A life without wine and beauty isn’t worth living. Don’t you agree, princess?” Aron slung his arm around Cleo’s shoulders as the group of four walked along the dusty, rocky country path.

They’d been in port for less than two hours and he was already drunk, a fact not unduly startling when it came to Aron.

Cleo’s glance fell on their accompanying palace guard. His eyes flashed with displeasure at Aron’s proximity to the princess of Auranos. But the guard’s concern wasn’t necessary. Despite the fancy jeweled dagger Aron always wore on a sheath hanging from his belt, he was no more dangerous than a butterfly. A drunk butterfly.

“I couldn’t agree more,” she said, lying only a little.

“Are we almost there?” Mira asked. The beautiful girl with long dark reddish hair and smooth flawless skin was both Cleo’s friend and her older sister’s lady-in-waiting. When Emilia decided to stay home due to a sudden headache, she’d insisted that Mira accompany Cleo on this trip. Once the ship arrived in the harbor, a dozen
of their friends chose to remain comfortably on board while Cleo and Mira joined Aron on his journey to a nearby village to find the “perfect” bottle of wine. The palace wine cellars were stocked with thousands of bottles of wine from both Auranos and Paelsia, but Aron had heard of a particular vineyard whose output was supposedly unparalleled. At his request, Cleo booked one of her father’s ships and invited many of their friends on the trip to Paelsia expressly in search of his ideal bottle.

“That would be a question for Aron. He’s the one leading this particular quest.” Cleo drew her fur-lined velvet cloak closer to block out the chill of the day. While the ground was clear, a few light snowflakes drifted across their rock-strewn path. Paelsia was farther north than Auranos, but the temperature here surprised her nonetheless. Auranos was warm and temperate, even in the bleakest winter months, with rolling green hills, sturdy olive trees, and acres beyond acres of rich, temperate farmland. Paelsia, by contrast, seemed dusty and gray as far as the eye could see.

“Almost there?” Aron repeated. “Almost there? Mira, my peach, all good things come to those who wait. Remember that.”

“My lord, I’m the most patient person I know. But my feet hurt.” She tempered the complaint with a smile.

“It’s a beautiful day and I’m lucky enough to be accompanied by two gorgeous girls. We must give thanks to the goddess for the splendor we’ve been greeted with here.”

Watching the guard, Cleo saw him briefly roll his eyes. When he noticed that she had seen him, he didn’t immediately look away as any other guard might. He held her gaze with a defiance that intrigued her. She realized she hadn’t seen—or, at least, noticed—this guard before today.
“What’s your name?” she addressed him.
“Theon Ranus, your highness.”
“Well, Theon, do you have anything to add to our discussion about how far we’ve walked this afternoon?”
Aron chortled and swigged from his flask.
“No, princess.”
“I’m surprised, since you are the one who’ll be required to carry the cases of wine back to the ship.”
“It’s my duty and honor to serve you.”
Cleo considered him for a moment. His hair was the color of dark bronze, his skin tanned and unlined. He looked as if he could be one of her rich friends waiting on the ship rather than a uniformed guard her father had insisted accompany them on this journey.
Aron must have been thinking the exact same thing. “You look young for a palace guard.” His words slurred together drunkenly as he regarded Theon with a squint. “You can’t be much older than I am.”
“I’m eighteen, my lord.”
Aron snorted. “I stand corrected. You are much older than me. Vastly.”
“By one year,” Cleo reminded him.
“A year can be a blissful eternity.” Aron grinned. “I plan to cling to my youth and lack of responsibility for the year I have left.”
Cleo ignored Aron, for the guard’s name now rang a bell in her mind. She’d overheard her father as he exited one of his council meetings briefly discuss the Ranus family. Theon’s father had died only a week ago—thrown from a horse. His neck had broken instantly.
“My sympathies for the loss of your father,” she said with true
sincerity. "Simon Ranus was well respected as my father’s personal bodyguard."

