

# Ferragost

## Melina Marchetta

### One

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It was late afternoon when they found Borealis Luby's corpse on the jagged rocks below the tower of the east.

Celie of the Lumateran Flatlands had thought it strange that he hadn't attended breakfast in the great hall. Borealis Luby had proven himself to be quite a pig when it came to consuming the food laid out before him, and in the five days since their arrival at the castle, the man had been the first and last at the dining trestle. If Celie hadn't feared being alone with the Castellan of the Castle, she would have sought him out to explain that Borealis Luby's absence could indeed be a worry.

But Celie did fear the Castellan. She had heard the whispers about the reclusive keeper of Ferragost Isle. That he spent most of the year guarding the castle alone with only an old nursemaid as companion. Some said he was possessed by demons. That he was a man with many secrets. What Celie had witnessed in his gatehouse residence on the morning of her arrival confirmed all she had been told. But she spoke of it to no one. There was much to be achieved on this visit to the kingdom of Belegonia and she could ill afford to draw attention to herself.

The absence of Mr Luby niggled at her all that day, so she was the least surprised when she heard the bellowing at the castle gate just before the meagre light of the day was about to disappear. Within moments she joined the Duchess, the King's Man and Argus Laraunt in the courtyard to see the portcullis being raised and the Castellan hurrying down the drawbridge.

'Banyon! What is it?' the King's Man asked.

The Castellan waved away the question.

'I'd appreciate everyone returning to your chambers,' he called back as he disappeared beyond the castle walls. His request had the opposite desired effect except for the Duchess who stayed behind. Celie, Mr Laraunt and the King's Messenger created a small procession to follow the Castellan out through the portcullis and around the wall. Despite it being a treacherous path down to the rocks of the east, Celie wasn't much interested in being left out of the excitement after so many days of isolation and boredom.

Regardless, she couldn't help but shiver from the sight they were privy to at this angle of the path. Ferragost Castle was almost an isle in itself, surrounded by a cruel coast that had shattered its fair share of fishing boats and taken many lives over the years. The inland sea that separated the isle from the Main was a malevolent force, none more so than these past days when it had exiled Ferragost Isle from the rest of the land.

Its unrelenting fury seemed almost a precursor to the horror that awaited them when they rounded the east corner and saw the corpse. In the fall from the tower, the man's boot had caught itself between the two highest rocks, and the upper half of his body hung face down over the larger of the two. It hadn't saved him from anything, except the horror of disappearing into the waves below, never to be seen again. At least this way, his family would have a corpse to farewell.

'That's his chamber,' Argus Laraunt said, pointing up to the tower window. 'Do you think he jumped?'

'It would make matters simple,' the Castellan said, his voice low and blunt.

'Why simple, Sir?' Celie asked, both her hands clasped around her hair to keep the wind from wiping strands across her face.

He didn't look at her. The Castellan of the castle wasn't one for eye contact. Her father and brothers would call that weak in a man and although Celie tried not to judge, she would have to agree.

'Well, if he didn't jump, then it could only mean someone pushed him,' the Castellan said in an irritated voice. 'And if someone pushed him, then we have a problem and thus, not so simple.'

Celie stepped forward beside the Castellan to inspect poor dead Mr Luby. She had seen her fair share of corpses. The last time was the previous summer when the reeve of her father's village had tripped and fallen into his scythe, slicing his head almost clear off his body. She had stared at the reeve's body that day, wanting to understand. Had he known a moment before that it would be his last? Had he sensed death that morning when he woke? Was there warning when life was taken so quickly?

'I can take records for you, Sir,' Celie said to the Castellan politely, holding up a journal she carried everywhere. 'The King will want to know all the details and I'm very good with a sketch.'

He gave her a quick glance and all Celie could see in her mind's eye was what she had witnessed the morning of her arrival. The Castellan's body flung across the floor, the way it twitched and shuddered as he convulsed, spittle coming from his mouth. The old nursemaid had shoved Celie out of his room. A witch, the villagers would whisper. A sorceress of evil intent.

'I think it's best you accompany Her Highness to the embroidery room,' the Castellan said, ignoring Celie's offer. 'Mr Laraunt, if you could assist me with the lifting of Mr Luby, I'll have one of the village women wash the corpse in the cellar.'

'A woman?' Argus Laraunt asked. 'Look at his skull, Banyon. This isn't a sight for a woman.'

'Women are more thorough about such things,' the Castellan said. 'They won't leave a mark of blood for his family to weep over.'

## Two

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Earlier that week Celie had journeyed from her neighbouring kingdom of Lumatere. She had arrived at the shore of the Main where the Grand Duchess and her two guests, were waiting to embark on a boat that would take them all to the isle. Each spring the Belegonian King's Family and its entire household would travel from the capital and celebrate winter's end on Ferragost Isle. Celie's family had lived ten years in Belegonia during the turbulent painful years of her kingdom's curse, and despite the tension between the two kingdoms of late, Celie was both a favourite of the Belegonian royal family, and shared a fierce friendship with the young Lumateran Queen.

'Let's make this work, beloved,' her Queen had said when they first received a request for Celie's attendance to the Belegonian court the summer before. Although she enjoyed the visits to the neighbouring capital, she enjoyed returning home to Lumatere even more. But when the invitation to the spring castle came weeks ago, they all agreed it was yet another good opportunity not to pass up.

This year, however, the Belegonian Spring had trampled the kingdom with days of rain. The road between the capital and Ferragost Main had been washed away, unable to accommodate the King and his large entourage. It's what the King's Man explained to the Duchess when he was sent ahead with two guards to deliver the news.

'How long will my nephew be?' the Duchess demanded to know as they stood on the shoreline of the Main looking across to the isle. In the grey haze of low filthy clouds, the castle seemed to appear and disappear as if playing with their minds.

'No more than a week, Your Highness,' the King's Man explained. 'And judging from the fury of this sky, I'd say we'd best make a decision whether to travel across to the isle now or wait for the King.'

'I suggest we return to your home, Your Highness,' Argus Laraunt said. He was a handsome young man with an unnerving smile that made Celie's face feel flushed each time he chose to address her in conversation.

'Ridiculous,' Borealis Luby said, dismissively. 'We're here now, packed and ready. We travel across.'

There was tension between the two men. From what Celie could understand, Borealis Luby was a last moment's addition to their small party and Argus Laraunt wasn't happy.

'Are you frightened I'll tell her Highness about... Tolliver?' Borealis Luby asked, a smirk on his face.

'What about this Tolliver?' the Duchess demanded to know.

'Just a brawl,' Argus Laraunt mumbled. 'In the town...of Tolliver... in Yutlind Nord.'

The Duchess made a sound of annoyance. ‘Aren’t you a bit too old for drunken brawls, Argus?’

Borealis Luby seemed pleased at the Duchess’s irritation. He seemed to have the upper hand and it would be Mr Luby who won on the decision to cross the sea.

Thinking of his corpse hanging off the eastern rocks of the isle, Celie couldn’t help but think that he should have taken Argus Laraunt’s advice and stayed behind.

### Three

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Back in the castle Celie joined the Duchess in the older woman’s residence for an evening of embroidery. She thought it ridiculous that she’d be forced to sit and sew after what she had seen. It’s not that Celie didn’t understand the worth of embroidery. It was always an excellent opportunity for talk, the acquiring of news, and spending time with friends. Queen Isaboe of Lumatere had very little time for embroidery, but when she and Celie did manage to get together for a bit of stitching, the conversation was always worthwhile.

‘I think it’s time you took a lover, Celie,’ Isaboe had said to her just weeks before.

Celie hadn’t stopped thinking of her Queen’s words. She knew that one day soon, her title as the daughter of a Lumateran Flatland Lord would be used as a marriage bargain between her kingdom and another. To keep peace. To secure trade. Whatever it was, Celie had long accepted it. But what she couldn’t accept was never knowing how it would feel to be deliriously in love. Her parents still were. Isaboe and her consort, Finnikin couldn’t keep their eyes off each other, despite their battle of wills most times. Staring at the sour Duchess now Celie knew she was looking at someone whose marriage to the King’s Uncle had not been a love match. Would this be Celie in years to come?

‘You, with your wounded stare,’ the Duchess snapped. ‘Lumatereans resemble ghouls, all eyes sunken in your sockets. I don’t like foreigners, have I told you that?’

‘Yes, your Highness.’

Soon after, when the Duchess was asleep in her chair, Celie crept out of the room. The emptiness of this place was beginning to unnerve her. She had never stayed in a castle void of the bustle of palace life. Apart from the sulky village cook who had been ordered up to the castle at the instruction of the Duchess, the kitchens were empty. Apart from the groom, the courtyard was deserted. There were three soldiers who had travelled with the King’s Man, but no other guard. There were no giggles from ladies-in-waiting, nor bellows from King’s soldiers, no smell of baking or whatnot.

Worst still except for their chambers, most of the castle was kept dark and cold. Without the King’s presence, there were to be no hallways lit with candelabras and no fires burning on every level.

Celie stepped out into the courtyard and found Argus Laraunt at the well. He seemed shaken and she watched him scrub at marks on his hand. She imagined that carrying Mr Luby's corpse to the cellar was no easy task.

