

## Chapter One: The Dying Boy

It was hot in my room, dark and stifling. The heavy red curtains were drawn against the window in such a way that not even a bare trickle of light could seep into the room, and the window behind them was firmly locked. The healer had suggested it a month or so ago, convinced that sunlight and fresh air would actually make me worse, but I didn't know how that was possible, considering the fact I was dying.

Not that anyone would say that to my face, of course, for fear of upsetting me, perhaps, or just because they didn't want to accept it themselves, that a seventeen-year-old boy, Prince Candale of Carnia, was dying, but I knew it all the same. It wasn't a complete surprise to me either, as I'd never been particularly strong, suffering from seizures all of my life. But I'd never thought that I would die like this, wasting away in the darkness of my room.

It had all started innocently enough, with a few bad headaches and the odd dizzy spell. After I'd almost collapsed in the Great Hall one evening, my father, Prince Gerian, had insisted that I go to bed. I had gone, complaining the whole time, insisting it was just a bad summer's cold and that I'd be all right again in a few days. Only I'd gotten worse, and quickly, too, and within a few weeks I was bedridden.

Some days were better than others. On the good days I could sit up; I could even hold a conversation with someone, although it might take me a while to get my words out. But on the bad days I was unable to do anything for myself; somebody had to wash me, feed me, even turn me over. It was something I had found embarrassing, at first, but after a while, as the bad days had become more frequent, it had no longer seemed to matter. In fact, I had become grateful for the help. My strength had gone and it had taken my dignity with it, leaving me trapped in my bedroom, in my red-covered bed, at the mercy of the healers who came, and went, and failed all the while, to cure me.

When my bedroom door swung open, it brought with it a much-needed blast of fresh air and light. For a moment I could only blink, as my eyes adjusted to it, but then my vision cleared and I saw my sister, Aylara, standing there, peering around the door. She gave me a bright, but nervous grin. "Hello," she said.

"Hello," I replied.

Then her blue eyes narrowed. "Gods, Dale, you look awful. Like a living skeleton."

"Thank you," I said, dryly. I struggled to sit upright, pulling myself up against the red silken cushions, shoving them as best as I could beneath me to support my back and shoulders. But moving like this hurt, it made my arms ache, and in the end Aylara had to come over and help me, holding me up while she arranged the cushions behind me. "Thank you," I said again, genuinely this time.

"Would you like to go outside?" she asked me in a quiet voice. The struggle it had been for me to sit upright had robbed her of her bright smile.

"I'd love to," I said. "But I can't walk."

"I'm not asking you that, Dale. I'm asking if you want to go outside."

"Then, yes, I would."

"Good." She gave me another bright smile and then turned on her heel and walked out of my room, closing the door behind her. For a moment I could only stare at the wooden obstacle, not sure what to think. Had Aylara really come to see me, and helped me to sit up, just so she could ask me if I wanted

to go outside? It was such an odd thing to do, especially when she already knew the answer. I was desperate to be taken outside, to feel the sun on my face, smell the lush grass and feel a cool breeze against my skin. Was she just trying to torment me? Confuse me? Or was this some sort of surreal dream?

A moment later, the door opened again and Aylara returned, but this time she had Lord Kal with her.

Kal had been my friend for years, since I was a child. He was a few years older than me, being twenty-three, but we had always gotten on well together. He had taught me to hunt, with birds and with dogs, and the first time I had ever gotten drunk had been with him. He had always been a major part of my life and often came with Aylara to visit me, so to see them together was no real surprise. But the look in his eyes now made me instantly suspicious. He looked nervous.

"I'll take the blankets and pillow downstairs," my sister said. "You can carry Dale for me." I watched in silent amazement as she opened the carved chest that stood at the foot of the bed and helped herself to two blankets and a spare pillow. Kal, meanwhile, was picking up my black, silk robe from over the arm of the chair in the corner of my room.

"Carry me?" I whispered.

"Outside," Aylara said, over her shoulder. "It's what you want, isn't it? To sit in the garden?"

"Yes," I said. "But ... but Father won't like this."

"Father isn't here," Aylara replied. "And I'll take full responsibility for this."

"Oh," I said. "All right. If ... if you're prepared to stand up to him, then it's not my place to argue with you."

