

HIS
ROYAL
HIGHNESS

THE ROYALS OF KÉRA ASNELA BOOK 1

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his royal highness

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His Royal Highness

The Royals of Kéra Asnela Book 1

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To my readers: This story is meant to take you through a journey of uncertainty, danger, desire, passion, and love. I hope you experience it all as I have left everything on the pages.





one

An orange and pink radiance illuminated the sky and showered the terrain as the sun set over Watima—a city in the country of Kéra Asnela. With a population of twenty-four million inhabitants, Kéra Asnela was home to many diverse people in the continent of East Africa.

Spread across one hundred and twenty acres of land sat Winthrope Estate Palace—home to the five members of the royal family: King Isaac Winthrope, Crown Prince Remington Winthrope, Prince Omari Winthrope, Princess Cadence Winthrope, and Princess Cadena Winthrope, who was also Advisor to the King.

On the east wing of the palace, next to a thicket on the manicured lawn, a leopard stretched, yawned, then laid down, closing his eyes for a nap.

A few feet away at the open terrace doors, a ruffled Cadena paced back and forth, stopping to glance at herself in the full-length mirror before picking up her pace again.

“Tell the princess that she is requested at my side, please,” she said to Amara—who was a part of her retinue.

“Yes, your highness.” The woman ran quickly to get Princess Cadence.

Standing idly next to the mirror, Cadena's primary assistant, Tally, spoke.

"When are you going to stop pretending that you yourself are not a princess?"

"You call it pretending; I call it non-acknowledgment."

"You cannot just change the rules on a whim because you do not like them. Royal tradition would've fallen long ago if that were the case."

"What's that European saying about rules made to be broken?"

"Well, it's a good thing you are not European."

Cadena's brows dipped. "Why do you care so much about my acceptance anyway? You know this family doesn't take certain traditions too seriously."

"And yet, The Spirit does."

Cadena froze, and her eyes left the mirror, slowly moving to Tally. "Why must you bring The Spirit into this?"

"So, you can face reality. You have the visions. The gift is only given to the next in line to be wed or queen. That's you. Or are you no longer receiving the sight?"

Tally waited quietly for Cadena to lie, but Cadena's mouth was tight-lipped, her jaw locked. Not even her breathing could be heard.

The tall wooden mahogany double doors to the room opened, and Cadence, Cadena's twin sister, floated through the door. She was donned in a royal gown with their sacred blue and gold colors deeply engrained in the material. At the bottom of the gown, jewels laced the trim.

“Everyone is waiting for you in the courtyard.”

Cadena’s brows dipped. “Everyone?”

“Yes.”

Cadena turned around to face her sister. “Everyone?” she emphasized.

Cadence smiled and sighed. “You know the guests wait for you to make an entrance. They are mingling amongst themselves, but official family pictures cannot be taken without you.”

“Why not?”

Cadence balked. “You’re the next queen.”

“I am not the next queen. You are.”

“I don’t have the visions.”

Cadena sighed and dared not glance at Tally. “I cannot be a queen without a king, and furthermore, I have no desire to be in that position.” She almost rolled her eyes, but years of training in royal etiquette prevented her from such an expression, even in her personal quarters.

“Regardless. The handsome photographer hasn’t snapped one photo of the family.”

Cadena pressed her lips together. “Why do you call him the handsome photographer? Doesn’t he have a name?”

Cadence blushed. “Mr. Raphael Valentine, the handsome photographer from the States, has not taken one photo of the family because everyone is waiting for you. Is that better?”

“You know he is wedded; why do you blush over him as you do?”

“He’s gorgeous, and I have eyes, sister. Don’t you?”

“Of course I do, but The Spirit wouldn’t like you gushing over a wedded man.”

“Oh, now she cares what The Spirit thinks,” Tally murmured.

Cadena cut her eyes at Tally, then turned to face her completely.

“I always care about what The Spirit thinks. I love The Spirit, respect The Spirit, and worship The Spirit every day with my prayers. Just because I have my own thoughts, feelings, and desires doesn’t mean I discredit The Spirit.”

“I did not mean to—”

“You’re excused, Tally.”

The room quieted, then Tally nodded and fast-walked out of the room. Cadena took in a breath, then turned back to face her sister.

“You were saying?”

“The King, Prince, and Princess of Myriad are joined with our family. The King, the Princes, and the Princess of Befania, and the presidents of Zambia and Zimbabwe are also waiting for your entrance. It’s rude to keep them waiting.”

“This celebration is for Aunt Imani and her companion Hakim. There is no reason why everyone should be waiting on me.”

“And yet they are.”

Cadena stared at her sister.

“You could take a lot of anxiety off your shoulders if you embrace your royal roots and stop fighting the inevitable.”

“I called you in here to ask about this dress.”

Cadence's eyes traveled over the gown. The top half of the material was gold and wrapped around Cadena's breasts, then flared lightly over her belly and hips, flowing down to her ankles in cobalt blue.

"The gown is beautiful."

"What about my arms?"

"What about them?"

"They're bare."

"I noticed."

Cadena sighed. "Does it appear improper or not, Cadence?"

"Not. I think it's sexy."

Cadena's eyes widened, and she spoke in their Swahili language. "*Ninaiondoa.*" *I'm taking it off.*

"Don't be ridiculous."

"So you think it's okay to be sexy in front of guests?"

"Sister, you've got it naturally. It's not the garb that makes you sexy, per se. It's you. Don't look at it as a bad thing. I'm sure Gemini will love it, yes?"

Cadena peered at her sister. "Why would I care what my royal guard would love?" She folded her arms.

"Have you forgotten that you've confided in me, or are there some ears close by that I need to know about?"

Cadena closed her lips. It was true; she'd entrusted her sister with the deep-seated desires she carried for her guard, Gemini. But those desires didn't go farther than the whispers from her lips to Cadence's ears.

“You were never supposed to repeat that in public.”

“Sister, I don’t know if you can’t tell, but we’re not in public.”

“You’re not to speak the words ‘Gemini and me’ into the atmosphere ever.”

“Why not?”

“It’s forbidden.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. Then Cadence took a breath.

“Okay. Can you calm down?”

“I am calm.”

“Yes, and that’s why your chest is heaving heavily... because you’re calm.”

Cadena turned from her sister and dropped her head back, attempting to steady her inhalation.

“Sister.”

Cadena lifted a hand, silencing Cadence. She strolled to the open terrace, refreshed by the refreshing breeze that cruised across her face, neck, and shoulders. She rested her hands on the marble balcony’s edge and stared at the peacefully sleeping leopard.

In the distance, music could be heard. Cadena knew it was the joyful sounds of festivities from Aunt Imani and Uncle Hakim’s ceremonial celebration.

Cadence’s voice sliced through the noise when she spoke. “Sister, while I don’t know your struggle—I understand it. To be smitten with someone who will never be destined as your

life-mate must crush your heart. But if it helps any, Father will allow you to love who you want to love. He will—”

“It’s only desire. I can get over it.” Cadena’s spirit wrestled with that tale. “And furthermore, it’s not tradition. Father would be prouder if I honored the sacred traditions. Besides, you heard Tally. I have the visions. It means I’m next. That person can’t be...be...” Cadena sighed. “There’s no point of entertaining such yearnings regardless of what I want or... feel.”

“You can fall in love with someone else. You could change your guard and remove yourself from any memories or longing for him through space and time. It’s ultimately up to you.”

Warm arms covered Cadena’s as Cadence closed her in an embrace. “I love you.”

Cadena smiled, looking at the horizon. “I love you, too.”

“Come, please. You know the next person to march in here will be Remington.”

Cadena smirked. “Swinging all of his testosterone everywhere with that deep voice: ‘Cadena, it is rude to keep our guests waiting!’” she mimicked.

They laughed, their high-pitched amusement carried off into the clouds. Cadena turned around to face her sister. “We’re off.”

Cadena slipped into her golden shoes, and together they left her quarters.



two

Trumpets blasted in a synchronized symphony as Cadena and Cadence stood side by side before the high concrete doors of the courtyard.

Turning her head to face her sister, Cadena crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue—mocking what she felt was a ridiculous routine to announce their entrance.

Cadence laughed, but the twins' faces grew serious as they put on a pretense for their guests when the doors opened. They exited the palace, their steps aligned like a dance they'd practiced daily.

All eyes were on them, and delighted expressions covered most of the faces that perused them while others were amazed by their beauty.

With all the attention sucked their way, it was easy to focus on the many people who ogled them. And yet, Cadena's eyes left the sea of people to sweep across the concrete balcony. In the dark area beyond, she knew Gemini lurked. She could feel his intense attention as a choreography of chills doused her body.

Seconds passed; then he stepped forward into a glow of light, presenting himself to her briefly before moving back into the darkness.

Cadena's lips spread into a smile, but it was her body's stimulation to his presence that made her inwardly chastise the behavior of her flesh.

“WE ARE GLAD THAT YOU COULD JOIN US, YOUR HIGHNESS.”

Eyes fluttering, Cadena brought her attention to the prince of Myriad, Mandla Sizwe. His slanted, squinting eyes made Cadena feel as if she were under his scrutiny—but that happened to be how his eyes settled on his face with the thin bridge of his nose and wide nostrils. Her attention was drawn to the mini afro on his head simply because it shined along with his forehead as if he'd sprayed a ton of oils before leaving for Kéra Asnela.

“Many apologies for taking so long, Prince Mandla...” She glanced at the others, “...Princess Izara, King Tau.”

“Whatever the reason for the delay, we are sure that it was important,” King Tau responded.

“I pride myself on honesty and truth. I couldn't figure out if my dress was too revealing or not. So, I asked my sister...” Cadena glanced at Cadence, “...to help me figure it out.”

They laughed lightly, and Princess Izara—dressed in a ballroom gown displaying Myriad's signature gold and green—responded. “I wish I had a sister to help me with such tasks.” Her high-pitched laugh was shrill as she rested one of her gloved hands on her chest. “If it were up to my brother, he would keep me cloaked in a full body bag, I'm sure.”

King Tau smiled while Prince Mandla smirked. But instead of retorting to his sisters' comment, he spoke to Cadena.

“We will always wait for you, Princess Cadena. A queen like yourself must be flawless at all times, yes?”

A soft, polite smile curved across her lips. “Except in the dead of night when I’m snoring,” she half-joked.

Alarm crossed Prince Mandla’s face while Cadence burst into laughter.

Cadena maintained her poise despite wanting to join Cadence in laughter. Her eyes slid to her father, King Isaac Winthrope; she caught the amusement in his eyes even as she felt the sternness of his posture. Internally collecting herself, Cadena addressed Prince Mandla again. “That was a joke.”

He finally laughed. “Oh, I see.” His curt chuckles made Cadena want to roll her eyes, but she maintained her poise as she continued, “Though I am pleased that you would wait for me, it is unnecessary. I loathed keeping the guests from their enjoyment of the festivities. And also, I am not a queen as of yet.”

Prince Mandla smiled and nodded. “That is correct; however, perhaps that can be changed.”

They watched each other for a few seconds when another voice behind her rose.

“Princess Cadena.”

She turned to face Prince Jubulani, the crown prince of Befania. “Good evening, Prince Jubulani.” Her eyes skipped past him, and she nodded in greeting. “Prince Thulani, Princess Imani, King Thando.”

They all greeted her at once, but Prince Jubulani held out his hand. Cadena slipped her fingers into his palm, and he bent slightly to kiss the back of her hand.

“It is nice to finally see you tonight.”

“You as well.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine. I apologize for keeping everyone waiting. It’s my fault for not realizing so many would wish to see me because the wedding ceremony for my aunt and uncle is the reason for our gathering.”

“We will always want to see you, Princess.”

Why? That was what Cadena wanted to say. Frankly, she was puzzled about such a need.

Everyone wants to see Cadena; she internally taunted herself. Cadena had been in the courtyard for a total of fifteen minutes, and she was beyond ready to leave.

She spoke to the Presidents of Zambia and Zimbabwe. As the head of the Board of Advisors, part of her duties was to make sure relations between global leaders were strong and alliances were intact. For that reason alone, she made small talk with the leaders at the party, even though she wanted to sit in a quiet corner with her thoughts.

“EXCUSE ME.” THEY ALL TURNED TO LOOK AT RAPHAEL Valentine, the world-renowned, multimillionaire photographer who had patiently waited for them all to come together. “If you are ready, I’d like to take your group pictures now.”

“Yes, of course.” King Winthrope spoke up. “Everyone gather close, please.”

The royal families and presidents stood together as Raphael's camera illuminated the area with a mirage of flashes. It seemed to go on for minutes when he pulled his camera down.

"I think I got the shot."

They all laughed.

"Mr. Valentine, is it?" Prince Mandla stepped forward.

"Yes."

"Princess Cadena and I would like pictures of our own. Would you mind?"

"We would?" Cadena blurted.

Raphael glanced between Prince Mandla and Cadena, a thick brow rising up his handsome face.

Cadena's outburst didn't deter Prince Mandla.

"Yes." He turned to eye Cadena. "We would."

Cadena's forced smile could be detected by anyone in her direct vicinity, but Prince Mandla remained none the wiser.

"Advisor?" Raphael inquired, knowing from their previous encounter in the United States that Cadena didn't like to be addressed as *princess*.

Prince Mandla was confused by Raphael's approach, and as such, his brows dipped, his forehead creasing into a frown.

"She's Princess Cadena, not Advisor, and you should resp
—"

"I have requested that Mr. Valentine call me Advisor, Prince Mandla. I hold many titles in our kingdom. And since you are unaware, it is now you that I must educate."

Raphael smirked as Cadena continued.

“I am Advisor to the throne, Prophetess, Your Highness, and Crown Princess. You see, I don’t get up every day to put on a dress, go to tea parties, and dance the night away at a magical ball, nor do I stand next to a prince or king to smile and be pretty.”

Her lips spread into a tight smile. “I hold duties in this kingdom that keep our affairs in order, including sitting at the head of many important tables.” She paused and glanced over her shoulder, grabbing her sister’s arm, who had been eavesdropping on their conversation. “If you would like a picture with me, allow my sister to stand in. I need to excuse myself for a moment.”

Cadena replaced herself with Cadence, stepping forward to reach out and lightly touch Raphael’s shoulder.

“Thank you so much for traveling over international waters to assist us tonight, Raphael. My family is a huge fan of your work, and we are grateful for your presence.”

“You’re very welcome, Advisor.”

Cadena nodded and moved past them, headed through the crowd. They parted to make way for her, and once she had walked to the exit, she stepped into another hallway. A few guests lingered but, upon seeing her went wide-eyed and dropped to one knee.

“Your Highness,” they spoke in unison.

A quick smile was replaced by thinned lips as she moved past them, down the hall, then turning to the right and entering a corridor that wasn’t as well-lit as the last. Cadena stopped in front of the bathroom.

“Damn it.”

A deep voice broke through the dim space. “Are you in need of a key, Your Highness?”

Heat cruised down Cadena’s flesh, and she turned slowly to face the baritone voice that often penetrated her dreams.

Gemini stood two feet away from her, next to a column, his shadow so tall it reached her feet and covered her own.

Cadena’s eyes moved over him. There was nothing new about his attire. It was the same royal ensemble he wore on most occasions. Still, Gemini’s muscular body gave the garb an appeal that didn’t belong to any other guards. The button-down uniform vest was creased and fit over his toned physique, as were the pants that rode the solid bricks of his thighs.

“Come closer, Gemini.”

He approached her without hesitancy, cloaking her in the natural fragrance of his flesh. He gazed at her with amber-glazed eyes that sent heat spiraling down her core.

Cadena swallowed and tried to remain poised, though she was stirred where she stood. “Do you have a key to this bathroom?”

“I do.”

“How did you know I would need it?”

“I have a key to every locked bathroom in the area around the courtyard.”

“Why?”

“In case you needed it during this celebration.”

They stared at one another with sparks of charged energy bouncing between them.

Cadena dropped her eyes from his, needing desperately to remove their connection. She laughed softly, then shook her head. “It’s amazing how you’re more prepared than I am. Yet, I’m the one who needs the respite.”

“I am here to serve you, Your Highness. You’ll never be without as long as I live.”

Cadena’s eyes rose back to his, and she caught his gaze settle on her lips. Her body was a thermos containing heat she needed to cool down. Her mouth opened, and his jaw locked.

“Um...” She blinked. *Get it together, Cadena.* “Thank you for the key. May I have it, please?”

Gemini reached for his vest, popping a button where he slipped a hand inside and removed a single brass key. He placed it in her hand, and she turned her back to him, shaken by his presence so much that the key bumped against the lock.

She struggled to unlock the door, and after watching her for a few seconds, Gemini reached out, his hand covering hers.

“Let me help you, Your Royal Highness.”

Her pussy pulsed from his touch, and her eyes widened, then closed in embarrassment.

“Just... Your Highness will do, Gemini.”

They stood there in the dim hallway, her back to his front, his hand covering hers, her breath hitched when she had spoken before.

“Are you all right?”

She turned around to face him and immediately realized that was a mistake. Gemini was so close that she could smell the moisturizer he’d used on his skin.

“I don’t know.”

“Would you like to talk about it, Your Highness?”

Her chest rose and fell, her breasts almost grazing against his chest.

“Maybe some other time.”

He nodded, leaned in, and Cadena gasped when his mouth neared hers.

Click.

Rising back to his full height, Gemini lifted a hand and pushed open the door behind her, holding it there for her to enter.

“Your Highness,” he said, letting Cadena know that she was free to escape into the bathroom.

Flustered and feeling foolish, she nodded. “Thank you,” and entered, rushing to find reprieve.



three

He'd come dangerously close to her lips.

Standing outside the bathroom, Gemini swept his gaze down the hallway left, then right—but in his thoughts, visions of Cadena's lusciously pouty mouth were stuck on a loop in his mind.

They'd come close before, but he didn't misinterpret the attraction springing between them this time. Nor did he miss the way her eyes perused him from head to toe. It had been detailed, purposeful, and deliberate. He would've kept her there had she obliged, but though he could see the yearning in her eyes, he could also feel the anxiousness riding off her in waves.

It was just as well. He and Cadena were two opposite sides of a coin, and anything related to a union between them would cause an uproar in the kingdoms around them.

She was off-limits to him, and the more he remembered that, the better things would be.

Gemini removed himself from view, slipping back into the darkness where he could keep an eye on her without being noticed.

It came second nature for him to do. Gemini had been a guard through the reign of two Kings—first at the end of King

Isaac Winthrope I's rule and now through his son's.

Gemini was a seventeen-year-old skilled young man when he became a guard with The Royals of Kéra Asnela. Ambitious and talented in school, Gemini had dreamed of protecting a royal family, becoming the highest-ranking member of the guard, and living a life of servitude.

Born in Lusaka, Zambia, Gemini's family was spiritually aligned—guided day and night through prayer and signs. Because of it, Gemini, his father Cepheus, and his mother Katrina learned to grow their own food, fish, and hunt. But Gemini was also talented with his hands and feet, possessing the skill to fight in any combat military exercise.

The first time his fighting ability came to light was when a thief was caught trying to steal their cattle. Cepheus had attempted to stop the robber, but the thief had gotten the better of Cepheus, placing him in a martial-art hold that rendered him helpless.

Gemini had watched the fight until the robber had gotten the upper hand on his father. On instinct, Gemini moved in quietly, slipping his arms around the intruders' throat and snapping his neck before the thief knew what had happened.

Bewildered by his son's actions, Cepheus stood wide-eyed and immediately went to Gemini to ensure he was okay.

“NDILI BWINO.” I'M FINE. GEMINI RESPONDED IN NYANJA, their primary language.

“Mukutsimikiza?” Are you sure?

“Atate, ndili bwino. Kodi muli bwino?” Father, I am fine. Are you all right?

CEPHEUS' EXPRESSION HAD LOOKED STUNNED THAT NIGHT. HE knew his son had no special training to date, but that incident became the start of Gemini's martial art training. He'd mastered those complex skills in half the time it took others to do so, but instead of stopping there, he went on to dominate at sword fighting and master archery.

When Gemini got the first opportunity to be a part of the royal guard in Kéra Asnela, he took the position without a second thought. Cepheus and Katrina were proud of their son, and for five years, he'd served under King Isaac Winthrop the first.

That was twenty years ago. At forty-two years old, he'd held his position as head over security operations in the country. Gemini had recruited the best leaders to lead individual commands under him in various roles within the branches of their organization. And even though he'd had the opportunity to leave his place inside the palace, nothing but Cadena's solid will or death itself would remove him from her detail.

Loyalty was Gemini's strong suit. And the bond that he'd grown with Cadena was as strong as it had been since the beginning. She was but a young girl moping around with a stern face when he first saw her and spoke.

“WHY DOES SUCH A YOUNG GIRL LIKE YOU LOOK SO SAD ALL THE time?”

“What would you like me to do? Put a permanent smile on my face?” Cadena offered Gemini a dry grin, which in turn

made him smirk.

“You are but a ten-year-old girl. You should be playing with your friends. Don’t you have some tea parties to attend?”

“If you must know,” she placed her hands on her hips. “I don’t like tea; I prefer water. And another thing, I might be ten years old, but one day I’ll be your boss, so you should speak to me with respect.”

Gemini frowned. “If you have found offense in how I have spoken to you, then I apologize, your little highness.”

His factual but witty retort made Cadena giggle. “Whatever,” she said.

THAT HAD BEEN THE BEGINNING OF THEIR PLAYFUL FRIENDSHIP. Anytime Cadena needed a security detail, she would request Gemini to lead the guards. He watched her grow into a young adult, interested in many things besides ruling.

He’d watch her snap at men and women alike when they addressed her as a princess if she had already told them not to.

There had been countless times that Gemini stood outside King Winthroe’s study, listening to Cadena and her father bicker about her roles in the kingdom.

Eventually, her father gave in, allowing Cadena to begin archery and martial art classes. However, Cadena wanted more.

Even now, she had yet to master the art of sword fighting. To this day, she was still sharpening her skills, and Gemini loved to witness her improve every time she picked up a sword.

Not only had he watched her elevate, but he had grown a fondness for her as well. At first, it seemed to come out of nowhere. But with each growing minute that they were together, Cadena's beauty, tenacity, and strong will to demand respect from men changed his platonic feelings and the rhythm of his heart for her.

She was intelligent, understanding, and caring—yet fierce. Besides that, her beauty was above all others in the kingdom, and Gemini had never known anyone more stunning than her. A child's laughter echoed through the hallway. Gemini reached for his earpiece and tapped the button, signaling his second-in-command.

“Jasir, are the students done with their archery course?”

He released the button and waited for a response. “Yes, we're gathering them now to get them out of the way of the celebration.”

“Signal me when you're finished.”

Another ten minutes passed when the door to the bathroom opened, and Cadena walked out.

Her eyes slipped around, no doubt looking for Gemini, but he chose to remain still until she called for him.

Without saying a word, Cadena made a left and went back down the highway in the direction she'd come. He followed her in the shadow of the building's interior, staying far enough away that he could not be detected but close enough to get to her if the need arose.

A few people strolled down the corridor, and they paused before Cadena and dropped to their knees.

She nodded at them but continued to walk and exit the door to the south lawn. On the plush manicured grass, Cadena

removed her shoes, holding them in one hand as she presented herself in another area of the party.

Flames rose from a bonfire where a chef prepared food. A dozen dancers from the neighboring country of Zimbabwe had come with the president to dance for the celebration. They were dressed in multi-colored traditional attire—leather skirts and beaded aprons. They stood in line while the royal party watched from the sidelines. Drumsticks sent a reverberating beat against barrels, and together the Zulu dancers began their routine.

PAUSING BEHIND A GROUP OF ONLOOKERS, CADENA WATCHED the dancers quietly as they kicked, jumped forward, and moved their bodies rhythmically.

The royal families took in the entertainment with smiles and claps, moving their shoulders side to side as the routine increased in tempo and volume.

Out in the open but still far enough away to stay hidden, Gemini surveyed the party. It was customary for a celebration of this magnitude to begin in the courtyard and extend to the south wing of the palace. The open field boasted recently cut green grass, trimmed bushes, and a parasol tree in the distance.

Gemini's earpiece beeped, and he pushed a button.

"What's your update?"

"All of the children have been accounted for except Ibrahim. He's the reckless one."

"I'll keep my eyes open but report back if you catch him."

"I'm on it."

Prince Mandla approached Cadena, and Gemini saw her shoulders tense slightly when he halted in front of her.

Gemini moved closer—their words now in the vicinity of his ears.

“Are you enjoying the show?” Prince Mandla asked Cadena.

“I am. How about yourself?”

“It is lovely, but not as lovely as you.”

Gemini smirked at Cadena’s phony smile.

“You’re very nice to say that.”

“It’s true. Have you eaten, princess?”

She stared at him for a long minute. “I haven’t.”

“You should join me at the royal table set for us.”

“Set for us as in you and me?”

“Yes, princess.”

She stared at him again, her jaw locking, then... “Prince Mandla, please call me Your Highness or Cadena.”

“Oh yes, you don’t like to be called princess. Do you care to explain why?”

“No. But since I want to be polite, I’ll humor you.”

He nodded and smiled. “Please,” he urged as he attempted to usher her toward a small private table.

“I think the title is silly. Princess places me in a box. I am more than my heritage. But to respect the royal roots I am born with, Your Highness suits just fine.”

“Hmmm.”

“Also, I think I’ll step over here and have a small tasting of what the chef is cooking. I’m enjoying the show; there is no need to sit at a table.”

Cadena focused on the curried potatoes, grilled chicken, and steamed spiced vegetables. She walked a few steps to where the chef worked his magic above the hot fire with a giant skillet that mixed the spice on the food.

“Smells delightful,” Prince Mandla said.

“It does.”

The chef glanced up. “Your Highness, would you like a bowl of tonight’s dishes?”

“A small bowl, please.”

Quickly, the chef prepared Cadena’s request. “Sir, would you like—”

“It’s Prince Mandla,” he corrected. “And yes, I’ll have what the princess is having.”

Cadena peered at Prince Mandla. He seemed to go out of his way to use whichever title he desired to give her. Gemini could tell Cadena didn’t care for it if the way she tensed was any indication.

After they’d gotten their food, Cadena and Prince Mandla stepped back so others could get in line.

“Would you care to join me in prayer?” she asked him.

“No, thanks. I’ll eat.” Prince Mandla started with the potatoes while Cadena’s eyes rose in surprise and audacity.

She sucked her teeth, then turned her head, her eyes running into Gemini’s watchful gaze. Their connection held

still for the longest moment, and a breeze of air circled around and between them.

In his peripheral vision, Gemini caught a figure slip past him. He removed his gaze in time to see Ibrahim raise his bow and arrow and send the arrow shooting across the field toward Cadena.

Gemini moved, his steps so quick that he almost flew to her side. Lifting his hand, he caught the arrow just as the weapon made it close to the potato that was going in Cadena's mouth. It sliced his flesh, peeling open a layer of skin. Blood seeped through his palm, and a sting followed in the aftermath.

"Oh, my God!" Cadena shouted, dropping her bowl of food as she glanced between Gemini and Ibrahim.

The child laughed, but he was quickly apprehended and carried away while a look of worry fell across Cadena's face.

"You're bleeding!"

"It's a scratch, Your Highness."

"Let me be the judge of that. Open your hand."

He obeyed her, showing that the middle of his palm was slit from end to end.

"That's a nasty cut. Come with me."

"Your Highness, it's quite all right."

She frowned, staring at him. "It's not all right. This can become infected. Let me clean it up before it comes to that."

"There are others who can take care of that," Prince Mandla inserted.

Cadena ignored him. "Come on. Let's go."

"He's right—"

“Prince Mandla,” the prince cut in.

They both ignored him. “I am capable of also helping with that, and I won’t take no for an answer. Now come.”

“If you wish, Your Highness.”

A crowd had now encircled them. King Winthrope approached, his broad shoulders moving the gathering as they eased aside in deference to his presence.

“What is going on?”

“One of the students was playing with their bow and arrows, and Gemini got caught in the middle of it. I’m going to help him with his wound.”

King Winthrope snapped his fingers. “Take Jabari and Amara with you.”

“I’m fine, Father. I can take care of it myself.” She turned to Gemini. “Stay with me, please.”

She reached for his other hand, slipping her fingers in a link with his. Warmth covered them both, and she glanced up, feeling his gaze as he stared at her. A few seconds passed when she shook out of their connection and turned, tugging his hand.

They strolled away together.

Standing back by the chef, Prince Mandla scrutinized their comfort with one another, derision filling his veins.



four

Gemini watched her from his seated position as she removed bandages, sterile gauzes, and antibiotic ointment. Still dressed in her royal garb, he had a hard time avoiding the smoothness of her brown shoulders, her swanlike neck, and the curves of her hips.

After collecting everything she needed, Cadena washed and dried her hands, gathered the necessary items, and strolled to stand before him.

“Open your hand for me, please.”

While soft, her voice held a depth that made his heart palpitate. His mind conjured an image of her commanding him to do naughty things to her, and he blinked, shaken but remaining still.

Gemini opened his hand.

“My goodness, this looks awful.” She shook her head, and a strip of black hair fell against her face.

Back in somewhat of a daze, Gemini reached, slipping the hair away to keep her eyes unobstructed.

“Thank you.” Her lips spread into a soft smile.

“I need to admit, that was for me.”

Cadena’s brows arched. “What do you mean?”

“It gives me the opportunity to see your eyes more.”

A curl of warmth enfolded them as they observed one another.

“To see my eyes more. You say that as if you don’t see them every day.”

“Not to this extent. Not...this close for this length of time.”

Her lashes fluttered, then playfully, she widened her eyes and crossed them, laughing. “Now. How’s that?”

“Beautiful.”

Her smile faded, eyes batting, heart rate increasing as she looked at him.

“You think so, huh?”

“Yes.”

Cadena slipped her hand under his and cleaned around his wound. “What if I said you have lovely eyes, too?”

He smirked. “Do I?”

“You do. They’re perfect for your gorgeous face.”

A lone brow arched on Gemini’s forehead. “You think I’m gorgeous?”

