

Homecoming

a *Winterspell* short story
by Claire Legrand

The first thing Clara saw after stepping through the Door was not so much a *thing* as a color, flinging itself at her:

Blue.

Bright blue, unnatural, like Godfather's electric lights, like faery magic.

Blue like the widening seam of light on the statue's thigh—Christmas Eve, two years ago now. Godfather's tiny clockwork dragons bleeding silver. Beasts breaking through the windows.

A naked man, shivering on the floor.

Nicholas.

Two years for her; *eight* for him.

What would that mean? What would have changed?

Too much? Or not enough?

Every day since leaving Cane and returning home to New York, Clara had tried to prepare herself for the reality of this—the lopsided passage of time. Slow at home, quicker here. Age and memory and loss and longing, and how these would even out between her and Nicholas, or if they would. If one of them would be left wanting something more than the other could give.

Or if, even worse, there would be nothing left at all. No connection, no warmth. Just a shared past, some reminiscence beside a fire. Awkward silences, fumbled attempts at finding what had once been.

Yes, Clara had thought of these things. She had prepared herself to expect differences—an older world, progress made without her, decisions come and gone.

But knowing something and actually seeing it were, she was now finding out, two radically different things.

For one, she knew exactly where she was—in the throne room of Wahlkraft—but it looked so different from what she remembered that she felt herself sway, unbalanced.

For two, there was a young woman in her arms.

“Bo?” Clara’s breath ruffled the mess of blue hair pressed against her cheek. “Is that you?”

“No,” said the woman, her voice muffled. “I’m not letting go. Not yet. And you can’t make me.”

Clara found herself smiling. Relief tugged on the knots in her heart. “I promise I’m not going anywhere, at least not right away.”

Bo pulled away, glaring. “Not right away? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Bo. *Bo.*” Then Clara could not find her voice.

She had prepared herself—she *had*. She had envisioned what they might all look like now, how they might have grown. Many nights she had lain awake, drawing Nicholas’s face in her mind, going over the lines of him until she had memorized the could-be Nicholas, familiarized herself with his body, warmed herself by imagining his deepened voice, his rougher hands.

But Bo—Bo was not a girl now, but a woman, and taller. Her face had thinned, her legs had lengthened. Her coat, embellished with flourishes of indigo and deepest violet, was fine and flattering, rather than that old patchwork thing from before.

“You’re old,” Clara said, because in humor lay a certain safety. She hoped.

Bo’s eyebrow quirked. It was a strange, familiar expression—child Bo peering out from this older Bo’s face.

“Careful,” Bo chided. “All I’ve done is catch up with you.”

Clara laughed. It was too loud in this booming room. She was glad they were alone. “Where is . . . ?” She trailed off. She had told herself she wouldn’t cry, that she mustn’t be sentimental. That she must hold herself away from him—from all of them—until she figured out how to do this. How to fit herself back into this place when she feared she never could.

“He’s elsewhere,” Bo said. “I told him to keep himself busy until we were good and ready for him.”

“You figured I’d be emotionally . . . well, whatever I am.”

Clara rubbed a hand over her face. “God, I don’t even know what to say right now. What to *feel*.”

“You’re as shook up as anyone else would be,” Bo said simply. “It’s not a small thing, coming here after all this time. So we’ll take it in little steps.” Then Bo’s voice turned breezy. “Besides, if he’d been here right from the start, there would’ve been awkward kissing and probably tears, and *possibly* declarations of eternal love and devotion, and all right in front of me, and I’m not sure I’m prepared to see my king make a fool out of himself like that, no matter how happy I am that he’ll finally get the chance to.”

My king.

Clara wiped her eyes and let out a burst of nervous laughter. A king, and kissing, and eternal devotion. These images did nothing for her sense of calm.

“I’ve missed your frankness, Bo,” she said.

Bo hooked her arm through Clara’s. “I would have missed me, too. I’m delightful.”

They walked through the throne room, Bo pointing out the changes that had been made over the past eight years. Torn draperies had been replaced with new ones in scarlet, trimmed with gold. New windows gleamed. Sunlight shone through stained glass portraits of silver-eyed mages and faeries all in white. Humans stood between them, arms outstretched.

One window, on the southern wall, displayed a woman with wild red hair, clothed in furs and tall boots, holding a dagger in each hand.

Clara stopped short. How strange it was, to look up and see herself looking so . . .

“Impressive, aren’t you?” remarked Bo, grinning.

Well, yes. She was. Or rather, *it* was, this portrait obviously crafted with such care. And yet, two years and a few weeks ago, Clara would have looked away from the image. She would have thought it false, a mockery. She would have not been able to accept the idea that someone saw her that way—ferocious, standing tall. A force.

Now, she only smiled, and wished for a wistful moment that her father could see this. Maybe, someday, he would.

“My hair is very . . . dramatic,” she observed.

“Nicholas was rather particular about your window,” said Bo, “especially the hair. I thought the glassmaker would lose his mind.”

Nicholas. Clara took a long, slow breath. “Tell me. How is he?”

“He’s a king. He works too often. He sleeps too little. He cares too much.” They walked out onto a terrace and stood at a stone railing. Noonday sunlight glinted off of Bo’s many earrings.

“What do you think?” Bo asked quietly.

