

# Kingdom of Feathers Bonus Chapter

By Deborah Grace White

*Timeline: begins during Chapter Twenty-Six*

## Caleb

Caleb's mind reeled as he watched the Entolian nobleman being led from the audience room. It truly had been a conspiracy of enemies from within both kingdoms.

A pang of pain shot through his bad leg. His frantic waddle from the gardens to the audience room had only been accomplished with excruciating pain, but he would do it again in a heartbeat, ten times over. There was no way he was going to stand by while Wren was arrested for conspiracy against the crown. Wren had done more for the Mistran crown than anyone in the kingdom's history. At the earliest private opportunity, Caleb intended to make sure his parents—particularly his father—truly understood the extent of what she'd sacrificed. He knew he would never forget it, not as long as he lived.

He reached down surreptitiously and rubbed at his leg. His arm wasn't troubling him much—that injury was old now, and thankfully his human body seemed to have taken on all the acclimatization his swan form had gained for the injury. But the magically wasted leg was something he still hadn't fully adjusted to.

Another flicker of pain passed over the limb. Caleb had no doubt that with time the injury would become more trying, but for the moment he welcomed the sensation. All it did was serve to remind him that he once again had human legs.

He glanced down, half expecting to see webbed feet protruding from his pants. But all he saw was two booted feet, a dizzyingly long way down from his face. In fact, he realized with some amusement that he was wearing the clothes he'd been in the day the enchantress attacked him. His amusement grew as he cast an eye over his brothers. Averett and Bram were faring all right—like him, they'd been fully grown, or close enough to it, when the curse hit. But Conan and Lyall were showing several inches of ankle, their chests bulging in tunics much too small for them, and Ari was most hilarious of all. Who would have guessed what a tall young man he'd become? He didn't seem to have even noticed how absurd he looked, with his eighteen-year-old body crammed into the clothes of a twelve-year-old.

A shocked hush had fallen over the crowd at Lord Baldwin's arrest, but once the guards had removed him from the room, everyone started muttering again. Caleb's eyes swept the crowd, and his heart skipped a beat as he caught sight of the one face he was looking for.

Anneliese.

Without consciously deciding to do it, Caleb began inching toward her, his gait slow and unsteady. Now that he was human again, he'd have to see about getting a cane. He was sure it would seriously improve his mobility.

Anneliese's eyes lifted to his as he approached. Her fair skin was paler than he'd ever seen it, and tears still glittered on her cheeks. He felt a sudden urge to reach out and wipe them away, but he kept his good hand firmly at his side. The air between them was thick with six years' worth of unspoken things, and Anneliese barely seemed to have processed the first shock of his reappearance. All Caleb's confidence in facing down Lord Kinley's disparagement had fled him, and he felt as wrong-footed and self-conscious as a lovestruck youth, declaring his feelings to a girl for the first time.

In fact, he felt more self-conscious than he remembered being when he'd been in exactly that situation, more than six years ago, with the same woman whom he stood before now.

"Anneliese," he said softly, the name tasting incredibly sweet on his human tongue. He saw Lord Kinley—the pompous old fool—goggling at them from nearby, but he ignored him.

Anneliese swallowed visibly. Then, to Caleb's disappointment, she sank into a graceful curtsy. "Your Highness. You've...you've returned to us."

Her formality sent a stab of pain through Caleb's heart. He remembered the tenderness of the promises they'd exchanged as if it had been days, not years. But so many things had changed since then. At least the wobble in Anneliese's voice as she spoke gave him hope. Whatever she was feeling, she wasn't unaffected by his presence. It was understandable that she would need time to adjust to the news of his miraculous survival.

Still, he wasn't about to let her go without showing at least some sign of his own heart. Without waiting for her to offer it, he reached for her hand and lifted it so he could place a punctilious kiss on the back of it. Her hand felt cold in his, but the contact still sent warmth racing through him.

His father's voice brought his attention back to where the rest of his family stood. It took him a moment to catch the thread of the conversation, but when he did, he blinked in surprise. Wren was leaning up against King Basil in unabashed affection, and the young king appeared to be soliciting their father's approval of a marriage alliance.

Well. He certainly hadn't wasted any time.

