



# Grimson Throne

JOLINE PEARCE

# Crimson Throne

Joline Pearce

# PART 1: SUMMER

## June

### Chapter 1

Red as far as I can see.

Blood in the river. Pooling on the ground.

Fire at my back. Fire in the sky. Smoke choking my lungs.

The color red is considered good luck among my people, yet our country's fortunes have taken a drastic turn for the worse. The entire country is awash in crimson and ash. What was verdant green and crystalline blue laid to waste. War has already claimed two of my friends.

Three, if Lorcan doesn't survive his injuries.

Four, if we don't find Zosia.

How many more, before this ordeal is over?

We've barely begun to fight. I'm already so tired.

A staticky screech from my pocket yanks me out of my morose thoughts. Good. Keep moving. Don't think.

"Come in, Princess Raina, come in." I fumbled the walkie-talkie out of my pocket.

"Ten-two." Receiving well.

"Convoy of eight bikes coming up the path toward you. Get out of there before they see you."

"Ten-four." Message received. I clip the device into my waistband. "We have to get off the trail."

My sole surviving guard is not in good condition, which is why we've taken the open road instead of a more circumspect route. The only outward sign of her injuries is the bandage on her upper arm. Beneath her sweat-stained, dirt-encrusted shirt are tight wraps holding her cracked ribs. I tied them myself. I carry our only supplies in a small pack. We abandoned everything else we carried after the attack that took out the rest of my guards and left Orisa in a bad state.

We're still at least a day away from our destination.

Hands on her knees, bent double, breathing and spitting thin trails of gray saliva, Orisa glanced up wearily. "Go without me, Princess."

“No. Come on. We can make it to Oceanside.”

I take her by the elbow. Orisa wipes her forearm across her mouth and stands up. Her pale face is covered in a layer of soot. Sweat has drawn streaks down her cheeks. It’s almost comical, clownlike, but neither of us is laughing. She shakes her head, short dark hair flying outward.

“I’ll hold them off. Buy time for you to get to safety.”

“We can make it. Together,” I plead. Futile.

Orisa closes her eyes. Tears run down her cheeks, marking them further. But when she opens them again, her brown eyes are full of determination.

“No. Orisa, no.”

There’s nowhere for us to hide. Every village has been either set on fire or overtaken by the invaders. Orisa and I have witnessed hundreds of burned-out wagons with dead horses in the traces and bodies left to rot. Women. Children. The Skía and their pirates are merciless in their destruction.

The sound of buzzing engines grows louder. We stand there for another minute, two determined women squaring off. I’m about to order her to come with me when a burst of gunfire causes me to flinch.

I'll never get used to that sound.

“Princess. Go.”

She gives me a tiny shove. Breathing ash and soot, I ran, trying to escape the tide of death hard on my heels. My guard doesn't follow.

Minutes later, I screw my eyelids shut against the sound of crashing and gunfire. An explosion tells me she's taken her retribution. Tears stream down my cheeks. *Damn it, Orisa.* Lungs burning, I run faster. No point in getting myself killed now. I refuse to waste her sacrifice.

So much loss, it makes me sick.

Kenton. Cata. My guards. Thousands of Auralians.

Lorcan, probably.

Zosia...no. She can't be dead. For several of reasons. Her life is of paramount importance to the country.

The night of the invasion, Lorcan got his head bashed in while trying to buy time for me and Zosia to make it to the safety of Čovari Village. We heard the rockslide he caused, and went back to find him badly injured with a head wound. I did what I could to stabilize his condition. Honestly, his chances of survival even then were almost nonexistent.

We took him to the Sun Temple, where Saskaya, the new leader of the Čovari tribe after her sister Cata's death, was trying to shut down the rampaging Sentinels she'd spent her whole life reconstructing. Four people lugging his prone form on a handheld stretcher through a war zone. It's a good thing he's no giant, like Bashir.

Likely, also dead.

No one has heard from Zosia, the Auralian princess, or her father, the king, since that night.

*We should've stayed in Scotland.*

Three weeks ago we were students at Royals University. The biggest things I had to worry about were my grades in biology; not getting assassinated, which wasn't terribly difficult to avoid considering how Royals was basically a protective fortress for the children of global elites; and keeping my crush on Lorcan under control.

It's been obvious for a year now that he was never going to date me, much less marry me. That was *before* I overheard him and Zosia promising to wait for one another.

It hurts, I'll grant you that. But it's nothing I didn't already know, deep down. Lorcan has always loved Zosia. I

didn't want to see it. I didn't want to see what motivated him, even though it was right there in front of my face. Now that I do, the inevitable feels right.

Looking back, I know why they kept their feelings for one another secret. They didn't act on them so as not to offend me.

And I feel lost.

Foolish. Stupid. I got in their way.

Now, it might be too late for them to be together. I'll never live down the guilt of costing them their one chance at happiness together.

The way Scarlett and Kenton will never get a chance to be together again. I'll never forget the devastation on her face the night we left. Her anguished sob when I called her with the news of his death will echo in my memory until the day I die.

As though any of that matters, now. What matters is getting to Oceanside and figuring out a plan to fight back, instead of taking loss after loss the way we have been. I know how to use weapons, thanks to Lorcan. I can defend myself in a pinch. Yet, as a princess of Auralia's secondary tribe, the Myseči, I was never meant to fight like this.



I'm not meant to lead this country. That's Zosia's job. She should be safe with Saskaya's people in Čovari Village, but when Lorcan was injured she stepped up to play hero.

All I know is that there were three pirates with dirt bikes waiting for us at the bottom of Marsh Hollow. Ragnall's assistants took them out quickly. There were two dirt bikes, without keys, hidden behind a rock.

Zosia was gone. Presumably, with the third bike and the missing keys.

Leading danger away, so we could get Lorcan to safety. She loved him enough to risk her country for him, knowing there was a chance he wouldn't come back to her the same man he'd been before. I tried to warn her, but it was her decision.

There's a strong likelihood that whatever they had before his injury might be best they'll get. I tried to tell Zosia that night. She made her choice—and now, no one knows where she is.

If she were alive, she would have called. Found a way to send word.

But there's been nothing. No sign of Auralia's last hereditary monarch. If she lives, the populace will fight. If she doesn't...

It's a void I can't fill. No one can. Zosia's role is unique and irreplaceable. We need her. Until we know for sure, I have to do as much as I can to save this country we all love.

I owe them a second chance, if there's any possibility of one.

When we placed Lorcan's body on the bed of the Sun Temple's secret bunker that night, I stuck a needle in his arm and gave him blood straight from my arm. My blood type is O negative. I can give blood to anyone, not that it mattered for Lorcan. He's AB positive. He can accept blood from anyone. It's not the first time that particular quirk of physiology has saved his life.

We all gave blood that night. Saskaya, Ragnall, and both of his assistants. It didn't matter what it took. We needed him to live.

We need him to find Zosia.

In the meantime, it's up to me to cobble together a resistance. We're outgunned and outmaneuvered, but not

outmanned—yet. It's hard to tell how many people have perished in the initial assault.

If I can't scrape together a fighting force, we'll soon lose control of the entire island. The invaders spent months moving supplies into the country and hit hard, with an element of surprise that shouldn't have been possible given all our planning to counter them. We were fools to look to the outside world for help.

We should've stayed in Scotland to keep Zosia safe... but that would have meant abandoning our people to fight this battle alone.

I don't want to know what the pirates are doing to Zosia right now, if they've caught her.

My father wanted me to cower in safety at River Bend. He said it wasn't my place on the battlefield. Maybe he was right. But just because our tribe was comparatively unscathed by the initial fighting doesn't mean we'll remain so if the Skía and their pirates finish conquering our island.

Who will do it, if I don't?

With Zosia and Lorcan sidelined, there's only me standing between our country and total destruction.

Keryn, leader of The Mountain Folk tribe, sent a token contingent to Nansier in the Timberlands District, halting the invaders' northern progress. They're not getting involved any more than they absolutely must.

The buzz of engines roars to life again. Orisa's attack wasn't enough to take them all out, apparently. I'm on my own. I'm eighteen days into a journey that should have taken five. I'm fucking tired, and to top it all off, I'm short. My legs hardly cover any ground with each labored stride.

There's one place I can go where they can't easily follow me. I veer uphill, toward the last green place in Auralia. The Boscage. Our jungle district, where no one lives. This dragon-infested place is the best bet to draw these bastards into danger.

Perfect.

I can lead my pursuers into the thick underbrush and let the mordecam eat them, if it exists. If not, there's bound to be a hundred other ways for a small woman to destroy a dozen armed and desperate men.

Assuming I don't die, first.



# Chapter

## 2

The first sign of life in the Boscage are the gnats. Swarms of them. The fucking things were attracted to sweat, and it's so sticky here that my skin is sheened with it.

Bugs in my eyes. Bugs in my hair. Bugs inside my shirt and down my pants, all biting mercilessly. But the thick underbrush and canopy conceal my movements. I go slow, creeping southward with frustrating, maddening caution.

“Cette pute est ici,” one man called out.

“T'es sure?” his companion panted, glossing syllables. Two more trailed after them. Four men. The others spoke fractured English, as though they were from different countries and were using a common language none of them were quite fluent in.

Typical of the Skía's recruits. They'll take any disgruntled volunteer willing to commit violence and overthrow a peaceful country in exchange for a cut of the money. Doesn't matter which country they hail from. The Skía exploit people's desperation.

Crouching in the underbrush, my calves burning, I experience a moment of despair. I don't want to die here.

Turns out, biting gnats also like salty teardrops. I swipe at my face. My hand comes away streaked with black crushed bugs. Worse, my cheeks itch unbearably. Wonderful. I suppose that's what I deserve for indulging in a moment of self-pity.

I shift onto my knees, listening for movement and trying to get my bearings.

I'm marginally more familiar with this place than my pursuers are. Nobody sets foot in the Boscage if they can avoid it. Between the insects, the heat, the humidity, and the dragons—not to mention rumors of the mordecam, a legendary beast said to roam this jungle—I'm not too pleased to be here myself.

I'd rather be anywhere else, instead of crouched in the underbrush, sweating and itchy, gritting my teeth against the *endless stinging gnats* so as not to betray my hiding place.

Rustling underbrush. I freeze, my heart pounding.

Something very large and decidedly not human slides between the trees. I glimpsed leathery scales the color of tree

bark and rust, a slow movement as an enormous scaled animal made its way down the pathway, minutes behind the men.

*Reila save me, it's real.*

I close my eyes and try not to panic. Try not to breathe, lest it notice me.

According to legend, the beast cornered our founder, the Goddess Auralia, and her sisters, Reila and Astra. It was about to eat them until the Hero Protector slayed the mordecam, winning the goddess' admiration in the process. Auralia married him and founded the royal line of descendants of the goddess.

Zosia is the last of her line. The other part of the legend is that if Auralia's line falls, so will the country she founded. It's kind of important that we find her.

So annoying how so many of the legends omit that part about the sisters, not that it's my biggest concern at the moment.

My biggest problem right now is getting away from that monster and the fuck out of this hellscape. The instant the leaves stop quivering, I bolt in the opposite direction, moving as quietly as I can.



Never thought running *towards* war would be the better option. Yet here I am. Running towards danger. Again.

We can afford to lose me. I'm the descendent of a lesser goddess. I have two younger sisters, a multitude of cousins, and aunts galore. Unlike Zosia, I'm not essential. Still, I'd rather not be lost. I'm looking forward to being coronated eventually. I've had a couple of years of fun, but I've been ready to settle down for a while. Lorcan, however, refused my marriage proposal, and then war broke out, and now—

A hand encircles my waist at the same moment as its partner clamps over my mouth. My back hits a warm, solid wall before I make a sound.

“Quiet,” a man said, in English.

My heart pounds in my ears. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* Captured by one of the pirates? Shit, no. I've seen what they do to women. I'm not going out that way.

He drags me backwards several feet. There's a rush of movement in the trees. A second large animal is moving through the undergrowth.

The instant it's gone, I bite down hard on my captor's hand. I only manage to latch onto a scrap of the fleshy part, so

I make it count.

He grunts and tightens his hold around my waist. Fortunately, Lorcan taught me how to fight hard and dirty—and I've had plenty of practice over the last several weeks. *Turn your weaknesses into strengths.* He's not the biggest guy in the world, and he has a lot of experience with winning when he's outmatched.

I pray he's alive, and channel his ferocity.

I slam my elbow into my attacker's ribs. He's ready for that move, but not for the way I stomp on his foot and throw my head back, hitting his chin with the back of my head. Double elbows to the ribs, a grunt, and I'm free.

I make it all of five steps.

My assailant takes a flying leap and tackles me to the ground. I roll and knee him in the stomach. He gets ahold of my wrists and *flips* over me, rolling softly on his back, out of reach of my legs, still gripping my forearms.

That's not a pirate move. They're strong, but generally untrained in hand-to-hand combat.

"You fucking bastard," I hiss, twisting to look at him.

Our eyes meet. I blink. He's beautiful. Wide, dark eyes fringed with the longest lashes I've ever seen. Full lips and a sloped nose. Black hair cropped close around his head and smooth, umber skin.

I blink again, then torque upward trying to kick him in that gorgeous face.

He releases me, so I wind up rolling up to standing instead. The world spins slightly as I regain my balance. Too late.

The pirate gets ahold of my arm and yanks it high up behind my back. I hook his ankle and fall, ignoring the pain in my shoulder and taking him down with me. After a scuffle, I get on top of him, pinning him to the dirt with all my body weight. Getting an opponent on the floor is the best way for a smaller opponent to subdue a larger one. How many times have I practiced this with Lorcan—

—except my friend never got a boner when we were sparring.

This guy's dick is definitely hard, prodding me in a sensitive spot.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I demand in Auralian, panting hard. “You’re turned on by this?”

I’m surprisingly turned on, myself. Must be the sweaty fight.

“It’s not every day I get my ass handed to me by a gorgeous stranger,” he says in my language. “Marry me?”

What the fuck?

I pull back my arm and try to deck him. He catches my fist in one hand and holds it. His hands are a lot bigger than mine. His bicep pops. There’s a bright blue leather strap tied above it. His eyes are alight with mirth. I’m straddling his hips, with his erection beneath my butt, my knee on his free arm, holding him down with all my weight and willpower.

Again—a hold I’ve used on Lorcan a hundred times without similar results. I chalked it up to his being a gentleman. But the truth is, he wasn’t attracted to me. He’d already found his true love. Zosia.

Reila above, I hope they’re okay.

I continued staring into this stranger’s eyes, transfixed.

“You’re Auralian,” I said.

“And you haven’t answered my question.”

He grinned. I sat up, which brought me into firmer contact with his hard cock. All that energy shifted instantly to arousal.

For a split second, I actually consider having sex with this complete stranger. I don't even know his *name*.

Only the fact that we're both coated in dirt and there are twigs in my hair and down my clothes holds me back from making a regrettable decision.

The stranger takes advantage of my confusion. He pulls on my trapped hand to bring me down, took my face between his palms, and kisses me. I have a split second to squeak with surprise before our lips meet. Not gentle. Not soft. But delicious. I moan. He slips his tongue between my teeth. Five seconds later, I lay flat on his chest, chasing his into his mouth.

When he pulls back, I scramble off him, thoroughly embarrassed. That's one way of beating your opponent, I muse sourly.

"Where did you come from?" He asks. Embarrassed, I push back to sit on my heels. What is *wrong* with me?

"River Bend. You?"

“Here.” He lay back in the dirt with a lazy half-smile.  
“Ansi tribe.”

“You liar.” The Ansi haven’t existed in centuries. They disappeared after the last great war, the one that led to my tribe’s control of the Moon Temple five hundred years ago. How the fuck does he even know about the Ansi? They’re a myth. No one outside this island has ever heard of them.

“I’ll prove it.” He jerked his head. “Come with me.”

“Oh, no. I’m going that way.” I point in the direction I was headed before he snatched me. At least, I think it’s the way I was going... Looking around, I realize with a sinking feeling that I had no idea which way leads out of the Boscage and back to the road to Oceanside.

The very dangerous road to Oceanside, which I’ll have to navigate alone.

“Are you, now?” my companion laughs. “Do you know where that path leads?”

Okay. This mystery guy might be hot enough to distract me *momentarily* from my mission, but one kiss does *not* earn him teasing privileges with a *princess*, soon to be *queen*.

Especially since he's obviously spinning a yarn by claiming to be Ansi.

Even if there was tongue.

"No," I reply sweetly. "But you're going to tell me."

On the last syllable, I press the tip of the dagger hidden in my boot beneath his chin. Even white teeth flash against his dark lips. A fluttery little shudder works its way down between my shoulder blades. My blade doesn't waver.

"I like you," those sexy lips say.

"That makes one of us."

He winks. This guy is unbelievable.

"I think you like me too, Sunshine."

I can't help it. I laugh, despite myself. He's so self-assured. The only other man I've ever met with this much brazen confidence is Lorcan, and he doesn't have the cheeky sense of humor. "I'm Myseči, you complete weirdo. The sun and I aren't really friends."

Unless you count Zosia, the descendant of the Sun Goddess, my best friend.

“I figured. You people tend to be as pale as your patron goddess.”

Five millennia of inbreeding will do that. I try not to think about it. There’s more intermixing these days, but Auralia has been a mostly self-contained society for five thousand years. My people started off as a subtribe of the Sun Goddess Auralia, and eventually declared independence.

How does this guy know about us, though? River Bend, my castle, is a five- or six-day journey by horseback to the north under ordinary conditions. If he truly lives here in the Boscage—and judging from the way he’s dressed...

Now that we’re not fighting, I realize his outfit is... unusual, to put it mildly. I glanced down at the bright blue leather bands around his biceps. Dragonskin leather. The high sheen is coveted, but the animals are difficult to catch and skin, so it goes for a high price. His shorts are crafted of hide, laced with matching blue leather. Chalky handprints cover his torso and thighs. His muscular thighs. I briefly imagine marking him there with my handprint.

*What is happening to me?*

My knife never wavers. It wouldn’t take more than a quick thrust to open his windpipe. Mystery man doesn’t seem



particularly worried.

“Since I don’t, in fact, know where that path leads, and you seem to have time on your hands, whoever you are—”

“Tovian.”

“Tovian,” I smile. “I’m afraid I must press you into service as my guard.”

He cocks his head. “Do you ordinarily travel with guards, Sunshine?”

Again, I’m flummoxed. Admitting that I haven’t left my own bedroom without some form of protection since I was born would tip my hand. I’m not sure I want him to know I’m royalty. He’s a little too self-assured for me to trust. Guys like him? There’s always a catch. They’re tomcats, like Kenton and Bashir were, or they’re in love with someone else, like Lorcan.

I’m not exactly the kind of woman who captivates men, either. He’s after something, and it’s not me.

“Any woman would be a fool to travel alone with the country overrun by invaders.” I neatly sidestep his question. “If you’ll take me to Oceanside safely, Tovian, I promise I’ll reward you.”

“Oceanside,” he repeats, frowning. It doesn’t suit his features. He’s made for mirth and merriment—although it’s clear he can hold his own in a fight, too. He’s definitely my best chance of making to the port city alive. “Why do you want to go there?”

“I need to.” I don’t elaborate. “Will you take me, or will you make me slit your throat?”

“To die by your hand, Sunshine, would be a heavenly way to die.”

He did *not* just misquote The Smiths to me. Nobody in this country even knows who Morrissey is. The handful of us who’ve been to the outside world don’t listen to oldies, anyway. The only reason I know of it is because of our friend from Scotland, Scarlett. Kenton’s girlfriend.

I squint at him suspiciously. Tovia gives me a “what?” look, then says, “I’ll take you to Oceanside, Sunshine. On one condition.”

Relieved, I sheath my knife. “Name it.”

“Tell me who you are.”

I froze. If I tell him my given name, chances are very high that he’ll recognize who I am. Back when Queen Ilíana,

King Rohan, and my parents were first starting to open up the country to outsiders, my parents chose a moniker for their daughter that reflected their interest in modernity. Raina is a name from the outside world that literally means “queen.”

Which I will be, once I’m coronated. In the meantime, my first name is a dead giveaway as to my identity.

“Arianelle.” I offer my middle name as a substitute.  
“Ari, for short.”

I just hope I remember to answer to it.

“Arianelle,” Tavian tests it out. His velvety brown eyes hold mine. “Pretty.”

Heat crawls over my cheeks. I’m already hot and covered in grime. I become acutely aware of my appearance. Travel-stained white shift with elbow-length sleeves turned gray, worn under a plain brown tunic that’s seen better days. Beige pants covered with grass stains, flecks of mud, and a hole in the knee. High boots to protect my shins. I hate to think what my feet will smell like when I take them off.

I don’t feel remotely pretty. Yet this guy took one look at me and asked me to marry him. Was he joking? Of course. But

there's no denying the fact that he had a boner, even with dead bugs smeared all over my face.

Speaking of which, now that we're standing still again, the cloud came swarming back. I swatted them as they crawled down my shirt.

The damn things weren't biting Tavian, though.

"Here."

He offered me a small stoppered vial.

"What is it?"

"Insect repellent. Distilled locustweed. The gnats hate it. So do humans. It's vile in concentrated form. Works, though."

I dabbed it onto my wrists and throat like it was the finest perfume. The effect was immediate, both upon me and the gnats. I wrinkled my nose, but everywhere I put it, the biting bugs left me alone. I proceeded to douse myself with it.

"Why aren't they bothering you?" I asked, a bit huffily.

Tavian shrugged. "Ansi methods are better."

"Distilled locustweed isn't Ansi?" I asked, archly, following him as he led me down a path I hadn't even noticed, away from the more clearly marked one.

“We use it for several things. Including warding off Big Ada.”

Tovian’s accent is lilting, rounding certain vowels. It’s beautiful. I could listen to him talk all day.

“Who’s Big Ada?”

He laughed. “Not Ada. Eater.”

*Eat-uh.* I misheard, but I understand now. “Who—or what—is Big Eater?”

“That,” he gestures down into a ravine. “Also known as the mordecam.”

I follow the direction he’s pointing, and scream.

## Chapter 3

For the second time in as many hours, Tovian's palm clamps over my mouth. He drags me backwards several steps.

"Shh. Don't draw attention. Big Eater is happy with her meal, for now. But there are smaller dragons that hang around looking for the scraps. We don't want them inviting us for dinner, lest we end up like those men, Sunshine."

I can't draw enough air. The cursed locustweed he gave me to ward off gnats chokes me as I take panicky little sips. I was so preoccupied with Tovian that I never heard the huge dragon attack four men.

"That is *disgusting*." I've seen a lot of horrible things over the past few weeks. My friends were shot down in a plane. I drilled burr holes into Lorcan's head, for fuck's sake. I'm not one to recoil from blood and viscera. I've never seen anything quite as grisly as that, though.

"Had I been a bit slower to pull you out of its way, that would be you down there." Tovian cautiously releases me though he stands close, with one hand resting lightly on my hip. "I didn't mean to startle you, earlier."

“You saved my life. Thank you.”

He chuckles. “My pleasure. Truly.”

My face flames, again. His impertinence about the fact that our tussle turned him on is roguishly charming.

“Shameless flirt,” I mutter.

“I’m just getting started, Sunshine.”

I roll my eyes. “Very funny, Tovian. The last thing on my mind is a random hookup, okay? I have to get to Oceanside.”

“Why?”

“There’s a war, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“The Ansi don’t make a habit of getting involved in other people’s wars. That’s why we make our home here in the Boscage, where few dare to venture.”

“Yet, you just got involved, by taking me to Oceanside.”

He half-turned to me, with a serious expression. “I said I’d take you there. I didn’t agree to anything more, Ari.”

I scowl. I’m no spy-assassin, like Lorcan is. Was. *You’ve done everything you can for him; it’s in the Goddess Reila’s hands now.* “Get me to the city and I’ll be in your debt.”

“In your debt,” Tovian echoes in disbelief. “You’re already in my debt, Sunshine. I saved your life.”

My mouth opens, but no protest comes out. Gnats swarmed. I bat ineffectively at them, choking and spitting elegantly. “Pestilential things,” I mumble, mentally including my rescuer. He’s a charmer, but he’s got a backbone. “I promise you’ll be rewarded.”

Tovian doesn’t look convinced.

“Reward me by not taking stupid risks, Sunshine. You’re lucky I happened to be in this part of the Boscage when you stumbled into my jungle.”

“Stop calling me that. I have a name.”

Even if I did lie about it, Arianelle is still technically my name. Sunshine, emphatically, is not. Cute, but all things sunny and golden are Zosia’s domain—except her personality, which is overly serious and, if I’m being honest, a bit despondent. Or was, until Lorcan got her to thaw out a little. The way she brightened whenever he was around...it twists my heart.

In retrospect, I should’ve been more concerned about her. A lot of people should have been. She wasn’t okay, and



none of us saw it. Except Lorcan. He paid attention, picked up on what the rest of us, busy with our war plans and introducing our secretive country to the outside world, didn't want to see.

After all, how could a princess be depressed? What could a beautiful nineteen-year-old woman have to be sad about?

Plenty, as it turned out. I didn't realize how bad things were between her and her father until he tried to force Zosia to the altar. I thought for sure Cata would talk him out of it, but she supported the plan, even knowing how Lorcan and Zosia felt about one another. I'll never understand why.

Can't ask her now.

I feel like I failed Zosia. I failed my two best friends, and I want a chance to fix it.

Tovian's brows knit together. "I didn't mean to make you cry. Ari."

"Oh, that happens, it's no big deal. I wasn't even thinking about your dumb nickname for me." I swipe at my cheek. It comes away damp and gray with grime. I cannot believe this guy thought I was beautiful enough to make out with, when I'm covered in filth.

Is he a keeper or serial killer, that is the question.

If Toviaian meant to kill me, he could've let Big Ada—*Eater*—have me for lunch. I get the sense that he's like me—a lover and a fighter, but the latter only when he needs to be.

Unlike Lorcan.

Lorcan is a killer, through and through. He's as cold as Zosia is. Both of them have hearts of fire encased in ice.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked, head cocked to the side.

“A friend,” I said. “Two friends. I didn't do well by them.” I adjust my pack. “Can we keep moving?”

“What's the rush, Sunshine? Are you looking to catch a bullet?”

“With my teeth.” I emphasize each syllable, implying I'm so tough I'll spit it right back out. “I'm needed there.”

It's all I dare tell him. If he knew who I really am, Toviaian might do anything. Kidnap me. Hold me for ransom. With Auralia's primary ruler missing, it can hardly afford to lose the backup queen. Not that I alone count for much.

The legends tend to focus on Auralia, at the expense of Reila and Astra, her sisters. The exclusion has led to

significant conflict between Auralia's main tribe and mine, the largest offshoot, most recently the conflict five hundred years ago that sent Tovia's people into hiding.

Some say that the Skía are an offshoot of that war. Our home-grown, secretive shadow organization bent on overthrowing the Auralian monarchy. For decades, they withered into a scary bedtime story, until, when the country started opening to the outside world, they became terrifyingly real.

First, Zosia's aunt died under suspicious circumstances. Her mother rushed into marriage—a reasonably happy one, if not a love match. King Rohan and his Queen ruled well together for a few years, producing one daughter. In the interim, her grandmother died. Then the Skía murdered Zosia's mother, leaving one little girl to carry the weight of centuries of tradition.

King Rohan pushed Zosia hard to fill her mother's shoes. Being the living goddess was supposed to be hereditary. But hereditary just means you get a certain combination of genetic material. It can't confer experience. It doesn't mean you automatically have access to ancient knowledge. He didn't

seem to understand that. The goddess was supposed to guide her, but as far as Zosia knew, the goddess despised her.

Worse, it was Lorcan's father who led her mother's guard the day Queen Ilíana was attacked. Zosia did not take well to being used as the vehicle for Lorcan's redemption.

We all contributed to the pressure on her. I see that with the clarity of hindsight. As long as there's hope for them, there's hope for the country, and I keep fighting—cute Ansi boy or no cute Ansi boy.

Which means, I need to get to Oceanside. Now.

“Well, Ansi? Are we going?” I gesture to what appears to be a trail, but might just be a haphazard opening in the underbrush. His teeth flashed, but the smile doesn't quite meet his eyes.

“This way, Sunshine.” He motions for me to follow him deeper into the jungle.

“I'm pretty sure Oceanside is that way.”

“Are you, now?” he calls over his shoulder.

Not really.

“We'll take a shortcut. Two days, and I'll have you inside the city. Alive.”

“Two days?” I groaned. Measuring travel in days is commonplace here, although it’s not a very scientific system. Two days can mean traversing twenty kilometers of rough terrain, or it can mean sixty kilometers of good road. Generally, though, people are good at estimating how long any given trip will take. Especially if they’re experts in their District, which I am not, here.

“One, if you hurry.”

As tired as I am, I push my short, aching legs to move faster.

#

Dusk falls fast. Shadows turn deep gray, fade into midnight blue and then suddenly, pitch black. The jungle canopy blots out the stars.

“Here we go. Up, Sunshine.”

“Up, where?”

Tovian takes my hand and presses it to the warm rock. My fingers curl into a niche. A handhold. He takes my other hand and reaches a little higher, tucking it into another niche. The only thing preventing him from pressing against my back is the bulk of my small pack. I shiver. Not from the cold.

“Got it.”

I climb.

The small holes are evenly spaced, carved into the volcanic rock wall. I keep going, remembering to use my legs. Up and up. Above the canopy of trees, into cooler air. Abruptly, they drop out. I place my palm on a ledge and climb the last few inches with shaking legs. I roll over and sit up.

A cave.

The only predators that could get this high into the cliff face are the smallest of dragons. Tigers and wolf-bears can't climb. We're safe. Brilliant.

Tovian hauls himself over the edge a minute later. I scoot over to make room for him.

“All right?” he asks.

“I'm good.”

We sit there, feet dangling over the edge, looking out over the treetops, listening to the sounds of the night. Birds sing. Insects chirp and whine. A harsh cry in the distance must be from a dragon. The sky above is pale blue, fading fast. Stars shine in the unblemished canopy above us.

It's the first time I've seen my country at any kind of peace in weeks. My soul hurts to think of the destruction down below, just out of sight. The only indication of war is the plume of smoke rising far in the distance, in the direction of the Grasslands District where fires rage out of control. From here, the island's sloping volcanic rock wall is clearly visible as it descends down to the curling hook that conceals our port town from view.

"Tomorrow, we'll continue climbing," Tavian says after a few minutes of companionable silence. He points to the long cliff. "We can make it by early afternoon if we move fast and go overland."

"Won't we be exposed to gunfire up there?"

He shrugged. "You will be. I blend in."

"How reassuring," I grumble. My stomach chimes in right then with a loud gurgle.

"Come on." Tavian pushes up, smiling. "I want to show you something."

"Does it involve food?"

The look he casts me over his shoulder makes my insides go slippery and hot. The warm humor in his expression

only enhances his good looks—not that he needs any help in the hotness department.

Whereas Lorcan...I really need to stop comparing him to Lorcan. Still, I can't help it. My friend's good looks are severe and stoic. I can hardly picture him smiling, or laughing. Intent and focused, yes. Deadly and beautiful.

Lorcan's sense of humor runs to flashes of insouciance and occasionally biting wit. He hides so much. Whereas Tovian is more like me: an open book.

I hear the water before moonlight coming in through a hole in the rock above illuminates a natural hot spring. My eyes have adjusted to the dimness.

"This. Is. Divine." I drop my pack as I walk and start tugging at the hem of my shirt. Halting mid-stride, I glance at Tovian. "Um. You mind?"

"A stripshow? Not in the least." He winks, but turned away.

I watch his back fade into the gloom with growing disappointment.

Do I want to have sex with a complete stranger? Yes, I do. Once I get to Oceanside, there is a strong chance I won't



survive. Not one of the guards I set out with did, after all.

Mine is not exactly a great impulse, but I'm not keen to go to my death without at least exploring the chemistry crackling between us. Danger banging is a thing, or could be, if I'm reading the situation right.

A little physical release before I go and get myself killed seems in order—after I've bathed. Hours of adrenaline and exertion haven't exactly improved my personal hygiene situation. I quickly strip down to nothing and unpin my hair. It falls in a long curtain down my back. Naked, I plunge into the warm, fizzing, impossibly blue water. My groan echoed from the stone walls.

“Feels nice, Ari?”

Tovian's voice is as sexy as the rest of him.

“Wonderful.” *Come on in* is on the tip of my tongue.

Tovian beats me to the punch.

“You won't mind if I join you?”

I hesitate, torn between the inappropriateness of enjoying myself when the world is on fire, and the need to feel good for a few minutes. Part of me doesn't feel like I deserve

to feel good. Not until I've fixed...what? Everything that's gone wrong?

That could take years.

It's still enough to hold me back.

"I have soap, Arianelle," he adds when I don't immediately respond.

I'd fuck him for the soap alone, but the way he says my full middle name—which is a mouthful of syllables that roll off his tongue—makes my abdomen clench hard. I could feel the slipperiness between my legs, even with my body surrounded by warm water from the neck down.

"By all means, hop in."

Maybe, if I ask nicely, he'll do me the honor of soaping me up.

*He's not your maid, Raina,* I scold myself. The scent of smoke tickles my nostrils. Jerking my head around, I find Tavian crouched beside a small flame.

The light from the fire illuminates a sheltered part of the cavern. Three cots—bent wooden frames, low to the ground, sit in a semicircle. Tavian has emptied his pack onto one, and placed mine on another, leaving one empty in between.

Hm.

Tovian clamps a lid over a small metal pot, and suspended it over the fire on a wire frame. There's no way he carried that contraption with him. This must be a regular Ansi stopover.

Maybe the Ansi really do exist.

He doesn't need to do much to get naked. Nor does he appear to have any shame about his body. The leather bands protecting his biceps come off, dropped onto the cot. Then the fur shin guards. He kicks off the supple leather shoes and stands to discard his shorts. I avert my eyes before they fall below his hips. I'm not going to be a perv.

Water splashes my face when he jumps into the pool. Bubbles frothed in his short springy hair when he comes up for air.

"Come here often?" I ask, deliberately misusing a terrible pickup line from the outside world. Tovian grins as if he gets my joke. My stomach flutters.

"On occasion. It's one of many hiding spots the Ansi have in this area. When we don't wish to be seen, we disappear."

He swims closer to me. On reaching the edge of the pool, he stretches his arms out and tips his chin up, staring out the overhead opening at the deep sky and bright stars. A thin plume of smoke trails up and out.

“Do you ever wonder what’s out there?” he asks, softly.

If I tell him I’ve been beyond these thick rock walls, into the world beyond, he’ll know I’m no ordinary Auralian. Only a handful of people have ever visited the outside world.

“Stars.” I smile. “Obviously. Symbol of the Čovari.”

He smiled. “How is that possible? The stars don’t come out when the sun is up.”

This guy really knows our culture. He doesn’t bat an eyelash at my reference to Auralia’s most secretive tribe, the Čovari, warrior-scholars dedicated to the preservation of the royal line.

“Just because you can’t see them doesn’t mean they aren’t there.”

“Fair enough.” His smile wilts. “The Ansi consider ourselves the star tribe. Split off when the Sun and Moon went to war.”

I go still. This isn't information recorded in our history books. Nobody really knew why they disappeared, only that the Ansi were disgusted with the fighting between the Auralians and Myseči, and refused to choose a side.

Some stories claim that Zosia's ancestors wiped the tribe out. Clearly not the case, although I wouldn't be surprised if there was an attack and those imperfect histories are the only record of an attempt at ethnic cleansing.

"The Sun and Moon have long since reconciled, Tavian." I wet my lips. "Have you considered doing the same?"

"It isn't up to me," he says quietly. "The Ansi are a small tribe, compared to the others. Five hundred years ago, we hid because to choose a side risked destroying us."

"This is an emergency, Tavian. We need all the help we can get."

His expression turns serious. Contemplative. It suits him, too. He's a thoughtful man, I realize with a start. There's much more to him than a keen sense of humor and a mysterious family.

“I’ll take you to Oceanside, Arianelle. I cannot promise anything further without consulting my mother.”

Before I could ask why, he ducks beneath the water. When he comes up, he takes the lump of soap and begins scrubbing himself clean. The handprint markings on his skin don’t run or smudge. Interesting. They don’t look like tattoos. I can’t figure out what they’re made of.

“Who is your mother?” I ask, when he offers me the soap.

“Queen Brenica of the Ansi.”

His teeth flash white before he ducks beneath the surface again.

*Shit.*

My guide is an Ansi prince.

The decision to conceal my identity as princess of the Myeseči doesn’t seem quite so smart, knowing that.

Before I can decide how to address the problem I’d created, a high-pitched whistling sound fills the cavern.

## Chapter 4

“Dinner’s ready,” Tovian says, hauling himself out of the water and giving me an uncompromised view of his spectacular ass in the process.

He’s like Lorcan this way: utterly unashamed of his body. And why should he be? I’m a medical professional (sort of). Nobody’s body is bad. Tovian’s is exquisite.

Trailing water, he pads over to the fire and pulls the little pot away from the flame. I quickly avail myself of the soap—as quickly as possible when you have hair down to your waist—and haul myself out into the cool air. I avoid his eyes as I wrap a barely-adequate and not quite clean towel around my salient bits, and quickly don the clean-ish nightshirt from my pack.

Clothed, more or less, I sit on the empty cot between mine and the one Tovian claimed. He’s donned a cloth garment of a type I’ve never seen before. It resembles something a Greek statue might depict a man wearing. His leather getup is hung over the side of his cot to air out.

He pretends not to look at my clearly visible nipples. I pretend not to care. I do care, but not in the sense of being offended. Frankly, the only thing that offends me was the fact that he's not attempting to tear my clothes off.

Well, I suppose kissing again would be a good first step. I'm still not certain how to handle his casual announcement of being Ansi royalty. Confessing my own, commensurate status would be a good start, but I'm too hungry to figure out how to go about it.

"This is fucking delicious." I moan. Salted fish and tangy tamarind with rice. It wasn't much to look at but the one-pot meal fills my empty belly, fast. Almost as soon as I scrape the last bite from my bowl, my eyelids droop.

"Tired, Arianelle?" Tovian asks, teasing. I'm falling asleep on my feet. Between losing Orisa—

*Orisa.*

Damn.

"I am, but I need to do something before I go to bed." I set my bowl aside and scrambled through my pack, looking for my satellite phone.

No signal. Low battery, too.



Stands to reason. We're inside a cave. The thick rock walls defy connection. I move closer to the naturally formed ventilation hole above the hot spring. Still nothing. Exasperated, I drop my hands to my side.

"Where did you get that, Ari?" Tovian's dark eyes bounce from the device in my hand to my face.

"My satellite phone?" This would be a good time to come clean about who I am, and what I'm doing here. But for some reason, I don't. I shrug with all the nonchalance I could muster. "Picked it off one of the dead invaders. Wasn't hard to figure out how it works."

"Let me see it."

"No."

He makes a grab for it. I jerk the phone away, tucking it behind my back. Daring him to try and take it. Tovian relents, to my disappointment.

"I don't believe you, Arianelle." He holds my gaze until I broke eye contact. "I don't think you've been truthful with me from the moment we met."

Guiltily, I tuck the phone away. Out of sight, out of mind, right?

He tucks two fingers beneath my chin and tips my face up to his.

*Kiss me.*

He doesn't. I pulled away as a yawn stages a hostile takeover of my face.

I have no real reason not to trust him. He saved my life, though I thought it was an attack at the time. Tovia revealed his identity to me. I didn't return the favor. I'm not sure why I don't now.

*Because he won't fight.* The voice inside me is a sulky, fierce little thing. It wants revenge for Orisa and the rest of my guards. It wants my country free from the invaders with a passion that demands I stop at nothing until I personally drive them out. It wants Lorcan to make a full recovery and Zosia to come back. After that, I can do whatever I want. That interior voice is uncompromising, and it will not allow me to be distracted. Not even for a single night.

"I'll tell you where I got the phone in the morning," I relent. He nods and drops onto his cot, back to me. Irritated.

My hopes of climbing Tovia like a tree diminished into nothingness, but it's for the best. He doesn't seem like a man

who would sleep with a strange woman and then send her off to fight in a hopeless war. He has better manners than that. He isn't denying the spark of attraction between us, but he isn't fanning it, either. He's being cautious, too.

Men here tend not to act entitled to sex, like so many do in the outside world. Auralia is a matriarchy with established and widely-available methods of contraception and abortifacients. Culturally, we tend to take a discreet and measured approach to sex, although there's some variation across tribes and even villages.

It's not that there aren't promiscuous people. We're human. But it's not a conquest. Your friends won't admire you if you're too casual about it, and if a man fathers a baby before marriage, it's considered a mark of poor character.

Similarly, we don't have a culture of shaming women for sex, which is one thing we'll have to be careful to protect if we continue to engage the outside world after this war. While young people are expected to have an exploratory period, most settle down into stable marriages.

The one exception is the representation of the goddess. Zosia was expected to keep herself pure and holy, even more so than any of her predecessors, because she was the last of

her line and there was a lot of anxiety about securing the succession. I know she was looking forward to escaping the pressure while at university, but she never really got the opportunity to explore, because of Lorcan's constant presence.

Among the things we stole from her: her freedom and her sexuality. It's a wonder she didn't rebel more.

As for me, I had a few brief hookups when I was at Royals. Part of me wanted to spark envy in Lorcan. It didn't work. The sex wasn't all that great, and ultimately, each experience left me feeling more discouraged.

