Ms. Honey returned and brought new bandages to clean my wound. Prince Zen had gone out; apparently, my father had asked for him. In the meantime, Ms. Honey kept me company.

It had been three days since the incident. My wounds seemed to be healing, and I could move around more easily. I had planned to head back to the palace to continue training the soldiers, but Ms. Honey would not allow me to. She kept saying, “It is too early for you to return to regular activities.”

So, I was practically locked inside Zen’s palace.

I wanted to explore it.

“Ms. Honey, may I explore the palace? I will stay inside,” I asked.

She nodded. “Why not? But return before sundown—and no lethal activities.”

I gathered myself and headed out.

As I opened the door, I noticed lovely small chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, lighting up the area. I walked along a long hallway. On the walls were many portraits. One caught my attention.

It was Zen in his younger days.

At first, I thought it might be his father. But at the bottom, it read not his name, but his father’s: Christopher Zephyr. Zen resembled him greatly.

I continued walking. The hallway was splendid, lavish, and vast. Guards stood stationed around the palace.

One door stood open. I looked inside—it was the kitchen.

I stepped in. Maids were cooking, and the aroma was delicious. They all turned and bowed.

“Good morning, Princess Valentina.”

One maid, who appeared to be the head maid, asked, “Your Highness, where are you heading? I can guide you.”

“Yes, please. I am quite lost,” I admitted.

“Where would you like to go?”

“I would like some fresh air. The garden would be nice.”

“Of course. Follow me.”

She led me through the hallways until we reached glass doors. They looked peaceful.

I stepped outside.

Golden sunlight bathed the grand palace. Tall columns and marble statues stood proudly above blooming gardens. A quiet fountain rippled in the foreground, reflecting the sky and flowers. Cascades of violet blossoms framed the scene like a royal curtain.

The entire place felt magical and timeless.

The maid left me alone.

I strolled past the flowers and picked a red rose. It smelled lovely. I held the rose as I wandered. Each section of the garden had its own unique beauty.

As I admired nature, I heard voices coming from behind a thick hedge.

I stopped and carefully looked through the bushes.

It was Prince Zen.

He seemed to be discussing something serious with his guards. I thought my father had summoned him—so had he returned already?

I leaned closer and overheard him say, “The king has requested that we handle the fourth level without Princess Valentina knowing.”

Shock froze me.

I was about to interrupt—but I controlled myself.

One guard asked, “Your Highness, if you do not mind me asking, what is the reason?”

“The king does not want Valentina involved in the fight. He has planned for Harry to go instead.”

I expected that from my father. He had always favored Harry.

But what he prefers does not define who I am.

I will show him that I, Valentina, can win this fight. I will obtain the fourth-level key.

My father has always believed that women cannot do things on their own.

We will see about that.

I carefully tried to step away without being seen. I looked behind me—no one. Then I turned forward.

Zen was staring directly at me.

Oh no. He had spotted me.

I stepped out from the bushes. He approached me quickly.

“Val, did you hear what we were discussing?” he asked.

I did not want to hurt him.

“No. Why? Was it something important?” I replied calmly.

Relief crossed his face. “No. Why are you here? Are you not in pain?”

“I just needed fresh air. I am doing fine.”

He gently held my arm and led me back inside. It was supper time, and the table was set.

He called for the maid, then returned with Ms. Honey.

“Ms. Honey, please examine her wound.”

She checked it. “It is healing perfectly.”

“Good. Time for dinner,” he said.

“Ms. Honey, please sit and have supper with us,” I suggested, glancing at Zen.

“I would like everyone to join us,” Zen added with a smile.

The maids, gardeners, and Ms. Honey sat with us. The food tasted as wonderful as it smelled—mouthwatering and rich. I ate until I was full.

Later, I returned to my room, feeling thirsty.

I went back to the kitchen for water.

I found Zen searching through drawers.

“What are you looking for?” I asked.

“The ring you gave me,” he replied.

“And what is it doing in the kitchen?”

“I couldn’t find a proper hiding place. Now I cannot find it at all.”

I glanced around and spotted something on the floor.

It was the ring.

“I found it,” I said, handing it to him.

Relief filled his expression.

“I am going to sleep. You should rest too,” I told him.

He nodded.

The next morning, I woke to commotion in the palace. Maids rushed through the halls.

“What is happening?” I asked one of them.

“We received a paper crest early this morning. They are arriving today.”

“Who?”

“The Kingdom of Ivor. They are coming to thank Prince Zen in person.”

I nodded and went to the main hall.

Zen stood dressed formally beside a large box.

“You are awake,” he said. “Royals from Ivor are arriving. I want your presence.”

“I am honored, but I have nothing prepared.”

“No worries,” he said, handing me the box. “I prepared for you.”

Inside was a beautiful ivory gown.

The dress glowed against my vivid red hair, making the fiery strands appear even richer. Gold embroidery shimmered warmly across the fabric. With its flowing skirt and airy sleeves, it felt like living sunlight—radiant and regal.

The maid styled my hair into soft waves, tying two strands back with a sun-shaped accessory.

“You look majestic, Your Highness,” she said admiringly.

“Thank you,” I replied.

The guests arrived.

“Welcome to the Kingdom of Volkaria. It is truly an honor,” I greeted them.

“We are here to thank Prince Zen,” one of the princes said.

They presented him with a sword.

It was tall and elegant, its blade fading from deep steel-blue into silver. The golden cross guard spread like wings. Dark patterns twisted along the hilt.

Zen held it, astonished.

Before long, jasmine tea was served.

The second prince, Gilbert, drank first.

After a few seconds, he whispered, “I feel dizi—”

He collapsed.

Panic erupted.

We called his name—no response.

Zen shouted for Ms. Honey, but she did not come.

I stepped forward.

“Give me space.”

They did.

His breathing was weak. His pulse faint.

I quickly examined the tea and removed the herbs. I rinsed them in water,

noticing something unusual. I grabbed dried lemon from a nearby cake and mixed it with fresh water and crushed herbs.

Then I added a single drop of a potion I always carry.

“Hold him up,” I told the other prince.

I forced the solution gently into Gilbert’s mouth.

We sat around him, waiting.

Waiting for a miracle.

Lavish: (Adjective) luxurious or extravagant.

Splendid: (Adjective) magnificent or impressive.

Aroma: (Noun) the smell or scent, especially pleasant.

Regal: (Adjective) royal, majestic.

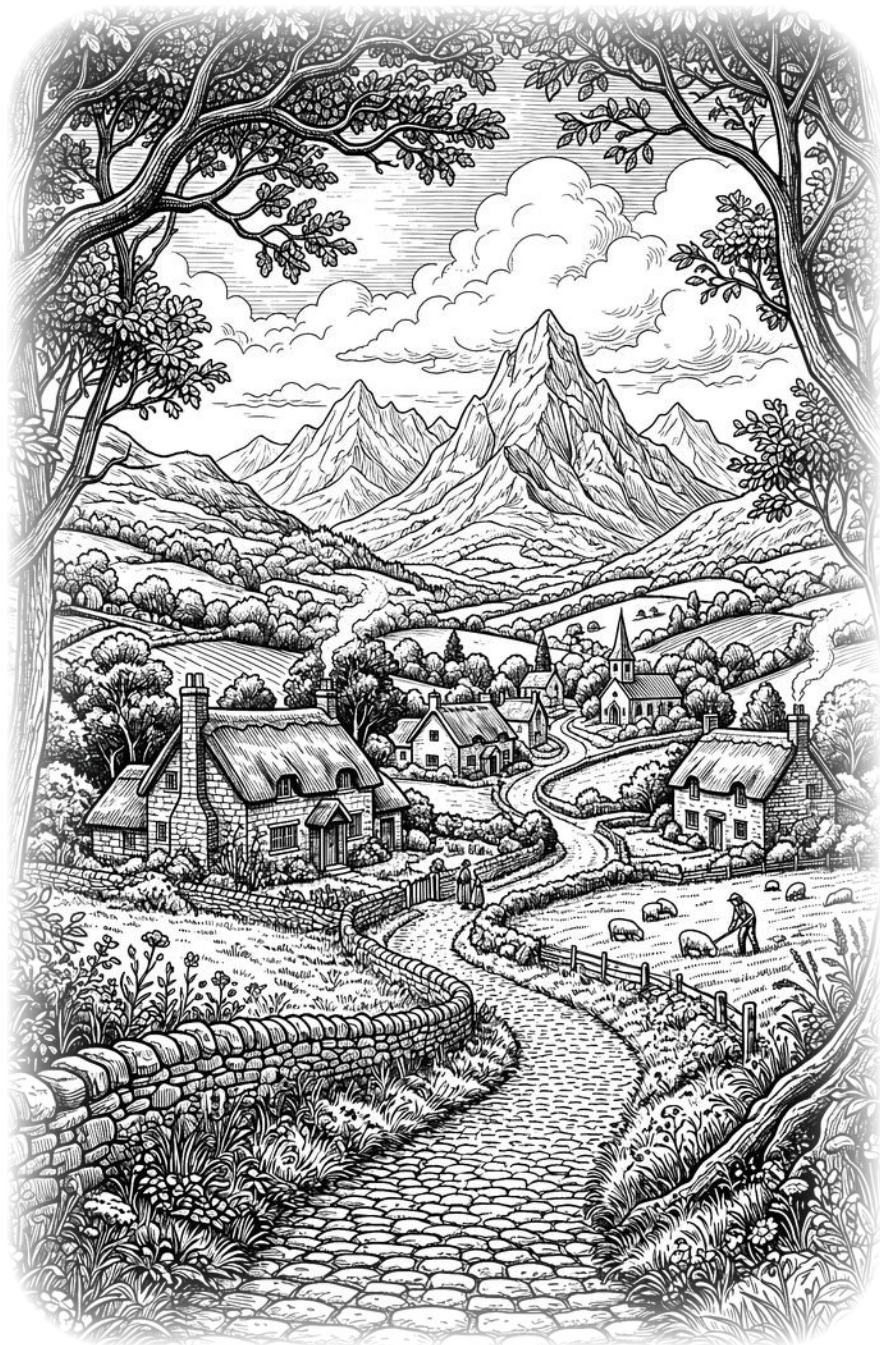
Ivory: (Adjective) pale white, like the material from elephant tusks.

Embroidered: (Adjective) decorated with needlework.

Accessory: (Noun) something added for decoration or function.

Commotion: (Noun) noisy disturbance or chaos.

Gown: (Noun) long, elegant dress.



Chapter Fourteen – The Fading Cure

All of us were waiting patiently for him to wake up while looking at his poor face and health. The antidote that I used on him was an easy and fast one so he could wake up early. But it does not seem like he will anytime soon. I have to think of another antidote before he dies. Blythe did not look pleased, but he did not hold a grudge against Zen. I told them I would be looking for different plants to mix. I left the palace. I felt lost; my mind was blank. I had no idea what to mix or what to do.

I felt at sea. That is when it hit me—my herb book. When I was at the orphanage, I would write all the mixtures I had done. I was in love with plants when I was younger; I still am. The only way I would run away from life was mixing herbs. I started sprinting back to the palace. I ran to my room, not letting anyone talk to me or ask me where I had been. I am sure they did not even notice my absence. I walked up the stairs, rushed in, and slammed the door of my room.