The capital city—Erstadt—stretched out before them, an expanse of white towers and gray roofs, stone walls still half-constructed, winding roads and the occasional decorative flourish of ironwork. A concession to the faeries? Perhaps a gesture of trust.

Looking down from this height, Clara could see courtyards, tucked between buildings and piled high with greenery—and the occasional dead patch of ground, blackened and bare. Scars, she supposed, from the decades under Anise’s rule, when her magic laced through the world like poison in the veins.

Often, when lying awake in her bed back in New York City, Clara had thought not just of Nicholas, but of Anise—what could have been, what *had* been. There had been nights when Clara had awoken, fuzzy, to mistake the slant of moonlight through her window as Anise herself, cloaked in some filmy robe.

Sometimes Clara wondered: What if she hadn’t killed Anise? What if she had managed to somehow get through to her, on that snow-topped castle roof, kambots swarming above them?

Would Nicholas have tolerated an alliance with her? Could they have managed to jointly rule? And how would Clara have fit into such an arrangement? Would there have been room for her at all?

“Where are you?” Bo pressed her fingers against Clara’s palm. “You stepped away just now. Are you back home? Are you . . . ?” Bo paused. “Do you wish you hadn’t come?”

“No!” Clara squeezed Bo’s hand. “Not at all. Just . . .”

“Memories?”

Clara smiled sadly. “Lots of them.”

Bo fell quiet. Past the silence between them, Clara could hear the low buzz of movement, laughter, industry: A city healthy and booming. Nicholas had done this, and Bo, and Godfather.

She had done this. She had made this possible.

A pang of something sank into her like a blade—tiny, but cruel. She knew she had done the right thing, returning to New York, helping her father, untangling Patricia Plum’s web.

But what did that mean for her life here? Two years ago, after healing in Nicholas’s ruined castle, Clara had just been starting to feel as if she could belong here, and then she had left, and now . . . ?

She tried to find the right words to say to Bo—something clever, something reassuring and meaningful. Instead, all she could manage was, “I’ve never seen such a beautiful city.”

True, but not exactly meaningful.

“There’s no need to be afraid. We’ve been waiting for you. We want you here, with us. Eh?” Bo smiled, tipped up Clara’s chin. It was an odd thing, to be mothered by someone she had only ever known as a child. Then Bo kissed Clara’s cheek, and said, “Come. I think we’ve kept him waiting long enough.”

*

When wondering what it would be like to reunite with Nicholas, Clara had usually imagined some awkward variation on old friends meeting again after a long time apart.

Having fallen out of each other’s rhythm, they would not know what to say, how to hold themselves. What would the other person do next? If there was a kiss, would they bump noses, foreheads? Would it be appropriate to touch, or were there rules of propriety when it came to greeting kings?

Sometimes, however . . .

Sometimes, on quiet nights when the air was still and close, Clara couldn’t help but let her mind grab hold of some warm memory, some fleeting image of him—Nicholas in the pleasure-house, holding

himself carefully away from her, their bodies tapestries of paint and jewels and dark metal. Nicholas, fighting with her through the faery train, flashing her a grim smile as blade met blade.

Nicholas, those last few days in cold, wounded Erstadt—shivering not from the damp but from Clara’s own nearness. Feathering kisses down her body. Finding, in his mother’s old wardrobe, a forgotten robe, fur-trimmed and embroidered with threads of gold—still smelling, faintly, of perfumed oil. Draping Clara in it, playfully, and then . . . not so playfully. Kneeling before her as she threaded her fingers through his hair. Whispering her name against her skin.

Yes, sometimes Clara would allow herself to think of those secret days, and wonder—would it be like *that*, to see him again? Delicious and deliberate, a quiet, slow reunion in some private room, hidden away from curious eyes. Curtains pulled to, doors latched shut, luxurious and unhurried on a bed made for a queen—

“Clara? *Clara.*”

She whirled, expecting Bo’s knowing smile.

But Bo only cleared her throat and looked anxiously back at the doors through which she had come. “They’re ready for you.”

Clara stiffened. “*They?*”

“Well . . .”

“You told me it would just be Nicholas.”

“Apparently they *all* want to meet you. Now.”

“Who?”

Bo looked rather pained. “The king’s council.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“The longer they’re kept waiting, the grouchier they’ll be. Come on, let’s just go inside and be done with it.”

Bo guided Clara toward the heavy wooden doors that marked the entrance to the Great Room. Then Bo leaned close and whispered, “I’m sorry about this. But if it’s any consolation, I’ve never seen him happier than he is right now.”

Bo’s words sent a tiny flutter of joy winging through Clara’s heart—and then she stepped through the doors.

Sunlight hit her full in the face, so bright she had no choice but to shield her eyes, despite her determination to look regal and unruffled. The tall windows on the opposite wall ran the entire length of the room. There was a table, dark and enormous, polished to an impossible shine.

Twelve people sat around it, clothed resplendently in long coats and silken gowns—men and women, humans and mages and . . . faeries.

Faeries, on the king's council. White-haired and white-skinned. Some amused, some more guarded. But without animosity, at least from what she could see.

Despite her discomfort, Clara's eyes filled with tears.

They had done this. *She* had done *this*. Faeries and mages and humans, sitting around a table in the king's castle, as friends.

A movement somewhere in the bright glare of the room made her turn.

"Clara," came a voice—familiar and yet not. Different. Deepened.