You could say I was primed to fall instantly in lust with the first man who showed a spark of real interest in me.

I like to think that under different circumstances, Tovian and I might have had a chance at something real. But none of us are getting what we want right now. My problems are minuscule compared to what's happening down in the valley below.

“Good night, Arianelle.”

Creaking of the reed mat as he shifted his weight. A breeze blew in from the front of the cavern, up and out the

ventilation hole, keeping the temperature even and comfortable despite the hot spring.

“Night, Tovi. Sweet dreams.”

His low chuckle is the last thing I hear as I pass out.

#

I awaken to the sound of birdsong. Tovian is already up, moving around the cavern, preparing for our departure. I roll out of my cot, nearly tipping it in the process, and quickly gather my belongings. There wasn't much to be done about my soiled clothing. I didn't bring much with me. What's most important are the supplies taking up most of the space in my pack.

Medical supplies.

I hurriedly bury the black pouch beneath my dirty clothes and buckle it closed.

“Hungry?” Tovian holds out a piece of fruit.

“Where did you get this?” I asked, examining it. “What is it?”

“Dragonfruit.” He offers me a knife, hilt-first. I take it and cut a slice. The tough skin yields to a surprisingly soft

interior studded with tiny seeds and pale purple flesh. Sweet juice drips down my chin when I bite into it.

“Why don’t we have these in the north?” I moan and gulp it down, grabbing the knife to cut another slice.

“You’d have to brave the Boscage to get them. Few people are willing to dare, and most of them wind up like your pursuers did yesterday. It’s mostly the Ansi and the dragons who eat them.” He slings his pack over his shoulder. “Ready, Arianelle?”

We return to the front of the cavern and continue climbing. The handholds carved into the cliff face continue off to one side. I try not to think about how dangerous this is. A fall would kill me. The cliff gradually tapers upward, however, until by the time I reach the top, all I have to do is lean over the rounded ledge and push up to standing.

“Get down!” Tovian shouts, his handsome features contorting in real fear.

Heart racing, I drop instantly to the ground. He quickly comes over the ledge to join me.

“Don’t *scare* me like that,” I complain.

In the bright morning light, I can see all the way to the opposite ridge. Jagged black rock rises from the ocean, forming protective walls that rise in altitude to form three mountains at the northernmost end of the island.

Directly below us is the Boscage, and further out, between the sloping rock walls is the Central Valley. The view isn't as peaceful in the light of day. Plumes of smoke rise. Red flames flicker amongst the deep black.

"Goddesses," Tovia breathes. "The fires are out of control. This is horrible."

"Nineteen days." I swallow hard. "Nineteen days to destroy our country."

What little we've learned about the Skía's attack strategy is that they've been infiltrating pirates into the countryside for months. Moving ammunition and dirt bikes up into Central Auralia by the wagonload and storing it until they felt they had enough numbers to strike.

We knew they were amongst us. But not how many. Not when they would strike. We may never know why they chose that moment. Our spies were busy trying to infiltrate the Skía; to this day, we don't know how long they had ships full of mercenaries on standby.

Now, we're in a race to find Zosia. One I am poised to lose.

If we find her first, we rally our people around her and reclaim our country.

If they find her, we're fucked. She's especially fucked, and not in a nice way. Zosia deserves better than that.

Tovian is somber for a while. He waves me over to the other side of the cliff. Here, it drops in a smooth, slick, lichen-bedecked black surface straight into the sea. Below are atolls stretching for miles. Bobbing amongst them are the small boats that made it possible for the pirates to congregate right offshore. These shallows have claimed many ships over millennia.

You can see the logic of the supply lines. Drop your ammunition on one of the uninhabited islands, just out of view. Move it under cover of darkness using row boats and skiffs. A few well-placed bribes in Oceanside would have kept their secret.

Anger at those traitors roiled within me.

Perhaps they didn't know why they were being asked to keep quiet. Perhaps they did, and chose to look the other way



for a little extra coin. Either way, I'd hang them for betraying us.

"They can shoot us from here." Tovian gestures to the pirates on the bare rock.

"How?"

It doesn't seem likely.

"Big rockets." He points up the slope. A large crater is visible beside a cracked outcropping. "Never seen anything like them. This ridge gets narrower and lower the closer we get to Oceanside. Your white shirt will be visible to them if you get too close to that edge, and visible to pirates on the interior as we get closer to the shore. The lower we descend, the easier it will be for them to shoot at us."

"Okay." I inhale. A gust of wind brought the scent of smoke into my nostrils, even though we're buffeted by the briny breeze coming off the ocean, too. "You lead the way, Tovian."

"Can you take off your shirt, Sunshine?"

"Oh, now you want a strip show?" I smile faintly. "No. I can't, if I don't want to burn to a crisp out here."

I've braided my long dark hair and pinned the thick coils around my head in a crown. Over this, I tied a thin woven brim to keep the sun out of my eyes. My filthy white tunic has a high collar and a slitted V at my throat, with long sleeves. It's too thin to provide real protection, but it's too hot to wear anything heavier. What I wouldn't give for a bottle of sunscreen from the outside world about now.

He grimaces. "You really aren't friendly with the sun, are you?"

"No. What was your first guess?"

He chuckles. I'm rapidly coming to adore that sound, the way it curls in my midsection like dripping honey on a warm afternoon.

"Come on, Arianelle. You'll stand out on these black rocks, so try to stay low. We'll move fast between outcroppings and boulders."

With that, he was off. Tovia n lopes down the uneven surface, the muscles in his legs bunching with each step. I follow. Try to, anyway. Within minutes, my muscles are screaming.

“You okay, Ari?” Tovian calls back. Glancing up, he’s nowhere to be seen. Bizarre. His voice came from close by.

“Fine,” I say through gritted teeth. “Tired.”

Nineteen days of flight and fight have worn me down. I must keep going. There’s a resistance forming in what’s left of Oceanside. I can be useful there. I can redeem myself and save my country. I just have to get there.

“We can make it by nightfall, if we push.”

Tovian’s form separates from his surroundings as if by magic.

“Holy shit.” I blink twice, forgetting how tired I am.

“How do you do that?”

“Camouflage.”

His trapezoid stands out as he raised one shoulder nonchalantly. Great goddesses, he’s fit. It’s covered in white handprints that look remarkably similar to the bird-droppings-streaked rocks, even from a reasonably close distance.

“I see that. Amazing. It was as though you disappeared for a minute there. Can I have some?”

“Some of what?” He’s distracted by something on the horizon.

“This stuff.” I poke his bicep. Tovia glances down at me. A slow smile spreads over his lips. I like watching the way emotions flicker over his features. It’s so different from Lorcan’s stone-faced, emotionless aspect.

And I will stop comparing them. Right now.

“You’d have to come and meet the Ansi, first.” He resumes scanning the horizon.

“You move fast,” I joke, wondering if he’ll understand the implications.

He does. Tovia shoots a quick glance at me, then leans in to kiss my cheek. “You, on the other hand, do not. Sore?”

I nod. He deftly turned the subject back to me. He’s so considerate, I don’t know how to react. I’m used to being told what to do, and then told I’m not doing it fast enough.

“Here.”

He passes me a leaf-wrapped parcel about the size of my pinkie finger. Inside was an uninspiring twiglike object. “What is it?”

“Dracaena leaf. Helps with muscle aches. Tastes terrible but it works.” He broke off a small section. “Chew on it.

Swallow the juice but not the pulp. You'll know it's working when your tongue goes numb."

I make a face. "No, thanks."

"Your call, Arianelle." He gives me that bemused smile again. "Let's go."

Reluctantly, I popped the nub into my mouth. It's not as bad as I feared. The stuff tastes like a piece of licorice that's been dropped in the dirt and then stepped on. I chew until it becomes pulp. By the time my tongue goes numb, the pain in my limbs has dulled and I'm able to breathe easier. As promised, the thing tasted like shit but did the job.

We kept moving.

#

Tovian disappears and reappears like he's part of the landscape all morning. It drives me nuts. At noon, sweating and sunburned despite my makeshift brim, I beg for rest. He didn't seem particularly bothered by the heat, the sun, or the exertion. I've eaten his entire leaf supply and dread the afternoon's muscle cramping.

"Is this when you'll tell me where you got that phone?" he asks, offering me his metal water canteen. It's clearly

modern, and a prized possession, judging from the way he keeps it in his pack.

“Why are you so interested in my phone?” I counter, trying to stare him down even though it’s more like trying to stare up at him. Not very effective, in terms of intimidation.

At times like this, I don’t much like being short.

“No Ansi has one.” Again, I’m drawn to his eyes, a light shade of brown striated with amber, surrounded by a dark edge. The pupils are pinpricks in this bright light. “We don’t know what they’re used for. How do I know you’re not collaborating with Skía?”

My mouth falls open. I hadn’t thought of that angle. A strange woman, alone in a part of the country no one with any sense ever ventures, carrying outsider technology, dead-set on getting to Oceanside? Suspect. The men who followed me in here could have been my guards, before Big Ada—*Eater*—lived up to her name.

He took a chance on agreeing to escort me.

“Because I hate the Skía with every fiber of my being,” I say fiercely. “They nearly killed the man I—” I break off, seeing Tavian’s expression close down. My crush on Lorcan

has done enough damage. I don't wish to lose the possibility of being with Tovian over feelings that belong in the past.

"The man I've known since childhood. A close *friend*," I emphasize, willing him to understand that there was nothing more to it. Not after what I heard that night in Marsh Hollow. "My best friend is missing because of them."

I do not mention that said *best friend* was the future queen of the realm. Details.

"Then explain where you got that, Arianelle."

"It was given to me by Saskaya of the Čovari the night I brought aforementioned friend Lorcan to the Sun Temple, for the purpose of informing me when and if he awakens from a coma. Until then, I'm to make my way to Oceanside to help organize the remaining inhabitants into a resistance movement." I unbuckle my pack and shove the dirty clothes down, producing the precious black supply kit. "I'm carrying medical supplies. Antibiotics." He probably doesn't know what those are. I hold up a small glass jar. "Strong painkillers"—morphine vials, to be precise—"stitching supplies, gloves, masks, Steri-Strips, gauze—"

"You're a healer," he says, after a moment. I can see his confusion. Who am I, with all this material from the outside

world? Someone important. Someone connected to the unofficial royal guardians, but clearly not Čovari. They have silvery-white hair and blue eyes. All of them. Every single one.

“Yes.” The best one Auralia has, at the moment, which is almost as frightening as the invasion itself. “The night of the invasion, Lorcan had an accident. I drilled burr holes into his head to try and stop the swelling in his brain from causing too much damage. I don’t know whether he’ll survive.”

If the bone hadn’t already been cracked, I wouldn’t have been able to pierce it with my limited tools. I’ll never forget the alarming color of what oozed out. So much blood, too. I’m still terrified I drilled too far and made things worse. I’m trained in field medicine. I can stitch a gash, irrigate a wound, check for underlying damage to tissue, or set a bone, in a pinch. That’s it. Brain surgery was not something I’m trained in.

My throat closes, remembering.

The night we lifted Lorcan’s body into the pedestal bed of the bunker beneath the Sun Temple, I clung to any sign of hope I could grasp. The situation was so shocking. So desperate. Lorcan had a pulse, thready and weak, but present.



His eyes barely fluttered as I stuck an IV needle in his arm and hung it beside him, praying the antibiotics would be enough to fight off an infection. Saskaya raised the fourth wall and filled the tank with that weird blue liquid she's studied for decades. The same energy liquid that powers the Sentinels.

We don't even know what it is.

Sas trusted the ancient technology, but the truth is, none of us know what the fuck it's supposed to do.

He floated as though asleep. When Saskaya cleansed the wound in his skull, he didn't flinch. No movement. For all I knew then, or know now, he was braindead.

I might have been the one who killed him.

A tear slips down my cheek. I swiped it away.

"Do you think it worked?" Tavian asks in that gentle, probing way of his.

"I don't know. He might not wake up. If he does, the chances that he'll be the same man he was before are slim to none." I wasn't completely honest with Zosia that night. I wanted to give her something to hope for. I should have told her that the man she knew was dead, even if Lorcan lived. "I lost my two closest friends during the invasion, Tavian. Two

others died. So no, I am not Skía, though I can see why you might think that. Considering how we met.”

“Who was the other friend?”

Fuck. Walked into that one. I lick my dry lips and try to sidestep his question.

“Before I left, Saskaya gave me a phone and the walkie-talkie and a few guards, and told me to get to Oceanside to coordinate the resistance.”

“You’re not Čovari,” Tovian said slowly. “Yet you’re working closely with them.”

“I am.”

*Just say it. Tell him who you are.*

Why don’t I?

Because if he learns I’m a Myseč princess, and next in line for the throne, Tovian will try to stop me from getting to Oceanside. He’ll send me right back to River Bend. Nineteen days of fighting my way down the coast, wasted. Five guards sacrificed their lives to get me this far. Telling him the truth means turning back. I can’t risk it.

“You’re Myseči?”

I nodded.

“Alright, Arianelle, I believe you.” He caps his metal canteen and pushes up to standing. “Let’s get you to Oceanside.”

Relieved, I follow him, sun beating down on my neck and back the whole way, muscles screaming with every step.

## Chapter 5

We stumble into the encampment well after dark. Smoke hazes the horizon and lingers in my nostrils. I want a bath and a change of clothes. Neither was forthcoming.

“I’m looking for Ephram,” I whisper to the guard, hands raised, palms out. The man’s exhaustion is evident in the lines etched around his eyes and the brackets at the corners of his mouth.

“Campfire,” he replies curtly, after patting me down and finding only the two blades I’m carrying.

When I glance behind me, Tovian is gone. Disappointment stabs me. He was as good as his word. Now I have no way to find him again. I should have told him my real name, at least.

Should’ve kissed him again, at a minimum. I wish I’d had the courage to do more than kiss, too.

*Pining for Lorcan fucked you up, girl*

Shaking off the stinging thought, I make my way toward the flickering campfire. A group of grizzled men are assembled around it. Some old. Some closer to my age, twenty-one. A man with a bandanna tied around his hair glances up, one eye baleful at my interruption, the other hideously swelled. I gasp.

“Ephram?”

“Who’re you?”

“Princess Raina Myseči.” I set my pack on the ground and take his stubbled chin in my hand, turning his face to the light. He winces. “You’re going to lose that eye.”

“Already have.” He jerks away. “Damned pirate popped it like a grape.” Rising, he extends his hand. “We’ve little in the way of accommodations, but there’s a spring nearby for washing. The women will stand watch for you.” Leaning closer he asks, “Is there any word from the castle?”

I shake my head.

When I called my father to report Orisa’s disappearance, he was beside himself with worry for me. River Bend has its hands full with holding the line against invaders. Many villages in the lowlands near the Great Rielka River have been

burned. Homesteads attacked. Our stronghold remains safe, for now.

But there's still no word from Zosia or her father. Nineteen days of silence. It won't be easy to convince people to fight, even for their homeland. Not when they're scared, outmanned, and outgunned, where resistance carries a high probability of death.

I have to try.

I have no choice but to hope.

I will keep choosing hope until it works, or I'm dead. There is no compromise.

"Not yet. She'll turn up." I chuckle, a halfhearted and weary attempt at reassurance that sounds fake to my own ears. It's nothing like Tovian's warm humor.

I miss him already. He didn't even say goodbye.

*Never even had a chance to thank him.*

Ephram isn't convinced. "I hope so. Without the princess to lead us, morale is..." He trails off, then claps me on the shoulder. "We have a princess. You're a welcome sight, Your Highness. We might not have much at present, but what we have is yours."

“Thank you.” I examine the swell of purple that used to be his eye. “Once I’ve cleaned up, we should attend to your injury before infection sets in.”

He grimaced. “Later. If necessary. I can endure it.”

Stubborn man. We have a lot of those around.

“I have medicine to help you endure it.” Wearily, I hoist my pack. It’s desperately inadequate, but I might save a few lives. I pray I can save as many were lost in getting me here. “Perhaps in the morning. When there’s light.”

It feels as though the entire world has gone dark, and no sun will ever shine brightly again.

#

Excising Ephram’s damaged eye requires three men to hold him still, even after a shot of morphine. Once finished, I burn my soiled gloves and force him swallow antibiotics. Then I leave him to complain vociferously until the morphine and pain forced him to sleep.

His second-in-command, Luza, leads me to the edges of the town. Her dark hair hangs in ringlets to her mid-back. Tendrils escape, sticking to her temples in the humidity.

“We’re overrun by pirates,” she says, passing me the binoculars she’s clearly nicked off one of the invaders. They’re easily distinguishable from locals. Nearly all of them are men, dressed in jeans and T-shirts, not dissimilar to the students I attended class with at Royals University less than a month ago. But there’s a hardness to them, a swagger born of arrogance and pride in their successful invasion. They walked right into our home. Raped, killed, and took anything they wanted, by force. Destroyed our homes.

They think they’ve won.

I lower the binoculars and mutter in English, “We’re not done fighting yet, you bastards.”

Luza gives me an odd look. Right. People here associate English with the invaders.

“Most of our fighters have regrouped in the caves and fields surrounding the marshlands.” She gestures northward. “Old people, women and children remain in the city where it’s marginally safer, as long as they stay out of the invaders’ way. They’ve pressed the residents into service. That’s how they’re maintaining supply lines to the north.” Luza pointed. “They load the wagons with ammunition and supplies, then take the eastern road up to the Grasslands Bridge and continue up the



western side of the river, using the ferry to avoid the wildfires. They're so fast on those damned bikes. They're faster than we are on horseback, even before accounting for the guns."

"Where do they land the supplies?"

"Right in the middle of Oceanside Beach," Luza answers grimly. "Run their shitty little boats right onto the shore, force our citizens to unload them and shoot anyone who resists."

"So we need to strike in three places simultaneously," I say, thinking out loud. "At the beach, at the bridge, and inside the city."

*If we could get guns to Tavian, and show him how to use them, could the Ansi shoot at their boats? Drive them away for a while, if not sink them?*

It would help. My budding plan would stand a better chance of success. Turning the tide in this war is crucial. We need to buy time for Lorcan to heal, and Zosia to return from wherever she's hiding—or rescued from being held captive, which is what I suspect is going on. She wouldn't abandon her people. But if the Skía had her, they'd have flaunted it in one way or another by now, either by harming her publicly to

humiliate us, or demanding ransom. Where could she have gone?

The castle is the only logical conclusion.

I can't solve that problem right now.

Lorcan always taught me to use weakness as an advantage. Make the enemy believe it's safe to attack, then counter it with everything you have. End the battle as fast as you can.

Tovian said his people wouldn't fight.

*He might not have left if you'd been honest about who you are.*

But if I had been, he might not have brought me here at all. The chances I would have made it here alone are virtually nil. He saved my life, twice. A deal was a deal. I have no right to expect more of him.

There's no time to dwell on that now.

"We don't have enough people to strike that hard." Luza shakes her head. "We're a few thousand rebels against an endless supply of well-armed, violent men."

"A few thousand trained fighters, perhaps," I said. "But you have eyes and ears on every street in Oceanside" —what's

left of it— “and people in their homes. In their warehouses. Carrying their ammunition and weapons.”

If we’re lucky, their medical supplies, too. We need more than the paltry amount I was able to bring on my person. I’ve already gone through half of the antibiotics, using it on a woman with a bad leg injury and two men with gunshot wounds. Plus Ephram. It’s not like they’re a single course of treatment, and sepsis is a real danger, so I treated them with what I had.

“What do you propose?” Luza asks somberly.

“I need ideas.”

What I need is manpower, but she’s already me shot down. I say this as an invitation for her to get out of the reactive headspace she’s clearly in, and start thinking proactively.

“We already have an information pipeline set up.” Luza leans against a rock, tapping her lip, impervious to the sun beating down. I’m feeling the burn from baking during the trek to get here. My neck and back are red despite the coverage from my shirt, and my face incurred damage that will surely haunt me when I’m middle-aged. If I make it that far.

Lorcan once joked, grimly, that living to age twenty-five seemed ambitious. When I left him at death's doorstep, he was twenty-one.

I hate it when he's right about bad things.

"We have a network of children running messages between Oceanside and the camps. Some as young as five." Luza interrupts my freighted thoughts.

I close my eyes. Five-year-olds should be learning to read at their grandparents' knee, not running messages in a war.

"What do you know?"

"Everything I've told you, plus details about what they're moving, how much of it, and when. Where they're storing it."

"Useful."

Luza smiles grimly. "The pirates have some of the village women cooking and cleaning for them." By force, undoubtedly. Auralians of all tribes are proud to a fault. The only way anyone would serve the pirates is under duress. "It won't be easy to contact them, but if we can find a way to pass

messages through the children, I'm sure we can leverage that for intelligence. If we're careful."

The thought of children being hurt for their participation in trying to save our country makes me sick.

We return to camp to discuss it with Ephram, but he's barely lucid from the pain and all the morphine I'm putting in him. In short order, Luza and I made a plan. A reckless plan. One few wanted to attempt, and wouldn't have, without my influence. I wasn't *their* princess, but I was a known quantity, and in Zosia's absence, they trusted me to fill the gap.

Now, I could only hope our plan didn't fail.

# July

## Chapter 6

My walkie-talkie squawks unintelligibly in my pocket. The cheap thing barely works, but we don't have anything better to use. One of our new spies stole fresh batteries from the pirates' stores. We have to hope it will be enough to get us through the next hour or so, which is beginning to feel like one of the worst ideas I've ever had in my life.

Worse than the time I let my own curiosity and Zosia's rebellious streak get the best of me and agreed to go clubbing, alone, in a foreign city. Beijing. Just to compound my terrible judgment that evening, I invited Lorcan along without telling her, hoping she'd go off and dance by herself and let me and Lorcan be alone together.

Ha.

Even when she couldn't stand him, he was completely fixated on her. Lorcan took one look at the crowd and started

herding her outside, saying it wasn't safe for us to be there—which was the appeal, of course.

Sure enough, the club got bombed minutes after we left. Lorcan's instincts are preternaturally keen. Or were. I hope they still are when he wakes up.

Zosia resented him for months afterward.

He claimed it was a crank, and maybe it was. Skía would've been more likely to slit her throat and leave Zosia bleeding out on the dance floor. But I've always wondered.

Back then, I tried to stay out of war planning. There was a sense that it wouldn't actually happen, that the Skía would never be quite that bold. It all felt a bit theoretical until it was terrifyingly real.

Now, almost everyone I know from that era is missing or dead. Despite the years of preparing for this invasion—unsuccessfully, as it turns out—I never thought I'd have to get through a war almost completely on my own.

I'd have done several things differently if I'd known this was how things would turn out.

“Red team, come in team red.” The lump in my pocket pipes up again, this time with a message I can understand.

“10-1, Red team receiving poorly.”

I don't know how much of my message got through, so I repeat it. I'm hidden inside a rocky overhang which doesn't help transmission. Outside, in the distance, the long low line of the Grasslands Bridge hovers like a mirage over the marshlands. Beside me, my horse stomps its hoof and flicks its tail against the biting flies. We're not even in the marshes yet.

“What I wouldn't give for some of Tavian's insect deterrent,” I mutter, patting the mare's neck.

“10-9, Red team, 10-9. Repeat message.”

Great. The entire reason I'm camped out here in this gods-forsaken estuary is that I'm supposed to get close enough to the bridge to blow up one of the five supports. The plan is to trap the caravan of wagons in the middle. We're outnumbered, and if our spies are found out, they'll be dead before they can kill their captors and escape.

This is a do-or-die mission. I'll make or break my reputation for leadership today. Or die. The latter is more likely, to be perfectly honest.

The buzz of dirt bikes in the distance makes me tilt my head, trying to figure out the direction. Lorcan would know. I



bet Tavian would, too.

But neither of them are here. When we spoke a few days ago, Saskaya said he was still breathing, but apart from that, there's been no improvement in his condition. All we can do is wait.

"10-20, this is Blue team." Luza.

"I can actually hear you."

"Good. I seem to be getting decent signal," she said, her voice tinny. "The wagons are coming up the road. You should be able to hear the bikes from your position."

"I can."

"Good. I'm going to start moving to Column Two."

I clipped my device back into my pocket, used a rock to hop onto my horse's back, and nudged her into the briny water. The mare didn't like it, and I can't blame her. At least we don't have leeches here. Reading about that historic method of medical treatment made me extra glad that if I had to be born in a relative backwater of a country, at least we believed in evidence-based medicine.

Then, there was no time to think about leeches, because we were making our way through the silty water toward

Column Four, our target. If we don't make it in time, there are twenty fighters hidden in the rushes on the other side of the bridge waiting to ambush the wagon train. They're our backup, but we only have a couple of guns and not much ammunition, compared to the pirates' seemingly endless supply of machine guns and bullets. Don't ask me what kind. That's Cata's business—or was. Now that she's dead, Saskaya and Lorcan are our resident arms experts.

They're not here, leaving me, and I know shit all about guns. You pull the trigger. They go bang. It's harder to hit a target than you'd think. That's about it.

If Luza and her crew don't succeed at cutting off reinforcements that will come running, guns blazing, at the first sign of trouble, all of us will be killed today. Without surprise on our side, my plan won't work and many lives will be lost. I cannot risk being seen.

This wasn't meant to be my role, but since the invasion it's been all hands on deck. I took the riskiest task because at the end of the day, this is my plan. I'll take out the fourth column or die trying.

My chestnut mare and I trudge through the muck using the tall grasses for cover. I don't ride, choosing to conserve her

strength for after the attack, when I'll need it most.

To get away.

Flies bite my flesh. I grit my teeth and slap them away. The horse flicks her tail in a never-ending attempt to swat them away. Whirring of insects bended with the sound of engines in the distance.

“Red team, your move.”

I lead my animal deeper into the marsh. At times, I cling to her mane and swim beside her, using her as a shield. If the waterproof bags secured to her withers leak, this mission is doomed. Explosives can't get wet.

We thread our way around islets of mud and grass. The bridge loom overhead. So close.

“Red team, are you in position?”

“Need a few more minutes.”

I'm soaked and muddy from the shoulders down, regretting that I've worn boots instead of going barefoot. The pillar is straight ahead.

This is the dangerous part.

We're close enough to the bridge that anyone could glance down and see me and my horse in the reeds. I slog forward, wincing at the squish and suck of the riverbed trying to hold me back.

Tense minutes pass. Utterly exposed, I trudge on. A loud pop—it could have been a gun, or a backfiring engine—causes me to dive beneath the water.

*Fuck. The walkie-talkie.*

I pop up to the surface and slip it out of my pocket, depressing the button. Nothing.

Shit. That makes things a thousand times harder.

I can't let them down. I drop the horse's reins. She didn't like where I'd left her, but I promised it wouldn't be long. I climb up the rocky pile, soaking wet, dragging the bags of explosives with me. I clamber onto the rusted metal ladder used for inspections. It holds. Thank Reila.

“Red, is the package in place?”

I nearly dropped the stupid walkie-talkie trying to get it out of my pocket. “Almost there. Give me a little more time,” I plead.

“Red? Red?”

They can't hear me. I put it back and continue my agonizing climb, terrified that I'd explode right off the stupid ladder.

*I wish I'd slept with Tovia while I had the chance.*

He's my last thought as I pour all my strength into reaching the top.

"Red, we're giving you a twenty-second countdown. Get away from the explosives, wherever they are."

If I don't get this stupid pack into place, fast, I'm going to get blown to bits by my own people.

I cannot let that go down as my legacy.

With strength drawn from the depths of my soul, I swing the divided pack over the top rung of the ladder and half-jump, half-fall as the world exploded above me. I let go, falling, crashing, barely registering the pain. Pain bursts across the back of my head, turning the whole world black.

## Chapter 7

*Raina.*

Someone shouts my name from very far away. Lorcan? I fight my way toward consciousness. There's an arm around my torso, beneath my shoulders, tugging me backward through the water. My head throbs. Air enters my lungs. Not enough of it.

But overhead, there's a broken bridge.

We did it.

I'm alive.

I can't hear, and I probably have a concussion, but thanks to whoever owns this...arm...

"Tovian?" I croak.

He bussess a kiss on the crown of my head and keeps swimming. It hurts to grin but that doesn't stop me.

Machine guns, however, do.

"Hold your breath," Tovian shouts, though it sounds like a whisper. We dive beneath the water, kicking, haphazardly

swimming in tandem. I'm a good swimmer—good enough to have competed in the Olympics once. I quickly outpace him. The murky water stings my eyes. Tovian grabs my foot and points to an islet of rushes. I nod. We'll be eaten alive by biting flies but we can hide in the tall rushes until the danger passes.

He goes first, checking for danger before waving me forward. Panting, covered in mud, I crawl into the grasses. Each fistful of reeds I grab tears at my raw palms. I cough into the mud until Tovian hauls me onto the islet beside him. I lay there, staring blankly at the clear blue sky.

Alive.

In all kinds of pain, but alive—thanks to him. I sit bolt upright.

“Tovian? What are you doing here?”

He inches closer, careful not to disturb the reeds too much and give away our position. I take in his appearance. The thin T-shirt he's clearly stolen off one of the pirates lovingly outlines the shape of his pectorals and hugs his biceps.

When his gaze meets mine, gone is the mirthful man I met that day in the Boscage. Ages ago. I blink at the hardness I find there.

“Looking for you.” Unsmiling, he says, “Princess Raina.”

I gulp, tasting dirt.

#

We don't have to wait long. Trapped on the eastern side of the marshes, the pirates couldn't do much more than pepper the water uselessly with machine guns. It wasn't long before our team on the western side of the marshes swarmed the cornered wagons and relieved them of their weapons.

The prisoners, injured and uninjured alike, are locked inside a cart for transport. I feel a momentary pang of guilt, but I don't intend to waste precious medical supplies on them.

Tovian collects my frightened mare from the marsh and leads the animal, with me on her back, across the marsh and up the steep embankment onto the road. Embarrassingly, I vomit twice along the way.

Some reunion. Despite my injuries—in addition to the blow to the back of my head, I catalog numerous abrasions



and contusions from my face to my ankle and everywhere in between—and being soaked in muddy water, I’m overjoyed to see him again.

I don’t quite know how to show it, considering I’ve been caught in a significant lie.

Luza gives me a bucket of clean water and change of clothes. I wash and dress behind the relative privacy of a stand of trees while she stands guard. I still smell like a swamp when I’m done, but at least my cuts aren’t likely to fester.

“Why am I always meeting Tovian when I’m covered in grime?” I complain to no one, wincing as I find a clump of mud embedded behind my ear.

“Are you talking about your mystery man, Princess?” Luza asked.

“He’s not mine.”

“I’ll leave that for you two to sort out.” she says. A shadow flickers. When I glance up, she’s gone. Tovian’s gaze locks on mine. He pulls the hem of a blue T-shirt down over his abdomen. The intensity of that look jolts me physically.

*Reila and all the celestial gods above, Lorcan looked great in blue but Tovian looks even better.*

Mentally, I slap myself for comparing them. Again. With shaky fingers, I manage to get the shirt I've been given buttoned to the throat. It's too big, billowing around my waist, so I gather the hem and stuff it into the waistband of my pants.

How freaking ironic that every time I see Tovian, I'm dressed in castoff or dirty clothes. My closets back at River Bend are overflowing, yet every time I'm around him I look like a bedraggled tomboy.

Strangely enough, I didn't mind when he thought I was a nobody. Now that he knows who I am, I'm self-conscious about my appearance.

"Coward," I mutter under my breath, stalking toward the rest of the Auralians gathered near the small wagon train. Tovian falls into step beside me.

"I presume that wasn't directed at me."

Gods, I loved his voice. It was like hot chocolate on a cold winter day, warming you from the inside out. I shook my head and said, "Luza. My guard."

Tovian is far from a coward. I wouldn't be alive if he were.

"The one who nearly got you killed?"

“She was following orders. My orders.”

“So you really did lie to me about your identity.”

“Last I heard, Tovian, your people didn’t want to get involved. I made sure you wouldn’t have to.” Despite my fatigue I stride faster—not that he has any difficulty keeping pace with a woman whose head barely comes past his shoulder. “I’m glad you showed up today, but I’m not sure why you think that gives you the right to know anything about me.”

“I saved your life, Sunshine. At considerable risk to my own.”

“Which I appreciate!” I turn on my heel. “What is it you want from me, Tovian? A reward? I’m sure that can be arranged.”

*The same thing I want from you?* My heart thuds in my chest. I take two steps backward and trip over a rock. Tovian steadies me. Warm hands around my biceps. I blinked up at him.

What I said got under his skin. His beautiful eyes narrow slightly. His grip on my arms is a fraction too hard.

“Depends upon the reward.”

Abruptly, he releases me. Now I'm the one trotting after him.

“What would make it worth your while?”

He cast me a sidelong glance and said, “I already told you. Marry me.”

My badly-abused stomach flips despite its queasiness.  
“Be serious.”

“I am.”

*Liar.* I roll my eyes.

“The Myseči won't accept an outsider. I doubt the Ansi would accept me, either, even if I were to abdicate.”

“I'd fight for you, Sunshine.”

I'm not ready to say I'd give up my right to the Myseči throne for a man I barely know.

“Prove it. Take me to meet your tribe.”

I don't know why I'm making demands of him. I mean it to be flirtatious, but my head is still muddled from the explosion. I need rest. I'm drawn to him. I know I want more than a night with him, but with our country teetering on the brink of conquest, it's not exactly ideal timing.

Besides, I don't believe he's serious about wanting to marry me. Not for one second. I'm interesting because I'm forbidden and unexpected, but he's not going to make a sacrifice of that magnitude to win me. No way, no how.

I'm setting myself up for heartbreak, and I've had quite enough experience with that. Hard to say which I trust least, his motives or my own judgment.

"We're on the wrong side of the river," Tovian says, with a smile played around the corners of his lips. Apparently, I've been forgiven for concealing my true identity from him.

At the makeshift camp, Luza, clad in a plain tunic buttoned high on her neck and too-short trousers belted at her waist, stands before a blazing fire. A pistol hangs from one hip, and a traditional Auralian hunting knife pokes out of the boot, its hilt visible in the space between the leather and the hem of her pants.

"No one is crossing the river tonight," she says, eyeing our guest. "We'll sleep in the wagons and move at first light." Her gaze flicks from Tovian to me. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'll live. I should treat these cuts, though."

Luza gives me a medical kit stolen from one of the wagons. It's basic, not much more than a few Band-Aids (knockoff brand), antiseptic cream (ditto), and gauze, but it's enough for me to patch my injuries. I lower myself gracelessly onto a log. Toviaian perches beside me, observing.

I wonder if this is how Zosia felt when Lorcan was guarding her. I don't mind being watched by Toviaian, but it is making me more self-conscious than usual.

Or, maybe it's the knock on the head. If I wanted to follow proper treatment protocol for a concussion, I would rest for the next few days. I don't have that luxury.

"Unless you want to ford the marshes again tonight, we're more than a day's ride north to get to the nearest ferry," Toviaian says. I roll my pant leg back down, covering the row of bandages plastered to my shin. He toys with the discarded wrapper, studying it.

"I can't take that big a detour. I need to get back to base camp in Oceanside."

We kicked the hornet's nest today. It won't be long before the pirates retaliate. I need to talk with Ephram.

I'm so damned tired.

“I can get you to Ansi Village, where you can rest, Princess.” He takes my wrist and turns it over, examining a bruise there by the firelight. “You’re pretty banged up. We can take cover in the cliffside caves tonight and make the crossing tomorrow.”

“Excuse me. Who died and made you commander, Tovi?”

A smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. He doesn’t release my wrist. I suck in a breath and don’t release it. His touch sends flutters through me.

“I’m a prince, Sunshine. You and I are equals.” He winks. “Bet you don’t have much experience with that.”

Damn his hide, he’s right. I’ve met princes, mostly a few random European shadow royals, the sons and daughters of kingdoms long since reduced to a name and an estate, nothing more. Around them, I was keenly aware that my country was nothing more than a curiosity. A civilization trapped in time—but at least I was someone who held actual political power.

Here at home, the only one who ever challenged me was Lorcan. Outside of the training ring, he was generally deferential—as befitted the son of a disgraced knight.

Nowhere close to my equal, although he's since managed to carve out a place for himself between royalty and legend.

If he lives.

I close my eyes.

*Wake up.* Nearly a month, now, since his accident. The longer he remains in a coma, the less chance he'll ever awaken.

"You okay, Sunshine?"

I summon a smile. "I like that nickname better than 'princess.' Even if it doesn't make sense."

He chuckles.

"Here. This should help your head."

Tovian holds out a white packet of ibuprofen. My heart sinks. It's not the right painkiller for someone with a concussion.

"Is there one with a red label? The first letter might be a T." I form the English letter with my hands. I know he can't read much English, but apparently his French is good enough to understand the words for *pain relief*. He unzips the bag, puts back the blue-and-yellow packet, and hands me a red-and-white one instead.



“Thanks.” I swallow the two pills dry. He hands me a water skin. The contents are warm but the wet relief is damn welcome.

“You should eat something.”

He’s right. It’s so weird to have someone taking care of me.

“I’m sleepy.”

Tovian presses a kiss to my forehead. “Food first. Then rest. No plotting and definitely no explosions for you, until you’ve recovered.”

I can’t help but smile.

“You’re not going to try and forbid me to fight?”

“Would it work, if I did?”

“No.”

“That’s what I thought.” He hands me a fruit. “Eat this, and let’s find your wagon.”

#

I pass out the instant my battered body is prone on the makeshift pallet, and awaken with a throbbing headache sometime after midnight. I’ve never felt this stiff and sore.

Luza snores softly on the other side of me. Feeling nauseous again, I crawl to the edge of the wagon and all but fall out of it. At least I managed to land on my feet. Sort of.

Plumes of smoke from raging wildfires paint the sky a ghastly shade of orange and gray. We've managed to disrupt the supply route from sea to Central Auralia, for a time, but there's so much more to be done. With no crops to harvest, mass starvation is a real possibility this winter.

Despair threatens to consume me.

A man's shadow separates from the campfire and strides toward me. Tovian.

"You feeling okay?"

I shake my head. He passes me a canteen of water. After a few swallows, I sat up, feeling steadier. "What are you doing awake?"

"I took the second watch."

"Shrewd of you." Taking the worst shift will ingratiate him with the rest of my co-leaders. "Have you told them about your tribe yet?"

"No. I told them I was from a village near Oceanside."

Still secret. Still unwilling to commit to helping his country. With a jolt, I realize he's helping me. Only me.

I don't know how to feel about the fact.

"I never asked you why you were on the bridge. Traveling with the pirates, no less."

He passes me a bowl made from pressed, dried leaves. It's filled with rice and meat. I take careful bites and wait for Tavian to formulate his response.

"I wanted to see you again," he says simply. "When I arrived at the encampment, Ephram told me you'd gone off to lead a mission. He didn't trust me enough to tell me more than that, so I got myself some modern clothes and went to Oceanside. It didn't take long for one of the pirates to assign me to a wagon train. I went along for the ride until I saw you in the marsh. I made sure you weren't spotted."

"I hate to think what might have happened if you hadn't been there."

He kisses my temple. "You'd have survived, Sunshine. It's what you do."

"Doesn't feel like it," I wince. Great golden goddesses, how did Lorcan put up with this kind of physical abuse, day in

and day out, for years?

But I'm not thinking about him. "How long can you stay?"

Tovian glances at his hands.

"Not long. What's your next move?"

"I need to check in with Saskaya and Raghnaill."

"Who?"

As succinctly as possible, I explain the new Čovari leadership structure. With Cata dead in a plane crash, her sister has taken over the tribe—except that Sas is trapped in the Sun Temple with Lorcan's comatose body. It's not safe for her to try and get home, even if he could be left alone. "I call her every few days to check in."

"Did Saskaya approve of your mission today?"

"She didn't know about it, but she won't care as long as I came through it alive. Čovari don't give a shit about injuries. She'll be happy to know we've got more machine guns and ammunition now, even if nobody knows how to use them yet."

Lorcan did. Cata did. The Royal Guards were trained to use modern weapons, too, but nobody has heard from them

since the night of the invasion, either. Were they able to get to the stockpile locked in the castle?

Seems unlikely.

It does not look good for Zosia and her father, but I refuse to give up hope. We need her. Symbolically. Politically. I cannot lead this country alone. That's supposed to be her job.

*I need her back. I'll be heartsick if I never get to see her happy and at peace after what she's been through. Every day that goes by without word from her is making me more anxious.*

“We'll talk in the morning about your next steps,”  
Tovian rubs my forearms. “Get some rest, Sunshine.”

#

At dawn, I roll out of the wagon still feeling stiff but otherwise much better. Stumbling to the first wagon in our caravan, I discovered Tovian consulting with Luza over a pile of maps.

“We'll have slowed the pirates down substantially,” she says with satisfaction, “It'll take them forever to move their cargo across the river now.”

“You know what would take them even longer?” Tovia pointed to a narrow spot where the estuary becomes the Great Rielka River. “Disabling the ferry.”

“But that would make it difficult for us to get across, too.”

“What if we hide it?”

“The entire ferry?” Luza frowns.

“We could ride hard to the ferry, take it apart, make it look like sabotage, and replace it with a rope-and-barge system a bit downriver.” Tovia points to the map, further down. “It’s not as efficient to cross that way, but we’ll have the advantage for as long as we can keep its existence a secret. A rope and platform could be hidden in the reeds.”

Luza props her chin on her fist, considering. “The next ferry is forty kilometers upriver. It’ll take the invaders at least three days to regroup and make their way up the eastern side.”

