

KNIGHT OF THE GOD KING



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WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

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First published in the United States by Wednesday Books,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

EU Representative: Macmillan Publishers Ireland Ltd, 1st Floor, The Liffey Trust
Centre, 117–126 Sheriff Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 YC43

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St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.wednesdaybooks.com

Designed by Devan Norman

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Blackwood, Lauren author

Title: Knight of the god king / Lauren Blackwood.

Description: First edition. | New York : Wednesday Books, 2026. |

Audience term: Teenagers | Audience: Ages 13-18

Identifiers: LCCN 2026009005 | ISBN 9781250891167 hardcover |

ISBN 9781250891174 ebook

Subjects: CYAC: Knights and knighthood | Kings, queens, rulers, etc. |

Magic | Romance stories | Fantasy | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction | Novels

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.B57 Kn 2026

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2026009005>

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First Edition: 2026

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ONCE UPON A TIME . . .



The Dark appeared suddenly, as if by an evil wish. Or perhaps a curse.

One moment, it was an ordinary, gray English morning. The next, a kilometer of the western shore was drenched in darkness.

Like a night without the stars or moon to illuminate it.

Or perhaps *death* was more fitting. Everything within its borders succumbed to it. Plants, animals . . . humans. Their screams like nightmarish echoes before they were silenced forever.

Some said demons lurked within. Some said the plague.

For two hundred years it crept along the land, ravaging as it went. And for those two hundred years, only one man possessed the rare magic to hold it back. An immortal with the power of a thousand men in one.

The King of England, known by his subjects as Deus Rex.
The God King.

CHAPTER

1

CALLIOPE

The holding room was brimming with bodies.

Nearly every knight from most every province was in attendance. Most were forced to stand, the full skirts of their elaborate dresses turning the room into an overheated, sweat-stench nightmare not even the mild English springtime rain outside the window could combat.

It wouldn't have been unreasonable to expect a more comfortable waiting room, something more befitting the station of a knight, or at the very least more time to prepare. Instead, the audition was sudden, and we waited in song and sweat, finding out by word of mouth only a few hours before. And we all knew what that meant.

The Royal Knight of Deus Rex was dead.

Lady Violet had been well known to us all, through songs

and the rare bit of gossip from the palace. But only those allowed at court had ever seen her, despite maintaining the role as the Royal Knight for the better part of three decades. It was a stable position, with a multitude of benefits, and one that rarely opened. And if I won the role, today would be the last time I'd have to lie to my aunt, making her believe I was running her errands instead of working on my craft.

I may not have been a working knight or blessed with noble parentage—I certainly had no business auditioning for a royal appointment—but if I succeeded, a permanent position would guarantee I could eventually find a noble husband without interference from my father's ruined name or my aunt's manipulations. He didn't even have to be noble—a brave soldier would do, so long as he was a good person. There was something about a man with a sword that was unbearably romantic.

Either way, I'd finally have a life of my own, away from my aunt's suffocating, restrictive household.

So I would remain through the stench of sweating bodies, the dirty looks from women just as travel worn as I, the cramped room with barely a place to sit . . . and the odds stacked against me.

Because what was on the other side of this audition was too tempting to ignore.

Freedom.

I tucked closer to the corner, gripping my audition number in my fist, so the close bustling bodies wouldn't knock it from my grasp. The taller woman standing in front of me had a number a few slots after mine, so between her and the expensive vase resting precariously on a stone pillar nearby, I was certain I could keep out of sight until my cousin had her turn. Many of

the knights were performing vocal exercises, their pretty voices paired with the multitude of conversations creating the atmosphere of a lively party. But I couldn't risk opening my mouth, of having Anise recognize my voice.

Anise, who stood on the other side of the room, conversing cheerfully with her best friend. Anise, the *actual* knight. Whether she deserved the title was debatable. Her voice, however pretty, was not the most accurate, which made her magic even less so. But *she* had studied at the Knight Academy. *She* had proper status as a practicing knight. I only had the skill. Anise certainly wasn't going to win on her own merits, and also happened to be petty, so if she spotted me she would do everything within her power to make sure I wouldn't succeed either.

The pair of doors leading to the audition room slammed open, and a woman stormed out, muttering something about being insulted. A churn went through my belly at her exit. What exactly did this audition consist of?

"Eight," the auditioner's voice called, his no-nonsense tone making it clear that this was not going to be a simple audition. One of the knights walked as gracefully as she could manage through the throng to enter the room, the door shutting behind her.

