

A Noble
PRINCESS

CORNERSTONE SERIES | *Book 5*
SARAINA WHITNEY



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CORNERSTONE SERIES #5

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*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and
though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;
Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the
mountains shake with the swelling thereof.*

Psalm 46:1-3, KJV

PROLOGUE

Aurelia

One year earlier...



I swung open the casement windows and leaned over the edge, drawing a shaky breath of sunlit air. Wind ruffled my curls as butterfly wings blinked at me and wood pigeons warbled in tree boughs.

And slowly, the ache in my throat receded.

Fresh air had a way of doing that to me. It sewed up the ragged edges of my heart.

But it couldn't fully eliminate the wounds.

Maman's confession still tumbled inside my brain, threatening to break my composure once more.

She believed she wasn't going to make it through another year.

"Non." I gripped the casement edge with fingers stained by minium oil paint.

It was going to be a gift for her. A painting of orange roses drifting in a pool of water. The idea struck me while I was in the castle garden, swinging in a hammock under the hawthorn tree. And something about it instantly reminded me of Maman. Her vivid, forceful personality, softened by the elegant grace of the queen she was, and her desire for harmony.

But I could see her fading now. Sickness and age were eating away at her.

I'd be all alone.

I realized too late that my restless fingers had wound into my hair, pulling on the golden spirals. A few strands fell to the oak floor, the consequence of my feverish energy.

Maman would press her lips in mute disapproval. Liese would *tsk* and pat my hair back into order, murmuring under her breath that I needed to stop this habit.

Did they think I wasn't trying?

Did they think it wasn't hard, keeping up the image of the golden girl?

My throat closed in again, my breath coming in panicked pants.

I had to get out of this castle. Now.

Minutes later, I had escaped the confines of the ancient castle and was sneaking through the garden gate. Over yonder hill, my favorite haunt awaited. A wooded glen, brimful with buttercups and butterflies last I checked.

It was poetry.

It was solace for my soul.

I arrived there winded and panting, my heart racing against my ribcage, a stitch in my side. But a weary smile bloomed on my face as I knelt by the edge of the gurgling brook. I sipped the clear, icy water, then shoved off my shoes and stockings and dangled my bare feet in the brook as I stretched back on the grass.

Peace.

I found it here in snatches. I tried to carry the feeling back with me into the castle, into my training as a soon-to-be-wedded princess, into my daily life.

But it never stayed.

“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in Thee.”

The Script drifted through my mind, but instead of comforting, it caused tears to burn my eyes. Angry tears, if I was honest.

Perfect peace felt as distant from me as Dieu’s presence.

“I can’t do anything to make Maman’s health improve,” I whispered, my voice hoarse. “Just like I couldn’t do anything to save *Papa*. So am I supposed to trust that You can? Will you perform some miracle?”

Like You did with Papa?

A jaded laugh scratched my throat. Because Dieu *hadn’t* granted Papa a miracle.

I let my eyes fall shut, hot tears molding my lashes to my cheeks as the truth sunk fangs into my heart. “*Dieu*, I...I’m afraid to trust You.” My voice was so choked I could barely understand it myself, but I pushed on. “What if Your will is not my own? What if Maman does die before the autumn and I’m left all alone to carry on? What if that’s what You deem good?”

Drawing a shuddering breath, I swiped a stray tear that was trickling toward my ear. “How do I let go?”

There was no heavenly answer that split the skies and rent the earth. But the brook bubbled softly and birds chirruped and the sweet-scented breeze swirled the grass around my head, and I knew that Dieu had heard every word of my prayer.

And He would answer.

Mayhap *this* was letting go, after all. Simply—

A soft footfall landed behind me, accompanied by a clearing of someone's throat. "Princess?"

I jolted upright, nigh choking on my own gasp. Coughing, I whirled around and faced the intruder who *dared* to disrupt my solitude.

Dressed in his black bodyguard uniform, Wilder Becks stood at attention, his face twisted in a pained wince. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

I pressed a hand to my racing heart, heat searing my cheeks as the possibility sank in—he might have heard every word of my prayer, garbled as it may have been.