Kal studied me and then half turned to my sister. "I'm not so sure this is a good idea," he said, in a low voice. "He looks terrible. Maybe your father is right; perhaps rest is the best thing for him."

"No," I said. "It ... it is a good idea. I've rested all summer."

"Just bring him, Kal," Aylara said, in her no nonsense voice, and she left the room carrying the blankets in her arms. Kal looked back at me.

"You have your orders," I said, with a forced grin.

"Yes, I do," Kal replied, with an equally forced smile, as he came toward me with my robe in his hands. He slipped it around my shoulders and leaned over to pick me up. "Oh," he said in a quiet voice, more to himself I think. "You hardly weigh anything, my prince." His face had turned ashen; his soft brown eyes were shadowed with worry.

"I know," I said. "I know. I am tall, though. Don't bang me on anything."

Kal laughed but it sounded strained. "You're the clumsy one," he said. "All legs and arms, always colliding with things or falling over. I think I can manage to carry you outside without knocking you against anything." He lifted me higher in his arms, cradling me against his chest, and carried me out of my bedchamber.

I hadn't left my bedchamber in almost three months, so it felt a little strange to be carried through it now, to see that it was exactly how I had left it, even down to the book I had been reading left open on my couch. I probably wouldn't get the chance to finish the book now and, only vaguely, did I wonder what the ending was.

"It feels like I have been ill forever," I told Kal. "I can't remember what it was like to be well anymore."

"No," Kal said, as we left my suite and entered the corridor outside. "It hasn't been forever. It wasn't so

long ago that you were in trouble for climbing out onto the castle roof. Do you remember?"

I laughed faintly as the image came back to my mind of how it had been that spring evening when I had climbed up onto one of the castle roofs and watched the sun set. It was before I had fallen ill, before all of this had happened to me. "I do remember," I said, clinging a little tighter to Kal's strong body as he started to go down the stairs. "Am I getting heavy?"

"No," he said. He met my eyes just briefly. The worry was still there. "You weigh less than your sister." He flushed. "Less than a kitten."

"When ... when will you be betrothed officially?" I asked.

Kal hesitated. "Candale." Then he sighed. "After."

"After?" Then it came to me. "Oh. After I'm dead?"

"Yes."

I swallowed tightly, trying to force back the lump that had formed in my throat. This was the first time that anyone had mentioned my death, my dying, out loud to me. Hearing it spoken seemed to strike the realisation of it home, like a sharp blow to my belly, and for a moment I couldn't breathe. "S-so you think I'm going to die?" I whispered finally.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "Aylara fears it. She cries about it nearly every day. No one knows how to make you better, Candale, and you can't go on being ill forever. You will either get better on your own or ..."

"Or I will die."

"Yes."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry, Candale."

"No," I said, closing my eyes briefly. "No. It's all right. You ... you're not telling me something that I don't already know."

"I'm sorry," he said again.

I just shrugged my shoulders. There wasn't anything else that either of us could say and Kal continued to carry me in silence.

I soon realised where he was taking me and my heart started to race with nervous excitement. We were headed towards my mother's garden, her own private area of grass, trees and flowers, mostly roses, in all the colours of the rainbow. It was also home to a dozen or so peafowl, which wandered around it, happily making a lot of noise, the males flashing their beautiful tail-feathers at the females. It was here that my sister and I had played together as children and where I had often gone, as a youth, to be alone. It was an ideal place to take me now, as there was little chance of being spotted, or of anyone coming across us by accident. It was also peaceful, which was something that I craved. But most of all, it was one of my favourite places to go in the entire castle, the place I had dreamed about, more often than not, while I lay in my bed. I couldn't believe that I was being taken there now.

Kal had to kick open the garden door so he could carry me outside, and then I was hit with the heady scent of roses and the sweet smell of the long grass. It was a warm day, but not as hot as the middle of summer would have been. There was a pleasant breeze and the leaves on the trees were already turning golden brown. I sighed contentedly.

Aylara had spread out a blanket for me on the grass and arranged the pillow. Kal set me down gently,

pausing to tighten the sash of my robe around my waist.

"Oh," I whispered slowly. "Oh, I love this."

"I thought that you might," my sister said. She covered me over in the second blanket. "Warm enough?"

