

The background of the book cover is a rich, dark still life painting. It features a woman's face in the upper left, her hands in the center, and a black snake with gold markings coiled around a golden object. The scene is adorned with various flowers, including pink and white lotus-like flowers, blue and red chrysanthemums, and clusters of red apples and green grapes at the bottom. The overall mood is mysterious and sensual.

A SPLIT OR
SWALLOW NOVEL

BETWEEN TWO KINGS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LINDSAY STRAUBE

Also by Lindsay Straube

Split or Swallow

Kiss of the Basilisk

BETWEEN
— TWO —
KINGS

LINDSAY STRAUBE

 *Bloom books*

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Published by Bloom Books, an imprint of Sourcebooks

1935 Brookdale RD, Naperville, IL 60563-2773

(630) 961-3900

sourcebooks.com

Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress.

This book is for anyone who has ever had to choose.

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Chapter One

Tem had never been fucked against a tree before.

They were alone in the forest, but it didn't matter—Tem would've let Caspen fuck her with a crowd present. His hands gripped her hips, her legs wrapped around his torso. The stars above them, the grass below them—it was all the same. Basilisk and human, predator and prey. The soft lines of Tem's body blended with Caspen's until they were one being rather than two. She was immeasurably *full*: of desire, of want, of cock. They were almost there, climbing the perennial slope of pleasure she'd come to know so well. Caspen's mind intertwined with hers. Smoke rose from his shoulders.

Let me see it, Tem.

She wanted him to see it.

Show me.

She would show him.

Caspen's entire body was pressed against hers, the great expanse of his chest anchoring her to the tree. There was no escape, and Tem didn't want to anyway. Her orgasm slammed into her so sharply that her vision went black. By the time it returned, Caspen had finished too.

They lay on the forest floor afterward, panting, their bodies soaked with sweat. Despite the frigid night air, Tem felt as if she were burning up inside.

“What's happening to me?” She gasped when they finally drew apart.

“You are adjusting.” Caspen was equally out of breath. Tem had never seen him so winded.

“But why now? It was never like this before.”

“Now that you have transitioned, your basilisk side has awoken.”

“*Awoken?*”

He shrugged, and a drop of sweat rolled down his shoulder. “I do not know another word to describe it.”

After a moment of thought, Tem found the word actually worked quite well. But she found herself wondering if she would ever feel fully adjusted. It had been a week since they’d gotten married, and she felt no closer to mastering her basilisk side than she’d been when she first transitioned at the lake. Instead she felt completely out of control, her body an open flame.

“If that’s the case, why can’t I transition the way you can?” Tem asked as they walked back to the caves. They’d been hunting in the forest for hours, and she hadn’t been able to turn at all; she’d only managed to transition once since her first time, and even then, she’d only been able to do so with Caspen’s guidance in her mind. He’d practically *pulled* her into her true form, his assistance barely enough. Transitioning felt just out of reach.

“You are new to this, Tem. It will take time.”

“But I’ve done it before. And you do it so easily.”

“I have been doing it for a very, very long time. You will get there.”

“I hate being weak.”

“Weak is the last thing you are.”

Tem tried to believe him. But it was difficult when there was evidence indicating otherwise. She was a Hybreed. She was supposed to be a powerful creature, and instead she could barely transition. The flow she’d found just a week ago was now nowhere to be found, and she was beginning to think that the first few times were flukes. Now she was

relegated to the sidelines, like a child who had played too hard and needed to rest. It was pathetic.

“I should be getting better, not worse.”

“You will get better, Tem. You will master it. You need only learn how.”

By the time they returned to their chambers, Tem was almost convinced. But any thought of transitioning disappeared the moment she saw the letter on their bed. Caspen read it first, his expression indecipherable as he handed it to Tem. Her throat went dry at the three neat lines of script:

Temperance Verus,

The king requests your presence at the castle this evening.

A carriage will be sent for you. Come alone.

Tem turned the paper over, half expecting to see an additional note. There was none.

“Come alone,” she whispered.

Caspen took the letter and tossed it into the fire. She knew he was merely disposing of it, but somehow the act felt significant.

“It should not surprise you,” he said.

“What shouldn’t?”

“That he wants you to come alone.”

“Oh,” Tem said again. “Right.”

It *didn’t* surprise her, exactly. But it made her nervous. Tem hadn’t seen Leo since the wedding. Surely, he had found Evelyn by now. Surely, they were together. The thought made her sick. She looked up at Caspen.

