

# *To Steal the Sun*

## **Bonus Epilogue - Charlotte**

“That was incredible!” Henry clambered to his feet, a look of exhilaration on his face. “Even better than I imagined!”

Charlotte righted herself with slightly less enthusiasm, although riding the wind to Arcadia had been a much smoother and more pleasant journey than her previous experiences with that particular mode of travel.

Easton grinned at Henry. “I still haven’t gotten used to it myself,” he admitted. “I never imagined I would one day be able to fly through the sky in such a manner.”

Charlotte examined her surroundings, admiring the extensive park that surrounded the Arcadian palace. So far, their unconventional arrival seemed to have disturbed only a gaggle of geese. But she doubted it would stay that way for long. And despite all her husband’s reassurances, she wasn’t convinced his parents or court would be as delighted as he was with his unexpected bride.

“Are you sure you won’t stay for a while?” Henry asked Easton, clearly not gripped with the same worry. “You should have something to eat and drink, at least.”

Easton shook his head. “Gwen was the one to insist I use the halter to bring you straight home, but I told her I’d come back immediately, so she’s expecting me.” He glanced down at his practical outfit and ran a rueful hand through his windswept hair. “And I’m not exactly dressed for a state visit.”

He smiled from Henry to Charlotte. “Besides, I’m sure your parents will want to focus on the family reunion without having to worry about unexpected royal visitors on their hands. Gwen and I will pay a proper visit soon—one that comes with ample warning, official invitations, and the like.”

“Very well, I can’t fault you there.” Henry chuckled, his eyes alight. He was clearly excited to be home, full of anticipation at seeing his family after so long.

Charlotte’s nerves settled somewhat. Given how much Henry loved his family, they couldn’t be as terrifying as her mind kept trying to make them. In truth, she didn’t think she would have been at all afraid of meeting them if only it wasn’t for the issue of their rank. Now that they had set foot in the grounds of the palace in Arcadie, her new role had become fully real.

Henry claimed she was everything a princess needed to be, but would his court and kingdom see her the same way?

She pulled herself together enough to thank Easton and wish him a proper farewell. She had barely finished when a shout rang out in the distance. Charlotte turned to see a squad of guards racing toward them from the direction of the palace.

“That’s my cue to leave,” Easton said with a grin, gripping the halter and leaping into the air with a practiced movement. Something invisible caught him, sweeping him quickly upward.

Charlotte watched him go with her mouth agape. She’d ridden the wind several times herself, but she’d never watched someone doing it without her, and it was an unnerving sight.

Several of the guards cried out in alarm and protest, and one even swung a bow off his shoulder. Henry called a protest, but the wind had carried Easton far out of reach before the guard had any hope of loosing an arrow.

Henry’s cry brought the guards’ attention back to him and Charlotte, and Charlotte gulped, drawing close to Henry as the men resumed running in their direction, blades drawn.

Henry stepped protectively in front of her, but his stance was relaxed, and the grin he’d been wearing since they’d spotted Arcadie in the distance was undimmed.

As the guards approached close enough for easy hailing, he spread his arms wide. “I’ve returned!”

The guard in the lead faltered and came to a stop, his men quickly pulling up behind him.

“Your Highness!” he gasped. “Prince Harry!”

“Prince Harry!” cried a younger guard from the back of the group. “Prince Harry’s back!”

“I hope you’ve kept up your sparring in my absence, Will,” Henry said. “I’ve been a little preoccupied myself, so you might finally have a chance to beat me.”

Several of the guards laughed heartily at this sally, all of them wearing looks of combined astonishment and joy.

“One of the guards at the gate said he’d seen three people arrive through the air—flying over the wall,” the lead guard said in a gruff voice. “We came to investigate, of course, but I was inclined to think he’d been drinking on the job. I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t just seen it with my own eyes! Are you truly all right, Your Highness?”

“I’m well, Stewart,” Henry replied with more seriousness.

Steward cleared his throat gruffly. “Their Majesties will be relieved to hear it.” He looked back at the guards behind him, his eyes falling on Will. “Run back and let the palace know who’s here.”

He turned back to Henry and Charlotte, shaking his head. “We were told to be on the lookout—Their Majesties got a very odd sort of communication that raised their hopes—but no one thought you could arrive so quickly.” He rubbed the back of his head. “Course we thought you’d be coming by road.”