'How are you fairing, Mr Argus Laraunt?' she asked politely.

'Argus,' he corrected, and then laughed. 'If you keep on saying it your way, it'll be a mouthful.'

She laughed with him. 'No matter how long I lived in this kingdom, I never quite understood the need for two names. Sometimes I forget which one to use.'

'And we in this kingdom don't understand the need to belong to a piece of land or rock, Lady Celie of the Lumateran Flatlands.'

She liked the way he said it. It made her feel known and in this strange empty place she was beginning to feel loneliness beyond reckoning.

'You look faint,' he said, pointing towards a barrel against the wall and holding out a hand that Celie took. 'This morning must have been a shock.'

She sat down on the barrel and he joined her on another.

'Looking faint is inherited,' she said, politely. 'I always look this way.'

Over the years Celie had heard other words to describe her. Frail. Dainty. Insipid. *It's not who I am inside*, she wanted to shout out loud.

'Is that annoyance I hear in your tone, Lady Celie?'

Argus Laraunt was flirting with her. It would have charmed Celie if not for the fact that he had the blood of a dead man on his clothing. Borealis Luby's head would have rested alongside Argus Laraunt's tunic. Celie imagined that if she were Mr Laraunt, she'd burn the clothing.

'Not annoyance at all,' she said. 'My mother was the daughter of a fishmonger. So my brothers and I are parts of two very different families. The Flatlanders are refined. The river people... aren't. The faint visage belongs to the Flatlanders, although my father is anything but a faint-hearted man.'

'I've heard much about Sir August and Lady Abian,' Argus said. 'They are very respected here. Many believed that after living in Belegonia for so long, you all should have made our capital your home as Ambassadors of your kingdom.'

Celie shook her head. 'We're Lumaterans, Sir. Our trunks were always packed. The moment it was possible, we returned home.'

He smiled and she saw appreciation in his eyes for her words.

'How is it that you're acquainted with the Duchess?' she asked.

‘She’s my benefactor,’ he said. ‘And I was once married to her husband’s ward.’ He was quiet a moment. ‘May the gods be looking after both their spirits.’

Celie wondered about his wife. She would have been young, judging from the age of Argus himself.

His eyes met hers and Celie knew she felt a great trust in him.

‘I saw something,’ she said quietly.

He waited, silently.

‘Days ago in the Castellan’s residence. I went to see him about my chances of returning to the Main. I saw something... and it frightened me.’

But they were interrupted by a sound of the portcullis being lowered and as if he knew he was the subject of discussion, the Castellan appeared through the castle gates.

‘Later,’ she said quietly.

‘Do you believe in curses and damnation, Lady Celie?’ Argus Laraunt asked, and she saw fear in his eyes.

Celie shuddered. ‘Oh Mr Laraunt, I’m a Lumateran. My people were torn apart for ten years because of curses and damnation. I’m not the one to ask such a question of.’

After a sombre supper where the castle guests were reminded of how small a party they had become, Celie excused herself and returned to the Chamber of Chronicles where she had spent most of her time since her arrival at Ferragost Castle. She enjoyed her time in this room of two tiers. It was a smallish space with a bench at its centre, surrounded by shelves laden with manuscripts. A set of winding steps led up to an even smaller upper level where chronicles of great colour and depths were piled high to the ceiling. There seemed to be no proper order to them, although at times, it seemed as if someone had tried.

Belegonia prided itself on having collected the oldest books in the land, pilfered most of the time from other kingdoms. There were sacred books written in every language. Tales of adventure and mystery. And those with sketches that made Celie’s face burn from their carnal images. Despite her knowledge of only the Lumateran and Belegonian languages, Celie understood some of the words written. Every kingdom in the land of Skuldenore used the same lettering, despite the different tongues spoken.

But Celie wasn’t here to study pages of lascivious acts or stories of suspense from the Ancients. She was determined to find a chronicle for the Lumateran Priestking written by the Yuts in the third century. So on her arrival, she had begun searching for perhaps a record of every manuscript kept in this chamber, but found nothing to fit such a description. She did find, however, Mr Borealis Luby’s official recordings during his time as Seneschal of Ferragost Main six years past. It didn’t surprise her that he was a sloppy scribe, judging from the pages she read.

Despite a relentless wind that rattled the window and whistled with fury, Celie stayed well into the night with just the wick of her candle as a companion. She couldn't help but notice the references of Castellan Banyon in one of the Ferragost Main records. There seemed to have been no love lost between Borealis Luby and the Castellan judging from what Mr Luby had written two years past when decisions were being made to appoint a warden on the isle. By this time Borealis Luby was in the employ of the Duchess and seemed to be quite the decision maker on the Main.

Celie was halfway through reading a horrifying account of Ferragost justice when she heard a sound in the passageway. She went to call but chose to stay silent. Instead, she extinguished the candle, and staying as still as possible, Celie waited. She heard the sound of footsteps stop outside the chamber and then the long eerie cry of the door opening. And so Celie hid. She called it a premonition or the voice of her goddess in her ear, but whatever it was, she knelt under the bench. She felt her chemise wet against her knee, but she didn't dare move, her eyes on the wall, watching the flicker of the intruder's flame bounced across the room.

It was the sight of the brown knee-length buskins that informed Celie that the Castellan was standing before her. Unlike Argus Laraunt who changed his style at a whim, the Castellan wore the same uniform each day. Dark woollen trousers beneath a brown tunic and his sturdy buskins. Celie felt the pounding inside her chest and kept a hand to her mouth. The Castellan didn't seem to move and she heard the slow turn of a page of one of the books left on the table. She should have called out when she had a chance, but what had stopped her? Isn't that what her brother would say? *'Our Celie always has to make everything more than it is.'* But in an empty castle, the corridors seemed longer, the spaces seemed more haunted, the imagination grew wilder and the memory of Borealis Luby's corpse on those rocks and her morning in the Castellan's chamber made Celie wary.

When the footsteps turned and retreated she waited and it was some time before she crawled out from under the table. Using her hand as a guide Celie made her way to the door, relieved that it stood half open and that she'd be able to leave the room without having made a single sound. But not even a moment later, she saw the shadow of a man on the wall.

The Castellan stepped before her, his face illuminated by the single flame of the candle he held. A white scar zigzagged across his chin. Dark eyes narrowed with suspicion.

'Would you like me to accompany you to your chamber, Lady Celie?'

He had a joyless voice. It matched a face perpetually in a state of impassiveness. This close he seemed younger than she first imagined, although he certainly had a good ten years on her. With a stocky build, the soldier in him had ensured this body had maintained its strength. He wore his hair surprisingly cropped for a Belegonian. Tidy. Controlled.

'Yes, of course, Mr Banyon. My candle burned low and I was attempting to find another in one of the nooks behind the shelves,' she lied. 'I thought I heard something.'

The narrowing of his stare said it all.

'I'd prefer you didn't wander the castle at night, Lady Celie,' he said, his voice lower in tone than any man she had ever heard. 'The Duchess has taken to her bed and we don't want the King and his people arriving to a household so low in spirit. Perhaps you can spend your day

instructing the cook and the village women to prepare for the arrival of the King's party. That should keep you busy.'

'I'm not one for giving instruction, Sir.'

His look was dismissive.

'You're the daughter of a Flatland Lord, Lady Celie. I'm sure you are used to giving such instruction. If not, perhaps you can persuade the Duchess to teach you. She seems to have mastered the art of giving orders.'

They reached her chamber, he bowed and then he was gone.

## Four

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Celie did exactly as she was instructed the next day and sat with the Duchess in her residence.

'When are your people going to marry you off?' Her Royal Awfulness demanded to know. 'How old are you?'

Celie answered the easiest question.

'Twenty-two, Your Highness.'

'I was married three times by that age!'

Celie nodded politely, and continued with her stitching. She was good at embroidery. She was good at most useless things.

'And do something about that brow,' the Duchess ordered. 'I have a sharp pumice stone that may help. Or have the laundress pluck at that hair.'

The possession of a high forehead amongst the nobility of Belegonia was very sought after. But if there was something Celie couldn't endure more than criticism from the Duchess, it was her brothers' ridicule and her mother's disapproval if she returned home to Lumatere with a hairless brow.

'Go on then,' the Duchess ordered. 'Go find the laundress. She's up from the village and hasn't anything better to do, the lazy thing.'

Celie felt the urge to return to the Chamber of Chronicles and hide there, but the chance of running into the Castellan was far less appealing than any other option in her life at that moment. She went searching for the laundress and was directed to the cellar where she found a woman washing the corpse of Borealis Luby as if handling a piece of mutton.

'No need to be squeamish, little pale dove,' the woman mocked. 'It's just his head caved in.'



Celie stepped closer, peering at the laundress's work. It sickened her to think that talk of a crushed head gave her a thrill of excitement.

'The rest of him is broken inside, not out,' the woman named Beattie explained, patting the lifeless belly. 'I can feel it. Like broken pottery, he is.'

'Poor Mr Luby,' Celie said, despite the fact that she hadn't liked him the slightest. When they had travelled across the sea from the Main, he had placed his feet on the seat beside her on the boat, catching her surcoat with his dirty boots.