She had heard it only hours before: *Clara. Are you there?*

I've missed you, my Lady.

Come home to me. I'm here.

She tried to say his name, but then paused. Was it improper, to address him as Nicholas in such company?

Your Majesty?

Sire?

"My king," she whispered, and then he was there, wrapping her in his arms, burying his face in her hair. He smelled the same, of sea air and warm skin. Something cold and metallic pressed against her cheek—one of those lingering pieces of the curse, lodged in him forever.

"You're here," he said, his voice rough. She felt the scratch of a beard, heard him inhale, heard his breath catch. "Clara, Clara."

Then he pulled away, cupping her face to look at her—and there he was.

The same dark eyes. The same full mouth. Dark hair, unruly. A beard, trimmed neatly and close to his skin. Lingering pieces of metal—at his temple, at his collar.

A sharper, older face, yes, but . . .

“It’s you,” she breathed, smiling, crying, but she didn’t care, for even with eight years of wear and time on his face, he was still utterly himself. The relief of that banished any care for decorum from her mind.

His eyes shone. He grinned widely, boyishly. “It’s *you*,” he said, and then bent low, and kissed her.

Clara’s body rose to meet his as if no time at all had passed, sliding her arms around his neck, giddy and blind with joy. His body was more solid, harder, not as brittle and thin as it had been while in the grip of Anise’s curse. He was impossibly warm; she leaned into him, curled her fingers into his coat. He nipped her bottom lip. A wildness overtook her; she could easily imagine them continuing this on the sunlit table.

Then he whispered against her mouth two words: “Later, darling,” caught her wrists, kissed her palms, and pulled away.

“We were wondering if you would remember we were here,” said the nearest mage wryly. A wave of kind laughter swept across the room.

Nicholas bowed, smiling. The color was high in his cheeks. “My friends, forgive us. Clara and I . . .” He turned to her, and the air was suddenly too thick to breathe. He looked at her as though the fact of her, standing here, was miraculous. “Many of you were separated from your loved ones during the war. I’m sure you can understand how we feel at this moment.”

His voice. His *voice*. Clara wanted to wrap herself up in it, steal him away from these curious, amused people and find out what that voice would sound like, now, years later, when she touched him as she had her last night in Erstadt.

But the council was rising, approaching her. Nicholas guided her toward them, his fingers tracing circles across her wrist. Too many

words crowded in Clara's throat. She let go of Nicholas's hand, clenched her jaw, tried to calm her treacherous, trembling body.

The desire to command them all to leave, at once, and quickly—*now*—nearly overpowered her.

Instead, she approached the mage who had spoken. He was older than Godfather had been when he died, his dark hair turned mostly silver. His smile faded as he knelt and took her hand in both of his. At the touch of her kindred, Clara felt the power in her blood surge in recognition.

"We are indebted to you, Lady Clara," said the mage, his voice now solemn, "and we are honored, humbled, that you have chosen to come back to us."

The rest of the council followed his example, kneeling and bowing their heads. They murmured her name, welcoming her home.

Home.

Clara glanced to where Nicholas stood, hands clasped behind his back, having stepped a few paces away. He smiled softly at her, and there were too many things in that dark gaze for Clara to parse—affection, certainly, so much more than she had dared hope for.

Pride.

Regret—that she had left? That she had returned? That so much time had passed?

Hunger.

Her skin prickled. She found herself acutely aware of the fact that Nicholas was a man now. Eight years older—steadier, graceful. Gone were the gaunt lines of the curse, the hard remnants of war. And yet there was a coarseness to him, somehow, despite his fine red coat and the golden dragon shining at his collar. A sharp slant to his cheeks and a light in his eyes that reminded her of the rough-edged boy she had known.

If he didn't stop looking at her like that, she really *would* tell these people to leave, propriety be damned.

She took a deep breath and turned away. Even with her back to Nicholas, she could feel his attention on her, as if his gaze were a tangible thing that she could lean against, caress, embrace.

Later.

“You honor me with your gratitude,” Clara told the mage, “and with your kindness.” Then she bid him rise, and asked him his name.

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The suite that had been set aside for Clara was a comfortable, airy set of rooms—cream-colored walls, worn wooden furniture painted powder blue, gauzy drapes in lavender and lilac. The bathing room was decadent; Clara felt the old, sharp fondness for Anise surface when she saw the polished ivory tile and the washbasin trimmed with gold, as she dragged her fingers across towels as soft as petals. A robe of indigo lace with a satin sash lay draped over a bench by the window, which was piled high with tasseled cushions.

Yes, Anise would have most certainly approved of such luxury.

Clara took as long as she could to bathe, and with each stroke of her hands, she imagined she could feel the grit of New York City melting away. The soap smelled of honeysuckle, the oils of vanilla and cinnamon—and also a scent she did not recognize, something unique to Cane that reminded her of a fire in autumn, the air crisp and biting.

“I come bearing gowns,” called out a voice from her sitting room. A door closed, and there was a rustling of fabric. “It’s a sign of how fond I am of you that I’m troubling myself with such things.”

Clara grinned, wrapping herself in the robe and thrilling at the feel of the lace kissing her body. “Not a connoisseur of fashion, dear Bo?”

Bo snorted. “If I had my way about it, I’d still be wearing my old coat, only with a few adjustments. But apparently, as an aide to the king, I’m not allowed to look like a damned ruffian.”