I swallowed, slightly dizzy at the thought.

"Forgive me, Your Highness."

Shock fled under a current of anger. I straightened, my hands fisting my skirts as I marched toward him. "This is my secret nook. No one is supposed to know about it. How do you..." I stopped short, aghast at the possibilities swarming my mind. "Did you *follow* me?"

"I—"

"Were you *spying* on me? Deliberately?"

"The q—"

"You heard every word I said, did you not?"

"Princess."

This time, his tone was sharp enough to cut through my interruptions, and I snapped my mouth shut. Suddenly, I realized

I was close enough to see the pale, faint scar running from his forehead to his cheek. And he, close enough to see the red veining my tear-stained eyes.

I took a step back, my toes curling in the blades of grass as he spoke.

“Would you like me to explain? Or would you like to slap me in the face?”

He looked solemn. Serious. As all bodyguards should.

But a suspicious glint twinkled behind those brown eyes of his.

I narrowed my eyes. “Both, *s'il vous plaît*.”

“I’m at your service.”

The prospect of slapping Wilder Becks, the tall and dangerous-looking royal bodyguard, was most inviting. I almost raised my hand.

But then I breathed a laugh, face heating as I flexed my fingers. “I apologize for interrupting, Becks. Please, explain yourself.”

“The queen saw you sneaking away and instructed me to run after you and escort you back to the castle.”

I gaped.

He blinked. “It’s unwise to roam about the country by yourself, even so close to the castle—”

“She *saw* me? But I made certain that...” I sank onto the grass and buried my head in my hands, feeling ready to cry again. But I wouldn’t. Not in front of *him*. “Now she’s *never* going to let me leave. Where will I go when I need...?”

“Need what?” His question was so soft I was compelled to answer it.

“Peace.”

Wind clanged the leaves like mourning bells. Sunlight wavered on the buttercups.

“It feels like a prison.” Already the pressure was rising at my throat. Clawing. Always greedy. “I feel trapped, and it is all my own doing.”

Trapped inside myself.

“I’m sorry.”

I shook my head, too heavy to even get a full sigh out. “It isn’t your fault.”

“You can always stroll in the garden by yourself. You’re safe there.”

I didn’t want safety. I wanted freedom. “*Oui.* I could.”

Grass rustled to my right, and I looked up in surprise to see Becks lowering himself to join me on the grass with a heavy sigh. “I don’t make the rules. But I’m sorry it has to be this way.”

I plucked a buttercup from the earth and shook my head. “Don’t mind me. It doesn’t do any good to complain. I’m not ungrateful, you know.” I’d rather die than have anyone think otherwise. I fixed a hard stare on Becks. “I couldn’t ask for a better life.”

His eyebrow slowly lifted, as if he wasn’t convinced.

I frowned, surprised he would dare to think I wasn’t sincere. “I meant that.”

His mouth twitched, but his gaze dropped from me, drifting to the brook. “You could ask for a different life.”

My frown only deepened. Why was he chasing this idea that haunted me? I was trying to be rid of it. “This was the life I’d been born into,” I said, forcing a laugh. “My future is to be the queen of Nordenberg, and nothing can change that. Nothing will.”

And I would make the most of it. I would use my position to care for the orphans and the needy in the poorest of the

rookeries, like we did in our own country. I would bring the Galandran love of rowdy, foot-stamping *branle* and *farandole* dances into the austere corners of Nordenberg. I would fill it with as much color and song and warmth as I could while respecting their own traditions.

Noble aspirations, Maman had told me.

It was the only way I could imagine myself feeling at home in a foreign country.

I looked at Becks, waiting for him to challenge my words. His face certainly was.

But then he sighed, mouth leveled in a tight line. “I know.”

Silence descended until a distant growl of thunder vibrated the ground.

Becks pushed to his feet. “Let’s go before your mother thinks I’ve abducted you. Don’t, ah, forget your things.”

His eyes awkwardly flickered to my feet.