'Poor Mr No-One,' Beattie said. 'Never trust a man who's her Highness's snake. Whisperin' in her ear all the day long. They're a bunch of murdering scum, I say. *Murderers!*'

When Beattie said the last word, she hissed it and punched a fist into Borealis Luby's already broken chest.

But Beattie worked silently after that and Celie was much too curious to leave the conversation behind. What she had come to realise over the years was that people spoke more when they toiled alongside of each other, so she removed a second apron hanging from a hook and placed it on top of her dress.

'I'd best advise you not to make such accusations about the King's Aunt,' Celie said quietly. 'You'll get yourself into trouble.'

'She's poison,' Beattie said, her lip curled in distaste. 'Everyone on Ferragost and the Main knows it. This one knew it.'

Beattie punched "this one" just in case Celie had forgotten he was there. 'Did the killings himself if you ask me.'

'Killings?'

Beattie threw down the bloody cloth.

'Help me turn him over. Back of his head might make you sick a moment or two. That and his fat arse.'

Perhaps it was delayed hysteria but Celie giggled and couldn't stop. The woman laughed with her, but Celie sobered up quick enough when she saw the back of the man's skull.

'Why would the King's Aunt possibly order Mr Luby to carry out killings?'

'Greedy,' Beattie said in her low hissing voice. '*Greedy. Greedy. Greedy.*'

She grabbed Celie's hand to hold Borealis Luby's arm upright. 'When the King's Uncle died, his wife inherited most of the Main,' Beattie continued, scrubbing away at a mark at the pit of his arm.

Celie couldn't resist a shudder. How cold and hard his arm felt. She didn't want to think of death, hers or any other person she loved.

‘She had no babies,’ Beattie said. ‘*No babies.*’

‘No babies,’ Celie repeated because she felt she was expected to.

‘But what if the Lord of the Main bedded his way across Ferragost Main and Isle?’

‘The Duchess would have nothing to fear,’ Celie said, peering closer at the skull wound. ‘Heirs have to be legal, don’t they?’ With shaking hands and a shudder Celie removed a piece of clay from the bloodied tufts of the man’s hair.

‘All I say is that six years past when the King’s Uncle died, there was killings in Ferragost Main. Killings of the innocent.’

Celie looked up at the woman, sickened by what she was hearing.

‘Talk such as yours, Madam, will get you into trouble,’ she said, her voice cold.

‘The gods see everything,’ Beattie said. ‘*Everything.* And the gods pushed this goat out of that window to revenge the bastards of Ferragost Main.’

As she undressed that evening, Celie couldn’t help but notice the stain on her chemise at the place where the cloth touched her knees. It was blood. She lifted her undergarment to search for perhaps a wound on her flesh, yet there was nothing there. Perhaps it had happened in the cellar while cleaning Borealis Luby’s corpse, but there was no such mark on the apron she wore, or her dress. She couldn’t help thinking of that moment the night before when she had hid under the bench in the Chamber of Chronicles, and how she’d felt a strange dampness under her knees.

Celie slept that night dreaming of shattered skulls and the Flatlands drenched in the blood of the innocents. Could she believe a simple woman’s rant about the Duchess and Borealis Luby? Was the strange emptiness of this castle causing Celie’s mind to presume more than what was?

After breakfast alone in the great hall, she took leave of the castle. She hadn’t walked outside the confines of its walls alone before although she had seen the small village nestled in woodlands close to the shore. The people of Ferragost Isle were considered a strange lot. Some had lived isolated from the Main all their lives and Celie had heard talk about children born between brothers and sisters and fathers and daughters. She had read in the Justice Chronicles of their brand of punishment. About two babies born attached by the arms being thrown onto a pyre with claims of their mother bedding a demon. On Ferragost Isle, the villagers truly believed that any child born disfigured could only be because of its wickedness. Without the King in attendance for most of the year round, the villagers made the judgement and carried out the execution.

Regardless, that morning she felt safer outside the castle walls. She could only think of Mr Luby’s skull and the piece of clay she had retrieved from his blood-matted hair. She thought of Beattie’s talk of murder. She thought of the possibility of blood on the floor of the Chamber of Chronicles. And of what she saw in the Castellan’s residence that morning of her arrival.

Celie was suddenly determined to get as far away from these people as possible. She'd travel down the path through the village and onto the shore to try to catch a glimpse of what was taking place on the Main. Perhaps the King and his party were on their way across the inland sea. Or find a fisherman who was willing to brave the winds and take her away from this place. But when she reached the shore she saw the size of the waves, the way they fought against each other, the cruel glimpse of the Main in the distance, half concealed by a low furious sky. No person of sound mind would take the journey today.

An old villager dragged a net from the sea and she watched him stumble. Removing her shoes, Celie padded towards him, the damp sand giving her a sense of comfort. When she reached the man, she threw down her shoes and gripped the opposite corner of the net, helping him drag it further up shore. She was the daughter of a river girl, and there was something about fisherman that brought Celie solace. The man had a weathered face, resembling the strips of cowhide that hung from the hooks of the tanner's workshop in Celie's village.

She crouched beside him and watched his work.

'What's your name?' she asked.

He opened his mouth and Celie gasped when she saw that his tongue had been cut off. She felt instantly ashamed at her reaction and stayed crouched until he held out a piece of flint. She took it and retrieved a fish from the net and began to scale, and then gut it. Whenever she had accompanied her mother back to the river villages of Lumatere, she'd watch Lady Abian of the Flatlands in awe. There was something about her mother's wild spirit that would reveal itself even more when she was amongst her own. Her father had been smart enough to celebrate it and there was a passion to their love that Celie wanted for herself. She knew her mother's wild spirit was deeply hidden inside Celie herself, beneath the layers of what was expected of her. Her mother saw it too. So did her Queen. Few others did. She wasn't feisty or outspoken like other girls in Lumatere, but Celie had a fire burning inside of her and she feared she'd never unleash it.

'Lady Celie!'

Argus Laraunt stood above on the rocks, perhaps sent out to search for her. Celie stared at her hands covered with fish gut and a sliver of her own blood. She walked to the water, washing it all away in the foamy sea. As she passed the old man, his hand snaked out to grip hers.

She tried to pull free, but his eyes pierced into hers before glancing to where Argus Laraunt stood, and then back to Celie again.

As if he was giving a warning.

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'You mustn't go walking alone, Lady Celie,' Argus Laraunt said as they took the steep path through the woods up to the castle. Between the copses of trees she could see a glimpse of a tumbledown shack, heard the bleat of a goat.

'And why is that?' she asked. 'Should I be frightened of these people?'

‘I didn’t say that,’ he replied. ‘I would just hate for anything to happen to you,’ he said with a disarming smile. She could imagine Argus Laraunt getting away with all sorts of mischief with women using such a smile. She remembered Borealis Luby’s mention of the town of Tolliver in Yutlind Nord. Had he brawled over a woman? Did he leave one from town to town?

‘This business with Luby has unnerved us all,’ he said. ‘Not to mention being isolated out here with nowhere to go.’

Argus Laraunt took her hand and squeezed it gently.

‘And you mustn’t let the Duchess upset you either. Once the King and his family arrive, she’ll have the Princesses to bother.’

‘And how do you get away with not being bothered by the Duchess?’ she asked.

‘I have a way of making it seem that I respond to her bidding,’ he said with a smile. ‘I can teach you to be as deceptive.’

She laughed. ‘Well that sounds very intriguing. I’d love to learn. I think it would get me very far in life.’

They reached the portcullis and found it raised.

‘Banyon must be somewhere out on the isle,’ he said quietly.

Doing what, she wondered. Perhaps it was time to speak to the Castellan about her suspicions. But Argus Laraunt was still holding her hand and she felt comforted by the warmth of it. She was frightened she’d never get the feel of Borealis Luby’s dead hand out of her memory. They walked across the courtyard where the two guards were playing dice to relieve the boredom. Celie heard a sudden curse from Argus Laraunt and watched as he lifted up his boot with disgust.

‘Blasted hounds,’ he said. ‘It’s strange how they can be trained for anything, but where to shit,’ he added. He instantly looked contrite. ‘My language—’

She waved it away.

‘I have brothers. Three of them, not to mention another who lives with us who we consider a brother of our hearts. The four of them together outdo each other with their wicked tongues.’

Argus Laraunt laughed. ‘I look forward to hearing about them at supper,’ he said.

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Celie returned to the Chamber of Chronicles and found it shut. For some reason, Mr Banyon was determined to stop her from entering the room and Celie was just as determined to confront him about why. The King would be appalled, she’d explain, to know that the door was locked to Lady Celie of the Lumateran Flatlands who had spent much of her time in Belegonia tutoring the young Princesses. And then, perhaps, she’d talk about Mr Luby’s skull

and how she doubted very much that the man threw himself from the window of the east tower.

It unnerved her to have to return to his residence. Because she wasn't quite certain what she had seen that morning of her arrival. Chairs turned over, clay pots smashed onto the ground and the Castellan's body convulsing as if it was indeed inhabited by a demon. His nursemaid had been crouched beside him, forcing a piece of wood between his teeth.

