

The Opal Crown

Prologue

*“Out of the wealth of fire opals and the blood of Eleanor’s
army was the kingdom of Galandria born.”*

—Eleanor of Andewyn House: Galandria’s Greatest Queen

King Fennrick lies in his bed, cursing the spoiled meat that has rendered him bedridden. He has never cared for being alone and has always loved the glittering thrum of the royal court. Solitude gives a man too much time to think, and if there is one thing King Fennrick tries not to do, it is think too deeply. For when he does, the shadows he keeps at bay through forced gaiety slip past his guard and creep toward him.

One day, he supposes, those shadows will strangle him.

Fennrick hollers for more ale and leans back on his silken pillows, dreaming of the amber liquid and the oblivion it will grant him. Oblivion is not the same thing as absolution, but on dark nights like these, it is close enough.

His golden bed curtains are swept aside. It is not his cupbearer who appears, but his son. He carries a steaming mug of foul-smelling muck, and Fennrick is sorely tempted to throw the boy out.

“I asked for ale,” the king says through gritted teeth.

“Tea is better for your stomach, Father,” Andrei
Andewyn replies.

Fennrick stares at the boy. This is his son. Has he ever loved him? Is it possible to love someone who never should have been born? Fennrick forced his wife—a woman whom he truly *did* love—to conceive a child, when her soul was already

broken. He is responsible for her death, though he suspects the boy blames himself.

Andrei stares back at the man who has broken his heart every day of his life. This is his father. Has he ever loved him? Is it possible to love someone who looks right through you, as though a ghost has always stood behind? Andrei looks down at his hands—hands that will one day rule a kingdom—and wonders how he is supposed to become a king when his father won't even teach him how to be a man.

Grudgingly, Fennrick sips the tea and bitter warmth floods his stomach. But he is clumsy and thick-fingered. The mug drops and the tea spills; a dark, spreading stain recedes into the shadows.

Perhaps the tea is slowly working through his stupor; or perhaps King Fennrick has just had a clear thought, all on his very own: it will not just be the crown Andrei inherits, but

Fennrick's sins as well.

He beckons his son forward, and begins whispering of the night that shattered his own soul.

A frigid draft creeps into the room. Candles flicker; bed curtains flutter. Andrei's shocked stare locks with Fennrick's weary one.

"Twins?" Andrei whispers.

Fennrick, for once looking his son directly in his eyes, nods.

And the shadows, released from their bindings, come slithering toward them both.

Part One

“As she established the laws of her kingdom, Eleanor gathered together her Guardians, and decreed that the opal crown should always pass to the firstborn of the reigning monarch. And so it has ever been.”

—Eleanor of Andewyn House: Galandria’s Greatest Queen

Chapter 1

Wilha

Every day I tell myself I should be happy with the life I have chosen. I have fled the gilded walls of my former existence. A life filled with everything anyone could ever want, save for true friendship and love. I walked away from all of it—me, the

girl so many others always believed to be fearful and incompetent—and built another life.

As I wrap my thick winter cloak about me, I look around the small bedroom I rent above the Sleeping Dragon. I remind myself that it is paid for by the fruits of my own labor. That I am free to come and go as I please. Free to show my face to the world. Perhaps more than most people, I understand these things are riches beyond measure.

I grab a handful of klarents off my writing desk and count them. It is not much, but it should be enough to pay Marko tonight.

I lock the door to my room and head for the staircase. Downstairs the inn is full, even on such a gelid night—just as I hoped. A group of weather-beaten fishermen hunch over the bar, trying to chase away winter’s chill with mugs of ale. Musicians play near the fireplace while the townspeople dance.

Victor, the owner, patrols the length of the inn, making sure the festivities do not get out of hand. James is serving a table of men and women, all of whom are wearing costume masks.

Victor scowls when he sees me. “You know I can’t spare James tonight. Do you have to visit the castle gates again?”

“I have been living in Korynth for nearly six months now,” I remind him. “I think I can manage the streets just fine by myself.”

Victor crosses his arms across his massive chest. “One would think you purposely choose our busiest nights to watch the Masked Princess appear on the balcony.”

I pause, for he is right. I choose the nights James cannot possibly accompany me. “I will not be too late, Victor, I promise.”

I turn away, but stop at James’s voice. “Willie, can you wait a moment?”

“Yes?” I turn around, hoping my frustration does not show. I had hoped to slip outside without him noticing.

He shifts uneasily. “I wanted to ask you something.”

I force myself to smile. “Ask away.”

My heart trumpets an anxious tune. All week, James has been working himself up to ask me something. I am quite sure I know exactly what it is.

I glance around the crowded inn. Surely he would not ask me here, in front of everyone?