I frowned, following his gaze, then gulped. I’d forgotten I’d shed my shoes and hose. Heat flushed my cheeks. Becks coughed and turned his back as I tugged the hose over my damp legs and slipped on the shoes.

I cleared my throat, certain I was red as the strawberries I’d eaten with cream-and-honey frumenty this morning. “I’m ready.”

Becks turned. I could’ve sworn laughter danced behind that dark, steady gaze of his, but I wasn’t sure.

I could never be certain with Becks. He was a master at concealing emotion. I liked to think I was, too.

Becks bowed his head and gestured for me to exit the glen. “After you.”

Biting my lip, I trudged out of my secret haunt, and he followed, guarding my back.

ONE

Wilder

I'D KNOWN THIS DAY would come. But knowing didn't make it any easier.

I kept the firm stance of the royal bodyguard I was. Hands clasped in front. Jaw square. Head level. And most importantly, face impassive to conceal the knots of tension in my gut.

Of course, it was only the bodyguard in me. It was only the fierce, primal instinct to protect those in my care.

And right now, that meant the princess.

“The time has come for my daughter to wed, Becks.” Slumped on her velvet couch, the aged queen held my stare with a steely resolve that belied the sickness dulling her azure eyes. “Nordenberg is eager to welcome her as their future queen, and Prince Albrecht has written that all is prepared. She needs only to come.”

She paused, her shoulders heaving with her sigh. If she was waiting to assess my reaction, she'd have to be disappointed. It

wasn't my place to argue that this was the worst possible time to send the princess away to be married.

It wasn't my place to voice the obvious fact that Queen Ina was, quite frankly, on the brink of death. Her royal successor, some distant relative, was already handling most of her royal duties, a king in everything but name only.

If her health continued on this spiral, the princess might never see her again if she left Galandra now.

And ever since I'd caught Princess Aurelia crying in the wooded glen just outside the ancient Castle of Bellshire, I'd known one thing for a fact. Aurelia cared deeply. There was more to her than the perfectly poised, calmly collected face she put on for the world.

And yet she wouldn't complain, wouldn't protest. She would do as she was told. Even if it meant leaving behind her sick mother, the only immediate family she had left.

The queen raised a weak finger, pointing it at my chest. "Becks, I want you to guard her on the journey to Nordenberg. There is no man I trust more to protect my daughter."

I dipped my gaze in acknowledgement even as my jaw tightened, holding back words.

A faint smile quirked the edge of the queen's mouth. "You may speak, Becks."

In that case...

"Your Majesty," I began carefully, keeping my eyes on the floor, "in light of your increasingly ill health, mayhap now is not the best time to send her away?"

"I may be dying, *oui*. But my mental faculties are still fully functioning." Her voice took on an iron edge. "I have thought this through carefully. And this is my final decision. My dying wish. Send Aurelia away to be wed, before it is too late."

I bit down on my tongue. Hard.
Despite Her Majesty's ill health, she was far from senile.
I knew that.

Even so...this was madness.

"Seigneur Oliver has informed me that the trouble in the south is only worsening. Raids from Nocveran, disputes over our border and the gold mines. Securing our alliance with Nordenberg through this marriage would end that immediately. Our kingdom needs it."

True.

But something about the hard cut of her mouth and the unspoken desperation in her eyes told me that the kingdom didn't need it as much as she did.

Why? Why would she want her only child to be torn away from her right when she needed her the most?

The queen's thin shoulders hunched as she wheezed out a cough. Wincing, I fetched a glass of water on the cherry-wood side table and handed it to her.

She took a sip, then looked at me with a weary smile. "Take a seat, son," she said, gesturing to the armchair across from her.

Son.

She'd never know it, but that one word dug wells in my soul. Opened up a dangerous longing.

I shoved the rogue feeling away and gingerly lowered myself into the armchair, sitting on the edge. I never allowed myself to grow too comfortable.

The queen kneaded her fingers, anxious lines deepening in her forehead. "I must warn you that there shall be much danger on this journey."

