

# CHARMING

## CHAPTER ONE

### I

#### The One Hundredth Ball

“GODS TAKE IT, woman. Halt!”

She could barely hear his yelled order over the rushing of the wind from her galloped flight. It was easy enough escaping from the palace courtyard, making the forest road. That he chased her wasn't part of the plan, wasn't unexpected either.

She shook her head free of the thought.

“For all the hell- Stop, damnit!”

She did not obey the command hurled at her from the pounding of chasing hooves at her back.

And all this because she'd lost a blasted slipper and the bastard had decided to follow her from the ball. It wasn't enough to have danced every single waltz with the brat. No, now he was following her without a thought for himself during the middle of the night in a dark forest where bandits were rather routine, and she wasn't even armed in case the wretches did show up.

A snake slithered into the moonlight cutting the path before her.

Her horse reared and her grip on its mane faltered. The folds of her gown caught around her legs, loosening her thighs' hold on the horse's flanks. When she fell, it was with little grace, arms

tucked around her head to protect herself while she tumbled to the ground, landing on her knee and rolling as quickly as she could away from the stamping hooves above her.

His horse reared in response, a motion of its owner's demands rather than being startled. While her beast bolted, he slid from his mount's saddle before rushing to her side.

"Hades—are you alright?" He reached for her, his fingers wrapping around her flailing wrists as she struggled to right herself from the ground.

"Get off of me."

She wasn't shocked that he didn't listen to her demand, continuing to help her back to her feet, even dropping to his own knee to settle her skirts around her legs more demurely.

For three days, she had ridden to the courtyard of the palace, slipped easily from the back of her horse and walked with confidence through the front doors to attend the royal ball thrown for the prince to find a bride. Said prince stood now before her, his face hidden in shadow from the moonlight though the glow no doubt highlighted her own olive complexion.

This was the prince's hundredth ball.

At one hundred and thirty, he was a young man, not yet even having reached his majority. A long-lived race, like her people, he wouldn't be considered an adult until his hundred and fiftieth year. He was so young to have such yearning, such shadows in his eyes.

He was handsome enough, she supposed.

Ah hell.

He was stunning. Hair black as night, eyes silver, glinting like steel freshly forged; he was a soldier trained from birth to lead and defend and it was evident in the definition of his shoulders, the way he stood before her. He loved his people, and that too was something to admire. Sharp nose, square jaw, cheekbones slightly less angular, softening his visage into something beyond classically handsome, something more charming than stately when he smiled.

Would he know a battle if he had to draw the ceremonial sword at his hip? It would be easier if this repost between them was one of steel and speed.

This was not a battle, not for him.

For her...

It was one of wits and words and hearts, damn it.

She pushed away from him, denying herself the opportunity to feel the strength of him beneath her palms a last time. Three nights were too much already. She had known better than to go to the ball, but forbidden the chance, told to stay away, she had had to.

Too dangerous, her council had said, to attempt a coup at the ball amidst all of his people. But she wasn't attempting a coup, just an assassination, which was much easier, all considered. So, she'd danced with him, and it hadn't been enough to dance only the one night. Engaging him in practice in the early hours of the morning, testing his strength and his skill in a sword fight, had been an even greater pleasure for her, had been another chance to strike, another failure. Honestly, the second night of the ball should have been an end to things, but he'd whisked her from the ballroom, walked with her in his gardens, spoke of his people the way she spoke of hers. She was born to fight, not talk, not dance. And yet it was the talking, the dancing she remembered most.

Not that she would think on that now.

"Why do you insist on running from me?"

"Why do you insist on chasing after?" She heard the petulance in her voice and would have blushed at the sound if she were not so well trained to hold her emotions in check.

Though she would not admit it, she enjoyed the bickering between them, the spirit he displayed. Pampered he may be, but there was a strength to him that reminded her of her people,

called out to her as kin. And she could not and would not call him kin, no matter the desire swirling within her, reflected in his gaze. “I do not like you, prince. We have had our fun these past nights. Let it be enough between us.”

“Never.” He reached for her, pulling her close to him, bending his head to her own though his lips did not touch hers. They never touched hers, though she did not doubt he wanted to. “Never enough between us; you feel it too. I know you do.”

No man’s breath should smell so fresh, not after a night of champagne and wine and sweets and a jaunt through the woods. He should smell of horse and sweat and look put upon, not as though he were just now remade for the day. She must look a disgrace compared to him, her russet hair a mess around her shoulders, dress stained from her tumble from her horse.

She did not care for customs or norms, finding more comfort in breeches than the tulle of a skirt, and yet for him she had found a gown and now it was ruined and that was quite fine. She stomped her foot. Perhaps a bit more petulance, simpering condescension might make the male rethink his desire for her. “Foolish boy, I feel nothing for you.” Her finger extended to poke at his chest, push him to her desires, make space between his heat that warmed her through. “You know nothing of me. Three days does not a knowledge grant. We have danced and wined but little else. If there were words spoken between us, I do not recall them.”