I took a deep breath, settling further into the corner, if only to take a bit of weight from my feet. It would be a while yet. I was number forty-two—I'd made sure to enter the queue as far from Anise as possible, so she would be long gone by the time I was called.

I jolted and looked up at the sound of the door—barely thirty seconds from when the knight first entered, and she was leaving, tear-streaked cheeks shimmering. What on earth was he saying to these poor knights?

From where I sat, I could see his black hair in the doorway, but I didn't dare try to see his face. "My ladies," he said, his voice colder now, if even possible. "If you can't perform the basics of sound vibration and intonation, please save us all some time and vacate the waiting room." He paused but didn't wait for anyone to leave as he continued with, "Number nine," and entered the room again.

One poor knight slipped out of the room shortly after, looking dejected. The wise ones, whether they lacked the skill or not, didn't move. One had to be truly foolish to not at least *try* for the opportunity to join the royal court. Better to try and fail than to give up.

But the auditioner did have a point. Creating vibrations in the air was the very first skill a knight perfected—it was *literally* the means to summon magic. Snapping or flicking one's fingers, creating puffs of air with one's mouth, those were all practiced before hitting different tones came into the picture. And certainly before instruments and tools were brought into play. In fact, unless one practiced their pitches or, ideally, were born with perfect pitch, there was no point in bothering with singing. The sound frequency combination for closing a wound, say, was completely different than the one used to create a shield. The art of knight magic was subtle and specific—many were born with it, few perfected it. It was the difference between blowing out a simple candle and, well . . . serving Deus Rex.

Thankfully, with the number of hours I'd spent helping my cousin learn the skills required to become an expert knight, I'd managed to perfect them right under my aunt and uncle's noses. Anise knew I could perform magic, but because we'd never shared the same ambition—she, an advantageous marriage, and I, a way to support myself so I could finally leave my aunt's

home—she didn't really care. But she was three years older and, at twenty-one years of age, hadn't even gotten close to marriage yet. This position may be her only chance.

I had to avoid her at all costs.

Clearly, the auditioner's warning went unheeded, because a few other knights entered and exited quickly, to the point that I was beginning to think these tests might be next to impossible. Everyone was speaking too much for me to hear if they were even given the chance to sing. By the time Anise was called, the auditioner's tone was so frustrated, I worried he'd send everyone home before my turn arrived.

Anise carried herself like she thought she should be the queen. An impossible goal—England may have practiced “free soil” but that didn't mean Black girls like us would ever be considered a proper wife for a king, let alone the immortal Deus Rex, the savior of England. But being in the king's court was incredible enough, and an advantageous marriage would certainly come out of it. Something she desperately needed, and everyone knew it—her mother had chased off every suitor she'd had for the past five years in hopes of finding that one perfect golden boy of elevated rank.

Thanks to my aunt's machinations, the gossip surrounding the family was brutal. More than a few of the knights looked at Anise, whispering and snickering. I almost felt bad for her—this position might have been the only way to break free of the unfortunate reputation her mother had saddled her with.

But that didn't mean I wanted her to have it over me. I wanted it just as badly as she did, if not more. I *deserved* it more.

Anise didn't stay in the room long. But she left with her head held high, a gentle smile on her lips—if she'd failed, no one would know it. If I didn't know her, I might have thought she'd

won the position, that she was simply headed home to fetch her things. Honestly, a small part of me thought it could be true. But as the door shut behind her, we were all still squished into this waiting room. If Ann had truly won, we would've been sent home. I released a breath. She didn't win the position. And she was no longer in the room. The hard part was over.

I braved a few vocal warm-ups, but at this point, there really was nothing more I could do to prepare. All I knew was that I needed to be proficient in knight magic, equipped to face *The Dark* . . . and I doubted any knight knew the expectation on that score. It wasn't as if any of us could do research on the subject—there weren't many writings on it, except by those who had come across *The Dark* through illegal means. It was forbidden, deemed too dangerous, to even approach its border. And yet all of England could see it from their windows, a certain point on the horizon, depending on the direction one faced, where everything simply went . . . dark.

And the king was the only one who could beat it back. The king and his knight.

Lady Calliope . . .

I'd never sought out wealth or position, but I had no doubt I could get used to being called *my lady* in no time at all.