"I'll assemble a large company of soldiers for her entour-"

“Non, keep it small.” Queen Ina lifted her chin in the air, a sharp spark in her eyes. “She will travel in disguise as a commoner, with only a small entourage. I want you and Captain Killigan to select three of your best men to accompany Aurelia.”

I realized too late that I was scowling. Traveling in disguise? Only five guards? “Your Majesty...what danger are you expecting us to encounter on this journey?”

Her eyelashes fluttered, shuddering the fear that lurked in her eyes.

She was hiding something from me. Something I was determined to know...because it concerned the princess.

“Your Majesty,” I said in careful, measured tones even as a nerve twittered in my jaw, “if you’re going to task me with the job of guarding your only daughter on this treacherous journey, I need to know what I’m getting into. With all due respect, what are you not telling me?”

She pressed her lips tight. Sizing me up, I sensed. Assessing the extent of my trustworthiness.

I bit my tongue to keep from mentioning that my trustworthiness wasn’t in question. Her daughter’s safety was.

I was about to blurt something else I shouldn’t when the iron set of her face finally broke.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, squeezing her eyes shut. “Ensure that door is bolted,” she whispered. “Then come and sit down.”

Nausea swimming in my stomach, I turned on my heel to draw the bolt. Then I returned to my place before the queen.

Clasping her weathered hands together, Queen Ina rubbed at the gold wedding ring she’d never taken off, even after becoming a widow. “The king and I made a decision nineteen

years ago that some would call foolhardy. Deceptive, even.” She swallowed. “But I’ve never regretted it, not for a blessed second.”

I narrowed my eyes. A hundred possibilities were crawling into my mind, nary a one good. “Your Majesty?”

The queen drew a trembling breath. “Aurelia is not my birth daughter.”

My leg, which I hadn’t realized was impatiently jiggling, turned to stone along with the rest of my body. All I had the wherewithal to do was blink.

What?

Tears puddled in the queen’s eyes, clouding them. “She was...” Her voice was so choked it was nigh unintelligible. “She was found in a trash heap. Cold, hungry. The tiniest little cry I’d ever heard before. She’d almost given up. What would you have done, Wilder Beckington?” she demanded, suddenly grasping my hand, as if willing me to understand. “Would you have left her there? Or dropped her on the doorstep of some impersonal orphanage who didn’t know who she was or whence she’d come from? Possibly handing her over to an even worse fate to strangers who didn’t care?”

I swallowed hard, my eyes wide and burning.

“I could do no such thing, Becks.” Queen Ina shuddered. “The moment I saw her, she became my daughter. She needed me. But I was selfish, Becks. Because...I needed her just as much. I’d just had a stillbirth. Nine months of hope and anticipation, all dashed to pieces when my babe came out lacking a heartbeat. I was broken and lonely and I needed someone to fill the hole. Aurelia did that.”

I rubbed my forehead, eyes squeezing shut as an entire battalion of emotions and thoughts stormed through me. They’d

lied to me. They'd lied to their country. And yet, seeing the queen right now...who could blame them?

A new thought sprang to life, darkening my mind.

Aurelia, too, had lied to her country.

And to me.

It shouldn't have stung. But it did.

"With her blonde hair and blue eyes, she fit in like Dieu had made her specifically for us. Like Dieu had meant for this all along."

The queen clutched my cold hand with trembling fingers, and I slowly opened my eyes, meeting her gaze.

She was waiting for me to say something.

But what was there to say?

"Thank you for confessing that you lied to your country?"

The queen wrung her hands. "As of yet...Aurelia does not know. And I plan to keep it that way."

My jaw distended from its hinges. All of a sudden, I had a thing or two to say. "The princess herself doesn't know she was adopted?" I ground out, not bothering to hide my scowl.

Queen Ina blinked nervously, her lips pinched and white. "Becks...I need you to swear to secrecy as well."

I drew back, flinching like I'd touched red-hot coals. How could she ask me to participate in the deception—to lie to Aurelia? "Why?"

It was an outrageously presumptuous question. The kind of question I'd learned early on not to ask. Not to mention the captain of the guard I'd trained under would hang me in a proverbial noose for my impudence. You don't question the queen, of all people.