But Celie's sense of duty was more powerful than her fear, so she returned to the gatehouse to speak to him. He was the Castellan of the castle and if she had suspicions about the death of Borealis Luby, then he was the man to speak to.

'Mr Banyon?' she called up the steps that wound their way to the guards' residence.

There was no response and she continued to climb all the way to the Castellan's solar.

'Mr Banyon?' she called out again at his door. She knocked and slowly pushed it forward, wincing at the images that came to mind. But the room was empty and strangely seemed cosier than she remembered it. There were ledgers spread across the bench and a neatly-made cot in the corner with a thick rug covering the floor. She picked up a book from his cot that she recognised from the Chamber of Chronicles. The Castellan was curious about the night sky. About the stars and whatever lay beyond. It made him seem more human.

There was a window that faced north across the sea and Celie could see the path that led down to the shore. She spotted more of the shanties that made up the village and wondered how people could live in such a way. All their lives on an island, yet their homes were ramshackled constructions that spoke little of staying put.

Twisting her body out of the window, she stood on tiptoes in an attempt to see as much as she could east of the castle. The window had a half view of the rocks where they had found Borealis Luby's corpse and that was where she glimpsed the figure of the Castellan.

'What are you doing here!'

Celie spun around, coming face to face with the Castellan's old nursemaid.

'This room is private,' the woman said in a flat tone. 'You got no business here.'

Celie didn't waste a moment. She pushed past the nursemaid and hurried down the steps and out of the gatehouse wanting to reach Mr Banyon before he returned.

Outside the castle walls, the wind was unrelenting and common sense demanded that she turn back, but instead Celie covered her head with the hood of her cloak and descended towards the rocks, slipping twice in her haste. When she rounded the eastern wall Celie she was relieved to see that the Castellan was still there, staring up to the tower window.

'Why is it that you're never quite where you should be, Lady Celie?' he asked in his low voice, without so much as a glance in her direction.

'I believe he was murdered,' she said boldly. 'I feel it in my bones.'

A wave crashed onto the rock closest to her and she stumbled back.

‘I’ve seen the corpse,’ she continued. ‘Helped wash it myself, if you must know. He had a wound here.’ She pointed to the back of her head and stumbled to escape yet another onslaught of sea spite which seemed to be solely directed at her.

The Castellan held out an arm to instruct her to step back.

‘Lady Celie, my request to you was to keep the Duchess company with embroidery.’

‘Well, I did, Mr Banyon. And she sent me to the laundress to do something about my brow. It wasn’t high enough for her liking.’

His glance flickered to her brow, which was thankfully well concealed under the hood of her cloak.

‘But the laundress was washing Mr Luby’s corpse,’ Celie continued, ‘and I felt that the height of my brow should be forgotten under such circumstances.’

Whilst she had his attention, she decided to explain her suspicions. At the supper table in Celie’s home, it was best to leap in with talk the moment the opportunity presented itself. She climbed past him, up to the highest rock.

‘He landed here which means that his head could not have made contact with any other rock on his descent. It’s the highest rock, Mr Banyon. It makes all the sense in the world that his stuffing inside would be crushed by the fall. But why his skull? You saw as well as I did how his corpse landed.’

He was studying her and she could tell he was contemplating whether to respond.

‘Perhaps Mr Luby’s corpse hit the rock twice,’ he finally said, realizing that she wasn’t going to go away. ‘The force caused his body to bounce into the second position. So his skull was crushed on first landing.’

‘If the force of the first landing was so fierce that it caused his body to bounce, then I believe there would have been nothing left of his skull,’ she said.

She waited for his response.

‘So what is our next move?’ she asked, politely.

‘Ours?’ he replied. ‘I think you’ve read too many tales of mystery translated from the old tongue, Lady Celie. About bored young ladies with nothing better to do.’

‘Old tongue?’ she said, ignoring the insult. ‘We call it the language of the Ancients in Lumatere. So do the Charynites. What does that say about us all in this land, Mr Banyon? Different terms, same meanings.’

‘It says that Belegonians don’t waste time on words,’ he said. ‘Why five words when you can use two.’

A strong gust caused Celie to almost topple off the rock. The Castellan sighed and clicked a finger twice beckoning her with a hand to step down. As if she was his hound.

‘I think he was murdered inside the castle,’ she said, refusing to move.

‘A feeling in your bones?’ he asked, and she heard the sarcasm.

She placed a hand in her cloak pocket to retrieve the fragment and held it out for him to see. ‘I found it caught in Mr Luby’s hair.’

The Castellan stared at it.

‘Whatever object crushed Mr Luby’s skull was made of clay, not rock,’ she continued.

Mr Banyon took the fragment and held it up to study.

‘And I may know where he was murdered,’ she said.

Celie finally had the Castellan’s attention.

‘And I’ll need the key to the Chamber of Chronicles for that.’

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The Castellan unlocked the door of the chamber and stepped back. It was a good enough invitation for Celie to enter first. She walked to the trestle where she had been seated two nights before and then crouched. He did the same. She suddenly felt crowded. But there was no time to reflect on the fact that Mr Banyon smelled of pine and sandalwood and sea salt. Because in the cold light of the day, the last smeared traces of blood were there on the ground before them.

Celie felt quite pleased with herself, despite the idea that there was a murderer amongst them all.

‘Well if I had to be inspired by those fanciful tales told in the old tongue,’ she said, ‘I’d say it’s best to write a list of suspects.’

‘Thank you for your advice, Lady Celie,’ he said, his voice anything but thankful as he got to his feet. ‘What say that we begin with you?’

‘Me?’ she asked, standing too soon and bumping her head on the bench.

‘As a suspect, of course.’

‘Why would I possibly be a suspect apart from the fact that I was a guest here on the night of his death?’ she said.

This time his eyes met hers and all those times Celie imagined he could be weak in spirit were swiftly crushed by the force of his stare.

‘Perhaps he found out that you were spying for Lumatere.’

‘Spying,’ she said, almost choking out the word. Then she laughed prettily. Her aunt said that when girls laughed prettily, they seemed confident.

‘Castellan Banyon, do you have a name?’

‘Yes, it’s Castellan Banyon.’

‘Well, what I mean, Sir, is that my name is Celina-May of the Lumateran Flatlands but my family and friends call me Celie and I know that Belegonians possess two names.’

‘And still my name is Banyon to you. Is there a point to this except an attempt to sway me away from the notion that you’re a spy for Lumatere?’

Celie laughed again. ‘My brothers will be highly amused by your suspicions, Sir. I’m actually quite flattered.’

She pushed aside the chronicles and made room for herself to sit on the trestle, preferring its height. She was all confidence on the outside, removing a stray of thread on her cloak and flicking it aside.

‘The King’s Man came with a chronicle that his Majesty sent ahead to me,’ the Castellan said. ‘It’s an account of events that occurred in his palace this year. The King is always keen for me to know of any strangeness that may cause interference with his stay. There were events that stuck in my mind. One, for example, was the case of the missing palace seal at the beginning of winter.’

‘Oh the poor animal,’ she cried out, ‘they’re such beautiful creatures.’

‘I’m speaking of the royal seal placed on correspondence, as you would know,’ he said. ‘It went missing for a day. And then there was a case of disappearing correspondence. One moment they were in the scribe’s quarters, next moment gone.’

‘Strange indeed.’

‘The keys to the fourth tower also went missing for a day. I’ve visited the capital, Lady Celie. There’s not much in the fourth tower except for two empty chambers and the grand library.’

Celie leaned forward. ‘I do think the palace in the capital needs you, Mr Banyon. The Constable there seems to have no idea what he’s doing if these disappearances are taking place.’

The Castellan leaned closer himself. They had the same colour eyes, hers perhaps a shade darker.

‘Do you know what all three events had in common, Lady Celie?’

She thought for a moment, and then she shrugged.



‘They always took place when you were in the capital.’

‘Well, I am very flattered to say the very least,’ she said. ‘I don’t tend to stand out in a crowd, Mr Banyon. ‘And here I am, Lumatere’s master spy.’

She held out a hand to push him gently away and then shuffled off the trestle and walked to the shelves.

‘Truly Constable Banyon. Look at me. I can barely carry a kitten, let alone the corpse of a man.’

‘True enough. But who says you’re working alone?’

Celie traced a finger across the spines of the manuscripts, studying them closely. She removed one and noticed it was written in the language of the Yuts. The castle steward in the Belegonian capital had told her that most of the foreign works were in Ferragost.

‘Why don’t we move on to another suspect,’ she said, turning back to him. ‘Perhaps yourself. Firstly, the murderer would have to be a man. Women are more thorough about such things, Mr Banyon. They’d never leave a mark of blood.’ She shrugged. ‘Your words, not mine.’

She returned to the bench with the Yut manuscripts, which she’d study closely later. ‘Another thing to consider Sir,’ she said, ‘is that Borealis Luby’s name was the sole objecting party to your placement here as the chief officer of the palace. You see, while I was... what did you call it... spying on your kingdom... I came across the records of appointment.’

‘And let me guess, Borealis Luby suspected that I was possessed by an island spirit?’