I looked around. I went to my book aisle, searching for it. But I remembered I did not put it there because it is an important book. I opened all the drawers of my room. I checked under my bed. I removed the covers. I could not find it. I do not even remember where I put it. I was just pacing around my room trying to remember where I had put it.

Think, Val. Think. Where could I have put it? I remember! It is under a wooden floor piece. But I forgot which one I put it under. My room is spacious; I will not make it back in time if I search everywhere.

My first instinct was to check the wooden tile under the book aisle. I had a mat there. I removed the mat and the wooden tile under it. I touched it and tried lifting it—and it lifted. I had found the book. I placed everything back in its place. I set the book on the table and turned pages after pages, potion ingredients after another, and found it. I found the antidote that I needed.

I looked through the ingredients, and I had them all. I started mashing the ingredients together. It was done in a few minutes. The antidote was in a potion container, and I left my room and ran across the hallways. I

returned to my horse and left the palace. We paced through the hills, and I made it to Zen's palace.

The horse was taken by one of the servants. I left it in their care as I went back to the princes. Prince Gilbert was not awake yet. Prince Blythe and Zen both seemed pale from their worries. I interrupted their thoughts with my uneasy breathing. They both saw me, but it seemed like nothing could make them clear-minded.

I ran to Prince Gilbert. I opened the antidote and gave him a few drops of it. I told them it would take around five minutes. While waiting, I poured water for Prince Blythe and Zen, even for the soldiers, and said, "Worry not. The antidote I gave him will surely work. I need you to have faith in him."

They all gave me a slight nod. We waited a bit more. Prince Gilbert started to gain his consciousness back. Before I let anyone do anything, I gave him more of the antidote so it would have full effect. And he took it.

Prince Blythe gave a tight hug to Prince Gilbert, and Zen—Zen gave me a hug. I was frozen in place. I was confused when he whispered, "Thank you, Val. Truly. You saved him. He is like my younger brother, and you also stopped a mistrust between us. I appreciate it, Val."

I gave him a smile.

Prince Blythe got on his knees and started thanking me. I went and picked him up.

"Please, I am ashamed. Stand up."

"What you did is something my brother and I will never forget. Thank you so much."

"It is my pleasure, Your Highness."

"I guess Val saved the day," Zen said.

Everyone burst out with laughter. The tension in the air was warm and

nice. I felt comforted. Now I know how home feels like—it feels like this moment.

I told Prince Gilbert not to stand up yet and that he had to take rest for a few days. Zen said, “I would be so happy to have you over for a few days.”

Prince Blythe said, “It is a pleasure for us to stay here, and sorry for the sudden staying—”

I cut him off, saying, “I smelled the jasmine tea, and it was poisoned. All the tea cups were poisoned. But who did that? Who wanted all of us dead?”

It was like a bolt from the blue.

Zen asked, “Princes, do you have any enemies in this kingdom?”

They both replied, saying, “No.”

I told them not to worry. I would find who did that. They believed in me and gave me the opportunity.

I said, “I will be going back home and try to find the truth. Take care.”

They said their farewells, and I walked out of the palace, both relieved and anxious. I need to find out the truth as soon as possible.

I got back home, and Harry was waiting. It looked like he was waiting for someone. I went past him, and he stopped me, saying,

“Princess Valentina, the king wants me to fight in the fourth level instead of you.”

I stopped. I sensed he smelled like jasmine tea. Why was that?

I did not reply to what he said, but I got closer and started smelling him. He looked confused.

“Harry, why do you smell like jasmine tea? Did you poison the princes from Ivor?” I spoke.

He did not answer me. I wanted an answer. I got out my sword and put it against his neck.

“Answer me, Harry.”

“Okay, calm down. It was me, but I was forced to do it. They made me do it.”

I let him go. I was so done with him. I told one of my guards to inform Prince Zen about the situation.

Before I got back to my room, I saw Ms. Honey. She asked, “Oh my God, I heard you faced an incident in the palace. Is everything alright?”

I answered, “I was looking for you to help me, but they told me you got back to the kingdom’s palace.”

She said, “I am sorry. I had things to do in the palace.”

I got back to my room.

The next day, I was woken up by Zen.

“Is everything alright, Zen?”

“Umm, I do not think so, because you have to get ready and we have to finish the fourth level this instant.”

“Right now?” I sat up in shock.

“Yes, right now. Get ready in five minutes. I will be waiting for you outside.”

Before he left, he looked back and said “Taking you to the fourth level is something I am not allowed to do but keep it between us.” Then he left. I collected my thoughts and got ready, geared up. I put my messy hair in a

side braid and headed out.

Prince Zen was standing by the horses. He saw me and said, “You ready?”

I gave a nod of agreement. I was still sleepy.

We got on the horse and raced to the deeper part of the forest. There was no sign of a dungeon, so we moved a bit further. It seemed like we made it up a small hill, and that is where we spotted a cave up ahead. We left the horses and continued on foot.

The cave hole seemed quite big.

“The next beast will surely be a bigger problem than the last. Are you ready to get this party started, Val?” Zen told me with a smile.

I returned a smile and replied, “I am ready when you are.”

He gave me a nod, meaning we should go inside. And we did.

The cave was really dark, so I used a light bomber that I brought with me. Zen threw it deeper into the cave, and we stood by the entrance waiting for a beast.

We heard a roar.

That is when we saw a dragon come into daylight.

Its wings seemed as if they would stretch endlessly, glowing like fire trapped beneath thin crimson skin. Veins of molten light pulsed through them as if lava flowed instead of blood. Each scale along its body shimmered deep red, hard as armor and edged like sharpened blades.

Blackened horns curved from its head, framing eyes that burned with ancient knowing. Smoke slipped from its nostrils with each steady breath, and its long tail swayed slowly behind it.

Its wings snapped open with a violent rush of air, and in one powerful beat it lifted from the ground. Heat rolled off its scales in waves, the

molten veins in its wings flaring brighter as it rose.

“Val!” Zen shouted.

I was already running.

The dragon dove first. Fast. Too fast. Its claws sliced through the space where we had stood seconds before, carving deep scars into the earth. Zen rolled aside, blades flashing, while I leapt forward and struck at its foreleg. Steel met scale with a sharp, useless ring.

The dragon twisted midair, impossibly agile for something so massive. Its tail whipped around. Zen barely blocked in time, the impact throwing him back hard enough to knock the air from his lungs.

Smoke poured from the dragon’s mouth. A second later, fire followed.

I grabbed Zen and dragged him clear as flames tore across the ground, melting stone and turning everything in their path to ash. The heat was suffocating.

The dragon climbed again before we could recover, wings beating once—twice—lifting it out of reach.

“We cannot keep it still!” Zen shouted.

I wiped soot from my face; eyes locked on the sky.

“Then we chase it.”

The dragon circled once above us, as if amused, then turned sharply and shot toward the distant town.

“No—” I breathed.

We ran.

By the time we reached the edge of town, the dragon had already descended. It swept low over rooftops, its shadow swallowing the streets.

One burst of fire set a building ablaze. People scattered, screaming.

Zen hurled a blade upward. It struck the dragon's wing membrane, slicing through glowing skin. The creature roared this time—furious, echoing through the streets. It faltered for a heartbeat.

I did not waste it.

I climbed the side of a stone fountain, launched myself onto a balcony, and leapt—grabbing onto the dragon's scaled back as it rose again. The heat burned through my gloves, but I held on.

“Val!” Zen yelled from below.

The dragon thrashed violently, twisting in the air above the town. I crawled forward between ridges of sharp scales, searching for a weak point. The dragon rolled suddenly, trying to shake me loose.

Zen sprinted across the rooftops, keeping pace, waiting for an opening.

The dragon climbed higher, flames building in its throat again.

And this time, we were not fighting in open land.

We were fighting above everything that could burn.

The dragon's chest swelled, fire building in its throat.

“Zen!” I shouted, gripping the ridges along its spine. “The wing!”

Zen understood.

As the dragon dipped low over the rooftops, Zen sprinted and leapt from one building to the next. Timing it perfectly, I jumped as the creature swept past. My blade flashed downward, cutting deep into the torn membrane I had already weakened.

The wing ripped.

The dragon shrieked—an enraged, thunderous sound—and lurched sideways. Its flight faltered. One wing beat wildly while the other dragged uselessly behind it.

I moved.

Clinging with one hand, I drove my sword down between two scales at the base of the dragon's neck—the only place the armor thinned. The blade sank in.

The dragon bucked violently, smashing into a tower as it lost control. Stone shattered. Flames burst from its mouth in a wild, uncontrolled stream as it plummeted toward the center of town.

“Jump!” Zen screamed.

I ripped the blade free and threw myself clear.

The dragon hit the ground with a force that shook the streets. Dust and sparks exploded outward. Its massive body thrashed once—twice—trying to rise.

Zen ran forward first. I was right behind him.

Together.

Zen pinned the dragon's torn wing to the ground, driving his weapon through bone. The creature roared, weakened now, smoke choking from its jaws.

I did not hesitate. I climbed the fallen neck, ignoring the heat burning through my boots, and plunged my sword back into the same wound—deeper this time. With a final cry, I twisted the blade.

The molten glow beneath the dragon's scales flickered.

Dimmed.

And went dark.

The massive body stilled. Smoke curled into the quiet air. The heat slowly began to fade.

I slid down from the dragon's neck, breathing hard. Zen stepped beside me; eyes still fixed on the fallen beast.

"It is over," Zen said quietly.

And for the first time since the wings had opened, the sky above the town was still.

We saw the fourth level key.

