

SO THIS IS EVER AFTER

SO THIS IS
EVER





AFTER.

F. T. LUKENS

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TO ANYONE LOOKING FOR THEIR HAPPY EVER AFTER:

DON'T GIVE UP!

IT MAY JUST BE IN ANOTHER CASTLE.

CHAPTER 1

I'd been envisioning what it would be like to behead the Vile One since the old wizard had shown up at my door the day after I turned seventeen and told me my destiny—that I would be the person who ended the dark shadow of evil that ruled our realm. Well, okay, not that specific second because who believes a drunken stranger with a crooked hat carrying around a humming staff? No one. That's who. At least, you shouldn't. That's unsafe.

Let me amend. I'd been envisioning this moment since after we'd had tea and he'd explained a few things and told me about *the prophecy*. Though it didn't feel real, as in very likely, and downright probable, until I pulled a magical sword from a bog and a beam of light shot down from the sky, anointing me with supernatural purpose.

After that, I kept a vision in my head about what would happen when I separated the Vile One's head from his shoulders in the final climactic battle. The cut would be clean. There would

be artistic arterial spray, and the disembodied head would roll down the steps of the raised dais and come to rest at the feet of my best friend. Everyone would cheer, and I'd finally be the hero I was prophesied to become. I'd *feel* different. Righteous. Awesome. Accomplished. Finally grown-up.

Unfortunately, as things seem to have gone since the start of this whole journey, that did not happen. Not even a little bit.

Fueled by adrenaline and vigor, I swung my blade for the death blow, expecting to cleanly remove the Vile One's head. Instead, the blunted edge buried halfway through his neck and jarred to a stop on his spinal column. Huh. Who knew that prophesied weapons didn't come ready-to-use? Apparently, magic swords that spring from bogs don't rise pre-sharpened.

Stunned at this unexpected turn of events, I froze long enough to draw attention from the party of questors supporting me.

"Arek!" Sionna yelled from somewhere in the chaos. "Finish him off!"

I wrenched the blade from the Vile One's throat, did my level best to ignore the astonished look on his face, the open mouth, the wide eyes, the gush of blood running down the front of his black robes, and struck again. And again. I hacked at the twitching body, which had fallen backward and slumped on the front of the throne, propped up like a grotesque doll, until I was certain he was dead, and no amount of magic could bring him back.

Finally, the neck gave way and the head plopped onto the ground, splattering like an overripe pumpkin. Dead eyes peered up at me from sunken hollows, and thin lips pulled over yellowed teeth in a parody of a scream. A picture that

would surely fuel my nightmares for at least the next few months, potentially the rest of my life.

I had also imagined lifting the Vile One's head by his hair and holding it up as a kind of trophy as all the dark magic he'd used to usurp the throne and control the realm would recede like a fierce tide, sucking itself from the world in a flash of light as the populace cheered. Except, the Vile One was bald, and there was no way I was picking the head up by anything else, because *ugh*.

Also, *nothing happened*. No flash of light. No magical reversal. No swell of victorious music. No fanfare. Nothing.

Huh.

Disappointingly, I didn't feel different at all, other than sticky. And weary down to my bones, and nauseated. There were no cheers from onlookers, though the sound of vomiting was clear over my right shoulder.

I dabbed my blood-drenched face with the hem of my tunic, but only succeeded in smearing the crimson more thoroughly. My chest heaved. My arms ached. I turned, swaying on the steps, and surveyed the chaos of the room behind me. The fighting had ceased. My friends were all upright, scattered around like thrown dice, but alive. Followers of the Vile One, distinguishable by their black robes and neck tattoos, were either dead, fleeing, or kneeling in defeat.

I leaned heavily on the sword—barely resisting the urge to sag right there onto the stone steps, next to the jerking corpse, and take a nap. Instead, I stumbled down to the main floor.

"You okay?" Matt asked. He had soot stains on his sleeves, tears in his clothes, and a cut above his eye that leaked sluggishly. His brown hair was matted to his head with sweat. He

smelled like ozone and magic. He held his staff in his hand, the bright blue jewel at the tip glowing like a star, but as we stood together in the aftermath, his power faded.

A late addition to the vision of victory I kept in my head included sweeping Matt into my arms and declaring my undying affection. But as I was literally covered in blood, I didn't think Matt would appreciate a hug at this point, or a grand gesture or even a friendly slap to the shoulder. Not when we were both trembling with exhaustion and ebbing adrenaline.

"Yeah. I'm good. You?"

"Yeah." He grinned weakly. "It's done."

"It is." I ran my gloved hand through my hair. "Super gross, though."

"Oh, definitely. That was, for lack of a better word, vile."

"Good one." I held out my fist, and he bumped his knuckles against mine.