Theon nodded stiffly. "It was a job he did with great pride. And one I hope to have the honor to be considered for when King Corvin chooses his replacement." Theon’s brows drew together as if he hadn’t expected her to know of his father’s death. An edge of grief slid behind his dark eyes. "Thank you for your kind words, your highness."

Aron audibly snorted and Cleo shot him a withering look.

"Was he a good father?" she asked.

"The very best. He taught me everything I know from the moment I could hold a sword."

She nodded sympathetically. "Then his knowledge will continue to live on through you."

Now that the young guard’s dark good looks had caught her attention, she found it increasingly difficult to return her gaze to Aron, whose slight frame and pale skin spoke of a life spent indoors. Theon’s shoulders were broad, his arms and chest muscled, and he filled out the dark blue palace guard uniform better than she ever would have imagined possible.

Guiltily, she forced herself to return her attention to her friends. "Aron, you have another half hour before we head back to the ship. We’re keeping the others waiting."

Auranians loved a good party, but they weren’t known for their endless patience. However, since they’d been brought to the Paelsian docks by her father’s ship, they’d have to keep waiting until Cleo was ready to leave.

"The market we’re going to is up ahead," Aron said, gesturing. Cleo and Mira looked and saw a cluster of wooden stalls and colorful worn tents, perhaps another ten minutes’ walk. It was the first
sign of people they had seen since they’d passed a ragged band of children clustered around a fire an hour ago. “You’ll soon see it was well worth the trip.”

Paelsian wine was said to be a drink worthy of the goddess. Delicious, smooth, without equal in any other land, and its effects did not lead to illness or headaches the next day, no matter how much was consumed. Some said that there was strong earth magic at work in the Paelsian soil and in the grapes themselves to make them so perfect in a land that held so many other imperfections.

Cleo wasn’t planning to sample it. She didn’t drink wine anymore—hadn’t for many months. Before that, she’d consumed more than her share of Auranian wine, which didn’t taste much better than vinegar. But people—at least, Cleo—didn’t drink it for the taste; they drank for the intoxicating results, the feeling of not a care in the world. Such a feeling, without an anchor to hold one close to shore, could lead one to drift into dangerous territory. And Cleo wasn’t in any hurry to sip anything stronger than water or peach juice in the foreseeable future.

Cleo watched Aron drain his flask. He never failed to drink both her share and his and made no apologies for anything he did while under its influence. Despite his shortcomings, many in the court considered him the lord her father would choose as her future husband. The thought made Cleo shudder, yet she still kept him close at hand. For Aron knew a secret about Cleo. Even though he hadn’t mentioned it in many months, she was certain he hadn’t forgotten. Nor would he ever.

This secret’s reveal would destroy her.

Because of this, she tolerated him socially with a smile on her lips. No one would ever guess that she loathed him.

“Here we are,” Aron finally announced as they entered the gates
of the village market. Beyond the stalls, off to the right, Cleo saw some small farmhouses and cottages in the near distance. Though far less prosperous-looking than the farms she’d seen in the Auranian countryside, she noted with surprise that the small clay structures with their thatched roofs and small windows seemed neat and well kept, at odds with the impression she had of Paelsia. Paelsia was a land filled with poor peasants, ruled over not by a king, but a chieftain, who was rumored by some to be a powerful sorcerer. Despite Paelsia’s proximity to Auranos, however, Cleo rarely gave her neighbors to the north much thought, other than an occasional vague interest in entertaining tales of the much more “savage” Paelsians.

Aron stopped in front of a stall draped in dark purple fabric that brushed down to the dusty ground.

Mira sighed with relief. “Finally.”

Cleo turned to her left only to be greeted by a pair of glittering black eyes in a tanned, lined face. She took an instinctive step back and felt Theon standing firm and comforting close behind her. The man looked rough, even dangerous, much like the few others who’d crossed their path since they’d arrived in Paelsia. The wine seller’s front tooth was chipped but white in the bright sunlight. He wore simple clothes, made from linen and worn sheepskin. A thick wool tunic for warmth. Feeling self-conscious, Cleo pulled her sable-lined cloak closer around her silk dress, pale blue and embroidered in gold.