“Liar. I was there too, my lady. We shared many words.” He leaned into her finger, forcing her to retreat or bow to his advance, yield to his physicality pressing into her. “I am not blind. I know the expression in your eyes. Why run from me when you know my heart? I have told you—”

“You have spoken with the passion of a moment upon you, nothing more. Any feeling you profess is that of close encounters late at night when heads were full of drink and eyes upon the stars. What you feel is a lie, despite your words.” The argument tasted of ash against her tongue. Lies upon lies and all starting the moment she was introduced at the opening of the ball and descended the stairs to the main dance floor.

She did not fall in love. Love was a thing for simpering toffs, not soldiers and assassins and princes and priests. Her people needed her return. No doubt they were already searching after her leaving.

Yet she stared at him, waiting for his words to deny her denial. Curse him.

Damn her.

“Why are you saying this? Why are you denying us?” His hands gripped her shoulders, hauling her close once more where she had let the small space between them build. “You spoke the words back to me, Ella.”

“That is not my name.”

He stared at her and her heart ached at the pain in his gaze. Damn him, she should not feel for him and his integrity, his humor, his compassion. This prince who was barely a man and had stolen her thoughts for three days’ time and would steal her from the world she could not leave behind. No, and that was worse, that he wanted to keep her with him and she was weak enough to desire it. If he learned her name, he would hate her, hate who and what she was and yet she wanted nothing more than to tell him and see what response he would have.

Her fingers spread over the crisp feel of his doublet, the velvet brocade stitched with golden thread to set off the deep red umber, pressing for the beat of his heart beneath her hand. He’d met her at the bottom of the stairs and extended his hand. She was a silly girl, Sweet Darkness, was it really only two nights’ past, to not know the man who stood before her was a prince, to ignore the tittering around her when she obliged her partner and slid gracefully into a quadrille struck by the orchestra.

“Another lie.” He cupped her cheek, and even knowing the road was clear at her back, that she was free to run if she but turned away, she could not move, denied the desire to, holding his gaze which so easily captured hers.

She was soft towards him.

She should not yield.

It would be so easy to take the sword at his hip and finish what her people had long sought but been denied. Who would have thought to enchant the prince in a dance? It was trickery and not the way of the woods that were subtle and swift.

“What is your name then, if not that which you have so easily said to me these past nights?”

The name was there on her tongue, waiting to sound in the air between them, hiding for a desperate moment more.

Leaves shivered with the breeze, broke across the moonlight filtering through their canopy, showing his face within the darkness. He didn’t think her name would matter. Surely an Abigail or a Tabitha or even a Rebecca would not change his mind towards her? But her name was none of those. Her name was a title, and he would loathe the title once he heard it.

To have his hatred felt a worse fate than to slip a knife between his ribs and end him quickly.

“Please do not ask this of me.” It was the only plea she had ever made in her life, would ever make in her life. Yes, she’d started the damn conversation, opened herself to the questioning, but she didn’t want to answer him. She wasn’t ashamed of who she was. But there was a niggling prayer deep in her gut, a wish to the Night to let her carry on the charade of these three days rather than go back to what she was. “Stop this.” If he heard the emotion in her voice, perhaps he would take it to heart and leave her be before she was required to spout harsher realities to him. Let this memory be sweet. Do not taint it with the truth.

“I am your prince.”

She looked away, fingers digging into his jacket. Her words came out a shrill laugh. “You are nothing to me.”

He could not be.

She wanted to tell him to look at where he was. Ask him why he thought a noble woman would run to the forest when not a single city dweller dared venture so close to the wood’s edge without a full contingent of soldiers to guard them? Had he not realized where they were, where she led them?

Her voice hardened into a growl, casting aside the airy lightness his courtiers so easily used, the lilting accent that each word rang with, to allow him a glimpse of who she was, why he should run. Her people’s tongue was harsher than his, the tone distinguishable. “You are a spoiled brat barely out of his leading strings. An infant thinking himself in love. It is easy enough to spout silken promises that innocents will believe. Why would I want a whelp when I could have a wolf of the forest to wed?”

He jerked away from her, the venom of her words.

A lifetime of animosity built between their peoples, an animosity she had never herself felt, and yet could imitate without trial, sounded in her words. “A city dweller, protected by his walls.” She spat on the ground between them. He stepped back another foot to avoid the assault. “You are weak; your people are weak. Your king is an old man and his son an imbecile who is easy to tempt, too trusting by far, a walking corpse without the sense to die like prophecy demands.”

Anger sparked in his eyes, the mounting fury giving his softer edges the strength of steel, unyielding, unbending. Sweet Darkness, but this was no boy before her. She knew that but couldn’t help tempting him, watching the spark of temper rise. How many times had she seen the same

strength enter his face, straighten his spine on the dance floor, surrounded by simpering idiots who spoke thinking their prince was a simpleton and wouldn't listen to their words?

She watched his anger flare.