Bethany appeared from around a corner, small harp in one hand, wiping clinging bits of vomit from her mouth with her sleeve. She peeled a strand of sweaty auburn hair from her cheek, cast a look at the throne, turned green, then disappeared again. The sounds of her retching echoed in the eerie silence of the previously chaotic throne room.

Sionna rolled her eyes. She wiped her sword on a prone body before sheathing it. Her brown skin was blood-spattered, but far less than mine. She'd no doubt sharpened her sword. Her black hair still swung in her high ponytail, and the wisps that had escaped framed her face, and though her shoulders slumped with relief, her steps were as energetic as ever. Every inch a warrior. Every inch beautiful. Every inch the reason for many of my inconvenient boners while on this quest.

"I'll check on her," she said.

I cleared my throat. "Good idea."

She left the room through the same arch. Matt and I exchanged a glance. Pretty sure we were on the same wavelength about the boners. Even if we weren't, at least he was still by my side. Thankfully, that piece of my vision was fulfilled. We'd been best friends since we were boys and we'd be best friends forever if I had any say, weird wizards, glowing staffs, enigmatic prophecies, and secret crushes notwithstanding.

"You two okay?"

Startled, I spun around.

Lila stood on the ribbon of purple carpet that led up to the throne. Her soft-heeled boots made little noise when she moved normally, but on the plush, she made no sound at all. With her hood pulled up, her features were partially hidden, but I knew the familiar jut of her chin and the bow of her mouth. She had a bulging sack over one shoulder.

"Yes. We're fine. Exhausted and"—Matt gestured toward the headless form—"vaguely traumatized, but . . ." He trailed off; his eyebrows drew together in consternation. "Have you been looting?"

She shrugged. "A little." She dropped the overstuffed bag at her feet with a loud clank.

"Lila!" I placed my hands on my hips, a difficult task when holding a sword. "Put it back."

"No."

"Now."

"No."

"But—but . . ." I sputtered. "What do you even have in there?"

"Oh, you know, loot, spoils, riches. The usual."

Matt pursed his lips. "That's vague."

She smirked. "Exactly."

"Here you are!" The voice came from behind us, and again, I found myself turning quickly, sword raised. Rion leaned on the heavy wooden doors that we'd barged through mere minutes before. Besides his grimy army, he looked almost untouched from battle. He smiled when he saw us, tipping his blood-smearred sword in acknowledgment.

I relaxed and blew out a breath. "Can people please stop sneaking up on me? I've had *a day*."

"Is it over?" Rion asked, not remarking on my outburst. Instead, his gaze drifted around the throne room until it settled on the body by the dais.

"I think so?" Matt said. "I mean"—he gestured helplessly—"this is it. Right?"

Sionna returned from the adjoining room, her arm looped through Bethany's. Bethany wavered on her feet, but she'd stopped actively vomiting. The entirety of our party now stood in the throne room. We looked at one another, no one speaking, merely existing in the moment of sudden calm after the storm.

I surveyed the group, reassuring myself that we'd all made it, that we were all there and safe. Bethany, our bard, rested against the wall, gaze locked on the broken window across the room, and not anywhere near the bloody neck stump that leaned against the foot of the throne. She was charismatic and magic, essential to our success with her ability to talk her way in or out of any situation. Sionna gripped Bethany's arm, lending her strength. Sionna was a fighter, sleek and deadly, as fearless as she was dangerous. Lila, the rogue, stood on the carpet, loot bag at her feet. She was dexterous and conniving,

her past shrouded in mystery, as were her motivations. Matt, the mage, my best friend, my confidant, my secret crush, and wielder of arcane spells, held his staff in the gentle curve of his hand. And Rion the knight rounded out the crowd. He was hulking and strong, older than the rest of us, but barely an adult himself, bound to our group by a sacred oath.

Then there was me. Arek. The Chosen One. The fulfiller of the prophecy, awkwardly standing in front of the throne. Somehow, this ragtag mess of personalities, dubious expertise, and questionable hygiene had come together and completed the impossible. We'd saved the realm. Holy shit. *We'd* saved the realm. *This* was the moment. This was victory.

Lila nodded once sharply, then grabbed her sack and threw it over her shoulder. "Great. Well, this has been fun, but I'm out."

"You're out?" Matt hobbled in front of her. I narrowed my eyes. Matt hadn't mentioned an injury. That doofus probably twisted his ankle when we ran up the entryway stairs dodging arrows. "What do you mean by that?"

She shrugged. "The quest is done. It's over. We won. I helped." She hefted the sack. "I took my reward. I'm out."

"Wait." Bethany straightened from her hunch by the wall. "You can't just *leave*."

"Why not?"

"Don't you want to be here for what happens next?" she asked.