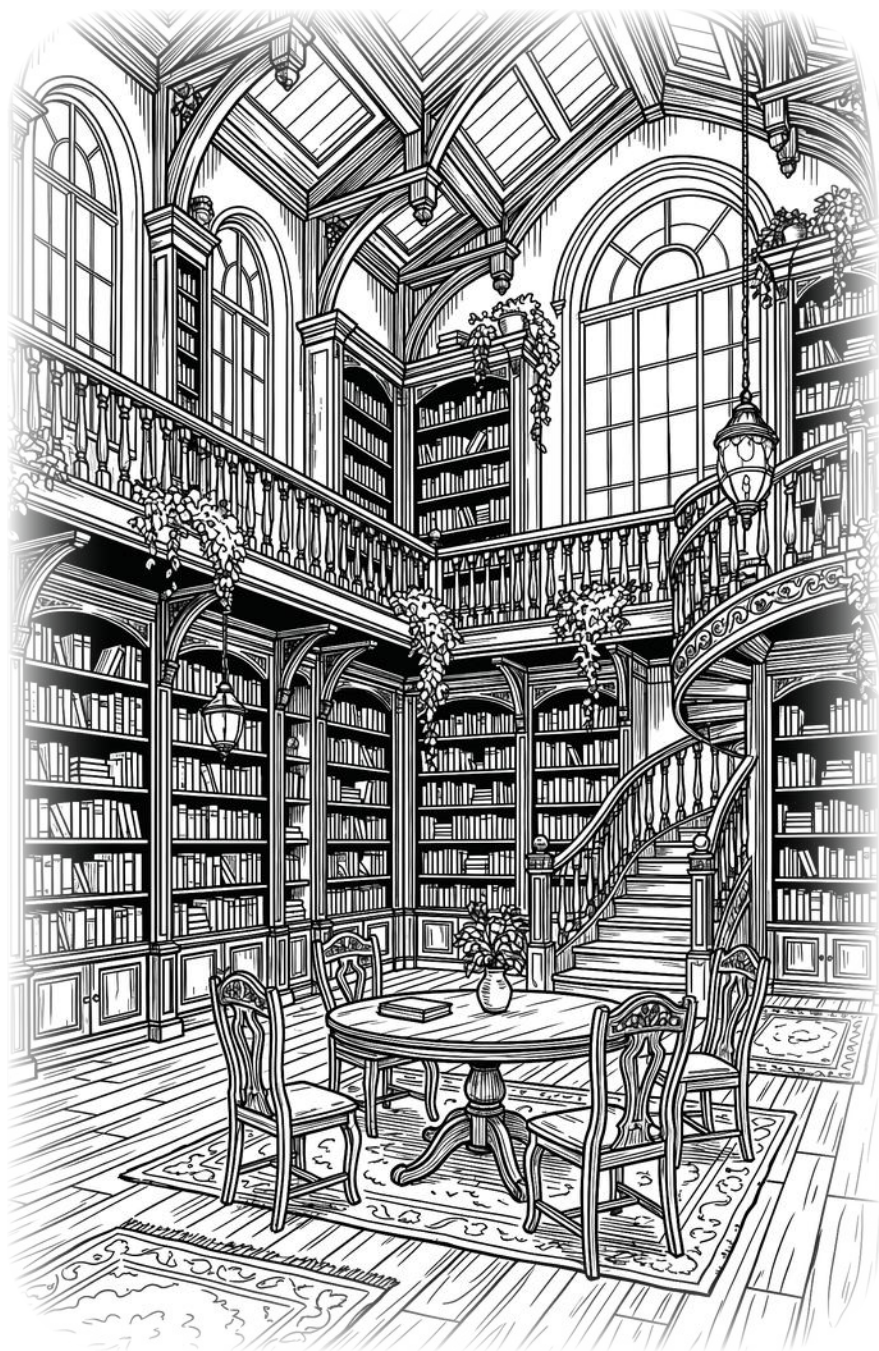
We really did it.

The town took quite a bit of damage. People started coming up to us and thanking us, not knowing we caused this in the first place. Zen and I stayed over for the evening. We helped the town with the damage the dragon caused.

Then we headed back to Zen's palace.

Patiently: (Adverb) in a calm way without complaining while waiting for something.

Grudge: (Noun) a lasting feeling of anger or resentment toward someone.



Chapter Fifteen – The Journey to Argon and the Secrets Unfold

Half a day later, it was evening. I brought books to read from Zen's library. Some were about plants and some were about rare creature species. I was still hanging around Prince Zen's palace. I am taking notes while reading when Zen comes up to me and said, "Val, Val, I got the ring's marking. We can finally make sure who it is."

He paused, then added, "Let's both check it out."

"I am ready. We can finally learn the truth about the mastermind who is trying to cause all this mess."

Zen sat in front of me. He put the envelope on the table, looked up at me, and pushed it toward me. He wanted me to open it. I started ripping the envelope open. I brought out a plastic bag that had the ring in it. I set that aside. There was a paper inside. I unfolded the paper and began reading it out loud. My pace grew slower, and my voice volume decreased as I read, "—the words that are written on the ring are 'Flora'."

I stopped reading and looked back at Zen. "Could it actually be Flora?" I asked.

"Well, I think it is Flora according to the test we did, but who knows?"

"I do not know. I do not think she would do such a thing."

"Val, expect the unexpected."

I did not want to believe that Flora did this, but she could have. I put this matter aside because there were so many questions that had not been answered. Who is the mastermind? Who finished the first level? Whose ring is that actually? Who wants to get the key?

I was so curious and confused, but in time, we would figure out the answers to each and every question. I tried to forget about it for now because I was in a world where all questions could be answered: the library. I immersed myself in books for the next few hours.

My reading was stopped by Zen receiving an email. It was written by the King of Argon; they needed Prince Zen. They wanted him to come back for a while to help with problems in the kingdom. But I still needed Prince Zen with my problems. I told him not to leave yet, but he insisted on going because it was his kingdom, so I respected that.

I decided I would not leave Zen alone.

“Zen, can I come with you to Argon?” I asked.

“Of course, you can come and go. Get packed,” he replied.

I went back to the palace and packed some clothes. I put in herbs, water, and food, just in case. I went down the stairs. I wanted to let my family know because it was important. I called the maid to ask if I could see my father. The maid came back, saying, “His Highness is asking for your presence.”

I entered his office.

“Valentina, please have a seat.”

I took a seat and said, “Father, I wanted to see you because I am leaving for Argon with Zen.”

The second I said Zen, he nodded and said, “You can go.”

I went back to Zen’s palace. The carriage was ready. I put my bag on the carriage. I smiled at Zen and said, “Let’s go.” He signaled the carriage driver to give the horses a whip, and our journey to the kingdom started. It would take us twenty-four hours to get to Argon.

After eight hours of riding, it got completely dark. We made a stop at a nearby village. We told the carriage driver to find us a place to stay for the night. He looked around and asked people for a place but could not find anywhere. We were out of choices.

I got off the carriage and saw some elderly rural residents. I got the confidence to ask them if they knew anywhere for us to stay. I knocked

on the door. An elderly woman opened the door. She seemed sweet. I told her our situation. The elderly woman held my hand and said, "Daughter, I have an area for you to stay for the night."

I called out to Zen and followed the elderly woman. She took us to a house that contained two rooms, a bathroom, and a kitchen.

"This place is enough for us. It is great. Thank you so much for letting us stay," I said.

She replied with the warmest voice, "You are more than welcome, my dear."

Prince Zen offered her a huge amount of money for letting us stay. She was more than happy to take it. I stayed in one of the rooms for the night. I was too tired and fell asleep right away.

The next morning, the weather was a bit rough; it was raining. I went to the kitchen to cook something for us. I opened the fridge, and it was full of food. I think that lovely elderly woman had filled it up. I made some omelets and cut some vegetables. Zen came to the kitchen and looked around, smelling the food. I gave him his plate, and he ate it pretty fast. I assumed he was hungry. I ate my breakfast as well.

After that, Zen suggested we leave. We got to the carriage and started to drive off. We had been moving for about six hours when the driver said, "Sir, this area is not safe. We may face some creatures on the way."

Zen replied with full confidence, "That will not be a problem." Zen had been on this road before, so he was familiar with it.

We got to the red zone. The coachman said, "Sir, we are in danger."

Zen had the greatest smirk on his face. He got down from the carriage, taking out his sword from the left side. It was the sword that the princes of Ivor had given him. There were creatures coming toward him. He was slashing them one by one, like it was nothing.

I got down to help him, but it seemed like he did not need any of my help.

There was blood dripping from his hand. He was taking in large amounts of oxygen. He finished all the creatures off and turned back to give me an achieving look. I was relieved that nothing had happened to him. I had packed water, and he washed the blood off himself. We continued our journey.

We did not stop until we got to the kingdom.

When we entered the kingdom, I felt like I was in a different world. This kingdom was so lively even at this time of night. The people looked bright, ambitious, and sincere. I felt the softness they carried. I looked at Zen; his face brightened with light just like his people.

Finally, after a day, we got to the palace. The guards saw Prince Zen, and happiness spread across their faces. It seemed everyone loved Zen. They greeted him with a bow. They opened the palace gates, and the carriage arrived at the entrance. Zen got off and gave me a hand. Everyone was surprised when they saw Zen.

Me and Zen entered the palace as the guards greeted us. Some of them looked at me in a weird way, but I ignored it. We got to the door of the king's room. The palace seemed smaller than ours. The guard said, "Come in."

We walked inside, and the king rushed to give a hug to his son. He looked delighted.

"Son, it was so hard when you were away." Tears poured down the king's face. "Who is this pretty lady?"

"Father, I missed everyone here. There I met Val. She is Princess Valentina of Volkaria."

"I am honored to meet you, your majesty," I said.

"I am also honored," the king said as he smiled.

The king and Zen discussed the kingdom's matters while I wandered around the room. I looked outside the window and felt more alive. I was

getting tired; it was late, and I was getting sleepy. I told Zen if I could get some sleep. He asked the maids to prepare a room for me. I do not even remember how I got to the room; I was that sleepy.

Zen woke up early because he wanted to show me around. But we had breakfast first. Then he had two horses ready for us. We got on the horses and drove off. I followed him because I did not know the way. He showed me around the kingdom. I loved their culture, music, traditions, sovereignty, and idyllic lifestyle. Zen said a phrase that caught my attention:

“This kingdom was built on trades.”

What kind of trades did he mean?

We went down to get something to buy as a souvenir for me. We walked through the town and cabins. As we were walking, I noticed something in one of the shops that caught my eye. It was a beautiful bracelet that I saw everyone wearing. But they were in different colors and backgrounds. I picked up a bracelet. The bracelet was unique because it had a specific kind of dragon on it. I told Zen to buy one of those bracelets as a souvenir. Then I asked Zen, “What does this dragon mean?”

He replied, “It represents our kingdom,” which I thought was wonderful and beautiful. I put it on my wrist. It looked marvelous. It fit my wrist perfectly. I wanted to pay, but Zen did not allow me. He bought me the bracelet.

We walked more. Zen said he wanted to introduce me to his friends. He took me to them. I saw two people up ahead. We were walking up to them. They both waved at us. One of his friends hugged him, and they greeted each other. He greeted me to his best friend, who was named Noah. He looked rude at first sight, but the more we talked, the more I knew he had a great personality. Noah had a sister who was also Zen’s friend. She was standing next to Noah. Her name was Ava. She brought positive energy to our conversation and was so cheerful. She gave me a warm welcome. Noah is twenty, same as Zen. His sister is one year younger than me. I am truly grateful that I got to meet Zen’s friends. I am

glad on how they treat him.

Zen said he wanted to have dinner with all of us today. Noah said he would take us to a place and that he had a great place in mind. We enjoyed dinner. They were really sweet. We parted ways. Zen took us back.

We decided to go to the secret hideout in the dungeon in his palace so we could have a duel and practice our sword skills. The next day, Zen finished his job with his father. I suggested to Zen that we should go back home, and he agreed. We said our goodbyes to everyone. We began our journey back to Volkaria. It would take us another day.

Zen said we should go slower because we left in the evening. The sky started to darken again. We decided to take shelter under a big tree for the night until the sun would rise. Zen and the coachman were talking. I was just looking out into the woods. I noticed that a few trees had sparks of light in their bushes. It was unusual—the burns on the trees. I wanted to see how long the burn of these trees would continue.

As I was walking further, moving left and right, it hit me: Where am I? I looked for any sign of Zen, but he was nowhere to be found. I tried to go back where I came from, but I did not remember because I was too lost in thought. I guess I am lost.

Mastermind: (Noun) a person who plans and directs a complex or ingenious scheme.

Idyllic: (Adjective) extremely pleasant, peaceful, or picturesque.

Sovereign: (Noun/Adjective) a ruler or having supreme authority; independent.

Molten: (Adjective) melted, usually referring to metals or lava; glowing with heat.

Membrane: (Noun) a thin, flexible layer of material or tissue.

Crimson: (Adjective) deep red color, often used poetically.

Secluded: (Adjective) private and away from other people.

Inclement: (Adjective) severe, harsh, or stormy (usually describing weather).