“Longer if we can strafe them from the Boscage.”

Tovia grins. I can’t help but match it. He’s so drawn to all things modern. It’s cute.

But it also makes me wonder if I’m only interesting to him because I represent access to a world he wants to

experience. My smile fades.

I duck my chin.

“Dangerous,” Luza says thoughtfully. “But with a bit of training on our new cache of stolen weapons, it might work. We don’t know the jungle, though. I don’t suppose you know anyone with expertise?”

The look she gives him was pure calculation. Tovian shifts uncomfortably.

“Not many people venture into The Boscage, for good reason.” I shoot him a glance. “The dragons are only the most recognizable danger. Even the pirates haven’t attempted to venture into the jungle.” I don’t mention the ones that died chasing me. Luza doesn’t need to know about that incident.

“They’re going to retaliate,” Luza says grimly. “Soon.”

A dull throb begins at the back of my head, where the bump has swelled into a knot the size of my fist. Thinking hurts, literally. Tovian cuts me a worried glance.

“That is why I need to get back to camp,” I say. “Luza, too. But first, we should get the wagons to safety. Take them south, to the caves along the western wall. We can hide in

them for a long time. Having a second base camp will put us in better position to fight.”

“Won’t we be too close to Oceanside?” A worry line mars Luza’s forehead. “If they find the caves, we’d be trapped.”

“That’s why they’ll make a good hiding place. We can continue raiding Oceanside with smaller attacks. Pick off their shipments and stockpile weapons.” Assuming we can assemble an army and train it, having a store of weapons would be useful. I wince and rub the back of my neck. The headache feels like it’s crawling down my spine. “The pirates don’t know about the caves, or they already would have commandeered them.”

“What about the Skía? They know this island as well as we do.” Luza said.

“They must have decided not to use them. From what our spy network has told us, there aren’t many Skía leaders compared to the number of pirates. Logically, they’ll expect us to go north.” I point at the map, tracing the route with the tip of my finger. The lines swim briefly. Ignoring Tavian’s concerned look, I continue laying out our strategy. “We should



send as many empty wagons as we can spare that direction. Throw them off the trail.”

A wave of nausea forces me to press my fist to my lips. I will not vomit in front of Tovian. I refuse.

“What about the situation further north?” Luza glances at the unrelenting clouds of smoke in the distance.

“We’ll tackle the fires once we’ve secured Oceanside. Round up any survivors who haven’t already fled. Try to put out the wildfires.” My throat closes. “We are going to have to fight for every inch of land we reclaim. At least Nansier was able to halt the invaders’ march to the mountains.”

Two mountains, one an active volcano, the other covered in ice year-round, mark the northern entrance to our island. If the invaders had managed to capture it, we wouldn’t have stood a chance at mounting a rebellion. The Skía sent a small force to Nansier, the forested border between Central Auralia and the mountain district, but that district threw everything it had into holding off the invaders. It succeeded—but at an enormous cost. The main city was razed. Thousands of lives were lost, including Kenton’s entire family. The Duke of Nansier went down with his people, and his wife and children stood by him until the bitter end.

The shipments we stopped today were intended to reinforce Skía battalions occupying Central Auralia as they prepared for a second assault.

We won't be conquered easily, but losing this war is still the likeliest outcome.

“Excuse me.”

Losing the battle with increasing nausea, I stumble away and empty the contents of my stomach behind a bush.

I can't let one little concussion stop me. Not now. Not ever.

## Chapter 8

“You need to come home to River Bend.”

My father’s tone is unbending. I smother my sigh. Queens don’t sigh, and they don’t accept orders, even from their father.

Then again, I’m not actually a queen yet.

“You took a foolish risk. You were injured. If not for this mysterious savior, you might have died.” When I don’t argue, my father says with begrudging curiosity, “Who is this Tovian person?”

How to explain him... I roll my shoulders, trying to ease the ache. I’m out of generic Tylenol and the last ibuprofen tablet I’ve allotted myself is wearing off. Every muscle in my body screamed in protest when the wagon bumps over the pitted road. Which is about every five seconds. “He’s someone I met recently. Tovian has helped me on several occasions, and twice saved my life. He’s trustworthy.”

“But who *is* he?”

“He’s—”

I stop. Tovia said his people wished to remain hidden, and I have no right to violate their secrecy. Even to my own father.

“Tovia is from a village near Oceanside. Close to The Boscage,” I hedged.

“Nobody lives in The Boscage,” she said. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I didn’t say ‘in.’ I said near, Papa.” The wagon jostles me again. I wince. This time I do sigh. “He’s willing to help us, but he doesn’t want to invite attention. He prefers to keep the details of where he lives a secret, even from me.”

I can feel my father’s unspoken disapproval through the satellite phone. “And his presence hasn’t alarmed the others. What if he’s a pirate who somehow learned our language?”

“You have my word he’s one of us.”

He wouldn’t believe me if I told him Tovia was Ansi, and saying I don’t know where he lives isn’t a total lie. Somewhere in The Boscage isn’t exactly a precise direction.

Luza, crouching, made her way to me. I’ve more or less got my own empty wagon, a privilege of being royalty. Only Tovia, Luza, and a driver ride with me. Luza looks apologetic

for interrupting me and says, “When you’re ready, Princess, one of the prisoners is in bad shape.”

“Papa, I have to go.”

“Before you do, is there any news of Lorcan?”

“No.” My stomach sinks.

“Zosia?”

“No one’s seen her, alive or dead. Or King Rohan.”

My father sighs heavily. “Get yourself home in one piece, Raina.”

“I will.” I hang up and pocket the phone. To Luza, I say, “I’ll take a look.”

There won’t be much I can do for him. The cargo we stole leaned heavily to ammunition and weapons, along with several boxes of perplexing machine parts. They look like they’re for the motor bikes, but I’m not entirely sure. We’ve mostly run through my stash of medical supplies treating our own people. I do, however, have one precious vial of morphine left. I’m saving it for an emergency.

As if this whole summer hasn’t been one big emergency.

The wagon train halts. Gingerly, I jump from the back of the wagon. Landing on the ground rattles my teeth. Turning my head hurts. Thinking hurts. Everything I do hurts.

“I’ll come with you.” Tavian follows me.

“Sure. I don’t mind company.” I flash him a smile. “It’s probably the guy from this morning. Treating him won’t be pleasant.”

He shrugs and falls into step with me. “Someone has to watch you.”

We’re so damned short-handed. We lost a lot of people early on, when fighting was uncoordinated and was mostly farmers with pitchforks, daggers, and spears up against heartless murderers with machine guns. People are scared to join our ragtag group of fighters.

But they’re angry, too. That makes recruitment a little easier. Already today, we’ve picked up a trio of young men whose families have fled to Canavale, a city in Central Auralia. They had no idea where they were going, only that they wanted revenge on the people who ruined their livelihoods.

We hoped to make it to the ferry crossing by mid-afternoon, but it wasn't long before we ran into trouble. The buzz of dirt bikes.

"I really hate that sound," I muttered to Tovian, who was riding beside me. Volunteering to take the worst guard shift last night had won over a lot of the Oceansiders, but I could see he was tired.

"No more than I." He halts, listening. "We have maybe three to five minutes before they come roaring up the road. We need to hide."

"Where, Tovian?" I gestured around us. To our right, a sea of marsh grass leads to the estuary. To our left is a rocky open space, the only reason the southern end of the Grasslands District wasn't on fire. The only place to hide is a patch of scrawny trees a good distance away from the road. "We'll be sitting ducks."

"Then we make a stand."

He takes one of the machine guns and points it at the ground as if trying to remember the very brief and inadequate demonstration I gave this morning. I do the same. The sound of metal clicking sets my teeth on edge.

“Forget the prisoner. Go with the riders up toward that stand of trees. Stay with them. I’ll handle this.”

“You’re giving orders now?” I say archly, though my pulse quickens at the thought of him taking control. I refuse to overthink that impulse.

He infiltrated the pirates once. Tovian thinks he can do it again. Fear, clarifying and cold, chases away my pain.

“Would you rather wait for the pirates to arrive while we debate the merits of who gives orders, or get as many people out of sight as possible?”

“What’s your plan?” I’m not giving an inch. Not even to a prince.

“I’m going to use the captives as shields.” He strides away.

“Tovian!” I dart after him. “You can’t do that!”

“Name one reason why not.” He doesn’t turn around. The others are scrambling to unhitch the horses from the wagons. They’re on board with his plan, clearly.

“They’ll kill their own without hesitation. They’re *pirates*. Skía.” Disloyal traitors and brutal killers, but humans nonetheless.



“That sounds like a pirate problem, not ours.”

“Tovian. Stop.” I hate seeing this coldness in him. It reminds me too much of Lorcan.

I grab his arm. He whirls. “Do you have another idea, Sunshine?”

“Yes. Turn the wagons sideways to prevent the pirates from getting through easily. They’ll be forced to stop. Then our riders can sweep in and take them captive. We have guns. We can match them if we have the element of surprise. But we have to get our riders into place for it to work. Right now. Would you lead them?”

I’m not in any condition to ride in an attack.

Slowly, he nods. “Not bad, Sunshine. Not bad at all.”

If Lorcan had said it, a small part of me would’ve felt like a dog getting a pat from her master. Coming from Tovian, it feels like he was trying to protect me while I’m wounded by stepping in, but stepped aside when I asserted myself.

Refreshing as fuck, I must say. I’m weirdly flattered.

Minutes later, I’m tying strips of cloth around the mouths of our prisoners. Not one of them likes being handled that way, so I take care to pull extra tight while they hurled

insults and try to bite me or kick. Only one doesn't resist. The pool of blood beneath his prone body explains why. I leave him for last.

“Not so nice being on the receiving end, is it?” I asked, in English.

“Fuck you, stupid whore,” a man sneers. I stuff a wad of cotton between his teeth and yank hard on the knot. I can still make out the gist of his insults, though.

“Yeah, well, I can tell you've never pleased a woman,” I shoot back, feeling no remorse.

Tovian chuckles. He's guarding me until I secure the prisoners.

“Not a problem I've ever had,” he brags, also in English.

I laugh, startled that he's picked up that much English. The man I'd just gagged turned red with fury.

Then his compatriots were upon us. The first of three dirt bikes slid to a halt, sideways across the path, followed by his two companions.

“Wait.” Tovian holds up one hand. Once the three intruders are off their bikes and inspecting the wagons, our group crept down from their hiding places. I caught sight of

Luza signaling the others—right as the man I’d insulted spat out his gag and called out a warning.

“You loud-mouthed *asshole*,” I hiss, and in a fit of impulsivity, I kick him in the face, hard. Blood sprays. I close my eyes, feeling sick. Everything Lorcan taught me about fighting was supposed to remain theoretical. My people value fighting skills. Most of our traditions involve some kind of ceremonial violence—but that didn’t mean I was meant to actually engage.

I could have avoided all of this if I listened to my father and stayed at River Bend. Yet here I am.

There’s no more time for recriminations.

Gunfire pops. Shouts. I dive to the floor of the wagon.

Outside, the scuffle is over within minutes. Two men dead, one wounded. Four captured. I have no idea what we’ll do with them, other than try to get information.

Luza bleeds freely from a bullet wound to her thigh.

“Get the horses hitched back up,” I order. “I’ll treat her in the wagon.”

One precious shot of morphine, a gruesome bullet extraction, and six stitches later, she was passed out on a thin

blanket. I slather the wound with a honey and sap mixture we use to prevent wounds from turning septic and bandage it. The shuddering ride made my task harder, and the gunfire did nothing for my concussion, either.

It's the best I can do for her.

Turning my attention to the injured pirate, I crouch to inspect the wound to his abdomen. A red trail of blood runs onto the wood planks,

He rouses enough to spit on me.

“Die then.”

I don't quite have the heart to kick him, though the impulse is there. I don't like who I am right now. I know part of it is the concussion, part of it is fear and exhaustion, but I like to think there's a core goodness in me. Today is challenging my self-perceptions. I sincerely want to hurt this badly injured man.

I can't help but wonder, if a small knock on the head is this bad for me, what will Lorcan have to contend with?

“You know what they promised us?” the pirate asks, his voice strained.

“Who?” I don’t want to talk to this asshole, but we need information, and he’s volunteering it. Right now, I can totally see how people talk themselves into torturing prisoners. I might do it myself.

“Your Skía.” He says it *skee-uh*. A choppy imitation of the way we say it: *skiya*.

“They’re not ‘our Skía.’ They’re shadows. Sworn enemies of the crown. But go on, I’m curious to know what brought you here.” I could give him a shot of morphine to ease the pain. Maybe I will, if he asks for it. He seems too dedicated to hating women to consider making a request of a mere woman.

His next, labored words, confirm it.

“They said this country was easy pickings. An island ruled by a girl. Pretty, airheaded, and weak. All she does is have her picture taken in fancy dresses.”

Anger flares within me. Zosia hated that shit. Her father trotted her out like a show pony. True—she’s gorgeous. She’s also smart as fuck and was thwarted at every turn when she tried to exercise her intelligence.

It still didn't stop her. Our princess has a damn strong backbone, and that's why I'll hold out hope that she's alive until proven otherwise.

“They said they would take her,” he continues, wheezing. “The castle and everything north. Promised us everything in the south. All the land up to a place called Canavale was ours for the taking.”

He coughs. Red spatters his lips. I don't reach for the kit at my waist.

“They said you wouldn't fight.” Teeth flash in a wry grin. “And for a while, it seemed to be true. Your people took our bribes without asking too many questions. Your king kissed every ass he could, and not one country lifted a finger to help you.”

My anger surges. King Rohan was wrong. So, so wrong. All those endless meetings and attempts to curry favor with foreign nations—it was like watching the new kid try to make friends with everyone at school, and be rebuffed by the entire cafeteria. Not that I have personal experience with this, but I watched enough TV when I was at Royals to know what it's like.

My father and I did nothing to stop him. Cata must have had misgivings, but if she tried to talk him out of that useless approach, it did not work.

None of us wanted to admit how little the outside world cared about us and our problems.

We tried to prepare, but Rohan didn't want to impose too much modernity on the population. We acted exactly like this dying piece of shit describes, and it makes me fucking furious.

None of that was Zosia's fault. She saw our strength. She wanted to lean into it, but we undercut her every step of the way.

"You were supposed to be easily conquered," the dying man wheezed. "But you fucking Auralians are two-faced. You all take our money and pretend to cooperate, then whisper to your friends when our next shipment is, where it's going, and then suddenly there's an attack. A month ago, we thought we had you defeated." He coughs again. His breathing becomes a wheeze that reminded me of a punctured accordion. "Now, I wish I'd never come here."

With that, his eyes went blank.

“Yeah, that makes two of us,” I said, reaching over to close them.



## Chapter 9

We make it back to the Oceanside camp late the next night. I spend most of the journey prone in the back of the wagon. The ferry crossing is especially harrowing for me. I throw up four times.

Tovian doesn't leave my side. Once, he holds my hair, careful of the tender lump on the back of my head. I'm too messed up to care that he sees me like this. Afterwards, I pass out.

By the time we make it back to camp, I've mostly recovered. The mood is celebratory. I can't decide whether my misgivings are lingering side effects from my concussion or intuition trying to tell me something.

*Listen to your feelings.* Lorcan used to tell me that, which is hilarious in retrospect, because that man displayed all the feelings of a rock. At the time, I thought it was profound.

Tovian catches me around the waist. "Congratulations on leading a successful mission, Sunshine."

"I had help."

“It was your brainchild. All the planning and intelligence gathering that went into it came from you.”

I lean into his embrace, a glow of pride flickering in my chest. I hate to admit how often I felt outshone by Zosia and Lorcan. I was the secondary princess, the backup, the useful friend. They were the stars. Now, a small part of me is happy they’re out of the picture so I can prove I’m capable. Worthy.

Still, I pray their absence is a temporary arrangement. I miss my friends.

Tovian senses the shift in me. “You okay, Sunshine?”

“Worried about my friends.”

Emotion flickers over his face. “You do that a lot.”

“Yes. Doesn’t everyone?”

He makes a noncommittal gesture. “I need to get back  
—”

My phone’s blaring ringtone cuts him off.

“I’m sorry, Tovian, it’s my father. I have to answer this.”

He nods curtly and steps back.

“Hi, Papa,” I plug my finger into my free ear. “Any news about Lorcan?”

“I spoke with Saskaya Čovari yesterday. No improvement.”

My heart sinks. It was late May when we left him. It’s now early July. Weeks of unresponsiveness does not bode well for an eventual recovery.

“Nothing?”

“She says his reflexes work. Occasionally, he makes a sound as if he’s in pain.”

I rub my temples. It’s nothing Sas hasn’t told me before, but I’ve been a little distracted here in Oceanside.

Zosia wanted him to live. What if he wakes up, and he’s not the man he was before? Brain injuries are weird. A relatively minor one can cause long-lasting changes; or, a person can make a full recovery from what seems like a devastating injury. Personality changes aren’t uncommon.

Will he forgive me for saving his life when he wakes up?

Protecting the last Auralian princess was his life’s work. If she’s gone...

“Any word from Zosia?” I ask, dreading the answer.

“Nothing, Raina. Not a word. I spoke with Keryn of The Mountain Folk. They haven’t seen Bashir, either.”

Something about the fact that they’re both missing bothers me. I know perfectly well that many people have gone missing since the invasion—ambushed and killed, left to rot where they fell.

But Bashir...he was one of our inner group. Trusted. He had a thing for me, not that I returned his feelings, and the night when we crash-landed in our newly war-torn country, I kissed him before he went off on what everyone expected to be a suicide mission.

In all likelihood, that’s what happened to him. We can’t start identifying and burying the dead properly until we can take control of the country again. Our small accomplishment in blowing up a bridge makes life harder for the invaders, but it’s not going to stop them. They already have a lot of supplies and fighters in the north. At best, we can hope to cut them off from receiving more supplies and try to keep them burning through ammunition and fuel until the tide turns in our favor.

“What about Rohan?”

A heavy sigh. “I fear the worst, Raina.”

“Don’t say that, Papa.”

“He would have gotten word to us by now. To the Čovari, at least,” my father said, his weariness audible. “If we’ve lost Zosia...” He trailed off.

“We haven’t lost her. I’m sure she’s hiding. There must be a reason she hasn’t gotten word to us. Has anyone gone to the castle to look for her?”

“There’s no way to get inside.”

No success on Saskaya’s end, then. The last time I asked her about it, she was so grumpy about her lack of progress that she about bit my head off. She’s snappish by nature, and being cooped up at the Sun Temple hasn’t improved her personality one iota. Besides, I’ve had my hands full, too.

We need more people. Fighters like Lorcan.

Watching him fight is like watching a dancer, only more violent. He knows exactly where his body is in relation to his surroundings at all times. Nobody strikes him. He harries his opponents until they’re too tired to keep fighting, tricking them into wasting energy while he stays just out of reach. The only time I ever held my own against him in sparring was when I remembered not to strike, tempting him to hit at me

instead. It rarely worked. He's too patient to be tricked that easily.

The truth is, nobody fights like Lorcan, even the Čovari. They're a small tribe and lost a huge number of their people during the initial invasion. My people can hold River Bend and the Three Rivers district, but we're also too small in number to advance. Plus, they're all in the north. The populations of the Grasslands District, Central Auralia, and the Timberlands have all been devastated by the invasion. People dead, or frightened and in hiding.

And every day, more pirates land in Oceanside. We can't hold out against them forever.

Fact of the matter is, we need Lorcan. Almost more than we need Zosia.

He's the warrior that can win this war. She's the heart and soul we're fighting for. We need both of them. Together.

"She has to be in the castle." Logically, there's nowhere else she could have gone. "And if she's inside, there's a strong possibility that Rohan is with her. We just need to *get* to them."

I turn and spot Tovia standing a few feet away, pretending not to listen. Standing guard to protect my privacy, I realize, smiling at his back.

“We’re doing everything we can, Raina. You know River Bend wants you to take your place as Queen.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and hung my head. “I know, Papa, I know. Soon. I promise.”

“That’s what you said when you went to university. ‘One year, Papa, then I’ll come home and claim my crown.’ Then it was another year. Now the war is here and you’re down there, risking your neck—” He inhales sharply. “Be safe, Raina. I know one of your sisters can step in if necessary, but you’re the one who trained for this. Come home. Fulfill your duty.”

My vision blurs.

“Everything alright?” Tovia asks quietly.

I make my goodbyes with my father and disconnect.

“Sort of,” I say. I refuse to do that thing Zosia does, where she says she’s fine and she’s obviously not.

Looking back, I would’ve done a lot of things differently, especially that second year when it was obvious how deeply in love she and Lorcan were. I always knew it

from his side, but to see her cautiously open up—I should have gotten out of their way a lot sooner. Should have been more direct in telling them that it was okay, I understood.

If I've cost them their only chance at happiness together, I'll never forgive myself.

“Any word about your friends?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Same as ever. Lorcan hasn't woken up. His reflexes work, and occasionally he makes a sound, but that's all. Saskaya is going out of her mind with boredom and frustration.” I smile wryly.

Tovian slings his arm around my shoulders. “We can always offer to trade places with her.”

I laugh at that. Then, because I can't leave it alone, I ask rhetorically, “What if he lives the rest of his life in pain—and I'm the one who did that to him?”

“We all made choices in the heat of the moment that we may come to regret. There will be more of them before this war is over.”

I think of the man bleeding out on the wagon. I could have given him morphine to ease the last minutes of his life. He didn't ask. He had no way of knowing it was available. I



never thought I'd feel guilty about letting a man who'd committed violent crimes suffer, but I do. I feel dirty that in the moment, I took pleasure in his pain.

To get our conversation back on track, I squeeze Tavian's waist and say, "Like giving someone a false name?"

"Not false," he said, brushing a kiss on the top of my head. "Your second name. I can't believe it took me so long to piece it together."

"My feminine wiles scrambled your brains," I tease.

"They certainly did."

"Even covered in dirt from head to toe—"

"You were still stunning," he interjects. "I'll never forget you kicking up and fighting me. Gorgeous, tough, and full of surprises. I was instantly smitten."

My face turns hot, and so does the rest of me. "It's unbecoming of a prince to fawn over ladies."

"You're not just any lady," he says, low in my ear.

"I wasn't any kind of lady, when we met. I was fighting for my life."

“Quite capably, too. This Lorcan who trained you must have been highly skilled.”

“He was.” I swallowed. “Is. Will be again, when he wakes up.”

Tovian is quiet.

“I did try to help them, towards the end.” Tovian has no reason to know what I’m talking about. I’ll blame the concussion for the fact that my brain is messed up and I’m having a hard time tuning out the past.

One specific memory stands out right now.

If I hadn’t talked Zosia into wearing that green dress that looked perfect on her, she would’ve gone to the Louvre wearing the pink one that made her look fifteen. It worked better than I expected. She had an idea of how she wanted to present our country to the world—as strong and beautiful instead of the weak and cowering nation King Rohan portrayed us as.

It was the first time I saw a glimpse of the queen I know she’ll someday become.

If she’s alive.

If this entire situation isn’t hopeless.

“Have you considered, Arianelle, that their relationship wasn’t something you could control?” Tovian asks softly, the words warm puffs from his lips near my temples. Using the name I gave him as a gentle reminder that I haven’t always been truthful with him. He brings me back to the present.

“I know it wasn’t. But have a lot of regrets. I thought I loved him. I mean, I still love Lorcan as a close friend, but not like—like I’m...” I trailed off.

*Like I’m starting to think I could love you.*

I bite my lip. Telling your new possible-boyfriend that you’re still hung up on your long-term crush has got to be high up on the list of unforgivable faux pas. I didn’t mean to. It just slipped out.

In my defense, my brain is still bruised.

We stop in front of my tent. Tovian turns me to face him and presses a kiss to my forehead. “Being queen doesn’t mean being in control of everything, Raina.”

“Good thing I’m not queen, then.” I smile wanly, wondering what the protocol is for inviting a man into your tent. *Want to come and make out on my pallet* seems like a pretty lowbrow thing to offer a fellow royal. Although, given

the state of Auralian royalty at the moment, a tent seems appropriate. “Do you, uh, want to come in? I know it’s not much, but it’s a little more private than sleeping with the rest of the crew.”

He strokes his thumb over my cheek. “Not tonight, Sunshine.”

Disappointment streaks through me, as hot as falling ash.

“Tomorrow, then?” My disappointment deepens when he shakes his head.

“I need to get back to my people.”

“Do you think there’s any chance you can convince them to fight for us?” I plead, knowing I should shut up. “It might turn the tide.”

Something in his eyes shutters. I feel him closing down like a passing shadow.

“I’ll see what I can do. Try not to get into any more scrapes, Arianelle. You can’t always count on me to be there to rescue you.”

“Pfft.” I scoff. “I’d have been fine.”

“Possibly. I’d rather not risk your life.”

“Then fight, Tovian. Help us.”

Our success is fragile. It could be fleeting.

He squeezes my hand once. “I have been.” An unreadable look. “The Ansi might be willing to participate if you came to make the case yourself.”

“And leave the Oceanside team just when we had a major victory?” When I suspect we’re going to be attacked at any minute, but convincing Ephram to move camp when we have injured fighters to treat and prisoners to guard will be nigh on impossible? “I can’t do that.”

Tovian’s smile is tinged with disappointment.

“When you’re ready, Sunshine.”

I watch his back as he strides toward the campfire. Ducking into my tent, I have the feeling I’ve made a huge mistake.

Sure enough, Tovian doesn’t follow.

When I crawl out of bed the next morning, he’s gone.

# August

## Chapter 10

“What’s happening?”

I’ve just finished checking on Ephram’s now-healed eye when the emergency horn bleats.

“The pirates didn’t take kindly to being attacked and us taking their cargo.” Luza chuckles mirthlessly. “Let’s get to the lookout point.”

Emboldened, after our success with the bridge, we’ve started daring to conceal fighters along the edges of the Boscage, high in trees where we can pick off targets as they came trundling up the rough road. A ground unit uses ropes to trip the quicker motorbikes, which we confiscate after disabling the drivers.

The invaders are furious

“Any word from your mystery man?” Luza asks without lowering her binoculars.

“Tovian? No. Haven’t seen him since the bridge collapse.”

Something clenched inside my chest. I messed things up, the last time I saw him. I wish he hadn’t left, so I could straighten things out. I’m *not* in love with Lorcan. I should never have said that.

*But you do love him*, my heart whispered.

As a longtime friend, yes. But not in a romantic sense. Not anymore. He belongs with Zosia. It’s so obvious.

In holding out for Lorcan for so long, I’ve passed up every chance of finding love with someone else. For years. I feel like a rank fool.

Part of me doesn’t believe I deserve Tovian’s interest. Even if the whole royalty-of-different-tribes thing wasn’t a factor. Or the war.

“Hey,” Luza nudges me with her elbow and offers the binoculars. “What’s that?”

It takes me a minute to adjust them to my face. “A traveler.”

“Nobody travels these days.”

The slim figure makes slow but steady progress down the dusty road. It's been weeks since the last rain, and the pirates with their horrible bikes have ripped deep ruts into the unpaved surface. As the figure comes closer, I can make out dark hair and brown trousers, with a beige top that might have been white at one point. A woman. She limps slightly with every step—

I drop the binoculars carelessly and dart down the hillside, skidding on rocks, ignoring Luza's yelp of surprise.

“Orisa!” I yell, heedless of the danger. “Orisa, you're all right!”

My former guard halts, staring. Then she lunges forward and grabs me in a crushing embrace.

“You're alive, I can't believe it. Princess.” She steps back, staring at me. “Where have you been? Never mind that. Let's get you—”

Luza's whistle comes at the same instant I register the sound of roaring engines, approaching fast. “Come on. Hurry.”

We scramble up to Luza's lookout spot just as the first rider pops into view, followed by a whole string of motorcycles. They keep coming. I count at least twenty.



“10-33, urgent message, fleet of bikes headed north toward the ferry crossing, repeat, bikes moving north, fast.”  
Luza says into her walkie-talkie.

The device screeches. “We have them in view. What are orders?”

I take it from her, unceremoniously. “Shoot to kill if necessary. Try not to pop the tires. We have a hard enough time getting replacements.”

Slowly, we’re figuring out how to fix the bikes we’ve stolen. Fuel and tires are the two biggest problems. Learning how to ride them is another challenge.

Could Zosia have figured it out, alone, the night she disappeared? It seems unlikely, but she’s good at problem-solving like Saskaya is, and she’d at least seen such things during our time in the outside world. But if she managed to ride one, where did she go?

A chuckle from the walkie-talkie brings me back to the present. “On it, Princess.”

In the distance, gunfire.

We all fell silent, waiting for the report. Minutes passed. The engines faded into the distance. No word from our

snipers.

“What do you think that was all about?”

“Don’t know. Maybe they’re using the bikes to transport goods and people, now that getting through with the wagons is harder?”

“Possible.” Turning to Orisa, I give her a quick visual assessment. Physically, she appeared unharmed, apart from that limp, but there’s a haunted look about her. “Where have you been all summer?”

“Hostage,” she says, simply.

My stomach hollows out. “No.”

Orisa stares into the middle distance. “I don’t really want to talk about it. They held me with other women and girls in a village they’d captured. We escaped when the fires came too close and the pirates panicked. The rest went through the marshes. I came this way.”

*They were looking for her. That’s why there were so many pirates.*

“Orisa—”

“I came to find out if you’d made it to Oceanside safely. I’m here to fight, Princess. Whatever it takes.”

Every day, I'm humbled by our people's dedication to winning our country's freedom despite impossible odds. Whenever I want to give up, or my father implores me to return to River Bend, I think of Ephram and Luza. Everything they've done to slow the invaders down has taken a toll. Luza has a son living with her parents in Oceanside. She's seen him a handful of times since the invasion started. He's our best runner, coordinating the other children.

Luza lives in terror that he'll be discovered, but she doesn't let it stop her.

Orisa's resolve humbles me. I clasp her hand.

"We'll get through this together."

Luza's walkie-talkie buzzes. She depresses the button, listening. It's Ephram, back at camp.

"We've got a situation developing. Can you get to the southern rock ridge by evening?"

She glances at me. I didn't want to embarrass Orisa by acknowledging her limp, so I hold her eye and ask, "Can you make it that far?"

She nods. I'm not sure I believe her. She's strong, but she's been through an ordeal and she's tired.

“We’ll be there,” Luza assures Ephram before signing off. Within minutes, the three of us were trudging back toward the encampment. My selfish heart beat harder as we skirted the edge of The Boscage, wondering if Tovian was there, watching over me.

I won’t let him walk away from me a third time. Even if nothing comes of it in the long run, I’m risking my life out here. I should be throwing myself at him, not worrying about whether or not we can get married before we’ve even hooked up properly.

All my plans for the future go sideways anyway. I need to embrace uncertainty. Go with the flow, right?

#

We make it to the southern ridge by evening. Orisa’s gait slows us down, but she’s determined.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” I lower the binoculars. Red sunset glints off the churning ocean waters. A light breeze tugs at my braid. Birds call out in harsh tones overhead. That’s not what has me cursing. It’s the cluster of small boats unloading boxes onto the small atolls that make getting into Oceanside so dangerous for large ships.

Two are visible in the distance. The small boats are making trips back and forth. The atolls are exposed to the elements. A single storm would ruin their goods. There's no fresh water, no food, and sharks in the water. The invaders may have adjusted to our raids by moving operations offshore, but it's not a permanent solution.

“They can't last out there for long.”

“No. But it gives them better control of when they land their supplies.” I rock back from a squat onto my haunches to sit cross-legged on the warm stone. “It also prevents our spy network from getting timely information to us.”

“We had a good run of it,” Ephram grunts. He's having some trouble adjusting to the lack of depth perception. He can't fight as effectively as he did before, but his organizational skills are top-notch. He keeps peace in the increasingly close quarters of our sprawling resistance encampment, acting as a cross between mayor and sheriff.

Better him than me. I've got my hands full. We should be moving north by now. We should be breaking up the camp. But he's resistant, and I've hesitated to override his authority. I'm not the princess of Oceanside, after all. I'm just here to help out in Zosia's absence.

“What do you think that big vehicle is?” Luza gestures to the bare rock where the pirates are unloading a boat anchored near shore. Three strong men push a clunky-looking vehicle with two seats and big, thick tires but no top, up a makeshift gangplank. “Ever seen one like it?”

“No.” I study the flurry of activity below, mind spinning with possibilities, none of them good. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

I set down my stolen binoculars—one lens had a hairline crack but they were still usable—and used my satellite phone to search for “small car” and “topless car.” I get convertibles and weird-looking three-wheeled cars that don’t look legal to drive. Nothing looked remotely similar.

“Hey. Raina.” Orisa pokes me with her elbow. “Look.”

This time, the pirates were mounting a machine gun to the front of the vehicle. “That looks bad, doesn’t it?”

“Really bad.”

I zoom in as far as the camera can go and snap a picture. When I upload it and do an image search, the answer comes back immediately: an *All-Terrain Vehicle*, or ATV.

“Oh, fuck.” Come to think of it, I had seen something like it—in one of Bashir’s friends’ video games. I was stoned when I saw it, so forgive my momentary lapse. I don’t miss pot. That second year, I mostly used it to dull the pain of knowing Lorcan was finally making headway with Zosia, and that I was losing him.

Never had him in the first place, if I’m honest.

I shook that thought away, holding up my phone.

“Ephram. Look.”

“What in Auralia’s golden garters is that?” He squints with his one good eye. Orisa snorts.

“An all-terrain vehicle mounted with machine guns. It can hold more cargo than a dirt bike, and manage rough terrain almost as well. Possibly better. I’ve never seen one used before. I think they’re planning to attack our encampment.”

I’ve suspected an attack was forthcoming ever since the bridge. I’m wasn’t sure why it’s taken so long. Now we know: they were waiting for better equipment to arrive.

Which means that time isn’t on our side.

The four of us roll away from the ledge and stand up, staring at one another with solemn expressions.

“Stands to reason. We’ve all but halted their supply lines. They were bound to hit back at us eventually.”

“How did they know where we’re hiding? We’ve been so careful!”

“We have spies,” Luza says with neutrality that belies the fury in her eyes. “So do the pirates.”

“Luza, the invaders won’t hesitate to harm children.” Orisa gestures to her ankle. The source of her limp was a metal shackle locked too tightly around her leg, which damaged the tendon beneath. The injury is permanent; she’s lucky she didn’t lose the foot itself. “If they threatened one of the runners to tell them where our hideout is, we can’t hold the boy or girl responsible.”

“The kids know what the stakes are.”

I know she’s worried about her son’s safety. I also know that I have to keep us from falling into infighting and pointing fingers, or we’ll be crushed.

“The only ones responsible for this war—every piece of it—are the Skía and their pirates,” I say firmly. “Given what they’re bringing ashore, I would say there isn’t time to



evacuate the encampment. We have a little time to set a trap of our own and find help.”

“Help? From who?”

“I’ll handle that.” Tovia’s getting a surprise visit. I’m scared of traveling alone, but I know what I need to do. Orisa can’t come with me. “Luza and Orisa, get as many of our current residents resettled with the others living in the caves on the western shore. I need both of you to marshal the weapons and bikes we’ve stolen, as quickly as possible. Anyone who knows how to shoot or ride, no matter how badly—bring them to the camp as quickly and quietly as you can. Do not let the pirates see you.”

What we’ve accomplished this summer is a good start. We’ve stemmed the bleeding, held our own against a formidable opponent and even managed to knock them back on their heels.

I’m not going to let all our hard work fall apart now.

Part of me is still furious with King Rohan and Cata, the Auralian leaders who spent two years planning for this attack and still managed to be caught flat-footed.

Although I suppose that means I have to be mad at myself.

Technically, I was only in charge of medical provisions and leading my own tribe. Yet I can hardly claim we're well-provisioned with basics like antibiotics, pain medication, sutures—all those modern necessities I was supposed to be stockpiling. We have some, but they're inconveniently located at River Bend and woefully inadequate to the scale of damage.

I never imagined the invasion would be this brutal and bloody.

“The camp likely being watched, so don't make it obvious that we're leaving, Ephram,” I continued. “Keep someone stationed here on the wall. When they start moving the ATVs onto land, that's when you get our fighters into place.” I get up, dusting my pants and shouldering my day pack.

“Where are we going?” Orisa asks, following.

“I am going in search of help.”

“I'll come with you.”

“No. You'll slow me down.” Hurt blossoms in my guard's expression. “Orisa. You've already sacrificed so much

to help us. Don't feel as though you need to do more."

"I promised to guard you with my life."

"I know." I take her hands. "I know. It's all right. I'll be fine. You are in much more danger than I am, by staying. Promise me you won't get hurt or captured again."

She squeezes my hands and doesn't meet my eyes. We all know that's a vow none of us can keep.

"I don't like you going off unescorted, Princess." Ephram says. "I don't fancy having my head served to me by the Myseč king."

"He won't." I step backwards. I have to go now, before I lose my courage. My father will absolutely pitch a fit if I die out here. He loves me, even if he doesn't approve of what I'm doing. "Keep our people safe! I'll be back with reinforcements!"

I run along the rock ledge where, two months ago, Tavian led me to Oceanside. The path along the top of the wall rises higher and higher, stealing my breath as I try to stay low and out of sight of the boats. A stiff, cold breeze come off the ocean to my right. To my left is the moonlit canopy and haunting sounds of The Boscage.

I only hope Tavian finds me before the dragons do.

# Chapter 11

Sometime after midnight, judging by the angle of the moon, the wall reaches its maximum height and levels off. I trudge along, sometimes talking to myself, other times silent, listening for danger as I run and walk in alternating bursts.

The summer of constant physical activity and relative hardship had honed my muscles and endurance, but I set off without much in the way of supplies. I sip water sparingly, hoping to pass a stream or waterfall where I can refill it.

I don't.

I scan the rocks for any recognizable rock formation, and find none. I have no sense of whether I've gone too far, or not far enough. Tovian never told me his tribe's location, only its general direction. I know I wouldn't make it through the jungle itself without running into Big Ada.

I'm never going to remember her real name is Big Eater. If the dragon even is a she. Could be male, for all I know.

"Tovian!" I shout. I imagine huge lizards bursting out of that impenetrable darkness to devour me, despite knowing,

intellectually, that they glide from high places. They're not capable of flying straight up. "TOVIAN!"

Nothing. I'm not sure what I expected, precisely. I trust him to find me, the way he has twice before. I trust him implicitly.

Yet, twice, I'd allowed him to walk right out of my life.

Why? Because I was still nursing a hopeless crush on one of my best friends?

I'm not anymore, and haven't for a long time, but now I don't trust my judgment.

I've had hookups. They weren't satisfying. I want a partner. I want someone who loves me back. But a man who proposes marriage before he even knows your name is joking, right?

I'd love to have a chance to ask him in person. First, I have to find him.

Speaking of proposals, I'm not exactly a paragon in that regard, either. "I cannot believe I fucking proposed *marriage* to Lorcan," I grumble to myself, kicking a stone with the toe of my badly worn boot. "Idiot. What was I expecting? That

Lorcan might kiss me and tell me he'd been waiting for me to make a move? Stupid, Raina.”

Talk about setting yourself up for rejection. I cringe to remember it.

Every time I think I've made my peace with Past Raina's stupid hangup on Lorcan, I'll remember the way I wasted two precious years of potential experiences wishing he'd pay attention to me, and find myself wallowing in regret all over again.

I knew perfectly well he was there to do a job—protecting Zosia, and to some extent, me—but I still harbored a fantasy that he and I would explore Europe together like a couple of Instagram travel influencers. Post cute couple pictures of us online, that kind of thing.

Instead, what I got was a bunch of boring conferences—Zosia is too serious for her own damn good, even without her father's influence—and some marginally entertaining campus parties.

At least Kenton made the most of his time abroad, unlike the rest of us did.

Gods, I miss him.

The sky above me lightens into pale gray. The moon completes its arc toward the horizon, casting long shadows onto the uneven ground that make it hard to see where I'm going. I want to curl up on the ground and sleep.

A mechanical sound cuts through the natural symphony of wind, waves and bird calls. A boat. More pirates with their dreaded guns and nothing to lose but their lives. I picked up a rock and fling it as hard as I can.

“Go AWAY you motherfucking cowards!” I scream. Bending, I choose another rock and throw that one, too. Then another. “Leave my country ALONE!”

When I bend for a fourth rock, the ground beside me explodes. I yelp and fall backward, scrambling away from the gunshot. “Fuck!”

Then I get up and run as fast as my tired legs will carry me. My pack bangs against my butt with every stride. Incensed, I held out my right hand with two fingers raised in the British sign for *fuck you*—right before falling flat on my face.

One minute I was running, the next, the ground dropped out from under me. I land on my stomach, barely keeping my



face from smashing into the rocks, and lay there, winded, until the pirates are gone.

“I really fucking despise pirates,” I mutter, pushing tiredly to my feet. I’m immediately faced with a new problem: an abrupt rise in the volcanic ledge.

I launch myself at the opposite wall, flinging all my weight at the top ledge. I don’t make it.

“Fuuuuck,” I groan. With a surge of adrenaline, I run at it and jump. This time I managed to kick myself up over the ledge.

“Welp.” I unscrew the cap of my canteen and take a swig. “Now, what?”

I’m lost. I have no idea where to find Tovian. I’m almost out of water. The sun is starting to bake me, and I don’t have anything to shade myself.