‘No, he had his suspicions about you before you came to Ferragost. And whatever he discovered about you, he did write a letter to the King last year advising that he would highly recommend you step down from Constable of Ferragost.’

The Castellan’s eyes narrowed. Celie felt great satisfaction in being the first person in days to alter the Constable’s expression.

‘Anyone else?’ he said, standing too close to her for comfort. She was at least closest to the door.

‘If we must,’ she said. ‘I could suggest the Duchess as a suspect.’

‘Because she criticised your brow?’

She ignored his question.

‘Is it true what they say about her?’ she asked.

He didn’t respond but knew exactly what she was referring to.

‘About the murdered bastards?’

‘And what good would it do you knowing that?’ he asked.

‘It would do me better good than denying it happened.’

‘As long as you’re not one of the bastards of the Main, you’ve got nothing to fear then.’

Celie couldn’t understand these people. Every human life in Lumatere was grieved. Here, the dead were easily forgotten.

‘Perhaps Borealis Luby knew too much of the circumstances and was threatening to make them public,’ she said.

‘And who would care, Lady Celie?’ the Constable demanded to know. ‘Borealis Luby could have had all the evidence in the world, and still people would not care. Including the King.’

‘The King would care,’ she argued.

He shook his head, perhaps with regret.

‘The King has three young daughters. No male heir, yet. He loves his children. What would happen if he dies now?’

‘There would be a Regent until one of the girls gives birth to a boy child,’ she said.

‘Of course. But what if the King dies now and there’s a bastard son or grandson belonging to his Uncle somewhere out there. It’s the last thing the King would want.’

‘Then the King should change the rules of succession and ensure that upon his death, his oldest daughter rules.’

He stepped towards her and removed the chronicle from her grip.

‘Regardless, it doesn’t sway me from my suspicions,’ he said.

‘Oh of course, yes,’ she said watching him as he placed it back on the shelf. ‘That I killed Mr Luby?’ she asked.

‘No. That you’re a spy for your kingdom.’

Celie laughed prettily again.

‘Mr Banyon, I will speak these words one more time. I. Am. Not. A. Spy.’

Celie was indeed a spy for Lumatere.

‘Let’s put you to good use, beloved,’ the Queen had said.

It had started with small things. Such as reporting back to the captain of her Queen's Guard any gossip about Belegonia and neighbouring kingdoms that could suggest a threat to Lumatere. The theft of the Belegonian royal seal for a day was used to set up a meeting with a man from neighbouring Charyn. Celie had stamped a letter from the Lumaterans under the guise of it coming from the Belegonians. Celie considered it her greatest achievement. She had enjoyed the feeling of almost getting caught. It reminded her of a game she would play with her brothers. Of who could place their hand closest to the flame before they cried out. Celie always won. It was the river blood in her. It made her want to be reckless.

Celie of the Flatland's greatest power was her appearance. Doe-eyed and shy. Pleasant to look at, but not striking enough for a lasting impression. Sweet, but not sickly. Impeccable manners. Trustworthy, unless when confronted with anyone who was a threat to her kingdom. Dutiful, especially when it came to answering her Queen's request to be a guest in the neighbouring royal court. In Belegonia she was an obliging puppet who listened to castle gossip and played companion to the King's daughters. Best of all, in Belegonia she lived in the royal residence, privy to royal seals and correspondence and keys to libraries containing chronicles that could be beneficial to Celie's Priestking. And no one had suspected anything. No one except for the Castellan of Ferragost Isle. And suddenly she was intrigued.

Celie helped Beattie later that afternoon hanging up the linens in the only corner of the courtyard that enjoyed the warmth of the sun.

'Could you help me heat the tub in my chamber,' Celie asked. 'I've not bathed since I arrived.'

Beattie continued her work without looking up.

'The Duchess don't like village scum in the guest chambers,' she said.

'Well it's a good thing there's no village scum to be seen,' Celie said.

In her room, Celie helped Beattie drag the barrel into the centre of her chamber after they heated the water by the fireplace.

'You watch yourself up here with these people,' Beattie said quietly as Celie undressed.

'It's best we don't talk about the Duchess,' Celie said settling into the water. With a gasp, she instantly raised herself, but Beattie pushed her down forcefully by the shoulders and Celie bit her tongue to hold back the cry. But after a while her body became accustomed to the heat and she found it soothing.

'Lean forward so I can get ya back,' Beattie said.

Celie did as she was asked and flinched again as she was scrubbed with vigour. Beattie lifted Celie's hair in a clenched fist and continued her attack behind the ears.

'Him as well. You watch him.'

Celie froze.

‘The Castellan?’

‘The other.’

Celie thought for a moment.

‘Argus Laraunt?’ she asked.

‘Killed his wife, that one.’

She turned to stare up at Beattie who nodded.

‘One day wed, next day gone. *Gone.*’

‘Beattie, enough of this talk.’

But when Beattie was in one of these hissing moods, she couldn’t be stopped.

‘Six years past, it happened. He says the brigands on the Main took them by surprise and knocked him out. Knocked him out and he said they took her. *Woe to me, they took my love.* Now her bones lay someplace in a ditch and he collects her money.’

Celie shook her head, not understanding. Beattie grabbed a comb and began to hack into the knots of her hair.

‘She was the Lord of the Main’s ward,’ Beattie hissed. ‘Tildie her name was. She came from the isle, but the Lord of the Main knew her ma and when Tildie was twelve, she went to live in his big house on the Main. Lived there eight years and then the Lord of the Main died and left one hundred pieces of gold a year to the girl. Argus Laraunt had come sniffing and she was wed before we knew it. *Wed to the devil who killed her.*’

‘You’re hurting me, Beattie,’ Celie said, trying to grip the top of her hair to stop the tugging that brought tears to her eyes.

‘Do you understand, idiot girl? No corpse, so the money still comes to her estate. To him. So you watch yourself. He’s a chaser of girls with gold.’

Argus Laraunt? Had Celie become such an awful judge of character that she couldn’t see a killer before her?

‘He killed her for the money?’ Celie asked.

‘Not just the money,’ Beattie said. She grabbed a linen and held it up. Celie stepped out of the tub and wrapped herself in the cloth, shivering from more than the cold.

‘He did it for the Duchess of Dirt. Because you know what another word is for the Lord of the Main’s ward?’

Celie shook her head.

*His bastard.*

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Celie couldn't fathom the idea of joining the others for supper. She had no idea what to believe and the longer she stayed on this damned isle, the fewer people she could trust. When there was a knock on her door later, she thought not to answer, but opened it with trembling hands.

'They want you in the great hall, Lady Celie,' the guard advised her, not to merely inform her, but to accompany her.

Whose orders, she wanted to demand. A murderer of young wives or a murderer of those guilty of nothing but being children of the King's dead Uncle? Would this guard protect her from the malevolence of this castle or was he there to carry out another's wicked instruction?

For the first time, Celie was frightened for her life. She had no one to trust. Perhaps the King's Man, but he seemed to be in thick with the Castellan and was sure to know she was a suspected palace spy by now. First chance Celie had, she'd escape to Beattie and her people in their hovels. They'd protect her, wouldn't they?

She entered the great hall to see the Castellan standing in the centre of the room before a trestle table, his arms held rigidly at his sides. Sitting behind the trestle table was the Duchess, Argus Laraunt and the King's Man. It was the presence of the Cook and the groom and the Castellan's nursemaid and the two foot guards that alarmed Celie more.

At the sound of her entrance they all turned to stare.

'She saw it! She saw it!' the Cook said, her voice shrill, pointing to Celie. 'He's a demon and she saw it.'

'*Demon!*' the groom bellowed.

Celie stared at them, stunned and realized quickly who the demon in question was. He was the only person present in the room who hadn't turned to acknowledge Celie's presence. His nursemaid spat at Celie's feet and she heard the first sound of regret from Banyon.

'Oshie!' he reprimanded as the two foot soldiers hurried to restrain the woman from further attacking.

Argus Laraunt approached Celie retrieving a kerchief. She took it with trembling hands, unable to meet his eyes.

'There are things you know, sly girl,' the Duchess said. 'About this man and his practices.'

What had Celie seen that morning in his gatehouse residence? The sight of a chair upturned, a bowl of milk cracked in two. The crazed stare in his eyes.

‘What alarmed you, Lady Celie?’ the King’s Man asked gently. ‘As a representative of the royal party I must act as Seneschal here. What did you see that caused you to express such fear to Mr Laraunt?’

What did she see?

When Celie was a child, the royal family of Lumatere was slaughtered. At first, it was suspected at the hands of the forest dwellers. Not because they were enemies of the King and his family, but because they worshipped a different goddess. What took place in the days that followed the murders would change the lives of her people for years to come. Even now they hadn’t healed. Celie’s beloved Queen, the only survivor of her family’s deaths, would say it again and again. *Curses don’t kill people, Celie. People do. Ignorant people. Cunning people. Curses happen as a result of the cunning and ignorant.*

On Ferragost Isle Celie was amongst the cunning and the ignorant.