Lila raised an eyebrow. "What does happen next?"

Again, we looked around at each other, silent and unsure. The question hung over the room, like the black pennants that swayed limply against the stone in the slight breeze. Bethany

shrugged. Sienna blinked. Rion tapped his fingers on his smudged armor. Matt's mouth tipped down in that funny little frown he always got when he was thinking.

Well, at least we all knew the question, but it didn't look like anyone had an answer.

Perfect.

It was Rion who broke the awkward silence. He cleared his throat. "A new ruler needs to be instated. He," Rion said, jerking his chin toward the body, "was the ruler of our kingdom, as ill-gotten as it was. He killed all the royal family save one—"

"Oh," Matt said, straightening from his impressive lean on his staff, "we should find the princess."

I furrowed my brow. "Isn't she locked in a tower?"

"I think we need to wake her from an eternal slumber," Bethany said, "with true love's kiss?"

"I think that's a different quest." Lila dropped her sack, the contents clanging. "Doesn't she have to let down her hair?"

"No," Sienna said. "We have to guess her name."

"You're all wrong." Matt waved his hand. "We just need to let her out."

"Well, that doesn't sound right," Bethany said, hands on her hips. "Are you sure?"

Matt sighed and dug around in the pouch at his side. "The prophecy—"

The entire group groaned. We all knew the prophecy. We'd all read the prophecy. Matt had lectured us extensively on the prophecy. I could recite the prophecy from memory with my hands tied behind my back while being beaten with sticks by angry gnomes. Well, almost all of it, save for a section that was significantly smudged by wine. But I didn't mention that

because it was a sore spot, and as fond as I was of Matt's withering glares, I didn't want to be the target of one at the moment.

Undeterred, Matt yanked the scroll from his bag and flapped the parchment in our direction like he was scolding us. "The prophecy doesn't mention true love's kiss or long hair or guessing names."

"You pulled it out just to tell us that?" Lila crossed her arms and quirked an eyebrow.

Matt's lips twisted into a frown. "I'm making a point."

"Is the point that you're pedantic?" Bethany asked, fake smile plastered on her face despite looking a little green around the gills. "Because we're aware."

"You have vomit in your hair," Matt shot back, stuffing the scroll into his pack.

"Okay, okay." I raised my hands and addressed the group. "Let's all take a moment to breathe."

Lila wrinkled her nose in my direction. "Before we embark on any side quests, there need to be baths all around. And food."

"Hey! I just killed the Vile One." I waved at the decapitated corpse behind me for emphasis. "Cut me some slack."

Rion cleared his throat. "Before I was interrupted, I did have a point."

I gestured at him. "Continue, then."

"So commanding," Matt whispered, snickering.

I bit my lip to keep laughter from bubbling out. I was covered in blood, and some of the castle residents had poked their heads out of their hiding places. Hysterically laughing wouldn't be a good look.

"The point is, with no current royal family to assume the

throne, and with you being the individual who hacked off the head of the Vile One, the job to rule the kingdom falls on your shoulders.”

Huh. He said hacker of heads. The alliteration was nice, but there could be a better title in my future. Better nip it in the bud.

I crossed my arms. “Let’s not go with ‘hacked off the head,’ please. And there’s a princess in a tower who is the lawful ruler. I’m just . . . a prophetic pawn here.”

“Yes, but until she is freed, you are the rightful monarch.” Rion nodded to the empty throne.

I shook my head. “But I don’t want to be the rightful monarch.”

“Arek,” Sionna said, pinching the bridge of her nose. “We can’t leave the throne open while we complete the side quest.”

“But—”

“Do you really want to have to do it all again,” Bethany whined while flailing her hands emphatically, “if someone even worse sneaks in and sits there while we’re gone and takes the throne?” She clutched her harp tighter and absolutely did not look at the headless body slumped nearby. “Or do you want to suck it up and proclaim yourself king for like a few hours?”

I shot a look at Matt. He shrugged, his expression not reassuring at all. Ugh, I really wanted for this all to be over because I wanted to talk to him in *private* and do the whole confessing thing that had been eating away at me for months. Putting on a dead man’s crown seemed the opposite of wrapping up the quest, but I couldn’t deny that Bethany’s point was sound. I *didn’t* want to do this all again.

“I . . . um . . . I . . .”

Rion took my stuttering as acceptance. He unsheathed his sword and knelt on the stone floor. "All hail, King Arek!"

"Oh no!" I held up my hands. "No. Stop that. Don't do that."

Bethany strummed her harp, her pale lips curled into a smirk. "All hail, King Arek," she sang, and with the magic of the instrument, the statement amplified into a chorus of voices. *Bitch.*

The proclamation rang out in the small room, and suddenly, everyone knelt. The few servants who had wandered in at the commotion. The remaining followers of the Vile One. And my fellow questors, my friends, those traitorous assholes.