The thought sent a pang through Caleb as he glanced back at Anneliese. He was happy for Wren, and approved of her choice without reservation. But it was hard not to regret that he had lost so much time himself.

*But she hasn't married another!* an optimistic voice in his mind reminded him. *You've lost six years, but that doesn't mean you've lost all the ones still to come.*

If only her blank expression was as encouraging as his own hopes. Seeing that Anneliese's gaze was also focused on the scene unfolding before them, Caleb began to shuffle back toward the rest of the royals. The affairs of his own heart would have to wait.



King Basil extended his visit for another week, during which time Caleb barely had a minute to call his own. In addition to spending a great deal of time with his parents and siblings as they all tried to process what had passed, he was eager to dive straight back into his role as his father's heir. He didn't want to give anyone reason to echo Lord Kinley's doubting comments in whispers behind his back.

When the royal family—and most of the court—gathered to farewell the Entolian delegation, Caleb found himself standing to one side of the action. His leg was painning him, and he felt exhausted from the strain of trying to constantly be calm and capable enough to convince everyone he was up to the job.

How poor Wren had managed to withstand the pressure without even the use of her voice, he could hardly imagine.

Wren was standing beside King Basil, locked in quiet conversation with her parents. She held herself steady, but to Caleb's eye she looked a little forlorn at the Entolian king's impending departure.

As it always had, her sadness woke a protective instinct in Caleb that made him want to shelter her from the world. Back in the days before the curse, she'd always been so small and eager, hopelessly outnumbered by her brothers, but so desperate to be included. He'd taken it as his personal mission to make sure her enthusiasm wasn't trampled by the other boys' impatience.

And then something unthinkable had happened. He still remembered the absolute horror he'd felt when she threw herself in front of him, taking the curse intended for him. Who would have guessed his sweet little sister had such a powerful protective instinct of her own? He hadn't even hesitated when he'd drawn his ring from his finger. No thought of Mistra, or his role as heir, had even crossed his mind. He'd only known he had to protect his little sister.

But he hadn't been able to protect her. She'd been plunged into six years of fear, isolation, and humiliation. And he'd been powerless to do anything but sit by and watch her suffer. Many nights he'd wrestled with his guilt over what she was facing, and even worse—his guilt over her guilt. Nothing he said seemed to convince her that far from being at fault for any of it, she was their rescuer.

And yet, as he looked at her now, standing at King Basil's side, still quiet, but glowing with contentment and confidence, some of that weight lifted from his heart. He'd hated not being able to protect her. But he could see now that although his inability to do so had cost her great pain, the experience had also gained her a great deal. She'd found a strength within her that she never would have believed was there if he'd been able to shield her.

Although Caleb couldn't hear the words, he saw that Wren was speaking now, both of her parents focused on her. King Basil glanced around and, seeing Caleb watching, made his way over to him.

"Safe travels, King Basil," Caleb said. "I trust you'll be able to visit us again soon."

"I hope so," said the Entolian. "But I expect it will be difficult to get away after such a long absence."

Caleb nodded, and for a moment the two stood in easy silence.

"I was moved by what you said in the audience hall," the young king said unexpectedly.

Caleb smiled. "I'm glad, but since you seem to prefer honesty, I'll tell you that I didn't speak up on my sister's behalf out of any desire to please you."

King Basil gave a low chuckle. "I'm going to have to fight my way through the bevy to claim her when the time comes for our wedding, aren't I? You were bad enough as swans. With you all in human form, I don't stand a chance. It's most unfair—I'm surrounded and outnumbered on all sides. As if it's not enough to be saddled with twelve younger sisters, I had to go and fall in love with a woman who has six older brothers."

“You do have my sympathy there,” laughed Caleb. “But not so much so that I’m going to let you carry Wren off without putting a little fear in you first.”

King Basil smiled, but his voice was perfectly serious as he replied. “Wren will never have anything to fear from me, as I hope to demonstrate with time.”

“I don’t doubt you,” Caleb assured him. “You forget how much I’ve watched you with her, before you knew I was there. Honestly, I’m relieved you came along and saw her worth while others still thought her out of her wits. Otherwise I’d be worried about her falling prey to some scheming nobleman who disdained her when she was silent, but wants her title now her secrets are explained.”