"Too warm," I said. She eased the blanket down to lie around my middle and stroked my hair. "Better. Thank you."

"This is a good idea, right, Dale? You're not too tired for this?"

"No," I assured her, giving her a weak smile. "No, this is lovely." I closed my eyes. "I'm just going to lie here, with my eyes closed, for a moment or two. I-I won't be asleep, I'll just be resting." I opened my eyes again to look at Aylara and lifted my hand as best I could to shake my finger at her. "So no talking about me."

"We have better things to talk about than you."

"No, you don't," I said. I closed my eyes again. "The world revolves around me."

Though my eyes were shut, I could tell that Aylara was smiling at me as she answered, "Of course it does, Dale. Of course."

I listened to the sound of the birds for a while, and just enjoyed feeling the sun on my face. It was remarkable how alive and real everything felt outside in the fresh air and in the sunshine. In my room, time seemed to stop. It had felt, sometimes, as though there was no one else alive. There had been no other sounds, no other presence, except for when people came to visit me, and when I was alone, it felt as though there was only me in the world. I had forgotten how good just the sound of a bird singing could be, or the noise of a cricket chirping. It was so nice to feel the wind on my face, to feel it blowing through my hair, like the touch of gentle fingers moving. I felt alive. Even as weak as I was, as tired as I was, I felt alive.

My sister and Kal talked while I rested; well they gossiped really. It was strange to listen to their soft voices and to think about how much I had missed lying in that sterile room of mine. While I had been lying in that bed, dying slowly, the rest of the world had gone on without me. People had gone on having arguments, falling in love, having babies, continuing with their lives the way that they had before I had fallen ill. My presence, or lack of it, had made no difference. The world didn't need me in it. The world could go on without me, and it was strange to realise that it had, while for me everything had stopped.

Their voices washed over me until Aylara started to talk about my parents. "They keep fighting," she said. "Mother isn't even talking to Father now, I think. They were so quiet at dinner last night and then she just left, before the second course was even brought out, and Father didn't say a word to her."

"I wish I had been there," Kal whispered, "and offered you support. I know how hard this is for you."

I struggled to open my eyes; they felt so heavy. "Why are they arguing?" I asked weakly.

Aylara didn't look up at me. She had picked some daisies and was threading them together to make a chain, as we had done when we were children. She had always looked like a doll, my pretty sister, and now she resembled one more than ever with those daises in her lap. She was a sixteen-year-old doll, with long, blonde hair, and large, blue eyes that were framed by the longest eyelashes I had ever seen on anyone. She dressed in the height of current Court fashion, but then, Lara set the fashion trends, was the centre of Court life, even when she didn't try to be. And she always looked as though looking beautiful took no trouble at all, but I knew that wasn't the case, having been forced to wait for her for several hours while she got ready for something as simple as a hunting trip.

"I thought you were asleep," she said. "I wouldn't have mentioned it if I had known you were awake."

"Why?" I whispered. I licked my lips. My mouth was dry. Kal must have realised, as he leaned in toward me with a mug of water. I realised then, that they had brought out some food with them and had wine that they were drinking. Kal lifted me up gently and I sipped the water gratefully, spilling most of it down my chin and throat. Kal smiled at me as he cleaned it up with the corner of the blanket, and then he settled me back down again. "They're my parents, too. Besides, I told you I wasn't going to sleep."

"I didn't want to worry you." She set the chain of daises down and gave me a sad look. "They argue all the time, Candale. I don't think they have said one word to each other in the last few days that hasn't been angry or hostile in some way, or even, just coldly polite."

"Is it my fault?" I whispered. "Are they fighting about me?"

"Yes," Aylara replied, "they're fighting about you, but no, of course it's not your fault!"

I was beginning to feel very tired; that familiar heavy feeling was washing over me and everything was turning dark. I struggled to draw the blanket higher to cover me. Kal leaned over and smoothed it carefully up to my shoulders. "Thanks," I told him.

"Do you want to go back inside?" he asked me gently.

"No. I can sleep here. In a minute." I settled down, gripping the blanket tightly in my hands and turned back to my sister. "Lara, I can talk to them, if you want. I can tell them not to argue about me. What are they saying?"