Charlotte watched from over Henry’s shoulder, warmed by the obvious affection between Henry and the Arcadian guards. But there was no doubt that word of the manner of her and Henry’s strange arrival was already spreading through the palace like

wildfire, and she only wished she knew if it was likely to help or harm her reputation among the Arcadians.

Henry drew her forward, looping her hand through his arm and clasping it tightly against him with a reassuring smile. She smiled back, determined to be brave for his sake. After everything they'd been through together, there was no reason for her knees to be shaking over something as simple as introductions.

"This is my wife, Princess Charlotte," Henry said proudly, and Charlotte was glad for the few weeks in the mountain kingdom that had accustomed her to the title. It wouldn't have made a good impression if she'd flinched at the sound of her own name.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," she said, hoping her smile looked more natural than it felt.

"Your Highness!" The guards all bowed as one, but she caught the wide-eyed glances they all sent her way.

Henry began to walk, however, gently pulling her with him as the guards formed around them. It was hardly an escort fit for a crown prince, but it was slightly more formal than the two of them strolling up to the palace doors alone.

But any vision of a formal introduction to the king and queen—either on the palace steps or in some grand receiving room—was promptly dashed. A loud bang reverberated through the courtyard in front of the doors, accompanied by an equally loud shriek.

Charlotte froze, staring at the palace door which had been flung open so violently it had hit the stone wall. But Henry laughed, dropping her arm and striding forward. He met the girl who was running toward them halfway, sweeping her off her feet and into a bear hug.

The guards stopped around Charlotte, and Stewart cleared his throat in a mildly disapproving way.

"Princess Rose," he said in muttered explanation.

Charlotte resumed a more sedate walk forward, unable to help smiling at the unladylike exuberance of Henry's younger sister. At sixteen, Rose was hardly a child, and yet she didn't seem in the least daunted by the growing audience in the courtyard—half the palace seemed to have come running as word spread of the prince's return.

Perhaps Charlotte wasn't going to find appropriate princess behavior so difficult after all.

"Rose," a more mature female voice said, and for a moment, Charlotte thought the elegant woman in her early forties was reproofing her daughter. But Rose only stepped aside, laughing as she mopped her streaming eyes, and the woman with the simple gold circlet immediately took her place, pulling her grown son into her arms.

The queen was behaving with more decorum than her youthful daughter, but not by much. Charlotte smiled, delight filling her. Queen Alyssa was the most elegant person she'd ever seen, but she still radiated warmth and love, her eyes full as she clasped her son close.

“You’re home,” she murmured just loud enough for Charlotte to hear. “You’re safe. We didn’t know if we could trust a letter from a queen whose name we’d never heard. So it’s true, then? There really is a mountain kingdom?”

Henry extricated himself, smiling affectionately down at his mother. “There is. But that’s a long story, and there’s someone I need to introduce you to first.”

He turned, his eyes seeking Charlotte and his hand reaching for her. She took it, stepping forward to join him. Her nerves had disappeared almost completely now that she had seen Queen Alyssa for herself.

“This is my wife,” Henry said, his eyes gazing down into hers with pride and love. “Princess Charlotte. We were married in the valleys and then again in the mountain kingdom before Queen Gwendolyn and King Easton. We’re happy to have whatever ceremony here you desire, but she’s already a part of our family, and I hope you’ll welcome her as such.”

“Already married?” Alyssa sounded dismayed. “I’d hoped that part of the letter, at least, might have been...” But she trailed off, turning to Charlotte with a smile that seemed genuine.

“Of course we will welcome you, my dear. If my Harry chose you, then we have no objection. We follow the High King’s ways here.” She threw a reproving look at her son. “Although I thought you knew your own mother wanted to be at your wedding.”

Charlotte, who had tensed for a moment, relaxed. It seemed the queen’s primary objection was to missing the wedding rather than Henry’s choice of bride. And while Charlotte didn’t have any children of her own yet, she could understand the queen’s feelings at missing such a major milestone in her son’s life.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” Henry said. “There were...circumstances that constrained us.”