“She’s too sensible for that,” King Basil smiled. “In any event, I’m straying from my point. When I said I was moved by what you said, I wasn’t referring to your defense of Wren. I was referring to what you said about your lameness.”

Caleb looked over at him in surprise. He knew the Entolian was forthright to a fault, but it was still a little startling to hear him refer so openly to what everyone else had avoided saying aloud.

King Basil met his eye calmly. “You said that your injuries wouldn’t affect your ability to do your role. My father lived with a debilitating injury the last several years of his reign, and I’m sorry to say that it did affect his ability to be an effective king. Just about destroyed it, in fact.”

Caleb opened his mouth, then closed it, completely at a loss for what to say.

Seeing his expression, King Basil rubbed at one temple, smiling ruefully. “I should have found a better way to phrase that, probably. I’m not trying to discourage you. On the contrary. It was clear to me from a young age that it wasn’t his health which weakened my father’s rule, but his bitterness over it, and his inability to adjust to his new limitations.”

There was a hint of sadness in his smile as he continued. “I don’t think you’ll share that inability. I’ve watched you this past week, and I’ve seen enough to believe that your injuries won’t stop you from being incredibly capable in your role as heir to your father, and one day Mistra’s king. In fact, I don’t doubt that it will give you a strength you wouldn’t otherwise have, enabling you to understand things most kings can’t, and giving you compassion.” He gave a small sigh, his gaze a little distant. “Alas, it was not a strength my father was capable of.”

Caleb was silent for a moment, thinking over the other man’s words. King Basil may not have been trapped in the body of a bird for six years, but clearly the conflict between their kingdoms had come at great personal cost to him as well. And the experience had aged him, matured him beyond his eighteen years. Caleb had no doubt he would be a capable king for Entolia, even if he still had a great deal to learn. And he would be a kind husband to Wren, of that there could be no question. For all his matter-of-fact manner, there were stars in his eyes every time he looked at her.

“Thank you for your words,” Caleb said at last, holding out his good arm to grasp that of the young king. “I value your goodwill.”

“And I yours.” King Basil returned the gesture. “I look forward to working more closely with you in future, both in matters of state and matters of family.” His smile softened as his eyes strayed to Wren, standing nearby with Anneliese, and Caleb knew he’d lost the king’s attention.

He stepped back, clearing the way for King Basil to return to Wren’s side. The tenderness in the Entolian’s movements as he lifted a hand to the princess’s hair should have warmed Caleb, who truly was relieved to see Wren give her heart to someone deserving of her.

But his focus was caught by the young woman standing beside the happy couple, and his heart ached with longing for the smooth resolution Wren and King Basil had found to their romance.

The Entolians' mounts were led out by a string of grooms, and the royals in the group moved toward the horses, leaving Anneliese standing alone. Using his cane, Caleb approached her quickly, eager to reach her before someone else could claim her attention.

She looked up in surprise, her pale cheeks flushing delightfully as she saw who had joined her. When she cast her eyes down, Caleb made full use of the opportunity to examine her. She looked markedly different from how she had when she'd agreed to marry him. She hadn't even been twenty then, still just a girl. But the years hadn't been unkind. She was every bit as beautiful in her mid-twenties as she had been then, and the quiet grace that had once captured Caleb's heart had only increased with the passing years.

Like Wren, she bore the marks of her years of grief and struggle. It was in the way she carried herself, somehow. But just as King Basil had said about Caleb's own changes, it didn't lessen her strength. In fact, from what Caleb had observed while a swan, there was no doubt whatsoever in his mind that Anneliese was a much stronger person now than she had been six years ago.

She didn't look strong now, however. She looked anxious, and close to tears. Caleb had barely exchanged a word with her since the curse lifted, and he found himself strangely tongue-tied now. But he'd been forced to wait six years. He wasn't going to let his own lack of confidence make him delay any longer.

"Will you walk with me in the gardens, Anneliese?" he asked softly, refusing to revert to titles as she'd done.

Her cheeks were once again suffused with color, but she nodded. Abandoning the departing Entolians altogether, Caleb turned toward the garden. For a moment she hesitated, and he realized in a rush that she was waiting—probably unconsciously—for him to offer his arm, as was customary.