“Doesn’t it bother you that I’m going to see him?”

Caspen raised an eyebrow. “No. It does not.”

She couldn’t understand his apathy. How could this pivotal event be of no concern to him? “But *how*?”

Caspen shrugged. “You chose me,” he said simply.

She stared at him. That was technically true; Tem had chosen Caspen. But it wasn’t because she didn’t love Leo. It was because she wanted *more* for Leo. And in doing so, she had accepted less for herself.

“Tem,” Caspen murmured. “You do not have to go.”

Of course he would say that—closure with Leo was of no importance to Caspen. What was her love for the human prince—now king—in comparison to her blood bond with the basilisk? To Caspen, his marriage to Tem was the only legitimate union. But not to her. Besides, Tem *wanted* to go. She needed to see that she’d made the right choice—that Leo had found Evelyn, that he was happy now.

“I have to go,” she said carefully. “He and I are technically still married.”

Tem did not voice the rest of her thought, which was that Leo could not marry Evelyn if he was still married to Tem.

Caspen shrugged again. “Then you shall go.”

This entire affair was of little interest to Caspen. Basilisks didn’t have paperwork; they didn’t concern themselves with human legalities. But Caspen understood human customs, and if there was anything he supported, it was Tem closing this chapter of her life.

Tem looked down at her naked body. “And just what am I supposed to wear?”

The corner of Caspen’s mouth twitched. “We will find you something.”

“Something” turned out to be rather difficult to find. The dresses Caspen had given her during the training were custom made, Tem learned, and it would take days to make another. Basilisks were always naked. Hours of searching led them to a single floor-length silk robe. When tied with a braided tassel, it marginally resembled a dress. Its plunging neckline was hardly appropriate, but Tem didn’t care. The outfit was the least of her worries.

Caspen walked her to the cave entrance but didn't follow her to the path. Instead he kissed her, and Tem felt the tendrils of his mind brush against hers. His grip tightened. Perhaps his earlier nonchalance had been feigned; perhaps he wasn't as unbothered by this process as he led her to believe. But Tem could do nothing about that now. The only way for Caspen to have her all to himself was to let her go to Leo and end their relationship.

A moment later, he released her. Then he disappeared back into the caves.

Tem waited alone for the carriage, which arrived just as darkness fell. She didn't recognize the stable boy; it wasn't Henry or Peter, which disappointed her. It would have been nice to see a familiar face. Instead, she resigned herself to staring out the window. It was nearly winter; autumn had flown by in a heartbeat, and there was a sharpness to the air that made her shudder with anticipation. Winters were long and dark in the village. She wondered whether they would feel different beneath the mountain. It would be her first winter away from the farm, away from the chickens, away from her mother.

But Tem didn't mind. She wanted nothing more than to assimilate into basilisk society, to finally feel like she was truly home. Caspen wanted that too. She could sense it every time his eyes met hers. He was always watching her, gauging how well she was adjusting, checking to make sure she still belonged to him. Sometimes Tem wasn't sure if she did.

Her thoughts turned to what was to come. She had no idea what to expect tonight, but it was imperative that the evening go well. There was far more than just her marriage with Caspen at stake. In the aftermath of the violence at her and Leo's wedding, tensions between the humans and the basilisks had never been higher. If they couldn't find a peaceful way to coexist, things would only get worse.

But the thought of just coexisting with Leo was impossible. One week ago they'd been in love. They were *still* in love—at least, Tem was. The

ache in her chest was evidence enough of that. But was Leo? He had agreed to share her. *That* was what Tem wanted. But then the wedding happened, and something had changed within her—some thread of selflessness had tugged on her heart when she'd looked in Leo's eyes after she'd crested him. It wasn't fair for him to have to share her. Not when he wanted all of her. He'd told her that himself once: *"I want all of you. Or I don't want you at all."*

Tem sighed, leaning back against the seat. The memory of their wedding plagued her—the way Leo had looked at her as she ascended the stage, the way they'd kissed when she'd crested him. It was a memory she cherished, a moment she thought of in the dark hours of the night when Caspen was asleep beside her. She remembered other things too, from the night they'd spent in his bed: the way he tasted like honey, the way he'd worshipped between her legs, the way he'd murmured her name while his cock was inside her.