As the room cleared, I managed to find a chair to sit in. Since I had spurned any offer of conversation due to the risk of my cousin overhearing, everyone had already settled into their social circles, no one particularly eager to add one more. And so, I opted to contribute to the noise by warming up my voice with birdcalls.

It was something I'd developed when I was young, something fun to pass the time—or the lonely nights when my aunt

had made me sleep in the stables. I would sing to the birds, hoping to be accurate enough that they would sing back.

Sparrows were my favorite, even if they were the easiest. They always sounded so joyful, so naturally rhythmic. And, sometimes, it felt like they were magic, the way their sweet sound put me at peace.

A few of the closer knights looked my way, snickering. I was used to that from living with my cousin, so I ignored it.

"Will you stop that?" one of them said, annoyed.

"Why?" I said. "I'm not chirping nearly as loudly as you're speaking."

"It's piercing."

"Annoying," said another, as if the first adjective hadn't been enough.

"Making animal noises is childish," said yet another. "And foolish. The king isn't going to select a fool as his knight."

"Though perhaps," said the first knight, laughing, "the King's Fool would be a far better position for you."

The others with her laughed.

I didn't want to call them pathetic, but if they only knew how badly I had been bullied by my own family they would be ashamed of themselves for their mediocre jabs. So I ignored their laughter and let out the high-pitched call of a kestrel, shutting them up as it forced them to cover their ears.

All the knights I could see were staring at me, horrified.

But the first one was positively fuming. "Why, you little freak—"

The audition door shot open, and the man stepped out quickly.

"What was that sound?" he demanded.

CHAPTER

2

CALLIOPE

Everyone fell silent at his question. We had all been filling the room with noise, but perhaps my attempt to annoy the knights around me had made it worse.

He continued, “I assume there are no kestrels in the building. Who made that birdcall?”

I swallowed down a thick lump of fear. My fellow knights lost no time in pointing at me, covering their mouths to hide their mocking laughter. My heart froze as the man locked eyes with mine and stormed his way through the crowd toward me.

I shot to my feet, tripping over the chair as my long skirt hampered my escape. I bit back a startled yelp as the man caught me, his hands gripping my elbows. Not a man, a boy, I realized. He couldn’t have been much older than me.

I looked up at him, gaping like a fool.

He was so handsome. His black wavy hair fell to his jaw, and his brown skin and eyes had an undertone that reminded me of damp earth. He must have been of high rank, because he wore jewelry—his earrings were dangling black crosses, with a thin chain that attached from his lobe to the upper helix of his ear. A matching chain necklace looped once close to his throat, the second longer loop peeking from his collar at the sides of his neck, along with a cross hanging from a chain at his belt. The sword at his hip was simple, but I recognized the signature handle's craftsmanship of Sir Wallis, the greatest smith in all of Britain. The blade would be made of rare steel, I knew. Unbreakable. Heavy. Deadly.

I felt the beginnings of a blush, only the heat of it, and tried my best to tamp it down. But how strong this boy must be, to wield such a weapon. And Sir Wallis didn't craft weapons for just anyone, even if you did possess the riches to afford it. Wallis was selective . . . and he'd selected this boy. How heroic he must be. Like the legendary heroes from fairy tales.

But I shoved my awe aside to focus on my present predicament. Everyone knew the king was not prejudiced when it came to hiring within his service, but it was relieving to see with my own eyes that someone of this boy's complexion would be elevated, put in charge of such an important task—to select the Royal Knight who would work alongside the immortal king until the day she died. But his gaze was severe, as if those beautiful brown eyes had never shown warmth and were unaccustomed to kindness.

That was, unfortunately, a little less soothing.

"Are you quite well, my lady?" he asked, though I couldn't tell if his tone was concerned for my health or my sanity.

I heard laughter break out across the room. As if the situation couldn't have been any more embarrassing.

"Yes." I felt myself blushing again, keenly aware of the boy's warm hands still holding me steady. "Forgive me, sir. Yes."

He released his hold as I took a few steps back. "Your call interfered with the last audition."

I raised my brows. "I wasn't the only one making noise out here."

"Yes, well, your voice is . . . resonant," he said.

Loud, he meant.

Obnoxious, his miserable expression implied.

My heart dropped. He had been in a sour mood long before I'd foolishly started my birdsongs, but that didn't change the fact I'd just limited my chances of ever being selected. Still, I stood tall, steeling my gaze. "If a knight can't work her magic through a little distraction, she can't be much good at her job, can she?"