Chapter Sixteen – The Dragon's Lost Egg

It seems I have been wandering the forest for a while. I lost sight of the flame-looking shimmers on the trees. I keep walking and walking, not knowing where I am headed. I do not have a clear vision of what is in front of me or what I am stepping on. Branches keep hitting my body as I continue trying to find a light or someplace to stay. It would be great if I could find Zen. Who knew this would happen?

I will not worry much. Instead, I will see if I can survive the wilderness with no one knowing my whereabouts. I do wonder what they are up to. It has been several more minutes, and I am still strolling past trees.

All of a sudden, I feel my legs stumble over some bricks and I lose balance. I fall, but I do not land right away. I get scratched by branches and more branches as I fall straight onto my face.

I collect myself. Looking up, I realize I fell through a pit hole. The only light allowing me to see is the moon shining from the hole.

I cannot truly be stuck here, can I? The space is ginormous. It really seems like there is no way up to the surface. It seems like level five, and the shadow must wait. I have got no food and no good clothing. At least my sword is still with me and my spare blade.

I plan to explore this underground cave hole.

Then I realize that all this time I fell onto piles of bones.

No wonder I did not take lethal damage and managed to stay alive. The piles of bones softened the landing somehow.

As I get off the pile, I realize that my stitch is loosened. The wound is bleeding out. I grab a cloth from a skeleton. It seems they were in disguise in black clothing. Ripping cloth from my top, I wrap it around my waist tightly so it is secured on the wound.

My whole-body aches from the damage I have taken. I really must figure a way out. Maybe another entrance—or some sort of light—would do

me good.

I look around and notice a narrow passage.

I step carefully into the narrow passage, the darkness pressing in from every side.

Ahead, a faint blue shimmer pulses through the tunnel like a distant star. Drawn to it, I move closer until the source reveals itself—clusters of small glowing plants clinging to the stone walls, their soft blue light breathing gently through the cavern.

I reach out and brush my fingers across one of the delicate leaves. It glows brighter at the touch, casting pale light across the damp rock.

Carefully, I pluck a few of the glowing stems and hold them like a lantern. Their gentle glow pushes the shadows back just enough to see the path ahead.

The tunnel stretches on for what feels like ages. The air grows cooler, and soon the distant roar of water echoes through the stone.

The passage opens beside an underground waterfall spilling from a crack high in the cavern wall, silver water crashing into a dark pool below. Mist drifts through the air, catching the blue glow of the plants in tiny sparks of light.

I use the water to clean the blood stains covering me and wash the dirt off my face. The water seems clean, so I drink from it. All the walking has made me tired.

I pick the plants back up to continue exploring.

Beyond the waterfall, the tunnel widens until it finally gives way to an enormous cavern.

Massive stone pillars rise from the ground like the ruins of an ancient hall,

stretching upward into darkness where the ceiling can barely be seen. The faint blue light reflects across the pillars, making the vast chamber feel both beautiful and strangely forgotten.

I move carefully between the towering pillars, the blue glow of the cave plants trembling in my hand.

The cavern is silent—too silent.

Broken weapons and scattered coins lie across the stone floor, half buried in dust and ash.

Then the ground trembles.

A heavy rush of wind thunders through the cavern as a massive shape descends from the darkness above. Wings like vast shadows spread across the pillars, and a great dragon lands before the nest with a crash that shakes the stone beneath my feet.

Its scales gleam dark in the faint blue light, and smoke curls slowly from its nostrils.

I barely have time to react before the dragon lunges forward, its claws scraping sparks from the cavern floor. I dart aside as a blast of fire scorches the stones where I had stood. The heat passes me like a storm.

The battle begins in a blur of movement. I weave between the ancient pillars while the dragon's tail smashes against the stone, cracking rock and sending dust into the air.

But suddenly the dragon stops.

It lowers its massive head, golden eyes narrowing as it studies me. A low growl rolls from deep within its chest.

"You dare step into my nest," the dragon rumbles, its voice echoing across the cavern like distant thunder.

I tighten my grip, breathing hard. "I did not come here for your treasure.

I fell into these caves.”

The dragon’s gaze shifts toward the great nest behind it. For a moment its fury changes into something darker.

“Lies,” it growls. “Your kind has stolen from me before.”

I frown. “Stolen what?”

The dragon’s claws scrape against the stone as it steps aside slightly, revealing the nest behind it—vast, woven with bones and shattered branches. But in the center of the nest is a hollow space where something should have been.

“My egg,” the dragon says, its voice lower now, heavy with anger. “Taken from this very nest while I hunted beyond these caves.”

The cavern falls quiet except for the slow drip of water somewhere far away.

The dragon’s burning eyes lock onto me again.

“If you value your life, human, you will return what was taken.”

I hesitate. “You think I stole it?”

“I think you are like the others,” the dragon snarls, smoke spilling from its jaws. “Thieves. Hunters. Liars.”

Flames flicker at the edges of its mouth again.

“Bring back my stolen egg,” it growls, “and I will spare you.”

The silence stretches between us, thick with tension.

I glance toward the dark tunnels leading deeper into the cave. Somewhere out there, someone—or something—has taken the dragon’s egg.

I have a choice now.

Refuse and continue the fight against a creature far stronger than me.

Or accept the dragon's demand and search the dark caverns for the stolen egg.

I do not want to fight it, because humanity does not allow me. I want to show the dragon that humans can be kind.

The one who stole it probably had a reason.

I decide to accept the second choice.

"I choose to bring the egg back," I say.

"Are you sure? Because if you do not, we will have serious problems."

"I am one hundred percent sure. I am willing to help you no matter what. I wandered around, my surroundings. It was so dark. I could barely see anything.

"I have a request." I said to the dragon.

"Sure, no problem unless you find my egg."

"I need light, I cannot see."

The dragon left and took her awhile to come back. All of a sudden, something came falling down, facing me. It almost hit me but I moved aside right away. It was a wood. The dragon appeared back.

"Hold the wood upwards and move your face. "The dragon commanded.

I did what she said. And she calmed fire out of her mouth. That is when it hit me. Wait, was it this dragon that burned the trees, I followed? I mean it could be. Now I had light to go down the underground cave. There were not any eggs around me. I took a step forward and went in the cave. The tunnel inside it seemed would go on forever. Shadows cling to the walls and every sound feels louder that it should. The air inside is damp and slightly cold, carrying the faint smell of earth and stone. It was deep,

mysterious and endless. I scanned the ground and the walls carefully, looking for any kind of clue. I see some cracks on the walls; I ran my hands along the wall. It was nothing. I walked farther in the tunnel, lifting the wood higher to see ahead. The passage narrows a little, forcing me to turn sideways to squeeze through a tight section of rock. On the other side, the tunnel widens again and the ceiling rises higher above me. I was getting hungry; I made a stop. I was searching for food and the egg. I kept looking, I felt like I would faint any time. I have not eaten anything for a really good time. It might be morning as well. Finally, I found some mushrooms that grew out of the ground. I picked it up and examined it, for safety. It was not poisonous. I held it on the fire and cooked it. I ate it and it was enough to get me by. I started searching again, my footsteps echoed softly against the stone wall. I checked every corner, I was passing. Something small on the ground caught my eyes. I leaned closer, kneeling down. A small feather was lying on the dusty ground. The feather felt light in my hand, almost delicate. I turn it slowly under the light and mesmerized by its beauty. My heart began beating faster. If a feather was here then, “maybe this is a clue,” I whispered quietly to myself. Could the egg have hatched by now? I strolled deeper into the tunnel. A few steps ahead, something else appeared. This time it was a small piece of shell, it was half buried in the dust. My excitement grew. If there is a shell, then the thing I am looking for is nearby. I placed both the feather and the shell in my pocket. I was spotting more feathers as I was going. This time the tunnel opened up into a larger space. I step forward into a small chamber and raise the light. I noticed something near the far wall. A smaller version of the dragon that I made a deal with but it could make eggs. It looked like this dragon has made eggs as well because next to it was some smooth looking eggs. I got closer to it but the dragon was giving me an angry eye. I did not know what to do. I tried talking to the dragon.

“Hello, I am sent by your mother to find you,” I said.

It eyes seemed calmer. “How can I believe you?”

“Your mother said a human stole an egg from her.”

“I have never seen my mother, since I was born, I have been here.”

I was trying to take guesses, how it ended up here. I gave up and said “please let’s just go and check it out. “It felt my tiredness; it agreed and came back with me to the beginning. We walked through all the areas, I have done. I had to carry its two eggs back because we cannot leave it behind. We got there and the dragon was waiting for us. The dragon saw me and asked “Where is my egg?”

“Well, I think your egg hatched and this is your child.”

They both looked at each other and the mother started crying. The mother finally admitted and said “Once upon a time, I took my egg to the depth of the tunnel to be safe but I grew up large and could not enter there again. “Tears were dripping from everyone’s eyes.

The mother told me “I would do anything you want and thank you so much for helping me.” as she kept hugging her child tight and continued her speech” Maybe not all humans are bad”

“It is my pleasure and I hope you help me get out of here,” I said but curiosity struck me so I asked.

“ Bur before that may I ask a question?”

“ Yes, of Couse ask away, “she said

“Why do you hate humans and what makes you hate them?” I asked the dragon.

“The whole reason I took my egg to that place was because of humans, they would come and try to take it from me, I gave them a test to test if they are trustworthy but they all failed and I had to burn them. and I kept growing in size so, I out grew the path way and got distant with my egg.”

sadness and guilt got build up in my chest, feeling sorry for the dragon.

“You ready to head back?” the dragon asked. “I am ready” I replied back happily.

The child dragon picked me up and took me out of the pit hole. I felt

alive after all this time. The dragons became my friends and they decided to catch up every few months. I said my farewells and tried to find Zen. I don't even know how long I have been in this pit. Maybe they even left me behind here. it appears the night has gone by. I wonder what part of day it is right now. it could be the next day and I am not aware. my stitch seems like it will not hold on for long I really am starting to lose more blood. I could get unconscious soon. looking to my surroundings makes me wonder how to go. but I do have trick, I looked to rising sun, measuring its place in the sky to mark the east. With the sun as my guide, the world aligned before me, and decided to headed back near to my kingdom, because I do not know which side Prince Zen could be. The palace is in the east so I shall head towards the sun and hope I do not go deeper into the forest. Moving through the forest were paths of only tangled roots, fallen branches, and thick bushes. with my blade a few quick swings cleared the worst of the brambles, opening a narrow way through the undergrowth. A rustling sound nearby revealed a small patch of wild berries growing beneath a cluster of bushes. Their deep color stood out against the green leaves. I picked a few carefully and tasted first—sweet enough to be safe. A small handful filled my stomach just enough to keep moving. My journey continued east, always east, following the gold light spilling through the wild trees. As long as the sun climbed in that direction, the way back to the palace.

Ginormous: (Adjective) extremely large or enormous.

Cavern: (Noun) a very large cave or underground chamber.

Pulsed: (Verb) to beat or glow with a steady rhythm.

Delicate: (Adjective) very light, fragile, or easily damaged.



Chapter Seventeen – Homecoming and Secrets

I was walking toward the sun in the east. I noticed some plants that only grew near my palace. I double-checked to see if I was really close. I touched one of the plants, and the second I did, I realized it. From excitement, I started jumping because that meant I was close to home. I walked a bit further and came to two trees leaning into each other. I recognized them and moved through the space between them. Ahead of me was my kingdom. I was exhilarated. I saw Zen from afar, standing by his carriage. It looked like he was waiting for me. How did he know I was coming? Out of enthusiasm, I ran to him.