But for once in my life, I didn't care.

Princess Aurelia deserved the truth.

Apparently the queen didn't share my sentiments. "Because Aurelia is still my daughter, no matter what anyone says." Her expression was fierce. Like a mountain lioness, prepared to defend her cub at all costs. "I will not have her future jeopardized. She must marry into royalty before I die, before I am unable to protect her with my rank as queen of Galandra."

There was no reasoning with the queen. Not with that feverish glint in her eyes.

I wanted to hate her. To lump her in with my preconceived notion of parents in general. All heartless. All uncaring. All greedy for their own gain.

Yet I knew it was nothing but love—misguided, overprotective love—that drove Her Majesty to this decision.

I shook my head. "How would someone find out unless they were told?"

"Before the king died, he wrote a letter to his cousin in the north, detailing the truth about Aurelia. However, the letter never reached him. It was lost, and as of yet, we have never known where it landed. Someone who wishes harm against her may have found out."

The queen's fingers wrapped around my fist, fragile but unrelenting. "She needs to be protected at all costs. And because of this, not even Aurelia herself can know of her true origins."

My heart raced. Sweat slicked my palms.

I'd been raised to do my duty. But this was asking me to lie to Aurelia. Not just a princess. Not just a random stranger. But Aurelia Beauregard, the girl who was generous and caring to a fault and held too much of herself back in order to give to others.

"For her good," the queen whispered, and the words joined the screaming chaos in my head.

My internal torment must have bled into my expression, because the queen leaned forward, fingernails digging into my clenched fists. “Think of what will happen if someone discovers her true identity. A peasant orphan, abandoned by her guardians. No more royal than the stable boy. She’ll be shunned, excluded, mocked. Never be able to secure the royal marriage she deserves.”

So it was for her good, was it?

Feeling lightheaded, I tugged away from her. If there was ever a good time to throw away my morals for a glass of hard liquor, it would be now. Growling under my breath, I paced to the casement window, then to the ornate bookcase, then to the gold-framed painting above the harpsichord.

The princess’s painting. It was a burst of daisies, wild yet graceful. Her signature was inscribed in the bottom right-hand corner. An elegant flourish that almost blended in with the background.

I stared at it as the queen went on.

“No matter what anyone says, I have claimed her as my daughter. She deserves the life I have given her. The love I have given her. Will you deny my daughter that?”

Well, when you put it that way...

I was lucky I hadn’t cracked a tooth, my jaw was clenched so hard.

She knew my Achilles heel. The weakness I tried to keep disguised as detached, impersonal duty.

I cared for the princess more than I should.

I cared enough to lie.

So I turned around and looked the queen in the eye and sealed my doom.

I swore to secrecy.

TWO

Aurelia

YOU'RE A COWARD, AURELIA Beauregard, and you know it.

I should be in the courtyard, spending my last moments here with Maman.

Instead, I was hiding in the castle stables, taking longer than I needed to ready my favorite palfrey for the long journey ahead. Waiting for the ache in my throat to fade away so I wouldn't be in danger of falling apart in front of everyone.

Brushing a lingering teartrail off my chin, I pressed my sweaty palm into the mare's honey-brown fur, feeling the quiet throb of her muscles. "I'm glad you're coming with me," I whispered to Sugarcane as her deep, mournful eyes sent wordless questions my way. "You'll be a piece of home to cling to on the way."

Maybe the last piece of home I'd ever know.

Non. I couldn't think that way.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed ... "

The priest had preached on that very Script in chapel last week. I was determined to believe it, even though my emotions stormed against me. Drawing a shaky breath, I brushed down Sugarcane's chestnut coat for the third time, even though she was already glossy enough to pose for a painting.

Sugarcane dipped her head to munch on more hay, then shifted away from me, as if protesting my obsessive attention to her grooming.

“Sugar...” I draped an arm around her neck, resting against her firm warmth as the scents of sweet hay and pungent horse-flesh tickled my nostrils.

“I knew I’d find you here.”