"They say," she hesitated. "Well, Mother says that you're her son, that it's worth anything if a cure can be found for you. Father insists that you're not going to die, that you're just weak and she's overreacting. Then Mother mentions this woman, Mayrila, and Father gets really angry at her and the argument usually ends with one of them storming off and slamming the door ..." Aylara sighed. "The argument doesn't always start off being about you. Sometimes Father will accuse Mother of not making a big enough effort with the evening meal, with the occasional banquet, or the plans for the Summer Dance. And she will then accuse him of being a 'cold and callous bastard', and demand to know how she can possibly make an effort when you're ill and that they should cancel the damn dance anyway. Then they go on arguing about you and about this Mayrila woman. They're so worried about you and I don't think Mother can sleep. She cries all the time. It just makes things hard for them."

"She doesn't come to see me very often," I said. The relaxing sound of the birds was starting to become a loud intrusion in my ears, the peacocks crowing like a screech for the dying. I longed for some peace and quiet. Darkness was swelling around me. I needed to sleep. I closed my eyes.

"She comes when you sleep. She finds it easier." I felt warm fingers against my face, in my hair, and my sister's sweet perfume as she leaned over to kiss my forehead. "Don't worry about it, Dale, just go to sleep. Sleep well and have good dreams. And maybe when you feel better, because I *know* that you will, you'll come swimming with me. It really isn't any fun without you splashing me and pulling on my legs."

I struggled to grin at her, though I didn't open my eyes. "First thing I shall do, when I'm well, is splash you, Lara," I promised.

They fell silent for a while to let me sleep.

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I woke up as the world suddenly moved around me. I gasped, opened my eyes and found myself staring up at the bearded countenance of Davn, one of my father's men. He had lifted me up into his arms and I

could hear my sister berating him behind his back. "He wants to stay outside," she snapped. "Davn, put him down."

"I don't take orders from you, Princess Aylara," Davn replied, "but from your father. Please bring in the blankets. Don't leave them out here to get wet."

"I will not," she snapped. "Put him down now!" She sounded like a child in the throes of a temper-tantrum, as though at any moment she would stamp her foot and toss her hair.

"Please," I added in a whisper. Davn looked down at me. His brown eyes were cold, hard, almost black. He looked weary of me, as though being sent outside to fetch me was more effort than he could be bothered with. I got the feeling that he wished that I would just die to make things easier for him, and for everyone else. "Please? I really want to stay outside."

"No," he said simply, a sharp end to the argument, at least, as far as he was concerned.

"Let him stay," Kal said. "I'll take him in later, put him to bed. The prince is fine. We are looking after him."

"If you can call this 'looking after him', then yes, you were. However, Prince Gerian doesn't consider it 'looking after' and, as I take my orders from him, I'm taking Prince Candale back inside and putting him to bed." He turned and walked away from my sister, carrying me across the grass in his arms, still wrapped up in one of the blankets. I started to struggle in his grip, wriggling about, trying to strike his shoulders, demanding that he just put me down, but my blows can't have felt like anything more than a snowflake falling on a snowman, and he just ignored me.

"I'm going to talk to my father about this!" I heard my sister yell.

"Do that, Princess," Davn said, calling back over his shoulder, and then we were inside.

"Please," I said again, as Davn carried me back upstairs to my bedroom. I was painfully aware of the looks passing servants and courtiers were giving me as I was carried back to my chambers in my nightgown and robe, begging to be taken back outside. They were looks of pity and I had never been looked at like that before. "Oh, for Drakan's sake, please let me go. I was fine; it felt good to be outside, in the fresh air. My room smells of sickness, a-and it's so hot in there."

"It's not up to me," Davn replied. "I'm sorry."

"No," I whispered. "No you're not."

"No," Davn agreed. "I'm not. You should have stayed in your room."

"Why?" I asked him. "The ... the summer is almost over and it isn't hurting anyone."

"You are an embarrassment, Candale, and as such you have to stay out of sight." He took me through into my bedroom and dropped me down onto my bed. "No one wants to see what you look like now. No one should *have* to see it, yet you let yourself be taken outside and flaunt it to the entire Court. You're supposed to be Prince Gerian's heir, a prince, second in line to the throne, and you should be acting like it. You should keep yourself out of sight so that no one has to see how weak and pathetic you are now, like a child. No, you're worse than a child because at least most children can walk, feed and bathe themselves. You're weak and pathetic like an old, old man." Unceremoniously he pulled off my dressing gown and tugged the heavy covers back up around me. I just goggled at him.

