

## “Reunion”

*Hayes*

He traced his fingers over the grooves of the tiles, doing his best to occupy his mind with the challenge of the game. Glyph was normally his choice when he needed a distraction, as the intense focus and recall required of playing strategically left little room for anything else.

Like the fact that *she* was back. After so many years, after so much work keeping her whereabouts hidden, Maia had found her way back to Duinn.

Hayes wasn't sure how—Kharon had been very vague with the details she shared, only that she had found Maia beside the Styx and she felt the princess would be safer and more comfortable staying with him. And since admitting that he would be content to have her under anyone else's care would have been a lie, Hayes agreed.

Even though he knew it could only end badly.

The faint sound of footsteps carried through the cavernous halls. He recognized Kharon's but the second set—almost indiscernible except for a slight, uneven shuffle—were foreign. Nervous adrenaline raced through his body, causing his knees to bounce under the table. He took a slow, purposeful breath, doing his best to focus on the game in front of him. Rhea was beating him soundly, and she wouldn't let him live it down.

*Maia doesn't know you, and you have to keep it that way.*

“Oh!” Rhea's voice brightened with interest, and though he couldn't see it from this close, he could well imagine the way her face lit up. “We have company. Kharon is here.”

“Yes, I heard her come in.” He worked hard to keep his voice disinterested and unaffected, his face trained towards the game. “Who's her friend?”

“Good evening, Rhea. It's lovely to see you.” Even after all these years, Kharon's voice never failed to calm and soothe his emotions as it had done since he was a boy. “This is Percy.”

*Percy.*

Rhea answered before he could find the right words. “It's wonderful to meet you, Percy. The dark and broody one over here is Hayes.”

Well, *that* was certainly not the first impression he wanted to make on his long-lost princess. “I'm not broody.”

He could hear the teasing smirk on Rhea's face. “You brood, therefore you are broody.”

Hayes scoffed.

*You would brood, too, if you were the king of a dying realm and there was absolutely nothing you could do to stop it.*

*But...if she's here now...*

Rhea was still talking. "Don't mind him; he's been especially grouchy today."

He hid the way his fingers were shaking by placing several of his tiles in the middle of the table. "You know I can hear you, right?"

"I know; I'm hoping the guilt from hearing your moodiness spoken of openly will prompt an attitude change." He felt the air shift as Rhea leaned toward him. "Stamen? That's not a word."

"It's a word. Look it up."

"It's not."

"The stamen is part of the inside of a flower. It's where the pollen is."

Percy's voice was light and musical, reminding him of birdsong and sunshine. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever heard, and Hayes's breath caught in his throat. It took every ounce of self-control in him not to whip his head around and drink her in with the little eyesight he had left.

*She's the real princess; I'm just a broken stand-in. Even if she did remember who I am, there's no reason for her to give me the time of day.*

"See?" He gestured in the direction of her voice. "Percy knows."

Kharon chuckled. "Where's Herman?"

Once again, Rhea answered before him. This time, Hayes was thankful for the few moments to compose himself. His heart was torn, warring between hope that Percy's arrival meant that Duinn and their people were not sentenced to death, and despair that his princess would see just how much the kingdom had suffered under his rule.

*That's not your fault, though.* A voice in his mind that sounded strangely like Kharon's argued back at him. *You weren't the one responsible for their deaths.*

"We joke that he's the king's right-hand man, and I'm what's left."

He caught the end of Rhea's self-deprecating answer, and his brows pulled into a frown. "That's not true."

"Did you miss the part where I said it was a *joke*?" He had. "I know it's not true; but the wordplay is amusing. Speaking of wordplay, it's my turn, I think. Would you like to join us, ladies? Supper will be ready soon."

"Thank you, but I'm afraid I can't stay that long," Kharon politely declined. "I just wanted to introduce Percy to you." Hayes could hear the subtle shift in her tone that meant she was

looking at him. It felt a little dishonest, pretending that Percy was a stranger, but he and Kharon had both decided it might make the transition a little easier. “She’s the woman I told you about, and while she has been with me for the first part of her recovery, I suggested that she might be more comfortable staying here for a while.”

Percy’s sweet voice jumped in, speaking quickly as if she were afraid that her presence was a burden.

*Nothing could be further from the truth.*

“It won’t be long. Just until I can find a way to get back home. Kharon thought that the king might be willing to help me—unless one of you knows how to make those magic portals?”

Hayes’s heart dropped to his feet.

*She wants to go home?*

“Where is home for you, Percy?”

“I’m from a little village called Loupoli in Helyos. It’s in the human realm, or whatever name you have for it.” Her voice grew stronger and brighter the more she talked. “A man named Bede brought me here against my will, and while I’m sure your barren, dusty soil has its charm, I would very much like to go home to my mother and my flowers.”

He couldn’t keep himself from looking at her any longer, even though he knew his face was scowling. “Bede did *what?*”

*We had an agreement! He was supposed to keep tabs on Sparrow’s movements, not take matters into his own hands! He—*

His thoughts came to a staggering halt as his failing eyes finally focused on the vision in front of him, like an angel in the light at the end of a long tunnel. He recognized the golden curls, the cute, slightly upturned nose, and the wide blue eyes of his princess, but not even his wildest imagination could have conjured the woman before him. She was tiny and delicate, but with a fire behind her eyes that hinted at a strength of will that made her seem even more vibrant and alive. Her skin was tanned and freckled, and bare toes peeked out from beneath the hem of her dress.

She was sunshine and flowers come back to a world that was dark and barren. The return of spring after an endless winter.

Percy lifted her chin. “He kidnapped me.”

And with that revelation Hayes knew, as his hope slowly died in his chest, that his kingdom of death was no place for sunshine and flowers.