

One of the women looked like she was about to scream. Clearly a formal greeting was lost on her. One of the others, looking like she'd just seen a ghost, raised her hand to wave. Then, Sally came to the rescue. She started laughing. She'd been slightly out of breath, so her laugh came off as tired but genuine, and the women stared at her instead of doing anything else, like alerting the guards. Sally sat down on the bed and looked up at the one who had seemed so completely terrified.

"Thank the gods you're here," she said and fell backwards onto the mattress as if she'd just run a marathon and I could tell she was playing up just how tired she was. She'd been fine just a moment before when we were just outside the door. I had no idea where she was going with this but I followed her lead and leaned against the wall. With everything that had happened, it wasn't hard to summon a slightly manic, breathy giggle. Before any of the women could say something, Sally propped herself up on her elbows. "You know every other door was closed?"

"What--" one of the women began.

Kazumi played along and crouched, leaning against the door. "We locked ourselves out," she said, and the third servant girl, the one who had waved, laughed with relief.

Sally giggled. "If you hadn't been here, we would've climbed across all those balconies for nothing!"

"My goodness!" The one who had seemed so scared just a moment before now said. She had been so ready to call the guards but now she was all concern. "Can we do anything to help?"

Sally got up and walked towards them swaying slightly as if she was still drunk on adrenalin. I joined her. I'd seen that glint she got in her eyes when she was about to do something reckless, and I was ready to either help her or stop her from hurting these women. She stopped between two of them. "Well," she said and then her hands shot up and clamped over the mouths of two of them. She looked at me and nodded at the third one. I did the same before the baffled woman could yell out.

"Now what?" I asked. The women were struggling aggressively but Sally had pressed them gently into the wall, and for all their kicking and scratching, they couldn't lay a finger on her. The woman in my hand was much the same. Her eyes were terrified. "This feels wrong, Sally. They haven't done anything *wrong*, you know."

"I *know* that, Liz," she said. "It's not like I was going to throw them over the balcony." When she said that, one of the women she was holding froze in terror, her eyes growing wide. "I said I *wasn't* going to," Sally said with exasperation.

"Listen," I began, turning to the women. "Do you all know what has happened to Queen Anastasia?" The woman I held nodded softly. "I'm going to let you go," I said. "Please don't scream. I think I'm faster than you are. I'm not going to hurt you. We don't want to hurt you."

We're here to help the queen." The woman frowned and I released my hand from her mouth. I could see my handprint on her face and hoped I hadn't hurt her too much. She touched her mouth softly as she sagged against the wall a little bit. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Matilde. What do you mean, you are here to help the Highness?" She looked at me with confusion. "She's been enchanted, that's why the Regents have stepped in."

I shook my head. "This was a coup, Matilde. The Queen is being held against her will. We're here to set her free."

"Mmmf!" one of the other women said and pointed at me. Sally released her with raised eyebrow in warning. "I knew it!" the servant girl said. "Her highness was in perfect health and no different from any other day when she came back!"

Sally released the third one, who looked at us cautiously, like a sheep surrounded by wolves who just told it they'd just eaten. "You're really here to rescue the Queen?" Sally nodded.

"What can we do?" Matilde asked.

"Well," Kazumi said. "If you can give us a spare uniform and then help her," she motioned to Sally, "to the Queen's chambers, she can get her out of here."

"How?" Matilde one asked suspiciously.

"Magic," Sally said with a wide grin.

"Hold on," the third woman said, "how do we know you're not just assassins, here to kill the Queen? I'm not leading you right to her."

Sally rolled her eyes. "If we'd wanted to, we could've just killed the three of you and made our way through the castle. You saw how strong we are. If we wanted Anastasia dead, she'd be dead. Besides," Sally said with smile that betrayed a little private joke, "I think she *likes* me."

"Say we're convinced," Matilde said, "how do you know we won't betray you?"

"You," Sally said, pointing at the second one who had seemed so convinced of Anastasia's innocence, "Give me your clothes, and I'll walk with one of you to get three more uniforms. Will that work?"

The women nodded in agreement, and the woman disrobed to her undergarments, which were thankfully more than a little modest, covering most of her body. They clearly dressed more modestly in the south than they had in the north, which Kazumi proved by stripping to almost nothing before hoisting herself in the servant's clothing. She looked positively demure in the maid's garb. It was strange to see her like this. I resisted kissing her, but only because of the audience she had.

After straightening herself out, Kazumi went with Matilde. They didn't have to know that Kazumi wasn't as strong as Sally and myself. Besides, she wasn't any less dangerous. After half an hour that felt like ten, they walked back in. We'd spent that time talking to the other two women, who we'd found out were named Magrat and Tiffany. They seemed nice enough once they'd gotten over their suspicion. We'd waved away most of their questions about our abilities with a vague "magic".