The carriage seemed suddenly too small. Tem was unquestionably turned on. Ever since she'd transitioned for the first time, the line between simply existing and arousal had become desperately thin. All it took was the mere thought of sex to make her wet. And when she thought about Leo, it took even less. Something in her body craved him beyond explanation. It was different from the way she craved Caspen. With Caspen, her desire was primal and raw, visceral, consuming her like a hungry animal. With Leo, it was slower—a glowing coal that smoldered deep within her chest. She could not rid herself of it. She wasn't even sure she wanted to. Just the thought of being close to Leo was sending her into a frenzy. Tem leaned forward, cradling her head in her hands. She had to get it together.

"Miss?" The footman's voice interrupted her thoughts. "We've arrived."

The carriage door opened, and Tem accepted the hand offered to her. The stars were bright overhead, the last sliver of the harvest moon glowing beneath the freckled sky. She stared up at the castle's foreboding turrets,

dreading what came next. No part of her wanted to walk inside those doors. This was no longer her home.

Now it was Evelyn's.

Tem paused before the entrance, her hand on the doorknob. Was Leo on the other side? Was Evelyn? He'd told her to come alone—did that mean he would be alone too? When she opened the door, however, Leo was not on the other side. Instead, Lord Chamberlain greeted her with a subdued smile.

"Temperance," he said calmly. "How are you this evening?"

"Oh," she said, clearing her throat. "I'm fine."

He nodded. "Please, follow me."

Tem did so, following him through the foyer and into the parlor, where Lord Chamberlain gave her a curt nod and bowed as he left the room. Tem wondered about the formality. Did her status as queen of the basilisks give her some respect in the royal castle? Or did he merely pity her for what was to come?

Tem needed a drink.

She scanned the room for alcohol, her eyes landing on a golden tray holding a faceted crystal bottle filled with whiskey. She crossed to it immediately, pouring herself a healthy dose and downing the entire thing. The liquor settled her nerves, but just barely. The parlor was hot; suddenly the stupid robe was too tight.

Tem looked up at the paintings on the walls. Dozens of faces stared back at her—all royals, all long dead. It was clear that Leo's icy-blond hair had been passed down through generations. Even when his male ancestors had married brunette women, the children somehow ended up blond. Her eyes traveled over the sea of angular faces, seeing Leo in every single one. One man had Leo's slate-gray eyes, another his thin, elegant fingers. Finally, she spotted Maximus.

Tem crossed to his portrait, still clutching her whiskey glass. The former king was standing in what looked like the library the Frisky Sixty ceremony had taken place in. A thick golden cuff glinted on his wrist. Tem wondered where Maximus was now, whether Leo had allowed him to roam free or imprisoned him for his crimes. Before she could follow that thought, someone cleared their throat. Tem whipped around at the sound.

There, in the doorway, stood Leo.

He looked just the same. Tall, slender, wearing an impeccably tailored velvet suit. His hair was just as she remembered it, white blond and slicked back. For some reason, Tem had expected him to look different—older, somehow. But the only thing that had changed was his eyes. They were hooded, as if he hadn't been sleeping properly. Tem didn't want to think about what could be keeping him up at night. He was wearing a wedding ring, and she wondered suddenly whether it was the same one he'd married her with. Tem still wore hers—she hadn't taken it off since their wedding. Surely, he would ask for it back. The thought killed her.

“Tem.”

Just her name, but something inside her awoke at the sound of his voice—something impossible to ignore.

“Leo.”

Just his in return.

Tem remembered Caspen holding her and Leo's heads together, sealing their bond with a kiss. She wanted to kiss him again now. Tem immediately suppressed the thought. Leo was not hers anymore. Not only did he belong to someone else, but Tem herself had told him to go. She didn't feel as though she was allowed to miss him when she was the one who had sent him away in the first place.

Leo's eyes traveled over her, lingering on the diabolically low neckline of her robe.

Tem set her whiskey down, afraid she might drop it.

“Thank you for coming.” His tone was oddly formal. She couldn’t stand it. “I wasn’t sure if you would.”

Tem frowned. “Why?”

He tilted his head. “Because you’re...with him.”

Tem didn’t know how to respond to that. Just because she was with Caspen didn’t mean she was going to ignore Leo’s existence. She was the one who’d made him promise they would see each other again.

“I’ll always come when you call,” she said quietly.

He didn’t reply. Tem rather wished she’d had more to drink, but perhaps it was better this way. There was no telling what she would do if she was drunk. Even without the influence of alcohol, she felt uncommonly warm. And every time she looked at Leo, she only felt warmer.

“Are you...?” Leo began but stopped.

“Am I what?” she prompted.

“Happy?”