"Get the crown," Matt said, nudging me with his shoulder, positively gleeful. His lips tugged into a smug grin that stuck to his ridiculous face. He sank to his knees. "Put it on."

"No. It's on the head. The *severed* head. That's disgusting."

"You're wearing gloves. It'll be fine."

"And then what? Put it on *my* head? Fuck that. Gore will get in my hair."

"It's already in your hair. It's all over you."

"Don't be a coward," Lila said. She was the last to kneel, but she did, which was surprising. She even pulled back her hood, revealing the long braids of her blond hair, and the pointed tips of her ears. "Do it."

"Do it. Do it. Do it," Matt whispered, cackling.

Lila reached out and pressed a single fingertip to my arm. "Peer pressure."

"Ugh." I marched back to the head, considered it, and nope. Putting on a bloody crown was not part of the vision. Neither was the whole ruling thing. Absolutely not part of the deal. But for appearances, and until the true heir from the tower

was freed, I guessed ruling for a few hours wouldn't be so bad. Especially if it shut up the irritating chants.

I yanked the golden crown off the head. It rolled to the edge of the step and teetered for an agonizing second before toppling off and hitting the stone with a gag-inducing splat. I swallowed down bile, desperately trying not to pull a Bethany in front of my soon-to-be subjects. Knocking the lifeless figure off the dais, I ascended the remaining stairs and stood in front of the throne.

It was ornate, in a menacing way, with terrifying monsters etched into the decoration, and intimidating all on its own. It shouldn't have been—it was only a chair—but I did pause at the idea of plopping down where the guy I just killed used to sit.

I took a breath. “Well, all right then.” Despite my misgivings, I placed the crown on my head, turned quickly, and dropped onto the throne. It was not at all comfortable.

I don't really know what happened in that moment, but something in the room swelled, and crackled, then broke over me in a wave of warmth and potential. The hair on my arms stood on end and a shiver traced down my spine. It was like standing in a field during an oncoming storm as the pressure and expectation of something much bigger than myself bared down on me, a reminder of the wonder inherent in magic and in the world, and my place in it. In an instant, I was suffused with the song of everyone who'd come before, and how all roads had led me there, to that place, to that moment, to that role.

It lasted the length of a breath, then evaporated.

The chanting ceased. I squirmed, trying to find a position that didn't twinge my back. All eyes stared at me. Yeah, this was

a bad idea. Almost as bad as leaving my house in the middle of the night nine months ago, clutching the prophetic scroll that landed me here with Matt trailing behind me.

“Say something,” Sionna hissed.

“Oh.” I leaned forward, shaking myself out of a stupor. “Uh. The Vile One is dead. I killed him. So, I hereby assume the throne of Ere in the realm of Chickpea and declare myself King Arek.” I licked my chapped lips. “But only until we free the princess from the tower. My rule will be for a few hours. Tops. An interim king, if you will. Yay. Huzzah. And all that.”

Sionna snorted.

“Spoken like a true statesman,” Matt said with a grin.

Lila rolled her eyes. Bethany, still pale, picked a few strings on her harp, and my words echoed outward, throughout the castle and the grounds.

A round of polite applause followed.

“Can . . . uh . . .” I swallowed. “Can we have the room please? And maybe a cleanup crew?”

The few interlopers scattered, including the last remaining living followers of the Vile One, and soon the room was clear save for us and the dead.

“Did you lot feel that?”

They blinked at me.

“Feel what?” Bethany asked. She clutched her stomach with one hand. “Sick? Because yes.”

“No. The magic? Matt, did you do something?”

He furrowed his brow. “Not that I’m aware of.”

“Huh.” It could have been the release of stress, the receding of adrenaline, leaving me chilled and shaking. But I knew better. After nine months of prophetic fuckery, I recognized the

presence of magic. The way warmth and power washed over me on the throne mirrored the prickling shock when Matt used his staff, or the sweep of mystical promise when I touched the sword for the first time in the bog. There was more brewing in the throne room than I wanted to be part of, and the sooner we found the princess and installed her as queen, the sooner I could be done with being destiny's pawn.

I slapped my hands on the arms of the throne and stood. "Well, let's find this princess, then."

"Now?" Bethany asked.

"Now," I said with a sharp nod.

Lila frowned. "But baths and food."

"And rest," Sienna said.

"Now." I pointed to the crown. "Consider it my first act as king."

"Your first act as king is to not want to be king," Matt said, smile lurking around the curve of his mouth. "Sounds about right."

Bethany snickered.

"Come on," I said, descending the dais and striding quickly out of the room. "The sooner we find this princess, the sooner we can put this whole quest behind us."