She stared at the Castellan, but his expression stayed impassive. Why could he not send her a look of desperation? Even hatred. But there was not even a question in his eyes. Perhaps there was resignation. She looked at Argus Laraunt. Thought of his boot and the suspicion it had planted in her head. Thought of the fisherman’s grip. Thought of every word Beattie had spoken. Everyone had a secret on this island, including herself. Didn’t she have a chronicle that needed to be smuggled out for her Priestking?

‘Lady Celie,’ the acting Seneschal prodded, his eyes glancing at the Castellan with regret. ‘What did you see that frightened you?’ He turned to Argus Laraunt. ‘Were they her words, Mr Laraunt?’

Argus Laraunt nodded.

But it wasn’t the image of the Castellan’s body bucking wildly around the earthen floor that Celie suddenly remembered. It was his nursemaid’s words.

*‘I’m here, sweet boy. I’m here.’*

As if she had lovingly spoken the words all his life.

‘Tell the truth,’ the Duchess demanded. ‘Isn’t it enough that poor Borealis has lost his life? Must we all?’

‘He knew,’ the cook shouted, pointing a finger at the Castellan. ‘I saw him. I saw him arguing with Mr Luby the day he arrived. I saw him. He’s a demon and Mr Luby, he knew.’

‘If I was a demon, don’t you think I would have cut off your annoying tongue by now?’ the Castellan said, his voice a strange comfort to Celie’s ear.

She held two hands to her flushed cheeks and closed her eyes.

‘Lady Celie?’ Argus Laraunt spoke the words gently. A murderer of a young wife shouldn’t have so harmless a voice.

‘He...was...’ she began.

They all waited.

‘... naked,’ she blurted out the word.

There was silence. Celie nodded, as if convincing herself of a truth.

‘And I’ve never seen a naked man before. Naked and...’

She walked to the Duchess, bent and whispered in her ear. ‘*Erect.*’

The Dowager pushed her away. ‘I’m sick to my stomach.’

Every pair of eyes in the room was on Celie. And then the King’s Man, no longer acting Seneschal, stood with a great sigh of relief.

‘Well there you go then. Back to work I say. If we’re going to accuse every naked and... ah... man on the island of being possessed by demons, then we’re all heading for damnation.’

Celie thought it best not to attend supper that night. From the dark looks thrown her way by the Cook and the Duchess she believed it was in her best interest to find solace in the Chamber of Chronicles instead. She was relieved to find it open. Less relieved to see the Castellan sitting at the trestle bench taking notes. It was too late to retreat so Celie entered, her cheeks aflame. She sat down on the only other stool in the room, directly opposite the Castellan. An uneven column of chronicles stood between them.

‘Where were we?’ he asked as if they had just completed a conversation moments before.

She found herself smiling.

‘Back to our suspects,’ she said.

She pushed the pile of chronicles out of the way so she could see him.

‘The Duchess?’ she asked quietly.

She wished he’d look up. She understood now why he didn’t. *I’m here, sweet boy. I’m here.* How long had he endured the fits? The looks of accusations? His teeth clenched on a piece of timber to stop his tongue from choking him.

‘The Duchess was married to the King’s uncle, the Lord of the Main,’ the Castellan said. ‘She never had children, but her husband did. Quite some. Now, in Belegonian tradition a bastard son or grandson can make a claim to an estate. Even make claim to a throne.’

‘Not a bastard daughter though?’ Celie asked.

He finally looked up.

‘No, and their rules not mine so don’t purse your lips so disapprovingly, Lady Celie. We all can’t be Lumaterans and enjoy the rule of a woman.’

Celie continued to scribe.

‘You know the rest,’ he said quietly.

‘Not really,’ she said. ‘Only that she was said to have ordered the murder of anyone suspected of being an heir to her husband’s estate... and to the crown.’

Celie studied what she had written. ‘But why kill Borealis Luby? As you said, who with enough power would care for the truth?’

There was no response.

‘Next suspect?’ she asked.

‘Your friend Argus, of the house of Laraunt,’ he said, his voice cool. ‘Would Banyon forgive her for hinting to Argus Laraunt that she had seen something strange in his residence that morning of her arrival.’

‘You threw in at least three very unimportant words,’ she said instead. ‘In Lumatere, we’d say Argus of Laraunt.’

‘Silence, or I’ll send you back to the embroidery room with the Dowager.’

‘I’ll be a mouse, Sir.’

She saw the slight twitch of his mouth.

‘Beattie from the isle told me about the disappearance of his young wife,’ Celie said.

Banyon nodded. ‘And perhaps Borealis Luby knew something that he didn’t want anyone else to know. And he paid with his life.’

‘And perhaps Argus Laraunt knew you were investigating a murder, Sir and used your...’

‘Demon tendencies...’

‘... to have you arrested in case you were to discover anything that would point to his guilt.’

‘Well, he’s not,’ Banyon said firmly. ‘Going to stop me, that is.’

And still, despite Borealis Luby’s murder, it all seemed wrong to Celie.

‘Why so important to solve this crime, Sir, and not that of the Duke’s poor bastards?’

Banyon’s eyes met Celie’s briefly.



‘Because the Duke’s poor bastards didn’t get their skulls crushed in the castle library under my watch.’

He spoke the words with a passion that surprised her.

‘Oh, Mr Banyon, you remind me so much of my father... except he has a personality and sense of humour.’

‘Very overrated attributes when you’re trying to keep a kingdom secure, Lady Celie.’

Celie sighed.

‘Next?’

They continued their list deep into the night until their candles burned low and Celie’s yawns turned indelicate.

‘It’s best you return to your chamber,’ he said.

She collected her journal and went to retrieve the Yut Chronicle from the shelf.

‘I’d prefer that you leave that,’ he said, his tone cold. ‘It’s not your property to remove from this room.’

She made a show of placing the chronicle back on the bench and he watched her, hawke-eyed.

For most of their walk back to her room, they didn’t speak. He extinguished each torch they passed until it was just the two wicks they held in their hands that lit the way.

‘You lied,’ he said quietly outside her chamber. ‘You saw something in my residence that morning and you lied.’

He was criticising her. No appreciation, but criticism. For lying! To save his life from whatever they did to demons on this isle.

‘Do you know anything about my Queen, Banyon?’ she asked.

‘She’s young. And besotted by her Consort. And smart. And has a strong will to survive.’

Celie nodded. Her Queen was all those things and more.

‘But the major tension between her and her Consort is truth. She believes that by omitting certain facts it’s not quite lying. It’s a sort of truth. Absolute truth is dangerous and gets in the way of progress.’

‘And what does that have to do with what you saw that morning?’ he asked.

‘I didn’t lie,’ she said, feeling quite bold. ‘I spoke part of the truth.’

He suddenly looked uncomfortable.

‘You were naked, Mr Banyon. And erect. And it was quite frightening.’

She closed the door softly in his face.

## Five

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Somehow, the previous day’s events had made Argus Laraunt a suspect in Celie’s eyes. Not only because of Beattie’s accusations about the death of his wife, but also his attempts to have the Castellan arrested.

‘Was the ward a favourite of the Duchess?’ she asked Beattie while they scrubbed the napery together on the rocks.

‘Course she wasn’t,’ Beattie snapped as if Celie was an idiot for asking. ‘The girl was a favourite of the Duke. He had done all he could to have her moved to his residence.’ Beattie’s eyes watered. ‘She never forgot us here on the isle and we’ll never forget her.’

‘How did poor Argus Laraunt lose his wife?’ she asked the King’s Man as she helped him count the crates of ale in the buttery.

‘The way I heard it, Lady Celie, they were set upon by a band of brigands on the road between the Dowager’s home and his village in the north. They never found her corpse,’ he added in a reverent whisper.

‘Does dear Mr Laraunt live with you the whole year round, Your Highness?’ she asked the Dowager as they embroidered. Celie had even gathered her hair in a crispinette so it would make her brow look higher.

‘Of course he doesn’t, you fool of a girl. He’s a merchant, always travelling for Belegonia.’

‘A merchant, you say?’

‘He suffers for Belegonia, poor Argus,’ the Duchess said, ‘Spent the whole of winter in the snow-capped mountains of Yutlind Nord convincing the King of Yutlind Nord to invest in Belegonian fleece,’ the Duchess added. ‘It’s the best in the land, of course.’

‘Yes, in Lumatere we pray to the goddess for Belegonian fleece,’ Celie lied.

‘It’s such a pretty island,’ Celie commented to Argus Laraunt as they stood on the parapet staring across at the still-raging sea. ‘Although I’d love to see snow one day. I’ve read about it in the Yut Chronicles.’

Argus Laraunt seemed distracted. No one seemed more desperate than he to get off the isle.

‘Never seen it myself,’ he murmured, ‘but I could imagine it being a stunning sight.’

‘Was the Castellan acquainted with Argus Laraunt prior to our arrival?’ Celie asked Banyon’s nursemaid, Oshie, whilst she helped her carry kindling up the steps of the gatehouse.

‘The Castellan is acquainted with very few,’ the old woman said. ‘It makes life easier for him.’

‘Is it an illness?’ Celie asked quietly.