In the seventeen years that I had known him, Davn had never once treated me with any respect. Oh, in public, in front of my parents, he might bow and use my title, but there had always been a mocking glint in his eyes. And in private he would be dismissive of me, ignoring me as if I was nothing more than a servant boy, making his dislike of me all too clear by his actions. I had no idea what I had done

to make him hate me but I'd always tried not to let him bother me. And usually that was easy enough to do, but not this time. This was very different, because he had never spoken to me like this before. No one had. Before I had fallen ill, I had, for the most part, been treated how a prince should be treated, with respect, dignity and awe. As a sick prince I had become a patient, someone to scold for not taking his medicine, someone to prod and poke, to strip and wash, without any regard for my embarrassment, someone who wasn't even worth talking to, as most of my healers spoke about me over my head as though I wasn't there. Now it seemed I was less than that. Now I was nothing, a no one, and Davn felt he could talk to me however he wished. "Haven't you seen yourself in the mirror?"

"No," I said.

Davn walked away from me and picked up my silver framed hand-mirror from the top of my dressing table. He returned and held it up in front of me. "There," he said. "See for yourself what your parents are so ashamed of. See why they argue so much and why you have to stay in your room, out of the way, so no one has to see what you look like now."

I reached out to take the mirror from him, struggling to curl my fingers around it. I couldn't hold up the heavy weight of the silver frame so, with a muttered oath, Davn took it from me and moved it closer to my face. I blinked and then I found myself staring at a face I barely recognised.

When I had been well, my dark hair had been thick and inky, with loose curls, like my mother's, and it had hung down to brush my shoulders and frame my face. My eyes, large and violet, had been bright, and with my pointed chin, my face had been somewhat feline in appearance. I had been told that I was rather attractive, although I had never had much reason to think about the way that I looked at all.

But now the changes were so drastic I barely recognised myself. My hair was limp and dull with grease, it even felt thinner as it rested against my head and it no longer curled so wildly around my face, just stuck there. There were shadows around my bloodshot eyes, and they appeared dark and empty, not violet anymore, just a flat, muddy colour. My lips were white, almost colourless, and my cheeks were sunken, showing up my high cheekbones even more drastically. My pale skin, which used to burn easily in the summer if I went out and about for too long uncovered, was now a sickly unhealthy colour, almost yellow in hue. There was a thin, patchy layer of youthful beard on my face, which was neither full nor healthy. I looked like the living skeleton that Aylara had called me. I had thought she was just teasing me but now I knew that she hadn't been. I looked terrible. I looked as though I was already dead.

I touched my face gently with my fingers, feeling the bones, the sunken cheeks, and then I saw what my illness had done to my hands. I had seen them before, of course, seen my whole body when the healers washed me, only I hadn't stopped to think anything of it. Now that Davn had drawn my attention to it, I noticed them. My hands were thin, the skin was nearly translucent and I could see the bones and the tendons beneath. They looked delicate, as though the skin was just wispy yellow paper wrapped around my fragile skeleton. I had always been slim, but now I was wasted.

Tears started to run down my face.

"Do you see," Davn asked me coldly, "why you're an embarrassment to your father and your grandfather?"

"They love me," I said. "I don't embarrass them, they love me."

"Yes," Davn said, almost wearily. "Yes, they love you, but they still wish that you weren't their first born son, their heir, after Gerian. They wish that they had someone stronger to call their own, not a boy prone to fits, not a boy who is now wasting away, not a boy who just left his room and showed the whole castle how sick and wasted he really is! They love you, but only because they *have* to."

"T-they wouldn't say this to you," I whispered thickly. I longed to yell at him, to tell him that this wasn't true, but I couldn't. Fear had gripped me. What if this *was* true? What if this *was* the way that my own father was talking about me behind my back? And my grandfather, the man who had taught me to ride, who had given me my first horse, who came to see me as often as he could while I lay sick, and secretly brought me sweet cakes and biscuits from the kitchen. What if he secretly resented me, too, and spoke about me, like that, to others? I couldn't stand that.