“Nicholas’s words?”

“Well, they’re certainly not mine. Now hurry up, the longer I stay here playing dress-me-up, the more quickly I die inside.”

Still smiling, Clara unpinned her damp hair, shook it out until it fell down her back in a cascade of red. Here in Cane, the few silver strands that had remained since her transformation seemed brighter.

Her power seemed to bask in this environment, where there was no need to hide. She scanned the length of her body. The robe was . . . not demure. Not so long ago, the sight of herself so revealingly clad would have left her feeling ashamed and small.

Now she simply felt . . . powerful. And it had nothing to do with the spark of winter tingling in her blood.

Bo knocked on the open door, glaring. "I'm quite serious, you know. Pieces of my very self, crumbling away by the second."

Clara dropped a kiss on her forehead. "I'm ready, you grump. Just enjoying myself."

"Well, it's about time, I say. Now here, pick one." Bo waved her arm dismissively at the pile of gowns on Clara's bed.

Clara raised an eyebrow. "You're not going to help me choose?"

Bo flung herself onto a chair and pressed a cushion to her face. "Please don't make me. I'll tie sashes, fasten buttons, I'll even braid your hair. But no decision-making. Or really anything that requires true effort, to be more precise."

"You're impossible."

"So I've been told."

Clara grinned. "Fine, I'll handle the dresses. You just talk to me. How is everything downstairs?"

"Oh, you know. Typical preparations. Food. Decorations. Wine, wine, wine. One of the servers dropped a stack of plates. My sister's like to pull her hair out before the evening's over."

Clara turned. "Afa! She's here?"

"Oh, yes, and beside herself with excitement to see you again. Nicholas invited her to live at the palace and organize all the tedious ceremonial things—festivals, parties. Coronations." Bo lowered the cushion and stared hard at Clara. "When you first got here, you said you wouldn't leave right away. What did you mean by that?"

Clara's skin warmed. She feigned preoccupation with her selection of gowns. She held them up, one after another, inspecting each of them in the large gilded mirror that stood propped against the wall beside her bed. A silk gown dyed violet and green, the neckline and hem edged with golden vines. A form-fitting slip of a dress in icy

blue lace, tiny jewels woven throughout the sleeves. An ebony gown, backless, with a severely cut collar and a plunging neckline.

“Clara?” Bo came into her line of sight, leaned against the massive mirror. “You’re ignoring me.”

“I’m not. I’m just not sure how to answer you.”

“Truthfully, and without any thought of sparing my feelings.”

Clara sighed sharply, discarded the ebony gown. “I meant I wouldn’t leave right away because I won’t—but I might not stay.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

Clara sat on the bed and faced Bo. “Because it’s possible I might not belong here,” she said bluntly. “I wasn’t here for that long, before, and while I was here, everyone was at war. Circumstances were . . . unusual. Nicholas and I have never had the chance to know each other as . . . well, as people. Not as soldiers, not as prisoners.” She paused, thinking of that lonely flight across the Rosche tundra, away from him. Cold to the bone and frightened of her own body. Betrayed. Heartbroken. She had long ago forgiven Nicholas, but that did not lessen the pain of remembering. “Not as enemies. What if now, after all this time, all this waiting, we find that we are nothing to each other? What if I cannot conform to life here? What if my presence stirs old anger amongst the faeries? I am not a hero to everyone.”

Bo stood very still. Too still. “No. You’re not.”

“Has there been anger at my return?”

Bo said nothing.

“Bo. Truthfully, and without any thought of sparing my feelings.”

“There have been a few . . . incidents.”

“Incidents.”

“Nothing for you to worry about.”

Clara stood, glaring. “Bo. I must know. It is my responsibility to know. I helped shape this world, and if I’m to live here, especially as a guest of the king, or as a—” A what? A friend? A lover?

A queen?

She breathed in and out, slowly. She turned her attention inward, searched for her power, grasped the reassuring silver cord of it,

let it cool and calm her. “If I’m to have any hope of belonging here, I must know.”

“Protests,” Bo said flatly. “Minor skirmishes between some lingering faery agitators and the royal guard.”

“Has Nicholas been in any danger?”

“Not yet.”

Yet. Clara turned away, a sick feeling washing over her.

“But it doesn’t matter, Clara.” Bo took Clara’s hands, her expression now open and fierce. “No king’s life is free of risk. No kingdom is free of unrest. Whether you live here or Beyond, some people would always find a reason for anger.”

Clara stared at the carpet, where the sigils of the four First Families intertwined—the nightbird, the stallion, the sea serpent. The dragon. After a moment, she said, “I can do good here.”

“Yes. You can. You *have*. There are those who are angry, and then there are those who are grateful, who want to meet you, thank you.”

An image flashed before Clara’s eyes—Anise, her torso stained bright blue, her beautiful face fallen slack. “Some of the things I did . . . I’m not proud of. I don’t blame them for being angry with me.”

After a moment’s pause, Bo said quietly, “Nicholas told me some of what happened between you and Anise. Not all,” she said quickly, “but enough.” There was a heavy pause. “Clara, if she’d wanted to be saved, she wouldn’t have forced your hand.”

At her friend’s worried expression, Clara blinked back her tears and smiled. She drew Bo close and kissed her cheek. “Well. I suppose I can’t make any decisions tonight, anyway. There’s a party to be attended.”