CHAPTER 2

“**R**ion, I swear to all the spirits in this realm and the next that if the princess *isn't* in this tower, I'm going to charm you to walk off a turret,” Bethany threatened as we climbed to the top of the tower. She huffed and puffed loudly. Bethany consisted of soft curves, an ample bosom, and a round face. She was not above using all her assets, including her magic, to get what she wanted. In this case, it was a faster way up the never-ending spiral staircase.

I did not blame her as this was the third tower we'd climbed, and I was exhausted. And still quite sticky and anxious to have a conversation with a certain someone.

Matt continued to hobble. I continued to eye him. He didn't complain. I wanted him to complain. It would be better than seeing his little grimace and the tight lines around his mouth every time he stepped too aggressively.

“This will be the one,” Rion said. “I'm sure of it.”

“Good, because I regret not changing my clothes and taking a bath before we chose to embark on this journey.”

“We *all* regret it,” Sionna muttered.

I placed a hand on my tacky crimson tunic, right over my heart. “You wound me.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“Oh, stop it.” Matt’s pain finally emerged as irritation. “It’s not like any of us smell like roses right now. We all stink. But if we can convince this princess that we’re the good guys and that we’re here to free her, she might let us stay, at least for the night.”

“Oh! I see the door!” Rion ran ahead, his armor clinking, his enthusiasm not exactly contagious. “And it’s locked! This is a good sign.”

“Shouldn’t there be guards?” Lila squinted in the gloom.

I scuffed a heel through the layer of dust on the stone steps. “Not if there are locks. Right?”

She squeezed past me on the stairs and peered ahead. She pulled her ring of tools from her belt, intent on picking the lock at the door, the same way she’d gotten us around the portcullis a few hours before, but Matt beat her to it. He leveled the jewel of his staff at the lock, said a jumble of magic words, and the door blasted open.

“No need for subtlety,” he said, tapping the end of his staff on the floor. A swirl of motes puffed into the air. “It’s not like we’re sneaking in this time.”

She tilted her head, considering. She slipped her tools into her hip bag and slid silently back into a position by the wall.

Wait. There was an awfully thick layer of grime on the floor. No one had been up here in a long time. But that door was definitely padlocked from the outside. A sinking feeling took hold in my gut, and despite Rion’s zeal, unease prickled through the rest of the group as well.

I picked my way to the front, my steps leaving distinct footprints in the dust, and pushed on the opened door. It swung

inward a few inches on creaking hinges. Cobwebs dislodged and fell in graceful wafts to collect on my borrowed crown. An uncannily cool breeze barreled past my right shoulder, followed by a stale smell that made me lift my sleeve to my nose.

A lump formed in my throat. Somehow this was scarier than bursting into the throne room, blood pumping, magic sword in my hand, to finally face my destiny. Because if my gut was right about what I thought lay deeper in this room, then my life was fucked. My hands shook. Sweat beaded along the back of my neck. I pushed the door harder, and it scraped along the stone.

On the other side sat a skeleton. An honest-to-spirits skeleton propped on a low bed near a sliver of a window. She wore a brocaded dress that sported moth-eaten holes, had glittering rings on her fingers, and an open journal sat at her right hand. The last princess of the former royal family had died a long time ago, locked in a tower, and all that was left was her bones.

Bethany craned her neck to look. “Well, your princess isn’t in another tower. She’s dead.”

Matt stood next to my shoulder. “Huh. I guess you are the rightful ruler.”

Panic seized my heart. I froze. *Shit!*

The group shuffled past me, poking around and rifling through the small room’s contents, seemingly unbothered by the big reveal that the princess was dead, and I was king.

“Well, what do we do now?” The question erupted from me in a shout, echoing in the enclosed space, bouncing off the stone. My pulse thudded at the thought of being *responsible* for a whole kingdom. I clutched the hilt of the sword at my side with a death grip.

“We should probably do something with this body.” Lila tugged on a piece of finery, and the skeleton slumped over. She inspected a bony hand, then slid a jeweled ring off a finger.

“Have some respect for the dead, Lila.” Rion crossed his arms, his tone stern.

“I’m sure she doesn’t mind.”

“Lila.”

She sighed. “*Fine.*”

Rion’s posture eased.

“We shouldn’t leave her up here, though.” Lila poked the skeleton’s shoulder. “Funeral rites are important.”

“Okay, noted. But what about our other problem?” I pointed to the bloodied crown, which kept sliding into an incongruously jaunty angle on my head.

Ignoring me and my existential crisis, Matt pushed aside a pair of fluttery curtains and peered out of a tiny window, more of an arrow slit than anything else. He stilled, and the tip of his staff pulsed with a warm glow.

“Matt?” Sionna asked, wary. “What’s wrong?”