The boy glared at me as I spoke, and continued to do so as the offended knights protested, said something or other to insult me. He had the look of a hateful mercenary, one that could make even the fiercest warrior crumble. It was a look that studied and assessed while being fully prepared to kill if need be. I had never seen someone look at a knight in such a way, as if meaning to intimidate. And yet as I returned his glare, something shifted in his eyes, a realization—at least I thought it might be—but he diverted his gaze from mine far too quickly for me to be sure.

He held his arm out, gesturing toward the open doorway. "My lady, will you enter the audition room?"

"O-oh—" I hesitated, looking at the number in my hand,

even though my mind knew he hadn't gotten close to it. "But you haven't called my—"

He snatched the scrap of paper from me, and I gaped as he crumpled it in his hand and tossed it aside carelessly. "Enter the room," he said, adding, "Please," after a breath of a moment. As if his cold attempt at politeness made him seem any friendlier.

I walked toward the open door without questioning what this all meant.

The murmurs around me were shocked.

He's auditioning her after that?

Of course not. He's throwing her out.

He skipped over so many numbers.

He's getting her out of the way. She's a nuisance.

How irritating.

He's angry. He'll get rid of her quickly, mark my words.

Who even is she? She doesn't belong here. . . .

No one would make room for me, so I pushed my way through, forcing myself not to look at the other knights. The ones I bumped into fussed, as if they themselves weren't creating the reason for the disturbance in the first place. I should have let the boy go first. When I glanced back, they were clearing the way for him, as if he were an executioner and might choose any one of them at random.

Terror behind me, ridicules around. And so I kept my eyes on the small room until I was safely inside. Or perhaps *safely* wasn't the right term, the sounds of heavy boots behind me and the door being shut igniting my nerves all over again.

I turned around quickly. "Sir, I do apologize for all the ruckus, but please just give me a chance to—"

"Stand there," he said, pointing at the wall.

I snapped my jaw shut and rushed to do as I was told. "A-am I . . . am I in trouble? Or did you truly just pull me out of the queue to audition?"

He went to a table on the other side of the small room, the only piece of furniture inside other than two chairs on either side of it. "Name?"

"Because of a birdcall?"

"The position of Royal Knight requires accurate pitch. You executed a perfect birdcall. I don't understand the confusion."

"O-oh—" Relief settled on me, and I grinned. "I thought you were going to stab me and throw me out the window."

He stared at me for a moment, and I had a distinct feeling my joke hadn't landed as intended. "What is your name?"

"Cali. That is, Calliope."

He raised his dark brows the slightest bit. "Truly?"

It wasn't a common practice in England, to be named after Greek Muses. But then, my parents had been uncommon people.

It was part of the reason my aunt hated me so much.

"My parents named me with the hope it would encourage musical talent," I said. "They always said I was born to be a knight."

"Mm." He didn't look convinced. "And your parents are?"

It had been a pretty lie until now. I should have never brought them up.

"I was raised by my uncle," I said, praying my voice kept steady. "John Bailey."

"Another Bailey." He sounded unimpressed. "Hopefully you're more talented than the last one."

"I am." I hadn't meant it to sound arrogant, but there was no

taking back my words. Anyway, I *was*. I had practically taught Ann everything she knew.

Now was the time to prove it.

Another sound of skepticism from him. "Are you unmarried?"

It seemed an odd question, given the nature of the position. But now that I was in the audition room, I needed to do all I could to secure my place. "Yes."

"Why? You're old enough."

"My aunt thought I'd be of better use at home."

"Your *cousin* would be of better use at home."

I snickered, swallowing back the sound when he looked at me.

I could have sworn he was going to laugh with me this time. Instead, he cleared his throat. "Let's begin," he said, and lit the candle on the table.

"Please don't tell me this is the skill you chastised everyone about earlier."

His expression gave away nothing. "I trust you know what to do."

I felt the vibration of magic inside me, and when I flicked the air with my fingers the candle immediately extinguished. The boy didn't look impressed, simply moved on to the next test, laying a piece of fabric on the table.

"Tear this in two," he instructed.

That skill was only slightly more complicated than extinguishing the candle—if it had been living or of a larger mass, it would be a bit more challenging, but this required nothing more than a couple of whistled tones before the fabric as my voice commanded and split right down the middle.

He shifted the two pieces apart. "Now mend it."