I chuck a pebble into the pit below my feet, despairing. Distantly, I could still hear a boat’s engine.

“I hope you ram an atoll,” I mutter. *Die motherfuckers.* I want our island to kill them, hunt them down, one by one.

I examine the scrapes on my knees and forearms. My summer camp outfit, already mended and patched, is fit for

rags after my tumble. I rip the hem off my tunic, wet it with the last drops of my canteen water, and dab at my wounds. A gurgle from my stomach reminded me that I'd been hiking for over twelve hours with nothing but a little dried fruit for a snack.

“Now, what?” I ask the rocks as despair sets in.

The sun rises higher. Soon, it'll be hot as blazes out here in the rocks. I have no water, no food, no shelter, and no idea what I'm doing out here.

I have the satellite phone and walkie-talkie. The latter won't work unless there was someone within range, and the phone has less than 20% battery left.

I could call for help, but how humiliating is that? A princess dashes off promising to bring reinforcements, only to divert badly needed fighters from their primary mission when she gets stuck?

No. I'm going to be a queen. Lorcan wouldn't give up. Zosia would never consider quitting. I can be at least as stubborn as my friends are.

I cup my hands around my mouth and shout,  
“TOOOOVIIIIIAAANNNNN!!!!”

“You don’t have to yell so loudly, Sunshine.”

“Aah!” My heel slips on loose gravel, forcing me to pinwheel my arms to stay upright. I smack the boulder behind me. “Where did you come from?”

Jaw agape, I peer at my feet. In losing my balance I sent a small cascade of dirt raining down on his head. He covers it with one hand and waits for the bits of rock to stop falling.

“You’ve been shouting my name for hours, Sunshine. I had a hard time pinning down where you were, but once I heard gunshots, I figured out your location in a hurry.” He pops up over the lip of the wall using a rope I hadn’t even noticed, his biceps and deltoids flexing deliciously. He dusts his hands and takes in my banged-up appearance. “Don’t scare me like that.”

“I’d forgotten how much I like those leather shorts on you.” I grin. They’re constructed to allow free movement, as well as a great view of his muscular thighs and flat abdomen. Not to mention that ass. Handprints in white chalk covered his torso, shoulders, and cheeks. I was tempted to fit my hands to them, just to feel him.

Yes, I went from despondence to ogling in the blink of an eye. I’m so damn happy to see him.

“Already cracking jokes.” He shakes his head. Taking my chin between thumb and forefinger, he says, “You had me worried, Raina.”

All my bravado evaporates. “They’re planning to attack the encampment, Tovi. We need help.”

He regarded me warily. “I don’t know what you think I can do. I am one person, Sunshine. And I’m not bulletproof.”

“I know, but we can’t fight them alone. The Skía have equipped the pirates with new vehicles. They’re—” I tried to describe the ATVs, and quickly gave up in favor of showing him on my phone. Now I was down to 12% battery with no way to charge it up again. Still, if it impressed upon him the urgency of the situation, it was worth wasting battery life. “They look like this, but with machine guns mounted on the front.”

“How do they drive and shoot at the same time?”

“No idea. I don’t care to find out, either. The point is, Tovian, that these vehicles are designed to roll over rough terrain. You can’t count on Big Ada to keep you safe.”

He smiled thinly. “Eater. Big Eater”

“Right. That’s what I meant.” It still sounds like ‘Ada’ to my ear, but I wasn’t going to quibble over accents. Gods know mine is pronounced enough when I speak English or French. “They’ll hunt down your dragon *and* your people.”

I can see him thinking it over. I knew full well it wasn’t easy, wanting to help others and protect your own people at the same time.

“Let’s get you to safety, Sunshine. Then, we can discuss it with my mother. You know it’s not my decision.”

My stomach rumbles loudly. “Is there food?”

He huffed a laugh and said, “Plenty of it.”

“How do we get down?”

He makes a loop with the rope, which I realized was made of thin vines braided and woven into a strong rope about as thick as my wrist. A comfortable width for most people to grasp. “Step in.”

“And then what?”

He puts one arm around my waist and steps into the second loop. “And then, we fall.”

Down and down and down, deep into a horseshoe-shaped canyon where the sun’s rays haven’t yet reached. The

chill raises the hairs on the backs of my arms. I lean my head on Tovian's shoulder just to soak up his warmth.

It's so peaceful in his arms. I hadn't realized how tired I was until I was away from the constant terror of war. Even when sleeping in my tent, I feel a low-grade dread of what the next day will bring. It's impossible to really relax. I'm not complaining. I have a modicum of privacy and comfort, while most of the resistance fighters have been sleeping on the ground or taking watch shifts. Princess privileges. But I notice the toll this summer has taken.

"I'm glad you came looking for me." Tovian tugs me closer, nuzzling my hair. "I'd rather have you safe with me than in danger."

"It's my duty to hold the line as best I can."

"You're doing a phenomenal job."

I squeeze his narrow waist. "Flattery will get you everywhere." We continue our slow descent. It should be terrifying to fall into nothing, six inches from a cliffside, but Tovian's slow feeding of the rope was almost hypnotic.

"Whoa, Sunshine." His arm tightens hard around my ribs, jerking me upright. "You're that tired?"

“Guess so.” I shake myself alert, feeling drugged. “I walked all night.”

“How long do you think we have before they attack?”

“A day or two. Three at the most.”

We land in a dusty canyon. Tovian ties off the rope and takes my hand, leading me down a trail. “It’s not far now. Just so you’re not surprised, you should know the Ansi have a ritual. A rule, if you want to call it that.”

“Oh?” I was too fatigued to summon much interest.

“Anyone who leaves the village and returns must bathe and be painted. It’s how we know you’re one of us, and it helps keep Big Eater away by washing away the scent of prey.”

“A bath sounds terrific, Tovian. As does food and a nap.”

“We can get you those things.”

The world had taken on a hazy glow that was entirely in my mind. Or not. I’ve never been here before. Was the mistiness of the canyon evaporating fog, and I was too tired to make sense of it? Possibly. Probably. I stumbled.

“You’re dead on your feet, Sunshine,” Tovia said, propping me upright. “How much have you been working since I last saw you?”

“A lot.” I didn’t mind clinging to his solid, muscular warmth. Not even remotely. I leaned into him, trying and failing to stifle a yawn. “I have to get back, though.”

“You’re no use to anyone until you rest.”

“I can’t *sleep* when we’re facing the biggest battle since the night of the invasion,” I insist. My feet betray me, weaving unsteadily. Tovia propels me forward in a straight-ish line with his palm in the center of my back. “It might already be underway. I should call them, but I ran off without a charger and my sat phone is almost dead...”

“Save it, for now.” Tovia’s handsome face turns stony. “Can you handle meeting my mother?”

“The Ansi queen?” I took a deep breath and steadied myself. The world hadn’t lost that shimmering unreality born of sleep deprivation, but I *was* royalty. I could pull myself together long enough to meet another queen—but Tovia’s mother? In this state? It didn’t seem as if I had much choice.

“Yes. Especially if it will help our case.”



“I make no promises.”

“You *have* to, Tovian. We need you. Do you know how many people will die if you don’t help us?”

My heart sinks at the idea that I’ve come all this way for nothing.

“I’m not one of your subjects, Sunshine.”

“I know. I’m not trying to issue commands, I’m desperate. We’re *all* at risk, Tovian. If the invaders win, how long do you think it will take them to raze the jungle and root you out? Joining forces with us now gives your people the best chance of survival. Right now, the invaders have the upper hand. The only reason they haven’t claimed victory is because —”

*I’m talking too fast.*

“Save it for my mother. I’m not the one who needs convincing.” He kisses my forehead. “This is the entrance to my village.”

I must be hallucinating from lack of sleep. All I see is a bare rock wall.

## Chapter 12

Tovian leads me around an outcropping, my half-empty pack dangling sadly from his broad shoulders. The seemingly solid cliff face opens into narrow canyon.

To my left tumbles a silvery waterfall. I wonder where it comes from. I saw no source of water along the top of the cliffside. I'm too tired to bother asking about it.

The waterfall joins a stream. We follow a pathway along the bank. More waterfalls, thin strings threading their way down mossy, fern-flecked volcanic rock, feed the stream until it rushes furiously through its carved-rock .

There was a steep climb down a hill. Tovian gave me his hand to steady me, his muscular legs braced in an open stance that left nothing to my imagination. Never had I ever seen a man as fine as he was. Noticing only underscored my travel-worn, dirt-stained, exhausted condition.

“My village is up ahead.”

“How many people?”

“About six hundred of us live in the main camp. There are smaller settlements nearby. We number about three thousand in total.”

“So many. How do you feed everyone?”

“We forage and hunt. We also send trusted individuals into Oceanside or up to Canavale to trade for goods we can’t grow or hunt here in The Boscage. Or we did, before the invasion,” he says wryly. “Brenica, my mother, ordered everyone to stay home ever since the invasion.”

“Yet you come and go?”

“I have been tasked with monitoring the situation. My run-in with the Myseči princess puts me in a good position to keep the queen apprised of new developments. As long as the Ansi aren’t directly threatened, you won’t find it easy to win her cooperation.”

I mulled this for the rest of the walk.

We came to a stone bridge over the stream. On the opposite bank was a large opening leading to the jungle. An enormous stone lay propped against the wall beside it, presumably to block the entrance in an emergency.

To my left was a circular opening with a fire pit in the center, filling the air with the scent of roasting meat. My stomach gurgles. I'm faint with hunger. A pathway winds around and up, no stairs, just a long circular ramp cut into the cliffside.

“Remarkable,” I breathe.

“Welcome to my home, Princess.” The charming hint of humor that makes Tovian sound like he's perpetually flirting with you is belied by his use of my title. I straighten. Our arrival attracts a crowd, staring at me with unnerving silence. I had no way to distinguish class differences. Only when Tovian approaches imposing woman with graying braided hair, deep tawny skin like his, and a similar slant to her eyes and cheeks, did I realize I was greeting the queen herself.

That was quick.

I bow, wondering whether I should have curtsied, or if that would look stupid for a woman wearing ripped-up pants and a torn, stained shirt.

Brenica's nose crinkles.

“This is the Myseči girl?” she asks Tovian.

“Princess Raina,” I say firmly. Glancing at him, I detect a little smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He’s enjoying this collision of two monarchs.

The queen’s gaze rakes down my body, taking in the mess. “I cannot abide the filth of outsiders. Tovian, have our visitor washed and dressed properly. Then we shall discuss business.”

“But there’s no time—”

Tovian takes my arm. “Don’t argue. She won’t listen until you’ve washed. It’s our custom. We do not permit outsiders. This is our way of assuring everyone that you are known to the queen and here with her permission.”

He did warn me. And a bath does sound amazing. It’s only that I’m worried about Ephram, Luza, Orisa, and the rest of the resistance encampment. Did they manage to get word to the contingent hiding in the cliffs?

Tovian hands me to two women, both naked from the waist up with tiny little dragonskin leather skirts that hug their hips. Full-on nudity is common here, even among the women. I guess it makes sense, what with the heat, but it’s disorienting for me—and I’m already light-headed with fatigue and hunger.

“Is there anything to eat?” I ask. The ladies exchange glances. One of them calls out to another woman sitting near the rocks, sorting piles of what looked like drying cloths. She stalks away, back toward the fire pit. In her absence, my guides strip my soiled clothes off and indicate I should get into a pool of water fed by another one of those mysterious waterfalls.

Suddenly self-conscious, I eyed the women out of the corner of my eye. I have a nice rack, if I do say so myself, but compared to these women I’m short, skinny and pale. Why would Tavian be attracted to me when he has all these gorgeous, naked women around?

Make it make sense.

Yes, there’s the royal title, but he didn’t know I was a princess when we met. I’m not so convinced of my own attractiveness that I believe I’m uniquely compelling.

Why would I be? History amply demonstrates that when presented with another option, men will take it.

Enthusiastically.

*Stop. It was one person, and you’ve admitted you were out of line.*

My tired brain can't find a rational explanation. I sink into the warm water and casually stuff the fish and rice balls I'm brought into my mouth like popcorn at a movie. Asking for food winds up being a mistake. With a full belly, floating in a bath of warm mineral water, attended by women who were washing my hair and frankly getting a little too personal —

“OW!”

The mercenary bitches giggle.

“Hold still,” one commands. “The hair is itchy in the heat. It's best to take it off.”

“Do the men do this?” Grudgingly, I let them do their thing. I've been physically attended to for most of my life. In the outside world, people pay big money to have their pubic hair ripped out, and these ladies are doing it for free. I ought to show more gratitude, but I'm too freaking tired for this.

“The smart ones do,” says one of my companions.

“Nothing worse than getting your pubic hair caught in leather shorts while hunting.” She mimics crouching, then standing up and wincing. I can't help but laugh.

By the end of the bathing session, I'm literally falling asleep in the water.

The air is warm when they pull me out.

"Where are my clothes?" The pile of rags is nowhere to be seen.

"Queen Brenica sent this for you to wear. It should fit with a few adjustments to the lacings."

Oh. My. Gods. The dress she sent looks like sexy club wear you'd find in Europe or Asia. If the red dragon-leather skirt covers my proportionally-generous ass, I'll be surprised. White laces threaded crosswise through the holes at either hip are a nod to my tribe's colors, red and silver. I decide to interpret this as a sign of respect and a not-so-subtle hint that Brenica is better-informed about my people than I am about hers.

I recognize a power play when I see one.

Smiling, I let the women dry me off and wiggle the strappy getup onto my body. It's been months since I dressed to feel pretty. They fuss with my hair, too, one braiding it while the other adjusts the fit of the bodice over my breasts.



Aware of the passage of time, I try to rush them along. They are having none of it, so I grit my teeth and wait for them to finish. Just when I think I'm done, they smile and tell me it's time for me to be painted.

“What?”

“Tovian has requested the privilege.” One grins. The other pouts. The first woman swats the other and laughs. “He was never going to paint you, stop being jealous.”

“What's the significance of painting someone?”

“It means he's laid claim to you. No other man will approach you while you wear his paint.” She holds up her hands. “See? Ours are small. If we paint you, it means you're available. If we put certain marks on you, you're seeking a lover.”

“I see,” although I don't, to be honest. Clearly, there's a kind of code indicating one's sexual availability, but it seems pretty complex. Even my overtaxed brain can figure out that the only man I want touching me is Tovian, so I meekly let them lead me out to where he's waiting for me at the entrance of the bathing area.

The way he lights up upon seeing me sends flutters swooping through my exposed midsection. He wants me, the weirdo. He doesn't even try to hide it.

I don't quite know what to do with that fact.

"You look..." he trails off.

"Ready to meet your mother again?" I prompt. The bath has been nice and the food necessary, but I'm worried about Ephram and Luza. I'm torn between wanting to explore this fascinating place and needing to help our people.

"Not quite." He dips his hands into a bowl of gross-looking purple paint.

"I don't think I want that stuff on me." I make a face. Disturbingly, Tovian squelches it in his palm.

"This is how people know you're not an outsider infiltrating the tribe. It's a security measure."

"I heard the paint has a secondary meaning." I can't keep the smile out of my voice. Tovian's generous mouth quirks up. I love the way there's always a hint of humor in his expression, whether it's a twinkle in his deep brown eyes or a smile playing on his lips.

"Ah. The women have been gossiping."

The first stroke of paint, on my collar bones, makes me flinch.

“Does this really mean you’re marking me as your own?”

I don’t mean for it to come out in a breathy tease, but it does.

Tovian studies my body. “If you’d rather make yourself available to the other men in the village, I’ll refrain from marking you in such a way.”

“Gods, no, Tovian. I’m not here to play the field.” I lick my lips. His gaze cuts to mine, drops briefly to my mouth, then back up. “Paint me. Please.”

He presses one cold, damp hand to the small of my back. Before the gasp leaves my parted lips, he pulls me hard against his chest. There’s so much exposed skin it feels like being naked. He cups my cheek with his free hand and kisses me languidly, thoroughly. I want to fall into his embrace and stay there, where it’s warm and safe and I feel treasured.

But there’s a war on, and maintaining the illusion of safety comes with a high cost. Besides, I don’t think the best way to impress a queen is by making out with her son in

public. The Ansi might be free with their physical affections, but I'm sure there are limits to their acceptance, particularly with an outsider.

Sensing my hesitation, Tovia pulls back fractionally. He touches the tip of my nose, undoubtedly leaving a clownish purple mark there. I try to rub it away.

"Here." He picks up an astringent-smelling rag and wipes it away. "If you need to remove the paint, use the clear stuff in this bottle. Takes it right off. We don't wear it outside of the village."

I squelch a bit of paint in my hands and place hand marks on his biceps. "Now we're even."

He laughs, clearly delighted that I marked him in return. Then he cleans his hands, and mine.

"Now, you're ready to meet my mother."

I yawn. My head buzzes, and that fuzzy feeling was back worse than ever.

"Great. I just hope I can stay awake long enough to make a convincing argument."

#

While I was being prepared, Brenica set the stage in the center of the main village for maximum impact. It's funny—no matter where in the world you go, or how the details differ, the expression of status remains the same: put yourself at the center of attention, and ensure other people wait on you hand and foot.

You can always tell who the guards are, too. Whether they're wearing armor or uniforms, they're the intimidating-looking ones holding weapons.

I do the same thing when I'm home at River Bend, although technically, my father is still ruling as king until I decide I'm ready to step up and take over leadership.

*I should call him.*

We haven't spoken much since our argument after the bridge collapse. All I have to report are my own minor victories in Oceanside, which cause him to demand I return to River Bend. Every time I call Saskaya to check on Lorcan, she curtly informs me there's no change in his condition and she'll call me if there is, so I've stopped checking in as often. If my father had heard from Rohan, he'd have called me right away. With no meaningful updates to discuss, we've both been avoiding contact.

Which hurts. My father and I have always been close, until now.

Brenica plucks a round fruit from a basket placed at her side. I drop to one knee, praying I'm not flashing the entire village in this skimpy skirt, and wait for her to speak.

“Princess Raina, you are the first outsider we have welcomed into the Ansi village in five hundred years.”

That's interesting. From the way Tovian described it, I thought they had occasional visitors. A misperception on my part.

“Majesty, I am honored by your hospitality—”

“I am not finished speaking.”

I'd risen to my feet, and now I tilt my head to indicate I was listening. I don't drop back down, though.

“Give me one reason why we should fight with you against the invasion.” Brenica says imperiously.

Briefly, I outline the same reasons I'd given Tovian. “If the invaders capture the island, you won't be able to hide forever. Your secrecy cannot last. If you fight with us, and we win this war, I vow we will leave you in peace if that is what you wish.”

“You presume to speak for the Auralian princess?”

A lump lodges in my throat.

“I know her well enough to give you my word that Zosia would honor such a promise.”

Brenica eyes me thoughtfully. “You are friends.”

“Yes.” I refuse to cry in front of this stern woman. I’m prone to tearing up. Gods know I’ve had to bottle up my emotions to get through this summer of fire and hardship. But suddenly, I’m having trouble keeping my shit together.

“And she is yet missing?”

“Also, yes,” I confirm. Fear splinters my heart. If she’s been captured...I hate not knowing whether she’s okay or not.

“What is it you wish my people to do?”

Right. Focus on the next steps. “We’ve managed to interrupt the enemy’s supply lines from the port in Oceanside to the north. Their fighters have razed villages, set the Grasslands district on fire, and taken over most towns and villages between here and The Walled City.”

“You haven’t answered my question, Princess.”

I swallow. I am not up to this conversation in my depleted state. Still, I have to try. Ephram and Luza are counting on me. I can't let Orisa be recaptured.

“We need reinforcements. Fighters to work hand-in-hand with us and drive the invaders back out to sea. We're badly outnumbered.”

Brenica cocks one eyebrow skeptically. “They have technology I've never before witnessed. My son tells me they ride mechanical horses.” She mimes revving a motorcycle. “He says they have sticks that shoot pellets that can kill a man in seconds. I have witnessed such atrocities first-hand on the ridge.”

“You should not have gone up there,” remonstrates the man sitting beside her. I realize with a start that he must be Tavian's father.

“I go where I please.” Brenica rebukes her husband mildly. “Princess Raina, I cannot give you what you ask. My first priority is to protect my people. We have enough supplies to last through the cold season.”

Not that it ever gets very cold in southern Auralia, but there's enough of a shift in the weather that certain plants go dormant in the winter months.



Zosia would love studying this stuff. She once smuggled seeds into Scotland just to keep experimenting with them while we were at school, even though she risked creating a diplomatic incident and, more worryingly, introducing an invasive species.

“With trade cut off, we won’t last the year.”

“We don’t need a year, Tovian” Brenica barely glances at her son. “We need a few months to see whether the Myseči and Auralian contingents can come together and defeat the enemy. It will be a chance for them to prove that the schism between the tribes that drove us into hiding five hundred years ago is truly mended. Perhaps then we will assist you with the rebuilding efforts.” Brenica sounds bored.

“But there might not *be* a victory unless you help us now.”

I can’t hold in my frustration any longer. Tovian cuts me a sharp look. I know I’ve blown it in that moment. Despair tugs at me.

Gods damn everything, leadership is *hard*. No wonder Zosia hated being forced into it.

“Rest, Princess. You may remain here as my son’s guest.” Her gaze flicks, not to the first time, to her son’s marks on my body. Acute self-awareness sizzles down my spine. “He will see you to his quarters.”

That’s the end of the debate. What a way to meet your possible-boyfriend’s family. It’s so fucked up.

“Come, Sunshine. Let’s put you to bed.”

It’s barely midafternoon, but I’ve been awake for over thirty-six hours and I’m dead on my feet. I trudge wearily up the winding spiral ramp. We pass openings carved into the cliffside along the way. Rooms. Leather flaps tanned to closely match the color of the volcanic rock cover each entrance. Some are folded back. I catch glimpses of low beds piled with furs.

A gurgling sound brings my head up. A system of wooden pipes are fastened to the rock facing.

“Ansi villages might not be as fancy as what you have in Oceanside or at River Bend, but we have running water and everything, Princess. You’ll be comfortable here.”

“I wasn’t questioning it.” A yawn nearly cracks my jaw in two. Gently, Tovian slides one arm around my waist, bare

skin on bare skin. The pathway is just wide enough for the two of us to walk side-by-side. My hair sticks sweatily to my back. Near the top, Tovia folds back a flap and gestures me inside.

It's several degrees cooler inside. A shiver rushes over my skin as I register the change in temperature. The cavern is tall enough for Tovia to stand upright. Even the prince's chamber isn't especially large. Daily life clearly centers around the fire pit where the village gathers. Private quarters don't seem to be meant for much more than sleeping.

I stare at the low bed frame piled with furs. Then at him.

"Listen, Raina, we don't have to do anything you don't want—"

I cut him off with a kiss. He grunts and rocks back on his heels, slipping one arm around my waist to anchor me against his hard chest. Tovia's low chuckle rumbles through me, a tickle in the back of my brain. It's the lightest, happiest feeling I've had in months. I clutch at him with desperate strength.

"I want to," I whisper against his mouth when we part for breath.

He scoops me up. I'm short and small-boned, but I'm not feather-light for my size. I've gained a lot of muscle during this summer of hardship. He picks me up like I'm nothing. I hook my legs around his waist. The skirt lacings bite into my skin, fighting every inch of lost territory as it rides up my thigh. My newly-bare pussy meets the leather-encased ridge of his cock. I shudder at the contact.

Tovian grinds against me. I moan against his cheek. His hands are on my bare ass, supporting me while I climb him like a tree. He kisses my neck right beneath my ear. I'm so beset with sensation that I barely hear what he says next.

“Part of me is grateful for this stupid war, Sunshine. If you hadn't come fleeing into my territory, we'd never have met.”

“I'll never be grateful to those bastards. But I am so glad to have found you.”

He drops me onto the low-slung bed. The temptation to roll back in the pile of furs and zonk out is strong, but I'm not passing up another opportunity to be with Tovian.

Life is too precarious not to try and seize what I want.

“Other way around. I’m the one who found you, Sunshine—” He cuts off with a grunt when I sit upright, my face conveniently at cock level, and deftly tug the laces of his shorts open. I don’t bother pushing them down past his knees. I’m officially a fan of Ansi clothes. Easy access.

He’s already hard. I stroke him twice, give one experimental lick, and suck the rounded head between my lips.

Tovian’s entire body tenses.

I can feel exhaustion hazing my mind with shimmering unreality again. I’ve never in my life been this forward with a man. Not unless you count proposing marriage to someone who was obviously in love with my best friend, but that’s a different kind of delusion.

Immediately, I realize I’ve set myself to a task I might not be capable of completing. Tovian’s cock is huge, and I stuck half of it into my mouth without thinking about a strategy. I change the angle. Tears well in my eyes and drip. I’m choking on him.

Great start. Idiot.

Determined, I ease back fractionally and inhale. The feeling that I’m dying eases. Tovian tents his fingertips on my

scalp. He makes a sound, and I realize he hasn't noticed my discomfort. My embarrassment is quickly replaced with excitement.

I take a moment to catch my breath, licking the underside. He groans and slides his hand to the back of my head. I have to crane upward a little, but the bed is perfectly positioned for this.

*Stop thinking and enjoy it.*

I do. In between bloodshed, explosions, and planning, I've imagined doing this for months. I'm done letting the world get in the way.

This time, I'm able to relax enough to take him all the way. He's still huge, filling my mouth and bringing tears to my eyes, but I manage. The tensing of his muscles beneath my hands at his hips has me squirming with my own desire.

“Fuck, Raina, I'm close—”

Determined to see this through, I move one hand to the portion of his cock I can't get my mouth around and squeeze. He swells, thighs shaking as he comes. If not for his hand at the back of my head I'd slip off. I give into the pulsing of his

hips, moaning around his cock, until Tovia n releases me with a soft grunt.

He exhales harshly and sticks his fingers through his hair. I lay back, taking in his compact, muscular body and sunset-hued skin. His gaze drops to my breasts. I arch my back invitingly and beckon him down.

“Let’s get this off you.” He kneels between my thighs, shoving the furs out of the way. I sit up halfway, trying to get at the lacings, which are placed in such a way that the top portion of my outfit can only come off over my head. Tovia n deftly loosens them and tugged. He knows his way around these getups, and I’m not going to overthink it. I strip the garment over my head and down my long hair before tossing it on the floor.

Naked, I recline on the bed.

Tovia n sits back on his heels, drinking in the sight of me. I’d never been *looked at* with such hunger. Even though I’m so tired I’m hallucinating, it feels real, and it’s what I need in this moment. A chance to feel desirable, to feel good, when this entire summer has been one catastrophe after another.

He skims warm palms up my ribs, covering my breasts.

“Fuck, Raina.”

I can't summon words. I play with his hair as he sucks my nipple between his teeth. The light scrape makes me cry out. With his free hand, he traces the outline of my dripping pussy.

“Gods, Raina. You're so wet.”

His groan of pure need as he delves inside me will forever be the sexiest sound I've ever heard. We twisted, writhing around one another until we lay side-by-side on the narrow bed with him half on top of me, his hand between my parted thighs, his hips rocking mindlessly against my thigh with his hardening cock trapped between us. Hurried kisses pressed to cheeks and lips and throats. I nip his earlobe and savor his shudder.

Tovian grinds the heel of his palm against my clit. The crest crashes over me. I cling to his broad shoulders, panting.

“Raina.” His hands are on my hips, his beautiful eyes fixed on me. “We don't need to take things farther. You're spent.”

Fatigue hits me like a freight train. I collapsed forward, breathing in Tovian's scent. He cradles me, stroking my hair. I



don't want to admit it, but I need reassurance almost more than I need the sex.

"What about you?" I mumbled into the crook of his neck.

"You already took care of me."

"I mean, what if you run off and I don't see you again?"

"We're going to get a handle on this war, and then we'll take all the time we need, Sunshine."

*But what if things end for us the way they did for Zosia and Lorcan?* I don't want to lose our chance to be together, waiting for some perfect time when we'd be free to be together. If I've learned one thing, it's that the perfect time will never come.

You take the happiness you can get when it's there. Or you risk losing it.

I palm his still-hard cock. He moves my hand away, brings it to his lips, and presses a kiss to my knuckles.

"Let it be, Sunshine. Next time, we'll do this right."

"How do I know there will be a next time? You keep slinking away every time we meet. I never know when I'm going to see you next."

He stills. “There’s no space for me in your world right now.” Kissing my temple, he says, “I’ll still be here when you’ve stabilized the country and found your friends.” Seeing my disappointment, he adds, “Let’s not rush this.”

“It’s been months since we first met.”

I hate and love how well he understands me. I cannot believe I stumbled across this man while fleeing for my life. I don’t deserve him. This can’t last.

But oh, how I want it to.

“That’s not the only obstacle. My tribe doesn’t take well to outsiders any more than yours does. When I claim the throne...”

I drop into heavy sleep mid-sentence, jolted briefly back to consciousness when he eases out from the bed.

“Where are you going?” I mumble. Tovian kisses my cheek. Sunlight streams through the flap when he pulls it back, but I can’t resist the lure of sleep for another minute.

“To speak with my mother. She needs more convincing.”

“Tovi.”

He glances up.

“I have to get back to the camp,” I mumble but my eyes were already falling shut.

He squeezes my hand. “Rest up, Sunshine.”

The flap falls, and I’m pulled under into dreamless sleep. When I awaken, it’s dark and I’m alone but for a small red dragon perched inquisitively on the end of the bed.

“Hello, there.”

It chitters and darts away.

*Tovian.*

He should have been back hours ago.

I bolt out of the bed, fumbling to get dressed, and storm out in search of my missing lover.

## Chapter 13

“He left without me?”

I can't believe it. I slept all through the night, for at least twelve hours, during which time Tovia managed to get Brenica's permission to lead a contingent of fighters to Oceanside.

Leaving me behind.

“You needed rest.” The queen offers a piece of fruit to a rotund blue and yellow dragon. I didn't really notice them yesterday, which is a mark of how out of it I was, but there are dragons everywhere in the village. Small ones, medium ones, even larger ones sunning themselves on the rocks. “You have done what was necessary. A princess is not expected to fight, much less for people who are not her own tribe.”

Several responses stick in my throat. *We are all in this together. I was taught by the best warrior this nation has ever known. I might not have Lorcan's innate sense of strategy or boldness in battle, but I'm no slouch with a spear.*

Brenica's argument is the same one my father made when he was trying to keep me at River Bend. I need to check in with him as soon as my phone is charged again—if only to prove I'm still alive.

But first, I have to get back to Ephram and Luza.

“Where are you going?” Brenica says to my back, astonished and definitely offended.

“To Oceanside.”

“Stubborn girl.” Brenica clicks her tongue. “Two hundred strong men went to aid your friends. Your presence is superfluous.”

I turn, walking backward several steps, and flash her a grin. “If you think I'm going to miss the Ansi fighters in action, Majesty, you're badly mistaken.”

I trip over a basket of eggs, sending them rolling. None broke. Hard-boiled, I guess. A woman muttered curses at me as she bends to collect them.

“I'm not useless in a battle, Brenica,” I call over my shoulder, striding up the spiraling ramp. The clothes I arrived in were rags, but Tovian has a stash of clothes from the outside world. I'll find something to fit me. “People need to believe

there's hope for a future. Belief is stronger than blades and bullets. It can mean the difference between victory and surrender.”

Lorcan's words, not mine. A memory of him mid-battle, fierce and fast, flecked with blood, flits through my mind. He believed in this country with every fiber of his being. He believed in Zosia when she didn't believe in herself.

He's got to come back.

I can't stop fighting until he does.

#

There's only one problem: I can't find my way out of The Boscage without a guide.

Once she saw that I wouldn't be deterred, Brenica reluctantly assigned me one. Despite her disapproval, Brenica also gave me a set of outsider clothing to wear.

Tash is lean and strong, like most young Ansi, and she leads me through the forest like a bird evading prey—with quick, sure steps, followed by a pause, then another short sprint. In this fashion, she guides me to the edge of the jungle.

We don't speak much along the way. I'm too breathless from trying to keep up to make conversation. She's too

focused on watching out for wild dragons, notably, the big one.

“Ada likes to stay further south,” Tash informed me when I asked. “This time of year, there are plenty of nests to raid.”

“They’re cannibals?”

“Big dragons will eat smaller ones.” Her gaze flicks to the green-scaled dragon gliding from tree to tree ahead of us. “Only the tamest dragons are permitted in the camp. Like Queen Brenica’s pet. Believe it or not, that was once a fighting lizard.”

“Fighting, how?”

“If you get to your camp in time, you’ll see. They fly down from the trees and tackle their prey from above. They can also swim.” She eyes the river warily before signaling for me to cross it.

“Do you ever go into Oceanside, Tash? Or trade in the Grasslands?”

“I used to. Women don’t leave the village anymore. It’s too dangerous for us.” Her smooth brow crinkles. “Only Tovian and his friends leave the safety of the Ansi now, to

keep Brenica informed about the war. She is more worried about the invasion than she wants to let on.”

“What makes you say that?”

Tash shrugged. “The elders think we should barricade ourselves inside the village until the conflict passes. She hasn’t done it yet, but she might at any moment. Once that happens, if Tavian is on the outside, he will be on his own.” She turned to me, serious. “Brenica tries not to play favorites, but Tavian is her favored son. She doesn’t have a daughter to carry on her line. She wants Tavian to marry the next Ansi queen.”

Well, shit. That’s a lot of resistance to overcome.

How I’d love to just spend a few weeks getting to know Tavian on an intimate level instead of our paths crossing haphazardly as we lurch from crisis to crisis.

Tash and I fall silent at the sound of buzzing motors cutting through the gentle forest sounds. A bright yellow bird takes wing.

“Ahead is the edge of the forest,” Tash says quickly, her eyes wide. “I must leave you here.”

“Go.” I have a plan. For once, those damned motorbikes are going to work for me, not against me. “I will be safe



enough from here.”

She clasps my hand. “You’d better keep your promise, Princess, or Tovian will hold me responsible.”

“Tell Brenica thank you. To all of you.” I hold her hand in both of mine for minute before letting go, hoping that gesture conveyed the depth of my appreciation. I know Brenica doesn’t want any part of this.

I don’t either, but both of us have stepped up.

Tash whistles. Her dragon rustles branches overhead, and the two disappear into the forest.

Carefully, I lay my trap.

#

Dusk paints the sky overhead teal and coral as I zoom down the dirt road and pull to a hard stop, sliding in the soft surface. The site of our former encampment is engulfed in flames.

It wasn’t hard to clothesline the bike’s previous rider with a rope strung between two trees. The fall snapped his back. My blade at his throat was a mercy killing—or at least, that’s what I tell myself.

I'm trained to be a healer. I find myself crossing the line into outright murder more and more often.

How did Lorcan stand carrying the weight of all those deaths...

A sharp screech brings my head up in the nick of time to find a dragon sailing right toward me, jaws parted, claws out.

I throw myself sideways and land on the dirt, my helmet thudding into the turf. The animal overshoots, twisting as it lands, its tail smashing the protective glass over my face and knocking the helmet loose. I scramble up with my heart thudding wildly in my throat. I can't see through the smashed glass, so I get the helmet off and throw it at the animal in an attempt to slow it down.

The dragon rushes at me again. I turn to run—straight into the upraised arms of a bare-chested man about to thrust a spear through my midsection.

The weapon lowers. Iron hands manacle my biceps. He tugs me hard against his bare chest before my panicked brain registers who it is: Tavian. There's a scratch on his cheek and a deeper cut on his shoulder, but he seems otherwise unharmed. He gestures at the dragon behind me. The big lizard shrieks irritably and trots off.

Damn, they're fast.

“What’s going on?”

“You were right about the attack. Ephram and Luza turned it into trap, but their plan almost backfired. There were more pirates than they expected, and they had new machines.”

An explosion lights up the sky behind us. I cover my ears. Tovian hugs me closer. Protective. I breathe in smoke and sweat. The iron tinge of blood.

Despite the battle raging all around us, it might as well be the two of us in our own world.

When the explosion’s roar fades into a crackling fire, he gives me a little shake.

“What are you doing here?” Tovian demands.

“You left! Without me!”

Tovian’s teeth flash in a wide grin. I smack his arm.

“You could have woken me up!”

“And interrupt your beauty rest?” He winks, then strokes my cheek with his thumb. “You were wrecked.”

“But I wasn’t here!”

“Raina. Being a leader doesn’t mean you have to be in the center of the action all the time. In fact, it’s better that you aren’t.” He tips his head, peering at me. “Didn’t your knight friend teach you that?”

I open my mouth, then snap it shut.

No. Lorcan never taught me that. His job was to be in the center of the action, no matter how dangerous. Besides, I’ve never been the center of his world the way Zosia was. If it came down to a choice between saving my life and hers, he’d have chosen Zosia every time.

He taught me to fight so I could save myself.

Why didn’t I see it at that time?

I can’t meet Tovia’s eyes.

Gently, he says, “You missed all the action, Sunshine. We’re rounding up the stragglers now.”

“I know,” I mumble. “Come on. Let’s assess the damage.”

The camp is a total loss. We regroup a short distance into The Boscage, with guards watching for dragons. The fire and noise should keep them away, but you never knew for sure. Someone ought to put a tracking device on Big Ada.

Eater. Whatever.

There were wounds to tend and bones to set. I had no time to dwell on the past. I must stay in the complicated present, with no set path into our uncertain future.

All I can do is cling desperately to hope—to Tovian—and keep fighting.

# PART TWO: FALL

## September

### Chapter 14

“Can you believe this?” I tug the wet rag up over my face. Smoke stings my eyes. We were still several kilometers away from the raging fires, but close enough to scare the horses. “We’ll never put the fires out.”

After the encampment attack, Tovian and his people rounded up their dead and took them home. I gave him a satellite phone and a charging stick. He didn’t quite understand how it was supposed to work, and we’d only managed to connect twice in the weeks since.

The Oceanside contingent split into three groups. Civilian survivors were sent to infiltrate the port city and wait for further orders. An insurgent contingent used the cliffside caves to harass and attack the pirates, stealing shipments

wherever they could. A third group comprised of fighters and refugees willing to help organize survivors moved north with me into the Grasslands District.

Our mission was twofold: to help any survivors who needed it, and somehow stitch together a group of traumatized Auralians willing to fight the fires.

There are far more survivors than we have supplies to aid. I hate that I'm disappointing people who've lost everything.

Worse, I'm not sure what to do about the group of orphans we've collected. Some, we've been able to leave with people from their destroyed villages. Others ride with us in wagons as we search for any family willing to take them in.

Orisa lowers her binoculars.

"We can dig trenches, along there." She points. "We can create a fire break and wait for the flames to die down. One good rain will douse the fires enough for us to move in and remove any remaining fuel."

One good rain would have done us a world of good. This has been the driest summer anyone can remember. It's like nature itself is trying to help the invaders win.

“We have fuck-all luck,” I mutter, in English. Orisa casts me a quizzical glance. Not many people spoke English or French before the invasion, and now everyone associates both languages with the pirates. I don’t bother to translate my thoughts for her. “All right. Let’s get out the plows and shovels.”

An hour later I’m interviewing a soot-streaked woman holding a wailing infant, with two small children clinging to her skirt and another child around ten years old hovering sullenly behind her. An air of exhaustion clings to them.

“Where is your husband?” I ask, briskly writing down the details.

“Gone to Oceanside to fight.” She hoists the baby higher on her hip. “Haven’t heard from him since. What supplies the pirates didn’t take when they attacked the first time went up in flames when the fire swept through. We have nothing. Nowhere to go.”

The mix of panic and despair in her voice would crack my heart if this weren’t a variation on the same story I’ve already heard twenty times today. I do my best to project empathy.



With no safe places to send the survivors, half the time, we're forced to send them north, to Canavale, or as far as Lorcan's home district in the mountains. We've made slow progress, what with having to leave work crews behind to repair buildings as best we could. Some decide they'd rather travel with us, straining what food supplies we've been able to muster.

At this rate, we won't make it back to Central Auralia until Midwinter.

Forget looking for Zosia. We can barely stitch together an army.

Frustrated, I finish writing down the woman's details.

"Have they found the princess yet?" she asks.

"Not yet."

"Are you sure she's coming back?"

*No.*

"Yes. We will find her. We think she and King Rohan are inside the castle, but until we find a way to clear the Sentinels..." I thrust the ledger where we're recording details of our refugees at Orisa. "Finish this, please. I need to make a call."

Saskaya picks up on the first ring, which tells me everything I need to know. Lorcan isn't awake, and she hasn't found a way to disable the machines she assembled to protect us. Given that the only place she can get reception is on top of the Temple Plateau, she must be out pacing. Again.

"Any progress?" I ask without hope.

"I said I'd call you if there was anything to report," she snaps.

I've gotten used to having my head bit off whenever I call, but this time, I'm in a similar mood.

"Have you found a way around the Sentinels yet?"

Her groan is akin to a lion's roar. I interpret that as a no.

"People are asking where she is, Sas. They're looking for leadership, and they don't want it from me."

"I know that, Raina. I've tried everything. Whoever got into my lab managed to override the main control function completely. There's nothing I can do."

"What about the power source?"

She sighs heavily. "It doesn't run out. That blue liquid doesn't give out."

“Ever?”

“I have vials of that shit still powering machines I made before you were born. Never needs a recharge. Completely safe to handle.”

Miraculous stuff. Too bad it’s working against us. Too bad the only place that blue energy liquid exists is in the Sun Temple where Lorcan’s unresponsive body lies floating in a vat of it. It would be a hell of an export product for our impoverished nation.