He gestured to the window with a frantic flap of his hand. “Him.”

“Him?” I asked, voice cracking as my thoughts immediately went to the Vile One. I pushed forward, stepping around Rion’s bulk, trying to ignore the uptick in my pulse as I squeezed close to Matt. I’d beheaded him, so he couldn’t possibly be back. Unless his corpse was somehow shambling around outside. Hopefully not, because ew. “Him who?”

“*Him!* The wizard!”

Sure enough, the old man who’d declared me as the chosen one now tottered around the gardens inside the castle walls.

I'd recognize the pointy-hatted bastard anywhere. If there was anyone who could fix my current predicament, it would be him.

"That's the guy who gave you the scroll?" Bethany asked, voice pitching high in incredulity.

"Yes," I said with a sharp nod.

"And you followed it? What the hell? I knew you two had extraordinarily little self-preservation skills, but honestly."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time. And hey, it worked out in the end, kind of. Anyway, Matt, did you call him?" I asked, eyeing the glowing tip of Matt's staff.

"Ha! If I knew how to call him, I would've asked for his help ages ago."

I didn't know how to take that, so I decided to move on. "Look, you lot take care of the princess. Matt and I will talk to the wizard. He had to have popped up here to offer advice or another prophecy or something. Matt and I will figure it out. Okay? Okay."

I slapped my hand on Matt's shoulder and dragged him out of the room before anyone could object.

It took us a few minutes to find the door that led out of the castle into the correct garden, but once we finally did, we tumbled outside in a hurry. Craning my neck, I searched for the tower where our friends remained and spied Lila's pale hand waving from an arrow slit up above us. Well, at least we had witnesses to whatever would happen.

"Hey! Hey, you!" I shouted, striding across the lawn.

The old wizard turned, his worn robes swishing around his ankles. His long, gray-streaked hair fluttered in a non-existent breeze. He was so old and gnarled that his wrinkles

had wrinkles, and his shoulders hunched. Despite his feeble appearance, he radiated power. The air shimmered with magic, and it prickled along my skin.

“Me?” he asked innocently. Then he squinted. “Oh! Hello.”

“Hello. Hi. How are you?”

He made a humming noise, then turned his attention to Matt. He stared at the slow flashing light emanating from the staff in Matt’s hand. “Ah, I see,” he said with a nod. “You’ve done it, then?”

Matt blinked. “Done what?”

“Succeeded. Congratulations!”

“You’re . . . not here to take back the staff, are you?” Matt pulled it closer to his chest. I didn’t want to break it to him, but I was fairly certain that if the wizard wanted it back, proximity wasn’t going to be an issue.

“Hm? No. No, that’s not why I’m here.”

“Great,” I said, clapping my hands, drawing the attention back to me. “Why are you here? Because we would love some help. We just found the rightful ruler dead in a tower, and somehow I’ve been named king, and I don’t think I want to be king, much less know how to rule a kingdom. So, do you have another scroll you could give us? Wise words? Direction?”

He peered at me under bushy eyebrows, looking confused. “Ah, no.”

Matt and I exchanged a glance. “No?” I asked.

The wizard shook his head. “Correct.”

“Wait, what?” Matt asked.

“Exactly.”

I clenched my hands so tight my fists trembled. “Okay, so why are you here?”

He blinked his ancient eyes, and then his gaze traveled the length of my body, from the scuffs of my boots to the golden monstrosity of the crown on my head. He laughed. Not a tinkling sound or a chuckle but an outright deep belly laugh. He bent over, grasping his knees as he guffawed loudly and enthusiastically and totally at my expense.

“You know,” I said, arms crossed, annoyed down to my bones, “you were much more talkative when you persuaded me to run away from home nine months ago to fulfill my destiny, which, I might add, included almost dying multiple times.”

The wizard continued to giggle.

“You do remember, right? Appearing the day after my birthday? Telling my best friend he could wield magic? Handing me a prophetic scroll?” I flapped my hand in Matt’s direction, and he yanked the offending parchment from his pouch. “Does this look vaguely familiar?”

The wizard finally regained his composure, clearing his throat. He regarded the scroll with an arched eyebrow. “Yes. Of course it does.”

“Well?” I prompted.

“That is the prophecy detailing the end of the tyrant known as the Vile One.”

Okay. Not wrong, but not information I didn’t already have. I leaned in. “And?”

The wizard shrugged.

I waited, thinking there might be more information forthcoming, but a solid minute passed in silence. I threw up my hands in disgust. “Can you at least tell me what to do about being the king? Am I even supposed to be king?”

He rubbed his chin. “No.”