“Yes. Your eyes are hypnotic. Your face’s sharp structure, wide nose, and full lips easily complement your handsomeness. Not to mention your eyebrows, which are so thick, dark, and evenly spread above your eyes. What has kept you from courting a woman, Gemini?”

HIS HEART WAS RACING NOW, HIS SKIN THE WARMEST IT HAD been in days.

“You noticed all of that about me?”

“It can’t be overlooked.”

Silence fell over them as they watched each other intently.

“I don’t have much time for courting, Your Highness.”

Somberness fell across Cadena’s face. “That’s because you’re at my side day and night. You know Jasir can take your place sometimes. If you want to take a vacation or find someone to fall in love with, just say the word, and we can rearrange your scheduled duties.”

“Is that what you would like me to do? Find someone to fall in love with?”

Cadena’s eyes shuffled from Gemini’s stare to his wound. She opened her mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

Her hands moved over his hand. “That arrow really tore through your skin. I don’t know how you’re not howling like an animal right now.” She smiled, and it faded just as quickly. “You’re going to need sutures.”

Cadena moved away from him, going back to the bins to remove tools so she could stitch up his wound.

Gemini watched her intensely. He was very much aware that she hadn’t responded to his question.

Back to stand in front of him, Cadena placed ointment around the disinfected wound, then sat it to the side. “I’m going to sew you up now. If you need something to bite down on, I can give you something.”

“I’ll be fine.”

She nodded, but her eyes remained on her task. Cadena worked her magic, and as she did so, Gemini couldn't help but be even more in awe of her abilities than before.

“I was unaware that you were a healer, too.”

Light melodic laughter flew into the air, and he smiled, taken by the honeyed tones of her voice.

“I am many things, Gemini. A healer is not one of them.”

“I beg to differ, Your Highness.”

She was halfway through the stitch when he asked, “I didn't make you uncomfortable, did I?”

Her eyes finally found him again. “No. How would you have done that?”

“Because you avoided my question.”

She didn't try to hide her knowledge of what he referred to. “I...of course, I want you to fall in love with someone. That must be the best natural medicine for the heart, don't you think?”

“Yes, and I would love to experience that feeling, but...”

Cadena frowned. “But what?”

Gemini thought about what he wanted to say, knowing the type of effect it could have if his words were spoken out loud. He inhaled a breath.

“But nothing.”

Cadena's brows rose. “You don't want to tell me?”

“It's best if I don't.”

“Oh...” She finished up his hand. “Well, how does your hand feel?”

Gemini glanced at her work. “Better already.”

Her smile didn't fill her face. “Good.”

She hesitated. “Gemini, I know that because of my position, you may feel like you can't confide in me about details in your life, but...” She rested her hand on his thigh. “You can.”

A spirited string of heat moved through him. “Your Highness, I didn't mean that the way it was presented.” He cleared his throat. “You see, I've been smitten with someone who is unattainable. And for that reason, I shouldn't entertain a conversation about love when there are no possibilities for me.”

Cadena's chest tightened, and she locked her jaw and held it for a few seconds, then sighed. “You never know. Anything is possible.”

He shook his head. “I don't think it is.”

“You should believe.” She tapped his chest. “Here.”

His heart soared. “Please, don't encourage me.” His grin stretched across his handsome features.

“Consider that all of the encouragement I have in my heart.” She rubbed his thigh gently. “You never know. She might reciprocate.”

They stared at each other for a long dragging moment, then Cadena blinked out of their haze.

“Let me wrap your hand, and you'll be good to go.” She reached for the bandage and wrapped his hand with care. “I want you to go straight to your quarters and get some rest.”

“Are you going to your quarters, Your Highness?”

Cadena grinned and dropped her head, a laugh cruising from her lips. She lifted her eyes back to him.

“What does it matter, Gemini?”

“If I am to go to my quarters, you must go to yours, or else I will be at your side.”

Attraction bounced between them.

“Jasir couldn’t have caught that arrow.” He winked, and Cadena’s laughter filled the room.

“Oh, my gosh!” She covered her mouth and stared at him.

“You know it’s true.”

She laughed harder.

“I’m just messing around. I love to see you laugh.” Without thought, Gemini reached out and touched her chin. “You have a beautiful smile, pretty lips, and you light up any room you enter.”

Cadena held on to her wide smile but sucked in her laugh. “Thank you, Gemini. I don’t think I’ve gotten this many compliments from you before.”

He nodded. “That’s because you’re my superior, and my compliments could be deemed inappropriate.”

“Hmm, then why are you comfortable with telling me now?”

“You encouraged me, remember?”

She nodded. “I did, didn’t I?”

“Consider me encouraged.”

For long moments, they remained still, kinetic energy creating sparks, their spirits entangled with what-ifs and

endless possibilities.



“**C**onsider me encouraged.”

Cadena lifted her head under the spray of the outside shower. It was the next day, and Gemini’s words continued to ring in her ears.

“Consider me encouraged.”

It was true. She meant everything she said. Cadena wanted him to find love. It wasn’t fair that he could spend his life in service and not have someone to adore.

However, she could also admit—to no one but herself—that she wanted that woman to be her.

Cadena shut her eyes tight and opened her mouth. Pushing away the thoughts had never been so difficult before.

Whenever she went to pray in her garden, she’d shower first, slip on a clean white cotton robe with the royal lion crest stamped around the trim, and focus on connecting with The Spirit.

Today, however, that difficulty was a surplus of struggle.

Talking to Gemini face-to-face became her favorite pastime. Those encounters felt personal, easy, and relaxing—unlike when he was standing at attention with no eye contact, no funny jokes, but all business. During those instances, it

didn't feel like she knew him. He was a shadow, almost a statue—there for one thing only, to guard her with his life.

Whenever he stepped outside of that professionalism, he was warm and comforting, and his personality was a burst of playfulness that she wanted to connect with and never release.

Turning off the shower's spray, Cadena dropped her head and slipped her hands through her wet curly hair. The outdoor shower was made with tall, stacked bamboo sticks formed into an oval-shaped steam room. There were two exits, one that led to her quarters and one that led to her garden.

Cadena pushed open the door that led to her garden and stepped out, reaching for the robe that hung on the back of the door.

Slipping her arms inside, she covered her body, tying a loose knot with the cotton belt. She turned to face the flowers—red, pink, and white roses, carnations, and lilies covered an abundance of the garden. As Cadena moved through the flower bed, orange and yellow *clivia miniatas* were just as plentiful, surrounding a parasol tree where she went and bent down on both knees.

She covered her head with the robe's hood and prayed.

“SPIRIT OF LOVE, LIFE, AND GOODNESS, I PRAY TO YOU AND request forgiveness for any transgressions I have bestowed on the world and its inhabitants. Clear my mind and cleanse my soul so that I can be of service to You in the way I was meant to fulfill Your purpose. Let the error of my ways be disclosed to me so that I may course-correct and rejoin the righteous path. Shower our kingdom in prosperity, peace, love, and the

flourishment of our lives, our seeds, and the soil our seeds are buried inside.”

She placed her fingers on the ground. “I am but Your steward, imperfect yet perfect when You live through me. I...” Her thoughts shifted to Gemini. “I recognize that Your plan for my life may not mirror my own. Direct me and give me an understanding of my journey. Allow me to see Your vision and carry Your desires to my kingdom. Amina.” *Amen.*

The humidity in the air dried her face, and Cadena remained kneeling there, waiting to see if The Spirit would give her a message in a vision to carry back to her father. The smell of freshly grown flowers was carried in a thick breeze, encircling her body and slightly moving the leaves on the tree. Nature could be heard all around her, and the soil between her fingertips was alive and fertile.

All became quiet suddenly, like the most unimaginable silence one has ever heard, then...

Cadena’s eyes opened, and the only thing she saw was a visualization of Gemini laughing. His face was bright, features strong, the weight of his duties erased.

She felt love at that moment—the most authentic, sacred, raw emotion she’d ever experienced in her entire life. It made her heart race, and she lifted her hand to reach for him when... the vision suddenly changed to her father. They were in his study, speaking about something serious. His tone was strict, and he talked to someone else in the room that she couldn’t see.

Abruptly, the vision ended and Cadena blinked rapidly, realizing her hand was still raised from when she had reached for Gemini.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered. “Please, I...” Her hand rested against the tree trunk, her heart beating wildly as she tried to put together the vision.

There was no rhyme or reason to what she’d seen, and sometimes, that was the way it was. Eventually, she would be given the entire story or live through it. But when the silence disappeared, and the sounds of nature resumed, Cadena knew there was nothing more coming at that time.

Cadena rose from her kneeling position and removed the hood of her robe, lifting her eyes to the sky.

The light blue picturesque scene was serene. Birds flew in flocks, and the sun’s rays beamed in the east. She closed her eyes, folding her arms around herself to bathe in the memory of the love she felt in her vision. Cadena wanted to hold on to it forever, but the second piece didn’t mirror that same adoration.

Opening her eyes, Cadena moved, strolling through the garden to exit through the shower. She planned to stop by her office; after that, it would be time for her to get her exercise via martial art training.

THE ONE-PIECE TIGHT-FITTING BODYSUIT HUGGED CADENA’S shape as she entered the warrior room. Inside, her trainer, Yuusuf, stood in the middle of a large floor mat. He dropped to his knees with hands at his sides, then returned to his feet.

“*Mchana mwema, Mtukufu.*” *Good afternoon, Your Highness.*

“Use English, Yuusuf.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Good afternoon to you.” Cadena glanced around.
“Where’s Gemini?”

Yuusuf frowned. “I assume he is where he is needed. Maybe the anterior grounds of the palace. Do you need him?”

“I want him here.”

“Do you mind if I ask why?”

“Because when I finish beating you, I’ll need a warrior to beat. How’s that for an answer?”

Yuusuf smiled slowly, then clapped his hands. The door opened behind Cadena, and Chima stuck his head inside.

“*Ndio bwana?*” *Yes, sir?*

“English, Chima. Make Gemini aware that the Advisor requests his attendance.”

“Yes, sir.” The door closed as Chima disappeared, and Yuusuf and Cadena faced each other.

“I’m pleased that you are confident in your skills, Your Highness. We will mix up today’s lesson—martial arts and sword fighting using spears instead of swords for practice.” Yuusuf bent down and grabbed a spear on the floor next to his feet. “Your weapon,” he said, motioning to a second spear on the opposite side of the mat.

Cadena walked to her weapon and got in position. Yuusuf lifted his arms, one high and the other out to his left.

“Begin,” he said.

They rushed to the center of the mat, Cadena’s arms coming down to block Yuusuf’s as he sent multiple hits toward her chest. Quickly she sent her open palm forcefully into his

chest, his throat; then she pivoted, going into a split to duck the spear Yuusuf sent swinging down on her.

“Ah—Uh!”

Sounds from their mouths resembled the force coming from them as they battled. Their movements were swift, with flips, turns, and their spears clashing repeatedly.

“Hut—hut—hu!”

Cadena jump-kicked, bringing her leg down on Yuusuf’s shoulder. Pain shot through his body, but he grabbed her ankle and flipped her. Cadena landed on her feet.

Sluggishly, Yuusuf moved around her as Cadena also moved in a circle strategically.

The door opened, and Gemini entered. Her eyes shifted to him as he assessed their situation.

“Do you need to stop, Yuusuf?” Cadena asked, returning her attention to her trainer.

“Do you, Your Highness?”

She smirked. “You know the answer to that. But I believe you should.”

“It seems we do not hold the same beliefs.”

Cadena squinted at Yuusuf. “Anger comes before the fall.” She ran toward him, and he met her—their spears clanged, braced against one another in an X as they stared each other down. “I’m going to win. Tap out.”

“No.”

She spun on her feet and flipped, the sole of her foot slapping underneath his chin in an uppercut. Yuusuf flew

across the room and hit the wall, sliding down where he slumped at Gemini's feet.

Gemini glanced down at the older gentleman; his brows arched as he looked over at Cadena. She sashayed to her end of the mat, gripping her spear, then held her arms up, one high, the other outward.

“Your turn.”

A soft smile curved Gemini's lip. “Your Highness, I—”

“Pick up your weapon, Gemini!” They stared at one another. “That's an order!”

Gemini inhaled, then exhaled, loosened his tie, and removed the button-down shirt.

A spirited spring of coiling heat wrapped around Cadena's skin. It was the first time she'd seen his bare chest, and it was a sight to behold. The musculature in his abdomen was pronounced, as were the bicep muscles in his arms. Pure power carried through the strength of his shoulders.

“YOU SEE, I'VE BEEN SMITTEN WITH SOMEONE WHO IS unattainable.”

She shook off the memory of his words.

Focus.

GEMINI LIFTED THE SPEAR FROM YUUSUF'S HAND, THEN knocked against the wall. The door opened, and Chima stuck his head in, his eyes widening to see Yuusuf slumped on the ground.

“Get some help for our friend,” Gemini said to Chima.

Chima yelled into the hallway, and two others entered the room and ran to Yuusuf’s side. Together the three of them lifted him, tossing his arms across their shoulders as they carried him off.

The door closed, leaving Cadena and Gemini alone.

“This is not a good idea,” Gemini said.

Cadena smirked. “I’m sure Yuusuf thought the same thing.”

“We can get someone else to fight you.”

“I have someone to fight.”

“Don’t be unreasonable.”

Cadena ran toward Gemini, and he met her in the middle, their weapons crashing at the same time she kicked, and he blocked her move, then grabbed her ankle, dropping to his knees where he jerked her body—slamming Cadena to the ground.

A cough flew from her mouth as her back hit the floor, and Gemini leaned over her, their eyes captured.

“Stop this, Your Highness. We can get someone else better suited than Yuusuf to fight you, but not me.”

Cadena took two quick breaths, then lifted her legs, closing her thighs around his neck. “HUT!” She flipped him with all the strength she could muster, and in mid-air, Gemini turned and dropped down on his feet in a squat.

He locked his jaw, a growl emerging from his lips.

Cadena got to her feet, grabbed her spear, and rushed him again. Their arms caught each other as they fought, up, down,

forward, and backward. Their legs struck as they kicked, twisted in their skilled dance, stepping to and fro.

Cadena was coming to realize quickly that Gemini was correct. She was throwing everything at him, and he caught and flipped her move at every turn. Anger began to build in her. She wanted to be the best in the land. She desired to wear the only crown that mattered to her—a warrior’s respect—and she could only do that by beating the best fighter in their country.

“Cadena!” She stopped in her tracks. “Why do you insist on trying to beat me at this game?”

Her eyes widened. *Had he just called her Cadena?*

“What game?”

Gemini’s brows rose, eyes cooled. “What game are we playing, Your Highness?”

They gazed at each other, a crackle of attraction sparking between them. Cadena took three quick steps forward—an outward kick against his abdomen, twice, three times. She spun on her heels when he moved to block her, bringing the stick down on his shoulder, then slipping out of his grasp in another spin move.

“You won’t beat me,” he said as she continued her strikes, and he blocked her moves. “It’s not because I’m a man and you’re a woman.”

“Hut! Ah!”

“It’s not because of my size, although that can be an advantage.”

She drove the stick of the spear against his chest in rapid succession.

Gemini went down on one knee but spoke as she pointed the spear at his face.

“It’s because of my experience. I’ve fought every kind of warrior you can imagine: martial artist, sword fighter, and beyond. I’ve mastered my fighting skills, and I would need to be up against an army—alone—to go down.” She stared down into his amber gaze. “This is why I am your guard, and no one is getting close to you.”

“If that is true, how did I get you on one knee?”

“I am vulnerable to you, Your Highness.” Cadena’s eyes widened as he continued. “I admittedly let my guard down with you. I am not battling you at full combat.” His chest rose and fell as he breathed. “That’s good for you, not so much for me—as seen by the spear pointed in my face. But if I were to fight you fair and square...”

“So you’re willfully disobeying a direct order?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes widened in shock.

“I’m willing to spend the necessary hours in the prison chamber for my disobedience. But I can’t...I won’t hurt you.”

Cadena sucked in a breath, dropped the spear, and planted her hands on her hips—her chest rising and falling from exhaustion.

“You are very skilled,” she confessed. “I think I need some water.” She collapsed to the floor but didn’t faint, and Gemini caught her.

“Your Highness.” Concern washed over his face.

“I’m okay. I promise.” She smiled. “I’m going to beat you one day, Gemini.”

“Why are you so stubborn?”

Laughter flew from her gut. “I have to be.”

“Why?”

“I need to prove that I can be more than a princess,” she said, her tone filled with disgust.

“You are more than a princess. What you have accomplished and continue to accomplish will be written in the history books. Little girls and boys will admire you and want to be just as dedicated, intelligent, and strong as you. Trust me; you don’t need to beat me for that to be true.”

She touched his face, a simple caress across his jaw that caused tingles to ripple through his neck.

“You called me Cadena.”

Gemini smirked but released it just as fast.

“Are you blushing?” Cadena asked.

“No.”

“You’re lying.”

“I was blushing...maybe—perhaps. But I’m not now.”

Melodic laughter surrounded him. “Wow. First the compliments yesterday, now blushing. And you called me Cadena. What am I to think about that?”

“I apologize if you are offended.”

“I’m not. It’s quite the opposite. But still, what should I think of it all?”

“Tell me what you believe, and I’ll inform you if you’re correct.”

“You like being around me.”

“Adore it.”

A deep ruby red shadowed her cheeks.

“Anything else?” Gemini asked.

Cadena’s heart raced; her courage built. “The woman you spoke about yesterday is—”

The door to the room opened, and Cadena jumped out of Gemini’s arms as he rose to his feet and then went back down on one knee.

“Father—Your Majesty.” They spoke together.

King Isaac Winthrope glanced from his daughter to Gemini and back. “What’s going on in here?”

“We were fighting—uh, practicing, of course.”

“On your feet, Gemini.”

He stood, meeting the king’s height straight on.

“Why would you fight my daughter?”

“I ordered him!” Cadena interrupted.

“I asked Gemini.”

“She wanted to be taught by the best in the land, Your Majesty.”

“You could hurt her, then I would—”

“Father!”

King Winthrope glared at Gemini, then took his sharp gaze to Cadena. “Why would you order such a thing? It’s reckless!”

“Why? Because I’m not good enough?”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“I think that’s exactly what you meant!”

“Lower your voice.”

Incensed, Cadena pushed past her father and left the room. The king glanced behind him, then turned back to Gemini.

“Your Majesty, I would never hurt the Advisor.”

“She’s not in the room. You can drop the Advisor title and call her Princess Cadena.”

“I’d rather not.”

King Winthrope’s eyes widened. “And why not?”

“It is respectful to call her by the title she has ordered me to, whether I am in her company or not.”

The king eyed Gemini for a long silent minute. “Are you in love with my daughter, Gemini?”

Gemini opened his mouth to respond when the king lifted a hand.

“Never mind. Don’t answer that. Because if the answer isn’t no, I’ll have to take you off her detail, and fortunately—you *are* the best in the land. Only the best can be at her side.”

King Winthrope added, “You better not be, however.”

He sucked in a breath, then turned and left the room.



Cadena ran down the hall, bumping into her brother, Remington.

“Whoa!” Remington grabbed her shoulders, steadying Cadena. “Why are you running?” He drew his sword, his eyes darting behind her.

“Put your sword away; it’s not an intruder.”

Remington waited for a second as if still expecting someone to charge behind her.

“Rem?” Her brother’s light brown eyes dropped to hers, making Cadena think about her mother’s eyes. She’d only seen those eyes in pictures since she died during labor with the twins, but still, she felt as if a piece of her mother had been left behind in her brother’s eyes.

“I’m just checking.”

“Do you think I would be running if we had an invasion?”

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to. Everyone around here seems to think I can’t handle my own battles.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

She went to move past him when he grabbed her arm.
“What is going on, Cadena?”

“Don’t worry about it. Continue to do...what are you about to do?”

“I am headed to meet Julian Alexander Rose—the owner of A Few Good Men male modeling agency. He’s doing a seven-page spread on the crown prince of Kéra Asnela.”

“I see. That should come out nice. Forget you ever ran into me. Have a good day, brother.”

“First, I want to know what you are running from.”

Cadena sighed and brought him up to speed on what had happened in the warrior room.

“Our father is trying to protect you. The last person that should be training you is Gemini.”

“See? You sound just like him. Unbelievable!” Cadena shook out of his grasp.

“Cadena, calm down. I’m not saying that you’re not good enough. But to beat Gemini will take more than one or two exercises. It could take your entire life. Don’t you get it? It’s not that we don’t think you are good enough. I saw Yuusuf. And I don’t think that he will be back to training you. You’ve clearly outgrown him. And when you started training with him, he had you on the floor every time. How long has it been since you two have been working together?”

Cadena thought about it for a second, even though she didn’t have to. “Four years.”

“So, you’ve been working with Yuusuf for four years, and now you’ve mastered the skill and overpower your teacher. I say bravo to that, my sister. If you must use Gemini as your

next teacher, imagine how long it will take for you to conquer him. And also, the many sore limbs you'll have in trying to do so."

Cadena planted her hands on her hips. "Okay, so you might be right. What am I supposed to do now?"

Remington smiled. "You are so damn feisty."

A slow smile spread Cadena's lips. "Maybe I am. But understand that because I am a woman doesn't mean I don't carry as much bravado in my bones as you and Omari do. You got that?"

Remington raised his hands in surrender. "I got it. And I've always known that. Just cut Father some slack. To him, you're still his little princess, and he doesn't want anyone touching you who could harm you. That's why Gemini is your guard."

"I'm thirty-five years old, for goodness' sake. I am well beyond a little princess." Cadena shuddered. "And frankly, I've never been a little princess if we're being honest."

"Oh, I know it. Take it easy on Dad."

Cadena smirked. "Yeah, yeah. Go."

"Have a better day, sis."

Cadena nodded, and Remington watched as she walked away.

"KNOCK, KNOCK." CADENCE EASED INSIDE HER SISTER'S space, but she was met with silence. "Cadena?" She strolled deeper into Cadena's quarters, through a live-in area, her

bedroom, the open terrace, and down the hallway to the open master bathroom. “Cadena, are you there?”

“Yes. Are you alone?”

“I am.”

“Come inside.”

Cadence eased into the bathroom and found her sister bathing in a bubble bath with rose petals floating on the top. She could smell what she knew was probably an aromatherapy mixture concocted by their healer.

“Good. I see that you’re resting.”

“Let me guess, Father sent you to check on me.”

“Correct. But I am sad that you did not confide in me about what happened.”

“That’s because it was silly. Nothing happened, exactly.”

“Oh, so you’re having another temper tantrum because you can’t get your way?”

Cadena gasped, her mouth opening and her eyes widening. “How could you say that to me?”

Cadence laughed. “I am just kidding...*oh, my God...*”

“Don’t bring The Spirit into this. You know I don’t play like that.”

“I apologize. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad, nor did I mean to disrespect The Spirit.”

“Good.”

“If it’s any consolation, I wish I could’ve been there.”

“What are you talking about?”

“To see you and Gemini fight one-on-one. That must have been exciting.”

Cadena smirked. “Why do you think that?”

“Because you are one hell of a fighter, and Gemini is the epitome of a master warrior. Are you kidding? Why else?”

“Please keep your voice down and mind your manners.”

“Why do you always say that like we’re not one thousand miles away from the next curious set of ears?”

“One thousand miles? Don’t be so dramatic.”

“Okay, so to be precise, we are four thousand six hundred and twenty-two square feet away from eavesdroppers... possibly.”

Cadena smirked. “Okay, okay, I get it.”

“Do you? Because as immense as this palace is, you seem to think someone will overhear us talking at any given time, and it’s not going to happen. Now, here is what I imagine: I see you and Gemini sweating, huffing and puffing—you taking him on like the strongest woman in the world, and him sweeping you in his arms to lean in and kiss you so heavy a mixture of heat and tingles make your body pulsate. Huh? Am I right? Am I right?”

A shriek of laughter escaped Cadena’s mouth. “That was the most insane description I have ever heard in my life. And you were so serious, too.” Cadena fell into a heap of giggles.

“Oh, come on, you know it’s true. Tell me. I live for you guys’ romance.”

Cadena’s head fell back into the soapy water, and she rested against the back of the tub.

“Your description is a bit dramatic, but... You’re not entirely wrong.”

“I knew it!”

Cadena’s heavy giggle kicked up a notch.

“So, you decided not to remove him from your detail. That means you don’t care if you fall in love with him.”

Cadena’s laughter subsided, and she remembered the disappointment on her father’s face.

“It’s still not a possibility. Even so, I am willing to be his friend and spend as much time as good friends with him as possible.”

Cadence sulked. “I’ve got to tell you, sister, that is not the ending I was hoping for.”

“Then you’re dreaming of a fairy tale. And if you hadn’t noticed, this is real life.”

“Ah, but life is what you make it. So, whichever direction this secret romance takes you, I sincerely hope you get your happily-ever-after. We are princesses, after all.”

Cadena smirked. She appreciated her sister for trying to make her feel better. She understood the need to keep hope alive. Cadena told Gemini to believe in his heart that, whatever was out of his reach, he could have if he so believed.

“I’ll let you rest in your bath, and I’ll meet you in the supper hall for dinner, yes?”

“Yes.”

Cadence grabbed her sister’s shoulder, smiled down at her, then left the bathroom.

ON THE OUTSIDE OF CADENA'S QUARTERS, GEMINI STOOD AT attention, waiting for a chance to spot her. Cadence exited, spotting him immediately. She smiled and nodded before turning to walk off.

“Your Highness.”

Cadence turned back to face Gemini. “Yes, how can I help you, Gemini?”

“I would like to have a word with the Advisor. Is she available?”

“She's...give me just one minute.”

Cadence disappeared back inside Cadena's room. Fifteen minutes later, she exited again, but Cadena stepped into the doorway behind her. She was covered in a robe, her hair a mass of curls in a ponytail on top of her head.

Cadena noticed the new bandage wrapped around Gemini's hand.

“You've got a new bandage.”

“My stitches came loose during your training.”

“Oh, I'm such an idiot! I didn't even think—”

“You're not an idiot. Not all the stitches came loose. But that's not why I'm here. I came to make sure that you were all right. Not physically, but you left in quite a hurry. Are you all right, Your Highness?”

Cadena folded her arms. “I'm fine. And you didn't have to do that. It was my father...” she backtracked. “Regardless, you didn't have to do that.”

“I know I didn’t have to, but I wanted to. It’ll help me sleep better at night knowing that you are in better spirits.”

Her body warmed. “I am. Thank you for checking.”

“I always will. If there’s anything else I can do for you, say the word. I will be there.”

“No, there’s nothing you can do today, but you can accompany me tomorrow. I would like to check on agriculture, and I would also like to take some time away from the palace to clear my head. Would you mind being at my side?”

“Never.”

Their heated stares consumed them for a long, intensely charged minute before Cadena responded.

“Great. I’ll see you then. Meet me here at ten a.m.”

“I’ll be here. Have a good night, Your Highness.”

He left her standing in the doorway, but if Gemini could have it his way, he would never leave her side again.



seven

Cadena exited her garden and sat with quiet thoughts before getting ready to meet up with Gemini. She didn't receive a vision today and found herself still pondering what yesterday's foresight meant.

His face filled her mind. Laughter and inexplicable happiness dripped from his enticing image. But then, her father—his serious expression and the movement of his mouth.

Who was he talking to, and—most importantly—what was he saying?

Cadena was perplexed. She didn't know if she were in attendance in that room or if she only saw him through her vision.

Usually, she would never be frustrated by this because Cadena trusted The Spirit to reveal the entirety of the information in due time. However, seeing Gemini's face first and her father's face second made her gut tighten, regardless of them being shown as two different instances.

CADENA SLIPPED HER FINGERS IN HER HAIR, FINGER-COMBING her curly tresses. A knock came at the door, then a voice spoke

through the panels.

“Advisor, it’s Tally and Amara.”

“Come in.”

The tall mahogany doors opened, and her retinue walked inside, kneeling before Cadena.

“Rise.”

Jointly they stood, and Tally spoke. “Are you ready to prepare for your outing, Advisor?”

“I am.”

The women nodded and entered her walk-in closet. They were inside for twenty minutes when they exited, carrying her clothes for the day.

Cadena looked over the garments. “I’m wearing the black lace bra and panty set today. You can put the others back.”

Tally’s brow rose, and Amara grabbed the undergarment. “Yes, Advisor.” Amara disappeared into the closet.

“You’re wearing the lace on an outing?”

“I am.”

“Is that going to be comfortable?”

Cadena’s lips spread into a smile. “You say that as if I’m wearing a chastity belt. I can barely feel it on my skin, and it suits me better than those big booty-loose panties that you’re constantly trying to stick me into.”

A giggle came from inside the closet, and Amara exited, coyly glancing between Cadena and Tally.

“Will you put on a slip, at least, with this dress?”

Cadena surveyed the canary yellow one-piece dress that would taper off just below her knees once she put it on.

“If I don’t, will you bust a vein?”

Tally locked her jaw, staring at Cadena. Cadena stared back, then glanced at Amara, who was struggling to hold back laughter. Cadena winked at the young girl, and amusement spilled from their mouths together.

Tally let go of a heavy sigh. “I’m serious.”

Cadena’s laughter waned. “We know. You’re always serious. You should learn to live a little.”

“Will you put on the slip, Advisor?”

“No.”

Tally’s eyes almost popped out of her head. She was the most traditional person in the palace. Even more so than Cadena’s father—which was saying a lot since he was the king, and it was routine for him to keep traditions alive.

Cadena threw up her hands. “Tally. Calm down. I’m wearing the slip, okay?”

Tally breathed a sigh of relief. “The short black heels, those gold pearl earrings, the pearl bracelets, and the necklace. Everything else can go back inside the closet.”

They nodded. “Yes, Your Highness.”

“Thank you.”

Cadena watched them disappear inside, still chuckling at her retinue’s reactions.

GEMINI'S EYES LIT UP WHEN CADENA EXITED HER QUARTERS. "Your Highness." He kneeled.

"Rise, Gemini."

He stood, his shadow mixing with hers as he towered before her. "I hope you don't mind me saying you look beautiful as always."

Her eyes trailed over him. "And you are handsome. How lucky am I to have a courageous, handsome guard? Women everywhere must envy me."