It was an impossible question. How to answer? Of course she was happy with Caspen—she always had been. But part of her yearned for Leo—*ached* for him. It was a part as real and as prominent as the part that loved Caspen. She couldn’t help it, couldn’t control it. It simply *was*. Rather than answer, Tem decided to ask him the same question in return:

“Are you?”

Leo’s gaze was unwavering. The intense eye contact was beginning to test her. She wanted to cross to him, to cup his chin in her hand, and pull his face to hers. She balled her hands into fists, resisting the urge.

“Happiness is an indulgence,” he whispered.

Tem had no idea what to make of that answer. Was he saying that he wasn’t happy? Or that he was, but it had cost him something to become so?

She didn't know, and she couldn't fathom asking. Instead, she asked the thing she'd come here to find out: "Did you find her?"

Tem expected an immediate response, but none came. It was a simple question. She already knew the answer. Still, she needed to know for sure—needed to hear him say it.

"Yes." His voice was tight when he said it.

Tem nodded. She could think of nothing else to do. On the one hand, she was glad Leo had found Evelyn. That's what she'd ordered him to do, after all. On the other hand, she felt a wave of jealousy so severe, it nearly ripped her breath from her chest. A thousand terrible images flashed through her mind: Leo touching Evelyn, kissing her, saying her name instead of Tem's. It was revolting.

There was only one more thing she wanted to say to Leo—one thing that weighed heavily on her heart. Tem knew she shouldn't say it—had no right to say it. But she needed him to know it anyway. "I miss you."

Leo's eyes narrowed. There was no mistaking the desire in them—pure, animalistic craving that matched the craving in her. But pain flashed across his face, and Tem immediately regretted her words. She hadn't wanted to hurt him.

Leo opened his mouth, then closed it. Not for the first time, Tem wished she could read his mind the way she read Caspen's. Instead she could do nothing but wait—and pray. She was helpless, as she always was with Leo.

It seemed like an hour went by before he said, "That will pass."

Something inside Tem wilted. This was a version of Leo that she wasn't used to—a version that was distant and cold. She understood it. But she hated it.

Leo crossed his arms, cutting himself off from her. "So, shall we get on with it?"

"Get on with...?"

“The annulment.”

So that was why she was here. Tem should have expected this, should have known that after Leo found Evelyn, the next logical step would be to marry her. But she couldn’t bring herself to speak. So she simply nodded.

Leo cleared his throat and gestured at the door. “After you.”

Every step toward him felt like it was taken underwater. Tem moved as if in slow motion, sensing every rise and fall of his chest—every twitch of his pulse. She could hear his heart rate speed up as she got closer, her basilisk side wide-awake and wanting. The moment she smelled his cologne, her nostrils flared, and she stopped. He smelled like summer—like a warm breeze over an open field. But there was another scent mixed with his. Sickly sweet, like vanilla. The whiskey turned in her stomach. It was *her*. Tem was sure of it.

She was still frozen in place.

Leo stared at her, his posture stiff and guarded. “Tem...?”

At the sound of her name, she looked up into his slate-gray eyes. He was so close. They were breathing the same air, their faces inches apart. Was she imagining it? Was he leaning in?

“Your Majesty? Are you ready?” Lord Chamberlain stood in the doorway.

Leo snapped immediately out of it, shaking his head as he turned toward his uncle. “Yes. We’re ready.”

Tem resented his use of the word *we*.

“The annulment must be administered by the former king, as he was the one who married you.” Lord Chamberlain gestured with his hand. “If you will both follow me.”

Tem’s steps synched with Leo’s as they descended the stairs to the dungeon.

She stared straight ahead, her eyes locked on the back of Lord Chamberlain's head, acutely aware of Leo beside her. His hand was almost brushing hers. Should she touch him? Better not. If she touched him, she wouldn't be able to stop.

By the time they reached the door to the dungeon, Tem was stiff with cold. It was freezing down here—far colder than she remembered. Everything in her wanted to shift closer to Leo, to drape herself against him and feel his warmth. It was a carnal need, one that took all her strength to resist. Lord Chamberlain was fiddling with the door; it appeared to be stuck. Tem tried desperately to concentrate on anything other than the heat emanating from Leo's body, but it was impossible. Her basilisk side clawed for dominance, forcing her to listen to her instincts. It was no use. She had to touch him.

Against all logic and will, Tem extended her hand toward Leo's. Her mind screamed at her to stop. But her body moved of its own accord, brushing just the tip of her pinkie finger against Leo's. The moment their skin touched, Leo froze. Electricity exploded across her skin. A barrage of memories flooded her mind so forcefully that she bit her lip to keep from crying out.