“Any improvement from Lorcan?”

I shouldn’t bother asking.

I swallow past the lump in my throat, tasting ash. *Come on, man. You have to survive so I can fix my mistakes. Get up. Fight for her.*

“I said I’d call if there was any news. Believe me, I want to get home to my son and my husband. The only reason I’m going out of my mind in this stupid bunker is because I can’t leave that kid alone. If Lorcan doesn’t wake his ass up soon, we’re not going to have a country to save.”

Saskaya is habitually grumpy and curt by nature.

My patience, however, also hangs by a thread.

“Sas. What if he doesn’t wake up?”

“Then we’ll find Zosia ourselves. But don’t even think it, Raina. Lorcan is the only person who’s ever managed to disable one of those stupid Sentinels. He’s going to wake up, find Zosia, and they’re going to give this fractured nation something to fight for. Believe it. He’s relentless when he wants something, and the only thing he’s ever wanted is Zosia.”

Ouch. The truth stings.

“That boy won’t let a little thing like death stop him from finding her.” Saskaya draws a ragged breath. “I should go check on him.”

She disconnects without saying goodbye. I stick the phone in my pocket. Orisa nudges me, holding out the notebook of survivors, and gestures into the distance.

“Tovi,” I breathe.

I fling myself into his arms, standing on tiptoe for a kiss. I haven’t seen him since the camp attack.

“Hi, Sunshine.”

“I missed you.”

He strokes my hair and kisses my forehead. There is no safety to be found in this war-torn land, but I find it in his arms.

Yet I felt his hesitation, too.

“Is there any news of your friends?”

I shake my head. “Lorcan is still a vegetable, and Zosia is still missing.”

Emotion flickers over his features. “And you? Are you holding up?”

“We’re doing okay. It’s hard, slow work. Every time we manage to dig a firebreak, the pirates will attack.”

“Destroying the ferry was never going to hold them off for long.”

“No. We keep destroying the replacements they put in place, but they keep rebuilding them as fast as we can take them down. They’re pissed.”

“So are we.”

I glance at the long line of refugees waiting to be recorded and allotted food and a place to sleep.

“The invaders have guns and an endless supply of volunteers. We have a lot of traumatized farmers.”

“That just means we have nothing left to lose, Sunshine.”

I can't help but grin. He side-arm-hugs me and says, “You haven't lost yet. You've put together a small army, led it to outsized victories, and managed to keep them from making any advancements for months. You've performed miracles.”

My stomach flips. I couldn't decide whether to be embarrassed or proud of what I'd accomplished. It didn't feel like very much, but when he frames it that way, I feel like less of a failure.

“Are you staying?”

“For a while. I've come to aid the mission.”

“Brenica permitted it?”

His expression flattens.

“Not exactly.”

Oh, no. I don't want to cause a rift between him and his family.

“Tovi, I want to tell her how grateful we are—”

“She knows, Sunshine.” He turned away contemplatively. “She’ll come around eventually. My mother is afraid. Everyone is.”

“You’re not.”

“Yeah, I am. I’m afraid of what they’ll do to this country if we don’t push them out. I’m afraid it will mean the end of the Ansi way of life.” He brushes my cheek with the back of one knuckle. “Most of all, I’m afraid of what they’ll do to you if they catch you.”

A sickening feeling roils my stomach. Zosia is our strength, carrying thousands of weight of cultural significance. She is also our weakness. Her daughters will be the heirs to the Auralian throne. The monarchy is central to our whole culture. What easier way to destroy it than to kidnap our queen, force her to bear children, and take them from her to raise in her place?

They raped Orisa. They wouldn’t hesitate to do the same thing to Zosia.

The Čovari were meant to prevent that from happening. Their tribe’s existence is dedicated to the continuation of the matriarchal line. Lorcan was their secret weapon.

“They won’t catch me,” I say with confidence I don’t feel.

“Not without going through me, first.”

The corners of my mouth tug upward.

“What?” he asks.

“Nobody has ever been protective of me like that before.” I buss a quick kiss to his cheek. “I like it. Come on. I’ll show you where I’m staying.”

As the highest-ranking person on the field, I’m always accorded a measure of privacy, however little it might be. Tonight, we’ve pitched camp inside a burned-out village. Canvas draped over soot-stained stone walls form our makeshift shelters. I have my own tent but this isn’t exactly the ideal the time to get reacquainted in a physical sense.

However, I am done waiting for *ideal*.

I’m giddy at the thought of finally getting to experience Tovian. For about ten seconds. Then we turn into the charred skeleton of a one-room house and I realize: there’s not ideal, and then there’s downright rude.

Orisa has arranged for my quarters to be guarded 24/7, which means there’s a scowling man whose brow furrows



further at the sight of my companion.

“He’s with me,” I inform the man. “You can leave us.”

He moves outside, leaving us a modicum of privacy. I sigh. Unlike the Ansi, Auralians expect people to keep sexual activities out of sight.

“Nice place,” Tovian says, glancing around.

“Best in the camp.” I sigh, surveying the neatly made cot, the portable iron stove and the water bucket heating on it through his eyes. Not sleeping on the ground, having a fire to keep the night chill away, and hot water qualify as luxuries, but it’s barely adequate for human habitation.

“I wasn’t being critical. It’s homey as long as it doesn’t rain.”

He tips his chin up, eyeing the patched and worn canvas secured over the living area.

“Looks clear tonight.”

“I can’t remember a drier summer.”

“Many people have made the same observation. I presume you didn’t come all this way to discuss the weather?”

He laughs.

“No, Sunshine. I most certainly did not.”

I grin and loop my arms around his shoulders. He brings me in for a lingering kiss. It feels so good to be pressed against him. It’s been weeks since I touched anyone like this. I’m almost drunk on the contact.

“I came to find you.”

“Oh, goody, I hoped so.”

He laughs again, then turns serious. “I came because my mother has kicked me out.”

“I—oh.” Shit.

“After we fought alongside you, the Ansi elders were furious. They wanted to replace Brenica.”

Fair to say I’ll never be welcomed as daughter-in-law, then.

“She tried to convince me to marry her successor.”

My heart drops through the floor. Or ground, rather, since the wood floor was burned to ash, which we swept out before setting up camp.

“I’m guessing you didn’t.”

His mouth quirks up at the corner. I can't help but smile.

“Would I be here if I had, princess?”

I launch myself onto a tiptoe kiss.

“She maintained her hold on power. But Brenica told me to go and find you, satisfy my curiosity about the outside world, and learn about your people. If I still decide I want you, she'll respect my decision.”

But his people would not. That went unspoken.

“What do you think, Sunshine? Can you take time away from the war effort to take me home?”

Torn between shock and excitement, I bounce on the balls of my feet.

“Yes! Orisa can manage things. Ephram and Luza have the Oceanside resistance under control. My father has been asking me to come home for months.” I clap my hands. “He'll be very interested to meet you. We can swing by the Sun Temple and check on Lorcan and Saskaya on the way.”

Tovian wants to meet my family. I still don't believe he's serious about marriage, but apparently he is?

“Getting to River Bend will be dangerous.”

“Not if we go through Canavale. We can blend in with the refugees.”

“Aren’t the pirates in charge there?”

“Yes, for now. We don’t have enough fighters to take it back. The danger is that the longer this goes on, the more people will decide the invaders aren’t so terrible. They’ll make their peace with the new reality and stop resisting.”

“Which is why you need Princess Zosia. To inspire them.”

“Yes.”

“And you need Lorcan to find her.”

I nod, too overcome to say more. He understands. I can’t describe what a relief it is.

“What do you say we swing past the castle and get the lay of the land, Sunshine?”

“You’d do that for me?”

He kisses the tip of my nose. It should be ridiculous. It is, I guess, but it’s so cute and affectionate.

“You’ve got it wrong, you know.”

“Hm?”

“You’re the sunshine, Tavian. When you show up, my day gets better, no matter how bad it’s been. And there have been a lot of terrible days lately. For everyone.”

His arm tightens around my waist. His other hand tangles in the loosening braid at the back of my skull. This kiss is sweet and slow, full of emotions we haven’t had the time or space to express with words.

He tugs the shirt out of my waistband. At least I’m not covered in filth for once. His hands skimming up my ribs to the close-fitted undershirt holding my breasts. Tavian has no trouble removing ordinary Auralian clothing either. A momentary impulse to ask him just how much time he’s spent disrobing women while pretending to blend in among Oceanside’s easygoing population flickers through my brain before I decide I don’t care. Nor do I wish to explain my sexual history, either. Neither of us are virgins, and yet this feels completely new.

I tug his tunic up. He shrugs out of it, leaving an undershirt, belted trousers, underwear, socks, and boots to remove. He makes quick work of my bodice, blunt fingers popping small buttons with ease. I shiver when he tosses it aside.

Unhurried, he rests his hands gently on my waist. His gaze skims down, then back up to hold mine.

“No injuries.”

“Is that why you needed to remove my clothes? To make sure I’m still in one piece?”

He bites back a grin. “I’m not finished with my inspection.”

I trace the scar on his shoulder from the cut he sustained during the camp attack.

“You’ve healed nicely.”

“Thanks to your ministrations.”

I put six stitches in him before he left that night.

“I’d better check to make sure the rest of your injuries healed.”

He smirks as I remove his undershirt—with his assistance. From there, it’s a quick process of unbuckling belts and pushing down fabric. With our boots kicked off, we tumble onto the tippy, narrow cot, naked.

“This is no place for my first time with a princess,” he comments. For balancing purposes, Tavian is on the bottom,

with me straddling his thighs. I have the ragged blanket wrapped around my shoulders. More and more of my hair is escaping the braid with each passing second.

“Considering where we met, this seems about right.”

Honestly, at this point I don't care where we do it. I just want to get on with it.

“You should have a real bed, at least.”

“We could wait until we get to River Bend,” I say sweetly.

Tovian groans and pulls me down, devouring me with hot kisses down my neck. His hands are hot and insistent at my breasts. I'm already wet and wanting, so I take him and slick his head along my center.

His palm moves to the small of my back. He stills as I press down, a gasp escaping my lips. He fills me completely. I bite my lower lip and ease the pressure, trying to adjust to his size. Tovian's blunt fingers dig into my hip.

I exhale and sink down again, this time seating myself fully. There's an edge of discomfort, but I've needed this. Badly.

“Okay?” he grits out.

“Yeah. You?”

A laugh ghosts pasts his lips. “I fan-fucking-tastic.”

“Great.” I adjust, placing my hands on his muscular shoulders. “Let’s do this.”

He grips my hips, but lets me set the pace. Honestly, if he’d climbed on top of me and taken control, this could easily have been the worst sex of my life. It’s quite the opposite.

Tovian lets me get accustomed to him before taking over. He strokes my clit with his thumb, circling it in time with the movement of my hips.

I come, my back and thighs stiffening, eyes fluttering closed, and nails digging into his shoulders.

“Good little princess,” he says, low and throaty, before easing me off his cock and bringing me alongside his front. I’m not limp and boneless yet, but judging from the molten heat in his eyes, I will be.

Part of this doesn’t feel real. He doesn’t feel real.

“Sometimes I think you’re a fantasy.”

“How so?” Tovian enters me from behind. He drapes my top thigh over his and reaches down to circle my clit.



“Did I conjure you to cope with the danger of this summer?”

“That’s how you know for sure I’m real.”

He rocks forward, supporting my leg with his. I don’t have to do anything, though I try, angling my ass backwards so he can have free movement. “I’m not following, Tovi.”

“If the bad is real, then the good is, too. They’re inextricable. Like we are.”

He proves his point by setting a relentless pace. I’ve never come twice with a man before. Half the time, I didn’t even come once. My expectations were so low. Tovian knows what he’s doing, and he’s giving this his best effort. It’s tender and sweet and filthy as fuck. He kisses me. I have to crane my neck for it, but it’s so worth it.

Then I’m holding on for dear life while he sets a pace that steals my breath. A sheen of sweat breaks out on my skin. Yes. This is what I’ve needed. What I’ve yearned for the past three months. What I’ve wanted since long before.

I come a third time, right before he locks me in place and takes what he wants from me. It’s not gentle. It’s not

sweet. Tovian's rough and needy, unsparing. He knows I can take it, and I do, coming hard on his cock.

"Good, Sunshine," he grits out when I climax around him. I had no idea I had such a praise kink. From the first moment we met, he's made me feel good.

About myself.

Slowly, we relax into a puddle of cramped postcoital bliss.

That's when the rain starts falling.

"This is charming." Tovian peers up at the canvas.

"Atmospheric."

I wheeze-giggle.

"What?" Tovian asks with mock offence.

"Since when did you become a Scot?"

"A what?"

"A person from Scotland."

"What's a Scotland?"

I laugh. I can't stop laughing. We're squished together on a cot with a tattered blanket in the middle of a burned village, on a war-torn island, under a leaky canvas roof with a

fire that's bound to go out and our leadership missing, yet I've never been happier.

Tovian kisses my cheek. "I'm counting on you to show me the world, Sunshine."

I work my way around until I'm facing him on the narrow bed.

"I can't wait to show you everything, Tovi."

He squeezes my waist and sighs contentedly.

## Chapter 15

“What do you see?”

I lower the binoculars and pass them over without saying a word. Tovia lifts them to his eyes and fiddles with the knob between the lenses. He whistles.

“That’s a lot of Sentinels.”

“Thirty-six of them, according to Saskaya.”

“And they can all do that—” He mimes an explosion. I nod. During the weeks it took us to get here, skirting carefully around occupied villages, I told him about the night of the invasion the origin of those machines. Instead of attacking our enemies, they attacked us.

*I can't imagine so much destruction* was what he said when I asked him about it.

“Are these the same machines used in the war five hundred years ago?” he says now.

“I think so. Sas found them in a secret bunker in the Sun Temple. Spent most of her life trying to reassemble them.”

Tovian again looks over the wall. “The Ansi have stories about being hunted by walking machines. Legends. Stories we tell children around the fire before bed.” Pensively, he says, “If they’re true, Brenica will have every reason to keep the Ansi hidden.”

He hasn’t spoken much about his mother since his arrival. Part of me can’t believe he’s risking the wrath of his tribe to be here with me. I’m still grateful to have him at my side. I squeeze his hand. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“My ancestors were half the reason for the war that sent your people into hiding, Tovian. The Myseči were the ones who didn’t want to share the Moon Goddess Temple with the Auralians.”

“It’s five hundred years in the past, Sunshine.” He brought my hand to his lips and kissed it. “If this war reunites all the tribes, then we must keep fighting.”

My heart swells. I love this man. I should probably tell him that. It never feels like the right moment. Either we’re so in tune that it seems superfluous, or we’re fighting for our lives.

He twists to look over the wall again. We're half a kilometer from the broken stone rim that separates the castle from the fields to the south. When we tried to get closer, a Sentinel's shot chased us away.

"There's no sign of life, is there?"

Tovian, still squinting through the binoculars, points at a pockmarked tower. "Is that a light flickering?"

"Can't be. The hydroelectric system was damaged." But when he hands me the binocs, I see what he means. My pulse quickens. "Maybe?"

"Half the pane is broken. You can see a light on in the interior. It doesn't flicker like a candle would."

Anxious excitement surges through me.

"Someone is alive inside that wreck. It has to be Zosia." Queasiness in my stomach, a sickening mix of hope and fear. "Who else could it be? But if...if she and Rohan are stuck inside the castle, why don't they call? They had phones. There's electricity. The royal guards would have braved the rapids or tried to climb the cliff..."

I trail off when Tovian gestures at the sheer rock wall rising behind the castle, protecting the rear.

“Perhaps they tried. The Sentinels have been shooting at the cliffs, too.”

He’s right. The stark stone wall shows evidence of Sentinel blasts.

“But there’s the river...I know there were boats stored in the dock.”

“Look at the river. It’s almost as high as where the drawbridge used to be.”

Again, he’s right. Thanks to the rains that finally helped douse the fires in the Grasslands district, and the broken hydraulic system that channeled the waterfall’s force, the once-calm moat is a raging rapid.

“They’re in there,” I say with conviction that has no basis in reality. “I know it. We just have to find a way past those damned machines. She’s alive. She has to be.”

It’s the question on everyone’s lips. Every farmer clinging to a homestead, every orphan who’s lost their family, every man debating whether to leave his wife and children to fight for the Auralian resistance—all of them are looking for a sign of hope. A sign that we can win.

Without Zosia, we can’t.

As long as the Goddess Auralia's line sits on the throne, Her country will thrive. If the royal line falls, so does the nation. This island and Auralian matriarchy are inextricably entwined. Without her, we have no future to fight for. She *has* to be in there.

Now, I can tell them she's safe. She's in hiding at the castle. She'll come out when Lorcan wakes up and her personal guard is able to rescue her. Her *legendary* knight.

I grabbed Tovia's shoulders.

"Tovi! It's going to be okay! Zosia is in there, she has to be, we're going to get her back!"

A wide grin splits his face. I jump up and down, then tackle him in a tight hug. He lifts me off the ground. I tuck one strand of hair behind my ear. Our lips meet. A joyous kiss.

My phone blurts out an ill-timed *beep beep beep*.

"It's probably my father," I grumble. Tovia releases me. At least I can give my father good news for once. Someone is in the castle.

Tovia gathers our belongings, giving me privacy.

"It's not him." I stare at the name on the cracked screen of my sat phone. "It's Sas."



I press the device to my ear.

“Lorcan’s awake,” she says in a rush. Saskaya doesn’t get emotional, but there’s a tense undertone in her voice. “He woke up. He’s out of the tank.”

Chills run over my body like a thousand skittering spiders. It’s a sign. It has to be. This can’t be a coincidence.

“How is he?”

“Weak. Doesn’t remember much.”

My heart sinks. I knew this was a possibility. Traumatic brain injuries aren’t predictable. A minor one can cause major personality changes and cognitive impairment, or a severe injury can end in a full recovery. We won’t know Lorcan’s outcome for a while, but I have to believe he’ll come back to us.

Tears roll down my cheeks.

“Thank all the goddesses.” I motion Tovian over and whisper, “He’s awake. Lorcan is alive and he’s going to be okay.”

Tovian’s smile flattened fractionally, an off-key note buried in a crescendo. I registered it without understanding its

import. After four months of fighting in the face of despair, we finally had a crumb of optimism.

“That’s great, Sunshine,” he said tightly. “I can’t wait to meet him.”

“Sas, can we come and see Lorcan? We’re near the castle. It would only take us half a day to ride to the Temple Plateau.”

She won’t say yes. I know it. She already rebuffed our offer of a visit once. Still, I can’t help but try. “It might help his memory if I could come—”

“No,” Saskaya interrupts. “Don’t come. You couldn’t get into the Plateau anyway. I took the precaution of blowing up the stairway.”

“You did? When?” Why hadn’t she told me?

“In June, when I realized how exposed we were here on the Plateau. Sitting ducks for any pirates looking to raid a temple,” she says bitterly. Not without reason. Every temple between here and the Timberlands District has been looted. “Or, worse, by the Skía. Those traitors know what we’re hiding here and wouldn’t hesitate to take it.”

I’m silent for a minute.

“Okay. We can’t see him. Can I at least talk to him?”

Spikes of anxiety course through my body. I want proof of life. Everything feels so close to a turning point. I don’t understand why a sense of doom is seeping into the first moment of optimism after four months of relentless setbacks. Lorcan’s awakening should be a triumph.

Why doesn’t it feel like one?

“He’s asleep right now. I’ll call again when he’s awake.”

“Sure.” I stare blankly at my phone after we disconnected, until Tovian gently touches the small of my back.

“You okay, Sunshine?”

I swipe away the tears on my cheeks and exhale a shuddering breath. He tugs me into an embrace. My next words come out in a sob. “I just want everything to go back the way it was four months ago.”

Tovian stills. He traces light circles on my back. Comforting.

“Everything except the part where I met you,” I add belatedly. “Meeting you has been the one bright spot in this whole disaster.”

Rising on tiptoe, I press a kiss to his lips. He returns it softly. “I wouldn’t change anything if I meant I never got to meet you.”

“Even all the people who’ve died?” I tease, unsure whether I could handle the implications if he said it would still be worth it.

Tovian tilts his head and says somberly, “Not even that.”

A lump forms in my throat, preventing further speech. His tribe suffered losses, too. People he knew. Yet he still wouldn’t change anything that happened if it meant he wouldn’t meet me.

It’s the scariest thing anyone has ever said to me.

Love isn’t supposed to be easy. You have to work for things worth having.

Or were those misconceptions the reason I stayed stuck on Lorcan long after I should have let go?

“There’s no use in looking backward, Sunshine.”

“Right.” I exhale. “Speaking of which, we’d best get moving.”

In silence, we gathered our belongings and set out on horseback for River Bend.



## PART 2: AUTUMN

### October

#### Chapter 16

“Your castle is huge.”

Tovian, wide-eyed, takes it in as we ride over the elegant bridge connecting River Bend to the mainland.

“Thanks, I think.” I twist on my horse to smile at him.

“I mean, it’s pretty, too.”

“The Myesči are skilled masons. This castle is newer than Zosia’s. It has a more modern design, relatively. As castles go.”

Also, it hasn’t been shot up by Sentinels for months. River Bend is smaller than Zosia’s castle, which doesn’t really have a name, but ours was nicer even before the destruction.

“You must think our village is pathetic.”

He cannot possibly believe that. The Ansi way of life is more communal. Different, not worse, and certainly not

*pathetic.*

Glancing over, I see that he is, in fact, sincere. Tovian's capable of hiding his thoughts and emotions, but he doesn't do it habitually. Not like Lorcan did.

Used to, anyway. I haven't told Tovian about the bizarre conversation I had with him, and I don't intend to, either.

Belatedly, Lorcan asked if

"I like your village better than the formality here at River Bend, to be perfectly honest. It might take some getting used to."

I'm trying hard not to show how worried I am that he won't like my people. As curious as Tovian is about the world beyond The Boscage, he's often surprised by unfamiliar objects or different ways of doing things. He adjusts quickly, to his credit. But with all eyes on me, the prodigal daughter who defied king's orders to go and fight in a war, we'll be scrutinized from every angle. Every flaw magnified and dissected.

"I'm up to the challenge," he says blithely, and for a second, I think he's read my mind. "You were brave enough to

be the first outsider to set foot in Ansi Village in hundreds of years. You didn't protest when we demanded you bathe and dress in our style, or wear paint. You managed my formidable mother capably. If I can do half as well with your people, Sunshine, we'll be fine."

"You'll do better, Tovi. I know it." Reaching across the gap between our horses, I squeeze his hand. "I'm glad you're here."

In some ways our welcome isn't dissimilar to the one I received at Ansi Village. We hand off our horses and are relieved of our bags by a servant.

"His Majesty has assigned your esteemed guest to the eastern wing."

I frown. "That's on the other side of the castle from my rooms. Put him closer to my private chambers, please."

"I will see what I can do, Princess." He bows deeply.

Tovian says nothing until the servant was out of earshot. "I thought I would share your rooms."

"So did I." I can't decide whether putting Tovian in an entirely different wing is my father's way of showing disapproval, or of demonstrating respect for a most unusual



visitor. Ordinarily, the eastern wing is where Zosia and King Rohan stayed when they came to River Bend.

I guess Tovia and I will find out together.

“It feels so empty. Where is everyone?” I peer down desolate hallways. Barring the occasional guard or a uniformed maid, we saw no one.

Rather than allow Tovia to get settled in his assigned quarters, I take him to mine. My bag is already placed on a wooden stand. It stands out like a turd amongst the opulence.

I drape my travel-worn jacket over the chair beside my desk. Tovia stands rooted in place, taking it all in. The huge four-poster with a red canopy and silver tassels. The mirror and changing screen. The enormous armoire that holds only a portion of my extensive wardrobe. I’m a clotheshorse. So sue me. I can’t wait to have an excuse to wear something pretty for once.

“This is your room?”

“Since childhood,” I grin, throwing out my arms and twirling. “I have my own bathroom and everything.” I strip off the long-sleeved shirt I’ve worn for three days straight. “Come and check it out?”

Seconds later, Tavian's clothes are on the floor. Our mouths meet hungrily. Off went my bra. Down went my trousers. I kick them away, using his shoulder to balance while I strip off my socks.

Naked, I palm his cock. He groans against my mouth.

"I'm not sleeping away from you," he growls. "I want to wake up next to you like this." He skimmed one palm down my back and grabs my ass. "I want to wake up with your hair stuck to my skin and breathing in your scent."

I laughed. "I smell like horse."

"You smell like wildfires and salt."

"The smoke smell will never come out of my clothes."

"An excellent excuse to go naked."

I giggle. My lips met the curve of his shoulder. He scoops me up, legs wrapped around his waist, and carries me into the stone bathing enclosure. No glass. Only a single knob that turns on a stream of water heated to the perfect temperature.

Being a princess has its perks.

His teeth gaze over a sensitive spot on my throat. I spike my fingers into his hair, reveling in the crisp texture, molding

my palm to the contours of his skull. Warm water sluices over us. Weeks of weariness melt away. Unerringly, he finds my slick center and stroked, driving my need higher. Deeper. Faster. I clench around him and cry out, the sound muffled by face buried in the crook of his neck.

Tovian lets me ride it out on his clever fingers. Before my climax fully subsides, he hooks my leg over his forearm and drives inside me. My hand curls around the back of his neck and I moan, loudly, as he sets a vicious pace. I come again before the aftershocks from the first orgasm have worn off. The sound of our bodies slapping fills my ears.

His movement sharpens. He's close. I cup his face between my hands, trusting him not to let me fall, and kiss him. Tovian's arms lock around my waist. We come in unison, panting into one another's mouths, our limbs tangled together. I exhale. Tovian touches his forehead to mine.

"Welcome to River Bend," I whisper, stroking his back. He sets me down. "I guess it's time for you to meet my father."

Emotions I can't fully read shimmer in his warm brown eyes.

"I can't wait."

#

Dressed in traditional Myseč clothing, Toviaian looks every inch a prince. Not that he doesn't exude royal confidence in his hunting shorts and sandals, but seeing him in my people's costume highlights his innate distinguished confidence.

I can't help wondering whether this is how he saw me, when I was first meeting his people.

My father greets us in the throne room. If it were just me coming home, he wouldn't bother with formality. We'd catch up in his private apartments. The display is to demonstrate respect to Toviaian—or to intimidate him. Or both.

“It is an honor to meet a member of the reclusive Ansi tribe,” King Myseči begins, his gaze flicking from me to Toviaian and back again. In the months I've been gone, my father's thick hair has gone from salt-and-pepper to frosty gray-and-white. Few strands of his once-black mane remain. There's a tiredness about him that squeezes my heart.

He's getting old. He never meant to lead as king for this long. I should have stepped into my rightful role years ago instead of leaving wartime leadership to fall on his aging shoulders.

“The honor is all mine.” Tovian bows deeply. “My mother, Queen Brenica of the Ansi, has sent a gift.”

My eyebrows lift. Tovian produces a small wrapped object, deftly folding back the cloth edges to reveal a carved figurine of a dragon about the size of my fist. I gasp.

The king holds it up, turning it to catch the light. Black volcanic stone, polished to a high gloss, is inlaid with gemstone eyes. The wings and claws are delicately painted. The dragon is posed on three legs, one foreleg raised, with its wings extended. The wings are so finely carved they’re translucent.

“How did you carry that all the way from Oceanside without breaking it?” I whisper. Tovian doesn’t glance at me.

“Very carefully.”

“Such an exquisite gift deserves an equal symbol of friendship. I shall prepare one for you to convey to your esteemed queen before you leave.” My father sets the figurine aside. “I look forward to learning more about you and your people over dinner this evening, Tovian of the Ansi. In the meantime, I must beg your pardon and speak privately with my daughter.”

“He can stay, Father.”

My papa turns to me with steel in his gaze. “No. He cannot.”

Anger strikes within me like a struck match. That’s *my* throne he sits upon. He may technically be in charge at River Bend, but I’m a grown woman and he treats me like a child whining for sweets.

“Tovian. Stays.”

My boyfriend’s palm lands on the small of my back. Soothing. A warning.

“Your Majesty, I shall leave you and Princess Raina to catch up.”

I glare at him. Tovian squeezes my upper arm and leaves.

*Lost that battle*, I muse ruefully.

“I see why you’ve been so distracted. He seems like a charming young man.”

“He is. Skilled with a spear and a bow, too. Tovian has saved my life on several occasions this summer.”

“Occasions that should never have come to pass, Raina.”

A sigh gusts out of him. “You understand that no matter how appealing he is, you cannot entertain a serious relationship with an outsider.”

“Is that why you had him placed as far away from my rooms as possible?”

Another sigh.

“I’m twenty-two years old, Father. No one will care if he stays in my rooms.”

My father’s face scrunches into a scowl.

“Not as long as it’s my bottom warming this throne, Raina. The minute you’re willing to stop gallivanting around the countryside playing at being a warrior, and take up the scepter and crown that which rightfully belong to you, you can make all the housing decisions you wish. Until then, you will follow my directives.”

I study the veined marble floor.

“At least put him in the room adjoining mine.”

“No. It is an insult to give a royal prince a servant’s lodgings. We need the Ansi’s help and cannot afford to alienate them.”

“We have it. Thanks to me.”

Sort of. Begrudgingly. Thanks to Tovia, actually.

“I know you understand protocol, Raina.” Warily, he adds, “I should never have let Lorcan train you to fight. Princesses are meant to lead, to direct the troops and allocate supplies. Not engage in the bloody business of warfare. Speaking of whom, do you have news of the royal knight?”

I can’t believe I forgot.

“He’s awake and doing well with his recovery. I spoke with him yesterday.”

Unease knots my insides. When I last spoke with Lorcan, physically, he was making great progress. Incredible progress, all things considered. Yet I couldn’t shake the feeling that the boy I’d grown up with was gone. He returned to us as someone different. Harder. Angrier.

“And Zosia?”

“I know she’s in that castle.”

“

[HOOKY ENDING - Dinner - assessment of the national vibes]





## Chapter 17

When I return to my rooms, I find Tavian sitting in the center of my bed, flipping through a fashion magazine from the outside world.

“How do they make lifelike pictures like this?” he asks.

“They’re called photographs. Similar to the ones you can capture with your phone.”

He ponders this for a minute. “Are they real?”

“You mean, did someone take that picture and print it on paper?”

“Is it a true representation of what life is like out there?”

“More or less.” I perch on the edge of the bed beside him. My throat tightens at the sight of a press picture of me, Zosia, Lorcan, Cata, and King Rohan together, attending a ball in London. “We really did attend that event, and I did wear that gown.”

“You look so different.”

“I was wearing a lot of makeup.”

Tavian shakes his head, confused.

“It’s kind of like your paint.” I get up and pad into the bathroom, returning with a zippered case. “Women put this stuff on their faces to look prettier.”

“You don’t need that stuff to be pretty.”

He cups the back of my head and kisses me. I close the case.

“Charmer.”

A smile flickers on his lips. He returns his attention to the magazine. “Is that her?”

“Zosia? Yeah.”

She’s unmistakable. Dark golden hair hangs in a thick gleaming curtain to her butt. She’s tall and well-proportioned. If her hips are a fraction too wide for her slender frame, it’s the kind of flaw that a lot of men go crazy over. Her long, tan legs are on full display in a billowing pink gown.

Tovian examines the picture closely.

“She’s very beautiful.”

“Yes. She is.” More beautiful than me. Always attracting a ton of stares and compliments, not that Zosia ever cared.

Hated it, actually.

Jealousy, my old familiar friend, hooks thorns into the most vulnerable parts of my heart. If envy is a shade of green, then mine is a weed bristling with sharp thorns. Impossible to eradicate from the garden of my soul.

Despite this, Zosia is my closest female friend. I only hope that Tovia isn't getting ideas about dropping me for her.

Instantly, I checked myself. Tovia hasn't even met her. He made a factual statement about a picture in a magazine, and I'm already anticipating that he'll dump me for my best friend. I have got to stop comparing myself to Zosia.

"Was she always that unhappy?" Tovia scrutinizes the picture.

"She's not unhappy." But when I look closer, I see it. The tense, determined smile that doesn't reach Zosia's bright green eyes, her shoulders set as if she's marching into battle instead of climbing the red-carpeted stairs to a gala in three-inch heels.

"Zosia didn't particularly enjoy her public role as the face of Auralia." I flip the page. Tovia turns it back and keeps studying the picture.

Makes me nervous as fuck.

“That’s your Lorcan?”

“Not mine.” I swallow. He looks so young. Scarred and strong, but vital.

He’ll have a new scar where I drilled into his skull. How many more does he carry where no one can see them?

Why is this the first time I’ve asked myself that question?

“Lorcan is your friend, is he not?”

“Since childhood.”

I stride across the room and root around in a closet until I find it. Brandishing a child’s wooden spear, I turn to Tavian and pretend to throw it. He throws up his arms and rolls flat on the bed. If I had thrown true, he’d have easily avoided it.

“Hey now, Sunshine. I was only asking questions.”

“Lorcan taught me how to use this when we were kids. His father was a knight assigned to rotation at River Bend for a summer. Later, he became the captain of Zosia’s mother’s guard.”

I feel my forced smile crumple.

Tovian, laid out on my bedspread, lifts one hand and gestures for me to come near. I prop the spear against my wardrobe and crawl over his torso so I'm laying on top of him. It's immensely gratifying to feel the ridge of his cock pressed against my low belly. I prop my chin on my hands. Tovian tenderly brushes my hair away from my face.

“I want to fit in with your friends.”

Shock stills me. I study the planes and edges of his face, trying to formulate a response.

“You will.”

“All the places you've been...the things you've seen. Cities. Continents. Languages. I knew the outside world was vast, but until I met you I never understood exactly how big and magical it is.”

A familiar ache blooms within me.

“Zosia was fascinated by it, too. You would have loved going to school in Scotland with us.” A lump forms in my throat. How different would things have been if Tovian were there? Would I have gotten over my epic crush on Lorcan sooner?

“I wish you could have been there, Tovi.” I lower myself down to kiss him. He greedily palms my ass. The tension changes in a blink from maudlin memories and wistful hopes to outright horniness.

“Someday, I’d like to take you there.” I duck my head so he can strip my shirt off. I straddle his hips, rocking my weight along the ridge of his cock.

“Where?” He hooks his thumbs into my waistband and pulls it down over my ass. “Tell me about these places.”

“London. Paris. Beijing.” I name the cities I’m most familiar with, knowing that to him they’re abstractions.

“New York?” he asks, and I’m reminded that he’s been sneaking into Oceanside to learn about the outside world for years.

“I’d like to go there too.”

“Why didn’t you?” he asks between kisses.

“Too many guns. Cata and Lorcan said it wasn’t safe.”

“Fucking guns.”

“Yeah. I really hate those things.”

“Efficient for killing,” Tovia muses somberly.

“No honor in it,” I complain. “No skill.”

“Hitting a target takes skill. It took me weeks of practice to aim reliably.”

I don't argue, partly because he's right and partly because he's captured my breast with his mouth. Licking. Sucking. Grazing it with his teeth. I'm so desperate for him I've lost the thread of our discussion. Besides, who wants to talk about guns.

I want us to be together. I want us to go and see all the wonders of the modern world. I want us to live here, in our home country, which begs the question of which tribe we'd choose.

I don't want us to have to choose.

I want everything, all at once.

Why can't anything be simple?

This is simple, though. The way he kisses me, taking his sweet time, savoring the experience.

Tovian rolls me to my back, tossing away the glossy magazine with its pictures of a life that now feels like a dream. Six months ago, that was my reality. I don't miss it. As terrible as this war has been, fighting for my country makes me wake



up each day with purpose. My life now has meaning. I never realized how unfulfilled I was in the outside world. I tried to bury the emptiness with shopping and studying. It didn't work.

All that changed when I met Tavian.

Then I can't think, for he shoulders his way between my thighs and parts me with a sure finger. By now, he knows exactly what I like: the way he glides his tongue up my center, dipping in briefly before circling my clit with the tip, then back down to repeat the process. Tension builds in my core.

He slides two fingers inside me, pumping rhythmically. I'm so close. He doesn't go in for the climax, though, keeping me riding along the edge for what feels like forever. Finally, I tip my hips upward and moan.

"Impatient, Sunshine?"

"You took your mouth off me just to say that?" I gasp.

"Put it to better use!"

He flashes me a wicked grin and obliges. Fireworks behind my eyes as I crash through the crest. Tavian expertly draws it out, tapering down the speed of his thrusting fingers. I lay there, boneless, staring at the ceiling through slitted vision.

"Satisfied, General Myseči?"

I huff a laugh and push him onto his back.

“My turn.”

I extract his cock from the prison of his trousers, stripping the fabric down his legs and throwing it on the floor near the magazine. Tovian’s body is mouthwatering. Sculpted muscles, velvety dark skin with a dusting of hair.

“You’re gorgeous. You know that, right?”

Tovian laughs. “I think that’s my line.” Sobering, he takes a lock of my long black hair and rubs it between his thumb and forefinger. “Better than your friend Lorcan’s?”

It hits me. He’s jealous. He hides it well, but he’s envious of my fucked-up friend group. Despite our messy relationships and interpersonal strife, we’re a close circle. Or were. I don’t know what we’ll be like if we’re reunited.

*When. Not if.*

“There’s no competition, Tovi.”

I head off further discussion by taking his cock into my mouth. His thighs are warm cages on either side of my shoulders. I have to stretch my jaw to accommodate all of him. The gods blessed Tovian with a magnificent cock, and I’m grateful to them.

He groans when I licked the underside of his cock. His eyes remain fixed on me, heavy-lidded, pupils blown wide. I take him into my mouth and suck, rolling my tongue over the head, revealing in the taste of his skin and the hint of salt from the droplet beading at the slit.

Tovian's fingertips brush the crown of my head. I move his hands to my temples, indicating that he should hold me where he wants me. We shift, adjusting slightly so he can fuck my mouth. There's not much for me to do, apart from bracing against his shoulders. He sets a relentless pace that brings tears to my eyes. The feeling of him sliding between my lips has me so turned on that I have to slip my hand between my thighs.

Tovian's legs stiffen. He swells against my lips. I hold perfectly still, letting him use my face. Tears stream down my cheeks.

He stops.

Bewildered, I remove myself from his cock with a guttural gagging sound. Muscles in my jaw and throat are sore from exertion.

He pulls me up by the elbows so I'm laying on top of him, the same way I was doing when we started this.

“Inside you,” he whispers. “I want to come inside you.”

Oh.

I shift my hips and lower myself down. As turned on as I already am, it takes effort to get fully seated. He’s that well-endowed.

Never thought of myself as a size queen until I met him. I don’t think I could ever do this with another man. I only want him and his kind heart and fierce intelligence, his sly humor and gentle touch.

I want us to be permanent.

Tovian’s hooded eyes cut to me.

“Okay?”

I nod and raise my hips, then slam back down. Tovian grips me hard enough to leave marks, steadying me as I bounce on his cock. Slick sounds fill my ears. I’m so wet. So close to going over the edge again.

Tovian’s ragged pants as he drives me down and down, hard strokes tell me that he’s close, too.

He gets there first. He clamps down on my hips, holding me still while his buck upward. Taking control. Taking what he needs.

It's enough to send me flying, too. I'm only a few seconds behind him. His erection lasts long enough for me to finish coming. Awkwardly, I dismount my boyfriend and snuggle against his side. He stroked my hair.

“Tovian?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you still want to get married?”

He chuckles and squeezes me.

“I wanted that from the moment I laid eyes on you, Sunshine.”

“My father won't be happy.”

“Neither will my mother.”

A long pause, as if he's thinking how to phrase his next question. “Would your father have objected to Lorcan, if he'd dated you?”

Lorcan has become a sensitive topic between us ever since he woke up. I hate that he's a third wheel to my relationship with Tovian.

But that isn't what Tovi asked.

“I don’t think so,” I hedge, knowing full well my father would’ve rolled over and welcomed Lorcan as his son-in-law despite the fact that he was only a knight and not from our tribe. Lorcan has that effect on people.

I don’t want to think about my friends right now, when I’m basking in the afterglow with Tovian. Yet I can’t stop the memory of our last conversation from flashing through my mind.

*You’ll go find Zosia, right?*

He actually hesitated. *If that’s where Saskaya sends me.*

*The old you would have gone after her by now. You wouldn’t have stopped until she was safe.*

*She might not even be alive,* he countered.

The Lorcan I knew wouldn’t have hesitated. He’d be climbing down from the Temple Plateau to go and find her the instant he was strong enough to make the descent. This version of him might as well have shrugged. I don’t understand why he’s not trying harder.

Then he had the temerity to ask, *Were we ever together?*

He meant me and him. I’ve never full-body cringed before. Ages ago, I proposed marriage to Lorcan. Some

cultures exchange rings. Our tradition is to exchange weapons. I gave him an Italian dagger that had once been owned by a renowned assassin. He gave me nothing in return except a simple thanks.

We were never an item.

I hooked up with a few guys at university, mostly as a balm to my pride after being totally rejected by Lorcan, but I've never really had a boyfriend before. Part of me still thinks Tovian will drop me in a heartbeat. I'm not ready to give him a weapon, nor am I ready to accept one from him. But I trust him enough to be here laying the foundation for an eventual proposal. Clearly, we have to win over many hearts and minds if we want to be together.

“So it's just me, then?” Tovian's words are clipped. I felt the tension in his body. He's understandably hurt that my people haven't readily accepted him.