Bo watched her with narrowed eyes. “You won’t put me off that easily.”

Clara turned to the next dress in the pile. The moment she touched the fabric, she knew this would be the one. “I might need many more of your reassurances, Bo, if I’m to do this thing. If I’m to stay. You’ll have to be patient with me.”

“I will. And so will he, Clara.” Bo helped Clara slip the gown over her head, gently pulled her hair free of the neckline. “I don’t exaggerate when I say I’ve never seen him happier. If there’s work to be done, relations to be smoothed, he’ll be at your side for every moment of it.”

They worked quietly for a few minutes, and when Bo stepped away, and Clara caught sight of herself in the mirror, she forgot everything but the simple delight of seeing herself in a beautiful gown.

Gold fabric wrapped around her torso in snug layers, sweeping from her right shoulder to her left hip. The straps were thin, silken cords, the neckline low. When she moved, the cool fabric shifted deliciously across her skin, shimmering a subtle, iridescent blue. The back was open, save for pieces of fabric and lace woven in a chaotic pattern that left patches of her freckled skin bare. The skirt was artfully tattered, as though someone had sewn together thin sheaths of gold. Strips of lace peeked out from beneath the gold, giving the skirt an airy look. It was a dress of cloud and metal sheen.

Bo’s smile in the mirror was utter glee. “All right, well, I’m going down early to find a good spot. And then when he sees you, I’m going to just stand there and watch his mouth fall open and point and laugh. Well, I won’t point and laugh, I suppose, but I’ll cackle. Inside. Or at least quietly.”

Clara burst out laughing. “If you make *me* laugh down there, I’ll kill you. I’m supposed to look queenly.”

“So you *are* staying then,” said Bo. “I knew it.”

Clara shot her a stern look, but it didn’t quite work. She could not stop smiling. “Just help me with my hair.”

*

The throne room was a festival of lights—candles by the hundreds, chandeliers that danced with white flame, strings of electric lights crackling faery blue. Four smaller ballrooms surrounding the throne room had their doors flung open to a steady stream of dancers, courtiers in furs and jewels, servants in long tailored coats. Long tables

sat heavy with food—smoked meats, iced cakes, unfamiliar fruits piled high.

Clara allowed herself a moment at the top of the grand staircase to get her bearings. Steady herself against the banister. Breathe.

When the current dance ended, a nod from Bo signaled the musicians to begin something new—a processional, stately and yet delicate, the notes turning sweetly like falling leaves.

Clara took another long breath and descended, one hand trailing along the iron banister. All eyes turned to her; the air was thick with quiet. She let her gaze sweep through the gathered crowd, locking eyes with the occasional courtier or servant, and smiling in what she hoped was a reassuring manner—and hoping they couldn't guess just how frantically her heart pounded. She wished the damned staircase wasn't quite so long.

When she reached the ballroom floor, the crowd began to part before her, and there, at the opposite end of the room, stood Nicholas.

Her breath caught.

He wore a long scarlet coat edged with gold—the Drachstelle colors—dark breeches, dark boots, a white shirt and dark vest. His dark hair had been combed back, arranged into a style that made him seem more a stranger to Clara than all the lost years between them. She had never seen him look so fine, so . . . clean. He stood tall and straight at the foot of his throne—and then he was moving, slowly at first, and then striding toward her, his dark eyes fixed on hers.

Clara's heart sang at his approach. She murmured a formal greeting and began to kneel, but he caught her hand before she could.

“Lady Clara,” he murmured, and brushed his lips across her fingers. Even that chaste kiss sent a jolt through Clara's body. “You honor us with your presence.”

“And you honor me with your kindness, my king, as do all of you present here.”

There was more she was supposed to say, a greeting she and Bo had practiced before coming down from her rooms. But the words caught in her throat. Nicholas's eyes upon her were too much to bear—

too soft, too hot, too full of things unsaid. Long years and lonely nights.

So Clara said nothing. Instead, she reached up and placed a hand on his cheek, marveling at the familiar feel of the metal at his temple and the unfamiliarity of his rough beard. Then she found his other hand with her own and drew them, clasped, to her heart. She wanted him to feel how it raced; she wanted him to understand what it meant to her, being here—the thrill of it, the fear of it. How the power inside her yearned to be closer to him.

What would they be to each other, now?

Before she could think about whether or not it was wise or proper to do so, she stretched up on her toes and kissed him.

All doubt vanished not an instant later, when the crowd around them began to cheer, Bo's piercing whistle loudest of all.

It was brief—too brief—but they broke apart quickly nevertheless, laughing. Nicholas let out a breath and drew his hand through his hair, mussing it. His eyes shone like the flickering chandeliers. He bowed low; Clara followed, curtsying. Around them, the ballroom was a shimmering sea of laughter, applause, and celebration.

“More wine!” Nicholas cried. “And more music! Welcome our Lady Clara with all your hearts, as we have longed to do for years!”

At once, the orchestra began a joyous, waltzing melody. The courtiers nearest Clara rushed forward to greet her.

As they turned to face the throng of well-wishers, Nicholas said under his breath, “Dance with me, later?”

“All night, if you wish,” Clara replied, and was gratified to feel his hand tighten on hers.

*

The evening flew by in a whirl of color, song, dance, food, and far too much wine.