‘Some people call it a demon. There’s no demon in Tien. He’s always been like that with his fits and ways. It’s made him even more determined. But sometimes, it’s harder to hide. Here, on the island, he gets his solitude except for in spring.’

‘Tien?’ Celie asked. ‘Is that his name?’

‘Valentien.’

Valentien Banyon. Who would have thought?

‘The thing is,’ she told Valentien Banyon that evening in his residence. ‘I do believe Mr Laraunt is lying to the Duchess about where he travels each winter.’

‘Hmm,’ he said, not looking up. The King’s Man had left him with the entire list of the King’s entourage and the accommodation of the guests seemed to have taken precedence over Borealis Luby’s death for the night.

Oshie came in with a bowl of pottage and a half loaf of bread, placing it before Banyon.

‘Is she bothering you?’ Oshie asked.

‘Is she bothering you?’ he asked his nurse without looking up.

‘Can’t understand why she’s running around unattended,’ Oshie said as if Celie wasn’t there. ‘Why aren’t you married?’ she then demanded to know. Celie had come to accept the woman’s abrupt ways in the past days and Oshie tolerated Celie with a grudging respect.

‘Why aren’t you?’ Celie asked, seeing as everyone was answering questions with questions.

‘The Lumateran Queen has other needs for her inquisitive subject,’ Banyon answered on Celie’s behalf. ‘Apart from getting up to no good here in Belegonia, there’ll be some useless Prince or duke to marry her off it. Lady Celie might be good enough to exchange for the building of a goods road between two kingdoms.’

Insulted by Banyon and his nurse, Celie said her goodbyes and left. She was never one to linger in rudeness.

In her haste, she hadn’t taken a candle but there were enough of the torches lighting the courtyard to guide Celie across to the west tower.

When she reached the steps leading up to her chamber, she regretted her decision not to turn back for at least a taper. She heard the footsteps behind her and saw the shadow of a flame flicker against the wall.

‘Slow down,’ she heard Banyon say. ‘The gods only know what you’re treading on in the dark.’

She suddenly thought of Argus Laraunt cursing Banyon’s hound and it reminded her of the heel of his boots.

‘Could you indulge me Banyon,’ she asked quietly. ‘Show me where Borealis Luby’s clothing is.’

He studied her a moment.

‘You’re a strange one, Lady Celie.’

She wasn’t quite sure what sort of response that was.

‘They’re in the Cook’s chamber. But if you’re searching for blood clues, his tunic and trousers have been washed.’

Celie shook her head. ‘Not blood. Soil.’

She heard him sigh and knew he already regretted his decision to accompany her back to her chamber.

‘Take my hand,’ he said.

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The servant’s chamber was miniscule. Cut into the wall was a space to sleep, padded with bedding. The room stunk of piss and Celie saw the pot in the corner. There was another tall narrow cavern dug out of the opposite wall partitioned with a piece of cloth serving as a curtain. Banyon pulled it across and held his lamp close to the garments hanging there.

Celie crouched to where the boots sat. Banyon hitched his trousers to crouch beside her.

‘Well, the thing is,’ she whispered, ‘that my good friend the Queen of Lumatere spent some time during exile in Sendecane. It’s where her Consort first found her and that very meeting began our journey home to our cursed kingdom.’

‘Yes, we’ve all heard the story, Lady Celie,’ Banyon said. ‘But is this the time and place for reminiscence?’

‘The thing is, Banyon, that she described Sendecane to me. Finnikin, her Consort, was irritated that he didn’t see the red earth of Sendecane in his travels. You see, he journeyed there through Sarnak. She also journeyed there through Sarnak, but she did get the opportunity to see Sendecane from the south.’

‘Lady Celie,’ he advised, ‘please use fewer words to get to your point.’

‘Of course. I’m sorry, Mr Banyon. Busiest man in Belegonia because he has nothing else in his life.’

She saw his mouth thin out in an angry line. If he was going to be rude to her, she’d be rude in return.

‘Continue,’ he requested.

‘The south of Sendecane is completely made up of red dirt according to my Queen. And Argus Laraunt has red dirt caked into the heel of his boot,’ she said. She lifted Borealis Luby’s boot. Banyon held the flame closer. It was a poor light, but he could see what was true.

‘And how did you get to see the bottom of both their buskins?’ he asked, intrigued.

‘Well, firstly, Borealis Luby shared the boat with me from the Main to the isle and he placed his feet on my seat as he slept. It truly irritated me. Very rude. And the other day, Mr Argus stepped into your hound’s shit, and lifted up his boots to inspect the damage. And revealed the red earth.’

He stared at her, and then he gave a laugh. It was short and she wasn’t quite sure what he was laughing at, but it made her smile to hear it.

‘Strange, really,’ she continued. ‘Especially when the Dowager believed that he spent the winter on the snow-capped mountains of Yutlind Nord. He, of course, claimed to have never seen snow in his life.’

‘You’re very observant, Lady Celie. A good trait for... a spy.’

They heard the sound of giggles and leapt to their feet, but it was too late for anything except to step inside the small space with Borealis Luby’s belongings. Banyon pulled across the curtain.

It was much too narrow a space and Banyon was forced to place his hands on the wall above Celie’s head. They stood almost brow against brow, her mouth almost against his. She heard every swallow in this throat.

And she heard what took place in the cook’s chamber. It involved the Cook and the King’s Man. She discovered his name was Alby. Celie knew this because Alby’s name was whispered. Spoken. Wailed. Keened. Long bursts. Short bursts.

*Alby. Albeeeee. Aaaaaalbeeeee. Alby. Alby. Alby.*

Celie shifted.

‘Don’t move,’ Banyon whispered, and his voice was hoarse, but Celie had moved and understood clearly why he had issued his command. Because her thigh was pressing into his and she didn’t need the flicker of a flame to imagine the desire in his eyes because it was all

there to be felt. She placed her hand against his chest and heard the intake of his breath and there they stood as the grunts and rants and cries rang between the Cook and Alby. Celie was disappointed that it was all over too soon between the lovers, but even though the Cook and Alby departed, Celie and Banyon stayed a while.

*This is the man you'll take as a lover, Celie*, she promised herself. Valentien Banyon. Who was she to defy her Queen's orders?

They reached her chamber and she wanted him to kiss her. She lifted her face to his, almost defying him to look away.

'What goes on in your head, Banyon?' she asked quietly when he didn't so much as touch her.

'I don't allow people inside my head, Lady Celie. The moment I do, it will be a weakness and I don't have time for those in my life.'

'And what do you have time for?' she asked with bitterness.

'Protecting this kingdom. This castle. From anyone.'

She spent the next day watching Argus Laraunt from her window. Argus Laraunt watched the sea from the battlement. Banyon watched Celie from the gatehouse tower. When she noticed Argus Laraunt crossing the drawbridge she was soon at his side. He had a small pack on his back and she was desperate to know what was inside.

'Can I come along, Argus? The tedium is driving me to despair.'

'I'm afraid I'm off to see an old friend on the shore,' he said, agitated. 'A fisherman. Perhaps we'll speak at supper, Lady Celie.'

Celie couldn't imagine Argus Laraunt having any friend on the isle. He had murdered the isle's favourite daughter. But she waved him off politely and returned to the Chamber of Chronicles. She was back to searching for the manuscript on behalf of her Priestking. There was a moment in the chamber the day before with Banyon when she thought she had found it, written in the foreign tongue of Yutlind. Regardless of the excitement she felt at the idea of coming so close, she couldn't stop thinking of Valentien Banyon and how she was going to get a chronicle past him. But she pushed aside the chronicle, thinking of the conversations between Laraunt and Luby. About Tolliver. It had been a strangely familiar name. Curious about this town in Yutlind Nord where Laraunt had made a nuisance of himself, Celie began searching for it in a manuscript citing every city of the entire land. But there was no Tolliver.

Her sleep that night was troubled. Sleeping and waking. Wondering what Argus Laraunt and Borealis Luby had been up to in Sendecane. And then thinking of Valentien Banyon. Saying his name. *Tien. Valentien. Banyon.* She dreamt of the Priestking. Heard him beg her to find the Yut Chronicle. And then Celie dreamt a memory of her time with the Queen's Consort, Finnikin.

*Our lives are paths of collision, Celie. Every single one of us. Not just Lumaterans, but the Sarnaks and Belegonians and Osterians and Charynites and Sorellians and Yuts and Sendecanese. We're not eight kingdoms, but an entire land with one heartbeat. It's why people like you and I need to record our people's stories so we can find those moments when our paths cross, and only then will we know true peace.*

And then the Queen was there beside her Consort.

*'Let me tell you about Tolliver.'*

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Celie woke with a start. It was all there in her own journal. When Lumatere had begun to settle three years past and the Queen was ready to talk, she asked Celie to keep her records. Some stories were painful to recall. The Queen as a young girl bore witness to the slaughter of their people in exile but found peace six years past in a kingdom at lands' end. The rest of Sendecane was wasteland, except for the cloister of Lagrami. The High Priestess had provided a haven for those who needed protection regardless of what kingdom they hailed from and what god or goddess they worshipped. Pilgrims could travel there to offer thanks at its gates, but the cloister was only open to women. Those who did not want to be found.