“Stay and have dinner with me?” he says. “We’ve barely seen each other all week.”

“I told a few girls from the dress shop I would meet them at the castle gates,” I say, hating myself for the lie. “I have to go—I am late as it is.”

“If you insist on going, then let me talk to Victor. Maybe he can spare me for an hour or so.”

“I already spoke with Victor,” I say quickly. “He said he could not. Just let me go see the Masked Princess, and when I return we can have dinner together.”

James sighs. “I just don’t understand why you feel the need to watch the barbarian princess wave from her balcony so often.”

“She is not a *barbarian*, James. She’s a Galandrian. You know I do not like it when you use that slur.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry, Willie.” James leans in for a kiss, but I turn away. “People are watching,” I say.

James turns back, and the fishermen at the bar raise their mugs in mock salute. “That wouldn’t have bothered you last summer,” he says, frowning.

“I will be back soon,” I say, ignoring his unspoken question. I head for the door and with one last wave, step outside and start up the street.

The sky is mottled with patches of deepening gray. Icicles hang from the rooftops. Men and women hunch forward in thick cloaks, propelled up the street by a frigid wind. Many of them wear costume masks and carry candles. My breath plumes white smoke as I blow on my hands, trying to keep my fingers from going numb. I could go back to the Sleeping Dragon and retrieve my forgotten gloves, but I do not want to face James again.

Because in his words lurks the truth. Last summer, after walking away from a life behind walls, nothing bothered me.

Colors seemed brighter, music seemed sweeter, and my heart thrummed from the knowledge that James wanted to be with *me*, and not the Masked Princess. I wanted nothing more than to dance the nights away in the inn and pass the days at Galina's dress shop, talking with my friend Kyra.

But all too soon, the days grew shorter. Summer faded, and after a brief autumn, winter set in. Kyra met a boy named Damek and married him a few weeks later. They live in the countryside now, in his home village. In her last letter, Kyra told me she suspected she was with child.

As the cold has deepened, something within me has changed. So many small things put me in a bad temper, and I cannot share my thoughts with anyone. None save Elara, but during our carefully planned visits she is usually in too much of a frenzy to listen.

When the crowd reaches the west side of the city, I turn up the street heading away from the castle. The street dead-ends, and I turn once again into a back alley that is ripe with the stench of rotting fish. On an overturned crate sits a glowing lantern, the candle within flickering in the blustery night. A man waits nearby. Upon seeing me, he unsheathes his sword. He steps forward, a grim look on his face—and offers me the hilt.

“You're late,” Marko says as I take the sword from him. “If you insist on meeting in secret, at least have the decency to show up on time.”

“I am only five minutes late.”

“That's still late.” He holds out his hand and wiggles his fingers.

I remove the klarents from my cloak and hand them to him. While he counts the coins, I warm up with the sword; the

blade makes a satisfying *whoosh* as it cuts the night air. A loud cheer erupts in the distance; Elara must be making her appearance on the balcony. After Marko stuffs the klarents away, he produces a sword of his own.

“Difficult to train in the dark,” he says. “Don’t know why we can’t meet during the day.”

“I work during the day.” I take my position and wait. He raises his sword, attacks, and we begin to spar.

It was not easy, locating a sword master who was willing to secretly train me. Yet some of the regulars at the Sleeping Dragon have proven more than willing to introduce me to their friends.

Marko is retired, but said to be one of the best sword masters in Korynth. For months I have been continuing the lessons I began with Patric in Allegria. I may have fled my life as the Masked Princess, but my memories remain.

For weeks after the masquerade, I dreamed of Lord Murcendor. Dreamed of him unsheathing his sword and offering me a choice: marriage or death.

Until I decided I needed to do something to stem the tide of fear that threatened to overwhelm me on those nights when I awoke in panic. I train with Marko a few nights a week. And late at night in my room, while a choir of drunken carousing rises from downstairs, I practice with the wooden sword I keep hidden under my bed. It keeps my nightmares at bay, while reminding me to never forget that Lord Murcendor is still out in the world somewhere, living in exile.

While Marko and I train, my heart thrums and my breathing becomes labored. The night no longer seems cold and biting, but alive with anticipation and promise as Marko and I whirl and spin.

“You’re growing stronger,” Marko says when we stop to take a break. “Bolder. And that is good. Now I want to show you a new guard. To start, take your sword in front of your body and point it downward. See”—he moves into position, the hilt pressing near his belly, and the tip pointing at the muddy ground—“this will invite your opponent to attack your upper quarters. But when he does, you will lift up”—he demonstrates with a quick, upward drive—“and knock his sword away from him. He will then be open, and you are to go on the offensive.”