"Women envy you for other reasons than me, Your Highness."

Cadena's chin lifted a bit more. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

"What reasons?"

"For being the fairest in all of the land, with power, prestige, and strength." Gemini whistled. "Just wait until they find out how powerful it is to be between your thighs."

Heat smacked Cadena with lightning-bolt intensity, and her lips parted on a smile. Her eyes widened.

Gemini placed a hand against his chest. "Forgive me, that came out...what I meant was...well."

Cadena clasped her hands together and licked her lips. "What did you mean, Gemini?"

Gemini cleared his throat. "You flipped me yesterday. I'm six feet seven inches tall, and my weight is three hundred and eight pounds, Your Highness. Powerful...sexy." He cleared his throat again. "If you don't mind me saying."

They stared at one another, totally enraptured by the moment. There was nothing Cadena could retort. Her comeback was lodged in her throat. She swallowed as tingles continued to assault her flesh, and in her silence, Gemini spoke.

“Shall we proceed to the fields, Your Highness?”

Cadena nodded, and she stepped out in front of him. Gemini trailed her as they exited the palace, confronted by a four-wheeled horse-drawn open carriage at the entrance.

“Oh.” Cadena glanced up at Gemini, who now stood at her side.

He explained, “I thought you might be interested in being transported differently today. Last night you made it clear you wanted some peace of mind. I thought fresh air and a leisurely gallop to the fields and wherever else you’d like to go would assist you.”

Cadena’s body was doing something it hadn’t done before. Besides the heavy sparks that tingled her flesh, her pussy signaled its pleasure in Gemini’s thoughtfulness as it thumped.

“I see.”

“Would you prefer the limo instead? It’ll take me five minutes to get the chauffeur.”

“No. This is what I need. Thank you for hearing me and understanding.”

“You’re welcome, Your Highness.”

“While we’re out, Gemini, call me Cadena.”

He gazed down at her, witnessing her lip turn upward into a smirk. She held her hand out, and Gemini accepted it,

guiding her carefully down the steps to the carriage's open door.

Easing in front of him, Cadena squirmed when his hands grabbed her waist, steadying her to help her climb the steps to get inside.

Gemini closed the door and strolled around, his confidence in revealing his love for her growing by the day.

IT WAS A LEISURELY RIDE. WITH THE SUN HIGH OVER THE CITY of Watima, and a soft breeze carrying around them, the silence of the ride allowed Cadena to connect with her thoughts.

While she knew her position meant she would one day marry a king, she didn't want to deny herself the simple pleasure of enjoying life to the fullest until that day came.

What was the reason for remaining guarded, anxious about the future, and irritated that she couldn't live her life on her own terms?

Nothing in life was promised, so it seemed wise to live in the moment.

“VICTORIA FALLS,” SHE SPOKE SUDDENLY.

She had Gemini's undivided attention. “You would like to visit Victoria Falls?”

“Yes, but after the fields.”

“Yes, Cadena.”

She smiled at him, and he gazed down at her, blushing. Gemini bit his bottom lip and then looked away.

“You’re blushing again, Gemini.”

He released his lip and looked back at her. “And so are you, Cadena.”

Her body tingled every time he called her name. It was getting reckless the way the nerves inside her responded to him.

“Maybe you shouldn’t call me Cadena.”

He nodded, half-understanding. “Is it too much?”

“No. It’s...” She tried to gather her words. “It excites me if that makes any sense.”

“Hmmm. You shouldn’t prevent yourself from experiencing simple pleasures like excitement, Your Highness. Live in the moment.”

Her brows arched. *Did he say live in the moment?*

“Okay, you’ve convinced me.”

They laughed together. “Call me Cadena.”

“Are you certain? It’s no pressure.”

“I am. You’re right. Interestingly, I thought I should live in the moment more before you said it, so... I feel our common thoughts confirm that I should.”

Gemini reached for her hand, and she glanced down at his thick palm, then slipped her hand on top of his. Their fingers tapped together, and their hearts pattered, their eyes stuck on one another.

“Halt! Halt!” the coachman said.

They'd arrived at the fields, and when Cadena swept her eyes to the land, Gemini's gaze remained transfixed on her.

LUSH VEGETATION COVERED THE FIELD AS FAR AS THE EYE could see. Avocado orchards, groves of cabbage, and stalks of corn were abundant in Watima.

Field workers stopped and stared, their eyes growing wide at the impromptu visit from Princess Cadena. She smiled and waved, stopping here and there to take in the richness of crops and their state of maintenance.

A field worker jogged toward Cadena, halted in his tracks by Gemini's outstretched arm holding a sword.

"Please," the man went down on one knee, calling out Cadena's titles before making his plea.

"Prophetess, Your Highness, Crown Princess, Advisor to the Throne."

"Let him speak."

Gemini reinserted the sword inside his sheath.

"Thank you. I'm Bessel. I've recently been given the opportunity to work out of the country. The pay is triple what I make now, and this will take care of my family for years to come. However, I am to work for free for the first thirty days. My family cannot withstand the absence of pay for that time. I am not sure what to do. Can you ask The Spirit for direction, please?"

"Bessel, have you tried asking The Spirit yourself?"

"I have, and the path is not clear."

Cadena nodded. “I will consult with The Spirit during our connection time, but it will be up to Him to give me the vision. I want you to remember that if I do not receive anything for you, it is not because The Spirit has rejected you, nor does it mean you have been forsaken. Sometimes the answers we seek arrive through our life’s journey, and we may miss out on an important lesson if we have the answer beforehand. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Prophetess, Your Highness, Crown Princess, Advisor to the Throne.”

The fieldworker kneeled again and remained there until Cadena passed.

It wasn’t rare for commoners to approach her when she was out in the city. They came asking for favors, wanting prayer, giving blessings, and sometimes offering gifts—much like the three women approaching her with baskets in their hands.

“Your Highness!”

Gemini gripped his sword again, but Cadena closed her hand over his hand, sending a spiral of tingles through his fingers.

“Let them come.”

They bowed at her feet. “We come with fruit and vegetables for your castle. They’re the freshest in the land, picked from the fields just moments ago.”

Cadena smiled and surveyed the baskets. Apples, pears, and oranges were in one basket. In the others, cabbage, cucumbers, and carrots were plentiful.

“Thank you all. May you be blessed by The Spirit.”

They chimed. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

“Take me to your storehouse so I can observe the harvest.”

The women stood, and the baskets were handed off to Cadena’s retinue, who took the food back to the carriage.

At the storehouse, rows of food were stacked for harvest. Bundles of corn, bags of millet, maize, and fruit were loaded and prepared for the markets.

Pride filled Cadena; she had been the one to put the people in the position to care for their agriculture. As busy as she was with other affairs, she still visited the fields and the storehouse to see how their harvest was doing.

“You’ve done a great job, Cadena.”

Gemini’s voice never ceased to amaze her—shaking Cadena to her core as her name slipped off his tongue with finesse.

Ever vigilant, he strolled one step behind her. Cadena responded, “Thank you, Gemini. I can confirm it does do something to my heart.”

“It’s one more thing to add to the history books of The Prophetess, Her Highness, Crown Princess, Advisor to the Throne.”

Cadena paused and glanced over her shoulder at him, a tickle running through her cheek after he reached out and lightly touched her there.

“Let’s go to Victoria Falls, Gemini.”

His smile spread wide. “Let’s go.”

“Without my retinue.”

Gemini arched a brow. “I have an idea.”



eight

“**Y**our Highness, do you think this is a good idea?” Tally asked, watching Gemini unharness one of the four horses from their carriage.

“I trust Gemini.”

Tally pursed her lips, her forehead creasing as she remained skeptical. “How will we get back to the palace?”

“The three horses will get you there,” Gemini said. He pulled out riding tack from the carriage and secured one of the geldings with a bridle and reins. Mounting the horse, Gemini reached over for Cadena.

“Your Highness,” Tally pressed, “this is unlike you.”

Cadena was lifted onto the horse’s back by Gemini’s firm grip.

“Oh!” she said, stirred from the effortless way he elevated her to the seat.

His arms slipped around Cadena as he grabbed the horse’s reins, then gave the animal a light squeeze with his legs and whistled.

The horse took off in a gallop, leaving Cadena’s retinue in the distance.

Laughter bubbled from Cadena's belly; her eyes wide as she enjoyed the view of the land from horseback with Gemini. The humid wind swirled around them, and their bodies bounced—the constant contact rubbing them both and driving excitement between their limbs.

A family of flamingos drank water from a river, and a few of them dispersed when Gemini and Cadena passed by.

On the horizon, they could see a guide in a cart filled with tourists on safari. The tourists were pointing toward a family of elephants assembled in the field.

They continued to gallop past and even caught some of the tourist's attention as they lifted their cameras and snapped photos.

"I'm certain if they knew about the precious cargo on this horse, they would love to meet you and revel about their fantastic trip once they got back to their homeland," Gemini said.

Cadena laughed. "I'm sure you're right."

"Would you like to turn around and meet them?"

"Not right now. All I want to do is what we're doing."

"Are you having a good time, Cadena?"

"A great time. And I don't want it to end."

Cadena glanced over her shoulder at Gemini, their eyes meeting momentarily before Gemini refocused on the road ahead.

Cadena inhaled and exhaled, feeling calmer than she had felt in a long while.

This was what she was missing from her life—the opportunity to get away from all her duties back at the palace and enjoy the land of her ancestors, her family, and what would be her children’s land one day.

They passed a tree of leopards, quietly lounging, some asleep while others watched them gallop by.

“We are almost there, Cadena.”

“So we are.”

Cadena rested against his chest, closing her eyes for a quick minute to enjoy the sprint. As long as she lived, she would never forget it.

“We’re crossing into Zambia. Would you like to see the Falls from here or the Zimbabwean side?”

“That’s a good question.” She squinched her nose. “Let’s start here, then make our way to Zimbabwe.”

“As you wish.” Gemini pulled on the horse’s reins. “Whoa.” The horse slowed to a trot as they eased through trees. Water could be heard in the near distance.

“We should walk from here.”

Gemini dismounted the horse, reached for Cadena, and lifted her, placing her on her feet. He knotted the horses’ reins to a sturdy stump, and Cadena slipped her hand in his, grabbing his attention as Gemini gazed down at her. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Why would I mind holding your hand, Cadena?”

“Because some would think it was inappropriate.”

“But not me,” he said, “if not you.”

She blushed and caressed his jaw again. “What about me touching you like this?”

Gemini shivered, his eyes closing, and then reopening on an inhale. “Yes, I have noticed. But again, I am comfortable with you, Cadena. If you are with me.”

Their gazes remained locked, looking at each other. “Now I have an idea. But first lead me to the Zambezi River, Gemini.”

WITH HER HAND IN HIS, GEMINI AND CADENA TOOK A PATH unknown to Cadena but long familiar to Gemini.

“My parents and I used to come here every spring for a change of scenery from Lusaka. While we loved our home, our days were filled with work, or studies, or for me, training.”

Their arms brushed as they strolled. “I thought you loved to train.”

“I did. But you see, the thing about life is that you don’t love a singular thing. If I could’ve had it my way, I would’ve had a normal childhood while training whenever I wanted to. I also wish my parents had spent more time with each other. It seemed we all had a task to take on. Whenever one or two of us were home, the other was not. I had to learn that some sacrifices must be made for the better of the family. After my natural ability as a fighter became obvious, my training went from something I loved to do to something I had to do.”

Cadena frowned. “That doesn’t sound great at all.”

Gemini smirked and drove his finger along her forehead as if to wipe away her distress.

“The good thing is I still loved the sport of fighting, so be of good cheer, Cadena. My parents were proud of me, and I was honored that they were proud. As a young man wanting to help provide for my household, nothing satisfies the heart more than seeing the jubilation on your parent’s faces.”

“I’m glad you felt that way. I was seconds away from ordering you to go live the life you want.”

Gemini’s low guffaw stirred her. “It wouldn’t be the first time you wanted me to take a leave of absence.”

Cadena’s face brightened. “Are you referring to the night in the medical bay?”

“I am.”

She closed her eyes and leaned into his arm, burying her face there, then looking up at him. They were so close they could feel the electric energy between them and smell each other’s natural flesh.

“I want what’s best for you, Gemini.”

“Why?”

Her brows arched. “I want what’s best for everyone in the kingdom.”

“Of course you do. Forgive me for insinuating you didn’t.”

“No.” Her voice was soft, smooth, holding that depth that Gemini loved. “You didn’t, I... I care about your heart. You’re a good man, Gemini. You deserve to be loved in ways that extend beyond fairy tales. So...” She cleared her throat. “That’s what I wanted to get across in the medical bay.”

They paused their stroll after approaching a stream of the river. Cadena grabbed the hem of her dress and pulled it over her head, stretching out of the garment and tossing it to the

side. But she didn't stop there, kicking off her shoes with the heel of her feet.

Gemini's gaze tightened.

"Your Highness.... Cadena. His eyes moved from her moisturized, pedicured feet to her smooth cocoa legs, thighs over the dress slip. Full perky breasts sat up in a black lace bra, and he couldn't remove his eyes from her skin.

"I'm hot, Gemini." She turned and ran off, and he ran after her. She jumped into the river, staying close enough to the edge to remain standing on her feet.

"Cadena!"

Gemini removed his shoes, pants, shirt, and royal vest, leaving on his boxer briefs, then entered behind Cadena, curling his arms around her body and drawing her underneath his chin.

"Cadena." He gazed down at her, surprised by her spontaneous activity.

She slipped her arms around his broad shoulders. "I've wanted to ask you, Gemini. The woman you spoke about in the medical bay...who is unattainable to you...is she me?"

"Yes."

His admittance, though what she hoped for, still shocked her. Cadena's heart raced, and every nerve inside her danced. "You're not joking with me?"

"I would never joke with you about something so serious. But now that you know that, will I lose my position with you?"

"No. No one has to know this but us."

“So, you’re okay with how I feel about you?”

“How do you feel?”

“If I could have it my way, you would be my queen, and I would be whatever title you wanted to give me.”

Her mouth spread into a delightful smile; her eyes wide. “Kiss me, Gemini.”

His lips dropped into hers in a smooth, hungry, delicious undertaking. He’d wanted to taste her mouth for so long but never thought it would be possible.

“Mmmm,” Cadena moaned into his mouth, opening her lips wider to his probing tongue.

Rippling heat attacked their skin. Carried by a breeze, the river pushed against their legs. Their mouths pressed against one another in desperation, expressing they’d both waited for this moment for too long.

A whimper fell from Cadena’s lips, and Gemini relieved her of his mouth but kissed along her chin.

“You taste exactly how I thought you would. Sweet, rich, unfiltered coffee in the morning. I could drown in your mouth’s caress forever.”

His dark vocals sent a shiver down her body. “I feel the same way.”

Gemini lifted from her face, capturing her eyes again. “Is this a dream?”

“It better not be.”

Their mouths crashed again, and Gemini lifted her as she jumped on him—her legs around his waist, his hands gripping her ass.

Their bodies vibrated against one another as they indulged, heat stirring from their mouths, pants parting from their lips.

Gemini's hands cruised up her back, where he grabbed her neck and drew her mouth from his. A slow trail of kisses was laid on her skin, down her throat, shoulders, and back again.

Moans floated from Cadena's lips, and her nipples hardened as her pussy drenched her black lace panties.

I think we should have sex.

It was a thought that ran through her head repeatedly, but she was much too nervous to say those words aloud.

"I think we should stop."

That came from Gemini, and it was not the position she wanted him to take.

"No. You don't think that."

He lifted his mouth from her flesh again, but this time when their eyes connected, Cadena saw the fiery hedonism in Gemini. At that moment, she understood his position.

"Your Highness..."

"Okay. Maybe...maybe you're right."

He sighed and dropped his head, and she placed kisses there, her lips sliding down his nose, his face, along his neck up to his ear lobe, where she nibbled with her teeth.

"I would love to do this again," she murmured.

"I was hoping you would."

He lifted his mouth, his lips trailing back to her chin, before swallowing her up in another mouthwatering kiss.

Heat coiled around them, and Cadena couldn't help it when she gyrated against his body with her hips.

His hands tightened around her, filling her up, grabbing her ass, digging into her back.

“Ooooh...this just feels too good.”

“Make me stop,” he growled.

“I don't think that I can.”

“You must.”

Movement off to the west drew Gemini's attention. It was enough to snap him out of their passionate moment and give his attention to their surroundings.

“It was probably an animal,” she said, nibbling on his ear again.

“In any case,” he said, “I need to check it out.”

“Can't you take even a few hours off from being a guard?”

“Not when you are my precious assignment.” He settled her back on her feet. “Stay here.”

Carefully Gemini moved out of the water, making sure not to make a sound or step on any sticks in his direct path. When he moved from behind the brush, an deer lifted its head, gave Gemini a startled glance, and then bounded in the opposite direction.

“See?” Cadena said, disregarding his request to stay put.

“You were right.”

“So this means next time you'll listen to me?”

“No. Next time I will still check it out.”

Cadena shook her head and laughed. “What do you say we go see the falls from Zimbabwe?”

“I’d say your wish is my command.”



nine

It had only taken them three minutes to cross over into Zimbabwe's rain forest. Lightly showered with the forest rains, Gemini and Cadena galloped to a path that brought them directly in front of Victoria Falls.

"Whenever I see this place, I'm amazed at its beauty. It's as if it were my first time," Cadena said.

"I agree." Gemini pulled the reins on the horse, and they stopped, then, one by one, dismounted the animal.

The splashing water was reverberating, leaving Cadena and Gemini with a calm spirit. Cadena approached a wooden railing, lifting her arms to rest on top. Behind her, Gemini moved closer and stretched out his arms to rest on either side of hers.

Cadena's eyes closed on an intake of breath, and she leaned her head back into the column of his throat. Together they held still, watching the falls, breathing in unison, their bodies vibrating off each other.

Feeling confident, Gemini dropped his mouth against Cadena's temple, kissing her and resting his lips there with a lover's caress.

"Mmmm...more," she whispered.

His mouth moved down her face, pressing into her neck, trailing to her shoulder.

“I love this,” she murmured.

“Be careful, Cadena. Love is a strong word.”

“It is, and I do.”

Her comments were giving him impossible thoughts of happily-ever-afters. Imagining her in a royal wedding gown was one thing, but hearing her say *I do* was another.

Gemini’s throat tightened. He could pretend, couldn’t he? There was no law against dreaming of a fairy tale with someone you adored.

The sun began to set, and the horizon lit up with color. Gemini and Cadena gazed at the vivid colors while half-enraptured by the arousal in their cores.

“We may not be able to linger long before someone comes along, Cadena.”

“I don’t care.”

Gemini smirked. “Yes, you do.”

Cadena bit her bottom lip. She only cared what her father would think. If not, she wouldn’t care at all. “We’ve only just arrived.”

“I know. And we can stay for as long as you like.”

He pulled away from her, and she twirled to face him. “Why can’t our life be as simple as today?”

He leaned and kissed her forehead. “Because you belong to a royal family.”

“Semantics.” They chuckled. “This is why I love the Bohemian culture. We could be adventurers, take up our

artistic pursuits, never have to worry about duties or traditions.” She pursed her lips.

“That is true.”

“Instead, I’m stuck trying to gain the kingdom’s respect at every turn.”

Gemini frowned. “Cadena, you undoubtedly have everyone’s respect in the kingdom. And if there is one person that you doubt, offer up their name so I can go in search of them.”

Cadena smiled and caressed his face. “You are the epitome of a hero. You’re always ready to take up arms for me. My own personal knight in shining armor.”

“That sounds kind of sexy, now that you say it.”

Laughter shot from her lips as Gemini wiggled his brows. She lifted her arms, placing her hands on his shoulders as she laughed, and everything about that moment made him warm and cozy inside.

When Cadena withdrew, Gemini grabbed her hands and brought them to his mouth—bestowing kisses on them, one at a time.

“Seriously, Cadena. What makes you think you don’t have everyone’s respect?”

“Because I’m a woman. An African royal woman. My only role is to be beautiful, listen, and don’t speak unless spoken to. Go to tea parties and woo the princes.”

“You’re right. It sounds dreadful.”

Cadena swatted at Gemini, who ducked and laughed. “I’m only kidding.”

“But it’s true.” She poked her lip out. “I would love to focus on my art and live life to the fullest on my terms.” Her eyes dropped, then she looked up at him. “Do you still sculpt, Gemini?”

The first time Cadena found out that Gemini was a sculptor, her interest in him grew. For so long, he’d been the fiercest of their guards. So while he had the warrior title down to a science, he was reserved and quite private with his personal life. One afternoon, he was discarding a piece when she saw him pass her door.

“GEMINI,” SHE’D CALLED. HE STOPPED WALKING AND SAT THE piece down right away as she approached the door.

“Your Highness.” Gemini kneeled.

“Rise.” Her eyes looked to the piece against the wall. “What do you have there?”

Gemini lifted the piece, placing it on his open palm. It was a bird drinking from a small fountain. The figure was made of clay and broken on one side.

“Did you make this?”

Her eyes shot up to his. “Yes, Your Highness.”

Cadena was amazed at his creation. “Are you selling it?”

Gemini frowned, his gaze dropping over the bird, then back to Cadena. “It would have to be worth something for me to sell it.”

Cadena planted her hands on her hips. “This is worth something. Oh my gosh, look at this!” Baby wings were

sculpted, eyes, a beak, brows—even the circumference of the fountain. “This is almost perfect. Where are you taking it?”

“To the trash.”

“No. Why?”

“I have started another one. Usually, I keep all my pieces, but there’s nothing I can do to save this one.”

“Somehow, I don’t believe that. Gemini, I don’t think you understand how great you are. But I would like the chance to show you.” She took the bird off his hands. “I will keep this here with me if you don’t mind.”

A single brow rose on his forehead. “Are you sure you want to do that?”

“I’m positive.”

They stared each other down, then Gemini nodded. “If you wish.”

“I do wish.”

They cracked smiles.

“Can I see your other creations? I’ll understand if you want to keep them to yourself. This is not an order, just a request if you like.”

Cadena didn’t know it, but a warm surge of emotion moved through Gemini at her curiosity about his craft. “I would love to share my art with you,” he said.

Cadena’s face brightened. “Give me a second, and I’ll follow you.” Her eyes shifted to something behind him. “Yes, Tally, how can I help you?”

“Your Highness.” Tally kneeled, then rose to her feet. “His Majesty requests your attendance in the meeting that begins in

ten minutes.” Tally glanced at Gemini, then back to Cadena.

Cadena nodded and checked the time. “That’s right.” She looked back to Gemini. “I apologize, Gemini. This will have to wait until another time.”

“Whenever you are ready, Your Highness.”

COMING OUT OF HER REVERIE, SHE FELT A WARM SENSATION float over her as Gemini’s eyes twinkled. “I do.” He smiled. “Are you still interested in seeing some of my pieces?”

“Absolutely. I hate that I haven’t been able to see them yet.”

“Your schedule is busy, Cadena. It is expected for you to be tied up most evenings. And you are still a human being. You need time to rest, pray, and enjoy solitude whenever it moves you. I would not expect anything otherwise.”

“That’s because you are a wonderful person inside and out. Very rare, might I add.”

Gemini gazed down at her just as the moon lifted in the sky. He twirled her around by her hips, driving her back into his chest.

“Just in time for the show.”

Cadena rested in his embrace as the beautiful light known as the moonbow shimmered before them.

The moonbow was a rare occurrence when the sun set on Victoria Falls. Cadena knew the phenomenon happened when the light from the moon bounced off the water’s spray and gave life to a rainbow. Visitors from all around the world gathered to see the spectacle.

And as they did now, Gemini and Cadena paid them no mind as his lips feathered kisses behind her ear. Both of them wished they could remain there forever, but that was living the dream of dreams.



Gemini was on cloud nine when he reached his quarters, but stepping inside, a figure sitting on his sofa made him draw his sword.

“Now, why would an enemy have clearance to lounge in your space, friend?”

Gemini slipped his sword back inside his scabbard and responded to Jasir. “My apologies, friend. It is a force of habit to draw my weapon when there is an unexpected visitor. Is everything okay?”

Jasir sat forward, resting an elbow on his thigh—his dreadlocks sweeping across his broad shoulders. In his other hand, he held a clipboard.

“When the horse and carriage returned to the palace earlier, I went out to meet you so you could sign off on this week’s guard schedule.” He lifted the clipboard, then placed it back on his lap. “But to my surprise, you were not there; neither was the Advisor. Do you care to share what that was about?”

Gemini removed his vest and tossed it across the couch. He unsnapped his cufflinks and rolled his shirt over his forearms to his elbows.

“I was with the Advisor. She wanted to see Victoria Falls.”

Jasir's brows rose. "She wanted to see Victoria Falls? For no other reason than to visit?"

"Yes. She wanted to get away from everything for a few hours." Gemini strode to his bar sitting in the corner of the room.

"With you only?"

"What? Do you think I'm not capable of protecting her alone?"

"That's not what I am saying at all."

"Good. Because you would be wrong."

Jasir sighed, his thick brows remaining arched.

Like Gemini, Jasir was also from Lusaka, Zambia. The two were not only top-ranked men among the guardsmen, but they had grown up together, training for military combat as young teenage boys. It was a random occurrence that they both ended up at the royal palace. Because Gemini knew that Jasir was at the top of his class—right behind Gemini—it was easy for him to give Jasir the role of second-in-command. They'd been close ever since.

But there was one thing that Gemini had not confided to Jasir. And for a good reason. Secrets of the heart like the one Gemini carried for Cadena could never be uttered.

And even though Jasir knew this, he couldn't help but ask: "What are you doing, Gemini?"

"I'm getting me something to drink. Would you like some?"

"You know very well what I'm asking."

“Tell me, what exactly are you inquiring, friend? “Gemini sat down in a chair across from Jasir.”

“Are you sure you want me to speak into the atmosphere?”

The two men stared at each other.

“Are you recording this conversation?”

Jasir’s brows dipped; his forehead creased. “Why would you ask me such a thing? Do you not trust me? Why would you call me a friend if there is no mutual respect between you and me?”

“Calm down. I only asked because of your question. Now, what do you really want to know, Jasir?”

“Is there something I should know about between you and the Advisor? Anything that would put me in a position to have to hurt my friend?”

Gemini understood him clearly. Jasir wanted to know if Gemini and Cadena were putting themselves in an unlawful position.

And with Jasir being second-in-command, he would undoubtedly be the one called on to lock Gemini in a cell in the royal prison.

“WE HAVE GROWN CLOSE—CLOSER THAN WE WERE BEFORE. For the longest time, I have been enamored with the Advisor. And I found out today that she feels the same. It’s not something either of us planned. But you can’t help who you adore.”

In utter shock, Jasir sat back against the sofa.

“I want to tell you congratulations because honestly, of all women to be enamored with and have them reciprocate; this is probably the highest bar there is. Unfortunately for you and for me, this cannot happen. You two have no choice but to leave this alone. It will not be pretty otherwise.”

Gemini took a sip of his drink. “I don’t think that I can.”

Jasir raised his voice. “You have to!”

“Calm down.”

“How can you remain calm when you know what type of outcome could derive from this? Do you have a death wish?”

“I don’t. And still, if that is the future that awaits me, I am willing to march toward it without fear.”

Jasir’s eyes widened. “Are you crazy, man? And what of your parents? What of the person who may have to end you?” he said, referring to himself. “Does none of that matter to you?”

Gemini locked his jaw. The last thing he wanted was to sadden his parents or unintentionally leave Jasir with a lifetime of pain if Jasir had to slay him.

But there was nothing Gemini could do about the palpitations of his heart every time he was with Cadena. From the mere thoughts of her, his skin would warm, his day would brighten, and his heart would soar. It was futile to fight it.

“I’m sorry, Jasir. If there’s any consolation, this thing between the Advisor and me isn’t eternal. As you said, it’s not realistic, and at the moment, we’ve only confided in one another about how we feel. It’s not on the level of ‘I’m going to ask her to marry me.’ As much as that would be the joy of my world, her father—not to mention the kingdom as a whole—would forbid it. So for now, you can rest knowing that she

and I would never be able to break the rules even if we wanted to.”

Jasir wanted to feel bad for his friend. He understood the obstacles between royals and everyone else. However, his gut still clenched at the thoughts of his friend and the Advisor being banished from the kingdom...or worse.

“Do you think you two will run off again?”

Gemini smirked. “Maybe.”

Jasir’s eyes widened in horror. “Wipe that smile off your face, friend. I am serious.”

“I know. You look alarmed.” Gemini couldn’t hold back his laugh.

“That is not funny.”

“I think it rather is. At any rate, today could’ve been a one-time thing. I did get a chance to...”

Jasir’s eyes lowered in suspicion. “Don’t stop for my sake.”

Gemini chuckled. “Oh, now you’re interested in the details?”

“I never said I wasn’t interested. I’m just worried about you.”

“Fair enough.” He paused for dramatic effect. “We kissed.”

Jasir leaned forward again, a smile ushering across his lips. “You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?”

“You know the answer to that.”

Jasir’s eyes brightened, and Gemini laughed. “Don’t look so happy for me, friend. It may never happen again, but...it

was one of the best things to happen to me in life.”

“That may be true, but how many men can say they kissed a princess?”

Gemini’s laughter deepened. “No many, for sure.” The space between them quieted. “She is extraordinary. I saw a side of her today that I had not witnessed before.”

“Like what?”

“As much as she is strong, she’s vulnerable. Her reasons for wanting to be in charge, be the best fighter, and her disdain for the title of princess are because she doesn’t think anyone will respect her otherwise. While she has known several princes in the past, she found them rude, uptight, and undeserving of her vulnerabilities, heart, and love. Today, however, she was vulnerable with me. I could feel her truly resting. Our connection was different.”

Gemini sighed, and Jasir sat back and pulled his leg to rest across his thigh. “I’ve never felt happy and sorry for a man simultaneously. It’s mind-boggling, friend.”

Gemini’s smile didn’t reach its maximum potential. “It’s fine. At least I can say I had a chance to honestly know her.”