Aron eyed the man with interest. “Are you Silas Agallon?”

“I am.”

“Good. This is your lucky day, Silas. I’ve been told that your wine is the best in all of Paelsia.”

“You were told right.”
A lovely dark-haired girl emerged from the back of the stall. “My father is a gifted wine maker.”

“This is Felicia, my daughter.” Silas nodded at the girl. “A daughter who should be getting ready for her wedding right now.”

She laughed. “And leave you to work all day lugging cases of wine? I’ve come to convince you to close shop early.”

“Perhaps.” The pleased glint in the wine seller’s dark eyes shifted to disdain as he took in Aron’s fine clothes. “And who might you be?”

“Both you and your lovely daughter have the great privilege to be acquainted with her royal highness Princess Cleiona Bellos of Auranos.” Aron nodded toward her and then Mira. “This is Lady Mira Cassian. And I am Aron Lagaris. My father is lord of Elder’s Pitch on the southern coast of Auranos.”

The wine seller’s daughter looked at Cleo, surprised, and lowered her head with respect. “An honor, your highness.”

“Yes, quite an honor,” Silas agreed, and Cleo couldn’t detect sarcasm in his tone. “We rarely have royalty from either Auranos or Limeros visit our humble village. I can’t remember the last time. I’d be honored to give you a sample to try before we discuss your purchase, your highness.”

Cleo shook her head with a smile. “Aron’s the one interested in your wares. I simply accompanied him here.”

The wine seller looked disappointed, even a little hurt. “Even still, will you do me the great honor of tasting my wine—to toast my daughter’s wedding?”

How could she refuse such a request? She nodded, trying to hide her reluctance. “Of course. It would be my pleasure.”

The sooner she did, the sooner they could leave this market. While colorful and well populated, it smelled less than pleasant—
as if the scent of a nearby cesspit lingered in the air with no fragrant herbs or flowers to cover the stench. Despite Felicia’s palpable excitement for her impending wedding, the poverty of this land and these people was distressing. Perhaps Cleo too should have stayed on the ship while Aron fetched the wine for their friends.

All she really knew about small, poor Paelsia was that it had one wealth that neither of the other two kingdoms flanking it could claim. Paelsian soil this close to the sea grew vineyards that put any other land’s to shame. Many said that earth magic was responsible. She’d heard stories of grapevines stolen from the earth here, but they withered and died almost immediately once they crossed over the border.

“You’ll be my last customers,” Silas said. “Then I’ll do as my daughter asks and close up shop for the day to prepare for her wedding at dusk.”

“My congratulations to you both,” Aron said with disinterest as he scanned the bottles on display, his lips pursed. “Do you have suitable glasses for our tasting?”

“Of course.” Silas moved behind the cart and dug deep into a rickety wooden case. He pulled out three glasses that caught the sunlight and then uncorked a bottle of wine. Pale amber-colored liquid trickled in the glasses, the first of which he handed to Cleo.

Theon was suddenly right next to Cleo, snatching the glass away from the wine seller before she touched it. Whatever dark look was on the guard’s face made Silas take a shaky step backward and exchange a glance with his daughter.

Cleo gasped, startled. “What are you doing?”

“You would taste something a stranger offers you without any second thoughts?” Theon asked sharply.
“It’s not poisoned.”

He peered down into the glass. “Do you know that for sure?”

She looked at him impatiently. He thought someone might poison her? For what purpose? The peace between the lands had lasted more than a century. There was no threat here. Having a palace guard accompany her at all on this trip was more to appease her overprotective father than out of any true necessity.

“Fine.” She flicked her hand at him. “Feel free to be my taster. I’ll be sure not to drink any if you fall over dead from it.”

“Oh, how ridiculous,” Aron drawled. He tipped his glass back and drained it without a second thought.

Cleo looked at him for a moment. “Well? Are you dying now?”