“Zen, look! I’m here! I’m safe,” I said.

He gave the biggest smile. “Val, I believed you could do this on your own, that you could survive, and take this water.”

“Thank you for believing in me. I knew I could rely on myself,” I said, taking the water from him.

I drank it. It felt unreal—it was a great experience. Zen wanted me to go back with him to his palace. At home, no one knew or noticed I was gone, so I went with Zen. On our ride back, Zen noticed my top—its bottom was half ripped—and that my stitch had reopened. He grabbed a first aid kit from under the cushions. Without hesitation, he pulled out supplies. Before he touched the cloth, he looked at me. I nodded slightly, allowing him to proceed.

Zen started removing the cloth. A shocked expression appeared on his face because the wound had opened badly, and I had lost a lot of blood. He used ointments and towels to clean the wound until we got back to his palace so Ms. Honey could stitch it properly. He wrapped the wound with a clean bandage. I thanked him.

We still had a bit to reach the palace. I told Zen about everything that had happened—my adventure, meeting a dragon, and getting back to safety. I even mentioned that the dragons could talk.

“Talk, you said?” he asked, his face unreadable.

“Yes, it talked to me! Is not that cool?” I said with a bright smile.

“Yes, it is. But do you know dragons do not talk?” he asked, a concerned look on his face.

“Why? What is wrong?” I asked.

“That means it is a great ancient dragon, and they only talk to those who could rule them. It has taken a liking to you.”

I realized something. “Does that mean something else besides liking?”

He nodded. “Yes. You may have influenced it to do something for you. And did it?”

I nodded. “Yes, it did.”

He laughed. “Well, that is great, and I love how shocked you are.”

I was amazed—I had controlled an ancient dragon.

We finally reached the palace, and Zen helped me off the carriage. I was limping and in pain. Zen assisted me to a room and called Ms. Honey to check the wound before it worsened. She arrived, cleaned my wound, and updated me on what had happened in the palace while I was gone.

She told me that Flora was getting engaged to Harry, though she did not know the details. I was appalled. “What? Harry?” I thought. The man I did not trust at all. How could my father allow that? I wanted to go back and find out more, but Zen stopped me.

“Val, it is too dangerous for you to go back now. Your injury is more serious than we thought. Let it heal for a few more days, and then you can go.”

“But I must head back. I do not trust Harry,” I insisted, trying to stand.

Zen stopped me. “Before you do anything, let me get the details for you. I know your doubts about Harry—I share them. I am also worried about Flora, just like you.”

He called one of the maids to bring me a meal. One of the maids brought a tray with chicken broth, bread, and water. Zen then headed out to my palace. I trusted him to get the details he promised. Meanwhile, I ate and rested. The soup was warm and tasty, and I drank the entire glass of water. I dozed off.

By the time I woke, it was night. I checked the clock—it was past eleven. Ms. Honey came in, surprised.

“You are awake! Have you gotten some rest?” she asked.

“Yes, I feel better. Thank you for everything you have done,” I said. She looked happy, and I enjoyed her presence. Then it hit me—I asked, “Where is Zen?”

“I do not know, but I can call him,” she replied.

“Yes, please,” I said.

Ms. Honey left, and I waited for Zen, but time passed with no sign of him. Exhausted, I went back to sleep.

The next morning, a maid knocked on my door and brought me food.

“I need Zen here right now, or I will go to him myself,” I said in a furious tone.

An hour later, someone knocked. It was Zen.

“Zen, where have you been all this time? I waited so patiently,” I asked.

“I am sorry, Val. I had an important job last night. I could not come, but I am here now,” he replied.

“It is all good, but what about my sister’s matter?” I asked.

Zen frowned. “Flora was willing to marry Harry. I tried to get details, but she ignored me and left. It felt odd.”

“Do you think she’s being forced?” I asked, trembling.

“Do not worry, we will get to the bottom of this,” he said reassuringly. “I will investigate more, Val.”

“I will help you, Zen. She is my sister, and I will see what is truly going on,” I told him.

Half the day passed. I stayed in my room, reading books to pass the time. I was on my second book when a knock interrupted me.

“Come in,” I said.

A maid entered. “Someone in the hall is hoping for your presence.”

“Sure, I will be there shortly. Offer them a drink in the meantime,” I instructed.

I prepared a suitable dress for receiving a guest and went to the hall. A blonde-haired lady stood there—the same hair as Flora.

“Flora? Is that you?” I asked, eager to know.

She ran to me, opening her arms for a hug. I opened mine and felt her warmth. She cried on my shoulder, and I cried with her.

“Flora, I am your sister. I can help you. We can do this together,” I said while sobbing.

“I have to get engaged to Harry,” she replied.

“Why? What is the reason?” I asked.

“I just have to,” she said.

I did not want to force her; she was already in pain. We calmed down, and

she told me how our father was doing. We had tea together. I wanted her to stay the night, but she said she could not. She promised to come the next day. After saying goodbye, the maid helped me back to my room.

I grew bored in my room; I had no one to talk to. Sometimes Zen visited if he was not busy. Another day passed, and he came to check on me.

“Zen, are you doing well?” I asked.

“Yes, do not worry, Val. I had to run some errands,” he said, exhausted.

“What kind of errands get you this tired?” I asked. He gave an odd expression, unsure how to reply.

“Have a seat. I will inform you about a few things,” I said, guiding him to the couch.

He needed the rest. I started, “You have probably heard Flora came to me yesterday. She said she is engaged but has not given more information yet. She will return later today.”

Zen nodded. “That is great. Good luck, Val. I am sure she will open up to you.”

He prepared to leave. I stopped him. “Wait, Zen.”

He turned. “I want you to be there tonight with me and Flora,” I said.

“Anything for you, my lady,” he replied with a reassuring smile and left, closing the door.

I returned to my books, drinking coffee. I called the maid to prepare a room for Flora, wanting her away from the palace chaos. Soon, the maid announced, “Your Highness, Princess Flora is here.”

With her help, I went downstairs to greet my sister. She stepped out of her carriage, and I met her at the entrance. I gave her another hug.

“Sister, it is a pleasure having you here tonight,” I said formally.

“No need to be formal. Did you forget we are sisters?” she joked.

I took her inside, seated her, and the maid brought us tea and sunflowers.
We talked about recent events, sharing moments and worries together.

Exhilarated: (Adjective) feeling very happy, excited, or elated.

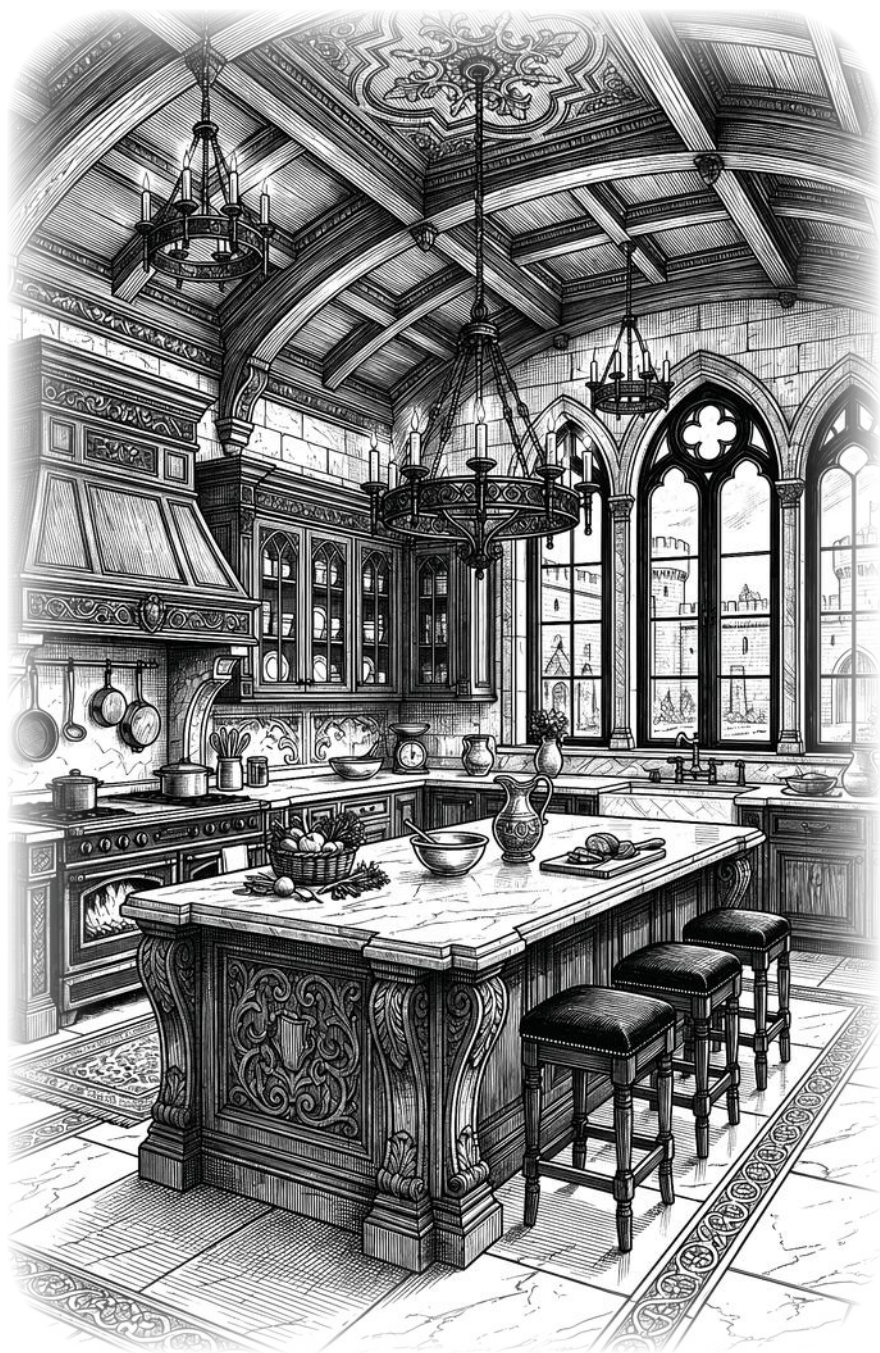
Appalled: (Adjective) shocked or horrified.

Reassuring: (Adjective) comforting, giving confidence.

Errands: (Noun) short journeys or tasks, often for someone.

Limping: (Verb/Adjective) walking with difficulty, often because of injury.

Trembling: (Verb/Adjective) shaking involuntarily, often from fear, excitement, or weakness.



Chapter Eighteen – Flora’s Secret and the Preparation for the Final Level

I had not mentioned to Flora about me being lost. Flora asked how I got injured. I made up something random. I do not need her knowing the exact truth. We kept talking and laughing together, waiting for Zen to come. We both agreed that if he was also here, it would be good. After waiting for a while, Zen appeared before our eyes.

He greeted us with a manly, polite bow. “Forgive my late coming. I had some important issues to take care of.”

Flora responded back to him, “It is fine, Prince Zen. You are always forgiven.”

“Thank you, Your Highness. I hope you both are well,” Zen said. He stopped and looked at me. “I am also glad to know you seem to be doing better, Val. Now shall we begin?”