Jasir nodded, and Gemini drank the rest of his drink. He sat the glass on the table before them, then reached over to Jasir.

Jasir handed Gemini the clipboard and changed the subject. “You know we could do this easier if you would switch over to electronic tablets.”

“And you know electronics can be hacked. This is the palace’s security detail. No one will know of it but the guards that check in for duty. If this were to get out, we would know someone inside has given out the information. And because

we run a tight ship, it wouldn't be hard to narrow those men down."

"Or, we could hire someone whose job is to make sure our systems are never broken into."

Gemini scribbled his signature across the schedule, then initialed next to his name. "We'll talk about that when I'm getting ready to retire or if I'm fired upon in the next practice at the shooting range."

Jasir scowled. "That is not funny."

Gemini's deep laugh bounced off the room walls. "You should see your face." He laughed. "The horror."

Jasir stood from his seat and jumped across the table, swatting Gemini with the clipboard.

Gemini couldn't contain his laughter. He covered his head and laughed, unfazed by Jasir's attack.



eleven

Cadena reached for a towel and stepped out of the shower, wrapping the cloth around her body. It didn't matter how long she stood under the cool water; her body's temperature stayed warm as it remained under Gemini's heated spell.

"How can I forget this?" she whispered, wrapping her hair in a messy, thick bun on her head.

But Cadena knew the answer to that. She sat down at her vanity in a plush cozy cotton chair and relaxed against the seat. Thoughts of Gemini's kisses—the erotic way he sucked in her tongue, the urgency in his suckles, and his firm grip on her ass—drove her insane. Cadena opened her towel, wishing she had a fan to help her out. But nothing could put out her fire but him—Gemini.

She blew out a frustrated breath and kept her eyes closed as she remembered those caresses down her neck, across her shoulders, and the powerful strength of his embrace. It was what she missed in her life. The entire day had become her deepest desire turned into reality.

But that wasn't enough for Cadena. There was no way she could leave things there and go back to the way things were.

So often, she wanted to get to know Gemini outside of his guard status. One of those times came when she searched him out, looking for the opportunity to see his art up close, only to find him kneeling and praying to The Spirit.

She didn't mean to eavesdrop but listening to him give thanks, cherish The Spirit, and pray over his family, life, the guardsmen's lives, and their kingdom had affected her deeply. Her entire nervous system lit up with a flurry of tingles that coiled around her and settled right into her heart. She'd eased out of the room that day, leaning her back against the wall in the hall as he continued to pray.

What was going on with her?

Cadena's curiosity about the man behind the stoic guardsmen's stance began when she was ten. He called her a little girl that day, and she put him right in his place. She expected him to give her another clever retort because of her age.

Most did not respect young people.

But that was not what he'd done. He valued her for her role, for being a human who deserved respect, and apologized if she was offended. Cadena had not expected that.

From that point on, she wanted to get to know Gemini. But he was almost a grown boy. And it was unnecessary for them to communicate regularly outside of his guardsman role.

Still, she found a way to keep him close. She thought that if he were on her detail, it would be a way to get to know him. But she found that Gemini was closed off. He would only give her so much of his personality in his role, which was disappointing.

However, catching him at odd times was enough to figure out who he was. She'd been walking around the corner when she saw Gemini and Jasir talking in hushed tones.

"I just need this one favor of you, friend," Jasir said. "My mom is lonely. I cannot stand seeing her this way. All I'm asking is that you take her out to dinner just once. It'll be good for her to get out of the house and have a good time."

"And what happens when I become your stepfather?" Gemini asked.

Jasir balked and cursed in Swahili. Gemini's deep laugh sent heat down Cadena's skin.

"I'm not trying to upset you, friend. But the fact remains, I'm somewhat of a catch. What happens when your mom wants to see me again?"

Cadena smiled and then laughed, and both of their attention shot her way. She eased on around the corner, making her presence known.

"Your Highness," they said in unison, kneeling.

"Rise."

They stood to their feet. "We were not aware that you were nearby. We apologize if our conversation disturbed you," Gemini said.

"Not at all. There's no need for apologies. I have enjoyed listening to you two for what I have heard. And Jasir, I would have to agree with Gemini. If your mother is looking for companionship, no matter how temporary, you probably don't want Gemini to be her escort on an evening out. From a woman's perspective, if he were my date, he would likely not make it home that night."

Before turning and strolling away, she winked at Gemini. "You two have a nice day."

Gemini, unbeknownst to Cadena, had stared after her parting figure, while Jasir was annoyed that he had failed to secure a temporary dining companion for his mother.

Cadena had yet to see Gemini's art, but the air between them was different from that day on. Gemini was no longer afraid to crack a joke or two around her. He seemed to adore Cadena's laugh if the way his face brightened during her amusement was any indication.

She became comfortable with him—touching his shoulder, hand, and sometimes his thigh. It had become one of her favorite things to look forward to.

Unfortunately, the reality of who she was, her status, and who she would become always brought her down off that high. For this reason, Cadena constantly thought about taking Gemini off her detail.

She even tried to do so one time during their visit to the States.

THE ROYALS WERE GUESTS TO A TRIPLE WEDDING OF THE Roses—a Black multimillionaire family who lived in the city of Chicago, Illinois.

Currently, The Royals and the Roses had formed a partnership where The Royals created a pipeline of agriculture to help the Roses with the homelessness in the city. In return, The Roses would provide resources to the country of Kéra Asnela.

During their visit to a local restaurant, she'd tried to switch Gemini's detail.

"Gemini," Cadena had called.

He approached the table within seconds, giving a short head bow. "Your Highness," his deep voice murmured.

Without giving him eye contact, Cadena addressed Gemini as she wrestled with an uncanny elixir of heat that cloaked her skin. "We're leaving. Escort our guests back to the estate, please."

Gemini hesitated, prompting Cadena to lift an eye and meet his heavy gaze.

A whistle slipped from Gemini's lips, and he pulled his eye from Cadena's mocha face as his right-hand man approached.

"Jasir, escort our guests back to the royal estate."

"No," Cadena said.

Gemini's eyes drifted back to Cadena.

"I asked you to escort our guests. Jasir will escort Cadence and me."

"Your Highness, it is my duty to protect you at all times by order of the King."

"You are also to follow my orders when outside the King's presence." Cadena glanced around to make a show of looking for King Isaac Winthrope. "I don't see my father, so should I ask again, or will following my lead be a problem for you?"

They eyed each other, long and hard, a battle of wills that shifted the atmosphere around them.

Watching with keen interest, the triplets—Phoebe, Eden, and Jasmine glanced between Cadena and Gemini, their

obvious fight more than the eye could see.

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

“Thank you.”

“If I may cut in,” Phoebe added, “We have our own security. There’s no need for any of your men to escort us.”

Jasmine and Eden agreed with a head nod.

“Besides, this is our city. We kinda own the joint,” Jasmine added.

Eden chuckled as Phoebe glanced at Jasmine with a broad smile, eyes enlarged. “We kinda own the joint? You’ve been around Carla too long,” she said about their close friend Carla Jones.

Jasmine winked. “You might be right about that.”

“Are you sure?” Gemini asked.

“We are certain.”

The triplets rose to their feet, and on cue, their security surrounded them, in line to escort the three wherever they were going next.

When Cadena moved to stand, Gemini slipped behind her seat, adjusting her chair as she rose.

“Where would you like to have me, Your Highness?”

The dark thread of his voice rippled down Cadena’s spine. She knew where she wanted him, but nothing about those inhibitions was like her, and somehow, she had to rid herself of the sudden lust in her spirit.

A few hours later, after Cadena’s seamstress had fitted one of the triplets—Phoebe—for her dress, she and Phoebe had a

conversation that Cadena had been avoiding thinking about since they'd arrived.

“If there’s anything else I can do for you, let me know.”

“Actually, there is,” Phoebe chimed.

A long brow arched on Cadena’s face.

“When it’s your turn to say I do, please send us an invitation. We’d love to return the favor of gifts in our own American way.”

Cadena’s face was devoid of all signs of expression. “You’ll be waiting a lifetime for that, but I’ll inform Cadence since she’s likely to find her prince before I will.”

Cadena’s gaze skipped around the room as if expecting to be caught red-handed by a lie that she had no business speaking.

The triplet frowned. “Don’t be so sure. I know that it’s royal tradition for the princess to be married to a prince that will align family ties. Is that not the case with you?”

Cadena was silent, her thoughts traveling to Gemini before shaking them off quickly.

“I don’t desire to wed the traditional way—or at all—if it was up to me. However, I respect my father and trust his judgment more than mine. If he saw fit for our family to become allied with another, I would wed the prince of his choice.”

She’d never lied so many times in one session, but the truth gnawed at her soul. That failed attempt to switch Gemini also let her know absolutely nothing of her will would pull them apart. It was as if he desired to be at her side as much as she wished to have him there.

“What am I going to do with myself?”

Her mind shifted to her father. They hadn't spoken since she'd run out of the warrior room, and she knew her father was giving her some space. When it came to Cadena and King Isaac, she felt that she'd spent most of her time showing him what she wanted for her life.

Initially, he'd given some resistance, but he was more understanding than not. She'd shown him through action why she deserved to be his direct advisor by staying on top of world happenings between leaders across the globe. She'd given advice on necessary meetings that occurred when one country undertook political action that could impact Kéra Asnela in some way or another.

She trained hard to learn to fight because she wanted to prove that she could honor him just as much as her brothers. Unfortunately, they seem to have hit a wall with that, and the way he responded to her training with Gemini showed her that truth.

Cadena moisturized her face, taking note of the tiny outline of moles underneath her right eye. Her father called them “beauty marks.” Cadena used to hate them, but now she could see the beauty in those marks on her face.

She pulled herself from the chair and strolled to the sink, brushed her teeth, checked them, and sucked off with her tongue.

She opened a small jar and applied a coat of lip balm, then looked over herself in the mirror.

There were two things she wanted to do more than anything: make up with her father and be near Gemini again.

Exiting her bathroom, Cadena entered her closet and put on a gold, knee-length, spaghetti-strapped silk nightgown. From there, she slipped her arms into her royal housecoat. It was reserved for walking around the palace—solid blue, ankle-length, with gold trim and the lion crest in a stamp on the front.

She slipped into a pair of short two-inch heels on her feet, then left for her father's study.

CADENA'S KNUCKLES BARELY REVERBERATED AGAINST THE wooden door. "It's me, Cadena."

The double doors opened quickly, and King Isaac stepped out of the way of the entrance.

"Thank you," she said, entering.

"Thank you for coming." King Isaac closed the doors and turned to face his daughter, who stood with her hands clasped.

"I apologize for the way I left the warrior's room. It was rude and unladylike. It was also childish. As you know, I am firm about my beliefs to be the best. But I just want to honor you, Father. I want to make you proud that I carry your last name."

King Isaac sucked in a breath. "Cadena...you make me proud already."

"No. I'm talking about the pride you have for Remington and Omari. The way you look at them with respect as the heirs to your throne. I want that from you, too. And if that means I have to show you that I am just as strong—mentally, physically, and intellectually—then I'll always aim for that."

“Daughter, my pride is not contingent on whether you’re my son or daughter. I apologize if you’ve felt that way. It means I haven’t done a good job showing you otherwise. I agree that I handle you differently, but as strong and intelligent as you are, you should still always have men of valor around you. I will not always be the king of this castle. When I’m no longer king, your brothers will need all the wisdom you possess to keep this country from falling. That’s why I’m so careful with you. I believe wholeheartedly that, without you, we wouldn’t be standing now.”

Cadena’s eyes widened as a mist of tears filled her eyes. King Isaac stepped to his daughter and drew her into an embrace.

“I love you now and forevermore. Please forgive me for misunderstanding you.”

Cadena cried softly into his chest. “I love you, too, Daddy. Forgive me, as well.”



twelve

She felt renewed when she left her father's study. However, there was one last thing Cadena needed to accomplish to complete her night.

She strolled down the dim corridor, past doors that led to libraries, bathrooms, exits to the stairway, and other rooms containing a plethora of activities. She hummed as she strolled, walking almost a quarter-mile before reaching Gemini's door. She stood outside, a smile surfacing on her lips as she lifted her hand and knocked.

Her heart picked up an extra beat, but she didn't have to wait long for the knob to turn and the door to open.

"Hi..." She lost her voice at his almost naked appearance.

Gemini was wet, bare-chested, with a towel wrapped haphazardly around his waist as if he'd thrown it on to open the door.

"Your Highness," he said, surprised. He kneeled, and she reached to touch his shoulder.

"Please, rise, Gemini." He stood to his feet, their shadows merging. "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

Gemini glanced up and down the hall, then back to Cadena. "I was getting out of the shower but don't worry about that." He frowned. "Is there a security breach?" He

grabbed a shotgun that he kept leaning against the wall and stepped into the hallway.

“No!” Cadena’s face brightened as she smiled up at him and grabbed one of his biceps. Laughter bubbled from her lips, and she shook her head, but the confusion on Gemini’s face made her explain. “There is no breach. I’m here to see you.”

Immediately, he lowered the gun. “My apologies. It’s a force of habit.”

“That’s okay. Do you mind if we go inside?”

“Inside...my room?”

“Yes.”

“Please, come in.”

Cadena eased into his quarters and, behind her, Gemini entered and shut the door. Cadena turned around to face him, a dark-crimson blush rising in her face.

“You’re blushing, Your Highness.”

Cadena nodded and took a step closer to him. “I am.” Her hand slid up the doorframe where she turned the bolt, locking the door.

His thick brows rose. “Your Highness...”

“I can’t stop thinking about this afternoon, Gemini, and I wondered if you were having the same trouble.”

He sucked in a breath. “My cold showers are doing nothing to fight off the heat.”

She laughed, her tone a light jingle. “It appears I’m going through the same.” She bit her bottom lip and built her courage, removing her palace coat and letting it drop to the floor. “What do you say we do something about it?”

Her lids lowered seductively, and Gemini sat the weapon back against the wall, then grabbed Cadena's body, lifting her by her ass, turning, and pinning her back into the wall.

Cadena's heart rocked, and her arms slipped around his neck.

"Is this what you mean, Your Highness?"

"Yes."

His nostril flared, his amber gaze staring her down hard. "Are you not saving yourself for someone special?"

"I have, and I've found him."

Heat ignited their loins. "The last time we were in this position, I asked you to make me stop. I will not ask again."

"Understood."

Gemini's jaw locked as he stared at her. "We will never be able to return to the way things were if we proceed, Your Highness."

"I hope not," her deep sultry voice purred. "And do me a favor—never call me Your Highness when we're alone again."

She yanked at his towel, unraveling the cloth and dropping it from her fingers. She was immediately met by the upsurging prodding of his dick—slapping against her mound like a strike against one's face.

"Oh!"

"Cadena..."

"Don't make me beg," she crooned.

An animalistic growl from his mouth became a warning. But he was too far gone to care anymore. Gemini dropped his lips on top of hers, sucking in her tongue, grinding his dick up

and down her pussy to get it wet. Cadena moaned against his mouth, shuddered, then gasped when a heavy, puncturing plow drilled into her tight essence.

“Oh!” Cadena’s yelp was trapped inside his throat, having nowhere to go as he inhaled her.

Tingles manifested in her toes, ears, and nipples as he buried himself to the hilt inside her. Her eyes rolled, a moan screeching from her mouth, and her body clenched as her pussy pulsated around his shaft.

“Gemini!”

He steadied himself, gazed into her eyes, and slow-stroked up, watching her facial expression change each time he pulled back and impaled her again.

Their love was gentle at first, but the more she adjusted to his girth, the more her legs opened, giving him the signal to slam into her.

He was drenched from her sticky nectar, slipping and sliding, his plunges becoming fast when finally, he drove a merciless, thrusting stroke inside her pussy.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” Her eyes lurched, and her body was doused in fervent heat.

Their moans mixed as he eased out, grinding back inside her, only to repeat his feverish stroking.

Lips meshing together, their passionate fervor intensified the longer their lips remained locked.

Gemini was hungry before, but being inside her body, drenched by her slippery, wet pussy, shocked his core with sporadic energy. Without trying, his speed amplified, his hips moving at a pace for experienced lovers. He dipped, buried his

dick, then pounded her fiercely, knocking them against the thick wall.

“Mmmmm!” he moaned.

“Ssssss,” she hissed.

Trailing down her chin, he sucked against her skin, nibbling, biting her neck, and plowing into her sanctuary.

“OH!” Her nails dug into his shoulders. “Oh! Ah! *Gemini!*”

A growl vibrated against her throat. “Cadena, my warrior princess, you’re a bit too loud, love.”

Cadena purred. “We’re nearly a quarter-mile away from the next bedchamber. No one can hear me. No one can hear ussssss!” His strokes were forceful, heavy, pounding her pussy with enough strength to create her body’s imprint against his wall.

“My goodness!”

“You have turned me into a wild beast,” he whispered against her ear. “I want you to cum for me.”

Their bodies slapped and slipped on hard penetration and wet cream.

Slap! Slap! Slap! Slap!

“Cum for me. Cum for me.”

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

“Ooooooh!” Cadena howled. Gemini nibbled on her earlobe, kissed back down her neck again, then dropped his mouth into her silk gown and sucked in a nipple.

“Oh!” Cadena’s hands shot to grip his head, bucking against him hard as he drove into her, stroke after battering

stroke. “Yes! Yes! Yes! Ah!”

“You’re so beautiful, so incredibly delicious I could feast on you forever.” Pounding into her wildly built his orgasm in a way that felt reckless to his soul. Gemini slowed, bringing his gaze back to her eyes.

“Don’t slow down,” she begged.

“I’m going to come inside you if I don’t, and I won’t be able to stop myself from doing so.”

Her mouth spread into a smile, and she licked his lips. He made her pay for that erotism, pounding her again, making her toes curl and eyes roll.

“I’m going to come on you, Gemini.”

“Yeah?” His fucking increased.

“Ah! Yes!” Her eyes bucked and rolled again, and their mouths crashed, tongues dancing as they sucked tongues and shook into orgasm together.

“OOOOOOH!” Cadena screamed, and Gemini pulled out of her, his semen showering her pussy, completely covering her vagina.

“You are...” Gemini’s body vibrated as he held her tight. “Cadena.”

“Gemini.” Entwined in each other’s arms, their mouths fused again, and Gemini pulled her from the wall, searching for the bedroom.

HE POUNDED BETWEEN THE SLIPPERY HEAT OF HER SEX, BOTH naked now. Gemini’s tongue explored Cadena’s body, licking

past her navel to her dark brown nipples.

“Mmmm...ssssss...ooooh...” she hummed, whining, purring, with fingernails that dug into his skin as he slammed into her pussy.

In his bed, heat showered their bodies, and chills rocketed wildly from one end of them to the other. Cadena’s body arched into his, and Gemini swallowed her whole—feasting on her breasts, sucking on her neck, biting into her throat, snatching her breath with the greedy surge of his tongue invading her mouth.

Their bodies moved in harmonious rhythm, like a dance of lovers who’d known each other forever.

It was a hot and spicy endeavor of pummeling thrusts, suckles, and flesh sliding against flesh—one moment in urgency, the next in a slow love-making song of heavy beats.

Gemini was consumed by Cadena’s love, passion, and the way she leaned into him from below, taking his forceful plunges. He gave her everything she could take and a little more, attentive enough to pull back when he felt her wince or yelp in a way that signaled too much vigor in his eager thrusts.

“Ooooh, Gemini...”

His vocals were a thunderous growl. “Cadena...”

“You’re such a wonderful lover. I’ve been missing so, so, much.”

“You’ll never have to miss it again.” His brain processed the words in a way that gave him pause, but his body’s movements never slowed, continuing his stimulating strokes at a steady pace.

What was he saying—she would never have to miss it again? What a nonsensical thing to say and be serious about the matter simultaneously.

“I want your mouth all over me,” she purred.

He kissed down her neck and whispered in her ear, “It’s because you’re greedy, I think.”

She smiled and moaned, gripping his neck and throwing her hips up as he tunneled into her pussy.

“I am. I surely am.”

His lips trailed down her shoulder blade, down the flesh between her arm and the sides of her breast where he sucked at her skin, nibbled there, then opened his mouth wider and swallowed her areola.

“Oooh, yes, Gemini, baby....”

He ground, plunged, then slipped out of her, flipping her so quick a rush of titillation scurried through her body.

“Oh!”

His heavy dick landed on the back of her ass in a hard smack, stinging and lighting up her flesh so much that her toes curled—her head thrown back and her body in a deep arch.

“Gemini!”

“Mmhmm...” he dragged his erection back and forth against her vagina from behind.

Cadena’s eyes closed, and she took a breath, bracing just as he drove inside her essence. “OH!”

He was easy on her at first. “Relax...” When she did, he buried himself in a wicked landslide that filled her entirely to the breach of her cervix.

A gurgle bubbled from Cadena's throat, her eyes wide, followed by a soul-snatching moan.

“OOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Gemini leaned over her, moving his mouth in caresses up her spine, and causing an upheaval of chills to the back of Cadena's neck.

Gripping her waist, his hands tightened on the sides of her ass, his hips pounding, rocking, lifting her slightly for slippery friction of penetrating access. He gave her what she wanted, kissing all over her body, sides, back, shoulders, arms, and even sticking her fingers in his mouth for a suck.

Cadena was in a delirious state of wanton euphoria, her eyes rolling, body vibrating, and toes tightening.

Moans filled Gemini's bedchamber, and their passion seemed to continue intensifying with no end in sight.

It was sure by the way their hunger proceeded by the minute that they would be tangled for some time into the early morning hour—and they were, kissing, their grips tight, bodies slapping, and praises mixing for the long stretch of the night.



thirteen

When her eyes fluttered open, she realized she was the first to wake. Next to her face, warmth settled down the crook in her neck. She was comfortable, relaxed, wanting to close her eyes back to slumber. But instead, Cadena pushed to an elbow and dropped her eyes to Gemini, sleeping soundly.

She watched his chest rise and fall, his melanin skin smooth to the touch and hot as if they were still in a rhythmical embrace. His strong jawline, perfectly kissable lips, and broad nose made her want to lie back down and cuddle with him more.

But Cadena knew that time was of the essence. Her eyes flipped to the clock on the wall. It was six a.m., and she had only slept for a few hours. The night had been long, the best long night she had ever experienced in her life. She wouldn't change anything about that, even if she were given a chance.

Easing out of bed, Cadena tiptoed lightly through Gemini's bedchamber to his living area.

There, she slipped back into her palace coat and pulled her hair out of the bun to make it appear as decent as she could. Looking back over her shoulder, she couldn't see Gemini, but she smiled a little, knowing they'd shared that intimate night

together. The door didn't creak when she opened it and slipped into the hallway.

Quietly and quickly, Cadena walked the lengthy distance past her father's study back to her quarters. Once she slipped inside the privacy of her space, Cadena closed the door and settled her back against the wall, breathing with relief.

There was no time to rest anymore. The day had begun. So instead, Cadena removed her palace coat, lingered with her thoughts for a minute, then headed to her outside shower.

She was there for the better part of an hour, lost in the night's memories with Gemini. Finally shaking off those thoughts, Cadena shut the shower down and exited to her garden, covered herself with a robe, then headed to the parasol tree for prayer.

Kneeling, Cadena covered her head with the robe and spoke:

“Spirit of love, life, and goodness, I pray to You and request forgiveness for any transgressions I have bestowed on the world and its inhabitants. Clear my mind and cleanse my soul so that I can be of service to You in the way I was meant to fulfill Your purpose. Let the error of my ways be disclosed to me so that I may course-correct and rejoin the righteous path. Shower our kingdom in prosperity, peace, love, and the flourishing of our lives, our seeds, and the soil our seeds are buried inside.”

She stuck her fingers into the ground. “I am but Your steward, imperfect yet perfect when You live through me. I receive the wisdom You are ready to give me today. I also have a request. Your servant, Bessel, has been given an opportunity to work outside of the country and have the chance to provide for his family for years to come. He needs

guidance on this; is it the right path for him, as he will receive no pay for some time. This action could ultimately throw his family into poverty.”

She paused, focused on her breathing, then: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares The Lord, plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Cadena paused again. “Allow me to see Your vision and carry Your desires to my kingdom. Amina.” Amen.

The humidity in the air dried her face, and Cadena remained there, waiting to see if The Spirit would give her a message in a vision to carry back to her father or Bessel. The smell of freshly grown flowers was carried in a thick breeze, encircling her body and slightly moving the leaves on the tree. Nature could be heard around her, and the soil between her fingertips was alive and fertile.

All became silent, then...

Cadena’s eyes opened, and she saw Bessel in a suit and tie, shaking hands with someone and not impoverished. The vision remained for a few moments, then moved to a family whose crops were plentiful, bellies were full, and children were laughing and playing in a yard. Watching them, Cadena smiled, her heart filled with love and a sense of prosperity. The vision ended, but another started just as quickly.

Gemini. He was laughing. His face was bright, features strong, the weight of his duties erased. It was similar to the vision she’d had before. Cadena felt the love, the same authentic, sacred, raw emotion she experienced the first time seeing him this way. Again, she reached for him. Unbeknownst to the soil dropping from her fingertips, Cadena desired to join Gemini in that space and remain there forever.

Her heart raced, her ears tingled, then...she saw her father. They were in his study, speaking about something serious. His tone was strict, and he talked to someone else in the room that she couldn't see. A knot formed in Cadena's stomach, and her throat tightened.

The vision ended abruptly, and Cadena blinked rapidly, dropping her hand and curling her arms around herself.

She stayed there in her own silence as the life in nature surrounded her ears again—the birds squawking above, the smell of fresh flowers, the breeze carried by the wind. But she was out of breath, taking in the vision she'd seen not long ago, plus Bessel's message from The Spirit.

Usually, Cadena wouldn't be bothered by a vision, good or bad.

But she'd never wanted to be with someone so much in one vision and stay away from the other like this vision she'd seen twice now.

Cadena rose to her feet, took a step back, and glanced up at the tree. Her mind wandered, going over those images again and again.

Finally, she removed her robe's hood and left the garden, searching for Tally to relay a message to Bessel.



fourteen

Over the next few weeks, Cadena found solace in her art. She would finish her daily duties at the main palace, and then head to her personal estate that her father had gifted each of his children on their eighteenth birthdays.

Those were smaller palaces surrounded by acres of land adjacent to Winthrope Estates.

Much like her garden, there was peace and an expansive room filled with blank canvases and unfinished works that she'd started but failed to complete because of some business that took her away from finalizing them.

With her, Gemini remained at her side, being the guard he'd always been—with the exception of their rapturous kisses and love they shared.

“I CAN’T GET ENOUGH OF YOU,” GEMINI WHISPERED AS HE filled her pussy in an upsurging stroke.

“I never want you to,” she confessed, her back planted against a wall as they sucked each other’s lips, raining kisses down their faces and necks.

“Uhhhhh! Yes!”

Slaps of penetration, skin against skin, filled the hallways, chorused through the open windows, and floated into the air.

Their sex was raw, uninhibited, dipped in desire, and strengthened in a passion that blended them together.

Their showers were even more erotic—slippery, hot, and stimulating as fat water droplets pelted their skin. Gemini had Cadena spread wide, her legs draped over his shoulders, his hands planted against her bottom, spreading her vagina, thrusting and stroking her like a skilled violinist creating a symphony of wails from his lover’s lips.

Some days, after taking care of her responsibilities at Winthrope Estates, they were inseparable, going from Cadena’s palace to Gemini’s sculpting room.

“I can’t believe I finally got to see this room.” Cadena strolled to some of his smaller pieces that sat on a shelf. “Is there any reason you keep this room so white?”

Gemini chuckled and glanced around the white walls, countertops, and white shelves.

“When I finish a piece, I add color.” He strolled to a covered piece, grabbed the sheet, and jerked it away, letting it fall to the ground. “It helps me see any flaws in the design.

Cadena’s eyes widened, and she left the shelf to move across the room and stand at Gemini’s side.

“Wow, this is...” she reached up and touched the cheek of an image that appeared to be familiar. “Is this me?”

“Does it look like you?”

“Very much so.” She touched her own face, then felt the figure again. “The eyes are so detailed.” Her fingers trailed

along the statue's forehead, then circled down to the moles underneath the eye. "Wow, you put in a lot of detail here. I'm almost speechless."

"I'm glad you like it." Gemini folded his hands behind his back.

"Like it? I love it! I always told you that you had a beautiful gift. I knew that from the day I saw that canary yellow bird drinking out of the fountain. What inspired you to sculpt these pieces?"

"The beauty in the world. I think we both know that where there is beauty, there is also ugliness. Often, we—and when I say we, I mean the inhabitants of the earth—tend to focus more on the horridness of the planet. That's understandable because the ugliness usually hits us harder. It feels different, almost detrimental to our souls, so we're more likely to focus on it.

"But I've decided the true way to know peace, live in peace, and extend peace to others is to focus on goodness. I want to be a part of that beauty."

He reached out and touched her chin. "To be a part of the love that extends beyond parallels of what we see, hear, and feel. I wish only to exchange energies with that type of beauty, too. If this were not possible, I would remain focused on what could be. It's the only way to live."

"You're so right."

"This specific piece, however, it's always been inspired by you. Once again, another beautiful soul just being."

"You didn't think I was such a beautiful soul when I had my hands on my hips and my head was swinging when I was ten years old."

They laughed wholeheartedly. Gemini nodded. “I thought you were funny. But I also took you seriously. I didn’t want to disrespect you, and I needed you to know that.”

“I did know that. And if I never thanked you for seeing me then—thank you, Gemini.”

“It’s my pleasure, Your Highness.” Her eyebrows arched. And he cleared his throat. “Cadena.”

They laughed again. “So when will I get my turn?” she asked.

“Your turn to...?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” She held her hands up and spun around the room, motioning to the art. “I want to paint you. Would you let me?”

He moved his hands down his body and stepped toward her. “You want to paint all of this?” he teased.

Laughter shot from Cadena’s lips, and she nodded as he wiggled his brows, also laughing.

Suddenly, everything about the moment became familiar. His expression, the excitement in his features, his smile...it was truly her vision come to life.