"No," Davn agreed, and I almost collapsed with relief. "It's not something they would admit to anyone not of the family, but I can see it in their eyes. They want you to die and it would be easier on everyone if you did, instead of dragging it out like this."

Again I stared at him, unable to believe that he was saying things like this to me, but then it hit me. Davn saw this as our last meeting, the one before I died, and because of that he felt that he had nothing to lose by speaking freely to me.

But I was damned if I was going to lie back and let him.

I struggled upright and Davn stood there, with his arms folded across his chest, watching me. He was almost amused by my struggles, by my gasps of pain and the sweat that beaded my forehead, ran down my face, and started to soak my nightshirt. Sitting upright was costing me more strength than anything should, but I was determined. And finally, when I was upright, I lifted my eyes to meet his. "Dying or not," I said. "I'm still your prince." Davn's eyes narrowed. "You *will* treat me with respect."

"Perhaps when you have earned it," Davn began.

"Whether you feel I have earned it or not it is immaterial. I am a prince. I am Sorron's grandson and you will respect me, or I will have you flogged." His dark eyes flashed fire at me. "Now, I want you to put my mirror back on the table and get out of my rooms."

"I'm not your servant," Davn said. "I do as your father tells me."

"Put the mirror back onto my table," I repeated. "And get out of my rooms." My voice croaked and died toward the end of my sentence, but I managed to get it all out. Davn just stared at me and for a moment I feared that he wouldn't do as I'd asked and I knew I wouldn't be able to force him. Even when I had been well, I hadn't had the strength, physically or mentally, to make this man do anything that I asked, and I was far from well now.

But he took the mirror from me, his eyes spitting with anger and there was a hard line to his shoulders that was his rage barely held in check. I feared that, perhaps, if I were well, he might have actually hit me.

Davn turned away, set my mirror down onto the table with over-exaggerated care and then he left my rooms. The bedroom door slammed shut behind him and, with a gasp, I collapsed back against the pillows and started to cry.

I wept for a really long time. My body shook with sobs beyond my control, and the pain I felt, deep inside my stomach, seemed endless, a giant hole that threatened to swallow me. I was going to die. I knew it. I had feared it, and thought it, and considered it, as I lay in my room at night, unable to sleep. I had believed it and, yet, it hadn't seemed real to me, but now that I had seen my face in the mirror, seen the ravages that my illness had done to me, I knew I was going to die. I was going to wither away to nothing, if I could, indeed, wither away anymore. I was going to slowly rot, lying in this red-draped bed, with the smell of my own illness and rotting flesh in my nose. I was never going to see another winter. Never make a snowman, or throw balls of snow at my sister and Kal. I wasn't even going to go to the Summer Dance, the annual ball that marked the end of the summer, dressed in the black breeches embroidered with silver, and the tight fitting violet doublet that I had ordered from the tailor during the

early stages of my illness when I had still thought that I would get well again. I doubted it would even fit me now, I was so thin. They would probably bury me in it. I hiccupped miserably. I was going to die here and there was nothing that I could do.

When arms encircled me, I was surprised, and then I was eased against a strong set of shoulders. The arms around me were warm and tight and I felt crushed and lost and yet, so safe, caught up in this stronger grip. I felt soft velvet beneath my fingers.

It was my grandfather, King Sorron, dressed as he always was, in blue, to match his eyes. It was what had given him the nickname of 'the Sky King'. I hadn't seen him in three days - affairs of state always kept him so busy - and I had missed him, but I hadn't ever wanted him to see me like this. But now he was here, with his arms around me, and I could smell that familiar scent of his and feel his grey, shoulder length hair brushing against my face, I couldn't stop myself from crying.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered. "I really am." He eased me back with gentle hands, propping me up against the pillows. I rubbed my eyes and nose on the sleeve of my nightshirt with a heavy, numb arm. Sorron frowned at me and produced a soft handkerchief, edged in expensive white lace, from one of his pockets. "Candale, really," he chastised me gently.

"Why?" I hiccupped at last. "Why are you sorry? What did you do?"

