

# BONUS CHAPTER

“How is it possible that I’ve been harboring a Shadow wielder for the past two years, spy master?” My father’s voice was as dry and powerful as thunder through the sunny throne room.

*How is it possible that I loved one?* I couldn’t help but think in response.

“Aren’t they supposed to be some sort of fairy tale?” he continued, attention solely on the dark-haired man in front of me. “Didn’t *you* convince me of that?”

“Your Highness,” Ivo said with a bow before adding in a strained voice, “I’m afraid she may be more than that.”

“Explain.” A rough command.

“I found these in her room.” Ivo extended a few documents to one of the palace guards flanking him, a very familiar ring – *my ring* – on top of it.

“I have my best spies trying to crack the code, but some of these letters bear the Alliance arrows. And she was in possession of a signet ring.”

I felt my father piercing gaze on me as I blurted, “what are you saying, Ivo?”

“I’m saying she played us all for fools, my Prince.” Sharp rage flashed through his face, a mirror of my own. “There is no knowing what she has used the ring for, but it seems she was requesting reports from the Royal archives. I believe she was tracking our own intelligence to warn the Alliance.”

*And she had been using me to do so!*

The well of Fire inside of me thrummed in response to the fury threatening to seize me. I stifled it, as sourly and definitively as I’d done at the sight of her disappearing in a cloud of shadows the previous night.

“So, your own niece, the girl who has been ...” My father glanced at me bitterly, the usual distaste clear in his tone, “living under my roof is not only the bearer of a legendary magic foretold to end the Kingdoms, but is also part of the Alliance?”

I didn't know what my father meant by that, but the silence hanging among us was strained, unstable. Yet, the tension of the moment did nothing to keep her face from springing into my mind, uninvited. I'd offered her trust and love. But she'd told me, hadn't she? *"I was made for something else entirely."*

A part of me still couldn't believe I had been so gullible, so easily swayed, but how could I not believe it after what I'd seen?

Ivo's shoulders dropped just an inch as he finally broke the silence. The spy master was a dangerous, ambitious man. I knew I should doubt him. Still, I recognized the painful disappointment in his eyes.

"My brother and I were stranded for years, and when he sent her to spend a summer with me, I thought he was trying to reconcile. He died while she was at my personal Villa and I ..." His voice broke, but he continued. "I let myself be carried by sentimentality. I should have looked into her past, I should have treated her with the same mistrust I treat everyone else, but she was the only family I had left. I never thought she would betray me."

"And you expect me to believe this young girl manipulated my spy master so thoroughly on sentimentality alone?" The disdain on my father's voice was deep and pungent.

And even as I heard it, I couldn't stop remembering the quiet nights we'd spent in the library, I couldn't stop thinking of the first night I saw that exquisite, quiet girl sitting alone by the window, as if waiting for the world to lay itself at her feet. She mesmerized me then, and she still did now. I only hated myself more for it.

"You should believe father. I know it well enough." My voice was as sharp as his, as commanding as any king's.

I felt my father eyes on me, and I didn't need to look at him to know the disappointment and judgement I would find there. But I was his heir, and he could find me foolish and stupid all he wanted. What he couldn't do was ignore my words.

"Why expose herself now?" I asked Ivo. "And why like this?" *Why kill her way through the palace?* Was the question I really wanted to ask.

"Billy always suspected her. I can only imagine he found something to prove his claims ... but the premier? I am as surprised as you, my Prince."

“I had him investigating the Alliance.” My father interrupted and surprise flickered through me. “But I don’t think she intended to expose herself. That we owe entirely to you, son.”

He turned the Royal ring at his finger. Sight lost on the sliver of red stone embedded in it.

“And yet, that is not the most important question, is it? The better question is what we *do* now.”

Ivo spoke before I could form any rational thoughts, his words aimed at my father, his face lingering on me. “She knew how to weave truths and lies. How to inflate a man’s feeling to the point of blind, foolish adoration.” A shameful pang shot through me at how deeply used I had been, at how many secrets and worries I’d spilled under her sheets. “Her manipulations cost me dearly.” Ivo kneeled, his gaze finding my father once again. “If you give me the authority, I’ll hunt her to the end of this world, and I will end anyone that stands in my way.”

My father considered his words, coldly measuring the man in front of him. “I want her alive and I want the Alliance destroyed. Will you give me that, spy master?”