He invites me to attack. I do, and Marko quickly thrusts upward, knocking my blade away. His sword is now poised at my shoulder, in perfect position to deliver a crippling cut.

“As you can see, it is a deceptive position.”

Marko has me practice until he grudgingly tells me I am not half bad.

“That is high praise indeed, coming from you.” I smile.

“Don’t get used to it. This is not a game. When an actual opponent comes for you, he is not jousting. He means to kill you.”

My smile vanishes. “Believe me,” I say. “I shall remember.”

* * *

Marko leaves after our lesson has concluded. Light snow begins to fall as I walk through the silent alley. I should get back to the inn, back to James and my promise of a late dinner, but instead I am drawn to the Kyrenican Castle. A few townspeople still linger at the gates, stamping their feet against the cold and speculating over King Ezebo’s health. I see a window glowing with soft, buttery candlelight, and wonder what Elara is doing right this very minute.

A few weeks have passed since our last meeting. It did not go well. The request she made of me still sits in my stomach like a bitter tonic.

I move on to the Broken Statue. It is aptly named, for it is a white stone statue of my own great-great-grandmother Queen Rowan, and it is indeed broken. Her head lies in front of her feet, as though she was beheaded. “When you escaped from the Kyrenican Castle, did it ever occur to you not to go back to Galandria?” I say, crouching down to look into her stone gaze. Yet even as I speak, I realize it is a ridiculous question. Rowan the Brave was a strong queen. Not a terrified princess who ran away from her own life.

The storm begins in earnest and soon snow frosts my cloak. But still I stay, all too aware I am purposefully avoiding returning to James.

When I can no longer stand the cold, I rise and walk slowly back to the inn, reminding myself that I am free, and this is the life I have chosen.

Chapter 2

Elara

Masks are useful when you have things to hide.

This was something I didn't understand when I first donned Wilha's opal-encrusted mask. I saw it only as a confining, stifling thing, and overlooked its benefits entirely. It has taken me some time to understand that the jeweled masks are a powerful, impenetrable weapon. A glittering guard that never drops.

One that will keep my secrets.

Now, I purposely select the most ornate mask from Wilha's collection for my midnight engagement. It's painted

gold and crimson, with multihued opals swirling along the cheeks and forehead, matching my golden brocade dress.

It is my hope that by covering myself with so much gilt, Stefan will not notice the anguish I can no longer keep from showing in my eyes.

All is silent as I step out of my chambers and into the corridor. I cross my arms against the bitter chill that seeps through the walls of the castle and hurry through the dimly lit halls, unconcerned about being spotted by a passing servant or guard.

This is what months of lying has bought me: the ability to move freely about the castle at my own leisure.

In the kitchen, Stefan is seated in our usual spot by the fire. Two crystal goblets and a plate filled with slices of spice cake sit on the small wooden table in front of him.

I watch him silently. Shadows cast by the firelight dance along his face; his eyes are troubled and tired as he looks into the flames. Stefan used to serve with the Kyrenican navy, and after so many nights of being lulled to sleep by the sea, he no longer sleeps well on dry ground. Many nights he walks the halls of the castle until dawn. Lately I've been joining him in the kitchen, as I've also found it increasingly difficult to sleep.

My secrets will not allow me rest.

"How long are you going to stand there before announcing yourself?" he says, not looking away from the flames.

I detach myself from the shadows and cross the room. He leans into me, his fingers wrap around my waist, and he rests his forehead against my stomach.

"How is the king?" I ask, putting my arms around him.

Stefan's voice is muffled. "His physician is hopeful the worst is over. Though of course, that is exactly what he said last month."

Ezebo, the king of Kyrenica and Stefan's father, was thrown from his horse a few months ago. It was a nasty fall. Ezebo has not recovered well; he has spent most of the winter bedridden and weak. The duties of running the kingdom have gradually fallen to Stefan. While we all await Ezebo's fate, the fearful thought has crossed my mind: Will I marry a prince this summer? Or a king?

"He'll be all right." I knead Stefan's tense shoulders. "We'll *all* be all right. Winter will end and spring will come. And we'll be all right."

"I am better already now that you are here." He pulls back and looks up at me. "Would you take your mask off, just for a minute?"

“A servant could see,” I say quickly. “And your father has always wished for me to wear it.” It’s a dirty trick, mentioning Ezebo, but a necessary one.

Stefan sighs. “You are right, of course. But when I am king I will not—” He breaks off as the implication of what he’s just said dawns on him. “Anyway . . . mask or not, I’m glad you came.” He flashes a weak smile. “I love you.”