This one was a tricky request if one wasn't paying attention. Often, pieces had to be smoothed together in order to fit right again. I walked to the table without being told and moved the pieces back together again, singing a gentle few notes before revealing the fabric whole.

The boy pulled out the chair for me and I sat, and he took the other. He passed a sheet of paper across the small table.

"Sight-sing the printed music," he said.

"I assume I have the usual thirty seconds to look it over?"

"Whatever pleases you."

That was definitely a trick. If I had thirty seconds, he would have said so. My best option was to assess the page as quickly as possible, glance at the time signature and key signature, and hope I hit the right tone.

As soon as I flipped over the page, he plucked a string from a lute leaning against the wall beside him. An A. He'd given me the first note, at the very least.

I grinned. "You are not as heartless as you make yourself out to be, sir."

"And you're stalling," he said, without giving my playful jab so much as a smile. "Sing."

This wasn't a song I'd ever seen before, but that was probably the point. Still, I began singing it without much thought. It was a short composition, only sixteen bars, and as soon as I was finished, he took the paper away.

"You will now create a shield."

"What are you, then?" I asked. "If not a knight?"

"Coventry Carol," he said, ignoring my question. "Lead the first verse, sing harmony the second."

“Coventry Carol’ is quite an odd name for a boy.”

Finally, he let slip a whisper of a smirk at his lips, an endearing look that quickly dropped away. “Begin when you’re ready.”

“D minor?” I suggested, before counting us in.

I nearly faltered in singing; he had such a lovely voice. But, whether or not I was failing this audition, there was no way I was going to miss the opportunity to blend with such beauty. So I sang, my voice melding with his. I longed for my lute to accompany us. It was so strange how little this felt like an audition, how much *fun* it was, how natural our voices sounded together. God, I loved singing. . . . Maybe that was why I was so very good at magic.

And our magic swam together, his amplifying mine. It pulsed through the air like a heartbeat, pulled at my heart like a prayer. It was as if our very souls were singing to one another. The boy stood as he sang, pressing his hand against the shield I’d created as if touching a sheet of glass.

When we finished, all he said was, “Good.”

Our residual magic skimmed through the air like smoke, mine gold and shimmering, his a soothing royal blue. They entwined before gradually disappearing. The leftovers of our magic paired just as well as our voices. I told myself it was more a sign than a coincidence.

“That was lovely,” I said. “Are you sure you aren’t a knight?”

“I would never presume to be.”

“A squire, then. You know the profession far too well to be anything but.”

“Prepare for your final test.” He sat across from me again and pulled up his sleeve, resting it on the table with his palm up.

My stomach turned at seeing his forearm.

He had a long cut along it, red and raw and clearly fresh. But there was something strange about it. A thick, black gunk, like dark veins, ran through the inside of the wound. I had seen an injury of this kind only once before—the black infection was unique to victims who encountered The Dark. Those could not be healed by any normal medicine. By anything but magic.

But that didn't worry me as much as the injury itself. How long ago had it been inflicted? And how many knights before me had tried and failed to heal it?

From sight-reading to protection harmonies to healing wounds. All necessary skills, but the king was immortal. Known from songs and lore to be impervious to injury. So who would I be attending to that would require such a skill?

I stood, so I could get closer to his arm and truly examine it. "How long have you had this?"

The one downfall of a knight's magic: Beyond a certain point, a wound could no longer be healed. The human body was a clever thing that went through its own processes, and once those progressed too far, not even magic could intervene. After twenty-four hours, there was no longer a point to summoning a knight. It's why there were so many—every small town had at least one, larger places two or three. It was also why I had been so bitter about my aunt not allowing me to officially study—we only had one knight in our town, and Anise didn't make an effective second one. Given the choice, I would've never remained there if I'd had the opportunity to move out, but still. It was selfish and cruel to deny people such help.

"It hasn't been a day." He paused, waiting. "Can you heal it or can't you?"

I looked at him, to make sure he was seriously treating his own safety with such little regard. It was clear that too many of the knights either didn't make it to this stage or weren't able to heal him at all, and it twisted my stomach with concern.

But the awful wound wasn't healing any faster simply from my thinking about it.