I gave him a nod, a nod appreciating his checkup and a nod of agreement. Flora used her hand to guide Zen to have a seat. Zen took a seat.

Flora took a sigh, and her hands were playing with one another. She is nervous, I am sure.

“You have heard of my engagement with Harry,” she said.

Zen and I both nodded at what she said. I said, “I am your sister, and Zen is someone we can trust. Was there a specific reason why you got married?” I added, “I even remembered you hid a truth from me.”

Zen looked at Flora in a way that meant something, but I had no clue what it meant. Flora kept silent. I let out a sigh.

“So, you will not tell us anything. It is okay, no problem,” I told her.

Zen changed the subject, and we did not mention the engagement after that. Because Flora was with me, I decided we should bake a cake. I wanted her to forget about the matter. We went to the kitchen, and Zen

followed. I asked the maid to take out the ingredients we needed to make a cake, and Zen looked around.

He asked, “Do you need my help?”

I laughed and replied, “No, please just look.”

He and Flora laughed so loud. We all knew he was not much of a cook. We started baking the cake. Zen was on the opposite side of the island, looking at us as we were trying to figure it out. Flora and I added the ingredients to the bowl. We kept laughing and joking around. Zen tried to help us out too, but we started making a mess and just had a fight with the flour. We made a whole mess in the kitchen.

I had so much fun with them. It has been a while since we had this much fun. Zen being here also makes it feel more special. I get to bake with my sister and with my best friend and companion.

We finished baking it. We brought out a cake pan and put it in the oven. We were waiting for it to bake so we could eat it. Flora was looking in the oven through the glass and said, “I really want to try it. It looks so delicious.”

I was trying to clean up the mess we made. Zen came up, and without a word he started cleaning up with me. We cleaned up everything. We all tried to go clean ourselves due to the mess we made. The three of us got to our rooms to change as the cake was baking.

I cleaned up earlier than them. On my way back, I came across Zen. Zen stopped me and said in a serious tone, “Val, there is something I have been searching for, and recently I found out the truth behind it.”

“What is it?” I asked.

He responded, “Harry is using Flora to claim the throne because Flora is next to the throne. Flora does not know that. She is also being blackmailed to marry him.”

I was furious. How can he do that to my sister? I was about to go and

confront her, but Zen did not let me. He added, “Val, let her tell us herself when she is comfortable.”

I felt so bad for her. She is under so much pressure. I tried to calm myself down.

After that, Zen and I went to the kitchen to check on the cake. Flora entered the kitchen. When I saw her, I felt miserable. She could have told me, but instead she let the pain eat her. I wanted to ask her why, but it would be best if she told us herself. Zen is right.

I called out to her and said, “Look, the cake is ready.” I put on safety gloves and took out the pan. I set the hot pan on the marbled island. I told Zen to take out a knife so I could start cutting the cake. At the same time, I told Flora to get out some forks and plates.

We cut up the cake and started dividing the pieces onto the plates. We gave some to the maids. We headed back to the living hall. After sitting down, we all started eating it at the same time. We all paused and looked at each other in surprise. It tasted very good.

As we were sitting and enjoying ourselves, I noticed Flora was starting to seem off, as if she was bothered a lot by something.

“Flora, what is wrong? What is bothering you?” I said worriedly.

The truth is I know what is bothering her, but I cannot say.

She looked me in the eye and started talking. “The truth is, Harry arranged this marriage, a marriage I never wanted. Father agreed all because he trusts Harry. I trust Harry too, but not like a lover. I have never thought of Harry as a lover, only as a knight and a friend.”

She gave a sigh, worry still on her face. “When Harry told me about how he wants to get engaged, he told me I cannot disagree, and if I tried to, he will...”

She paused and looked at us both.

“He... he said he will target Valentina and threaten her.”

I could not ask him why. I had to silently agree and accept, even if it was against my will. I really do not know his full motive. I am sorry, Val. I truly am.”

Flora started to get teary eyes, and I was furious. Furious about the fact that Harry would do that to her and use my name to threaten her. I was feeling guilty about the fact that I am the reason she agreed in the first place.

I got up from my seat and went up to hug Flora. I hugged her tight. Zen was facing me as I was hugging Flora. He seemed somewhat mad and disappointed, just like what I feel. Zen and I never knew Harry would do such an awful thing. I am sure Flora would have never guessed as well.

We had to think of a way to make Harry commit to the truth and give up on marrying my sister, but it is not as easy as we think it is. Harry wants the throne. I cannot tell Flora this. She is already in a lot of trouble.

I tried to remain calm because this way we can get what we want.

I calmed both of them and looked at Zen, asking, “What do you think we should do?”

He replied, “Let’s wait for now. We will see what happens to this situation.”

I agreed with him.

I held Flora’s hand and said, “Sis, let’s go sleep. You are tired.”

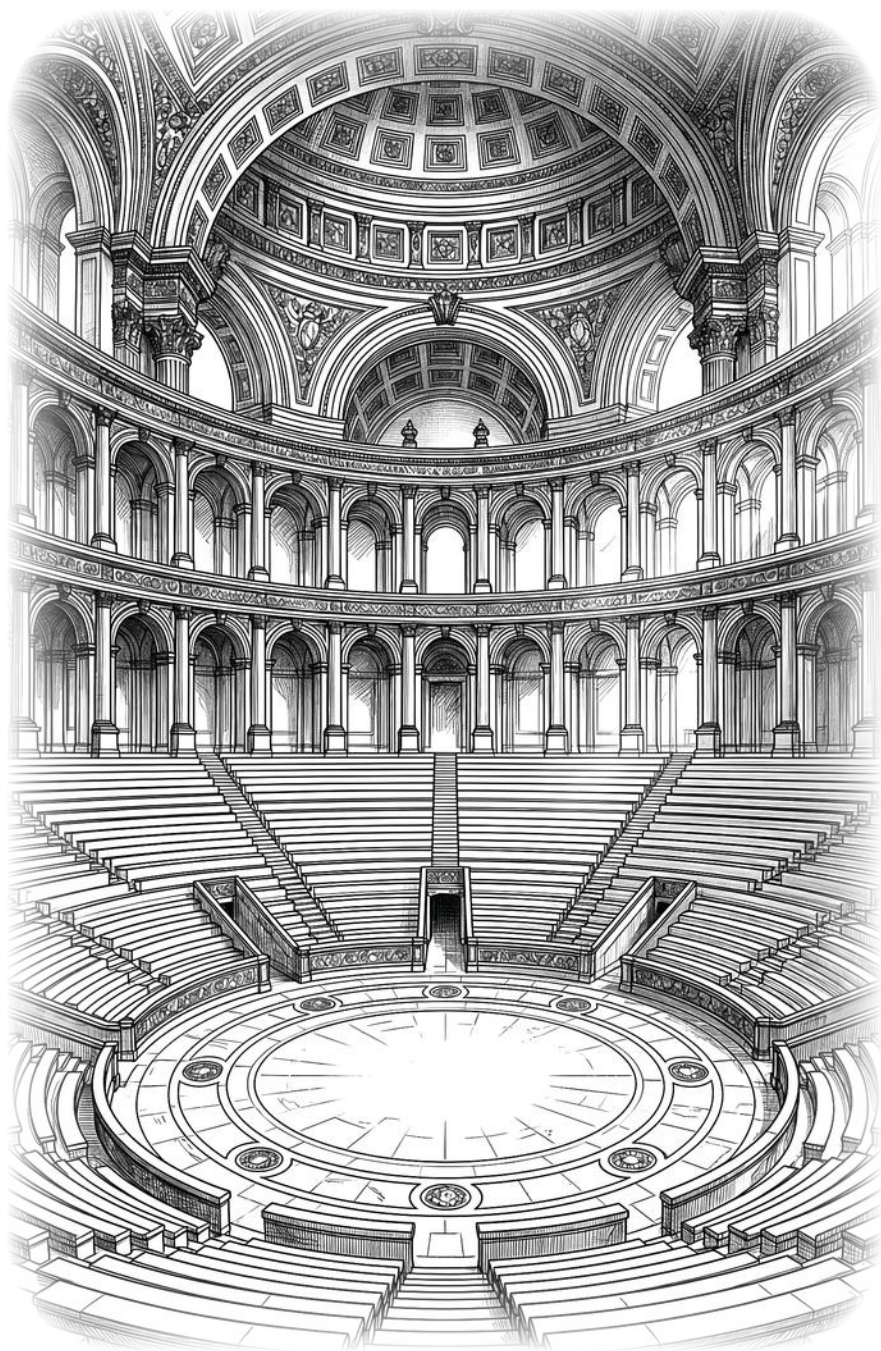
She nodded in agreement. Zen went back to his room to sleep, and I took Flora to her room. I gave her a set of my pajamas. I did not leave her room until she fell asleep. After she did, I went back to my room.

I got to my bed and put my head on the pillow. The second I did that; I fell asleep right away.

Blackmailed: (Verb) forced someone to do something by threatening them.

Miserable: (Adjective) very unhappy or

Threaten: (Verb) to say you will harm someone or something.



Chapter Nineteen – The Final Level and the King’s Sacrifice

Harry came up to me. He took a glance at Zen, then a small smirk started to grow on his face. He looked back at me and said, “To think you would also come early is quite shocking, because if I remember correctly, which I do... the king said this is not really your duty anymore. Is that not right, Princess?”

I did not respond to him, not caring about a single word that came out of his mouth. Little did I know he was not done. He looked at Zen and said, “And Prince Zen, what do you find in that odd princess? Why bother being with her?”

As soon as Harry finished his speech, Zen punched him in the face.

Harry’s nose started bleeding, yet Harry did not hit Zen back. He just laughed off the situation.

Zen and I left him to himself. Zen did not say a word—I did not say a word either. We continued our search.

I came across a weird-looking handle on a tree, not something I was expecting. I called out to Zen. I told him about something weird I found.

He came.

Zen held the lever, taking a look at me, and he pulled it down. Nothing happened. We checked our surroundings, and there was nothing. We both were confused. Could this be a joke?

All of a sudden, the ground below us started to shake. A part of the ground began to split apart, as if a door was opening to another world.

Staircases were getting visible. It seemed ancient, and probably no one had come across this level. The stairs were spiraling deep into the ground.

We followed the staircase into the deep, narrow walls.

We got to the ground floor. There were torches on the walls as if they were guiding you to a never-ending path. Zen took the lead with his sword ready in his hand, and I followed him with my sword in hand.

The tiles below us and the tiles on the walls looked worn out, dusty, and ancient. Some tiles had random drawings or words on them. It could not be from this century.

Coming to the end of the path, we saw nothing but darkness. Out of nowhere, torches lit up.

The arena was wide and open, with a large sandy floor in the middle and many rows of stone seats rising high around it. Torches burned along the walls, their light spreading across the huge space and making the hall feel grand and endless.

We went into the middle of the arena, admiring the ancient interior.

Zen pointed out a door at the end of the arena. We made our way to it, and we saw goblins—huge goblins.

There were three.

One was sitting on a throne that seemed to be the king. On his right there was a smaller goblin that carried a huge axe. On the left, the goblin was tiny.

The one on the left seemed to have a key.

A key?

So, could this be the final level?

“What is a human like you doing here, you humans!” the king goblin said, looking at us with judging eyes.

“We are here to destroy the final creature within the five levels,” I said, trying to act brave and hoping terror would not show in my tone.