“No. It would be anyone. Lorcan is...he's always a special case. Rules never seem to apply to him.” I sighed and stroked Tovian's upper arm. He squeezed me closer to his side.

“Can't wait to meet him,” he says tightly. My stomach sinks.





# November

## Chapter 18

“What do you mean, he went south?”

My voice rises with each word. On *south*, it cracks.

“Look, I don’t like it either. But we can’t control him.”

I plop unceremoniously onto the stone parapet. Cold seeps through my skirt into my bottom.

“Lorcan is Zosia’s personal knight. His first priority should be finding her!”

“I know that, Raina. I’ve tried everything I can think of. He doesn’t remember her.” Saskaya’s irritation is commensurate with her despondence.

“But he does! He remembers things from school.”

Is he lying? Brain-damaged? Definitely brain-damaged.

“He only remembers the bad parts,” Saskaya says wearily. “I showed him the pictures you sent. I told him

everything you said about their last night together. How Zosia ran off to try and buy you time to get him to safety.”

“And?”

“He doesn’t believe me.”

A long silence passes. I picture her pinching the bridge of her nose. I pinch mine, then stare up at the blue sky overhead. It’s a clear fall day. “Would he believe me, if I tried telling him?”

Stupid question. I’ve already done that. It didn’t work.

“Probably not.”

Saskaya has never been one to sugarcoat the ugly truth.

“Where is he?”

My turn to sound weary.

“I think he’s a little south of Canavale. He liberated a village that had been taken over by Skía. Spent two days planning it.” She huffs with begrudging respect. “Got most of the pirates into a firetrap of a building and lit it up.”

I gasped.

The Lorcan I knew wasn’t cruel enough to burn people alive. But haven’t we all done things during this war that we

never want to think about again? I sure have.

I close my eyes and saw the face of the dying man who I refused to give morphine. I could have helped him. I chose not to relieve his suffering.

I, too, have become hard-hearted.

His was always guarded. Lorcan's stoicism led people to believe he didn't have feelings. He was remarkably adept at tuning them out, but they were there, simmering beneath the surface.

Now, it seems the dam has burst. I ache for my old friend.

"At least they're dead," I say softly. Lorcan wouldn't have left anyone alive.

"That's how I feel, too. Look, if Zosia and her father are in that castle, they're safe. Nothing can get in. The kitchens are well-stocked. The storerooms have enough supplies for hundreds of people to survive an entire year. We can afford to let Lorcan do whatever it is he thinks he's doing."

"Waging war."

"Yeah. That. Working out some issues," she adds, cryptically.

I assume she means killing people had always been something he disliked. He would do it to keep Zosia safe. Apparently, killing isn't something he minds doing, now. "Like therapy."

"I don't know what that means," Saskaya snaps.

I forget sometimes that she doesn't have as much experience with the outside world as Cata did. She was there with us in Scotland. Watching over us. Zosia, anyway. I was under their protection, too, but I didn't suffer the illusion that I was a priority.

"It's this thing where you go talk to someone about your problems..." I broke off. Trying to explain the concept of talk therapy to Saskaya was like trying to teach astronomy to a wolf-bear. "It's paying someone to listen to you complain about your life."

Saskaya laughs harshly. "What a pointless waste of money."

I don't disagree. The literature says its clinically helpful, but it's just not something any Auralian would do.

"Is it good to be back in Čovari Village?" I change the subject.

“Magnificent. I missed my bed. And my son. My husband, too. Not in that order.”

It’s my turn to chuckle.

“What are the latest casualty reports?” she asks.

I blew out a breath and mentally scan down the updated roll of our dead.

“An estimated five thousand dead from Oceanside alone. Mostly men, but a lot of women and some children, too.”

Saskaya curses floridly.

“The Grasslands District is basically destroyed.”

Another ten thousand people dead, either from attacks or wildfires. Possibly as high as twelve. When this is all over, Zosia will need to do a proper census.

“Nansier?” Saskaya prompts.

“Obliterated.”

The Timberlands District was always sparsely populated. It boasted only one proper city, Nansier. Six thousand people, reduced to a few hundred. The Timberlands understood how important it was to stop the invaders from advancing. It came at a great cost.

Kenton's entire family perished.

"A third of the Čovari are gone." Saskaya keeps her tone devoid of inflection.

Another twelve hundred lives lost, give or take. Without the help of the secret tribe dedicated to protecting the royal family, we'd have lost that first night. They paid a high price. Their tribe was only around three thousand people to start with. They're our best warriors, but their time-honored fighting skills were no match for bullets.

"The Mountain District is relatively unscathed. As are The Mountain Folk." Saskaya says.

"Lucky them."

I'm salty toward Keryn's tribe. They initially sent a contingent of fighters to help guard the border to the Timberlands, but they didn't do much else. My people have lost half our army fighting to keep the invaders away from our castle. The remainder are stationed at the border trying to prevent any further attacks. Relatively, we're well off. But that doesn't mean we don't have a lot of losses.

"If the Skía controlled both entrances to the island, we'd be pincerred."

“I know.” I do. I resent them anyway.

“How’s your boyfriend?” Saskaya asks. She, too, can unobtrusively change the subject.

“Tovian’s great.”

I don’t want to whine about my father’s continuing reluctance to accept him as a part of my life. After a month in residence at River Bend, you’d think people would be used to his presence. That has not been the case. He’s doing his level best to ignore it, but the stares and whispers are getting to him.

Saskaya isn’t the type of person you confide in, anyway.

“Would he be willing to join our erstwhile royal guard on his journey to Oceanside? I hear Lorcan is using explosives. Those are always fun.”

“Why not me?” *Why isn’t Lorcan rescuing Zosia?*

“Because you’re needed at River Bend. Tovian isn’t.”

Sas isn’t wrong. Between distributing food stores to remote villages and farms that managed to survive the invasion, tending the injured in our makeshift infirmary, and setting up the new orphanage, I have my hands full.

“He’s helping me with the orphanage.”

Part of me recoils at the thought of Tovian and Lorcan together. I can't explain it. I don't know where it's coming from. Therapy would probably help me sort it out, despite Sas' skepticism. And mine.

"I think Lorcan could use some company," Saskaya says carefully. "Ask him. I gotta run, Sethi is marauding and Tahra isn't here to watch him."

She disconnects without saying goodbye.

I stare at the phone in my hand, with its cracked orange case and buttons with the numbers rubbed off. There's no such thing as planned obsolescence in Auralia. We use everything until it gives out, and even if that weren't our cultural ethos, we have no means of replacing phones.

Heaving a sigh, I toss the phone on my desk. I wish I hadn't left my laptop computer in Scotland the night we fled. It would be helpful for tracking food distribution and parents. Instead, we're doing it all by hand. The old-fashioned way, with paper and pen.

Tovian comes into my room. Warmth sparks in my chest at the sight of him. Red looks good on him. Silver doesn't suit him quite as well. He deserves a gold crown. But gold is for



the Sun Goddess and my people worship Reila the Moon Goddess, so silver it will be.

“How is your scientist friend?”

“Sas is good. Happy to be home.” I lick my lips, debating whether to convey Saskaya’s request. I don’t want him to leave.

“Good.” He sat beside me on the edge of the bed. “I’ve been thinking.”

“About?”

“It’s time for me to go home.”

I suck in a breath. “But...why?”

“My presence here is making your people uncomfortable. I understand why. I’m one more new thing to adjust to when they’re already having to adapt to so much change. Most of it for the worse.”

He’s not wrong.

“Are you breaking up with me?” I squeak. Reila save me, I sound like a mouse.

“No, Sunshine. Of course not. I just think your people need to see you leading by yourself for a while. They’re afraid

I'll come in and start changing things even more. I hoped that if they saw me working alongside you to end this war, they would accept me. That isn't how things have worked out."

I go still. He's right. I do need to prove that I'm a capable leader in my own right. Failing to do that would undermine my rule. One of my sisters or cousins could challenge me. I'm not close to either of my younger sisters. Ulia and Melsi are a decade younger than me. My mother died in childbirth with Melsi, the youngest, and the childish part of me associates her arrival with losing my mom.

It's too bad there are no therapists in Auralia. I could definitely use one.

"They'll accept you, Tovi. Eventually. Stay? Please?"

I place my hand on his, braced on his knee like he's steeling himself for a difficult conversation.

"I'm not giving up. I need to reassure my mother I haven't gone missing. It's only for a few weeks, Sunshine."

"A few weeks of traveling through a country overrun with invaders," I grumble.

"Exactly how your father felt when you went to Oceanside." Tovia chuckles.

“It’s not funny!”

“I’m not laughing at you, Raina. It’s amusing how similar you and your father are. That’s all.”

He’s not wrong. I take after my father in a lot of ways.

“If you really have to go, I guess I can deal with it. Promise me you’ll call?”

“As often as I can.”

He’d gotten pretty adept at using the satellite phones. Signal remains spotty though. We rely on stolen walkie-talkies for short-distance communication because they’re more reliable.

I suck it up and say, “Since you’re leaving, um... Saskaya wants you to meet up with Lorcan.”

Anger flares within me. I’m so mad at him for not going straight to the castle.

“I could do that.”

Tovian tries to hide it, but I can see how much he likes that idea. He wants to get a read on Lorcan without me there to act as a buffer.

“Why don’t I go with you?” I blurt out. Something about the prospect of the two men together without me makes my anxiety spike.

“You’re safer here.” Tovia kisses my forehead. “You have important work to do. Leave the field of battle to those of us who are trained to fight.”

“I am trained! Lorcan trained me himself!”

“I know. But you’re still a princess on the cusp of queendom. You’re needed here.”

I hate that he’s right. I hate everything about this miserable war.

“I’ll set out tomorrow. Okay, Sunshine?”

“Fine.” I’m being totally ungracious about it. He’s right, though. I fling both arms around his waist, awkwardly since we were still sitting side-by-side, and bury my face in his shoulder. Breathing him in. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’m going to miss you, too.” He dropped a kiss on my head. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

A lie. It would be months before I saw him again.



# January

## Chapter 19

“You have a death wish, my friend.”

Lorcan chuckles mirthlessly.

I don't know what to make of him. I'm trying really hard to go back to what we were before. Close friends, fighting on the same team—minus my idiotic crush. Maybe his memories will come back if I keep acting like nothing is wrong.

He's reporting in after he blew up an entire village in Central Auralia that had been overrun by pirates. Male citizens who resisted were killed. Female resisters were either killed or taken captive.

The women who died got off easy. The captives were chained to beds and repeatedly raped, for months. I close my eyes, thinking of Orisa. She went through the same ordeal.

Still, burning people alive, even if they're the worst people imaginable, isn't the Lorcan I knew and loved. I'm trying to conceal my shock. He's hardened. Talking to him is

difficult. I keep trying to make him remember Zosia. He gets pissy the instant I start pushing.

So right now, I don't.

“Where am I meeting your boyfriend?” Lorcan's abrupt change of subject tells me I'd pressed a raw nerve again. He's a walking exposed wound.

“Near Aparā Bayne.” Bayne means village. Aparā means peaceful in Auralian. There used to be a pretty temple to the Sun Goddess there, but it was ransacked and stripped of its gold. After terrorizing the inhabitants and stealing everything of value, they set it on fire and left. It's the same story across all of Auralia. The invaders have overtaken a number of towns and villages, using them as bases from which they conduct raids. Only Canavale remains relatively independent.

“How will I know what he looks like?”

“I'll text you a picture.”

We disconnect. I immediately texted Lorcan a picture of me and Tovia together. Did I select the one that makes me look like a movie star? Yes. Did I think long and hard about

why I chose that particular image? No, I did not. Nor was I going to.

I desperately wanted some aspect of my life to feel normal again.

A few days later, Tovia called me.

“So...what do you think of Lorcan?” I ask nervously.

“He isn’t what I expected.”

My stomach drops. “How? In what way?”

There’s a long pause, as if Tovia is trying to find the most tactful way to say, *I don’t like your friend.*

“He’s very reserved.”

Relief floods through me. “Yeah, he’s always been like that. He does not show emotions.”

“Okay, I guess that’s normal for him, then.” Another long pause. “He’s a talented fighter. I’ve never seen anyone move as fast or hit as hard as he does.”

“Yep! That’s him,” I chirp brightly. Good. He hasn’t changed as much as I thought he had.

“I get the sense that he’s, um...angry.”

“At me?”



“No, Sunshine. At the world. I don’t want to speak ill of him. But he’s doing things I can’t really condone.”

“I know burning a building full of people is cruel, but he was outmatched. He’s doing that to protect us.”

“It’s not the...Never mind. I guess I was a little surprised by how cold and angry he is. It like he doesn’t care whether he lives or dies.”

“Does he ever talk about Zosia?” My voice cracks on her name.

“No.”

“No? Not ever?”

“Only when people ask about her. He just seems annoyed by their questions.”

I fall silent, trying to take it in.

“I don’t mean to disparage your friend, Sunshine, but he seems to have a chip on his shoulder.”

“You don’t like him,” I state flatly.

“I do, actually. It’s pretty obvious he’s going through something.” Tavian sucks in a breath like he was steeling himself to tell me bad news. “He hates Zosia.”

Stunned, I switch the phone to my other ear.

“No. That can’t be right. She’s the one who hates him. Or did. He loves her. He promised he would always come for her!”

Panic froths inside me.

He’s forgotten her. Forgotten what they were to one another. No wonder he’s resisted my pleas to go to the castle and find her.

“His entire life has been dedicated to Zosia!”

“I’m sorry, Sunshine. It seems like he has other priorities now.”

I hate Tovian’s gentleness. His reasonableness. I want to scream and throw things. Throw up. When I touch my cheeks my fingertips come away wet. I sniffle.

“If it’s any consolation, he’s determined to get the invaders out of Auralia. Won’t stop until they’re gone. His rationale for not going to the castle is that if Zosia and her father are in there, they have plenty of food. They’re safe. They can’t get out, but nothing can get in, either. Not with the Sentinels swarming the ruins of The Walled City.”

I sit with this information, digesting it slowly. If I contort, I can sort of see his logic. Not that I agree with it. People need to know their living goddess yet lives. If she's gone, the country will fall. Fatalism is baked into our culture. If the royal line has fallen, then we're fucked. People don't want to fight if there's no hope of winning.

That is why she's so important. All-important.

Yet he's forgotten her.

"Are you still there?" Tovia prompts.

"Yeah. Sorry. I'm just trying to take this in."

"He's a brilliant strategist, Sunshine."

"He learned from the best." Cata, whose bones now lie on a field in Central Auralia, awaiting a time when her remains can be properly memorialized, like so many others.

"Lorcan is doing what he thinks is best for the country," Tovia says gently.

"He's doing it for himself," I seethe. "He's doing it for glory. He loves being a hero."

There it is. The dark side of Lorcan I never wanted to acknowledge. He's always been ambitious. He took risk after risk to get himself appointed as Zosia's personal guard.

Beneath that placid façade is a ruthless streak a mile wide and just as deep.

He wanted Zosia because he wanted to be king.

I feel sick.

Cata knew. She approved. She would; the Čovari are all about fighting for the royal family. What better king than the one who can best protect the future queen's life?

Now, the mask has fallen off. I feel unmoored. I want to see the change in Lorcan with my own eyes.

I can't. Not right away, at least. I have work to do here at River Bend. It's not safe to travel, even with a regiment of guards, none of whom could be spared from the frontline anyway.

Until Lorcan decides to head north, or eradicates the invaders, I won't be going anywhere.

It's now a question of how quickly Lorcan blaze his way to Oceanside—and how many invaders he can kill along the way.

I'm the one who sent Tovian into this mess, too. Guilt curdles sourly in my gut.

What have we wrought?

#

After the tense discussion with Tovian, I decide the best way to maintain peace is to keep treating Lorcan like an old friend and prodding gently wherever I can. I have to remember he's badly injured and still recovering.

“Do you remember the time we were in Scotland together and the five of us went to a movie theater?”

A beat of silence passes. I hold my breath.

“The huge screen with rows of seats? Exit sign at the front that led into an alleyway used for trash disposal?”

I grin, though he can't see me. He checked out the theater thoroughly before we were allowed to purchase tickets—or rather, before we were permitted to bring Zosia along with us. Lorcan and Cata always knew how to get out of a bad situation. They planned ahead for every possible outcome.

Unfortunately, that meant Zosia was never free to mingle or socialize like a regular person. I could, and did, to some extent. Kenton explored to his heart's content. Bashir took to life in the outside world like a fish to water. He loved everything about it. Especially the marijuana. Total pothead. I

don't think he would have come home if we all hadn't been hustled onto a plane the night the pirates attacked.

"That's the one!" Good. He remembers something. "Do you remember the name of the movie?"

"No."

That's odd. Before his accident, Lorcan had perfect recall. He could see something once and never forget it. Eidetic memory.

It must be so hard to lose an essential part of yourself.

"Raina?" He interrupts me mid-stream-of consciousness recitation of events on that forgettable evening.

"Hm?"

"Never mind. Here's Tavian."

What was that about?

"Hi there, Sunshine."

I feel the tug in my cheeks as my mouth curls upward at the corners. "Hiya, handsome." He chuckles. "I miss you."

"Not as much as I miss you."

"Want to hear what we did today?"

"Does it involve explosions and blood?"

“You know it does.”

“Hit me.”

“What?”

“It’s an English idiom. I think it comes from gambling. It means give me something that could be good or bad, I’m ready to roll the dice.”

He’s quiet for a minute, digesting that information.

“Last night, we sneaked into the biggest pirate camp.”

“Together?”

“You should’ve seen us, Raina. Lorcan was like a ghost. I’ve never seen anyone as ruthless and deadly as he is. I’m glad he’s on our side.”

“So am I. What did you do?”

“The two of us took out hundreds of pirates.” I can hear the pride in his voice.

“How?” My heart leaps into my throat. Those are beyond dangerous odds. Those are impossible odds. No wonder Tavian is so pleased with himself. But what the fuck is Lorcan doing, dragging him into such dangerous missions?

He describes their plan in considerable detail. It involved tricking the motley crew of pirates to turn on their Skía leadership. “Our success was built on bit of planning, the element of surprise, and a bit of luck.”

“Diabolical,” I say. “Totally something Lorcan would come up with.”

“Hey, I helped to plan it too.”

“I didn’t mean to slight your contributions, Tovi.” Shit, I hurt his feelings. “I just mean that Lorcan’s mind always worked a little differently. He could figure out a solution to any problem.”

Except the problem of Zosia hating him on sight.

At the time, I hoped he’d forget about her and finally date me. That did not happen. Now, I’m glad it didn’t. I wouldn’t have met Tovian, who loves me unconditionally and has from the start.

“How are things at River Bend?” Tovian asks cautiously.

“About where they were when you left.” I sigh. “We’ve gotten word out that we’ll take any orphaned children that need care. I’ve turned the ballroom into a giant bedroom for the younger children. We’ve hired some older women to help



care for them. Older boys are housed in the North Wing with the recuperating soldiers. We let them train for a couple of hours a day. It's good for both the injured men and the kids. Mentorship, you know? Plus, it's an outlet for them. You know. Physically. Mentally."

Emotionally, the kids are traumatized, angry and sad. I can't blame them for wanting to kill every outsider on sight.

"But you won't send them into battle?"

"Hopefully, by the time they turn seventeen, this stupid war will be over."

"We're getting there, Sunshine. With their bases destroyed, the enemy is in no position to run attacks. Oceanside is doing a great job of sabotaging the reinforcements. What few supplies are getting to the north, we've mostly been able to destroy or capture."

"I can't believe this is so close to being over." *And Zosia isn't here to witness it*, I don't say. "Hey, what's up with these rumors about Lorcan being the Hero of Auralia?"

Tovian coughs.

"Yeah. About that...he didn't start it, but he's not really trying to tamp it down, either. You were right that we needed

him. He's a symbol of the old order. People are more willing to fight because they know he's the princess' guard."

"If he's still fighting then she must be out there somewhere, you mean?"

To be honest, I'm starting to get a little nervous about the rumors I hear about Lorcan. I knew better than to put much stock in them. Rumors have always followed both him and Zoisa. But these are disturbing, and if there's one thing I've learned, it's that there's often a kernel of truth. I was shocked when I overheard the maids' whispers of Lorcan's prowess with women. Or, his lack of prowess, rather. He's said to be willing to sleep with anyone who asks, but he satisfies himself and moves on without a care for the women.

I can't square the rumors with everything I know of Lorcan. As far as I know, he's never slept with anyone. He never wanted to, unless it was Zosia. Toward the end, I'd suspected they were sweet on one another for some time. The night of the invasion confirmed it. That was the moment I realized they'd taken great pains to conceal their fledgling relationship from me and the entire world.

He'd have been removed from service and thrown out of the guard altogether if her father ever found out that Lorcan

and Zosia hooked up. I therefore dismiss them as wild tales told by women bored by the monotony of wartime restrictions. There are no festivals, no harvest parties, nothing to do except the monotony of cowering in the castle.

Lorcan was hell-bent on redeeming his father's reputation. He wouldn't have done anything improper.

Didn't mean he didn't want to. He spent two years in Scotland preventing any other man from getting near Zosia, to her intense frustration. That was a big part of why she hated him.

The other half of it was that he scared the shit out of her.

"It's good to have him on the battlefield." Tavian brings me back to the present. "If we can keep this up, we'll be able to drive every remaining invader to Oceanside by Midsummer."

"From there, we can load their sorry asses onto ships and send them back to sea."

I don't want vengeance. I want them gone. That's all.

"We'll still have to deal with the Skía, though. They're a homegrown threat."

Fact of the matter is, until Zosia has a baby or two, the line of succession hangs by a thread. If Lorcan thought his job ended with eradicating the enemy, he has another think coming. She'll need protection for the rest of her natural life, and so will her children.

Assuming she has any. She's never been the mothering type.

“True. Let's not borrow trouble, Sunshine.”

Tovian and I lapse into cutesy lovebird chitchat for several minutes, until the connection abruptly cuts out. I toss my phone across the bedspread and heave a world-weary sigh.

I can't molder here at River Bend while others fight for glory. I need to get back to Oceanside.

It takes me no time to pack. Over my father's protests, I ride out the next morning, accompanied by a single guard.

It's time I get to know my boyfriend's people, since there's a strong possibility I'll be abdicating my throne to marry him.

## Chapter 20

“What were you thinking?” Tovia rails when he finds out I’d left the safety of my people. It’s not a yell, exactly, but there’s steel in his tone I’ve never heard him use before.

Great. Now both my father and my boyfriend are furious with me.

Still, I’m not going back. I’m a leader. I should lead from where the action is, like Cata would have done. Not from a crimson throne in a silver palace, bedecked in fine red velvet and adorned with jewels.

No. I belong here, on horseback, with a knife in my boot and determination steeling my spine. Alert and aware to every danger—

“Ahhhh!”

My guard’s shriek stops me in my tracks. Our horses dance in place, trying to back away from the sudden threat. A wolf-bear. Its lips curl up in a snarl to reveal long incisors.

The animals are notoriously bad-tempered and prone to attack. Auralia has a couple of apex predators you don’t want to get too close with. Maned tigers and wolf-bears,

specifically. Their territory overlaps in this part of the country. We've taken the detour route from River Bend through the relatively unscathed Mountain District, in a bid to avoid the invaders.

Unfortunately, our chosen course put us directly in the path of our country's biggest predators.

"Remain perfectly still."

My guard holds out one hand. He's leading. We have a pack horse, too. The wolf-bear can't take us all down, but it could badly injure our horses.

The wolf-bear sniffs, grunts, and moves on. A parade of tiny cubs waddle after her. They're akin to badgers—the North American version, not the bumbling European kind—but taller and shaggier. Meaner, too.

We're fortunate today. This one just wanted to get her family across the path.

"What is happening?" Tavian demands with an edge of panic in his voice.

"It's fine. Just a wolf-bear and her cubs crossing the road."

"Raina, go back to River Bend. Now."

I waited until we were halfway to Oceanside before I told Tovia what I was doing. I'm not turning around now.

"Tovia. I will not cower in comfort while the country struggles."

I keep my voice low, trying to prevent my stoic guard from overhearing. He hasn't been particularly gracious about escorting the crown princess into a war zone.

"You could die!" Tovia says.

"So could you!"

We've never had a fight before. I've never had a real boyfriend before, either. A couple of hookups in Scotland, when I was trying to soothe my pride after Lorcan's outright rejection. The sex wasn't great and the guys weren't people I wanted to be with in the long term. Sex with Tovia is totally different. I cannot imagine a better experience. And I cannot enjoy that rhapsodic experience when I'm far apart from him, so I'm getting as close as I possibly can.

"Where are you right now?" he asks tiredly.

"We're just north of The Boscage," I say grumpily. "At least four days out from Oceanside. We're moving slowly. We're not taking any risks."

“Do you have guards?”

“One.” Grouchy silence through the line. “I miss you, Tovi.”

“I miss you, Sunshine. I don’t want to go on missing you for the rest of my life. You need to get somewhere safe.”

“I am safe.” Sort of. Not really. “I’m not breakable. I can help win this war.”

“You already have.”

He’s right. He’s also wrong. I’m not fragile. He knows that. What’s with this protectiveness, all of a sudden?

“Don’t come to Oceanside.”

“Are you ordering me around, now?”

“No. I know better than to try that. I don’t want you in danger, that’s all.”

“Good. I was starting to think Lorcan was rubbing off on you. He used to be so paranoid. He’d tell Zosia where she could go and when, never anywhere alone—”

Tovian cuts me off mid-sentence. “Lorcan isn’t rubbing off on me. Trust me.”

“Are you not getting along?”



When I asked him to join up with Lorcan, it was partly because I wanted them to be friends. Now, I realize I have a secondary reason: I want Tovia's independent opinion of him.

As much as I want to believe Lorcan is on the road to recovery—his physical comeback has been remarkable—something is off when I talk to my old friend. It's more than the fact that he can't remember much from the months prior to his accident. He's harder. His fundamental sweetness is gone.

I'm trying hard to find my friend inside the murderous shell. He has to be in there somewhere.

"We get along fine. He's different from what I expected."

Have I made Tovia jealous? Ridiculous. There's nothing between me and Lorcan, and he knows that.

Doesn't he?

He damn well should.

"I know he's changed, but he'll come back with time." I hope. I pray. It's very possible he's gone for good, but I won't give up. "I know he appreciates having you with him. Lorcan will never admit it, but he gets lonely like anyone else."

"I don't think loneliness is his problem, Sunshine."

What the fuck am I supposed to make of that statement?

“Do you have a sense of what is?”

Tovian sighs. “Not really. He feels like the world owes him something. I don’t think he knows what it is, though.”

“Zosia.”

Her name slips out before I can catch myself. Mentally, I berate myself for talking about her like she’s a prize to be won.

“I don’t think that’s it.” A long pause. “We could hold the line long enough for him to go and look for her. He won’t do it.”

“Still?”

My stomach drops.

Tovian goes quiet. At least we’re not fighting anymore, though things don’t feel resolved. It feels like Tovian isn’t telling me something about Lorcan, and I don’t know what it is or why he’s keeping secrets.

Maybe it’s nothing more complicated than that part of me wants Lorcan’s approval of my boyfriend, and I’m bitterly disappointed that he doesn’t to feel a need to provide it. Not so much as a simple, *he seems great, Raina*. It’s not like Tovian

and I are getting any encouragement from either of our families.

Lorcan remains focused on moving south, taking out every pirate stronghold in his path. I think Tovia is mostly enjoying the experience. Working with someone who's skilled is always a thrill, and no one does murder and mayhem better than Lorcan.

On one hand, I'm pleased with their progress. We've worked for months to achieve what he's managed to do within a few weeks. His capacity for strategic thinking remains as keen as ever.

On the other hand, I'm increasingly frustrated with Lorcan for ignoring Zosia. I get mad like anyone, but I don't get mired in emotions. Yet this is getting hard for me to keep under control. Every time we talk, I push him to go look for her. He blows me off.

I'm trying so hard to keep things cheerful and upbeat, but damn him, Lorcan makes it so hard. It's like talking to a wall.

An angry, violent, hurting wall.

“I’m going to come and meet you.” Toviaian breaks into my thoughts. “You need someone who can get you to my village. I’m not that far away from you. Find a safe place to wait until I can get there.”

I’m so excited at the prospect of seeing him that I can’t bring myself to care that he’s probably mad. “What about Lorcan?”

“He can handle himself for a few weeks.” A smile creeps into his voice. “I’m glad you want to spend time with my people, Sunshine.”

“You spent over a month with mine, and we weren’t exactly welcoming. Honestly, even I needed a break from them.”

“We’re going to figure this out,” he vows, and before we can say another word, the connection abruptly drops.

“Fucking cell service sucks,” I mutter, gathering the reins and kicking my mount into a trot to catch up with my guard.



## PART 3: WINTER

### February

#### Chapter 21, 22, 23

[Tovian and Raina spend time with the Ansi. Lots of steamy scenes. Tovian is delayed from returning to help Lorcan by a massive snowfall. Lorcan reports in from time to time. He's still on a rampage; we see Raina trying to reach him, and failing, repeatedly. As the Ansi warm up to her, she starts seriously considering abdication. At the end of this section – 2-3 chapters – Tovian rejoins Lorcan, who has worked his way closer to this section of the country, and they attempt their most ambitious raid yet. Lorcan is injured. They take refuge with a farmer's wife whose husband has gone to fight in Oceanside. During a call where Raina shows Tovian how to use modern medical supplies to suture a gash to Lorcan's thigh, she makes a "sassy" comment about his butt in an attempt to defuse the tension. Tovian is hurt and calls her on it.]



# March

## Chapter 24

“I can’t believe you said that, Sunshine. In front of me.”

His disappointment is crushing.

“Tovi...” I can’t believe I said it either. Commenting on Lorcan’s butt was totally inappropriate of me. “I was trying to use humor to make a bad situation a little less bad. It was a nasty gash. I felt awkward staring at his rear end.”

“So did I. There was no way he could stitch the back of his leg by himself. I didn’t mind doing it, even if I’d never seen those strip things before. Convenient.” He hms thoughtfully.

“Lorcan was the one showing off.” He was never exactly ashamed of his body, but he didn’t flaunt it, either. He’s more aware of his looks now. I admit I was startled by that.

“Raina.”

Uh-oh. Using my proper name is serious.



“Tovian.”

“If you’re pining after Lorcan, I will step back. I’m not going to try and compete for your affections with your childhood friend. Especially since I’m ninety-percent sure I couldn’t take him down in a fair fight.”

I snort. At least he gave himself a ten-percent chance.

“There’s no such thing as a fair fight with Lorcan. He bends the rules to the breaking point. If you win a match, it’s because he let you.”

I’m starting to suspect Lorcan doesn’t let anyone win matches anymore. He’ll keep fighting until he drops dead. Somehow, that accident turned him into a killing machine that’s mad at the whole world.

I definitely don’t want Lorcan now.

Yet here I am, screwing up the best thing that’s ever happened to me.

“He can be kind of a dick that way,” Tovian says ruefully.

“Lorcan is ridiculously competitive.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

“Tovian?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry I said that. It’s you I miss, not him.”

Not strictly true. I do miss my old friend, but only in a friend way. I hate the fact that didn’t tell Tovian about Lorcan’s half-hearted attempt to reignite the spark with me after he woke up. It feels like I’m lying to him.

What Tovian says next is a knife strike to my heart.

“I keep worrying that I can’t fit in with your friends.”

“Tovi. My friends *adore* you.” Well, Saskaya does. Sort of. She likes to think of herself as a good judge of character, and tends to make snap judgments about people. She took to Tovian right away, not that it stops her from being just as grouchy with him as she is with everyone else.

“Your father doesn’t.”

“He’s not my friend.”

“No, he’s your family. That’s even worse.”

I sigh. “Name one father who’s thrilled to meet his daughter’s first boyfriend.”

“First boyfriend?” Tovian echoes, incredulous.

“Yes, my first boyfriend! I’ve never been in a serious relationship before. This has moved quickly. We only met last summer.”

“I didn’t think we were moving quickly.”

Okay, six months wouldn’t be moving quickly under most circumstance, but we’ve been forced to spend so much time apart. Time is weird during a war. “Well, I do.”

“I know you only made that comment to defuse an awkward situation,” he says after a beat of silence. “I just want to know where we stand.”

“We’re exclusive. We’re hoping to get married at some point? I think?” I can barely say the words. If we do, one of us will have to leave their tribe behind. Brenica may welcome me as a daughter-in-law, but I’ll always be an outsider among the Ansi. Plus, I’d have to give up my claim to the Myseči throne.

The same goes for Tavian. He’d have to leave his people, his culture, and his family behind.

I slump wearily.

There’s no blending. Not with the Ansi as recalcitrant as they are and my people as wedded to tradition as they are. No

matter which way you look at it, us being together requires a significant sacrifice.

“We’ll figure this out, Sunshine,” he says firmly. “I want to marry you, too. It would pain me greatly if you didn’t feel the same way. Sometimes, when you talk to Lorcan, I feel like you’re still clinging to the past.”

“I’m not,” I insist, stupidly, because he’s right. I totally have been. “I just need him to find Zosia, for reasons that have nothing to do with the past and everything to do with the future. Once he finds her, we can all move forward.”

“And if she’s dead?”

“Don’t say that, Tovi. She’s not dead.” She can’t be. Lorcan is alive. She and Lorcan are destined to be together. Aren’t they?

I can’t even convince myself, much less anyone else. Tovia called it. I am definitely hung up in the past—and now it’s screwing up my future.

“I’ll be more careful going forward, Tovia. I promise.”

“I believe you, Sunshine.”

“When are you coming home?”

“Soon. Really soon. I’ll try to sneak back for a visit when we’re approaching Oceanside.”

I sniffle again. “I can’t wait to see you.”

“I’ll hurry, Sunshine. I miss you, too.”

#

[Increasing tension as Raina gets on Lorcan’s case to go find Zosia, already. He brags about single-handedly winning the war. Raina and Tovia both side-eye him.

Raina finds out she’s pregnant from 3<sup>rd</sup> time banging. Doesn’t know how to tell him, asks Tovia to return to the Ansi but doesn’t give details. Tovia does, bringing Lorcan with him.]

## Chapter 25

I hate to say that I put special effort into my appearance knowing I'd see Lorcan again for the first time in months, but I did. I have my vanity. I've always dressed in hopes he'd actually fucking notice me for once, and old habits die hard.

Doesn't help that I'm jittery at the thought of seeing him again, and unsure how to deliver my news to Tovian. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. But if there was any question of trying to renew a romantic relationship with Lorcan, my pregnancy puts it to rest, permanently.

I can't imagine my family is going to take the news well, never mind Tovian's. Brenica is furious with me for embroiling her people in a war and exposing their tribe's existence to the world. Will he want to come with me to live at River Bend? Or will he ask me to abdicate leadership in my tribe and stay with him here?

It would be so much easier to take a tea and evade these difficult questions, but I'm sick and tired of all the death and loss. I'm keeping this baby, even though it's not the best timing.

I therefore dress for maximum impact, boobs on display on in a red dragonskin halter that's little more than two pieces crisscrossed around my neck and tied behind my back, leaving my newly defined midriff on display. A curtain of glossy obsidian hair falls down my back. Months of daily exertion have honed my body into the best shape I've ever been in, even when I was swimming competitively. Can't help that I'm short-petite if you want to be polite about it—but I have great tits and legs, and my butt has never looked better.

You bet I'm going to flaunt it in Lorcan's face. He missed out. All this gorgeousness is Tovan's now.

Also, given my newfound pregnancy, it's probably the last time I'll ever look this good. Might as well make the most of it.

My gambit works a little too well.

A murmur carries up the spiraling hive of rooms cut into the stone walls. I pause before stepping out of Tovan's quarters, where I've been primping to kill time waiting for their arrival, and try to summon my best princess reserve.

I spot them immediately. Two men of roughly equal height, one with a messy mop of dirty blond hair, the other with short black twists like a natural crown, crossing the stone

bridge into the center of the Ansi village. They move with lethal ease through the gathering crowd.

I almost can't believe it. Lorcan's back. Seeing him in person is proof that everything will be okay. He's the symbol of the Auralian monarchy, the princess' personal guard. He'll find Zosia. Order will be restored. We can all go back to our ordinary lives. The country will thrive for another five thousand years, gods willing.

Lorcan glances up, and my fantasy crumbles into dust.

He looks *ravaged*. Haunted. Barely-banked rage simmers in those once-unreadable blue eyes. Anger gives way to a knowing gleam of lust as his gaze skims down my body, then back up.

My steps falter. A tendril of smoke stings tears from my eyes.

I never thought I'd like it better when I couldn't read his thoughts.

Gods, though, this is cruel.

For years, I'd have given anything to have Lorcan look at me the way he is right now. All that focus and attention



directed solely at me, as though I'm the only woman in the world. The only one he has eyes for.

Me.

The center of his fucked-up world. Now that I have Lorcan's attention, I'm repulsed by it.

I don't want him to look at me like this, because it means there is no going back to what we were before. Any of us.

I can't live with the fact that I cost my friends the only chance they were ever going to have to be together with my selfish interference. Yeah, I sort of stood down at the end, but it was too late. They hid to spare my feelings. Until that last night together, all our truths spilled out.

Lorcan isn't that man anymore. He might have survived, but the man I knew then hasn't come back.

Old Lorcan barely looked at me no matter what I wore.

The way he looks at me now is so fucking unnerving that I break eye contact, wishing I'd chosen to wear a burlap sack instead of this intentionally sexy outfit.

I paste a huge smile on my face and brush right past Lorcan. I throw myself into Tovian's arms, anchoring him to

me for a kiss. I need reassurance. I need to know that it'll be okay.

He, too, looks at me with lustful appreciation—and a hint of worry.

“You okay, Sunshine?” Tovian asks softly. “You’re trembling.”

“I will be,” I lie. “Relieved you’re both home, alive.”

My slip of the tongue has an instantaneous effect. Tovian wants my whole attention the same way I used to crave Lorcan’s. I didn’t give him that. It’s subtle, but I feel his disappointment in the slight tensing of his shoulders. My heart aches. I wish I could take it back.

I press my lips to his in a claiming kiss, trying to reverse course and show him how much I missed him. It almost works. One hand drifts down to my ass, the other tangles in my hair, high on my back. When we break contact, my heart is hammering.

“I have news,” I whisper. Hurt feelings like a drop of ink in a glass of clear water, unfurling, tainting a moment that should be a joyful reunion.

“Oh?” Tovian arches one eyebrow.

“I’ll tell you in your room.”

“Our room,” he corrects me.

“Right.” It sure as hell will be, once he knows the truth. The real challenge will be getting my people to accept him.

It might cost me the crown.

So be it. I’ll pay the price to have Tovian at my side. I never cared about sitting on the Myseči throne anyway.

It was a choice I always had to make, and Zosia never did.

If—*when* we get her back, I’m going to make sure she gets the chance to make every choice on her own terms. I’ll fix the damage I caused or die trying.

I glance warily at my old friend, now a stranger.

At closer range, I can see the pink raised scar above his temple, where I drilled into his cracked skull and prayed he’d live through the ordeal. The hair I shaved that night has grown back, as unkempt as ever, with a thick section falling over the injury and partially covering one blue eye. It lends him a feral, suspicious aspect at odds with the eternally optimistic boy I grew up with. Back then, no obstacle was too difficult for him to overcome through sheer willpower.

Now? There's a darkness to him. Seething anger just beneath the surface. He's as deadly as ever, but now, he doesn't care whether he lives or dies.

We took that beautiful, headstrong boy and molded him into a killer. We kept him to ourselves because we knew what he was. Determined. Talented. A once-in-a-generation athlete and warrior. We did it with the best of intentions, and we were totally, completely wrong.

It's the same thing we did to Zosia. Pressed her into the shape of someone she never wanted to be. Told her she had no choice.

We were wrong there, too. She always had a choice, and the harder we pushed, the more likely she was to make the worst one. We set her up for failure. Her father, especially, but all of us had a hand in making this mess. The repercussions are falling hard upon our people, but perhaps hardest on her. If she's alive, she's the one who will have to make this country new...and we've given her every reason to despise the role she's fated to play.

What if we'd all simply gotten out of Zosia and Lorcan's way? Let them find one another and fall in love on their own terms? Would they have met this challenge hand-in-hand?

Would Zosia have found in him the support she didn't get from anyone else?

She's the last of her line. Without her, this island might still exist, with people still living here, but our culture and history will be destroyed. There's still a chance to save it.

Maybe. It's up to Lorcan now.

I just hope Zosia is still alive. If she is, there's hope for our collective redemption. Mine, most of all. If not...

I don't know how I'll live with this guilt.

#

"Go on, Sunshine," Tovia says tiredly. "Tell me your secret."

"I'm pregnant. It's yours. Obviously."

This isn't as easy a conversation as I envisioned. I've waited weeks for him to get back so I could have this talk in person. I wonder if I shouldn't have told him over the phone.

But then I wouldn't have been able to gauge his reaction.

Tovia blinks. He blinks again. Then a huge grin cracks across his face. He positively lights up.

Everything inside me loosens at once. A rush of joy so intense I can hardly contain it all sweeps through me. He's happy. Clearly, obviously happy.

But oh, Reila save me, the timing is so messy.

Tovian scoops me into his arms. I lock my ankles at the small of his back. We kiss and kiss this way, with his hands under my ass and mine in his hair.

"I'm so fucking happy," he whispered between kisses.

"So am I."

"Thank fucking gods."