He had his eyes shut, savoring. “Only from thirst.”

Her attention returned to Theon and she smiled slightly mockingly. “May I have my glass back now? Or do you think this wine seller took the time to poison each one individually?”

“Of course not. Please, enjoy.” He held the glass out for her to take it. Silas’s dark-eyed gaze was now filled more with embarrassment than annoyance at the drama her guard had caused.

Cleo tried to shield her immediate appraisal of the glass’s questionable cleanliness. “I’m sure it’s delicious.”

The wine seller looked grateful. Theon moved back to stand to the right side of the cart, at ease but watchful. And she thought her father was overprotective.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Aron tip his glass back and drain a second sample glass the wine seller’s daughter had poured for him.

“Incredible. Absolutely incredible, just as I’d heard it was.”

Mira took a more ladylike sip before her brows went up with surprise. “It’s wonderful.”
Fine. Her turn. Cleo took a tentative taste of the liquid. The moment it touched her tongue, she found herself dismayed. Not because it was rancid, but because it was delicious—sweet, smooth, incomparable to anything she’d ever tried before. It stirred a longing inside her for more. Her heart began to pound faster. A few more sips was enough to empty her glass entirely and she glanced around at her friends. The world suddenly seemed to shimmer with golden halos of light around each of them, making them appear even more beautiful than they were to begin with. Aron became marginally less loathsome to her.

And Theon—despite his overbearing behavior—looked incredibly beautiful too.

This wine was dangerous; there was no doubt about it. It was worth any amount of money this wine seller might ask for it. And Cleo had to be careful to stay away from it as much as possible, now and in the future.

“Your wine is very good,” she said aloud, trying not to seem overly enthusiastic. She wanted to ask for another glass but swallowed back the words.

Silas beamed. “I’m so glad to hear that.”

Felicia nodded. “Like I said, my father is a genius.”

“Yes, I find your wine worthy of purchase,” Aron slurred. He’d been drinking steadily during the trip here from the engraved golden flask he always kept with him. At this point, it was a surprise that he continued to stand upright without assistance. “I want four cases today and another dozen shipped to my villa.”

Silas’s eyes lit up. “That can certainly be arranged.”

“I’ll give you fifteen Auranian centimos per case.”

The tanned skin of the wine seller paled. “But it’s worth at least forty per case. I’ve received as much as fifty before.”
Aron’s lips thinned. “When? Five years ago? There are not enough buyers these days for you to make a living. Limeros hasn’t been such a good customer over the past few years, have they? Importing expensive wine is at the bottom of their priority list given their current economic straits. That leaves Auranos, because everyone knows your goddess-forsaken countrymen don’t have two coins to scrape together. Fifteen per case is my final offer. Considering I want sixteen cases—and perhaps more in the near future—I’d say that’s a good day’s work. Wouldn’t that be a nice gift of money to give your daughter on her wedding day? Felicia? Wouldn’t that be better than closing up shop early and getting nothing?”

Felicia bit her bottom lip, her brows drawing together. “It is better than nothing. I know the wedding is costing too much as it is. But . . . I don’t know, Father?”

Silas was about to say something but faltered. Cleo was only half-watching, concentrating more on trying to resist the urge to sip from the glass that Silas had already refilled for her. Aron loved to barter. It was a hobby of his to get the best price possible, no matter what he was after.

“I mean no disrespect, of course,” Silas said, wringing his hands. “Would you be willing to come up to twenty-five centimos per case?”

“No, I would not.” Aron inspected his fingernails. “As good as your wine is, I know there are many other wine sellers at this busy market, as well as on our way back to the ship, who’d be more than happy to accept my offer. I can move my business to them if you’d prefer to lose this sale. Is that what you want?”

“No, I . . .” Silas swallowed, his forehead a furrow of wrinkles. “I do want to sell my wine. It’s the reason I’m here. But for fifteen centimos . . .”
“I have a better idea. Why don’t we make it fourteen centimos per case?” A glint of wickedness appeared in Aron’s green eyes. “And you have to the count of ten to accept or my offer decreases by another centimo.”