My stomach tightens, and I know he wishes I would return his words. But I won’t. I can’t. I’m not sure if I love Stefan; I’m not sure I even know what real love looks like. And this, at least, is one lie I will not tell.

“You should try to get some sleep,” I say.

Stefan’s face falls slightly, but his disappointment is quickly replaced by wearied concern. “These are for you.” He gestures to the slices of spice cake. “You hardly touched your dinner tonight—all week, in fact. Are you unwell?”

A lump rises in my throat. Stefan notices so many details. Too many. “I’m fine.” I pick up a slice of cake and force myself to choke down a bite.

“What do you know about horses?” he asks suddenly, rubbing his temples.

Such a simple question. And yet it’s one I could easily answer wrong. What *does* Wilhamina Andrewyn, the famous Masked Princess, know about horses?

“Horses?” I ask, stalling for time.

“Yes. Father was going to purchase one for Ruby’s birthday next month. He has asked me to take care of it. I seem to recall being told you had a stable full of your own horses in Allegria, did you not?”

This is new information to me, and I make a mental note to ask Wilha about her horses the next time I see her. I

take a large bite of cake—ignoring my stomach’s queasy protests—in order to prevent having to answer right away.

Why don’t you just tell him the truth?

The voice comes from somewhere deep inside; it’s one I’ve had to stuff away more and more often. I quickly remind myself why the truth isn’t an option: Stefan would never forgive me, I’ll be hanged as a traitor, and the entire world would come looking for Wilha. So I will have ruined her life, as well as forfeited my own.

“I’m afraid I don’t personally know a lot about horses. My father purchased them without consulting me,” I say, hoping this is close to the truth.

Stefan leans back in his chair and nods, seemingly too tired to pursue the matter further.

“Do you have a story for me tonight?” I ask, hoping to change the subject. “Tell me more about your time with the Kyrenican navy.”

Stefan shakes his head and grins. “Nope, I’ve shared enough about my travels. Tell me one of your stories about Tulan.”

During our nights by the fire, we pass the time telling tales. He tells me of his adventures on the Lonesome Sea. In return, I tell him of my own life in Tulan. Of course, I pretend they’re just ramblings I heard from a maid who served me in the Opal Palace.

Tonight I tell him of a day when I was still quite young, and Cordon and I came upon a tree that had fallen across the Eleanor River.

“And then he dared Elara to walk across the tree and cross over, despite the fact that the rapids were fierce. . . .”

Stefan's eyes have closed, his hand is propped under his chin, and I wonder if tonight he'll finally get the rest he deserves.

I know it's dangerous using my own name, but it slipped out one night. The night Stefan first said *I love you*. Not, *I intend to love you*, but simply, *I love you*. In return, though he will never know it, I offered him my own name, and my own life, disguised as a story.

Stefan's eyes pop open. "And did she do it? Did she cross?"

"Of course. She was quite spirited and never one to refuse a dare."

"Sounds like someone else I know." He grins.

I pause, and wonder if he's becoming suspicious. But I see only a weary playfulness in his eyes and continue.

"Halfway across she fell in. Her foot became wedged between some stones, and Cordon had to jump in to save her. Her dress

had torn, though, and when she returned to the lady of the manor, she was crying and said, '*I'm sorry, mama. . .*'" My throat swells as I remember. "And . . . and the lady replied, '*Mama? I'm not your mama, you filthy brat. I'm your mistress.*'"

I stop there. I don't want to finish the story; it ends with a beating and a warning to never, ever call Mistress *Mama* ever again. Up until then, I had always believed I was her daughter. A less-loved, harder-worked daughter than her precious Serena. But a daughter, nevertheless.

A sleepy page enters the kitchen and startles us both. He hands Stefan a small roll of parchment. "I'm sorry, Your Highness. We have just received an important message for the king. But when I brought it to His Highnesses' chambers he was sleeping. The queen was at his bedside and asked that I deliver it to you."

“Thank you.” Stefan begins reading. “It’s from Sir Reinhold.”

“It would be nice if it was good news for a change,” I say, turning to the fire. Ever since Sir Reinhold, Kyrenica’s ambassador to Galandria, returned to Allegría, he’s sent several messages of the growing unrest in the capitol. I bear little love for my homeland, but I still can’t fathom how the glimmering, opal-flecked city of Allegría can be declining so fast.

“Wilha?”

I look away from the flames. Stefan’s face is ashen.

“What’s wrong? It’s more bad news?”

“It seems the whole world is going mad.” He turns and addresses the page, “Please rouse my father’s advisors and tell them I wish to meet in the great hall. Tell them it’s urgent.”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

After the boy bows himself from the room, Stefan reaches for my hand and reads the letter aloud.

And I understand that the news I’ve just heard has the power to change everything.