He shot Charlotte a look, and she almost burst into laughter in front of the royal family and a crowd of interested bystanders. *Circumstances* was one way to describe his sojourn as a large, white bear.

Alyssa looked between the two of them, her eyes starting to gleam. “I see there’s even more of a story here than we already guessed. And I do love a good story.” She smiled brightly at Charlotte. “You must be tired, my dear. Do come inside and freshen up while I see what we can do by way of a meal.”

“The guard said you flew in on the wind!” Rose exclaimed, the words bursting out of her.

This time her mother did remonstrate with her—although she somehow managed to do it with no more than a raised eyebrow—and the princess subsided, flushing.

“As I said, we are anxious to hear every part of this strange story,” the queen said, “*inside*.”

Rose nodded, still downcast, but Henry winked at her, and the princess’s wide smile returned. Charlotte looked at the queen apprehensively, but Alyssa only shook her head at her children, her expression one of affectionate amusement.

“We do usually manage a little more decorum,” she murmured to Charlotte. “I hope you won’t form the wrong impression of us.”

Charlotte rushed out a hasty denial, adding, “You must have been worried about Henry.”

A shadow passed over Alyssa’s face, but the queen shook herself and resumed her smile. “A mother’s lot, my dear. It doesn’t matter if you’re a queen or a peasant, eventually your children grow up, and you must trust them to make their own way in the world. Harry had written that he wanted one big adventure before he settled down to a life of duty, and so we were clinging to the hope that no news is good news.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened. “He left without your approval? Just leaving a letter?” She shot her husband a disapproving look, but he was a step ahead of her, his arm around his sister’s shoulders as they ascended the short flight of stairs toward the open palace door.

The queen shook her head as the two of them followed the prince and princess into the building. “He’d just turned eighteen, and we knew he was itching for a moment of freedom and a bit of adventure, so we asked him to escort Rose to Rangmeros to visit Princess Ellery. The two girls are less than a year apart and have always got on well.”

Alyssa sighed. “Only Rose arrived in the Rangmeran capital. She eventually admitted that they’d planned it all between them, and that he had slipped away just before they reached the city, heading for the mountains. He’d left a letter for her to give to us.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows rose.

“She was barely fifteen at the time,” Alyssa said, clearly having forgiven her daughter for her part in Henry’s disappearance. “And she regretted it when he was gone for so long, without sending any word. She began to fear some misfortune had befallen him.” Alyssa smiled warmly across at Charlotte. “But it appears just the opposite, given he’s returned with a beautiful bride.”

“He did suffer misfortune,” Charlotte said loyally. “A great deal of it.” She hesitated. “But I should let him tell you the story. I wasn’t there for the beginning of it anyway.”

“My curiosity only grows,” Alyssa said lightly, not pressing Charlotte for more information.

“Is it true?” a strong, masculine voice called from a distance. “*Is it true?* Has my son returned?”

Alyssa’s face transformed, a smile lighting her up from the inside. “Oh,” she murmured with pleasure. “Max will be so relieved!”

A tall man in his forties, only the occasional gray strand in his thick dark hair, strode into view. He stopped abruptly, his eyes fixed on his son.

For the first time, Henry hesitated. Squaring his shoulders, he met his father’s gaze. “Yes, it’s me, Father. I’m back. And I understand now how foolish it was of me to go off on my own in such a way. I’m sorry for worrying you.” He looked back over his shoulder at his mother. “For worrying both of you. I shouldn’t have been so rash.”

The king remained frozen for a moment, staring at his son. Then his eyes met his wife's, and a smile grew on his face.

"I told you that Harry knew how to look after himself. Look, he's returned to us with arms and legs attached. You can stop worrying now." He strode forward, clapping his son on the back before seeming to change his mind and giving him a rough embrace.

Charlotte felt fresh moisture at the back of her eyes. Clearly the queen hadn't been the only one worrying about their missing son.

But when the king drew back, he was looking stern. "You missed my coronation, Henry."

Henry winced at his full name on his father's lips, although he seemed to like it when Charlotte called him by it. But she'd noticed his family all called him Harry.

"I apologize...Your Majesty," Henry said formally. "All I can do is assure you that I have no intention of disappearing again. I'm ready to take up my responsibilities as the crown prince."