And there in her own journal, she saw the word.

*Tolliver.*

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The sun was beginning to appear and Celie hurried down her tower steps to the next landing where Argus Laraunt slept. But his chamber was bare. His possessions gone. Without so much as a cloak or shoes, Celie tore down the rest of the steps and into the courtyard where she could see the portcullis raised for the day. Not even stopping to tell Banyon, she flew across the drawbridge, her bare feet at the mercy of splintered grass and acorns and half-concealed rocks that cut into her flesh, her chemise no protection from the wind that tore through the fabric. But she needed to find Argus Laraunt. He had murdered a man to keep a secret. He had almost had another man tried as a demon to keep his secret. There seemed no one more desperate than Argus Laraunt and Celie understood why.

By the time she reached the shore, her heart was battering. But she saw him there, dragging a small boat out into an unforgiving sea.

'Argus!' she cried. 'Stop!'

He stared up at the sound of his name, but stayed true to his task.

'Argus,' she called out again and when she reached him she fell onto the sand on her knees in exhaustion.

'I know the truth,' she said.

'Lady Celie, don't let me have to hurt you. *Please.*'

‘You won’t hurt me, Argus,’ she said, getting to her feet and wading out to him.

A wave crashed against her and she fell into the water, stumbling to her feet.

‘Tell them whatever you want, Lady Celie,’ he said with bitterness. ‘She’ll laugh in your face. Do you honestly think the Duchess doesn’t know what I did? She ordered it herself. She knows the truth.’

‘But a different truth to what Borealis Luby knew. Perhaps a worst truth for some, but a better one for most, Argus. A better one for me.’

She gripped at his coat and tried to pull him back on shore.

‘Don’t cross this sea, Sir. You’ll get yourself killed,’ she said. ‘Stay, and I promise, the Duchess will never know from me.’

‘Know what?’

‘That you killed Borealis Luby. To hide a great truth. Not that you killed your wife, Argus. But that you allowed her to live. Because you loved her.’

She saw the despair in his expression at her words.

‘You were frightened he was going to tell the Duchess the truth. That he followed you to Sendecane.’

Argus Laraunt leapt onto the boat in an attempt to catch the next wave, but each time it brought him back to land.

‘I can help you,’ she said. ‘I can speak to my Queen.’

‘About what?’ he shouted. ‘You know nothing.’

‘You were in love with her so you came up with the plan. You knew she’d be next. The Duchess was finding out the truth about her husband’s bastards. The Duke’s own ward, Tildie, was one of them. The Duke loved a woman from this isle and upon her death, he gave their daughter a place in his home.’

Argus Laraunt seemed a mad man, pushing the boat out to sea, despite the tide returning him to the shore.

‘You hid her in Sendecane. In the cloisters. You see, it was all there in my own work. My Queen lived there from when she was fifteen until her Consort came to find her two years later.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he said.

‘Well I do. It’s not as if my Queen remembers every girl who came and went. But she would remember one that came in her sixteenth year. She’d remember her, not because the girl was beautiful or Belegonian, but because she brought into the Cloister something that had never



been allowed there before. A male. You see, my journals are sacred. What my Queen allows me to record is private only to her and myself. And the women of the cloisters were overjoyed and frightened by the birth of a little boy five years past. It's why Borealis Luby threatened you that day as we crossed this sea. Tolliver wasn't the name of a town in Yutlind Nord. It's the name of your son. Toli for short.'

A flash of pain crossed the man's expression.

'It's where you go every winter. To spend time with your wife and your child and for some reason, Borealis Luby suspected something and followed you to Sendecane.'

Argus Laraunt stepped towards her and gripped her by the arm. 'You are a very foolish girl, Lady Celie. Why would I possibly allow you to live knowing you're a threat to my wife and child?'

They heard the hounds and Celie saw the panic in his eyes. He spun around staring at the boat and the sea.

'Stay, and I will do all I can to provide sanctuary for your family, Sir. I pledge it with all my heart.'

He shook his head with despair and she saw the tears of fury.

'Lady Celie, if my King was to die now with only three daughters and no son, then Tolliver, as the grandson of his Uncle is the heir to the Belegonian throne. Do you honestly think my son will be allowed to live if that knowledge was to get out? Or do you honestly believe I'd want him in the hands of another kingdom as a bargaining tool?'

'Celie! Celie!'

They heard the shouts and Argus Laraunt stumbled into the water alongside the boat, trying again to push it out to sea.

'It's not safe, Sir,' she cried.

But he was a man possessed.

'Argus,' she cried. 'You'll get yourself killed. Come back.'

'*Celie! Celie!*'

It was Banyon's voice and it spoke of fear. His fear for her. And then Argus Laraunt was gone, disappearing amongst waves so fierce in their size, and Banyon and the King's Man and the villagers were there on the shore running towards her. Celie stared at the tiny boat as it became smaller and smaller.

Later when they found the boat crushed against the rocks in splinters and Argus Laraunt's belongings washed up on the shore, Celie sat huddled waiting for the sea to reveal its power and give up its dead. But it was greedy and kept Argus Laraunt all to itself. Someone placed a blanket over her shoulder, but she refused to move. She couldn't move. She could hardly

breathe from the sorrow and fear she felt for a man and the young family he would have done anything to protect. It was the sort of love Celie had craved for and all she could imagine was Tildie of the isle and her son waiting for Argus Laraunt next winter, fearing the worst when he failed to arrive.

## Six

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The King arrived with his entourage three days later and there was much talk of the deaths and events and the floods and roads. Celie heard talk that the Duchess was desperate to return to the Main after the horror of her stay and preparations were being made for her to leave at week's end.

'We're going to have to shower Aunt Awful with gifts before she goes,' Orna, the eldest Princess said.

'Not that she even looks at them,' Sareena, the second Princess said.

'Until she gets home, of course,' Lehandra, the youngest, piped up. 'There she sits in her chamber all day long, greedily opening all her treasures. Sharing them with none.'

She did an impersonation and the girls laughed.

'Enough of that,' their mother said.

Celie realised then that she would leave the island with the Duchess.

'If you please, your Grace, may I accompany the Duchess?' Celie said. 'I think I'd be the poorest of company if I stayed with the girls. Perhaps if we send a message to my home and have a carriage wait for me on the Main.'

The Princesses were disappointed but understood, having heard all the stories about what had taken place at Ferragost.

One by one the next day the Princesses went to visit the Duchess and Celie followed.

'For my rudeness, your Highness,' Celie said, handing her the gift.

The Duchess merely pointed to the mountain of boxes in the corner of the room and Celie placed hers with the others.

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When she heard a tap at her door the next morning as she packed, Celie found herself facing Banyon. For the first time in days, she wanted to weep. Because Celie had learned to read many of his expressions, and despite a flash of longing in his eyes, this one frightened her most.

'Tien,' she said softly.

Banyon stepped aside. Behind him stood a guard, the King's Man, and the King's first Minister, Lord Osborne, a contrite look on his face. She knew the Minister well, having grown up with his children during exile.

'It's best that we check your belongings, Lady Celie,' Lord Osborne said, his voice gentle.

Celie watched as they searched the chest. As they flicked through her journal. As they crumpled the fine silk dress given to her by the Queen of Belegonia. It was the King's Man who came across the box.

'May I?' he asked.

'I don't think I have the authority to answer that question, Alby. Perhaps you should ask the Castellan,' she said, her voice cold.

The King's Man stared up at her, surprised. 'It's Albeton,' he corrected with great curiosity in his voice.

Albeton looked at Banyon for permission to open the box. Banyon nodded. When the lid was lifted, they all stared inside and then at Celie.

'A dead rat?' Lord Osborne asked.

'Is that not allowed?' she asked. 'Is the removal of a dead rat from the castle punishable?'

There was no reply.

'It's for my brother,' she said with a sigh. She turned to Lord Osborne. 'You remember Ren, don't you? When we lived in the capital, my brother had an obsession with finding the largest rats there were to find.'

Lord Osborne chuckled. 'I do remember indeed.'

'There's nothing larger than a Ferragost rat,' Celie said, staring at Banyon when she spoke the words. 'If you don't mind I'll step outside while you finish your task.'

She passed Banyon. 'Coward,' she whispered.

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She wept most of the way across the inland sea whilst the Duchess instructed her to stop making such an awful noise. They reached the shore where two carriages awaited them. One for Celie from Lumatere, and the other for the Dowager whose poor groom stared at the mountain of gifts to be carried.

'Let me help with that,' Celie said, instructing her guard to join in. 'We don't want your Highness's belongings confused with mine.'

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When Celie and her guard were settled in the carriage, she began her weeping once more. And if she hadn't exchanged the box of a dead rat for the package she had given the wretched Duchess, containing a stolen chronicle for the Priestking of Lumatere, Celie would have cried a whole lot more.

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On the isle, when all was still and in order, the Castellan of Ferragost Castle blew out the last torch and returned to his solar in the gatehouse. And if it weren't for the scent of Celina, May of the Lumateran Flatlands on the blanket he had placed around her shoulders the night of Argus Laraunt's disappearance, Valentien Banyon would have slept fitfully.

But there it was.

And so he didn't.