Kazumi handed both of us a fresh uniform and then turned to Tiffany, who was sitting against the wall in her undergarments, and paused briefly. She pulled at her sleeve questioningly, and Tiffany shook her head with a smile. "No, keep it," she said. "I would rather the fresh uniform, thank you."

"Now," Kazumi said. "Matilde agreed to bring Sally to Anastasia's chambers. You two," she motioned to Tiffany and Magrat, "should leave the palace grounds as quickly as you can. When we find the Queen, we will try to evacuate her quietly, but if we are spotted, there might be violence."

The women nodded. They were on board with the plan, and after the initial shock, Magrat had warmed up to Sally somewhat. They found they had a similar sense of humour, which had passed some of the time while we'd been waiting for Kazumi and Matilde to come back. Sally and I got dressed in the uniforms and stuffed our clothes in our bags, which we stuffed in the giant dresser in the room. They should be safe there for now.

"Will you be okay?" I asked Sally. She nodded. I smiled and pulled her into a hug. "If we don't find each other, we meet where we had lunch?" She nodded again.

"It'll be okay, Liz," Kazumi said and hugged Sally too. "We know she can do this."

Sally smiled sheepishly.

"I'll get you home," I said to Sally and I saw her trying not to cry as she smiled and nodded.

"I know."

After taking deep breaths, we all stepped out into the hallway, and Tiffany took Magrat by the elbow and pulled her toward the palace gate. Matilde stood up straight and proper, and Sally mimicked her. They both picked up a basket with sheets in them, and with a nod to us, they both disappeared into a hallway.

Kazumi and I looked down the other. If Kazumi's memory and Tiffany's directions had been accurate, the Royal Hall was down that way. It was where the Queen was supposed to meet with the Regents, but it had been converted into a war room of sorts, where the Regents apparently spent almost all of their time now. They'd become increasingly paranoid when reports of my traveling south had come in, and apparently most of them almost never left the room anymore.

If I was going to convince anyone, it was going to have to be them. Kazumi was with me for moral support, but I was going to have to stand up to them as myself, as the Queen. Straight up killing them wasn't an option. The point was to create change, not just become another usurper. We walked down the long corridor and held hands for a short moment.

"Whatever happens next," Kazumi said and looked me in the eyes, "I love you, Liz."

I didn't like how final this moment felt. It was real, of course, and I felt what she was feeling too. I squeezed her hand softly and remembered how far we'd come. We slowed down slightly and I looked out the window. "It feels so long ago," I said. She squeezed my hand back. She knew what I was talking about.

"We'll go home again, my love. You'll make this right and we'll see the sun rise over those fields again," she said.

"I love you too," I said and kissed her softer and sweeter than I remembered doing in weeks. She tasted like spices I couldn't quite place. After a moment that didn't last even remotely long enough, we pulled away from each other again. There would be time for that later, I told myself, and took a deep breath. We would have time for it. We were going to make it. We'd made it this far. I could fix this. I could *feel* it.

Finally, after climbing a set of stairs that was entirely too long, we arrived at a large door guarded by two imposing looking guards. I worried briefly we'd have to bluff our way past them, but I trusted that Kazumi would take the reins if it came to that. There was no reason for anyone to suspect two servant girls, and with our little white caps our faces were partially covered. We lowered our heads demurely and they opened the door for us. Apparently there was no need for us to lie. Maybe the regents required a lot of cleaning up.

As I stepped inside the room, I saw why. The Regents had moved tables, chairs and even beds into the room. Their paranoia had been understated, if anything. It smelled exactly like a room that had a bunch of old men living in it for weeks would smell like. It was less than pleasant, and I tried not to make a face.

The other thing I noticed was that, other than the regents, who were easily identified by their fancy if frumpled clothing, and the fact that they were sitting around a table arguing loudly, there were several men in the room who did not look like guards. They wore the same blue and white robes we'd seen before on the mages that had attacked us, but these men weren't built like brick shithouses. They looked lean and more than a little wise. These must've been the mages, here to protect the Regents.

Kazumi opened one of the giant windows that lined the walls of the room to let some cool air in. Clearly she'd smelled the same thing I had. I took a deep much-more-pleasant breath and turned to the table and took off my cap.

"My lords," I said.

*"What?!"* one of them snapped. I felt my throat close up, but I couldn't afford to let them verbally trample me, not here, not now.

I reached up to touch Sabine's soul stone for strength, when a man standing a little ways away from the table, a painted eye on his forehead, stared at me. I realized what happened the same time he had, as he pointed at me and screamed. "It's her!" He yelled, and I pulled off the magic stone and grew to my full size, wings wide.

I had just about regained my vision when I saw nearly a dozen bolts of fire and lightning thundering towards me.