King Maximilian made his son wait for almost half a minute before he relaxed again and clapped him on the back a second time.

"I'm relieved to hear it. Just make sure you never worry your mother like that again."

"I'll do my best," Henry said with a broad smile. "And I hope, in return, you'll do everything possible to welcome my wife."

The king's eyebrows rose, but somehow Charlotte knew he hadn't missed her presence beside the queen. He had simply been taking care of the most important matters first.

King Max gave Charlotte a formal smile. "Welcome, Charlotte. It's a pleasure to meet you." His smile turned rueful. "I wasn't expecting Harry to settle down quite so young, but after his recent antics, I'm thinking marriage is the very thing for him." He threw a look at his wife that was filled with love. Apparently the years hadn't dimmed the fabled connection between the two.

"I'm happy about Harry getting married, too." Princess Rose threw her arms unexpectedly around Charlotte, making her rock backward. "I've been telling him for years that he had to get married as soon as possible and give me a sister."

Fresh tears pricked at Charlotte's eyes. Already her new sister was showing more warmth and welcome than her own sisters had ever extended her. The last of her earlier nerves and worries dissolved completely at her first taste of the loving warmth that existed between the members of Harry's family.

"They rode in on the wind, Father," Rose added, her arms still around Charlotte. "Can you believe it?" Her eyes shone as she finally let go of Charlotte in order to poke her brother. "You'd better tell me everything immediately. Do you know how long you made me wait!?"

"I'm sorry, Rosie," Henry said, sounding truly contrite. "I would have returned much sooner if I could have."

Rose's face instantly fell. "Was it very awful?" she whispered.

Henry took Charlotte's hand, drawing her to his side. "There were terrible moments, certainly, but I'm glad now that I was prevented from returning more quickly. If I had come home when I originally intended, I never would have met Lottie."

He smiled down into Charlotte's eyes, and she felt warmth radiating through her. The vague, shadowy image of her future—frightening because of the fog that shrouded it—turned clear. She was a princess, and her new life was inside a palace, but Henry would be by her side through it all. And now she knew Rose and Alyssa—her new sister and mother-in-law—would be there on her other side, showing her the feminine aspects of her new life that Henry might not grasp. Charlotte had experienced what it was like to feel unwanted within her own home and family, but it was already obvious those years were behind her. In Arcadia, she would make a new start as part of a true family.

"Thank you all," she said, her voice strong. "I appreciate your welcome more than I can say."

"Yes, you should all do everything possible to welcome her," Henry said. "It's only because of Lottie that I was able to come back at all. She rescued me. Twice."

He grinned at her, as she shook her head, her cheeks reddening.

"You only needed rescuing the second time because of me," she muttered.

He laughed. "But if it hadn't been for our mistakes, we wouldn't have ended up helping rescue Gwen as well. You can hold your head up, Princess Charlotte of Arcadia—you're not coming to your marriage with empty hands. You're bringing a rock-solid alliance with the lost mountain kingdom."

The king's eyebrows rose even higher than they had the first time. "Now this I really do need to hear about," he said. "May I suggest we all retire to the family dining room? Harry and Charlotte can have something to eat, and the rest of us can hear more of this mountain kingdom."

"You mean we can hear about how Harry met Charlotte!" Rose protested as she wrapped her hand around her father's elbow and started towing him down the corridor.

"I think you both mean that we can hear the whole story from beginning to end," Alyssa said with a stern look that made her husband and daughter laugh.

Henry and Charlotte followed behind.

"They're just as lovely as you said," Charlotte murmured. "I don't know what I was worried about."

"I told you that you had nothing to worry about." Henry dropped an affectionate kiss on the top of her head.

"Do I need to start calling you Harry?" Charlotte asked, trying out the unfamiliar name.

Henry raised an eyebrow. "If you want to." He smiled. "But I like that you call me Henry when everyone else always calls me Prince Harry."

Charlotte beamed up at him. “Like how you’re the only one who calls me Lottie. Whenever you said it back at our castle in the woods, it was like you were tugging directly on my heart.”

Henry paused, gazing down at her with fire in his eyes. But Charlotte laughed and pulled him forward over the threshold of the room that had swallowed the others.

“Come on,” she said. “Your family are waiting! And we have a story to tell them.”