They were in his bed, naked, the night before their wedding.

"Be still."

She would be anything for him.

"Say it. Say you want my cock."

She would say anything for him.

"You were made for me."

Nothing could be more true.

Was Leo remembering it too? Was he seeing what Tem was seeing—the two of them together, the way they were supposed to be? Tem expected him to pull away, but he didn't. Instead, after a debilitating pause, his finger

moved too. It trailed along the length of hers, brushing all the way up to her knuckle. Tem savored the vibration that coursed up her arm at the contact.

Something inside her called to him. Something predatory and instinctual and undeniably inhuman. Tem had to have him; she needed to kiss him and taste him and press her skin against his until she—

“After you,” Lord Chamberlain said.

They both jumped at the same time, yanking their hands apart. The dungeon door was open, its gaping darkness beckoning.

Tem’s heart was pounding so fast, she found it difficult to breathe. It was as if she’d just exchanged something vitally important with Leo—as if some element of his body had transferred itself to hers, and vice versa.

She didn’t dare look at him. Instead she stared straight ahead as they entered the dungeon, stepping into the darkness together. It was just as she’d remembered it: dimly lit and brutally cold. But this time, it wasn’t her father in the cell at the end of the row. It was Leo’s.

Maximus was slumped against the stone wall, his blond hair tangled, his eyes closed. He looked nothing like the proud king she’d come to know during the courting contest, and Tem found she enjoyed the sight. He was right where he belonged, reaping the consequences of his actions in the place where he had caused others so much pain. Seeing him in the same cell her own father had once occupied was an incredible victory and one she knew she owed to Leo. Tem wondered how soon after the wedding he’d put his father here. She could only imagine how that must have felt for him.

“Father,” Leo barked. “Wake up.”

Maximus’s eyes opened slowly. They traveled first over Leo before settling on Tem. He let out a low, humorless laugh that cut into her like a blade.

“Not who I expected,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“We need you to witness our annulment,” Leo continued as if he hadn’t spoken.

Maximus laughed again. This time it descended into a tortured cough. “Pathetic,” he said, his eyes locked on Leo’s. “Even for you.”

“Enough, Father.”

Tem looked at Leo. It wasn’t his usual sharp comeback—he sounded tired. She wanted to reach for him again.

Maximus shrugged, and it was then that Tem noticed he was manacled to the cell floor. It seemed a particularly cruel way to keep him—he couldn’t stand, and his shoulders were permanently hunched. It was a personal touch; there was no need to restrain him within his own cell, and Tem knew Leo must have ordered him to be kept that way. She wasn’t sure how to feel about this revelation. She knew Leo was capable of cruelty—all men were. But it wasn’t his instinct, and it certainly wasn’t his preference. Had his experience at the wedding hardened him? Was he no longer the twenty-year-old boy she knew?

There was no time to wonder about this. Lord Chamberlain produced a piece of paper from his jacket pocket, and in the dim light of the dungeon, Tem caught the words *dissolution of marriage*. She felt the sudden urge to fight back tears. *This* is what would unbind her from Leo? It seemed so stupid, so *worthless*. Tem stared at the piece of paper. It was so simple—nothing more than ink on a page. Signing this would do nothing to change the way she felt. It wouldn’t soothe the fiery need that threatened to drown her whenever he came close. Nothing could soothe that—love demanded to be felt.

“Ladies first,” Lord Chamberlain said as he brandished the paper at Tem.

Numbly, Tem took the quill and signed her name. She took specific care not to touch Leo’s skin when she handed the paper to him. Then he signed his name too. Lord Chamberlain passed the paper and the quill through the

bars, into Maximus's outstretched hands. He took his time signing it, first reading every word as if he were savoring the experience. Tem couldn't exactly blame him. Surely, this was the highlight of his day. When he was done signing, Lord Chamberlain retrieved the paper and tucked it away into his jacket. The moment it disappeared, Tem felt even colder.

They were just about to leave when Maximus said, "Well, Thelonius? Has it been hard?"

Leo stopped in his tracks. Tem stopped too.

"Has what been hard?" he whispered.

"Knowing the truth."

Leo's fists clenched at his sides. Tem looked from him to Maximus, wondering what was going on. She was missing something—clearly there had been a previous conversation between father and son.

Leo's answer was a single word: "Yes."

Then he turned on his heel and left.

