

Prologue

The moon shone full and bright, its light streaming through the castle windows and illuminating the marble steps of the spiral staircase. Elise paused her ascent and cradled her sleeping baby closer to her chest. The warm breeze from the window lifted her hair and carried in the smell of lavender and the ocean. The scents mingled in the humid air to a calming effect.

The window provided a view of the colorful homes and businesses spread out below the castle tower. Beyond the city, fields of crops stretched to the edge of the forest. Elise smiled down at the view and began humming her favorite lullaby.

Her baby was just a month old, but when she heard the melody she stirred and gave Elise the gummy smile that never failed to fill her mother's heart. Elise had waited to bring her to the castle until she was confident the baby wouldn't cry during the excursion. Wouldn't give them away. Yet each day passed and her daughter never cried. She only fussed briefly to remind Elise she wanted fed or held. Elise never experienced such pride as she did realizing her daughter was completely content in her arms.

Elise knew duty required her to put her other responsibilities first, but she would be lying if she said she loved or cared about anything more in this world than the baby she held.

Elise continued up the staircase. She stopped humming and shifted her walk so her feet moved silently up the spiraling steps, drawing near her destination. Another breeze blew in from the windows. The smell of salt and power from the ocean heightened. It crashed into the beach Elise could now see below. Her daughter's fist made its way out of the blanket, reaching the direction of the waves.

"We'll go see that next," Elise promised, her whisper just a breath.

They reached the princess's room. Elise slipped in through the unlocked door and stopped short when she saw the queen already inside, leaning over her own daughter's crib.

If the queen was surprised, she didn't show it. She didn't even glance in Elise's direction until she straightened. It had been years since Elise had seen the queen without her white hair done up elegantly in braids and her crown resting neatly on top of her head. Now it was curled in ringlets fuzzy from sleep. The moonlight made it glow.

"This is the one then?" the queen asked in a hushed voice, turning to Elise where she stood clutching her daughter.

Elise swallowed and nodded, suddenly fearful the queen would disapprove of her girl. The queen glided forward and bent her head to look at Elise's bundle. Her daughter gave the queen her cheekiest grin and reached for her. Elise's shoulders relaxed when the queen let out a breathless laugh.

"Fearless." She carefully lifted the baby from Elise's arms.

“That she is.” Elise shook her head at her smiling girl. The queen carried her to the crib, setting the baby next to her own. The two women stood close and looked down at their tiny miracles.

“Gods be praised,” the queen said. Elise smiled. She should have brought her daughter here sooner.

The princess woke slowly and the babies looked at each other. One with downy white hair, the other with hair so rich the silver wisps looked blue in the moonlight. The princess let out a coo and Elise’s daughter giggled as though she understood the joke. Elise and the queen laughed in delight. The babies smiled up at their mothers’ voices.

“They’re going to be a handful,” Elise said.

“Maybe they’ll liven this place up a bit.”

“Be careful what you wish for, your grace.”

“We already know if she’s anything like her mother she’s going to be trouble.” The queen’s eyes took on a glint of teasing. Elise grinned at her sheepishly.

“If she’s anything like her father though...” Elise echoed the queen’s tone.

The older woman groaned. “Gods help us all!” They both laughed, and laughed harder when the babies joined in.

“They’ll be good for us,” the queen whispered, brushing her daughter’s cheek. “Good for each other.”

The two women stood silent as their babies got to know each other, snuggling close on the princess’s soft mattress. When Elise saw her daughter was close to sleep, she moved forward to take her.

“We should leave you to your rest, your grace,” she said.

“I don’t mind. I can’t seem to take my eyes off her. My sleep has suffered for it. I tell everyone she keeps me up at night crying, but she’s remarkably quiet.”

“Mine too.” Elise lifted her daughter and hugged her close.

“We have been blessed,” the queen said. She gave Elise one last distracted smile before turning her attention back to the crib. With their white hair and white nightgowns, Elise thought the queen and her baby looked like spirits, staring at each other until the end of time. She was glad her daughter was lively despite her lack of tears.

When she left the princess’s nursery, Elise ran full speed on silent feet through the castle, sending her baby into gales of laughter caught in the wind. When she reached the beach she let herself join in the laughter, hugging her daughter close. She shifted the baby in her arms so they could both see the moonlight scattered across the waves. Elise bent awkwardly and removed her shoes. Holding her child in one arm and her shoes in the other she walked along the sand singing softly in her daughter’s ear until she slept.

The night was warm and the sound of the waves calming. Elise walked until she found a familiar alcove and sat. With her sleeping daughter settled across her lap, Elise began singing a different song. This one was full of longing as she stared out at sea.