Mira looked away from the debate, embarrassed. Cleo opened her mouth—then, remembering what Aron could do with her secret if she chose, closed it. He was determined to get this wine for the lowest price he could. And it wasn’t as if he couldn’t afford to pay any more, since Cleo knew he had more than enough money on him to buy many cases even at the top price.

“Fine,” Silas finally said through clenched teeth, although it seemed as if it deeply pained him. He flicked a glance at Felicia before returning his attention to Aron. “Fourteen per case for sixteen cases. I’ll give my daughter the wedding she deserves.”

“Excellent. As we Auranians have always assured you . . .” With a small smile of victory, Aron dug into his pocket to pull out a roll of notes, counting them off into the man’s outstretched palm. It was now more than obvious that the total sum was only a small percentage of what Aron had with him. By the look of outrage in Silas’s eyes, the insult wasn’t missed. “…Grapes,” Aron continued, “will never fail to feed your nation.”

Two figures approached the stall from Cleo’s left.

“Felicia,” a deep voice asked. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be with your friends, getting all dressed up?”

“Soon, Tomas,” she whispered. “We’re about to finish up here.”

Cleo glanced to her left. Both boys who’d approached the stall had dark hair, nearly black. Dark brows slashed over copper-brown eyes. They were tall and broad-shouldered and deeply tanned. Tomas, the older of the two in his early twenties, studied his father and sister. “Is there something wrong?”
“Wrong?” Silas said through gritted teeth. “Of course not. I’m dealing with a transaction, that’s all.”
“You’re lying. You’re upset right now. I can tell.”
“I’m not.”
The other boy cast a dark glare at Aron and then at Cleo and Mira. “Are these people trying to cheat you, Father?”
“Jonas,” Silas said tiredly, “this isn’t your business.”
“This is my business, Father. How much did this man”—Jonas’s gaze swept the length of Aron with undisguised distaste—“agree to pay you?”
“Fourteen a case,” Aron offered casually. “A fair price that your father was more than happy to accept.”
“Fourteen?” Jonas sputtered. “You dare insult him like that?”
Tomas grabbed the back of Jonas’s shirt and pulled him backward. “Calm down.”
Jonas’s dark eyes flashed. “When our father’s being taken advantage of by some ridiculous silk-wearing bastard, I take offense.”
“Bastard?” Aron’s voice had turned to ice. “Who are you calling a bastard, peasant?”
Tomas turned slowly, anger brimming in his gaze. “My brother was calling you a bastard. Bastard.”
And this, Cleo thought with a sinking feeling, was the absolute worst thing someone could ever call Aron. It wasn’t common knowledge, but he was a bastard. Born of a pretty blond maid his father once took a liking to. Since Sebastien Lagaris’s wife was barren, she had taken the baby on as her own from the moment he was born. The maid, Aron’s real mother, had died soon after under mysterious circumstances that no one had dared to question either then or now. But there was still talk. And this talk was what had met Aron’s ears when he was old enough to understand what it all meant.
“Princess?” Theon asked, as if looking for her command to intervene. She put her hand on his arm to stop him. This didn’t need to become more of a scene than it already was.

“Let’s go, Aron.” She exchanged a worried look with Mira, who nervously set down her second glass of wine.

Aron’s attention didn’t leave Tomas. “How dare you insult me?”

“You should obey your little girlfriend and leave,” Tomas advised. “The sooner the better.”

“And as soon as your father fetches the cases of wine for me, I’d be more than happy to do just that.”

“Forget the wine. Walk away and consider yourself lucky that I didn’t make a bigger deal of your insult toward my father. He is trusting and willing to undersell himself. I am not.”

Aron bristled, his previous calm now thrust aside by offense and inebriation, making him much braver than he should be when faced with two tall, muscular Paelsians. “Do you have any idea who I am?”

“Do we care?” Jonas and his brother exchanged a glance.