"I'm sorry for allowing your sister to take you outside," he said. "I feared that it would be too much for you, but she insisted that it wouldn't be, that she and Kal would take care of you."

"No." I shook my head. "No, it isn't that. I ... I loved being outside, but ... but you didn't tell my father. He had me brought in."

"No, I didn't, because I knew he would fight me on it. Your father listens to the healers too much when they say that you must stay in bed, with the windows closed, but I had my doubts, as what they recommended didn't seem to be helping you very much. When Aylara came to me with her request to take you outside, I agreed to it because I knew how much you wanted it yourself. I didn't think it would hurt to try something different. I'm only sorry it ended like this." He wiped at my eyes with his handkerchief. "Would you like some water?" I nodded and watched as he leaned over to my bedside table to pour me a glass. "If it wasn't that you were tired, then why were you crying?"

"I-I don't want to die," I said, my voice shaking.

Sorron turned to look at me sharply, spilling the water down the side of the glass. He barely seemed to notice. "Who told you that you were going to die?" he demanded.

"N-no one told me," I whispered. "I fear it and then I saw m-myself in the mirror and what else can I think? I don't even look like myself anymore." I swallowed painfully. "T-the water," I whispered. "Please?"

"Oh. Of course." My grandfather supported my head as he let me sip the water. I drank slowly, trying not to spill it as I had earlier, not wanting to embarrass myself any further before my king, only I doubted that Sorron noticed. He wasn't being my king now, he was being my grandfather. There was concern in his blue eyes and I could see how tired he was. There were rings around his eyes and bags beneath them. He had lost weight, too. He had never been a large man - neither he, nor my father, nor myself - but he was tall, and strong. At least, he had been, but now he seemed thinner somehow. Was it worrying about me that had done this to him? "Better?" I nodded. "Good boy." Sorron set down the glass and then settled me back on the bed, the heavy covers smoothed over me so that I couldn't move. "Who let you look in the mirror?"

"Davn, but I insisted," I lied. "I-I wanted to. It has been three months since I last saw my face." I was

covering for Davn, not for his sake, really, but for my own, and for that of my father. The last thing that any of us needed, on top of my illness, was to worry about the inappropriate way that my father's bodyguard and friend had spoken to me. I wondered if Davn would appreciate my silence. It was doubtful. He probably saw it as part of my honour to keep silent about our conversation, something that I *had* to do, and he probably wouldn't have expected me to even consider telling my grandfather about it. It was no one else's business but our own, after all.

Sorron frowned. "You look terrible, Candale," he said. "Yes, you do. And yes, I can see how you would think that you were going to die. Your mother, your father, your sister, they all fear it." He grabbed both my hands suddenly, holding them tightly. "But I'm not going to let that happen."

I tried to laugh only I started to cough instead. The coughs shook my body and the more I coughed, the harder it became to stop. My grandfather gathered me up, held me upright as I coughed and spluttered in his arms. I could feel something bitter in my mouth, a familiar copper taste and, when the coughing fit finally died and I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand, I found blood there. For a moment I could only stare at it, my eyes wide and my body very still, and then I lifted my gaze to meet Sorron's and saw fear in his eyes. Silently he wiped the blood away with his handkerchief, smearing red across the white cloth, before he lay me back down on the bed.

"Candale," my grandfather said very slowly. "I'm going to do all I can to help you."

"But I-I thought that you had. All those healers you sent for ... some of them were so famous and from so far away ... what else can you try?"

"There is someone else," my grandfather said quietly. "And I know she can succeed where others have failed."

"Then ... then why didn't you send for her before? Why would you hold something back from me if you thought that it could save me?"

"Not me, Candale." Sorron soothed my hair. "Your father. He doesn't like this person, he doesn't trust her and he fears what will happen to you if we let her near you, but I don't think that we have a lot of choice." I nodded. I was feeling weary now, so I let my eyes flicker shut again. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes, sir," I whispered. "You know I do."

"Then trust me on this, I'm not going to let you die. Now, can I get you anything else before I go?"

"No," I whispered. "I'm all right, but will you stay, please? J-just until I fall asleep?"

"Of course, Candale." The hand left my hair and moved over to grasp my wrist. His fingers were warm and strong against my own. I felt his touch comforting me as the darkness swarmed around me and pulled me down.