“Ha ha ha,” the goblin laughed, and the other two went along with it. “Getting the key? The last time I remember a human came was decades ago. They could not even manage five minutes, let alone defeating it. What makes you think you can now, human girl?” The goblin’s voice became serious, trying to make his words sound true.

I was nervous inside, not knowing what to respond with, but my back was straight, showing bravery.

Zen put his hand on my shoulder, telling me he was right beside me and would help out, reminding me I was not alone.

I locked eyes with the king goblin and spoke confidently. “I have the skills, and I am not alone. Your words do not scare me. I will defeat you if I must.”

I tightened my grip on the sword, readying myself for the fight that was to come.

The king goblin laughed once more. This time he seemed surprised. He signaled the kid to give me the key.

Wait... what? Why?

“You passed the first round. I never said you would fight me. What you have to fight is there,” he said, pointing at a big door gate that was locked. “Take this key and go on to your second round, the round where terror meets you.”

The goblin kid walked up to us and handed us the key.

“Thank you,” I said kindly, although I was still stunned by the truth.

“We will prove our words and worth. We will make it through,” Zen said.

“I shall see what you humans will do. Good luck to your new adventure, where life and death are held by a thread in your hands.”

The king goblin started turning to golden dust along with his wife and

child as he said those words.

Zen looked at me. “Are you ready, Val?” he asked.

“I am so ready, Zen,” I said, smiling back.

The door gate was in front of us. The key was in my hands.

Putting the key into the keyhole, I took a look at Zen—a look that told him we got this.

I turned the key, and the gates opened wide by themselves. We walked into the gate and there was a coffin. We both looked at each other, feeling suspicious. I decided to push the coffin's head open. All of a sudden, the wall opened up. The next thing we see it is a skeleton standing up, holding a sword in a huge arena. Zen told me we have to get the sword. I moved forward and tried to take the sword. But I could not and Zen shouted, “Val, come back.” He had noticed that the skeleton was growing up, looking entirely different.

A dark warrior stood in the middle of a burning battlefield, surrounded by flames and drifting ash. His black armor was sharp and heavy, and a hood hid his face except for two glowing red eyes shining from his mask. In his hand he held a blazing sword, its blade glowing like molten fire and lighting the ground beneath him.

Behind him, a massive shadowy creature twisted through the flames, its red eyes burning in the darkness as if it were a spirit of fire bound to the warrior. The heat of the battlefield surrounded them, and sparks rose into the air.

The warrior stood still and fearless, looking less like someone trapped in the fire—and more like the one who commanded it.

The battlefield burned like the heart of a dying star. Flames crawled across the shattered ground, and ash drifted through the air like black snow. In the center of the destruction stood the monster—a towering figure wrapped in dark armor, its glowing blade blazing like molten fire. Behind it rose a swirling creature of shadow and flame, its enormous

eyes burning red as it twisted across the sky.

I tightened my grip on my sword, the heat stinging my face. My heart pounded in my chest, but I refused to step back.

“We end this now,” I said.

Zen stood beside me, his blade already drawn. His eyes moved quickly, studying the monster’s movements. “Stay close. That thing’s stronger than it looks.”

Behind us, Harry had arrived. He lifted his weapon, watching carefully. “Just keep it distracted,” he said. “We will take it down together.”

The monster moved. In a flash of fire and darkness, it rushed forward. Its flaming sword crashed down toward me. I raised my blade just in time.

CLANG!

The impact rattled through my arms like thunder. Sparks exploded between the swords as the creature pushed against me with terrifying strength.

“Zen!” I shouted.

Zen darted forward, striking the monster’s side. His blade scraped across its armor, sending sparks flying. The creature roared, a sound that shook the ground beneath them.

A massive claw of swirling darkness lashed out from the shadow behind it.

Zen barely rolled away as the claw slammed into the earth, leaving a deep burning scar in the ground. I took the chance and swung my sword toward the monster’s chest. The blade struck, but the armor held strong.

“It’s too strong!” Zen shouted.

Harry fired from behind us, his weapon sending a bright blast of energy

into the monster's back. The creature staggered slightly, giving me an opening. All the guards arrived and they were also helping but it was not easy for them as well.

"Now!" Harry yelled.

I lunged forward with all my strength and drove my sword into a glowing crack in the monster's armor. The creature screamed.

Fire burst outward as the blade pierced deep into the burning core inside its chest. The shadow behind it twisted violently, shrieking as if it were being torn apart.

Zen rushed forward and struck again, slashing across the monster's shoulder. The creature stumbled. Then, with a deafening roar, its body exploded into swirling flames and smoke. The shadow creature shattered like broken darkness, dissolving into the fiery air. Slowly, the battlefield fell silent. Ash drifted down around us. I dropped to one knee, breathing heavily. My arms trembled from the fight.

"It's... over," I said.

Zen wiped soot from his face and nodded. "Yeah. Finally."

Harry stepped forward from behind us. I stood and turned toward him, relief filling my chest. But something in Harry's eyes felt wrong.

Cold.

Empty.

Before I could speak, he raised his weapon. And pointed it directly at me.

Zen frowned. "Harry... what are you doing?"

Harry did not answer at first.

Then he said quietly, "The monster was only half the problem."

My stomach dropped. “What...?”

Harry stepped closer, his grip tightening on his sword.

“You were never supposed to survive this fight.”

Zen immediately stepped in front of me. “Back off.”

But Harry moved fast. His blade swung toward me. Zen tried to block, but Harry knocked his sword aside and rushed forward. I barely had time to react. The blade came down toward me. But before it could reach me—

CLANG!

Another sword appeared between us. The impact rang across the battlefield. I stared in shock. Standing between me and Harry was my father. His armor was scratched and worn, and blood ran down his arm, but his sword held firm against Harry’s strike.

“Dad...?” I whispered.

My father did not look back at me. His eyes stayed locked on Harry.

“You will not touch my daughter.”

Harry pulled back and swung again. Their blades crashed together, sparks flying through the air. My father pushed him back, but the fight had already taken its toll on him. His breathing was heavy.

“Run, Val,” he said.

“No!” I cried.

Zen grabbed my arm. “Val, listen to him!”

Harry attacked again, faster this time. The swords clashed once more, but Harry twisted his blade and struck low. My father tried to block— But the blade slipped through. The sword pierced through his chest. I froze. Everything around me seemed to disappear. My father staggered

but stayed standing, still between me and Harry.

“Dad!” I screamed.

Harry pulled his sword free and stepped back, watching. I rushed forward and caught my father as he fell to his knees. His blood stained the ground beneath us.

“No... no, please...” I whispered.

My father looked at me, his face pale but calm.

“I believe that you can take care of this kingdom instead of me,” he said softly.

Tears streamed down my face. “No, Do not say that. You are not leaving us”

He gently placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Forgive me for not loving you too much, you are still my daughter I am sorry my sweet Val.”

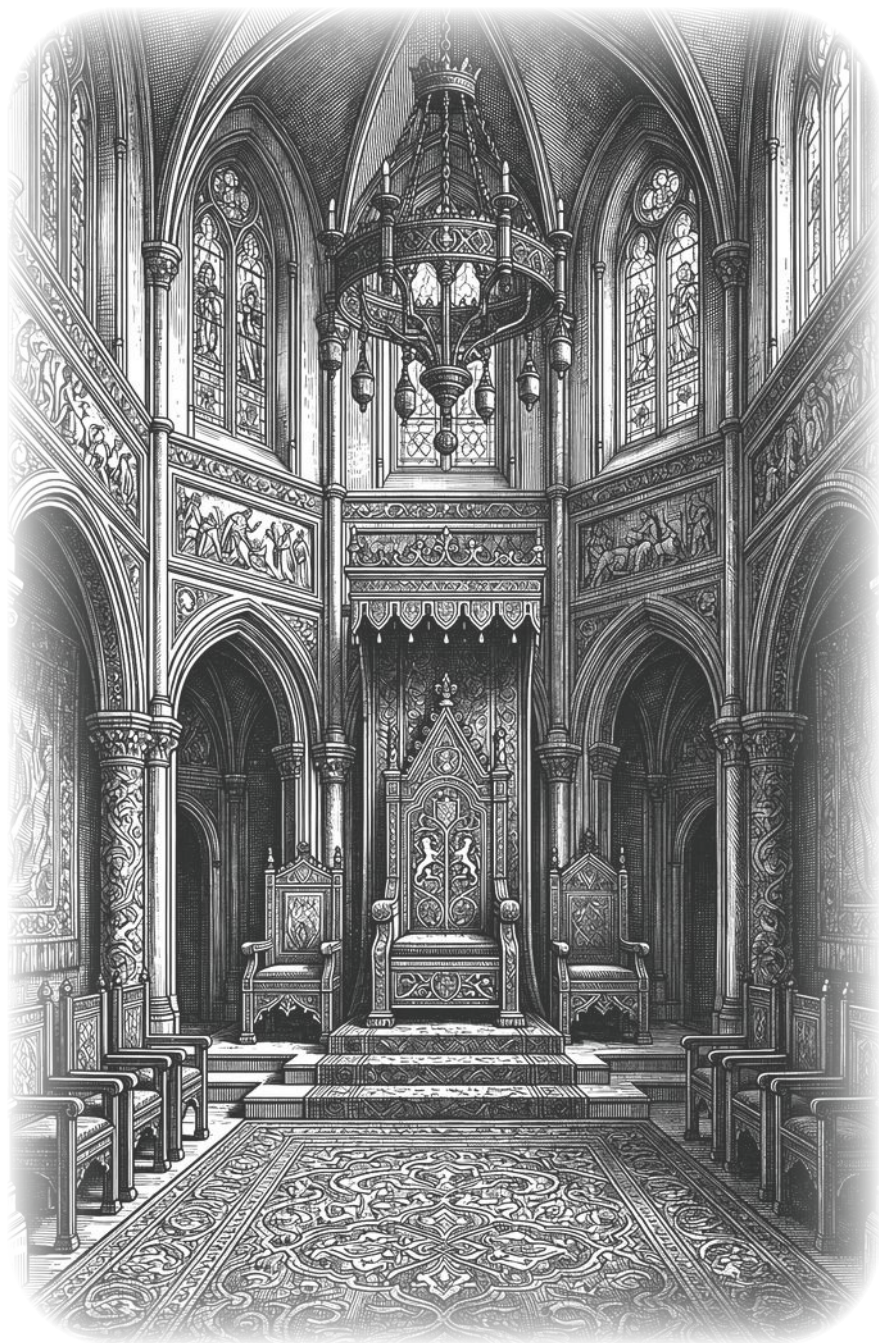
His hand slowly slipped away as his strength faded. I held him tightly as the flames crackled around us. The battlefield that had once roared with chaos now stood silent, broken only by the sound of the fire and my quiet sobs. My father had saved me. But the cost was everything.

Arena: (Noun) a large open area used for battles, performances, or competitions.

Disintegrate: (Verb) to break apart or turn into small pieces.

Battlefield: (Noun) a place where a battle or fight happens.

Staggered: (Verb) to move unsteadily as if about to fall.



Chapter Twenty – Rise of the Queen and the Secret of the Keys

I could not bear letting my father go. I felt my father's warmth for the first time—and the last—not wanting to let go. I am not ready to accept that he is murdered. Why was he here in the first place? I will avenge him.