"I, uh..." He swallowed, flushing himself. "I'm afraid I can't ask you to take my arm." He lifted his cane to show that his good hand was occupied.

"Of course," mumbled Anneliese, looking mortified. "I didn't expect...I mean, there's no need..."

She trailed off, looking miserable, and Caleb's heart sank at the unpromising beginning. Refusing to be deterred, however, he pushed on.

"I can still walk, though." He gave a self-deprecating smile. "Even if the pace will be slower than it used to be."

A frown flitted across Anneliese's face, but she said nothing as they began to walk toward the castle. They passed down the corridors in silence, neither speaking until they'd made their steady way out into the gardens.

"I'm sorry we haven't managed to speak before now," Caleb said abruptly. "I've hardly been able to draw breath, but you've never been far from my mind."

"You don't have to explain," said Anneliese quickly. "I'm amazed you have time to spend now."

"I don't really," Caleb smiled. "But I'm spending it anyway."

She smiled before she caught herself, and the familiar expression buoyed Caleb.

“I can’t even imagine all you must have to do,” she added. “So much has passed, and you have so much to adjust to.” Her voice trailed off, and she stopped walking abruptly. “I must apologize, too. I feel I was a little cold when you greeted me in the audience hall. I was just too stunned to even know what I said, if truth be told.” She raised her eyes to his, brimming with such emotion that Caleb caught his breath. “When you appeared, Caleb...” Her voice was a whisper now. “I thought I was dreaming. I could hardly even...” She ended with a choke that told him she was holding back tears. “For six years I thought you were dead. Six years, Caleb.”

Shifting his weight onto his good leg, Caleb tucked his cane beneath his weak arm. Reaching out with his other hand, he lifted Anneliese’s chin gently, so she was looking into his eyes.

“I know,” he assured her softly. “It was the cruelest trick to play on you. I wish there had been a way for you to know the truth.”

She shook her head, tears glistening on the ends of her lashes. “I’m not blaming you. Or Princess Wren,” she added hastily. “It’s just...hard to take in.”

“I can imagine,” he said with sympathy.

“There are...” she swallowed, “there are many things I said to Princess Wren that I...that I wouldn’t have said if I’d known...”

“That’s my fault,” Caleb said with real remorse. “There was no way for Wren to warn you that you weren’t truly alone without endangering us all. I could have stayed away when you were with her, of course, and that would have been the gentlemanly thing to do.” He gave her a crooked smile. “But the opportunity to be near you was so rarely offered to me, I could never resist it when it was.”

“Oh, Caleb,” she whispered.

His muscles tensed at the sound of his name, but at that inconvenient moment his leg wobbled beneath him. He’d disregarded his cane too long. Removing his hand from her chin, he reclaimed the cane, and gave her an apologetic grimace.

“I’m afraid I need to sit down.”

“Of course,” said Anneliese quickly, moving toward a nearby bench.

Caleb joined her more slowly, lowering himself with a flush. “I’m sorry for the inconvenience,” he said stiffly.

“Why are you doing that?” The snap in Anneliese’s voice startled him into meeting her eyes. “Why are you apologizing, acting like you need to be embarrassed in front of me? Me, Caleb!”

He gave her a twisted smile. “You’re still you, but I’m not quite the me I was, am I?”

“Of course you are,” she said, sounding exasperated. “And you know it. You were so confident when Lord Kinley started spouting off like the halfwit he is. You didn’t show a hint of embarrassment then—why are you doing so now?”

Caleb regarded her in silence for a moment. “Can you honestly tell me you don’t feel any embarrassment right now?” he challenged her softly.

Her instant flush betrayed her, and she bit her lip. Pushing herself to her feet, she took a couple of steps away and stopped, facing toward the pond which had been Caleb’s home for six years.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice again choked with tears.

Caleb pushed himself up as well, approaching behind her.

When she heard the click of his cane, she spun around. “No, don’t get up,” she said, sounding anxious.

He reassured her with a smile. “I’m all right,” he said sincerely. “I just needed a rest, but I’m fine now.” His eyes drilled into hers. “Anneliese, you have nothing to apologize for.”