I smoothed the skin on either side of the wound, pinching the ends together with my thumb and the side of my finger. The pinching was a more technical part of the process than the singing—pinch too hard, and the scar would pucker; smooth too deeply, and the nerves would pinch. It was a delicate process. As I sang, the insides knitted together and became whole, the black infection replaced by healthy flesh as if it hadn't even been there in the first place. The last to heal was the skin, which I held together until it was ready, then I continued on, smoothing and pinching until I reached the end of the wound.

I checked my work, running my fingers over the nearly invisible scar remaining.

But now that he was healed, I suddenly wanted to roll up the sheet music and whack him over the head with it.

"Next time," I said, resuming my seat as he examined his scar, "don't use yourself in this way."

He looked up quickly, his eyes narrowed the slightest bit, his dark brows lowering, but it was more in confusion than anything else. "Why are you upset?"

"You've been suffering with this wound for hours upon hours, using it as a *test* when there were perfectly capable knights in London who could have taken care of it sooner. I hate the idea of you putting some test above your own well-being. Most

knights can't even function without their squires. You are just as important."

He looked at me for a moment, as if he didn't know what to make of my words, before standing and pulling a rope in the corner. An armed guard entered the room, and I braced myself against the chair. Oh God . . . I'd said something wrong. I should've just done the tests without making a scene.

The boy walked over to me and held out his hand. "Welcome to court, my lady."

Shock overtook my body. I could hardly breathe. "Really?" I gasped, feeling foolish—but my elation overshadowed the feeling quickly.

"Did you doubt your ability?" He helped me to my feet. "You'll be escorted to the palace. The queen will meet you there and explain your next steps."

"Now? That is, is there no time to stop at home to get a few things?"

"Everything you need will be provided, clothing included."

I chewed on my lip. I don't know why that lack of closure made me nervous. I was so used to having to check in with my aunt, so used to my cousin getting what she wanted above me. None of this felt real. My aunt and uncle would be annoyed by my absence but would soon forget me, pleased to have one less mouth to feed. It was my cousin I was worried about. The last thing she'd ever want was for me to live happily ever after if she couldn't.

But she had to be home by now, sulking, thinking I was on an errand. Never dreaming of the truth.

The boy went to turn away, but I gripped his hand, suddenly desperate. I had never lived away from family before . . . alone.

It felt almost sad to sever the one connection I'd made outside of them.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Beric, my lady."

"Will you be at court, Beric?"

A softness crept into his gaze, so different from the cold expression he'd worn since I met him, and it almost made me hope.

Hope for what, Cali?

"Yes, my lady. As soon as I'm able." He paused. "Don't be nervous. You will not be left without guidance."

I nodded and he gently released my hand from his, heading toward the room where the other knights waited.

I took a deep breath and followed the guard. I could hardly believe what was happening, that I would finally be free of my aunt and uncle's restrictive home . . . from my cousin's vicious judgment.

We exited the building through a back door, out into an alleyway where a coach was waiting. There was a bit of a commotion, and when I looked to the end of the alley I could see into the square. If only the audition hadn't taken place on this day of all days—Wednesday was execution day, when I generally avoided town. There looked to be only one man this week, but the punishment was beheading, and I secretly prayed that the executioner had sharpened his blade better than the last time. At least then it would be quick. Healing gruesome wounds was one thing, but watching people die was another. Part of me wondered why I wanted to work with a king who saw fit to put so many of his subjects to death, even if they were in the wrong for committing crimes.

But I would be a knight. The *God King's* knight. My life would be one hundred times better than it had ever been living in my aunt's house. And in the palace, I would be far from any executions.

Suddenly, it hit me that I was on my way toward my future.

And that future was brighter than I could have ever imagined.

"My lady," the guard prompted, and when I pulled my eyes away from the mob hungry for death, I saw he held open the coach's door for me.

I took a deep breath, gathering my skirts.

"I knew it!"

CHAPTER

3

CALLIOPE

My heart dropped. There was no mistaking the voice that had fussed at and bullied me for half my life. I should have gotten into the coach and let the guard shut me inside. Instead, I took a deep breath and turned to my cousin as she stormed down the alleyway toward me.

“She’s family,” I told the guard, because he looked like he was ready to cut her down right then and there. Some petty part of me wanted him to do it, but not enough to actually allow it to happen.

We were family, after all. Even if she was awful.

Too late I realized I should’ve just let the guard chase her off. Because as soon as she got closer, she said, “You’re not leaving without me, are you?” and I felt my stomach twist.