Zen knocked Harry out from the back. "This will last for around ten minutes. We really need to go now, Val. The arena will crumble down," he said to me.

I could barely hear him, barely concentrate. Focus, Val. Focus.

I put my father down, no emotions showing on my face. Looking around, I saw no key.

"What about the key? I must get it," I mentioned.

"No time for the key, Val. If we stay, we will be crushed. The guards went out already," Zen said to me, as if he was begging me, just for my safety.

I will not leave the mess that we started.

"Zen, I trust you. Take my father out of here. I will fight him to his death and get the key. I need your trust in me," I told Zen.

It did not seem like he liked the idea, but he gave a sigh. "You will never change, will you? I will take your father. And you must get out safely," he commanded.

I gave a nod. He looked down at Harry and said, "What about him? Should we just leave him to his death?"

"No, I will get him out with me. Now go!"

Zen listened to my words. I watched him as he took my father's corpse. As I saw them get out, I got myself into a ready position.

I will bring the beast down.

I lunged at him. We had a one-on-one fight.

I was focused. My eyes traced all its movements—managing to kick his hand hard, sending the fiery sword into the air and into my hands. Now it was swordless.

The shadowy beast vanished behind it; instead, it appeared behind me.

I used the fiery sword and struck through its chest where its heart was. It may be a skeleton, but it regenerated its heart.

Pulling the sword out, I slashed off its head this time. It turned back into a skeleton.

The skull rolled away.

I picked up the key that fell, putting my swords away. The shadow disappeared.

The walls started to come down. Everything was slowly crumbling apart.

I ran to Harry, carrying him on my shoulder. He was heavy with all that armor.

I ran back to the first round, then through the long path. I was starting to lose my breath—he felt heavier as my energy drained. I managed to get back up the spiral stairs and threw Harry out. I needed two more steps, but the stairs started to crumble and disappear.

I held myself with one hand, holding on for dear life.

That was when I saw Zen.

He grabbed my hand and pulled me up. We made it out safely.

He hugged me.

A hug. One I needed the most right now.

“Where is my father?” I asked, searching around.

“Do not worry, Val. He is on the horse. We will take him back,” he reassured me, as a frown grew on both our faces.

We got on the horses. Zen was in front with Harry in the back. I was behind, with my father in my arms.

We made our way back to the palace. Guards stood on each side, making way for us. Tears fell from their eyes.

Flora was at the far end, crying. We stopped in front of her. They took my father to prepare his grave. Flora gave me a tight hug as she cried.

Zen informed everyone about my father’s last wish—to make me the protector of this kingdom.

Flora seemed to like that idea. Everyone found out I was the one who defeated the final level.

Harry regained consciousness, but I knocked him out again. I told the royal staff to call off Flora’s engagement. That was my first command as the new queen.

My father had his funeral. Everyone said their goodbyes. Citizens across the kingdom came to honor him by placing flowers near his grave.

A few days passed. I became the new ruler of Volkaria. Not everyone worshipped me yet.

Harry had been in prison since our return. He was the shadow I had been chasing. The pain I endured was because of him. I took back the first-level key from him. I decided his future would be decided by the citizens.

Zen had already informed his friends that their help was no longer needed. I told him to invite them as a thank you.

The next day, the staff set up a podium to decide Harry's fate. All the citizens gathered. Harry was on his knees, chained. Flora and everyone else stood below the podium. I stood beside him.

I introduced myself as the new queen. Most knew, but some were shocked.

Holding my fiery sword, the shadow stood beside me. Everyone was stunned. I placed the blade near Harry's throat and asked the citizens what to do.

They decided he should be stripped of his name and work as a slave.

The staff took Harry away.

Standing alone on the podium, I made my oath.

An oath to protect this kingdom at all costs.

Everyone cheered.

Zen shouted from the crowd, calling me the Queen of Fire and Flames. The crowd fell silent—then began cheering even louder.

I felt joy, but something was still missing.

I had all the keys... but why?

What was the point of collecting them?

I left the crowd. Zen followed.

"Val, you do not look happy. Is everything alright?" he asked.

"Zen, what was the reason we collected all these keys?"

"I do not know yet, but we will find out soon."

I returned to my room, staring at the keys. Flora came in and sat beside me.

“Sister, why are you still wearing that ring?” I asked.

She explained everything—how Harry forced her.

I smiled. “It is nothing to worry about.”

Flora looked at the keys. “Wait... put them together. There is a clue.”

She was right.

We arranged them and found codes.

Zen entered and solved it.

“The word is WATCH.”

It made sense.

We went to a repair shop.

A man gave us a clue:

“Where petals fall and colors grow, look for the mark that points below.”

We searched until we found a marked blossom tree.

We dug beneath it.

A box with five locks.

I used the keys.

One by one... they unlocked.

I opened it.

The box burst open with blazing light.

A crystal rose.

Energy spread across the kingdom.

A shield formed in the sky.

Unbreakable.

The kingdom was finally protected.

Regenerate: (Verb) to grow again after being damaged or destroyed.

Podium: (Noun) a raised platform for speaking in public.

Yielding: (Verb) can mean producing something, it usually means giving way to pressure or surrendering.

Tingling: (Adjective) a light stinging or unusual feeling on the skin.

Befuddled: (Adjective) very confused and unable to think clearly.

Blossom: (Noun) a flower that grows on trees

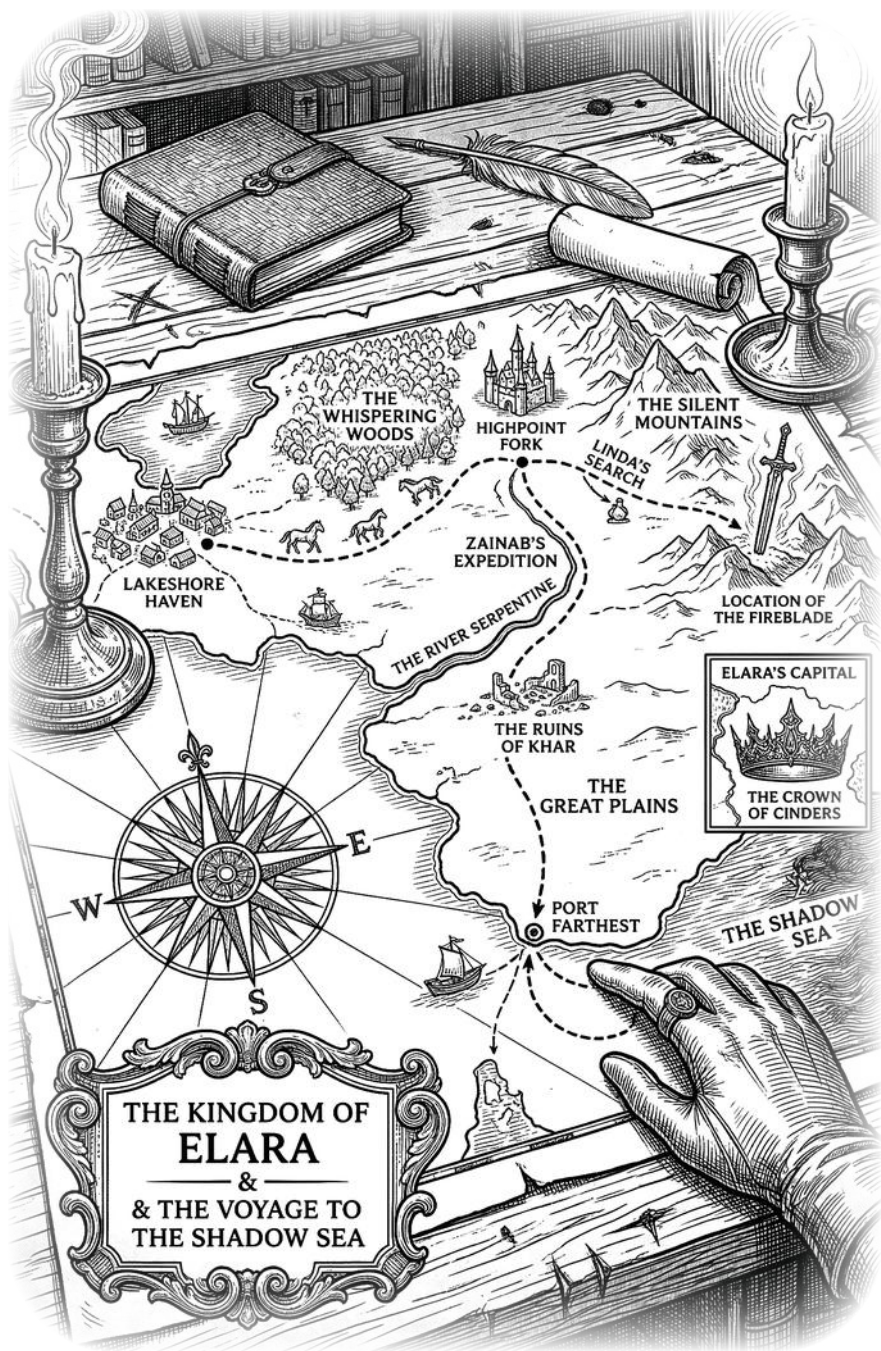
Surged: (Verb) moved suddenly and powerfully forward

Author's Note

Thank you for joining Valentina on her journey. This story is about courage, friendship, and discovering strength even in the darkest moments. Throughout her adventures, Valentina faces dangerous creatures, mysterious lands, and powerful enemies, but she never stops moving forward.

I hope this book inspires you to be brave when things feel difficult and to believe that even the smallest choices can change the future. Every challenge Valentina faces helps her grow stronger and wiser, just like the challenges we face in our own lives.

Thank you for reading and stepping into this world of adventure and mystery.



Crown of Flames

By: **Zainab A. Hawiz** And **Linda H. Sadiq**

A kingdom on the edge of darkness.

A princess forced to become a warrior.

A destiny written in fire.

Valentina never asked to be the one to fight. But when danger rises and secrets unfold, she must step beyond fear and into a world filled with deadly creatures, hidden truths, and powerful enemies. Alongside Prince Zen, she faces trials that test not only her strength—but her heart.

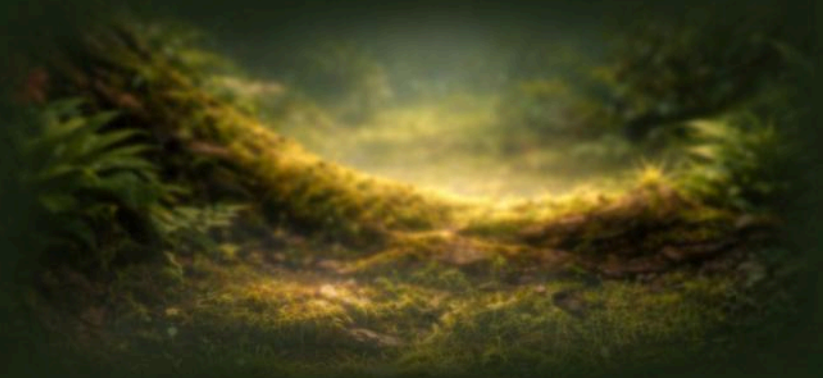
But the greatest battle is not against monsters.

It is against betrayal.

As the truth behind the five levels is revealed, and the cost of victory becomes painfully clear, Valentina must rise—not just as a fighter, but as a queen.

Because some crowns are not given.

They are earned through fire.



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