Clara met Lady Ilona, a gregarious faery who seemed wholly delighted to meet Clara and could not stop praising her choice of dress;

a serious, soft-spoken mage, Lord Kambrach, who thanked Clara for ending the war that had claimed his entire family. Most happily, there was a reunion with Afa, who drew Clara into jeweled arms and kissed her cheeks.

“We have missed you,” Afa whispered against Clara’s ear.

“You have been gone far too long.”

“I have been gone as long as I needed to be,” Clara said gently.

“Of course. I know that. It is only . . .” Smiling, Afa held Clara’s hands and stepped back to look at her. “It’s just that now I feel things are as they ought to be.”

Clara felt a twinge of unease. “I’m glad at least one of us feels so confident.”

Afa frowned. “You are having second thoughts?”

“It’s just all happening so quickly. I’ve barely had a chance to think since arriving. I thought perhaps I’d have a few days to myself first, a few days to—”

“To spend with him, alone?”

“*Afa.*”

Afa’s smile was soft. “I don’t mean to tease you. I just meant, time to know each other again.”

“Yes. Exactly. And he acts as though there is nothing to be worried about whatsoever. As if everything has already been answered for us, and there’s nothing left to do but follow instructions.”

“I think you will be surprised, once you have the chance to speak with him.”

“You cannot mean he’s nervous, too.”

“Of course he is. What, you think, since he is older, since he is a king, that he does not know fear? That he does not know uncertainty?”

“Well, no, that wouldn’t be fair of me.”

Afa nodded serenely. “Indeed. Just give yourselves the time you require. After tonight, it will be easier. Now, pardon me, but I have duties to attend to, and I believe you are about to be asked to dance.” She turned away with a small smile.

Clara felt his presence before seeing him. His attention slipped down her body in trails of heat, and the air behind her seemed suddenly lighter, more vital.

“Will you dance with me, Lady Clara?”

She turned at the low voice, smiled. “I’ve never danced in Cane before. You’ll have to teach me the steps, my king.”

Nicholas gathered her into his arms, one hand firm against her lower back, the other weaving their fingers together. His palms burned her skin. The music changed, and he leaned to whisper into her hair, “I’ve missed you.”

She had expected him to tease her, but the roughness in his voice gave away some deep emotion that set her eyes burning. She blinked away the tears and let him sweep her across the dance floor. She would not allow herself to make a fool of herself here, with everyone watching them.

“I won’t apologize for leaving,” she said shortly, once she had gotten her voice under control.

He pulled back enough to frown at her. “I’m not asking you to do that. All I said was that I’ve missed you, Clara.”

She wanted to push away from him, harden herself against that softness in his voice until she was more sure of herself.

She wanted to confess how much she had missed him, how many nights she had thought of nothing but him. How frightened she was of the intensity of him, of *this*.

She wanted to melt even closer into his embrace, let him quell this ache inside her as her hands had never been able to, alone in her bed.

She looked away, smiling into the crowd of courtiers so they would not see her distress. They danced in silence for long moments, Nicholas’s eyes upon her. The cheery music seemed grating and ridiculous.

Finally, Clara spoke, though even as she did, she wasn’t sure what to say. “Nicholas, I—”

The dance ended. Another one began. An eager young human, one of the lower courtiers, presented himself to Clara bashfully.

“Would you grant me the joy of one dance, Lady?”

“Of course,” Clara managed, and curtsied to him.

Before Nicholas stepped away, he said low in her ear, “Meet me in the Great Room in twenty minutes. Please, Clara?”

She nodded, once, not meeting his eyes. Then he was gone.

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As Nicholas requested, Clara soon managed to sneak away from the ballroom and find the darkened Great Room. Once inside, she found herself alone. The massive table gleamed with moonlight, and the open windows boasted an impossible vista of stars.

A door on the opposite end of the room opened, admitting a wash of light. Nicholas's silhouette was tall and unfamiliar and dear.

“Come with me?” he asked quietly, extending a hand to her.

She took it, and let him lead her down a quiet stone corridor lined with tapestries and a plush carpet. Torches lit their passage, and when they came to a small, modestly furnished room, quiet and comfortable, Clara felt some of the tension in her body unwind.

“This is my private study,” Nicholas explained. “No one comes here but me—no advisors, no council members. It's my retreat.” He closed the door behind them and seemed suddenly shy. “Is this all right? I thought we should have some time to talk.”

“It's perfect.” Clara crossed the room, stood in front of the window. “I was getting a bit edgy in there.”

In silence, Nicholas lit candles around the room, bathing it in a warm golden glow. Clara gazed out at the moonlit city, trying to appear steady when she felt anything but. Each of Nicholas's quiet movements seemed to reverberate inside her, tugging at her belly, tightening her throat.

“You're upset,” he observed, after a long moment.

She turned, found him watching her steadily, his hands clasped behind his back. “I'm . . . I don't know what I am.”

“What does that mean?”

“I said I don’t know.”

“But if you tried to explain it—”

The sound of his patient voice broke her. She threw out her hands, let out a sound that was half laughter, half a choked sob. “I’m happy to see you. I’m intimidated by all those people. I don’t know which of them hate me, which of them admire me, which of them are already sizing me up and finding me lacking. I miss my family, and I haven’t even been gone for a day. I don’t know if I belong here. I don’t know how to talk to you anymore. I want to find out, discover how to do this again, but I’m terrified I won’t be able to. I feel young around you. Too young. You’ve grown up, and you’ve left me behind. And I want you to touch me. No. It’s more than want. I *need* you to touch me. I feel like if you don’t touch me, and soon, I’ll lose my mind. Maybe if you touch me, my head will be clear enough to think. But no one’s let me have you to myself since I got here. No one’s given us the time.”