I spun around to see Wilder Beckington lumbering toward the stable I was in, his one-eighth of a smile as subdued as the warmth in his eyes. My tense muscles unwound, and I loosed a soft chuckle. “You didn’t check the gardens first?”

He leaned against the wood rail fence with a casual fold of his arms, his gaze dropping to my fingers. One dark eyebrow tilted.

Said fingers were both paint-stained and lined with dirt, I now realized, clasping them neatly behind my back.

“Mayhap I should have,” he said wryly, locking an amused stare on me. “What possessed you to be gardening on the day of your departure?”

I shivered. “Don’t say it like that, it sounds like a knell of doom.” Grabbing Sugarcane’s bridle, I unlatched the gate, and Becks quickly moved to pull it wider as I led Sugarcane through. “If you must know, I was harvesting some vegetables and herbs to add to our provisions.”

Becks slid me a look that seemed to pierce right through me.

Fine, maybe that hadn't been the only reason for my excursion to the garden. But he didn't need to be burdened with the dark thoughts weighing me down. Rending my heart and breaking my spine.

"I saw the physician leaving this morning," he said. A question, not a statement.

I bit back a moan. Apparently I would be telling him the truth, after all. But no one said I had to look him in the eyes while I did so. I knew the gentle concern in them would unleash a fountain of tears.

So I turned my back on him, hanging the horse brush on its hook and grabbing Sugarcane's saddle. "He said she's not improving as he'd like," I said crisply.

There. That was still the truth. Just...not the full truth.

Wordless, Becks draped a gray saddle blanket over Sugarcane's back, then helped me attach the saddle.

A groom brushed past us and out the stable, a broad-backed black palfrey in tow.

Then Becks caught my gaze. "How so?"

A lump rose, obstructing my airway. Pretending to adjust a strap, I bent close to my mare's neck so that Becks, on the opposite side, couldn't see me. "She may have only a month left," I finally managed, a telltale hitch in my voice.

Saying it aloud felt like a curse, bitter in my mouth.

I'd known it was coming. But now that the day had arrived, now that I was leaving all I had known and loved from childhood, it had become real.

"To live?" Becks' voice was low and harsh.

My heart shot to my throat, stealing words, so I let my silence answer him.

His hand, rough and callused, covered mine, stilling my fingers as they uselessly fiddled with part of Sugarcane's tack. "Aurelia..."

Saltwater stung my eyes, much to my consternation. Once I let the sobs loose, they wouldn't stop. So I blinked fiercely and tugged my hand away. "Mayhap he's wrong. He has to be wrong. I'll see her again. Today shan't be the last day."

It can't be.

Becks growled under his breath as he spun away and paced the hay-matted floor. "Did you even try to protest?"

A flush of indignant heat prickled my scalp. "Of course I tried," I said through my teeth. "But it is no use. This...this is her..."

Her dying wish.

Becks rounded my mare and faced me head-on, the steel in his eyes rooting me to the floor as if he'd reached out and touched me. "I know you, princess. You would do anything to please your mother. But you have a voice too. Just try. One more time. You can change her mind—"

"Only I *can't*, Becks." My voice shook.

"You mean you can't say no."

I crushed Sugarcane's bridle in my white-knuckled grip. "How *could* I refuse her dying wish?"

How could I knowingly disappoint her once again?

This was my final chance to show her that I loved her enough to sacrifice my wants for hers.

"I have to do this."

The intensity in Becks' face died away as he blew out a long breath. His neutral mask fell back into place as his honey-brown eyes studied mine. "You're a good daughter."

I let out a breath of laughter.

If only.

A frown twitched between Becks' eyebrows, as if daring me to call him a liar. "I meant that."

I gave him a sad smile to appease him.

Shaking his head, he backed away. "Bring Hurricane out so we can load the packs."

Despite the shadow hanging over my heart, I couldn't help the smirk that flickered on my lips. "It's *Sugarcane*, and I'll thank you to remember her name."

THREE

Wilder

THIS WAS WRONG. ON all fronts.

But I kept my thoughts to myself and a tight lock on my lips as I watched the princess embrace her mother in the castle courtyard.