Cadena’s eyes widened, her smile fading as her heart raced. She touched his chin, finally connecting with this mysterious part of her mind’s eye that had eluded her during the spiritual moment.

In awe and stuck in her headspace, Gemini turned his mouth to her fingers and kissed them, one at a time, then her entire hand.

Heat moved through her body, and where Cadena wanted to rejoice, she couldn’t help but remember the last part of that

vision.

Her stomach turned, and she swallowed thickly.

Noticing her sudden change of emotion, Gemini grabbed her hand and kissed it again, then drew her close, gazing down at her. “Are you okay?”

“Hmm? Yes, I am.”

“Are you certain?” His brows dipped as his gaze tightened.

“Yes.” She cleared her throat. “I’m sure, and yes, I want to paint all of this,” she teased, trying to steer them back on topic.

He bit his bottom lip. “Whenever you’re ready, just say the word.”

“I’m ready now. But first I would like to get something to eat. I want some fresh game. Give me a few minutes to see if I can find one of the hunters. Then maybe we will head to my palace, have something to eat, and you can pose for my painting.”

“Or, I’ve got an idea.” He intertwined their fingers, then pulled her hand to his lips for another kiss. “How about I become your hunter? I’ll get us some food, and we can build a fire at your palace, and then you can paint me.”

Cadena’s mouth opened, and her eyelids lifted. “I don’t know why I am surprised that you continue to be dominant in everything put before you.”

“That’s because you forgot that I lived with my parents until I was seventeen, and my father taught me everything there is to know about survival.”

Cadena nodded. “You’re right. And I would love for you to be my hunter. Can we do it now?”

“Absolutely. Let’s go.”

HE WAS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MAN SHE’D EVER LAID EYES ON—powerful, muscular, and tall. At the moment, he was focused on taking down his prey—the intensity in his gaze making her shiver.

Stealthily, Gemini moved through a patch of shrubberies as Cadena watched from behind them. In his hand, he took a spear, lifted it, and sent it flying thirty meters across the grove into the neck of an impala. The animal dropped to the ground.

And with her mouth agape, Cadena rose from behind the thickets.

“Oh, I cannot believe what I just saw.” She left her spot as Gemini walked over to the slain animal.

He squatted, checked to ensure it was down, and then glanced at Cadena. “I’ll teach you someday. If I ever get a chance. If you would like to be taught, of course.”

“Honestly, I’m not sure if I want to be.”

Gemini smirked and nodded. “That’s understandable.”

“How about you be my hunter, and we call it even.”

He guffawed and stood. “How can we be even when you haven’t done anything for me yet?” His gaze drove down her belly as she stood in a bikini top and a Tarzan-like loincloth.

“What is it that you would like in return, Gemini?”

He rubbed his chin. “Let me think about it, and I’ll get back to you.”

Tinkling laughter slipped from her. “I shouldn’t be as excited as I am waiting for your request. But I am.”

He wrapped her in an embrace. “I’ll make sure not to take too long, then.” Gemini dropped a kiss on her lips, and she moaned, drowned in the motion of his mouth’s caress.

“We should get back to your palace before I plant you against a tree.”

Her tongue slipped out of her mouth; her eyes low-lidded as she licked across his lips. “I’m not opposed to that.”

His mouth spread into a gorgeous smile, and he lifted her and tossed her over his shoulder while hoisting the impala with his other hand.

“We’ll see about that.”

THE FLAMES COOKED THE IMPALA EVENLY ON A ROTATING ROD in Cadena’s fire pit. Sparks popped, while Gemini checked the temperature with a thermometer to make sure the game was cooked to perfection.

Exiting her palace, Cadena carried a tray of several bowls of different vegetables. Looking back at her, Gemini turned and took a step forward, his intention to take the tray off her hands, but he stalled. Cadena’s exquisiteness in the simple two-piece was a sight for sore eyes. The smoothness of her brown skin, the natural sultriness of her eyes, medium lips, and perfect nose were the standard of beauty for Gemini.

His gaze moved down to her feet—her flesh bare and oiled. She approached him, staring back, a tiny smile lingering on her mouth.

“What?”

Her voice snapped him out of his reverie, and he took the tray off her hands.

“Nothing.”

She smirked. “There must be something because you’re staring at me, Gemini.”

“I love staring at you.”

“Hmmm. Why is that?” She blushed.

“Because you’re the only person in the world I want to see.”

Her heart thumped. “Is that so?”

He sat the tray down on a square table they’d prepared earlier. “It is.”

“I can honestly say being with you gives my heart so much pleasure,” she said. “I can’t believe I waited so long to let you in.”

“I understand it.”

“Well, tell me because I don’t.”

He snickered and drew her into an embrace. “You do. It’s unfortunate, but we can do nothing about the past. It’s only the present that I care about now.”

“Me too.”

He dropped a kiss on her lips. “What do you say we eat?”

Her stomach growled, and Gemini peered at her. “I think you agree.”

Cadena laughed. “Yes, let’s.”

Gemini spread a blanket in front of the fire while Cadena fixed their dishes. Together, they kneeled, and Gemini led them in prayer to The Spirit over their food. As they murmured “Amina,” they glanced at each other, smiles rising on their faces.

On the blanket, they sat and ate, having small talk while enjoying their food. The sun was setting by the time they realized how long they’d been there—now lounging on the blanket, Gemini with his hands behind his head and Cadena resting her head on his chest.

“It looks like we’ll see the stars come out tonight,” she said. “And I was supposed to be painting you. Now all I want to do is sleep.”

He chuckled, and a breeze swept across them, a bit more chaotic than before. Gemini frowned, then rose to his elbows. His sudden movement startled Cadena as she looked up at him.

“What’s wrong?”

Movement in the shrubs beyond their campfire caught his attention, and he stood quickly, grabbed a spear, and lifted it.

“It’s me, Gemini.” Prince Remington stepped into the clearing, making his presence known, and Gemini lowered his spear, then kneeled.

“You can stand.” Remington’s stare moved from Gemini to his sister, then took in the setup before them. “Why wasn’t I invited?” he teased.

Cadena and Gemini shared a small smile as they glanced at each other.

“Maybe next time,” Remington continued. His expression turned serious as he focused on his sister. “Cadena, Father

requests your attention.”

“Is there something wrong?”

“Not wrong, but he’s called a meeting. It seems to be important.”

Cadena stood to her feet, and again Remington took in their attire and the comfort they seemed to be enjoying when he arrived on horseback.

“Give me a minute.” Cadena walked away and entered her palace, leaving Remington and Gemini alone.

The two men eyed each other—Gemini trying to feel the vibe Remington was putting off while Remington wondered what was happening.

“You’ll probably want to put on something a bit more presentable, Gemini.”

Gemini nodded once and followed Cadena into the palace, with Remington looking after him.



fifteen

When Cadena entered her father's study, it was with Remington in tow. Three sets of eyes turned to them—Omari, Cadence, and King Isaac.

“Is Gemini with you?” King Isaac asked.

Cadena glanced around the room. “Yes.”

“Ask him to come in, please.”

Remington stepped back into the hallway and then re-entered with Gemini at his side.

“For now, this conversation stays between us,” King Isaac said. “Have a seat, everyone.”

The chairs scraped against the floor as Remington and Cadena took seats.

King Isaac looked at Gemini, who stood next to the door.

“You too, Gemini. Have a seat.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” He found a seat next to Cadena and everyone turned their attention to King Isaac.

“I called this meeting because King Tau and I have been negotiating on how to strengthen our ties and extend our land over the last few weeks.

“I offered him thirty percent of the best of our agriculture, along with workers and a lucrative capital fund. He offered an alliance of soldiers to build on to our military and connect our overall tribal forces.

“My family, I am always open to your ideas, especially since you all will be leading this country together one day. I’m interested in your knowledge, wisdom, and your opinions on how to strengthen our foreign relationships. King Tau, however, wants something a little bit more specific.”

His gaze traveled to Cadena. “Prince Mandla wants you to be his queen, Cadena.” All eyes turn to Cadena, and her pulse spiked, her heart ricocheting behind her breastbone.

Gemini didn’t move. He remained staring at King Isaac.

“Okay,” Remington interrupted. “Well, what else does he want?”

“The Royals of Myriad are willing to give us everything I have asked for in exchange for the marriage between Cadena and Prince Mandla.”

CADENA’S HEARING PHASED OUT SUDDENLY. HER FATHER’S mouth was moving, but she could no longer comprehend what he said. Her breathing spiked, and a sheen of perspiration spread across her forehead.

Cadence spoke up, but again Cadena did not catch her sister’s retort. Omari spoke next, and his words also eluded Cadena. Her eyes fell to the table before them, her hands now feeling moist as sweat seeped through her pores.

It was her worst fear come to life. To be in an arranged marriage, a loveless, thoughtless marriage with someone who thought of her as property and not a person.

King Isaac called her name, but Cadena didn't respond, her eyes remaining stuck on the table. Remington called her name, then Cadence and Omari, but none of their voices pulled her from her state of shock.

"Cadena." Gemini's voice broke through, bringing her back to the here and now. She blinked, glanced over at him, and witnessed the sadness in his eyes that was reminiscent of the dread in hers.

Everyone in the room observed them, with questions bouncing from one mind to the next.

It was the first time anyone had heard Gemini call Cadena by her first name. Silence stretched throughout the room then Remington cleared his throat.

"Did you hear what was just said?" he asked her.

"Prince Mandla wants me to be his queen to fulfill the treaty that Father has set out with the Royals of Myriad."

Remington turned to eye his father, and King Isaac spoke, "What are you thinking, Cadena?"

"Is this something that you wish?"

"When we spoke a few weeks ago, I told you what I see for you and your future. It would benefit the country if you had leading roles in both households. However, I will leave it up to you whether you will accept his proposal."

"So that was his proposal?" she said, contempt lacing her voice.

“You don’t have to answer that question right now. I’ll give you some time to think about it.”

“What is there to think about? If I do not do this, then there is no chance of us strengthening our military or building an alliance with the Royals of Myriad. Is that right?”

She and her father stared at one another. “Unfortunately, that is correct,” he said.

“There has to be another way!” Cadence yelled out.

“I’ll accept.”

Everyone turned to stare at Cadena, including Gemini.

King Isaac sat back against his chair, staring at his daughter. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” The room became quiet again, and Cadena spoke up. “Is there anything else?”

“You have an appointment to meet Prince Mandla tomorrow at noon. Gemini, you will be with her as usual, as will Jasir and Yuusuf.”

“So you already had this decision made for me? Is that right, Father?”

“It is not that I made a decision, but rather, in case you agreed, we saw it best to have certain affairs in order. There is much to discuss, yes?”

“Yes. Is there anything else?”

“Not at this time.”

“Then I will excuse myself.”

Cadena stood abruptly, and Gemini was just as fast to grab her chair and adjust it behind her. Her heels echoed against the floorboard, and she exited the room without another word.

GEMINI STOOD. “MAY I BE EXCUSED, YOUR MAJESTY?”

King Isaac’s gaze connected with Gemini. “You and my daughter seem to be closer than usual, Gemini. Are you?”

“We are.”

“Hmm.” The two men kept their eyes on each other. “What do you think of her exit?”

“I’m not sure, but I can find out if you want me to.”

“Yes, do that and let me know if this is something she truly wants.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Gemini left the room, and King Isaac glanced at his children.

“What do you make of it?” he asked them collectively.

“She’s upset,” Cadence offered, her eyes narrowed as she peered at her father. “I’ve never questioned your wisdom before, Father, but are you sure this is something you want to do?”

“What can we do differently? I’m open to options.”

Omari spoke up. He and Remington weren’t twins, but their features were so similar that some people thought they were. Their dark brown skin, sharp facial features, and light brown eyes branded their look—making them the perfect set of African models. But while Remington sported a beard, Omari kept his facial hair groomed into a goatee.

“Is it possible to reject King Tau and inform him the only offer we will make is the one you presented?”

“We can,” King Isaac said.

“But that would likely kill the deal,” Remington added.

King Isaac nodded. “I think it might.”

“We don’t need their military. Ours is bigger than theirs as it is,” Cadence said.

“That’s true. But at some point, we need to ensure that if a country or leader wants to show muscle and invade us, our kingdom cannot be taken.”

“What about the Elite Alliance?” All eyes turned to Remington. “Isn’t that one of the purposes of being a part of that society?”

“What is the Elite Alliance?” Omari asked.

“I’ve never heard of the Elite Alliance either,” Cadence said.

King Isaac exhaled. “That’s because you two are not a part of the society yet.” King Isaac took his sharp gaze to Remington but spoke to Omari and Cadence. “The Elite Alliance is only to be talked about amongst members. But, since your brother has brought it up and you will eventually have a chance to pledge if you see fit, I will give you a basic definition of the Alliance.”

Their attention was wholly focused on King Isaac’s words.

“A large group, bigger than you could imagine, makes up the Elite Alliance. They are leaders and security council members from twenty-four countries. The purpose of the group is to keep peace in the world. If something should threaten global humanity, the Elite Alliance will come together and decide upon a plan of action to address the threat.”

His gaze traveled from Remington to Omari to Cadence. “What we are talking about with The Royals of Myriad is on a smaller scale. This would be considered local even though we’re dealing with another country. Your brother Remington, our head of security Gemini, your sister Cadena and I all belong to the Elite Alliance. This responsibility means we are obligated to control any threats in our geographical area to avoid triggering the need for the Elite Alliance. Every country that is a part of this society has that same mission in its geographical area. But again, if there is trouble and things get out of hand, the Elite Alliance will call a meeting so that it will be dealt with.”

King Isaac inhaled a deep breath, then released it. “This is why it’s important to make smaller alliances around us. It not only keeps the peace, but anything out of the ordinary will be brought to our attention, and we can deal with it immediately. Do you understand?”

Omari glanced at Cadence, then to Remington and his father. “What does membership in the society mean for us individually?”

“I told you that I would only tell you the basic definition of the alliance.”

“But you can’t leave this with that. Besides what you just said, I want to know what my father, brother, and sister are appointed to do.”

“Fight,” Remington answered as he and his father exchanged glances.

Cadence shifted, and they all looked at her. “Fight what?”

“If a global danger were imminent, we would represent our geographical area and fight.”

The room became silent.

“I want in,” Omari said.

“You will get your chance,” Remington added.

“When?”

“Soon,” King Isaac added. “The invitations go out once every five years. The current five-year period concludes in four months.” The king looked at Cadence. “This is not something you must enter. You know your sister well enough to know she jumped at the chance when she received her invite.”

“And it’s not just about security and conflict. We also come together for gatherings.”

“What type of gatherings?” Cadence asked.

“They appear to be high-society parties, but we’re there to make sure everything is running smoothly in our lead areas, and while doing so, we dance, drink, and eat.”

“I’m in,” Cadence said.

Omari smirked at her and shook his head. “You have to learn how to fight first.”

“There may be other positions for her,” King Isaac said.

Omari turned to him. “Like what?”

“In due time,” the king responded. “As of right now, we have to strengthen our military and create a family bond with The Royals of Myriad.”

“That means Cadena has to marry Prince Mandla,” Cadence murmured.

“Unfortunately.”

The room became silent again as they all settled in their thoughts.

CADENA PACED BACK AND FORTH, TAKING OFF A PIECE OF clothing each time she covered one end of the room.

It was actually happening.

Cadena sucked her teeth. She had gone over this scenario a thousand times—knowing this day would eventually come.

She thought of Prince Mandla. He was someone who didn't respect her. She knew from the small conversation they had during the festivities of her aunt and uncles' ceremony—addressing her as a princess even after she explained to him why she loathed the title.

“He's a pompous prick.” She shook with anger and thought about her visions. They were the first sign; they let her know something like this was on the horizon. She never forgot the first time she had one.

Cadena tended to her garden, planting a bed of calla lilies, when everything around her became silent. Her mind's eye opened, and she saw her Aunt Imani getting married. Cadena would never forget how she felt coming out of the vision. She was bewildered, her heart ricocheting, her ears buzzing from the memory.

She knew then what it meant—experiencing the visions—for her future. And she denied it. In her soul, it didn't make sense. But she also knew that this was traditional, and no amount of denial would change her destined path.

Cadena would be wed, she would be queen, and now, she was in that reality.

CADENA WALKED UP TO HER TERRACE DOORS AND OPENED them, then stepped out on the veranda. A breeze of cool air swept across her face, and she leaned over the rails, head down and heart heavy as tears burst from her eyes.

“I don’t want this,” she cried. “I don’t...”

Her body convulsed as she wept, feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders. She was completely drowned in her sorrow when a warm set of arms drew her into a firm embrace. She turned around to face Gemini, and her tears rained harder. Her chest heaved as he held on to her, her tears soaking his royal vest.

“How am I going to do this?”

Gemini caressed her back and dropped his lips to her forehead for a kiss. “I’m going to be with you. Every step of the way.”

That only made Cadena cry harder. It was Gemini she wanted, after all.

“I don’t want him. I don’t!”

Despondency filled both of their eyes, and their hearts matched in a sad rhythm. With no other words between them, they stood, still embracing, with Gemini holding Cadena tight long after the midnight hour.

The next morning

CADENA LOOKED AT HER REFLECTION IN THE FLOOR-TO-ceiling mirror.

“You don’t seem pleased today, Your Highness,” Tally said. “Just imagine; you’re going to be a queen. Do you know how exciting that is?”

“No, I don’t,” Cadena said dryly. “Why don’t you tell me, since you seem to know more about it than me.”

“You’ll get used to it. Before long, you’ll be in the same role just as you are here, and you and your prince will eventually fall in love. Oh, think of it as something to look forward to.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Hold your arms up, please.”

Cadena did as Tally asked her, as her retinue worked around Cadena—tightening her corset, fluffing out her dress from her hips to her ankles, and working on her hair.

They did all of this while Cadena stared motionless at her image. She drew in a breath and exhaled, imagining how uneventful her life would be from here on out.

If it were left up to her, this would never be a thing.

She would abolish weddings for the sake of aligning tribal forces. Maybe when she was queen, she would do just that. Her gut churned. Being a part of a loveless marriage was the last thing she wanted to do. The only way to get out of this at this point would be if she didn’t exist.

Even though her etiquette usually stopped her from such an expression, she rolled her eyes.

“Now, you look beautiful,” Tally said.

“Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

They exited the room, and at the palace entrance, she met up with Gemini. Their eyes drank each other in, a spark of ignition driving them both at each other’s presence.

“Good afternoon, Your Highness.” Gemini kneeled.

“Rise, Gemini.”

He stood, and she strolled to stand close to him.

“Stunning,” he said.

Her ears tingled, her flesh coming alive. “Thank you.”

“Are you ready to meet your prince?”

“I have met him,” she replied softly. “Unfortunately for me, we must meet up in another lifetime.”

They lingered in that moment, with hearts swelling and sorrow buried deep in their souls.



sixteen

Sun rays beat down over Myriad—a neighboring country north of Great Rift Valley. Clouds were nonexistent as the sky was reminiscent of a crystal-clear blue lake overhead, and increasing temperatures made elephants in the vicinity seek fresh water. The lay of the land was as beautiful as Kéra Asnela—though smaller in size and population, the country was still lovely and welcoming.

Even with that being the case, in the backseat of a limo, shielded by a motorcade, Cadena sat stoic, her mind in disarray, her heart unsettled. She glanced at Gemini, who was just as resigned, and wondered what was on his mind.

She decided not to ask for fear that he would scold her about the decision that she made abruptly during yesterday's meeting in her father's study. Cadena could understand it. Her decision was quick and brash, almost as if it required no thought at all.

But that was not the case.

In fact, she hadn't gotten much sleep, tossing and turning through the night, wondering about Gemini and what was going through his mind or if he was having a restless night like she was.

Today, however, seeing him on the palace steps, waiting for her, he appeared calm, and Cadena didn't know how to take that. What could she expect from him?

He had been steeped in security and fighting; hardcore for years, even decades. Here, they were the closest they'd ever been before. The truth was, Cadena loved him, and she wondered if he reciprocated that sentiment. But what was love when tradition took a front seat, and love felt like a figment of the imagination?

None of that mattered now as they approached the palace to the Royals of Myriad. Golden gates, as well as a huge golden statue of King Tau, greeted them when they arrived at the palace. It had been years since the last time Cadena's family visited the Royals of Myriad. Despite those memories, she didn't remember the massive statue that she saw now.

The motorcade stopped, and Gemini exited swiftly to check the surroundings. The seconds that passed seemed like extremely long, agonizing minutes, then her door opened.

Gemini was there. "Are you ready, Your Highness?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"Then you are clear to exit."

He took a step back and allowed her to move out of the limousine, but Cadena did not like his professional tone even though that was all he could give her. And that was all that she deserved.

One step behind her, Gemini strolled as Cadena walked across golden cemented floors, her steps deliberate.

The palace doors opened, and Prince Mandla's lips curved into a daring smile as he stood at the entrance. He was dressed in royal garb, the green and gold of their traditional ensemble.

“Good afternoon, Princess Cadena.”

“Just Cadena will do.”

Prince Mandla’s smile stretched across his face. “You are certainly a feisty one when it comes to the title *princess*, aren’t you?”

“Is that a question that I should answer, or is it rhetorical?”

The prince cackled. “I know you prefer to be called Advisor.”

“So why do you continue to call me princess?”

“My apologies. I will call you whatever you would like to be called. I don’t have a problem with that. Please come in. We have much to discuss.”

They entered but didn’t go far, as the meeting room was on the direct right in a vast sitting space where they got comfortable.

“Would you like something to drink, princess?”

Cadena’s eyes narrowed into a glare.

“Oh, my, I’m having such a hard time with this. Forgive me, Advisor. Would you like something to drink?”

She was silent for a long minute, wondering if he was trying to get underneath her skin. “Water will do.”

“Are you sure? No tea?”

“No.”

The prince snapped his fingers, and one of their palace guards left the room.

“If you have any questions for me, you can ask them at any time.”

“Very well. My father offered you thirty percent of our best agriculture, workers, and a lucrative capital fund in return for your alliance of soldiers to build on to our military and connect our overall tribal forces. Why was that not enough for you?”

“A joining of tribal forces is an honor-bound ceremony. It cannot be tied with the exchange of currency. It must be signed in blood and family ties, as is the tradition in our culture—or were you not aware of our culture?”

“I’m aware. I’m also aware that you have the power to do whatever you want. So, I’ll ask again, and this time maybe you can answer me with the truth behind your heart’s intentions. Why wasn’t it enough?”

“You’re an intelligent woman. That is precisely why I wanted you.”

“Oh... Do you plan to appoint me as an Advisor to the King?”

He frowned; his face twisted in irritation.

“Or maybe you plan to appoint me as High Counsel over the Board of Advisors.”

Prince Mandla sighed, then glanced at Gemini. “Leave the room. We would like to be alone.”

Gemini didn’t respond and didn’t move. He continued to stand at the door’s entrance.

“Did you hear what I said?” Prince Mandla’s voice rose, but with no response from Gemini, he snapped his finger. “YOU, by the door.”

“His name is Gemini,” Cadena corrected.

“I don’t care what his name is. He hears me talking to him.”

“He deserves respect. Call him by his name if you want to address him.”

Prince Mandla and Cadena glared at each other. Then the prince cut his eyes back to Gemini.

“Gemini.”

Gemini took his gaze to Prince Mandla. “Leave the room. We would like to be alone.”

“I am bound by the law of King Isaac to guard the Advisor at all times.”

“Yes, you have done that very well, but the princess is fine here with me so you may be excused.”

Gemini spoke slower this time, articulating his words in case Prince Mandla couldn’t comprehend. “I...am bound...by the law of King Isaac Winthrope...to guard the Advisor...at all times.”

“King Isaac’s law holds no merit here, and I have given you an order.”

Gemini’s gaze darkened. “Unfortunately for you, I do not take orders from the Royals of Myriad. My orders come from the Royals of Kéra Asnela. And I do not know that the Advisor is safe here with you. This is why I am here right now, to make sure that she will be secure in the case that she decides to remain. For all I know, in thirty seconds, you could have slit her throat and escaped out the veranda, and unless she commands me otherwise, I will stay.”

Prince Mandla’s brows rose, and his face knotted in frustration. While he was clearly irritated, Cadena had become

aroused by Gemini's unyielding loyalty.

"Gemini stays," she said. "Whatever you want to say to me can be said in front of him. That won't be a problem, will it, Prince Mandla?"

The prince glanced between Cadena and Gemini. "You are close to your guard, yes?"

"I am."

"And just how close would that be exactly, princess?"

"Closer than I am with you. Gemini has guarded me for almost a lifetime. And he respects me, unlike yourself, who continues to call me princess regardless of how many times I have told you to refer to me as Advisor. Now I want you to answer my previous question. Why wasn't my father's proposal enough?"

The prince crossed his legs. "I didn't take your father's offer because I want you as my wife, to myself, for a lifetime. Because I am infatuated with you, Cadena. And while you don't love me now, you will grow to love me." His eyes crawled over her body. "Or maybe you won't. How you spend your time here is up to you."

The room became silent, then Prince Mandla spoke again. "Are you a virgin, Cadena?"

Cadena bristled. "Excuse me?"

"I think you heard my question, but I'll ask you again. Are you a virgin, Cadena?"

"No. I am not. Do you now regret your decision?"

"It seems that you would like that, wouldn't you?"

"Do you want me to answer that question?"

They stared at each other, a battle of wills bouncing between them.

“I do not regret my decision. But I do regret yours.”

“That’s too bad. Because I don’t.”

Prince Mandla’s nostrils flared, then he chuckled. “I knew what I was getting into when I requested you be my queen.”

“Are you sure about that? Because I do not plan to be at your side, nodding and smiling, while you do all the important work or give those duties to someone else. If I am to be your queen, I will have as much respect and responsibility in this kingdom as I have in mine. Is that going to be a problem for you, Prince Mandla?”

Prince Mandla smiled, then chuckled and shook his head. “I’ll appease you for now.”

“Please don’t. Show me who you really are. Isn’t that the purpose of these meetings?”

“Don’t worry. We have a lifetime for that.”

“I can never understand how a man wants to wed a woman who does not love him. Maybe you can help me with that. What is it in the core of powerful men that makes them okay and willing to have someone at their side who does not know them, trust them, or love them, which is most important in any type of relationship?”

“What you should understand, *princess*, is powerful men like me are the dominant species—especially royalty. We will take what we want, and eventually, you will grow to love it. Why are you disturbed by this? I am not here to hurt you. On the contrary, I can offer you all of your heart’s desires. Our kingdom, for example, is one of the richest in the world. Our family is worth fifteen-point-four billion dollars. For example,

this land alone—this castle has vast properties and numerous acres of land surrounding our empire. We have more gold than you could ever imagine, and we host some of the best parties in the country. And I'd like to say as a man of this royal family; our alone time will also be a party in itself.”

Cadena didn't respond to his hint of sex, only stared at him with contempt.

“Allow me to show you that you can be comfortable here with me, Cadena.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“Stay the night with me. Not in my quarters. I have a guest room especially made for you. I'd like to show you around, give you a tour, and you may find that you can grow to love this space and make it your own. What do you say?”

“I'll think about it.”

“I'll accept that. I am also making arrangements for your new security.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, any time you are here, and especially when you move into the kingdom, you will have a new guard who will look after you. Someone close to my heart whom I trust to protect you with their life.”

“My decision to stay here for tonight or any night will require Gemini to be on guard for me. Anything else is a dealbreaker.”

Prince Mandla's eyes widened. And he again glanced between Gemini and Cadena.

“Are you staying the night?”

“Are you getting rid of this security you speak of?”

His smile was mischievous. “For you, I will.”

“Then I will stay the night.”

“Excellent.”



seventeen

“Do you have a garden?”
“Is planting a hobby of yours?”

“Yes, but I also pray in my garden. So I would like to see where your garden is.”

“Let me show you to our quarters.”

“Our?”

“Once you become my queen, you will reside with me.”

“You have already made arrangements for our sleeping quarters?”

“Yes.”

Slightly alarmed with the quickness of how everything was moving, Cadena ran her fingers along her collarbone as she stared at him.

“Is there something wrong?”

“No. But I will follow you. Proceed.”

Pleased, Prince Mandla stood to his feet and strolled toward the exit. The doors opened on cue as if someone on the opposite side knew that he was leaving the room.

Cadena frowned, then glanced at Gemini, who met her eye contact, a warning resting in his gaze.

In the corridor, Prince Mandla and Cadena strolled side by side, and she couldn't help but notice the seamless Venetian tiled floors incised and painted in gold. The statues of King Tau, Prince Mandla, and Princess Izara—and their pictures in gold frames—were suspended against the wall of each section of the hallway.

It was evident to Cadena that the family considered themselves elite and wanted to highlight their image in every way possible throughout the castle. They reached an elevator, and it opened automatically upon their approach.

Prince Mandla stepped onto the elevator without offering to let Cadena proceed inside first.

She sighed. Everything about him screamed pompous prick, but she would keep that to herself and go along with these shenanigans for as long as possible.

“After you, Advisor,” Gemini said.

Cadena's eyes locked with his, and she smiled softly, then stepped onto the elevator. When Gemini entered behind Cadena, he ignored the prince and waited for her to find a comfortable spot next to Prince Mandla before turning to settle his footing.

Prince Mandla assessed Gemini—his eyes moving like daggers over his height from head to toe.

He was jealous; that much Cadena could sense. But it also made her wonder what the prince thought of him. Why would a prince be jealous of her guard unless he could feel their attraction?

Cadena tried to suppress those thoughts. If they were true, that could jeopardize the treaty that her father had put together, and she had to remember why she was doing this.

The elevator door dinged.

Gemini stepped out to check the corridor and then turned and nodded toward them.

“It is unnecessary for you to check every corner of this palace,” Prince Mandla said. “I would not have the princess in a place where I am not comfortable living.”

“Good,” Gemini said. “Then I won’t be forced to snap your neck.”

The prince’s eyes grew wide. “I beg your pardon?”

Cadena stepped in. “He’s just joking. Isn’t that right, Gemini?”

Gemini forced a smile but did not confirm Cadena’s comment.

Cadena drew the prince’s attention to her. “Are you taking me to show me our quarters, or are we going stand here looking at Gemini?”