She stopped, glaring at him. “There. Does that explain things quite well enough for you?”

He let out a slow breath and gave her a sheepish smile. “I have to say, all of that makes me feel better.”

“How could it possibly make you feel better?” she demanded. She wanted to scream. She would not allow herself to cry.

“Because I’m happy to see you, and I’m intimidated by all those people.” He began to take slow, measured steps toward her. His eyes never left her face. “I don’t know which of them will hate you, or hate me for asking you back here. I don’t know which of them thinks me mad for wanting to have a girl from Beyond as my queen. I’ve missed you for so long that it feels impossible that you’re finally here. I don’t know if I can live up to your memory of me. I want to have the time to know you—unhurried and unspoiled time—but I know we won’t be able to, because I’m the king, and someone else will always need me. I’ve grown up, and I’ve lost many years with you.”

He was near to her now, close enough that the air felt taut and searing. Clara imagined their bond stretching between them like a

thrumming cord. It was *right* to be so near him, to find herself leaning closer. Her whole body screamed that it was right.

“I want to touch you,” Nicholas went on, his voice low. “I need to touch you. I’ve dreamed of touching you for years. But since you’ve arrived, no one’s let me have you to myself. No one’s given me the time to reassure you, to reassure myself, to just be Clara and Nicholas, not a king and a lady.” He gave a wistful smile. “Just a curious girl and a statue in the corner.”

Clara’s eyes were full. If she moved, they would spill over.
“Nicholas—”

He moved closer. He feathered his hands down her sides; the steady rhythm of it soothed her. She closed her eyes, and he kissed her wet cheeks.

“You’re not the only one who’s frightened and unsure,” he murmured, his lips against her skin sending shivers of need down her spine. “But we can work this out together, if you’ll agree to it. Say the word and I’ll let you be, Clara. You are not and will never be beholden to me. If you find that you cannot abide life here, if you’d rather return home, you are free to do so. You know this, don’t you?”

She nodded, moving her hands up his torso to rest over his heart. She forced her eyes open, locked them with his. “And if I choose to stay, but not with you, I will.”

“Of course.”

“And if I choose to stay, but it takes me time to accept you, to accept this . . .”

His eyes were soft. “Then I will wait.”

She felt her face crumple, tried to fight it. “You’ve waited for so long.”

“*We’ve* waited.” He kissed her forehead, her cheeks, the soft skin behind her ears. She gasped, arching into him.

“Clara,” he said roughly, stepping back from her, “perhaps we should stop.”

“No.” She curled her fingers into his shirt, tugged him closer. Her eyes were wet, but she did not look away. She felt a surge of

power as his gaze darkened. If they stopped now, she feared she would dissolve. She needed him like breathing. “Touch me. Now.”

A moment passed, still and hot.

She traced the lines of his face with her fingers—his cheekbones, his eyebrows, his lips. “Please, Nicholas.”

A beat, and then another. Then Nicholas let out a ragged breath, and his lips were crashing into hers.

His arms came around her, trapping her own between them. Clara felt surrounded by the strength of him; she felt lit up from the inside. His hand wound into her hair, tangling with the ribbons Bo had tied; he wove his fingers between the fabric criss-crossing down her back. His hand pressed into her skin, branding her. She let out a soft cry against his mouth, grabbed his waistband and tugged him closer.

They stumbled back against a thick brocaded curtain that bordered a window. Clara felt the cushion of velvet at her back and the hard planes of Nicholas’s body pressing against her front. She gasped, tipped her head back and tried to breathe as he pressed hot kisses to her neck, her collarbone, nipping lightly.

He said her name, an edge to his voice that she had never heard before. Heat lanced through her, and she was alive. She was powerful and herself. She was his.

“More,” she breathed, wrenching her arms free to pull his coat down his arms. She caught sight of his flushed, joyful face and grinned, tossed the coat away and wrapped her arms around his neck, let him lift her into place against his hips.

His kisses deepened, softened. His tongue parted her lips and she devoured him. She was floating; she was flying. A roaring sound filled her ears, pulsing with the rhythm of their kisses. His fingers, woven through her dress’s straps, tugged with increasing desperation.

“This dress is complicated,” he said with a growl. “I’d complain more if you didn’t look so exquisite in it.”

At his breathless frustration, a lightness bloomed inside of her. She threw back her head and laughed, and then he managed to slip the sleeve of her gown down her arm, and she was no longer laughing.

She gasped, shuddered, held him to her, and then they were moving, heading for the low chaise pushed against the windows. It was wide and plush; they fell against it, and pillows scattered.

“Shirt, off,” she panted, tugging at his vest, the white shirt beneath it. He sat up, their legs locked together, and she tried to catch her breath as he flung off the vest and then pulled the shirt off over his head.

“Wait,” she said, pressing her hands against his stomach, tracing the muscled lines of his body, following their tangled path with the few pieces of metal still curling across his skin.