And I realized something.

I'd never prayed about it. I'd never even thought to ask Dieu for wisdom, for guidance. Was I so calloused, so numb to His voice?

Guilt twinged through my heart, but I snuffed it out with a sharp shake of my head. It was too late, anyway. I'd made my choice. And who was to say Dieu would even have heard my prayers anyway?

"That smacks of bitterness, old boy," Hayford would say with a dead-serious gaze that belied the playful lilt in his voice. My best friend and fellow guard aspired to be a military chaplain one day. Sometimes he thought he could fix anyone.

He couldn't fix this, though.

Sometimes duty meant sacrificing the thing you loved most.

“I love you, Aurelia Beauregard,” I heard the queen rasp, her hands framing the princess’s face. She pressed a teary kiss to her daughter’s forehead. “And I promise you, we shall see each other again. We shall.”

Princess Aurelia nodded, and though I couldn’t see her face, I sensed that tears had stolen her voice. She whispered something, and the queen pulled her into another clinging hug, then reluctantly released her.

“Go on, now, my daughter—and may Dieu go with you.”

When they broke apart, and Princess Aurelia finally turned around, dressed in peasant garb that would disguise her noble rank, red rimmed her eyes.

It did something to me. I wanted to shout, to beg the queen to change her mind. I almost did.

But duty stood in the way, putting a stranglehold on my voice.

This was for the princess’s good, even if it broke her heart in the beginning.

I cleared my throat. “We need to depart now.”

I might have expected the princess to counter my rather brusquely-delivered command with a playful jab, like she would any other day.

But this was no time for lightheartedness.

She only spared me a brief glance, but her eyes darted away before I could fully take in the meaning behind her lake-blue gaze.

I assisted her onto her favorite mount, a feisty and graceful gelding who somehow turned into a docile lamb whenever Princess Aurelia touched him. She had dubbed him Sugarcane, but I called him Hurricane whenever she was in earshot. Just

so she could toss me that decidedly unamused look over her shoulder.

No such teasing passed between us today, however. Aurelia settled into her side-saddle without a word, and I mounted my horse, then pierced the queen with a hard stare, not bothering to hide my desperation.

Change your mind, I beg you.

Her gaze wavered, and she looked at her daughter instead.

Heart sinking in resignation, I glanced around the courtyard, taking in the princess's tiny, yet carefully chosen entourage. Captain Killigan, who had researched every detail of the journey with me until we had an accurate and feasible travel itinerary. His wife Liese, who had been the princess's nurse from infancy and could double as a first-rate cook. Guardsman Hayford, our resident redhead and my unofficial right-hand man. Guardsman Douglas, a brawny native of the Andra Mountains and the only man here I'd never bested in a spar. And Guardsman Paddley, a strong fellow with sharp, crystal-blue eyes and a fluency in Nordish, thanks to some distant relative from Nordenberg.

I could find worse people to be stuck with on this otherwise depressing journey.

It was a risk, choosing to travel undercover. But parading across Galandra with the pomp that a full retinue would necessitate was a waving red flag. The queen had revealed that Aurelia's origins would put her in even more danger on this journey. There were some who despised her for her betrothal to a prince of Nordenberg—a country that many Galandrans had mixed feelings about.

I would do whatever it took to protect the princess from those who would wish her harm.

I looked at her, wishing the wide brim of her straw bonnet didn't hide her face from view. All I could see was summer sun glistening on the braid that curved over her shoulder. Hands that were white-knuckled on the reins. A stiff posture with shoulders that bore too much weight.

She twisted on Hurricane's back, raising a fluttering hand in the air. "Adieu, Maman." Her voice was too bright. Too breezy.

She faced forward, then tilted her face so her brim wasn't blocking my view anymore. Meeting my searching gaze, she gave a tiny, pert nod.

But I asked anyway, "Are you ready?"

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. It couldn't reach her eyes. "*Oui*."

I touched my heels to my horse's flanks, then, and together we rode through the open iron gates flanked by Galandra's green-and-gold flags.

There was no going back.