He would push her away now, cast her aside as he should.

His jaw clenched tightly closed and he said nothing.

"Would you deny the truth of my words, boy?"

He snorted, a sound undignified from the man she'd come to know so well these past nights. If he smiled, she rarely saw it, and if his lips did turn up, the emotion did not reach his eyes. His face was as much a show for the world as the gown swirling around her ankles, making her a woman in his eyes rather than the warrior she was and could not change from. He would hate her when he learned who she was, an enemy on his doorstep, taken into his confidence. She'd grown on mother's milk tainted with stories of how this prince was his father's despair, a boy marked by the gods yet worshipped by none, the death of his country if he would but lay down and die.

"I am no boy."

No, he was not.

Her lungs froze when he wrapped her in his arms once more. She gripped his elbows to steady the unseemly trembling in her limbs.

She was an assassin. He should not have this power to overwhelm her the way he did.

"Tell me you do not love me."

"I do not love you." There was no conviction to her words.

"Say it again, for I do not believe you."

"Foolish boy," was barely a breath of air between them, meant more for her than him.

He bent his head to her, and she nearly gave into the desire, nearly let his lips touch hers, brand her in a way she dared not know, that he most certainly was not meant to know. She was a core of iron. There was no love inside her. She closed her eyes, blocking her mind from the thought of the sweetness of his lips, the longing to reciprocate. He pulled back without touching her, pulled back to stare into her gaze, saved her from reaching out herself.

"There is no other who compares to you." He cupped her cheek in one hand, brushing his thumb across her mouth, his expression a mix of awe and consternation. She knew that look, imagined it similar to the one on her own face. "Is it that you run from me? Is it the chase that goads me so?"

"Yes."

He smiled. "Lying again."

Truly she wasn't. That she ran from him, rebuffed him, wanted him, was part of the appeal. Merciful Night, if she'd just remained at his side until the last chime of midnight and told him no, she would be free.

Her fingers smoothed over the rumple of his sleeve.

"Tell me what it is about you that I cannot resist." He caught her stare, this prince cursed by his gods, feared by his people for the destruction his death foretold, desired for his place beside a throne. "Tell me it is a spell or a curse that you have cast upon me and I will let you go." The spell was not of her making. His eyes dropped to her lips when she made to respond that she knew darker magics than a simple enchantment of a heart. "Tell me, and make me believe, that you feel nothing for me."

She could not make the lie sound in her own head. How could she convince him that she felt nothing beyond what any of his nobles felt, was nothing but another lass out to bed a prince when

she was meant to kill him, and found herself equally enthralled? She could not love a man like this. And she could not lie convincingly enough that she didn't.

Very well.

She released her hold on his arms, trailed her hands over his chest to his hips, her right hand settling over the hilt of his sword, the filigreed steel fitting neatly in her grasp. "Do you know how easy it would be to kill you, Prince?"

His eyebrows rose, questioning her meaning, her intent.

She slapped the hilt against his side, forced the scabbard to sway against the length of his leg. "Is this truly the first you've worried about it? You rode out here with no guard at your back, no weapons in your hands. The sword at your hip is for ceremony and you've no dagger to block with. It would be so easy to steal your blade and run you through. A thousand and one dreams of your death would be easily accomplished and you look at me as though I am innocent in my thoughts and deeds. You're a fool to think I could feel aught for you."

She watched the doubt tighten his eyes as he stared at her. What type of woman would speak so forthright about death or the dealing of it? "You would not harm me." She heard the hesitation, the question of his next words. "You, a woman, could not do so even if you tried. What do you know of sword and shield?" He removed his hand from her face, covering hers atop his sword hilt. "Why are you running from me? Why are you pushing me away?"

*Because you cannot love me, Prince. Not and know who I am. And I cannot love you.*

And love was not a thing of three night's invention, no matter what fairy tales the children told.

She could not say that though. He would take hope like a bone, bury the feeling deep within his chest so he could dig it out some day like a dog. Hope would only hurt him more when she denied it again and slit his throat.

So why couldn't she say the words to him? Why couldn't she kill him like she should? "I have no desire to be a princess."

"I have no desire to be prince." He shrugged off her words, his fingers tracing whorls over hers beneath his grip on his sword.

"You don't understand, city-man. I have no desire to be a princess. No *Dienobolos* would."

She felt the stutter of his heart despite the distance between them.

His gaze sharpened on the angular planes of her face, her leaner build compared to his people's stancher heights. Her hair was uncommon to the city, but norm enough within the trees. The olive of her skin was more suited to hiding within branches than working ploughed fields.

He shook his head, and his hand clenched hers, the threat of danger pulsing from him in waves. "A child of the Woods would not come to the Capital. Not for any call. Not even for a chance at killing me. They would have tried it before now if they dared."

The last assassin king had forbidden the attempt.

But she was queen, and her word was now law, even when council spoke in opposition.

She buried the tears beneath a growl. "Then ask me my name, prince, and hear my answer."