Prince Mandla glared at Gemini, then turned his eyes to Cadena. “Yes, I am. Follow me.” They stepped out of the elevator, and she was met with more golden floors, statues, and jewel-encrusted picture frames.

“Are there any flowers or plants in here?”

“No. Would you like that?”

Cadena softly mumbled, “I would like to leave this place and never return.”

“What was that?”

“I said yes, that would liven up the place.”

Prince Mandla laughed. “Once you get a taste of our parties, you will see just how lively the Royals of Myriad can

be.”

“I can’t wait,” she said unenthusiastically.

Black tall double doors stopped their stroll as they faced a dead end in the hallway.

“Wow,” Cadena said. “Who lives in there...Dracula?” She laughed, and the melody in her voice echoed off the walls.

She glanced back at Gemini, and he winked. That small yet flirtatious response from him excited her. Still, she couldn’t wait to get a moment alone with him. She missed being embraced by his arms, touching him passionately, and simply enjoying their time together.

“This is where we will be staying,” Prince Mandla said.

The doors opened as they approached as if they were activated by motion sensors. Inside, an aroma of raspberry and spice floated to her nose. She glanced around, noticing the maroon drapery, black furniture, gold tabletops, and lavish accessories that decorated the space. The colors were utterly contrasting to what she expected to see in the room, and to say that she was displeased was an understatement.

Cadena followed Prince Mandla through the ample open space, past the living area, entering a bedchamber equally as dark as maroon drapes covered the windows.

“I’m starting to think that Dracula does live here,” she said. “Why is it so dark?”

“It is for sleeping and things that go bump in the night.” He was hinting at sex again, and it was all she could do not to regurgitate her breakfast. Cadena’s heart palpitated. How would she ever linger in such madness?

“In just a few hours, we will have dinner with my father and sister. I will give you some time to get acquainted with the space, and then I will be back to retrieve you.”

“Are you leaving now?”

“Yes, unless you would like me to stay.”

“I was hoping to see your garden and the guest room you spoke about previously.”

“We don’t have a garden, but we can always build one for you.”

“Build one?”

“Yes.”

They stared at each other, and she finally nodded and sighed.

“As for the guestroom... If you’d rather stay there tonight, allow me to show you to your space. It’s not far.”

Cadena nodded, and they all left the room. Prince Mandla was right, her guest room was but a few feet away from their quarters, and unlike the dark rooms they’d left, this room was covered in pink. Cadena inwardly moaned, knowing this was yet another show of his misogyny with her princess title.

“Are you pleased with your space?”

Cadena decided not to fuss about the colors, but she still wanted some semblance of her room back home. “If you could make a few changes, that would please me.”

“What are your requests?”

“A blue spread and sheets for my bedchamber and yellow drapes for the windows would be lovely.”

His short smile was intended to please her, but it didn't. "I'll make sure you have what you need, and the help will bring in your items from your transportation. Would you like anything else at the moment?"

"No. That'll be all."

"Very well. I'll see you in an hour for dinner."

Cadena nodded, and Prince Mandla left the room.

She turned her eyes to Gemini, who stood at the door, then sank into a chair and dropped her face into the palms of her hands.

THE HOUR HAD CREPT BY AT A SNAIL'S PACE, BUT WHEN Prince Mandla came to retrieve Cadena, he was delighted with her look. His face brightened, and his eyes lit up as he drove his eyes over her blue and gold gown—adoring the way it fit her curves yet left a bit of mysteriousness to her shape. Cadena's hair was brushed up off her neck into a bun that sprouted her thick black curls. With long eyelashes that also curled upward, her sharp almond eyes stared back at him with no emotion at all.

"You are absolutely beautiful, Cadena."

"Thank you."

"My father and sister await us. If you'll follow me."

They exited her room, shadowed by Gemini, who paced behind them a few feet back. They walked through Sizwe Palace rooms and conjoined hallways before making a left and entering an area dressed in more gold colors with white lace draped from the ceiling.

“There you are,” King Tau said, his tone jubilant. He rose to his feet and met Cadena halfway to the long rectangular table. “It’s so nice to have you here in our country. Thank you for joining us and staying with us tonight. Our family looks forward to having you be a part of our family.” His smile stretched up his face, and he held out his hand for a shake.

“Your country is beautiful, King Tau. Thank you for having me.” She reached out to shake his hand, and he drew her in for a hug. “Oh!” she said, surprised by his sudden pull into his chest.

“It is we who are thankful for you. When your father and I were speaking about our affairs and how we can best strengthen our ties, I felt a tenseness from him when you were mentioned. I’m not sure if I should have said that to you, but I like to be frank and open, especially since it’s important for us to get along and trust one another. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, I agree, and I appreciate your honesty and openness. It is one of the things that will allow me to get comfortable and trust you more if that continues. And if you don’t mind me being frank, your son could take a page out of your book.”

Cadena looked back at Prince Mandla, and his eyebrows arched.

The king looked between his son and Cadena. “Is my son being difficult?”

“He speaks about love and trust growing on me, but I don’t think that he’s willing to open up about any and all matters.” She glanced at the prince while continuing to speak to his father.

“He’s sheltered for sure, and it is my observance that he wants to hold all the power once he becomes king and I

become queen. I would like him to understand that he would need to share that power with me. Otherwise, he could have asked for a princess from a neighboring kingdom who doesn't mind being a doormat instead of one who demands respect and authority."

Prince Mandla and King Tau eyed each other while Gemini remained in the background, watching them all.

"Well," Princess Izara finally spoke up. She'd been standing next to the table waiting for her father to finish speaking to Cadena so she could have her turn. "It looks like my brother doesn't know what he's gotten himself into. Sharing power is not in his repertoire. Or is it, brother?" Princess Izara's long butterscotch-colored hair swept off her shoulders to hang at the middle of her back when she turned her head to Prince Mandla.

The prince peered at his sister without saying a word.

"Oh, please...don't stall on my behalf."

"As I said before," the prince reiterated, "I know what I asked for when I requested Princess Cadena. So, whatever she wants, she'll have."

King Tau and Princess Izara appeared skeptical, and Cadena was no fool. He had already spoken his truth by telling her that he would appease her for now. But if she must endure the life of the Royals of Myriad, she would find a way to make sure she had everything she wanted regardless of how the prince felt about it.

"Well, that solves that," King Tau quipped. "Come, let's eat. Our chef has prepared a delicious repast for you. I hope the meal pleases you."

They strolled to the table, and all sat down, King Tau and Princess Izara on opposite ends, Cadena and Prince Mandla facing one another. Cadena always felt that it was ridiculous to sit at a table as large as this, where each person felt a mile away from the next. Yet here they were, having to speak to each other by raising their voices to be heard.

The chef, along with three other servers, entered the dining room, placing a dish in front of each of them. With a flourish, he removed the domes covering their plates. “Sardines and anchovies, fresh corn, and sauteed leafy greens,” the chef announced.

When the king lifted his fork to his mouth without anyone saying a prayer, Cadena spoke up. “Is anyone going to pray to The Spirit?”

Metal dropped to a plate and clattered loudly. Cadena glanced at the princess, meeting her light-brown eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I was just surprised by your question.”

“Why is that?”

Princess Izara glanced at her father and brother, then back to Cadena. “I take it no one has told you that this is not a praying family. We don’t worship a being we cannot see, touch, or trust. We and we alone have been the reason for our country’s ability to flourish, our crops have been tended by soil we have nourished, and that is why we are able to eat well. There is no need to pray to some mystical being. We are the Gods.”

“*Kufuru!*” Cadena shouted. *Blasphemy!* “Your ignorance of the being who created your soul is why your crops are dying. Or did you not know that a part of this treaty was

getting thirty percent of the best agriculture we could provide in our country of Kéra Asnela?”

Princess Izara dropped a round of expletives in their native tongue of Swahili.

Upset about Cadena’s rebuke, the princess demanded that she take it back.

“I will not. And in fact, I have lost my appetite.”

Cadena pushed away from the table, stood to her feet, and left the room with Gemini striding behind her.



eighteen

She was worthy of more than this and that much Gemini knew for a fact. As much as it bothered him to see her mingle with the Royals of Myriad, he knew it was not his place to intervene. That didn't stop Gemini from reaching out and knocking on her door after she'd disappeared into her quarters for an hour.

Seconds passed, and the door opened, and Gemini stepped into the door frame, his gaze driving over her slowly.

“Are you okay, Your Highness?”

Cadena exhaled. “I thought you were one of them. And I'm thankful that you're not.” She eased into the hallway and stood in front of him, crossing her arms over the robe now tied around her form.

“I noticed that you were a bit disturbed when you left dinner.”

“A bit?”

He smirked. “Okay, I noticed that you were upset, and I wanted to check on you. How are you doing?”

Cadena exhaled harshly. “I'm trying to keep it together. I'm aware that there will be changes when you're entering a new life, but sometimes, the amount of ridiculousness is more than one can bear.

Gemini nodded, and Cadena continued. “I mean, who doesn’t pray?”

“Believe it or not, Your Highness, many people don’t pray. Everyone has different beliefs, and some people can’t understand the totality of a deity.”

“They don’t need to understand the totality. That’s what faith is for.”

“I understand. Trust me, I do. But unfortunately, everyone else has to come to grips with that truth on their own. Even if you were to teach them or help them understand from your point of view, they would still need to accept it and believe themselves. I know that that can be frustrating, but it is the way it is.”

Cadena sighed again. “You’re right.” She reached out and touched his bicep, a smile curving her lips. “You’re always right. I can’t help but wonder if this move is the right decision. Why would I be tied to a family that doesn’t believe in The Spirit? We would be unequally yoked. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Have you spoken with The Spirit about this decision?”

“Not in layman’s terms.”

A single brow rose on Gemini’s forehead, and Cadena explained.

“I’ve known that when or if I received the visions, it would mean that I was next to be wedded or meant to be queen. I’ve prayed for guidance and direction. But I haven’t asked about this specific decision. It always felt like something that was in my cards—that was in my future. So, I never questioned it. Does that sound crazy?”

“Not at all. I understand why you wouldn’t question The Spirit because it seems like your visions align with your

destiny. However, I don't think it is wrong to ask for clarity. As you said, I don't see The Spirit aligning you with a family who does not believe. I can't imagine that you would be the person to make them believe, and that's not because I don't think you could do it, but more so because this family doesn't seem to be too interested in what anyone outside of their own head has to say."

"You always have the right things to say. I want to hug you, Gemini."

Gemini sucked in a breath. "I would like that, too. Very much." Cadena moved close to him. "Unfortunately, Your Highness, we probably shouldn't."

She frowned. "Why? We are not doing anything wrong, and we're alone."

"But we are not alone, Your Highness."

Her eyes widened. "What are you talking about?"

"There's a camera at the top of the wall to the left that has watched us this entire time. It is not inoperable; it moves when we move."

Cadena's mouth dropped, and a gasp flew from her lips. "Why would there be a camera in the main palace?"

"Unfortunately, Your Highness, that is a question I cannot answer. But I am worried that there may be cameras in your quarters as well."

Another gasp flew from Cadena's lips, and she began to tremble, rubbing her palms on her upper arms. "They wouldn't..."

"I wish I could believe that, but I'm not so certain. If you allow me inside your space, I can check the entirety of your

area. It's something I should've done, to begin with, but like you, I assumed this would not be something we would need to worry about."

"If there are cameras in my room..."

"I understand."

"Please, go check for me."

"Say no more, Your Highness."

Gemini entered the room, and Cadena stood at the entrance, watching him as he carefully checked the corners of the walls, top, and bottom. He checked underneath the tables, the chairs, and all the furniture. He disappeared from her sight for more than a minute as he searched deeper into her quarters, bedchamber, closets, and bathroom.

When Gemini emerged, the look on his face said it all.

"Gemini?" Her brows came together; concern etched in her features.

"I found four devices. Two were in your bedchamber; the other two are in your bathroom." Cadena gasped and grabbed her chest, her eyes wide with horror. "I'm so sorry, Your Highness, your trust and privacy have been violated. Should I call for our transport?"

Anger settled in Cadena's veins. "Yes, Gemini. You should."

Gemini nodded and immediately reached out to Jasir.

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG FOR PRINCE MANDLA TO APPEAR AT Cadena's door.

Because of the cameras, Cadena knew he would see her distraught and moving about to get her things together before long. For that reason, she left her door open, so there would be no mistaking what she was up to when he arrived.

WITH HIS FACE KNOTTED INTO A FROWN, PRINCE MANDLA watched Cadena as she exited her bedchamber and entered the living area, headed toward him at the exit.

“Is there something I should be made aware of?” he asked.

“Prince Mandla, I am leaving your palace. In fact, I am leaving your country in approximately thirty minutes on a flight back home to Kéra Asnela. You have not been honest with me. While you have lectured me about getting acquainted with you and the things going on in this kingdom, you have not given me that same courtesy.”

“What are you talking about?”

Cadena would have scoffed, but instead, she stared at Prince Mandla, her rueful gaze sharp as she sucked in a breath.

“Oh, I think you know what I am speaking about. Why are there cameras in my room?”

“There are cameras in all our rooms. You are overreacting. There’s nothing to be upset about.”

“Are you insinuating that it is not an invasion of my privacy to watch me as I am undressing, taking a bath, or relaxing in bed? Because I can assure you that actions such as this would have you imprisoned in my country. Your behavior is beyond disgusting. And I have never known anyone with the power you hold to be as malicious as this. I don’t believe you

have cameras set up in your own domain. Nor do I believe that King Tau and Princess Izara have cameras set up in theirs.”

“Why would I care to peep in on you specifically and not the entire palace?”

“Because you want to keep an eye on everything that I do. I am not a child for you to keep an eye on to ensure that I don’t run away in the darkness of night. If I want to leave, I will, and there would be nothing you could do about it.”

“You should watch your mouth when you’re speaking to me. I don’t like your tone.”

Cadena’s eyes widened. “That’s what you have to say to me? After you invade my privacy? What you fail to realize, Prince Mandla is your royalty doesn’t supersede mine.”

“On the contrary, it does. And the sooner you understand that, the better things between us will be. Because you see, Princess Cadena, no matter how hard you try to be important in your kingdom or mine, you will always be beneath me in rank and respect. I told you I was willing to give you what you want, and that doesn’t seem to be enough for you, but you need to realize I speak the truth. Going in this direction could break our family ties, which is something neither of us wants.”

Incensed, Cadena moved around him, and he caught her by the arm. “Don’t leave here like this. I can correct this mistake.”

“If you felt that way, you should have said that to begin with, but now that I know what you really think of me and how you actually feel about my rank and respect, I don’t think I can stand to stay in this place another second.

She shook out of his grip and exited the door as he responded, “You’ll change your mind soon enough.”

Hating that the prince's words may have some truth to them, Cadena went in search of King Tau to inform him that she was leaving.

PRINCE MANDLA CLOSED HIS EYES AND LOCKED HIS JAW.

He knew marrying Cadena would come with some spice. He'd seen how she moved around her kingdom and understood how seriously she took her roles. That hadn't been a problem for him—at least when he first considered a union between them.

He could give her anything she wanted—even roles in the palace. Cadena could have them, but final decisions would always come through him. That was a win-win situation for Prince Mandla. It was putting her in charge or at least making her think she was in charge—when realistically, it was he who held all responsibility.

Sometimes it became necessary to play a game the right way to win at the end, even if a little shuffling or misguidance amongst one's moves was called for.

Something had told him not to add the cameras to her room. Leaving them in the passages would've given him an easy excuse. They were there for her security, just like everyone in the palace. Then, she would have no reason to cause trouble.

But Prince Mandla wanted to know what she was doing every second of her time there. So, against his better judgment, he had the cameras put in her bedchamber and her bathroom. He'd watched her undress, shower, and don clothing for their dinner.

She was the rarest beauty he'd ever seen. Beautiful brown skin, flawless like silk to the touch, he was certain. And Prince Mandla couldn't wait to have her writhing underneath him when the time came for their intimacy. He would have forced her to sleep in his bed instead of a guest room if it were up to him. But he knew that he needed to keep them separated to gain her trust. She was not the type of woman who would have agreed to stay the night had she known that he expected her presence in his private suite.

Now he had to figure out a way to get back into her good graces.

An expletive dropped from his lips. Prince Mandla knew what he said about her roles, rank, and respect would be the things she despised him for the most. However, he also hoped that she cared more about keeping their families allied than her personal role; that somehow, she would forgive him and allow him to correct the damage he'd done.

From here on out, Prince Mandla would remember to mind his tongue—at least long enough for them to become king and queen. Then, she would have no choice in the matter, and regardless of how she felt about any decision that he made, she would have to live with it for all time.

Prince Mandla nodded, then spun around as a new set of anger boiled within him. And just as he thought of her guard, who he knew undoubtedly was the one to discover the security devices, Gemini stepped into the doorway.

“Gemini, I'd like a word with you.”

Gemini made eye contact with Prince Mandla, who had a steady scowl. “I'm listening.”

“Follow me to my study, please.” Prince Mandla knew the longer he kept Gemini away from Cadena, the longer it would take before she fled the palace.

“I am bound by the law of King Isaac Winthrop to guard the Advisor at all times. Where is the Advisor?”

“Aren’t you supposed to know? You are her guard.”

Gemini entered the room and began to check the area. Prince Mandla’s nostrils flared, and he shouted, “She is not in here!”

Gemini turned around to face the prince. “Where is she?”

“She’s safe here. Do you think something would happen to her at her new home?” The prince added that last part to shake Gemini up, but Gemini was not moved.

“By the amount of camera footage in her bedchamber, I don’t know what you are capable of...Prince.” Prince Mandla’s scowl deepened. “Now tell me where she is now.”

“Or what?”

Gemini lifted a device to his lips and spoke into it. “Jasir, is the Advisor present with you?”

The device squeaked, and then Jasir’s voice came through. “Yes. She’s just walked up. We’re set to leave the premises.”

Exhaling slowly with his jaw clenched, Gemini’s fast-paced heartbeat calmed. “I’m on my way.” Gemini stepped around the prince without touching him.

“You’re making a mistake. You are getting directly in the way of an international treaty. You should rethink this approach.”

Gemini turned to face Prince Mandla.

“I do believe that the mistake is yours. But we’ll know for sure once we debrief King Isaac about what happened in full detail...so there are no misunderstandings. For your sake, I hope it can be resolved.

And with that, Gemini exited and left the prince glaring after him.



nineteen

King Isaac sat across from King Tau, both men watching each other sternly. They had not spoken in a week. They were in a conference room inside Winthrope Estates Palace. Their mediators had decided it would be the best place to resolve their conflicts before any discussions of a marriage between their progeny could proceed.

King Isaac was the first to speak. “Do we have a problem?”

“There is no problem from the Royals of Myriad. But there does seem to be an issue with the Royals of Kéra Asnela.”

“Are you here to take my kindness for weakness? Because we both know why there is a conflict between us. Why would you disrespect my daughter after agreeing on a sacred union between our forces and our children?”

King Tau exhaled. “There’s confusion amongst us. And I do not understand why we have gone a week without speaking about it. Alliances do not do this. How can we come together if we don’t know how to have conversations when misunderstandings arise?”

King Isaac’s fist slammed against the table—his fingers tightly knotted, his nostrils flaring, and his eyes wide. “It is not

a misunderstanding that you have invaded my daughter's privacy! It is not a misunderstanding that your son Prince Mandla has not shown her the proper respect. If you wanted a princess whom you could own, one who you could do whatever you wish to at any moment, you should not have come to the Royals of Kéra Asnela! That is not how we operate, and I could have saved you the trouble.”

“THE DEVICE IN YOUR DAUGHTER'S BEDCHAMBER AND bathroom were not spying on her. They are inoperable and have been there for some time. She was mistaken, and so was her guard. It is another reason she should be appointed a new guard, and we would like to apologize to her since it seems that this misunderstanding has been taken too far.”

“Do you think that I am that dense?”

“Excuse me?”

“Gemini has been a part of our security detail since my father's reign, King Tau. He is the head of our palace security and he oversees operations that are classified. There is no way that I will trust your word over his. If he says he found working operable devices in her room—”

“So, you are calling me a liar.”

The two men glared at one another. King Isaac wanted peace to continue in their land and an extension of their military, but not at the degradation of his daughter—or with ties to an unworthy family.

“The devices are not operable,” King Tau restated. “And my son would like the opportunity to apologize to you and Princess Cadena. If she can be convinced to hear his sorrow.”

“You know, not many people get second chances for such a betrayal. And if I find out that those cameras were indeed operable, there will be hell to pay.”

King Isaac hit a button at his end of the table, and the door opened immediately.

Cadena strolled into the room with her head held high, their traditional blue and gold colors wrapped in a warrior’s bodysuit, as she planned to attend training after this meeting. Her face appeared refreshed as if she had no care in the world. She moved to stand next to her father. “I heard shouting in this room,” she said. “Is everything all right, Father?”

“Everything will be fine once I know that you are truly well.”

Cadena’s lips ushered into a smile. “I’m in great spirits. You don’t have to worry about me.” She turned to stare at King Tau, then back to her father.

“King Tau has made me aware that the devices found in your bedchamber and bathroom are not operable. Do you believe him?”

Cadena stared at the king. “I do.” Her father’s eyes went wide as he was surprised by her response. But Cadena remembered the greeting she’d received from King Tau. She did believe that he was being truthful.

“However, as for Prince Mandla, I do not believe him. The king has given Prince Mandla so much power and believes completely in him—because he is his son. From my short time at their palace, I have come to believe that while the king is just and true, the prince is not.”

She took her eyes to King Tau.

“I cannot marry into a family who is not on one accord. Your son needs to hold just as much honesty as you for him to be deemed trustworthy in my eyes, and currently, he has a lot of work to do.”

“I am willing to force him to do that work if you consider continuing with our union so our alliances may be tightened.”

While Cadena was almost sure that the prince was not ready to be a king, she also didn't want it to be her fault or indecision that caused the rift between their families.

“Under one condition. You allow my security to examine the same devices present in my guest room. If he finds that they are inoperable—we will proceed. If not...”

King Tau rose from his seat and knocked on the door. It opened, and Prince Mandla entered, his eyes going straight to Cadena, his father's, King Isaac, and back.

“Allow me to apologize. I have certainly ruined our impressions of each other. While I have grown to think that a queen is someone who would do as I say and not as I do, in the short time that we have been acquainted, I have learned otherwise. I am sorry for how I spoke to you, for the way you have been treated in my company, and for the devices you found. They should have never been there, and you deserve more respect than what I have given you. If you give me a second chance, I can show you that I am not the horrible man you deem me to be. Your security has any clearance they need to check behind me.”

Cadena wanted to roll her eyes. “Thank you for your apology, Prince Mandla.” Feeling her father's anger next to her, Cadena rubbed his shoulder in a light caress to reassure him that she had everything under control.

THE DEVICES WERE DEEMED INOPERABLE.

Cadena couldn't believe it when the findings came back to her. But she believed in Gemini with her life.

“Do you think they may have been tampered with?” she asked.

“There's no way to tell if these cameras are, in fact, the same cameras in your domain. We would have to trust that they'd not switched them during the time we've been away.”

She was annoyed beyond belief, wanting to get this charade over with. She missed Gemini more than she could express, and trying to stay away from him became unbearable.

WEEKS WENT BY WHILE CADENA AND PRINCE MANDLA SPENT time together.

During one outing, on a leisurely stroll, Prince Mandla presented Cadena with a black horse with a smooth, shiny coat and a long silky tail.

The prince smiled as he handed the reins over to her.

“Is this for me?” Cadena questioned, a brow quirked, half-confused.

“Who else would it be for, Princess?” He didn't even try to pretend that he had made a mistake when calling her name. Instead, he continued talking as if he were determined to mistitle her.

“Would it be okay if I called you Mandla?”

His face scrunched into a frown. “I didn’t think so. But yet you still—”

“I’ve got your point.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that you do.” She took her eyes over the gelding. “Beautiful animal,” she said. “What is his name?”

“He is yours, to name him.”

“Oh, why is that? You’ll only misname him anyway.”

Prince Mandla laughed, and it felt like the first time she’d heard genuine laughter from him. How apropos that it would be because he found his disrespect funny. “You’ve got me there.”

“Tell me, what is the reason that you’ve given me a horse?”

“It is a gift. Are you opposed to receiving gifts?”

“Not at all. But why a horse?”

“Let’s just say I did some research and found out that you were fond of the animals.”

Cadena’s eyes widened. “You did research?” She turned her head and peered at him.”

“I did. Because I want you to know that I care about what you like and what you’re interested in, and this gift was meant to show you that.”

“I see. But do you know the way to show me that you care about what I like or feel is—”

“If I call you Advisor instead of Princess?”

Cadena pursed her lips. “You’re catching on, Prince Mandla. Now I see that you do pay attention to me after all.”

“Of course I do.” He held on to his smile. “Now allow me to give you something else later while we are at dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Yes, our lunches have gone well, and so have breakfast. So now I think that we should have dinner. Then maybe you would be comfortable with staying the night.”

Cadena took a step back and gave him a look of uncertainty.

“Your guard can inspect the room so you will be content in your space and know that there are no devices in your area or in the hallway that you walk through. What do you think about that?”

Cadena thought it was a nice gesture, but she still didn't trust Prince Mandla.

“Let's have dinner, and afterward, we will see.”

“I can agree to that.”

“Then you have a deal.”

“HAVE YOU ENJOYED YOURSELF SINCE YOU'VE BEEN BACK AT our palace?”

Cadena took her eyes from their meal to Prince Mandla. “It's been nice.”

Prince Mandla's dark brown eyes lit up. “Nice is good. What can make your time here...better than nice?”

Cadena licked her lips and sighed. “A garden. But... unfortunately, that's not something that I can rest in right now.”

“I told you before we can make you a garden.”

“Yes. You did. However, growing a garden from scratch would be ideal.”

“That would take some time, Advisor.”

Silence fell over the table and Cadena smirked.

“You like that, huh?”

“Like, what?”

“Oh, come now. I called you Advisor. I know you heard it.”

“I did.”

“Do I receive a pat on the head for that?”

Cadena forced herself not to roll her eyes. “Addressing me as Advisor is the bare minimum, Prince Mandla. Am I content that you addressed me correctly once out of the numerous times I’ve been in your company? Yes. It is a breath of fresh air. Keep that up and we might get along.”

Prince Mandla smiled. “I’ll take that in good spirits.”

“You should.”

“But about that pat on the head...”

“You can’t be serious.”

Prince Mandla’s laugh was dark and unsettling. There were not too many things that bothered Cadena, but the prince’s aura certainly did. He snapped his fingers, and an elderly woman carrying a silver tray with one dish on top entered the room.

The aging woman had a gold apron around her body and matching slippers on her feet. Her skin appeared wrinkled and

loose, and her hands shook as she carried the tray. She was clearly tired and worked to the bone. Gray hair was tied in a knotted ponytail at the back of her head, and her steps were slow—not that she took her time, but it seemed to be as fast as she could walk.

Cadena stood instantly, hurrying to the woman to assist her. She took the tray from her grasp, and she and the woman locked eyes—the woman surprised.

“What are you doing?” Prince Mandla said, still sitting.

“Do you have to ask?”

The woman attempted to kneel before her.

“No.” Cadena sat the tray on the table, then turned back to the woman, grabbing her arm. “No. You do not have to kneel. In our country, elders are exempt from this greeting. A simple bow with your head will do. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Her voice was even more fragile, almost creaky. “What is your name?”

The woman glanced at Prince Mandla, then back to Cadena. “I’m Zuri Sizwe, Your Highness. It is very nice to meet you.”

Cadena’s mouth fell open in shock. “Sizwe?” She looked at Prince Mandla, and he stood to his feet and strolled to stand before them.

“Yes,” he said. “This is my grandmother. The king’s mother. I would’ve introduced you if you would’ve given me the time.”

Cadena couldn’t believe her ears or her eyes. She was incredulous. “Prince Mandla, why is your grandmother

working as a servant?”

“It is her duty here.”

“What?”

“Why are you outraged about everything?”

Cadena sucked in a breath. “Look at her. She should be resting or having someone tend to her, not serving us.”

“Is that what you would prefer?”

Cadena was baffled. “Yes. Why isn’t it what you prefer?”

“Everyone works. If you don’t, how can you eat?”

“This is your belief? I...have no words.” Melancholy fell over Cadena for Zuri Sizwe.

Prince Mandla snapped another finger, and the woman gave him her attention, hands down, standing like a soldier.

“Zuri, you are excused for the night. Get some rest, and if you need anything at all, Ayaan will be there to serve you.”

Zuri’s eyes grew big—astonishment in her sight. “Will I get dinner tonight?”

Appalled and stunned by the woman’s eager question, Cadena pressed her hand against her throat.

“Of course. I’ll have Ayaan bring it to you right away.”

Zuri smiled and nodded, and attempted to go down on one knee. When Prince Mandla saw Cadena’s wide-eyed expression, he stopped Zuri, reaching out to touch her shoulder. “Never mind that for tonight. Have a good evening. You are dismissed.”

Zuri nodded curtly, then turned and left the room. “Please, have a seat while I get Ayaan’s attention for Zuri.”

“Why do you call her by her name?”

“What should I call her?”

They stared at each other, with Cadena bewildered by the family’s morals—or lack thereof. “Never mind.”

Prince Mandla nodded. “I’ll return in a moment.”

SHE’D HAD ENOUGH TIME TO SEE THE TRUE NATURE OF THE Royals of Myriad, and while Cadena had assumed King Tau was the best of them, she wasn’t so sure after seeing his mother in servant attire when she was royalty, too. It made her want to whisk Zuri away from this place and never return.

Prince Mandla reentered the dining hall, grabbed the tray with dessert on top, and repositioned his chair next to Cadena’s.

“This pie is the best in our land. The crust is made by hand, and the lemon is the ripest in all of the Myriad kingdom.” Prince Mandla took a fork and sliced the edge of the pie, then lifted it to Cadena’s mouth. “I can’t wait for you to try it.”

“How is Zuri? Was she given dinner?”

Prince’s Mandla’s excitement dropped at her change of subject.