“But I do,” she said, not quite able to meet his eye. “And you know it. You were there when I spoke to Princess Wren. You heard what was said in that audience hall. While you were here, right in front of me, suffering in silence, I was agreeing to marry another man.”

Caleb was so stunned by this explanation for her uncertainty, he almost laughed aloud. “Do you think I blame you for that, Anneliese? Dragon’s flame, you thought I was dead!” He paused. “Obviously it distresses me that you almost shackled yourself to such a snake, but you can’t be blamed for not knowing his true nature when the rest of us were equally oblivious.”

Still her eyes were lowered, and Caleb shifted closer to her. “Anneliese,” he said incredulously. “Can you really think I would resent you for not wanting to live out the rest of your life in loneliness for the sake of my memory? I never dared to hope that you would wait for me, ignorant as you were that there was any hope at all. You owe me nothing, and I assume nothing.”

She lifted her gaze to his at last, a shy smile hovering around her mouth. “Matters of the heart don’t have anything to do with owing debts, Caleb.”

His chest swelled painfully at the look in her eyes.

“So much has changed, Anneliese,” he whispered.

Her smile grew. “But some things haven’t.”

He shook his head. “You mustn’t rush into a decision. I’m not the man you fell in love with.”

“You are exactly the man I fell in love with,” she protested, and this time it was her turn to reach for him.

She laid a hand against his cheek, her fingers warm and soft this time. He closed his eyes, unable to resist leaning his cheek into her touch. The feel of his skin against that of another human was nothing short of intoxicating.

“You’re wiser now, even I can see that,” she said. “And stronger. But you’re still my Caleb.”

“Stronger?” The word burst from him, and his eyes flew open. “Anneliese, look at me. I can’t even walk properly anymore.”

“Caleb, I don’t understand,” Anneliese said, frustrated. “Why is it so hard for you to believe that none of that matters to me? It didn’t matter to you either when Lord Kinley was being such a daft fool. Why does it matter now? With my own ears I heard you tell everyone that you were as capable of being the crown prince as you ever were, and I applauded you for it!”

Caleb shook his head. “I meant what I said to Lord Kinley. I’ve been a crown prince all my life. I know how to fill that role, and I’m not concerned that my physical limitations will prevent me from doing so. But...” he met her eyes with a self-conscious smile, “I’ve never been a husband before. I can’t say with the same certainty that my injuries won’t affect how worthy I am of you.” His voice dropped into a soft caress. “You deserve the very best, Anneliese. And I’m not sure I can be that.”

Tears pooled in Anneliese’s eyes, but she smiled through them as she lifted her other hand, so that she held Caleb’s face between them.

“If you could only hear what I hear, and see what I see when I look at you, you’d never doubt that you were enough for me,” she told him simply. “I thought I’d lost you forever, and even so I couldn’t bring myself to settle for anything less than being yours. If you think I’m going to do so now that you’re actually here, that curse must have addled your mind more than your body.”

Caleb let out a low, throaty laugh, the last of his uncertainties fleeing before the look in her eyes. Dropping his cane with a clatter, he wrapped his good arm around Anneliese and tugged her against him. For a tantalizing moment he paused, their faces inches apart and their breath mingling. Then he claimed her lips with his, the one strong arm left to him snaking up her back to cup her neck as she returned the kiss.

“Well,” he murmured breathlessly, as soon as he could speak again. “That part seems much the same.”

“Better,” Anneliese contradicted, her head pressed into his shoulder as she contentedly let him lean on her in place of his cane.

“How soon will you marry me?” Caleb asked abruptly.

Lady Anneliese pulled back, looking up at him with a look that was half surprise, half amusement.

Caleb smiled as he tucked a strand of honey hair behind her ear. “We’ve lost six years,” he explained. “I don’t want to waste another day.”

“Neither do I,” Anneliese agreed. “I’m ready. More than ready.”

Caleb’s heart was so light, he thought he might lift from the ground, crippled leg and all. “I’ll start arrangements at once,” he beamed. “I think a royal wedding is exactly the kind of celebration the kingdom needs right now. And you, Anneliese,” he lowered his voice to a soft hum, “are exactly what I need, now and forever.”