“I am Aron Lagaris, son of Sebastien Lagaris, lord of Elder’s Pitch. I stand here in your market accompanied by none other than Princess Cleiona Bellos of Auranos. Show respect to us both.”

“This is ridiculous, Aron.” Cleo hissed a small breath from between her teeth. She did wish that he wouldn’t put on such airs. Mira slipped her arm through Cleo’s and squeezed her hand. Let’s go, she seemed to be signaling.

“Oh, your highness.” Sarcasm dripped from Jonas’s words as he mock-bowed. “Both of your highnesses. It is a true honor to be in your shining presence.”

“I could have you beheaded for such disrespect,” Aron slurred. “Both of you and your father. Your sister too.”
“Leave my sister out of this,” Tomas growled.

“Let me guess, if it’s her wedding day, I’ll assume she’s already with child? I’ve heard Paelsian girls don’t wait for marriage before they spread their legs to anyone with enough coin to pay.”

Aron glanced at Felicia, who looked mortified and indignant. “I have some money. Perhaps you might give me a half hour of your attentions before dusk.”

“Aron!” Cleo snapped, appalled.

That she was totally ignored by him was no surprise. Jonas turned his furious gaze on her—so hot she felt singed by it.

Tomas, who seemed the marginally less hotheaded of the two brothers, turned the darkest, most venomous glare she’d ever seen in her life on Aron. “I could kill you for saying such a thing about my sister.”

Aron gave him a thin smile. “Try it.”

Cleo finally cast a look over her shoulder at a frustrated-looking Theon, whom she’d basically commanded not to intervene. It was clear to her now that she had no control over this situation. All she wanted to do was go back to the ship and leave all this unpleasantness far behind. But it was too late for that now.

Powered by the insult toward his sister, Tomas flew at Aron with fists clenched. Mira gasped and put her hands over her eyes. There was no doubt Tomas would easily win a fight between the two and beat the thinner Aron into a bloody pulp. But Aron had a weapon—his fashionable jeweled dagger he wore at his hip.

It was now in his grip.

Tomas didn’t see the knife. When he drew closer and grabbed hold of Aron’s shirt, Aron thrust his blade into Tomas’s throat. The boy’s hands shot up to his neck as the blood began to gush, his eyes wide with shock and pain. A moment later, he fell to his knees.
and then fully hit the ground. His hands clawed at his throat, the
dagger still deeply embedded there. Blood swiftly formed a crim-
son puddle around the boy’s head.

It had all happened so fast.

Cleo clamped her hand against her mouth to keep from scream-
ing. Another did scream—Felicia let out a piercing wail of horror
that turned Cleo’s blood ice cold. And suddenly the rest of the
market collectively took notice of what had happened.

Shouts sliced through the market. There was a sudden rush of
bodies all around her, pushing and shoving. She shrieked. Theon
clamped his arm around Cleo’s waist and roughly yanked her back-
ward. Jonas had started for her and Aron, grief and fury etched
onto his face. Theon pushed Mira in front of him and pulled Cleo
under his arm, Aron close behind. They fled the market while Jo-
nas’s enraged words pursued them.

“You’re dead! I’ll kill you for this! Both of you!”

“He deserved it,” Aron growled. “He was going to try to kill me.
I was defending myself.”

“Keep going, your lordship,” grunted Theon, sounding dis-
gusted. They pushed their way through the crowd, making their
stumbling way onto the road back to the ship.

Tomas would never live to see his sister get married. Felicia
would never see her brother again—instead she’d witnessed his
murder on her wedding day. The wine Cleo had drunk churned
and soured in her stomach. She yanked away from Theon’s grip
and threw up onto the path.

She could have had Theon stop this before it got so far out of
control. But she hadn’t.

No pursuers seemed to be following them, and after a while
it became clear that the Paelsians were letting them leave. They
slowed to a fast stride. Cleo kept her head down, holding on to Mira for support. The foursome walked through the dusty landscape in absolute silence.

Cleo thought she’d never get the image of the boy’s pain-filled eyes out of her mind.