“No, you can’t tell me, or no, I’m not supposed to be king?”
Please let it be the second option. Please let it be the second option.
I hoped for an answer, but as another long pause stretched between us, I realized there wouldn’t be one. My frustration and fatigue reached a breaking point. “This is useless!” I yelled. “Absolutely useless! Come on, Matt. I bet the others are dying of laughter up there.”

The wizard snorted. With a wave of his hand, he unrolled his own scroll from midair and plucked a quill from nothing. Pinching the feather between his fingers, he made a single tally mark on the parchment.

“What’s that?” Matt asked, craning his neck. “What are you doing?”

Sighing, the wizard snapped his fingers, and the parchment and quill disappeared in a spark. He folded his hands in the wide sleeves of his robes. “There are thousands of prophecies in the world,” he said. “Not all of them are true. This one happened to be. I’m marking it down in my records.”

“Wait, *what?*” Matt asked again, his voice a screech. “You keep data?”

Though I echoed Matt’s outrage, I felt like he missed the bigger issue. “Do you mean to tell us there was a chance we could’ve *failed?*” I’d never felt more betrayed in my life. The one bedrock of this whole journey was the prophecy, and it could’ve been *wrong?* My entire world tilted. “We could have *died?* What the fuck?”

“You didn’t,” the wizard offered helpfully. “This proph-
etess has a ninety-five percent accuracy rating. It’s quite astonishing.”

Matt made a very complicated face at that information.

I felt like my soul left my body. We had relied on that prophecy like it was truth, and now I found out that *it might not have been*. I went light-headed and staggered over to lean against the castle wall to keep from face-planting.

The wizard was unfazed. "This has been nice, but I have a few more of these visits to complete today, so I better be off."

"Wait." Matt stepped toward the wizard, hand outstretched. He had already squirreled the prophecy back away in his bag. "Do you have another prophecy about Arek? Or about someone in our group? Did the prophetess write anything else?"

Good thinking, Matt. Always the one to ask the right questions. One of the many reasons I liked him so much. I currently couldn't be trusted to do so. I was in the midst of a mental breakdown, because the wizard clearly said he had a few more visits. A few more visits? How many prophetic schemes was this guy running? How many teenagers did he send out on quite-possibly-fake adventures?

The wizard's eyebrows angled oddly. "No."

Matt deflated.

Ignoring him, the wizard pinned me with another intense look. "Enjoy your reign, King Arek." Then he smirked.

Oh, that was uncalled for. I pushed away from the wall, grabbed the hilt of my sword, intent on doing something brash and kingly, but the wizard merely waved his hands and popped out of existence.

Matt shook his fist at the sparkles hanging in the air in the wake of the wizard's departure. "Well, screw you!" he yelled.

"Wow. Such language," I said. "Who's the mature one here?"

Matt swung his head and, oh yes, *there* was the withering glare I was so fond of. He took a steadying breath, one hand

pressed to the center of his chest, the other curled around his staff in a death grip. “Let’s go find the others,” he said. “And give them the wonderful news that we have no plan, no help, and that you are indeed the king of Ere in the realm of Chickpea.”

“Yay. Long live me, I guess.” I gave him the best smile I could muster.

Matt narrowed his eyes, then shook his head as his expression softened. He even huffed a laugh as he stomped to the door. I followed, because the only solid thing in my world was Matt, and I was certain that, together, we’d figure something out.

CHAPTER 3

“He reigned for forty years.” The firelight played across Bethany’s features, and her eyes reflected the funeral pyres. “I don’t know why we anticipated finding anything different.”

“Anything different than a pile of bones? Really?” I adjusted the crown. It was so heavy it gave me a headache and pinched my ears when it slid down too far. I considered tossing it into the fire as well, but Lila would probably snatch it out of the air and squirrel it away before I could blink. And throwing it away wouldn’t relieve the burden of ruling the kingdom. I’d declared myself king. Bethany broadcasted it throughout the castle, the grounds, and the surrounding village with her magic harp. I was royally screwed.

“I mean, I guess you hear the term ‘princess’ and automatically assume, you know, a typical princess.” Matt gestured helplessly.

“You know what they say about assuming things. It makes an ass out of you and me.” They all glared at me. Matt even groaned. “What? I make jokes in uncomfortable situations. You should know that about me by now. It’s not like you haven’t

spent the last several months of your lives trying to keep me from becoming a corpse.”

Sionna rubbed her thumb between her eyes. “Yes, we have, despite your jokes.”

The fire crackled. Sweat rolled down my spine. The heat pouring from the flames was unrelenting, even with the cool evening. It had been a solid four or five hours since we’d raided the throne room and I’d unwittingly become king. The day was waning and so was my patience and energy. And I still hadn’t found a bath.

“And the wizard had nothing to offer?” Rion asked. “At all?”