The journey back up to ground level was silent. It wasn't until they were once more in the foyer and Lord Chamberlain had bowed away that Leo finally turned to face her.

"Tem," he said quietly.

She paused, her hand already on the front door. Was he going to address the way they'd touched earlier—the electricity that had passed between them? Or was it entirely one-sided?

Before she could spiral, Leo continued: "I wish for us to have dinners."

Tem blinked. "Dinners...plural?"

"Yes," Leo said, a shadow of a smile twitching his lips. "Dinners, plural."

"What sort of dinners?"

"Every Sunday night, you and Caspen will come to the castle and dine with me and Evelyn."

A chill ran down Tem's spine at the sound of her name. It was the first time she'd heard him say it. She wondered once again whether Evelyn was here, just upstairs, perhaps in Leo's bedroom. Her presence permeated the walls.

"But...*why*?"

Leo rolled his shoulders as if they pained him. "Because we need an avenue in which to discuss how our two kingdoms can coexist. I thought dinner might be pleasant."

Tem was still having trouble grasping the concept. Her *and* Caspen? *Here*? It was absurd. Dinner with Leo and Evelyn would be anything but pleasant. She couldn't imagine a worse way to spend a Sunday evening.

"Leo—" she began.

"We have to work together, Tem. Otherwise this will all fall apart."

She sighed. She knew he was right. They were attempting to break a centuries-old pattern of strife between their kingdoms. It was necessary work. But the thought of sitting so closely with him and Evelyn was abhorrent. She didn't want to see them together, didn't want to observe how Leo looked at her the way he used to look at Tem. That was a special kind of torture—one that not even Tem deserved. When she didn't answer, Leo leaned in.

"There will be excellent food," he said quietly. "And ample dessert."

The smallest of smiles broke her face. The memory of feeding him the chocolate soufflé in front of his father sprang immediately to mind. "In that case, we'll be there."

Pure joy flitted across his face, so quickly Tem almost missed it. A moment later, it disappeared, smoothed over by a careful mask of indifference.

Leo nodded. "Very well," he said. "I shall send a carriage."

Tem nodded too. It was all she could do.

There was a silence as they looked at each other, and Tem remembered all the conversations they'd had in this very foyer. The one after their first date: *"I'm not going to kiss you. Instead I'm going to picture everything I want to do to you without that dress on. And I'm going to pretend that someday you'll let me do it."*

The one where she'd asked for his trust before taking him down to the dungeon:

"You can't tell him I'm showing you this."

"I will not tell him. You have my word."

Tem would take either of those conversations over the one they were having now. She no longer wanted to be in this castle—it hurt her to stand here among all the gold. But there was one more thing she needed to ask him.

She held out the hand with her wedding ring. "Do you want this back?"

Leo's eyes flicked to her fingers—to the slim silver band that had belonged to his mother. Tem expected him to answer immediately, but he didn't. Instead, he stared at her raised hand, his jaw tight, his own hands behind his back. Then, he said simply, "No."

Then he turned and left her.

Tem stood in shock as Leo ascended the steps to where she knew his bedroom was. Was Evelyn waiting for him? She wanted to vomit at the thought. How different this interaction had been from her previous nights at the castle, during the competition to see who would be his bride. Back then, Leo had constantly pursued her, his sole goal to marry her. Now that marriage was annulled.

Tem looked down at the marble floors, staring blankly at the tiles laced with gold. The whole castle felt poisonous to her now, as if the walls themselves were trying to strangle her. She should leave. But somehow,

standing here, she still felt close to Leo. She wished she could run up those stairs after him. It didn't matter that Evelyn was there—it didn't matter that there were a hundred reasons why she shouldn't. Tem wanted to fall into Leo's arms and never leave him again. But she couldn't do that.

She may have won the competition for Leo's hand in marriage, but she'd barely had any time as his wife. None at all, really. It would have been a good marriage, of that much she was sure. Leo would have taken care of her, ensured she never wanted for anything.

And yet.

A life in the castle with Leo would have been a life without Caspen. A life without the addictive rush of danger and lust that only a basilisk could provide. Tem remembered the heat from the dream the night before she went into the caves for the first time. Caspen's heat. She didn't know much, but she knew she would die without that heat. Tem had duties now—obligations and promises to people other than herself. She belonged to Caspen and her quiver and every single basilisk beneath the mountain. She was their queen. She would not let them down; she would not let it all fall apart. Even if it meant missing Leo—even if it meant feeling incomplete every day for the rest of her life. Her future was decided.

It was time to return to her husband.