“Zuri’s fine. She is eating and will bathe afterward, then sleep.”

Cadena sighed, and Prince Mandla hovered the pie next to her mouth. She turned her head away. “I’m not hungry, Prince Mandla.”

“The dessert is for purposes of pleasure, not to fill you with nutrition.” He made a show of moving the fork away from her mouth, then back. “Taste it.”

Cadena wanted to bite his fingers off, but instead of acting like a savage, she opened her mouth to appease him. Prince Mandla smiled and sat the fork on her tongue. Cadena quickly ate the piece and moved her head away from the utensil as the prince watched her, leaning in closer than she would like.

“Isn’t it divine?”

Cadena nodded. “Yes. It’s good.”

Happy with himself, Prince Mandla cut another piece and held it up again, but the pie wobbled from the fork and fell on her shoulder.

“Oops, let me get that for you.”

He leaned over her, dropping his mouth on her shoulder, eating the piece of dessert, then kissing up her neck.

“Prince Mandla!” She moved quickly, pushing him back while shifting away.

“What’s this fuss?” His eyes pierced her.

“That is not proper. What are you doing?”

Prince Mandla grabbed her arm and pulled her close. “I’m being romantic.” He stuck his tongue out. “Kiss me.”

She pushed him again. “No!”

His brows arched. “No?”

“No,” she repeated.

“You don’t tell me no. I’m your husband.”

Her eyes grew wide. “You are not my husband yet, and even if you were, no is still no.”

Prince Mandla’s laugh was darker than before. “In what world do you live in? You and I will be intimate, and I don’t understand your hesitancy. It’s not as if you’re a virgin. Give me a kiss and stop with these dramatics!”

“I said *no*.”

He grabbed her jaw and pulled her into him, smashing their lips together as she fought against him.

Opening her mouth, Cadena bit his lips, smacked him, then flipped his chair with her foot.

The commotion caused Gemini to enter the room. His gaze shot straight to Cadena, who was on her feet in a warrior’s stance.

On the floor, Prince Mandla got up quickly, his angry gaze glaring at Cadena as he grabbed her shoulder.

Gemini was across the room in seconds, and while Cadena wanted to fight Prince Mandla on her own, Gemini intervened—standing in the gap, danger in his gaze as he removed his sword.

Prince Mandla’s eyes grew wide with disbelief after having his intentions thwarted. He lifted a finger and pointed at them. “I’m sick of you two. I should teach you both a lesson.”

“Then teach us,” Gemini said, “and begin with me.”

The men stared at each other, then Cadena spoke. “Gemini, let’s go.”

Cadena turned and walked away, and Gemini returned his sword to his sheath. “I’ll be waiting on that lesson,” he said,

turning his back on Prince Mandla and exiting behind Cadena.



twenty

She was quiet on the way to the private jet. Gemini waited until they arrived and got settled inside before approaching her about what happened back at the palace.

With a blue silk blanket with their royal lion crest stamped on the trim wrapped around her and her legs curled into a lounge chair, Cadena looked up at Gemini as his shadow covered her.

“How do you feel?”

She sighed, then shook her head and dropped her face into the blanket.

Gemini locked his jaw. Cadena wasn't ready to talk about it, but his gut churned thinking about what must have caused the disturbance back at Sizwe Palace.

“I'll give you space.”

He watched her for a second more, waiting to see if she would respond before turning and finding a seat at the front of the jet.

IT WAS EARLY MORNING HOURS WHEN THEY TOUCHED DOWN IN Watima, and she was sleeping like an angel.

Gemini carried Cadena to the limo and rode in the back with her in his lap, her head laying against his chest. She snuggled against him, soft snores calming his spirits and letting him know she was getting some rest.

The partition rolled down, and Jasir glanced at him from the driver's seat. The two friends exchanged a silent message—one that said a conversation between them was needed.

Twenty-five minutes from the hangar and they were en route to Winthrope Estate Palace when Cadena stirred, her eyelids blinking awake.

She took in a breath, moving her eyes up Gemini's thick neck to catch his gaze bearing down at her.

“What time is it?”

“Four twenty-seven a.m.”

“Where are we?”

“Five minutes from the palace.”

“Take me to my palace, please.”

Gemini stared at her a moment more, then looked up past the partition to see Jasir glancing between them and the road ahead.

“Jasir, take us to the Advisor's palace.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jasir made a U-turn, driving another ten minutes out before pulling into a roundabout and parking in front of Cadena's palace. Gemini and Cadena waited for Jasir and Yuusuf to clear the area.

When the door opened, Cadena slipped from Gemini's lap, easing out the door with him behind her.

"Thank you, Jasir."

"You're welcome, Your Highness."

She moved toward the entrance and Gemini turned his attention to Jasir. "Give me a minute and I'll be back to talk."

Jasir nodded and Gemini went after Cadena, catching up with her steps. At her foyer, she paused for a moment.

"Would you care for something to drink?"

The silence made the night's sounds louder.

"...No."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

She turned her eyes to his. "Stay with me tonight."

Their gazes held, indecision bouncing between them.

"I will."

Cadena's face was devoid of an expression, her mind in disarray.

"Would you like me to send Jasir and Yuusuf back to the main palace?"

"Yes."

Gemini tilted his head. "I'll return momentarily."

OUTSIDE, JASIR STOOD NEXT TO THE DRIVER'S SIDE DOOR OF the limo when Gemini approached. "What's going on—or rather, what happened back at Sizwe Palace?"

“I don’t have the details. I was on guard outside the dining hall when I heard a commotion. When I went inside, Prince Mandla was on the floor, and Cadena was on her feet, braced for a fight.”

Jasir’s eyes widened.

“When Prince Mandla got to his feet, he grabbed her, and I intervened.”

“Should we prepare for backlash?”

“I would say so.”

Jasir took in a deep breath. “So be it.”

“I’m going to look after her tonight. You and Yuusuf can head back to Winthrope Estate Palace.”

“I’ll send out a high alert to the guardsmen.”

Gemini nodded and Jasir spoke again.

“I couldn’t help but notice your closeness with the Advisor. You two appear closer than you were after coming back from Victoria Falls.”

“Are you asking if you should also prepare the firing squad?”

Jasir’s eyes broadened. “That is not funny, and if this is going to be your sense of humor going forward, then consider yourself the worst comic on the planet.”

Gemini smirked. “All right.” He inhaled deeply. “Don’t prepare the firing squad just yet. We are closer than the last time we spoke. I’ll leave it at that. The less I say to you, the better for you.”

Jasir was worried about his friend, but Gemini was his own man. Jasir nodded, and the two shook hands before Jasir

departed.

BACK IN THE PALACE, GEMINI FOUND CADENA STARING OUT OF an open window, awash in the moonlight as it spilled over her and covered a part of the floor and canopy bed.

“Thank you for staying,” she said, keeping her eyes on the moon.

“You don’t have to thank me for such a simple pleasure.” Gemini leaned his shoulder into the doorjamb and folded his arms, watching her.

Cadena sighed. “It is unbearable to be healthy, rich, powerful, intelligent, and endure the despair I feel.”

His gut churned. “Why do you feel despair, Cadena?”

She turned her misty eyes to him, tears sitting at the rims of her lids. “I’m in love with you—yet, I’m destined to marry another. I thought I was strong enough to stand this, but...” her voice cracked, “...I cannot.”

Tears fell from her eyes, and Gemini shot across the room just as she collapsed, sweeping her in his arms.

Her body trembled. “I can’t do it, Gemini.” Her face was awash in sorrow. “I can’t...I can’t.” She closed her eyes and wept as he held her. Long seconds of heartache filled his chest. Then strength like nothing he’d ever felt coursed through his veins.

“Cadena. Look at me.” He wiped her tears as she blinked up at him. “Watching you with the prince has been the heaviest weight I’ve had to carry. I’ve been in love with you for a long time. To be with you intimately and have you share your most sacred parts of you with me eagerly has expanded my heart

beyond the measures of my chest. I never knew I could love someone so deeply, and if it is your wish, together we can make it known to the family.”

Cadena’s eyes widened. “But—”

“I no longer care about the consequences. I’m willing to endure whatever outcome derives from our confession. But only if you are.”

Cadena nodded frantically. “Yes. Let’s do it.”

Gemini dropped his lips into hers, and they moved suddenly, clothes flying as they disrobed, grabbing, fingers pressed against hot skin—hungry for one another.

“Uhhhhh!”

Naked in his arms, Cadena moaned as Gemini’s mouth kissed down her neck to her breasts, sucking in her areolas, one after the other.

Her body vibrated with need, grinding her hips against his bare skin.

“Gemini...”

Chills spread over her flesh, her pussy pulsating in fevered demand for him.

“I’ve missed you so much,” he said, nuzzling her breasts—sucking, licking, slurping, his erection now tapping her below. “Yearned for you every day. Tossed and turned on many nights. Prayed for you, even knowing you did not belong to me.”

He spread her on the bed, nibbling down her navel and lower belly to slurp at her clitoris.

“I longed to taste you...” He flipped his tongue, and she writhed on the sheets, but he caught her with a grip on her hips.

“Ooooooooooh!” Her hips thrust toward his mouth, the pleasure he gave driving her desire, making her lose her mind. “Gemini! OH!”

He sucked and flicked, driving his tongue down her pussy to dip inside her sanctuary, then back again.

The sensitivity of his tongue-lashing made her body convulse, and she came on his tongue, unable to stop the river of cream that squirted the back of his throat.

“Mmmmm,” he murmured as he slurped. “Just like I thought you’d be. As sweet as the love you gave me.” He licked and kissed her pink pussy until she was writhing with sensation again, then lifting over her, he drove his dick inside her.

“AH! OOOOOOOOO!”

His arms wrapped around her waist, holding her tightly so she could take on the unyielding weight of his spearing erection.

“Gemini!”

Tingling all over, they melded together as Gemini drilled her, in and out, bodies slapping together and nerves exploding—unending.

Cadena’s screams turned into moans, her body adjusting to his girth as he pounded her. She became greedy, grabbing his shoulders, her nails digging, lifting her hips to his, meeting his heavy strokes.

“Ooh! OOOO! Yeah! OOOO!”

Gemini dropped his mouth to her neck and sucked her there.

“I’ve missed you so much...” he moaned—an animalistic growl shooting from his mouth. “I never want to be without you again, Cadena. Do you understand?”

“Yes! Yes! I want the same thing!”

Their bodies slapped together as they fucked, going from tight pulsation to an orgasmic release.

“OH!”

A guttural moan flew from Gemini’s mouth, and he pulled out, but she reached for him. “No...give me all of you.”

She grabbed his dick, and he warned her, “Cadena...”

Cadena slipped her mouth down his shaft, sucking him in, her mind instantly blown by the taste of her nectar.

“Mmmm...” she moaned, taking as much of him in her throat as she could stand.

“Cadena...” He grabbed the nape of her neck and caressed her back as she bobbed up and down, sucking him hard, then soft—fast and slow.

Gemini’s eyes rolled and his head fell back, a tremor moving through his body to the tip of his dick.

“Cadena!”

She enjoyed weakening him; it was the only way she wanted him to kneel before her again like he was on the bed while she pleased him.

Expletives dropped from his mouth in Swahili, and he stuck his fingers in her hair, gripped her scalp, and stroked her mouth.

A shudder expelled from him when he gave a final warning. "I'm going to cum in your mouth, Cadena..."

She sucked him faster, harder, and a meeting of chills drove up his dick. He cursed and came in her mouth, jerking, his ears popping.

"Uhhhhhhh!" He released her head and fell forward, catching himself as she was still arched underneath him with his dick in her mouth.

"This is so, so, good..." She licked the length of him. "I need you like this more..."

Gemini closed his eyes, then blinked, lifted a hand, and smacked her on the ass.

"AH!"

She scurried away from him, her lips spreading into a wicked smile.

"You weren't expecting that, huh?" His deep laugh tingled her flesh. "Don't run now."

And he went after her, wrapping Cadena in his love for another hour before they both crashed against each other. He cupped her body into his and covered them to their waists with the royal blue sheet, forcing their impending announcement to the back of his head until morning.



twenty-one

““W ill you pray with me?”

Gemini reached for her hand. “Yes.”

Still at her palace, they went into the garden she kept tended there. Both of them had showered and covered themselves in robes, Cadena’s robe a blend of royal colors.

Next to a thicket, Gemini and Cadena kneeled and pulled the hoods over their heads:

“Spirit of love, life, and goodness, I pray to You and request forgiveness for any transgressions we have bestowed on the world and its inhabitants. Clear our minds and cleanse our souls so that we can be of service to You in the way we are meant to fulfill Your purpose. Let the error of our ways be disclosed to us so that we may course-correct and rejoin the righteous path. Shower our kingdom in prosperity, peace, love, and the flourishing of our lives, our seeds, and the soil our seeds are buried inside.”

Together, they stuck their fingers into the ground.

“We are but Your stewards, imperfect yet perfect when You live through us. Direct us and give us an understanding of our journey. Bless us, and be with us as we speak to our family

today. Cover us in goodness, give us grace, give us mercy, protect us and guard us with Your spiritual sword.”

She paused, breathed in, and finished her prayer. “Allow me to see Your vision and carry Your desires to my kingdom. Amina.”

“Amina,” Gemini agreed.

The humidity in the air dried her face, and Cadena remained there, waiting to see if The Spirit would give her a message. The smell of freshly grown flowers was carried in a thick breeze, encircling her body and slightly moving the leaves on the thicket. Nature could be heard around her, and the soil between her fingertips was alive and fertile.

All became silent, then...

Cadena’s eyes opened.

The south wing of Winthrop Estate Palace was filled with people—family, friends, neighboring kingdoms, even animals. Giraffes fed from trees, and a family of elephants sat in the distance, watching along with a pride of lions and their cubs.

Cadena was there, dressed in a gown that was unmistakably wedding attire—a dark blue gown embellished with crystals the size of marbles. Diamonds hung from her ears and drooped down her neck, covering her breasts and shimmering brightly.

Peace. She could fill it in the air, unrestricted, flowing effortlessly through the party. She couldn’t see the face of the person at her side. Still, they were lavishly clothed, and from what she could tell, the person was also dressed in formal attire suitable for a wedding.

A smile spread across her face, and she murmured, “More...”

Her vision shifted to another field of people...only this time, fear, anger, and dread permeated the area.

“No!”

She was standing in the front of a group, her back to them, her eyes forward on something...whatever she witnessed crippled her, made her stagger forward, but she was held back by...

She glanced to the side...

“Omari?”

The vision disappeared. Cadena blinked rapidly. With her heart beating wildly, she cried out, “No!”

The silence disappeared, and the sounds of nature resumed.

“No. No! *No!*”

“Cadena.”

Gemini grabbed her and she blinked up at him. “What happened?”

She shook her head once, and he helped her to her feet. “It was...”

Gemini’s face was stern, his forehead creased as he frowned.

“It was so beautiful, so peaceful, then...” She shook her head. “I have to pray again. I need to see what was happening.”

“Is that how it works?”

Cadena dropped her face in her hands, a wounded wail emitting from her mouth. “No. Still, I have to try.”

“What happened after the feeling of peace?”

“I don’t know. But I’ve got the feeling that the peace doesn’t come first.”

They stared at each other, both sensing the foreboding hanging in the air.

“We will not fear it. Whatever *it* is,” Gemini said.

Cadena nodded. “We won’t fear.”

“Are you still with me?”

“Yes. Of course. Forever.”

Gemini reached for her hand. “Let’s call a meeting.”

CADENA LIFTED HER HAND TO KNOCK ON KING ISAAC’S STUDY door when the entryway opened—almost colliding with Omari.

“Cadena,” he said, surprised. “I was on my way to come and get you.”

“Why?”

“The Royals of Myriad have reached out to us. Father is currently on a video call with them now.”

Omari glanced behind Cadena at Gemini. He frowned. “Is there a problem?”

“There is,” Cadena said. “Let us in so we can discuss it.”

Omari eased back into the room, and Cadena and Gemini followed him.

Remington and Cadence gathered on opposite ends of a rectangular meeting table with their father at the head.

On a seventy-inch widescreen television mounted on the wall, the Royals of Myriad were also positioned at a conference table in the comfort of Sizwe Palace. All eyes followed the entrance of Cadena and Gemini.

“You’re just in time.” King Isaac said. “I was informed at dawn that you had returned from Myriad. Why is that?”

“Yes, I would like to know this as well,” King Tau inserted. “Because from my understanding, my son has shown you courtesy, given you gifts, and you have deserted him yet again.”

Cadena’s low-lidded eyes gave King Tau her attention. “You know, King Tau; your name—Tau, means lion—your surname, Sizwe—unifying nation. Prince Mandla’s name represents power and strength, but I have found that both of you are neither of those things.”

King Tau’s and Prince Mandla’s eyes grew big while King Isaac and her brothers were intrigued with where Cadena was going with her speech.

“You and your son are incompetent, self-serving, and dishonorable. Not only do you force your own mother...” she glanced from King Tau to Prince Mandla, “...*your grandmother*...to serve you as if she is not royalty, which is unforgivable...”

Cadena’s accusing gaze returned to King Tau. “Your son tried to force himself on me last night.”

Every eye in the room shot to Cadena, including Gemini, his gaze murderous. “As far as I’m concerned, none of you deserve to create binding ties with us—not for currency and—especially—not a queen.”

She glanced at her father, brothers, and sister.

“I attempted to look past my desires.” Contempt in her gaze traveled back to The Royals of Myriad. “I even went so far as to ignore some of your blatant disregards for traditions that I hold sacred. But you are not men of valor.”

She turned to her father. “You told me that I deserve always to have men of valor around me. The Royal men of Myriad have no valor. Furthermore, I am in love with someone else.”

Gemini strolled to stand next to her, and he slipped her hand inside his grasp, linking them.

With his right hand, Gemini reached inside of his vest pocket and removed three tiny blue-and-gold drawstring bags—sliding one to each of the royals sitting at the table.

Inquisitiveness followed by surprise crossed their faces as they opened the bags. Cadence gasped at the items, but Remington was the first to speak.

“Kola nuts.”

Everyone’s eyes went wide.

Kola nuts were a symbol of healing, respect, and unity. They were given to a family as a proposal declaration—when a man wanted to marry into that family. If the family agreed, the woman in question would decide if she accepted the proposal.

“YOUR DAUGHTER AND I ARE IN LOVE. I KNOW THIS ISN’T THE traditional way for a princess to wed into a family, and many countries forbid it. However, I hope you can see that I am someone you can trust with your most precious asset. I want

you to know that I am willing to be and do everything she needs. And we would love your blessing to begin a relationship without disdain.”

“You son of a bitch!” Prince Mandla yelled. “I knew it!” He glared at them. “I always knew! I could tell by the way you watched her, by the way she watches you, and this is treachery of unimaginable proportions!”

“Calm down,” King Isaac said, his tone soothing. “You tried to force yourself on my daughter, and that is a betrayal of your kindness and trustworthiness to adhere to the terms of our agreement.”

“Your daughter is no angel, King Isaac,” Prince Mandla spat. “Her purity has been tainted. She said so herself, and I can guess by who.” He glared at Gemini, and more surprise filled the conference room. “Even with this revelation, I have accepted her although she has been corrupted.”

“Oh, please!” Cadena shouted. “That does not give you a right to—”

Prince Mandla slammed his hand on the table. “That is where you are mistaken, *Princess*,” he empathized. “It *does* give me the right. I am your appointed King, whether you like it or not. I have been agreeable to you, and because we hold some differences in culture and tradition, you cannot change what we have written in binding legal script.”

“If I had known that you were a bastard, I would’ve never spoken with King Tau about you and my daughter uniting in marriage.” King Isaac’s tone was firm.

“That is unfortunate, King Isaac, because you did. It can be resolved if we equally agree in a binding legal agreement between our countries; or...”

“Or what?” Prince Omari and Prince Remington said simultaneously.

“Or we go to war.”

Everyone’s eyes grew large at Prince Mandla’s threat. Even King Tau glanced at his son, side-eyeing him awkwardly.

Cadena was hit with *déjà vu*—she had seen this moment from one of her visions during prayer. Her father’s angry face, him speaking to someone she couldn’t see at the time.

Everything about this situation made her realize that this was it.

King Tau raised his hands. “I agree with King Isaac. Everyone needs to calm down.”

“We are far past calming down, King Tau,” Prince Mandla added. “Gemini, the guard thinks he can take my queen from me. Because I do like the Royals of Kéra Asnela, and I do not have an ire against them, other than this, I’m willing to negotiate this thing differently. Instead of our countries going to war—” he looked at Gemini directly, “—I challenge Gemini to a fight to the death.”

Gasps shot from Cadena and Cadence, as well as Princess Izara. The men’s eyes went wide, with Omari glaring at Prince Mandla.

“The person left standing will be the one who marries Princess Cadena.”

“I accept.” All eyes then turned to Gemini.

“Wait. What?” Cadena shouted.

Prince Mandla laughed. “You haven’t even heard the entirety of my terms.”

“Whatever the terms of your challenge, I accept them.”

“All right.” Prince Mandla eyed them all. “Everyone, you heard him; he accepts my terms regardless of what they are.” He shook his head. “Your eagerness to defeat me will be your downfall.”

“There, we can agree to disagree, Mandla,” Gemini said, dropping his royal title.

“This cannot happen!” King Tau roared. He looked at his son. “What are you thinking?”

“I think you should get ready to plan a wedding.” Prince Mandla laughed, but King Tau was apprehensive.

“For once, I am with King Tau,” Cadena added. She stared at Gemini; concern etched in her features. “Don’t do this.”

He held her hand, bringing her fingers up to his mouth for a kiss. “I am not afraid. We will not fear, remember?”

Cadena’s heart palpitated. “We will not fear,” she responded.

Laughter came from the monitor, and everybody turned their eyes to Prince Mandla. “Ah, you two are so charming. It’s a shame to see such authentic love go to waste. Enjoy it because it is only a matter of time before it will end.”

“Are you sure this is something you want to do?” King Winthrope asked Prince Mandla. “Once this happens, there will be no going back.”

“I’m not the type of man who changes his mind once he’s made a decision, King Isaac. We will fight at noon this Friday.”

“That’s in three days,” Remington said.

“That’s true,” Prince Mandla added with a smirk. “I don’t see any reason why we should hold this up. Besides, I’m ready to get it over with. It’s past time for me to rid myself and my queen of Gemini.

“Oh, and before we go, here are the terms of this challenge. There will be a range of weapons at our disposal to use during the fight. No guns. Also, you will be fighting me and two of the best warriors in our nation. It will be three against one, Gemini. I appreciate your acceptance of those terms before you heard them.”

“You can’t do that!” Cadena yelled, outraged. “That’s an unfair fight!”

Prince Mandla shrugged. “You can blame Gemini for his recklessness in agreeing to a conflict to which another sets the rules.”

Everyone turned their eyes to Gemini.

“I still accept,” he assured confidently.

Prince Mandla glared at him. “I will see you Friday at noon. Don’t be late.” The live feed disconnected abruptly, and everyone started talking at once.

“This is a setup...”

“You should rethink this...”

“This is terrible news...”

“Maybe we should try a different approach...”

Gemini glanced from Omari to Remington to King Isaac to Cadence. “I understand your concerns, but I am not worried. My spirit is aligned with The Spirit, and only calm and strength reside inside of me.”

He looked at Cadena, and she repeated, “We will not fear.” He smiled at her and squeezed her hand.

“This was a lot to take in,” King Isaac said, “But I am not surprised that you are in love with my daughter.”

“Neither am I,” Remington added.

“I didn’t expect you guys to admit it, but I’m not surprised, either,” Omari confirmed.

Cadence’s eyes twinkled over at Cadena, and she winked.

Gemini and Cadena glanced at each other, then back to their family. “What do you mean?” Cadena asked.

“None of us are blind, sister,” Omari said. “The same way Prince Mandla could sense your closeness...well, so could we.”

“Still...” Remington added, “...we all knew that you would stand with tradition, so none of us expected you to admit your love.”

“It was more than I could bear.” Cadena looked at her father. “As much as I would love to honor you in this sacred belief, it was more than I could bear. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’ve always wanted what was best for you, even if that meant going against customary ways. And Prince Mandla is not the man I thought he could be.” His eyes shifted to Gemini. “I trust you like a third son, Gemini. Don’t make me regret it.”

“You won’t, Your Majesty.”

“Good. You realize that you must win this fight.” He cleared his throat. “I accept your proposal, and I relieve you from the burden of a dowry. The only thing I want—and I

think my children agree—is for you to win this battle and be the man of valor with my daughter that I know you are.”

“I will.” Gemini strolled to stand in front of King Isaac, extending his hand for a handshake.

King Isaac rose to his feet and accepted Gemini’s hand. The men shook fiercely; then, the king drew him in for an embrace.

Gemini had never felt more thankful—as it stood, this moment was a dream come true. Love filled his heart, and he couldn’t wait to rejoice with his parents.

The men parted, and King Isaac took his seat while Gemini rejoined Cadena. They smiled at each other, and Gemini rubbed his nose across her forehead affectionately.

Remington shifted in his seat; his eyes focused on Gemini. “Let us help you prepare: Omari, me, and Jasir. We’ve got three days before the fight, and while we believe that you are equipped to win, we want to make sure you are sharp. Fight against us in the warrior room. This is not a fair fight, but as Father said, you must win.”

“I will win.”

Prince Omari glanced at each person in the room. “I hate to be the one to bring this up, but I think we have more problems on our hands than the quandary we’re currently in.”

King Isaac frowned. “What problems?”

“What is the likelihood that if Gemini wins, King Tau will honor the terms of his son’s death? We need to be prepared for war in case it comes to that. Prince Mandla is his heir to the throne. Something about this doesn’t feel right.”

“You’re right,” Remington said.

The room quieted.

“Gemini, you train with my sons and Jasir. Until the time of this event, keep the guards alert and get an army of men prepared for battle.”

Cadena rubbed her forehead. She felt partial to blame for this turn of events, and her visions floated to the front of her mind.

“You are dismissed,” King Isaac said.



twenty-two

Word of the upcoming fight between Gemini and Prince Mandla spread across the Kingdom like wildfire.

Over the next few days, while Gemini trained with Remington, Omari, and Jasir, Cadena constantly remained in prayer. Though she drew strength from Gemini and believed that he could win the fight, it still hurt her heart that it was something he had to do.

The last thing she wanted was for him to be in conflict because of her. Those thoughts assaulted her constantly.

Once, she decided to step into the warrior room and watch Gemini train; witnessing him did give her hope. Gemini was a formidable contender, fighter, warrior, a master at his art. But he was also up against a madman, and it was Prince Mandla that Cadena did not trust.

A breeze swirled around Cadena as she sat with her legs folded in her garden. She took in the smell of the flowers around her and listened to the birds above her squawk while she rested in that space.

“I thought I would find you out here.”

Cadena glanced over at Tally, who had unexpectedly joined her. “Is there something I can do for you, Tally?”

“No. But I was hoping there was something that I could do for you.”

Cadena didn't speak for a long second, then: “No, I don't think there is.”

“I could set you up with the masseuse if you need to relax.”

“Don't I look relaxed now, Tally?”

“You do. But a woman in your position could always use something more.”

“Thank you, but no, thank you. I'm fine.”

“Okay.”

Tally lingered, and Cadena glanced back over at her. “Is there something more you want to say?”

Tally sighed. “I know what it meant for you to have the desires of your heart.”

“Tally, if this is about traditions, I don't want to have this discussion.”

“No, it isn't. It would be me apologizing if I came off as discouraging or disregarding. That is not something I ever want to do to you, and I am happy that you got what you wanted. That's all.”

Cadena's brows rose. “Thank you, Tally.”

“You're most welcome, Your Highness. If you need anything, you know how to reach me.”

Tally gave a head bow, then turned and left the garden, leaving Cadena smiling after her.

“HOW ARE YOU DOING?”

Gemini slipped his arms around Cadena outside on her terrace, letting them rest on the marble railing top. He placed gentle kisses down the side of her face.

“I should be asking you that question.”

“I’m feeling the best that I ever have in my life. To be with you here like this without hiding has been my heart’s desire for a long time.” He kissed her face again. “How are you?”

Cadena smiled, enjoying his embrace and his adoration. “I could be better if I’m being honest. This whole fight has me tense. I hate that we must endure it.”

“It’ll be over soon. Tomorrow at noon, I will make my victory known in front of our kingdom and theirs. Do you not believe me?”

Cadena sucked in a breath, her body trembling slightly. “It’s not that I don’t believe you. I wish this were not something we had to deal with.”

Gemini turned her to face him. “Do you know something that I don’t, Cadena?”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You seem shaken more than usual. Was it the vision?”

Cadena swallowed thickly. “Yes.”

“Do I fall?”

She inhaled a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. “I don’t know. There were two visions, and while one of them was good, the other... I didn’t get the full picture, but I did feel

violence and fear; my heart was racing.” She slipped her hand across her forehead, closing her eyes.

Gemini wrapped his arms around her. “I think that you may have experienced a bit of tomorrow. But we will not fear. We stand in strength and are guided by The Spirit.”

Cadena nodded.

“Look at me.”

She opened her eyes and repeated, “We stand in strength and are guided by The Spirit. We will not fear.”

He embraced her tightly, both of them holding on to the truth of their words.

Friday

Noonday

THE STADIUM WAS ENTIRELY FILLED, SPLIT EVENLY BETWEEN people from Myriad and those from Kéra Asnela.

Located at the border of the two countries, King Tau and Princess Izara had a bird’s-eye view of the fighting ring on the stadium’s balcony from the right.

On the left, King Isaac, Princess Cadence, and Prince Remington were on the balcony overlooking the ring and crowd below.

On the ground at the front of the group, Cadena, Omari, and Jasir stood watching as Gemini faced the warriors he would battle.

GLARING AT HIS OPPONENTS, GEMINI OBSERVED THE MEN. ALL of them were similar in height, a few inches shorter than him. They held morning star weapons in their hands—an extended shaft attached to a ball covered with spikes.

In Prince Mandla's hands were two axes—with short handles for smooth swinging and connection.