"It was our fucking that did it, but I take your point."

Tovian wheezed with laughter. "Speaking of which, we should celebrate by doing more of that."

He takes two strides to the cot and drops me onto it. I squeal and giggle. Tovian is already stripping off his Ansi costume, what little of it there is. The shin guards and shoes go first. The leather shorts go next. From there, the only thing he's wearing is a short fur vest, akin to a shrug, which he quickly divests himself of.

I'm as keen to celebrate this monumental development as he is, but I'm not as quick to unlace my complicated outfit.

Impatient, Tavian seizes a knife and slices through the leather lacings.

“Effective.” I grin. “And hot.”

“Yeah? You like it when I rip your clothes off?”

“I love it when you’re so eager for me you can’t wait two seconds to remove them.”

Tavian shoulders his way between my thighs. “Hello there, my darling pussy.”

I can’t stop laughing. “Excuse you? Whose pussy is that?”

“Mine,” he says, with a wicked smile. “From this day forth, these are my legs”—he skimmed warm palms along my thighs—“my pussy”—he licks to prove his point. I moan and tip my hips up, seeking that glorious tongue. He gives me what I need, feasting on me like a man starved. I suppose in a way, he has been, what with traveling with Lorcan for months.

But he’s here now, driving me higher with each thrust of his tongue into my center. He sucks the stiff bead at the apex, making me writhe. It’s so good and so much, almost too much

---

My back and thighs stiffen as the climax takes me. When the haze clouding my vision clears, I'm staring up at a smooth rock wall, lying on a pile of furs, chin tipped back, and Tavian is tracing my hypersensitive folds with the tip of his tongue. Little aftershocks quake through me. He takes me down gently, then rolls away.

It would be easy to lay back and be a pillow princess, letting Tavian do all the work, but this is a huge development for him, too. We both get to celebrate.

I perch on the edge of the bed and palm his cock. Ansi beds are low to the ground, which puts my face right at blowjob height. With a quick glance up at his face, I take him into my mouth and swirl my tongue over the head. Tavian's gaze is hot and possessive. He tents his fingers on either side of my head, lightly guiding me to where he wants me. I take him deeper. My jaw aches. Saliva pools in my mouth. His hips tilt fractionally, a primal, pulsing rhythm that makes me want him inside me a different way. Tears well at the corners of my eyes and drip down my cheeks.

Tavian grunts faintly and gently eases me off his cock.

“On the bed, Sunshine.”



I scramble to obey. We wind up in a tangle of limbs, my knees pressed together with him penetrating me from behind.

“Who’s my princess?” He growls.

“I am.” I can barely summon the breath to whisper. “My pussy is yours. This baby is yours.”

“Ours,” he corrects. “This baby is ours. We made it. We’re tied together forever now. You’re my queen, Raina. Queen of my heart and soul.”

“My king,” I contort to kiss him. Tovian stiffens, swelling inside me. I rub my clit and climax on his cock as he floods me with his seed. His free hand is on my breast, squeezing it, rolling it, flicking his thumb over the tightly beaded nipple.

Panting and sweaty, we slowly disengage.

“They’ll have to accept us, now.” I kiss his shoulder. Tovian enfolds me in his arms. It’s too hot and sticky, but I’m so content being surrounded by him that I snuggle closer. He drops soft kisses on my cheek. My temple. When I crane my neck, our lips meet.

“If they don’t, Sunshine, I’ll still be here. We’re in this together.”

#

We remain with the Ansi for an entire week. Lorcan is supposed to be planning his final push to drive out the invaders once and for all, but I have no idea what he's really up to. I tell myself I don't care.

Even when I overhear the women attending the bathing pools talking about the newcomer in salacious terms, I chalk it up to gossip. He's the first man from outside the village in hundreds of years. While the women used to go into Oceanside for trade, it's been too dangerous for such excursions for the better part of a year, now. They're tired of sleeping with the same men in the village. I can understand why they talk about him that way.

Heck, I used to.

I'm too busy wallowing in happiness with Tovian to bother wondering what my old friend is up to.

My extended stay with the Ansi has had the intended effect. Brenica and I have come to a place of mutual respect. She's not overly demonstrative, but I choose to believe she likes me, even if I'm not the woman she would have chosen for her son. She accepts his choice, and that's enough for now.

One morning, we're called to the central fire pit where Brenica holds court. I bow, feeling my stomach press into the waistband of my red dragon-leather skirt. I'm not showing yet, but it won't be long before the truth is obvious to the entire world. Hopefully, I can convince my father to bless our union before that momentous day.

It's strange, carrying this secret in my belly. Right now, it's mine to hold close. Brenica knows. Lorcan does not, and I haven't decided when to tell him the news. I'm just savoring this interlude of peace and hope for the future. There will be plenty of hardship to face, and soon. I see no reason to rush it.

"Raina Myseči, princess and heir apparent to the crown, you are welcomed into the Ansi tribe as one of our own."

I remain bowed, wondering why there's so much formality.

"What's this about?" I whisper to Tovian, kneeling beside me.

"We're being formally recognized as a couple. It's like a wedding, basically."

"What?!"

"Shh!"

I did not think I was getting married today. I don't actually mind, to be honest. Call me old-fashioned, but I'd rather have been consulted first.

I suppose this is a hazard of trying to join a new tribe. Even with a shared language, there are things that get lost in translation, or never explained at all.

I duck my chin and wait. Brenica speaks to the crowd about how change is difficult, and letting go of old habits is even harder.

"We have hidden away for too long," she declared. "It is time the Ansi take a more active role in Auralian society."

A rumble of voices from the crowd gathered behind us. I briefly twist to check behind me. There are a mix of reactions on people's faces. Stunned surprise. Curiosity. Anger. Astonishment.

Swallowing hard, I return my attention to where they belong: staring at Brenica's feet. She wears soft blue slippers stitched with gold leather thread. Dragonskin is so tough that you can slice it into fine strips and it won't break. It's still much thicker than real thread, though. It takes a lot of strength to sew with leather.

The fashionista in me notices these details while my brain follows Brenica's speech.

I know this is a huge moment for Tovian. He's worked hard to bring his mother around to his point of view. I reach over and squeeze his hand.

"As of today, Raina, heir apparent to the throne, you are welcomed as my own daughter. Rise."

I summon every ounce of my regal splendor to get up from my knees gracefully. It almost works. I'm so short I basically pop up. Times like this, I wish I were taller. Brenica looms over me.

"An Ansi takes great pride in our dragons. Tovian, fetch your gift."

He does, rising in a fluid motion and striding to a lidded basket. I try to mimic his smoothness, but being so short, I pop up like a fishing bobber. Times like this, I wish I were taller.

Tovian stands before me, both of us angled so the assembled citizens can witness this...whatever is about to happen. A scuffling noise tells me it's not a basket of paint pots. Presumably, that will come later. My current paint job is

fading and smeared. I was due for a new painting session with Tovian anyway.

It's kind of like getting your nails done. Except if you don't wear the paint, the Ansi will kill you. Apparently, there have been occasional attempts to infiltrate the tribe by outsiders over the centuries of their isolation.

“An Ansi princess must have her own dragon.” Tovian's voice carries clearly. He'd make a terrific film actor, what with his movie-star looks, muscular athleticism, and easygoing charm. I'm so busy being deliriously in love with my boyfriend—husband? Our wedding today holds no importance to my people, and what did he mean by *like a wedding*, anyway?—that I almost miss him undoing the leather-and-bead latches on the basket to reveal a tiny red dragon. I gasp.

“This is yours,” he says, smiling. “I chose this little one for you. He's the most brilliant hued of all the red dragons this year. In honor of your people.”

I cup my hands carefully. He deposits the lizard into my palms. Its tiny nails scratch. Its ridges are high and spiky, a sign of distress. It cocks its head this way and that, examining me.

Gently, I stroke its spiky head with the tip of my finger.

“How old is it?”

“A hatchling.” His gaze drops briefly to my stomach. I smile. I love that we share this secret. “It’s about two months old.”

“I love him.”

“What will you name him?” Brenica asked.

“Garnet.”

The name pops into my head. It feels right. Everything about this moment does. The bright sunlight, the people gathered around to celebrate our union, even my nippy little pet dragon.

If I have to give up being queen of the Myseči to be with Tavian, it will be worth it. I’m still optimistic that we can convince my father to see reason.

The only sour note of the day is that Lorcan couldn’t be bothered to show up for our ceremony. I’m still weirded out by his reaction to seeing me for the first time since his accident.

Where has he been—or do I want to know?

## Chapter 26

After the ceremony, Tovian and I spend most of the next couple of days in bed. We're a paint-smeared, blissed-out mess.

Couldn't ask for a better honeymoon.

Until Lorcan barges in. There's a momentary scramble to make sure nothing essential is exposed. My pulse races with barely-contained outrage. How freaking dare he? I bury my sleepy face in the crook of Tovian's neck. I don't want to deal with Lorcan's shit right now.

"We have to go," Lorcan declares in clipped tones.

"What's the rush? I thought you liked it here." Tovian yawns.

"I do. I have business further north."

"Now, you decide you're going to rescue the princess?"  
Tovian doesn't scowl often. "Five months after you wake up, you've suddenly got a burr under your saddle?"

"Seven. I came out of the coma in September."



Tovian feels me go tense and gives me a reassuring squeeze.

He knows how unsettled things are with me and Lorcan. It crashes back down on me all of a sudden, just how fucked up this whole situation is.

Lorcan ducks out. I throw back the covers and get dressed. Honeymoon is over. Time, once again, to wage war.

#

“We’ve chased the invaders into Central Auralia.”

Tovian points at the center of the map, tracing a lopsided circle around what was once the most populous part of the country.

“Canavale is still overrun. If we don’t keep up the pressure, they’ll make it their new base.”

“You’ve already made their lives harder by taking out the bridge across the marshlands. Nicely done.” Lorcan saunters around the table where we’ve laid out hand-drawn paper maps. There are cheap printed examples created by the outsiders stacked haphazardly along with our homemade ones. You can’t buy a commercial map of Auralia outside our country, and the Skía only hand out partial maps to their underlings because they don’t want them to join forces and take the island for themselves.

“That was all Raina’s idea.” Tovian, standing with his arms crossed over his chest, gestures to me. My stomach turns all fluttery. I want to preen. He never hesitates to acknowledge my leadership, and compliments from a hot shirtless guy do wonders for my ego.

Which, frankly, could use a little coddling right now. I don’t know if it’s the pregnancy hormones or the fact that I’m not going on this particular adventure and I’m feeling left out, but all my emotions are too near the surface. I’m one argument away from biting Lorcan’s head off.

He even moves differently now. Before, he used to walk with this tightly-controlled gait. He was quick and quiet, the way the Čovari move. He was, after all, trained by them. But now he’s adopted a rolling lope that’s almost a strut. It’s hypnotic. You can’t help staring at him. He has a fantastic body, all lean, sculpted muscles, and he’s covered with scars. It’s impossible to look away.

“I learned from the best,” I say weakly, not meaning it.

Lorcan’s cut-glass gaze rakes over me. “I did teach you, didn’t I.”

“Everything I know about fighting.”

It's the truth. Saying it in front of Tovian, though, feels wrong.

“You were a good student.” Lorcan studies the map again. “We'll hit them here. Drive the remaining invaders into Oceanside, give them a choice between death or being banished from the island. As soon as Ephram can coordinate with sleeper units in Oceanside, we'll strike. We leave in the morning.” Another sharp glance at me. “Get packed, Princess. We're going to need a medic.”

I hate the way he says that word. Sneering. Ugly.

Tovian and I exchange glances.

Gods willing, this war will be over soon—and then we can find out whether Zosia is still alive.

#

“What's this?”

Tovian takes the clothbound spearhead from me, not knowing what's inside.

“It's a betrothal gift. In my people's tradition, we exchange weapons as gifts. Go on. Open it.”

He peels back layer after layer to reveal a gleaming silver trident spear. The handle collapses for transport. I show

him the mechanism to lengthen it.

“With practice, it’s easy to get out during battle. Or, you can hold it like this and punch at enemies.” I demonstrate, sticking my fingers through the tines of the trident. Tovian twirls it. The spear is lightweight and covered in filigree. “This is some of our finest workmanship. It was mine when I was young. I had the length changed to suit a man of your height.”

“It’s beautiful, Sunshine.” He kisses my forehead. “I don’t have anything to offer you.”

“It’s okay,” I say in a rush. *Please, Reila, have pity on your descendant. Don’t let my second attempt at betrothal become as much of a fiasco as the first one was.* “You don’t have to give me anything. We’re already married by Ansi tradition. I just wanted to bring a part of my family to you.”

Because getting acceptance from my people is going so well.

And tomorrow, Tovian is off to Oceanside for their final push. Only once the country is safe again will he let me travel home.

I wonder if all men get this protective of the mothers of their children. Honestly, it’s a bit obnoxious. I’ve been making

my way around Auralia, and the outside world, for years. That was how we met, for fuck's sake. Now that I'm having his baby, Tovian insists on accompanying me everywhere.

He hangs the spear on a hook embedded in the stone. It looks out of place in this stone-walled room, with its filigree and gleaming shine.

Tovian rummages around in a basket. Sitting up, he tosses a bone-handled knife into the air and catches it by the obsidian tip. He held it out to me.

"I made this for my coming-of-age ceremony." The sharp stone gleams even in the low light. "I'd be honored if you carried it, Sunshine."

My throat closes. My vision swims. Although we're already official under Ansi tradition, it doesn't feel as binding as a Myseči ceremony would. I'm beyond gratified that despite their cool reception of his presence, he took the time to learn about the importance of this exchange. It's akin to a proposal, except that both sides offer a gift.

"You have my blade and my protection, Tovian." A formality. He repeats it to me. I sheathe the dagger and tuck it into my belt. "And my heart."

He pulls me in for a lingering kiss. I'm so full of emotion. I can't contain it all. Joy tinged with worry, hope dogged by fear that this is too good to last. I'm terrified that Lorcan will lead Tovia into an impossible battle and Tovia won't come home to me.

"Promise me you'll come back to me in one piece."

"Pinky swear." Tovia hooks his little finger around mine. I can't hold back my fond smile.

"Where did you learn about that?"

"From Lorcan."

I feel my brow squinch.

"Who was he making promises to?"

*Why hasn't he gone to get Zosia?*

I don't say it out loud.

There's the barest flicker of darkness in Tovia's warm brown eyes. Something he isn't telling me. About Lorcan. I don't have the heart to try and drag truth out of him right now. I just want to bask in this feeling of contentedness with my almost-husband.

I'm terrified this loving calm won't last.

“Lorcan pinkie-swore to some children we rescued that he’d help them find their families. If their families were dead, he would find a way to protect them.”

Mollified, I curl into him. Breathing in his scent.  
Memorizing him.

“I’ll miss you, Tovi.”

A gentle squeeze from his strong arms.

“Not as much as I’ll miss you, Sunshine.”

“When you get back, we’ll go to River Bend?” I asked with apprehension. Our first visit was awkward as fuck, and I know he’s not looking forward to going back. I have to make a decision, though: am I going to step down and let my sister lead so I can be with Tovia? Or will I fight to make sure he’s as accepted among my people as I am among his?

I can’t fathom giving up my home and my culture along with a queendom. I have to at least try.

But first, we finish this war.

## Chapter 27

“When are you coming home, Raina?”

My father’s voice is weary. For the first time, I realize he’s *old*. He’s leaning on me to take my rightful role because he’s tired and wants to step down.

“Soon, Father. I, um, have some news.”

“Oh? Have you found Zosia?”

“No. Nothing that important.” I try not to be bitter about the fact that even he is more concerned about the missing Auralian princess than he is about his own, disappointing, rebellious daughter. I revert to a childhood name for him that I haven’t used in years. “Papa,”—gods, this is so hard—“I’m pregnant.”

Stunned silence on the other end of the line.

“Tovian’s?”

“Who else?”

“I thought perhaps Lorcan had finally come around.”

That was not what I wanted to hear. Anger flares within me.



“Father. I’m having a baby with Tovian. We’ve already made things official here in the Ansi.”

He sighs. “I suspected you might do that. I have no objection to the young man. He is honorable, skilled and will protect you and your daughters with his life. Politically, this will cause a stir, but we can manage it.”

“Wouldn’t marrying Lorcan cause just as much of a stir?” I demanded, unwilling to ignore the issue any longer.

“Lorcan is a knight. He is not of our people, but he has been known by our people for much of his life. Tovian is new. He is a prince to a tribe no one knows much about. He has responsibilities to his own people. I trust you can understand why the Myseči are wary of a king who might have divided loyalties.”

There it is.

“Although he comes from another tribe, Lorcan isn’t a leader. To marry him would be a step down, socially speaking, and a snub to our dukes, yet one cannot have too much intermarriage lest we put the health of the royal line at risk—”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. He did not just imply that my family is inbred. I really prefer not to think about the fact.

“—Besides, with Lorcan’s accomplishments in winning this war—”

“His accomplishments?” I explode.

“Well, yes. He drove the invaders out of Central Auralia —”

“With help from Tovian.”

I am positively snarling. Every doubt that’s been eating away at me, every frustration, comes spilling out.

“*I* am the one who led the resistance effort while Lorcan was floating unconscious in a tank for four months! Me! This has been a group effort from the start, and there is no reason why Lorcan should receive all the accolades!”

Stunned silence on the other end. Eventually, my father says cautiously, “Perhaps this awful war is an opportunity for rethinking our traditions. Auralian society has become a bit...” He paused as if searching for the right word. “Sclerotic.”

“King Rohan would protest mightily.”

Emotion leaches out of me in a rush, like a tub gurgling the last swish of water down the drain. I’m not angry with my father. He made it possible for me to play a significant role in the resistance effort.

I'm disappointed in Lorcan and wondering how well I ever truly knew him. I ache with the loss. I hate who he's become, and I don't know where he fits in my life now.

Yet he's lost and hurting, too. I can't bring myself to abandon him. We're just...stuck.

"He would." My father chuckles mirthlessly. "He wanted to uphold our traditions while pleading to outsiders for help. I admire him. He was a good man. I cannot wait to clasp his hand in friendship again. Yet his approach has been an undeniable disaster."

*Was.* A tiny slip. A revelation. My father doesn't think his friend is coming back.

If Rohan is dead, chances are that Zosia is, too.

We have got to get into that damned castle. To get answers, if nothing else.

Finally, Lorcan seems fired up to go and find her. What changed, I don't know. What I do know is that if Saskaya couldn't shut off those stupid Sentinels by now, they're not getting shut off. The only person who's ever managed to destroy one is Lorcan. After the carnage they wrought on the

countryside, I couldn't convince a brigade of our strongest fighters to take them on.

“We've all been wrong, Papa.” I swallow past the lump in my throat. “About so many things.”

Another strained silence.

“Perhaps I, more than anyone.” He sighs. “Bring Tovian to River Bend. I will cajole the priests into accepting your wedding, if you absolutely must have him for your king.”

A lone teardrop made a trail down my cheek.

“Thank you, Papa.”

I'd rather he welcomed Tovian as kindly as Brenica has welcomed me. But it's acceptance, and I'll take it on any terms I can get it.

#

For all that his cockiness annoyed the shit out of me, Lorcan knows his way around a battle plan, and his went off without a hitch.

The last of the pirates were driven off the island, leaving only the shadowy Skía to skulk back to their home villages and blend in. Pretend nothing had happened. It didn't mean we were totally free of the enemy. Desperate people will cling to

any scrap of hope. They set up a camp on one of the rocky atolls just off the protective rock ridge. There wasn't much point in chasing them further. Their motorized boats were faster than our sailboats, and with neither water nor leadership, baking in the hot sun, they would eventually go of their own accord.

At least, this was the plan conveyed to me.

I didn't much like being cut out of everything. This was precisely the situation I'd hoped to avoid by coming south in the first place: me, cowering in safety, while the real heroism took place far away.

I'd better get used to it. Queens did not go into battle, never mind pregnant ones.

That was the price of Tovian's acceptance. Our wedding meant I would finally take my rightful place on the Myseči throne. I've trained for it all my life. I don't want to give it up.

The minute Tovian arrived to retrieve me from Ansi Village, I ran down the spiraling ramp and flung myself into his arms. He caught me easily and swung me around.

"We're done. It's done, Sunshine. Our country is ours again."

I could hardly contain my glee.

“And you’re here unscathed.” Frowning, I corrected myself. “What’s this? A scratch?”

There’s a bright red line across his cheek, and a deeper scratch on his shoulder.

“It’s nothing.” He laughed. “Fell down a ravine trying to avoid Big Ada.”

We made our goodbyes. By mid-afternoon, we’d traversed The Boscage and met up with Lorcan and the rest of the caravan going north.

“Why didn’t Lorcan come with you?” I asked along the way.

“He had other things to do.” Tavian said evasively. I don’t like that, but I don’t want to burst our bubble of joy, either.

I wondered if it had anything to do with the rumors going around about him. That he’d slept with any woman who asked, but never invited them back or bothered to learn their names. It’s so far out of character that I chalked it up to bored women making up stories.

What if it was true?

I can't fathom that he could betray Zosia that way. Even knowing what he's become since his accident, I don't believe it.

"With the pirates gone, we can get back to normal. Start rebuilding," I say, more to hear myself speak than anything. Filling the air with nervous words. I'm jangly and worked up.

Everything will need to be re-thought. Our entire culture. Our relationship with the outside world. There will be a struggle for power. Do we hold elections? Do I just declare myself Queen of Auralia? What would Zosia think of me if it turns out she's alive after all? Will the tribes that came together to fight the invasion be torn apart by infighting?

I fear that without Zosia's hand to steer us into an uncertain future, we're looking at a second war on the heels of the first.

"Your friend Lorcan is being hailed as a hero."

A chill works down my spine. Lorcan always wanted to be king. Did he want Zosia more, or only because she was a means to an end?

Right now, I'm not going to think about it.

“Nothing new about that,” I said evenly. Tovia cast me a sidelong glance and kept walking, moving a large frond out of my way.

“Are things okay between you and Lorcan?”

“Why?”

“Things seem strained between the two of you.”

*Yeah, because he’s failed to do the one thing he swore upon his life to do: save the princess.*

“In what way?” is all I say.

“I...look. You’ve known him a lot longer than I have. I’m just trying to figure out...you know. Him. You. Where I fit.”

We walked in silence for a time.

“I admit I had a rose-tinted view of Lorcan before the war. His accident changed him. I’m not sure I want to know how much.” It’s more than I want to confess, and less than I need to. “I’m glad the two of you have become friends.”

I am. Really. Not at all put out by the fact that it went from me and Tovia fighting side-by-side to Tovia and Lorcan, with all the glory accruing to the latter. Doesn’t bother me a bit. Which is how it should be. I have a kingdom to run.



A baby on the way. A second wedding to plan. Seriously, let Lorcan be the hero and do whatever it is he's doing with himself these days. It's not my business. The only thing that matters is that he finds Zosia.

“If Lorcan wants to be a real hero, he'll get into that castle and find Zosia.”

“What if she's dead, Sunshine?”

“Then we wouldn't have won this war,” I insist stubbornly. “Besides, don't you think we need to know? The entire country needs closure. Imagine if we get into an election campaign and then it turns out she's been safe all along. What a mess that would be.”

“True.”

[END ON A HOOK]

## Chapter 28

Our return to River Bend goes more smoothly than our first visit. There's no question that Tavian will stay in my rooms. To my surprise, Lorcan is housed in the same wing instead of the guest wing. I don't protest it.

Maybe I should have.

Not long after our arrival, I catch a maid coming out of his room with her skirt askew, fastening her bodice. My spine ices. The cold spread quickly down my arms and legs. I cannot believe the implications.

She lifts her chin haughtily, then realizes who I am and blanches.

I see red.

“What were you doing in there just now?”

“I...uh...” She swallowed visibly. “I was changing his... I mean, I was refreshing his bedclothes.”

“Refreshing them. At this hour.”

The maid's face turns scarlet.

I march into Lorcan's room, where he's still fastening his trousers. My stomach twists. No. It can't be. He's not this kind of person. He was not a man who fucked random women and never bothered to learn their names.

He loved *Zosia*. Who was still missing.

And he hasn't done a damned thing to find her.

I don't know this man.

"What were you doing with the maid, Lorcan?" My tone is steel, my words clipped.

He gives me this *look*. Like I'm a fool. I guess I have been. Clinging to the past, unable to get my footing in a new reality. Then again, I never have seen him clearly.

"What does it look like, Princess?"

Something inside me breaks. I stride forward, arm raised, intent on slapping sense into the man. Lorcan catches my hand before I can strike.

Rage burns through my veins.

"How could you?" I try to hit him with my free left hand, but it's no use, he's so much stronger and faster than I am. "She *loved* you. You *promised*. I heard everything that night."

With both wrists manacled, I resort to kicking him in the shins. Not terribly effective, since I'm wearing slippers, not boots.

Lorcan looks confused and pissed off.

“She’s waiting for you to come and rescue her and you’re out here slutting your way through Auralia like—like —”

I break off in a furious growl and aim for his balls. He blocks me, just barely. We lose balance and tumble onto the bed. I'm so grossed out by the fact that he was having sex with a stranger not five minutes ago, and irate that he's not letting me hit him like he deserves. The more I struggle, the harder he restrains me.

“Get off,” I seethe between clenched teeth. My breath comes in harsh pants. Adrenaline is ripping through my bloodstream. I don't want him touching me. I want to wail on him until I whack his brains back into place. He doesn't let go of me. “I'll have you fucking hanged, folk hero or no. I will kill you, Lorcan, if you don't let go of me *right now*.”

“Stop. Hitting. Me.”

As if I've managed to land a single proper blow. I would, though, if he let go. I'd leave him black and blue, and he'd deserve every bruise.

Since I can't hurt him with my fists, I go for the low blow.

“Or what? You'll rape me? You've fallen that low?”

He freezes. I know in that instant I've gone too far. Our friendship won't recover from this.

One more devastating loss in a year marked by them.

I feel him release me and roll away. He'd been pinning me with his weight, and then there was a movement from the corner of my eye and it was gone. I push myself upright.

Tovian.

“I will kill him for you, if you wish.”

For the first time since Lorcan came back to us, I look him directly in the eye. There's an ocean of pain beneath those blue depths. It might be kinder to let Tovian snap his neck. He could do it. Wouldn't hesitate, if I asked him to. He's waiting on my word.

But the truth is, Lorcan didn't rape me. I attacked him. He has a right to sleep with whomever he wishes. He and

Zosia weren't together in any meaningful sense before the war. And he is still our best hope of finding her, dead or alive.

“Let him live. For now.”

Tovian all but shoves him away, rolls off the bed and stands at my side. I love him so much I can hardly contain it all.

“We should have left you for dead that night,” I tell Lorcan.

He shrugs into his shirt. Sullen. Filled with anger. He's become a killing machine. If he has any humanity left, I can't see it. The boy I knew is gone.

Lorcan brushes past me, moving fast and silent the way he always does. I close my eyes against his nearness. Tovian's hand curls protectively around my shoulder.

“You could have had a queen,” I call after him. “You're throwing it away, for what?” I have to try one more time to get through to him. If there's anything left of the boy I knew, perhaps he'll respond. “What are you getting out of this, Lorcan?”

“Laid. Which is a lot more than I got before.”

I suck in a sharp breath.

He did *not* say that.

He's not finished, either.

“All I remember is a spoiled brat of a princess who hated everything I stood for. If Zosia's feelings changed, that's her problem. I owe her nothing beyond her freedom—if she's even still alive.”

I close my eyes. I feel sucker-punched. He remembers more than I thought. He still doesn't care. He's let himself be consumed by resentment and bitterness.

There's nothing left to save.

I should have let Tovia kill him.

“I'll see him out,” Tovia says, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead. “Make sure he goes.”

Numb, I exit Lorcan's room so he could pack. Calmly, I fired the maid. Help is hard to find, but no castle needs maids who fall into guests' beds at the crook of a finger. It gives you a bad reputation and foments problems among the staff. I'm running a kingdom, not a brothel. I don't feel bad about making that decision.

Lorcan and Zosia aren't coming back. I'm going to have to reckon with rebuilding an entire nation.

No wonder Zosia hated carrying this burden. It's too much for any one person.

I wouldn't blame her if she ran to the outside world and never came back. She'd be happier living that way. Free.

These are my thoughts when Tovia returns from ensuring Lorcan leaves River Bend. He shot out of the stables at a gallop and never looked back.

"You okay, Sunshine?"

"I will be."

I sniffle. He pulls me into an embrace.

"He's gone."

"I know."

"We'll find a way to get into the castle, Sunshine."

I nod dully.

"Tonight might have been for the best."

"In what way?"

Suddenly, I'm as sharp as that obsidian knife he gave me. The one he crafted with his own hands.

"I've been hesitant to go through with our River Bend wedding," he says slowly, softly. He's given whatever he's



about to say a lot of thought. “Your people don’t want me. That alone wouldn’t be enough to stop me from going through with it, but you can’t seem to let go of your past with Lorcan and Zosia.”

His words cut deep.

“I tried to be a friend to him,” Tovia continued. “I think I was, for a while. But he’s not listening to anyone who wants to help him. Lorcan is stuck in limbo. And you’re stuck in the past.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” I do, though. I do. It’s so obvious.

“You’re not focused on the baby. Or on me. Or on your tribe. You couldn’t see Lorcan for what he’s become until it was right in front of you. You’re living with ghosts.”

A choked sound escaped me.

He’s right. And I feel gods-awful about it.

For the first time, I’m being forced to reckon with the fact that I’ve been putting Tovia last for as long as I’ve known him.

“I think we should postpone the wedding.”

“No, Tovi.” An agonized whisper. “I promise I’ll put you first. I haven’t done a good job of that this summer. Or winter. Or spring. But I see clearly now how right you are, and I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“Shh.”

He strokes my hair.

“I’ll still be here for you and the baby. I’m not going anywhere for the moment.”

It sinks in that he’s actually breaking up with me. For perfectly valid reasons that scare me to death.

“I’ll give up the throne. My sister can be queen. I’ll come live with you. We can be happy in Ansi Village.”

He pinches my chin and raises my weepy face to his. Another soft kiss, this time on the lips. A goodbye kiss.

“You don’t want that. Besides, with Zosia gone, this country needs you. You’re a strong leader. Irreplaceable. I’ll still be part of your life. I’m not going to let my child be a stranger. But I’m not giving up my tribe to join yours if I’m going to be sidelined in everything important.”

Tovian smiles sadly. I burst into tears. I’ve done to him. No man could live up to the fantasy I’d woven about Lorcan.

It was a boil that needed to be lanced ages ago. Instead, I've let it fester. I see it now.

Tovian holds me for a long time before kissing my forehead and closing the door, leaving me alone in the dark.

## Chapter 29

“The wedding is off.”

My father’s jaw ticks. “Off? As in, canceled?”

His gaze flicks to my barely-rounded belly. An unwed, pregnant princess isn’t the catastrophe it would be in the outside world, but it’s still frowned upon. Apart from the Ansi, most Auralians, including the sub-tribes, are pretty conservative about sex. The Mountain Folk more or less ignore its existence.

“For now,” I add hastily. “We’re reassessing...our relationship.” As in, everything. “It turns out that we aren’t on the same page about how we’re going to handle me being queen here, and his role as Ansi prince. One of us will have to give.”

It’s not going to be me.

Tovian was right. If Zosia is gone, I’m the next logical leader for the country. If asking my people to accept an Ansi king is difficult, then asking the entire country to accept me as their queen will be far more challenging.

The scary part is that I might have to go up against Lorcan for leadership. He's so competitive, he'd do anything to win the crown if he wanted it. I don't want to fight him.

For one thing, I'd lose.

People are calling him *The Hero of Auralia*. As if he saved this country all by himself, when it was a collective effort. It makes me furious to think about it.

All I can do is pray he doesn't decide to make a power grab. Considering where his head is, it would be a disaster for the entire nation. My plan, once we can convene a council of tribes and agree that Zosia isn't coming back, is to simply assert myself as next in line to the throne. There's no protocol for this situation. I'm just going to have to make it up as I go.

I hate all of this.

Absently, I rub my low belly. It's too early to feel movement yet, but I feel connected to the life growing inside me. This baby is the one good thing in my life, now that Tovian has decided to keep his distance.

"Is the wedding off permanently?" My father asks gently.

"No." I shudder. "I hope not."

I don't know, though. He's still here at River Bend. We shared a bed last night, though we hardly touched. My heart ached to have him so close and yet emotionally distant.

This morning, he headed down to the orphanage to work with the children. He genuinely likes kids. He's going to be an amazing father.

I'm not so sure I'll make a halfway decent mother.

*Sorry, little one.* I rub my stomach again. *I swear I always wanted kids.*

I'm not convinced I deserve the one I'm having.

"Are you well?" my father asked.

"The nausea is getting worse."

It comes and goes. Morning sickness is usually a sign that the pregnancy is progressing smoothly, so I don't mind much. I do wish I had a scale to track my weight gain. I think I've lost some weight, but I can't be sure.

*You're not focused on the baby.* Tovian's accusation weighs heavily on me. I don't think that was quite fair of him to say. I can do much for it, other than eat right, hydrate, and sleep. Meanwhile, the demands on my time only grow with each passing day.

I understand why he said it, though.

“Try your mother’s tincture. I’m sure the kitchen has the recipe tucked away.”

“I’ll ask for it. Thanks.” I inhaled. “Papa?”

His gaze cut to mine.

“Don’t cancel the wedding yet. Please. Delay it a day or two if you can. Please.”

He brightened.

“You’re going to try and patch things up with Tovia?”

“Try.” I huff. It’s not quite laughter and it sounds like despair. “I’m going to try.”

#

I find Tovia in the makeshift orphanage, meaning, our former ballroom. I could have had the bunk beds cleared out to use it for our wedding celebration. I chose not to. These children have been uprooted enough without having their beds set aside for a party.

He glances up at my approach. There’s a wariness about him that I hate. He feels so distant, like I’m reaching for him across a canyon.

As much as my heart ached during the years I spent pining fruitlessly after Lorcan, I'm in ten times as much pain now. The mere sight of him makes my vision swim.

How did I mess up so badly with literally the perfect man?

“Raina.”

I nod. This group of children are old enough to know when adults want them to scatter, and they do.

Leaving us awkwardly alone.

“Would you really have killed him?”

I don't have to specify who.

“Without hesitation.”

“Do you wish I'd asked you to do it?”

“No.”

He says this, also without hesitation.

“I wonder what it must be like to go through life with so much certainty,” I said. Tovia tilted his head in bafflement.

“You always know what to do in every situation. You never second-guess yourself.”

“Is that what you think?”



He shoved off the edge of the dais he was leaning against. The stage itself has been repurposed as storage. The grand red curtains made of gleaming crimson spidersilk are closed, concealing the makeshift racks that contain the children's personal belongings.

Tovian rarely raises his voice. I've heard him do it on the battlefield. When he needs to be heard, he can project.

He chooses softness now. The kind of quiet speech where every consonant is a razor and every vowel a knife.

"Don't you think I've second-guessed myself every day since I met you?" He stalks forward. Lethal. Not to me. I know he would never harm me physically. "Do you think I've never asked myself whether a woman is worth abandoning your entire tribe for?"

He circles me. I stand, ramrod straight. Our eyes meet like swords clashing.

"Do you honestly think I've never second-guessed choosing a stranger over my own parents? My brother? My cousins?"

My lungs constrict. I sip air.

“Only to find that the woman I love enough to follow her into battle, is hopelessly in love with a man who barely gives her the time of day?”

“I’m not!”

Panic drips into my bloodstream.

“I’m not in love with Lorcan. I never have been.” I wince. It’s not true. I fancied myself in love with him for a long time, but now that I know what love actually feels like, I know it wasn’t real.

Tovian shakes his head in disappointment.

“I’m not. I thought I was, but I’ve known for a long time now that it was nothing more than friendship. Since well before I met you.” I lick my lips, trying to figure out how to convince him. “It was a girlhood crush that went on too long. That is my fault. I own it. I fucked up two people’s lives because I couldn’t see what was right in front of my face.”

“What about your life?”

“I wasn’t counting my own.”

Tovian’s lips twitched at that.

“I screwed up my friendship with Lorcan. I know it’s hard to believe, but there was a time when he and I were real

friends. We had fun. I admit I hoped it would evolve into more, but looking back..." I swallowed. "Looking back, it was easier to maintain a crush on him than it was to try having a romantic relationship with anyone else. I hated the idea that I might be rejected, or desired only for my title. Arranged marriages are common among Myseči royalty. If nothing else, I could be sure that Lorcan wouldn't reject me outright, and I knew he didn't want to be king."

Not my king, anyway.

This is the most embarrassing thing I've ever had to admit. Worse than the time I told Zosia about my attempt to propose to Lorcan. Worse than the time my father caught me stealing wine from the butler's locked stores when I was thirteen and going through a rebellious stage.

"He's not the boy I grew up with, Tovian. It was happening long before his accident. I didn't want to see it. But nothing has ever disturbed me as much as the day he looked at me and saw someone he desired."

Tovian scoffs.

"I mean it. It meant he'd lost the cornerstone of his existence."

“His love for Zosia.”

“Yes.”

“I have seen little evidence of his love for anyone. As for the princess, he outright despises her.”

I suck in a sharp breath, turning away to press a fist to my mouth. She was the one who hated him. Never the other way around. He pursued her relentlessly in his fucked-up, manipulative way. Scared the shit out of Zosia. All she wanted was to be free, and he was a living reminder of the weighty burden she carried.

And I told her *she* was in the wrong.

I stumble across the room to a wastebin and deposit the contents of my stomach into it.

A gentle touch between my shoulder blades is almost as upsetting as it is soothing. Tovian gathers my long hair and holds it to the side as I retch.

It feels like a purging.

I would honestly rather not barf in front of my boyfriend mid-argument, but I guess that's one way to get it all out.

“You okay, Sunshine?” Tovian asks softly.

“Not really.”

I vomit again, straining to expel a string of bile.

“This can’t be good for either of you.”

“They say morning sickness means the pregnancy is healthy.” I spit. I feel disgusting. My teeth feel like they’re wearing a fuzzy sweater. I want water.

“It’s mid-afternoon,” Tovia said.

“Morning sickness is a euphemism. It can happen any time of day. Or all day, in my case.”

“Can I get you some water?”

“Please.”

I sit on the edge of the stage, feet dangling, head aching, while he summons a maid for water. When Tovia returns, it’s with a pinched expression, carrying a small package.

“What’s this?”

“A wedding gift. From Lorcan.”

We stare at it as if it’s a bomb. Neither of us moves to open it.

“I thought I banned him from the premises.”

“You did, Sunshine. He bribed a stable hand to bring it to us.”

Figures. Lorcan never takes no for an answer.

Cautiously, I pick it up.

“Go on.”

I hold it out. “He’s your friend, too. As flawed as he is, I think you got along.”

“We did.” Tovia sighs. “I’ve never met anyone as lost as he is. Whatever it is he’s looking for, I hope he finds it. There’s a good man buried underneath all that pain.”

I think of the scars that crisscross Lorcan’s body. He’s fought so hard and overcome so much. It hurts to see him falter when he was so close to having everything he wanted. The love of the princess he adored. A sterling reputation. His father’s suicide ruined his prospects, fairly or not. He fought tooth and nail to restore his father’s honor, only to lose it at the last stage of his journey. Hard to believe anyone would accept him as king, now. Not when he’s apparently slept with half the country.

*Zosia.*

My vision swims.

She'll be heartbroken. If she's alive. Which at this point, I'm forced to accept that she probably is not.

Maybe it's...better that way.

She'll never know of Lorcan's betrayal. In time, maybe he'll remember enough to understand how much she once meant to him. Maybe they were never destined for happiness.

If there's a lesson in all of this trauma, it's to seize joy when you find it. Not the way Lorcan has done. The way I've been afraid to do with Tavian.

I cradle the gift in my cupped palms.

"Tovi? Want to do the honors?"

## PART 4: SPRING

### April

#### Chapter 30

We stare at the [object] in my hands in disbelief.

It's so perfectly Lorcan.

[A pair of throwing knives? A ???]

My heart shatters. Somewhere deep down, my old friend is still inside that battered shell of a body. Maybe Saskaya is right. We asked too much of him, too soon. We healed his body but never gave a thought to his soul. All that killing must have taken a severe toll.

Without Zosia as his lodestar, all the accumulated darkness in him came out, unchecked.

Tears drip down my face. I'm still laughing, but even I can hear the edge of pain in each helpless guffaw.

"I'm so sorry, Sunshine."



Tovian drapes one arm around my shoulders in a side-hug, and presses a kiss to my temple.

“I can’t believe she’s gone,” I whisper.

“You don’t know that. There’s still hope.”

I turn to him, my vision still swimming. “We both know better. Zosia died that night. The chances that she’s in the castle are remote. She’d have found a way to signal for help by now.”

“Not necessarily,” Tovian traced the curve of my shoulder with his thumb. “The Sentinels blast anything that moves. If her phone isn’t working for some reason—and that’s a fair assumption—she’d be completely cut off from the world. Hanging a sheet out the window would get her shot. Throwing a bottled message into the river wouldn’t work, either. The glass would likely be broken on the wreckage from the bridge. We couldn’t get within half a kilometer of the exterior wall. It’s going to take a lot of planning and risk to get in there.”