“Wait,” she said, more quietly, and pressed her lips to each bit of metal, tasting the tang of long-ago faery magic on her tongue. She let her teeth graze his skin, rejoiced at how her touch made him shiver.

She found his belt, curled her fingers around it. His hands convulsed in her hair, and he said her name in a strangled whisper—
“Clara, you will unravel me.”

She pulled gently on his arms, bringing him back down against her. Skin to skin, lips to lips. She felt his heartbeat echoing in her blood, an answer to her own. His hand slid down her side, down her thigh. When he found the slit of her dress, when his palm came to rest against bare skin, she arched up against him and gripped the cushions hard.

“Can I, Clara?” he breathed against her lips. Her skin tingled from the scratch of his beard, and she twisted in his arms, turned molten as his body pressed against hers. Each touch was a flood of warmth to her fingers.

She told him, “Please,” and when his hand slid up her thigh, beneath the fabric of her gown, she let out a soft cry.

At the sound, his hand faltered against her. With his other arm, he gathered her close, and she latched on gladly, wrapping herself as closely around him as she could. His mouth found hers, desperate, and then dipped lower, to her neck.

“I imagined that when I saw you again,” he said hoarsely, “I would kiss you for hours. But . . .”

“Later,” she told him, and took his face in her hands. She smoothed his hair back from his brow and let herself smile as she hadn’t in years. “We have plenty of time.”

He leaned his forehead against hers, and the love on his face robbed her of breath. “I’ll hold you to that, my lady,” he whispered.

Then he bent low to kiss her, his hand sliding down her back to bring her closer to him. His unhurried caresses turned urgent, and Clara lost herself in them, in him, in the press of his body and the tease of his lips. She wound her arms around his neck, let his touch wash over her in a haze of feeling, until she was nothing but the rush of her blood and the taut thrum of their bond and the cold fire of her power, drawing her higher and higher.

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Hours later, Wahlkraft was still and quiet, the ballrooms deserted.

The moon spilled through the study windows, bathing Nicholas in cool, white light. He had fallen asleep, at last, and Clara lay beside him, watching fondly as dreams moved across his face. When she could bear it no longer, she blew a soft puff of air against his beard.

His mouth twitched.

Stifling her laughter, she blew again.

He grunted, sleepily. “Are you enjoying yourself?”

“I rather am.”

That earned her a smile, and a strong arm hooking warmly about her waist. “You are tireless.”

“It’s only that I have something to tell you.”

“And what is that?”

Clara took a long, slow breath. “It might be premature of me.”

He opened his eyes. “You sound serious.”

“I am. And like I said, it might be premature of me. But the way I see it, I have been thinking about this for a very long time, and you have been thinking about it for even longer, and while we won’t be able to spend all of our time like . . . this . . .”

“Unclothed, you mean.”

She smiled. “I’m not joking, Nicholas. Even though it won’t always be like *this*, and we have much left to discuss, and many difficult things to work out between us, and in all likelihood many more difficult things to work out with your people—despite all of that, I know myself. After seeing you, after being with you . . . I cannot deny how that makes me feel. I know I am in the right place, and I would like to stay.”

After a moment, he blinked. “You could have waited until I was more awake to begin such an important discussion.”

“Well, that would have been rather too merciful of me, I think.”

He raised himself up onto his arms. The fur-lined blanket they had found to warm them slipped down his chest, revealing chiseled lines she could not resist touching.

“Clara,” he said, catching her hands and watching her carefully, “you don’t have to make this decision now.”

“I know I don’t have to. But I want to, and I have. After everything that’s happened, I think I’m quite capable of making up my own mind.” She leaned over him, scooting closer. “You yourself have learned what happens when you try to keep me from doing what I want.”

Nicholas tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. In the sea of red, a strand of silver caught the moonlight. “I’d be more successful moving mountains.”

“Well, then.”

A slow smile spread across his face. “Yesterday, you were a world away. Tonight, you’re in my arms. Clara.” He drew her close, pressed a soft kiss to her temple. “Clara.”

She let her eyes drift shut, felt her body warm at his touch. “I would like Bo to be my personal advisor, if she’ll agree to it.”

Another kiss, and another, feathering along her jaw. “Fine. Then *you’ll* be the one who has to put up with her.”

Clara laughed. “And I would like my father and sister to live here, in Wahlkraft, once our affairs are in order, and if they’ll agree to leave New York.” Another kiss, to her throat; a light nip to her

collarbone. She gasped, squirmed closer. Nicholas helped her, his hands gentle on her hips.

“Of course,” he agreed, kissing her bare shoulders. “They should be here for your coronation, as well.” Then he paused, pulled back to look at her. “Clara.”

“Mmm?”

“It may be difficult, what we have ahead of us. This country still has a long journey to make before it can be whole again.” He tipped up her chin, his gaze searching. “I know you understand that, but I need to hear you say it.”

She linked her fingers with his, held them against her chest. Her blood hummed with the rhythm of him, with the strength of their bond, and though she knew he could feel it just as she could, she wanted to remind him of it—of what they had been through together, of what they had seen and shared. She remembered finding him as a child, looking up at his ferocious face. She remembered how he had towered over her, and yet how she had never been afraid of him.

“Clara?” he questioned. His thumb circled softly against her palm, and love swelled in her like the rising sun.

“It will be a long journey,” she agreed, leaning down to kiss him, “but we will make it, together.”

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