The announcer pulled the microphone to his lips. “The rule of this battle is simple—the last man standing wins. On the right, we have the warriors of Myriad—Drummond, Prince Mandla, and Hannibal.”

The crowd on the right went wild: loud screaming, their fists punching the air, and jumping up and down with enthusiasm.

“On the left...” the announcer yelled through the microphone, “...the warrior of Kéra Asnela, Gemini.”

The people of Kéra Asnela also shouted in celebration and support, their feet stomping the ground, making the stadium and the ground tremble. They were coordinated, chanting a warrior's victory tune as they continued to stomp the earth.

Prince Mandla glared at them, his face contorting into a scowl.

Gemini smirked, donned in a royal blue and gold garment made to withstand a stabbing blow from any sharp object. On top of his garment, he wore body armor, opting to use a vest made from the same material instead of metal to avoid being weighed down. The same flexible armor covered his thighs

and arms. On his feet, the tips of his boots were spiked, and tactical gloves covered his hands, leaving his fingers exposed.

He removed two short swords from their sheaths, one in each hand, waiting for the signal.

A humid breeze flew around them, kicking up grains of dry earth in clouds of red dust. The stadium was in an uproar, as those on both sides continuing to chant, stomp, and scream.

At last, the announcer shouted, “Fight!”

The man on the right, Hannibal, moved first, running up on Gemini while swinging his morning stars simultaneously. As he drew closer, Drummond, the man on the left, also rushed forward, lifting his weapons into the air as Gemini spun on his feet, slicing Hannibal across his armpit with the right sword, then turning to block Drummond’s strike with the left.

A scream tore through Hannibal’s faceguard, and he dropped the weapon in his right hand—making the chanting from Kéra Asnela’s side grow louder.

Drummond swung one weapon over the other, and Gemini’s swords blocked each strike. Up high, then down low, the men’s feet moved as they twisted, spun, and slammed their weapons together.

Drummond was a good fighter, but Gemini was better, faster—stronger. He struck the handle of one of Drummond’s morning stars with his sword, and Drummond lost it momentarily as the weapon flew into the air, giving Gemini enough time to stick the blade of his knife in Drummond’s upper chest, breaking his collarbone.

The man screamed, and blood spurted between his neck and armor as the morning star fell to the ground. Gemini spun again to catch Hannibal’s second strike, lifting his sword to

block a blow from the only weapon Hannibal continued to hold—slashing his second sword down the side of Hannibal’s face, slicing off his ear.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Both men went down. And Gemini twisted his swords’ handles, getting a better grip, as he turned and eyed Prince Mandla.

The crowd was louder now; Myriad’s audience obviously furious that Gemini had the upper hand, while the warrior chant from Kéra Asnela’s side became deafening.

King Tau rose to his feet along with Princess Izara, their eyes wide, disbelief written across their faces while pride-filled King Isaac’s heart and daring smiles crossed the faces of Remington and Omari.

On the sideline next to him, Cadena’s heart thundered in her chest. Everything about the scene reminded her of the second vision. The angst she felt, the anger from the other side...even her brother, Omari, being at her side.

She spoke a silent prayer. Gemini was a fierce, fearless fighter, and it was proven in the way he effortlessly coordinated his strikes, swings, and footwork. Her heart pounded, watching him, feeling him even from afar as he fought.

With the two other combatants from Myriad down on their knees, Gemini and Prince Mandla rushed each other, Gemini’s swords clanging against Prince Mandla’s axes, forming an X.

Struggling, striving, straining toward each other, the two men were locked in combat. Suddenly Gemini shoved away, slicing open Prince Mandla’s left elbow, then crouched, moving into a martial-art stance.

“Hu—hut—hu!” He jumped, striking the prince in his upper torso and sending Prince Mandla flying backward.

King Tau shouted expletives from his seat. He knew his son was no warrior, yet he had permitted the prince’s arrogance to control their kingdom, and this was the result.

On the field, Drummond got his second wind, grabbed a fallen morning star from the ground, and charged at Gemini from behind.

On the sidelines, Cadena recognized this exact moment from her vision as she lurched forward, and Omari caught her arm. She glanced up at him.

“Let me go!”

“He can do it!”

They stared at each other as she shook to get out of his grip.

“Omari!”

“We will not fear!”

Cadena took her eyes back to the ring to see Gemini recoil, as if catching Drummond out of his peripheral vision. He flipped over the man backward, then sliced behind Drummond’s knees with his swords, severing the ligaments of his lower legs simultaneously.

A scream tore into the atmosphere as Drummond went down, losing the use of his legs altogether.

Gemini looked at Hannibal, and the man turned in the opposite direction and ran to exit the ring.

Myriad’s attendees had quieted as Gemini approached Prince Mandla. But the people of Kéra Asnela’s chants

remained steady, their feet pounding the ground.

Prince Mandla rolled to his side and coughed, then pulled his faceguard down and vomited. Sucking in a breath, he wheezed, unfamiliar with combat pain as his chest burned.

He managed to stand to his feet and turned in time to catch Gemini's fist punching him in the face, dislocating his nose. Again, he fell back to the ground, blood spurting, dazed, and spinning.

Gemini slipped his swords back in his scabbards, then bent and picked up one of Prince Mandla's axes.

He stood, flipped the ax in the air, caught it, then brought it down to Prince Mandla's chest, halting as King Tau screamed:

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

He turned his head, looking up at the king, who had almost fallen off the balcony screaming.

“You win! You can have her! Don't kill my son!”

Gemini cracked his neck and glanced at Prince Mandla, who was still dazed, his eyes rolling back.

King Isaac lifted his hand, and the chanting of Kéra Asnela's peoples slowly paused. “Gemini!”

Gemini stood to his full height and turned his attention to King Isaac, waiting for instruction.

“Spare him.”

Gemini dropped the ax.

The crowd of people erupted in celebration as Gemini left the ring.

Cadena rushed out to meet him, jumping in his arms and kissing him all over his face.

RUNNING TO THE FIELD, MEDICS, THE ANNOUNCER, KING TAU, and Princess Izara crowded around Prince Mandla, ignoring the other warrior Drummond, who was lying prone and bleeding profusely.

Seeing his son injured—but alive—wrenched at King Tau’s heart.

Prince Mandla mumbled something that no one could understand.

“What?” Princess Izara asked.

Prince Mandla turned his head, spat out a blood clot, then whispered, “War...”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, you can’t be serious after all you’ve endured!” Izara yelled.

“They can’t get....” Prince Mandla coughed again. “They can’t get away with this!”

“Son!”

Prince Mandla grabbed the mic from the announcer’s hands.

“War!!!” he yelled into the microphone, grabbing the attention of everyone surrounding them.

King Isaac glared at King Tau and his family from the balcony, those words putting the guards of Kéra Asnela on alert as they protected the royals.

“If it is a war you want, it is a war you’ll get.”



twenty-three

A council meeting

“**G**ood afternoon, everyone. I hope you have had a restful night because today we have business to discuss.” At the head of the table, Cadena linked her fingers, staring at the five counselors who were her best advisers.

“As you all know, the Royals of Myriad have declared war against us. Currently, our military is preparing for battle, and we must get caught up on any foreign affairs before our attention becomes too focused on this fight.”

“Femi, what do you have for me?”

“There are whispers that the Egyptians are causing chaos in northern Africa. What do you make of that?”

“I don’t make anything of it. Whatever it is, I’m sure they’ll handle it. Anything else, Femi?”

“I think that we should look into it,” Rufaro added.

Cadena shifted her gaze to Rufaro. “That’s not necessary.”

“Why not?” Femi countered.

“Because it is not our business. As you can see, we have our own affairs to deal with. Did we ever receive a response

from the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom about our proposal?”

“We did,” Azizi answered. “We’ve already responded with our gratitude and signed the proper paperwork to get the ball rolling.”

“Great. Anything else?”

“What about our allies?” Cadena took her attention back to Femi.

“The Alliance is as strong as it’s ever been. There’s no need to investigate.”

“But the Egyptians—”

“There’s a reason that the Elite members were picked to govern their societies. We will leave it up to them to deal with the chaos. It is not our responsibility.”

“It will be if it bleeds over into our territory,” Rufaro retorted.

“Then, at that time, we will handle it. Why are you pressing this?”

“Because I don’t believe that we should let it linger until we have no choice but to face it.”

“Thank you for your advice, Femi. But we shouldn’t do a thing but deal with what we have going on here in Kéra Asnela.”

“We should at least call a meeting with the Elite Alliance to see if they would be willing to look into the disruption.”

“We don’t have to,” Bandile interrupted.

They all turned to give Bandile their attention. “And why not?” Cadena asked.

“They have already requested a meeting with us.”

Frowns materialized on the counselor’s faces. “What in heaven for?” Azizi asked.

“The war...” Cadena answered. “While you are worried about the Egyptians’ chaos, the Elite Alliance is worried about ours. Let’s put their fears to rest.”

Elite Alliance Gathering

Privately owned island, somewhere off Africa

“IS THIS REALLY NECESSARY?” CADENA ASKED.

She was standing side by side with Gemini in a dimly lit area that reminded them of an interrogation room, minus a steel table and chairs. Instead of solid walls, their images reflected off the glass walls surrounding them. On the opposite side of the immense panes, one leader from the other twenty-three countries connected to the Elite Alliance watched them through the glass.

A voice spoke through the speaker hanging overhead.

“You know if we have called you to this setting, we are interested in what is happening in the area you govern.”

“But not about what’s going on with the Egyptians?”

“We have contacted the Egyptians. That is not your concern, as the situation there is under control. We need to know from you that you have your country under control.”

Gemini spoke up. “We do.”

“The fighting we hear of sounds serious. Are you saying that we should not be concerned?”

“We are saying,” Gemini continued, “that we have our issues under control, and it in no way will become a global problem. Or a situation for the Alliance to handle.”

The room became quiet for some moments, and then a different voice—a female—came over the speaker.

“Congratulations, Gemini, on your victory. I hear that some of us should expect to get an invitation to a wedding, yes?”

Gemini and Cadena eyed each other, a smile forming on their lips.

“We are planning an intimate ceremony with close friends and family. As you know, with some of the tensions surrounding our country, we want to make sure that we are surrounded with peace and love. If any of you wish to receive a formal invitation, let us know before our jet leaves this island, and we will make sure that you get one.”

“We are?” Cadena held a surprised smile on her face as she stared at Gemini. “I don’t remember talking about a ceremony. What’s the occasion, sweetheart?”

Gemini drew Cadena into his arms. “Love of my life, light of my soul, I love you to no end. I asked your family, but I have not yet asked you. Will you be my queen and marry me?”

Her smile was wide, her tongue tracing her teeth. “Yes. I will.”

Gemini sank his mouth into her lips, heat swirling between them followed by a string of chills. Applause rang through the speakers, and their kiss deepened, a moan slipping from Cadena’s lips.

“I envy you, Your Highness. I am determined that I, too, will have a love like this one day.”

A male voice broke through. “Lovebirds, I think you two have started a thing.” They laughed, recognizing the familiar Caribbean accents from the voices behind them.

“When it is your turn, Delilah, we expect to have invitations as well.”

“We’ll make a note of that,” the accented voice responded. “In the meantime, if tensions become too great for you to handle and you fear that conflict could bleed over into another region, you must get in front of it and inform us immediately.”

Gemini and Cadena kept their eyes on each other. “We do not fear. We stand in strength and are guided by The Spirit.”

“Congratulations. This meeting is dismissed.”

The room went pitch-dark before it was illuminated by the recessed lighting. The way they had come in was also lit up, and the exit door was ajar, as it had been unlocked once the meeting had ended.

Gemini slipped his hand inside Cadena’s and their fingers intertwined.

“Are you ready to get out of here, my love?”

“Maybe.”

Gemini’s brow arched, and Cadena laughed.

“I was thinking maybe we could stay at the retreat for the night and pretend we don’t have a care in the world.”

“You’re back following your Bohemian practices, aren’t you?” They strolled out of the door hand in hand.

“Maybe...” She laughed again, and they headed to the nearest resort.



twenty-four

South Wing

The sun was setting over Watima, Kéra Asnela, and the sky was illuminated with an array of orange and pink colors. Guests that spread across the field were a mixture of friends, family, and residents of the Kingdom.

After receiving a certified letter from the Royals, King Isaac had opened it immediately and read.

TO THE ROYALS OF KÉRA ASNELA,

This correspondence is to inform you that the Royals of Myriad have no tension with you. Prince Mandla misspoke during his delirium on the battlefield at the stadium, and for this reason, we wanted to assure you we will not be warring over the incident. It is understandable you may feel differently about what happened and consider not opening your mind to a possible treaty in the future. However, on behalf of the peace our countries both enjoy, I hope that you do.

—King Tau

INITIALLY, KING ISAAC DIDN'T TRUST THE ROYALS OF Myriad.

For that reason, their military continued to prepare for possible battle, and the country remained on high alert. But after months of having no further communication from the Royals—coupled with reports from their scouts that The Royals of Myriad seemed to be resuming their day-to-day operations without fail, The Royals of Kéra Asnela decided to do so as well.

The first exciting task on the long list of getting back to normal was Gemini and Cadena's wedding.

On that wonderful day, surrounded by loved ones, Cadena and Gemini stood at the altar, elegantly attired, with Cadena clad in the dark blue gown of her dreams, embellished with crystals the size of marbles. Diamonds hung from her ears and drooped down her neck, covering her breasts and shimmering brightly.

Her foresight came to life, and she couldn't be more ecstatic about the situation before them.

Peace.

She could feel it in the air, unrestricted, flowing effortlessly through the party. Giraffes fed from trees, and a family of elephants sat in the distance, watching along with a pride of lions and their cubs.

Gemini was clothed in a royal blue and gold suit at her side, with a long overcoat of material that draped over his shoulders, extending to his knees. Dressed in his elegant royal attire, he appeared handsome almost beyond belief to Cadena—along with every woman who witnessed their ceremony.

The couple had just uttered the words “I do.” Gemini drew Cadena into his chest, where he removed the veil that covered her face to kiss her lips—soft, slow, and warm. The transference of their souls had already taken place long ago, and now they were united as a family, coming together forever for as long as they both lived.

Fireworks burst in the sky as the celebration erupted in cheers. Though King Isaac had relieved Gemini’s family from the obligation of a dowry, his parents Cepheus and Katrina presented twenty cattle out of respect for centuries of wedding tradition.

The happy couple danced the night away, with Cadena going from one person to another, clapping her hands and moving her hips as joy overtook her. Gemini acted much the same way, dancing, clapping, and enjoying the festivities as the night progressed into a late hour.

CADENA’S ECSTASY WAS AT AN ALL-TIME HIGH ONCE SHE AND Gemini were in the throes of passion. Her body had never been stimulated so thoroughly from the nibble and suck of his mouth, the grips of his fingers in her flesh, the thrusting strokes of his dick. She was electrified by him, grabbing his shoulders, kissing his mouth, sucking his tongue, bucking against his drives, and dreaming of those moves even in her slumber.

She remained in dreamland until a loud alarm woke her from those beautiful images. Startled, she sat straight up in bed, clutching her naked chest as her eyes widened.

Next to her, the bed was empty, the sheets in disarray, and the alarm that woke her continuously blasting.

Cadena jumped up out of bed, hastily threw on some clothes, and went in search of Gemini, but at her door, she ran into Jasir instead.

“Jasir, why is the alarm going off?”

“Your Highness, our enemies, have caught us asleep, and they are approaching as we speak.”

“What?” she yelled.

“I’m afraid you’ve heard me correctly.”

“Where is Gemini?”

“You should go back into your room. Someone is coming to explain everything to you.”

“I will do no such thing. Tell me where Gemini is now!”

Jasir hesitated, and Cadena flew past him, running into Omari—her hands colliding with his chest.

“Omari!” “Cadena.” They spoke simultaneously.

“Where is Gemini?”

“He’s headed to the field.”

Her eyes widened. “What field?”

“Our enemies are thirty kilometers from here, and Gemini is in command of our army to go meet them head-on.”

“Oh, my God!” Cadena spun around on her heels and ran back toward her room, speeding past Jasir.

Trailing her by only a few steps, Omari grabbed her arms and spun her back around. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going out there with him. What do you think?”

“No, you are not.”

“Who’s going to stop me? You? Jasir?”

“We will if we must.”

Her eyes widened. “Why would you do that?”

“Because we need you here.”

“The palace is safe and no one needs me here; what are you talking about?”

“If Gemini’s army cannot hold off The Royals of Myriad’s army, we will need true fighters to protect the palace. That’s you, me, Jasir, and the other fifty-two guardsmen who are currently surrounding the palace.”

Despair filled Cadena’s heart. “Where is the rest of our military?”

“We were caught by surprise, Cadena. The bulk of our military will take time to get to us. We have to fight with what we have now!”

“Where is our father?”

“With Gemini’s army. He would not stay back. Neither would Remington. They are the army’s last line of defense.”

“And Gemini?”

Omari locked his jaw and blew out a breath. “He’s on the front line.”

Horror spread across her face. “How could you do this to me! What would you put him on the front lines!”

“He did it himself! We tried to talk some sense into him—asked him to stay on the last line with Remington and Father, but he wouldn’t. He insisted it’s his army, he’s their leader, and as their leader, he would fight with them head-on. You know

Gemini. He's a warrior, and he won't let the men go out there and fight alone."

Cadena screamed and fell to her knees. She understood Gemini, but hated his brave decision all the same.

"If you don't think me and Jasir want to be with them, you're wrong. I'm currently in charge of the kingdom while they're out there fighting, and this is the first time I've had such a responsibility laid on my shoulders. I could use your wisdom and direction, sister."

Cadena's tear-stained eyes looked up at Omari. If their father and brother didn't make it back, he would be the next king. She felt sorrow for him, knowing that his responsibility weighed as massively on him as the heaviness in her heart.

"Where is Cadence?"

"In the south wing, surrounded by guards. She's safe—for now."

Cadena pulled herself from the floor and wiped her tears. "You're right. I'm going to pray to see if The Spirit will help us."

Omari reached out and grabbed Cadena's shoulder, and she flew into his arms. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you."

"SPIRIT OF LOVE, LIFE, AND GOODNESS, I PRAY TO THEE AND request forgiveness for any transgressions I have bestowed on the world and its inhabitants. Clear my mind and cleanse my soul so that I can be of service to You in the way I was meant to fulfill Your purpose. Let the error of my ways be disclosed to me so that I may course-correct and rejoin the righteous

path. Shower our kingdom in prosperity, peace, love, and the flourishing of our lives, our seeds, and the soil our seeds are buried inside.”

She pressed her fingers to the ground. “I am but Your steward, imperfect yet perfect when You live through me. Our kingdom has been surprised by a known enemy. War is at our doorstep, but we stand and depend on You to defend us. Allow me to see Your vision and carry Your desires to my kingdom. Amina.”

THE HUMIDITY IN THE AIR DRIED HER FACE, AND CADENA remained there, waiting to see if The Spirit would give her a message in a vision to carry back to Omari. Unlike most praying times, there was no breeze in the air. The smell of her flowers remained strong, but they didn’t move, and the sky had darkened.

THE QUIETNESS BECAME DEAFENING, THEN...

Cadena’s eyes opened, and she saw six rows of soldiers from The Royals of Myriad. She gasped. They were covered in body armor, and the first three lines of men carried swords in their scabbards, bow and arrows on their back, while the last three lines carried guns in their holsters.

It was a tactical approach. They were going to send their men in to fight, but if they were overpowered, the last line would shoot to defend. Cadena’s gut tightened, but The Spirit powered her, so fear could not rest inside her.

King Tau and Prince Mandla sat on horseback behind the last line of men but farther away from the chaos, watching

through binoculars.

Fifty feet in front of their army, the Royals of Kéra Asnela's army stood, and she gasped when Gemini came into view. He was in the middle of the front line, and he stepped out and lifted his sword.

He wasn't one to use guns, but he carried them in holsters on his side, along with the swords he so effortlessly wielded.

Their army was just as vast, their men strong, trained, and steady as they waited for Gemini's signal.

All was quiet, then...an arrow from Myriad's side flew above, striking one of their men. "No!"

Gemini's sword dropped, giving the signal to fight. The two armies ran towards each other clashing as they shot arrows, clanged against blades, while the last few lines lifted their guns, aimed and ready to shoot should they need to.

Cadena's vision focused on Gemini. He remained the best warrior she'd ever seen, fighting three men at once, not killing them but taking them all down with slashing wounds which cut the muscles and tendons to their hands, fingers, and toes.

He turned quickly, fighting more men, battling each one with no fear in his soul. That seemed to go on forever—two men, then three again. Twisting and turning, striking, blocking, kicking, and charging. He was naturally a protector, and as such, he helped men he'd trained when they were down—got them on their feet and continued to fight. More strikes, blocking, stabs, punching—it was the most combat Cadena had seen in a decade.

Gemini moved like he had the energy of a bull with unyielding strength. It was insane to watch him wield the power bestowed on him, but while he was busy fighting three

men, a fourth one snuck up on him from behind, stabbing the sharp edge of his sword in his back.

“Noooooo!”

He dropped to one knee, then turned quickly as the armor had protected him, rising to his feet while being assaulted repeatedly.

She watched as he fought, man after man, as if he had all the might in the world, but some of those blows had broken through. Because of that, his wounds were getting the better of him, and he began to stagger, obviously dazed, before inevitably falling to the ground. His eyes were wide as he stared up at the clouds, his breathing fading, his lids slowly closing.

She witnessed every second of the battle, seeing her father fall and her brother wounded. Even amid all that chaos, Kéra Asnela came out the victor. Myriad’s men were not enough, nor were they prepared for the intensity of the war.

But through it all, Cadena lost two of the most important people in her life, and as the vision ended, a torrent of tears fell from her eyes.

She wept, screamed, and shook in despair. But was reinvigorated by a sudden burst of vigor.

The Spirit.

Knowing her visions were all happening at future times, Cadena got to her feet, fled the garden, entered her room, and rushed to change into her warrior training armor. She added a scabbard, belting two swords similar to Gemini’s on her waist and grabbing two handguns to add to her weaponry.

Back outside in the garden, she placed two fingers in her mouth and whistled, then jumped over the beds of flowers

when her dark horse arrived.

Once on his back, she pulled the reins, and the horse took off, galloping fast through their fields.

“I’m here for you, Omari. I’m here for us all. This all started because of me, and I’m going to end it.”



twenty-five

The two armies stood quietly watching each other, the foreboding silence felt by every soldier there. Gemini stepped forward and lifted his sword, and it sparkled off the noonday sun.

An arrow from Myriad's side flew above, striking a soldier three men away from him.

"Fight!" Gemini barked out, slashing downward with his sword to give the signal to his entire militia. Both armies ran towards each other.

In the distance, Cadena and the dark horse galloped toward the battlefield as fast as they could, determination in her veins, and she locked her jaw and leaned into the animal to make him go faster.

The ground beneath them vibrated from the horses' hooves beating the earth. Her entire body was on fire from the extreme adrenaline rush coupled with the juddering of the ride.

She was getting closer, so close that the men no longer looked like distant objects but actual moving soldiers.

"Come on, come on, come on!"

They galloped faster, and finally, she was with them, directing the horse to the front of the fight where she found an opening, trampled a few men to get to Gemini, then was at his

side as the first strike from a sword went to stab him. Her blades were in her hands before her next breath, reaching down to block the cowardly strike on her husband in the nick of time.

The enemy turned his eyes to her with a glare, and that small break gave Gemini a chance to also turn and notice the sneak attack—and Cadena.

His eyes grew wide, and his heart slammed behind his breastbone to see her in the midst of the war. But with no time to send her away, he quickly struck down the Myriad soldier as Cadena jumped from the horse to her feet.

Side by side, they fought, swords stabbing, piercing, slicing, and blocking men back-to-back. They moved congruently, striking down a soldier when one of their backs was turned and protecting each other's flanks. The roar of men in battle was like a thousand reverberating screams, swords clanging, gunshots blasting—the bitter copper smell of blood an unmistakable stench in the air.

As she had seen in her vision, Gemini also helped his fellow soldiers while she did the same. When a break came in the battle, he grabbed her, swung up on her horse, settled her on his lap facing him, wheeled around, and roared at the animal to run.

Her arms wrapped around his back, and she had lost one of her swords when she was snatched onto the animal.

“Baby!”

They'd galloped far enough away from the center of the assault for Gemini to slow the horse's gallop. He removed his faceguard and tossed it to the side.

“What were you thinking!?”

“I had to!”

“Why?”

“I saw how this ended!”

They stared at one another, and as tears sprang from her eyes, he understood what the vision had shown.

“Cadena.” He drew her mouth to his lips for a mouthwatering kiss. “Listen to me.”

“You can’t go back,” she shouted. “And that’s an order!”

Concern washed over his masculine features. “Sweetheart, listen to me. I can’t leave my men on the field.”

“There’s another way!”

He stared at her momentarily.

“Do you believe me?!”

His heart thundered along with hers. “Of course I do. What’s the plan?”

“I know where King Tau and Prince Mandla are hiding, watching the battle. If we hurry, we can end this before a slaughter!”

He kissed her again, then lifted her by her waist and turned her to face forward. “Take us there!”

She grabbed the reins, and they raced off the battlefield to put her plan into action.

SITTING ASTRIDE HIS HORSE SAFELY AWAY FROM THE battlefield, King Tau removed the binoculars from his eyes—a

smug smile curving up his lips. “We’re winning,” he said to Prince Mandla.

“No, you’re not.”

Still on horseback, Cadena and the animal trotted up to King Tau’s side, quickly putting the sword to his throat.

“You were so busy looking in front of you that you ignored what’s behind you, King Tau. Such a shame.”

“How the hell did you—”

“Watch your mouth.” She pressed the blade tighter. “I am a prophetess. Unlike you, I worship The Spirit, and I have seen how this begins and how it ends.” She glanced at the prince. “Don’t think of doing anything brazen, Prince Mandla, because I’m angry and ready for a fight.”

“What do you want?” King Tau sneered.

“You can’t win this war. Your men will be slaughtered unnecessarily. Call off your army.”

Prince Mandla sneered in derision, and his father laughed with him.

“Your men will go down as well, Princess. And even if you cut my throat, my son will be Kin—”

His words died as Gemini appeared at the side of Prince Mandla’s mount, his sword to the prince’s throat.

Cadena continued speaking.

“You will have no King. Kéra Asnela will take over your land. Your people will become ours. Our King will replace your king. We will rule everything. Our allies are strong; they will not disparage us. And the Sizwe kingdom will cease to

exist.” She paused to let that sink in. “Call off your army now. I won’t ask you again.”

Cadena and Gemini pressed their swords tighter, drawing blood from both of their royal necks.

“All right!” King Tau screamed. “All right!”

He dropped the binoculars and raised a mirror-like tool, signaling to someone in the distance.

The shrill of a loud horn blasted in the air. After a few minutes, King Tau snapped, “The fighting has ceased. Check for yourself!”

She kicked him off his horse as Gemini snatched Prince Mandla from his gelding, then she jumped down to her feet.

Binding their hands behind their backs, the Myriad royals were pushed to the ground, next to the horses’ hooves.

Gemini took the King’s binoculars and looked out onto the field to confirm that the fighting had stopped and the soldiers were retreating on both sides.

Relieved, he handed the binoculars to Cadena, and she searched for her father and brother, thankful to see that the war had not made it to their line.

She sighed and dropped her head back, thankful to The Spirit as Gemini peppered kisses across her forehead.

One month later

KÉRA ASNELA WAS ONCE AGAIN A VIBRANT, THRIVING country, and thanks to their faith, tenacity, and strength, they remained prosperous.

King Tau and Prince Mandla had been imprisoned for war crimes against humanity. Princess Izara, while still at the Sizwe Palace, was confined and under heavy guard.

The defeated Myriad army was given two options—return to Sizwe to be banned from crossing into Kéra Asnela again or be jailed with their king and crown prince.

Most of them chose to be banned, with a few stragglers following the king and prince into the dungeon.

Many men were hurt on the field that day, and unfortunately, some met an untimely death. Those few who gave their lives from Kéra Asnela were deemed heroes by King Isaac, while the vanquished dead were put into pine boxes and sent back to Myriad.

THE DAY OF THE WAR HAD BEEN NAMED AFTER CADENA FOR her heroism in saving the kingdom. Blushing, she accepted the honor while also giving credit to Gemini.

They'd moved into her palace, and Gemini was working on building their first home with a team of construction master-craftsmen that would turn their mansion into a beautiful fortress.

Her life was like the fairy tale she had always imagined, but the journey to get where she was had been nothing of the sort.

Her remaining goal now was to continue to make a difference in her many roles, with her favorite guard at her side for all time.

YOU'VE BEEN INVITED.”

—*E.A.*

OMARI FLIPPED THE ENVELOPE BACK AND FORTH.

E.A.? His mind puzzled over it for a moment, and then it hit him.

“Elite Alliance,” he whispered. His father’s and brother’s voices reverberated through his ears.

“You will get your chance,” Remington had said.

“When?”

“Soon,” King Isaac added. “The invitations go out once every five years. The current five-year period concludes in four months.”

OMARI’S HEART RACED WITH ANTICIPATION, AND A GRIN spread across his face.



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note from the author

Hey, reading family!

I hope you have enjoyed His Royal Highness. It gave me everything! The romance, the drama, the suspense! I loved writing Cadena and Gemini's story. There's was one for the books for me! Thank you so much for reading!

As a reminder, reviews are an indie author's bread and butter. They are a vital part of the publishing process. Not only do they help others who are shopping for good reads find books that they'll enjoy, but they also help gain access to specific promotions that are vital to the success of a book. With that said, I would be more than thankful for your review! You can leave them on my website also!

XOXO

—Stephanie

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about the author

Stephanie Nicole Norris is an author from Chattanooga, Tennessee, with a humble beginning. After becoming a young adult, her love for romance sparked, leaving her captivated by heroes and heroines alike. With a big imagination and a creative heart, Stephanie penned her first novel in 2012. She went on to write grin-inducing romance and has been nominated multiple times, receiving several literary awards. As a prolific writer, Stephanie's catalog continues to grow. You can find her books on Amazon.



afterword

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