“I will, even if it is the last thing I do.” The words sounded too much like an oath.

“Then do it as my new premier! But make no mistake, you can fall as fast as you climbed, Ivo. Faster, in fact.”

I thought I saw something akin to satisfaction crossing Ivo’s face, but it was gone before I could be sure. He bowed his head lower, in deep deference, before making his way out of the room.

Maybe I always knew what would happen, maybe I only wanted to face her again, even if for a few minutes, even if only to hear more lies.

Even so, my voice was unyielding as I finally said, before he reached the door, “When you leave for her, premier, I’ll go with you.”



There were many places in the palace where I should be, many things I should be doing with my day. Yet, all I could think about

was Aila's bloody figure vanishing through the corridor under a cloud of pure darkness.

I could blame the surprise of her magic, the risk to my men, even the mystery of how far her abilities really extended. But, deep in my thoughts, I knew there was only one thing that really stopped me from burning the whole corridor down to ashes: her.

There was no erasing her face from my mind, no erasing the solace I had found on her arms and the swell I felt in my heart at the mere sight of her. There was no forgetting the nights we'd spent together, even if it had all been a charade. A long, elaborate lie.

I'd loved her, and she'd used me. I wanted to give her the world, and she'd chosen a rebellion.

I could still feel the humming of power in my ears, the pressure of the Fire inside my skin. Stronger and deeper every time her bloody face and stained hands flashed through my mind.

Deep in my mind, I knew the only way to quiet the maddening rumble in my soul was retribution, knew that she'd played me and used me. And yet, only a day before I had been ready to defy my father for her, to choose her safety over my birthright.

I reached inside my pocket for the ruby and diamond ring I'd chosen for her and wondered what would have happened if Flynn hadn't interrupted us, if I'd had a chance to share my plans with her. I knew better now, it would have changed nothing, no matter how much I wished differently.

I buried the ring back in my pocket and resumed my path to the room where Valran had been found. She had asked me for a chance to explain and, even if I didn't owe her one, the doubt would eat me alive for the rest of my days if I didn't see what she was capable of with my own eyes.

Valran had been found on the administrative section of the palace, near the Royal archives. In one of the rooms reserved for small meetings and negotiations. An utterly empty place that late at night.

The large ocean-facing windows and the swaying light curtains gave the room a veil of tranquility that was completely at odds with the gore in it. Valran's body had already been removed, but blood still painted most of the light blue sofas and cream chairs in a splatter of red dots. A small crimson puddle had formed and dried

under the chair where he'd been found. Still, no furniture was out of place, not a single flower knocked down. Whatever had happened between them had been brutal, if not much of a fight.

As I entered the room, a figure came into view. A tall and slender figure, as smug and arrogant as ever. Flynn's hair was perfectly messy as he looked at me with faint amusement in his face.

"And here I was, thinking that keeping your boss alive was part of your job description?" I said coldly to Valran's captain.

He slipped his hands into his pocket, reclining against the wall.

"Well, I thought selecting guards able to stop an assassin from roaming the palace grounds was part of yours," he countered. "Looks like we are both disappointed, aren't we?"

I'd once trusted him, thought him a friend and maybe that was why, even as child, he was always able to affect me, to tip me over the last shred of control I had.

Over the past few days, he'd been very close to do exactly that.

But today I needed him and his knowledge of Valran's routine. I needed him to figure out why Aila had acted now of all times. I needed him to give me definitive proof.

Or so I told myself.

I took a deep breath to calm my nerves.

"Why would someone go after your boss in such a brutal way?"

"Well, let's say that was part of his job description."

And then it hit me. He knew more than Valran's routine, he knew what he was doing. He knew what my father had asked of him. A too-familiar shot of painful rage cursed through me.

"You know, don't you? About my father orders? His assignment," I said, not managing to leave the note of disbelief out of my voice.

"The King finally decided to update you, then." He tilted his head slightly. "Interesting."

It wasn't the first time my father had trusted the skilled captain over me, it wasn't the first time he'd made clear what he thought of his heir: weak and sentimental. It hurt all the same.

Flynn always had all the attention, all the praise and admiration and, as an unsolicited image of him taking Aila's hand flashed through my head, I knew there was no denying why I'd engaged in this conversation, no denying what I really wanted to know.

“You seemed very close to Lady Aila last night.”

“Lady Aila ...” I thought I’d heard a note of interest in his voice before he continued, “most pleasurable company, isn’t she? Fascinating. But I guess you know that better than me. Or do you?”