For once in my life something was about me—I didn’t have to share my birthday presents with her, didn’t have to pretend

I didn't know what I was talking about to allow her to shine. But it didn't matter. Anise insisted on commandeering my victory.

"How did you know?" I asked, defeated.

"I didn't know you'd be the winner, if that's what you mean," she said, looking me up and down as if I was nothing but forest brush. "I simply wanted to see who was. I did, however, know you'd be here in town—apparently, Mother believes you've gone to run an errand. As if you would miss an audition of this magnitude. I know you better than she does."

The guard looked at us skeptically. "We must make haste, my lady," he said, stepping closer to me, hand on the hilt of his sword.

"I'm sorry, Ann. I am," I said, turning away from her. *Why are you apologizing? You did nothing wrong.* "I have to go."

"And exactly whose family name did you give, Cali?"

I turned to meet her smug expression. Because it was true. I had given my uncle's name—*her* name—not my own. Because my parents had lost their fortune by underhanded means, died penniless, and my mother's brother had taken me in out of pity. Because my father's name would have been unfit to present at court. Beric hadn't even asked for it after hearing the name Bailey, but perhaps he would have immediately eliminated me if he had known. Perhaps I wouldn't even be in this position now.

Doubt left my lungs empty.

"One moment, please," I said to the guard.

His expression begged me to consider otherwise. "I am instructed to bring you to the queen without delay."

"Thirty seconds," I said, and I hated that I had to sound apologetic about accepting the position I had won based on

pure talent. I hated myself for giving Anise even this much of my time. I should have gotten into the carriage and left. So why couldn't I make my feet do it? "Please."

I dragged Anise out of earshot, rolling my eyes at her fussing.

"I won fair and square, Ann," I said, nearly begging. "Can't you leave me alone for once?"

She scoffed. "And miss out on the opportunity to finally attend court?"

"You've had plenty of opportunity—"

"Which Mother swiftly killed with her outrageous marriage demands. We both know very well I'd be married to a marquis by now without her interference." She stood tall, smoothing her dress, and I knew she had finally reached her point. "So I will just have to come to court with you and find a match, without her help. And, in exchange, I'll keep your lack of pedigree to myself. Wouldn't want the king finding out the truth, now would you?"

Her last sentence felt sinister, as underhanded as I knew her to be. "And what excuse will we give?"

"I don't know," she said, waving her hand carelessly. "I'm your squire, perhaps. A more respectable position than a maid, and it guarantees I'll be with you at all times, including court. Once I'm there, I can catch a husband easily. You owe me that much."

A stress headache was building behind my eyes. "A squire cannot marry a nobleman. And you don't know how to be a squire—you'd never deign to do their duties, even if you did. Besides, you don't have the right magic for it."

"None of that will matter. If anything, we can just combine our knight magic, and that will be enough. But it won't come to that, because all I have to do is stay long enough to find a

husband. Without Mother there to deter suitors, it shouldn't take long."

"That's all very well, but what do you think will happen to us if we're caught lying to the king by passing you off as my squire?"

A flash of fear crossed her face then, but it passed so quickly I briefly wondered, as I often did, if she actually had a soul. "So leave me behind and watch your future crumble as I spread all the right rumors to get you thrown out of court."

I chewed on my lip. "No one would believe you. It was too long ago."

"Trust me, if given the reminder, the senior members of court will recall your father and his downfall easily enough."

It was an insult to us both. Her mother was well known to be a bit of a nuisance and embarrassment, whereas my father . . . well, if anyone remembered him, it was only for the bankruptcy that brought him to a horrifying end.

At that moment, I heard the disturbing sound of the executioner's ax, the gleeful shouts of the crowd. I winced. Anise didn't. Like so many others, she had become desensitized to the weekly killings. It was a gift from the king, as far as they were concerned. Entertainment.

"My lady," the guard prompted, approaching to guide me away with an outstretched arm. "We must depart."

All I had to do was get into the carriage without a word. Allow the guard to keep Anise back. Instead I said, "Fine. You can come," before quickly getting in and allowing my cousin to enter behind me.

My one moment to be rid of my cousin for good, and I fumbled it.

I hated myself for giving in, for letting fear and paranoia get the better of me. But the dread of losing my position was just

as strong as my dislike for Anise, and so I had picked the safer option of the two. At least I'd finally be a knight—the *king's* knight, of all people, if *person* could even be used for such a glorious entity.

And no one, not even my scheming cousin, could take that away from me.