“Tovi, you don’t have to try and hold onto that hope anymore.” I took his face between my hands. “Everything you said the other day was right. I haven’t been able to let go of the

past. I've been giving you short shrift this entire time, when you've been giving me everything."

We kissed, soft and tentative, but I wasn't done talking.

"I can accept that Zosia is likely dead. I know Lorcan is on his own to sort his shit out. I'll try to forgive him for flailing his way through recovery. He did, after all, play a huge role in driving out the invaders."

"But not the only role."

"Not even close, no matter how he's bragged." I give Tavian a watery grin. "Whether or not you and I ever get public credit for organizing the initial resistance doesn't really matter. We were there. We worked with Ephram and Luza. We know the score." I place his hand over my heart. "And I never would have had the courage to keep going if it weren't for you being there at every turn."

Tavian's expression softened. "Oh, Sunshine, you'd have kept going without me. If Lorcan hadn't woken up, you'd have found a way to chase those bastards out of our country. It might have taken you a while, but you have all the qualities of a good leader."

"I do?"

All my life, I've lived in Zosia's shadow.

I'm not happy that she's gone. I truly would give anything to have my friend back. Yet in some ways, this summer has been a relief. It gave me a chance to shine. I blew up an entire bridge. I fought men who were stronger than me, and won. I treated battlefield wounds that made Lorcan's many injuries seem like paper cuts (except the one time when I had to stitch him up in Cata's kitchen; that was pretty gruesome).

And I met a man who sees me and loves me for what I am. Who thinks I'm the brightest star in his universe.

I've been afraid to accept his gift. Scared that it wasn't real, that I'd find out that he was only interested in me for my proximity to the true Auralian Queen. All it took was one ridiculous [GIFT] for me to see it.

"Yeah, Sunshine, you do." Tovian ran his thumb over the curve of my cheek. "You're selfless and determined. You don't give up, even when a situation seems hopeless. People listen to you because you know how to delegate, and you act decisively even when you're not totally certain you're doing the right thing. Finding the balance between sticking with a plan and reassessing when the facts change is never easy. I've seen my

mother wrestle with it all her life.” He huffed a laugh. “She especially wrestled with it once it became clear that you weren’t a passing fancy for me. You were everything I wanted, and so much more.”

His hand drops to his side.

“Which is why I’ve been gutted that you don’t see me the same way.”

“I do! Tovi, I do—

“Shh.” He places a raised finger against my lips, stilling me. “I know it’s because you don’t see yourself as worthy of what we have, and that breaks me. I cannot fathom it. Took me a long time to understand that your reasons for being wary of me had nothing to do with me at all. Your hesitation was rooted in your relationship with your friends. If you think I haven’t been actively trying to break you away from that perspective, you don’t know me at all.”

I laugh shakily. Tovia did to me what Lorcan did with Zosia, and I never even registered it. Set his sights on me and didn’t stop until I said yes.

Until he realized I wasn’t saying it with my whole heart.

I am now.

I really wish I didn't cry so easily, but I do, and the entire point of this conversation is that I shouldn't be ashamed of who I am. "Tovian?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry it took me so long to see you."

He smiles fondly.

"Just because Lorcan is an idiot, doesn't mean I am, Raina."

I laugh, for real, this time. Right on its heels come tears. I break off in a sob and bury my face in his shoulder, letting myself cry for everything I've lost: my friends, my naïveté. I weep for fear and excitement about everything I'm becoming: a mother, a queen, with the distinct possibility that I will have to step up on a much larger stage than I ever anticipated. I might have to fight one of my best friends for it, if Lorcan decides to challenge me for the right to rule this kingdom in Zosia's absence.

I want to protest that he's wrong about Lorcan being an idiot. I mean, Tovian's right, of course. But not about Lorcan never wanting me. He and Zosia are caught up—or were caught up—in something grander in scale than I could ever

have offered him. They're elemental. Timeless. Our culture doesn't believe in direct reincarnation, meaning a soul that comes back over and over again, but part of me believes that if Zosia is really dead, they'll find one another in their next lives. They're legends, and it's taken a severe toll on both of them.

None of this makes me less.

I wouldn't want to be a living goddess anyway.

I'm content to be right here, in Tavian's arms, facing our future together.

Which means there's only one last thing to sort out, and I could really stand to use a handkerchief before blurting out what I say next: "Tavian?"

"Yeah, Sunshine?"

"I still want to marry you. Again, since we're already wedded in the eyes of your people. But it would mean a lot to me if you'd be willing to go through the Myseč ceremony, too." I sniffle. Tavian produces a handkerchief. I feel ridiculous blowing my nose right after asking him to be my lawfully wedded husband, but that's what I do. He's seen me in less glamorous condition, after all.

Ansi marriages are ephemeral. They can be broken by either party at a moment's notice. When there's little impact on the welfare of the children because the basics are covered by your community, there isn't much point in compelling two people who don't want to be together anymore to remain coupled.

But for my people, marriage is a sacred and nigh-unbreakable vow. While there are legal means for dissolving a marriage, they're cumbersome and more or less unavailable to royalty. Even among the high nobility, it's frowned upon, although it does occasionally happen. Arranged marriages don't always work out.

If he marries me, Tovian will be committing to a relationship unlike anything he's ever known.

Maybe not entirely true. His parents have remained married for decades, after all.

“If you want me to give up the throne, and go to live with your people? I'll do it.”

I wait for his response with bated breath.

Tovian's eyes are liquid pools of warmth. Forget my weird-ass violet irises. His eyes are the most beautiful in the world. He cups my chin.

"Raina," he says, and I almost burst into tears thinking he's going to turn me down. "I'll marry you as many times as you want. Every day, if need be."

He kisses me gently. Sweetly.

My lower lip trembles against his.

"I don't want you to give up being queen. I've seen you lead in battle. I've witnessed the way you take command of a situation when everything feels hopeless, and give people a reason to keep on fighting. You're compassionate, evenhanded, and creative. When there's no immediate solution, you always find a way forward." His thumb traces the shape of my lower lip. "It's fair to say that this country wouldn't still be independent if not for you. I would never want to deprive your people of a magnificent queen."

Another kiss. This one isn't quite so sweet. A sweep of his tongue against mine. Heat combusts within me. I moan.

We're not done talking, though.



“I learned everything I know from Lorcan,” I whisper.  
“That’s what hurts so much. We were really close once.”

“Not everything, Sunshine. He taught you to fight, and ferociously at that, but that man doesn’t know a damned thing about how to handle people.” Tavian shifts closer to me. I swing my leg over his thighs, straddling his lap. “Being a queen is ninety-nine percent people skills and one percent spear-wielding capability. He doesn’t have what it takes.”

He grins and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “You do.”

“I had help.” I grin and rock my hips forward. At roughly three months of pregnancy, my stomach is barely rounded enough to make fastening my pants difficult. The nausea, fortunately, is gone. For now.

“You did.”

He cups my ass, bringing me firmly into contact with his burgeoning erection. A tiny smirk quirks his luscious mouth up at one corner. That tiny gesture has an electric effect on me. Lights me up on the inside.

When he smiles, I know it’s because he’s happy. He’s emotionally available—something that threw me at first. I’d

never met a man who said what he thought and felt, without trying to hide it behind an emotionless mask.

I had no idea what hit me that day in The Boscage.

“Tovian.” I take his face between my palms. “I wouldn’t have made it through the summer without you. Nor the winter. Definitely not this spring.”

I kiss him. It’s dirty as fuck and yet the sweetness lingers on his lips. I taste it and want more, but he pulls back just long enough to whisper, “You’d have made it without me, but I’m so glad I got to be there with you.”

Then I’m not thinking—or feeling bad—about how clinging to the fantasy version of Lorcan kept me from seeing what Tovian’s been saying all along. That he loves me. He fell fast and hard, and finding out my real identity only made him fight harder to stay at my side.

Did it scare the shit out of me, even while it the most flattering thing that’s ever happened to me? Yeah. Did I tumble head-first into love with this man without even realizing it? Yeah. I sure did.

Took me long enough to figure out what happened to me. An unplanned pregnancy that felt right even though it

came at the worst possible time.

It takes me three seconds to strip his shirt off over his head and push him back onto the [surface].

“I have so much to show you,” I whisper, sinking my teeth into Tovia’s earlobe and feel his slight shudder.

He lays back, taking me down with him, cupping my breasts through my shirt. “Seen this before.”

I laugh. “I meant of the outside world.”

He tenses. I know how badly he wants to experience all the wonders of civilization beyond our shores. I know I’m his ticket to go abroad, but I’m not worried that his interest in me is only because I can give him all of that and more.

“I want to see the world with you,” he says softly, stroking my long black hair. “But even if we stay right here at River Bend, I’ll be content. You’re my world now, Raina. Forever.”

I squirm. As queen, I can’t make the same bold declaration. I’ll always have demands on my time. So will he, as my prince consort. But the two of us together will make our own world together. A good and kind one, for our children, and for all the children who lost their families this year.

“I have one thing from the outside world to show you.”

Sitting up, I strip off my shirt to reveal the lacy bra I bought in Paris. Purchased with Lorcan in mind, while knowing he was never going to see it. Past me was an idiot, but right now, I’m thanking her for setting me up for this moment.

“I figure I’d better wear as many of my clothes acquired in the outside world while I can still fit into them. Retail therapy was my thing, and I needed a fuckton of therapy what with the whole Zosia and Lorcan fiasco.”

“Sunshine?”

“Yes?”

“Let’s not talk about your friends for a while.”

I laugh. He’s right. I’ve let them dominate my consciousness in ways that have been unhealthy. I’ll still have to deal with Lorcan at some point, and grieve the loss of Zosia, but they don’t need to be with us now.

Tovian hasn’t taken his eyes off my chest. His gaze is worshipful and impish. “What’s this, Sunshine?”

“Lingerie.”

He's already trying to get my pants unfastened, curious about what's underneath the plain red silk. Pale pink embroidered lace appears.

"This is nice," he says admiringly.

"You should see what I have tucked away in my closets." We kiss. I tuck my hair behind my ear. "Before it doesn't fit."

"We'll just have to get you new... what was it called? Lingerie?"

"Yeah. French."

Tovian fumbles with the tiny clasps, but quickly figures it out. The bra comes away with a gentle tug, stripping the straps down my arms. He cups my breasts, squeezing, flicking his thumb over my nipples.

"Lingerie is nice," he says, "but this is better."

I wriggle backward, off his thighs, and attempt to remove my pants in a strip tease. I'm already too awkward to bend properly, so it ends with an inelegant hop-skip. Tovian isn't bothered by my lack of grace. The heat in his gaze flares higher. His cock twitches visibly. I fall to my knees, between his, and work the silvery-gray fabric open.

He springs to attention. I take him in hand, squeezing lightly. Tovia's leaning back on his hands. His head falls back, eyes closed, when I stripe my tongue up the underside.

"Fuck, Sunshine."

"Not yet. We'll get there."

We shouldn't be doing this here, but fuck it, it's my castle and I'll suck my boyfriend's cock wherever I damn well please.

He groans and tents his fingers on my scalp. I take him all the way down my throat, as far as I can manage. Sucking sounds echo in my ears. It feels wild and bold to be doing this with him where anyone could pass by to see. I'm so wet that my fancy embroidered tanga might never be the same. I shift, trying and failing to ease the ache. Tovia's abdomen clenches.

"Off, Sunshine."

Instead, I grip his hips and go lower. He makes a sound that's half submission, half surprise, followed by a low moan. He swells, impossibly larger, so big my jaw hurts. I firm my lips around his shaft. Salt explodes on my tongue. He pulses, his vein pulsing against my lower lip. Slowly, his tense grip on

my hair relaxes. He's still hard when I slip off, gagging a little as the pressure eases. I wipe my mouth as discreetly as I can, but there's no hiding what we just did together.

Tovian hauls me up, plastering me to his chest. I listen to his heart racing. Then I strain upward to press a tender kiss to his jaw. He's not a giant, but he's a heck of a lot taller and stronger than me, which makes me feel small and protected.

Knowing he could've—and would have—snapped Lorcan's neck if I'd asked him to is weirdly gratifying. I'm not supposed to be thinking about my friends, if you can still call Lorcan that, yet they're woven into the fabric of my life. Being close with two living legends made me feel small. Less than.

But that was all in my head.

I wouldn't trade my life for either of theirs. No way.

I've already started weaving a new life with Tovian. Literally, in one sense. We'll have to figure out what an Ansi-Myseč family will look like. Nobody has done anything like it in at least five hundred years.

Maybe it'll be a mess. But it'll be glorious, because it's ours.

“What are you thinking, Sunshine?”

Tovian strokes my hair. I realize with a jolt that it's a tactile turn-on for him, the same way I like to twist his crisp curls into tight spikes, although that's more of a comfort thing for me.

Given the way his cock twitches, touching me like this is more sensual for him.

"Thinking about how we're going to be a queen and king like my people have never known."

He chuckles.

"In what way?"

"You know. We're insular. Moon-goddess worshipers were always a little, uh, off, compared to the rest of the population." Kinda goth, not that Tovian would understand that word. "And the Ansi are even more so. It's going to be up to us to show that there's a new way to be open to the world, without losing our cultural identities."

Tovian smiles. "Thinking like the queen you are."

"Not technically, yet." I've debated waiting until the baby is born to be formally crowned. Now that I'm back home and dealing with more of the day-to-day leadership, my father doesn't mind so much. What were you thinking about?"



“Nothing remotely worthy of a king.” He makes a face.

I laugh. “Now you have to tell me.”

Tovian pulls me up his torso so he can whisper in my ear. Skin sliding against skin. The desire I’d banked while sucking his cock comes raging back.

“It’s a shame I can’t get you pregnant again. I’d take a lot of pleasure in doing it intentionally, next time.”

He swells. I bite my lip and prop my chin on one hand, grinning. “Mmm. I always wanted a big family.”

“Yeah? How big?” He tilts his hips up, making it a joke. I’m of half a mind to slide right down over him and fuck him here in the [PLACE].

“I don’t know. Four seems like the right number?”

“Ten is out of the question?”

I giggle and swat his bicep. “You’re not the one who has to deal with childbirth.”

“True.” Tovian sighs melodramatically. “I would, if I could. But since I can’t, you’ll be the final word on how many babies we have. If I have to content myself with four, I’ll manage.”

“What if it’s so bad I say one is enough?”

I’m eager to move things forward, but this feels like an important detail.

“Then one will be enough.”

He says it without hesitation. My heart is so full I can’t bear it. I kiss him, hands on either side of his face. Tavian gathers me into his arms. Our kiss deepens. He breaks to press his hot, open mouth down my neck.

“We have every child in this dormitory looking up to us, Sunshine,” he says softly. “I have all the children I’ll ever need, even if this is the only one we make together.”

“It won’t be,” I promise. “I was serious about having four.”

“And I was serious about next time, we’ll do it deliberately.”

I grin. “I don’t know. I kind of like the element of surprise. This one came along right when we needed it most.”

He squeezes me tight, then flips me onto my back. Tavian works his way down my body, draping one leg over his shoulder, intent upon his destination. I exhale harshly when he

kisses my inner thigh. He parts me with two fingers and groans. “Fuck, Raina. You’re so wet.”

“I was getting a lot out of going down on you,” I answered, shifting restlessly. He obliges me, striping his tongue up my center. Sucking sounds as he fingers me rhythmically, driving me higher.

“Yeah, Sunshine,” he says, taking his mouth off me long enough to leave me mewling like a kitten at the loss of his mouth. “I like getting you off, too.”

Then he’s back at it, circling, licking, sucking. Driving me higher and wilder while holding back the release I need.

This man knows me intimately. In ways I’ve been afraid of letting anyone see. He barged through every defense like it was nothing. Patient and skilled as a hunter taking down prey.

I never saw him coming. Literally or metaphorically.

When I can’t stand another moment of torment, I thrust my fingers into his close-cropped curls and lift my hips. Begging. Tavian has me right where he wants me. He teases me for another few seconds. A groan of frustration escapes my lips.

I swear I can feel him grinning as he pushes me over the edge. I climax against his tongue with his fingers crooked inside me, pumping unhurriedly, letting me linger in that space for as long as I can hold it. At last, I relax, slumping against the [surface], boneless.

He knows when to withdraw, too. I'm too sensitive, yet still somehow unsatisfied.

“Up.”

“Huh?” Slowly, I peel myself off the [surface]. “Tovi, we'll get caught.”

“So?”

“They're kids, they can't see us—”

He shoves me against the wall, kissing me hard. I taste us, commingled, and arch upward, wanting more. Needing it with every fiber of my being.

“They won't catch us if you're quiet.”

Tovian cups my ass and pins me against the wall. He's hard and insistent at my hip. I squirm, but I can't impale myself on him from this angle.

“I can be quiet.” I say in a whine of pure need.

“Yeah. Good girl.”

Being so strong and so much bigger than I am, he hooks my legs around his waist and holds my arms against the stone. I resist with one wrist only. He lets me go. I reach down with shaking fingers and angle him inside me. The second he's in place, Tavian grips me with unyielding fingers and slams my hand back in place. He drives hard, seating himself fully in a single stroke.

I gasp. I can't catch my breath. There's only out and out and out, in time with the battering of his hips, pinning me to the wall with each thrust. He shifts, putting one forearm beneath my bent knee, still pinning me but with better traction. This is a ferocious claiming. He's forcing me to stay in the moment, remember only his skin on mine, a reminder of whose child I carry and what he'll do to protect us.

I clutch his hair and try to meet his thundering pace, but all I can do is receive. I'm his. He's letting me know that this is forever. I'm marked, body and soul, and I fucking love it.

Probably ought to tell him that.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“Say it again, Sunshine,” he demands through gritted teeth.

The climax is so close. Right there, driving me higher with every punishing thrust.

“I love you.”

“Only me.”

“Only you. And our baby.”

“Fuck.”

He loses control. I didn't know Tavian could be that wild. He fucks me with a feral, unbridled need, filling me, taking everything he needs. Somehow, I get there first. I clutch his head and bite his shoulder in an effort to stifle my orgasm, but all it does is make him even wilder. My spine grinds against the stone. I don't even care. The pain is only a delicious tang to the pleasure coursing through me.

His breath blasts hot across my neck and he comes, driving me into another climax even harder than the first.

I can't hold back. The sounds of my pleasure ring from the rafters. I sincerely hope we're alone, because if not, this exhilarating moment I wouldn't trade for anything will become the most humiliating moment of my life.

Tovian's growl echoes in my ears. I can feel us pulsing frantically, the throb of his blood and mine, commingled. Carefully, he withdraws. I wince.

"Got carried away," he says a bit sheepishly.

I kiss him to tell him it's okay. So did I. Words are still beyond me.

He exhales and lets my feet touch the floor. I find my breath.

"If I weren't already pregnant, Tovi, I definitely would be after that."

Laughing, he touches his forehead to mine and says, "We'd better get dressed."

#

Later, after we've made it to my bedroom—now our bedroom, at least until we move into the guest wing, which will become our private suite—Tovian says, "We still have to close things out with Lorcan."

"Really? Do we have to?" I groan, though I know he's right. Lorcan left an apology gift. A wedding gift, technically, for all that it's a bit ridiculous. We need to acknowledge it.

Otherwise, he might show up at the wedding thinking all is forgiven.

It's not.

Not by a long shot.

At this point, I think Tovian is more open to reconciling with Lorcan than I am. He's had months to get used to the fact that Lorcan has been sleeping with gods-know how many women. He never knew the Lorcan from before, the one so dedicated to Zosia that even when she despised him, he wouldn't look at another woman.

But I'm a long way from being able to look my old friend in the eye, forget welcoming him back into my life. In any capacity.

"Why do you think he's avoiding the castle?" I asked Tovian. My own question surprises me. It doesn't surprise my boyfriend.

"He's afraid."

"Lorcan isn't afraid of anything—" I bite off the sentence. That's what we've all thought, isn't it? And we were wrong. "What do you mean, afraid?"



It's so weird to think that Tovia knows my oldest friend better than I do, now. After months of traveling and fighting together, though, it's true. He's seen this new version of Lorcan, whereas I've been clinging to our shared past. I was willfully blind. I'm not anymore.

I'm just plain sad. Grieving for my old friend. Aware, now that it's too late to change it, that we expected too much of him after his injury. Unsure how to help him, while knowing with perfect clarity that this is something he's going to have to figure out on his own.

No wonder Lorcan seems so alone. He might be the Hero of Auralia, but he's isolated and dealing with his hurt in the most destructive way imaginable.

Until he decides to stop, there's nothing I can do for him.

I pick up the phone and type quickly. There's no guarantee it'll even get through to him. A twinge in my heart tells me I do still care about my old friend. It's hard to see him suffering. It's harder to watch him wallow in anger and failure instead of getting his ass in gear to go fix it.

So, I'll give him a swift kick in the rear to do what he should've done months ago.

**Thank you for the gift. Don't come back here again unless it's with Zosia. We care about you, but you're not welcome here until you do.**

I hold the phone out to Tavian. He nods.

“It's good. Firm and fair.”

Firm and fair. Two things I'll need to be, as a mother and as a queen. I hit send. It doesn't bounce back.

I don't think about Lorcan again for a long, long time.

# May

## Chapter 31

The river is red. For one nervous beat, I'm reminded of the way the water glistened crimson with blood and fire the day I met Tovia, not quite a year ago.

I turn to find him staring at me with a soft smile on his lips. Memories shift to happier thoughts, twinkling with bright starlight. We're waiting for the moon to rise high enough in the sky for the ceremony to begin. Until then, it's us, garbed in elaborately embroidered spidersilk.

Red means good luck. I twitch my sleeve aside and thread my fingers through my husband-to-be's. The boat rocks gently, tethered to the deep riverbed as the waterfall's force pushes our vessel downriver. Music echoes gently over the water.

"How will you stop the waterfall?" Tovia asks.

"We don't, really. We temporarily redirect the flow."

He scans the ferocious waterfall, trying to figure out how that's possible. I can see his clever mind working. Feel his steadfast presence. Tovia is my rock. I am his water. We shape one another's path through life. Time will change us, direct our route, but we will remain united despite the uncertain future.

My heart is so full I can hardly breathe.

“What are you thinking, Sunshine?”

I smile and glance at Tovia.

“I'm thinking that I'm so happy we're here together.”

He squeezes my hand. Silver bangles jingle, reflecting moonlight. It's almost time.

“I'd follow you anywhere, Raina.”

My vision mists, as it always does with strong emotion. I rise on tiptoe. He turns his head in time to catch my kiss, a quick, chaste press. We have an audience, after all.

“Good. I have many places I want to take you.”

His quirk of a smile tells me he picked up on my double entendre.

The music stops.

A murmur sweeps across the river, silenced by the clank of chains. Enormous chains, which are ordinarily pulled by teams of strong men. Since River Bend, like all of Auralia, lacks able-bodied men, others have been pressed into service. The operation isn't as smooth as I remember from past ceremonies.

It's okay. I'm honored that everyone came together to continue this tradition.

Even Brenica and a contingent of the Ansi are here on their own red-bedecked boat. They brought Garnet, too. My little dragon is as long as my forearm now. Tovia catches sight of them and waves. I wave, too. Honestly, after the year we've had? Fuck formality.

The moon shines brightly on two enormous slabs parting the waterfall. When they extend far enough out, a second mechanism slowly raises them outward. It's a long process, requiring enormous strength. This is what my people once went to war with Zosia's tribe over: access to the Moon Temple. We won, and in the process, forfeited our access to the Sun Temple for five centuries.

Our civil war drove the tribes apart, and the Ansi into isolation.

I hope we can continue the process of bringing this country's five tribes together again.

A memory of Zosia, dressed in leggings and a sweater, laughing, burns into me. That hole remains a wound in my heart, unhealed.

*I'm sorry. You deserved better.*

Most of all: *I pray you're not dead.*

I have little hope on that score. She wouldn't have hidden for this long. If she'd been taken captive, the Skía would have tried to ransom her—or worse—by now. They wouldn't have been silent.

Mentally, I recite the Myseč prayer for the dead. Tonight, I'm letting her go.

Just as she always wanted.

Maybe she ran off. She could be out there, living free, anonymous. If she is, I want to tell her we'll be okay. The country might fall but we'll pick up the pieces and build it anew. The worst that can happen, already has. Tovian and I will do our best to carry the torch of leadership forward and lead Auralia in her absence.

She can rest.

But gods above, I wish she were here now. As my friend. She should be here to see this.

Tovian is staring at the alcove revealed by the parted waterfall. The boat rocks, then stills, in response to the changed current. I grin up at him.

“Isn’t it amazing?”

“Incredible.”

He stares, awestruck, at the enormous statue of Reila, the Moon Goddess. She’s thousands of years old, three stories high and painted vivid red, black, and inlaid with silver. Her face is carved alabaster, adorned with the silver crescent emblem of my people. The alcove behind the waterfall is covered in silver ornamentation, from hammered plate that reflects moonlight like water, flecked with gold accents. Viewing it from a boat on the river, the effect is that of an enormous mirror. Everyone can witness our union.

Hand-in-hand, we stepped from the low-lying boat onto the rocky shore. Crimson silk, weighted with glimmering thread, caressed my legs.

The young priestess’ black hair hangs to her waist. She wears a white silk gown gathered at the shoulders and waist

with elaborate designs representing the Myseč people. A depiction of a river on the belt around her midsection. Fish wrap around her wrists and wild rice hung from her ears. My cousin's mouth quirks up at the corners when we make eye contact.

She bids Tovia and me to kneel. Bending is starting to get awkward. I'm not showing yet too much yet, and my gown is cut for maximum disguise, but my stomach strains the fabric. Tovia's grip on my elbow tightened fractionally. He cast me a concerned glance. I grinned, folded my hands, and bent my head.

[Cousin]'s voice carried on the wind, echoing faintly in the cavern. I picture the boats on the water crowding closer, fighting their way into the calm center of the parted waterfall, which thundered down in a curtain of rushing water on either side of the cavern.

*We are fragments of stars, at the mercy of the wind and weather and time. We come together to face our fate and trust the Three Goddesses to guide us. Do you promise to honor Reila, Goddess of Moonlight and Water?*

Tovia promises.

*Do you promise to uphold Her vow to Her people?*



Again, he speaks the words. In binding himself to an ancient goddess, he tied himself to her descendant. Me.

I can't help but marvel that this gorgeous, steadfast, brave man chose me over his own people. I didn't believe I was worthy of that kind of devotion. I accept it humbly now.

Then it's my turn to promise myself to him. It's a crappy exchange, to be honest, for immediately on the heels of that vow is my promise to reign fairly and with dignity, in honor of the Goddess Reila, may her moons wax and wane and ever guide me along the path of peace, etc. etc. All that good stuff. Basically, Tovian has to honor me. I honor the goddess first, then him.

But we're all on board with this arrangement.

Even the dukes who were furious when I chose an outsider over them have more or less conceded that an alliance with Tovian's people is worth the indignity of having to wait another decade until my sister comes of age to have a chance of marrying into the royal family.

Fireworks split the air.

Oh, yes, we have fireworks in Auralia. They're an ancient technology, one brought to us by an unlucky Chinese

ship that wrecked on our shores many centuries ago. The passengers stayed—after all, there was no way for them to return home—bringing their knowledge of printed language and explosives.

Our country has never been as isolated as we pretend to be.

Tonight, it doesn't matter. We float in the red-tinged river with silver stars above, a white moon shining down with Reila's blessing. Tovian and I make the rounds to every boat, acknowledging all the people who came to celebrate our union.

There are too many parentless children and sad women, mourning their husbands. Yet even the ones who've lost everyone they love are here to celebrate ours. I'm humbled and determined to do well by these people who now call me Queen.

We dance beneath the moon on a terrace bedecked with red and silver banners that wink and wave in the night breeze.

Tovian catches one of the youngest orphans, a little girl barely old enough to walk, and dances with her like she's the star of the evening. I take the hands of two boys, brothers who lost their mother and father in the war, kicking wildly in a

circle to make them laugh and squeal. I am the queen mother to all these lost children. I'll never forget the sacrifices their families made to hold onto our freedom.

I sidle over to my new husband. He's holding the toddler against his shoulder, clearly smitten with her round little face, huge brown eyes and black hair.

"This is Raina. Your queen."

"Hi there, pumpkin." I don't know the girl's name. She's one of hundreds of orphans. I haven't memorized everyone yet. I make a note to do so, though. These children are our future. They'll remember the queen and her prince consort giving them refuge long after I'm old enough to pass the torch to my own daughter.

If I have one.

Tovian's family runs to boys. Supposedly, it's a 50/50 shot having a boy or a girl, but his line is suspiciously boy-oriented, come to think of it.

Never really thought of myself as a boy-mom. Huh.

"What are you thinking about?" Tovian asks.

"Whether we're having a boy or a little girl, like this dumpling." I poke her tummy. Shyly, she burrows into Tovian,

hiding from me. She sticks one finger in her mouth. A thread of drool drips down her chin.

Kids. So cute. So disgusting.

Gently, I wipe it away.

“I’m happy with either one.” Tovia n stroked the child’s back. She yawned. All the children are up late. We should find their minders and get them to bed—if they’re not too busy celebrating.

“Dance with me?” Tovia n asks.

“You already have a partner.” I grin.

“I can make room for one more.”

He hooks his free arm around my waist.

The three of us sway in the night breeze, the toddler fast asleep on his shoulder.

# Epilogue

## June

The buzz in my ear yanks me out of a light slumber. Tavian stirs beside me. He likes to cuddle. I get hot when he won't let go and wriggle away from his heavy, sleeping body. Some nights, it takes me awhile to fall back asleep. This is one of them.

I worry. About the baby. About the state of the country. About the future. Sometimes, about Zosia, but I've been trying to let her go.

I even worry about Lorcan. I try not to. I'm still mad at him, and a little bit heartbroken at the loss of our friendship. Mostly mad, though I'm trying to let that go, too. Part of me still hates seeing him crumble.

My phone vibrated insistently again. The one name I don't want to see pops onto the screen. Lorcan. I bolt upright and snap, "What the fuck do you want?"

Harsh. Electric tension surges through me. I shove the bedclothes back. Cold stone meets my bare feet.

“I’ve got her. Zosia.” A pause. He sounds on the verge of tears when he says, “She needs help.”

“In what way?” I need to move. I need to pee. I always need to pee, nowadays. My cute baby bump is starting to get uncomfortably big, and I still have many months of pregnancy to go.

“She’s...” There’s guilt and fear in Lorcan’s voice like I’ve never heard before. “I think she’s dying.”

“Fuck,” I exhale. I don’t need to say it. He took too long in getting to her.

Tovian blearily rolls over. He sees me and sits up.

Saskaya comes on the line. “Raina, we have a situation. The princess is here, but she’s unconscious. She needs medical help. Can you come tonight?”

I exchange a wordless glance with Tovian, already pulling on his clothes.

“Tell me what you need.”

End.

## **Sneak peek at events from *Eternal Knight and Queen***

### **Rising**

The sight of Zosia striding over the bridge into the courtyard at River Bend, where I'm entertaining a group of the orphans, is like seeing a battle-weary warrior get up one last time to defeat their enemy. She looks so different, so much *more* like the version of herself from that night at the Louvre, though her appearance is shockingly altered. Rail-thin, worryingly frail, but with an unyielding inner strength.

Her green eyes are clear and bright, larger than ever. Her long hair is gone. The poorly chopped short strands frame her cheekbones, now sharp and high above sunken hollows. Zosia's gaze dips to my stomach, then back to my face.

Her expression is that of a starving dog getting a sharp kick instead of a hoped-for treat.

It's the look of someone enduring one final, crushing indignity after enduring oceans of hardship. It's the death of hope, and I have witnessed its like far too often in the past year.

She's wrong, though, about this. I can't spare her the truth of what Lorcan has become, but I can disabuse her of the notion that he and I are together.

"Zosia. You're so thin! What are you doing here?" I rush at her. Try to, anyway. I'm not as agile as I was a few months ago. "I missed you. I was so *worried* about you. We all were."

"I'm fine," she says quickly, in that way that means the opposite, but she won't talk about it. I throw my arms around her waist and squeeze. She's so physically diminished that even with my rounded front, my forearms overlap at the small of her back. It's terrifying, how close we came to losing her. Zosia strokes my long hair. "You are not thin. Quite the opposite. Tell me everything."

Her voice is heartbreakingly brittle, yet steady. *Oh, no, she thinks it's for the best.* No, no—anything but that. "I'm due sometime after the Autumn Harvest, not that there will be much of one this year," I said quickly, releasing her. "Tovian is over the moon."

Zosia's confusion knits her brows together over the bridge of her nose. "Tovian, who?"

"The man responsible for this," I rub my stomach. "It wasn't exactly planned." Then, rambling because I can't stand



the thought of her asking about Lorcan and me, I say, “Ansi Tribe. Believe it or not, they exist. Without them, Auralia would have fallen during the initial invasion. Tovi and Lorcan are out rounding up the last of the pirates and giving them a suitably violent goodbye.”

As long as he stays gone, and lets Zosia believe he’s forgotten her, I’ll stay silent on the matter of my onetime friend’s less-than-noble behavior. I owe him that much. She’ll find out soon enough, anyway. Rumors about the Hero of Auralia run from the Timberlands to Oceanside. She’s probably heard whispers already.

Tovian thinks he regrets the way he’s been living. He says Lorcan’s been on a tear ever since leaving Čovari Village while Zosia was still unconscious and fighting for her life. Taking stupid risks, like he’s trying to get himself killed.

It might be a mercy if he did.

A small part of me thinks I’m being too harsh. But then I recall the maid’s guilty expression, and remember his total lack of feeling or respect for his partner, and I know he’s gone. Really gone. Never coming back. Nothing but the killer remains.

Zosia does *not* need what he’s become.

I stay quiet the next day when Zosia outlines her plan to marry an outsider to get money to begin rebuilding, even when my father attempts to suggest she consider a suitor closer to home. Hinting broadly that an alliance with the Hero of Auralia would be a politically astute match.

He's right, theoretically. But Lorcan threw away his chance to have everything he ever dreamed of. I'm not sure how much my father knows.

*Lorcan, you stupid ass. You should have gone after her sooner. You should have had a queen, and Zosia should have had you to help her through this.*

This sham marriage is her sacrifice. It's like she accepts her father's belief that the only value she has is the baby she'll eventually have to produce. King Rohan was a good man. Not a great king, but a decent one. But he was a shitty father to Zosia, in retrospect.

Pushing his grieving daughter into the role of High Priestess at such a young age, wholly untrained. She's never talked about the trips to Mount Astreia, but I've known Zosia since we were little. The first time she went, she was excited. Sad about her mother, but ready to fill Queen Ilíana's shoes as best her ten-year-old feet could. After that first visit, though...

Zosia, the bright, curious little princess everyone adored? Her light began to dim. Outwardly, she tried to keep up appearances, but the more Rohan sent the message that she had nothing individually valuable to offer the world—her interests were inappropriate, her talents useless, her ideas unwanted—the more she quietly rebelled. My father commiserated with Rohan about headstrong daughters, never seeing that his friend wasn't handling single parenthood well.

Until that night in Beijing, when it became clear she was *done* pretending to be a replica of her mother.

All I knew was that my friend had gotten more reserved, sulkier, and more stubborn with each passing year. I didn't understand why Lorcan was so obsessed with her. It made no sense to me. But he remembered the bubbly, pretty girl he'd seen once as a boy. He was sure she was still there. Hiding.

He was right.

I mull the events that brought us to this juncture of thin hope and despair as Zosia outlines her plan to me and my father. She barely touches the food. Instead of putting it in her mouth, she shreds it into tiny pieces. Later, when I search for severe malnourishment symptoms, I learn that it's a common

trait of people who've been to the brink of starvation, however they got there.

So, as much as I hate hearing Zosia dispassionately explain her plan to play *The Bachelorette*—it wasn't even a good TV show, much less worth imitating in real life—I say nothing to dissuade her from the idea. I can't. Not in good conscience. The wheat fields that once stretched for days up the Central Valley are overgrown with weeds and prairie grass. Most of the sheep that once fed and clothed our population have been devoured by predators. Our horses run wild. We need money. The only one with a plan to get it is Zosia.

And then, *he* burst in, ruining it.

Lorcan, wild-eyed and silent, stares her down as though Zosia is the one foe who can strike terror into his heart. I've never seen that wild look before. But the determination is familiar. I knew, then, that if she didn't make good on her plan to marry elsewhere soon, he was going to try and win her back. Nothing has ever stopped him from pursuing her—except Zosia's own resistance. All I can do is close my eyes and pray she never discovered what he'd become since waking up.

#

I catch Lorcan heading out the next morning. Zosia needs to stay put. She needs time to rest and recover, but the country can't give her that. Anger spikes in my heart. All this damn country does is take and take and take from her, until she has nothing left to give. Still, we demand ever greater sacrifices. Everything she has. We've all sacrificed. Her more than anyone. Her dreams and aspirations, her heart, her mind, her body—she's given it all, and gotten damn little in return.

*Let her be happy. Reila above, give this woman something to live for.*

I don't think she'd take her own life. But there's no question Zosia thinks about it. Has for years.

Perhaps Hallie, the princess we met when we were at university in Scotland, will help Zosia find someone who can appreciate her for who and what she is. A man who will be gentle and understanding while she figures out how to run her country. One who will treat her with dignity and respect, while pouring millions of dollars into making this island habitable again.

A qualm in my stomach as I watched her pull herself into the saddle, clearly still sore from yesterday. Determined to go no matter how much pain she's in.

*Men who take trophy wives to become kings aren't known for their generosity or fidelity.* This isn't one of my romance novels. It's her life, and while the rest of us waved away her concerns with empty reassurances, Zosia faced her fate with a clear-eyed sense of doom.

We lied to her. For years. Cata, Rohan, me—not one of us wanted to admit what we were forcing her to become. That would've made us culpable. We all wanted to gloss over it. Told her to grow up.

Zosia already had, though. Her childhood ended the day her mother died.

I screw my eyes shut, fighting back tears. If she can be unbreakable, then damn it, so can I—at least for long enough to say goodbye.

Upon opening them, I find Lorcan speaking with the guards I assigned to accompany Zosia. A moment later, he's striding toward the stable, pack slung over his shoulder, stone-faced.

I hurry after him. As best as I can, given my rounded stomach and resulting waddle.

“You leave her alone,” I order, upon catching up. “Did you hear me, Lorcan? You leave Zosia—”

“She needs a proper guard.”

“Is that right?” I snap. “Some guard you’ve been. Leaving her locked in with a madman for over a year.”

He doesn’t answer. I hate that he’s right. As wrecked as she is physically, Zosia’s got a will of steel. She’s going to do this, and that means she needs a guard.

Which is why I assigned her two of our best.

“There and back again, you hear me, Lorcan?” I hiss, not wanting our argument to be overheard. “Stay out of her way. Zosia’s doing what’s best for the country, and hopefully, for herself.”

He leads his horse out. He barely glances at me. I can’t tell if there’s still a human heart beating inside his chest, or if that’s turned to stone, too.

“Stay away from her, Lorcan. Let her do what she needs to do.”

A loveless marriage. I shut my eyes and squeezed them tight. *No*. She needs warmth and love, a gentle, steady light to chase away the darkness of everything she’s been through. She

hasn't told me all of it. Won't. Refused my attempts to ask delicate questions about her time locked in with Bashir. Protecting me from the horror of her time there.

Whatever happened, was bad.

My eyes snapped open. What she definitely does *not* need is the hard, jaded man Lorcan has become. And if not him, then what's the alternative? Either the royal line ends with her, or she chooses someone who might get our country out of this mess. It's not as if either option is great.

She always knew what being the last of her line meant for her future. That future has arrived fast and hard.

Lorcan swings into his saddle.

"Do you hear me?" I call after him. His horse's tail twitches. He doesn't look back.

Warm hands skim up my arms. Tovian.

"Raina. Let them work it out."

I huff. "There's nothing *to* work out. He'd better leave her alone, or I'll murder him myself."

Absent-mindedly, I rub my stomach. Tovian kisses my hair. "Your distress isn't good for the baby, Arianelle." Using the name I gave him when we first met, an affectionate



reminder that I've played fast and loose with the truth when it suited my purposes, too.

“He'll hurt her. Again.”

“They're adults. Lorcan can't conceal the truth of what he's done for long. He might be looking for a way to tell her in private. She might forgive him. It could be good for both of them, however they decide to move forward. Clear the air, you know?”

I know he's right. I have to find a way to let go of my simmering anger. It's heartbreak for the man I thought I knew and once loved. I don't want to have these feelings for him. My heart only belongs to Tovian. But a piece of it still loves the boy I knew as a child, no matter how changed he is now. A part of me always will, and it grieves.

I love Zosia, too. Along with being my fellow ruler, she's my closest female friend. Closer than my sisters or my cousins, because she knows what it's like to carry the weight of expectations. Even if her burden is a thousand times heavier than mine, we'll always have that connection.

“I can't stand to see her hurt again.” I sigh. “Especially not by him. It's best if she thinks he doesn't remember her at all.”

For her to let herself fall for Lorcan—whom she loathed for so long—and then find out how profoundly he betrayed her...it will convince her that everyone was right. She'll never come out of that hard shell again. She'll learn the wrong lesson, that she can't trust anyone. It will kill her. If not literally, then in every way that matters.

“Yeah,” Tovia says neutrally. “That might be for the best.”

I have the distinct impression he doesn't agree with me.

Is it too much to hope that two deeply wounded people will find strength in one another and fight their way back to happiness?

I think it is.

Time will tell.