Matt and I had already provided the painful details of our conversation with the wizard, but I could see how it would seem unbelievable. I had actually talked to the guy and I could scarcely believe it.

“Nothing,” Matt said on a sigh. “We completed the quest and now we’re a tally mark in his records.” He tossed a twig into the fire. “And Arek is king.”

The group stood in silence, the only sound the popping and crackling of the fire. Embers floated in a soft breeze. The sky inched toward twilight. We needed a plan, at least for the night, but everyone was exhausted and, for the moment, content to merely exist in the same spot for a while.

“You know,” Lila said, breaking the silence, “for a dead lady, she’s very poetic.” She held up the journal from the tower. “Listen to this: ‘If I ever get out of here, I’m going to tell her I love her.’” She pressed the book to her chest. “That’s so sweet. Sad as all the hells, but sweet.”

Matt shifted next to me, staff grasped in his hand, looking pained. His ankle must be hurting again. He refused to

sit down when I offered to pull a chair from one of the many castle rooms into the garden.

I huffed in Lila's direction. "Did you steal the journal?"

"What? Not like she needs it." She tilted her chin toward the dual pyres.

Bethany grabbed it from her hand. She flipped through it. "This might have information we need to figure out how to rule this blasted kingdom."

Cocking my head to the side, I considered the group. "We? Rule?"

She blinked. "You're the king."

"Yeah. So?"

"So. That means you are in charge."

"I realize that, kind of." I was trying hard not to think about it. "But what does that have to do with you?"

Scoffing, Bethany leveled a thoroughly unimpressed look in my direction. "I'm not leaving. This is a castle. There are beds here. And food."

"And the rest of you?"

"This is just getting interesting," Lila said with a grin. "I'm staying, at least for a bit."

Sionna rolled her eyes at Lila but nodded. "Same."

"I swore an oath to you," Rion said. He shrugged. "The God of Vows heard my words and would not look kindly upon my breaking them."

"But the quest is over. You don't have to protect me anymore."

Rion's brow furrowed. "You're king of this land. You need protecting now more than ever."

I opened my mouth to retort, but snapped it shut. I hadn't

thought of it that way. I'd barely thought of anything beyond fulfilling the prophecy since I'd found out about it, and since our victory, I hadn't thought beyond the next few minutes at a time.

"I don't want to be king."

"You don't?" Sionna asked.

Lila crossed her arms. "You literally put on the crown."

"Under duress!"

Matt nudged me with his shoulder. "You'll be fine. We'll all be fine. Those of us who choose to stay will help you. Like we've *been* helping. We're . . . we're a—" Matt cleared his throat. "Well, we're a group. We've congealed into something that works. We wouldn't have made it this far if we didn't."

"Matt is right," Sionna said, standing from where she had sat cross-legged on the paving stones in the courtyard. "We work well as a party."

It had been her idea to burn both the Vile One and the last princess as our first task after finding the bones. Lila and Sionna were adamant about adhering to the funeral rites according to the princess's beliefs. I wanted to ensure the Vile One couldn't be resurrected via his own dark magic. Even headless, we couldn't risk him returning. Because that would be terrifying and gruesome, and I was certain his first order of business would be to exact revenge on the individual who made him headless in the first place.

"We'll continue on this journey, together." Rion crossed his arms over his chest, the greaves of his grimy armor clanking together. With his feet shoulder-width apart, his posture ramrod straight, he moved into what I had dubbed his righteous

stance. He used it often when addressing us because, though we were all roughly the same age, he was the one with the strongest moral compass while the rest of us ran around like feral barn cats.

I couldn't stop the swell of affection that I had for this group, surprised but grateful that their friendship extended beyond the confines of a written prophecy. I rubbed my hands together. "Okay. That's great. It's settled." In an attempt at leadership, I tried to infuse my voice with the confidence of someone who was comfortable with the idea of governing a kingdom. "We'll look into this ruling thing. Tomorrow, though. Right now, I'm exhausted and gross."

"Food too," Bethany said. Matt agreed, nodding like his head was on a spring.

"Okay, food too. We should find places to rest for the night. Or one place. We'll room together for safety, just in case. And baths. And dinner. We should do that. Eat. Sleep. Be merry because, hey, we won. We fucking won!" My voice cracked on the last word, but my false cheer lifted the heavy mood. Because, despite the odds, our months of toil hadn't been for naught. The Vile One was dead because of us. The land was free.

I breathed a deep, cleansing breath, then gagged on the smell of burning flesh and ash. Huh. Not a good idea. I coughed into my hands, and Matt pounded a fist between my shoulder blades until I regained my composure.

"Yes. We did win," Rion said. "We deserve rest. Our situation will look different in the light of a new day."

"Sure, it will," I said with as much enthusiasm as I could