Heat pulsed through my core and head at the devilish gleam in his face. I could feel a faint flow of anger starting to trickle inside of me again, my power humming in response.

“Was she with you last night or not?” I said through gritted teeth.

“Careful, Prince. Jealousy is not a good color on you. Never has been.”

The pounding got higher and higher as I strained to keep a leash on the flames threatening to erupt.

Flynn took a step closer and continued gravely.

“You know what I’ve been thinking? After so many long nights, how come the whole ...” He seemed to look for the right word, or the word that would affect me the most. “Shadow magic thing never came up? Is she really such a skilled liar, or ...?”

Before he could finish, tall flames erupted from all the torches around the room, the floor under my foot turning molten and orange at the heat emanating from me. His insinuation and his knowledge enraged me in equal measure.

A condescending smile bloomed on his lips. “Easy there. You may want to get a better hold on your temper. I heard it is quite a valuable skill at court.”

I draw a ragged deep breath, willing my power back into my core, breathing deeply to control the rage flooding me.

“You know what your problem has always been, Aiden?” Rare bitterness diminished the constant amusement in his voice, “You spend so much time dreaming about being a hero, that you often miss what is happening right under your nose.”

His face was inches from mine, his eyes pools of cold, sharp gold. And, despite myself, I wondered if maybe it was time I accepted my real role in the world.



If she'd deceived her own uncle, what chance did I have? What hope could I ever have of being anything more than another pawn in whatever game she was playing.

Every minute of my day was filled with painful memories, every step around the palace a reminder of how thoroughly she'd put me at her mercy. Me, the heir of the most powerful Kingdom in the world.

Nausea roiled in my stomach at her cold, calculated ruse just as an unwelcome chill shot through my spine at the thought of the amount of influence she would have yielded through me and my silly desire.

I fell through a spiral of guilt and anger, crumbling under the weight of the truth. Maybe I wanted to fight it, to believe there was some sort of truth in what we'd lived and felt, but I couldn't deny Ivo's words. Wishful thinking aside, she played us all for fools. And me for the biggest fool of them all.

Flynn's words were an echo behind me as I trailed the palace corridors. I had been blind, too concerned with my own dreams, I had failed to see the truth under my nose. Through the silent, empty corridors, I couldn't stop wondering how much more I'd failed to notice or blissfully ignored.

But I wouldn't be naïve and hopeful any longer. For when cold reality knocks at the door, there is hardly any space left for childish dreams.

Quick steps interrupted my musing and I turned to see a young, fair-skinned woman rushing through the corridor.

"Lady Lidya," I called, surprised as she bowed deep to me. "I'm so sorry for your loss," I continued in a grave voice as I held her arms, urging her to raise.

She was as beautiful as always, her blue eyes clever and misty and ethereal. But I could still see the marks of pain she had gained overnight. In more ways than one, I recognized her pain as my own. The pain of losing your best friend and your deepest love.

"Thank you, your Highness," she said in a low, modest voice, before adding with more certainty. "I heard you chased her yourself?"

I nodded. "The guard is looking for her now."

"Thank you." She held my hands.

“May I escort you somewhere?”

“I need to see it.” Unwavering steel tinted her tone.

I knew she meant the room where Valran had been found. There was nowhere else she could be going in this area of the palace.

“The palace staff is still – ”

She interrupted me “Good, I need to see it before they clean everything.”

Her cold determination surprised me.

“I need to see what was done to him, I need to say goodbye on my own terms, and then I need to find and kill the woman who robbed me of the love of my life.”

There wasn't an ounce of doubt or fear in her tone, her grief a fuel to the storm clearly brewing inside of her. I didn't doubt she would turn the whole Kingdom – and more – to rubble if it meant avenging her husband. I didn't doubt she would hunt Aila to the end of the world.

She shouldn't have to.

Clarity struck through me, and I knew I'd failed my people once; I'd been consumed with idealistic hopes of a better world. But that was not the world I got.

The world I had was full of deceitful, cold people. Full of pain and hurt. The world didn't deserve salvation.

If I couldn't be a hero to this world, I would give my life to my crown and my Kingdom. I would be a protector to *my* people. No matter how much it hurt me.

“You won't have to, my Lady. Your pain will be avenged, your loss will be repaid. Even if I have to do it myself.”

A vow, one that I was glad to make.